

Jo Churchill MP  
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Health and Social Care  
Department of Health  
Richmond House,  
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London,  
SW1A 2NS

15<sup>th</sup> August 2019

Dear Minister,

On behalf of Breast Cancer UK, I am writing to congratulate you on your appointment as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Prevention, Public Health and Primary Care, and to introduce you to our work, which is of important relevance to your new role.

Breast Cancer UK works to promote the primary prevention of breast cancer and focuses on the lifestyle and environmental causes of the disease. Breast cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer in the UK - 1 in 7 women will be diagnosed with the disease in their lifetime - and incidence rates are projected to rise by a further 2% between 2014 and 2035<sup>1</sup>. Despite welcome improvements in diagnosis and treatment, efforts to prevent breast cancer have stalled. This is why we believe it's time for a fresh approach to prevention with a greater focus on addressing all lifestyle and environmental risk factors.

Most breast cancers are thought to be associated with environmental and lifestyle risk factors, yet today we invest only a small proportion of our cancer research budget towards understanding the causes of the disease and how to prevent it. Given that an estimated 38% of cancer cases and at least 1 in 4 breast cancers are preventable<sup>2</sup>, we believe that there is an urgent need to rebalance the scope of the UK's cancer prevention policy towards primary prevention, thereby broadening the current focus beyond secondary prevention, early diagnosis and search for a cure.

To date, UK cancer prevention policy is focused almost entirely on raising awareness of the symptoms, screening, early diagnosis and promoting preventative medicine for those at high risk. Whilst early diagnosis is vital, it has been promoted to the public as the best form of prevention, despite it having little to do with preventing the disease. In order to effectively promote the primary prevention of diseases such as breast cancer, the government must ensure that national plans and NHS bodies do not fall into the trap of conflating prevention with early diagnosis.

We very much welcome the recent publications of the Prevention Green Paper<sup>3</sup> and the NHS Long-Term Plan<sup>4</sup> which are clear evidence of the Government's commitment to make the prevention of ill-health a top priority. This new focus on prevention is essential, given that we spend over 60% of healthcare funding on cure and rehabilitation and just 5% on prevention<sup>5</sup>. However, strategies for cancer prevention across the UK are primarily focused on reducing alcohol consumption, encouraging active lifestyles, discouraging smoking and identifying genetic predispositions to the

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<sup>1</sup> Cancer Research UK (2019) 'Breast Cancer statistics' available at: <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/health-professional/cancer-statistics/statistics-by-cancer-type/breast-cancer> (Accessed: August 14<sup>th</sup> 2019)

<sup>2</sup> Brown, K. F. et al. (2018) 'The fraction of cancer attributable to modifiable risk factors in England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and the United Kingdom in 2015', British Journal of Cancer 118: 1130-1141 available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41416-018-0029-6> (Accessed: 1<sup>st</sup> August 2019)

<sup>3</sup> Department of Health & Social Care (2019) 'Advancing our health: prevention in the 2020s- consultation document' available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/advancing-our-health-prevention-in-the-2020s/advancing-our-health-prevention-in-the-2020s-consultation-document> (Accessed: August 14<sup>th</sup> 2019)

<sup>4</sup> NHS England (2019) 'The NHS Long Term Plan' available at: <https://www.longtermplan.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/nhs-long-term-plan-june-2019.pdf> (Accessed: August 14<sup>th</sup> 2019)

<sup>5</sup> CIPFA & Public Health England (2019) 'Evaluating preventative investments in public health in England' available at: <https://www.cipfa.org/evaluatingpreventativeinvestments> (Accessed: August 14<sup>th</sup> 2019)

disease<sup>6</sup>. Whilst these initiatives are extremely valuable, they only have a limited impact on hormonal cancers such as breast cancer.

Crucially, one of our greatest concerns remains that the Government and NHS bodies continue to underestimate the impact of environmental pollutants and harmful chemicals on the nation's health, treating them as separate rather than interlinked matters. Despite mounting scientific evidence about the links between breast cancer incidence and public exposure to endocrine disrupting chemicals<sup>7</sup>, this association is yet to be acknowledged or addressed within National Cancer Plans. This creates a fundamental gap in cancer prevention policy, one that weakens our battle against the disease.

This is why we are in the process of putting together a Breast Cancer Prevention Strategy, which will provide guidance on how prevention can be incorporated into national policies and local services. We would very much like to share this with you once its details are finalised. Currently, we are preparing for discussions with other prevention practitioners across Public Health Bodies, Royal Colleges, Business and Workplace Organisations, and other Third Sector partners to inform our thinking and incorporate the primary prevention of breast cancer into their work.

In parallel, we continue to advocate for a breast cancer prevention strategy which prioritises the primary prevention of the disease; a national cancer strategy that acknowledges hormone disrupting chemicals as a potential risk factor for breast cancer; and encourages greater research investment into the causes of the disease. We believe that these measures will not only enhance the prevention agenda but complement the Government's 'Prevention is better than cure' vision, with its central objective of achieving five extra years of healthy life expectancy by 2035<sup>8</sup>.

Once you have had the chance to settle into your new role, our Chief Executive would welcome the opportunity to meet with you or your designated officials to discuss our views and proposals to support the Government's prevention agenda. We also ask for a response on how the Department of Health and Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs intend to oversee the public health implications of Brexit, in respect of maintaining existing protections from harmful chemicals that protect public health and the environment.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kit Bowerin', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Kit Bowerin

Public Affairs Officer

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<sup>6</sup> NHS England (2017) 'Achieving World-Class Cancer Outcomes: A Strategy for England 2015-2020 Progress Report 2016-2017' available at: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/national-cancer-transformation-programme-2016-17-progress.pdf> (Accessed: August 14<sup>th</sup> 2019)

<sup>7</sup> Breast Cancer UK (2019) 'BCUK Background briefing, Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals' available at: [https://www.breastcanceruk.org.uk/uploads/documents/BCUK\\_EDC\\_brief\\_v2\\_23.9.2018.pdf](https://www.breastcanceruk.org.uk/uploads/documents/BCUK_EDC_brief_v2_23.9.2018.pdf) (Accessed: August 14<sup>th</sup> 2019)

<sup>8</sup> Department for Health & Social Care (2018) 'Prevention is better than cure: our vision to help you live well for longer' available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevention-is-better-than-cure-our-vision-to-help-you-live-well-for-longer> (Accessed: August 14<sup>th</sup> 2019)