

**Maggie Throup MP**  
**Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Vaccines and Public Health**  
**Department of Health**  
**39 Victoria Street,**  
**London,**  
**SQ1H 0EU**



Breast Cancer UK  
BM Box 7767 London WC1N 3XX  
T: 0845 680 1322  
W: [breastcanceruk.org.uk](http://breastcanceruk.org.uk)

**30<sup>th</sup> September 2021**

Dear Minister,

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

At Breast Cancer UK, we work to prevent breast cancer through education, scientific research, collaboration, and policy change. We are the only UK charity that focuses on breast cancer prevention, including diet, lifestyle and exposure to harmful chemicals found in everyday products and the environment. We campaign to strengthen public health and environmental protections to prevent breast cancer and fund animal free research to understand and address the causes of breast cancer.

Breast cancer is now the most diagnosed cancer in the world<sup>i</sup>. In the UK, 55,000 women and 390 men are diagnosed every year and countless more are affected by the disease. Incidence rates have increased by 25% over the past 20 years with one woman being diagnosed every 10 minutes<sup>ii</sup>. Despite huge progress in diagnosis and treatment, efforts to prevent breast cancer have stalled. The Covid pandemic has also had a devastating impact of people affected by breast cancer. Around 11,000 people are estimated to have missed a diagnosis<sup>iii</sup> with 40,000 fewer patients starting treatment in 2020<sup>iv</sup> and the UK is set to lose up to £7.8 billion in medical research by 2027<sup>v</sup>.

1 in 7 women will develop breast cancer in their lifetime, yet 25% of breast cancers are preventable<sup>vi</sup>. That represents a staggering 13,000 cases that could be prevented through lifestyle changes saving thousands of lives, avoiding unnecessary suffering, and reducing the cost of breast cancer to the NHS. We believe it's time for a fresh approach to prevention, placing a greater focus on lifestyle and environmental risk factors to address the cancer backlog and reduce the number of people being diagnosed with breast cancer.

Most breast cancers are thought to be associated with environmental and lifestyle risk factors, that's why Breast Cancer UK has launched a brand new prevention hub<sup>vii</sup>, a free to use online educational resource for the public highlighting what actions individuals and communities can take to reduce their risk and put prevention first. This October, to celebrate Breast Cancer Awareness Month, we are encouraging the nation to focus on the prevention of breast cancer with our 25 Saves lives campaign, to raise awareness of the 25% of breast cancer diagnoses that could be prevented.

If we are to prevent cancers, public health and cancer strategies must move beyond their primary focus on lifestyle factors, behaviour, and genetics. To date, cancer prevention strategies have targeted alcohol consumption, encouraged active lifestyles, discouraged smoking, and identified genetic predispositions to disease. Whilst these are all key parts of the prevention picture, they will only have a limited impact on hormonal cancers such as breast cancer. If real progress on prevention

is to be achieved, it is vital that the Department of Health, UK Health Security Agency, and NHS England work together to promote a healthier environment, as well as healthy lifestyles.

We welcomed the publications of the Prevention Green Paper<sup>viii</sup> and the NHS Long-Term Plan<sup>ix</sup> which are clear evidence of the Government's commitment to make the prevention of ill-health a public health priority. This new focus is essential, given we spend 60% of healthcare funding on cure and just 5% on prevention<sup>x</sup>. However, there is an urgent need to rebalance the scope of the UK's cancer policy towards primary prevention, thereby broadening the current focus of beyond secondary prevention, early diagnosis, and search for a cure. If we are to stop cancer before it starts, and make the 2020s the decade of prevention, research funding towards prevention and aetiology must be prioritised.

Crucially, one of our greatest concerns remains that the Government and public health bodies underestimate the impact of 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 and public exposure to endocrine disrupting chemicals<sup>xi</sup>, this association is yet to be acknowledged or addressed within cancer plans. This creates a fundamental gap in cancer prevention policy, one that weakens our battle against the disease. This gap must be recognised and addressed in future cancer prevention plans and the government's wider prevention strategy.

Accordingly, we continue to advocate for a breast cancer prevention strategy which prioritises the primary prevention of the disease; a national cancer strategy that acknowledges exposure to endocrine disrupting chemicals as a cancer risk factor; and encourages greater research investment into the causes of the disease. We believe 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>xii</sup>.

We ask for a response on what steps the Department of Health is taking to support cancer prevention and address the cancer crisis. We also ask for a response on how the Department of Health will work the UK Health Security Agency and Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to address the impact of public exposure to harmful chemicals on the nation's health.

Once you have had the chance to settle into your new role, we 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. Breast Cancer UK stands ready to support the Department of Health in any way possible to support the prevention of breast cancer.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Thalie Martini', with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke at the end.

Thalie Martini,

Chief Executive

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- <sup>i</sup> World Health Organisation (2021) '*Breast Cancer now most common form of cancer*' (Accessed: 30<sup>th</sup> September 2021)
- <sup>ii</sup> Cancer Research UK (2021) '*Breast Cancer statistics*' (Accessed: 30<sup>th</sup> September 2021)
- <sup>iii</sup> Oppenheim, M (2021) '*Nearly 11,000 people in Britain could be living with undiagnosed breast cancer to Covid upheaval*' (Accessed: 30<sup>th</sup> September 2021)
- <sup>iv</sup> Cancer Research UK (2021) '*Cancer services during Covid-19: 40,000 few people starting treatment*' (Accessed: 30<sup>th</sup> September 2021)
- <sup>v</sup> Institute for Public Policy Research (2021) '*Research at risk: Mitigating the impact of Covid-19 on Health R&D investment*' (Accessed: 30<sup>th</sup> September 2021)
- <sup>vi</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 119 (8) 1130-1143.
- <sup>vii</sup> Breast Cancer UK (2021) '*Prevention Hub*' (Accessed: 30<sup>th</sup> September 2021)
- <sup>viii</sup> Department of Health & Social Care (2019) '*Advancing our health: prevention in the 2020s- consultation document*' (Accessed: 30<sup>th</sup> September 2021)
- <sup>ix</sup> NHS England (2019) '*The NHS Long Term Plan*' (Accessed: 30<sup>th</sup> September 2021)
- <sup>x</sup> CIPFA & Public Health England (2019) '*Evaluating preventative investments in public health in England*' (Accessed: 30<sup>th</sup> September 2021)
- <sup>xi</sup> Breast Cancer UK (2018) '*BCUK Background briefing: Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals*' (Accessed: 27<sup>th</sup> September 2021).
- <sup>xii</sup> Department for Health & Social Care (2018) '*Prevention is better than cure: our vision to help you live well for longer*' (Accessed: 30<sup>th</sup> September 2021)