

Dear Secretary of State,

Right now the Government is drafting their HIV Action Plan to end new cases of HIV by 2030 in England.

We cannot continue with a business as usual approach. This will not help the approximately 5,900 people living with HIV who still do not know their status. The National AIDS Trust have said that access to HIV testing remains a postcode lottery across the country.

Ending new cases of HIV by 2030 is scientifically possible and Government policy - to achieve this we need to make real progress now.

Russell T Davies' drama *It's A Sin* shown on Channel 4 has reminded many of the true horror and real experience faced by many people during the height of the epidemic including the tragic loss of life.

However, this has reignited a new wave of public interest about the realities of HIV. I hope that this will help counter the abhorrent level of misinformation about HIV and the stigma still faced by people living with HIV and AIDS today.

Lewisham has one of the highest rates of HIV in Europe and HIV is considered a ['crisis'](#) in Lambeth, Southwark & Lewisham. Government must meet its target of ending new domestic cases by the end of the decade and we must end this 'crisis'.

"The three selected boroughs Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham have amongst the highest rates of HIV in Europe, and HIV is considered a crisis in these areas." - *Elton John AIDS Foundation*

Thanks to the charity the **Elton John AIDS Foundation** a Zero HIV Social Impact Bond (SIB) operates across Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham. The figures from the first 18 months show that more than 120,000 people received HIV testing. This led to over 180 South Londoners living with HIV starting HIV treatment, with 114 people receiving a new diagnosis of HIV and attending their first treatment, and 68 others returning to treatment after previously leaving treatment.

Therefore, I support the calls from the Elton John AIDS Foundation, The Metro and the National AIDS Trust that the HIV Action Plan must include the following:

Funding for opt-out HIV testing across the NHS – When an individual presents at A&E, registers at a GP practice, and the NHS otherwise takes a blood sample, a test for HIV should be routinely undertaken, unless the person chooses to opt-out. This is already standard practice within maternity units and has resulted in a near elimination of vertical transmission of HIV in the UK.

Free at-home HIV testing should be available nationwide all year round – At present this is only the case during National HIV Testing Week and otherwise dependent on local authority provision.

Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) availability beyond sexual health clinics – This drug is a game-changer in the fight against HIV but data from the NHS England PrEP Impact Trial showed only 4% of participants were not gay and bisexual men; that is despite heterosexual people accounting for nearly half of new HIV diagnoses. PrEP provision should be negotiated into the Core GP contract, available in pharmacies (via a Patient Group Direction). We need to raise awareness and increase access in all communities, but especially Black African communities, women, trans people and migrants, where awareness is currently lowest.

A step change in targeted health promotion programmes – Additional resources for HIV prevention and HIV testing campaigns.

Action to reduce late HIV diagnosis – In 2019, 42% of all new HIV diagnoses were made at a late stage. This rises to over 50% among Black African heterosexuals. Late diagnosis leads to worse health outcomes for individuals, potential additional onward transmissions, and avoidable costs to the NHS. These cases must all be investigated as serious incidents within the NHS to improve practice and support earlier diagnosis.

A new anti-HIV stigma campaign – The Don't Die of Ignorance campaign undoubtedly saved lives. However, it has also tainted public awareness and understanding of HIV in modern times. HIV is no longer a death sentence and now advances in medicine mean that 97% of those with HIV on treatment are virally suppressed or 'undetectable', which means they can't pass the virus on. Ongoing stigma impacts people living with HIV, including in employment, their access to services and relationships. It remains a stubborn barrier to testing for HIV. As well as a new anti-stigma programme, it's also vital new Relationships & Education lessons in England provide young people with accurate and up-to-date information about HIV.

Mental health support available for those living with HIV – People living with HIV are twice as likely to experience poor mental health than the wider population, including depression and anxiety. Despite this, access to mental health support remains inconsistent and generic services do not suffice. All HIV clinics need access to a psychological or mental health professional within their multidisciplinary teams.

While the Commission's recommendations focused on England, to make them happen, and maximise effectiveness, we hope that the Department for Health and Social Care will also coordinate constructively with the devolved governments and health services in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in this common endeavour.

We will only achieve this one-off opportunity to end the domestic HIV epidemic if the HIV Action Plan is worthy of the name and fully funded. You are in a position to help ensure that it is.

Yours sincerely,



Councillor Alan Hall
London Borough of Lewisham