



# Delivering a revolution in Cancer Care

**MACMILLAN**  
CANCER SUPPORT



# Introduction

Cancer care in Scotland is at a critical moment. We are three years into a ten-year cancer strategy but have seen little change and even less delivery.

Who you are and where you live heavily influences your experience of cancer in Scotland. Too many people are still waiting too long for diagnosis and treatment, struggling to get the support they need, when and where they need it. The system is at crisis point and the pressures are growing.

The people of Scotland deserve better.

The next Scottish Government must take urgent action to deliver on the Cancer Strategy. They must be bolder and move faster to ensure everyone can access the best treatment and care.

**Ahead of this crucial election, Macmillan Cancer Support is calling for:**

- **Bold action to tackle inequities in cancer care**
- **Clear steps to address unwarranted variation in treatment and care**
- **A revolution in cancer data and digital infrastructure**
- **Renewed commitment to delivering person-centred care**

Macmillan is committed to being a partner in the challenges ahead. We will work alongside government, the health system, professionals, sector partners and most importantly, people living with cancer in Scotland – wherever they live, whatever it takes and whichever community they're from – to make it happen.

# Inequity

Despite the commitment in the current cancer strategy, recently released data demonstrates the clear inequities that persist within the cancer system in Scotland. The next Scottish government must take bold action to address these deep-rooted inequities by centring the voices of marginalised communities – working with them to co-design cancer care that meets their needs and reflects their lived experiences.

We welcome the first steps taken to improve demographic data collection along the cancer pathway, and the work that has begun to understand more about racialised health inequities, but this work needs to move faster. Data published in August 2025 shows little progress has been made in tackling the deprivation gap, with cancer incidence rates 24% higher in the most deprived communities compared with the least.

**The 2026–29 cancer delivery plan must contain clear, measurable commitments to reduce inequities in cancer prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and care. Without decisive action that goes further and faster than ever before, the gap in outcomes between the most- and least-deprived communities will continue to widen, with disastrous consequences for people living with cancer across Scotland.**





**“Mary describes the service as ‘not just about words – it saves lives’”**

## Mary's Story

Mary retired in 2011 and was enjoying good health, and an active social life. She spent the rest of her time dancing, gardening and supporting her community with volunteering work in Inverclyde. At 70, life was good.

During the pandemic, Mary contracted COVID, and one night she began experiencing chest pains. After contacting her GP, she was sent for a chest X-ray and initially reassured that nothing was wrong. However, weeks later the scan was reviewed and further tests followed. In August 2022, after months of uncertainty, Mary attended hospital alone and was shocked to be diagnosed with cancer.

Mary underwent surgery which successfully removed the cancer. However, from here on she was offered no support. All the uncertainty that follows cancer treatment and care left her anxious, with a constant “what if” in the background.

To help with this anxiety, Mary feels that her lung specialist nurse worked above and beyond the call of duty, as it was she who identified her need for help and contacted a Macmillan Nurse. She also referred her to a local Improving the Cancer Journey (ICJ) service, which had arrived in Inverclyde in 2022, just after her surgery.

ICJ listened to her concerns, supported her mental health, and helped with practical issues such as receiving financial support towards heating costs and her overall wellbeing.

Mary describes the service as “not just about words – it saves lives”.

Now, Mary volunteers weekly with her local ICJ. Her experience highlights the need for better coordination between services and for primary care to play a stronger role in supporting people living with and beyond cancer in Scotland.

# Variation

People with cancer in Scotland should be able to access the best care available, regardless of where they live or the type of cancer they have. We know unwarranted variation in treatment and care leads to poorer outcomes for people with cancer, with increased costs, stress, anxiety and exhaustion. The most recent cancer waiting times continue to show significant variation in access to timely treatment, with performance against the 62-day pathway ranging from 45.6% to 95.8% across Health Boards.

Furthermore, our latest research also shows that due to a postcode lottery in cancer services, 49% of people living with cancer in Scotland have been affected by local variation in their treatment and care – approximately 140,000 people. This situation is wholly unacceptable and must change.

Addressing these systemic gaps is not only a matter of fairness but a key step toward improving outcomes and experiences for those who are most at risk of being left behind, as well as the trust of the wider public who are all too aware of inefficiencies present in the health system. Unless action is taken, we risk these disparities becoming further embedded in the cancer system, as treatment and care becomes ever more complex.

**The current ten-year strategy is a commitment to tackling unwarranted variation in the cancer system by 2033 – but this isn't enough. We need to see the next Scottish Government move much faster and be more ambitious in the 2026–29 cancer delivery plan. There must be clearer actions, timelines, accountability, and a renewed urgency to reduce unwarranted variation. Macmillan is ready to partner with the next Scottish Government in finding innovative solutions to address these challenges.**





**“ She believes that better communication, less fragmented treatment and care, as well as adherence to cancer waiting time targets are vital in improving outcomes for people with cancer in Scotland. ”**

## Carrol's Story

Carrol is a retired primary school teacher and long-standing Macmillan volunteer from Larbert. She was diagnosed with cancer in December 2024 after her cancer journey began with a routine mammogram. Although she was told she needed some further tests, she was repeatedly reassured that everything would be fine. However, before any biopsy had been carried out, she was abruptly told it was cancer, leaving her distressed and unprepared.

Carrol initially received compassionate support from a Macmillan-trained nurse, who helped her cope with the shock of diagnosis. However, once she was transferred to her local hospital, her care became fragmented. Promised that treatment would begin quickly, Carrol instead experienced long delays caused by poor communication, holiday backlogs and unclear pathways between services.

Although Scottish cancer guidelines state that treatment should begin within 35 days of diagnosis, Carrol waited weeks without a clear plan. In mid-January 2025, she was told her cancer might be incurable and that further scans were needed, then asked to wait several more weeks for some certainty. This period left her feeling overwhelmed and unable to advocate for herself.

It was only after contacting Macmillan Cancer Support's helpline that Carrol regained her confidence and voice. With the right information and support, she was able to challenge delays and ensure her care moved forward. As well as undergoing surgery, Carrol eventually received chemotherapy, radiotherapy and immunotherapy, but felt that support dropped away sharply once treatment ended. Carrol was left to process the trauma of her diagnosis and treatment alone.

Reflecting on her experience, Carrol believes no one should have to fight for basic standards of care. She believes that better communication, less fragmented treatment and care, as well as adherence to cancer waiting time targets are vital in improving outcomes for people with cancer in Scotland.

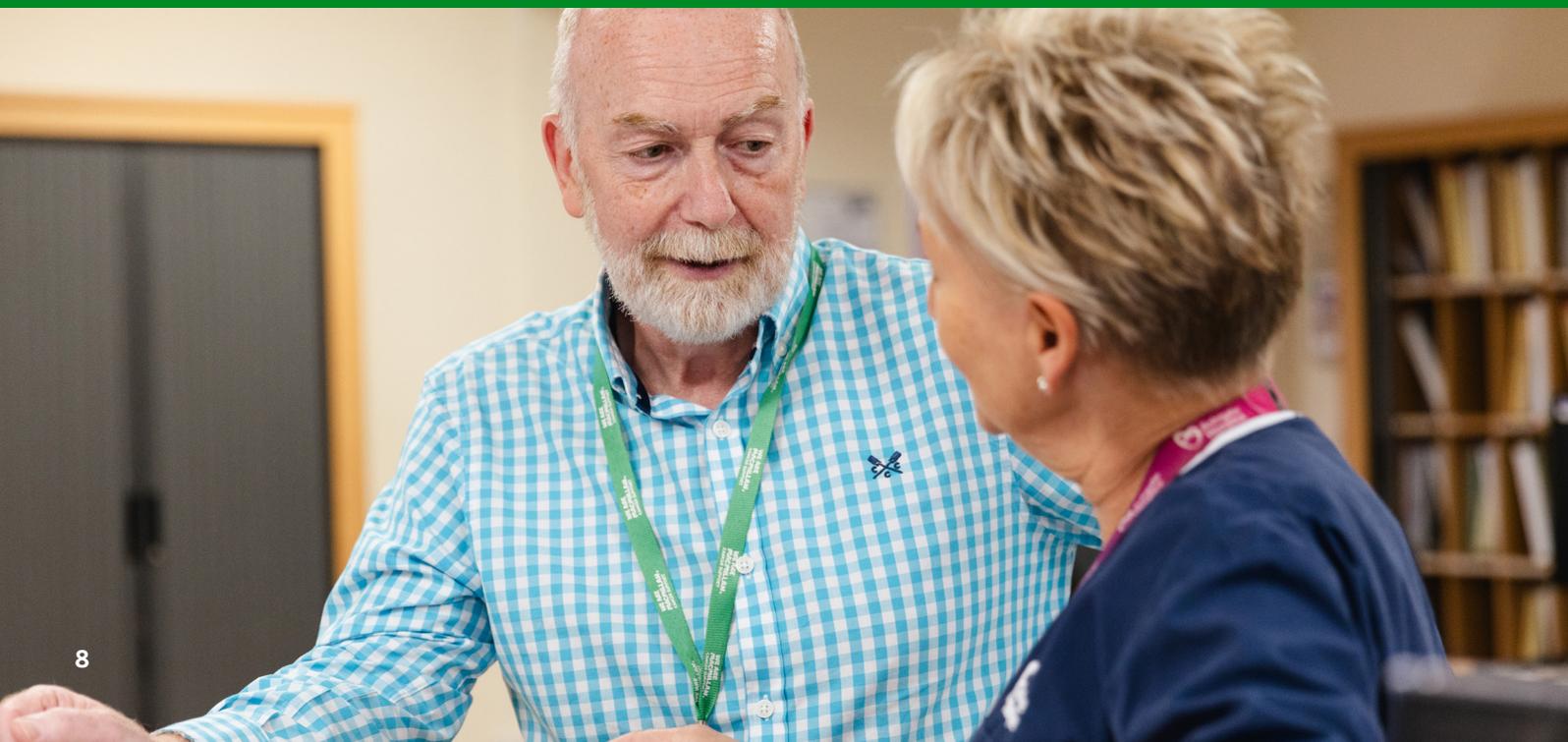
# † Data

The next Scottish Government must deliver a revolution in cancer data and digital infrastructure with long-term investment and leadership: enabling smarter planning, faster delivery and futureproofing of services, whilst empowering people living with cancer and professionals.

Whilst the current ten-year cancer strategy commitment on data was strong, the subsequent publication of vital statistics has been infrequent and incomplete. For example, the most recent cancer incidence statistics published in Autumn 2025 failed to include data on deprivation. We need to see increased investment in the digital infrastructure that drives improvements in cancer systems.

Macmillan believes improving the sharing of health data between medical professionals is essential for ensuring continuity of care and addressing persistent health inequalities. Currently, limitations in data availability and interoperability mean professionals can't have a full, shared picture of a person's care journey. This is especially problematic for people living with cancer and other long-term conditions, as their care often spans multiple health settings.

**We're calling for the annual publication of detailed cancer statistics, broken down by deprivation and ethnicity. Ultimately, improved data sharing – grounded in robust, inclusive datasets – will help us build a health and care system that is more equitable, person-centred, and responsive to the real-world experiences of people living with long-term conditions like cancer.**





**“ Alexandra believes prevention and early diagnosis are key, and that everyone should be able to access high-quality cancer care, regardless of where they live. ”**

## Alexandra's Story

Alexandra lives in a rural, hilly area near Pitlochry. At age 59, after feeling unwell over New Year 2023 and noticing that she was passing some blood, she contacted her GP. Although routine appointments looked like they might take weeks, one doctor recognised the urgency of her symptoms and acted quickly, referring her for tests.

In January 2023, Alexandra was diagnosed with bowel cancer following a colonoscopy. She was told sensitively and clearly, and a treatment plan was put in place immediately. Within weeks, she had surgery to remove a 3cm tumour. The speed of care meant she had little time to worry, which she believes was crucial in enabling her to cope with the circumstances. Macmillan Cancer Support also played a vital role, proactively contacting her to check on her finances, wellbeing and support at home – something she describes as “really fantastic”.

Alexandra's experience of hospital care was generally positive, but she was struck by how many people she met living with cancer, and the huge variation in experiences. To compound this realisation, just two days after Alexandra's surgery she was hit with the sad news that her sister-in-law, Karan, had died

of cancer, having had a far less positive experience of treatment and care than Alexandra.

Alexandra later underwent six months of chemotherapy and continues to have regular scans. While she still experiences fatigue and digestive issues, she feels well supported. However, her experience left her concerned about postcode variation in access to treatment. Alexandra believes prevention and early diagnosis are key, and that everyone should be able to access high-quality cancer care, regardless of where they live.

# Person-centred care

Cancer can disrupt someone's whole life, entailing practical, physical, emotional and financial problems that can last long after treatment ends. Person-centred care ensures a person's medical, psychological, emotional, and practical needs are met across treatment and care settings, reduced inequities, and has been shown to improve outcomes. As cancer care becomes more complex, and the burden of co-morbidities increases, a person-centred approach is even more vital. This is why a recent survey of Macmillan's campaigners in Scotland chose the continued embedding of personalised care across health systems in Scotland as their highest priority ask of the next Scottish Government.

Huge progress has been made in the spread of person-centred care across Scotland, and Macmillan are the proud delivery partner of our innovative Improving the Cancer Journey (ICJ) which will cover the whole of Scotland by Summer 2026.

ICJ is a initiative multi-agency collaborative model of integrated care across health, social care and the voluntary sector. It supports people living with cancer through a needs assessment, person-centred care planning and community assets. Recognising the holistic and non-clinical client needs, ICJ evaluations have found improved outcomes and experiences for clients, and system efficiency and effectiveness for healthcare professionals who agreed that ICJ saved them time and improved staff morale. The adoption and spread of innovative practices and projects like ICJ must become embedded in the health system to deliver the best care to patients wherever they are in Scotland. The ICJ model of neighbourhood care has shown how it can deliver real change for people living with cancer and address some of the challenges of a fragmented and complex health system.

**The next Scottish Government must demonstrate a renewed commitment to delivering person-centred care and continue to build on this community-based approach, ensuring it is embedded across the country to support the wider needs of cancer patients as they go through their journeys.**





# Acknowledgements

We would like to thank everyone affected by cancer in Scotland who shared their stories, experiences and insights to shape this manifesto. Your voices – honest, powerful and personal – are at the heart of everything we are calling for.

We also extend our thanks to Macmillan professionals across Scotland who contributed their expertise and frontline perspectives. Your commitment to supporting people affected by cancer, often in pressurised environments and challenging circumstances, is what drives our mission to spark a revolution in cancer care for the future.

This manifesto is yours – and we will do whatever it takes to make sure your voices are heard.

**At Macmillan, we do whatever it takes to help everyone living with cancer. Whatever your question or need, big or small, we are here to provide reassurance, information, and support to help you right now.**

**For information, support or just someone to talk to,  
call 0808 808 00 00 or visit [macmillan.org.uk/whateveryouneed](https://macmillan.org.uk/whateveryouneed)**