

BLAKE STEPHENSON MP
Member of Parliament for Mid Bedfordshire



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

David Carter

Chief Executive, Bedfordshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
Bedford Hospital
South Wing
Kempston Road
Bedford
MK42 9DJ

Dear David,

Opt-out HIV testing

I trust this letter finds you well.

I am proud that the last Government listened to calls from Terrence Higgins Trust, alongside other HIV and hepatitis charities, and invested £20 million of new funding to expand opt-out HIV testing to 47 more emergency departments across England, including to our local hospitals in Luton & Dunstable and Bedford. As you will know, these hospitals regularly provide A&E services for my constituents in Mid Bedfordshire. That's why I welcome this vital new investment that will help us to find people living with undiagnosed HIV in our area, a crucial step to ending new HIV cases in England by 2030. I am dedicated to this target and to ensuring we play our part locally.

You will know that the initial funding made available in 2021 for opt-out HIV testing in London, Blackpool, Brighton and Manchester has led to incredible results. In the first 18 months, nearly 1,000 people were found with HIV. Thanks to additional funding from the Hepatitis C Elimination Fund, hepatitis B and C have been included – and a total of more than 4,000 people have been found with blood-borne viruses in just those four cities. The programme has proven a crucial way of tackling health inequalities, disproportionately finding women, older people and people of Black African ethnicity – all groups who are more likely to be diagnosed late in other services.

I understand that as part of the expansion of this programme, every emergency department in an area with a high prevalence of HIV is receiving a year of testing funds to draw on before April 2026. I am therefore writing to express my support for the programme at Bedfordshire hospitals and to urge you to draw on these funds as quickly as possible. The sooner we start testing, the sooner people living with undiagnosed HIV in our area can access the life-saving treatment they need. It is incredibly welcome that the Hepatitis C Elimination Fund is matching this expansion so that hepatitis B and hepatitis C testing can be included too. This will be game-changing for our local efforts to end new cases of HIV and tackle blood-borne viruses.

Nearly one in three of those found through opt-out HIV testing so far have been previously diagnosed with HIV but were not accessing the care they needed. This is the result of complex factors, including stigma and poverty. It's therefore welcome that as part of the expansion of the programme, 10% of funding will be dedicated to post-diagnosis support for people living with HIV.

You will know that funding for this testing is coming from the National Institute for Health and Care Research, which will be evaluating the programme. I understand that it is therefore crucial that data from the programme is reported swiftly through the sentinel BBV surveillance system so that it can be evaluated. This data will also be essential to make the case for future funding for our area.

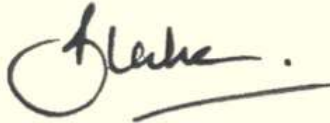
I would therefore be grateful if you could provide an update on local efforts to implement opt-out HIV testing, including:

- a) When your hospitals will be ready to start opt-out HIV and hepatitis testing.
- b) How you will ensure swift reporting of results to inform the evaluation of the programme, including through the Sentinel BBV surveillance system.
- c) What local plans are in place to invest in post-diagnoses support services.

Thank you in advance for all of your work on this world-leading programme. It will save lives locally and turbocharge our efforts to end new HIV cases. When the programme is up and running, I would be delighted to visit to see it in action.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Blake', with a large circular flourish on the left and a horizontal line underneath.

Blake Stephenson MP

Member of Parliament for Mid Bedfordshire

Copied to: Richard Angell, Chief Executive, Terrence Higgins Trust