

The HIV Outcomes UK programme is funded by Gilead Sciences, ViiV Healthcare and MSD as co-sponsors

HIV services at the crossroads: Wales

Introduction

The Welsh Government has shown strong leadership and commitment to the HIV response. In 2023, it published the HIV Action Plan for Wales 2023–2026¹, setting out key actions toward achieving its goal of ending new HIV transmissions and HIV-related stigma by 2030. Wales has also made history by becoming the first Fast Track nation in the world, with all health boards across the country committing to ending new HIV transmissions.²

In May 2025, the Welsh Government announced £9 million in funding for the implementation of Wales' HIV Action Plan – a portion of which is set to be invested in a National Peer Support Network – which we hope to see commissioned soon – and renewed funding for an All-Wales Coalition.

However, new HIV diagnoses in Wales increased between 2021 and 2023³ with almost a third (31%) of these being a late diagnosis where HIV has already started to damage an individual's immune system. Continued leadership and investment is needed to support people to live well with HIV and meet the goal of ending new HIV transmissions.

Findings from the UK-wide 'HIV services at the crossroads' report highlight that HIV Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprises (VCSEs) are vital partners in the HIV response – offering trusted relationships with communities, extensive reach, and high-quality, person-centred support that statutory services alone cannot provide. Yet across the UK, vital services provided by HIV VCSEs are under serious and growing pressure, threatening our ability to meet the 2030 targets.

HIV VCSE services for people living with and affected by HIV in Wales are limited. The Welsh Government's HIV Action Plan has recognised that the country does not currently have commissioned HIV support services across the country nor a dedicated HIV peer support network.⁴ Compared to other UK nations, the level and range of support available to people living with HIV in Wales remains significantly more limited.

The recommendations in this briefing build on the strong foundations and strategic plans already in place with a focus on the actions that the Welsh Government has already committed to implement.

Recommendations for the Welsh Government

- **Deliver on the goals of the HIV Action Plan for Wales and ensure that the priorities and ambitions are continued through renewed action in the next Parliament** and with a strategic and joined-up approach across the policy and health landscape, including but not limited to the Women's Health Action Plan and the LGBTQ+ Action Plan.
- **Prioritise a national peer support network.** The Welsh Government has previously set out a commitment to commission a peer support network as part of the HIV Action Plan. The availability of peer support to everyone living with HIV in Wales is essential for people to live well.
- **Prioritise re-engagement in HIV care.** Building on the HIV Engagement (HIVE) Project in Cardiff which piloted a re-engagement model to reach those not served by existing services, the Welsh Government should ensure the provision of engagement support workers and local multi-agency networks in all Health Boards.
- **Establish a national HIV anti-stigma campaign.** The Welsh Government should work to develop and support a national HIV anti-stigma campaign for Wales to raise awareness of HIV and tackle common misconceptions about the virus. This must be delivered in collaboration with VCSEs and informed by the experiences of people living with HIV across Wales.
- **Improve data collection.** The Welsh Government, in partnership with Public Health Wales, should improve HIV data and surveillance methods, with an improved focus on people who are diagnosed with HIV but are not currently engaged with HIV care and treatment. Central to this approach must be the delivery of an all-Wales sexual health case management system, as committed to in the HIV Action Plan.



1 <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2023-03/hiv-action-plan-for-wales-2023-to-2026.pdf>

2 https://www.pressreader.com/uk/western-mail/20250728/281968908736994?srsltid=AfmBOoocn-gwARZ-1yjJJv753A8_6IA-TRPurMzmbIEWGzZVwSKOFxNQ

3 <https://phw.nhs.wales/publications/publications1/annual-hiv-report-2024>

4 <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2023-03/hiv-action-plan-for-wales-2023-to-2026.pdf>

How HIV VCSE services are key to ending HIV transmissions and supporting people to live well with HIV in Wales

Life-changing impact of support services

People living with HIV across the UK highlight the value of HIV VCSE services, such as peer support, in meeting their needs to manage their treatment, deal with stigma, reduce isolation and improve their mental health and wellbeing.

Peer support is a cost-effective approach to improving mental health and wellbeing, and reducing stigma for people living with HIV. It has been found to have an impact in strengthening communities, creating social connections, and contributing to public health and prevention.

Currently, the majority of people in Wales living with HIV are able to access peer support online.

These digital services (including Terrence Higgins Trust's My Community and PlusHealth's online peer support) help to foster community and address barriers for people living with HIV receiving support, particularly for those in rural areas.

However, face-to-face peer support provision is currently only available in one out of seven Health Boards, and the absence of localised voluntary sector support has left many isolated and unsupported, particularly in rural areas. One man living with HIV in Cardiff shared that when he was diagnosed, there were no VCSE support services available to him in Wales. It wasn't until eight years later, when he accessed support through Terrence Higgins Trust's UK-wide service offer, that he felt he "got his life back."

Another person living with HIV told us that relying solely on online services while living in shared accommodation "can feel like an invasion", stressing the need for a "safe environment away from home". Others living with HIV in Wales highlighted the lack of in-person tailored services for specific groups, including young people and women. In light of these gaps, it is welcome that the Welsh Government recently re-committed to deliver a national HIV peer support network for Wales. This is a long-awaited service and funding must be delivered as a priority.

5 <https://nat.org.uk/publications/living-well-with-hiv-in-wales/>
6 *ibid*



Fast Track Cymru

Fast Track Cymru is a Welsh based charity with a focus on HIV and related conditions, coordinating efforts to end new HIV transmissions in Wales while tackling stigma and improving outcomes for people living with HIV.

As a cross-sector coalition, the initiative has seen significant progress in embedding HIV into national priorities and community-led practice over the past year.

A significant development was Wales becoming the first Fast Track Nation in the world. This milestone reflects national commitment across Welsh Government, Health Boards, local authorities and the third sector to deliver against the HIV Action Plan for Wales and to achieve the UNAIDS 95-95-95 targets.

Over the past six months, Fast Track Cymru has delivered targeted training to multiple organisations across Wales, co-designed by people living with HIV. These sessions are driving culture change and helping to build a more confident, stigma-aware Wales. Fast Track Cymru also consulted with young people as well as educators to shape their Gilead-funded RSE (Relationships and Sexuality Education) resources, and a National Art Competition, which launched nationally in September.⁷

These accessible and engaging resources embed HIV and stigma awareness into the Welsh curriculum ensuring that all young people in Wales regardless of their age, stage or background can be informed and empowered. Alongside this, Fast Track Cymru are launching a national art competition for all young people in Wales, culminating in a Senedd exhibition for World AIDS Day.

Fast Track Cymru have participated in hundreds of community events, including Pride events, community engagement events and Public Health Wales awareness campaigns, and recently supported the Red Ribbon Project, which featured powerful storytelling and music from people living with HIV and clinicians, strengthening public engagement through culture and conversation. They are also a partner in Cardiff Universities Texting for Testing (T4T) study. Fast Track Cymru continues to engage with hundreds of people in Wales each week through their multifaceted, collaborative approach.

Through innovative, equity-driven approaches, Fast Track Cymru actively reaches and includes marginalised and underserved groups, including asylum seekers, people from global majority backgrounds, farming communities and others too often excluded from decision-making. Their success in working across all regions of Wales, recognising and valuing both rural and urban communities, shows that meaningful inclusion is not only possible but transformative. This model of practice offers a compelling blueprint for other national initiatives, such as becoming a Marmot Nation, to ensure that every voice is heard, every community is represented, and no one is left on the margins.

As part of their evolving vision, Fast Track Cymru is broadening its priorities to include other blood-borne viruses and related conditions, such as hepatitis B and C, tuberculosis, and sexually transmitted infections, recognising the interconnected nature of health inequalities and the need for integrated responses whilst maximising the impact their community engagement opportunities have.

Why tackling inequalities is essential to the Welsh HIV response

Participants at our research focus group in Wales highlighted the shift in the demographics of people affected by HIV in Wales, with increasing impact on deprived and Black communities.

Without a deliberate focus on reaching those who are structurally excluded, participants warned that the Action Plan would “miss the mark”. It is welcome that the Government’s HIV Action Plan seeks to advance work with all diverse communities, including ethnic minorities.

The impact of peer support can be significantly strengthened when delivered as part of the holistic, wrap-around care that is often provided by HIV VCSEs in other UK nations. These services go beyond HIV care, offering tailored support such as information, advice and advocacy, support on benefits and housing, guidance on sex and relationships, psychological support. Our UK-wide research demonstrates that access to this broader support helps meet the wider health and social needs of people living with HIV – needs that directly affect their ability to stay engaged in care and their overall health outcomes.

HIV VCSEs in Wales are not currently funded by statutory bodies to deliver this wider support. Whilst some Boards, such as Cardiff and Vale, and the Aneurin Bevan University Health Board, employ an HIV service support worker that builds connections with other services and helps meet the wider needs of people living with HIV, this support isn’t available by either NHS or VCSE providers across Wales. Without this, it can contribute to worse health outcomes and missed opportunities to address the social determinants of health that often underlie disengagement from care. Although there are limited statutory resources, this is an area where longer-term government investment should be considered to strengthen the Welsh HIV response and support for people living with HIV.

Our research has highlighted an urgent need for greater investment in services to support retention in and re-engagement with care across the UK. Not being engaged in care presents serious risks to people’s health, increases the likelihood of onward transmission, and impacts Wales’ efforts to achieve the 2030 targets. People disengage from their HIV care for a range of different, interacting factors including HIV stigma, their socio-economic circumstances, drug and alcohol misuse and poor mental health.

The HIV Engagement Project (HIVE) in Cardiff successfully piloted the role of an HIV Engagement Support Worker which worked to re-engage people in HIV care. Part of their work involved connecting with organisations in the community that patients may be connected to and building reciprocal relationships between them and the HIV care team, such as housing support, mental health teams, financial aid, charity organisations.

The HIVE project has had a tangible impact on the lives of people living with HIV. For example, Emily, a 32-year-old from Cardiff, was diagnosed with HIV in 2023 and felt overwhelmed at first. She was quickly signposted to support through the HIVE project and invited to join the Expert Patient Programme pilot. Fast Track Cymru have highlighted that this six-week course helped her build confidence, understand her treatment, and connect with others living with HIV. Throughout her journey, clinicians and support workers worked together to ensure she received person-centred care. Emily now lives well with an undetectable viral load and is actively involved in awareness campaigns through Fast Track Cymru, using her experience to challenge stigma and support others in Wales living with HIV.

Building on the HIVE Project, the Welsh Government should ensure funding for engagement support workers (either VCSE or NHS based) and local multi-agency networks in all Health Boards.

Tafod+, Terrence Higgins Trust Cymru's peer support offer

Across 2024-2025, Terrence Higgins Trust Cymru have invested in developing a peer support service for people living with HIV in Wales, working to ensure that no one faces their diagnosis or journey alone.

Central to this offer is Terrence Higgins Trust's national online peer support service, 'My Community'. My Community is a free, private and confidential online space for people living with HIV to connect. Members can share their personal experiences of living with HIV, seek advice from peers and access reliable information about HIV including diagnosis, treatments and managing multiple health conditions. Available in all UK nations and moderated by staff and volunteers who are living with HIV, it also provides private spaces for specific communities, including a women's space and a trans and non-binary space.

A dedicated space for people living with HIV in Wales is also hosted on My Community, informed by the voices and needs of people living with HIV in the country. Terrence Higgins Trust Cymru's peer support group, Tafod+, now run vibrant sessions held online every fortnight, fostering a sense of regular connection. Support is tailored and flexible: one-on-one sessions are also offered both in community settings and online, accommodating different preferences and needs. All support services for people living with HIV in Wales are available in both English and Welsh.

Terrence Higgins Trust Cymru are now working with partners across Wales to ensure peer support is integrated into HIV care pathways. This means that people who are newly diagnosed with HIV, as well as people in need of community support, are seamlessly introduced to the resources and support available, both online and in-person.

Terrence Higgins Trust Cymru's peer support journey is defined by collaboration, empowerment, and a steadfast commitment to ensuring that every person living with HIV in Wales feels seen, heard, and supported.

Person supported by Terrence Higgins Trust Cymru

"M", a person in their late twenties, attending a semi-rural clinic, was diagnosed within the past year. M receives care at this clinic but went on to relocate within Wales. Isolated and fearful of disclosure, M had never met anyone else living with HIV. Referred by their clinic via email to Terrence Higgins Trust Cymru's peer support project, M attended a one-to-one assessment, registered with My Community, engages with the different feeds on the platform to understand how others thrive with HIV and address any challenges they face. M now attends "Tafod+", and registered for the newly diagnosed course. With ongoing follow-up, M now knows about a range of services and is becoming better equipped to navigate life with HIV.

Terrence Higgins Trust Cymru runs a fully bilingual website tht.cymru, an online low-cost HIV home test kits service, prevention campaigns on PrEP, testing, stigma and their award-winning 'Can't Pass It On' campaign to communicate undetectable equals untransmissible. It is currently engaging in a joint project with Social Care Wales to provide bilingual education resources to the social care workforce.

Service users in Wales have access to all Terrence Higgins Trust UK services, including THT Direct. For people living with HIV there is the hardship fund, 12 hours of free counselling, peer support, internalised stigma workshops and the Work & Skills programme.

Value of HIV VCSE testing and prevention initiatives in Wales

It is estimated that between 11 and 18% of people living with HIV in Wales are currently unaware that they are living with the virus.⁸ It is essential that these people can get tested and be linked into care. VCSE outreach, campaigns and community testing is critical in increasing testing and reaching communities that may not access traditional services.

Wales HIV Testing Week, led by Public Health Wales with support from Fast Track Cymru, raises awareness and increased access to HIV testing. The Welsh campaign directs people to order free and confidential postal STI test kits which can be delivered anywhere in Wales all year round. This led to a marked increase in the number of people accessing and ordering home HIV testing kits.⁹

However, as one interviewee living with HIV highlighted, testing alone is not enough without proper follow-up support, otherwise newly diagnosed people “will fall through the cracks”. While the expansion of Wales’ online HIV testing service is welcome, this must be matched by continued investment in post-diagnosis support. The Welsh Government and Health Boards should ensure robust referral pathways and timely access to appropriate services for those newly diagnosed. Interventions such as structured newly diagnosed courses and access to peer navigators can play a critical role in helping people process their diagnosis, build confidence, and engage well with treatment.

VCSEs in Wales also do critical work in preventing HIV transmissions through campaigns and community outreach, condom distribution, and improving awareness of PEP and PrEP. The Welsh Government has confirmed that Public Health Wales, in collaboration with partners, will develop the existing awareness campaign beyond HIV Testing Week so that it runs throughout the year. VCSEs will remain central to the design and delivery of these campaigns, using their trusted community links to tailor messages effectively and reach diverse populations that may otherwise be excluded from HIV prevention.



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⁸ https://tht.org.uk/hiv/about-hiv/hiv-statistics?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁹ Fast Track Cymru (2025) Wales HIV Testing Week. Available at: <https://fasttrack.wales/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/poster-bhiva-2025-ac-print.pdf>

Challenging Stigma and Discrimination

HIV-related stigma remains one of the most significant challenges facing people living with HIV in Wales. Participants in interviews and focus groups spoke powerfully about the ongoing impact of stigma – both within health and social care settings, and in wider society.

One man living with HIV in Wales shared that a nurse once questioned his need for a flu jab, saying, “Why do you need a flu jab? You’re fit and well.” After he shared his status, the nurse “shot across the room to close the door”. In another case, a dental technician told him, “We keep them [people living with HIV] to the end of the day... it gives us time to clean.”

HIV VCSEs in Wales have led the way in addressing stigma at a health system and societal level. For example, Fast Track Cymru’s Stop HIV Stigma campaign toolkit has been adopted by over 440 groups across Wales, equipping the public and organisations to challenge harmful stereotypes and confront misinformation.

There are also several impactful VCSE initiatives that have improved HIV education and awareness in Wales. For example, Terrence Higgins Trust’s Positive Voices programme provides informative talks and education sessions to education, corporate, public sector and other audiences about their personal experiences of living with HIV. In addition, Fast Track Cymru’s Three Letters legacy project, an arts-based initiative, provides creative HIV education resources for all school learners in Wales. Fast Track Cymru have delivered numerous training sessions to a broad spectrum of organisations across Wales which centres the voices of people living with HIV.

Public Health Wales, in partnership with Fast Track Cymru, have also produced HIV Awareness animation videos and a healthcare worker specific version has been rolled out to NHS payroll staff. It is also welcome that the Government is working to adapt/translate existing HIV training modules developed by VCSEs for resources for social care staff in Wales. This includes adapting versions of the HIV Confident charter mark e-module and Terrence Higgins Trust ‘Can’t Pass It On’ resource.

Building on these welcome interventions, and recognising the persistent stigma in various settings and the need for deeper engagement with underserved communities, the Welsh Government should fund the development of a national HIV anti-stigma campaign for Wales that raises awareness and challenges misconceptions about the virus.



Further information and partnership

For more information on HIV Outcomes UK, and to download the full ‘HIV Services at the Crossroads’ report, please visit: www.nat.org.uk/hiv-outcomes.

If you have any questions or would like to arrange a meeting, please get in touch with us at HIV.Outcomes@nat.org.uk.