

# HOW THE ‘EARLY BIRDS’ HELP FIND CANCER EARLIER



## BACKGROUND

Cancer is Scotland's biggest killer. Early detection plays an important role in changing this, because the earlier someone's diagnosed, the more likely they are to have a good outcome. This is why the Scottish Government continue to invest in their Detect Cancer Earlier (DCE) Programme which takes a whole-systems approach to reducing later stage disease, of which social marketing plays a key role.

Encouragingly, the cancer death rate has fallen by 11% over the last decade but Covid-19's disruption to life and NHS services led to a dramatic fall in the number of people being diagnosed.

There were multiple reasons for this, but one was people putting-off contacting their GP practice. This risked more people being diagnosed at an advanced stage, when outcomes are poorer.

As NHS services recovered, a new DCE behaviour change campaign was launched to remind people of the importance of getting possible signs of cancer checked sooner rather than later.

The campaign targeted people aged 40+ in areas of higher deprivation, as they are more likely to be diagnosed with cancer, including at an advanced stage.

## METHOD

Independent surveys showed that over 80% of the target audience (those aged 40 and over from areas of deprivation) were aware that detecting cancer early saves lives. However, in-depth qualitative research revealed that despite rational acknowledgement that finding cancer early helps save lives, associations were predominantly pessimistic, causing many to push all cancer messaging from their mind.

But it wasn't dying of cancer that scared people most, it was fear of the entire cancer journey, and three things in particular:

1. Impact on loved ones
2. Gruelling cancer journey
3. Doubts that anyone lives well after cancer treatment

Rather than emphasising how 'early detection saves lives', we identified an opportunity to highlight some of the 'smaller' ways acting early can make a difference. Proposition testing research identified three benefits that were most credible and motivating:

1. Better news to tell your loved ones.
2. More treatment options.
3. A greater chance of living well again.

The challenge was to bring these messages to life in a way that would stand-out, against the 'ultra real' approach of cancer charities.

Creative teams spotted an opportunity to draw on a famous proverb - 'the early bird catches the worm' - and transform the cancer conversation in Scotland. "Be the Early Bird" involved a flock of charming, funny, Scottish birds, sharing the benefits of getting cancer diagnosed and treated earlier.

Creative testing research revealed many strengths:

- Huge cut-through on a topic our audience tried to avoid.
- The birds provided a less frightening way to talk about cancer; one-step removed but with characters and emotions the target audience related to.
- Effective at raising awareness of multiple cancer symptoms, and the three new benefit messages.
- Using a well-known proverb as the call-to-action made it particularly motivating and memorable.

The campaign launched in March 2023, with a second burst in September-October. In the film, we see a series of worrying moments for each of the birds, but thankfully, each takes swift action and ultimately returns to living their life well. The creative includes a range of symptoms and the benefits identified in research.

The campaign used a multi-channel approach to build reach and frequency of message across Scotland amongst the target audience. TV was the primary channel used to reach the target audience including STV ad break takeovers to create additional cut through. Out of home (poster sites and pharmacies) visibly reinforced the TV film to boost recognition and reach, along with press advertorials (print/online) and radio features sharing real survivor stories.

Roadshows were mapped to shopping centres within the 5% most deprived areas (using the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation), delivering 15 days across 5 local authorities: Edinburgh, Glasgow, North Lanarkshire, Inverclyde and Dundee. The activity provided;

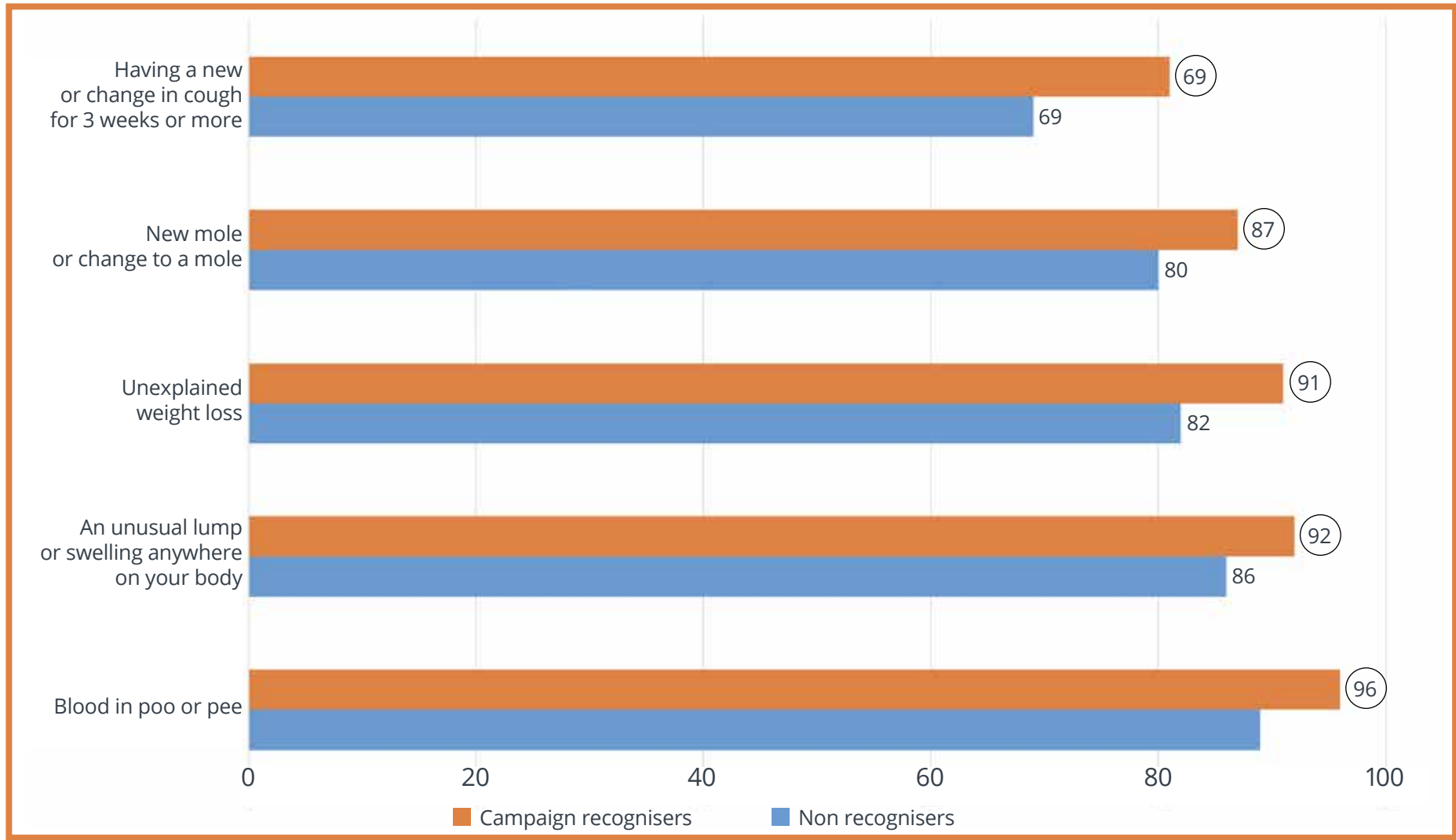
- in-depth conversations about early detection.
- assisted use of DCE's online symptom checker and, where applicable, encouragement to visit their GP practice.
- information leaflets.
- trolley coins to enable recall over a longer time period.

## RESULTS

The campaign exceeded objectives:

- The proportion of those who could identify all three benefits of taking action to detect cancer earlier mentioned in the campaign increased to 53% (following launch) and 58% (second burst).
- Campaign awareness and the proportion of campaign recognisers taking action as a result of the campaign was +70% following both the initial campaign launch and second burst.

Campaign recognisers were more likely to be able to identify the symptoms in the campaign:



Towards the end of 2023, Diane Browning reached-out to the DCE Team.

She'd heard 'Be the Early Bird' on the radio in March and contacted her GP practice about a lump she'd noticed under her arm. At the time of writing, Diane has now completed treatment for breast cancer and is living well again -

**"It can be daunting, but as my story shows, finding it early can make all the difference. I have the Early Bird campaign to thank for making me take that first step."**




## DISCUSSION

Social marketing plays an important role in reducing later stage disease; improving public education and empowerment is highlighted as a priority within the Cancer Strategy for Scotland (published June 2023) and activating targeted DCE campaigns aimed at those in areas of deprivation included as an action within the Action Plan for Scotland (2023-2026).

Independent evaluation of the campaign found that while campaign recognition was excellent and key messages were well understood, recognition was lower for men than women. A focus on targeting men in future campaigns is recommended.

Further areas for improvement identified during evaluation included strengthening messages for younger age groups and lower socio economic groups (sharing good news stories and continuing to emphasise the importance of not delaying contacting GP practices) as well as emphasising that the NHS is open/available and that cancer is a priority.

Visit DCE's website

 [getcheckedearly.org](mailto:getcheckedearly.org) [cfsdcancerandedteam@nhs.scot](mailto:cfsdcancerandedteam@nhs.scot) [facebook.com/theweec](https://facebook.com/theweec)