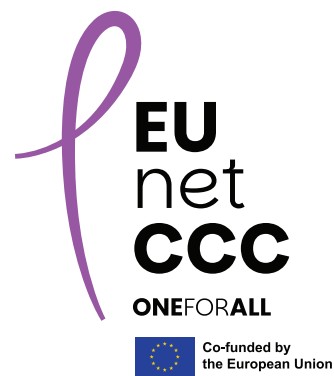


WHITE PAPER



UNLEASHING THE POTENTIAL OF THE FUTURE EUROPEAN NETWORK OF COMPREHENSIVE CANCER CENTRES (EUNETCCC)

f TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE
AND AMBITIOUS EUROPEAN
RESPONSE TO CANCER

ABSTRACT

Cancer is the second leading cause of mortality in Europe, with persistent gaps in care quality, access to research, innovation, and survival between and within Member States. To close these gaps, Europe's Beating Cancer Plan (EBCP) called for the creation of a European network of Comprehensive Cancer Centres (CCCs) – integrating research, care, and training – with a least one CCC in each Member State. Launched in October 2024, the EUnetCCC Joint Action seeks to operationalise this ambition.

It introduces an EU certification scheme to recognise CCCs and connect them into a cross-border infrastructure.

The objective is clear: define common standards and integrated pathways that link research, care and training to deliver earlier diagnosis, consistent quality, and equitable access to clinical trials and innovation for patients across Europe.



The objective of the network is also to provide capacity-building tools and collaboration opportunities to help centres progress.

This paper outlines the vision, objectives, and challenges facing the network—emphasising its potential to become a foundational platform for EU and international cancer policy. It calls for its consolidation and formulates concrete recommendations to ensure its sustainability.

These include the recognition of EUnetCCC as an EU priority; the establishment of a stable governance and legal anchoring; long-term EU funding; and the use of EUnetCCC as a platform for deploying future EU cancer and health innovation initiatives.



Introduction: A turning point for cancer in Europe



Despite major advances, Europe still faces a heavy cancer burden.

Around **2.7 million people** are diagnosed each year and **1.3 million die**.¹

Europe accounts for a quarter of the world's cancer cases, while representing less than 10% of the global population.²

Access to screening and diagnostics, participation in clinical trials, and uptake of innovation vary widely, resulting in avoidable survival gaps between and within Member States.³ Without coordinated action, incidence is projected to rise significantly by 2035 and inequalities will deepen.⁴

To address these gaps, the Commission launched Europe's Beating Cancer Plan in 2021, a milestone strategy backed by Commission funding instruments with a total budget of €4 billion, including €1.25 billion from the EU4Health programme, to reduce the cancer burden across Europe and

support Member States, ensuring that 90% of eligible patients have access to such centres by 2030.⁵

This political ambition marked the birth of EUnetCCC Joint Action, co-funded by the EU4Health programme, coordinated by the French National Cancer Institute (INCa) and bringing together 163 partners across 31 countries to create network.

The ambition of creating a European network of CCCs stems from a simple vision: every patient, in every region, should have access to excellence in cancer care, research, findings and innovation as close to home as possible. As such, EUnetCCC is not just a project – it translates the European Union's (EU) ambition into a tangible, scalable architecture—one that embodies the founding logic of the Union itself, that can serve as a model for structuring other areas of European health cooperation and transform the way cancer care is delivered across the continent.

For patients, this will have tangible impacts.

It will translate into more integrated pathways (earlier diagnosis and timely, evidence-based treatment), consistent quality of care wherever they leave, more research, and fairer access to the clinical trials and innovative therapies.



The EUnetCCC initiative: Building the future of cancer care in Europe

EU Comprehensive Cancer Centres (CCCs) will be more than high-performing hospitals. Combining state-of-the-art clinical care, cutting-edge research, education, prevention, and patient engagement under one governance structure, CCCs will serve as engines of excellence. They will be designed as multifunctional and adaptable infrastructures that can absorb and drive rapid advances in science and technology. They will operate as single institutions or as interconnected regional or national networks, and will aim to provide a one-stop pathway grounded in interdisciplinarity.⁶

The goal of EUnetCCC Joint Action is to build and operationalise a European network of CCCs.

As such, the network will bring tangible impacts to the European cancer control landscape:

➤ Establish a EU certification scheme for Comprehensive Cancer Centres.

EUnetCCC JA is creating a robust, EU-wide certification scheme – the first of its kind for CCCs – to assess and recognise centres across Europe. Developed under the EBCP's mandate, the scheme will be aligned with EU Regulation and will be based on criteria and standards co-developed by project members across seven



domains: care, research, integration research & care, education and training, innovation, prevention, and governance. This certification will take into consideration existing certifications (e.g., national systems such as in Germany or OECI Accreditation & Designation) offering an accelerated certification pathway for DKH and OECI certified CCCs.

EUCC certification, while offering a new public scheme recognised at the EU and Member States level, will deliver tangible benefits providing: a transparent benchmark; a consistent quality in care, education and research through high standards and harmonised processes; clear targets with practical guidance for centres to reach excellence and detailed plans for continuous improvement.

➤ Advancing quality, equity and innovation through structured cooperation.

The network of CCCs will foster cooperation between centres, across countries, and at every level of the



cancer care and research system.

This will allow to improve quality by expanding territorial coverage (mapping of capacities and referral links between CCCs and partner hospitals), coordinating infrastructures and practices (common criteria and standards, model pathways and shared data standards), and strengthening activities across centres (shared tools and training modules, twining programmes, cross-centre discussions for complex/rare cases and joint research projects or clinical trials).



At its core lies a principle of equity: enabling collaboration between well-established and emerging CCCs, ensuring that no country or region is excluded from progress. Together, these measures should facilitate European cancer research, increase the number and reach of clinical trials, supporting faster, more representative patient recruitment and accelerating access to innovation for all EU citizens.

► Amplifying impact and attracting investments.

By centralising cross-cutting activities, pooling expertise, infrastructures, and resources across borders, the network will allow to reduce fragmentation and improve value for money. The EU-wide certification scheme, will also provide a ready-to-use framework for Member States to guide national planning, prioritise investments, and channel resources toward CCCs.

It will also provide a trusted vehicle to mobilise existing EU instruments—Horizon Europe, EU4Health or the future Competitiveness Fund, and financing from the European Investment Bank (EIB)—by offering a common platform for the deployment of EU projects. Finally, the network will open new possibilities for blended financing models, combining EU support with national co-funding and private-sector investment.

► Serve as a backbone for impactful European initiatives and global health innovation.

The network also fills a long-standing structural gap in Europe's health landscape. Certified CCCs will provide the operational infrastructure needed to anchor, deploy, and scale up major EU initiatives – from networks of expertise to personalised medicine, AI, and clinical trial platforms. The CCC network offers a living infrastructure: a connected community of trusted institutions, able to implement complex, collaborative projects across borders, disciplines, and sectors.



These centres will act as reliable engines for the deployment of pilots and large-scale programmes. This architecture will also position Europe as a global leader. The EU CCC network will serve as the basis for an international platform of CCCs, connecting leading centres worldwide and supporting a globally coordinated response to cancer.

Far from being just an additional layer of bureaucracy, the EU network of CCCs represents a structural breakthrough in the European healthcare and research ecosystem. It provides the long-missing backbone for delivering impact at scale.

By connecting centres of excellence and promoting continuous improvement as well as sharing of expertise, the network acts as one of the strategic instruments to deliver on the European Health Union and EBCP's objectives, while positioning Europe as a global leader in cancer control and innovation.

Key challenges and the need for a sustainable framework

While the EUnetCCC initiative marks a major breakthrough in structuring cancer care, research and education across Europe, its long-term success is contingent on overcoming several challenges. Without decisive action, the network risks becoming an ambitious but incomplete architecture unable to deliver its full potential. To become a lasting and impactful pillar of the European health landscape, EUnetCCC must evolve from a time-bound initiative into a permanent, well-anchored infrastructure. This requires bold decisions on its governance, legal status, funding, and integration with EU projects:



➤ Ensuring long-term sustainability and continuity of the network.

The EUnetCCC Joint Action is a time-bound instrument, set to conclude in 2028. Yet, as of today, no permanent structure has been established to ensure the network's continuity beyond this initial phase. Without

clear political commitment, stable governance, and dedicated fundings, the considerable efforts invested in building this network risk being lost. Becoming a CCC requires major efforts from centres (internal re-organisation, new governance models, strengthening interfaces between research and care, and establishing partnerships with other institutions).



Without a clear and credible perspective for the future of the network, the risk of demobilisation among centres is high. The lack of predictability risks undermining the credibility and uptake of the certification scheme, and limiting the network's ability to scale and absorb new initiatives.

On our side, the commitment is already real and unprecedented: every Member State is part of the Joint Action and a large consortium of partners is engaged, signalling a mobilisation of Europe's cancer community rarely seen before. To

deliver on its promise, the EU CCC network must be institutionalised as a permanent European structure, with a clear mandate, and stable fundings.

► **Establishing inclusive and sustainable financing mechanisms.**

The success of the network depends on the ability of cancer centres in all Member States to participate regardless of their financial capacities, as well as the network's capacity to sustainably fund its governance and core activities beyond the current Joint Action. As of today, there is no dedicated EU funding mechanism to support these costs. To fully unlock the potential of the network and as well as avoid deepening existing inequalities, financing solutions should be made available.

These may include: a recurrent operating line to fund the network's core functions (coordination, governance, patient involvement, etc); a co-funding mechanism to cover certification costs for centres; and targeted support to reduce disparities by financing capacity-building, joint research and clinical projects, data interoperability and sharing, workforce training, and



infrastructure upgrades around certified CCCs and their partner hospitals. For this to be possible, however, the future network will need an EU legal base.

► Integrating EUnetCCC with broader European cancer initiatives.

Beyond its standalone value, the network must also be recognised and leveraged as a structural platform to integrate and sustain other major EU cancer and health initiatives. These include, but are not limited to, Understand CANcer (UNCAN.eu), the EU networks of expertise on cancer (JaNE-2), and personalised medicine. At present, many of these initiatives are implemented in silos, without the operational infrastructures needed to ensure long-term uptake and integration into health systems.

The EU CCC network fills this gap by providing a trusted, certified, and connected network of centres capable of turning innovation into real-world outcomes.

Taken together, these challenges highlight that while the foundation has been laid, transforming EUnetCCC into a lasting European infrastructure now depends on bold and coordinated political choices. Strategic decisions on governance, legal anchoring, and financing are needed—not in the distant future, but in the very next phase—to secure the network’s continuity and operational capacity. This step will require coordinated action from the

Commission, Member States, and stakeholders to align ambitions, scale up implementation, and unlock the full potential of this new EU infrastructure.



OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure the success and sustainability of the future European network of Comprehensive Cancer Centres, we call on EU institutions, Member States, and key stakeholders to:

- 01 Recognise the EU CCC network as a strategic EU priority and a key instrument** to implement the EBCP, the Cancer Mission and effectively create the European Health Union.
- 02 Position the network as a unifying and structuring platform** to deploy and scale up EU cancer initiatives.
- 03 Ensure a clear institutional and legal anchoring** of the network



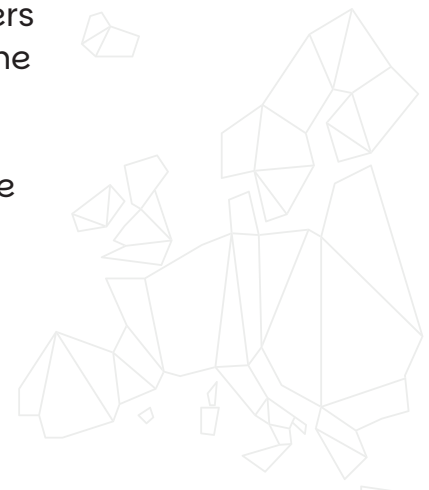
CONCLUSION: A COLLECTIVE COMMITMENT FOR A CANCER-FREE EUROPE



The creation of a European network of Comprehensive Cancer Centres is one of the most promising and structuring initiatives in the fight against cancer in Europe. EUnetCCC directly addresses key shortcomings identified in past EU health programmes and the EBCP: fragmented efforts, limited-scale investments, and a lack of continuity.

It provides the operational backbone Europe needs to translate innovation into impact, pool resources, and sustain progress over time. It offers a unique opportunity to turn political ambition into tangible progress for patients, professionals, and systems.

But this opportunity will only be realised if we act collectively and decisively now. We therefore call on all stakeholders – European policymakers, national authorities, patient organisations, healthcare providers, and researchers – to support the vision behind EUnetCCC and ensure the continuity of the network beyond 2028.



within the EU framework, to guarantee its sustainability and eligibility for long-term support.

04 Establish a high-level governance mechanism, involving the Commission, Member States, and key stakeholders, to oversee the strategic orientation and coordination of the network.

05 Secure dedicated and long-term EU funding in the future Competitiveness Fund to support the coordination, maintenance, and development of the network.

06 Establish dedicated EU grant schemes to support certification, infrastructure development, and capacity-building for CCCs in development or transition.

07 Secure ring-fenced funding for patient involvement at network and centre level (including remuneration, participation costs, capacity-building, etc.)

Endnotes

1. Eurostat. (2023). Cancer statistics: Deaths from cancer. Retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Cancer_statistics#Deaths_from_cancer
2. Bray, F, Laversanne, M, Weiderpass, E, Soerjomataram, I. (2021). The ever-increasing importance of cancer as a leading cause of premature death worldwide. *Cancer*; 127(16): 3029–3030. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cncr.33587>
3. OECD and European Commission. (2023). Beating Cancer Inequalities in the EU: Spotlight on cancer prevention and early detection. OECD Publishing, Retrieved from https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/beating-cancer-inequalities-in-the-eu_14f2b8b3-en
4. International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC). (2023). Cancer Tomorrow: Estimated future cancer incidence. Retrieved from <https://gco.iarc.fr/tomorrow/en/>
5. European Commission. (2021). Europe's Beating Cancer Plan. Retrieved from: https://health.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-02/eu_cancer-plan_en_0.pdf
6. Thamm, C, Button, E, Johal, J, Knowles, R, Paterson, C, Halpern, M.T., Charalambous, A, Chan, A, Aranda, S, Taylor, C, et al. (2025). Describing the Core Attributes and Impact of Comprehensive Cancer Centers Internationally: A Chronological Scoping Review. 17, 1023. <https://doi.org/10.3390/cancers17061023>.