

INTERVIEW BRIEFING

Health Minister interviews on latest NHS performance data – Nov & Dec/ End of industrial action by junior doctors

Date and time	Friday 19 th January 2024
Location	Zoom – links to come
Interviewer and format	Radio Cymru 8:10 Redacted – Section 40 Live on Zoom Radio Wales 8.10 Redacted – Section 40 Live on Zoom
Lead press officers	Redacted – Section 40
Background	<p>The monthly NHS performance data will be published at 9:30am on Thursday 18th December 2024.</p> <p>You will be responding to these.</p> <p>You will also be responding to how the NHS fared following the end of industrial action by junior doctors.</p>
Top Messages to get out	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Thanks to the hard work of our dedicated staff the NHS in Wales has coped relatively well under difficult circumstances so far this winter. I'm also encouraged to see the steps we have taken this winter, and over the last year, are helping to stabilise or improve performance.• I am delighted that for the first time in a number of months the overall number of people on waiting lists has come down, but the challenging winter we have been through means that this may be difficult to sustain over the coming months.• When compared to the same time last year we've seen improvements in ambulance response time performance and reduced ambulance patient handover delays, as well as a 20% fall in numbers of patients spending over 12 hours in an emergency department before admission or discharge.• This is despite immense pressure. As an example, the NHS 111 Wales service answered more calls than ever,

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Latest NHS performance data

Top lines to take:

- Thanks to the hard work of our dedicated staff the NHS in Wales has coped relatively well under difficult circumstances so far this winter.
- I'm also encouraged to see the steps we have taken this winter, and over the last year, are helping to stabilise or improve performance.
- I am delighted that for the first time in a number of months the overall number of people on waiting lists has come down, but the challenging winter we have been through means that this may be difficult to sustain over the coming months.
- When compared to the same time last year we've seen improvements in ambulance response time performance and reduced ambulance patient handover delays, as well as a 20% fall in numbers of patients spending over 12 hours in an emergency department before admission or discharge.
- This is despite immense pressure – as an example, the NHS 111 Wales service answered more calls than ever, and the average number of daily red calls made in December was the second highest on record.
- However, despite the proportion of red calls receiving a response within eight minutes falling slightly in December, the number within the eight minute target was the highest ever, and 80% received a response within fifteen minutes. The average response time to 'amber' category calls was 1 hour and 45 minutes faster than in December 2022. Hours lost to handover delays at hospitals were also down 29% compared to last year.
- Progress is also being made on Pathways of Care Delays which fell from 1,567 in November to 1,361 in December – and down from 1,750 in April.
- Our provision of new detailed data is helping health boards identify the areas in which they need to target resources to help more people leave hospital when they are ready to do so.
- I would also like to thank the public for using the new services we have funded to reduce pressure on GPs and emergency departments.
- It is great to see the national NHS 111 Wales service; urgent primary care centres and same-day emergency care centres successfully and safely providing care and support to tens of thousands of people every month.

- In December, more than 95,000 calls were made to the 111 helpline, an increase of around 24,500 calls compared to November. Of these, over 78,000 calls were answered - the highest figure on record.
- Health boards have continued to make progress in the delivery of planned care services during November.
- The number of patients waiting over two years continues to fall, and November also saw a fall in the overall number of pathways on the waiting list, this is a change from the recent monthly increases.
- The numbers waiting for diagnostic procedures have also reduced in November.
- The number of people told they do not have cancer was the second highest figure on record.
- But there is much more to be done and we will continue to work with health boards to tackle the longest waits.

Winter pressures

- It is important to point out that despite the significant increase in demand for services at this time of the year– the NHS continues to perform well for the vast majority of patients.
- More people than ever before are employed by the NHS in Wales with more doctors, nurses, ambulance staff and support healthcare workers delivering quality care on a daily basis.
- Planning for winter starts from April to enable a collective, whole-system response.
- This year, £25m was allocated to support the six goals for urgent and emergency care improvement programme, enabling an increase in capacity in key parts of the system.
 - NHS 111 press 2 was rolled out across Wales, and it is worth noting that more than 400 people accessed urgent mental health support through the service in December;
 - We have established 13 new urgent primary care centres and new remote navigation hubs, helping around 10,000 people a month to access care away from the emergency department;
 - And we have set up 23 new same day emergency care services, diverting around 5,000 patients a month from hospital.
- It is a well-established policy ambition to support more people closer to home. £8.24m was made available to health boards and their regional partners to increase their ability to plan, monitor and provide enhanced community care

for people with the most complex needs in our communities as a safe alternative to hospital admission.

- Vaccination is one of the safest and most effective ways of protecting our citizens and health service. I'm really pleased that 1.6 million influenza and COVID-19 vaccinations have been administered in Wales as part of the current programme.
- Primary care remains busy, but demand is in line with typical yearly patterns; with no escalation beyond the high levels we see at this time of year. Continuous monitoring is in place to support GP practices in delivering effective services during winter.

Winter planning

- An integrated approach has been taken to plan for the this winter, which is expected to be extremely challenging.
- A whole system approach will be required with expectations of primary, community planned, social and urgent services to enhance capacity during predicted periods where demand on services is likely to increase.
- Our emergency services and GPs will face increased pressure during this period, and we want everyone to be able to access the care they need quickly and easily.
- If you're unwell or injured, there are many ways to access the NHS in Wales, including pharmacists, minor injury units, mental health helplines, online consultations and more. So, it's easier to get care, help and advice with new or existing conditions, even without leaving your home or workplace.
- Often people feel they have no option but to go to their GP, call 999 or go to their nearest emergency department for advice or treatment. But now, people with urgent care needs can be treated elsewhere by the many different health professionals and services working and available in NHS Wales. E.g community pharmacies, NHS 111, (and 111, press 2) UPCC and SDECS.
- Our 'Help Us Help You' – better health starts with you – campaign promotes the range of services available within primary care and the community to prevent the default of 'going to the GP' or 'going to A&E'. It aims to:
 - Educate the public on the most appropriate ways to access the services fitted to their needs,
 - Signpost to alternative services to help people get the 'right care, right place, first time' – not just defaulting to GPs or Emergency departments,
 - Shift perceptions that GPs/EDs are best places for treatment – many health specialists can be accessed quicker and closer to home,
 - Reinforce importance of self-care, prevention, and wellbeing.

- Successful progress has also been made since the launch of the Welsh Government's 'Six Goals for Urgent and Emergency Care' programme, which has since seen the implementation of:
 - National NHS 111 service, and 111 press 2 for urgent mental health support
 - Urgent primary care centres (UPCC)
 - Same day emergency care services (SDECS)
- All this aims to reduce pressures on GPs and emergency services to help the patient get the right care, in the right place, first time.

Welsh Ambulance Service Trust

- Progress is being made around improvement in clinical outcomes for patients who have suffered a cardiac arrest. The Welsh Ambulance Service's information shows **record high performance levels** during September and October – around one in four (23%) - for patients who were in cardiac arrest but were supported to circulate on their own behest on arrival at.
- WAST has also developed a winter ambulance improvement plan which contains actions to strengthen its approach this winter, including:
 - Optimising use of the Clinical Support Desk, to manage up to 17% of patients remotely where clinically safe to do so, and reduce the number of patients conveyed to hospital.
 - Increasing the availability of staff overtime within controlled levels to optimise the availability of resources at times of peak demand.
 - Additional volunteer capacity through the Trust's Connected Support Cymru initiative, which aims to provide "eyes-on" to patients earlier than would otherwise be available, providing important information back to WAST's remote clinical workforce to aid decision making and support more patients to remain at home.
 - £120,000 Six Goals Funding has been allocated to enhance discharge transport for patients' return to the community from hospital, across all 12 ED sites during the remainder of winter.
 - Additional resource capacity will be brought in during the festive period including mobile foot teams and alcohol treatment centres in key urban areas, deployed according to forecasting outcomes.
 - Ensuring public messaging is clear, helpful and points the public to the appropriate service to meet their needs.
- Officials will monitor delivery against these actions through weekly assurance meetings with Health Boards and WAST over the winter period.

- Health Boards have developed integrated ambulance improvement plans jointly with WAST. These plans deliver a wide range of actions to support better management of 999 demand in the community, increased ambulance capacity, improved responsiveness to people with time sensitive complaints and aim to eradicate long ambulance patient handover delays.
- Supported by £3m in additional funding from Welsh Government, the Trust has also added an additional 76 whole time equivalent (WTE) clinicians in post nationally since December 2021. We have provided funding for a pilot delivered by St John Ambulance which is supporting around 50% of people referred to the service to safely avoid transport to hospital.
- We have targeted investment in 999 ambulance clinical triage, including video consultation technology. This is enabling around 4,500 patients per month to be managed without needing transport to an emergency department. This has further enabled WAST to increase the number of 999 callers who can be safely managed through remote telephone assessment, enabling people to receive the support they need in the community and freeing up ambulance resources to respond to other calls.
- We have also seen progress from the Trust in delivering the agreed workforce efficiencies which are helping to increase capacity, including a reduction in sickness absence, supported by an attendance management programme and a 40-point plan.
- These actions show the ambulance service is increasing capacity, responding to more calls within 8 minutes, and managing more patients in the community, but challenges caused principally by ambulance patient handover delays are impacting on ambulance availability and performance against the national target.
- It is likely to be another challenging winter ahead, but without the interventions we have made to better manage patient demand across the system, the pressures on emergency care services would be far worse.

Six Goals for Urgent and Emergency Care

- The national six goals for UEC programme was established with senior clinical leadership to enable local teams to deliver the goals and improve experience and outcomes for service users. The national programme Board has set two key priorities for Health Boards:
 - To develop a safe and effective 24/7 urgent care model to help signpost people to care as close to home as possible to optimise experience and outcomes. This should include development of 'urgent primary care centres'; and

- To deliver enhanced 'same day emergency care services' that help people who may have ordinarily been admitted to hospital to return home to sleep in their own bed on the same day.
- We have given an extra £3m to each Health Board this year to help develop these services and provide additional capacity over the difficult winter months.

Six Goals Programme Outcomes

- We have made real progress in delivering programme objectives to increase access to Urgent Primary Care Centres and Same Day Emergency Care services:
 - Urgent Primary Care Centres are treating approximately 10k people a month, reducing pressure on GP in-hours services and Emergency Departments; up 9% on the same period last year; and
 - SDEC services are treating and discharging around 4.5k patients per month. That's over 13.5k patients who would otherwise have been admitted to hospital over the past quarter.
- We've provided £50m over two years to help people access the right care, in the right place through our Six Goals programme- without this funding, emergency departments would be even greater pressure.
- Investment in NHS 111 Wales online has delivered 76 symptom checkers. The site is now receiving around 400k hits a month. The 111-telephony service is receiving 70k calls a month and only around 11% of callers are referred to the emergency department.
- We have launched a 111 press 2 for mental health pathway. over 30k callers have accessed the pathway since its launch in November 2022 and 8 in 10 callers do not need further advice or treatment from an urgent or emergency care service. 97% of people who call in distress report lower levels of distress following the call.
- We have targeted investment in 999 ambulance clinical triage resources and technology. This includes the use of video consultation technology. Around 4500 (10 – 15%) of patients per month are managed without needing transport to an emergency department.
- We provided £3m to the Welsh Ambulance Service last year to recruit 100 new staff, and also provided funding for a pilot delivered by St John Ambulance which is supporting around 50% of people referred to the service to safely avoid transport to hospital.

- Without these interventions over the past year, the system will be under even greater pressure.

NHS 111

- Urgent health advice is available across Wales 24 hours a day, seven days a week via the NHS Wales 111 helpline and website, which continues to give people up-to-date health advice and guidance on which NHS service is right for them.
- NHS 111 Wales provides expert healthcare advice, both online and on the phone. If you call 111, you will speak to one of our highly trained Call Handlers to make sure you get the right care, in the right place, first time.
- The NHS 111 Wales website receives around **400k hits a month** and has delivered **76 symptom checkers**, which will point you in the right direction to get the care you need as quickly as possible. This may not always be your GP or and emergency department – it could be a pharmacy, opticians or minor injury unit.
- We are reminding everyone to ‘help us, help you’ and always consider an alternative like NHS 111 Wales to calling 999 or presenting at an Emergency Department unless absolutely necessary.
- If your health concern is urgent, the 111 service call handlers on the helplines can help you get the right treatment at the right time and in the right place.
- **The 111-telephony service is receiving 70k calls a month, with only approximately 11% of callers being referred to an emergency department or MIU. However, a further 8% of patients get re-prioritised back to 999 as their condition may have deteriorated or was more serious than originally thought.**

NHS 111 press 2

- The ‘111 press 2’ service is now available in every health board in Wales providing urgent mental health support to people of all ages 24 hours a day 7 days a week.
- By providing access to a mental health professional, without the need for a GP referral, it can help support people to manage a mental health crisis and in many cases be an alternative to attending emergency departments or calling the police - reducing pressure on those services.

- **Over 30k callers have accessed the pathway since its launch in November 2022 and 8 in 10 callers do not need further advice or treatment from an urgent or emergency care service. 97% of people who call in distress report lower levels of distress following the call.**
- Most callers have had their problems resolved through advice on self-management or been referred to local third sector groups, with a minority of callers referred to urgent mental health care services.
- The service now has over 140 staff in hubs across our seven health boards.
- 111 press 2 builds on a range of easy to access mental health support which includes our 24/7 call listening line (for non-urgent mental health advice) and online cognitive behavioural therapy (via SilverCloud)

Community pharmacists

- To reduce demand on GPs – and ensure people with urgent needs can be seen quickly – our HUH campaign has highlighted the other local services where people can access help and support.
- This includes pharmacy services such as the Clinical Community Pharmacy Service (CCPS), Pharmacist Independent Prescribing Service (PIPS), and Sore Throat Test and Treat (STTT).
- The Clinical Community Pharmacy Service introduced in April 2022 as part of our wide-ranging reforms to community pharmacy, ensures **around 700 pharmacies (99% of pharmacies in Wales)** now provide the national common ailment service, the national contraception service, seasonal influenza vaccination, and access to supplies of repeat prescriptions in an emergency.
- Clinical service activity within community pharmacies in Wales is now at its highest ever level. Between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023, pharmacies delivered more than 0.5 million Clinical Community Pharmacy Service consultations - an increase of 28% on 2021-22 and 154% on pre-pandemic activity levels.
- Activity included 160,000 flu vaccinations, 31,000 consultations in which emergency, bridging or QuickStart contraception was provided, 80,000 emergency supplies of prescribed medicines and 250,000 common ailment service consultations. Of these, 26,000 consultations were for sore throats where point of care testing was used to determine whether or not the infection was caused by bacteria and needed antibiotics; **Wales is the only place in which such point of care testing is used in community pharmacy to reduce unnecessary antibiotic supply.**

- Of the people using the common ailment service **80% report** that had the service not been available they would have visited their GP or used an alternative NHS service (such as out of hours, NHS111 or emergency department). **This translates to around 200,000 GP appointments saved between April 2022 and March 2023.**
- In April 2022, Wales became the first UK country to introduce a nationally directed community pharmacist prescribing service under which pharmacists who are trained to prescribe can treat a range of ailments which would otherwise be treated by GPs or in other NHS services.
- One in five pharmacies (143) in Wales now provide this service with around 7000 consultations now taking place each month in which **99% of patients reported they would have otherwise visited their GP.**

Urgent primary care centres (UPCC)

- Since the launch of the Welsh Government's 'Six Goals for Urgent and Emergency Care' Programme, the latest NHS data shows that **approximately 10k people are accessing and being treated by urgent primary care centres (UPCC) a month**, without needing a traditional GP appointment or presentation at emergency departments.
- A priority of the programme was to develop a safe and effective 24/7 urgent care model to help signpost people to care as close to home as possible to optimise experience and outcomes – including the development of UPCC.
- **12 UPCCs** have been established across Wales through cluster based, co-located models at hospitals – serving a population of around 2 million people. Whilst they are still relatively new, **activity in UPCCs is up 9%** on the same time last year.
- People with urgent care needs can be assessed and treated quickly without having to go for a GP appointment to or a busy emergency department. Patients report a high level of satisfaction with **UPCC sites (85% - 95% rated experience as excellent).**
- These new centres have been particularly valuable during the winter period, when a combination of strep A and COVID-related activity threatened to overwhelm the system.

Same day emergency care services (SDECs)

- The second key priority of the 'six goals' programme was to establish and increase access to same-day emergency care services – SDECS – to help people access diagnostics and treatments and to return to sleep in their own bed on the same day.

- There are now SDECS operating across **16 hospitals in Wales**, as well as a new innovative new community-based model.
- There is a total of **24 SDEC units** (medical, surgical, combined, specialist) across Wales – this is an increase of two since April 2023, and a further two SDEC units are due to open by November 2023.
- **SDEC services treated and discharged 14,500 people with emergency care needs, who would have otherwise needed a hospital stay in the last quarter.**
- NHS data show that around **75-80% of patients** accessing these services are receiving the care they need and are returning home without the need for hospital admission - freeing up hospital beds.

Changes to how GP services are accessed

- **95% of practices** across Wales have said they are now providing a mix of remote, face to face, urgent and pre-bookable appointments, and that people can contact their practice throughout the day to make an appointment.
- We also need to acknowledge that ongoing high demand for GP services can make it difficult to get an appointment. We know over 1.5 million people consistently access GP services across Wales each month.
- These practices have also said they have now trained staff to direct people to the care that is right for them – to other services, like pharmacies or opticians, where appropriate, or to offer an appointment the same day or in the future if less urgent.
- Data from the past year shows that on average around **80,000 people across Wales do not attend their appointments each month.**
- The Health Minister has also encouraged the public to think about how they can help improve access to GPs by attending all appointments or cancelling appointments if they are no longer needed to free up appointments for other people.

Winter Respiratory Viruses

- Thousands of people in Wales are hospitalised with respiratory illnesses every winter. Vaccination remains our key defence against severe disease and hospitalisation from flu and COVID-19. It is vital those most at risk of winter illnesses take up the offer of their vaccinations.

- I would like to take the opportunity to thank all those who have come forward so far, and to encourage those eligible who haven't come forward yet, to get protected before the peak of the flu season.
- **Over 80%** of care home residents have received their COVID-19 booster. This is the most effective way of keeping our care homes safe from respiratory viruses this winter.
- COVID-19 has not gone away. The virus remains unpredictable, and we continue to closely monitor the epidemiology. We will keep under review the options for additional precautionary measures we may need to take and stand ready to implement those measures.

Enhanced community care

- The Welsh Government has held back an extra £8 million this winter to support people at greatest risk to stay well, receive care at or close to home and reduce pressure on hospitals.
- The Health and Social Care sectors are working closely together to build community capacity in order to help people stay well at home, preventing or reducing the need for hospital care this winter.
- The funding will wrap care around the most vulnerable in our communities to help them avoid hospital admissions. It will increase community health and social care workforce capacity in the evenings and on weekends including increasing the hours of community nurses and end of life clinical nurse specialists.
- Research shows people recover better at home than in hospital and the Welsh Government wants people to be able to live their best life as independently as possible in their own communities.

New top 5 tips for self-care messaging

There are some simple ways you can take care of yourself and your family this winter.

- **Stay up to date on your vaccinations.**
Vaccination is the best defence against a range of illnesses including flu and COVID19. If you're eligible make sure you and your loved ones get vaccinated.
- **Be prepared.**
Make sure your prescriptions are up to date and order repeat prescriptions in plenty of time, so you don't run out.
- **Keep supplies at home.**

Have a basic supply of simple medicines to manage minor illnesses. You can buy these from your local pharmacy.

- **Use NHS 111 Wales.**

If you feel unwell, check your symptoms on NHS 111 Wales online, to help you get the right care, in the right place, first time.

- **Ask your local pharmacist.**

Your local pharmacist can provide free advice and treatment for a range of minor medical problems. They will tell you if you should seek further help and advice from your GP.

Industrial action by junior doctors

Latest Update

Redacted – not in scope for relating to misinformation, public messaging strategy, or reputational risk

Pay Deal Negotiations

- I am disappointed that doctors have voted for industrial action, but I understand their strength of feeling about our 5% pay offer.
- We wish to address their pay restoration ambitions, but our offer is at the limits of the finances available to us and reflects the position reached with the other health unions for this year.
- We will continue to press the UK Government to pass on the funding necessary for full and fair pay rises for public sector workers.
- We remain committed to working in social partnership with the British Medical Association and NHS Employers to find a solution and are always ready to talk.

IS this the worst pay offer in the UK? Junior Doctors now on lower pay in Wales than England.

- The offer we have made – a 5% increase which has already been paid into junior doctor pay packets is equal to that made and accepted by, other NHS workers this is at the limits of the finances available to us.
- Whilst we have not been able to meet the recommendations of the pay review body this year, during the last financial year we offered a significantly higher sum than was offered in England and higher than that recommended by the pay review body.

- A new Junior Doctors contract was negotiated in social partnership with the BMA and NHS Wales Employers in 2022 with an additional investment of in the region of 3% of the contract costs (up to £8 million), unfortunately junior doctors voted to reject this contract, this has resulted in junior doctors pay in Wales falling behind that in England as any pay awards have been based on the 2002 contract.
- The new contract for junior doctors if accepted would have resulted in slightly higher pay for junior doctors in Wales compared to England and improved terms and conditions.

Effect on services

- **We worked with the British Medical Association and NHS to ensure patient safety was protected during the industrial action.**
- **We expected significant disruption to NHS services**, with most non-emergency and elective activities to be stood down during this period, and for services to resemble those generally provided on a Bank Holiday.
- Emergency and life-saving care continued and those with a critical need to attend an emergency department could still do so.
- We will be in a position to confirmed figures on how many operations were cancelled on Monday.

NHS Finances

- The Welsh NHS is facing considerable funding pressures caused by high inflation, ongoing impact of Covid/pandemic pressures and rising emergency and planned care demand.
- In recognition of these challenges, an additional £425m has been allocated to support the NHS this financial year.
- The additional funding for the NHS in 2024-25 comes on top of the additional £425m which was announced in October for the remainder of this financial year, and which was baselined into the budget for the future. This means that Health will receive more than a 4% increase for 2024-25, compared to less than 1% in England.

- Funding will be provided to organisations in support of the pay award commitments that have been agreed with and committed to our union partners.
- Local Health Boards have also been notified of the additional allocations being made in recognition of the challenges that are being faced, in addition to confirmation that each Local Health Board has been required to reduce planned deficits by 10%.
- Plans submitted by Local Health Boards at the outset of this financial year detailed a combined deficit position of £648m. A 10% reduction to this planned deficit therefore equates to £64.8m.
- In addition to providing funding to support pay awards, additional allocations, which total £460.2m, will be issued to Local Health Boards proportionately according to the established Local Health Board resource allocation formula. £336m of this funding is recurrent in nature and is conditional on each Local Health Board making progress towards the level of deficit which we have set for them to work towards ('target control totals') and which we will fund from the wider Health and Social Services budget. This constitutes £150m of funding to support organisational underlying deficits and the recurrent impact on the cost base as a result of the COVID pandemic, and £186m to support inflationary pressures including in relation to prescribing, medicines, and packages of care.
- In addition, following the review of central budgets, a further £124.2m will be provided to Local Health Boards on a non-recurrent basis. Of this £75m is to further support inflationary pressures, and £49.2m to support the additional costs of energy above historical baseline levels.
- Following these allocations and deficit reduction expectations, revised target control totals have been set for Local Health Boards which across the seven Boards combine to total a deficit of £123m. These are target deficit positions for Local Health Boards to work towards achieving and are offset by funding within central budgets.
- All Strategic Health Authorities & NHS Trusts are forecasting to achieve financial balance and where there are opportunities to deliver financial improvement beyond those positions, I have asked my officials to ensure those opportunities are realised to support the delivery of this overall position.
- I have also asked my officials, with support from the NHS Executive, to monitor progress against the target control totals set out, alongside implementation of actions with each organisation as part of the escalation framework. This includes working with organisations to support the delivery of savings that health boards have identified within plans and implementing processes to strengthen actions on a consistent national basis to support local savings delivery.

- Delivery of the position set out will be challenging, but I expect progress to be made by Local Health Boards in delivering the target control totals set by organisation. We should be clear that these are not cuts to Local Health Board budgets, but Health Boards will need to take actions to reduce expenditure and manage to the target deficits we have set out. This will be an on-going process and my officials will continue to work with all NHS Wales organisations in progressing delivery of the target forecast positions set out for the remainder of this financial year.

Other hot topics

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ENDS