



Department
of Health &
Social Care

*From Helen Whately MP
Minister of State for Care*

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26 April 2024

Dear Ms Crawford,

Thank you for your letter of 26 June 2023 to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care about the death of Keith Nielsen. I am replying as Minister with responsibility for urgent and emergency services. Please accept my sincere apologies for the significant delay in responding to this matter. I would like to assure you that the department is mindful of the statutory responsibilities in relation to prevention of future deaths reports and we are prioritising responses as a matter of urgency.

Firstly, I would like to say how saddened I was to read of the circumstances of Mr Nielsen's death and I offer my sincere condolences to his family and loved ones. I am grateful for you bringing these matters to my attention.

Your report raises concerns about ambulance response times by South East Coast Ambulance Trust (SECAmb). I note the trust have provided you with a comprehensive response on the action they are taking locally.

As the Minister responsible for urgent and emergency care services, I recognise the significant pressure the urgent and emergency care system is facing. That is why we published our 'Delivery plan for recovering urgent and emergency care services' which aims to deliver sustained improvements in waiting times. Our ambitions for this year are to improve A&E waiting times to 78% of patients to be admitted, transferred, or discharged from A&E within four hours by March 2025, and to reduce Category 2 ambulance response times to 30 minutes across this fiscal year. The plan is available at <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/B2034-delivery-plan-for-recovering-urgent-and-emergency-care-services.pdf>

The report highlights that SECAmb was under high demand at the time of the incident. A primary aim of our recovery plan is to boost ambulance capacity. Ambulance services received £200 million of additional funding in 2023/24 to expand capacity and improve response times, and we are maintaining this additional capacity in 2024/25. This is alongside

the delivery of new ambulances and specialist mental health vehicles. With more ambulances on the road, patients will receive the treatment they need more swiftly.

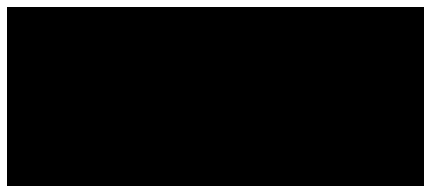
I recognise that ambulance trusts work within a health and care system and issues such as delayed patient handovers to hospitals can impact on capacity and response times. That is why a key part of the delivery plan is about improving patient flow and bed capacity within hospitals. We achieved our 2023/24 ambition of delivering 5,000 more staffed, permanent hospital beds this year compared to 2022-23 plans, backed by £1 billion of dedicated funding, and we will maintain this capacity uplift in 2024/25. Further, we also achieved our target of scaling up virtual ward bed capacity to over 10,000 ahead of winter 2023/24, and there are now over 11,000 beds available nationally. We have also provided £1.6 billion of funding over two years to support the NHS and local authorities to ensure timely and effective discharge from hospital. These measures are helping improve patient flow through hospitals, reducing delays in patient handovers so ambulances can swiftly get back on the roads.

Regarding staffing capacity, we have made significant investments in the ambulance workforce – the number of NHS ambulance staff and support staff has increased by over 50% since 2010. To help ensure we have the ambulance workforce to meet the future demands on the service, the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan sets out plans to boost the number of paramedics by up to 15,600 to deliver services in ambulance and other care settings.

At a national level, we have seen significant improvements in performance this year compared to last year. In 2023-24, average Category 2 ambulance response times (including for serious conditions such as heart attacks and strokes) were over 13 minutes faster compared to the same period last year, a reduction of over 27%. In 2023-24, SECAMB performance has also improved and on average the trust's Category 2 response times have been over 8 minutes faster than the national performance. Information on ambulance handover times has been published since October 2023. In March 2024, average patient handover times in the SECAMB region were 18 minutes 41 seconds and is the fourth month in a row that handover time has improved. I also understand the time the trust has spent in surge level 4 has reduced across 2023. However, I recognise there is still more to do to reduce response times further and back towards pre-pandemic levels – improving NHS services and reducing waiting times is a key priority of this Government.

Thank you once again for bringing these important issues to my attention.

Yours,

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of Helen Whately.

HELEN WHATELY