



Department of Health & Social Care

*From Helen Whately MP
Minister of State for Care*

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[REDACTED]

Louise Hunt
Senior Coroner for Birmingham and Solihull
Coroner's Court
Steelhouse Lane
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12 April 2024

Dear Ms Hunt,

Thank you for your letter of 28 June 2023 to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care about the death of Mrs Hilary Thomas. I am replying as I am replying as Minister with responsibility for Urgent and Emergency Care. Please accept my sincere apologies for the 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 deeply sorry I was to read the circumstances of Mrs Thomas' death and I offer my sincere condolences to her family. I am grateful to you for bringing these matters to my attention.

Your report raised concerns about the capacity of Birmingham Heartlands Hospital to deal with the volume of patient attendances. I note that the University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust has written to you separately. The trust's response acknowledges the emergency general surgery service has become increasingly busy following the pandemic. The trust has set out the specific actions they are taking locally to increase capacity and resources to manage the increased volume of patient attendances. This includes the provision of additional consultant resource.

I recognise the pressures A&E departments are facing and the impact of waiting times for patients. In January 2023 we published our ambitious Delivery plan for recovering urgent and emergency care services to drive sustained improvements in urgent and emergency care 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.

A key part of the plan has been to increase hospital capacity to improve patient flow and reduce overcrowding in A&E. 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 also have provided £1.6 billion of funding over two years to support the NHS and local authorities to ensure timely and effective discharge from hospital.

We have seen improvement in A&E waiting times this year following the Delivery plan's publication, however we recognise there is more to do, and reducing waiting times is a priority for this Government.

I hope this response further reassures you of the work undertaken. Thank you for bringing these concerns to my attention.

Yours,



HELEN WHATELY