



Department  
of Health &  
Social Care

*From Helen Whately MP  
Minister of State for Care  
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Mr Guy Davies  
Her Majesty's Assistant Coroner for Cornwall & the isles of Scilly  
Cornwall Coroners' Service  
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TR4 9AA

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1 May 2024

Dear Mr Davies,

Thank you for your letter of 23 November 2023 to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, about the deaths of Kenneth Heard and Peggy Watters. 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 and I am thankful for the extension you have granted.

Firstly, I would like to say how deeply sorry I was to read the circumstances of Mr Heard and Ms Watters' deaths, and I offer my sincere condolences to their families. I am grateful to you for bringing these matters to my attention.

Your report raised concerns about ambulance response times by South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust (SWAST) and handover delays across the region. You have appropriately shared your report and concerns with SWAST and Royal Cornwall Hospital. SWAST and Royal Cornwall Hospital NHS Trust (RCHT), who are best placed to respond on the specific action they are continuing to take locally to reduce handover delays and improve ambulance response times.

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 on average 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>

Your report highlights that SWAST were under high demand at the time of the incident. A primary aim of our delivery 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.

We recognise there is variation in performance across the country. That is why the Delivery Plan also provides a new tiering performance and improvement approach to give targeted support to challenged systems. There is support in place at national and regional level to support Tiers 1 and 2 with a universal improvement support offer being made available for all systems which will help improve system performance across the whole patient pathway.

Both South Western Ambulance Service and NHS Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly ICB are in Tier 1 of the urgent and emergency care recovery plan tiering support approach. This means that NHS England provides bespoke support to them to help improve performance and reduce variation.

Further, a new emergency care hospital for the University Hospitals Plymouth NHS Trust will be delivered by 2030 as part of the New Hospital Programme. This will provide a new integrated emergency care hospital, bringing all urgent care into one emergency care hospital, with dedicated areas for children and frail patients.

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 previous year, a reduction of 27%. For SWAST, average Category 2 response times were over 26 minutes faster in 2023-24 compared to the previous year, a 38% reduction, while average handover delays were over 13 minutes faster in March 2024 than October 2023 (information on ambulance handover times has been published since October 2023).

However, I recognise there is still more to do to reduce response times down 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 concerns to my attention.

Yours,



**HELEN WHATELY**