



Department
of Health &
Social Care

*From Helen Whately MP
Minister of State for Care*

*39 Victoria Street
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[REDACTED]

Clare Bailey
Senior Coroner
Middlesbrough
Town Hall
Albert Road
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[REDACTED]

26 April 2024

Dear Ms Bailey,

Thank you for your letter of 22 January 2024 to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Victoria Atkins, about the death of Mrs Donna Smith. 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. 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 Mrs Smith's 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 clinical decision support system (NHS Pathways) used by the North East Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust (NEAS) in responding to 999 calls. In particular, a concern about the detection of a worsening patient condition and the re-categorising of calls from a Category 2 ambulance response to Category 1 response.

In preparing this response, my officials have made enquiries with NHS England (NHSE). NHSE has confirmed that changes to a patients' symptoms or status during a 999 call, or on any subsequent 999 call, should prompt a reassessment of the relevant symptoms. Health Advisors are trained to recognise where presenting symptoms change, and the NHS Pathways system has functionality within it to allow changes to previous answers to reach the appropriate disposition. You have also shared your report and concerns with NEAS who I understand have provided you with a comprehensive response following their review of the specific circumstances in this case and the action being taken locally to improve ambulance response times.

More broadly, as the Minister responsible for urgent and emergency care services, I recognise the pressures ambulance services are facing and the impact of waiting times for patients. Last January we published our Delivery plan for recovering urgent and emergency care services to

drive sustained improvements in urgent and emergency care waiting times. This includes the aim to reduce Category 2 ambulance response times to 30 minutes across 2024/25.

Your report highlights that NEAS 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.

At a national level, we have seen significant improvements in performance this year compared to last year. For 2023-24, year to date (April-February) average Category 2 ambulance response times were almost 15 minutes faster compared to the same period last year, a reduction of over 28%. NEAS average Category 2 response times were over 12 minutes faster when compared to the same time period last year, a reduction of over 25%.

However, I recognise there is still more to do to reduce response times down further and back towards pre-pandemic levels – 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.

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

Yours,

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

HELEN WHATELY