



Department of Health & Social Care

Minister Helen Whately
Minister of State for Care
39 Victoria Street
London
SW1H 0EU

Lauren Costello
HM Assistant Coroner
Coroner's Court
1 Mount Tabor Street
Stockport SK1 3AG

15 May 2024

Dear Ms Costello,

Thank you for your letter of 12 March 2024 to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care about the death of Peter Beresford. I am replying as Minister with responsibility for urgent and emergency services.

Firstly, I would like to say how deeply sorry I was to read the circumstances of Mr Beresford's death and I offer my sincere condolences to his family. It is vital that we learn from incidents, where they are identified, to improve NHS care. I am grateful to you for bringing these matters to my attention.

You have appropriately shared your report and concerns with NWS who are best placed to respond on the specific actions being taken locally to improve ambulance response times. I note the measures the trust has said are being taken to improve performance, as set out in your report, including the ongoing recruitment of staff and also that performance regionally has been improving.

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 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 NWS 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 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.

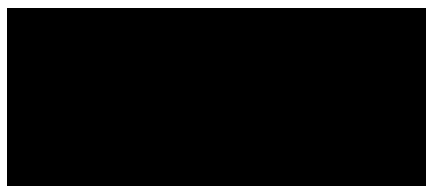
At a national level, we have seen significant improvements in performance this year compared to last year. In 2023-24, average Category 2 ambulance response times (including for serious conditions such as heart attacks and strokes) were over 13 minutes faster compared to the previous year, a reduction of 27%. NWAS average Category 2 response times were also over 13 minutes faster in 2023-24 compared to the previous year, a 32% reduction.

In March 2024, average patient handover time in the NWAS region was 32 minutes 51 seconds, and the second month in a row that times have improved (information on ambulance handover times has been published since October 2023).

However, I recognise there is still more to do to reduce response times further, and the Government will continue to work with NHS England to achieve this.

Thank you once again for bringing these concerns to my attention.

Yours,

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

HELEN WHATELY