



Department of Health & Social Care

*From Minister Helen Whately
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[REDACTED]

HM Assistant Coroner Guy Davies
Cornwall Coroners' Service
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[REDACTED]

22 May 2024

Dear Mr Davies,

Thank you for your Regulation 28 Report of 25 March to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care regarding the death of Robert Andrew Prowse. 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 Prowse's death and I offer my sincere condolences to his family. It is vital we learn from Regulation 28 reports where they raise matters of concern so NHS care can be improved. 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), in particular how this is impacted by handover delays and issues with discharging patients from hospital.

You have appropriately shared your report and concerns with SWAST and Royal Cornwall Hospital Trust (RCHT), who are best placed to respond on the specific action they are taking locally to reduce handover delays and improve ambulance response times.

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 ambition for this year is to reduce Category 2 ambulance response times to 30 minutes on average. 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 responding to high demand at the time of this sad event, affecting the service provided to Mr Prowse. 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.

Your report also highlights that Royal Cornwall Hospital was experiencing high demand with long handover delays. I recognise that ambulance trusts work within a health and care system and issues such as delayed patient handovers to hospitals, as you rightly identify in your report, 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. We have 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 12,000 beds available nationally.

We are also investing an additional £1 billion this year through the Discharge Fund, to support the NHS and local authorities to ensure timely and effective discharge from hospital. This funding follows £600 million last year and £500 million in 2022/23. The NHS and local authorities are using this funding to help provide people with the right care in the right place when they are discharged from hospital. We have also ensured every acute hospital has access to a care transfer hub, bringing together professionals from the NHS and social care to manage discharges for people with more complex needs who need extra support with a view to promoting early planning and timely discharge. These measures are helping improve patient flow through hospitals, reducing delays in patient handovers so ambulances can swiftly get back on the roads.

SWAST, NHS Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly ICB, and NHS Devon ICB are all in Tier 1 for support for their urgent and emergency care performance. This means that NHSE provides bespoke support to them to help improve performance and reduce variation with issues such as handover delays.

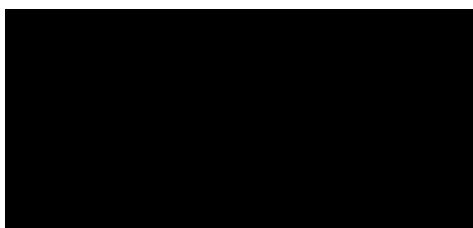
The report referenced University Hospital Trust Plymouth being one of the most impacted by ambulance delays in the SWAST region. In the longer term, a new emergency care hospital for the University Hospitals Plymouth NHS Trust will be delivered by 2030 as part of the New Hospital Programme. This will improve services by providing a new integrated emergency care hospital, bringing all urgent care into one emergency care hospital, with dedicated areas for children and frail patients. Further, locally Cornwall Partnership NHS Foundation Trust received £3 million in 2023/24 as part of £250 million of capital funding provided nationally to help increase NHS urgent and emergency care capacity.

Since publication of the recovery plan in January 2023, we have seen significant improvements in performance. Nationally 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 over the same time period, a 38% reduction. Regarding handover delays in SWAST, there has been notable improvement with handovers almost 20 minutes faster on average in April than October 2023 (information on ambulance handover times has been published since October 2023). At Royal Cornwall Hospitals NHS Trust which RCHT sits, 4-hour trust performance of patients being admitted, transferred, or discharged within four hours of arrival was 79.0% by April 2024. This is 4.6ppt higher than the national average in this period.

However, I recognise there is still more to do to reduce patient waiting times further, and the Government will continue to work with NHSE to achieve this.

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

Yours,



HELEN WHATELY