



Department of Health & Social Care

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

[REDACTED]

HM Assistant Coroner Guy Davies
Cornwall Coroners' Service
Pydar House, Pydar Street
Truro
TR1 1XU

[REDACTED]

3 July 2024

Dear Mr Davies,

Thank you for your letter of 25 March to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care regarding the death of Patricia Anne Van Der Eyken. 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 Ms Van Der Eyken's death and I offer my sincere condolences to her family. It is vital that where Regulation 28 reports raise matters of concern these are looked at carefully 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, who are best placed to respond on the specific action they are taking 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 NHS is facing and the impact of waiting times for patients. In January 2023, NHS England published a two year 'Delivery plan for recovering urgent and emergency care services' with a target for this year to reduce Category 2 ambulance response times to 30 minutes on average. An update to this plan has now been published, to build on learnings from the first year and to continue to support systems to improve performance and reduce waiting times. The plan is available at:

https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/PRN01288_ii_Delivery-plan-for-recovering-urgent-and-emergency-care-progress-update-and-next-steps-May-2024.pdf

Your report highlights that SWAST and local hospitals were experiencing high demand and long handover delays. To support ambulance services, ambulance trusts received £200 million of additional funding in 2023/24 to expand capacity and improve response times. In addition, to improve patient flow and bed capacity within hospitals £1 billion of dedicated funding was provided to increase staffed core hospital beds by 5,000 compared to 2022/23 plans.

£1 billion was invested this year through the Discharge Fund in commissioning packages of care for people being discharged and improving discharge processes. A £40 million fund was also launched in September 2023 for local authorities in areas with the greatest challenges on urgent and emergency care. Local authorities used this funding for social care provision and strengthening admissions avoidance and discharge services over the past winter. The number of people discharged from hospital with packages of health and social care support has increased by 9% from the end of March 2023 to the end of March 2024.

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.

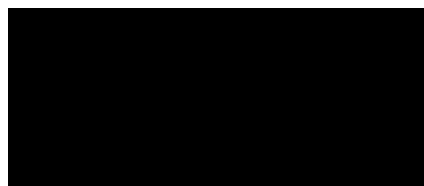
The report referenced University Hospital Trust Plymouth being one of the most impacted by ambulance delays in the SWAST region. Information on the creation of a new UEC Centre locally is available here: <https://www.plymouthhospitals.nhs.uk/building-for-the-future/>

Further, the local 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, there have been 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. There have also been improvements in handover delays with SWAST handovers almost 23 minutes faster on average in May than October 2023 (information on ambulance handover times has been published since October 2023).

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

Yours,

A large black rectangular box redacting the signature of Helen Whately.

HELEN WHATELY