

Interview Briefing

Winter Pressures - Accessing NHS services and reducing pressures on emergency services and GPs

Date and time	Wednesday 3 rd January 2024 8:00am – 8:30am
Location	Virtual - Zoom
Interviewer and format	Radio Wales Redacted – Section 40 Live Join for 8am and on approx. 8.08am Radio Cymru Redacted – Section 40 Live Join straight after BBC Radio Wales approx. 8:15
Lead Press officers	Redacted – Section 40 Or Redacted – Section 40
Background	Interview on winter pressures and current status of NHS Wales. ED comparison 2023/4 to 2022 - Period 24/12-01/01 inclusive <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over the Xmas / new year period very similar level of 999 calls to last year – 11500. the number of calls responded to was up by 1250 (23%) and WAST conveyed 900 more patients to hospital than last year Most urgent calls responded to in 8 mins performance improved by around 10% Average handover time at hospital down from 2hrs 50 mins to 1 hr 33 mins Lost hours over Xmas and New year down by 45%
Top Messages to get out	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> We have difficult winter months ahead but I am pleased that the steps we have taken so far this winter, and over the last year through our national six goals programme, have already proved to be successful. We've been planning for winter all year. Since last year we've increased capacity through invested in urgent primary care centres, same day emergency care centres, more ambulance staff and rolling out 111 press 2. When comparing the Christmas and New Year period from this year to last, despite the demand (23% more calls to the ambulance service and 900 more people being taken to hospital), we have seen: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Red performance improving by around 10% - we are responding to people with life threatening concerns much quicker;

	<p>b. Average handover time at hospital down from 2 hrs 50 mins to 1 hr 33 mins – we are much better at moving people in to our emergency departments for their ongoing care and treatment;</p> <p>c. Lost hours over down by 45% – we are enabling ambulances to respond more timely to those waiting in our communities.</p> <p>4. Everyone can help to reduce demand on GPs and emergency services this winter – by using 111 or your local pharmacy and get a vaccine if you're eligible.</p> <p>5. People with urgent care needs can be treated quicker by professionals in minor injury units, by dialling 111 or using the 111 website and its range of symptom checkers; or being referred to urgent primary care centres and SDECs – many of which are now up and running across Wales – and have saved many trips to emergency departments or helped safely avoid admission to hospital.</p> <p>6. We are investing in caring for people at home, and care homes to keep them out of hospital. We've developed new ways to reduce delays in discharging from hospital like the trusted assessor system – reducing the amount of people stuck in hospital waiting for an assessment.</p>
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Update on Winter Pressures

- Following a period of ongoing pressure but relative stability in November, we have observed an increase in activity for 111, the ambulance service and Emergency Departments into December.
- Over the festive and new year period, we saw a marked increase in demand on the 111 service, some of which were equivalent to the peaks seen during the first wave of COVID. This demand has resulted in a higher rate of abandoned calls.
- This is likely to have been caused by a range of factors including the recent cold snap which has a delayed impact and results in greater emergency admissions of people with conditions like stroke and exacerbations of respiratory complaints. This is largely among frail older people with complex needs.
- We have observed an emerging increase in influenza although this is likely to increase more significantly in January.
- The result of this higher demand and increasing complexity of needs is longer delays for an ambulance response, for ambulance patient handover and for admission to hospital (N.B. this is management information).
- We have sought assurance from Health Boards on their capacity plans for into mid-January, and on their wider enhanced plans to manage more people in the community supported by the additional funding we made available at the start of the year (i.e. £25m for urgent and emergency care, and £140m for regional integration fund).
- We are ramping up scrutiny of plans and monitoring the position very closely.

Period 24/12-01/01 inclusive

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- Lost hours over Xmas and New year down by 45%

Key Messages

- An integrated approach is being taken to plan for the forthcoming winter, which is expected to be extremely challenging.
- Health Boards are working with Regional Partnership Boards to make improvements to support hospital flow and discharge prior to the winter period, by reducing delayed pathways of care and through use of the trusted assessor model and actions to speed up assessment processes.
- A whole system approach will be required with expectations of primary, community planned, social and urgent services to enhance capacity during predicted periods where demand on services is likely to increase.
- As we head into winter, our emergency services and GPs will face increased pressure, and we want everyone to be able to access the care they need quickly and easily.
- If you're unwell or injured, there are many ways to access the NHS in Wales, including pharmacists, minor injury units, mental health helplines, online consultations and more. So, it's easier to get care, help and advice with new or existing conditions, even without leaving your home or workplace.
- Often people feel they have no option but to go to their GP, call 999 or go to their nearest emergency department for advice or treatment. But now, people with urgent care needs can be treated elsewhere by the many different health professionals and services working and available in NHS Wales. E.g community pharmacies, NHS 111, (and 111, press 2) UPCC and SDECS.
- We are reminding everyone to 'Help Us Help You' get the treatment you need, at the right place and at the right time, by considering the other services available in NHS Wales, without having to dial 999 or go to a busy emergency department – unless absolutely necessary.

Welsh Ambulance Service

- WAST has also developed a winter ambulance improvement plan which contains actions to strengthen its approach this winter, including:
 - Optimising use of the Clinical Support Desk, to manage up to 17% of patients remotely where clinically safe to do so, and reduce the number of patients conveyed to hospital.
 - Increasing the availability of staff overtime within controlled levels to optimise the availability of resources at times of peak demand.
 - Additional volunteer capacity through the Trust's Connected Support Cymru initiative, which aims to provide "eyes-on" to patients earlier than would otherwise be available, providing important information back to WAST's remote clinical workforce to aid decision making and support more patients to remain at home.
 - £120,000 Six Goals Funding has been allocated to enhance discharge transport for patients' return to the community from hospital, across all 12 ED sites during the remainder of winter.
 - Additional resource capacity will be brought in during the festive period including mobile foot teams and alcohol treatment centres in key urban areas, deployed according to forecasting outcomes.
 - Ensuring public messaging is clear, helpful and points the public to the appropriate service to meet their needs.

- Officials will monitor delivery against these actions through weekly assurance meetings with Health Boards and WAST over the winter period.
- We have also been clear with Health Boards of our expectation for improved ambulance handover performance to free up ambulance capacity.
- Health Boards have developed integrated ambulance improvement plans jointly with WAST. These plans deliver a wide range of actions to support better management of 999 demand in the community, increased ambulance capacity, improved responsiveness to people with time sensitive complaints and aim to eradicate long ambulance patient handover delays.

Six Goals for Urgent and Emergency Care

- The national six goals for UEC programme was established with senior clinical leadership to enable local teams to deliver the goals and improve experience and outcomes for service users. The national programme Board has set two key priorities for Health Boards:
 - To develop a safe and effective 24/7 urgent care model to help signpost people to care as close to home as possible to optimise experience and outcomes. This should include development of 'urgent primary care centres'; and
 - To deliver enhanced 'same day emergency care services' that help people who may have ordinarily been admitted to hospital to return home to sleep in their own bed on the same day.
- The Six Goals programme plan for 2023/2024 includes a specific focus on supporting Health Boards, Regional Partnership Boards and local authorities to improve patient flow through the comprehensive goals 5 ('optimising patient flow through discharge planning from the point of admission') and 6 ('a home first approach') programmes of work which include specific workstreams on:
 - Discharge to recover then assess (D2RA) models;
 - Implementing the Trusted Assessor model;
 - Reducing patient deconditioning; and
 - The SAFER and Red 2 Green enabling tools;
- We have given an extra £3m to each Health Board this year to help develop these services and provide additional capacity over the difficult winter months.

Six Goals Programme Outcomes

- We have made real progress in delivering programme objectives to increase access to Urgent Primary Care Centres and Same Day Emergency Care services:
 - Urgent Primary Care Centres are treating approximately **10k people a month**, reducing pressure on GP in-hours services and Emergency Departments; **up 9% on the same period last year**; and
 - SDEC services are treating and **discharging around 4.5k patients per month**.
- We've provided **£50m over two years** to help people access the right care, in the right place through our Six Goals programme- without this funding, emergency departments would be even greater pressure.
- Investment in NHS 111 Wales online has delivered **76 symptom checkers**. The site is now receiving around **400k hits a month**. The 111-telephony service is receiving **70k calls a month** and only **around 11%** of callers are referred to the emergency department.

- The '111 press 2' service is now available in every health board in Wales, providing urgent mental health support to people of all ages 24 hours a day 7 days a week. **Over 38,000 callers** have accessed the pathway, with **56.4%** receiving self-care advice / no further action needed. **99.1% of people** who call in distress report lower levels of distress following the call.
- We have targeted investment in 999 ambulance clinical triage resources and technology. This includes the use of video consultation technology. **Around 4,500 (10-15%)** of patients per month are managed without needing transport to an emergency department.
- We **provided £3m to the Welsh Ambulance Service** last year to recruit **100 new staff**, and also provided funding for a pilot delivered by St John Ambulance which is supporting around **50% of people** referred to the service to safely avoid transport to hospital.
- Without these interventions over the past year, the system will be under even greater pressure.

Top Lines

What is the WG doing to reduce pressures on GPs and emergency services?

NHS 111

- Urgent health advice is available across Wales 24 hours a day, seven days a week via the NHS Wales 111 helpline and website, which continues to give people up-to-date health advice and guidance on which NHS service is right for them.
- NHS 111 Wales provides expert healthcare advice, both online and on the phone. If you call 111, you will speak to one of our highly trained Call Handlers to make sure you get the right care, in the right place, first time.
- The NHS 111 Wales website receives **400k hits a month** and has delivered **76 symptom checkers**, which will point you in the right direction to get the care you need as quickly as possible. This may not always be your GP or an emergency department – it could be a pharmacy, opticians or minor injury unit.
- We are reminding everyone to 'help us, help you' and always consider an alternative like NHS 111 Wales to calling 999 or presenting at an Emergency Department unless absolutely necessary.
- If your health concern is urgent, the 111 service call handlers on the helplines can help you get the right treatment at the right time and in the right place.
- **The 111-telephony service is receiving 70k calls a month, with only approximately 11% of callers being referred to an emergency department. This compares favourably to England.**

NHS 111 press 2

- The '111 press 2' service is now available in every health board in Wales providing urgent mental health support to people of all ages 24 hours a day 7 days a week.
- By providing access to a mental health professional, without the need for a GP referral, it can help support people to manage a mental health crisis and in many cases be an alternative to attending emergency departments or calling the police - reducing pressure on those services.

- **Over 38k callers have accessed the pathway since its launch and more than half** receive an outcome of self-care / no need further action needed. **99% of people who call in distress report lower levels of distress following the call.**
- The service now has **over 140 staff in hubs** across our seven health boards.
- 111 press 2 builds on a range of easy to access mental health support which includes our 24/7 call listening line (for non-urgent mental health advice) and online cognitive behavioural therapy (via SilverCloud)

Community pharmacists

- To reduce demand on GPs – and ensure people with urgent needs can be seen quickly – our HUY campaign has highlighted the other local services where people can access help and support.
- This includes pharmacy services such as the Clinical Community Pharmacy Service (CCPS), Pharmacist Independent Prescribing Service (PIPS), and Sore Throat Test and Treat (STTT).
- The Clinical Community Pharmacy Service introduced in April 2022 as part of our wide-ranging reforms to community pharmacy, ensures **around 700 pharmacies (99% of pharmacies in Wales)** now provide the national common ailment service, the national contraception service, seasonal influenza vaccination, and access to supplies of repeat prescriptions in an emergency.
- Clinical service activity within community pharmacies in Wales is now at its highest ever level. Between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023, pharmacies delivered **more than 0.5 million Clinical Community Pharmacy Service consultations** - an increase of 28% on 2021-22 and 154% on pre-pandemic activity levels.
- Activity included 160,000 flu vaccinations, 31,000 consultations in which emergency, bridging or QuickStart contraception was provided, 80,000 emergency supplies of prescribed medicines and nearly 240,000 common ailment service consultations. Of these, 26,000 consultations were for sore throats where point of care testing was used to determine whether the infection was caused by bacteria and needed antibiotics; **Wales is the only place in which such point of care testing is used in community pharmacy to reduce unnecessary antibiotic supply.**
- Of the people using the common ailment service **80% report** that had the service not been available they would have visited their GP or used an alternative NHS service (such as out of hours, NHS111 or emergency department). **This translates to around 200,000 GP appointments saved between April 2022 and March 2023.**
- Nearly **240,000 consultations for common ailments**, an increase of 73.9% from 2021-22 and more than **a fivefold increase** (453.9%) from five years ago.
- There have been more than **81,500 consultations for emergency medicines**, an increase of 54.6% from the previous year and more than **a fourfold increase** (357.6%) from five years ago.
- In April 2022, Wales became the first UK country to introduce a nationally directed community pharmacist prescribing service under which pharmacists who are trained to prescribe can treat a range of ailments which would otherwise be treated by GPs or in other NHS services.
- **Almost one in four pharmacies** (155) in Wales now provide this service with around **7000 consultations** now taking place each month in which **99% of patients reported they would have otherwise visited their GP.**

Urgent primary care centres (UPCC)

- Since the launch of the Welsh Government's 'Six Goals for Urgent and Emergency Care' Programme, the latest NHS data shows that **approximately 10k people are accessing and being treated by urgent primary care centres (UPCC) a month**, without needing a traditional GP appointment or presentation at emergency departments.
- A priority of the programme was to develop a safe and effective 24/7 urgent care model to help signpost people to care as close to home as possible to optimise experience and outcomes – including the development of UPCC.
- **12 UPCCs** have been established across Wales through cluster based, co-located models at hospitals – serving a population of around 2 million people. Whilst they are still relatively new, **activity in UPCCs is up 9%** on the same time last year.
- People with urgent care needs can be assessed and treated quickly without having to go for a GP appointment to or a busy emergency department. Patients report a high level of satisfaction with **UPCC sites (85% - 95% rated experience as excellent)**.
- These new centres have been particularly valuable during the winter period, when a combination of strep A and COVID-related activity threatened to overwhelm the system.

Same day emergency care services (SDECs)

- The second key priority of the 'six goals' programme was to establish and increase access to same-day emergency care services – SDECS – to help people access diagnostics and treatments and to return to sleep in their own bed on the same day.
- There are now SDECS operating across **16 hospitals in Wales**, as well as a new innovative new community-based model.
- There is a total of **24 SDEC units** (medical, surgical, combined, specialist) across Wales – this is an increase of two since April 2023, and a further two SDEC units are due to open by November 2023.
- **SDEC services treated and discharged 14,500 people with emergency care needs, who would have otherwise needed a hospital stay in the last quarter.**
- NHS data show that around **75-80% of patients** accessing these services are receiving the care they need and are returning home without the need for hospital admission - freeing up hospital beds.

Changes to how GP services are accessed

- **95% of practices** across Wales have said they are now providing a mix of remote, face to face, urgent and pre-bookable appointments, and that people can contact their practice throughout the day to make an appointment.
- We also need to acknowledge that ongoing high demand for GP services can make it difficult to get an appointment. We know over 1.5 million people consistently access GP services across Wales each month.
- These practices have also said they have now trained staff to direct people to the care that is right for them – to other services, like pharmacies or opticians, where appropriate, or to offer an appointment the same day or in the future if less urgent.

- Data from the past year shows that on average around **80,000 people across Wales do not attend their appointments each month.**
- The Health Minister has also encouraged the public to think about how they can help improve access to GPs by attending all appointments or cancelling appointments if they are no longer needed to free up appointments for other people.

Winter Respiratory Viruses

- Thousands of people in Wales are hospitalised with respiratory illnesses every winter. Vaccination remains our key defence against severe disease and hospitalisation from flu and COVID-19. It vital those most at risk of winter illnesses take up the offer of their vaccinations.
- I would like to take the opportunity to thank all those who have come forward so far, and to encourage those eligible who haven't come forward yet, to get protected before the peak of the flu season.
- **Over 80%** of care home residents have received their COVID-19 booster. This is the most effective way of keeping our care homes safe from respiratory viruses this winter.
- It is also important other eligible cohorts take up the offer. Health Boards across Wales all expect to meet the WG target of contacting everyone who is eligible by the end of November. People who believe they are eligible but have not yet received an invitation should look on their health board website for more information on how to access the vaccine in their area.
- We are also, appealing to parents to ensure their children take up the offer of a flu vaccination.
- COVID-19 has not gone away. The virus remains unpredictable, and we continue to closely monitor the epidemiology. We will keep under review the options for additional precautionary measures we may need to take and stand ready to implement those measures.
- We are also reminding the public of protective behaviours to limit the spread of respiratory infections and protect the more vulnerable including **wash your hands regularly, ventilate rooms and keep your distance** for other people if you have respiratory symptoms.
- We continue to invest in our integrated surveillance and genomics programmes to monitor COVID 19 and other respiratory viruses. These PHW-led systems provide us with a collection of data and indicators to give early warnings and a picture of virus transmission.
- We published our public health framework for respiratory viruses for this winter on 26 September 2023.

Enhanced community care

- The Welsh Government has held back an **extra £8 million this winter** to support people at greatest risk to stay well, receive care at or close to home and reduce pressure on hospitals.
- The Health and Social Care sectors are working closely together to build community capacity in order to help people stay well at home, preventing or reducing the need for hospital care this winter.
- The funding will wrap care around the most vulnerable in our communities to help them avoid hospital admissions. It will increase community health and social care workforce capacity in the evenings and on weekends including increasing the hours of community nurses and end of life clinical nurse specialists.

- Research shows **people recover better at home than in hospital** and the Welsh Government wants people to be able to live their best life as independently as possible in their own communities.

New top 5 tips for self-care messaging

There are some simple ways you can take care of yourself and your family this winter.

- **Stay up to date on your vaccinations.**
Vaccination is the best defence against a range of illnesses including flu and COVID19. If you're eligible make sure you and your loved ones get vaccinated.
- **Be prepared.**
Make sure your prescriptions are up to date and order repeat prescriptions in plenty of time, so you don't run out.
- **Keep supplies at home.**
Have a basic supply of simple medicines to manage minor illnesses. You can buy these from your local pharmacy.
- **Use NHS 111 Wales.**
If you feel unwell, check your symptoms on NHS 111 Wales online, to help you get the right care, in the right place, first time.
- **Ask your local pharmacist.**
Your local pharmacist can provide free advice and treatment for a range of minor medical problems. They will tell you if you should seek further help and advice from your GP.

Draft Budget

On financial position and Winter

- We provided additional funding at the start of the financial year to enable health boards to manage more people in the community (i.e. £25m for urgent and emergency care, and £140m for regional integration fund).
- Recognising the financial pressures Boards faced this financial year we provided, an additional £425m was allocated in the autumn to support the NHS this financial year.
- Whilst this additional support from across Government was both welcomed and essential, Health Boards will still need to make difficult decisions to achieve a sustainable financial position.

If pressed on budget "cuts"....

- It's important to recognise that we have provided significant additional funding this year, however the pressures in Boards combined with the impact of inflation on the overall Welsh Government budget will mean some difficult decisions will be needed.
- We have been clear that whilst we would do all we could to support the Boards in 2023/24, that the planned deficit positions were not supportable in full and additional actions would be required to reduce expenditure and forecast deficit positions.
- We laid out our target control total framework and expectations of Boards in November and we will continue to work with all NHS Wales organisations in progressing delivery of the target forecast positions set out for the remainder of this financial year.

BMA Wales Junior Doctors dispute

Pay Offer

Background

Redacted – not in scope for relating to misinformation, public messaging strategy, or reputational risk

Lines to take:

- BMA and BDA are disappointed with the value of the pay offer and have registered pay disputes with Welsh Government.
- Despite this we arranged for this pay award to be made as soon as possible as, in a cost of living crisis, it is better for people to have the increased pay that is available for them to spend now even if it does not meet their full aspirations.
- **While we wish to address their pay restoration ambitions, our offer is at the limits of the finances available to us and reflects the position reached with the other health unions for this year.**
- **We will continue to press the UK Government to pass on the funding necessary for full and fair pay rises for public sector workers. Without that additional funding, we are not in a position to currently offer any more.**
- **We remain committed to working in social partnership with the British Medical Association and NHS Employers and we will jointly ensure that patient safety is protected during industrial action.**

Planned Industrial Action

Background

Redacted – not in scope for relating to misinformation, public messaging strategy, or reputational risk

Lines to take:

- The impact of this industrial action is expected to be significant.
- We expect non-emergency and elective activities to be stood down for the IA period.
- However, if you have a genuine need to attend an emergency department you should still attend.
- Planning for a response to industrial action has commenced within Welsh Government and across NHS Wales. Engagement to inform this is underway with health boards, trusts and NHS Wales Employers.
- Welsh Government is working closely with BMA Wales and NHS Employers to ensure patient safety is protected during the strike period. We are grateful for the collaborative approach being taken by the BMA in Wales.
- Arrangements are being put in place for Consultant and Specialist doctors to provide cover whilst also maintaining senior decision-making roles.
- We have agreed with BMA the circumstances in which striking Junior Doctors may be asked to return to work – 'derogations'
- This includes for example a mass casualty incident or unexpected circumstances in which planned cover is not available on the day of the strikes.
- There is a robust mechanism in place for the strike period to ensure requests for derogations are dealt with quickly and correctly.
- A joint statement from Welsh Government, BMA Wales and NHS Employers Wales has been issued to all Health Boards/Trusts clarifying the derogations process.

Other hot topics for awareness

Redacted – not in scope for relating to misinformation, public messaging strategy, or reputational risk

ENDS

Notes to editors

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