Classification: Official

Publication reference: PR1929

To:
- Integrated Care Board Chief Executives and Chairs
- NHS Foundation Trust and NHS Trust:
  - Chief Executives
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12 August 2022

cc.
- Regional Directors

Dear colleagues

Next steps in increasing capacity and operational resilience in urgent and emergency care ahead of winter

This week the NHS reached its first key ambition on recovering services, focusing on patients who had been waiting more than 104 weeks. We delivered this important milestone despite having to contend with further waves of COVID-19, including more than a quarter of our COVID-19 inpatients occurring since publishing the Elective Recovery Plan, an unprecedented heatwave, and other significant pressures. It shows once again that when we prioritise, invest, and innovate, the NHS can, acting as a national service, deliver for patients.

Urgent and Emergency Care is currently under significant pressure. Staff have faced one of their busiest summers ever with record numbers of A&E attendances and the most urgent ambulance call outs, all alongside another wave of COVID-19. Thanks to the professionalism and commitment of those staff, the NHS continues to provide care to over 100,000 urgent and emergency care patients each week. Despite their best efforts, these pressures have meant that there have been too many occasions when staff have not been able to provide timely access for our patients in the way they would have wanted.

Our immediate response has been to focus on ambulance performance, and the linked issue of speeding up discharge. We have provided extra funding to ambulance services, offered intensive support to those trusts most challenged by ambulance delays, and rolled out virtual wards across the country, enabling patients who would otherwise be in hospital to receive support at home.

And we have begun planning for the coming winter earlier than usual, recognising pressure on the NHS is likely to be substantial, particularly in UEC, making the most of the opportunity created by the formation of ICBs to maximise the benefits of system working.

In addition to maintaining progress on 2022/23 operational priorities and building on the significant successes in delivering our Elective Recovery plan, with a strong focus on 62 day cancer backlogs and elective long waits, today we are setting out the next steps in our plans to rapidly increase capacity and resilience ahead of winter, building on the operational plans we have worked on together.

Core objectives and key actions for operational resilience

Our collective core objectives and actions are to:

1) **Prepare for variants of COVID-19 and respiratory challenges**, including an integrated COVID-19 and flu vaccination programme.
2) **Increase capacity outside acute trusts**, including the scaling up of additional roles in primary care and releasing annual funding to support mental health through the winter.
3) **Increase resilience in NHS 111 and 999 services**, through increasing the number of call handlers to 4.8k in 111 and 2.5k in 999.
4) **Target Category 2 response times and ambulance handover delays**, including improved utilisation of urgent community response and rapid response services, the new digital intelligent routing platform, and direct support to the most challenged trusts.
5) **Reduce crowding in A&E departments and target the longest waits in ED**, through improving use of the NHS directory of services, and increasing provision of same day emergency care and acute frailty services.
6) **Reduce hospital occupancy**, through increasing capacity by the equivalent of at least 7,000 general and acute beds, through a mix of new physical beds, virtual wards, and improvements elsewhere in the pathway.
7) **Ensure timely discharge**, across acute, mental health, and community settings, by working with social care partners and implementing the 10 best practice interventions through the ‘100 day challenge’.
8) **Provide better support for people at home**, including the scaling up of virtual wards and additional support for High Intensity Users with complex needs.

This letter and the appendix sets out the important actions, developed in partnership with you, to help deliver these core objectives, as well as how NHS England will support you. Taking these actions should help manage pressure across the pathway, supporting improved flow for patients in emergency departments.

Clearly, expanding capacity is dependent on both sufficient workforce and workforce wellbeing. This is why it is important that the plans have been built from the bottom up, with ICBs responsible for developing plans that are based on realistic assumptions, including how many staff can be recruited and at what speed. We will fully fund the recent pay award nationally, avoiding the need to cut frontline services for winter.

Similarly, ICBs have been clear with us that much of the pressure on urgent and emergency care is driven by the current, significant, growing strain in social care. Too many patients are spending longer in hospital than they need to, creating pressure along the entire pathway. We will continue to work with the Government, and national local government partners, to help, as far as possible, address these issues. At a local level, the creation of ICSs offers an opportunity for all partners in a local system to work together to deliver local solutions. This includes making best use of the Better Care Fund, building on the work you are doing locally to map local demand and capacity.

Performance and accountability: A new approach to working together

This plan is underpinned by a new approach to how organisations in the NHS work together – the Health and Care Act 2022 has enshrined Integrated Care Systems in law. Although this winter presents significant challenges, it is an opportunity to show how these new ways of working can make a real difference to patients and join up the entire urgent and emergency care pathway in ways we've been unable to do before. The plan empowers system leaders to do this in a number of critical areas, and where you can go further, please do so.

System working also means a new approach to accountability. ICBs are accountable for ensuring that their system providers and other partners deliver their agreed role in their local plans and work together effectively for the benefit of the populations they serve. ICBs are responsible for initial problem solving and intervention should providers fail, or be unable, to deliver their agreed role. Intervention support can be provided from NHS England regional teams as required, drawing on the expertise of our national level urgent and emergency care team as needed.

That line of accountability does mean that we will want to continue to work with you to stress test your plans and to 'check and challenge' progress in delivering them. We will expect that you work with us to report on local performance and collaboratively, but quickly, tackle problems where they occur.

On performance metrics, the overall objective remains the provision of safe and effective care. Until the adoption of the Clinically-led Review of Standards is agreed with the Government, current standards remain for emergency department performance and flow. Likewise, objectives set out in Planning Guidance, which includes reducing 12 hour waits and increased clinical input in 111, remain. These should continue to be used to understand flow through your emergency departments.

Working with ICBs we have identified the following six specific metrics, key to the provision of safe and effective urgent and emergency care, that NHS England and ICBs will use to monitor performance in each system through the Board Assurance Framework:

- 111 call abandonment.
- Mean 999 call answering times.
- Category 2 ambulance response times.
- Average hours lost to ambulance handover delays per day.
- Adult general and acute type 1 bed occupancy (adjusted for void beds).
- Percentage of beds occupied by patients who no longer meet the criteria to reside.

We will work with you through the Assurance Framework to develop local performance trajectories to sit alongside these measures.

The work on elective care and the 100 day discharge challenge demonstrates the value of using an improvement approach based on data, easy to access best practice guidance, as well as senior clinical and executive peer review in spreading solutions focused on those facing the greatest challenges. We will launch new improvement offers to support ambulance handover and response times in the coming weeks.

To support ICBs, we will provide you with a Board Assurance Framework to monitor progress monthly against the combined System Capacity Plans, Actions and Good Practice basics and improvement priorities developed with colleagues over time. This is aimed at supporting and ensuring trusts continue to implement best practice. Each BAF will be unique to each ICS to reflect the specific capacity gaps that you have identified.

While these plans represent substantial work to increase capacity and improve operational resilience, clearly epidemiological modelling suggests reasonable worst-case scenarios for Covid-19 which would require a more significant set of actions. We will work with you to develop plans for these scenarios.

Thank you to you and your teams across the NHS for your continued hard work. While there is no doubt that we are going to experience challenges over the winter, when the NHS unites as it has over the past two and half years of the pandemic and works closely with wider partners, we know we can best serve patients, support our teams and maintain the momentum of the NHS's recovery from the pandemic.

Yours sincerely,

Amanda Pritchard
NHS Chief Executive

Julian Kelly
Chief Financial Officer
NHS England

Sir David Sloman
Chief Operating Officer
NHS England

Appendix – Actions: Further details on increasing capacity and operational resilience in urgent and emergency care ahead of winter

Each ICB plan has been discussed, and agreed, with the relevant NHS England region and a series of specific actions have been agreed between NHS England and each ICB in the following areas:

1. **New variants of COVID-19 and respiratory challenges**

SPI-M scenarios for COVID-19, combined with scenarios for flu, suggest that even in optimistic scenarios, high numbers of beds may be needed for respiratory patients during winter. Resulting IPC requirements will make bed management complex, especially if bed occupancy remains high. We will do further work with you in the coming months on stress-testing planning for the operational response to realistic worst-case scenarios. We are working with local areas to:

- Deliver an integrated COVID-19 booster and flu vaccination programme to minimise hospital admissions from both viruses.
- Implement UKHSA's IPC guidance in a proportionate way and develop strategies to minimise the impact of 'void' beds.

2. **Demand and capacity**

A lack of capacity across the NHS has an impact on all areas of the system. It is essential that ambulance and NHS 111 services have the necessary capacity in place and that access to primary care, community health services and mental health services for urgent patients is sufficient to ensure patients do not need to present to emergency services. We are working with local areas to:

- Open additional beds across England, to match the additional capacity identified by ICSs to be able to deliver against expected winter demand. This should create the equivalent of 7,000 additional general and acute beds, through a mix of new physical beds, scaling up virtual wards, and improvements in discharge and flow.
- Increase the number of NHS 111 call handlers to 4,800 and the number of NHS 999 call handlers to 2,500.
- Increase provision of High Intensity User services.
- Support good working relationships with the independent sector, building on the success so far, and facilitating patient choice.

In community care:

- Increase two-hour Urgent Community Response provision by maximising referrals from the ambulance service and other providers, aiming to maintain and improve the current standard of responding to 70% of call outs within two hours.
- Increase the number of virtual wards to create an additional 2,500 virtual beds.

In primary care:

- We will maximise recruitment of new staff in primary care across the winter, including care co-ordinators and social prescribing link workers.
- ICBs to actively support and engage with PCNs to work with each other and other providers to develop collaborative models to manage seasonal preparedness and

specific winter pressures (such as oximetry monitoring for COVID-19 patients) alongside the digital development of primary care.

In mental health, cancer, and elective care:

- Share mental health best practice between systems and work with the VCS and LA sector to alleviate capacity constraints.
- Releasing £10m of annual funding to support MH through the winter, in addition to continued planned growth in community and crisis provision.
- Maintain and increase elective capacity to eliminate waits of over 18 months, as per the Elective Recovery Plan, except for patients who choose to wait longer or require alternative plans due to clinical complexity.
- Reduce the number of people waiting more than 62 days from an urgent cancer referral back to pre-pandemic levels by March 2023.
- Ensure the preservation of the standard clinical pathway for CYP elective surgery, critically ill children, and emergency, general and specialist services.

3. Discharge

While challenges are often seen at the ‘front door’, we know that their root cause is often in the ability to discharge patients from, and flow through, hospitals. There is a significant number of patients spending longer in hospital than they need to, often due to a lack of availability of social care. While the provision of social care falls outside of the NHS’s remit, the health service must ensure patients not requiring onwards care are discharged as soon as they are ready and can access services they may need following a hospital stay. We are working with local areas to:

- Implement the 10 best practice interventions through the 100-day challenge.
- Encourage a shift towards home models of rehab for patients with less severe injuries or conditions.
- Maximise support available from the Seasonal Surge Support Programme, provided by VCS partners.

4. Ambulance service performance

While ensuring there is enough capacity for ambulances to respond to the most urgent calls and take patients to hospital is essential, it is also important to focus on what can be done to reduce avoidable ambulance activity, through treating patients at the scene. We are working with local areas to:

- Implement a digital intelligent routing platform and live analysis of 999 calls.
- Agree and implement good practice principles for the rapid release of queuing ambulances in response to unmet category two demand.
- Work with the most challenged trusts on ambulance handover delays to develop solutions, including expanding post-ED capacity.
- Increase the utilisation of rapid response vehicles, supported by non-paramedic staff, to respond to lower acuity calls.
- Model optimal fleet requirements and implement in line with identified need.
- Implement the ambulance auxiliary service which creates national surge capacity to enhance the response and support for ambulance trusts.

- Deploy mental health professionals in 999 operation centres and clinical assessment services and deliver education and training to the workforce.
- Increase the use of specialist vehicles to support mental health patients.

5. NHS 111 performance

The NHS 111 service can only work if it has sufficient clinical capacity to provide consultations if required and patients are able to be directed to the right service for their needs. We are working with local areas to:

- Improve call handling performance through the implementation of regional call management which will enable better integration between providers and ensure the entire NHS 111 capacity is used effectively.
- Continue pilot of national Paediatric Clinical Assessment Service and build on what we are learning.
- ICBs to update details of the 24/7 urgent mental health helplines for patients experiencing a mental health crisis, and ensure these services are promoted.

6. Preventing avoidable admissions

A full range of urgent care services should be available to ensure patients can access the right care in the right place. The Directory of Services should be used by staff to direct patients to the most appropriate place, while same-day emergency care, frailty and 'hot' outpatient services should also be available for patients requiring urgent specialist treatment but not necessarily via an ED. We are working with local areas to:

- Increase number and breadth of services profiled on the Directory of Services to ensure only patients with an emergency need are directed to A&E.
- Develop and protect capacity for same-day emergency care services so that operational hours are profiled against demand and surgical availability.
- Review non-emergency patient transport services so that patients not requiring an overnight hospital stay can be taken home when ready.
- Improve the provision of the Acute Frailty service, including the delivery of thorough assessments from multidisciplinary teams.
- Implement out of hospital home-based pathways, including virtual wards, to improve flow by reducing hospital attendances. Reduce unnecessary attendances for patients with mild illness through revised NHS @home pathways that incorporate broader acute respiratory infections.

7. Workforce

NHS staff have worked incredibly hard throughout the pandemic and both current and future pressures on the health services mean teams will remain stretched. The health and wellbeing of the workforce is crucial and interventions targeting recruitment and retention will be important in managing additional demand this winter. We are working with local areas to:

- Implement your recruitment and retention plans including staff sharing and bank arrangements.
- Utilise international support for UEC recovery, identifying shortages of key roles and skills and targeting recruitment as such.

- Implement the Wellbeing Practitioners' Pack.
- Develop roles for volunteers that reduce pressure on services and improve patient experience, such as community first responders and support in discharge.

8. Data and performance management

Making the full use of data at a local, regional, and national level will help inform operational decision-making and improve the delivery of services. We are working with local areas to:

- Ensure timely and accurate submission to the Emergency Care Data Set.
- Encourage use of the A&E Forecasting Tool.

9. Communications

We are undertaking the following actions to enable strong communications:

- Implement your winter communications strategy to support the public to minimise pressures on urgent and emergency services.
- Deliver the NHS 111 and GP Access strands of the Help Us Help You campaigns.