



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

WRITTEN STATEMENT BY THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

TITLE **NHS Pressures**

DATE **10 December 2020**

BY **Vaughan Gething, Minister for Health and Social Services**

When I issued the Winter Protection Plan in September, I made it very clear that I expected this winter to be one of the most challenging that we will have seen across the health and care system. Health and social care organisations have plans in place and have been taking urgent action to ensure they are ready to respond to the demands of COVID-19, to continue to provide essential services and to prepare for winter pressures.

Despite those best efforts, the rate of COVID-19 transmission continues to rise across communities in Wales at an alarming rate. As transmission rises, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the fragile balance between providing care to those who require hospitalisation because of COVID-19 and the delivery of essential, non-COVID services. There are now more patients being treated with, or recovering from COVID-19 in our hospitals than ever before.

Difficult choices will have to be made as services and our workforce start to be stretched beyond the levels that we would normally see at this time of year. NHS organisations will need to take action to ensure they stand ready to face increasing levels of COVID-19 in the coming weeks and in the run up to Christmas. My priority remains to save lives and to minimise harm.

We are starting to see significant pressure on our unscheduled care services. NHS Wales is still here for you if and when you need it, but it is beginning to feel the weight of the demands upon it at this difficult time.

As we move further towards winter, it is vital that our health and social care system in Wales is prepared. I am firm in my commitment to support NHS organisations to take local decisions and action to continue to provide care and support to the most vulnerable people in our communities. I am choosing to act now before we see sustained surges in demand over Christmas and into the New Year. A larger number of people requiring high levels of care is anticipated over the coming weeks as we see higher levels of Covid-19 in our

communities alongside visible system pressures which arise in this most challenging period for the NHS.

I have taken advice from professional colleagues, including NHS Chief Executives and Medical Directors to inform my decision to act now to ensure our preparations can be made in a planned and measured way. I have therefore approved a framework of actions, within which local NHS organisations can make decisions. Please see attached annex.

We are collectively growing increasingly concerned about the potential risk of harm to patients who require access to essential healthcare services. The framework of actions for local consideration by NHS organisations is intended to mitigate the potential risk of harm in the system by:

- maximising use and deployment of the workforce;
- ensuring people only access 999 or hospital care if essential;
- reducing long delays in crucial parts of the system;
- improving patient flow; and
- enabling people to leave hospital when ready, reducing the risk of readmission.

These actions will ease the pressures on the NHS by allowing for services and beds to be reallocated and for staff to be redeployed to priority areas.

As well as taking individual actions set within a local context, I also expect NHS organisations to work together to ensure the resilience of the emergency response beyond their own boundaries.

Our NHS Direct Wales online service and the 111 telephone number are still available and protect our vital primary care and emergency department services from undue demand.

The key principle is to keep people safe and to keep patients out of clinical settings if there is no urgent need to attend.

The COVID-19 vaccination programme, which commenced this week gives us great hope about returning to some sort of normality. But we are not there yet. It will take a number of months for the vaccination programme to be rolled out fully. In the meantime, NHS organisations are having to redeploy staff from other areas to support that effort.

The health and care workforce is doing a fantastic job in extremely difficult circumstances, as we enter a busy winter period following what has already been the most challenging of years. I thank them for their hard work, commitment and perseverance.

It is not surprising that we are starting to see an increase in NHS staff absences due to sickness, including COVID-19 and self-isolation. The welfare and well-being of the workforce, as well as the wider population of Wales, in the face of this pandemic is critical at this testing time in order to support and deliver services to the people of Wales.

To be clear, if rates of COVID-19 transmission in communities continue to rise, and pressures on the health and care system continue to increase, Welsh Ministers may need to consider what further urgent actions and restrictions are necessary.

In the meantime, Welsh Government, and the health and care system will do everything it can to keep you safe. Help us help you - I am asking every one of us to do everything we can to protect ourselves and to protect the NHS. Together we will keep Wales safe.