

From the Permanent Secretary  
Sir Chris Wormald



## Department of Health & Social Care

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Dame Meg Hillier MP  
Chair of Public Accounts Committee  
House of Commons  
London  
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Sent via email to: [pubaccomm@parliament.uk](mailto:pubaccomm@parliament.uk)

31 May 2022

Dear Chair,

**Re: Public Accounts Committee, One-Hundredth Report of Session 2017-19, NHS waiting times for elective and cancer treatment**

I am writing to provide the committee with an update from the Department of Health and Social Care on progress against the outstanding Recommendation 3 in the above-named report.

**3: PAC Recommendation: The Department of Health & Social Care should ensure that any changes to current waiting times standards:**

- **help to improve patient outcomes and patient experiences;**
- **do not water down current standards to make them easier to meet; and**
- **are communicated clearly to the public, so that patients understand what they can expect of the NHS.**

The Clinically Led Review of NHS Access Standard is broken down into four workstreams and NHS England continues to make progress across all of these. Whilst this recommendation is not about delivering this work, it is about the principles underpinning it. As such, I wanted to update the committee on progress more generally to reassure you that this recommendation is being integrated into the work as it develops.

Key to each of the workstreams under this review is ensuring that NHS standards promote safety and outcomes; drive improvements in patient experience; and are simple and easy to understand for patients, the system and the wider public.

**Urgent and Emergency Care:** NHS England published recommendations from the clinically-led review of NHS access standards for urgent and emergency care in December 2020. The review proposed a new bundle of standards which measure the whole pathway of urgent and emergency care. NHS England has worked with a group of hospital trusts to field test these proposals and launched a public consultation in February 2021.

We have supported the NHS as it looks at the way its performance is tracked to ensure the measures and targets used are clinically relevant and reflect what matters most to patients. The recommendation to change the performance standards is subject to review and a decision will be made in due course on whether to accept the recommendations.

**Mental Health:** NHS England published recommendations from the mental health clinically-led review of standards in July 2021. The recommendations centre around timely access to meaningful care in the community services for children and young people, and for adults, and in

urgent and emergency settings. The review proposes that these standards will ensure people who need care know when they can expect to receive it and support more rapid access to evidence based care. NHS England field tested the proposed standards and recommendations in pilot and early implementer sites from May 2019.

A public consultation took place concluding in September 2021. The consultation response was published in February 2022, with the majority of respondents indicating that they supported the proposals.

The Government will work with NHS England and Improvement on the next steps for the proposed mental health access and waiting measures. Meanwhile, NHS England will continue to drive improvements in data quality.

**Cancer:** A consultation on the approach recommended by the Clinical Review of Standards for cancer services ran from 9 March until 6 April 2022 to capture views from the public, wider stakeholders and other interested organisations.

Key to the recommended approach is the introduction of the 28-day Faster Diagnosis Standard. This aims to reduce the overall time between referral and diagnosis of cancer which, in turn, leads to quicker treatment and improved outcomes. For patients, it is outcome-focused and places emphasis on getting either a definitive diagnosis of cancer or cancer ruled out within 28 days.

NHS England is currently analysing responses to the consultation which closed on 6 April 2022.

**Routine (elective) care:** NHS England is working with field test sites and other stakeholders to refine proposals for changes to NHS access standards for elective care.

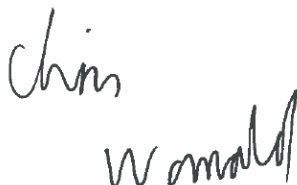
The testing will also focus on measuring care in a way that supports and stimulates improved performance in a clinically safe way, by looking at referral to diagnosis and diagnosis to treatment.

In addition to this review of standards, in February 2022 NHS England published the Delivery Plan for Tackling the COVID-19 Backlog of Elective Care. This plan commits the NHS to a series of ambitious and stretching targets to recover services, including around waiting times for elective care.

Delivery of these targets will improve patient outcomes and patient experiences and will require increased health service capacity and the transformation of the way the NHS provides elective care. The NHS has also committed, as part of the Plan, to provide better information and support to patients to help them manage their lives around their healthcare needs better.

Before any changes to NHS access standards, the Department will work with NHS England to communicate changes to patients.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Chris Wormald', written in a cursive style.

**SIR CHRIS WORMALD  
PERMANENT SECRETARY**