

To: • NHS Trust and Foundation Trust
Chief Executives

- Ambulance Trust Chief Executives
- ICB Chief Executives
- ICB Chairs

NHS England
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Dear colleagues,

Update on ambulance handovers in light of current heatwave

Over the past year we have seen increased pressure on our ambulance services. The issues underlying this include the ongoing impact of Covid-19 as well as difficulty in discharging patients out of hospital into onwards care services. The result is worsened flow leading to exit block in our emergency departments and delays in handing over care between ambulance and acute services.

We know there is a shared recognition, alongside impressive dedication, across the health and care system of the importance of getting people into emergency departments as soon as possible, and over periods such as the Easter weekend systems were able to make significant progress. This often requires difficult decisions about how to best balance risk across the system and requires some organisations to take on more risk – in a managed way – in order to reduce both the known and unknown risk that sits within the community.

As systems these are some of the fundamental challenges that you are trying to address. We must collectively take immediate steps to reduce the delays that patients experience by creating capacity within acute hospitals to allow for quicker handover and therefore faster response to the public. We know this is not easy, and that it may place additional burden on staff at an already challenging time, but it will be essential in order reach people in the community in a more timely way.

The level of risk that ambulance services are carrying on behalf of systems has now further increased due to the heatwave we are experiencing, and which is forecast to carry on into next week, as well as increased staff absences due to Covid-19. This increases the level of risk in two ways: firstly it creates additional demand for ambulance services; secondly, it increases the risk associated as patients may have to be held in enclosed ambulances as they wait to be handed over to emergency departments.

Keeping patients in enclosed vehicles for an extended period of time introduces a number of new risks, including potential build-up of oxygen in the vehicle (when being delivered to a patient), and a risk of Covid-19, or other transmissible pathogens, being spread.

Given these factors, it is even more important that ambulances are not held for longer than 30 minutes before offloading patients into the emergency department and we are asking all systems to take necessary steps to ensure that this is case.

In doing so it should not be the sole responsibility of emergency department teams to care for increasing numbers of patients within their units. Instead steps should immediately be taken to move patients who have completed their emergency medical care and are awaiting an inpatient bed out of the ED to create space for new patients. We recognise that this may involve the creation of observation areas and exploring further ways to add additional beds elsewhere in the hospital.

Trusts should continue to work with social care and other partners across the system to support timely discharge. Systems will also want to ensure they are also maximising the capacity of other services, including urgent community response and 111. It will also be important to further increase efforts on staff wellbeing and support, including supporting proper hydration and other mitigations due to the increased risk of heat stress that can occur when wearing PPE in hot weather.

All systems that are currently unable to offload ambulances within 30 minutes should now take further steps to create capacity within acute hospitals to ensure the rapid release of vehicles. This will require risk-based decisions to be made about both the use of estate and deployment of clinical workforce. We will continue to work with you to support this—including working directly to share and support implementation of emerging best practice.

We will write again in the coming weeks to share more detail on the support offer as part of planning ahead of winter, building on the operational response to current pressures.

As we continue through this current spell of hot weather, systems should continue to monitor updates from both the UKHSA and Met Office on the potential impact of the heatwave in your area and implement local hot weather plans as appropriate.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Stephen Powis
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NHS England



Dame Ruth May
Chief Nursing Officer
NHS England



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Pauline Philip DBE
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