



Ein cyf/Our ref: VG/00169/20

Assembly Members
National Assembly for Wales

26 March 2020

Dear Colleagues,

I am writing to you to provide an update on the progress with planning for COVID-19 preparedness and response that you will be aware has moved from the 'contain' into the 'delay' phase.

I continue to make decisions on the range of issues as they emerge, and you will appreciate the pace of these developments is exceptional. The overriding priority is to ensure that we continue to ensure health protection and safeguarding of vulnerable groups; the safety and welfare of staff to ensure preparedness and that we create resilience across the NHS and social care system.

I previously outlined a framework of actions, within which local health and social care providers can make decisions. These actions were to allow for services and beds to be reallocated and for staff to be redeployed and retrained in priority areas. They will remain in place and facilitate and support the ongoing health and social care response.

As I have said previously I continue to take advice from professional colleagues, including NHS Chief Executives and Medical Directors to inform my decisions and to ensure our preparations can be made in a planned and measured way.

The following actions demonstrate the progress that is being made and current position as of today:

Non-urgent outpatient appointments have been scaled down and urgent appointments are prioritised:

- Video consultations are to be rolled out where required.
- Staff and resources continue to be redeployed.

Non-urgent surgical admissions and procedures have been scaled down (whilst ensuring access for emergency and urgent surgery)

- Staff and resources continue to be redeployed.
- Health board plans are already in place to broadly double capacity.
- Additional critical care capacity is being identified.

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

- Procurement of ventilators is being progressed by both UK and Wales.
- On 21 March I announced accelerated works on the Grange University Hospital to facilitate the early opening of 350 beds and 150 mortuary spaces by the end of April.
- Further capital requirements across health board sites are being explored.

We have prioritised the use of Non-Emergency Patient Transport Services (NEPTS) to focus on hospital discharge and ambulance emergency response.

- WAST is prioritising the use of NEPTS for hospital discharge and to maximise the emergency ambulance response to patients in the community.

The NHS has expedited the discharge of vulnerable patients from acute and community hospitals and to support this NHS Wales guidance is being developed as a priority to free up acute capacity and ensure patients are cared for or reside in the right setting.

In addition, there are fast track arrangements in progress for placements to care homes for suspending the current protocol which gives the right to for people to have a choice of home.

To support capacity locally there has been a relaxation of contract and monitoring arrangements for GPs and primary care practitioners. Letters have been issued to primary care practitioners regarding temporary primary care contract changes on 17 March. You will also be aware that I announced changes to access to community pharmacy to support workflow and the preparation of prescriptions.

I have also taken the decision to suspend NHS emergency service and health volunteer support to mass gatherings and events and which was confirmed via my written statement on 13 March.

We continue to mobilise business continuity arrangements across health and social care with business continuity plans and arrangements in place across the NHS and social care that will be under regular review.

New health care pathways are being implemented for COVID-19 across acute secondary care and primary and were issued on 17 March and 23 March respectively.

I am conscious of the concerns expressed regarding testing and I am keen to ensure there is clarity on the testing of health and social care workers. I will continue to clarify the position on an ongoing basis to provide the most up to date position. There has been an expansion of the testing arrangements over the weekend and we continue to explore all other options as matter of urgency taking account of the capacity constraints.

Work is ongoing to ensure health and social care staff are able to access PPE if needed and understand when it should be used. I want to stress that mutual aid arrangements are in place between Local Authorities and health boards to enable urgent and timely access to PPE where required. Further clarity will be provided as a matter of urgency on the guidance in relation to PPE.

We are working across sectors at this challenging time and we are in discussions to commission private healthcare capacity, staff and equipment to support the national effort.

Regional Partnership Boards have refocussed to prioritise health and social care preparedness, in alignment with Local Resilience Forums and this will continue for the

foreseeable future. There has also been a necessary scale down of dental and optometry activity.

Within all these developments significant work has been undertaken to increase workforce capacity and utilise staff and resources to best effect. This includes an emergency register for returning nurses and midwives along with supporting guidance to further enhance capacity across the system.

We are writing out to vulnerable people whose existing health conditions make them more susceptible to becoming very unwell with coronavirus. We are asking these people to take even more stringent measures to shield themselves from this virus. We are working with GPs, Local Authorities and the voluntary sector to ensure that these people can access all the services they need to support them during the difficult weeks ahead.

These are wide ranging and necessary actions that are critical to our success in beating the COVID-19 crisis. Our NHS and Social Care system is working as hard as possible caring for those people affected by coronavirus. Our staff at the front line are doing a fantastic job and I thank them for their hard work, perseverance and resilience.

The escalation of the social distancing measures we announced are critical to helping the NHS to meet the challenge ahead so I urge everyone to rigorously stick to the advice on social distancing and social isolation and stay at home.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vaughan Gething". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Vaughan Gething AC/AM

Y Gweinidog Iechyd a Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol
Minister for Health and Social Services