

Ambulances and Patient Transport

28 November 2007

Edwina Hart, Minister for Health and Social Services

I am grateful for the opportunity to make this statement on ambulance services. Many of you have raised concerns with me about the provision of both emergency ambulance services and patient transport services in your constituencies, and the need for improvements in the delivery of those services, particularly in rural areas.

Twelve months ago, the Wales Audit Office published its report on ambulance services in Wales, which identified serious long-standing problems with the service and made 28 recommendations for improvement. The WAO considered that the Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust's then draft modernisation plan addressed all the crucial challenges that needed to be faced to turn the service around, and that the successful delivery of that plan would be fundamental to establishing an efficient and effective ambulance service for Wales.

Since the WAO report was published, progress has been made in taking forward many of its recommendations. The trust has published its final modernisation plan, 'Time to Make a Difference: Transforming Ambulance Services in Wales', and a number of service improvements have been successfully implemented. Response times have improved in recent months, but there is still considerable variation in performance across local health board areas, which must be addressed.

The Welsh Assembly Government is supporting the trust in implementing its modernisation plan through the provision of additional capital and revenue funding. More than £22 million in revenue funding has been provided to purchase new vehicles, and £55 million has been committed over the next 10 years for a digital communications network to be established.

The public of Wales has a right to expect a high-quality and responsive ambulance service. It is important to consider the extent to which improvements have been made in the last year, and to reassure the public that robust plans are in place to improve the service further still. As we are now a year on from the publication of the WAO report, it is an opportune time to take stock of the current position. Therefore, I have asked officials and I hesitate at this point, Presiding Officer to institute a review of progress against the report's recommendations, and to consider whether the trust's plans for further modernisation are robust and deliverable. Members may be aware of the report on the investigation into the cleanliness of ambulance vehicles across the UK, published by UNISON earlier this week. I have stressed the importance of infection control to the health service, and will ensure that it is also picked up in the review. The review will be led by Stuart Fletcher, chair of the Welsh ambulance trust, with advice being sought from ambulance colleagues, external experts and trade union representatives.

I am absolutely committed to improving the way in which transport services are currently organised and delivered in Wales to provide a better experience for the people who use them. I would like to see a new approach to patient transport services, which places the individual's experience at its core. I have asked for a high-level group to be set up, with a wide-ranging remit, to consider this in detail. The group will include service user groups, the voluntary sector, union representatives, national health service organisations, local government, and transport organisations, among others. I want the work of this group to focus on the review of the current patient transport service and to determine how it can be improved to provide a better experience for the individuals who use it. I also want the review to consider the broader issue of improving transport services for public service users across Wales. I believe that this

is a significant opportunity to improve the way in which resources are shared between organisations in Wales, to provide services that are more integrated and are of a higher quality, which better meet the needs of the people who use them.

I expect the review group to report back to me and outline the opportunities for improvement and the range of options that are available to deliver transport services that are more responsive, are of a higher quality and truly provide the people who use them with a good experience. The terms of reference for the group and its proposed membership are being drawn up, and I expect the group to begin its work in January next year. I am determined to see significant improvements achieved in the delivery of ambulance and patient transport services in Wales, and I look forward to reporting back to you on the outcome of this work

Finally, I wish to turn to the air ambulance service. Many Assembly Members will be aware of recent publicity about the funding issues faced by the air ambulance in this financial year. In order to stabilise the position of this important service, I will make £337,000 available on a non-recurrent basis in this financial year. This will allow the air ambulance to cover the full salary costs of its paramedic team. In return, I expect a full review of the way in which air ambulance services are provided in Wales, including an examination of current protocols and the location, usage and deployment of existing helicopters. The review is to be carried out rapidly and concluded by the end of this calendar year. It will inform any decisions that have to be made about funding requirements for the service in future years.

Ambulance services are complex and have many different dimensions. A great deal of work is under way to scrutinise the distinct strands that currently fall within that broad umbrella, and to ensure that future developments are better calibrated against those different requirements. I look forward to reporting back to Assembly Members on the outcome of this work.