

Busiest January on record for Welsh emergency departments

During a visit to Ysbyty Glan Clwyd emergency department today (Thursday, 21 January), Mr Gething also said he wanted to see an improvement in performance at Emergency Departments, particularly in North Wales, where performance was well below the national average.

He said:

“Last month was the busiest January on record for Emergency Department staff. There was an increase in numbers of seriously ill patients attending, with emergency admissions and attendances at major emergency departments noticeably higher.

“Big spikes in cases of flu and gastroenteritis have contributed to pressure, with more flu cases confirmed in hospitals so far this winter than the same time last year.

“It is testament to our hard-working NHS staff that despite this pressure the number of patients seen and treated within the 4-hour target was the highest for January since 2014.

“Four health boards improved their four-hour performance compared to January last year. While the ambulance target was surpassed for the 41st consecutive month and the average response time for red and amber patients improved compared to the same time last year.

“However, I am disappointed to see an overall drop in emergency departments’ performance indicators, which has been particularly affected by the poor performance at two of the three Emergency Departments in north Wales. I have been clear with the Chief Executive and Chair of Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board that I expect to see immediate and continuous improvement following substantial Welsh Government support.

“We are committed to whole system solutions to drive improvement – this is not an Emergency Department issue but one that can be improved by the wider health and social care system.”

The Minister welcomed significant improvements in the longest waiting times for planned care.

He said:

“We are investing record levels in our NHS, including almost £50m this year to tackle some of the longest waiting times. This

investment is paying off as the latest figures show continuing improvement in this area. The number of people waiting over 36 weeks for treatment was 41% lower this December compared to December last year and all health boards are in a better position than they were last year.

“Diagnostic waits over eight weeks were 54% lower in December 2018 than December 2017 and 14 week waits for therapy services show an 83% improvement over the same time period. We expect further improvement in all these areas by the end of March.”

Mr Gething also pointed out that the number of cancer patients seen within the 62 day target improved on December last year and the number of people seen within the target period in 2018 was the highest ever for a calendar year.

“I am pleased to see the number of delayed transfers of care in January decreased by 8% compared to December and by 6% compared to January last year and continues to show a long term downward trend. This is an indication that our commitment to investing in social care is paying off and helping to relieve pressure on the health service.”

Cabinet to meet in North Wales

First Minister Mark Drakeford will meet Horizon at Wylfa, before meeting the leader of Anglesey Council and hosting a roundtable of council and business representatives from across North Wales. He will be accompanied by Ken Skates, the Minister for Economy and North Wales.

The First Minister said:

“One of my immediate priorities has been to ensure North Wales has a strong voice in government and in the Cabinet so we have a strong focus on the region and its future.

“I appointed Ken Skates as Minister with responsibility for North Wales. Holding an early Cabinet meeting in North Wales is part of that effort.

“There has been some difficult news for North Wales over the past few weeks, and the uncertainty of Brexit is a source of concern for

businesses across the region – Airbus has been clear about its views in the last week, for example.

“But we must – and we will – deliver for North Wales. We are committed to the region and are investing in the area’s economy.

“We will provide whatever assistance we can to support individuals and companies affected by the recent announcements. I will be listening carefully to what people tell me today.

“I have previously called on the UK Government to put in place a funding model to deliver large infrastructure projects such as Wylfa Newydd and I repeat that today.”

Ken Stakes, Minister for Economy, Transport and North Wales, added:

“We have strong relationships, which have been built across North Wales over many years, these are crucial now as we work together to respond to the announcements about Wylfa Newydd and Rehaul and to the challenges of Brexit.

“Our commitment to North Wales is clear. We are making unprecedented investment in transport in the region, with £600m of developments planned. These include the Caernarfon to Bontnewydd bypass, with work now underway. We are moving ahead with the next stages of the third Menai crossing, which includes the appointment of technical advisers to develop the scheme in more detail with stakeholders and we are making progress with the vital A494-A55 Flintshire Corridor.

“The Welsh Government is investing significantly in supporting the long-term North Wales economy, including £20m in a new Advanced Manufacturing Research Facility (AMRF) at Broughton.

“We have invested £20m of Welsh Government and European funding in the Menai Science Park on Anglesey, which has enjoyed a successful first year, and we have pledged to match the UK Government’s commitment to the North Wales Growth Deal and called on it to increase the contribution to allow the region to maximise its impact.”

The Cabinet meeting will be in the Welsh Government’s Llandudno Junction office.

New measures to help tackle waste crime come into force

Under the waste duty of care, householders are required to ensure that waste produced on their property is transferred to an authorised person for disposal and can be prosecuted if they do not. However, taking someone to court is not always the most appropriate response for this type of offence and can take a great deal of time and effort.

Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government Hannah Blythyn said:

“We know that over 60% of fly-tipped waste comes from households. However, often people in these households haven’t fly-tipped the waste themselves, but they have failed to carefully check who they passed their waste to for disposal.

“We all have a responsibility to prevent our waste from getting into the wrong hands, and these regulations will provide councils and Natural Resources Wales with alternative way of tackling the issue.

“We consulted widely on these proposals and received widespread support. Local authorities who responded asked for a consistent, national approach to setting penalties and for the level of the penalty to be proportionate to the offence.

“However, we recognise that not all householders will be aware of their duty of care responsibilities and so we are developing a campaign to help people to understand their obligations.’’

By using fixed penalties this will allow local authorities to have a more efficient enforcement system and this not only frees up much needed resources but it can also help act as an effective deterrent.

The regulations have set the fixed penalty at £300 and enforcing authorities have the discretion to offer the option of an early payment of £150. Councils can retain the receipts to help contribute towards the costs of dealing with waste crime. They will still have the option to exercise their existing criminal prosecution powers for offences they believe require a fixed penalty.

New funding to help prevent and reduce suicide in Wales

Mental health is one of the Welsh Government's top priorities. To support this, Ministers continue to spend more on mental health services than on any other part of the Welsh NHS, with £655m being invested in 2018-19.

Each year in Wales around 300 to 350 lives are lost through suicide. The Talk to Me 2 Strategy has led to an increased focus on multiagency working to prevent suicide, with plans established in all areas of Wales.

In delivering the Welsh Government's response to the National Assembly for Wales' Health, Social Care and Sport Committee's inquiry into suicide, the Minister is announcing today that an additional £500,000 a year will be invested to specifically support national and regional approaches to tackle suicide and self-harm prevention.

These include:

- Recruiting National and Regional leads across Wales;
- Implementation of the support after suicide post-vention pathway to support those bereaved by suicide, as well as a full review of support and targeted investment to improve this;
- Improved awareness and availability of resources including Help is at Hand and a new suicide prevention website developed by the national advisory group talktometoo.wales;
- Guidance on suicide prevention training for staff across public services;
- Funding to support programs and initiatives that have been shown to be effective.

Health Minister, Vaughan Gething said:

"Improving mental health and well-being and preventing suicide continue to be a priority for the Welsh Government.

"We can't always predict who will be affected by suicide. However, suicide can be prevented if we reduce the risk factors that make it more likely. That's why we will target the additional investment we are making towards actions that can help prevent and reduce suicidal behaviours, as well as providing appropriate support to communities to address this complex issue.

"As a society, we all need to work together to prevent suicide. Friends, families, organisations, and communities all have a part to play."

Ebbw Vale train frequency enhancement scheme starts

Economy and Transport Minister Ken Skates has announced a reopening of the feasibility study into increasing the frequency of trains running from Ebbw Vale to Cardiff.

He is also calling on the UK Government once again to invest more fairly in Wales' rail infrastructure, especially given the continued concentration of UK Government railway enhancement spending in the wealthier parts of the UK.

Welsh Government entered into a contract to deliver the Ebbw Vale frequency enhancement scheme with Network Rail, but took appropriate steps to pause and review it when costs began to escalate.

Network Rail (Wales Route) fully supported this, and worked closely with Welsh Government to reduce costs, and make sure all expenditure on the scheme delivers the required outcomes.

It will now resume its task to look at the process needed to bring four trains an hour to the line by 2024, as part of the South Wales Metro.

Due to be completed by early summer, it will form part of the case to the UK Government for investing in the non-devolved railway.

Transport Minister Ken Skates said:

“Ebbw Vale needs a high quality and regular rail service – one that can support jobs, investment and economic development in the wider area.

“We are delivering a step change in the provision of rail services in Wales. Our investment through the Wales and Borders rail service contract and in the first phase of the transformation of the South Wales Metro demonstrate what the Welsh Government can deliver when given responsibility and funding.

“This is against a context for rail infrastructure delivery across Wales that is still unnecessarily complex, fragmented and underfunded. Current arrangements in investment in the railway in Wales are a reflection of the time in which they were created, predating devolution. Twenty years on, the Secretary of State for Transport in Westminster continues to retain control of railway infrastructure in Wales.

“The imperfect devolution settlement is the root of many of the problems with our railway. The ongoing lack of infrastructure

enhancement investment limits the capacity for new services, restricts the speeds of new trains, and fetters our ability to open the new stations we want to see. When we have intervened, we have done so using devolved budgets. We shouldn't forget that it was Welsh Government funding that led to the reopening of the Ebbw Branch line and not the owner and funder of the infrastructure.

"Keith Williams' root-and-branch review of Britain's railways is an opportunity to reform the railway and create the fully integrated public transport network that Wales needs. Our expectation is for the Williams review to set out a clear path for further devolution to Wales.

"In the meantime, we need fair funding from the UK Government – it must invest given its continued responsibility for rail infrastructure."