

Ministear airson Slàinte Phoblach is Slàinte
Bhoireannach
Jenni Minto BPA



Minister for Public Health and Women's Health
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Michael Dickson/Tom Steele
Chief Executive and Chair
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20th December 2024

Dear Michael and Tom,

SCOTTISH AMBULANCE SERVICE ANNUAL REVIEW: 11 NOVEMBER 2024

Thank you for hosting the Scottish Ambulance Service's Annual Review of the performance year 2023-2024 at your Gyle Square offices on 11th November. I was supported by John Burns, Chief Operating Officer for NHS Scotland and Rebecca Chalmers, Unit Head for the Scottish Government sponsorship team for SAS. This letter summarises the points we discussed.

Annual Reviews remain an important part of the accountability process for the NHS and help to ensure that we have effective governance procedures in place. I am grateful to you for organising discussions with the Clinical Forum and Partnership Forum members to enable me to explore the scope of the work they have completed in the performance period. It was helpful to hold discussions with the Senior Management team as part of the public Annual Review meeting and the private session which followed.

I was impressed with the wide range of innovative clinical service developments described, which aim to build support for anticipatory, preventative and palliative care for patients in the community alongside the traditional models of emergency response. We discussed the continued importance of working in partnership with NHS 24 and other providers of urgent and unscheduled care both in and out of hours, to redesign and improve the delivery of urgent care. The Joint Collaboration Board between NHS 24 and SAS continues to provide

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oversight of this work and help to assure the Scottish Government that collaborative working to improve patient experience and outcomes remains of paramount importance.

The development of the Integrated Clinical Hub and its associated patient pathways has been a great success and prevented over 57,000 unnecessary ambulance journeys last year. It is clear that this service development has provided real improvements for patients, ensuring that they receive the right care in the right place without the need for conveyance to hospital. I will ask the SG sponsorship team to continue to support you to interpret the data on outcomes for patients from this initiative, and to feed this into the ongoing work on reforming urgent care pathways.

It was encouraging to hear of the progress of the development of the mental health pathway, which has been an excellent example of joint working between your organisation, NHS 24 and Police Scotland. The wealth of data you are able to collect on this will be vital in continuing to maximise the efficiency of resources to support vulnerable people in dealing with mental health crisis. The Reform Collaboration Group continues to support the development of joint working across the three blue light organisations, and this is an example of the positive difference joint working can make to patients. I look forward to hearing how this pathway evolves in the future.

I expressed my congratulations to you for your organisation's recent award for partnership working with MacMillan cancer care, helping palliative patients to receive the care they need in their preferred place at the end of their lives. This is a further example of the positive expansion of the role of the Scottish Ambulance Service in supporting the full range of primary care services provided across Scotland.

We met with Partnership Forum representatives and heard about matters of interest and concern from the staff group. Since the meeting on 11th November I have received a further written update from your Employee Director which provided more detail on a number of areas of joint working between managers and staff representatives.

The management of rest breaks for ambulance crews has improved and the implementation of the reduced working week has been successful. In response to concerns raised by staff representatives about the length of time it is taking to conclude investigations, you provided assurance that there are robust mechanisms in place for Whistleblowing in line with Scottish Government guidance and I am keen for the SG Sponsorship team to continue to include regular review of this activity as part of performance meetings in the coming review period.

The development of the workforce in partnership will be critical to ensure that the Scottish Ambulance Service is equipped to support the reform of urgent care pathways as part of the plans for NHS Reform. This will include: continuing to invest in leadership training and development, improving systems for the recruitment and retention of newly qualified paramedics, and developing a structured programme for existing ambulance technicians progressing to paramedic roles. I look forward to hearing about how the SAS workforce can continue to contribute to multi-disciplinary working in a range of primary care settings, both urban and rural, to improve patient experience of our health service.

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The Scottish Ambulance Service continued to perform well across the range of targets for emergency response in 2023/24, showing particularly significant improvement in response times for the most urgent 'purple response' category. The biggest challenge in terms of performance remains the issue of timely hand over of patients to hospital emergency departments.

I was concerned to hear about the frustrations that your staff are experiencing with this issue, and the resulting impact on their wellbeing and morale. You highlighted that there continues to be significant variation in performance across the country, with some sites working closely with SAS to stabilise and improve turnaround times. Where delays have occurred throughout the year, you highlighted that patient safety has always been of paramount importance.

We were interested to hear of your ongoing concerns about patient flow through Accident and Emergency in NHS Grampian in particular and the consequent delays in the handover of patients by SAS crews. I would encourage you to continue to work together to find solutions with NHS Grampian with the support of SG officials as we enter the winter period. As a national service you have the ability to be able to share information about where things are working well and suggest improvements to patient flow and decision-making in emergency departments across the country. The Cabinet Secretary and I look forward to hearing of your progress with NHS Grampian and other Boards as you all focus your efforts on improving the turnaround of ambulances at hospital sites across Scotland.

I was pleased to note that SAS met their financial targets in 2023/24 and delivered a balanced budget. The Scottish Government will continue to work closely with all NHS boards to address the financial pressures facing the system, whilst ensuring that patient safety remains the key priority. The financial position for next year will continue to be especially challenging across the entire system and I encourage you to make every effort towards achieving financial balance.

Finally, I would like to offer my thanks to all your staff for their enthusiasm, professionalism and dedication to the highest standards of patient care for the population of Scotland. It will be critically important to continue to work with NHS 24 and other partners to meet the challenges of sustaining responsive and person-centred care throughout the coming year. The sponsorship team will continue to support you in the successful implementation of your Annual Delivery Plan this year, and I look forward to hearing about your progress in 2024/25.

Yours sincerely,



Jenni Minto MSP

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