



WALES AUDIT OFFICE
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Jonathan Morgan AM
Chair, Public Accounts Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
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Dear Chair

ASSEMBLY GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE WALES AUDIT OFFICE REPORT 'UNSCHEDULED CARE: A WHOLE SYSTEMS APPROACH'

The Deputy Clerk wrote to us on 21 July 2010 seeking our advice on the reply from the Minister for Health and Social Services to your letter requesting a formal response to our December 2009 report entitled *Unscheduled care: A whole systems approach*. This whole systems report was the last in a suite of reports themed under the banner of unscheduled care, following on from three separate reports about ambulance services in Wales (in March 2009, June 2008 and December 2006), as well as reports on *NHS Direct Wales* (September 2009) and *Patient handovers at hospital emergency departments* (April 2009).

The Committee considered the whole systems report on 13 January 2010 and decided to write to the Assembly Government to ask for a formal response to our report's recommendations. The Minister's letter acknowledges that the response has taken longer than anticipated but the explanation for this delay is, in my view, reasonable. The response to our recommendations, coupled with the general intelligence emerging from our audit work across NHS Wales, leaves me in little doubt that the Assembly Government considers unscheduled care to be a high priority and that there is a significant amount of ongoing work regarding these complicated issues. An earlier response might have proved unhelpful if, as the Minister suggests, it would not have been as detailed.

The Minister's response indicates that the Assembly Government accepts all of our eight recommendations and provides, both in a general summary and a separate annex, considerable detail about the Assembly Government's intentions for implementing the recommendations. These intentions are, on the whole, specific in terms of the proposed actions, responsibilities (of the Assembly Government and/or Local Health Boards) and timescales for implementation.

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If implemented successfully, the proposed actions have the potential to contribute to sustainable improvements to the system of unscheduled care. Examples include the intention to develop a minimum data set for unscheduled care that will hopefully contribute to a much better, holistic understanding of demand across the whole system. Other notable intentions include plans for a common clinical governance and triage system, as well as the introduction of an electronic patient record that will allow the ambulance trust to transfer patient-level data directly to other unscheduled care services.

Nevertheless, some aspects of the response to our recommendations are less detailed. For example, the future direction for NHS Direct Wales is not clearly set out and has perhaps been cast into further doubt by the UK Government's announcement of its plans to replace the NHS Direct service in England with an alternative service. The response also acknowledges that there is more work to do regarding ensuring hospital emergency departments are adequately staffed.

More generally, while the response sets out broad and ambitious plans for improvement, as with all aspects of public service improvement, the proof of success is not in the planning of change but in the actual delivery of change. With that in mind, I believe that it would be worthwhile for the Committee to take further evidence from officials, in early 2011, on their progress in delivering improvements in unscheduled care.

By early 2011, many of the Assembly Government's intended actions are scheduled to have been delivered, while the new Chief Executive of the Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust should also be fully established in post. The Committee might also like to take evidence from one, or possibly more, Local Health Boards, for example from Hywel Dda Health Board whose Chief Executive, Trevor Purt, is chairing the National Programme for Unscheduled Care referred to in the Minister's response.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gillian Body', written in a cursive style.

GILLIAN BODY
Auditor General for Wales