



Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP
Chair, House of Commons Health Select Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

24th October 2021

Sent via email

Dear Jeremy Hunt MP,

Re: NHS ambulance service pressures

GMB, the union for ambulance service workers, has serious concerns regarding the untenable workplace pressures that our members are facing in the ambulance service.

Whilst this is not a new reality for workers within the service, as the pressures have been getting worse for a number of winters, over a number of years; Covid-19 has severely exacerbated it.

Certainly, our members are telling us the service is now under the worst service pressures they have ever experienced - worse than any previous winter - and do not feel confident things are going to get better as we head from autumn into winter. The word is overused, but our members are convinced the ambulance service is facing an utterly unprecedented crisis. This is only being illustrated further in the latest NHS England figures which have repeatedly shown a growing continuation of record pressures in the service including in 999 calls to the service.

Without serious strategic and joined up action led by government and across the healthcare system it will become even more devastating for our members, and those that need emergency care.

The list of immediate issues facing the service is too extensive to go into great detail in this letter but include:

- The increasing demands on the service and hospitals as a result of growing Covid-19 cases alongside the growing 5.6 million backlog of routine hospital treatments where delays have resulted in the need for more emergency care, or where there have not been enough hospital beds or A&Es are already over capacity;
- The Government's approach to Covid-19 communications since the summer and the lack of serious and clear public health communications including the need to spell out to the public what they should and should not be calling an ambulance for;
- The ongoing failures of the entire health and social care system that then need emergency responders, including the lack of pathways for social care cases, the failure of the NHS 111 service to triage their calls within the 60-minute deadline including in non-emergency cases and the lack of access patients have to secure GP appointments and primary care in the community.

All this means the existing workforce are struggling with severely increased demands on their time and as a result of understaffing, increased working hours with contractual breaks not being met, and unscheduled overtime. Low pay, exhaustion and fatigue are causing staff burn out as well as impacting workers mental health and with little or no support in place and a culture in many services where the goodwill of workers is being exploited by management so they feel they have to work while sick.

Unless rapid and serious action is taken, we now feel this winter the problems may become insurmountable.

The additional funding from the Government's health and social care surcharge - while we would argue would be better coming from other sources and nowhere near at scale needed - urgently needs to go into rectifying these issues outlined and addressing the understaffing in the sector by raising pay.

We also need serious scrutiny on the Government's plan going into winter. We need the details from the Department to ensure there is a whole system approach in train and our members concerns in the ambulance services are addressed, including clear public health communications about the problems facing the service. With poor access to GPs and other NHS services the ambulance service has become the gateway to treatments. It is clear that this cannot work and will fail patients and also staff in the service and beyond.

We have already raised these issues in writing with the Secretary of State for Health and write to you today in your role as Chair of the Health Select Committee asking that you and the committee look at initiating an inquiry into the issues facing the NHS ambulance service, and the pressures around burnout facing staff, particularly in light of the escalating situation we have seen since existing committee inquiries closed for evidence.

We hope we can start an urgent dialogue with yourself and others on the committee to address the issues outlined here in more details. We also enclose a short briefing on a survey of GMB representatives in the ambulance service carried out in October 2021.

We will be sharing the contents of this letter and the attached briefing with the committee clerks and other members.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,



Rachel Harrison
GMB National Officer



Steve Rice
Chair, GMB National Ambulance
Representatives Committee