



Department  
of Health

From the Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP  
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*Dear George,*

Thank you for your email of 11 January on behalf of a number of your constituents about A&E pressures.

We are aware that the NHS has experienced unprecedented demand over the last two years, which is exacerbated over the winter period and has placed increasing pressure on hospitals and the wider urgent and emergency care system. The need to plan year-round, and specifically for winter, is imperative to ensure hospitals are prepared to respond to any changes in demand.

The NHS has been planning for winter earlier than ever and, whilst winter is always tough, the NHS has probably never been more prepared, with all our health and care partners working at greater levels of collective engagement.

The NHS has allocated £400million to local health systems, nationally assured the winter plans of every trust, launched the largest ever flu vaccination programme, with over 13 million people already vaccinated, and strengthened support outside A&E departments with 12,000 additional GP sessions offered over the festive period. The Government also launched the *Stay Well This Winter* campaign in October, which last year reached 18 per cent of patients aged 65 to 74, and 47 per cent of over 75s, who promptly sought advice from their pharmacist when they started to feel unwell.

The result has been that this winter has already seen days where A&E departments have treated a record number of people within four hours. As NHS leaders have said, although there have been serious problems at some trusts, the system as a whole is doing slightly better than last year.

The Department of Health is working closely with NHS England and NHS Improvement to ensure there is robust governance and operational arrangements in place so patients are confident about the quality and speed of access. Together they have undertaken comprehensive reviews to determine the causes of pressure and the lessons learnt have led to a change to the approach when planning to ensure the system is in an operationally stronger position.

This Government remains committed to maintaining and delivering the vital four-hour A&E standard for those attending A&E. The standard has been an important means of ensuring people who need it get rapid access to urgent and emergency care and we must not lose this focus. We know that A&E performance is often used as an indicator for how the NHS is performing over winter and we are therefore focused on improving A&E services this year. The NHS has developed an A&E Improvement Plan, taking a whole-system approach to improvements against the four-hour waiting standard, with a clear set of national interventions and best practice that tackle inappropriate attendances, improve patient flow and facilitate faster discharge.

As your constituents are aware, we are giving local authorities access to up to £7.6 billion of new support for social care by 2019/20, so they can increase social care spending in real terms by the end of the Parliament. Funding allocated for 2019/20 will not be brought forward. However, since April 2016, councils have been able to introduce a Social Care Precept, allowing them to increase council tax by two per cent above the existing threshold. 95 per cent of councils made use of the precept, which raised £383 million in 2016/17.

This year, local authorities will be able to raise the precept by up to three per cent, and three per cent the year after, but by no more than six per cent over the next three years. This could raise £200 million in additional funding for adult social care in 2017/18 and over £400 million in 2018/19. In addition, from April social care funds will be made available to local government through the Better Care Fund, rising to £1.5 billion by 2019/20.

I hope this reply is helpful.

  
**JEREMY HUNT**