



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

The Rt Hon Victoria Atkins MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
Department of Health and Social Care
39 Victoria Street
London
SW1H 0EU

16 February 2024

Dear Victoria,

We are writing to you as Members of Parliament in North Wales, in relation to the extreme concern we have over the safety of NHS services in our region.

This is not a new issue and we have met with each of your predecessors to flag the situation facing our constituents. However, it continues to progressively worsen. Although health matters have been devolved in Wales for 25 years, they form a sizeable proportion of our weekly postbags as MPs. Correspondents include patients, their families and members of staff – including a number of senior clinicians. We consider this not only reflects the gravity of the situation but also the lack of faith there is in the current devolved arrangements.

The NHS organisation in North Wales, Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board, is now in Welsh Government special measures for the second time. During its total of six years in such measures, it has, in our view, only worsened. The Board was last year heavily criticised in a report prepared by EY, who found that senior executives had deliberately falsified accounting entries. In a similar vein, there is a widespread belief that the Health Board has often demonstrated poor adherence to its duty of candour.

It is difficult to express quite how awful in nature the stories that we receive can be, but we believe it is no exaggeration to liken them to those that might emerge from a third world service. We each have a catalogue of cases we could share with you, which will only represent the tip of the iceberg. While the NHS faces significant pressures UK-wide, it is clear that the circumstances in North Wales are significantly worse. Too many of our constituents are experiencing avoidable death and harm as a result. It is a disgrace that some are feeling the need to move out of North Wales to other parts of the UK out of fear over the local health provision.

In an effort to demonstrate this in a statistically significant and politically independent manner, we have been pushing for HM Government to legislate for UK-wide comparable and interoperable health data and statistics on health performance and outcomes. We are certain that this would ultimately lead to the conclusion, among the most senior leaders and policymakers, that national-level intervention is required. The Office for National Statistics has, in evidence to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, acknowledged that the lack of comparable data is regrettable.



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We have also pushed for a public inquiry to be launched; for the restoration of UK-wide healthcare audit, inspection and investigatory mechanisms; and for patients in our constituencies to be given the right of access to NHS services in England. On the latter point, Simon Hart as Secretary of State for Wales, and later Stephen Barclay as Secretary of State for Health & Social Care, did write to the Welsh Government to offer such access. However, any further progress was hampered by the Welsh Health Minister's claim that she did not have additional budget to facilitate this.

As you would expect, we have convened repeated meetings with many relevant bodies, including the Health Board itself; the Welsh Health Minister; the North Wales Community Health Council; the Senior Coroner for North Wales (East and Central); Healthcare Inspectorate Wales; the General Medical Council; the British Medical Association; Audit Wales; the Royal College of Surgeons; Health Education and Improvement Wales; Donna Ockenden; and others. None have disagreed with the need for radical improvement and indeed many of these individuals and bodies have published countless formal reports stating as such.

It is our strong view that what has been taking place within the NHS in North Wales for over a decade constitutes a national scandal at least as significant as others previously exposed within the NHS elsewhere in Britain.

The UK Government has a moral responsibility for the wellbeing of British citizens throughout the United Kingdom, irrespective of devolution. It also has international duties placed upon it as a signatory of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Yet it is potentially unable to satisfy either of these in respect of healthcare due to a flawed devolution settlement which, as it stands, has left it with no relevant policy levers. The consequence is that our constituents are having to endure a grossly deficient health service, which would not be the case if they were resident in England. We firmly believe that this state of affairs must be remedied as a matter of priority.

We would appreciate an urgent meeting with you to discuss this critical matter further.

Kind regards.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Atherton MP (Wrexham)
Virginia Crosbie MP (Ynys Môn)
Rt Hon David Jones MP (Clwyd West)

Simon Baynes MP (Clwyd South)
Dr James Davies MP (Vale of Clwyd)
Robin Millar MP (Aberconwy)