



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA**

15 December 2017

Dear Colleague

Re: Winter preparations in the NHS

The NHS is our most precious public service but we are all aware of the challenges it is facing this winter in light of rising patient numbers, and the increasingly complex needs of an ageing population. I am proud that, despite these pressures, the dedication of NHS staff has helped ensure that the majority of health and care systems are providing good or outstanding quality care, the safety of that care is going up and performance against targets is improving.

However, every year winter poses a particular challenge due to the combination of cold weather, increased levels of flu, sicker patients and staff illness. It is vital we ensure the NHS continues to deliver the highest quality of care for patients throughout this period. That is why this year we have done more than ever before to plan for the weeks ahead.

In the Spring Budget we invested £2 billion over the next three years for adult social care, in part to improve flow through hospitals, alongside £100 million for streaming programmes in hospital A&Es. The Autumn Budget backed this with further money – an additional £337 million to support resilience during winter and free up capacity for additional elective activity. This new money will now reach trusts serving your constituents, in all parts of the country.

We are already starting to see signs of improvement: despite the fact that nearly 5% more people attended A&E last month than in the same period last year, performance against the 4hr target is currently 0.5% higher. Overall, since 2010 we are seeing 1,800 more people every day within the 4 hours, which is made possible by the fact we have over 1,800 more emergency care doctors and 600 more emergency medicine consultants in our trusts.

However we can never be complacent, which is why today I would like to set out the additional measures to support resilience during winter:

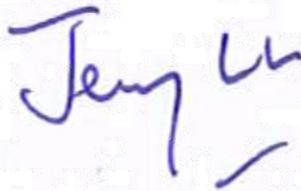
- **Extension of the flu vaccination programme:** Every winter several million people in the UK will get flu and for some the consequences can be devastating. That is why this year we extended the flu vaccination programme, making more people than ever before eligible for a free flu jab. In addition to being offered to those existing groups who are most vulnerable to the virus, this year the vaccine will also be offered to all children aged two to eight. And, for the first time ever care home staff are also receiving vaccinations free of charge, matching the offer made to frontline NHS workers.
- **Extended access to GP appointments:** We will make sure GP appointments are available throughout the Christmas holidays. For the first time nationally, urgent appointments will be available from 8am to 8pm at your local GP or one nearby from 22nd December to 7th January with the single exception of Christmas Day.

- **Hospital flow and bed capacity:** We know that good hospital performance is reliant on patients being able to flow through the hospital and discharged effectively when appropriate. The equivalent of at least 1,000 beds have been freed up by the system's efforts to reduce delayed transfers of care (DTocS), supported by the additional £1bn funding for adult social care that was announced in the March Budget.
- **National Emergency Pressures Panel:** This year we are further strengthening the NHS's ability to respond to risk by forming a new National Emergency Pressures Panel which will support the system in managing clinical risk. The panel will be chaired by NHS England's Medical Director, Professor Sir Bruce Keogh, and made up of senior clinical and social care leaders. It will advise the NHS and Ministers on the level of system risk nationally, whether it should be escalated or de-escalated and potential actions that could be taken to mitigate such risks.

I have outlined to you here today just some of the many preparations underway in the NHS, across government and in the wider health and care system to ensure winter delivery and resilience. We have done more this year and earlier to put us on a better footing as we enter the winter period and the latest performance figures show we are making headway against a backdrop of increasing demand.

That is no reason to be complacent however and I hope this provides you with assurance of our continued efforts to deliver world class health care even in the most challenging of situations.

Yours sincerely



Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP
Secretary of State for Health