

Time to end ambulance under-funding

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Ambulance service leaders say a funding shortfall of nearly £240 million is having a negative impact on patient care.

A joint briefing by NHS Providers and the Association of Ambulance Chief Executives calls for a focus on ambulance service funding as part of next week's spending review.

Securing the right support for ambulance services highlights the key role that they have played in dealing with the pandemic.

During the first wave they received additional funding that enabled them to respond rapidly and effectively. They put an extra 614 double crewed ambulances on the road, with the ability to help over 7000 more patients per day.

In the period from May to July, for the first time in a decade, ambulance services met all the national performance targets.

Although the total number of incidents was lower than for the same period last year, services had to contend with new pressures such as additional infection control measures, social distancing and workforce absences.

However, as additional resourcing reduced, demand began to increase and services had to return to "business as usual", they were unable to sustain the same level of performance, with a negative impact on patient care as well as the mental health and wellbeing of ambulance staff.

This has highlighted once again the fact that ambulance services have historically been underfunded, as year after year financial settlements have fallen behind ever-increasing demand. Based on estimates from all ten services across England, the briefing says the combined recurrent funding shortfall is £237.5m.

This is particularly worrying as COVID-19 cases increase and winter pressures loom large. The growing pressures across the health system are causing a rise in handover delays for ambulances outside emergency departments. This is unacceptable and a major indication of enduring capacity pressures within hospitals, presenting a significant risk to the safety of patients waiting in the ambulance and those who are waiting for a response in the community.

The chief executive of NHS Providers, Chris Hopson, said:

“The ambulance sector has made a vital contribution to the NHS’ pandemic response.

“The commitment, resilience and professionalism of ambulance staff has been remarkable.

“We owe them a debt of gratitude.

“The way ambulance services managed to meet performance standards in the midst of the pandemic was a remarkable achievement, and showed what can be done when they are funded adequately.

“This resulted in a faster, safer and better service for patients.

“We are clear that this is a lesson for the long term.

“It’s time to end ambulance under-funding.”

Ends.

Notes to editors

About NHS Providers:

NHS Providers is the membership organisation for the NHS hospital, mental health, community and ambulance services that treat patients and service users in the NHS.

We help those NHS trusts and foundation trusts to deliver high-quality, patient-focused care by enabling them to learn from each other, acting as their public voice and helping shape the system in which they operate.

NHS Providers has all trusts in voluntary membership.

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