Exclusive: Minister misled Parliament over ambulance crisis

By Alison Moore14 July 2022

**Minister planning to meet ambulance trusts “in coming days”**

**A health minister incorrectly told the Commons yesterday a contract was in place for providing surge capacity for ambulance services, despite the contract not having been awarded yet, *HSJ*has learned.**

There are also doubts about two other points made by health minister Maria Caulfield in Parliament yesterday in a debate about the current high pressure on ambulance services.

She said: “We have procured a contract with a total value of £30m for an auxiliary ambulance service, which will provide national surge capacity if needed to support the ambulance response during periods of increased pressure. That capacity is there, should we need it.”

However, NHS England, which advertised the contract in May, confirmed to*HSJ*todaythat it “is yet to be awarded”.

Ms Caulfield was responding to an urgent question from Labour shadow health and social care secretary Wes Streeting about pressure on ambulance services and the heatwave. *HSJ* reported on Tuesday that all 10 major ambulance services in England were on the highest level of alert.

During the debate, Ms Caulfield was repeatedly questioned about poor ambulance response times, and she said NHSE figures ”show that ambulance service response time performance has improved month on month”.

However, figures issued this morning showed response times had in fact deteriorated in June, with the most urgent, category one, calls being answered in 9m 6s on average compared with 8m 36s in May.

The average response time to category two calls – which include suspected heart attacks and strokes – also increased from 39m 58s to 51m 38s. The target time for category two is 18 minutes and for category one seven minutes.

Some Department of Health and Social Care staff – including ministers’ private secretaries – are routinely alerted to the new monthly performance figures at 9.30am the previous day — ie 9.30am yesterday (Wednesday), before Ms Caulfield addressed the House.

The May figures, which were the latest in the public domain until this (Thursday) morning, had shown an improvement on the previous month, as did those for April.

Ms Caulfield also told the Commons she would be meeting all 11 ambulance trusts “over the coming days to make sure that they have the capacity and the resilience they need not just to deal with the pressures now, including with the warm weather, but to prepare for the forthcoming winter pressures that we know are inevitable”.

*HSJ* has spoken to senior sources at several ambulance trusts who said they were not aware of any planned meetings with Ms Caulfield.

Responding to *HSJ’s*corrections about these statements from the minister, a DHSC spokesman said: “Recognising the pressure NHS staff are under, especially those on the frontline in the ambulance service, the NHS has allocated £150m of additional funding to address pressures on ambulance services, with the number of ambulance and support staff increasing by almost 40 per cent since February 2010.

“There is also an additional £50m of NHS funding to support increased NHS 111 call taking capacity this year, helping people access urgent care when they need it and use ambulances and A&E only when necessary.”

He did not directly answer *HSJ’s* questions about the procurement, meetings with ambulance services, or latest performance figures.