

Over 50% of ambulances miss response time targets

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999 CREWS ARRIVING IN EIGHT MINUTES

EMERGENCY ambulances are reaching less than half of critically ill people in parts of London within NHS target response times, it can be revealed today.

Performance has plummeted to a modern-day low, with up to seven boroughs a month seeing the eight-minute national target missed on more than 50 per cent of 999 calls.

These include the highest-priority patients who have stopped breathing and do not have a pulse, and those who have had a suspected stroke or fit.

Today the London Ambulance Service said it was receiving more calls than at any time in its history – about 35,000 a week – as it pleaded with Londoners not to abuse the service.

It has been hit by a spate of “unnecessary” calls, ranging from a patient demanding help because the buses had stopped running, to a cat with a broken leg and a woman with period pain.

NHS England warned that the LAS's response to the second highest priority of emergencies was the worst ever recorded across the health service.

The scale of the challenge facing LAS was highlighted this week when cyclist Angie Cook, 63, was left lying injured in the road for 90 minutes due to the shortage of ambulances after colliding with a car in Teddington.

Today an Evening Standard investigation found the number of priority calls receiving a response within eight minutes fell to 44 per cent in Redbridge in September.

It was one of seven boroughs that month – others included Haringey, Barnet and Waltham Forest – and three in October where less than 50 per cent of “category A” calls were reached on time. The NHS minimum is 75 per cent.

Across London, response rates to the most serious “life threatening” calls

Bark & Dag	55%	Greenwich	59%	Lewisham	58%
Barnet	48%	H'smith & Ful	64%	Merton & Sutton	65%
Bexley	55%	Haringey	48%	Newham	60%
Brent	53%	Harrow	55%	Redbridge	53%
Bromley	59%	Havering	59%	R'mond & Tw'ham	56%
Camden	66%	Hillingdon	58%	Southwark	66%
City & Hackney	60%	Hounslow	55%	Tower Hamlets	60%
W'minster	64%	Islington	55%	Waltham Forest	50%
Croydon	54%	Ken & Chelsea	62%	Wandsworth	62%
Ealing	51%	Kingston-u-T	65%		
Enfield	52%	Lambeth	64%		

Source: LAS

within “category A” crashed from 81 per cent in March to 64 per cent in October, with July the worst at 61 per cent.

At the same time, the capital has fallen below the national average for the percentage of cardiac arrest patients discharged alive from hospital, and for those arriving at a hyper-acute stroke unit within an hour.

Malcolm Alexander, chairman of the London Ambulance Service Patients' Forum, feared increasing pressures and staff shortages were causing a breakdown in relations between LAS executives and front-line staff.

He said: “I think they are not coping. We have been monitoring the London Ambulance Service for 10 years and it's never been down to anything like this. If it went down to 70 per cent we would consider it to be a disaster.”

Problems were exacerbated by crews being forced to keep patients in the back of ambulances for more than an hour on hundreds of occasions, due to A&Es being full.

At one hospital, Queen Elizabeth in Woolwich, 209 patients waited more than an hour in an ambulance between July and September. Over the same period across London, 5,852 patients waited in an ambulance for more than 30 minutes – double the 15-minute maximum. Last week the Standard

revealed that Boris Johnson had written to Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt warning of the pressure facing LAS as it entered its toughest time of year.

The LAS treated 10,187 seriously ill and injured patients last week – 10 per cent more than last year. About 3,500 of the 35,000 calls it takes each week receive phone advice rather than an ambulance.

A national shortage of paramedics has resulted in more than 400 LAS vacancies. It hopes to recruit 1,000 new front-line staff by next year.

LAS director of operations Jason Killens said: “We're very busy, please only call us in a genuine emergency and at all other times call NHS 111, visit your GP or pharmacist or alternatively make your own way to hospital.”

In June, only 5.7 per cent of cardiac arrest patients – 17 out of 296 – on whom resuscitation was commenced were subsequently discharged alive from hospital, compared to national average of 8.5 per cent.

A spokesman for Lewisham and Greenwich hospitals, which runs Queen Elizabeth hospital, said it had made 46 extra beds available last month which had helped to reduce the number of ambulance delays.

power is the only way of making these

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Ambulances in crisis

THE London Ambulance Service gets more calls now than it has ever done, about 35,000 a week, and the result is that the service is sometimes dangerously slow to respond to calls from critically ill people. As we report today, in up to seven London boroughs a month, in more than half of cases emergency ambulances fail to respond to 999 calls within the NHS target of eight minutes. In London overall, the response to serious emergency calls within the target time fell from 81 per cent during March to 64 per cent in October. In some cases the problem is exacerbated by the shortage of space in A&E departments: ambulance crews may wait up to an hour before they are able to bring a patient into a hospital.

This is a genuinely disturbing development, with life-threatening implications. There are plans to increase the numbers of paramedics to meet rising demand; it can't happen too quickly. Yet we too must play our part: the service says that it is beset with frivolous 999 calls from people with trivial complaints. That has to stop.

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Ambulance service needs our support

AS YOUR report last week on the London Ambulance Service revealed, while those with life-threatening conditions usually get the attention they need, a large number of seriously ill people are waiting unreasonably long for the expert care that the LAS should provide.

Paramedics often work 12-hour shifts day after day, and if there is an emergency at the end of a shift they might work 13 or more hours in a day. They are London's unsung heroes but the pressure on them is too great; many are exhausted and every week several leave the service for higher-paid, less stressful jobs elsewhere.

We need action now. Health minister Earl Howe should publicly state his commitment to our emergency ambulance services, ensuring paramedics are paid a wage that enables them to live in London.

The boss of NHS England, Simon Stevens, should stop wasting money on consultants doing more research into ambulance services and guarantee that the LAS has the resources it needs.

The LAS must make sure that all paramedics feel valued and respected, and focus on recruitment. Long-term sustainability of the paramedic workforce requires active and continuous recruitment – neglecting this process and then recruiting from Australia (as the LAS is now doing) is no long-term answer to our problems.

Malcolm Alexander, chair, Patients' Forum for the London Ambulance Service