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# BMA

Cymru Wales

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Our Ref: CL

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Dear Minister

## Health and Social Service priorities

Congratulations on your appointment to the role of Minister for Health and Social Services in the Welsh Government.

As you may know, the BMA is a professional association and trade union representing and negotiating on behalf of all doctors and medical students in the UK. We are a leading voice advocating for outstanding health care and a healthy population. As an association we provide our members with excellent individual services and support throughout their lives.

Based in Cardiff Bay with staff working out of North Wales, BMA Cymru Wales represents doctors and medical students throughout Wales.

In January 2021 the Chief Medical Officer for Wales made [eight recommendations](#) in his Special Report on the response in Wales to the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ensuring that these recommendations are put into action must be the priority of Welsh Government. Doing so will help Welsh Government to bring change to the three most pressing matters that Wales faces.

## Reducing the backlog

While doctors and other healthcare staff have experienced unprecedented times during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, many of the challenges facing the Welsh NHS are far from new: staffing shortages, the prioritising of prevention, and the need to address sustainability issues to name but a few. These are detailed further on our manifesto for the 2021 Senedd election '[A Manifesto for Health](#).'

However, there are three areas that Welsh Government need to give immediate focus:

1. The Welsh NHS needs to see an increase in staffing levels to carry out procedures to begin to reduce the backlog of patients awaiting surgery. Investment is required as the staff in place at present have been working throughout the pandemic and need more assistance. Failure to do so could lead to staff leaving the profession early, resulting in

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yet more recruitment being required while at the same time seeing a significant loss of experience and knowledge.

2. The space within hospital facilities needs to be made better use of. This will allow for more patients to be seen while at the same time maintaining safe conditions for patients and staff.
3. There needs to be increased access to diagnostic tests in the community which could reduce waiting time for both inpatient and outpatient care by speeding up the patient pathway and potentially remove the need for referral altogether in some cases.

Through investment in these key areas Welsh Government will be able to considerably reduce the amount of time that it will take for waiting times to return to pre-pandemic levels.

### **Supporting staff**

The stresses experienced by staff during these difficult times need urgent and immediate attention from the new Welsh Government.

In a recent survey of BMA Cymru Wales members, 55% of respondents said they are currently suffering from depression, anxiety, stress, burnout, emotional distress or other mental health conditions, while four in five doctors told us that their current level of health and wellbeing is either the same or worse than it was during the first wave of the pandemic.

Even more concerning is the fact that 25% of our members said they were now more likely to consider taking early retirement, while 50% said they are considering working fewer hours.

I am sure you will agree that this is unacceptable and cannot continue.

A healthcare workforce that feels valued, supported and healthy is able to provide the best possible levels of support and care for patients.

Therefore while taking action to increase staffing levels is urgently required, additional support must also be provided for those staff who have been working throughout the pandemic. We therefore urge you to introduce Freedom to Speak Up Guardians as soon as possible so that staff have an appropriate outlet to voice their concerns about working conditions and patient safety without fear of reprisal from managers.

Wales remains the only part of Britain to not have introduced such a scheme.

While Covid-19 has shone a light on many of the challenges experienced in the NHS like never before, it has also led to new ways of working that have benefitted patients and staff. It is however crucial that frontline staff are consulted about changes and play an active role in implementing new ways of working so that an appropriate blend of new ways of working is available. This will ensure that no patient is left behind.

### **Population Health**

I am sure you agree that a healthy population is better protected from long term health conditions and infections.

We now know that that obesity significantly increases a person's risk of dying from COVID-19, while people with long-term lung conditions are at a high risk of severe illness from the virus.

It is therefore vital that Welsh Government makes the improvement of the population's health, and in doing so the reduction of health inequalities, at the heart of its policies.

Action on smoking, obesity, air pollution, physical inactivity and alcohol misuse are critical to be physical and mental wellbeing of the population. These, along with investment in mental health services, campaigns to help people manage their own health, and support for children at risk of adverse childhood experiences, are required immediately to ensure that Wales is better protected from future viruses and illnesses.

Should you require any further information about doctors, medical students or health services please do not hesitate to get in touch.

I look forward to working with you to ensure the Welsh NHS fully recovers and that doctors and other healthcare workers are supported so that they can provide the best levels of care for patients.

Yours sincerely



**Dr David Bailey**

Chair, BMA Welsh Council