



The voice of NHS leadership

WINTER IS COMING

Confidence in the NHS's ability to deliver safe care this winter

In a survey of health and care leaders involved in winter planning - over a third of all respondents were either not very confident (29.6%) or not at all confident (5%) in the ability of their local NHS to deliver safe care this winter.

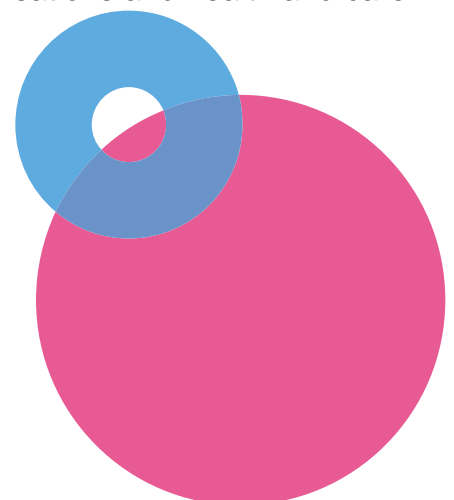
The NHS is about to enter what many commentators believe will be an extremely challenging winter. Monthly performance reports have shown that in October and November A&E attendances were already reaching record breaking levels of over 2 million people. This has consequences for NHS performance.

The performance summary for November published by NHS England last week, showed that as we head into winter the NHS is already under significant pressure, with performance against the A&E four hour waiting time target at 87.6% and only 13 trusts meeting the 95% standard for patients to be seen within 4 hours. The 95% A&E standard was last met in July 2015. Elective waiting times are also of concern, with 4.18 million patients now waiting over a year to be seen for treatment and we have seen an increase in the number of delayed transfers of care.

In the first week of NHS England's weekly winter situation reports, we saw 11 hospitals with 100% General and Acute bed occupancy, 5 of which were in London. Around a third of trusts (55 trusts out of 135) were operating at above 97% bed occupancy across the week. There were also 25 NHS trusts that had A & E diverts in place at some point over the course of the week, meaning that they were too full to accept more patients.

These statistics would be worrying at any time of the year, but are even more concerning, given that we are heading into winter, when we usually see pressure on NHS services increase to their highest levels. There is strong concern that the NHS will not be able to cope, putting patients at real risk.

There are now a variety of tried and tested steps that NHS organisations and health and care systems take to prepare themselves to meet the challenge of surges of demand expected during winter. We know that our members across the NHS have been working hard to prepare, well in advance of winter and they are already implementing a variety of actions from their winter resilience plans. However, despite this focus on planning there is still a lack of confidence amongst many respondents, in the NHS's ability to cope with winter pressures.

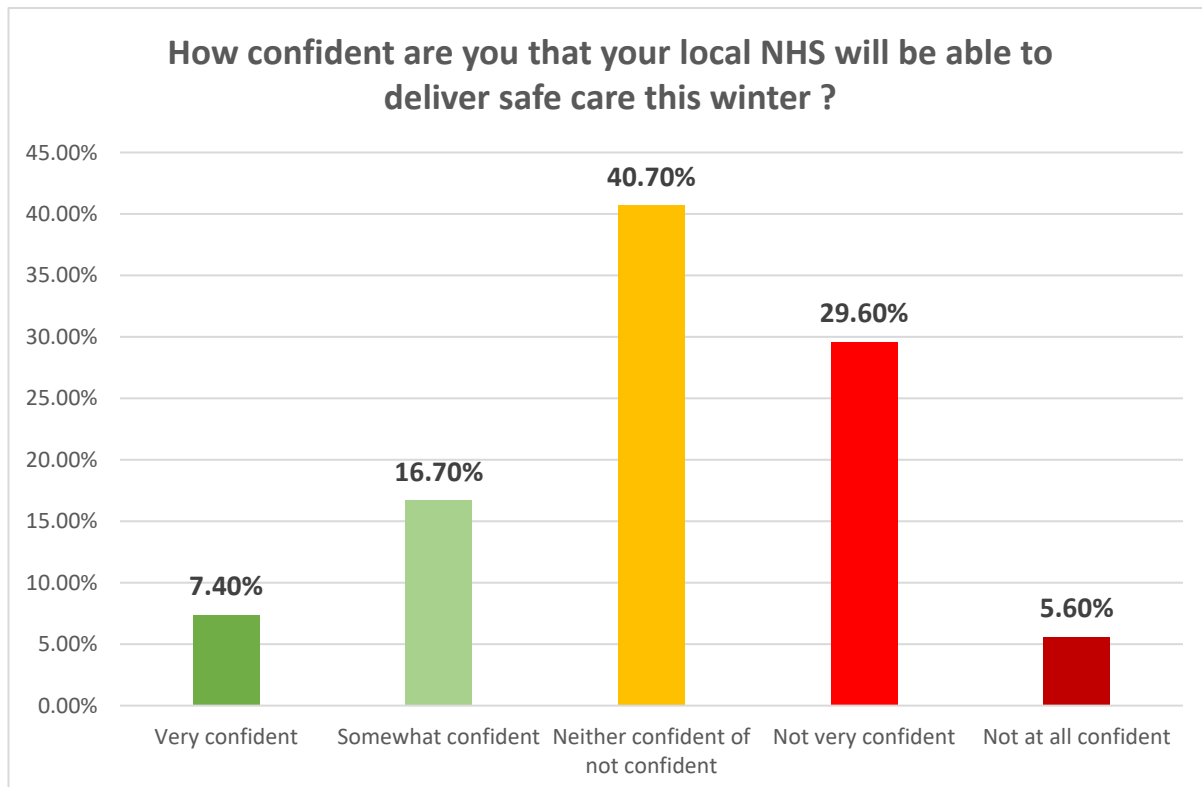


OUR PRE-WINTER SURVEY

The NHS Confederation sent out a short survey to Accident and Emergency Delivery Board Chairs, drawn largely from acute trusts and CCGs. We also sent the survey to Ambulance Trust Chief Executives. The survey was open for three weeks from November to December. Just under half of all those contacted responded. This is the first set of results and we will be releasing further results over the course of the winter, in order to highlight the challenges the NHS is facing in dealing with winter pressures.

Confidence in the NHS's ability to deliver safe care this winter

Respondents were asked how confident they were in their local NHS's ability to deliver safe care this winter.



In total over a third (35%) of all respondents were either not very confident (29.6%) or not at all confident (5%) in the ability of their local NHS to deliver safe care this winter.

Although there is room for some optimism, as 16.7% of respondents were somewhat confident in the ability of their local NHS to deliver safe care this winter, and 7.4% were very confident.

Overall, more respondents lacked confidence (35%) than had confidence (24%) in the ability of their local NHS to deliver safe care this winter.

As we head into winter with significant spikes of demand expected over the coming weeks, our survey suggests that many of the health and care leaders involved in making winter resilience plans are themselves anxious about the NHS's ability to deal with winter pressures and believe that patient safety is at risk.

We know that significant amounts of time and effort have been put into making winter resilience plans to help local systems better cope with the demands of winter. However, despite these significant efforts, the survey suggests that relentless demand on NHS services highlighted in the monthly performance data and the weekly winter situation reports is leaving many NHS leaders still feeling very uncertain about the NHS's ability to cope.

We will be monitoring the NHS's performance over the coming winter and exploring further results of our survey to identify some of the key challenges facing NHS organisation. We will try to understand what the barriers and enablers are to coping with winter demands and look to highlight what can be done to support the NHS to better meet the significant challenge of winter.

Annexe

Winter Situation reports

In the first week in which NHS England has produced a winter situation report, looking at the performance of trusts in England on a weekly basis, we have seen 11 hospitals with 100% General and Acute bed occupancy, 5 of which were in London. Around a third of trusts (55 trusts out of 135) were operating at above 97% bed occupancy.

Across the week, General and acute bed occupancy averaged at 94.2%, which is just a bit lower than the same time last year when it was 94.6%. Bed occupancy peaked at 94.9% on the 3rd and 4th of December. A significant number of escalation beds were opened and occupied across the week, with 2,701 open on the 3rd December.

A and E diverts were the same as last year, with 25 diverts in place over the course of the week.

Norovirus is already causing problems, with between 400-600 beds closed daily due to norovirus, although this is not as bad as last winter, it is concerning that figures are already at this level, so early into winter.

Equally as concerning is the number of people who have been in hospital for 21 days or more, which stands at around 15,000 for the first week of December. Although, we recognise that this is a 10% reduction in the number of patients staying in hospital over 21 days compared to the same week last year, it is still high.

There were signs of real pressure in Paediatric intensive care, where bed occupancy stands at 84.7%. This is 2.2% higher than the same week last year. PICU beds were a real issue last winter when we saw examples of some trusts operating at full occupancy for several days over the course of the winter, leading to cancelled operations. There are concerns that we will see the same story play out this winter.

The improved performance in numbers of ambulance delays is good news, especially given that the number of people arriving was 3% higher, compared to the same week last year. There was a total of 97,472 ambulance arrivals, which is very high and the only week that was higher last year was the week that included Christmas.

Ambulance handover delays of 30-60 minutes are improved compared to the same week last year. They peaked at 1,629 on Monday 03/12/2018 and fell towards the end of the week, to 963 on Sunday 09/12/2018.

Ambulance handover delays of over 60 minutes peaked at 432 on Monday 3rd and were at their lowest – 179, on Wednesday 5th.

As we head into winter 2018-2019, it looks as if the NHS is already under significant pressure, this is especially worrying given that we have had a relatively mild winter so far and the normal strains that accompany the Christmas and New Year party season haven't yet kicked in.

ⁱ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/statistical-work-areas/combined-performance-summary/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/statistical-work-areas/winter-daily-sitreps/winter-daily-sitrep-2018-19-data/>