

FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH



Department of
Health

An Roinn Sláinte

Máinnystríe O Poustle

www.health-ni.gov.uk

Eilish McGoldrick
Belfast City Council
Legal and Civic Services Department

mcgoldricke@belfastcity.gov.uk

Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
BELFAST, BT4 3SQ
Tel: 028 9052 2556
Email: private.office@health-ni.gov.uk

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Date: 10th March 2021

Dear *Eilish*,

Thank you for your letter of 10 February 2021 to the First Minister and deputy First Minister, regarding the motion that the Council passed on 1 February about the use of available healthcare resources.

Firstly, let me say that it is unacceptable that any patient has to wait longer than is clinically appropriate for surgery or treatment, and I can assure you that waiting times for elective surgery remains one of my key priorities.

Since the number of patients requiring admission and treatment for Covid-19 related illness began to rise in October, it became increasingly difficult to maintain planned services. Staff across the system had to be redeployed to help manage the higher number of patients being admitted to hospitals on an emergency basis and also to allow the system to increase critical care capacity.

All Trusts maintained urgent bookable theatre lists for emergency surgery and utilised capacity within those lists for cancer surgery. This was kept under daily review.

In addition my Department has established a Regional Prioritisation Oversight Group. This ensures that clinical prioritisation of time critical and urgent cases across surgical specialities and Trust boundaries is consistent and transparent. It also ensures that the utilisation of all available capacity is fully maximised.

Whilst this may mean that patients travel further for their surgery, I would rather see the highest priority treatments delivered elsewhere in Northern Ireland, than not at all.

Given the impact of Covid-19 on health service operating capacity, I have made it clear that all possible sources of additional capacity should be utilised. That has included securing theatre capacity from local independent sector health providers. From 1 April 2020 to 7 February 2021 approximately 4,300 patients have been treated by local HSC consultants in the three local independent sector providers. Provision for continued access to the three independent hospitals had been made until 31 March 2021 and will continue beyond March, for the foreseeable future.

In addition to that, some capacity has been secured from Republic of Ireland private clinics. Discussions are ongoing with NHS England for in-house and independent sector capacity for Northern Ireland patients.

I can assure you that Trusts are working very hard to maintain cancer care in so far as that is possible during the current surge. That will include seeking to continue to maximise fully all available in-house HSC and independent sector capacity both within and outside Northern Ireland.

It must also be recognised that cancer services were in a challenging position before the pandemic. The pandemic has exacerbated the challenges but it has not created them. There is no doubt that some services would benefit from reform, but above all, there needs to be a commitment to significant and sustained investment.

I deeply regret that anyone has had their surgery postponed or delayed.

Yours sincerely



Robin Swann MLA
Minister of Health