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Wellington House
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6 July 2023

Dame Meg Hillier DBE MP
Chair, Public Accounts Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Dear Dame Meg,

Thirty-Eighth Report on NHS Backlogs and Waiting Times

Thank you for your letter dated 27 June regarding the government's response to you on TM38. I am grateful to you and to the Committee for your continuing interest in the delivery of NHS cancer services.

I wanted to respond specifically on Recommendation 1 on *Managing NHS backlogs and waiting times in England*, and your recent letter regarding the status update included in the response to the Committee's report.

I should say at the outset that there has never been any intention or attempt to imply that the 62 day performance standard is being met. We have made this completely clear in both our public statements, including at the Public Accounts Committee, and through the data, included in your letter, that we at NHS England publish. We have set out in some detail in those Committee meetings the challenges which mean that standards are not currently being met and the actions the NHS is taking to improve performance. This remains a clear priority for the NHS.

The joint view with government in response to the Committee's recommendation was that we now have in place a comprehensive set of actions to reduce pandemic backlogs and improve cancer performance. It is on this basis that the response concluded we were doing '*whatever is required to bring cancer treatment back to an acceptable standard*', with the actions underway in the accompanying text, although we understand and appreciate this is not how you interpret the recommendation. Indeed, the data is beginning to show that we are starting to reverse some long-term trends in performance:

- Despite record levels of referrals at 120% of pre-pandemic levels, 2022-23 saw the first year-on-year reduction in the number of patients waiting longer than 62 days (the "62 day backlog") since data began to be collected in 2016, including a reduction of more than 40% between mid-2022 and March 2023.
- The Faster Diagnosis Standard was met for the first time in February 2023 meaning over 171,000 people - 75% of those referred – received a definitive diagnosis within 28 days.

We understand and share the importance that the Committee attaches to the 62 day standard. As we have said previously, reducing the pandemic backlog, ensuring that we diagnose and where necessary treat those who have been waiting longest, has been our first priority. While we focus on the backlog, that does mean performance against the 62 day backlog inevitably reduces. However, it is the right thing to do clinically, and a necessary first step towards improving 62 day performance. Even as they focus on those who have been waiting longest, NHS staff are also ensuring that people who need care most urgently are seen as promptly as possible.

The recent improvements we have seen in the backlog position and in Faster Diagnosis Standard performance have followed a sustained focus on the diagnostic phase of the cancer pathway. 65% of lower GI referrals are now accompanied by a FIT test – up from 24% ten months ago – and we are rapidly accelerating the use of teledermatology to speed up skin pathways. In 2023-24, we have asked local systems to ensure that the new capacity created by the rollout of Community Diagnostic Centres is prioritised for patients referred for cancer checks.

While the recent industrial action has not made the job any easier, we are confident that we remain on-track to maintain the recent improvements we have seen against the Faster Diagnosis Standard and to reduce the backlog to a level at which we calculate sustained improvement against the main 62 day standard will be achievable. We would be very happy to keep the Committee informed of our plans and progress.

I hope this letter helps to explain why the response did not constitute selective reporting. We remain grateful for your support for our work and look forward to a continued dialogue as we build on progress made in 2022-23.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cally Palmer". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of "Cally" and "Palmer" being capitalized and prominent.

Dame Cally Palmer
National Cancer Director
NHS England