

Review Welsh General Practice Access standards in light of pandemic

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 15 Tachwedd 2021
Petitions Committee | 15 November 2021

Reference: SR21/1044-1

Petition Number: P-06-1206

Petition title: Review Welsh General Practice Access standards in light of pandemic

Text of petition:

GPs in Wales have been set an unachievable target of answering 90% of calls within 2 minutes in order to receive full funding. This is nigh on impossible to achieve under normal circumstances but due to increased demand and staff shortages this is unrealistic during a pandemic.

1. Background

On 20 March 2019, the Minister for Health and Social Services announced the Access to In-Hours General Medical Services (GMS) Services Standards. Underpinned by clear measurables, expected achievements by March 2021 and supported by a delivery milestone under the Primary Care Model for Wales, the Standards set clear requirements on practices in terms of minimum expectations relating to access, including an increased digital offering.



The Access Standards for 2019/20 were published in October 2019, including the requirement that 90% of calls should be answered within 2 minutes of the recorded message ending.

2. Development of the Access Standards

The Access Standards for 2020/21, (published October 2020) were reworded very slightly, requiring that 90% of calls are answered within 2 minutes of the introductory message ending. The guidance on the Standards noted that:

The Standards set out within this guidance have been amended from the 2019/20 guidance, to take account of changes in working practice necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic. All amendments have been agreed between Welsh Government, GPC Wales and NHS Wales.

On 21 May 2021 the British Medical Association (BMA) published an update on the 2020/21 GMS contract for Wales. The BMA noted that the existing access standards would remain in place for the remainder of 2020/21, following their introduction in 2019, but that a new phase of standards would be introduced for 2021 onwards and continually discussed in future negotiations.

In July 2021 the Welsh Government subsequently published updated Supplementary guidance for the GMS contract Wales 2020/21. This supplements the 2019/20 guidance and the October 2020 guidance, to take account of changes in working practice necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It notes that “All amendments have been agreed through the tripartite approach between Welsh Government, GPC Wales and NHS Wales”, and sets out in relation to access standards that:

The last year has not provided a true platform to show how the current standards have improved access. It was agreed that a further year of the current standards would be maintained to 31 March 2022 to allow the measures to embed and a true measurement taken of how effective the standards have been in improving access for all.

Contractors will be paid annually for the standards completed during a QAIF (Access) year subject to evidencing that they have complied with the relevant access standards for at least one calendar month prior to the end of the financial year for which payment is being claimed. Contractors are expected to achieve standards 1 to 7 by 31 March 2022

and are required to report their achievement progress at the end of each quarter. The below standards remain for 2021/22. (p.4)

These updated Standards include:

Standard 2: People receive a prompt response to their contact with a practice via telephone. **Achievement for this Standard at the end of March 2021 will be carried forwards with achievement for this standard being counted as the same as at March 2020, with practices retaining the ability to evidence achievement if they didn't last year. Full achievement will be required in 2022 to receive the payment for this standard.** (p.5)

3. Welsh Government response to the petition

On 12 October 2021, the Minister for Health and Social Services wrote to the Chair of the Committee in relation to the petition, recognising that the COVID-19 pandemic has placed enormous pressure on the whole health and social care system, and noting that:

A letter was sent to all GPs in Wales on 2 March 2021 which acknowledged that the past year has not provided a true platform on how the current access standards have improved access. We agreed to extend the funding for a further year, standards to 31 March 2022, to allow the measures to embed and a true assessment made of how effective the standards have been in improving access for all.

[...]The Access Standards, including any amendments made, are measured and funded as part of the GMS contract and as such form part of annual negotiations between Welsh Government, GPC Wales and NHS Wales. Tripartite contract negotiations commenced in July and are ongoing and I will be making a statement once they conclude.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.