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Dear Darren

## **REVIEW OF GP OUT OF HOURS SERVICES, BETSI CADWALADR UNIVERSITY HEALTH BOARD**

Further to your letter of 14<sup>th</sup> May 2015 and subsequent discussions at the Public Accounts Committee, I thought it important that I write to you to respond to your concerns that we should have been more alert to the issues which have emerged about GP out of hours services at Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board. I would be very concerned if the Committee thought we had been "asleep on our watch", and I have consequently sought internal assurance that this was not the case.

Some history is relevant here. You will recall that in September 2013 I published a report entitled *Unscheduled Care: An Update on Progress* that drew together messages from local audit work undertaken during 2012-13. Whilst we were aware of challenges within GP out of hours services in scoping that work, the stakeholders we spoke to were much more concerned about in-hours access to primary care and the knock on effect this was having on emergency departments. We were also aware that a sub-group of the national unscheduled care board, led by Dr Chris Jones, was undertaking a specific review of out of hours services across Wales, with plans to formally report their findings. Consequently, and to avoid duplicating the work of the national sub-group, we decided that our audit work would not focus substantially on out of hours services. However, my 2013 report did take the opportunity to raise a number of concerns about GP out of hours services in Wales, and referenced findings of the interim report from Dr Jones's sub-group.

In response to my 2013 report, your Committee held an inquiry on unscheduled care and took evidence from a number of witnesses, including Dr Jones. The Committee's subsequent report included a recommendation for Welsh Government to respond publically to the findings of the national subgroup's work on out of hours services. The Welsh Government accepted that recommendation, and has since provided the

Committee with a number of updates on progress. We had noted from the most recent update in October 2014 that a revised set of Quality and Monitoring Standards for out of hours services were launched in May 2014.

Monitoring the achievement of these type of standards does not form part of my routine remit, as this would stray into Healthcare Inspectorate Wales's clinical governance territory and the performance management work undertaken by the Welsh Government's Department of Health and Social Services. Instead, I would rely on any concerns about the implementation of these standards being raised at the routine trilateral escalation and intervention meetings. No such concerns on out of hours services have been raised at recent meetings.

I now turn to the question of whether my recent local audit work at Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board could have picked up the concerns which have subsequently emerged on out of hours services. The key point to make here is that I need to rely on the performance management information that is routinely available to help inform my analysis of risks and issues facing a Health Board. My team would then use this alongside our observations of how it is discussed and scrutinised at the appropriate forums and Committees within the organisation to inform our wider views of the robustness of governance arrangements. In the local work on unscheduled care at the Health Board that underpinned my 2013 national report, we clearly highlighted the need for improvements in relation to performance management information relating to primary care. We have repeated these concerns in our subsequent annual structured assessment work and they have been echoed again in the recent report by Partners4Health, which confirmed significant gaps in the reporting and performance management of out of hours services.

I am therefore confident that, within the parameters of the information available to us, we have been suitably vigilant in our work on unscheduled care and wider governance arrangements as they relate to out of hours services at Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board. I am, however, concerned that the recent report by Partners4Health has once again reinforced our concern about continuing gaps in performance management and information. I believe this is illustrative of the concerns we have all expressed about the Health Board's ability to grip and address important governance issues, and which has ultimately led to the imposition of special measures.

Going forward, I am particularly keen to ensure that future tripartite escalation and intervention meetings are accompanied by the fullest possible set of performance information (which in the main the Welsh Government has access to), and that where concerns are identified in services such as out of hours provision, that the information is shared with myself and Healthcare Inspectorate Wales in a timely manner so that we can agree appropriate responses. This is something that I shall be raising with both the

Welsh Government and Healthcare Inspectorate Wales as part of our planned tripartite review and reflections on the operation of the current escalation and intervention arrangements. In doing so I will be keen to ensure we adopt the most efficient and effective approaches to accessing this information, ensuring the efficient use of my staff's time and also avoiding any unnecessary burdens on NHS bodies.

Yours sincerely



**HUW VAUGHAN THOMAS**  
**AUDITOR GENERAL FOR WALES**