

Structured Assessment 2021 (Phase One) – Operational Planning Arrangements: Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust

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Summary report

About this report

- 1 This report sets out the findings from phase one of the Auditor General's 2021 Structured Assessment on the operational planning arrangements at the Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust (the Trust). Our Structured Assessment is designed to help discharge the Auditor General's statutory requirement to be satisfied that NHS bodies have made proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in their use of resources under section 61 of the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2014.
- 2 Health bodies are required to submit a three-year Integrated Medium-Term Plan (IMTP) to the Welsh Government on an annual basis. In January 2020, health bodies submitted IMTPs, covering the period 2020-2023, for approval. However, the Welsh Government suspended the process for approving IMTPs to allow health bodies to focus on responding to the unprecedented and ongoing challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 3 The Minister for Health, Social Services and Sport set out shorter planning cycles for health bodies covering 2020-21. Guidance set out key considerations for planning, with the requirement for health bodies to produce a quarter one plan by 18 May 2020, a quarter two plan by 3 July 2020, and a combined plan covering quarters three and four (Q3-4) by 19 October 2020.
- 4 The planning framework for Q3-4 2020-21 covers the maintenance of effective and efficient operational planning arrangements in health bodies to guide their continuing response to the pandemic as well as responding to winter pressures and the implications of EU transition. Health bodies also need to continue to lay the foundations for effective recovery beyond 2020-21.
- 5 In our [2020 Structured Assessment report](#) we considered the Trust's planning arrangements for developing the quarters one and two plans. This report considers the planning arrangements underpinning the development of the operational plan for Q3-4 of 2020-21.

Key messages

- 6 Overall, we found that **the Trust has continued to adapt and refine its planning approach to respond to new requirements, the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and maintain oversight of its long-term ambitions. However, as a result of operational pressures some aspects of monitoring and reporting of plan progress were paused or altered during the year and there is scope to clarify these arrangements going forward.**

Detailed report

Operational planning

Scope and coverage of the Quarter Three and Four Plan 2020-21

- 7 Our work considered the scope and coverage of the Trust's 2020-21 Quarter Three-Four Plan (the Q3-4 Plan) in line with Welsh Government planning guidance.
- 8 We found that **the Trust submitted its Q3-4 Plan to the Board and Welsh Government in line with required timescales and although the Plan broadly covered relevant areas, there was scope to provide greater detail for some aspects.**
- 9 The Q3-4 Plan was considered and approved by the Trust Board at a dedicated closed meeting on 16 October 2020. Minutes from the meeting reflect a good level of discussion between Board members, who considered the Q3-4 Plan in the context of the broader health system. The Q3-4 Plan was subsequently submitted to Welsh Government by the 19 October 2020 deadline.
- 10 The Welsh Government's planning guidance covers all NHS bodies in Wales and sets out the areas it expects to be covered within health body's plans. There are elements of the planning guidance that do not apply to the Trust, and thus are excluded from the Q3-4 Plan.
- 11 In addition, while the Trust completed the minimum data set required by each Health Body to accompany its Q3-4 Plan. Appropriately it did not present the Annex to the Board given that the data requested mainly related to Health Board data, as opposed to data for services relevant to the Trust. Key data relating to finance and workforce was summarised within the plan itself to provide members with oversight.
- 12 However, in some areas, information expected to be included under the Welsh Government guidance were either limited or absent in the Trust's Q3-4 Plan. For example, the Q3-4 Plan provided limited information on milestones and monitoring arrangements for delivery. Subsequently milestones were identified through the tracker.

Arrangements for developing and delivering plans

- 13 Our work considered the Trust's arrangements for developing the Q3-4 Plan to support its ongoing response to COVID-19, maintain essential services and resume more routine services.
- 14 We found that **the Trust continued to adapt its planning arrangements, using intelligence from engagement and forecasting activities and balancing immediate, operational actions with strategic, longer-term ambitions.**

- 15 In responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Trust altered its operational and strategic planning processes. We noted in our Structured Assessment 2020 report that the Trust's day-to-day operational planning arrangements had changed significantly with the establishment of a cell structure. The cells (some of which were subsequently renamed teams) bring together representatives from various Trust departments, including finance and workforce, to enable rapid decision-making based on the most recent information and predictions for future demand. These structures also help mitigate the risk of the Trust's decisions not being sufficiently aligned to one another and leading to gaps and weaknesses in its response to COVID-19.
- 16 In past years, the Trust has developed local departmental plans (termed Local Delivery Plans) to help inform its organisational strategic plans (IMTPs). In order to develop a series of quarterly plans in a timely way in 2020-21, the Trust's planning team mainly led the process to develop plans, relying on broader discussion through its Assistant Director Leadership Team and Business Continuity and Recovery cell to ensure alignment of ambitions and actions across departments. The plans were considered and approved by the Trust's Executive Pandemic Team along with the Board to ensure appropriate oversight and governance.
- 17 Each quarterly operational plan has set out how the Trust can transition between various defined phases of responding to the pandemic, including the key service areas the Trust needs to protect as part of its most critical 'response' phase to ensure it can respond to the sickest patients in greatest need. These services include ambulance response, the clinical contact centre and supporting functions such as fleet. As the Trust has moves between the most critical 'response' phase through to 'recovery' and 'normal' phases the quarterly plans also detail how it can and will resume other actions, such as supporting health boards in the process of recovering their services by facilitating travel for routine appointments.
- 18 Key to the Trust's planning activities in developing its Q3-4 Plan, as well as its recently developed IMTP for 2021-24 is consideration of how it can support staff wellbeing during a period of prolonged pressure. The Trust is clear about the need to provide some recovery time for its staff when possible whilst balancing the need to maintain momentum on responding to the pandemic and pursuing longer-term aspirations. This includes a need to consider both operational and corporate service staff as pressures on the former have inevitably impacted the latter, for example as it has increased frontline capacity to support service changes system transformation for urgent care, such as managing several mobile testing units and leading on national initiatives such as Phone First.¹
- 19 As with its previous quarterly plans, the Trust's Q3-4 Plan was informed by data and predictions from the work of its forecasting and modelling group. This group

¹ Phone First is a telephone triage initiative introduced by Welsh Government in summer 2020 which aims to immediately direct people to the right service for their condition or injury rather than have patients seeking care at their local A&E department.

uses national modelling data, data from previously commissioned demand and capacity reviews and data from the Trust's Optima Predict software to develop scenario plans for immediate and longer-term situations and required resources. The Trust is confident about the value of this information in enabling it to articulate and plan resource needs.

- 20 Despite the need to develop shorter-term, operational plans, the Trust maintained its focus on delivering longer-term, strategic ambitions during 2020-21. Alongside developing its quarterly operational plans, during 2020-21 the Trust also continued to deliver and oversee key areas of the Board-approved IMTP 2020-3, including the successful recruitment of over a hundred additional frontline employees as prescribed by a demand and capacity review conducted in 2019. The Trust developed a set of prioritisation principles to help it determine which of the longer-term priorities from its IMTP 2020-23 should be maintained and which should be paused or reframed in light of immediate operational pressures caused by COVID-19. The prioritisation principles and scoring mechanisms considered areas such as whether the action is likely to improve quality and safety, if there has been adequate consideration of the resources and corporate support required and how the action supports the mitigation of current and/or future risks. The Trust undertook this exercise in October 2020 which informed the development of its Q3-4 Plan.
- 21 In addition to reviewing its existing priorities and the need to alter its services to respond to the pandemic, in developing its quarterly plans, the Trust undertook regular engagement with a range of stakeholders to ensure that respective operational plans aligned. For example, the Trust undertook regular engagement with Local Resilience Forums, Strategic and Recovery Co-ordination Groups and the South Wales Trauma Network. However, the Trust acknowledges that it has been challenging at times to ensure alignment of local health board plans, given that health boards have needed to introduce rapid changes to their services. Changes to service delivery at health boards often have implications for the Trust's own services, therefore there has been additional pressure on operational leads during 2020 to identify and respond to such changes quickly. The Trust also continues to meet fortnightly with the Chief Ambulance Services Commissioner team to discuss planning.
- 22 The Trust has not, to date, undertaken a formal evaluation of its quarterly operational plans or the planning process used to develop them. However, it is evident within the Q3-4 Plan and from speaking to members of the Trust that it has reflected upon its approach. For example, the Q3-4 Plan discusses how, as a result of increasing activity during phase one of the pandemic, it needed to further prioritise and protect its safeguarding function to protect vulnerable adults and children. The Q3-4 Plan demonstrated that the Trust had also reflected upon and responded to feedback from Welsh Government and the Chief Ambulance Services Commissioner. For example, the Q3-4 Plan provides greater detail on how the Trust will support health boards' essential services as well as articulating the Trust's preparedness to take on a leading role with national initiatives such as

Phone First. Information from staff and public surveys conducted during 2020 were also used to help inform the Trust's planning activities. An example cited was how, after reflecting on staff's positive opinions of the matrix planning approach, the Trust decided not to resume developing local development plans for in recently developing its IMTP 2021-24.

Arrangements for monitoring delivery of plans

- 23 Our work considered the Trust's arrangements for monitoring and reporting on the delivery of the Q3-4 Plan.
- 24 We found that **the Trust paused some aspects for overseeing delivery of its quarterly operational plans during the year and there is scope to clarify arrangements for monitoring and reporting delivery of plans**
- 25 The Q3-4 Plan outlines that progress against delivering the actions set out in the plan will be monitored by the Strategic Transformation Board, which reports to the Trust's Executive Leadership Team on any areas of significant risk or concern. The Strategic Transformation Board introduced a new tracker for monitoring performance of its quarterly plans during 2020. The tracker provides the opportunity for the Trust's Executive Team to monitor delivery of its quarterly plans, by assessing progress against milestones, identifying where delivery is off track, the reasons for non-delivery and mitigating actions.
- 26 The Strategic Transformation Board was stood down between March and June 2020 and again between December 2020 and February 2021 due to operational pressures caused by COVID-19. These pressures also meant that the tracker used by the Strategic Transformation Board was not routinely updated and was not in use at the time of our fieldwork. However, the tracker was updated in March 2021 with more recent information to provide a year-end assessment of performance against actions within the Q3-4 Plan.
- 27 While the Board received a high-level report summarising progress against delivering the Q2 Plan in July 2020, neither the Board nor any of the Board committees has, to date, received a similar report on the Q3-4 Plan. This is because the Board is more focused on maintaining oversight of delivery of the Trust's longer-term strategic actions than the shorter-term actions set out in the quarterly plans. In January 2021, the Finance and Performance Committee received a report providing a RAG rating on progress against the twenty-five IMTP 2020-23 actions that were maintained following the prioritisation exercise (see **paragraph 20**). The report showed good progress had been made, with more than half of the actions complete or on track, although eleven actions were not on track and one action required urgent attention. The Finance and Performance Committee provided an assurance report to the Board on progress made against the IMTP actions.
- 28 More routine and detailed information relating to progress against delivering the shorter-term actions (set out in the quarterly plans) could provide the Board with

necessary assurance as to whether planned actions to help the Trust respond the pandemic have been delivered in time, and where this is not the case, what mitigations are in place. Continued use of the tracker would have helped in this regard (see **paragraph 26**).

- 29 The Trust intends to further refine its arrangements for monitoring and scrutinising delivery of its plans, building on learning from its existing arrangements. For example, the Trust's Strategic Transformation Board will continue to receive the tracker to help it to monitor performance against the IMTP 2021-24 and will develop a summary dashboard to accompany it. The Trust also has plans to clarify executive responsibility and accountability for delivering actions set out in its plans. The Trust has recently created a Transformation Support Office to provide support for key transformational programmes of work.
- 30 In light of the changes highlighted above there is an opportunity for the Trust to improve its arrangements for monitoring and scrutinising delivery of plans, at both executive and Board level.



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