

# Comments on Ministerial response to Petition P-06-1400 Fair and Adequate Resourcing of General Practice in Wales

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## Introduction

BMA Cymru Wales is grateful to the Senedd Petitions Committee for considering the petition and the surrounding issues at its next meeting on Monday 22 April 2024.

We are pleased to provide **comment on the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care correspondence dated 11 March 2024 to the Chair of the Senedd Cymru Petitions Committee regarding Petition P-06-1400 Fair and Adequate Resourcing of General Practice in Wales.**

The BMA is a professional association and trade union representing and negotiating on behalf of all doctors and medical students in the UK. It is a leading voice advocating for outstanding health care and a healthy population. It is an association providing members with excellent individual services and support throughout their lives.

## Comments

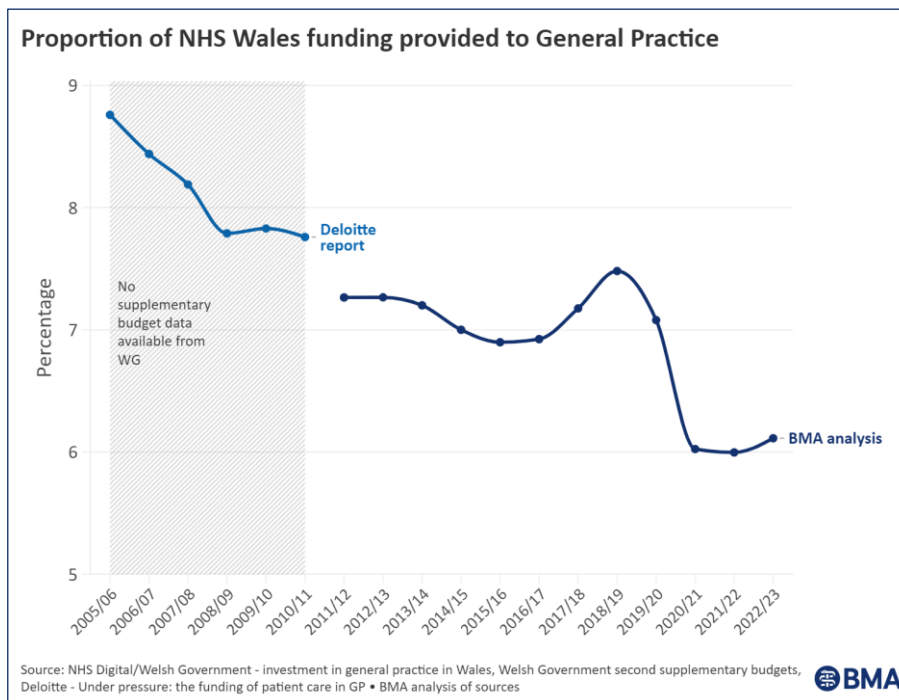
We are pleased that our petition is now due to be considered by the Petitions Committee on 22 April. The petition garnered 21,620 public signatures<sup>i</sup>, signalling strong sentiment of citizens in Wales to see General Practice resourced properly to meet their increasing needs. The Health Secretary's overall acknowledgement of the core issues in her letter to the Chair of the Petitions Committee is encouraging but the problems in accessing GP services are all too real for patients and citizens.

We urge the Petitions Committee to recommend this petition for debate, and also a full inquiry by the Health and Social Care Committee. This would allow for further evidence on the needs and potential societal benefit of increasing direct investment into General Medical Services (GMS) as a proportion of the NHS Wales budget.

The chronic underfunding of GMS has led to many critical issues, with lack of capacity directly impacting the quality and timeliness of healthcare services. It is beyond question the root cause of access issues experienced by many patients across Wales.

Our analysis<sup>ii</sup> suggests that as of 2022/23, 6.1% of the NHS Wales budget is invested into GMS whereas this was once 8.7% in 2005/06:





Redressing the level of funding for GMS via incremental rises in the proportion of spend would:

- in the short term, secure the future for general practice from its current precipitous state.
- in the medium term, allow GMS to enhance its natural role in prevention and to improve citizen well-being, in line with the aspirations of 'A Healthier Wales'<sup>iii</sup>. This relatively small prioritisation of investment would disproportionately reduce the burden on wider NHS and care services.

### Does it adequately address the issues that you raised?

While the letter states that the Welsh Government “looks forward to working with the GP profession to progress solutions to workforce and sustainability issues”, we feel that this response falls short of offering tangible constructive solutions to the issues and suggested approaches set out within the *Save our Surgeries*<sup>iv</sup> report and ongoing dialogue between ourselves and the Welsh Government. A ‘More of the same’ approach is likely to jeopardise the future of GMS in Wales.

### Contract negotiations and Pay Uplifts

The 2023/24 contract negotiations, conducted on a tripartite basis between the BMA’s Welsh General Practitioners Committee (GPC Wales), NHS Wales representatives and Welsh Government, concluded without a negotiated contract agreement. Subsequently a sum of £20m, which the Health Minister maintained as the maximum available financial offer, was invested into the GMS contract for 23/24. This investment included a minimum 5% pay uplift for all staff working in General Practice and was backdated to April 2023.

To put the financial offer into perspective, this quantum represented 4.4% of the ‘core’ GMS Contract value of £450 million, at a point in time when CPI was running at 8.7%.

GPC Wales was clear that the value of this investment was sub-inflationary, inadequate in terms of unavoidable expense pressures, and contained a pay award which did not meet the recommendations of the independent Doctors and Dentist Review Body.

As the uplift barely covered increased expenses (the mandated staff pay award plus mounting running costs) GP contractors will receive a real terms pay cut, exacerbating retention problems.<sup>v</sup>

## Reprioritising funding for General Practice within the Primary Care system

We acknowledge the Welsh Government's current Primary Care Model for Wales. In our opinion it is yet to be proven that this alleviates pressures on GPs or provides adequate care for patients.

The Minister's response highlights alternative primary care services, such as Urgent Primary care centres (UPCCs), the 111 services and the Common Ailments scheme. Whilst every little helps, these schemes are a drop in the ocean compared to the ever-increasing demand for GP services and come at a disproportionately higher cost per appointment in our estimation.

- Between April 2022 - March 2023, Welsh GMS practices provided just short of 20m contacts.
- In the same time frame, UPCCs offered 35,000 appointments (0.18% of the GMS total)
- UPCC coverage is not universal, with only 80% of the population having access.
- We would question the value for money of the investment, as recent estimates from Cardiff & Vale UHB show that each UPCC appointment costs **£32.38**, approximately 50% more than a GMS appointment.
- The capacity figures provided by NHS Wales for 111 are misleading - with 111 offering 24/7 coverage for all health enquiries, not just GMS, and is not a direct alternative.

Long-term, measured and costed comparative evaluation of these new primary care initiatives against direct investment in General Practice is needed to deduce overall return on investment and reach a truly sustainable solution to the provision of GMS in the future. GMS practices have always been innovators in using skill mix to deliver the right professional and maximum value for money. Directing the equivalent investment into General Practice could provide greater practice level continuity of unfiltered holistic care to the entire population of Wales.

## Additional points for consideration

### Workforce and sustainability

According to our analysis of Welsh Government's GP workforce data<sup>vi</sup>, one in five practices has handed their contract back since 2013, totalling 92 practices. We expect this trend to continue based on current sustainability concerns.

Meanwhile, although GP headcount appears to have remained stable in reality the number of Full Time Equivalent GPs has reduced by 25% in that period. This means that for those remaining, the number of patients per full-time GP increased by 36% from 1,676 to 2,283.

### Workload

The workload in General Practice is exceptionally high. Thanks to the Activity Data Quality Improvement Project, developed in part by GPC Wales, we now have national-level activity and escalation data, which means practices should consistently categorise their activity and document the pressure on their services. This data allows us to evidence the scale of pressure upon GPs at a national level. For a population of around 3.2m people, during the year 2022/23, there were:

- 27 million telephone contacts to surgeries
- 19 million appointments offered.
- 56 million items issued on prescription.
- January 2024 saw 1.68m appointments delivered alone.

Escalation status data has been often quoted by the First Minister in response to MS questions at Senedd plenary. Practices record the pressures upon them via the Primary Care Information Portal.

This data is available to Health Board executives meaning that the immense pressures on practices are now directly visible to commissioners of GMS services.

### Do you have further questions in response?

Despite the rhetoric and stated aims of A Healthier Wales calling for a “*shift in resources to the community*” to redress the health system’s reliance on traditional hospital services, our analysis shows that the proportion of the NHS budget provided to general practice is extremely low in comparison to the wider health service spend, at 6.1% for 2022/23. This will have been further exacerbated by the bailout of Health Board deficits<sup>vii</sup> during the 23/24 financial year. The value of the bailout amounts to approximately 107% of the total GMS core contract value at 22/23.

- Does WG consider that the aims of ‘A Healthier Wales’ and the needs of the Welsh public in accessing GPs are being met with these funding decisions?

With the recent announcement that our BMA colleagues in secondary care have paused their industrial action relating to their pay disputes to allow further negotiations, we ask that the requirements and needs of General Medical Services are similarly considered in what must be a ‘*fair and proportionate*’ prioritisation of NHS Wales resources.

- Does WG and the NHS in Wales have a coherent overall view for funding all sectors in a sustainable way?

### Is there anything additional that you would like the Committee to know at this stage, either in response to this document or as an update to the Committee?

The contract negotiations for GMS in Wales for the 2024/2025 year are due to begin in the coming weeks, with the exchange of mandates for negotiations due by 19<sup>th</sup> April. With this in mind, GPC Wales has written to the First Minister, urging him to consider the issues raised within this document regarding General Practice sustainability and the importance of Resource Restoration.

It is important to note that GPC Wales is not calling for pay restoration as our directly employed colleagues are rightly doing but asking for a fair and proportionate consequential of overall NHS funding to be directed to GMS to avoid the systematic defunding we have seen since 2008.

Moving into a new financial year and new budgetary cycle, it is of great public interest that this debate be heard in the Siambr so that Members from across the Senedd can discuss and represent the views of their constituents. Time is running out for NHS General Practice in Wales.

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<sup>i</sup> Fair and Adequate Resourcing of General Practice in Wales <https://petitions.senedd.wales/petitions/245944>

<sup>ii</sup> Based on Welsh Government Second Supplementary Budgets, Welsh Government and NHS Digital *Investment in General Practice* statistical returns

<sup>iii</sup> [Welsh Government: A Healthier Wales: our Plan for Health and Social Care](#)

<sup>iv</sup> BMA Cymru Wales: *Save Our Surgeries* [www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/nhs-delivery-and-workforce/pressures/wales-save-our-surgeries-campaign](http://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/nhs-delivery-and-workforce/pressures/wales-save-our-surgeries-campaign)

<sup>v</sup> BMA Cymru Wales *GP Contract in Wales: Mythbuster* (October 2023) [bma-gp-contract-in-wales-mythbuster.pdf](http://bma-gp-contract-in-wales-mythbuster.pdf)

<sup>vi</sup> *GP workforce as at 30 September 2023* [www.gov.wales/general-practice-workforce-30-september-2023-html](http://www.gov.wales/general-practice-workforce-30-september-2023-html)

<sup>vii</sup> *Written Statement: LHB Allocations and Target Control Totals* (08 November 2023) [www.gov.wales/written-statement-lhb-allocations-and-target-control-totals](http://www.gov.wales/written-statement-lhb-allocations-and-target-control-totals)