
Ed Humpherson, Director General for Regulation

Scott Heald, Director of Data and Digital Innovation
Public Health Scotland
Alastair McAlpine
Chief Interim Statistician
Scottish Government
(by email)

31 October 2022

Dear Scott and Alastair

NHS Inform waiting times

I am writing to you about the [NHS Inform dashboard](#) which was launched in August 2022. You will be aware that concerns have been raised with us, as well as being highlighted in [this article](#) in The Times, that the figures are misleading.

We understand that the dashboard has been developed in collaboration between Scottish Government, Public Health Scotland and NHS24 in order to give patients accessible information on planned care waiting times via NHS Inform. The aim is to provide an indication of the typical waits experienced by patients in their local area over the last quarter. The data in the dashboard are extracted from [Official Statistics](#) published by Public Health Scotland which includes, amongst others, statistics on waiting times for patients seen, waiting times for patients waiting at month end, and patient unavailability.

The NHS Inform dashboard shows the numbers of patients treated in the last quarter and their median wait times by clinical specialty. However, patients who have not yet been treated, some of whom may have been waiting a long time, are not included in these statistics. The dashboard could potentially mislead some patients about the length of time they may have to wait. For example, in some specialties, those with non-urgent clinical needs may experience a much longer wait than is suggested by the figures. We have heard that there have been instances of conflict between patients and surgeons in the orthopaedics specialty around the realistic lengths of time patients should expect to wait.

These statistics are of high public interest in Scotland, particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic. We welcome the development of a dashboard to make these statistics accessible to patients. However, it is important in developing dashboards that the principles of [intelligent transparency are followed](#). In this case, it can be difficult to find the source of the data and to understand the methodology choices and data limitations. Although links to the relevant statistics are included on the pages for each NHS Board, there is no easily locatable link on the dashboard landing page.

The Public Health Scotland team explained that the dashboard is still in development and we welcome your plans to publicly consult with stakeholders, including patients. In addition to user engagement around the dashboard we recommend that you:

1. Consider publishing a range of statistics on the waiting times for each specialty and local area to reflect the range of waiting times experienced by patients. We understand that plans are currently underway for this.
2. Provide more prominent links from the dashboard landing page to the underlying Public Health Scotland statistics and methodology information.
3. Prominently highlight the strengths and limitations of the statistics for the purpose of giving an indication of a patient's typical waiting time for planned care. A clearer explanation of why the statistics presented have been chosen would be helpful.

I look forward to hearing about progress in making improvements to this dashboard.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ed Humpherson', with a stylized, cursive script.

Ed Humpherson
Director General for Regulation