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THE TIMES

NEWS

Ambulance waiting times by postcode: how does your area compare?

NHS data reveals a postcode lottery, with only 8 per cent of areas meeting the required standard. Is your neighbourhood one of them?

Max Kendix | Graphics by Michael Keith, Cecilia Tombesi and Ryan Watts

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Patients are facing “fatal delays” in care, doctors have warned, as new figures show heart attack patients in parts of the country waiting more than three hours for an ambulance.

Waits for the highest priority calls, including when patients stop breathing, reached more than half an hour in parts of rural Norfolk last year, compared with the NHS target of seven minutes.

In 2019, 75 per cent of postcode districts met the NHS target for heart attack and stroke calls. The figure was just 8 per cent last year.

The Times has produced a tool to help readers in England compare response times where they live with the national average.

The gap between the fastest and slowest response times in postcodes has increased nearly sevenfold, with rural areas affected the most, according to Freedom of Information data obtained by The Times from England’s ten ambulance trusts.

Despite the growing divide, the pressure on ambulance services was near-universal. More than 99 per cent of postcodes recorded slower ambulance response times in 2022.

Dr Adrian Boyle, president of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, which represents emergency doctors, said: “We run our hospitals too full to function effectively and the visible markers of this are long emergency department waits, long ambulance handover delays and long ambulance response times.

“A delayed ambulance response can be fatal. It is clear the whole emergency care system is not meeting the needs of the population.”

Chris McCann, campaign director for the patient watchdog Healthwatch, said public confidence in ambulances has plummeted.

“These ambulance delays are putting people in danger and they’re adding more pressure to overstretched services,” he said. “People are starting to lose confidence that they’re going to receive the care they need as quickly as they need it. People die or sustain serious injuries due to delays. We know this has a really bad impact on quality of care.”

• [999 ambulance call staff worry: ‘How many will I kill today?’](#)

At least 500 patients died because of slow ambulance response times in 2022, more than double the recorded deaths in 2021, according to The Guardian.

There was a

[significant improvement in response times](#)

nationally for category 2 calls in January, which were an hour faster than in December.

However, the figures did not improve in February. The response times are still around the level of early 2022 and well above 2019 levels.

Thousands of ambulance workers, including paramedics and handlers, walked out over four dates in December, January and February in co-ordinated action by GMB, Unison and Unite unions.

Further strikes were called off to enter pay talks with the government, and union members are now voting on whether to accept the resulting multibillion-pound pay deal.

Boyle said ambulance delays caused “moral injury” to staff. “It is what happens in the distress when you’re not able to look after your patients properly and you see them receiving substandard care,” he said. “It’s a huge concern.”

The NHS lowered the target for category 2 calls from 18 minutes to half an hour in January this year.

Just one of the more than 1,700 postcode districts, M90 around Manchester Airport, met the previous target in 2022, compared with one in five districts in 2019.

“Just lowering expectations is not a way to manage the problem,” said McCann. “It is not acceptable and we would call for a return to the previous performance standards, as promised to patients in the NHS constitution.”

The NHS published a two-year recovery plan at the end of January with a commitment to 800 new ambulances, and an aim to improve category 2 ambulance response times to an average of 30 minutes by March 2024.

A spokesperson for NHS England said: “The NHS prepared extensively for winter, with 24/7 care system control centres across the country, and more beds and call handlers, and recent improvements in response times show these measures are paying off, despite sustained demand for services.

“The recently published blueprint to recover urgent and emergency care will continue to build on this progress and sets out how local areas will improve patient experience further, including hundreds more ambulances and increased use of measures like urgent community response teams.”

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