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Covid-19: Pressures in north east England are making services unsafe, MPs are warned

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Doctors' leaders have written to MPs in the north east of England to voice fears that services in the region are unsafe and unsustainable amid rising covid admissions and staff shortages.

The North East and Yorkshire is the only region in England where covid hospital admissions have continued to rise over the past week, with a seven day average of 390 admissions per day as of 10 January.¹ There were also 9684 staff absent for covid related reasons² at hospital trusts in the region in the week ending 9 January—the highest in the country—which is exacerbating long standing workforce shortages.

In a letter to MPs sent on behalf of all doctors in the region, George Rae, a GP in Whitley Bay and chair of the BMA's north east regional council, wrote, "There is collective concern across the profession that service pressures are currently unsafe and unsustainable. We believe that there are steps the government and the NHS in England could and should take to assist with reducing this burden."

The letter urged MPs to show their support by putting pressure on the government and trusts to make important changes to help staff, including better personal protective equipment (PPE), covid hubs, and better rest facilities.

The letter warned that PPE in the region is still inadequate to ensure the safety of patient facing NHS staff. "In order to properly protect NHS staff and by virtue protect NHS services, enhanced PPE of FFP2 or FFP3 masks should be provided across all care settings," it said.

It also warned that inadequate rest facilities had left many healthcare workers without suitable areas for breaks throughout the pandemic, impacting their wellbeing. "Lack of adequate facilities has an impact on doctors' wellbeing, with social distancing adding additional pressures," the letter said. "There are examples of junior doctors across our region having no designated desk space."

The letter also emphasised that establishing and maintaining separate settings, such as hubs for patients with covid related symptoms, was another key approach to keeping staff and patients safe and reducing the spread of covid.

"The health service is under unprecedented pressure, there are serious recruitment and retention pressures in the north east, we believe that tackling these problems would, although not solve the matter, help substantially," the letter said.

1 Healthcare in North East and Yorkshire. <https://coronavirus.data.gov.uk/details/healthcare?areaType=nhsRegion&areaName=North%20East%20and%20Yorkshire>.

2 NHS England. Urgent and emergency care daily situation reports 2021-22. www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/statistical-work-areas/uec-sitrep/urgent-and-emergency-care-daily-situation-reports-2021-22.

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