



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

STATEMENT BY THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

TITLE **The Impact of a No-Deal Brexit on our Health and Social Services**

DATE **22 January 2019**

BY **Vaughan Gething AM, Minister for Health and Social Services**

When I first set out the potential impact of a no deal Brexit for NHS and social care services in Wales in June last year, some in this Chamber accused me of scaremongering and political mischief-making.

Two-and-a-half-years after the EU referendum and less than 70 days before the UK leaves the EU, the prospect of a no deal Brexit is greater than ever. Barely a foundation stone of our future relationship with our closest and most important trading partners has been laid.

Instead, just last week, we were hearing reports about increasing numbers of medicines affected by supply issues across the UK, in the face of a no deal Brexit.

The UK Government is responsible for maintaining the continuity of the supply of medicines, like so many other areas, which will potentially impact the people of Wales. Although the number and type of medicines affected is relatively low, it is clear the UK Government cannot provide full assurance that Brexit will not affect business as usual.

A no deal Brexit must be taken off the table, as a minimum.

I continue to be concerned about the future supply of radioisotopes to Wales in the event of a no deal scenario.

Radioisotopes are essential for diagnostic and therapeutic use by our NHS. There are no sources in the UK and supplies are routinely imported from other EU countries through the main cross-channel ports. Disruption from customs checks at our ports is likely to render radioisotopes useless for healthcare treatment. We are reliant on UK Government assurances that although the UK still plans to withdraw from Euratom, there will be no regulatory barrier to the continued import of radioisotope post-Brexit.

However, a no deal Brexit could lead to divergence in regulatory arrangements and standards between nations. That of course is the express desire of most no-deal advocates.

Let nobody underestimate the impact a no deal Brexit will have on individual citizens and families. EU nationals living and working in the UK, or UK nationals who have taken advantage of freedom of movement to live and work in the EU will all be affected.

Apart from the uncertainty over reciprocal healthcare and settled status arrangements, a no deal Brexit will inevitably lead to a tighter health and social care labour market across the UK. That will make it even harder for us to compete for staff and a likely rise in the costs.

A no deal Brexit will have a profound impact on all professions and all health and social care staff. The effects of changes to migration policy, particular a policy which favours high skills and wages, will be most keenly felt in those parts of the health and social care sector which depend on lower-paid workers, such as workers providing domiciliary or residential care, who have essential roles supporting some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Let us be clear, disruption in our social care sector would inevitably lead to delayed discharges and increased pressures on our hospitals.

The Welsh Government has been clear that a no deal Brexit would cause serious and unavoidable harm to our health and care services. That harm would extend to all sectors, including at least 1,400 EU nationals known to working in our NHS. If we are to leave the EU with the minimum harm to our health and social care services, then there must be the certainty of a deal which ensures continued full and unfettered access to the Single Market and the development of a new migration system that links migration more closely to employment, while protecting those employees from exploitation.

I now want to focus on the work we have been doing to mitigate some of the substantial and known risks of a no deal Brexit. We have been working closely with the NHS, local authorities and professional and representative bodies to plan and prepare wherever possible.

To support social care providers we have commissioned Ipsos Mori to assess the composition of the social care and childcare workforce in Wales. This research will help to identify how many EU workers are employed in the sector so that we can support them and their employers. It will also facilitate proportionate and cost effective planning for areas or roles where vulnerabilities are identified.

I started my statement this afternoon by referring to reports of medicines shortages. We have been focusing work on ensuring the availability of a supply of medicines, medical devices and clinical consumables in the event of a no deal Brexit.

In terms of medicines, we are essentially reliant on the work being undertaken by the UK Government and pharmaceutical industry to ensure stocks and dedicated transport routes are available. However we are being rigorous in our interrogation of the data available from the UK Government about the medicines most likely to be affected or where there is insufficient assurance from the manufacturers.

In terms of medical devices and clinical consumables – everything from pacemakers to incontinence pads to surgical gloves - we will use UK arrangements where that is the right thing to do. We will also take additional steps where we have areas of concern or we feel that we can provide additional certainty in Wales.

In doing that we are considering how we can look beyond March 29 and secure some lasting value from the measures we are having to take to prepare for a no deal Brexit.

I was pleased to welcome yesterday the publication of a very thorough and considered analysis by Public Health Wales about how Brexit could impact on almost all aspects of health and wellbeing in Wales over the short, medium and long term.

The report focuses on the distinct political, social, cultural and economic challenges Brexit poses to Wales. It will provide an invaluable reference and evidence base for service and community leaders as we move forward into even more uncertain times and the possibility new international relationships.

This is the only Health Impact Assessment of Brexit which has been published in the UK – it is a further demonstration of how we are taking what we can from UK arrangements but also going further where we think that is the right thing to do.

Both of these initiatives are vitally important to our overall contingency plans and will provide additional assurance that we are as prepared as we can reasonably be, as we still don't know what form Brexit will take, with only nine weeks to go.

Check against delivery

Embargoed until after Vaughan Gething, Minister for Health and Social Services has delivered the statement.