

Inside the Ambulance Service: The crisis gripping one of NI's key emergency services

One paramedic insists major reform is the only way to fix it



NI Ambulance Service staff are the first responders; a lifeline in a patient's time of most urgent need, yet the service is increasingly finding itself paralysed by delay



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The sight of ambulances queuing outside our emergency departments was once worthy of headline news.

Camera crews were dispatched to capture images that were supposedly indicative of a health service damaged beyond repair.

Now it's the status quo; a row of emergency vehicles sat impotently at A&E barely raises a ripple. The current state of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) is the sharp end of NI's healthcare omni-crisis.

Its staff are the first responders; a lifeline in a patient's time of most urgent need, yet the service is increasingly finding itself paralysed by delay.

In the last fortnight alone, this newspaper has covered two cases where patients faced multiple-hour waits.

A woman with a suspected back injury was left waiting for two hours at the side of Belfast's Westlink – just 500 yards from the Royal Victoria Hospital – due to a high volume of calls in the area.

Later that week, William Bingham (68) waited 15 hours on an ambulance in south Belfast after a spell of prolonged head pain and vomiting.

A glimpse through some of NIAS' own statistics reveals the extent of the crisis engulfing an organisation that is fighting to keep its head above the surface.

A Corporate Scorecard presented to a meeting of the Trust Board in August this year provided data on the service's performance up until June 2024.

The data showed a 10% increase in demand for services and a 2% reduction in patients conveyed to hospital from the previous year, while more than 92% of handovers in the last 12 months exceeded the Trust's target of 15 minutes.

Margaret and William Bingham, who waited 15 hours on an ambulance earlier this month

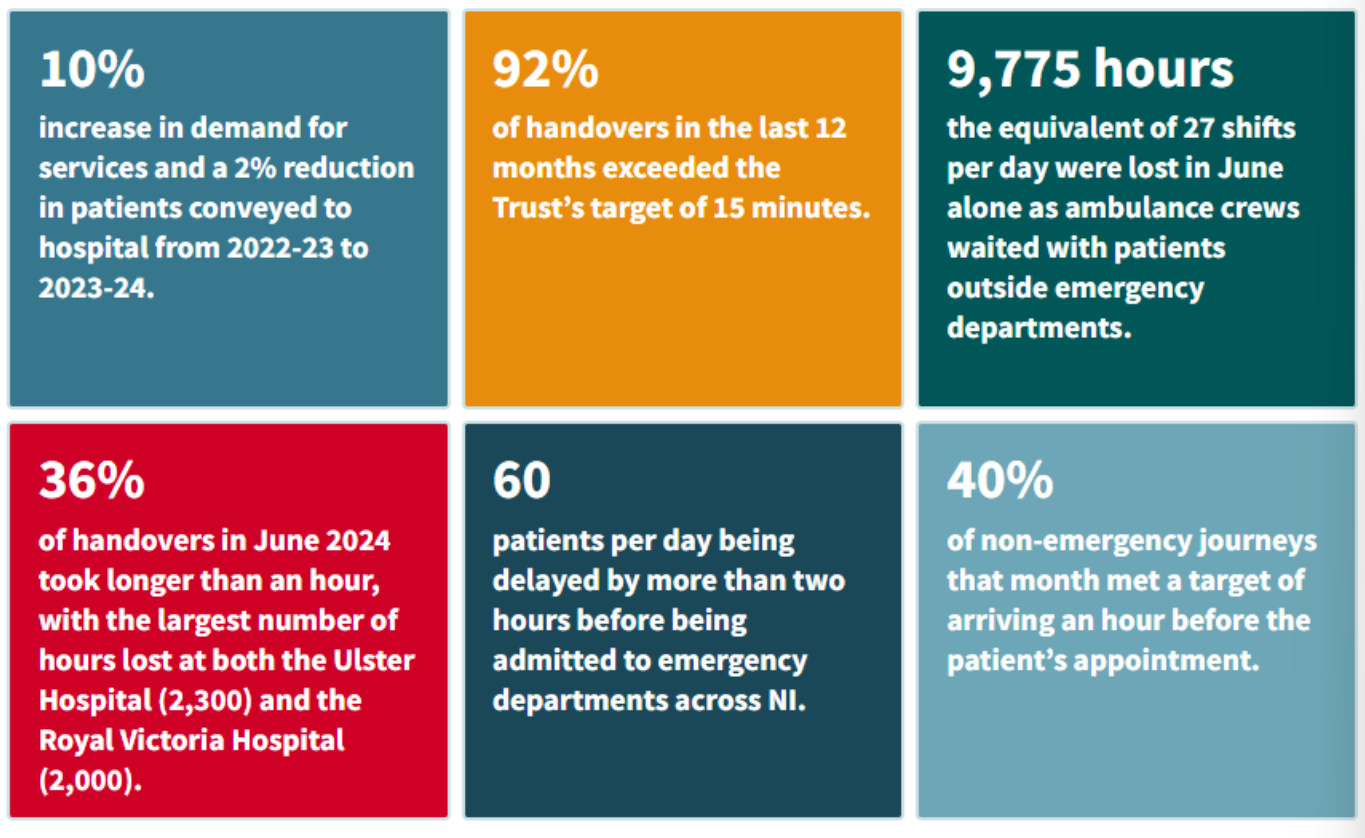


A total of 9,775 hours – the equivalent of 27 shifts per day – were lost in June alone as ambulance crews waited with patients outside emergency departments.

More than a third (36%) of handovers in June 2024 took longer than an hour, with the largest number of hours lost at both the Ulster Hospital (2,300) and the Royal Victoria Hospital (2,000).

NIAS is now experiencing an average of 60 patients per day being delayed by more than two hours before being admitted to emergency departments across NI.

A line within the document notes that processes introduced to try and address the situation “are showing no signs of control over the past number of months”.



One currently serving paramedic said delays in handovers was one of the main factors behind a lowering in staff morale.

"Balancing your work life with your private life has become more difficult over the past couple of years," they told the Belfast Telegraph.

"There are days when you might be rostered on 12-hour shifts and you don't have a clue if you're going to get home after the 12 hours – it might be 16 or 18.

"As a Trust they are doing quite a lot to mitigate it, but the overruns still happen and it's probably the worst thing about the job at the minute.

"Say we start at 8am; more often than not we are sent to a hospital to relieve a night crew, to take a patient off the ambulance that has been sitting outside the hospital for nine hours already so we can essentially nurse that patient.

"A few years ago, when the delays maybe weren't as bad, you might have seen six, seven patients a shift; nowadays that is probably two or three.

"We are now almost an extension of the ED. Some of us feel now like we are a glorified cubicle with all the waiting."

That drop in morale is taking its toll on staff, with statistics presented at board meetings showing a large number are experiencing difficulties.

Mental health reasons accounted for almost a third (32.8%) of all staff absence within NIAS in 2023/24, with stress – including work-related stress – accounting for just over a fifth (22%) of that.

Data included in the document estimated staff absence had cost the service an average of £644,000 in June.

Minutes from that month's meeting indicated the Board felt "significant progress" had been made on the issue of staff absence, with May 2024 showing the lowest figure (9.64%).



Almost a third of NIAS staff absence last year was attributed to mental health reasons.

The paramedic we spoke to said some staff were leaving to find jobs with more reliable work patterns.

"People are leaving for posts in other Trusts. Hospital emergency departments are taking on paramedics to be clinical practitioners," they said.

"Those jobs are coming with the guarantee of walking out the door at a certain time, coming in, doing your work and then leaving. Your work-life balance will be better.

"I know colleagues who are working the odd shift with a private provider for a bit of extra money in the knowledge that they are not really exposed to a lot of clinical list."

Ambulance response times

12 minutes

Average wait time for an ambulance to respond to the most serious Category 1 calls between January and June, short of the service's target of 8 minutes.

52 minutes

Average response time to Category 2 calls, with the Trust's target set at 18 minutes.

19 hours

Recorded response time for one call in May 2024.

Many independent ambulances are carrying out non-emergency care within the ambulance service, with the board's own statistics showing just 40% of journeys in June met a target of arrival an hour before a patient's appointment.

Of those that didn't make it, more than three quarters (76%) missed the appointment time by more than an hour.

The scale of overall waiting times was also laid bare by the Department of Health (DoH) in response to an Assembly Question from DUP MLA Stephen Dunne.

Patients waited an average of just under 12 minutes for an ambulance to respond to the most serious Category 1 calls between January and June, short of the service's target of eight minutes.

It took NIAS an average of just under 52 minutes to respond to Category 2 calls, with the Trust's target set at 18 minutes.

One call in May 2024 took the service more than 19 hours to respond.

Current Chief Executive Michael Bloomfield has announced he will retire from his post at the end of March next year. The paramedic who spoke to this newspaper said Mr Bloomfield had kick-started well overdue reforms that his successor will need to take forward.



Outgoing NIAS Chief Executive Michael Bloomfield

"NIAS is a Trust crying out for reform; it has a lot of really talented staff and good people doing a job that has become a lot tougher over the last ten years," they said.

"Probably over the past 12 months, I could count on one hand the amount of sick children I've attended, whereas people over the age of 60, 70 – that's our clientele these days.

"The Trust does recognise that and they are bringing in things to focus on that. Though society has aged, the health service really hasn't adapted quickly enough.

"Even if Michael Bloomfield got an extra load of millions per year to recruit another cohort of staff to bring us up to required capacity, I still think there will be delays.

"If you put on 15 new ambulances in the morning and recruit a hundred staff to work in them, you are just going to have 15 more ambulances sitting outside EDs waiting to offload people.

"The problem with the health service is not at the front door, but the back; it's getting people out, getting care packages in place, getting people who are well enough to go home to do so safely."

NIAS has previously apologised for longer waits than usual and said it is working with the Department of Health to progress a business case featuring a multi-year investment in the service.

"In the meantime, the NIAS continues to recruit and train as many staff as possible within available resources and to prioritise calls in line with the operational targets.

"Delays in ambulance turnaround times impact greatly on the number of crews we have available to respond, in a timely manner, to emergencies in the community."

The ambulance service has been approached for further comment.