

Free prescriptions are a long term investment in people's health – Vaughan Gething

Since 1 April 2007 prescription medicine has been provided free in Wales. All patients registered with a Welsh GP who get their prescriptions from a pharmacist in Wales are eligible.

The GP is one of a number of frontline clinical experts able to prescribe medication. Others include pharmacists and nurses: prescriptions issued by these are also free of charge.

The decision to abolish prescription charges was taken in light of evidence that some people with serious chronic conditions, such as high blood pressure or heart disease, could not afford their prescriptions and chose to have only part of the prescription dispensed to reduce the cost.

Health Secretary Vaughan Gething said:

“Free prescriptions were introduced in Wales in 2007 as a long-term investment to improve people's health.

“We were the first of the home nations to take the step to introduce free prescriptions and I'm delighted that both Scotland and Northern Ireland followed our lead.

“We firmly believe by providing people with the medication they need helps to keep them well and out of hospital, thereby reducing the overall cost to the NHS. It should never be the case that people with serious chronic conditions can not afford to collect their prescription.

“Ensuring patients have the medication they need not only improves their own health and wellbeing, it also benefits the health service as a whole by reducing hospital attendance and placing fewer demands on general practitioners.”

“It is socially irresponsible to charge people with serious chronic conditions for the medication they need. Free prescriptions are progressive and an integral part of our health services in Wales.”

A55 update

He said:

"Firstly, over the last 4 years we have undertaken a major programme of works to bring the A55 tunnels at Conwy, Penmaenbach and Pen y Clip up to current legislative and design standards. I am pleased to report that the programme came to an end last night with the re-opening to normal operation of the Conwy tunnel. It is now my expectation that all maintenance and improvement works for the medium to long term will be carried out overnight.

"Last week also saw the re-opening of the westbound A55 at Abergwyngregyn where we are carrying out advance flood alleviation works to improve the resilience of that section of the A55. Works will now continue off-line with little impact on traffic.

"However, the A55 recently suffered a significant partial failure of a bridge joint just west of Llanddulas. We have had to put together an emergency package of works to minimise the impact on the A55 should that joint fail completely. We are thus installing a full central reserve crossover at Rainbow Bridge. This is vital, as any further failure of the joint, which would require immediate and full closure of the westbound carriageway, would allow us to effect contraflow on the eastbound carriageway. That would cause significant delays in itself, but without the crossover the only option would be to divert all traffic, 24/7, onto the old road from Llanddulas to Colwyn Bay (which would result in disruption similar to that caused by last year's chemical tanker spill but over a much longer period).

"The crossover works, which are being carried out to a extremely challenging programme by local contractors, will be complete by Wednesday 5th April at the latest. The works cannot be removed at the weekend because it is too unsafe to leave a gap of over 200 metres in the central reserve.

"Our suppliers are, concurrently, progressing a design of a temporary fix for the bridge joint which will provide sufficient support to keep the joint from complete failure until we can effect planned contraflow next winter to replace the joint.

"As the works will continue over the forthcoming weekend we are extending messages across the border to warn motorists to allow extra time for their journeys.

"Finally, you may not be aware but we have resurfaced long lengths of the A55 over recent weeks, all carried out overnight with very little disruption to traffic.

"I hope this gives you confidence and reassurance that investment in the A55 is being made at pace, with the aim of minimising disruption. I will not compromise on the safety of motorists, but I am also determined to ensure infrastructure upgrades are carried out in a most timely fashion.

"I will be inviting journalists to visit roadwork sites on the A55 in the future and would welcome the opportunity to host you on such visits."

Funding announced for Armed Forces free swimming scheme

AFFS was rolled out nationally from November 2015, with all 22 Local Authorities having a local scheme in place by 1st January 2016. It enables serving members of the Armed Forces and Veterans to swim for free at participating leisure centres and pools, using their Defence Privilege Card.

The funding, announced today, will support the delivery of the scheme in 2017-18.

Public Health Minister, Rebecca Evans, said:

"Physical activity has a huge impact on people's health and wellbeing. The free swimming scheme was designed to ensure members of the Armed Forces past and present are able to benefit from the physical, and mental, health benefits swimming can offer. I am very pleased to announce £75,000 funding for the initiative in 2017-18."

Communities Secretary, Carl Sargeant, said:

"We owe our Armed Forces a huge debt of gratitude. The free swimming initiative is part of a wider package of support we are pleased to provide to the Armed Forces community in recognition of their service."

Chris Llewelyn, WLGA Deputy Chief Executive & Director of Lifelong Learning, Leisure and Information, said:

"Local Government is proud to deliver free swimming for our Armed Forces personnel and Veterans. We hope that even more people take

part in the scheme in the coming year, taking advantage of the significant recuperative and social benefits physical activity offers. There are participating pools in each of Wales' local authorities; to find out where your closet facility is, visit your Local Authority website."

New "robust, fair and transparent" regime of marine licensing fees

In consultation with industry and other partners, a Marine Licensing Fees Review has been undertaken for the first time since 2010 with the intention of developing an updated, suitable system for marine licensing fees and charges in Wales.

The new fees model introduces, for the first time, a tiered approach, with a mix of fixed fees and hourly charges, a change from the previous model of universal fixed fees. The new approach enables cost recovery to be achieved more accurately and fairly.

Application fees are set proportionately against the services being provided. Fixed fee bands of £600 (Band 1) and £1,920 (Band 2) will apply for what are considered small scale and routine activities, respectively. There will also be an hourly rate charge of £120 per hour (Band 3) for the most complex work packages. In these cases customers will be quoted costs upfront and kept regularly informed on costs.

The new fees have been set by the Welsh Government and will be charged by Natural Resources Wales (NRW), the marine licensing authority in Wales.

A wider provision of pre-application services will be provided by NRW, including dedicated and bespoke pre-application discussion and support, as well as the review of draft environmental statements. This is designed to achieve a better service to customers and realise efficiencies in the process.

NRW will implement a programme of continuous improvement for marine licensing and the fees will be reviewed regularly. The existing Marine Licensing Stakeholder Group will also hold regular meetings share information and get feedback from industry representatives.

The Cabinet Secretary for Environment and Rural Affairs, Lesley Griffiths said:

"I am pleased to confirm we are launching what we consider to be a

robust, fair and transparent regime of marine licensing fees and associated charges.

“The marine industry is vitally important to Wales. We worked closely with them when reviewing the fees regime and I am sure they will join us and Natural Resources Wales in welcoming this new system.”

Wales leading in UK on neurological care measures

Launching the Annual Statement of Progress on Neurological Conditions, Vaughan Gething said:

“No other UK nation has attempted to measure patient experience and outcomes across both stroke and neurological conditions before.

“The aim is to have a Patient Recorded Experience Measure and a Patient Recorded Outcome Measure which can be administered, collected and collated on a national level.

“We will continue to develop and evaluate these high-quality measures over the next year and use this data to identify where services need to be improved, evaluate changes to our services and measure improvements over time.”

The Patient Recorded Outcome Measure aims to determine patients’ feelings on their symptoms, their ability to function and how their health affects their quality of life.

The Patient Recorded Experience Measure will determine patients’ feelings about their care, being treated with dignity and respect, the personal impact of any delays to treatment and measure these against their expectations.

The progress statement also outlines:

- a gradual reduction in the average length of time neurological patients spend in hospital, falling from 6.4 days in 2010-11 to 4.2 days in 2015-16
- a 65% increase in spending on neurological conditions between 2010-11 and 2014-15 to £283.7million
- £1.2m that has been invested in improving neuro-rehabilitation services across Wales

Vaughan Gething said:

“Increasing numbers of people need to use neurological services, and health boards are improving the services they offer. I’m determined that we will continue to work to improve care for neurological patients and these measures will form a key part of this work.”