To:
- Chief executives of all NHS trusts and foundation trusts
- CCG accountable officers
- GP practices and PCNs
- Providers of community health services
- NHS 111 providers
- PCN-led local vaccination sites
- Vaccinations centres
- Community pharmacy vaccination sites
- ICS and STP leads

cc.
- NHS regional directors
- NHS regional directors of commissioning
- Regional incident directors
- Regional heads of EPRR
- Chairs of ICSs and STPs
- Chairs of NHS trusts, foundation trusts and CCG governing bodies
- Local authority chief executives and directors of public health

NHS England and NHS Improvement
Skipton House
80 London Road
London
SE1 6LH

24 December 2021

Dear Colleague

Reducing the burden of reporting and releasing capacity to manage the COVID-19 pandemic

Once again, the NHS is facing a significant challenge from COVID-19. As we continue to manage infections from the Delta variant, the Omicron variant is growing substantially and once again there is a risk of significant levels of COVID-19 hospitalisations with the challenges these place across the whole NHS. At the same time, the NHS is delivering a national COVID booster vaccination programme and continuing to provide essential non-COVID care.

This letter should be read in conjunction with 'Preparing the NHS for the potential impact of the Omicron variant and other winter pressures', which declared a Level 4 National Incident.

Following our letters in March and July last year and January, this letter updates our position on regulatory and reporting requirements for NHS trusts and foundation trusts, including:

- streamlining oversight meetings
- streamlining assurance and reporting requirements
- providing greater flexibility on various year-end submissions
- focusing our improvement resources on COVID-19, vaccination, discharge, UEC and elective recovery priorities
- only maintaining development workstreams that support recovery and safety.

Our intention is that the measures here will collectively help you free up resource to address the priorities we have set out.

We will keep this under close review, making further changes where necessary to support you and remaining mindful of the balance between timely information and not flooding the service with requests. We will review and update the measures set out in this letter in Q1 2022/23.

Once again, we appreciate the incredible level of commitment and hard work from you and your teams that has helped the NHS rise to meet the challenge of COVID-19 since March 2020.

Sir David Sloman
Chief Operating Officer
NHS England and NHS Improvement

A) Governance and meetings

No.	Areas of activity	Detail	Actions
1.	Board and sub-board meetings	Trusts and CCGs should continue to hold board meetings but streamline papers and focus agendas. No sanctions for technical quorum breaches (eg because of self-isolation). For board committee meetings, trusts should continue quality committees, but consider streamlining other committees. While under normal circumstances the public can attend at least part of provider board meetings, government social isolation requirements constitute 'special reasons' to avoid face-to-face gatherings as permitted by legislation. All system meetings to be virtual unless there is a specific business reason to meet face to face.	Organisations to inform audit firms where necessary
2.	FT governor meetings	Face-to-face meetings should be stopped wherever possible at the current time[1] – virtual meetings can be held for essential matters e.g. transaction decisions. FTs must ensure that governors are (i) informed of the reasons for stopping meetings and (ii) included in regular communications on response to COVID-19, eg via webinars/emails.	FTs to inform lead governor
3.	FT governor and membership processes	FTs free to stop/delay governor elections where necessary. Annual members' meetings should be deferred. Membership engagement should be limited to COVID-19 purposes.	FTs to inform lead governor
4.	Annual accounts and audit	Wherever possible the NHS England and NHS Improvement accounts team will reduce the administrative burden of year-end accounts as far as is possible, but the current intention is to stick with the published timetable. We will, as ever, remain responsive to challenges as they emerge.	Organisations to continue with year-end planning in light of updated guidance
5.	Quality accounts – preparation	The deadline for quality accounts preparation of 30 June is specified in Regulations. As in previous years, we intend to write to all providers concerning the requirements for 2021/22 Quality Accounts.	No action for organisations at the current time

[1] This may be a technical breach of foundation trusts' constitution but acceptable given government guidance on social isolation.

No.	Areas of activity	Detail	Actions
6.	Quality accounts and quality reports – assurance	We are removing requirements for FTs to include quality reports within their 2021/22 annual report and removing the need for assurance of quality reports and quality accounts from all trusts.	Organisations to inform external auditors where necessary
7.	Annual report	We wrote to the sector on 15 January 2021 confirming that the options available to simplify parts of the annual report that were introduced in 2019/20 and kept for 2020/21 are available for 2021/22.	Organisations to continue with year-end planning in light of updated guidance
8.	Decision-making processes	While having regard to their constitutions and agreed internal processes, organisations need to be capable of timely and effective decision-making. This will include using specific emergency decision-making arrangements.	

B) Reporting and assurance

No.	Areas of activity	Detail
1.	Constitutional standards (eg A&E, RTT, cancer, ambulance waits, mental health and learning disability measures)	See Annex A
2.	Friends and Family Test	Reporting requirement to NHS England and NHS Improvement has been resumed. Note that trusts have flexibility to change their arrangements under the new guidance, and published case studies show how trusts can continue to hear from patients while adapting to pressures and needs. We emphasise local discretion.
3.	Long Term Plan: mental health	NHS England and NHS Improvement will maintain the Mental Health Investment Guarantee. As a foundation of our COVID-19 response, systems should continue to expand services in line with the LTP.
4.	Long Term Plan: learning disability and autism	Systems should continue learning disability and autism investment and transformation to support the LTP.
5.	Long Term Plan: cancer	NHS England and NHS improvement will maintain their commitment and investment through the Cancer Alliances and regions to improve survival rates for cancer. We will work with Cancer Alliances to prioritise delivery of commitments that free up capacity and slow or stop those that do not, in a way that will release necessary resource to support the COVID-19 response

No.	Areas of activity	Detail
		and restoration and maintenance of cancer screening programmes (including bowel and targeted lung checks) and symptomatic pathways.
6.	Long Term Plan: maternity and neonatal	Systems should ensure that maternity services can operate safely in the pandemic context and continue to implement initiatives which support this, such as Saving Babies' Lives and the seven Immediate and Essential Actions from the Ockenden report. We will work with local maternity systems to prioritise delivery of commitments that free up capacity and slow or stop those that do not, in a way that will help them to maintain safe services. This will include reviewing planning milestones, such as submission of plans to roll out continuity of carer and improve equity.
7.	GIRFT and transformation programmes	Routine GIRFT visits to trusts have been stood down with resources concentrated on supporting hospital discharge co-ordination and HVLC work. National transformation programmes (outpatients, diagnostics and pathways) now focus on activity that directly supports the COVID response or recovery, eg video consultation, personalised outpatients and patient-initiated follow-up, maximising diagnostics and clinical service capacity, supporting discharge priorities, etc.
8.	NHS England and NHS Improvement oversight meetings	Oversight meetings will continue to be held by phone or video conference unless it is agreed that there is a compelling business reason to hold them face-to-face, and they will focus on critical issues. Teams will also review the frequency of these meetings on a case-by-case basis to ensure it is appropriate, streamlining agendas to focus on COVID-19 issues/discharge/recovery/ winter and support needs.
9.	ICS development activity	System working is essential in managing the response to COVID-19 and delivering the NHS's priorities in 2022/23. Work to establish ICSs – and ICBs as statutory NHS bodies – continues, with a revised target date of July 2022. This will allow sufficient time for the remaining parliamentary stages of the Health and Care Bill and provide some extra flexibility for systems in preparing for the new statutory arrangements and managing the immediate priorities in the pandemic response.
10.	Corporate data collections (eg licence self-certs, annual governance statement, mandatory NHS Digital submissions)	Look to streamline and/or waive certain elements. Delay the forward plan documents FTs are required to submit. We will work with analytical teams and NHS Digital to suspend agreed non-essential data collections.

No.	Areas of activity	Detail
11.	CQC routine assessments, Use of Resources assessments, HSIB investigations	With CQC, we continue to prioritise our Recovery Support Programme work to give the appropriate support to the most challenged systems to help them manage COVID-19 pressures. CQC has suspended routine assessments and currently uses a risk-based transitional monitoring approach. NHS England and NHS improvement continue to suspend the Use of Resources assessments in line with this approach. Visits and inspections in connection with HSIB investigations will also be reduced.
12.	Provider transaction appraisals – mergers and subsidiaries Service reconfigurations	Potential for NHS England and NHS Improvement to deprioritise or delay transactions assurance if in the local interest given COVID-19 factors. Urgent temporary service changes on safety grounds in response to COVID-19 or other pressures can still be made with agreement from system partners. Should systems look to make these permanent, normal reconfiguration assurance processes will apply at a later stage.
13.	7-day services assurance	No changes – self-cert statements to continue.
14.	Clinical audit	Given the importance of clinical audit in COVID and non-COVID care, clinical audit platforms will remain open for data collection. It should be noted clinical teams should always prioritise clinical care over data collection and submission.
15.	Pathology services	We need support from providers to manage pathology supplies which are crucial to COVID-19 testing. Trusts should not penalise those suppliers who are flexing their capacity to allow the NHS to focus on COVID-19 testing equipment, reagent, and consumables. Trusts must also continue to support the prioritisation of covid testing and genotyping services within their own laboratories.

C) Other areas including primary care, HR and staff-related activities

No.	Areas of activity	Detail
1.	Mandatory training	With staff absences likely to rise, new training activities – eg refresher training for staff and new training to expand the number of ICU staff – are likely to continue to be necessary. Reduce other mandatory training as appropriate.
2.	Appraisals and revalidation	Professional standards activities may need to be reprioritised: eg appraisals can be postponed or cancelled. Appraisal is a support for many doctors, so it is helpful to keep the option available, but if going ahead, please use the shortened Appraisal 2020 model. Medical directors may also use discretion to decide which concerns require urgent action and which can be deferred.

		The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) has also extended the revalidation period for current registered nurses and midwives by an additional three months for those due to revalidate between December 2021 and March 2022.
3.	Primary care	We have already announced a series of changes to GP contract arrangements and some changes for community pharmacy.
4.	CCG clinical staff deployment	Review internal needs to retain a skeleton staff for critical needs and redeploy the remainder to the frontline. CCG governing body GPs to focus on primary care provision and booster campaign.
5.	Repurposing non-clinical staff from CCGs	Non-clinical staff to focus on supporting primary care and providers to maintain and restore services and the vaccine booster programme.
6.	Enact business critical roles at CCGs	To include support and hospital discharge, EPRR etc.

Annex A – constitutional standards and reporting requirements

While existing performance standards remain in place, we continue to acknowledge and appreciate the challenges in maintaining them during the continuing COVID-19 response. Our approach to tracking those standards most directly impacted by the COVID-19 situation is set out below.

A&E and ambulance performance – Monitoring and management against the four-hour standard and ambulance performance continues nationally and locally, to support system resilience.

RTT – Monitoring and management of RTT and waiting lists will continue, to ensure consistency and continuity of reporting and to understand the impact of the suspension of non-urgent elective activity and the subsequent recovery of the waiting list position that will be required. Application of financial sanctions for breaches of 52+ week waiting patients occurring during 2020/21 continue to be suspended. Recording of clock starts and stops should continue in line with current practice for people who are self-isolating, people in vulnerable groups, patients who cancel or do not attend due to fears around entering a hospital setting, and patients who have their appointments cancelled by the hospital.

Discharge – Monitoring and management of delayed discharge for patients who no longer meet the reasons to reside will continue, and from Tuesday 21 December daily calls will take place in every region with every ICS discharge SRO to discuss performance and actions to decrease the number of people with a delayed discharge.

Cancer: referrals and treatments – Cancer treatment remains a priority and should be protected. We will continue to track cancer referral and treatment volumes to provide oversight of the delivery of timely identification, diagnosis and treatment for cancer patients. The Cancer PTL data collection will continue and we expect it to continue to be used locally to ensure that patients continue to be tracked and treated in accordance with their clinical priority.

Screening: cancer (breast, bowel and cervical) and non-cancer (abdominal aortic aneurysm, diabetic eye and antenatal, newborn screening and targeted lung checks) – Screening remains a priority and should be protected.

Immunisations – All routine invitations should continue to be monitored via the NHS England and NHS Improvement regional teams.

The Weekly Activity Return (WAR) will continue to be a key source of national data, and through the urgent and emergency care daily SitRep return we now capture data on the clinical priority ('P code') of elective cancellations and patients who have not yet been booked for treatment. This is vital management information to support our operational response to the pandemic, and we require 100% completion of this data with immediate effect. Guidance can be found here.

Note: it has been necessary to institute a number of additional central data collections to support management of COVID – for example, the daily Covid SitRep and the Critical Care Directory of Service (DoS) collections. These collections continue to be essential during the pandemic response, but to offset some of the additional reporting burden that this has created, the following collections will be suspended:

Title	Designation	Frequency
Critical care bed capacity and urgent operations cancelled	Official Statistics	Monthly
Delayed transfers of care	Official Statistics	Monthly
Cancelled elective operations	Official Statistics	Quarterly
Audiology	Official Statistics	Monthly
Mixed-sex accommodation	Official Statistics	Monthly
Venous thromboembolism (VTE)	Official Statistics	Quarterly
Mental health community teams activity	Official Statistics	Quarterly
Dementia assessment and referral return	Official Statistics	Monthly
Diagnostics weekly PTL	Management Information	Monthly
26-week patient choice offer	n.a. - trial	weekly

(This has already been communicated to data submission leads via NHS Digital.)