



## What's Going On with Our Ambulances?

**Is a protocol on paramedic breaks endangering lives in North Northumberland?**

**Please share your view on our ambulance cover.**

The issue of ambulance provision, in sparsely populated and largely rural North Northumberland, is rapidly developing into a crisis here in the aftermath of a recent tragedy. There have been growing concerns about ambulance response times and we held public meetings back in 2013 to see if better provision could be made for the townsfolk of Berwick & its rural hinterlands. For these people, there is always a 60 mile journey to the nearest A&E so the paramedics are truly life-savers.

I have recently been contacted by paramedics, who have shared with me some of their private concerns, and I have increasingly got the sense that there is much more to this issue than meets the eye and which can be resolved by starting a disingenuous and opportunistic petition, such as is presently running with the LibDems.

The fact is that during the day shift there are 2 fully staffed ambulances available, and on night shift one is on call in our border town. The serious question remains about the adequacy of this provision and I am interested to hear of possible, genuine solutions such as the operation of an additional voluntary ambulance service, a long the lines of the RNLI, as they do in rural towns in Germany.

However, at present this is the cover available. Following the tragic recent death

of a 16 year old, road traffic accident victim in Berwick-upon-Tweed itself, it took 26 minutes for an ambulance to arrive despite indications that there was an ambulance already on standby in the town at the time. This seemed bizarre to me, so I met last week with senior representatives of the North East Ambulance service.

What I have found out is truly startling and raises an issue of significant national importance, & it is one which I am seeking to address directly with the regional GMB and Unison Unions as well as the Health Secretary, Jeremy Hunt.

A protocol negotiated with the unions, dating from the Agenda for Change agreement in 2004, states that calls will not be put through to the nearest paramedics, if they are on breaks, even for Category A calls, which relate to the most serious, life threatening emergencies.

As part of those union negotiations in 2004, the outcome position was that 12-hour shift paramedics would be entitled to at least one 45 minute break, which would be 'unpaid and undisturbed'. The ambulancemen at the time wanted to continue on an "emergency services" contract of always being on-call, but negotiations to agree a payment level for this could not be reached so the Agenda for Change protocol was set in place.

It is quite right that paramedics, who work under enormous pressures, get assured downtime. However, it cannot be right that there are no options in a situation where an ambulance and paramedic team are available to attend the scene of a serious accident in a few minutes but the call is not put through because of Union stipulation about designated breaks. I would support these teams being compensated in terms of time in lieu or financially but when it comes to category A calls, which evidently require a rapid response and are a matter of life and death, it just seems unacceptable that the NE Ambulance Service & the public they serve cannot get life-saving treatment to the trauma victim.

There are major issues in terms of retention, recruitment and morale within the hard working and heroic ambulance services and I am concerned about the welfare of the wonderful paramedic team in Berwick and elsewhere who are blameless and I am sure are the very last people who think that 'undisturbed'

breaks imposed by the unions should take priority over saving lives.

If you have any specific experiences of life-threatening events which had poor response times, I would like to hear from you confidentially in order to build up a better picture of the impact of this protocol. I can be contacted at [anne-marie@dualthea1.com](mailto:anne-marie@dualthea1.com)

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