

Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP  
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care  
Department of Health and Social Care  
39 Victoria Street  
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23 June 2020

Dear Secretary of State,

I am writing to urge you to take immediate action to amend the Heat-Health Watch Service operated by Public Health England and the Met Office so that it provides more effective and timely warnings for those most at risk from hot weather.

The Department of Health and Social Care has been in possession since at least November 2019 of the final report of a review of the Heatwave Plan for England, which it commissioned from the Policy Innovation and Evaluation Research Unit at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. The report was published on 27 May 2020.

The report confirms that older people and those who have underlying illnesses, such as respiratory diseases, are most at risk of ill health and death during hot weather. However, one of the report's main findings is that the temperature thresholds for the Heat-Health Watch Service are too high and more than 90 per cent of deaths in our largest cities that are linked to hot weather have been occurring outside periods of high alert. It concluded that heat-related deaths in London start when a temperature of 24°C is reached, well below the 32°C that triggers a heat-health Level 2 alert. Similarly, the risks posed by heat start to increase at 23°C in the West Midlands, far lower than the regional threshold of 30°C for a heat-health Level 2 alert.

The executive summary of the report states:

*"Since the largest number of excess deaths and hospital admissions associated with heat take place outside of heatwave alert periods, this raises questions about the appropriateness of current threshold levels as well as the need to place more emphasis on general preparedness strategies as represented by levels 0 and 1 of the HWP [Heatwave Plan for England]."*

As you know, the Heat-Health Watch System stays at Level 0 outside of the period between 1 June and 15 September, and operates at a background Level 1 during most of the summer. The Met Office and Public Health England issue a Level 2 alert when there is a forecast of temperatures that exceed at least one of the regional thresholds in the following days. Level 3 is reached when those temperatures are imminent. These alert levels are intended to warn the public and to trigger action by health and social care professionals. Unfortunately, the

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evidence is that the alerts are focused on the needs of healthy people and ignore the elevated risks of those people who are most vulnerable to hot weather.

More than 3000 heat-related deaths occurred during summer heatwave conditions between 2016 and 2019, according to the annual analyses carried out by Public Health England. The evidence from the review of the Heatwave Plan for England indicates that some of these deaths could have been prevented if a more effective Heat-Health Watch Service was in place.

Climate change is increasing the probability of more frequent and intense heatwaves, and the occurrence of heatwave conditions outside the summer months. The highest ever daytime temperature recorded in the UK occurred in July 2019, and summer 2018 was jointly the hottest summer on record. The Committee on Climate Change has warned that about one in five homes is prone to overheating during relatively cool summer conditions. In addition, some of our care homes and hospitals also overheat, which is of particular concern given that they are places where there are many people who are vulnerable to hot weather. The number of heat-related deaths could rise in future if preparedness is not increased, including an improved alert system.

It is extremely disappointing that the Department of Health and Social Care apparently did not act promptly on the findings of the review of the Heatwave Plan for England and amended the thresholds of the Heat-Health Watch Service ahead of this summer. The hot weather that is likely to occur over the coming months will create potentially fatal risks for many people, including those who are suffering the worst effects of COVID-19, as your Department warned last month. I do hope that you will act immediately to address these risks, given their urgency and magnitude.

I am copying this letter to the Chief Medical Officer for England, as well as the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who both have lead Cabinet responsibilities for tackling climate change.

Yours sincerely,



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cc Professor Chris Whitty, Chief Medical Officer for England  
Rt Hon Alok Sharma MP, Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy  
Rt Hon George Eustice MP, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs