

SOARING AIR AMBULANCE COSTS NEED STATE SUPPORT



Shadow health minister in Wales, Darren Millar argues that Wales Air Ambulance should be funded by government.

Since its creation more than 10 years ago, the Wales Air Ambulance has grown to become a vital piece in the emergency services jigsaw.

The service started from humble beginnings – it had one helicopter serving the whole of Wales. But, over the last decade it has experienced phenomenal growth.

As of March 1, its mission counter stood at 15,212. The Wales Air Ambulance now successfully runs three helicopters based in Swansea, Caernarfon and Welshpool, which can reach any corner of the country in an astonishing 20 minutes.

The recent sunny weather has added pressure on the air ambulances services. A dramatic increase in the number of calls was experienced as residents and holidaymakers rushed to the Welsh countryside and coasts to enjoy the sunshine.

The organisation successfully dealt with scores of serious missions over the sunny weekend, including sporting injuries and road traffic accidents. The emergency services readily admit their ability to deal with such serious incidents would be significantly diminished if the Wales Air Ambulance was not there.

It has achieved growth and successful provision through funds directly raised by the people of Wales. This shows the generosity of the Welsh public and demonstrates how highly the service is valued. Furthermore, it is a testament to the hard work of the staff and army of volunteers at the Wales Air Ambulance.

But the service faces challenges going forwards. The Mid Wales helicopter is due to be decommissioned because it is 20 years old.

The re-organisation of hospital services across Wales, with the potential to axe emergency services from some hospitals, will also place extra demands on the service.

Each year, the Wales Air Ambulance raises millions of pounds to fund the costs of running the vital services – around £6m is required in the current year. Not surprisingly, the service has indicated it would welcome government support.

But, in spite of its clear value to the people of Wales, this crucial emergency service receives no direct funding from the Welsh Government. Furthermore, because it is classed as an emergency service it cannot qualify for National Lottery funding.

Over the years there have been many calls from various quarters for the Welsh Government consider funding the service.

Its hard work and its constant battle to maintain high-quality equipment was recognised by a pledge in my party's manifesto to match pound for pound any charitable funds raised to ensure up to £3m of public funding a year.

This level of public funding is sorely deserved by the Wales Air Ambulance. But, disappointingly the Welsh Government has thus far refused to consider providing any funding to the service.

It is astonishing the Welsh Government has never properly considered the issue.

The Welsh Government has indicated it is awaiting a formal request for funding from the service before it will consider the matter – such an attitude is very disappointing.

Surely such a vital service should not need to come with a begging bowl in hand before being taken seriously by the Health Minister?

One glimmer of hope for the Wales Air Ambulance Service is the fact the Health Minister has recently signalled her intention to review rescue services and I sincerely hope she will extend the scope of this review to look at funding of the air ambulance.

Hopefully, a government that has been happy to waste more than £600,000 on a failed free laptop scheme, spent millions on free toothbrushes for children and paid for free paracetamol for millionaires will be able to see sense and support an essential service that has saved countless lives over the years.