



How the NHS in Wales is supporting people with long COVID

Introduction

This briefing outlines some of the actions that NHS organisations in Wales are taking to support those affected by long COVID. These range from the establishment of multi-disciplinary teams to self-management advice, which aims to support people to manage their own health and wellbeing.

Overview

Most people who catch COVID-19 won't become severely ill and will get better relatively quickly. However, some people have had longer-term problems after recovering from the original infection – even if their symptoms weren't severe in the first place.

Since the beginning of the pandemic there have been a number of people who have contracted COVID-19 who have experienced long-lasting effects of the virus weeks and months after initially falling ill. Post-COVID syndrome, or more widely known as long COVID, includes a wide-ranging set of symptoms which impact individuals differently, including breathlessness, chronic fatigue, chest pain or tightness, heart palpitations, joint pain, anxiety and stress. The NHS, and other partners, are still learning how long the illness lasts and how it impacts individuals. It is still unclear what causes some people to experience long COVID and not others.

All health boards are now providing integrated and multidisciplinary rehabilitation services for those with long COVID, which are all accessible via primary care. NHS Wales organisations have been engaging with their local communities to shape and tailor these services.

Long COVID has also had an impact on health and care staff, with some staff needing to take a long-term Covid-related absence. Across Wales, NHS staff are being supported by managers to enable them to ease back into work after long-term sickness. [NHS Wales guidance](#) around long COVID has been developed by NHS Wales Employers, in partnership with trade unions, to support NHS staff and managers. The guidance has been reviewed and updated as the situation has evolved.

How are NHS organisations in Wales supporting people with long COVID?

NHS Wales COVID Recovery App

In February 2021, the [NHS Wales COVID Recovery App](#) was released. Developed in collaboration between patients and NHS staff, the COVID Recovery App has been designed to offer individuals a free, bespoke tool and personal coach to help them on their road to recovery post-COVID-19.

Long COVID Syndrome Resources

The [Long COVID Syndrome Resources](#) web page has been designed to be printed by health and social care professionals for use in health and social care venues, including GP practices, community clinics, pharmacies, and hospital waiting areas.

The [Adferiad \(Recovery\) programme](#) has ensured that IT platforms have been developed with colleagues from NHS Wales to provide advice for Primary Care and GPs around referral and diagnostics. The programme is based on the [All-Wales Community Pathway for Long COVID](#), and developed in line with NICE guidance, and offers healthcare professionals the latest information for managing long COVID across NHS Wales, including the referral process into secondary care, if required. The programme ensures that healthcare professionals across Wales have access to the same information and treatment advice, enabling health boards to develop multidisciplinary recovery services for patients suffering from long COVID. In March 2022, the Minister for Health and Social Services [announced](#) a further £5m for the programme, which will support the continuation of the self-management COVID recovery app and the All-Wales guideline for the management of long COVID.

NHS Wales services and self-management

Aneurin Bevan University Health Board

In the Aneurin Bevan University Health Board (ABUHB) area, there are options for treatment and further investigation following a GP assessment. These include a referral to a multi-professional Post-COVID Recovery Service.

The multi-disciplinary team has access to a wide network of specialist advice drawn from areas such as cardiology, respiratory and dermatology. The rehabilitation provision is always based on the needs of the individual and may include therapy for specific rehabilitation needs. It also could involve focused activity to help recover previous levels of physical and mental wellbeing.

Patients are supported to set recovery targets and goals through contact with a designated therapist using the 'Living-with-health' app. This work is part of a UK-wide research programme led by the University College London, with ABUHB patients being the first Welsh participants in this research.

ABUHB also provides a range of dedicated web pages to support patients in self-management of symptoms including [recovery from illness](#), [post-Covid recovery](#) and [specific advice for children](#).

Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board

Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board (BCUHB) established a Long-COVID Recovery Programme Group and have co-designed their long COVID Patient Pathway and multi-disciplinary service. The health board has a multi-disciplinary team, which liaises with existing services as required, ensuring that care is organised and coordinated effectively.

Patients are able to be referred to the service by their health care professional or [self-refer](#), and the health board aims to provide care as close to home as possible in a community setting.

Further information can be found on the health board's [website](#).

Cardiff and Vale University Health Board

Cardiff and Vale University Health Board (CVUHB) established the COVID Rehabilitation Service in December 2020, also developing a multi-disciplinary therapy-focused COVID Rehabilitation and Community Care pathway.

Significant liaison has occurred between CVUHB Primary Care and Specialist Services' Medical Directors within cardiology, respiratory medicine, neurology and psychiatry. This has ensured expert advice was available on the appropriate investigation and intervention strategy for patients reporting ongoing or enduring post-COVID symptoms/syndrome.

The COVID Rehabilitation Therapy team comprises an allied health professional lead therapist, a physiotherapist, an occupational therapist, psychologist, a dietitian, a speech

and language therapist, psychology assistant, rehabilitation coach and administrative support. The consultant specialists are consensual in their considerations that individuals in the majority do not require specialist intervention and to 'medicalise' their needs would be detrimental.

CVUHB is encouraging people who are struggling in their recovery from COVID-19 to visit its [Keeping Me Well](#) online rehabilitation resource, launched in June 2021. The website features a range of information and guidance that people experiencing post-COVID syndrome can access to manage elements of their own rehabilitation.

CVUHB has developed a Therapy MDT Rehabilitation [website](#) to underpin the work of the COVID rehab team and other CVUHB rehab teams and has been active in its promotion.

You can hear more about the impact that the support provided by the long COVID rehabilitation service by listening to [Donna's story](#).

Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board

The COVID Rehabilitation Hub in Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board (CTMUHB) offers multi-disciplinary support for people experiencing post COVID-19 syndrome. The health board has provided information via their [website](#).

The service delivers individualised rehabilitation programmes and support with self-management through a combination of face to face and virtual approaches. The service uses a comprehensive assessment, adapted from the [COVID-19 Yorkshire Rehabilitation Screening tool](#), to determine individual needs. During a recent capture of Patient Reported Experience Measures (PREM), 95% of people asked would recommend the service to others.

Hywel Dda University Health Board

The long COVID Multi-Disciplinary Service (MDT) in Hywel Dda University Health Board (HDUHB) offers targeted recovery and rehabilitation. It is designed to meet the expected demand of people predicted to develop ongoing symptoms of post-COVID syndrome.

The team consists of physiotherapists, occupational therapists, dietitian and clinical psychologist, with support from an assistant nurse practitioner. All health professionals and GPs can refer patients to the service which provides a comprehensive person-centred assessment and runs virtually five days a week. Patients experiencing more complex ongoing symptoms have access to follow-up care with specialist MDT management and access to specialist diagnostics and medical review.

The health board also provides a range of free self-management health and wellbeing programmes and workshops. These provide users with the opportunity to learn new coping skills which can help improve the quality of daily life. Programmes and workshops vary from single sessions of 1 ½ hours, to programmes covering seven weeks and are run at community venues and online.

HDUHB also provides information through a dedicated [webpage on COVID-19 recovery](#), which provides support to self-manage symptoms and signposts to further support.

Powys Teaching Health Board

The COVID Recovery and Rehabilitation service in Powys Teaching Health Board (PTHB) accepts referrals for individuals from GPs and is hosted by the Pain & Fatigue Management service. The service has been in place since December 2020 and is delivered by a multi-disciplinary team consisting of psychology, physiotherapy, a GP and an advanced nurse practitioner. The service is delivered remotely using telephone/video consultations, group video workshops, workbooks and online videos.

In addition, the [Invest in Your Health programme](#) has been introduced for anyone in Powys who would like to improve their health and wellbeing. The programme is offered to all individuals referred into the COVID Recovery and Rehabilitation Service during their initial consultation.

PTHB also provides [information](#) around the COVID-19 app and the self-management of symptoms.

Swansea Bay University Health Board

The Pulmonary Rehabilitation service in Swansea Bay University Health Board (SBUHB) consists of a multi-professional team including physiotherapists, occupational therapists, dietitians, respiratory nurses, technicians and exercise instructors from NERS (National Exercise Referral Scheme). There are also sessions from a GP with a specialist interest in lifestyle medicine.

The team provide a full holistic assessment followed by therapy. Therapy includes exercise and education tailored to the individual. It is about promoting self-management of long COVID symptoms, with particular emphasis on fatigue management, nutrition, dysfunctional breathing and stress and anxiety management to name a few. In addition the health board has developed a COVID and long COVID recovery [Therapy Information Pack](#).

The SBUHB has recently established a new [walking group](#) for people suffering with long Covid symptoms. The group sees those taking part exercising at their own pace as they are accompanied by a GP and a physiotherapy assistant practitioner. Patients who have been referred to the long Covid Rehabilitation service are invited to take part in the weekly walks as an extension of the support available to them. The service supports patients to return to their daily activities by offering rehabilitation that aims to understand and improve each person's health and wellbeing. SBUHB community-based approach to long COVID rehabilitation aims to help patients close to their homes in ways that best aid their recovery.

Public engagement

Patient voice and experience have been central to the establishment and running of current long COVID services across the NHS in Wales. For example, ABUHB has held frequent events to meet with people experiencing symptoms of long COVID and this engagement has strongly influenced the approach taken. There are two mechanisms by which people can engage with the ABUHB team leading long COVID services: through monthly engagement events advertised via the health board's website or through an email for anyone who wishes to provide views or find out more about the services on offer.

In CVUHB, the delivery of the service is reflective of whole-person care, where patient narrative and voice are paramount. The service engages with "expert by experience" groups and service users to shape and mould the intervention and coordination of care profile. Engagement with 'seldom heard populations' remains a significant priority and the Patient Experience Team is working with the service to facilitate Town Hall events promoting the service, access and involvement to all.

BCUHB has also ensured services are being [developed in partnership](#) with patients. Claire Jones, advanced physiotherapy practitioner, has been appointed as therapy lead for Long COVID for the health board and is working with the Long Recovery Programme group, which was established to help shape the new long COVID service.

SBUHB Long Covid Rehabilitation Service has also [reached out](#) to local communities to understand how people are being affected by long COVID to better shape services.

NHS staff wellbeing

During the pandemic, the health and wellbeing of staff has been recognised as integral, not only to providing quality patient care but also to ensuring individuals and their teams are as resilient as possible to manage the professional and personal impacts of the pandemic.

Staff who are struggling with the symptoms of long COVID can access services and support from occupational health teams. For example, in SBUHB staff can self-refer for support from an occupational therapist who undertakes a holistic assessment with a focus on helping staff to develop self-management skills to support a return to work, with recommendations given to managers to support their staff.

[NHS Wales Employers guidance](#), developed with trade union partners, has also been issued to better support NHS managers to help staff return from a long-term absence. Regular communication via long-term sickness meetings is advised, with a compassionate approach expected to underpin all meetings that take place.

The [Managing Attendance at Work Policy](#), developed by NHS Wales Employers, also supports all employees to return from a long-term absence with a rehabilitation programme. However, a flexible approach to this phased return is recommended due to the prolonged nature of long COVID recovery. Managers are therefore advised to agree a bespoke rehabilitation programme which can be amended in the face of a changing condition.

Mental health

Emerging knowledge, professional guidance and clinical experience indicates significant psychological consequences of COVID-19. Physical health can [affect](#) an individuals' mental health, with conditions such as long COVID leading to greater feelings of anxiety or low mood. A [study](#) by the Lancet has shown the estimated incidence of a neurological or psychiatric diagnosis in the following six months was around 34 per cent. There has also been some [discussion](#) around whether the mental health effects are a result of COVID infection or the "*result of long Covid and its physical and social consequences*". The link between mental health and long COVID is complex and evidence is still emerging but there are indications that anticipated need will require properly resourced mental health services.

In HDUHB, a psychological pathway has been operational for those recovering from COVID-19, delivering a tried and tested approach based on the [British Psychological Society Guidance](#). It delivers a stepped care model enabling the right level of care at the right time.

About the Welsh NHS Confederation

The Welsh NHS Confederation is the only national membership body representing all the organisations making up the NHS in Wales. We represent the seven local Health Boards, three NHS trusts, Health Education and Improvement Wales and Digital Health and Care Wales. We are part of the NHS Confederation and host NHS Wales Employers. We support our members by acting as a driving force for positive change through strong representation, facilitating system leadership and our proactive policy, influencing, communications, events and engagement work.

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