

“It’s not just a crisis, it’s a national emergency”: Addressing the challenges in social care

This briefing provides an overview of the results from a survey of Welsh NHS Confederation members regarding the impact of social care on the NHS. It also seeks to outline some of the actions being taken by the NHS and local authorities at a local level to assist in reducing the current extreme pressures on health and care services in Wales.

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Key points

- NHS leaders have said the pressures in the care sector are having a knock-on effect across the health and care system. Many of the 50+ leaders surveyed said these pressures are driving urgent care demand, with a lack of social care capacity having an impact on the ability to tackle the elective care backlog.
- 100 per cent of NHS leaders agreed there is a crisis in the social care workforce, with a subsequent impact on patient care and safety. Many of those surveyed expect the situation to deteriorate over winter.
- These pressures require urgent government action, with healthcare leaders standing in support of their care colleagues. There are opportunities for Wales to deliver on integrated citizen-centred care. Therefore, we are calling on government to take actions to alleviate current pressures in the system and ensure future sustainability.

We are calling on the Welsh Government to:

1. Provide sustainable funding for social care with a fully funded pay rise to enable recruitment and retention, alongside greater overall investment and career progression opportunities.
2. Support better integration between health and social services to achieve seamless care and support for the patient.
3. Provide sufficient, ring-fenced funding and longer-term investment to transform out of hospital care and allow for long-term service development.
4. Publish locality-based delayed discharge data so there is clear information and evidence of the current issues in providing packages of care to people leaving hospital.
5. Introduce performance measures that focus on quality-based outcomes, prevention, community services and whole-system collaboration.

Introduction

The health and social care sector is facing tremendous pressure, which is subsequently impacting the ability of the NHS and social care providers in Wales to continue delivering services.

Social care services play a crucial role in care pathways – keeping people well for longer outside of hospital and enabling faster, safer discharges home. Therefore, the sector plays a critical part in protecting NHS capacity and its ability to deliver high-quality, safe care.

However, social care services are facing significant challenges, including vulnerabilities in funding and market stability, growing unmet need and high levels of staff vacancies. The impact of these challenges means people are missing out on vital care and support, leaving them less independent, more vulnerable and more likely to rely on healthcare services.

To understand how these system-wide challenges are playing out on the NHS frontline, we surveyed our members, NHS leaders in Wales, between 5-18 August 2022. We asked our members to describe the impact that staff shortages and a lack of capacity in social care are having on NHS services in Wales, as well as what effective solutions may look like. We received over 50 responses from NHS chairs, vice chairs, chief executives, executive directors and assistant directors.

This briefing provides an overview of the survey results and seeks to outline some of the actions being taken by the NHS and local authorities at a local level to assist in reducing the current extreme pressures on health and care services in Wales.

Survey results: Impact of staff shortages and lack of social care capacity on NHS services

Social care workforce crisis

The survey results evidence the significant challenges in relation to the recruitment and retention of staff that social care has faced for many years. These challenges put pressure on the sector, its workers and service users, with care providers increasingly highlighting the significant impact they are having on providing care to the most vulnerable in society.

100 per cent of healthcare leaders surveyed agreed there is currently a social care workforce crisis in their local area and this is putting the care and safety of patients in the NHS at risk. Almost all leaders agreed that the crisis is worse than it was 12 months ago (94 per cent) and expect it to deteriorate even more over the next six months as we move towards winter (88 per cent).

“This is the single most important issue for the NHS”

Healthcare leader’s survey response

Interdependence of capacity constraints and hospital discharges

The capacity and workforce constraints in social care are having serious implications on the NHS’ ability to discharge large numbers of medically fit patients from hospital into care packages. Given the number of people who require ongoing support following their medically fit diagnosis, without a good supply of well-staffed social care services (care homes, home care, supported living and other services), people cannot be easily discharged from hospital in a timely way. 89 per cent of healthcare leaders surveyed agreed with this, saying the absence of a social care pathway is the primary cause of delayed discharge of medically fit patients.

These delays lead to longer stays in hospital, which can damage people’s confidence to live independently as well as their health – particularly for older people where extended stays can be associated with loss of muscle tone, falls and rapid deterioration. This not only results in poorer outcomes and greater reliance on services for those patients, but fewer hospital beds available for new admissions – emergency or elective.

“There needs to be a more continuous pathway - passing patients from one sector to another is damaging to patients and services”

Healthcare leader’s survey response

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Welsh Government suspended delayed transfers of care (DTOC) reporting requirements. While it was beneficial that the new discharge process increased focus on rehabilitation and reablement, it is vital that delayed discharge data is published to ensure transparency and a clear understanding of the current issues.

Impact on preventative care and keeping people well at home

Beyond delayed discharge, the most significant impact of the lack of adequate capacity in social care cited by healthcare leaders surveyed was around emergency department (ED) pressures and ambulance waiting times. Over 80 per cent said social care capacity had either a very significant or significant impact in driving urgent care demand, with 85 per cent saying it has a very significant or significant impact on EDs, and 81 per cent saying it has an impact on ambulance waiting times.

“People are having to stay in hospital longer, leading to impaired outcomes, ambulance delays, as flow through the hospital/healthcare system is slower and delayed”

Healthcare leader’s survey response

Survey responses also highlighted the impact of the lack of adequate social care capacity on primary care services. 69 per cent of healthcare leaders responding agreed the lack of social care capacity is resulting in increased demand on GP services and 67 per cent said it was resulting in increased demand for mental health services.

However, this is not a one-way relationship – the lack of capacity in primary and community care is also an important factor, which is leading to more pressure in social care services. Without allocated social workers in place, we see increasing numbers of GPs supporting patients’ personal care during home visits. Ambulance crews and families are contacting GPs due to poor housing situations and when unable to contact social care.

Impact on the elective and diagnostic backlogs

The NHS is doing everything it can to ramp up elective activity to provide more people with access to the care they are waiting for. However, elective waiting lists are still extremely high, and referrals are increasing. Bringing the waiting list down will require the whole system to work at its most effective, which relies on few disruptions, free patient flow through hospitals and adequate capacity in social care.

Currently, this capacity is extremely challenging, with 69 per cent of healthcare leaders who responded agreeing the impact of a lack of adequate social care capacity on their ability to tackle the elective and diagnostic backlog is significant or very significant. The extent of patient flow challenges is demonstrated in bed occupancy rates in Wales, which remain consistently over 90 per cent.

Greater integration between health and social care and greater investment in social care

We asked healthcare leaders to consider a range of potential options for supporting the challenges being felt in the social care sector and to indicate the extent to which they might be effective. 95 per cent of leaders felt better integration between health and care services would be very or quite effective. There is already significant work being carried out across Wales between health and social care and through Regional Partnership Boards, but the Welsh Government must consider how partnership working can be enhanced.

At a time when many people are facing a spiralling cost-of-living crisis, with numerous sectors reporting problems filling vacancies, we know healthcare leaders are concerned that their colleagues in social care have the impossible task of trying to recruit significant numbers of staff. 93 per cent of healthcare leaders said improving social care recruitment and retention via increased pay and terms and conditions would be the most effective action.

“This is skilled work and needs to be recognised as such, with job titles, pay bands and structures”

Healthcare leader’s survey response

While the introduction of the Real Living Wage for social care workers in April 2022 was welcomed, there is a need to reconsider the hourly wage and increase it to respond to recruitment and retention challenges. Crucially, any wage increase must be fully funded by the government and distributed through local authorities to ensure funding reaches the front line, does not impact self-funders’ cost of care, and alleviates these severe staffing challenges.

Along with increases in pay, there was strong support among healthcare leaders for an increase in investment to expand overall social care capacity (89 per cent) and for enhanced career progression opportunities to improve recruitment and retention (89 per cent).

In addition to the significant role social care plays to support people to stay well at home and to enable people to be discharged from hospital, healthcare leaders highlighted the vital role of the third sector. 70 per cent of healthcare leaders surveyed said increased and more innovative partnership working with the voluntary and third sector to keep people well could reduce demand on other health and care services.

Actions taken to mitigate pressures in the health and social care system

While NHS leaders have indicated support for future solutions, they are also undertaking work to alleviate pressures in the here and now. Some examples can be found below but a wider range of actions can be seen in our more detailed briefing, which can be accessed [here](#). This briefing provides examples under the following four headings.

Preventing hospital admissions and providing care closer to home

Some examples in this category include a Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board/Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust pilot to enable occupational therapists or physiotherapists to travel with paramedics as an initial response to falls. It also highlights Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board's hospital frailty assessment service to reduce admissions for vulnerable people who attend ED.

Discharge to Recover then Assess (D2RA)

This section looks at initiatives such as Marleyfield House in Flintshire, which provides dedicated D2RA beds to support safe and timely hospital discharge. Cardiff and Vale University Health Board have also appointed additional discharge coordinators to reduce the amount of time qualified nurses spend organising packages of care to enable discharge.

Workforce

The briefing takes a look at actions to better support the care workforce such as Health Education Improvement Wales' care home education facilitator roles, Powys Teaching Health Board's Health & Care Academy and Digital Health and Care Wales' Welsh Nursing Care Record.

Broadening care and support approaches

NHS leaders are working with local authority and voluntary sector partners to find solutions to challenges faced and minimise disruption. These examples include Aneurin Bevan University Health Board commissioning packages of care from a private domiciliary care agency and vacant care home beds as a short-term solution, and micro-enterprise home-based care in Hywel Dda University Health Board.

Further detail and more examples can be found in the briefing linked above.

Conclusion

There is plentiful evidence to suggest Wales has a golden opportunity to achieve so much when it comes to designing and delivering integrated citizen-centred services. The legislative frameworks, in particular the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, mean Wales is well-placed to put people's needs at the heart of decision-making, support people to maintain their own physical and emotional wellbeing, promote the use of preventative approaches and work collaboratively across all sectors to achieve the outcomes that matter most to the people of Wales.

The challenges in social care are long-standing and require immediate government action to support better integration, which those surveyed agreed would be an effective means of alleviating pressures. We continue to call for a sustainable funding model for the sector.

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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