



Briefing for Members of the Senedd for the hospital discharge and patient flow through hospitals debate

Introduction

This briefing has been developed for Members of the Senedd in preparation for the debate on the Health and Social Care Committee report “Hospital discharge and patient flow through hospitals” on Wednesday the 12th of October.

Key points to consider:

- We welcomed the Health and Social Care Committee’s (the Committee’s) report on hospital discharge and having the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry.
- Delays in hospital discharge of clinically fit individuals impacts patients, staff and on the flow of patients through hospitals, affecting the care available for others. It leads to patients being cared for in settings which are not the most appropriate to their needs and could introduce additional risks of harm to them, including hospital-acquired infections. It also has a knock-on effect on other NHS services.
- We support the Committee’s recommendation that there needs to be significant reforms to the pay and working conditions for social care staff. As highlighted in our recent briefing, ["It's not just a crisis, it's a national emergency": Addressing the challenges in social care](#), 100 per cent of NHS leaders who participated in our survey agreed there is a crisis in the social care workforce, with a subsequent impact on patient care and safety.
- While there are significant challenges across the health and care system, the NHS is working with local authorities at a local level to develop [partnerships](#) to assist in reducing the current extreme pressures on the system, with initiatives taking place within hospital discharge, workforce and prevention space. One major development taking place across Wales is the systematic approach to discharging patients from hospital to assess their strengths and identify care and support requirements.
- As recommended within the Committee’s report, we support the introduction on improved data measurements in respect of delayed transfers of care.
- There needs to be flexible use of resources across health and social care, with funding allocated to both sectors as an integrated system and involving key incentives to encourage closer working relationships.
- Delayed transfer of care disrupts not just the life of the patient, as well as potentially compromising their recovery, but the lives of their family and carers.
- The Welsh Government [Help Us Help You](#) campaign should be rolled out and promoted across all public and third sector organisations to raise awareness of the most appropriate NHS service for individuals’ needs.

Impact of delayed transfers

Impact on patients

NHS leaders have commented that length of stay in hospital has increased during the pandemic, and patients are finding themselves waiting for community care and support for many weeks. Unfortunately, a small number of patients spend the last days of their life in hospital waiting to be transferred home or to a care home.

The increased length of stay in hospital impacts on patients physical and mental health and leads to poorer outcomes and greater reliance on services. Physically, patients may experience muscle wastage, a loss of mobility and an increase chance of falls as a result of extended periods of unnecessary bed rest. It also damages people's confidence to live independently and feelings of low mood because they want to be able to leave hospital and go back to their place of residence.

Impact on the health and care system

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.

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. In our [recent survey](#) of healthcare leaders, 89 per cent of respondents agreed that the absence of a social care pathway is the primary cause of delayed discharge of medically fit patients.

There are numerous reasons underlying hospital discharge and transfer delays. Some of the most notable of these are patients waiting to access a care home bed, for a home care package, awaiting assessment and transfer between health board facilities.

As we know, being unable to discharge patients from hospital has a huge knock-on effect on NHS capacity. This is most visible in both ambulance response times and ambulance handover delays, where they can be stacked up outside hospitals, unable to get out to other patients who urgently need their care and causing long waits in emergency departments. This in turn can affect hospitals' ability to carry out scheduled care, such as hip and knee operations.

Consistent approach

Historically there has been variation in approaches to addressing the challenges of delayed discharge across Wales, however significant efforts to secure a consistent approach to hospital discharge from a national perspective have been made over recent years.

A systematic approach to discharging clinically fit patients from hospital to assess their strengths and identify care and support requirements is a major element of development across Wales. National initiatives such as Discharge to Recover and Assess (D2RA) are bringing more consistency across Wales and lessons learned from early implementation are being used to improve this approach.

Lack of social care capacity

The Committee's findings reiterate the importance of a strong, stable social care sector and the need for long-term funding. Without significant improvements in this area, including improved pay, conditions and career prospects for those working in social care, the situation is unlikely to improve as much as we need it to. The rising cost of living will only exacerbate problems recruiting into the sector and add to existing costs.

The [Welsh NHS Confederation survey](#) of NHS leaders in Wales highlights how the social care system is struggling to cope with demand and a pressing need for a long-term pay and funding strategy for the sector.

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 and more likely to rely on healthcare services.

NHS leaders in Wales stand in support of their social care colleagues and are urging the government to increase investment in care services. Along with increases in pay, almost nine in ten healthcare leaders who responded to our survey supported an increase in investment to expand overall social care capacity and improve career opportunities to boost recruitment and retention. They say failure to act will leave more and more vulnerable people without the care and support they need, as well as adding further pressure on frontline NHS services.

Finally, NHS leaders recommend the need for flexible use of resources across health and social care, with funding allocated to both sectors as an integrated system and involving key incentives to encourage closer working relationships.

Data

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Welsh Government suspended delayed transfers of care 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.

Families and unpaid carers

It is important to recognise the increasing burden and pressure on unpaid carers, which can have detrimental impacts on their own health and wellbeing. As Carers Wales highlighted in their report, [State of Caring in Wales](#), 26% of unpaid carers described their physical health

as bad or very bad, 34% reported their mental health as bad or very bad and 26% said that they are often or always lonely. NHS leaders have noted the increasing reliance on families and unpaid carers, especially with the current healthcare workforce gaps, which may cause unintended consequences.

Engagement with families and unpaid carers and listening to their wishes are central to the discharge planning process, with NHS leaders citing the use of the 'What Matters to Me' approach, which puts the needs of patients and unpaid carers at the centre of the process, and for information to support services being provided through the discharge process, including information and signposting to third sector organisations who may be able to provide assistance and support.

Public engagement and preventing hospital admission

It is important to recognise that some of the solutions lie in the more effective management of patient demand and responses to clinical need in the community. The Welsh Government '[Help Us, Help You](#)' campaign is being promoted across NHS organisations with the public to minimise hospital admissions where appropriate healthcare services exist. However, as highlighted within our briefing, [Reshaping the relationship between the public and the NHS](#), it is important that the campaign is rolled out and promoted across all public sector and third sector organisations to raise awareness of the most appropriate NHS service for individuals' needs.

Within the Welsh Ambulance Service, there is a long-term focus on treating as many patients at the scene as possible and reducing unnecessary conveyance to hospital. Health and care must work as one integrated system if this approach is to be successful.

Conclusion

The health and social care sector is facing a tremendous amount of pressure, which is subsequently impacting on patient flow across the system. While action is being taken, in partnership, to [mitigate pressures across Wales](#), without real system change, existing efforts cannot go far enough. Therefore, we are calling on the Welsh Government to:

- 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.
- Support better integration between health and social services to achieve seamless care and support for patients.
- Provide sufficient, ring-fenced funding and longer-term investment to transform out of hospital care and allow long-term service development.
- 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.
- Introduce performance measures that focus on quality-based outcomes, prevention, community services and whole-system collaboration.

Further information

If you would like further information on any of the issues raised in the briefing, please contact Nesta Lloyd – Jones on nesta.lloyd-jones@welshconfed.org

The Welsh NHS Confederation represents the seven Local Health Boards, three NHS Trusts, Digital Health and Care Wales and Health Education and Improvement Wales (our Members). We also host NHS Wales Employers.