

# BRIEFING NOTE

## *For Elected Representatives*

# Children's Chemotherapy



Recent coverage on children's chemotherapy provision will have been concerning for you and your constituents. In this briefing, we want to provide you with some answers to questions you may have and give reassurances on current service provision.

Chemotherapy did not stop and continues to be provided at the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children. Currently, all children who require chemotherapy are receiving it and no child is waiting to commence treatment.

Unfortunately, during the last two months, the number of chemotherapy-trained nursing staff on the ward has temporarily decreased. Seven out of twelve ward based staff nurses with chemo competency skills are absent, this is largely due to maternity leave and a small amount of unplanned leave including sick leave and a career break. While the service does plan for backfill for a proportion of the temporary maternity leave staff absences, and in addition utilises bank staff to support safe staffing levels, those staff may not have the immediate requisite specialist chemotherapy skills required. A wider review of all available nursing workforce was therefore undertaken, which remains ongoing, in order to continue to deliver the service safely.

During this period fewer than five children had their chemotherapy deferred, with all cases individually reviewed using a risk assessed approach by the responsible Consultant Team. The deferrals occurred due to a range of factors which were not exclusively related to the current staffing challenges and included the assessed clinical requirements of individual children (for example blood results), bed capacity and chemotherapy preparation availability during a weekend. Using this risk assessed approach to the deferrals resulted in no negative clinical outcomes, with all planned chemotherapy treatments delivered in accordance with individual treatment regimes.

Staffing and service delivery is being closely monitored on a daily basis to ensure adequate and safe staffing levels. For the children in our care, safety and delivery of timely treatment is and will remain our highest priority.

# Your Questions Answered

## **Were the delays as a result of vacancies within the unit?**

Children's Haematology Ward Nursing posts are fully recruited and there are currently no nursing vacancies. Nurses working on the Haematology Ward require specialist training to a very high standard so they can safely provide chemotherapy treatments. For newly qualified nurses, this training can take up to two years to complete, and the team are supporting more nurses to undertake this specialist chemotherapy training, which they are expected to complete in the next few months.

## **Are there longer term plans in place to build up the number of nurses trained to deliver paediatric chemotherapy?**

Nurses working on the Haematology Ward require specialist training to a very high standard so they can safely provide chemotherapy treatments. The service has, and will continue to support a rolling programme for specialist chemotherapy training and currently has two staff members due to complete the programme at the end of August 2025, and a further two staff members beginning the programme with an expected finish date by the end of the year.

## **What support is being given to staff to manage the current pressures?**

To provide support to the ward team, the service has reviewed all the nursing roles within the wider haematology and oncology departments, and have utilised staff from the wider team, other ward areas and bank staff to safely and adequately cover the service and protect the most time critical treatments. This staffing review was undertaken, using a risk assessed approach, with the management team continuing to actively work to improve the situation and are closely monitoring staffing and service delivery on a daily basis to ensure safe, effective care delivery.

Belfast Trust provides a programme of support services to ensure the health and wellbeing of staff which is open and available to all staff. There has been ongoing communication and support for the nursing teams through regular staff engagement meetings.

## **What was the reason for the closure of the family room in the ward and what impact has this had on the workload of the ward nurses?**

The parent kitchen in the Children's Haematology Ward was closed as a precautionary measure and allowed the Trust to undertake necessary works in order to comply with health and safety requirements. During the period of closure, a number of catering alternatives were available to families while the work was happening, including provision of food vouchers parents could use in the canteens in the hospital, fresh sandwiches and bottled water.

This did not affect the workload of the ward nurses during this time and the parental kitchen re-opened on 21 July.

## **Have there been bed closures on the ward? What was the reason for this and what impact has this had on the capacity to deliver services?**

The Children's Haematology ward and the Children's Haematology Out patients department operate as a whole unit, providing support and cross cover of nursing staff between the two departments, as required, to safely deliver care. The 10 bedded ward has temporarily reduced to 8 inpatient beds, with the two remaining beds currently being used for day case chemotherapy cases, using a day case model which allows for optimal utilisation of skilled nursing staff across both areas. Any child determined to require an inpatient bed, following Clinician-led triage, will be admitted to an appropriate bed, based on clinical need, in line with the normal site-wide escalation plan.

# Your Questions Answered

## **What steps are being taken to ensure children get the treatment they need in a timely manner?**

The safety and delivery of timely treatment for the children in our care remains our top priority. Action was taken in line with the risk assessments to ensure service delivery was maintained. All children who require treatment are currently receiving treatment and there are currently no children awaiting commencement of treatment.

## **Is there a need for need for an appeal for specialist nursing support from elsewhere in the UK/Ireland?**

Currently, the team is able to provide a safe service with the existing mitigations and workforce review that has been undertaken. Should it be required, the Trust will investigate any other contingency measures required to support the care and treatment of the children in our care.

## **Have any children had to travel elsewhere to receive chemotherapy following a postponement or cancellation?**

No children have had to travel outside of Belfast Trust to receive chemotherapy treatment.

## **Were staff warnings acted on as soon as possible?**

There is open and regular communication with staff within the service. The risk assessment process was undertaken when staff raised concerns and a number of controls put in place to help mitigate risks and support staff. There was and continues to be regular engagement with staff to ensure their involvement in decision making, identifying training needs and workforce planning. The service recognises the vital contribution that staff play in the delivery of the service and will continue to provide support at all times.

## **Is there a timeline for when the service will be stabilised and will this be communicated to families who have been impacted?**

There are a number of actions which have been implemented to stabilise the service, including daily monitoring to ensure adequate and safe staffing levels. All the nursing roles within the wider haematology and oncology departments were reviewed in order to assess capacity for support across the wider team. The service utilised staff from other ward areas and bank staff to safely and adequately cover the service and protect the most time critical treatments.

Two additional staff will have attained the necessary specialist training by the end of August and an additional two staff will have completed training by the end of the year. Those staff availing of planned and unplanned absence leave will be expected to return to work within the appropriate timeframes.

The specialist nursing team, who work alongside the ward and out-patient service as part of the wider team, delivering specific nursing roles, continue to support the ward team, providing expert guidance, and nursing care support.

The position was communicated to families and this communication has been reviewed and remains current. If there is any change to this position the families will be updated immediately.

## **What discussions has the Trust held with parents of children affected?**

The Trust has written to parents and provided them with information regarding the current staffing situation and the actions being taken to address them. Parents and carers have also been offered an opportunity to speak with a member of the team should they wish to discuss any aspect of their child's care.



# Your Questions Answered

## **Were these service pressures escalated to the Department of Health & the Strategic Planning & Performance Group (SPPG)?**

An Early Alert was submitted to the Department of Health on 01 July 2025 outlining the staffing issues and the contingency arrangements that had been put in place. Colleagues in SPPG were also advised and there were discussions with them in early July.

## **What options are the Trust looking at to ensure this does not happen again?**

The service will continue to progress current actions and continue with regular contingency planning to ensure we have the necessary resources and to ensure service resilience now and in the future.

We hope this will address any queries you may have on this issue. If you have any further queries, we are happy to arrange follow up meetings with you. To set up a meeting, please contact [publicliaison@belfasttrust.hscni.net](mailto:publicliaison@belfasttrust.hscni.net).

