



Belfast Health and
Social Care Trust

caring supporting improving together

Belfast Trust Winter Plan 2025/26

Introduction to Winter Plan 

Winter plan 

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Introduction

As we approach the winter months, Belfast Trust reaffirms its unwavering commitment to delivering care that is safe, high-quality, and compassionate. Although our Health and Social Care system works under pressure all year, winter presents unique challenges. This is seen across HSC but in particular within Emergency Departments (EDs), acute services, and community settings. Despite growing demands and financial constraints, this plan builds on the lessons learned from previous years and outlines evidence-informed actions to improve patient flow, reduce delays, and support timely discharge.

Our focus this year is sharper than ever: we aim to enhance the experience of patients and staff by providing alternative pathways of care that avoid ED attendance, reducing bottlenecks in emergency departments and acute pathways, and ensuring that patients who are medically fit can return home safely and promptly. This approach builds on the four 'Big Discussion' workshops led by the Department of Health, reflecting the Minister's commitment to collaborative planning for winter pressures and future service improvement. As part of this regional approach, our Trust identified actions to improve ambulance handover.

These efforts are underpinned by our commitment to visible leadership, strong oversight, and a compassionate culture and is reliant on our strong partnerships in Primary Care, NIAS, community services, and the independent sector.

We want to thank the dedication of our workforce, and recognise the importance of maintaining their wellbeing during this demanding period, while we continue to deliver the right care, in the right place, at the right time, for every person who needs us.





Belfast Winter Plan 2025/ 2026

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Reducing Time
in Emergency
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Reducing Ambulance off load Times

The Trust is working together with Northern Ireland Ambulance Service to support timely ambulance handover, enhanced co-ordination and smoother transfer of patients.

Belfast Trust, Primary Care and Care Homes work in partnership to keep people well at home and to reduce unnecessary ED attendance. This will involve a continued focus on a co-ordinated approach for respiratory patients in the community, and building capacity to provide IV antibiotics in people's own homes.

The Trust is introducing a new Rapid Emergency & Acute Care Therapy Team (REACTT) model, a multi-disciplinary team-based approach to provide early assessment, initiation of investigations, and treatment within ED.

Further expand SDEC (Same Day Emergency Care)- Specialist clinics allowing patients to be assessed, treated, and safely discharged home all on the same day, without needing an overnight stay in hospital.

MDT to enhance care in care homes and prevent ED attendances (Big Discussion pilot in West Belfast).

New Hepatology Hot Clinic- to support discharge and prevent readmission.

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Reducing Ambulance off load Times continued

An enhanced model for patient-centred palliative and end of life care in Belfast has been developed so that patients can access services to support and maintain patients at home. This has been co-developed with the Trust, Primary Care and Marie Curie and the Northern Ireland Hospice.

The Trust has developed pathways so that people do not have to attend the ED. These include but are not limited to:

- Phone First (Adults and Children)
- Belfast Trust currently delivers a Multi-disciplinary Treatment Team on Fridays and Saturdays 7pm-3am, and Sundays 3pm-11pm, to improve weekend alternative pathways
- In-reach support to independent sector Nursing Homes
- Skill-mix reform in our Primary Care Out of Hours service
- Enhanced capacity with Hospital at Home service

We are also actively working to improve and protect the health of the population (both local and regional) by providing timely diagnostic and interventional outpatient procedures.

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Reducing Time in Emergency Departments

We will make best use of our ED arrangements by offering an Urgent Care Centre, Acute Medical Assessment unit and Acute Frailty Assessment Unit.

We will also maximise use of existing pathways so that people do not need to unnecessarily attend or spend time in our EDs, including virtual clinics, rapid access arrangements (Adults & Children), service helplines and the potential for patient initiated follow-up.

Respiratory will put in place specialist nurses who will support ambulatory pathways from ED and support admission avoidance.

Our Adult Surgical Ambulatory Unit provides investigations, care and treatment for the ambulatory emergency surgical patients, who would otherwise require admission to hospital.

The PATH (Psychiatric Assessment and Treatment Hub) has a dedicated team located in the Mater Hospital, to support patients awaiting admission to acute mental health beds and provides a calm, therapeutic alternative to EDs for patients in psychological distress. This model enables the liaison team to focus on patients presenting to ED, reducing time to assessment.

Under times of extreme day-time pressure, ED transfer teams will be stood up to ensure no patient waits longer than 15 minutes to transfer to an identified inpatient bed.

We will expand the number of fracture theatre lists and inpatient fracture beds.

We will continue to embed Direct Access Clinics within RBHSC.

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Timely Hospital Discharge

The Trust is working to improve engagement with, and support for patient, carers and families to promote safe, effective and timely discharge.

The Trust will continue to provide a 7-day Hospital Social Work and Discharge Hub service to assist in providing admission avoidance pathways and to facilitate complex discharges.

Additional hospital social work staff x 2 will be in place to support discharge planning.

The Trust aims to provide Discharge co-ordinators for most medical specialties.

The Trust aims to appoint a second Trust Assessor, this post supports timely and safe discharge to care homes.

The Trust will aim to provide a twilight service for NISTAR Nurse-led service to assist with repatriation of children regionally, this will be funding-dependent.

The Trust will aim to increase capacity of blocked Care Home beds provision.

Protecting Elective Care

At times of undue pressure, winter pressures often have to take priority over planned or elective services. This can then impact on waiting times for receipt of elective care, but the Trust is committed to protecting elective care as best it can.

To do this, we will ensure best use of elective inpatient and day case theatre capacity. This includes continuing to safely admit as many patients as possible on the day of surgery, supported by building capacity within our pre-assessment services. We will also continue to develop and enhance the use of the Mater Elective Overnight Stay Centre.

The Trust will continue to make appropriate use of the regional Elective Care Centres to increase productivity, efficiency and reliability of the service. It is anticipated that these will have a positive impact on the number of patients treated. The Trust works in partnership regionally with the rest of the HSC family and the Independent sector to reduce length of stay and address waiting lists.

Key Enablers

Protecting and Promoting Staff Health and Wellbeing

Digital Solutions

Leadership

Monitoring and Reporting

Funding

People

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Protecting and Promoting Staff Health and Wellbeing

- The Trust recognises that none of our health and social care delivery would be possible without our dedicated staff. It is our duty to ensure that they are cared for to be able to provide safe, effective and compassionate care for the people we serve. As such, we are committed to prioritising the physical and mental wellbeing of our staff with a strong focus on mental health
- We also aim to increase the uptake of flu vaccinations amongst our staff to more than 75%. We will commence the roll out of flu vaccinations earlier
- We recognise the importance of retaining and supporting our staff to carry out their valuable work. We are committed to maintaining capacity through timely recruitment and comprehensive induction processes

Digital Solutions

- We will endeavour to make best use of technology and digital solutions. We know that improved service user experience and better patient outcomes are core to any digital innovation
- The Trust will continue to roll out the implementation of encompass and embed its use in both recording of care records and to support the Trust's monitoring and reporting
- We encourage our service users and patients to access their clinical and social care records on the new digital record encompass, through the use of My Care. People can view details of their appointment and their test results on the My Care App
- For those who would prefer not to use My Care, the current arrangements of appointment notification letters and test details will continue to be available

Leadership

- The Trust is committed to ensuring that there is ongoing visible leadership, which is enhanced during increased service pressures, to ensure our staff are listened to and feel valued
- Frequent staff engagement and communication at all levels is fundamental to our aim to be a learning and listening organisation
- We will implement Trust surge plans and business continuity arrangements, as required

Funding

- The significant financial pressures facing the Health Service across Northern Ireland are already well documented, and are not expected to change this winter
- During the coming months, we may find it difficult to provide all of our planned services whilst also managing the expected increase in demand for unscheduled or critical care. Patient safety will always be our priority, whilst we balance these risks

Monitoring and Reporting

- At times of additional pressures, there will be enhanced operational oversight arrangements at all levels across the organisation. This will help to implement and oversee timely actions to address pressures
- The Trust is committed to the objectives set out in the SPPG's Support and Intervention Framework (SIF) and includes rigorous oversight of identified areas for improvement
- As referenced earlier, the improved regional co-ordination, communication and co-operation is helping to reduce inequality of access to services and to minimise disruption to patients

People

- Our people – patients, service users, carers, families and staff are at the centre of everything we do in Belfast Trust. We are committed to listen and learn, ensuring we provide safe, effective and compassionate care, in spite of forthcoming pressures
- We will work to strengthen our partnerships with NIAS, Primary Care, community and voluntary services and independent sector, to meet the health and social care needs of our patients and service users
- To help alleviate unnecessary pressures on our system, it would be most valuable if patients, service users, carers and families could be guided by following the **Choose Well** advice to opt for the right level of care, at the right place, at the right time

How can you help?

Choose well if you become ill or injured and need medical help or advice.



Selfcare: To treat an ache, pain, upset stomach, cough or cold, get plenty of rest, take simple pain killers if needed and use over the counter medicines.



Children's symptom checker: If your child is feeling unwell, you can use our symptom checker below to gain a better understanding of what might be happening and where to get treatment. [Visit the Children's Symptom Checker here.](#)



Your local pharmacist: Can give confidential, expert advice and treat a number of minor ailments such as aches and pains, skin conditions, allergies, eye conditions, upset stomach and emergency contraception.



Your GP: Provide expert medical advice and diagnosis, referring you for further care or consultation as needed.

GP Out of Hours: For people needing urgent medical treatment but cannot wait until their GP practice opens. Available from 6.00pm during the week until your GP surgery opens the next morning; 24 hours on Saturdays, Sundays and public holidays.

Phone First: 028 9615 9444: Patients can be given an appointment for a minor injury unit or urgent care services, directed to their GP or asked to attend Emergency Department.



Primary Eyecare Assessment & Referral Service: Treats sudden eye conditions such as red eyes, sudden reduction in vision, eye pain or a foreign body in the eye. [Find out more on the HSC website](#)



Mental healthcare: If you are experiencing mental health difficulties there are a range of services available to help you. More information is available on the [NI Direct website](#).



Emergency Dental Treatment: If patients have an urgent dental need they can follow advice on the [HSC website](#).



Minor Injuries Unit: Treats injuries that are not life threatening such as broken bones, sprains, bites and burns.



Urgent Care Centre: Treats injuries that are not life threatening such as broken bones, sprains, minor scalp wounds and suturing of minor wounds.



Emergency Department: Provides the highest level of emergency care for patients, especially those with acute illnesses or trauma, such as heart attacks, stroke, serious accidents or head injuries.

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Reducing Ambulance off load Times

- Building capacity for care in people's own homes
- Provide additional support to healthcare within Care Homes
- New Rapid Emergency & Acute Care Therapy Team in ED
- Expand SDEC (Same Day Emergency Care)
- New Hepatology Hot Clinic
- Phone First
- Improved weekend alternative pathways - Adults and Children
- Remodel for patient-centred palliative and end of life care
- Skill-mix reform in our Primary Care Out of Hours service
- Enhanced capacity with Hospital at Home service

Reducing Time in Emergency Departments

- Provide alternatives to ED e.g. Urgent Care Centre, Acute Medical Assessment unit and Acute Frailty Assessment Unit
- Consideration for virtual clinics, rapid access arrangements, service helplines and patient initiated follow-up.
- PATH (Psychiatric Assessment and Treatment Hub)
- ED transfer teams
- Mental Health Liaison service
- Expanded number of fracture theatre lists
- Direct access clinics within RBHSC

Timely Hospital Discharge

- Increase number of social workers (x 2 posts) who support discharge planning
- Provide enhanced support within Discharge hub
- Aim to provide Discharge co-ordinators for most medical specialties
- Appoint a second Trust Assessor
- Twilight service for NISTAR
- Improving capacity across blocked Care Home beds provision

Protecting Elective Care

- Consideration for admission on day of surgery
- Enhance the use of the Mater Elective Overnight Stay Centre
- Use of the regional Elective Care Centres
- Continue working regionally to reduce length of stay and address waiting lists
- Continue partnership working with the Independent Sector

Key Enablers

- Protecting and Promoting Staff Health and Wellbeing
- Digital Solutions
- Leadership
- Monitoring and Reporting
- Funding
- People

