

**Chief Executive Update**

**Trust Board**

**Thursday 26 October 2023**

## **1 HSC Pressures**

**1.0** There are currently huge pressures across the health and social care system in Northern Ireland, as demand for care outweighs capacity.

**1.1** SHSCT hospitals continue to be fully occupied and operating far beyond the capacity/resource that is available.

With continual requests for new care packages and some of our private domiciliary care providers experiencing recruitment difficulties, we are unable to match demand for care packages despite ongoing recruitment trawls.

**1.2** On a daily basis, around 100 beds in our hospitals are regularly filled with patients who are fit to leave. Delays in discharging patients on wards means patients in our Emergency Departments are waiting for an unacceptably long time to be admitted to a hospital ward. It also means that patients arriving at the Emergency Department will experience significant delays in waiting times for assessment and treatment (if required).

**1.3** It is vital that patients leave the hospital no later than 48 hours after confirmation they are medically fit/optimised for discharge and where a suitable discharge option which can meet their needs is available. Unnecessary or prolonged hospital stay can be detrimental as some patients may develop infections, confusion, low mood, reduced confidence, a risk of falling, a sense of social isolation and the risk of loss of mobility with further reduction in independence due to muscle loss. Any of these can have a significant impact on long-term recovery.

**1.4** Recent Department of Health statistics show that the number of patients who waited more than 12 hours in emergency departments (EDs) in Northern Ireland increased by almost 9% between June 2022 (8,193) and June 2023 (8,918). The total number of people going to emergency departments in June 2023 rose to 69,123 - up 6.6% on the year before. More than 500 excess deaths may have occurred in Northern Ireland's emergency departments between 2020 and 2021 due to crowding, a report has said. The findings are from a Royal College of Emergency Medicine report.

**1.5** Ambulance handover delays are a widespread and increasing challenge across trusts in Northern Ireland. Handover delays are not an ambulance issue, they are a whole-system issue impacted by challenges elsewhere in the system, particularly with hospital capacity and patient flow. This includes delayed discharges to social care and other services, as well as bed occupancy. As such, a whole-system approach is needed to tackle them.

**1.6** Delayed handovers result in poorer ambulance response times, as ambulances sit queuing outside of A&E departments unable to attend patients waiting in the community. Not only does this increase pressure on clinical staff, it also causes pressure on ambulance call handlers, as distressed patients and

their families call to get updates on their wait time. This can lead to thousands of additional (duplicate) calls, placing even more pressure on ambulance services.

**1.7** The NI Audit Office recent report found the number of patients in N.Ireland waiting for elective care has risen by 452,000 during that nine-year period (from 2014 to 2023). The reasons for the poor performance include rising demand from an ageing population, at a time when public funding has not risen to match that demand.

**1.8** The report also pointed to staff shortages, a lack of progress in modernising services and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which "significantly contributed to lengthy waiting times". The report said it was "now imperative that the necessary funding is allocated as soon as feasible to both clear patient backlogs and drive longer-term HSC (health and social care) transformation".

**1.9** Research by the Department of Health has shown that more than 281,000 people per million are on a waiting list for appointments (inpatient and outpatient) in the N.Ireland, compared to 138,000 per million in the Republic. The disparity is even greater among those who have waited more than 12 months for an appointment, with 140,000 people per million on the list in Northern Ireland, four times as many as the 30,000 waiting in the Republic.

## **2 Precautionary review of cervical smears**

**2.0** The Southern Trust recently initiated a precautionary review of the results of some women who had cervical smears analysed by the Trust between 1 January 2008 and October 2021.

**2.1** Over 17,000 women are to have their smear tests re-checked following a review of a screening results process dating back to 2008. The Trust has apologised to women affected.

**2.2** The review follows a notification from senior laboratory staff who alerted the Trust's management team that they had concerns about performance in some steps of their laboratory's screening system. The Trust then commissioned the Royal College of Pathologists (RCPath Consulting) to undertake an independent assessment of its cervical screening services from 1 January 2008 and October 2021.

**2.3** The Department of Health has confirmed that Northern Ireland's cervical screening programme will be significantly enhanced by the full introduction of primary HPV testing and is on course for full introduction of by December 2023. Detailed work on implementing and testing the underlying IT systems is being taken forward as an urgent priority.

**2.4** There have been 12 serious adverse incidents (SAIs) registered within the Western Health Trust since 2017 in relation to cervical screening.

### **3 Joint statement**

**3.0** Chief executives of Northern Ireland's six health and social care trusts recently issued a joint letter to Northern Ireland Secretary Chris Heaton-Harris to emphasise in the strongest possible terms the need for concrete action on pay awards for HSC staff.

**3.1** The letter was issued to the SOS in the continued absence of the NI Assembly and states that reducing our unacceptably long waiting lists will require not just investment but a sustained focus on productivity. It says that progress becomes immeasurably more difficult with a demoralised and depleted workforce and a sustained period of industrial action which will inevitably impact heavily on an already fragile health and care system

**3.2** In the absence of a functioning power-sharing government at Stormont, Northern Ireland Secretary Chris Heaton-Harris set the 2023-24 budget for the region in April. Speaking at the time, he said departments faced difficult decisions "in order to live within the funding available".

### **4 RQIA System Inspection**

**4.0** RQIA recently commenced an independent 'system inspection' to examine the effectiveness of collaborative working across the N.Ireland health and social care system, including statutory Trust services and those provided by the independent sector, such as care homes and domiciliary care.

**4.1** This first 'system inspection' took place in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust area, following an invitation from Maria O'Kane, Chief Executive SHSCT. The inspection commenced late September 2023 and will identify existing good practices; and the areas where there are difficulties. It will highlight opportunities for improved joined up working, in the shared objective of improving patient safety.

**4.2** The overall findings of this 'system inspection' will be published on RQIA's website [www.rqia.org.uk](http://www.rqia.org.uk) later this autumn.

### **5 Budget**

**5.0** Currently, SHSCT is forecasting a deficit of £22.88m. However, given the growing demands on services we are anticipating that by year end this may be an underestimate and will likely be in the region of £29.68m.

**5.1** There will be an increase in demand and service growth as we enter into the winter months which will place a greater strain on our system. The pressures are resulting in increased staffing levels with increase use in higher use of agency and locums.

**5.2** SHSCT has been set a savings target of £26.4m in 23-24 and has identified that £17.6m that could be achieved through low/medium impact savings however £8.7m could only be achieved through high impact savings. We do not anticipate that the remaining £8.7m is achievable in 2023-24.

## **6 Industrial Action**

**6.0** Consultant doctors in Northern Ireland to be balloted on industrial action over pay concerns. The British Medical Association (BMA) said the decision to move to a formal dispute and balloting members was taken following an indicative ballot of members where 77% of consultants who responded said they were willing to take industrial action.

**6.1** Junior doctors in Northern Ireland are also to be balloted on industrial action, the British Medical Association (BMA) has announced.

## **7 Winter health plan**

**7.0** A detailed winter plan was published recently for Northern Ireland's health and social care system. The 2023/24 Winter Preparedness Plan details a series of investments and initiatives.

**7.1** Representatives from HSC Trusts, General Practice, community pharmacy, social care and the Department attended a joint summit on the challenges ahead.

**7.2** The Department of Health's Permanent Secretary said: "winter causes difficulties for all health services and we know that our system in Northern Ireland will face severe challenges. The measures set out today in this winter plan can undoubtedly help mitigate the pressures in NI but they cannot eradicate them."

## **8 GP vasectomy service**

**8.0** The Department of Health has said recently that the primary care vasectomy service has been suspended temporarily but no decision has been made to cease this service

**8.1** Chair of the Northern Ireland GP Committee, Dr Alan Stout said that GPs are trained to perform vasectomies, to help tackle hospital waiting lists. They are angry they cannot provide this service

**8.2** Dr Alan Stout said Northern Ireland now has a system "designed to create waiting lists and we recurrently fail to change this".

## **9 NIAS**

**9.0** The Department of Health has approved the go-ahead to the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service for the recruitment of 48 additional paramedics next year.

**9.1** The approval will mean that the first cohort of students graduating from the Ulster University BSc (Hons) Paramedic Science degree in 2024 will be able to apply for the newly created positions within NIAS.

## **10 Urology Services Inquiry**

**10.0** A statement was issued recently by Christine Smith KC, Chair of the Urology Services Inquiry. The inquiry is currently hearing from clinicians who worked in the Southern Trust's Urology service and will continue until the end of November.

**10.1** Hearings continue on November 7, with four planned weeks of hearings due before mid-December. In-person hearings are likely to continue until Easter 2024, and are expected to include other health bodies, including the Strategic Planning and Performance Group (SPPG) in the Department of Health.

## **11 Safe Access Zones**

**11.0** Safe Access Zones have been introduced at eight health service locations across Northern Ireland. The Zones are now in operation at premises run by five Health and Social Care Trusts.

**11.1** Information on the location of each Safe Access Zone is displayed at protected premises and published on the Department of Health and HSC Trust websites, and public signage highlighting the legal requirements has been erected at each Zone.

**11.2** Two people were recently arrested at an anti-abortion protest outside the Causeway Hospital near Coleraine, County Londonderry. The man and woman allegedly refused to leave the established safe access zone

## **12 Review of Children's Social Work Services**

**12.0** Professor Ray Jones, who was commissioned by the Department of Health to undertake a review of how children's social work services were managed and delivered in Northern Ireland Published his review findings on the 21<sup>st</sup> of June 2023.

**12.1** The review makes 52 recommendations, the most significant being that Children's social work services should be managed and delivered by a singular and dedicated Arm's Length Body (Standalone agency).

**12.2** This report is now open for public consultation until the 1<sup>st</sup> of December 2023 and can be found at: the DOH consultation page <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/consultations/consultation-recommendations-independent-review-childrens-social-care-services-northern-ireland> which contains a link to the consultation paper and the questionnaire for those who wish to fill it in hard copy and also a link to Citizen Space <https://consultations2.nidirect.gov.uk/doh-1/independent-review-cscs>.