



Southern Health
and Social Care Trust

TOGETHER, IMPROVING CARE, TRANSFORMING LIVES

Winter Preparedness Plan 2025/26



Introduction to our winter plan



Winter Preparedness Plan

Context



How you
can help



Context

As we approach the winter period, we remain steadfast in our commitment to delivering safe, high-quality care for our patients while supporting the wellbeing and resilience of our staff. Winter brings predictable pressures—rising demand for urgent and emergency care, increased acuity, and seasonal illness—but also presents an opportunity to accelerate transformation and embed sustainable improvements across our services.

This year's Winter Plan is underpinned by three core principles: safety, responsiveness, and innovation. We are prioritising robust escalation frameworks, enhanced discharge coordination, and proactive workforce planning to ensure that both patients and staff are protected during periods of peak demand. Our approach is informed by real-time data, cross-system collaboration, and lessons learned from previous winters.

Crucially, this winter marks the phased introduction of Encompass, our new digital care record system. Encompass will enable more integrated, person-centred care by improving access to information, reducing duplication, and supporting clinical decision-making across settings. Its rollout is a key enabler of our broader transformation agenda—helping us move from reactive to anticipatory models of care.

Through this plan, we aim not only to manage winter pressures but to build a more agile, connected, and resilient health system—one that delivers better outcomes for patients and a safer, more supportive environment for our workforce.

What you can do to help

To help alleviate unnecessary pressures on our system, patients, service users, carers and families should follow the Chose Well advice use the appropriate health service for your needs

Choosing well ensures you received the right care at the right time and that emergency medical care is available for the people who need

How can you help?



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.



Phone First: 0300 123 3111: 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.



Urgent Care 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.

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



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.

Winter Plan

The Trust has a range of initiatives within our Timely Care Programme which support the handover of ambulances, front door admission avoidance, effective ward processes, streamlining discharge, enhancing community care capacity and reducing pressure on hospital beds. While these initiatives focus on improving flow all year, they particularly help with unscheduled care pressures during the winter months.

What the Trust will do – Our Winter Plan

- Managing Admission
- Improving Patient Flow
- Timely Discharge

Winter Preparedness Plan 2025-26

Managing
Admission

Improving
Patient Flow

Timely Hospital
Discharge

Challenges



Managing Admission

This winter, our teams will be working on a number of initiatives to optimise Hospital Admissions: Enhancing Flow, Capacity, and Patient-Centred Care. Effective management of hospital admissions is critical to ensuring timely, safe, and appropriate care delivery across acute and community settings. This approach prioritises:

- Maximising Ambulance Capacity:** By reducing handover delays and streamlining ED entry points, we enable faster turnaround and improved availability of emergency transport resources.

- ED Triage and Flow Pathway:** A robust triage framework ensures rapid clinical assessment, risk stratification, and early decision-making. This supports efficient streaming to appropriate care pathways, minimising bottlenecks and improving throughput.

- Right Care, Right Place, Right Time:** Supporting patients to receive the right care in the right place at the right time, our Ambulatory and Same Day Emergency Care Pathways include:

- Urgent Care Centre
- Acute Medical Ambulatory
- Surgical Ambulatory
- Cardiology Ambulatory
- Respiratory Ambulatory
- Frailty Integrated Team

This integrated strategy aligns with regional improvement goals and supports sustainable operational delivery by embedding escalation protocols, real-time monitoring, and collaborative governance across multidisciplinary teams.

Improving Patient Flow

- Improving hospital flow demands precision, pace, and proactive care. By embedding effective ward processes, we streamline discharge planning, reduce delays, and optimise bed utilisation. Rapid access to diagnostics accelerates clinical decision-making, enabling timely treatment and safe streaming to appropriate pathways. With enhanced medical cover during evenings and weekends, we ensure continuity of care, reduce out-of-hours risk, and maintain momentum across the seven-day service. Together, these levers unlock capacity, improve patient outcomes, and deliver a resilient, responsive hospital system.

Improving Patient Flow

Effective Ward Processes

Reduce unnecessary time spent in hospital

- Ward rounds with a focus on Home First
- Hospital control room – a centralised hub for managing patient flow
- Discharge Lounge
- Focus to increase discharges at weekend

Rapid Access to Diagnostics

- Informed decision making, reducing waiting
- time for treatment and improved health comes
- Bloods
- Scan results

In-reach

- Paediatric enhanced medical cover over evenings and weekends.
- Increase of paediatric beds in Blossom and Daisy Hill overnight with additional nursing cover.

Timely Hospital Discharge

Improving discharge timeliness requires a unified, patient-centred approach. By deploying a Single Integrated Discharge Team, we simplify coordination across simple and complex cases, reduce duplication, and accelerate decision-making. Enhanced community capacity, supported by an early review team, enables proactive planning and rapid response to evolving needs. Harnessing the use of digitised solutions to optimise domiciliary increases efficiency and enhances care quality.

Simple and Complex Discharges

- Single Discharge Team – Enhance discharge to assess. Approach to the management of simple and complex discharges.
- Early Review Team – to maximise the capacity within Domiciliary Care.

Enhanced Community Capacity

- Digitisation of in-house domiciliary care via 'Care Line Live'.
- Maximise core community beds through review of admission criteria.
- Care navigation flow hub approach to coordinate care and better utilise the Independent Sector provision.

Challenges

Our hospitals: As we approach the winter period, our Trust is preparing to navigate a complex landscape of operational pressures. We face sustained high demand for inpatient hospital beds, contributing to longer waits and increased strain on urgent and emergency care pathways. The delivery of planned care remains a priority yet must be balanced against the need to respond rapidly to acute presentations and seasonal surges.

Supporting our workforce is critical. Our staff are at the heart of everything we do. We remain focused on supporting the wellbeing of all colleagues, so they can continue to provide safe, effective, and compassionate care for the people we serve. With staff resilience and capacity under pressure from increased activity, sickness absence, and the emotional toll of prolonged escalation the Trust will do everything possible to maintain safe staffing levels in areas where the demand increases. We are encouraging staff to take regular breaks, use annual leave, and receive their flu vaccinations to help protect themselves, their colleagues, and our patients.

Challenges

Financial constraints. Continued financial constraints require careful prioritisation and resource allocation to maintain safe, effective care. The Trust, like every other Trust in Northern Ireland, continues to face very significant financial challenges. We will work carefully within our available resources to deliver the best possible care and ensure that essential services remain safe and sustainable.

Managing Respiratory Illness and Outbreaks . Additionally, the anticipated rise in respiratory illnesses and potential outbreaks demands robust infection prevention measures, agile bed management, and coordinated system-wide responses. Our focus remains on delivering high-quality care while safeguarding our teams and patients through proactive planning, integrated escalation frameworks, and collaborative problem-solving.