



Winter Plan 2025/26

Introduction to our Winter Plan



Winter Plan



Challenges



Introduction

The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, like every Trust across Northern Ireland, is facing some of the biggest challenges in the history of health and social care. We are all dealing with huge financial pressures, the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost of living crisis, an ageing population and growing health inequalities.

Despite this, our commitment to you hasn't changed.

We are determined to keep our patients, service users and staff safe and to provide the best possible care for everyone who needs us.

Winter is always a particularly busy time for health and social care. Demand for hospital and community services increases significantly, often stretching capacity across the system. To help manage this, we prepare a Winter Plan each year which sets out how we will respond to increased demand and continue to deliver the best possible care we can.

Over the past year, we have seen some exciting developments across the Trust. Following our successful introduction of encompass, Northern Ireland's new regional digital patient record system, we have continued to build on this progress. The new system is already helping to improve patient safety and communication between care teams, while giving people easier access to their own hospital health information through the 'My Care' app.

We have also made great strides in transforming how care is delivered in our communities. Our new Hospital at Home service has expanded and is helping more people receive treatment safely in their own homes, reducing the need for hospital admissions. We have increased support for mental health and wellbeing, and strengthened partnerships across health and social care to ensure people get the right help, in the right place, at the right time.

Our Winter Plan for 2025–26 outlines the practical steps we are taking to keep our services running safely and efficiently through the busiest months of the year.

What you can do to help over Winter

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

Choosing well ensures you receive the right care at the right time and that emergency medical care is available for the people who need it the most.

Take some time to find out more about the variety of healthcare services that are available.

Visit [Help Us Help You - South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust \(hscni.net\)](https://hscni.net) to find out more.



HELP US HELP YOU



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..



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.

WHAT THE TRUST WILL DO - OUR WINTER PLAN

Health and Social Care Trusts have developed robust plans to reduce ambulance handover delays and make sure our services operate as safely as possible this Winter.

A summary of the work the Trust plans to do is set out below:

Think Home First



Alternative Urgent Care Services



Improving Patient Flow



**Improving Discharge
Processes**



Think Home First

This Winter, our teams will be working on a number of initiatives to support and care for people in the community and in their own homes if possible, rather than in a hospital setting. This will include:

- Promoting the use of alternative health and social care services available in the community
- Working with our partner organisations to support care at home if possible
- Expanding our Hospital at Home Service. This means that we are able to provide Consultant led, hospital level care at home, for some conditions which would normally require a hospital admission
- Using technology to monitor patients in their own home including remote digital physical examinations. This allows the clinician to make an informed decision about the appropriate next steps for the patient, avoiding the need to attend the hospital
- The care of our frail elderly population is a priority for the Trust and how we can best look after them in their own homes
- Maintaining and supporting independence through support and education programmes, including how to manage and prevent falls
- Extending the hours of our Mental Health Home Treatment Team to ensure 24/7 care provision



Alternative Urgent Care Services

This Winter, we will continue to provide a range of alternative services, aimed at preventing attendances at our Emergency Department and admissions to hospital. Patients arriving at a hospital with appropriate conditions can be rapidly assessed, diagnosed, and treated, preventing admission to an overnight inpatient ward.

You may be referred by NIAS, GPs and other Healthcare Professionals to these alternative services, including our:

- Urgent Care Centres (Phone First in Lagan Valley and Downe Hospitals)
- Care of the Older Person services – including our Downe Acute Frailty Unit, Lagan Valley Frailty Hub and Frailty at the Front Door Service in the Ulster Hospital
- Ambulatory Hubs - these are specialist units on our hospital sites, which provide patients with rapid specialist assessment, advice and treatment

We will also continue to promote the use of our 'Phone First' model for advice on where best to receive the appropriate care for your needs.

These services can triage and treat injuries that are not critical or life-threatening.



Improving Patient Flow

This Winter, we will continue to focus on improving patient flow into and out of our hospitals, to ensure that patients are seen, treated and discharged as soon as possible. Key actions include:

- Promoting alternative pathways such as our ambulatory hubs, as well as community teams and resources
- Using our Mental Health Liaison team who provide an in-reach service to our Emergency Department to ensure patients are assessed and treated as quickly as possible
- Increasing our Senior Management cover to manage the day to day flow of our hospitals, seven days a week
- Monitoring the beds that we have access to, across our hospital network, including the Ulster Hospital, Lagan Valley Hospital, Downe Hospital, Ards Hospital and wider community to make sure that these are used as efficiently as possible
- Working closely with colleagues across the Department of Health, Regional Coordination Centre, and other Health and Social Care Trusts to ensure escalations are in place, as quickly as possible, during periods of pressure and lessons learned are shared



Improving Discharge Processes

It is our priority to ensure that you are discharged safely from hospital.

A lengthy stay in hospital can be detrimental to your health and wellbeing and delay your recovery. This Winter, we will continue to help our patients to leave hospital as soon as it is clinically appropriate.

It is vital that you and your family/carer accept the discharge options available, even if this is not your preferred choice, as this will still meet your needs in the community, while you wait for your first option becoming available. The hospital team will work with you and your family/carer to ensure you receive the appropriate level of support you require after you leave hospital.

Over Winter, we will use a number of initiatives, including:

- Regular Multi-Disciplinary Team meetings on our to support a smooth and timely discharge for our patients
- Weekend Discharges
- Nurse Facilitated Discharges
- Early Review Team to ensure patients who are discharged from hospital are provided with a review of their needs after discharge, to identify the correct level of care required in the community
- Collaboration with the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service to arrange timely transport for your discharge
- Discharging patients to an appropriate interim placement to wait on their Home Care package



Challenges

Supporting our Workforce – Our staff are at the heart of everything we do. Our health and social care services would not exist without them. This winter, 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.

We know that the winter months can bring additional pressures, including higher levels of staff sickness and ongoing workforce challenges. 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.

Our Hospitals – We expect to see a higher demand for inpatient beds across our hospitals during the winter period. At times, we may need to open additional temporary beds to ensure that everyone who needs hospital treatment can receive it. All patients will receive the same high standard of care from our dedicated teams, regardless of where it is delivered.

There may also be occasions when patients experience longer waits in our Emergency Departments while a suitable ward bed becomes available. We understand how difficult and frustrating this can be, but we must prioritise patients according to their clinical need. We really appreciate everyone's patience and understanding..

Delivery of Planned Care – Winter pressures can make it more challenging to deliver all planned procedures and appointments while also responding to urgent and emergency care needs. We will continue to prioritise the most urgent and time-critical cases, with patient safety remaining our highest priority. We are committed to keeping any disruption to planned services to a minimum and will keep patients informed as quickly as possible, if changes are needed.

Financial Pressures – 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 – Respiratory illnesses, including flu and COVID-19, continue to have an impact on hospitals and care homes during the winter months and as a result, preventative measures are vital.

Despite our best efforts, outbreaks may still occur and could lead to temporary bed closures or reduced capacity in some areas. We will continue to monitor the situation closely and take every step possible to minimise disruption to patient care.



Leading the Way through Winter

The Trust remains committed to visible, supportive leadership throughout the Winter period.

We will continue to listen and engage with our dedicated staff, ensuring that communication and collaboration are at the heart of everything we do.

During times of increased pressures, we are determined to identify any challenges or problems as quickly as possible, so we can work together to resolve them.

Our focus, as always, will remain on supporting our teams and providing the best possible care we can for the people who need us most.

