

Winter Surge Plan 2026/27

18 September 2026



Introduction

Each winter brings additional pressures for health and social care services. As demand increases across our hospitals, community services and social care, our priority remains the same: **providing safe, high-quality care for the people who rely on us.**

Last winter, our staff continued to demonstrate extraordinary commitment and compassion in supporting patients, service users and families during periods of significant pressure. Together with our partners across health and social care, we introduced new ways of working, increased services closer to home, and continued to improve how people access care and support. These developments are helping more people receive the right care, in the right place, at the right time.

Our Winter Surge Plan for 2026/27

As we prepare for winter 2026/27, we know the challenges facing health and social care remain significant. Demand for urgent and emergency care continues to grow, more people are living with complex health needs and seasonal illnesses place additional pressure on services during the winter months. At the same time, we remain committed to transforming how care is delivered, enabling more people to remain independent and receive support closer to home wherever possible.

Our Winter Surge Plan describes how we will work with patients, service users, carers, staff, partner organisations and communities to deliver safe, effective care throughout the winter months. It sets out the practical actions we will take to prepare for winter, reduce avoidable admissions, support the flow of patients through our hospitals, improve discharge arrangements and strengthen community-based services. It also highlights the important role that all of us can play by choosing the most appropriate service when we need care and by taking steps to look after our own health and wellbeing throughout the winter period.

By continuing to work together with patients, service users, carers, staff and partner organisations, we can ensure that people receive timely, safe and effective care throughout winter 2026/27.

Four priorities for winter 2026/27

Our Winter Surge Plan is focused on four key priorities:

01

**Think Home First –
Delivering Care Closer to
Home**

02

**Alternative Urgent
Care Services**

03

**Improving Flow Through
Our Hospitals**

04

**Improving Discharge
Processes**

Our aim this winter is that we will work with our partners to **support you to stay well and live independently and provide care based on your assessed need.**

We recognise that the health and social care system has many interdependencies, and within the South Eastern Trust, we are focusing on ensuring our systems deliver the services required that help those in our care, but also support our Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) colleagues through delivery of ambulance handover performance in line with Release to Rescue protocol.

We will improve access to and strengthen community-based care to reduce unnecessary admission to hospital. We will provide hospital care for you when you are acutely unwell, and then when you are medically fit, we will support your timely discharge from hospital with onward support as required, and enable your transition back home or as close to home as possible.

Working in this way will ensure we make best use of the services available and that patients receive **safe and effective care at the right time and in the right place** this winter.

How you can stay well and independent this winter

We want to help you to choose well this winter and support you to manage your own health.

There are a number of steps you can take to help protect your health and ensure you receive the right care when you need it.

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.
- 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.

Choose the right service for your needs

Using the most appropriate health and social care service helps you access care more quickly and ensures Emergency Departments and ambulance services are available for those who need them most.

Take time to learn about the services available, including pharmacies, GP services, Urgent Care Centres and Phone First. Find out more by visiting [Help Us Help You](#).

Protect yourself and others

Vaccination remains one of the most effective ways to protect yourself and people who are most vulnerable from serious respiratory illness during winter.

We will support vaccination programmes for eligible groups, pregnant women, children, other vulnerable groups and staff, including flu, COVID-19, RSV, pertussis and MMR.

Working with the Public Health Agency, we will raise awareness, encourage vaccination uptake and follow public health advice to help reduce the spread and impact of seasonal illness and maintain safe, effective services.

Plan ahead

Make sure you have your regular medicines available, know how to access the services you may need, and check in on family members, friends and neighbours who may need additional support during severe weather or illness.

Think Home First – Providing Services Closer to Home

Our aim

Our aim is to support more people to remain independent and receive care closer to home whenever it is safe and appropriate to do so. By identifying problems earlier and providing the right support at the right time, we can help people stay well and avoid unnecessary hospital visits.

What we will do this winter

A key priority this winter will be to support our older and frail population to live well at home. Support will be provided by our Hospital at Home service, which provides short-term consultant-led care in people's own homes. Our Hospital at Home service accepts direct referrals from GPs, Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, care homes and from hospital, ensuring that this service is maximised. Multidisciplinary community teams will focus on rehabilitation and reablement to help people maintain their independence, recover where possible, and continue to live well in their own homes and communities for as long as possible.

We will continue to develop and deliver services that enable people to receive specialist treatment and remote hospital monitoring at home helping them to avoid unnecessary hospital admissions and remain independent for longer. Our community care teams will continue to strive to provide those in need with the social care they need to keep people well and at home.

This winter, we will continue to work with our partners through the emerging Neighbourhood Model and the development of four Integrated Neighbourhood Teams across the South Eastern Trust area, bringing together primary care multidisciplinary teams, community services, social care, the independent sector and voluntary and community organisations to provide more joined-up care and support. The initial focus will be on identifying people most at risk of hospital admission, particularly older people and those with complex needs, and providing early assessment and support to help them remain well and avoid deterioration over the winter period.

We will continue to work closely with care homes and community partners, promote falls prevention and self-care, and make greater use of digital technology.

What this means for you

We will support more people to access care and support closer to home where appropriate. By bringing together health, social care and community services, we aim to provide a more coordinated approach to care, reduce avoidable hospital admissions and help ensure hospital services are available for those with the greatest clinical need.



Alternative Urgent Care Services

Our aim

We want to ensure people can access the right care, in the right place, at the right time. By providing alternatives to Emergency Department attendance where appropriate, we can help people receive timely treatment while ensuring Emergency Departments remain available for those who need them most.

What we will do this winter

We will continue to promote the Choose Well campaign, helping people understand the range of health and social care services available and how to access the right service for their needs. We will also encourage the use of Phone First services at the Consultant-led Urgent Care Centres in Downe and Lagan Valley Hospitals, helping people access the most appropriate service for their needs, first time.

When people need to attend hospital, we will maximise the use of Urgent Care Centres, Ambulatory Hubs and Same-Day Emergency Care services, which provide rapid assessment, diagnosis and treatment without the need for hospital admission and you can return home as quickly as possible.

We will continue to work closely with GPs and Northern Ireland Ambulance Service to provide direct and timely access to care, referral to specialist pathways and strengthen access to specialist services, including frailty pathways, mental health support and rapid assessment services.

We will continue to provide rapid access to assessment and care for children and young people with the extended paediatric service within our Emergency Department, working with regional paediatric networks to help ensure safe and timely access to care throughout the winter period.

Working closely with our partners in primary care, community pharmacy, the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service and regional partners, we will help people access the service best suited to their needs and reduce avoidable Emergency Department attendance.

What this means for you

People will have access to a greater range of urgent care services, ensuring care is provided in the most appropriate setting for their needs. By promoting alternatives to Emergency Department attendance and improving access to urgent care services, we aim to make the best use of available resources and ensure our Emergency Department remains available for patients with the most serious and life-threatening conditions.

Improving Flow Through Our Hospitals

Our aim

Our aim is to ensure patients receive timely assessment, effective treatment and holistic care during the winter period. By improving how patients move through our hospitals, we can help people receive the care they need in the right place and at the right time.

What we will do this winter

This winter, we do not want patients to remain in hospital for any longer than is necessary. This will mean further strengthening of our senior medical team, with a new model of acute medicine. This approach will improve the co-ordination of care and reduce delays in treatment.

We will maintain robust coordination across our hospital sites, supported by clear escalation arrangements and daily regional oversight, enabling us to respond quickly to increasing pressures across the whole system and ensure patients continue to receive safe and timely care. We will use up-to-date information from encompass and other systems to monitor demand, bed availability, ambulance handovers and how patients move through our hospitals on a daily basis, helping us respond quickly when pressures emerge.

We will improve the movement of patients through assessment, treatment and onward care pathways, making best use of available hospital and community capacity.

We will continue to place a high priority on protecting urgent and time-critical planned care, including cancer services, wherever possible, and work closely with partner organisations to coordinate responses and manage winter across the wider health and social care system.

We will respond to periods of increased demand by maximising our resources to provide additional capacity, reducing delays and ensuring the delivery of safe, timely and effective care.

What this means for you

By improving how patients move through our hospitals and working closely with partners across the health and social care system, we aim to reduce unnecessary delays and help people receive care in the right place and at the right time. This will support the delivery of safe, effective care throughout the winter period and help ensure hospital services remain available for those who need them most.

At times of pressure, patients will be transferred to other hospitals to receive their care, therefore allowing more acutely unwell patients to be admitted to the Ulster Hospital. When arranging your discharge, if your preferred discharge option is not available, a temporary alternative will be provided for you.

Improving Discharge Processes

Our aim

Our aim is to support patients to leave hospital safely and as soon as they are medically fit, helping them recover in the most appropriate setting and ensuring hospital beds are available for those who need them most.

What we will do this winter

Our multidisciplinary teams will focus on proactive discharge planning on all wards, as early as possible in the patient's admission, to ensure they can leave hospital safely, at the right time and with the appropriate support in place. This will minimise delays and protect inpatient capacity.

At times of increased pressure, inpatient ward care will be prioritised across the multi-disciplinary team, to help the Trust keep patients safe.

Our integrated discharge teams will support timely access to home care, residential or nursing home placements for patients who are deemed to be medically ready to leave hospital. This will avoid unnecessary prolonged stays in hospital which can accelerate deconditioning for many older and frail patients.

We will strengthen discharge arrangements, including weekend and nurse-facilitated discharges, and continue to develop our Trusted Assessor model to support timely allocation of care home placements.

We will work closely with social care, community services, care homes, home care services and independent sector providers to maximise community support and reduce delays in discharge.

Our Early Review Team resources will be maximised promoting a 'home first' approach, supporting more people to discharge and recover at home wherever clinically appropriate. Service support and delivery will focus on rehabilitation and reablement, helping people regain independence and live as independently as possible in their own homes and communities.

Where it is clinically appropriate, we will support people to leave hospital and complete their treatment and recovery at home. Through services such as Hospital at Home, antibiotic treatment will be provided at home. Also, with support from our multidisciplinary teams, more people will be able to receive care in their own homes and communities, helping them to recover and maintain their independence.

We will continue to support timely access to home care, placements and community services, with enhanced social work input for people with more complex needs following discharge from hospital.

What this means for you

Leaving hospital at the right time can support recovery, maintain independence and reduce the risk of complications associated with prolonged hospital stays. Supporting timely discharge and maintaining patient flow through our hospitals will protect elective care services as much as possible during winter and ensure patients can continue to access planned treatment and procedures. We will work closely with patients, families and carers to plan safe and timely discharge, ensuring ongoing care and support arrangements are in place and helping people recover in the most appropriate setting for their needs.

Supporting our workforce

Our aim

To help our staff stay well and maintain workforce resilience this winter.

What we will do this winter

We will provide wellbeing programmes and support resources with a particular focus on stress management.

We will monitor Flu and Covid vaccination rates among all staff groups.

We will minimise vacancies by fast-tracking recruitment where possible for targeted staffing groups whilst working within established workforce controls.

The Trust is taking forward significant actions that will deliver increased stability within our clinical teams. With an increasing percentage of staff being substantively employed within the Trust, we will see reduction in our agency spend and an improved experience for both staff and patients.

The Collaborative Bank is a new initiative offering staff the opportunity to work across both the South Eastern and Belfast Trusts without completing separate recruitment processes or attending additional interviews. It will enable staff to increase their available hours, broaden their experience and add greater variety to their roles, while supporting workforce flexibility and reducing reliance on agency staff.

Nursing assistants can now join the Collaborative Bank, with registration for registered nurses and midwives expected to open by January 2027.

Recognising the holiday period, we will ensure key services and areas are operational to provide safe, effective care when and where it is needed.



Working Together Through Winter

We recognise that this winter will present additional challenges across the health and social care system.

By working closely with our partners, making the best use of available resources and monitoring pressures closely, we will continue to respond to changing demand and maintain safe, effective services throughout the winter period. We will focus on supporting our workforce, protecting urgent and time-critical care wherever possible, and taking early action when pressures emerge.

What this means for you

There may be times when services experience increased pressure during the winter months. We will continue to work with patients, service users, families and carers to ensure care is provided safely and in the most appropriate setting, while keeping people informed of any changes that may affect their care.

In South Eastern Trust, there are 3 acute hospitals that work together to provide care for our communities. You may be asked to move to any one of these hospitals depending on your clinical need, and the clinical needs of others.

How we will provide assurance

Throughout the winter period, we will closely monitor pressures across community, primary care and hospital services, taking action where needed to support safe and effective care.

Progress will be overseen through existing governance arrangements, with regular review of pressures across our services, how patients move through hospital care, discharge performance and the availability of beds across the Trust.

We will continue to work closely with local and regional partners to coordinate our response to winter demand, helping to ensure services remain safe, responsive and focused on meeting the needs of patients, service users and carers.



Our Commitment this Winter

Our ambition is to **help people stay well, remain independent and access the care** they need throughout the winter months.

By **working together across health and social care**, with our partners in primary care, the independent, community and voluntary sectors, and with patients, service users and carers, we will continue to **provide safe, effective care while supporting more people to receive care closer to home.**

