



Healthcare Inspectorate Wales

National Review of Patient Flow (Stroke Pathway) 2021-22

Terms of Reference

The Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015¹ underpins our work and we contribute to the well-being goals with a specific focus on a healthier Wales, a more equal Wales and a Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language.

In our role we check that healthcare in Wales maximises people's mental and physical well-being over the long term, we focus on risk to the quality of healthcare to people and communities as they access, use and move between services.

As health and care services across Wales continue to meet the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, this has introduced unique and unprecedented pressures on the system that will continue through the winter months and beyond. The review will be conscious of how services have adapted and changed to cope with these pressures, whilst considering the quality of healthcare services being delivered.

Background

In its operational plan for 2021-22, HIW committed to a reviews programme that takes into consideration the risks and challenges facing health services as they continue their response to, and recovery from, the pandemic.

Ineffective and inefficient patient flow can have a significant impact on the quality and safety of patient care. Consequently, we wish to gain a greater understanding of the challenges that health services face in relation to how patients flow through the healthcare system, and to test if arrangements for patient flow are robust. We will also consider how NHS Wales's services address peoples' access to acute care at the right time and if care is received in the right place, by people with the right skills, through to timely discharge from hospital services including transfer care to other services.

As a result, we have decided to undertake a national review of Patient Flow. In order to assess the impact of patient flow challenges on the quality and safety of patients awaiting assessment and treatment, we have elected to focus our review on the

¹ [Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act 2015](#)

stroke pathway. We want to understand what is being done to mitigate any harm to those awaiting care, as well as understand how the quality and safety of care is being maintained throughout the stroke pathway.

We will review patient flow through the stroke pathway. Patient flow refers to the ability of healthcare systems to manage patients effectively and with minimal delays as they move through stages of care, through to discharge. Stroke is a complex condition, and timely assessment, treatment, rehabilitation and recovery requires support from health and social care professionals with specialist knowledge and skills.

The consequences of poor flow are well known, and this can include:

- Ambulance response times to calls
- Ambulance handover delays
- Overcrowding in Emergency Departments (EDs)
- Patients being admitted as 'outliers' to wards that are not best suited to manage their care, which may mean they have worse clinical outcomes
- Ambulatory care services, clinical decision units, even catheter labs and theatre or endoscopy units may fill with patients waiting for ward admission
- Inpatients are moved between wards to accommodate new patients
- Staff are overstretched and routine activities slow down dramatically
- Clinical outcomes can be measurably worse, particularly for frail older people, who suffer more harm events and may decondition due to extended periods in hospital beds.

Discharge delays and increased demand on beds also contribute to poor flow. Health and social care systems that have adopted best practice to improve flow find themselves much better able to cope with external pressures than those that have not.

We recognise there are pressures through the stroke pathway to deliver effective person centred stroke care, which relate to:

- Timely access to effective care, including transfer to hospital, assessment, key diagnostic interventions, thrombolysis and/or thrombectomy
- Timely admission to an acute stroke ward/unit (or other relevant ward), and other acute care requirements
- Timely therapeutic assessments and treatment
- Stroke rehabilitation and preparation for life after stroke
- Discharge with social care pressures, access to required therapies and ensuring the right support.

Our decision to undertake this review was based on a range of information sources. This includes our intelligence and other data sources, media reports, and the issues identified through our previous ED inspections and within both our WAST reviews in 2019-20² and in 2020-21³

Our most recent WAST review highlighted how patient flow issues, such as system bottlenecks and discharge problems can negatively impact on the availability of beds within EDs, since the departments cannot transfer patients to wards due to insufficient ward bed availability. The review reflected that patient handover delays are a consequence of wider systemic patient flow issues through NHS healthcare systems and social care services. It may also increase the risk to people awaiting an ambulance in the community, with fewer ambulances available to respond to their needs.

Consideration of work by other organisations

We are aware that there is much focus on the challenges facing patient flow, and throughout stroke services in Wales. As such, we will ensure that our work complements that of others.

Within its 'Programme for Government'⁴ 2021-2026, Welsh Government has committed to the provision of urgent and emergency care services in the right place, first time. It has developed 'six goals for urgent and emergency care'⁵ as expectations for the health and social care system to enable delivery of the Programme for Government commitments. Welsh Government has commissioned a programme to focus on the delivery of goals 5 (optimal hospital care from admission) and 6 (home first approach to reduce risk of readmission), with the intention of enabling improvement in the flow of patients through the hospital system and out into the community.

In addition, Welsh Government has published its 5 year plan⁶ to improve the quality of stroke services and outcomes. It outlines how services will change to improve the quality of care and reduce variations in care across Wales.

Scope and methodology

² [HIW local review report of WAST - Assessment of Patient Management Arrangements within Emergency Medical Service Clinical Contact Centres](#)

³ [HIW review report of Welsh Ambulance Services Trust - Patient Safety, Privacy, Dignity and Experience whilst Waiting in Ambulances during delayed handovers](#)

⁴ The programme sets out the commitments Welsh Government will deliver over the next 5 years. A copy of the Programme for government can be found [here](#)

⁵ [Six goals for urgent and emergency care](#)

⁶ [The quality statement for stroke](#)

The review's overall focus will be on patient flow concentrating on the stroke pathway, from the point of requesting an ambulance or people self-presenting at ED, through to discharge from hospital or transfer of care to other services.

Our research, stakeholder and third sector engagement has helped inform the main questions which our review will seek to answer. That being:

- How are healthcare services ensuring that timely access and treatment is provided to patients on the stroke pathway?
- What steps are healthcare services taking to ensure that safe and effective quality care is provided at each stage of care, minimising the impact of delays?
- What measures are healthcare services taking to ensure that patients are able to be discharged effectively, and safely from hospital services?

Throughout the review we will explore:

- The experiences of people accessing care and treatment for stroke, focussing on key aspects of patient flow, at each stage of care, from assessment through to discharge
- The impact that patient flow can have on outcomes for patients.

It will also explore:

- The processes in place for managing patient flow through healthcare systems
- The patient journey through the stroke pathway

The work will include:

- A review of national and local data
- National public and professional surveys
- Interviews with health board, Trust and third sector representatives
- Fieldwork focusing on retrospective case studies and current cases of people travelling through the stroke pathway, which will include the 12 month period prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, during the pandemic and at the time of our fieldwork

Throughout our fieldwork we will seek to determine the extent to which services are delivering the Welsh language active offer⁷. We will also consider the extent to which services can demonstrate equity of access to patients and work to tackle inequalities and fairness in outcomes.

[Working with other organisations](#)

⁷ An 'Active Offer' means providing a service in Welsh without someone having to ask for it. It means creating a change in culture that takes the responsibility off the service user to ask for a service through the medium of Welsh

We will seek to collaborate with a range of stakeholders, including the NHS Delivery Unit, National Collaborative Commissioning Unit, Care Inspectorate Wales, Community Health Councils and third sector organisations, in order to understand ongoing work programmes, and to help engage with people who have travelled through the stroke pathway, to understand their experiences across Wales.

We will liaise with these stakeholders at key intervals throughout the review, to share plans and ensure any joint working opportunities are explored to avoid unnecessary duplication of efforts and to share findings following completion of fieldwork.

Planning

We have established a stakeholder reference group to inform the review. They will provide support and advice to our internal project board as required on the day to day implementation of the review.

Timescales

The following table includes estimated project timeline for the review.

Task	Timing
Researching and scoping	October – November 2021
Health board and WAST self-assessment Planning of surveys	December 2022
Planning of fieldwork	January 2022
Fieldwork	February 2022 – June 2022
Report publication	November – December 2022

Analysis and reporting

A dedicated webpage for the review will be developed on our website, and this will be used to provide updates on the key findings from the review prior to the final report publication towards the end of 2022. The report may make recommendations for WAST, health boards and Welsh Government to consider and act on.

If any urgent concerns are identified during the review, these will be raised promptly with health boards, service providers or Welsh Government.

Publication and engagement

Any highlight reports will be published on HIW's website and a communication strategy will be developed to enhance exposure.

We will also use a number of communications tools and channels to raise awareness of how people can take part in the national survey and engagement activities.

Following the publication of the final national report, follow-up, engagement and learning events will be considered.

Personal data

This review forms part of our work to provide independent assurance on the quality and safety of healthcare services in Wales. The Health and Social Care (Community Health and Standards) Act 2003 (Part II, Chapter 4) gives HIW the power to carry out inspections, reviews and investigations of the NHS or services provided for the NHS.

Where we process personal data, this is in accordance with data protection legislation, including the Data Protection Act 2018 and the General Data Protection Regulations. Further information is set out in HIW's privacy notice which can be found on our website <https://hiw.org.uk/privacy-policy>.