



NHSCT Winter Plan

2026-2027

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Introduction

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Winter is traditionally one of the busiest periods for health and social care services. Increased seasonal illnesses, higher demand for urgent and emergency care, and the additional needs of vulnerable people place significant pressure on services across our hospitals, community services and social care system.

As we prepare for Winter 2026/27, our priority remains clear: to provide safe, high-quality care while supporting more people to stay well, remain independent and receive care closer to home. Building on the commitment and resilience shown by our staff and partners last winter, we will continue to strengthen community-based services, improve access to care, support timely discharge from hospital and work together across the health and social care system to meet increased demand.



Four priorities for winter 2026/27

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This Winter Plan sets out how we will work with patients, service users, carers, communities, staff and partner organisations to maintain safe, effective services throughout the winter months. It focuses on four key themes:

- keeping people well and independent,
- providing more care closer to home,
- improving access and patient flow, and
- working together to meet increased winter demand.

Through these priorities we aim to reduce avoidable admissions, support timely discharge from hospital, strengthen community-based care and ensure services are responsive to the needs of our population.

We want to help people stay healthy and independent throughout winter, reducing the need for hospital care wherever possible.

By working together and making the best use of available services, we can help ensure that people receive timely, safe and effective care throughout winter 2026/27.



Keeping People well and independent

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We want to help people stay healthy and independent throughout winter reducing the need for hospital care wherever possible.

What are we doing this winter?

Vaccination remains one of the most effective ways to protect individuals, communities and health and social care services during the winter months. This winter, we will support the delivery of flu and RSV vaccination programmes for eligible children, pregnant women, vulnerable groups and health and social care staff.

Working with PHA and public awareness campaigns we aim to maximise the uptake of vaccinations across our population and workforce to reduce the impact of seasonal illness, protect vulnerable people and help maintain safe and effective services throughout the winter period.

We want to help the public to choose well and support people to manage their own health by providing information on the right services at the right time.

How can you help?



Selfcare: To treat an ache, pain, upset stomach, cough or cold and 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: They are there to give confidential, expert advice and can treat a number of minor ailments such as aches and pains, skin conditions, allergies, eye conditions, upset stomach and emergency contraception



Your GP: They will give 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.



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 this means for our public

People will have access to information, advice, vaccinations and preventative services that will help them stay well and reduce the risk of illness or hospitalisation during the winter months



Providing more care closer to home

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We will continue to provide more care in people's homes and local communities, supporting independence and reducing the need for hospital attendance or admission whenever it is safe and appropriate to do so. Many people can receive safe, effective care without needing to attend hospital

What are we doing this winter?

We are continuing to develop our Hospital at Home service – this means we can provide short-term consultant-led acute care in patients' homes and care homes. The service is focused on our older and frailer population who might normally be admitted to hospital. The service provides an alternative to hospital admission and ensures care is delivered in the right place for this population group.

We will continue to deliver services that allow people to receive specialist treatment and virtual monitoring at home from our Direct Assessment Unit and community-based nursing services, helping them avoid unnecessary hospital admissions and recover in familiar surroundings where it is safe and appropriate to do so.

We will develop a multidisciplinary care home support team, providing assessment and input to care home residents across the Northern Trust, helping to keep them in their home and avoid unnecessary hospital admissions.



Providing more care closer to home

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We are working closely with our partners in the Neighbourhood Model of Care to develop the four Integrated Neighbourhood Teams (INTs) in the Northern Area, bringing together Primary Care, Community Care, Social Care and Voluntary/Community Sector with service user and carer involvement.

The initial focus of INTs will be on identifying older people at risk of hospital admission and providing individual assessment and support planning aimed at keeping them well and avoiding deterioration over the winter period.

What this means for our public

More people will be able to access care and support in their own homes and local communities, reducing the need for hospital admission where appropriate.

By providing earlier intervention, rapid support and coordinated care closer to home in partnership with primary care and community services, we can help people stay well, maintain their independence and ensure hospital services are available for those who need them most.



Improving access and patient flow

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Ensuring that patients receive timely care and are able to move through the health and social care system efficiently is central to the Winter plan.

What are we doing this winter?

We have expanded Same Day Emergency Care services at both Antrim and Causeway Hospitals. This means that patients attending the Emergency Department, or referred by their GP or the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS), can be assessed, treated and return home on the same day without the need for a hospital admission, where it is safe and appropriate to do so.

Patients with minor injuries will be directed to the most appropriate urgent care service, helping them access timely treatment and reducing unnecessary delays in Emergency Departments.

We will continue to work closely with GPs and NIAS to provide direct access and referral to specialist pathways where appropriate.



Improving access and patient flow

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By working closely with the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, we will improve ambulance handovers and the timely movement of patients through hospital, helping people access the right care at the right time while reducing delays across the system.

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 maximise the resources available to us to provide additional capacity at times of peak pressure, reducing delays and bottlenecks and ensuring patients receive timely intervention and care.

We ensure early discharge planning for our patients to reduce delays. Our integrated discharge teams will support timely access to home care, residential or care home placements for patients who are deemed to be medically fit to leave hospital.

This will avoid unnecessary prolonged stays in hospital which can accelerate deconditioning for many older and frail patients. We will implement early review of patients who have been discharged with a package of care to make sure this is still right for them.



Improving access and patient flow

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We are redesigning our home care services to deliver a more sustainable and responsive model to support timely hospital discharge and help more people remain independent at home.

By working closely with our providers to strengthen capacity and align resources where they are needed, we can reduce delays in discharge and ensure people receive the right support in the right place at the right time.

What this means for our public

Patients will receive timely care in the most appropriate setting, with improved support to leave hospital as soon as they are medically ready.

By supporting timely discharge and maintaining patient flow through our hospitals, we can protect elective care services as much as possible and ensure patients continue to access planned treatment and procedures.

Improving patient flow, strengthening home care and discharge services, and working closely with ambulance, community and care home partners, we can reduce delays, support recovery and independence, and ensure hospital services are available for those who need them most.



Working together to meet increased winter demand

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Our ability to deliver safe services during the increased pressures of the winter period requires collaboration and participation across the whole health and social care system and the public who use it.

What are we doing this winter?

We will support our workforce through effective planning and safe staffing.

We will gather and use our data and intelligence to identify emerging pressures, adjust our plans and respond in a timely way.

We will ensure our communication with the public is accessible and informative in accessing the right care in the right place.

We will continue to develop our partnerships and work with Integrated Neighbourhood Teams to provide care closer to home as much as possible.

What this means for our public

People will benefit from more joined-up care, better access to local support and earlier intervention when they need it. By working together across health, social care and community services, we can help more people receive the right support in their own communities and reduce the need for hospital care wherever possible.



Key message

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Our ambition is simple: 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, our partners in primary care and in the community and voluntary sector, and with the public, we will continue to provide safe, timely and effective care while supporting more people to receive care closer to home.