****

**Briefing on Welsh Government recovery plans for Health and Social Care –**

On the 22nd March 2021, the Welsh Government published a strategy on how they will build a better, fairer and more equal health and social care services to deal with the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Please see below a summary of the key actions within the documents. Particularly relevant sections have been highlighted in red.

**Improving health and social care (COVID-19 looking forward) –**

The document [Improving health and social care (COVID-19 looking forward)](https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2021-03/health-and-social-care-in-wales--covid-19-looking-forward_0.pdf) describes the impact on health and social care, some of the lessons learnt and priorities as we move towards recovery. The strategy has been presented in service-focussed chapters for convenience, however it recognises that do not exist in isolation but are inextricably linked, and action is required by the whole health and social care system, working together to meet the needs of citizens.

The document also sets out an approach rather than a definitive plan. The aim will be to continue to work alongside the NHS and social services to develop more detailed plans as the pandemic eases, building towards sustainability and recovery as quickly as possible recognising the enormity and complexity of the challenge which lies ahead.

**Covid-19 and health inequalities –**

The numbers of people that are now waiting for treatment for non COVID-19 conditions is larger than at any time. Recognising the inequalities that exist, Welsh Government proposes radical steps and the need ready to adopt new technologies and new ways of working if we are to address them.

It is recognised that-

* Alongside ethnicity, the impact of COVID-19 has been greater for those suffering from obesity and multiple health conditions. Having more than one illness or condition is associated with poorer outcomes for COVID-19. Additional support was required for some groups, such as people who were shielding, who have unequal access to a range of resources, including health and social support.
* COVID-19 has impacted on both physical and mental health.
* An analysis of children’s rights impact assessments, undertaken on a range of policies during 2020, highlighted that it is often the same groups of vulnerable children that are negatively affected when these policies are implemented. The impact from COVID-19 is no different, for example those most affected are:

• Vulnerable and young children

• Children with additional learning needs

• Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic children

• Welsh medium learners where Welsh is not the language of the home

• Those who are digitally excluded

• Disadvantaged children – including those with no outdoor space

• Those who may suffer developmental delay.

Welsh Government priorities –

* To build a more resilient health and social care service and support and develop the workforce. Next steps must be taken to ensure not only to just recover to the position pre-COVID-19, but rather reframe services so they provide the integrated health and care support that Wales needs and deserves.
* To tackle all forms of harms resulting from the pandemic as we move towards recovery. This includes harm from delays in access to treatment or care and the impact on mental and emotional wellbeing.
* To accelerate the work underway to develop a Race Equality Plan which represents an important statement by Welsh Government of its vision and values. The practical actions will address racial inequality and improve the life chances and outcomes of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities in Wales. A toolkit to help employers and employees to feel safe and well at work is being developed to address the issues that COVID-19 has shown all too clearly.
* Recognition of the enormous impact that COVID-19 has had on the mental health of all ages. Building support, particularly for low level interventions is key. Children and young people have been significantly affected and more needs to be done to ensure their mental health concerns are addressed promptly.
* The opportunity has been taken to review and create new **A Healthier Wales actions** to reflect lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and challenges ahead in terms of recovery. These new actions include a focus on health inequities, mental health, children and young people and decarbonisation.
* To share best practice and support new ways of working in relation to a range of services, such as hospital to home services; place based care; technology enabled care and emotional and mental health services.

**Responsive primary and community care –**

Primary and community care are at the heart of Wales’ communities and the core of NHS and the vision for the future. **A Healthier Wales** sets out the intention to create new models of seamless health and social care. Local cluster primary and community care providers are the foundation for collaboration and innovation.

It is recognised that -

* rehabilitation has become a particular area of focus during the pandemic for those affected by COVID-19. This focus must continue and also ensure people come forward for treatment including those who may have delayed or put off seeking advice on a health problem, and people affected by the lockdown measures, such as people who have been isolated or were shielding.
* Allied Health Professionals (AHPs), such as therapists, have worked together in multiprofessional teams, adopting new digital ways of working, to deliver the highest quality of care and improve health outcomes.
* Encouraging a multi-disciplinary approach is essential to meeting people’s needs, ensuring that they can access the right person, at the right time in the right place. Creating a simple line of diagnosis and treatment for the patient to follow will be critical to creating an effective model for the future, which involves changing public expectation as what is the most appropriate place to be seen, treated, and supported and who is best placed to provide this care.
* Encouraging Allied Health Professionals to develop further new models of care will help keep people well. This includes remote self-management guides, group consultations and preventative treatments. By increasing the capacity of community based staff we will support long term physical and mental health conditions, including for people with orthopaedic problems, people living with dementia and Long-COVID.

Welsh Government priorities –

* The Primary Care Model for Wales and the cluster approach focuses on health and wellbeing. Moving into 2021/22, the following principles need to underpin service planning and delivery at cluster and health board level:

• Community services must work with each other and with hospitals to provide the right care at the right time from the right professional or service as close to home as possible.

• Care and support is about the whole person encompassing mental wellbeing and physical health.

* The four priorities are:

1. Management of COVID-19, including the vaccination service and care for people with Long COVID
2. Delivering essential services, requiring joined up care with hospital services
3. Development of integrated community care services, including optimal use of Allied Health Professionals, including therapists to deliver increased provision of recovery, rehabilitation and health services for people in care homes
4. Improved access to primary care, including new ways to access urgent and routine care closer to home.

**Supporting mental health services –**

Modelling work is underway to inform the future size and shape of mental health services, including reviewing waiting lists and referral data. Improved cross-Government action and a better multi-agency approach is needed to prevent the anticipated surge in demand and meet the needs of individuals effectively.

Welsh Government priorities –

* People’s mental health concerns must be given equal parity to their physical needs. Health and social care recovery proposals must ensure that mental health support is embedded in all programmes and services across the whole system to achieve this.
* Work is underway between Welsh Government and the NHS to update the framework for an all-Wales recovery plan for mental health and substance misuse services covering all ages and tiers of care. This plan is intended to facilitate joint planning and a co-ordinated approach that can be communicated to a range of stakeholders, including health board leads and Third Sector partners. The framework is based around the following areas:

• Workforce wellbeing and resilience

• Retaining innovation and good practice

• Agreeing service expectations for mental health

• Building additional service capacity and equity of provision

It is not intended to replace the need for individual health boards to develop their organisation’s own recovery plans and governance arrangements. Rather the framework aims to provide a steer on the considerations that mental health service teams should include and where a common approach could be taken, or an all-Wales approach agreed.

* The 2019-22 Mental Health Delivery Plan, which was refreshed in October 2020, includes the latest priorities for mental health services. Whilst the priority areas outlined in the refreshed plan remain relevant, the clear priorities of the Minister for Mental Health, Wellbeing and Welsh Language include:

• A clear multi agency pathway for Crisis Care, including for Children and Young People

• Ensuring the roll out of the Together for Children and Young People Programme’s Early Help and Enhanced Support Framework via Regional Partnership Boards.

• Focus attention on communities who are less likely to access mental health support e.g., members of the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities.

• Ensuring ongoing mental health support for those who have been at the front line of the pandemic in the NHS and Social Care.

• Improve transitions from childhood to adulthood in NHS mental health

* Improving access to memory assessment clinics.

**Effective and efficient hospital services –**

It is recognised that –

* In order to facilitate additional beds, staff had to be drawn in from other service areas and retrained to support senior critical care colleagues. Whilst this met the immediate requirement it has resulted in other, important NHS services, being stood down to meet the pandemic requirement.
* Field hospitals have been a key part of the overall strategy in meeting the challenge of the pandemic. This additional capacity has been instrumental in enabling people who are recovering to leave acute hospitals, freeing up much needed beds in acute and community hospitals. Similarly to critical care, opening of field hospital sites required staff to be drawn in from other parts of the health and social care system with implications for delivery of other service areas.
* Extended access to same day emergency care played an important role in ensuring that patients were seen by specialists in hospitals to avoid them needing to be admitted to a hospital bed. Equally important was the focus on a range of services to discharge patients from hospitals and into community and local authority care. This helped patients to spend less time in hospital and to be discharged with support from recovery and assessment services. Maintaining these approaches is crucial in order to build sustainable service.

Welsh Government priorities –

* The ambition is to improve the offer for patients who want or need urgent or emergency care, delivering advice, information or treatment in the right place, at the right time to enable improved outcomes and a better experience.
* Health boards, NHS trusts and their partners are developing integrated urgent and emergency care models which will:

• Maximise use of specialty advice and guidance lines enabling community clinicians and healthcare practitioners to make confident decisions about the care needs for people

• Implement a contact / phone first model for people who think they need to present immediately at an emergency department but would benefit from self-care, care in the community or to be given an appointment in an emergency department, if appropriate

• Implement ‘urgent primary care centre’ pathfinder services enabling people with urgent primary care needs to access timely multi-disciplinary advice or care in their local communities, reducing pressure on in-hours GPs and emergency departments

• Develop same day emergency care services to enable patients with appropriate conditions to be diagnosed and treated safely without needing admission to a hospital

• Consistently deliver the four “discharge to recover then assess” pathways to enable patients to safely avoid admission through assessment and recovery at home

**Planned care –**

COVID-19 has had a major impact on the delivery of non-emergency operations and treatment across NHS Wales. There are significantly more patients listed for outpatient appointments, diagnostic and treatment services than before the pandemic.

It is recognised that –

* People are having to wait significantly longer, with the potential for harm and negative patient experience, both of which can influence their long-term outcomes.
* Outpatient activity has continued throughout the pandemic and clinicians have been very effective at using new technology to support patients and manage their clinics
* The pandemic has led to a significant growth in waiting times which will take several years to address. To create a sustainable future for planned care in Wales, there must be sufficient capacity in the system to address the underlying demand as well as the long waits that have been an inevitable consequence of the pandemic.
* The increased use of digital technology to support online appointments, and the use of specialist advice and guidance, are two new ways of working that will be critical in shaping how NHS Wales operates in the future.
* The default for follow up care will be discharge. Where this is not appropriate, the ‘See on Symptoms’ and ‘Patient Initiated Follow Up’ pathways will become the norm. This will empower patients to take responsibility for their own health and well-being. Wherever possible, patients will be supported to be on a self-management pathway.

Welsh Government priorities –

* New ways of working, and new pathways need to be developed and implemented within a framework which see the adoption of best practice consistently across the country in line with A Healthier Wales.
* NHS organisations are working to develop recovery plans, which will deliver a service capable of dealing with both COVID-19 and non COVID-19 demands. It will take time to build capacity within the NHS, in the interim it may be necessary to work with partner organisations who can provide capacity quickly.
* A priority will be engaging widely on the scale of the challenge. Discussions with the public and clinicians are key, about how to manage the significant backlog of demand in a way which balances patient benefit, available capacity, pathway options and potentially very lengthy waits for some patients. This will not be an easy discussion, but it is important to be open and honest about the scale of the challenge caused by COVID-19 and the choices which will be required until a better balance between demand and capacity can be achieved.

**A supported, engaged and motivated workforce-**

Health and social care staff are suffering from mental and physical impacts of working under extreme pressure over a sustained period.

It is recognised that –

* Delivering new ways of working across whole clinical pathways, community based services and changes in the need for services post COVID-19, means we must maximise the potential contribution of the whole workforce.
* Staff must work in a multi-disciplinary way and think flexibly about the roles of registrant and non-registrant colleagues, including optimising skills and encouraging staff to utilise the full extent of their education, training and experience. Further investment in Continuing Professional Development, such as in prescribing, will be key to ensuring skills in this area are optimised in order to support recovery.
* A strong focus on the health and wellbeing of the workforce has been a very clear priority during the pandemic and Welsh Government will build on this further in the coming months.

Welsh Government priorities –

* Focus on delivering the Workforce Strategy to give a clear strategic direction to work and use the principles of compassionate leadership and workforce engagement to guide, plan and deliver recovery work.
* The existing health and wellbeing support available to the workforce will be strengthened. Working with social partners, Welsh Government will develop ways to enable individuals to find targeted support which best meets their individual needs over the short, medium and long term.
* Improved workforce data and intelligence will enable monitoring the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 response on the workforce and to target actions during recovery in response to emerging trends or issues.

**Effective digital support –**

COVID-19 has reinforced our understanding of how digital technologies are an enabler of transformation, as set out in A Healthier Wales.

Welsh Government priorities –

* An extensive programme of digital transformation is planned for 2021, including increased investment in national programmes, creating Digital HealthCare Wales, a new governance framework, new national leadership roles, and further upgrades to key elements of digital infrastructure and devices across NHS Wales.
* Supporting professionals to work more efficiently, and remotely through investment in new digital technologies across health and social care.
* Ensuring that data is shared effectively as a single electronic health and care record. This work, led by the National Data Resource programme, is a headline commitment in A Healthier Wales and has been a key enabler of the COVID-19 digital response which will be continued to be built upon.

**Next Steps –**

* A range of priorities are set out in this Welsh Government strategy and it is envisaged that the whole system will pursue them in the coming months and years.
* **‘A Healthier Wales’** remains the guiding statement of the future direction for Wales’s health and social care system.
* Initial plans for 2021/22 will be produced by individual organisations by the end of March, with support and guidance from Welsh Government. These plans will set out the local assessment of the impact of COVID-19 and the proposals organisations have.
* At a national level, existing programmes for example in primary care, planned care or mental health will continue to support consistent approaches to pathway design, service models and standards.
* **The National Clinical Framework** is an important document which will guide the development of healthcare services.

**Next steps**

I will also be publishing a summary of the national clinical framework paper.

Over the next few months, the RCSLT Wales office will be continue to horizon scan to look at opportunities for the profession and listen to members’ experiences of recovery. Please get in touch to share your thoughts. We can be contacted on [wales@rcslt.org](mailto:wales@rcslt.org)

**Naila Noori**

**Policy Team Wales**

**Naila.noori@wales.nhs.uk**