

Evidence paper for the Health & Social Care Committee - Minister for Social Care Priorities – 6th June 2024

Overview

This paper outlines the key portfolio priorities for the Minister for Social Care for 2024/25 and beyond.

Summary

Social care remains one of the most important services provided to thousands of people on a daily basis. However, as with other government portfolios, we continue to experience a challenging period of increasing demand, pressures on the sector and restricted funding.

The following paper provides detail on the headline key priorities that we intend to tackle over the coming year and beyond. These range from broader national priorities, aimed at strengthening and supporting the sector as a whole; to more focused priorities targeting specific elements of our sector such as children's services and pathways of care.

As well as the detail of our aims and objectives within each of these priorities we have also highlighted support, opportunities and challenges that will have an impact on our path to delivery.

Key Priorities

Health and Social Care (Wales) Bill

I am pleased to have introduced the Health and Social Care (Wales) Bill into the Senedd earlier this week. The Bill contains provisions to restrict the extraction of profit from the care of looked after children, to enable the introduction of direct payments for Continuing NHS Healthcare (CHC), and to ensure that the Regulation and Inspection of Social Care (Wales) Act 2016 and Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 are able to operate fully and effectively.

I am very grateful for all the work my immediate predecessor Julie Morgan, the former Deputy Minister for Social Services, and the former First Minister, Mark Drakeford, have done on this Bill. The government also consulted on the proposals in 2022 and the Bill has been informed by the responses received.

The provisions give effect to our long-held belief there should not be a market for care for children, and that profits should not be made from caring for children facing particular challenges in their lives. Under these proposals, the residential, secure accommodation and foster care of children that are looked after in Wales will in future be provided by the public sector, charitable or not-for-profit organisations. The Bill also makes provision to manage the transition to this approach.

The Bill will also amend the NHS (Wales) Act 2006 to allow the Welsh Ministers and Local Health Boards to make direct payments to individuals. The government intends to use these powers in relation to NHS continuing healthcare, so that Local Health

Boards will be able to make direct payments to individuals who have been assessed as having a primary health need and are entitled to receive continuing healthcare. This will enable individuals to secure services to meet their assessed needs for healthcare, instead of receiving services provided or commissioned by the NHS in Wales. This will also enable individuals to have more of a choice in how, and by whom, their care is delivered.

The Bill will also make a number of more minor amendments to the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and the Regulation and Inspection of Social Care (Wales) Act 2016. These build on experience of how these Acts have operated since they were implemented and should help them operate fully and effectively.

I look forward to engaging with the Committee as it scrutinises the Bill in the coming months.

Children's Services Transformation

Our vision for children's services in Wales is for children to be supported to remain with their families and for fewer children and young people to enter care, by providing the right support at the right time to families going through difficult times.

For those children who are in care, we want them to remain close to home so they can continue to be part of their community, remain in their schools and close to their friendship groups. We must deliver a multi-agency approach to care for each child or young person that best meets their needs. I am fully committed to delivering this vision and firmly believe that the transformation programme we have put in place is the right one and substantial progress has already been made.

The lived experience of care experienced children and young people is at the heart of everything that we have done and continue to do. That is why we have worked closely with Voices from Care to organise a series of Care Leavers Summits. These Summits have provided an opportunity for Ministers to hear directly from care-experienced children and young people on their experiences and their thoughts on what changes need to be made.

We are working hard to deliver the commitments set out in the Care Experience Summit declaration, the first of its kind in the UK. I am committed to achieving the vision outlined by the young ambassadors and the First Minister will be signing the declaration again to reaffirm our commitment to its delivery.

Work is firmly underway to develop and deliver a National Practice Framework. The Framework will be the first set of national standards for children's services in Wales, sitting alongside other all-Wales procedures like the All-Wales safeguarding procedures. We undertook engagement on the first 6 standards earlier this year and following consideration of the feedback received, the final Framework is due to be published by the end of the year.

We are progressing our commitment to eliminate profit from care and have introduced the Health and Social Care (Wales) Bill to deliver on this. Eliminate is much more than models of ownership and profit, it is about building resilience in the sector, best

meeting the care and support needs of our young people, keeping them within their communities and doing all we can to support them to be with their families.

We launched the Corporate Parenting Charter in September last year. To date 35 organisations have signed up including Welsh Government and Welsh Ministers. We continue to encourage all public bodies as well as private bodies and the third sector across Wales to sign up and become Corporate Parents.

Between 2021 and 2023, a total of £3.5m of Regional Accommodation funding was used by 15 projects across all regions in Wales. This resulted in the creation of 26 new beds of regional provision for children with complex needs and support was provided to 62 children and young people with complex needs. Since then, we have allocated over £23m in this area and continue to receive proposals through the Housing with Care Fund. This will deliver a further 96 beds in total, of these, 5 homes are already operating with 15 beds. Complementing this approach, the Health and Social Care Regional Integration Fund (the RIF) includes a significant investment of circa £18m per annum in supporting families to stay together safely and therapeutic support for care experienced children.

We have also continued to heavily invest in our national fostering scheme, Foster Wales, to improve the ability of local authority fostering services to recruit and retain foster carers.

We are committed to ensuring that kinship foster carers receive the same support as mainstream foster carers and through the Foster Wales National Commitment we are working towards an agreed package of training, support, and financial assistance being consistently available to all kinship foster carers through all 22 local authority fostering agencies in Wales.

This is a journey, this is the beginning, and we will be constantly reviewing and updating our work to ensure we address the concerns identified by young people while aligning to the Children and Young People's Plan. Various elements of work are at different degrees of maturity, and I am confident that they will deliver better outcomes for children, young people and their families.

Social Care Workforce

It is important that we recognise and celebrate the commitment and passion of our dedicated workforce. Our social care workforce is our greatest asset. We want to improve services in Wales in line with the ambitions of the [Social Services and Well-being \(Wales\) Act](#) and Welsh Government's [A healthier Wales](#) plan for health and social care, to provide care closer to home and improve the quality of support for children and adults of all ages.

The pandemic had a significant effect on the workforce and our communities, especially for people who rely on good quality care and support and their carers. There's greater pressure on the sector caused by increased demands because of an ageing population and higher life expectancy, combined with a reduction in those of working age. These two factors combined are a key challenge for how we balance workforce capacity to meet care and support needs. Of our workforce categories we know that 23% of our workforce are over 55.

We are committed to raising the profile and status of the workforce through registration of the workforce and improving pay, terms and conditions for this important sector. Our programmes of work, investment and work with stakeholders, targets our vision of a resilient and stable workforce through focusing on recruitment, retention, and building a resilient workforce.

- **Recruitment** – Focusing on recruiting the social care of today, whilst ensuring that we build our social care workforce for the future.
- **Retention** - We need to ensure that our workforce considers social care as a career for life that can accommodate different individual career needs and aspirations.
- **Resilience** - We will focus on creating the right environment for social care practice through well-being support and technological improvements that reduce daily demands on our workforce.

Our funding through Social Care Wales enables them to provide national leadership and expertise in social care, leading on developing and regulating the social care workforce, service improvement, data, and research to improve care and support.

Social Care Wales working with Welsh Government, sector partners and through workforce consultation have led the development of a Social Care Delivery Plan for 2024-27 focusing on the social care workforce. This plan builds on progress made so far and outlines further development areas based on engagement with the sector. The draft delivery plan was published for consultation in 2023, ensuring the voice of the workforce, stakeholders and those receiving care directly shaped the content. This delivery plan, due for publication shortly, will set out a wide range of actions to build on the momentum that has already started.

Our Workforce and Sustainable Social Services grant of £45m supports a wide range of workforce interventions. Local authorities have been able to use the funding to support increases to pay, but also for other interventions aimed at supporting the delivery of sustainable social care services to ensure that they were better placed to meet increased or unexpected demand.

Our investment in the social worker bursary has driven an increase in take up in 2023-24 compared to 2022-23. This is a positive step in the journey in ensuring we have sufficiency of qualified social workers. We will be reviewing current awareness raising, investment and terms of the bursary to consider how we can strengthen this further moving forward. Funding through Social Care Wales supports a range of areas of work including the local authorities 'grow your own scheme' supporting paid employment and funded social work training.

We know there are several local "care academies" across Wales offering opportunities to earn while learning, allowing trainees to gain an insight into different careers in adult and children's care, whilst studying for health and social care qualifications. We are currently exploring how we can support these initiatives further.

A Social Care Fair Work Forum Task and Finish Group has been considering how to develop a unique model in the form of a 'Social Care Workforce Partnership' for the

independent social care sector in Wales. We are moving into the third financial year of our Programme for Government commitment to pay the Real Living Wage (RLW) to social care workers in Wales, and funding to support local authorities to continue to meet the additional costs of introducing the RLW for care workers has been included in the Local Government settlement.

The well-being of the sector is a priority and should underpin all our policies. We recently extended the free mental health support offer (Canopi) to the social care workforce which was originally for health only. Canopi have reported an increase in take up of social care staff, and they are also presenting with more complex issues. We are therefore exploring how we can further support Canopi to deliver the full offer to the social care workforce. BASW Peer Support Service (PSS), which offers social workers a free peer to peer support, allowing them to manage work related issues, and to develop their career by getting advice and support from more experienced, fellow social workers.

Establishing the National Office for Care and Support National Care and Support Service

Following appointment of a Chief Social Care Officer for Wales at the start of this government term, work commenced to establish a National Office for Care and Support. Taken forward as part of the Rebalancing Care and Support programme, a Steering Group was formed to support the development and establishment of the National Office which included membership from key stakeholder organisations and met regularly under the Chairmanship of the Chief Social Care Officer.

The Steering Group advised on the proposed functions of the National Office, which were then consulted on as part of the wider Rebalancing Care and Support Consultation in summer 2023. The 90+ responses were thoroughly analysed with the Summary of Responses Report published late November 2023.

In summary, it was determined the National Office would have three core functions. These were consulted on as part of the wider Rebalancing programme. The agreed core functions are:

1. managing oversight of the National Framework for Care and Support;
2. the development, implementation, and ongoing delivery of the National Care Service;
3. and executing the functions of the Chief Social Care Officer.

An Expert Group was established by Ministers with the role to prepare recommendations on practical steps which can be taken towards the shared ambition for the creation of a **National Care Service** which is free at the point of need. The group met between February and September 2022 with a view to agreeing an implementation plan by the end of 2023.

The Expert Group produced a thorough and detailed final report with 46 far-ranging recommendations about how a national care service could be developed with a number of those recommendations aligning with the agenda for the reform of the social sector.

Noting the extremely challenging financial situation, officials have worked with Ministers to develop a three-staged Initial Implementation plan. Having a staged implementation plan remains in-keeping with the proposal made by the Expert Group that a phased delivery plan of at least 10 years would be required to recognise the full ambition of the report.

This Initial Implementation Plan was published on 14 December 2023 and work is underway on moving forward with the Stage 1 activities such as the recent appointment of a Programme Manager, and the development of a Programme Initiation Document and programme board.

Implementing the new National Framework for commissioning care and support

Through our Rebalancing Care and Support Programme we aim to establish a National Framework for Commissioning Care and Support, strengthen regional partnership arrangements and create a National Care and Support Office that will oversee and support the implementation and management of the National Framework.

This transformative programme aims to move us closer to achieving the vision of securing the outcomes and well-being of people who need care and support and carers who need support as set out in the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014.

The National Framework will be established through a statutory Code of Practice and will apply to the commissioning of care and support services. It will set principles and standards for commissioning practices aimed at reducing complexity, facilitating national consistency of commissioning practices and rebalancing commissioning to focus on quality and outcomes. The development and implementation of the National Framework is an important step towards building the necessary foundations for achieving a National Care Service.

Delivering the National Framework is one of the three parts of the Rebalancing Care and Support Programme. If successfully implemented the Framework will help us to move closer to achieving our vision, as set out in the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014, of securing well-being for people who need care and support and carers who need support.

The toolkit we are developing to support the implementation of the National Framework will play a critical role in supporting commissioners to effectively implement the Code by delivering their statutory functions for the commissioning of care and support.

The flexible, non-statutory and collaborative nature of the toolkit means that as the commissioning landscape evolves and the evidence for the effectiveness of the Code in realising our aims to rebalance care and support develops, we can add additional tools and modify existing resources as required quickly and efficiently to ensure the toolkit has the maximum positive impact.

Similarly, our approach to reviewing and updating the Code every 2 years means that we can ensure we are continually modifying the Framework to move us towards

achieving our overall aims. The National Office will help to do this by putting a spotlight on the Framework and help to raise the profile of social care in Wales.

Most responses to the 2023 Rebalancing Care and Support consultation provided positive feedback on the proposed National Framework and helped to strengthen the policy intent and direction of our rebalancing proposals. However, there were some issues and challenges raised in the consultation particularly in relation to integrated health and social care services, funding and barriers to the effective implementation of the Framework and the realisation of its aims.

My officials spent significant time analysing the responses and considered at length what the final Code should look like in light of the many helpful suggestions made. We have tried to reasonably balance what can be achieved through this first iteration and what can more appropriately and flexibly be achieved through its implementation and the functions of the National Office.

Whilst the on-going challenges in the social care sector relating to funding, workforce and integrated delivery cannot be solved alone through the introduction of the National Framework, it does allow us to move towards a more nationally consistent way of commissioning care and support. The Framework will help to contribute to how the overall social care system in Wales works as established through the Act, Codes, regulations and guidance by bringing partners up to the same level across Wales.

As the Code applies to both local authorities and health boards it provides a great opportunity to strengthen integrated and partnership working especially given how it aligns to the Part 2 Code of Practice (General Functions) and the Part 9 Statutory Guidance on Partnership Arrangements which are also in the process of being updated to strengthen partnership working.

Paying for Care

Work has taken place to undertake the annual update of the minimum income amount relating to residential care which come into force at the beginning of April 2024. This will be reviewed again in preparation for the next financial year.

A consultation is currently live on raising the current non-residential care cap from £100 to £120 per week. This consultation is due to close on 13th May. The Part 4 and 5 Code of Practice (Charging and Financial Assessment) is currently being reviewed based on annual changes to legislation that have been completed and the potential changes required as a result of the consultation.

Work on undertaking research in-line with the Stage 1 activities within the Initial Implementation Plan is currently ongoing.

As a part of the National Office, we have the opportunity to look at the funding requirements of working towards a National Care Service, free at the point of need.

One of the key features of the National Office will be to maintain an oversight of the social care sector in Wales and driving forward transformation and consistency by working closely with Local Authorities and the sector.

Research activities are currently being planned as part of the National Care Service programme, specifically the research elements outlined in the Implementation Plan. These research questions form a key part of Stage 1 of the programme and will give us the data required to assess the realistic cost of moving towards a National Care Service, free at the point of need.

We are very aware of profound financial pressures on local authorities and concerns raised by the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) on the funding of adult social care. Officials prepared a detailed consultation package on increasing the non-residential care maximum weekly charge, which was launched on the 19 February 2024, and ran for 12 weeks, ending on 13 May 2024, to seek views on the proposed amendment to the policy.

Any decisions to change policy would only be made after careful consideration of consultation findings, with any subsequent timescales for potential implementation shared as part of any post-consultation publications and announcements.

Pathways of Care Discharge Delays

In April 2023 we formally launched Pathways of Care Discharge Delay reporting framework as our revised approach to monitoring the flow of clinically optimised patients who are ready to leave acute beds and either return home or move on to their next stages of care.

The framework uses a unified approach to the definition and reporting process from health boards which has, for the first time, given us a comparable picture of patient flow across regions.

The data that is being reported monthly has presented us with a much broader and accurate picture of the key issues being faced in our hospitals. The data is being used by both health boards, and their partnering local authorities, to focus on those areas that require the most attention and this has been supported by action being taken by Officials and NHS Executive.

For example, we have supported regions to adopt the trusted assessor model which seeks to increase capacity for proportionate assessments to be conducted by relevant staff, where appropriate, to allow social workers to focus on those more complex patients who require a more detailed assessment to be conducted. This action was taken as a result of the initial review of our PoCD reports showing that assessment related delays – comprising health, social care and joint assessments – presented some of the highest grouping of reported discharge delays.

However, despite the availability of robust data we are still seeing high numbers of discharge delays and fluctuating progress across all health board regions. This is showing us that there are positive steps being taken in all areas, although we are not yet seeing sustainable results being embedded.

As we move beyond the first year of reporting we will now have the added benefit of being able to review year on year data to help us to determine trend analysis which will further help us identify what progress regions are making.

We know that in order to achieve success and reduce delays it will need a concerted effort from both health and social care partners. A key focus for us for the coming year and beyond will be to ensure that regions have robust integrated plans in place to tackle pathways of care delays.

We are already collecting supporting narrative information through monthly action plans which are provided by regions; however, these have been mostly focused on supporting the implementation and embedding of the reporting framework in its first year. We have already signalled to regions that we expect their plans to evolve to focus on delivering sustainable improvements to their systems and processes to evidence how they will be taking local approaches to addressing delays.

The integrated approaches will need to explore best practice ways of working and we will support this by fostering opportunities for regions to share learning so that we can strengthen patient flow across Wales. Health board and local authority partners will be expected to collaboratively develop approaches that will best fit their regions and systems, being mindful of the availability of services and resources that can help them deliver reductions in delays.

Building Care in the Community Capacity

I am determined to see a strengthening of our community health and care system, ensuring health, social care and third sector partners work closer together to help people maintain their own health and wellbeing, and access the right advice, care and support locally, when needed, to help them live and stay well at home.

Helping people to manage their own health and wellbeing and building capacity in our communities to help them do so is critical to preventing poor health and enabling people to live well at home. At the same time, building community capacity to support this approach will also reduce the need for higher level health and care services, including admission to hospital.

A critical element of this will be to improve the ways in which we use digital solutions and technology to enable better join up across our health and social care system. Having digital systems that enable us to share information between services and sectors is critical to helping people receive seamless care and support. In addition to this, technology is advancing rapidly, and we need to ensure we maximise the opportunities this brings to help with the proactive management of people's health and wellbeing.

The case for investing in and building preventative community capacity to support health and wellbeing has long been made, however facilitating the shift of resources into the community away from acute services in order to make this happen continues to be a challenge.

Despite this, some great work has already been achieved in this area. Through the important work of our seven Regional Partnership Boards (RPBs) we have seen significant revenue and capital investment in the development of community-based services.

Our £146m a year Regional Integration Fund is enabling partners to work together and develop and embed integrated models of care for some of our most vulnerable population groups including older people with complex needs, people with learning disabilities and neurodivergence, children and young people with complex needs, unpaid carers and people who have poor emotional and mental health and wellbeing.

In line with the aims of the Regional Integration Fund, we are working closely with RPBs and delivery partners to share learning across Wales, identifying the most impactful practices and approaches, with the ambition of scaling them up into more consistent national models of care for the people of Wales.

A good example of this is the development of the home first model in West Wales which has been developed through partnership working and investment of the Regional Integration Fund. Through this model people can access crisis and short term/intermediate care via a single point of access which offers a range of integrated health and social care services to help people remain at home or return home quickly from hospital. The home first service is proven to prevent unnecessary admission to hospital and to facilitate discharge from hospital for people who are clinically optimised and who can be supported to rehabilitate at home or in the community. The model also makes effective use of digital technology to help with pro-active and preventative care management, helping people to get early support to prevent poor health. This integrated, multi-disciplinary approach is providing us with an evidence based model of delivery that I am keen to see mirrored across Wales.

Importantly the third sector are also playing a key role in our partnership and delivery arrangements to help build community capacity. I am delighted that £24.6m of the Regional Integration Fund is directly supporting the third sector to deliver community based services. Additionally, I am pleased to see that over £12m is being invested to directly support unpaid carers, who play a pivotal and often undervalued role in our health and care system.

Building on the learning and progress to date we have developed a high level Blueprint for an Integrated Community Care System for Wales which sets out the key building blocks we need to develop and align to help us build and deliver on our vision of providing seamless care and support for people in the community. This will help our delivery partners to work together to deliver a consistent community care offer across Wales.

In addition to the revenue funds, we are also investing significant capital funds and RPBs have facilitated a joint approach to capital planning across the health and social care sector, with each having developed a 10 year capital plan.

The £70m a year Integration and Rebalancing Capital Fund managed through RPBs is helping us invest in developing a network of integrated community health and social care hubs that enable people to access a range of health and care services locally. To date we have awarded funding to 20 capital projects with a further 6 currently under consideration.

In addition to this the £60m a year Housing with Care Fund is enabling partners to invest in innovative housing development to meet the care and support needs of older

people and people with learning disabilities and more local residential accommodation for care experienced children and young people. In 2023/34 the fund supported 78 schemes across Wales.