

## Audit scope

# Delayed discharges

ACCOUNTS COMMISSION 

AUDITOR GENERAL 

Prepared by Audit Scotland

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## Background

Delayed discharge occurs when a person remains in hospital despite being medically fit to leave. This could be for example due to assessment delays, a lack of available home care services or waiting for adaptations to be made to their home. This issue has significant implications for a person's wellbeing, hospital capacity, and the efficiency of health and social care services in Scotland.

In 2026, it will be ten years since the Scottish Government legislated to integrate health and social care, to improve services. This included addressing whole-system issues such as delayed discharges. Addressing delayed discharges requires system wide collaborative leadership across Scottish Government, integration authorities, NHS boards and councils. In 2023, the Scottish Government announced a comprehensive plan and initiatives with partners to address delayed discharges and improve hospital occupancy rates.

Despite the introduction of the initiatives, delayed discharges remain a significant challenge and continue to rise. However, the scale of issues and pressures being faced by integration authorities and their partners is huge, and delayed discharges are only a small element of this. Public Health Scotland reported that in the financial year ending 31

March 2024, people who were delayed from being discharged spent 666,190 days in hospital, marking the highest annual figure reported and an increase from previous years.

## Why this audit is important

In our [NHS in Scotland 2024: Finance and performance](#) report, published in December 2024, we noted that delayed discharge rates are at their highest on record, and hospital occupancy is still putting pressure on the health and care system. Reducing delayed discharges contributes to improved hospital flow and ensures bed availability for new patients.

In 2023/24, of the 666,190 bed days occupied by people who were delayed from being discharged, there were 431,447 occupied by people aged 75 and over, accounting for 65 per cent of the total delayed discharge bed days.

Delayed discharges have wide-ranging effects on people in hospital and timely discharges support their wellbeing, allowing them to recover in more suitable settings, such as their homes or community care facilities.

Reducing delayed discharges in hospitals is vital for improving people's health and safety

by minimising risks associated with prolonged stays. Prolonged hospital stays are expensive, staying in a hospital longer than necessary can lead to deterioration of physical and mental health, increasingly complex care requirements, loss of independence, and a higher risk of infections.

## What this audit will look at

This performance audit aims to assess how well the challenge of reducing hospital delayed discharges is being addressed in Scotland. To do this, it will aim to answer the following questions:

- What are the key factors that lead to delays in discharge from hospital and what are the current processes for managing delays in discharge at a local and national level in Scotland?
- What has been the impact of the steps being taken to find a sustainable long-term solution to reduce delayed discharges?

## How we will carry out this audit

We will use a range of evidence to develop judgements and recommendations. We will review and analyse a range of documentation and financial and operational data from the Scottish Government, NHS boards, integration authorities, professional bodies, third sector organisations and others. We will consider the implications of a range of factors such as demography, deprivation and rurality. We will interview representatives from relevant stakeholder groups, including those outlined above.

## What we want to happen as a result

The audit will provide an independent assessment of how effective the current delayed discharge process is, by looking at

leadership, governance, and the levels and quality of integration. The audit will analyse the impact the initiatives put in place by Scottish Government and the sector are having to reduce delayed discharges. We will highlight areas of good practice, the barriers that are being faced and make recommendations for public bodies to implement that will support improvement.

This work will also involve developing an online product that will allow the user to compare national and local data on delayed discharges against contextual information.

## Timetable

We will carry out the work between April 2025 and December 2025. We aim to publish the report in January 2026. Following publication, the Auditor General will present our findings to the Scottish Parliament's Public Audit Committee.

## Contact

If you have any questions or would like further information about this audit, please contact Adam Bullough, Audit Manager at [abullough@audit-scotland.gov.uk](mailto:abullough@audit-scotland.gov.uk). For information on how we collect, use and store personal information as part of our audit work, please refer to the [privacy notice](#) on our [website](#).