

News release

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Delayed discharges, a sign of wider challenges in health and social care

Delays in discharging patients from hospital affect people's physical and mental health, and make it harder to admit others to hospital. Delayed discharges are a symptom of wider pressures across health and social care in Scotland.

A joint report by the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission warns this has a significant effect, despite impacting only around three per cent of hospital patients. People medically ready to leave spent 720,000 unnecessary days in hospital in 2024/25. Whilst the full financial impact is unknown, the cost to the NHS in hospital days alone is an estimated £440 million a year.

The causes are complex, including rising demand for health and social care services, financial pressures, long-standing recruitment and retention problems across Scotland and for some, not having a Power of Attorney in place.

Reducing delayed discharges is a priority for the Scottish Government and their partners in health and social care, with significant activity underway to tackle this. But a lack of evaluation of initiatives across the country means it is difficult to measure what is having the greatest impact and whether these initiatives represent value for the money and time spent.

Stephen Boyle, Auditor General for Scotland, said:

'Delayed discharges from hospital have far-reaching impacts on people's health and well-being. The Scottish Government, health bodies, councils and other partner organisations agree on the need for major changes and are actively trying to reduce delayed discharges.

'Now they must improve how they collect, analyse and use data to evaluate the initiatives underway to tackle the problem. Without this, it's impossible to understand the impacts and costs of delayed discharges and whether the initiatives across Scotland are improving lives, services and delivering value for money.'

Malcolm Bell, Member of the Accounts Commission said:

'Significant change is critical across our health and social care services, shifting towards preventative care, greater use of technology and ongoing investment in the workforce. Without this, the care and support individuals need to leave hospital won't always be available.'

'The Scottish Government and COSLA's joint health and social care service renewal framework is an opportunity for progress to be made with health and social care reform. But IJBs and social care need to be at the centre of planning and decision-making on service renewal, and it's not clear how the framework will address the challenges faced by social care.'

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Notes to Editor:

1. [An interactive data set on community health and social care](#) has also been published today, with a short accompanying report. This focuses on the performance of Integration Authorities (IAs).

2. The data shows a general long-term picture of declining performance and satisfaction:

- IAs and Health and Social Care Partnerships are struggling to keep up with increasing demand across the health and social care system
- More progress is needed with shifting the balance of care to the community and to prevention
- The amount of choice and control service users feel they have remains variable
- There is a gap between the ambitions to address health inequalities and progress with improvement.

3. Find out more about our work across health and social care on our website.

4. Audit Scotland has prepared this report for the Auditor General for Scotland. All Audit Scotland reports published since 2000 are available at www.audit.scot

- The Auditor General appoints auditors to Scotland's central government and NHS bodies; examines how public bodies spend public money; helps them to manage their finances to the highest standards; and checks whether they achieve value for money. The Auditor General is independent and is not subject to the control of the Scottish Government or the Scottish Parliament
- The Accounts Commission is the public spending watchdog for local government. It holds councils and various joint boards and committees in Scotland to account and help them improve. It operates impartially and independently of councils and of the Scottish Government, and meets and reports in public.

- Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000. It provides services to the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission for Scotland.

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