



Eich cyf/Your ref
Ein cyf/Our ref

NHS Chairs

19 December 2025

Dear colleagues,

Transforming Services to Deliver Better Health and Care - NHS Wales Planning Framework 2026-2029

We issue every year a new Planning Framework for the NHS. It's a crucial point in our annual calendar, setting our next priorities. These priorities are Ministerial choices, designed to make services better, and help steer the NHS towards a more sustainable future. And they build upon a fundamental requirement for all health bodies in Wales, which are non-negotiable and never change: to provide safe and high-quality care for all those who need it, within given resources, and sustainably.

I know the context this year is really challenging. I am asking the NHS to keep services safe and make improvements, when financial pressures are significant, demand is increasing, and staff already deliver more every year. But I have great confidence that the NHS will rise to this challenge. Your ambition for improvement is as great as mine, your innovation and creativity are undimmed, and we all know that standing still will not deliver an NHS fit for the future. I am also clear in my expectation that your plans will need to make hard choices and not include many improvements which would otherwise be desirable, outside the six areas of focus set out below.

We have seen some good progress over the past twelve months, and I would like to thank everyone in NHS Wales for their huge efforts and commitment during a challenging time. For example, we have seen a reduction in number of patients waiting over 2 years for planned care treatment and an improvement in cancer waiting times, reduced ambulance handover delays and fewer delays in hospital discharges. It is also good to see that all health boards have plans in place to establish pathfinder Women's Health Hubs by the end of the financial year and that work is underway to deliver a national lung cancer screening programme.

It is important that we build rapidly on this progress to improve people's health and well-being, and ensure patients can access the care they need, where and when they need it.

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

We must tackle the challenges of today, whilst at the same time driving forward speedily the transformation which will lead over the longer-term to a more effective and sustainable service, and better health outcomes.

To give you clear and consistent direction for the period ahead, the NHS Wales Planning Framework for 2026-2029 echoes and builds on the previous Framework, and is aligned with the commitments made by the First Minister in relation to planned care, delayed pathways of care and women's health.

We must build on the progress made this year, to deliver the recommendations of the [Ministerial Advisory Group on Performance and Productivity](#) and the priorities I set out in my letter of 3 July 2025, *Improving Performance Together*. This Planning Framework reiterates those expectations, and I expect NHS organisations to ensure these are embedded in your planning arrangements.

I am aligning this Framework to financial allocations to health boards. These will help mitigate the impact of unavoidable inflationary and demand pressures on frontline services, but it is a challenging financial settlement, with no discretionary funding for investment I expect health boards to do more to address waste, harm, and variation, in addition to increasing productivity and efficiency.

I am expecting all health bodies to develop and submit plans that achieve financial balance.

My 3-Year Strategic Priorities for NHS Wales

This Framework sets out the strategic priorities that must be delivered by all health boards, and (where relevant) other NHS organisations over the next three years.

The areas on which you must focus are:

- **Timely Access to Care**
- **Population Health and Prevention**
- **Community by Design**
- **Mental Health Access**
- **Women's Health**
- **Quality and Safety**

The minimum delivery expectations under each of these strategic priority areas have been refreshed for 2026-27 and are set out in Annex 1.

The areas of focus remain broadly the same, to provide continuity, though I have chosen to bring together our priorities on quality and safety and to highlight them in this Planning Framework.

Timely Access to Care

We have refreshed our referral to treatment guidance and provided faster access to tests and scans. This means we are reducing the time patients wait for diagnostics, reducing hospital treatment waiting times, especially for those who have been waiting longest and reducing the overall total waiting list. But there is much further to go.

I expect NHS organisations to explore opportunities to strengthen the way in which they communicate with their patients on waiting lists to enable patients to be better informed about their likely waiting times. It can be an anxious and difficult time for patients, and I believe it is important that they are fully engaged in their care, so they know what to expect.

Whilst focusing on those already waiting for treatment, we must also take the opportunity to think differently about how we deliver care in the future by utilising the opportunity we have of integrated health boards and maximising what can be done in primary and community care via Community by Design.

We know there continue to be pressures on our emergency departments and that long ambulance handover waits present significant and avoidable risk of harm to patients. I welcomed the MAG recommendation setting out the need to plan to deliver all handovers within 45 minutes. We have seen progress this year, but I expect health boards to improve patient flow rapidly, so that this expectation is met as standard practice, across all parts of Wales.

Population Health and Prevention

We know we need to improve people's long-term health and reduce health inequalities to improve life expectancy and the well-being of our population. Wales has higher rates of preventable deaths than similar countries. This requires a focus on prevention and earlier intervention in your plans including support for people to quit smoking, live healthier lives and to reduce obesity rates, especially amongst our children and managing chronic diseases such as diabetes. Your plans should also drive an uptake in vaccinations, including childhood immunisation, building on catch up programmes over the last year and reducing vaccine inequity.

In line with Community by Design, the commissioning and provision of health and care services in your area must be based on your population's health needs. I am keen to see population health management approaches reflected in the integrated planning of your services especially at a community level, which will be supported by a national population segmentation and risk stratification tool.

At the population level, Wales will become a Marmot nation to support our work in reducing health inequalities by working locally and nationally in applying the Marmot principles - from early childhood and education to employment, preventing ill-health, housing, and community wellbeing. I am keen to see how you will work with other partners outside the NHS to take forward these approaches,

Community by Design

As well as placing prevention and population health at the core of NHS Wales we must make greater progress with the delivery of integrated services in the community, moving from a hospital by default approach to one of community by design, in particular supporting people with long-term conditions or frailty remain well and receive care in their communities. I expect to see how you plan to co-design these service models with your communities, working with GP practices, other key partners and stakeholders, to deliver integrated services in the community and how you will increase the proportionate spend on primary and community-based services over the course of 2026-29.

We must recognise that rising demand for services and increasing costs mean our social care system remains under pressure. I expect NHS organisations to continue working closely with their key partners to help ensure the care provided is person-centred, compassionate and flexible enough to adapt to an individual's changing needs and it is important that your plans support a collective effort with social care services to avoid unnecessary hospital admission and a further improvement in timely hospital discharge. Alignment with and commitment to delivering Regional Partnership Board plans will be key.

Mental Health Access

We are committed to ensuring there are seamless mental health services, that are person centred and needs-led. Earlier this year the NHS Wales Performance & Improvement Strategic Programme for Mental Health developed guidance, 'Transforming our system to open access mental health support – Supporting Information', setting clear expectations for the remainder of 2025-26. This is aligned to a 'Community by Design' approach and vital in order to continue to improve quality, safety, experience and outcomes, and driving this agenda at pace will place our mental health services in a stronger position to deliver the sustainable services we need to deliver through collaboration. I expect your plans for 2026-29 to build on this and ensure mental health services are shaped in alignment with the [Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2025-35](#).

Women's Health

Progress over the last year in strengthening women's health services has been encouraging, but we need to do more to address the health inequalities women continue to face. We know there are serious challenges in accessing healthcare, including taboo, stigma and a lack of understanding by others when discussing their health and wellbeing - which can be a barrier to receiving the right help. The Women's Health Plan sets out the improvements required across Wales. I am encouraged by the commitment shown by health boards to establish a pathfinder women's health hub by March 2026. We must build on this to provide women with the care and support they need, as locally as possible and to deliver better outcomes. I am keen to see this reflected in your plans.

Quality and Safety

Addressing harm, waste and unwarranted variation in clinical services must be at the forefront of organisational planning and operational delivery. Your organisations are subject to the [Duty of Quality](#) and the [Health and Care Standards](#) - and this should shape your decision making. I would like to see this more strongly reflected in your planning and, as a minimum, I would like to see how your organisations are planning to work towards the expectations set out in the [Quality Statements](#), including those for cancer, circulatory diseases, diabetes, and Palliative and End of Life Care.

You should also identify and plan to address clinical services that meet the principles for fragility described in the [National Clinical Framework](#). The variation reported in [Quality and Outcomes Framework](#) and [National Clinical Audit and Outcome Review Programme](#) should be routinely used, and improvement actions regularly considered as part of your quality assurance and governance arrangements.

Year 1 Delivery Expectations for 2026-27

The minimum delivery expectations set out in Annex 1 highlight those areas of greatest priority and should therefore be the focus of your year-1 plans (2026-2027).

Securing these outcomes should be at the centre of how you use your resources and capacity to speed up delivery within existing resources. Progress in some of these areas will require you to prioritise partnerships with social care. Meeting these expectations will help achieve the improvements in performance and outcomes that we would all wish to see in year 1 of your plans (2026-27). I expect to see continual and consistent improvement towards delivery across all the strategic priority areas over the three years.

Enabling Actions

To support you to deliver against these expectations, I am also setting out a refreshed set of enabling actions (attached as Annex 2) which I am again mandating on the basis of “adopt or justify”.

These have been updated to reflect the progress made over the last twelve months and aim to drive forward improvements on a consistent basis and reduce variation. Each has an evidence base to demonstrate improved efficiency and/or outcomes, without driving additional cost. They are the product of work undertaken by the National Strategic Programmes and the Value and Sustainability Board. Several of the enabling actions relate to activity which must be deprioritised and stopped where there is evidence of waste, harm or variation resulting in no (or low) clinical value or effectiveness. Delivering the mandated enabling actions, along with an assessment of the associated productivity, efficiency and/or financial gains must also be reflected in your plans.

I am disappointed that not all the enabling actions for 2025-26 will have been achieved by year end. These are “just do it” actions, and, acknowledging the progress which has been made over the last year, much more must be done to ensure implementation during 2026-27. **I am expecting a clear organisational assessment of the baseline position, and the improvements that you will deliver, by enabling action, to feature as an annex to your plan.**

Your plans must also include an assessment of your progress in delivering the MAG recommendations on performance and productivity and the priorities set out in Improving Performance Together, as well as your commitment to deliver these during 2026-27.

Although this Framework is clear about the national priorities that your plans need to focus on most, I recognise of course that NHS organisations need to commission and/or provide a wide range of services to improve the health of your populations and to meet the strategic objectives of *A Healthier Wales*, within the resources available to you. I trust that your Boards will keep this balance in mind when making decisions and choices in other areas.

As NHS organisations, you are best placed to identify the needs of your local populations, so whilst setting out my expectations for delivery against the 3-year national strategic priorities, Year 1 delivery expectations and enabling actions, I recognise that this means greater flexibility in delivering on other areas. As you develop your plans, it would be helpful to have an open dialogue with you as you consider the options and choices open to you.

Financial Framework

The expectations set out in this Planning Framework should be achieved within existing resources. Delivering the progress required in 2025/26 on enabling actions, as well as cutting the waiting list will improve the effectiveness and sustainability of services on an

ongoing basis. However, we must go further within existing resources to appropriately reduce cost, increase productivity and address variation, whilst improving outcomes.

I expect all health bodies to develop and submit plans that achieve financial balance.

In developing your plans, I emphasise the following:

- New additional funding provided in the allocation letter is to support inescapable demand and unavoidable inflation, in supporting front line services. **It is to be utilised for this purpose only.** I expect plans to be free of discretionary investment.
- My officials have undertaken work to baseline as much funding as possible into core allocations and in return expect health boards to plan on living within that resource.
- I expect a step change in the achievement and consistent delivery of all enabling actions.
- Health bodies will need to ensure clarity and visibility for significant savings in non-core areas and overheads to prioritise front-line services, to ensure that savings and mitigations delivered in 2025/26 are maintained in full on a recurrent basis, and to deliver the savings and cost mitigations that are required to achieve financial balance. No area of expenditure can be exempted from this and the need to increase productivity. The first draft of the NHS Wales total factor productivity model will be provided to health boards over coming months, and I expect all boards to develop clear quantified plans showing how their actions will deliver a quantified productivity gain in 2026/27.
- I expect health bodies to proactively reach agreement on commissioning and providing services across organisational boundaries and strengthened collaboration on a regional basis.
- Your organisations must continue to have the highest levels of strong and effective financial management, that support cost control.
- Given the scale of investment in 2025/26 to address treatment backlogs, with the action on enabling actions, and productivity, a number of areas will have sustainable solutions on a recurrent basis. I am retaining £20m of funding to support a reduction in waiting times in areas of residual challenge. This will be used on a directive basis, only when all opportunities to deliver sustainability and productivity have demonstrably been exhausted. This position will be assessed through the planning process.
- I have taken a decision to invest in GMS services to proactively increase capacity and activity in primary care, closer to home, in support of the expected focus and development of the Community by Design programme. I expect your plans to show how you will shift activity and resource from a secondary care setting into primary and community care.
- There will be an increase in discretionary capital allocations, which is a 12% uplift on the baseline allocation, to support local plans and resilience.

System Leadership and Transparency

This is my second Planning Framework as Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, and I am still amazed by the dedication of our NHS workforce. They are at the heart of all we do for our patients. We must continue to focus, in social partnership, on ways to engage and empower our people to deliver safely, effectively and flexibly.

We must continue to lead with compassion at all levels across the NHS and this involves engaging the workforce. They are the key to delivering the transformation and improvements we all wish to see. I expect to hear how organisations continue to develop their leadership and culture to ensure the safety, health and well-being of their workforce to enable them to deliver, optimise their team effectiveness and improve their services. Clinical leadership is critical to this, directing the NHS to improvement in patients' interest. I have been pleased to see real improvements already in this area, nationally, regionally and locally, and look forward to seeing even more in coming months.

There is more for us to do together to streamline the relationship between the Welsh Government and NHS organisations, so that we can ensure that our data reporting, accountability and other systems are transparent, proportionate and reduce duplication. We have already taken action in some areas, for example the new Public Accountability Meetings, but there is more to do. I think that by engaging more – and more effectively - with our patients and staff, showing transparently what we are doing and welcoming accountability and honest reflection, we embed improvement in our working lives.

I am keen to ensure all parts of our NHS seek continuously to learn from best practice both from within the NHS in Wales and beyond, proactively working together to identify successful innovation – applying a principle of “adapt, adopt or justify”. This includes the need to make far greater use of digital innovation. The rewards for patients are huge. We will continue to work with you to ensure a strong national digital architecture.

Regional solutions will be necessary in order to deliver quality, access and levels of care that often cannot be delivered by one organisation alone. Where such challenges exist, I expect your plans to set out tangible regional proposals, showing how your organisations will work together to strengthen services, and maximise the skills and facilities available in your regions to improve patient outcomes.

All organisational planning and delivery must be built upon the domains of improving quality, safety, outcomes and value, supported in turn by robust enabling plans for capital, digital, collaborative working, the NHS workforce, and within available resources.

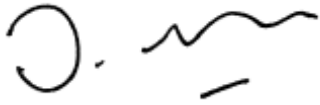
We must not lose sight of the cross-Government priorities such as the refreshed NHS Wales Decarbonisation Strategic Delivery Plan, Anti-Racism Wales Action Plan, Welsh Language and the delivery of priorities in Mwy na geiriau / More than just words to name but a few. In addition, I would naturally expect you to work within the context and principles of the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and embrace Value Based Health Care to deliver the care we all aspire to on a sustainable basis.

Outcomes that matter to people

We must continue to balance better long-term outcomes with addressing the here and now issues that face our communities, our patients, our workforce and our health and social care system. I am struck by the commitment of your staff working on the front line and delivering care in our communities, and how much making a difference for patients and their families

means to them. Working together I am confident that we can make the improvements we all want to see, and the people of Wales deserve.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'J' followed by a series of wavy lines and a short horizontal stroke at the end.

Jeremy Miles AS/MS

Ysgrifennydd y Cabinet dros Iechyd a Gofal Cymdeithasol
Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care