

HEALTH AND CARE

01

'Gridlocked' health and social care system is putting patients at risk of harm, regulator warns amid growing alarm over bed-blocking crisis

Patients are routinely at risk of harm because health and social care services are 'gridlocked', the care watchdog says.

The Care Quality Commission warns the logjam is paralysing services, making it 'tougher and tougher' to access care – with a lack of staff as a major factor.

In a report out today, the regulator says reduced capacity in adult social care has contributed to bed-blocking in hospitals, with only two in five patients discharged when medically fit to leave.

This has led to record-breaking waits in A&E and 'dangerous' ambulance handover delays, as crews wait for a bed to become available before they can offload patients.

The CQC report states: 'What this gridlock means for people is that they are stuck – stuck in hospital because there isn't the social care support for them to leave, stuck in emergency departments waiting for a hospital bed to get the treatment they need, and stuck waiting for ambulances that don't arrive because those ambulances are stuck outside hospitals waiting to transfer patients.'

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Interviewed about urgent and emergency care, 250 health leaders told the CQC the system was 'in crisis'.

Bed-blocking reached a new high last month. In the week to September 30, an average of 13,646 beds a day were occupied by people ready to be discharged from hospital, according to NHS England.

The number of people left languishing on a trolley in A&E for 12 hours or more while waiting for a bed on a ward also hit a record high.

There are 132,000 job vacancies in the NHS and 165,000 across adult social care.

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A THIRD of NHS capacity is taken up by bed-blockers at busiest trusts

Up to a third of beds at England's busiest NHS trusts are occupied by patients who shouldn't be there, according to a startling MailOnline analysis that lays bare the scale of the country's 'devastating' bed-blocking jam.

More than 13,000 hospital beds across the country, or one in seven, are currently filled with patients declared fit for discharge by doctors.

But rates soar to as high as one in three at the worst-hit hospitals, found in Bristol and Coventry as well as parts of Lancashire and Norfolk.

NHS data show that between August 2010 and February 2020 — the month before Covid kicked off, an average of 4,580 beds a day were blocked by so-called 'delayed discharges'.

Even before the pandemic, the situation prompted warnings that the knock-on effects, including having to cancel operations due to a lack of space, were killing thousands every year.

Now official NHS figures analysed by MailOnline show how the scale of the crisis has drastically worsened during the pandemic.

August just gone was the worst month ever, with an average of 13,000 beds blocked every day in England.

Advertisement

CQC chief executive Ian Trenholm warned the recruitment challenge would 'translate into real difficulty'.

The regulator said it had seen a big rise in the past year in people stuck in hospital thanks to a lack of social care for them upon discharge.

In some cases, almost half a hospital is full of people who are medically fit to be discharged but are waiting for social care support, it said.

Beds are available but some care homes are closing their doors to arrivals due to a lack of safe staffing levels.

Mr Trenholm said: 'This is not just a care consequence. There's an economic consequence as well. People who are ill can't go back to work because they're in a backlog.'

The Association of Directors of Adult Social Services said 542,002 people were waiting for assessments, reviews or care as of April 30 this year.

The CQC report also warned that the rising cost of living could result in more care staff leaving for better-paid work. Meanwhile the 'inability' of patients to access GP services is 'exacerbating the high pressure on urgent and emergency care services', its report found. The CQC said that, overall, public satisfaction with the NHS and social care in 2021/22 had 'plummeted'.

It stated: 'Most people are still receiving good care when they can access it. Too often, however, people just can't access the care they need.'

The report comes days after it was revealed NHS waiting lists had passed seven million for the first time.

Caroline Abrahams, charity director at Age UK, said: 'The state of our health and care services has crossed a line in a way we hoped never to see.'

The Department of Health and Social Care said: 'The report identifies the same priorities set out by the Health and Social Care Secretary in our plan for patients... to address ambulance pressures, bust the backlog, support care and discharge from hospital and improve access to doctors and dentists.'

02

Health and care staff shortage nearly at 300k as it gets 'tougher and tougher' to get aid

NHS employee slams Conservative voters in live debate

According to reports, the patient had been given antibiotic treatment in the ambulance but suffered cardiac arrest in the vehicle as no beds were available in the hospital on Tuesday. Paramedics and ambulance workers have been raising the alarm up and down the country for months that ambulances are now being seen as extra wards as there is an insufficient amount of hospital beds.

NHS staff have spoken out about some patients who have been made to wait hours in the back of the ambulance where they have then been treated and sent home without making it into the hospital.

Now the CQC has said that the cost-of-living crisis is likely to push NHS staff away to better paid positions which will worsen the staff shortage issue which is plaguing the health organisation.

According to the CQC, in order to fill the gaps in the workforce, they will have to recruit the equivalent to the population of New Castle to help the health and care system which is now "gridlocked".

The CQC have said that it is getting “tougher and tougher” to access care with 132,000 vacancies in the NHS and 165,000 in social care.

Ambulance

The health and care system is "gridlocked" (Image: Getty)

The NHS sign

The NHS is at breaking point with staff shortages and long waiting lists (Image: Getty)

The workforce gaps are severely impacting waiting lists, accident, and emergency response times and hospital bed availability.

The CQC concluded that the entire health and care system is “unable to operate effectively”.

Chief Executive Ian Trenholm said that the recruitment issue “is going to translate into real difficulty” in the winter and the coming years.

He added: “And this is not just a care consequence. There’s an economic consequence to all of this as well.

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Hospital beds

A lack of hospital beds and staff has seen patients treated in ambulances instead of the hospital (Image: Getty)

NHS worker protest

NHS workers have protested about their lack of pay which is leading to many leaving the organisation (Image: Getty)

“People who are ill can’t go back to work because they’re in a backlog, in some kind of queue waiting for care.”

According to the NHS England chief executive Amanda Pritchard, around 10,000 hospital patients are medically fit for discharge but are unable to be moved as there is no care services for them in the community.

The CQC said that only two out of five people are able to leave hospital when ready which is fuelling the issue of record-breaking waiting times in emergency departments and ambulance handover delays.

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Surgeon

According to the CDC, to fill the gap in staff the population of Newcastle would have to be hired (Image: Getty)

Meanwhile, in some care homes across the country, there are available beds for new patients, but the homes will refuse entry on grounds that there is not enough staff to provide a safe level of care.

The Association of Directors of Adult Social Services said that over half a million people (542,002) are thought to be waiting for assessments, reviews, or the beginning of care since the end of April 2022.

Without urgent measures being taken, the CQC warned that more staff will quit meaning services will be stretched even further and patients will be put at further risk of harm.

03

Workforce crisis responsible for ‘gridlocked’ health and social care system

Long-term planning and investment in the health and care workforce are urgently needed to protect patients and staff in England, the Care Quality Commission (CQC) has warned.

In its annual report to parliament, the regulator stated that the health and social system in England was “gridlocked” and unable to offer care to people who need it, in large part thanks to the ongoing workforce crisis.

“The health and care system is gridlocked and unable to operate effectively”

Ian Trenholm

The CQC said ongoing understaffing problems in the NHS posed “a serious risk to staff and patient safety”, both for routine and emergency care, and that shortages in social care are even worse than they are in the NHS.

The data in the report, The state of health care and adult social care in England 2021-22, came from CQC inspections of more than 33,000 services and providers across England, as well as routine monitoring data and feedback from patients and health and social care leaders.

The CQC reported that there were currently 300,000 vacancies across the health and social care system, of which 168,000 were in social care.

In the first three months of 2022 alone it found that 2.2 million hours of homecare could not be delivered because of insufficient workforce, and approximately half a million people were believed to be waiting for an assessment, review, care package or direct payment from adult social care.

In addition, the number of registered care homes in England dropped by 2.4% between March 2021 and August 2022, meaning that 366 homes were unable to continue offering nursing care.

This was a result of the difficulty care homes were continuing to have in recruiting and retaining nursing staff, with vacancy rates remaining above 10%, noted the regulator.

This shortfall in care services has had severe knock-on effects on emergency and urgent care, the CQC warned in its report.

Without enough care workers to support people ready to leave hospital, patients were not able to be discharged, blocking the whole system.

“The social care sector is in a perilous state, with thousands of nursing vacancies in England”

Pat Cullen

This conclusion was supported by data released by the NHS Confederation in July this year, which found only four in 10 patients were able to leave hospital when they were ready to be discharged.

Speaking at the launch of the new report, CQC chief executive Ian Trenholm said: “The health and care system is gridlocked and unable to operate effectively.”

“This means that people are stuck – stuck in hospital because there isn’t the social care support in place for them to leave, stuck in emergency departments waiting for a hospital bed to get the treatment they need, and stuck waiting for ambulances that don’t arrive because those same ambulances are stuck outside hospitals waiting to transfer patients.”

He said the key to unlocking the gridlock was a long-term workforce plan, saying: “Without a long-term workforce plan it’s hard to see how we get out of gridlock. Everything will just get worse and worse.”

“There are no quick fixes, but national leaders need to take action,” added Mr Trenholm.

Ian Trenholm

Ian Trenholm

Chief inspector of adult social care and interim chief operating officer at the CQC, Kate Teroni, said: “With 165,000 vacancies in adult social care, there needs to be a real step change in thinking about how to attract and retain staff, with better pay, rewards and training linked to career progression.

“If this doesn’t happen, people will be at increased risk of harm,” she warned.

Responding to the CQC report, the Royal College of Nursing’s general secretary and chief executive, Pat Cullen, agreed that action needed to be taken to alleviate workforce pressures threatening patient care.

“The social care sector is in a perilous state, with thousands of nursing vacancies in England,” she said. “The CQC makes clear that the vast majority of providers cannot recruit the staff needed.

“And more care homes are struggling to provide adequate care – likely because of the huge workforce pressures. The system is at breaking point,” she said.

Ms Cullen added that it was “particularly worrying” that care homes have had to stop providing nursing care because of staff shortages, as it would only make the pressure on remaining staff even more severe.

The nursing workforce crisis was also having a negative impact on patient care in hospital, the CQC has found in its review.

A recent adult inpatient survey carried out by the regulator revealed that 11% of patients felt there were “never” enough nurses on duty during their hospital stay, which is up four percentage points on last year.

Despite this, the CQC found that when patients have been able to access care, the overall quality of that care has been high.

The regulator gave credit for this in its report to health and social care staff across the country who have been “working relentlessly” to keep people safe.

As of 31 July 2022, 83% of adult social care services, 96% of GP practices, 75% of NHS acute core services and 77% of mental health core services, including independent providers, were rated as 'good' or 'outstanding'.

However, the CQC identified two areas of significant concern, with maternity services and services for people with learning disability and/or autism across England providing care that was "not good enough".

Care for people with a learning disability or autism has failed to improve significantly since the CQC's report Out of sight – Who cares?.

"It's clear that workforce shortages are the root cause of these pressures"

Andrea Sutcliffe

It warned two years ago of the risks of institutionalisation to people with a learning disability or autism who end up in hospital as a result of not getting the care and support required in the community.

Out of the 17 recommendations the CQC had made, only four have been partially met, and 13 have not been met at all, the CQC has found.

This has left too many people with learning disabilities or autism in hospital, not receiving the care they need, according to the regulator.

Concerningly, maternity services across England have deteriorated and were now the worst they have been since the CQC was established, the regulator said, warning of a "systemic failing".

As of 31 July 2022, 6% of NHS maternity services were rated as 'inadequate' and 32% rated as 'requires improvement'.

This means that the care in almost two out of every five maternity units in England is currently not good enough, and comes just two days after a damning review into failures of maternity services in East Kent.

The CQC also found widespread inequalities in maternity services, with four times as many Black women and twice as many Asian women dying in pregnancy and childbirth as White women.

Black and Asian babies are also more likely to die when in the care of maternity services than White babies. Mr Trenholm said that this rampant inequality was “unacceptable”.

“Black women are 4 times more likely to die in pregnancy and childbirth than white women. Nobody can think that is acceptable in this day and age,” he said.

Andrea Sutcliffe, NMC chief executive and registrar, was among many stakeholders who responded today to the CQC report’s findings.

She described it as having exposed the “difficulties people experience in accessing safe, kind, and effective care, and the challenges health and care professionals are facing as they seek to provide it”.

“It’s clear that workforce shortages are the root cause of these pressures,” she said. “There are more nursing and midwifery professionals than ever before on our register, but it’s still not enough to keep pace with the rising demand for care.

“We need a long-term, sustainable workforce plan that focuses on social care as well as the NHS, given how critical the situation for nursing in social care has become,” said Ms Sutcliffe.

“The focus on maternity services is just as important,” she said, citing the need for “adequate resources, fully functioning multi-disciplinary teams and the right leadership”.

“This is key to improving the experience and safe outcomes for women and their babies and tackling the unacceptable health inequalities that blight maternity services.”

She added: “I know nurses, midwives and nursing associates are dedicated professionals who want to improve everyone’s health and wellbeing. But today’s report shows that too often, systemic challenges hold them back.”

Earlier this month, Skills for Care revealed there were now 165,000 vacancies in the adult social care sector in England and a decrease in the workforce of around 50,000 people from the previous year.

Specifically, the strategic workforce development body said nursing had the top vacancy rate among all adult social care staff groups in England and was also among the professions with the highest turnover.

In response to the regulator, Skills for Care chief executive Oonagh Smyth said: “Today’s CQC report does recognise most people are still receiving good care when they can access it.

“We agree with their assessment that we need to think creatively about how to attract and retain staff with the right values, including better pay, rewards and training linked to career progression.”

She added: “We will work with CQC and other sector partners to make sure that everyone who draws on care on health and care support can access services that meet their needs.”

Earlier this week, an organisation representing more than 160 social care providers appealed to the chancellor to ensure the sector was given more funding and that a workforce plan was published.

The National Care Forum’s chief executive, Professor Vic Rayner, published an open letter to Jeremy Hunt on Tuesday following his first financial statement since taking over at the Treasury.

Mr Hunt had confirmed the abolition of the proposed health and social care levy, a new tax to be launched in 2023 and designed to enable extra health and care spending.

It would have seen around £12bn a year provided to tackle NHS backlogs and improve social care, with funding raised from a 1.25% increase in National Insurance payments.

Professor Rayner said the new CQC report highlighted “starkly the real impact on people when social care is underfunded and under-resourced”.

“Recognition of the heroic efforts, dedication and hard work of the care workforce to continue to support people in very difficult circumstances despite all the pressures is welcome,” she said.

“However, the government cannot continue to ignore the very real human impact on the millions of people who need care and support and the people working relentlessly every day to provide it.

“The possibility that the chancellor is planning to delay social care reform and impose spending cuts is disastrous. This will impact on the already ‘gridlocked system’ CQC identified,” she said.

Matthew Taylor, chief executive of the NHS Confederation, said: “The safety and quality concerns the CQC has laid bare in its annual report are the other side of the coin of when health and care services are not given the long-term funding and support they need to deliver for their local communities.

“The regulator’s birdseye view of health and social care puts it in a unique position to highlight the interdependencies across the different services and how when one part isn’t functioning well due to external pressures, it can lead to access problems and delays, elsewhere.”

Mr Taylor said: “In particular, health leaders remain very worried about the situation across social care. Only two-fifths of patients in hospital are able to leave when they are ready to do so

“Yet the government still has not set out how and when its £500m winter investment will be released to the system. Each day that passes is another where too many medically fit patients are left in hospital beds they shouldn’t be in.”

He said the 42 new integrated care systems (ICSs) had the potential to drive forward improvements but were being held back by the government’s “refusal to acknowledge the scale of the workforce and funding challenges and to provide adequate support”.

Similarly, NHS Providers' interim chief executive Saffron Cordery said the regulator's "hard-hitting" report made clear that people's care was affected by chronic staff shortages.

"At a time when the government ought to be focussed on fixing the big issues and problems affecting the NHS and social care, and ultimately patients, the backdrop of political confusion and uncertainty is a worrying diversion."

Dr Rhidian Hughes, chief executive at the Voluntary Organisations Disability Group (VODG), said: "Resolving the health and social care gridlock described by the regulator must be firmly front and centre in government's response.

"Social care is in a fragile and unsustainable position. Every day, charities make harsh decisions about the services they are able to offer to disabled people," he said.

He added: "Government has the power to repair the gridlock. Government should provide £500m in financial support to enable social care services to overcome the difficult winter ahead.

"With a shared social care vision for the future, adequate funding and better pay and security for the workforce we can enable millions of disabled people to live independent and fulfilling lives."

Meanwhile, Nuffield Trust deputy director of research Sarah Scobie said: "The CQC report paints a familiar but deeply troubling picture of a health and care system on the brink.

Progress to plug severe staffing gaps across health and care and the effects of years of underinvestment have left the service ill-equipped to work through the backlog it already had, let alone the sharp increases in waits we have seen since the pandemic.

"Worryingly, this crisis of access to health care doesn't affect everyone equally," she said. "We can see that specific services areas, including some of those looking after patients with the greatest needs, are struggling even more than others."

Gavin Terry, head of policy at Alzheimer's Society, said: "The CQC's report today paints a shocking but sadly not surprising picture of the current state of care in this country.

"A gridlocked system, a workforce at breaking point and a lack of long-term planning and investment is failing people living with dementia, by far the biggest users of social care," he said.

"Not investing in social care is a false economy which simply piles pressure and pounds onto other areas of healthcare, from people living with dementia rushed to A&E due to a lack of support, to hospital beds filled with people waiting for care in the community.

"We need long-term sustainable investment, better pay, mandatory training on dementia and a 10-year People Plan to ensure the social care workforce is suitably skilled, supported and sustainable."