

Debate Pack

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By Devyani Gajjar,
Hannah Burnett

NHS readiness for winter 2024/25

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Summary

A Westminster Hall debate on NHS readiness for winter 2024/25 is scheduled for Wednesday 30 October 2024 at 2.30pm. The debate will be led by Helen Morgan MP.

This briefing explains what extra pressures the NHS faces over winter and why, government policy and stakeholder comments. Health policy is devolved. This briefing provides information relevant to England.

1 Background

1.1 What extra pressures does the NHS face over winter?

[Health services are under pressure](#) and face significant capacity issues. An ageing population with increasingly complex care needs, high demand and inflation are all contributing to pressure on NHS finances and a [reduction in timely access to services](#). [NHS England has stated that elective care waiting lists have been significantly impacted by the covid pandemic](#) and that it is working to deal with the backlog (see Lords Library briefing on [the 75th anniversary of the NHS](#))

For key NHS statistics in England, including on A&E waiting times, hospital waiting lists, ambulance response times, staffing levels and more, please see the library briefing on [NHS key statistics: England](#).

Many health conditions such as asthma, other respiratory diseases and lung conditions can be caused or worsened by cold weather. Winter typically also sees higher incidence of illnesses such as flu, noroviruses and pneumonia that particularly affect the elderly and vulnerable.¹ These factors can lead to more people being admitted to hospital over the winter period.² For example, [NHS England reported](#) that the number of people in hospital with flu at the end of December last year (an average of 648 patients per day in the week of the 21 December) was four times the figure at the end of November (160 in the week of 26 November). Research from Suffolk suggests that hospital admission rates are significantly higher in colder winters compared to warmer winters.³

In winter 2023, there were [substantial pressure on hospital beds](#), with people experiencing lengthy waits to be admitted, ambulances facing difficulties handing patients to emergency departments, and delays in discharging clinically ready to leave people from hospital beds (see [Library insight on Delayed hospital discharges and adult social care](#)).

Delays in discharging can further lead to long waits for people who need to be admitted to hospital after attending A&E. In recent winters, the number of

¹ The Health Foundation website, "[NHS winter pressures](#)"; O NHS, "[The NHS Long Term Plan](#)" (PDF), January 2019, pages 66-67

² Laura Schlepper, Emma Dodsworth and Sarah Scobie, "[Understanding delays in hospital discharge](#)", 10 March 2023, Nuffield Trust

³ Stephen Patterson, "[Do hospital admission rates increase in colder winters? A decadal analysis from an eastern county in England](#)", *Journal of Public Health*, Volume 40, Issue 2, June 2018, Pages 221-228

people waiting more than 12 hours to be admitted (after the decision to admit them was taken) was more than 40,000 in December and January.⁴

According to NHS England data, in February 2024 there were [between 13,200 and 14,200 patients remaining in hospital each day](#) who did not meet the criteria to stay. This represents over one in eight general and acute beds in England (see Library article on [Capacity pressures in health and social care in England](#) for more details).

Delays in discharging patients can be due to:⁵

- patients needing further assessment, or team’s agreement on what further care patients need
- patients waiting for community health service and/or social care to be set up at home
- patients waiting for a short-term bed, such as for rehabilitation
- patients waiting for a permanent bed in a care or nursing home

All these factors contribute to NHS pressures increasing over the winter, including in GPs, pharmacy services and in hospitals.⁶ Pressures can also be compounded by staff vacancies and absences, which are an ongoing challenge for the NHS (see [Library briefing on The NHS workforce in England](#)). Vacancies can worsen in the winter due to factors such as illness or industrial action in previous years.⁷ [NHS England reported that in the week of 18 December 2023](#) almost 50,000 staff absences were recorded on average, with Covid related absences up 37% since the end of November.

1.2

Government policy

In previous winters, the government has given extra support, such as providing emergency short-term funding, to support local areas in better managing increased NHS pressures over the winter.⁸ For example, in September 2023, [the government announced £200 million to support NHS services](#) through peak winter months.

⁴ Kings Fund, [The Darzi review of NHS performance signals why radical change is needed](#), 12 September 2024

⁵ Laura Schlepper, Emma Dodsworth and Sarah Scobie, “[Understanding delays in hospital discharge](#)”, 10 March 2023, Nuffield trust

⁶ The Health Foundation “[NHS winter pressures](#)”, last updated 2021

⁷ Darren Hughes, “[Health and care face operational and financial pressures like never before](#)”, 1 February 2023, NHS Confederation

⁸ Camille Oung, “[Getting the fundamentals right: how to better prepare for discharge pressures next winter](#)”, 24 July 2023, Nuffield Trust; Siva Anandaciva “[A short history of NHS winter funding](#)”, 11 October 2018, The King’s Fund

[The 2019 NHS long-term plan](#), which aimed to set out healthcare priorities for the next 10 years, said in regard to NHS winter preparedness (p19):

Over the period of this Long Term Plan, by expanding and reforming urgent and emergency care services the practical goal is to ensure patients get the care they need fast, relieve pressure on A&E departments, and better offset winter demand spikes.

Integrated Care Systems (ICS) were legally established in July 2022 and replaced clinical commissioning groups. They are local partnerships that include NHS organisations and upper-tier councils to develop shared plans and joined-up services.

In the past few years, ICS have been putting in place initiatives to better handle NHS winter pressures. These include virtual wards where people can receive health care in their own home and initiatives to support patients being discharged from hospital quicker, such as hubs that coordinate services.⁹

In September 2024, [NHS England announced plans to “prepare for a busy winter period”](#). These plans included:

- upgrading its 24-hour live data centres to manage demand
- having front door assessments for patients to ensure they are signposted to the right place for their needs
- regular board and ward rounds throughout the day
- timely discharge for patients who are medically fit to leave hospital such as through a care transfer hub that works across the NHS and social care to manage discharges for patients with more complex needs
- ensuring community care can be provided for “those with complex needs, mental health issues or frail older people” to avoid the need for hospital admission, such as ensuring regional supplies of mental health response vehicles ahead of winter months
- having same-day emergency care services in hospitals with major A&Es so that patients do not need to spend the night in hospital
- vaccinations, including covid and flu jab rollouts for those most at risk of serious illness
- reviews by NHS England of each of the 42 ICS to support them to cut waiting times and improve patient safety and experience

⁹ Camille Oung, [“Getting the fundamentals right: how to better prepare for discharge pressures next winter”](#), 24 July 2023, Nuffield Trust

NHS England also has guidance for its organisations, leaders and managers on [key actions to support the health and wellbeing of its workforce over winter](#) which include:

- having appointed wellbeing guardians
- prioritising wellbeing conversations and opportunities for peer support
- protecting rest breaks and providing access to good quality rest areas
- communicating support resources and how to access them to staff
- supporting occupational health and wellbeing services
- taking measures to support staff from flu, covid and respiratory illness such as through vaccinations and equipment

More information on the steps NHS England is asking providers to take is provided in a [letter from senior leaders](#) (16 September 2024).

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) publishes guidance, advice, quality standards and information services for health, public health and social care. In 2015 it published [guidance on how people vulnerable to the cold can reduce their health risks in the winter](#).

1.3

Stakeholder comment

In July 2024, [Wes Streeting, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, commissioned Lord Darzi to carry out an independent investigation into the NHS in England. Lord Darzi's final report](#) concluded that the NHS is in “serious trouble” and raised numerous issues including with access, quality of care, funding and NHS structure. In regard to winter, the report said (p89):

The chronic lack of capital investment and cost-improvement targets set alongside imperatives to increase clinical staffing levels means that hospital managers are always under pressure to reduce beds. The result is that the number of beds has fallen more quickly than length of stay, putting many hospitals into a perpetual bed crisis, and damaging productivity. National planning guidance required hospitals to reduce occupancy from 94 per cent to 92 per cent, but even at the reduced level it will inevitably cause occupancy to exceed 100 per cent during peak periods such as a particularly cold snap during winter.

The NHS confederation is formed of organisations that commission and provide NHS services. In September 2024, NHS confederation published an

article that cautioned “improvements in NHS performance could be jeopardised by winter”.¹⁰ The article went on to say:

Without immediate funding there is a very real risk the NHS falls into crisis this winter, with ambulance response and handover delays, overcrowded A&Es and people stuck in hospital beds because of a lack of community and social care.

In September 2024, the British Medical Association published a report that recommended the government and health leaders should immediately implement a number of interventions to minimise pressure on NHS services, including:¹¹

- communicating honestly with patients about pressures
- protecting the health and wellbeing of staff such as by taking a zero-tolerance approach to violence, protecting staff from infection and challenging “political and media rhetoric regarding the dedication of NHS staff” that risk “undermining staff morale”
- reducing bureaucratic workload such as pausing new initiatives that don’t aid winter pressure
- taking additional measures to maximise workforce capacity, such as supporting staff to control unmanageable workloads
- promoting responsible public health policies such as vaccine uptake and improved ventilation
- directing resources to areas such as the workforce, short-term staffing, dedicated winter funding, urgent repairs on estates and adequate social care

In 2023, a Nuffield Trust article recommended the government should make a sustainable difference to winter pressures by:¹²

- ensuring collaborations and local systems enable people to access good care and support throughout the year
- building the evidence base for different approaches, such as virtual wards

¹⁰ NHS Confederation, “[Improvements in NHS performance could be jeopardised by winter](#)”, 12 September 2024

¹¹ British Medical Association, “[Vital actions to minimise pressure on the NHS this winter](#)”, 18 September 2024

¹² Camille Oung, “[Getting the fundamentals right: how to better prepare for discharge pressures next winter](#)”, 24 July 2023, Nuffield Trust

2 Parliamentary material

2.1 Parliamentary questions

Health Services: Weather

29 July 2024 | UIN 628

Asked by: Rachael Maskell

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, when he plans to commence preparations for winter planning; and if he will make it his policy to prioritise funding for increased levels of care in the community in those plans.

Answering member: Karin Smyth | Department of Health and Social Care

Guidance on winter planning for health and care services is expected to be issued by the summer recess, building on NHS England's 2024/25 operational planning guidance published in April 2024.

The Government has been clear that as part of the future reforms of the National Health Service, we must increasingly shift from a model geared towards late diagnosis and treatment, to one where the NHS focuses on prevention, and where more services are delivered in local communities.

Primary Health Care: Pensioners

8 October 2024 | UIN 5821

Asked by: Mary Kelly Foy

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what steps he is taking to ensure the adequacy of primary care provision for pensioners in (a) City of Durham constituency and (b) County Durham in winter 2024-25.

Answering member: Stephen Kinnock | Department of Health and Social Care

The Government cares about pensioners and access to primary care services. We know that patients nationally and in Durham are struggling to access their general practitioner (GP), and that this can be worsened throughout the winter period when demand is higher. We have committed to restoring the front door of the National Health Service by shifting the focus of the NHS out of hospitals and into the community. We know when patients aren't able to get a GP appointment, they end up in accident and emergency, which is

worse for the patient, more expensive for the taxpayer, and creates additional winter pressures.

Durham sits within the NHS North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (ICB), where the percentage of appointments delivered within two weeks of booking is 1.7% lower than the national average. To address this, we will increase the proportion of funding for primary care, starting with a commitment to recruit over 1,000 newly qualified GPs through an £82 million boost to the Additional Roles Reimbursement Scheme. This will increase the number of appointments delivered in GPs, secure the future pipeline of GPs, and take pressure off those currently working in the system.

The Government will trial new neighbourhood health centres to bring community health services together under one roof. We will also bring back the family doctor, by incentivising GPs to see the same patient, so ongoing or complex conditions are dealt with effectively. In doing so, we will improve continuity of care, which is associated with better health outcomes and fewer accident and emergency attendances.

Health Education: Communication

7 October 2024 | UIN 5163

Asked by: Tom Hayes

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, if he will launch a national public communications campaign ahead of winter 2024-25 on how to stay well including advice on (a) vaccinations for (i) flu and (ii) coronavirus, (b) keeping warm and (c) contacting relevant services.

Answering member: Andrew Gwynne | Department of Health and Social Care

This year's national communications campaign to support the uptake of essential winter vaccinations, including influenza and COVID-19, launched on 23 September 2024, and will run throughout the autumn and winter. The campaign, called Get Winter Strong, will particularly target eligible cohorts where uptake has historically been lower, and will involve a range of national media engagement activities, paid marketing, social media, and stakeholder engagement.

There is also a comprehensive range of information leaflets, promotional materials, and other resources to inform members of the public and health care professionals, to raise awareness of the programmes, and support decisions in relation to consent. Further information is available at the following link:

<https://www.healthpublications.gov.uk/Home.html>

These cover all of the vaccination programmes, including childhood programmes, flu, COVID-19, and vaccines for older people, specifically pneumococcal, respiratory syncytial virus, and shingles. These resources are co-branded with the National Health Service and include translations into a range of languages and accessible formats, for instance braille, British Sign Language videos, large print, and audio.

In addition, NHS England has now published the Winter and H2 Priorities for the NHS letter. This is available at the following link:

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/winter-and-h2-priorities/>

A national press release has also been issued, and is available at the following link:

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/2024/09/nhs-announces-plans-to-prepare-for-busy-winter-period/>

Winter Fuel Payment: Health Services

30 September 2024 | UIN 4397

Asked by: Dr Caroline Johnson

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, if he will make an assessment with Cabinet colleagues of the potential impact of the proposed changes to the eligibility criteria for the Winter Fuel Payment on (a) the number of (i) acute admissions to hospital, (ii) patients attending emergency departments, (iii) elderly people (A) with pneumonia, (B) requiring antibiotics and (C) GP appointments, (b) the risk of death in elderly people, (c) the number of deaths and (d) NHS expenditure.

Answering member: Andrew Gwynne | Department of Health and Social Care

The Government is committed to a preventative approach to the public's health. Keeping people warm and well at home, and improving the quality of new and existing homes, will play an essential part in enabling people to live longer, healthier lives, and reducing pressures on the National Health Service.

In deciding on Winter Fuel Payment eligibility, the Government had regard to the equality analysis, in line with the Public Sector Equality Duty requirements. The equality analysis was published on 13 September 2024, and is available at the following link:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/responses-to-freedom-of-information-requests-on-equality-impact-assessments-produced-for-targeting-winter-fuel-payment/dwp-freedom-of-information-response>

The NHS is preparing for coming winter pressures as it does each year, and there will be an absolute focus on minimising long waiting times in accident and emergency and supporting patient safety.

We will continue to stand behind vulnerable households this winter. Support includes delivering the £150 Warm Home Discount for low-income households from October, extending the Household Support Fund with £421 million, to ensure local authorities can support vulnerable people and families, and ensuring around 1.3 million households in England and Wales will continue to receive up to £300 in Winter Fuel Payments. Through our commitment to protect the triple lock, over 12 million pensioners will benefit, with many expected to see their State Pension increase by more than £1,000 over the next five years.

The fuel poverty strategy for England, Sustainable warmth: protecting vulnerable households in England, was published in February 2021. The 2021 strategy is currently under review. The Department of Health and Social Care works closely with the Department for Energy and Net Zero to ensure that fuel poor and health vulnerable households are supported.

Vaccination

24 July 2024 | UIN 629

Asked by: Rachael Maskell

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what steps he plans to take to (a) review take up levels of vaccinations and (b) raise awareness of the potential benefits of vaccinations (i) in childhood and (ii) for tackling (A) flu and (B) covid-19.

Answering member: Andrew Gwynne | Department of Health and Social Care

The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) monitors and reviews vaccination coverage, including the assessment of barriers that reduce the uptake of vaccination, for all routine immunisation programmes in England.

To raise awareness of vaccination benefits, the Government provides information in multiple languages and accessible formats, runs e-learning programmes, provides training for healthcare professionals, and carries out national marketing campaigns.

Working with the Department and NHS England, the UKHSA runs national marketing campaigns to encourage greater uptake of childhood immunisations. The next campaign will start at the end of August 2024, and will run for six weeks.

During autumn and winter, a national communication campaign for winter vaccines, including flu and COVID-19, will target those in eligible cohorts, to ensure that they are aware of the benefit of having their vaccines.

2.2

Debates

[NHS: Winter Pressures](#)

23 January 2024 | House of Commons | 744 cc135-136

[NHS Winter Update](#)

8 January 2024 | House of Commons | 743 cc47-64

[Winter Pressure on NHS Services](#)

5 December 2023 | House of Commons | 742 cc192-193

2.3

Written statements

[10 Year Health Plan: Building a health service fit for the future](#)

21 October 2024 | HCWS147

[Respiratory Syncytial Virus Immunisation Programmes](#)

18 July 2024 | HCWS7

[Preparing the NHS and Social Care System for Winter](#)

14 September 2023 | HCWS1027

3

Press and stakeholder material

The following is a selection of news and media articles relevant to this debate.

Please note: the Library is not responsible for either the views or the accuracy of external content.

United Kingdom and Great Britain

[Vital actions to minimise pressure on the NHS this winter](#)

British Medical Association

18 September 2024

[The impact of winter pressures on different population groups in Great Britain: 18 October 2023 to 1 January 2024](#)

The Office for National Statistics

29 January 2024

England

[How much more money does the NHS need?](#)

The Nuffield Trust

25 October 2024

[What would the norovirus vaccines mean for NHS pressure and wait times?](#)

The Independent

24 October 2024

[Health leaders recognise Lord Darzi's diagnosis of issues facing the NHS](#)

NHS Confederation

12 September 2024

[What's going on with A&E waiting times?](#)

The King's Fund

12 July 2024

[The NHS crisis - decades in the making](#)

BBC News

7 January 2023

Scotland

[RCEM responds to Scotland's Health and Social Care Winter Preparedness Plan](#)

Royal College of Emergency Medicine

25 September 2024

[NHS Scotland winter preparedness plan launches earlier than ever before](#)

National Health Executive

25 September 2024

[Another winter crisis? Five key markers for NHS performance](#)

The Herald Scotland

25 September 2024

['The indignity of corridor care': How Scotland's NHS 'perma-crisis' must be fixed to avoid worst winter yet](#)

The Scotsman

24 September 2024

Northern Ireland

[Long-term Northern Ireland funding plan needed to fix public services, MPs say](#)

The Standard

24 October 2024

[Northern Ireland's emergency departments facing 'disastrous winter'](#)

The Irish News

24 October 2024

[Stormont 'must act now to avoid disastrous winter for patients'](#)

Belfast Telegraph

24 October 2024

[Winter vaccination programme opens in Northern Ireland as Public Health Agency issues flu and Covid warning](#)

Belfast Live

3 October 2024

Wales

[Health secretary sets out plans to ready Welsh NHS for 'significant' winter pressures](#)

Herald Wales

September 2024

[NHS Wales set for 'significant strain' this winter](#)

Nation Cymru

25 September 2024

[Welsh Government's plan to tackle the longest waits on the NHS](#)

Wales Online

24 October 2024

4 Press releases and government publications

4.1 Press releases

[Winter vaccinations and winter health](#)

NHS

16 November 2022

England

[Winter and H2 priorities](#)

NHS England

16 September 2024

[NHS announces plans to prepare for busy winter period](#)

NHS England

16 September 2024

[Landmark moment as NHS kicks off first ever RSV jab rollout](#)

NHS England

2 September 2024

[Millions to get protected ahead of winter in NHS vaccine rollout](#)

NHS England

15 August 2024

Wales

[Public Health Wales Winter Planning Update 2024/25](#) (PDF)

Public Health Wales

16 September 2024

[Flu vaccine and COVID-19 Autumn vaccine](#)

Public Health Wales

[Winter health: How we can all make a difference](#)

Public Health Wales

7 October 2024

Scotland

[Scottish Vaccine Update](#)

Public Health Scotland

2 September 2024

[Viral respiratory diseases \(including influenza and COVID-19\) in Scotland surveillance report](#)

Public Health Scotland
24 October 2024

[PHS adverse weather and health plan 2024-2027](#)

Public Health Scotland
22 July 2024

Northern Ireland

[Don't let your protection fade this winter](#)

Public Health Agency
3 October 2024

[COVID-19 vaccine](#)

NI Direct

4.2

Government publications

[Who's eligible for the 2024 COVID-19 vaccine, or 'Autumn Booster'?](#)

UK Health Security Agency
2 August 2024

[How we monitor flu and other respiratory viruses each winter](#)

UK Health Security Agency
8 October 2024

England

[Adult social care winter letter 2024 to 2025](#)

Department of Health and Social Care
17 September 2024

[Government to meet health experts to prepare NHS for winter](#)

Department of Health and Social Care
13 September 2023

Wales

[Winter respiratory vaccination programme 2024 to 2025](#)

Welsh Government
2 August 2024

[Winter respiratory framework 2024 to 2025](#)

Welsh Government
20 September 2024

Scotland

[Health and social care: winter preparedness plan 2024 to 2025](#)

Scottish Government

24 September 2024

Northern Ireland

[DoH underlines scale of winter pressures](#)

Department of Health (Northern Ireland)

13 December 2023

5 Further reading

5.1 House of Commons Library

- [Lord Darzi's Independent Investigation into NHS Performance](#), 1 October 2024
- [Capacity pressures in health and social care in England](#), 16 July 2024
- [NHS key statistics: England](#), 16 July 2024
- [The NHS workforce in England](#), 29 February 2024
- [Delayed hospital discharges and adult social care](#), 9 February 2023

5.2 House of Lords Library

- [The 75th anniversary of the NHS: How is it doing?](#), 23 November 2023
- [NHS in England: Current performance and innovation](#), 8 June 2023

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