

Our manifesto for the 2021 Senedd Election



About the BGS

The British Geriatrics Society (BGS) is the membership association for professionals specialising in the healthcare of older people across the UK. Founded in 1947, we now have over 4,000 members, including nearly 200 in Wales. We are the only society in the UK offering specialist expertise in the wide range of healthcare needs of older people.

Older people are the main users of health and social care services and have high mortality rates, different patterns of disease presentation, slower response to treatment and requirements for social support that call for specialist medical skills. Geriatricians, nurses, GPs, old age psychiatrists, allied healthcare professionals and researchers provide high quality care for older people as part of a multidisciplinary team during acute illness, chronic illness, rehabilitation and at the end of life, both in hospital and community settings.

Context

This election comes at an extraordinary time for the health service and for Wales. The COVID-19 pandemic has been devastating for the entire nation and even more so for older people. 90% of deaths involving COVID-19 have occurred in people over the age of 65 and the virus has been particularly overwhelming in care homes. On a more positive note, vaccines for COVID-19 have been developed very quickly and are being rolled out across the country, bringing hope that the worst of the pandemic is over.

The impact of the pandemic will however be longer lasting, with large numbers of people suffering the long-term effects of COVID and probably even larger numbers of older people who will have deconditioned as a result of lockdown or will be presenting with illnesses in later stages than otherwise would be expected. The pressure on the health and social care system is likely to be significant over the coming months and years.

The incoming Welsh Government has an opportunity to build back better and to ensure that the legacy of the pandemic in Wales is an improved health and social care service and a Wales that is the best place in the world in which to grow old.

Political parties wishing to achieve this should prioritise the following areas:

1

Prioritise the reform of social care

As people live longer and more independently, pressures on Wales' social care system will become ever greater. The long-lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will inevitably place even more pressure on the social care system.

The current Government's recent White Paper, *Rebalancing care and support*,¹ acknowledges that the social care system is overly complicated, the market does not work to the benefit of the people receiving social care services, and focuses instead on price rather than delivering value for those who use the system. The current Government has consulted on proposals to reform the social care system, implementing a simpler system focused more on delivering quality rather than on price.

The social care needs of older people in Wales will continue to grow over the coming years and it is vital that the new Government continues to prioritise reform to social care.

2

Ensure older people are central to COVID recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit the whole of society in a way that we could never have imagined and the impact has been particularly pronounced in older people. The vast majority of deaths from COVID-19 have been in those aged over 65. As we move out of the pandemic, there will be a need to provide additional support to those affected by COVID-19. This will include people who have had COVID-19 and recovered but require ongoing support, those who have experienced deconditioning due to decreased physical and mental activity during lockdown and those who are bereaved and are now experiencing loneliness and social isolation. The incoming Welsh Government will need to consider how these people are supported in the coming months and years. We urge the incoming Government to prioritise older people as the group most likely to be affected by these COVID after-effects.

3

A refreshed and sustainable health and social care workforce

Most health and social care professionals work with older people more than any other population group. Care for older people is an area where true multi-professional working is essential. There is clear evidence showing better outcomes where geriatricians, nurses, GPs, therapists, pharmacists, social workers and other health and care professionals work together, and with older people and their families. It is therefore essential that we have more specialists in the care of older people and that generalists have training to enable them to deliver the right care for our ageing population.

The NHS and social care workforce has been under-funded and under-resourced for many years and the COVID-19 pandemic has taken its toll on the workforce. Many health and social care professionals are exhausted and burned out. The incoming Government will need to prioritise the recovery of the workforce to prevent a mass exodus of NHS and social care staff.

It will also be important to enhance the education of healthcare professionals at the beginning of their careers. Trainees across the workforce have experienced a year of disruption and compromise to their training and it will be important to restore training as soon as possible to ensure that the next generation of healthcare staff are encouraged to continue in their chosen specialities.

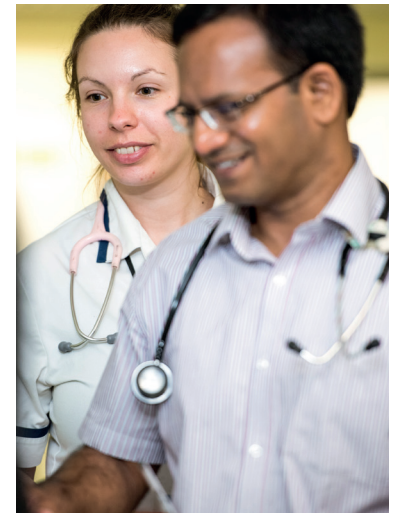


4

Use of digital technology in healthcare

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way that healthcare has been delivered with an increasing focus on digital technology. Digital technology has for many people been a lifesaver during the pandemic, enabling people to stay in touch and connect at a time when they could not see their families face to face. The delivery of healthcare during the pandemic has also been helpful for many, with older people able to see healthcare professionals without leaving their homes. However, while many older people are digitally literate, many are not and can only access digital healthcare services with support from a family member or carer. While digital healthcare is a useful option to retain as we emerge from the pandemic, it is important to ensure that such older people are not left behind and to promote technology to make Wales a dementia friendly society.

Older people must be supported to access healthcare digitally, including grants to purchase the necessary equipment and training to help them to learn to use devices. It will also be important to ensure that face to face appointments remain an option for those who do not wish to have appointments online or for whom this is not practical. The incoming Government should also work to ensure that more clinics are held in community hubs and local practices which are easier for older people to access.



5

Review of ward transfers

The system of acute and community hospitals throughout Wales means that many older people admitted to hospital will not remain in one hospital or one ward but will be moved during their treatment. Older people presenting at accident and emergency may be admitted to an acute hospital ward but later be transferred; this is not necessarily bad – indeed many patients report prefer to be in a smaller healthcare environment better tailored to their specific needs. However, BGS members report these transfers happening at inappropriate times, including late at night or in the very early hours of the morning. This has a detrimental effect on the older person's ability to recover from illness as well as impacting their mental health. Many older people have cognitive impairments and experience conditions such as delirium when they are in hospital. Movements between rooms, wards and hospitals can only serve to exacerbate these impairments and inevitably increase the total length of their hospital stay. We call on the incoming Welsh Government to commission a review of older people's hospital care with the aim of eliminating such transfers and ensure the right care is provided, in the right place at the right time.

An Age Friendly Wales

The current Government recently consulted on plans to create an Age Friendly Wales. This plan acknowledges that making our society a welcoming place for all older people involves more than health and social care. Housing, transport, planning and digital infrastructure are all essential aspects of making Wales a great place in which to grow old. Wales has an ageing population with the number of people aged over 65 projected to increase by 16.3% between 2018 and 2028. This increase is even larger in older age groups with the number of those aged over 75 projected to increase by 29.3% in the same time period.² It will be essential for the incoming Government to continue to work towards transforming Wales into an age friendly society in which older people are not only cared for but also valued for their active contribution to society.

References

1. Welsh Government, 2021: Rebalancing care and support: A consultation on improving social care arrangements and strengthening partnership working to better support people's well-being. Available at: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultations/2021-01/consutation-document.pdf> (accessed 9 April 2021)
2. Welsh Government, 2019: National population projections: 2018-based. Available at: <https://gov.wales/national-population-projections-2018-based#:~:text=The%20number%20of%20people%20aged,378%2C100%20between%202018%20and%202028.> (accessed 9 April 2021)



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