

# Our manifesto for the 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly 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 4,500 members including 120 in Northern Ireland. 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, pharmacists 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

It has been more than two years since the first case of COVID-19 was identified in Northern Ireland, marking the beginning of an incredibly challenging time for everyone who works in health and social care and for society more generally. Health and social care services have been required to go above and beyond the call of duty over the previous two years and unfortunately such enhanced levels of working are still necessary in order to cope with ongoing COVID-19 demands.

There can be no denying that older people have borne the brunt of the pandemic with 83.7% of the COVID-related deaths in Northern Ireland between March 2020 and October 2021 occurring in those aged over 70.<sup>1</sup> Older people were more susceptible to developing the virus and were more likely to die of it if they did catch it. Many older people who survived COVID will now be experiencing the long-term side effects of the virus. The pandemic has also impacted older people who did not get COVID but may have been less active during lockdowns and have deconditioned as a result. It is likely that there are a significant number of older people with frailty who did not have frailty before the pandemic or who now have moderate or severe frailty, having had mild frailty previously. The pandemic has also had a considerable impact on the mental health of many older people, with a significant number reporting that they feel less confident and independent than they did previously.

Aside from the pandemic, Northern Ireland's population continues to age. In 2019, 17% of the population of Northern Ireland was aged over 65. This figure is projected to rise to 26% by 2051.<sup>2</sup> While an ageing population is to be celebrated and cherished, it also means that we have more people with multiple complex conditions who require care and support.

The incoming Northern Ireland Executive has an opportunity now to ensure that the legacy of the pandemic is an improved health and social care service that meets the needs of its biggest user group – older people.

Political parties wishing to achieve this should prioritise the following:

# 1

## A refreshed and sustainable health and social care workforce

Most health and social care professionals will 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 across the multidisciplinary team and that generalists have the training they need to support our ageing population.

The health and social care workforce in Northern Ireland has been under pressure for several years with an 8.5% vacancy rate across the service in December 2021. The highest vacancy rates are seen in social care staff (12.2%) and registered nursing and midwifery (10.4%).<sup>3</sup> While the pandemic may have had some impact on vacancy rates, it is worth noting that these vacancy rates have changed very little over the last five years, suggesting that the health and social care workforce has been under-resourced for some time.

The pandemic will have had a significant impact on the mental and emotional wellbeing of the workforce with many healthcare professionals having faced excessive death among patients and colleagues and more pressure in their work than they ever could have trained for. In our *Through the Visor* reports, BGS members told us they were exhausted and that the pandemic had impacted their mental health and that of their families and loved ones.<sup>4</sup> Some of our members told us that they were looking for ways to reduce their clinical work including moving to less than fulltime working or taking on non-clinical roles or by leaving the profession entirely and taking early retirement.<sup>5</sup>

The incoming Northern Ireland Executive must prioritise ensuring that the health and social care workforce caring for older people is fully and sustainably resourced and that the workforce is given the support it needs to recover from the emotional and mental toll that the pandemic has taken.

## 2

### Ensure older people are central to COVID recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on all of society with older people among the worst-affected population groups. As already detailed, older people were more likely to contract the virus, more likely to die from it and more likely to be adversely affected by precautions such as lockdown.

As we hopefully move out of the pandemic, it is essential that older people are central to COVID recovery, particularly within the health service. There is an understandable focus at present on catching up on waiting lists for surgery and cancer treatment. However, it is important that older people with multiple long-term conditions are not neglected in the rush to address growing waiting lists. By prioritising this population, the need for more intensive treatment at a later stage of illness can be delayed or avoided, saving the health service money.

It will also be vital to ensure that the COVID recovery is not confined to the health sector alone and that the social care sector is equally supported to recover from the pandemic. Older people are often delayed in hospital for want of care packages to support them at home. This is not good for patients as they can decondition in hospital, inevitably needing more support once they are eventually discharged. However, older people being stuck in hospital when medically fit for discharge also affects the ability of the system to address waiting lists as hospitals do not have the space for those patients who have been waiting for treatment.

We urge the incoming Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that COVID recovery prioritises those who have been most affected by the pandemic.



## 3

### Bring care closer to home for older people

In recent years, there has been a move to provide more care for older people in or closer to their own homes. This includes some care previously only available in acute hospital settings such as intravenous fluids or oxygen being provided through Hospital at Home services. While not suitable for everyone in all circumstances, many older people prefer to be able to stay at home for their treatment, often leading to outcomes that are as good as those achieved in hospital. In addition, avoiding hospital admission means that older people are not put at risk of deconditioning and hospital acquired infections.

This model of providing hospital-level care to older people at home is in place in Northern Ireland, usually under the brand of Acute Care at Home. The incoming Northern Ireland Executive should expand support to these services, ensuring that older people have a viable, appropriate alternative to hospital admission wherever possible.

## 4

### Implementation of advance care planning process

The Department of Health recently consulted on the implementation of an advance care planning (ACP) policy across Northern Ireland.<sup>6</sup> This is, to our knowledge, the first time that a UK Government has taken steps to implement a national policy on advance care planning which is to be commended. ACP is a process that can help individuals plan for the end of their lives, including whether they would wish to accept certain treatments such as cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) if the situation arose.

We urge the incoming Northern Ireland Executive to continue with the excellent work already started in embedding ACP into health policy across Northern Ireland. As a society, we do not plan enough for our eventual deaths. While not a panacea, ACP can help people to better plan and communicate their wishes and this should be encouraged.

## 5

### Addressing digital exclusion in healthcare

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way that healthcare has been delivered with an increasing focus on digital technology. The increased use of digital technology has for many people been a lifesaver during the pandemic, enabling people to stay in touch and connect with others at a time when they have not been able to see people face to face. The virtual 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 older people are not left behind. Northern Ireland has the highest proportion of non-internet users in the UK at 14.2% and across the UK, 80% of those who do not access the internet are aged over 50.<sup>7</sup>

Older people must be supported to access healthcare digitally including through 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 medical appointments remain an option for those who do not wish to have appointments online or for whom this is not practical.

## Strengthening services that provide value to older people

As society and the health service recover from the pandemic, it will be important to remember that there are many services that provide significant value to older people that will not be captured in the rush to catch up on waiting lists. Many services such as day centres and rapid access falls clinics have been stopped or reduced during the pandemic and have not yet been restarted, despite the clear benefit that they provide to older people and their carers. There is also a need for reforms to stroke services to be progressed with accuracy and urgency to meet the whole population need.

We encourage the incoming Northern Ireland Executive to consider the holistic needs of the ageing population when planning for COVID recovery and ensure that the focus is not solely on surgical waiting lists. Services that were stopped during the pandemic should be restarted as soon as possible to ensure that older people get the best possible care and support.

### References

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