



## Impact of reported NHS Pressures on older people's access to health services

**This briefing paper shares key findings relating to older people's views and experiences of health services in Wales, captured as part of a research survey undertaken by the Commissioner during March 2023.**

### Background

The NHS provides essential treatment and services for older people in Wales, many of whom experience poor health, as evidenced by the fact that healthy life expectancy is as low as 59 in some places and that two-thirds of people aged 65+ report living with a longstanding illness.<sup>1</sup>

Easy, timely access to the NHS is therefore important for many older people, particularly given the impact that delays in accessing services can have on a range of factors such as quality of life, deterioration of conditions and morbidity.<sup>2</sup>

### Pressures on NHS Services

Already under significant pressures as a result of the pandemic, the NHS in Wales faced further 'unprecedented'<sup>3</sup> challenges during the winter, and was described by the Welsh NHS Confederation as being 'on a knife edge' in terms of its ability to cope due to the impact of covid and flu, as well as levels of sickness amongst staff.<sup>4</sup>

This unfortunately meant a number of issues for patients, including cancelled appointments, long waits for ambulances, bed shortages and delays in seeing medical professionals. Pressures also led to one health board declaring a critical incident during this period, as well as frequent messages from health boards that patients should only seek treatment for urgent or life-threatening illnesses and injuries.

The Commissioner was concerned that these widely reported issues might be deterring older people from seeking treatment, and used part of a research survey to examine how NHS pressures were affecting people's decisions to access key health services.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://olderpeople.wales/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Understanding-Wales-ageing-population-5.4.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/long-reads/waiting-for-care>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-64126632>

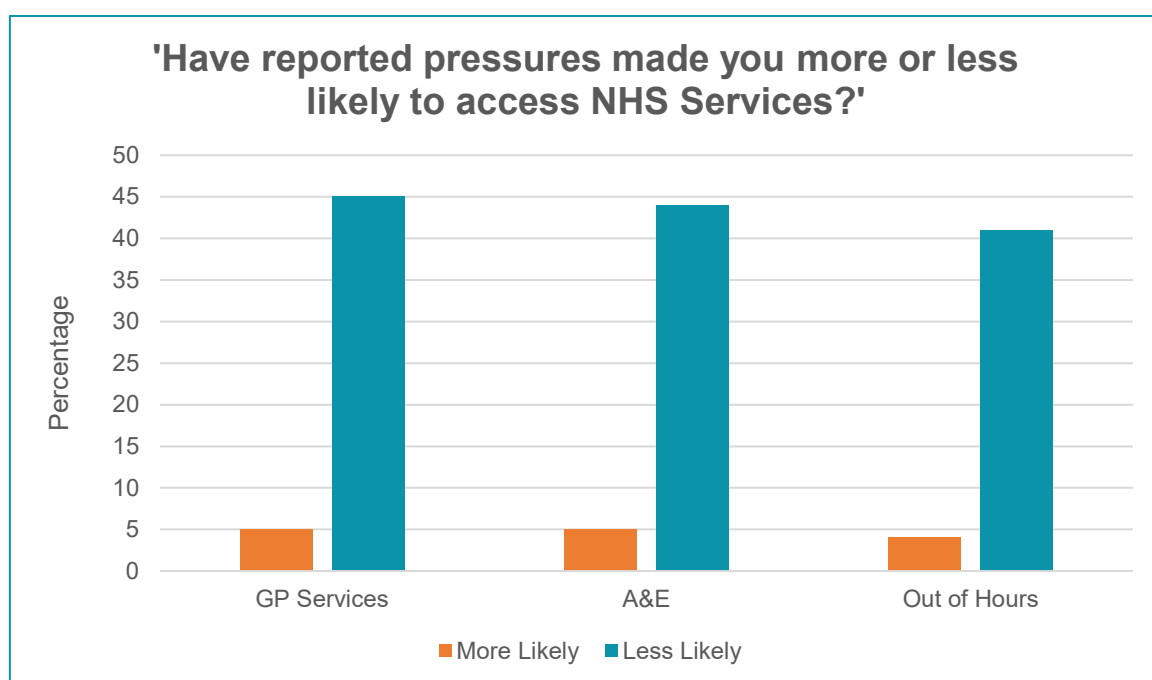
<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-64151141>

## Research Survey Findings

The Commissioner's research survey involved 503 telephone interviews with a representative sample of the Welsh population aged 60+, which were conducted between 28 February and 17 March 2023.

Within the survey, the Commissioner asked a series of questions about how the reported pressures on the NHS might be impacting upon older people's decision to access services, covering GP services and A&E, as well as wider services such as dentistry and optometry.

The findings show that over 40% of the older people surveyed said they were less likely to visit A&E, try to get a GP appointment, or contact an out of hours GP service as a result of reported pressures.



This is concerning as a significant number of older people may not be seeking medical help when they need it, even in potentially serious cases where a visit to A&E might be required.

If older people are being put off seeking necessary medical help, they could be putting their health at risk, whether during a moment of crisis, or in the longer term.

The percentage of people less likely to access wider health services was less pronounced, although it is important to note that around 1 in 3 older people said they were less likely to access dental treatment, while 1 in 4 said they were less likely to contact the NHS 111 service, which provides information and support via telephone.

The Commissioner recognises that staff across the NHS have been working incredibly hard to deal with a wide range of pressures during the winter months, but it is crucial that older people are not discouraged from accessing the help and support they need from the NHS.

## Action Required

The Commissioner has shared her findings and concerns with the Health Minister, Eluned Morgan MS, and has called for the Welsh Government to work with health boards to reach out to older people to provide assurance that NHS services are open, accessible, and that people should contact them if they have concerns about their health.

The Commissioner wants any planned communications, whether by letter or digital, to emphasise these messages, something that could be supported through further phases of the 'Help us to help you' campaign.

The Commissioner is also calling on the Welsh Government to set expectations of health boards in future meetings and discussions that encourage all partners to take steps to counteract prevailing narratives that may be deterring older people from seeking treatment.

In addition, the Commissioner has highlighted the importance of the Welsh Government considering how other messaging, such as the promotion of a 'digital first' approach to the NHS in Wales could potentially further deter some groups of older people from seeking help, given that around a third of older people do not use smart phones according to the findings of her survey (rising to 39% amongst people 70+), and around a third of people aged 75+ do not have access to the internet.<sup>5</sup>

Any moves towards further digitisation in healthcare therefore need to be accompanied by easy and equal access to non-digital options, as set out previously in statutory guidance issued to health boards and local authorities by the Commissioner.

Alongside calling for this action from the Welsh Government, the Commissioner is asking older people to get in touch with her office to share their experiences of accessing and using health services, particularly where NHS pressures may have delayed or prevented someone seeking or receiving treatment.

This will provide the Commissioner with additional information about the particular issues older people are facing to help identify any specific further action needed from the Welsh Government and health boards.

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://olderpeople.wales/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Understanding-Wales-ageing-population-5.4.pdf>

# Older People's Commissioner for Wales

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales is an independent voice and champion for older people throughout Wales.

The Commissioner is taking action to protect older people's rights, end ageism and age discrimination, stop the abuse of older people and enable everyone to age well.

**The Commissioner is working for a Wales where older people are valued, rights are upheld and no-one is left behind.**

## How to contact the Commissioner:

Older People's Commissioner for Wales  
Cambrian Buildings  
Mount Stuart Square  
Cardiff  
CF10 5FL

Phone: 03442 640 670

Email: [ask@olderpeople.wales](mailto:ask@olderpeople.wales)

Website: [www.olderpeople.wales](http://www.olderpeople.wales)

Twitter: @talkolderpeople