Social Care Survey 2025/26

Introduction

NHS Scotland is still recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, and as of June 2025, approximately 1 in 9 people in Scotland are on an NHS waiting list. The Royal College of Emergency Medicine also claimed more than 800 deaths in Scotland last year were linked to long A&E waits.

SHA members have emphasised the impact of inadequate social care on hospitals. The latest data shows that 720,119 days were spent in hospital by people who were delayed in their discharge. This is the highest annual figure reported since the current recording guidelines came into place. Audit Scotland has recently published a report highlighting how delays in discharging patients from hospital affect people's physical and mental health and make it harder to admit others to hospital. Delayed discharges are a symptom of wider pressures across health and social care in Scotland.

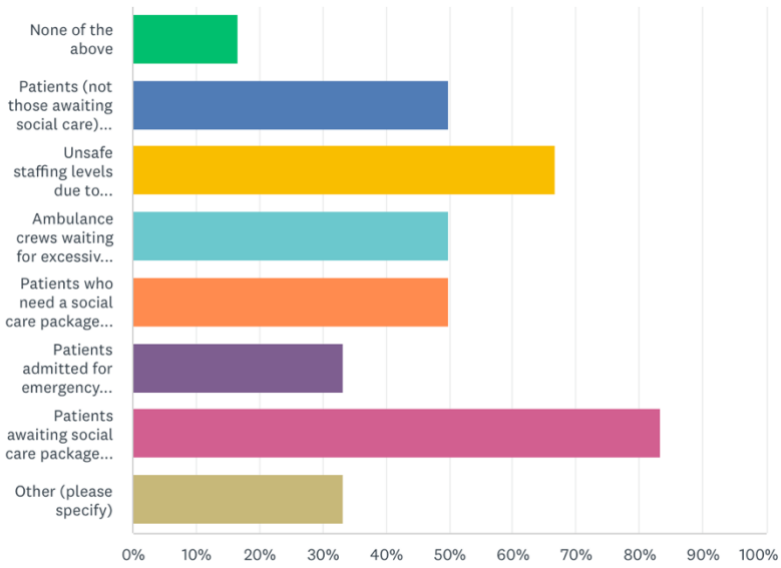
The delayed discharge statistics have remained largely unchanged for years. Members report that these delayed discharges compound the stress on NHS Scotland - causing longer waiting times for diagnosis and treatment, cancelled elective procedures, unsafe staffing levels, and pressure to discharge other patients too early. Ambulance staff say they are waiting at hospitals when they could be on the road, reducing response times.

To get a broader understanding, we asked members to complete a brief survey. This paper summarises the responses.

Survey responses

We started by asking respondents where they worked. Just over 50% worked in hospital settings. The remainder is evenly split between social care and other community settings, including the voluntary sector.

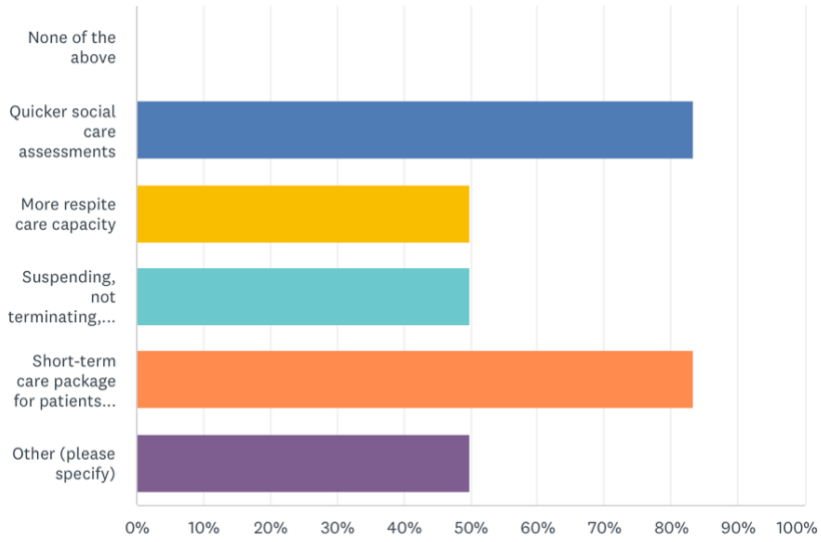
The policy action that would make the biggest difference to NHS waiting times was to expand social care to end delayed hospital discharges. This was supported by 83% of respondents. The weighted response still overwhelmingly favoured action on social care, followed by more primary care capacity. More hospital capacity was well behind the other two, with comments indicating that action on the other two would release hospital capacity.



In hospital settings, respondents reported most of the options we

described, with the most common being patients awaiting social care packages experiencing a discharge delay. Unsafe staffing levels and readmissions were also worryingly high. 50% had seen ambulance crews waiting for excessive periods, something evident to anyone attending A&E Departments. 50% had also experienced a less well-publicised issue: patients who need a social care package being admitted to hospital due to 'not coping at home'. This points to limited social care provision not only delaying discharge but also increasing the number of patients admitted to hospital. While less prevalent, the pressure on informal carers is also reflected in the responses.

In terms of social care interventions, respondents were equally split between quicker social care assessments and short-term care packages after a hospital stay to support their recovery. However, all the options had significant support, and they are not mutually exclusive.



Other actions noted by respondents included:
"Engage community services in delivering outsourced services mentioned above - lower cost than private companies and better personal services, which keep more elderly clients in their own homes. E.g. Also address hospital transport issues-many Third Sector organisations have high-quality quality fully accessible minibuses."
"Insufficient use of community and primary care by the secondary sector. Modern technology properly applied could resolve 'quality control out of hospital."

Conclusion

This survey confirms the concerns highlighted in the recent Audit Scotland report. It also supports the response to the Audit Scotland report from UNISON Scotland, the largest trade union in the sector. "UNISON has consistently called for sustained investment in social care and fair funding for social services alongside our NHS. We need properly resourced services and a fairly paid workforce who can coordinate the services we all rely on."

Our thanks to those busy workers who took the time to respond to this survey.

Dave Watson
SHA Scotland
12 January 2026