

# Wales 2026 Election Manifesto

Emergency Care must be there to support everyone in their moment of greatest need. However, in 2024, more than 118,000 patients waited 12 hours or longer in Emergency Departments (ED) across Wales. This is more than double the number in 2018 (47,601). More concerning, 24 hour waits in Wales are also now far from unusual. In 2024 alone, 44,472 patients waited 24 hours or more in an ED. Long waits are putting patients in more danger, with clinicians having to treat patients in inappropriate spaces such as corridors on a daily basis.

The crisis in emergency care must be addressed. Ahead of the 2026 Senedd elections, we ask all political parties to commit to:

## 1. Ending overcrowding in Emergency Departments

In every ED in Wales, patients are being made to endure long waits for admission, treatment or discharge. This poses a severe threat to patient safety. Due to a shortage of available inpatient beds, some of the sickest patients who need to be admitted are forced to wait long, often painful, hours for admission.

The most recent **RCEM crowding survey** in Wales found that cubicle space is dangerously full, with the average occupancy being at 176%. In each month of 2024, around 1,500 hospital beds were taken up by patients well enough to go home. Health boards work collaboratively across the system, including with social care services to speed up discharge and free up beds. Having social care capacity in the community as well as other supportive services is absolutely essential for speeding up discharges and improving flow through hospitals.

Ministerial Advisory Group guidance that ambulance handovers should be completed within 45 minutes (W45), has the potential to worsen the situation as more patients are pushed into already overcrowded EDs. We therefore urge the Welsh government to implement whole system solutions to prevent the impact of W45 being endured solely by EDs.

A recent **RCN report** highlighted overcrowding in shocking detail, with nurses in Wales stating that it was impossible to get vital equipment such as oxygen to patients due to the lack of space, and that it was hard to reach the patients to check on their condition.

In 2024, it was estimated that there were 936 excess deaths related to waits for admission of 12 hours or longer. This is a national scandal and must be addressed.

The effects of this overcrowding across Wales can be seen clearly in the worsening NHS performance data. If April 2021 (the month before the last Senedd election) is compared to April 2025, the percentage of patients who waited more than 12 hours has more than doubled (7.1% to 15.2%).

Crowding is an issue in all Health Boards in Wales – but there is a clear regional disparity which must be addressed. In one health board, 24.5% of patients endured waits of 12 hours or longer in December 2024, whereas another health board reported a figure of just 8.8% in the same month.

There needs to be a focus on improving flow through hospitals from presentation to discharge, ensuring that patients are not left in EDs for long periods of time. This not only requires more beds and staff but also sustained investment in social care and other discharge pathways, so that patients who are well enough to go home can be discharged.



## To end overcrowding, the next Welsh Government must:

1. Focus on eliminating 12 hour or longer waits in the ED.
2. Implement whole-system planning across all health boards to tackle overcrowding nationally, and to ensure new guidance doesn't place an increased burden on emergency care.
3. Increase spending on social care to improve patient flow.

## 2. Ensuring there are adequate staffing levels in Wales to protect patient safety

When emergency departments are understaffed, it adds avoidable pressure on staff, and means patients receive a much poorer standard of care than they should expect.

The most recent **RCEM Wales workforce census** revealed that there is 1 consultant for every 7784 patients - well below the **RCEM recommendation of 1 consultant for every 4000 patients**, and far lower than the consultant to patient ratio in Scotland, which has a ratio of 1 consultant for every 4692 patients. Having too few staff leads to longer waits for patients, and increases the pressure on clinicians, increasing the risk of medical errors and of burnout.

To ensure that there is a consistent and safe standard of care, we ask the Welsh government to significantly increase the number of consultant posts in line with RCEM recommendations. This will be extremely beneficial for emergency departments, as it will decrease their reliance on locums, and ensure that those finishing their training in Wales will get posts there too.

## To ensure adequate staffing levels in Wales, the government must:

1. Plan to increase the number of full-time equivalent consultant posts, with the aim of moving towards the RCEM recommended ratio of 1:4000.

## 3. Investing in digital infrastructure and greater data transparency

Data transparency requires health boards to accurately record their data. However, there are currently inconsistencies in the way that data is recorded and the way boards measure data varies. Uniquely in Wales, health boards use so-called "breach exemptions" to reduce the number of patients who are recorded as having waited 4 hours or longer in the emergency department. This gives the appearance that performance is better than it is in reality. These exemptions are applied inconsistently across all health boards, to the extent that they are meaningless. RCEM calls for the end of these breach exemptions, as it is an unnecessary use of administrative resources, and hides the true extent of the challenges facing our EDs.

The accuracy and publication of the data is also affected by the hardware and software itself. The information systems and software used in health boards across Wales lack interoperability, and some boards still rely on antiquated technologies, such as **fax machines and paper-based patient records**. The lack of connectivity makes it harder to do whole system planning, as many issues will only be known locally. Therefore, greater investment in digital infrastructure is needed so that there is consistent and accurate data from all health boards.



## To ensure better data transparency, the Welsh government must:

1. Provide sustained investment in IT systems and digital infrastructure.
2. Integrate all information systems in Wales to reduce administrative burden on staff, and to reduce clinical errors.
3. Commit to ending the use of breach exemptions.

## About us and our work

The Royal College of Emergency Medicine is the single authoritative body for Emergency Medicine in the UK. Emergency Medicine is the medical specialty which provides doctors and consultants to Accident and Emergency Departments (EDs) in the NHS in the UK and to other healthcare systems across the world. The Royal College has nearly 15,000 members, who are clinicians in Emergency Departments working in the health services in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Between them, they cared for nearly 20 million patients in 2024.

Most people do not plan to visit an ED, yet every single one of us will at some point. Whether for ourselves or a loved one, we all expect to be cared for in dignified and safe way. Our emergency care system provides a vital service, ready to care for us when we need it most. Please contact us on [policy@rcem.ac.uk](mailto:policy@rcem.ac.uk) if you want to know more about this manifesto.