



NICHS Covid Position Statement:

Development of a public facing Covid Assessment and Support Service

Introduction

The Covid pandemic has had a colossal impact on the health of the public in Northern Ireland and consequently on the public services including the health and social care sector. To date (end January 2022) over 3,000 deaths have been reported of people who had tested positive for Covid. Over 500,000 positive lab tests have been reported and nearly 16,000 people with Covid have spent time in hospital.¹

The total estimated costs of the COVID-19 response in NI, at 31 March 2021, is estimated at over £6.2 billion². The Department of Health estimates that its additional spend relating to Covid at 31 March 2021 is £1,062.8m. This has primarily related to 'front-line' spending on workforce, service delivery and Personal Protective Equipment. In July 2021 Health Minister Robin Swann formally opened a £10 million fund designed to assist charitable organisations offering support services to people with mental ill health.

In May 2021 the Finance Minister announced the allocation of an addition £316m of Covid funding³ including over £60m for Health.

“The £50.5 million resource allocation to Health includes provision to allow the Department to continue the roll out of the Covid 19 vaccination programme. £12m is being provided to help meet the additional costs faced within adult social care as a result of Covid. Funding is also being provided to meet a range of pressures across the Health Service as it continues to recover from the impact of the pandemic, including within Cancer services, Nursing and Midwifery, as well as Cardiology. The allocation includes £1.4 million to support a number of mental health interventions *and a further £1 million towards managing the long-term health effects of Covid on individuals.*”

To date the NI Executive response has rightly focused on tackling the immediate problems posed by the pandemic and Department of Health has focused on the hospital treatment of those affected and the vaccination of the public.

A focus is now required on the assessment and support of those who have experienced Covid.

¹ NI DOH dashboard 2 Feb 2022 <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/doh-db-010222.pdf>

² NI Audit Office <https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/sites/niao/files/media-files/Overview%20of%20the%20Northern%20Ireland%20Executive%27s%20Response%20to%20the%20COVID-19%20Pa...pdf>

³ <https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/news/murphy-allocates-ps316-million-covid-funding>



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Extensive need demands a substantial response.

Surveys suggest that the number of people in Northern Ireland experiencing Long Covidⁱ symptoms is between 20,000ⁱⁱ and 40,000ⁱⁱⁱ. Northern Ireland Chest Heart and Stroke believes it is essential that

1. A comprehensive assessment and support service is put in place.
2. The Assessment and Support Service should offer physical, cognitive, psychological and psychiatric assessments with the aim of providing consistent services for people with post-COVID syndrome ('Long COVID').
3. These services should support those who need them, irrespective of whether they were hospitalised and regardless of whether clinically diagnosed or by a SARS-CoV-2 test.
4. Services should have clear pathways to ensure referral into appropriate services which may include rehabilitation, psychological support, specialist investigation or treatment, or to social care support services or the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector. Prioritisation should be based on clinical need.

Strategy for Quality Rehabilitation

The development of Covid Assessment and Support Service must form part of a new Strategy for Quality Rehabilitation. Rehabilitation must be an integral part of the health and social care system.

We must expand and modernise rehabilitation to meet the scale of need, both Covid and non-Covid related, with focus on delivering it in the community and with the help of the community and voluntary sector in addition to the statutory sector.

Long term plans must be put in place to grow the multi-disciplinary rehabilitation workforce, with the appropriate skills and staff numbers.

All aspects of rehabilitation services must endeavour to measure the need and the impact of the services provided.

ⁱ . (The term 'Long COVID' includes both ongoing symptomatic COVID-19 (5-12 weeks after onset) and Post-COVID-19 Syndrome (12 weeks or more).

ⁱⁱ

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/bulletins/prevalenceofongoingsymptomsfollowingcoronaviruscovid19infectionintheuk/1april2021>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-research-shows-2-million-people-may-have-had-long-covid>



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NICHS Covid Support

We established the first community support service in Northern Ireland for people recovering from COVID-19. Our Breathing Better team, who operate our Respiratory Services, set up the COVID Recovery Service in July 2020, initially as a pilot.

The referral service was set up to help adult COVID survivors deal with the physical and psychological problems caused by the illness and to assist them in building up their lung and general health on the, sometimes long, road to recuperation. The service offers support with breathing, fatigue, anxiety and isolation, and sleep.

It is one of a number of services we have either created or adapted to ensure thousands of local people have the support they need to stay healthy and safe during the pandemic. Interest in the service has been overwhelming. The programme has been operating at full capacity - with a waiting list.

Those who have taken part in the Covid Recovery Service have rated the service highly – 95% rated it as excellent and 91% rated the support and advice they received as very good or excellent.

The service is largely funded by donations, although we have received £23,000 from the Public Health Agency for our Long COVID work.

NICHS Respiratory Services

The Covid Recovery Service is part of our long standing respiratory service offer which includes a Family Support Service, Breathing Better and Taking control.

These services have a proven track record of success. Evaluation of these services shows that in addition to improving the health – physical and mental - of individual service users, NICHS is contributing, if only modestly, to improving the health of the population and saving health service resources. Following engagement with NICHS service users report reduced visits to GP, reduced visits to hospitals and reduced emergency admissions.

The service costs over £250,000 a year to provide and, again, this is funded by NICHS through charitable donations.

NICHS is calling on government to reimburse the costs of providing help to Long Covid patients and others availing of respiratory services.