



## RQIA Publishes Its 'Winter Plan' 2025/26

The coming winter will present significant challenges and predictable additional pressures for the entire health and social care system in Northern Ireland. These pressures will be compounded by seasonal factors such as severe weather, difficult travel conditions, and winter illnesses. All of this will affect a system already under tremendous pressure and demand.

Our focus in RQIA over this winter is to support the wellbeing of our staff, ensure that people know how to contact us and support providers. Our Winter Plan outlines the practical steps we are taking to deliver on these.

While the additional pressures that will be faced this winter are predictable, it is important we do not accept this situation as our new 'normal'. We must not normalise the issues being faced by our acute hospitals and the consequences faced by our committed workforce across the spectrum of roles, clinical and support, and the impact for our service users and their families. Our Emergency Departments face unacceptable situations, our acute hospital wards are caring for patients whose needs could be met outside of hospital and our care home and domiciliary care staff are making difficult decisions every day when capacity cannot meet the demands for these vital services. The issues result in unacceptable conditions.

The growing practice of patients having to be cared for in unsuitable environments, known as corridor care, in our hospitals is now accommodated and reported on and we know that this can result in: compromised patient safety, dignity, and the overall quality of care. Corridor care should not be normalised. Where it is used it must be managed safely, with effective oversight, and consideration of the needs of patients. Ultimately we must collectively work towards eliminating the need for corridor care altogether. Patients waiting access to hospitals in our emergency ambulances must also not be normalised.

Amid these pressures, we must remember to *Be Human*. There is no situation where incivility, disrespect, or a lack of openness should prevail. RQIA encourages and supports everyone—across the health and social care system, and our service users, families, and communities—to embrace a culture that is 'Safe and Compassionate', 'Just and Open', and 'Continually Learning and Improving' as described in the '[Being Human](#)' framework. This is not about accepting unacceptable conditions within our services; it is about choosing our behaviours and changing our culture.

ENDS

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# RQIA: WINTER & SERVICE PRESSURES PLAN 2025/2026

## Objective:

*To prepare to deliver safely RQIA's regulation and improvement functions, and scheduled programme of inspections and reviews, during a period of predicted increased demand across health and social care services.*

**Staff Wellbeing:** to look after all who work in RQIA so that we can effectively do our work and to assist with the safety of service users and patients

**Support Providers:** to provide accessible guidance and support to service providers to help them maintain quality and safety for everyone

**Deliver a Planned Programme of Registered and HSC Service Inspections** using safe, robust approaches that adapt to service pressures and user needs.

**Ensure Effective Communications and Partnership:** optimise opportunities for working together to improve services and patient safety

1. **Promote Vaccination Uptake**  
Actively encourage staff to receive flu vaccination through internal communications and signposting to available clinics.
2. **Support Staff Winter Wellness**  
Host events and share resources to support staff health and wellbeing.
3. **Ensure PPE Availability**  
Confirm sources of PPE and maintain an adequate stock level to meet operational needs.
4. **Plan Annual Leave and Cover**  
Require all Teams to schedule annual leave in advance and ensure appropriate cover during peak winter periods.
5. **Secure Additional Staffing Capacity**  
Confirm availability of bank staff to provide additional capacity during periods of high demand or staff absence.
6. **Prepare for Travel Disruptions**  
Develop and issue communications regarding staff travel disruptions caused by severe weather or other winter-related issues.

1. **Update and Share Business Continuity Guidance**  
Refresh and circulate regional business continuity planning guidance to registered providers
2. **Promote Timely Statutory Notifications**  
Remind and support providers to submit statutory notifications promptly for outbreaks, staff shortages, or service interruptions.
3. **Ensure Staff Training Compliance**  
Encourage providers to review and complete essential staff training, including manual handling, infection prevention and control, and business continuity.
4. **Facilitate Shared Winter Planning**  
Contribute to and offer to co-host winter planning events and online opportunities with HSC bodies

1. **Refresh and Communicate the RQIA Business Continuity Plan**  
Review and, where necessary, update RQIA's business continuity plan to ensure resilience against staff shortages, premises access issues, or IT disruptions, ensuring the staff contact list is up to date. Share updates with all staff.
2. **Review Remote and Blended Inspection Methods**  
Review and refresh remote/blended inspection methodologies and ensure teams know how to access and implement them if required.
3. **Apply Risk-Based Inspection Planning**  
Maintain a risk-based inspection approach, prioritising services with high or emerging risks and deferring low-risk inspections where appropriate.

1. **Share Winter Plan with Partners and Stakeholders**  
Distribute the RQIA Winter Plan to key partners and stakeholders, inviting feedback on actions to maintain connectivity during periods of pressure or business continuity.
2. **Enhance Sector Communication and Engagement**  
Maintain clear, consistent communication with providers and stakeholders through multiple channels, ensuring timely updates, feedback opportunities, and shared learning during winter pressures.
3. **Promote HSC 'Big Discussion' Work streams**  
Encourage engagement in the development of the HSC work streams, including initiatives for frail elderly care, risk assessments, and early detection of deterioration.
4. **Promotion of the RQIA Guidance Team**  
RQIA will continue to promote its Guidance Team to ensure the public, whistleblowers and providers know how to contact us.