

# Chain Reaction

Managing patient flows across health  
and care systems and services

Executive Summary

June 2026

# Executive Summary

This paper examines the challenges, causes, consequences and solutions of poor patient flow within health and care systems. It draws together a range of evidence-based and innovative solutions to optimise more prudent, effective and efficient health and care delivery.

Patient flow refers ***to the seamless movement of patients, resources, and information through care pathways to prioritise those with the greatest need and enhance outcomes and experiences.***

## Key Causes and Challenges

- **Lack of strategic oversight:** results in siloed approaches, ineffective system, workforce and service utilisation, waste and harm.
- **Underutilisation of patient engagement and self-care support:** leads to higher costs, faster disease progression, and increased multi-morbidity.
- **Demographic pressures and managing rising demand:** overburdens emergency and diagnostic services, increases waiting times and reduces patient satisfaction.
- **Inefficiencies and transport delays:** contributes to overcrowded emergency departments, slower ambulance response times, poorer patient care and outcomes.
- **Social and residential care limitations:** results in prolonged hospital stays, increased costs, high bed occupancy rates, and poorer patient outcomes.
- **Staff shortages:** leads to burnout, inefficiency, high turnover and costs.
- **Inappropriate and unnecessary (imprudent) interventions:** wastes resources, time, expertise, and compromises patient safety.

## Consequences

These challenges, further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and economic pressures, result in unsustainable systems and services unable to meet the needs of people now, let alone the future growing demands upon the system.

They exacerbate systemic inefficiencies, fragmented care, unwarranted variation and unintended consequences resulting in poorer outcomes for patients, staff, and the health and care system overall. Holistic, integrated and transformative solutions, working in partnership with people, professionals in all parts of the system, will be needed.

## Proposed Approaches and Solutions

A comprehensive approach combining tools from lean methodology with a systems thinking lens should enable an understanding of the main elements of system flow to reduce waiting times and blockages, improve patient safety, and use resources where they add most value.

### 1. Stemming the Flow:

- Health is a shared responsibility, extending beyond the NHS to include local government, workplaces and wider communities/community organisations. Addressing health literacy, prevention and early intervention can reduce unnecessary demand for clinical services. Effective communication strategies will be key to this.
- Services and support such as telemonitoring, self-management and other digital tools (e.g., Education for Patients Programme (EPP), and predictive risk tools) social prescribing, and community support networks can help individuals to better manage their own health and well-being, and reduce reliance on, and demand for, formal care services.

### 2. Directing the Flow:

- Communicating and using data effectively to help understand people's needs (including improving data-sharing across the system) to both design and target services most prudently and effectively (right care, place, time).
- Initiatives such as 'One-Stop Shops', Single Point of Contact and streamlined access to services, alongside effective communication, can reduce unnecessary hospital admissions and optimise resource use, ensuring that services are aligned with patient needs.
- Expanding integrated step-up and step-down intermediate care, rehabilitation and removing barriers to timely discharge.

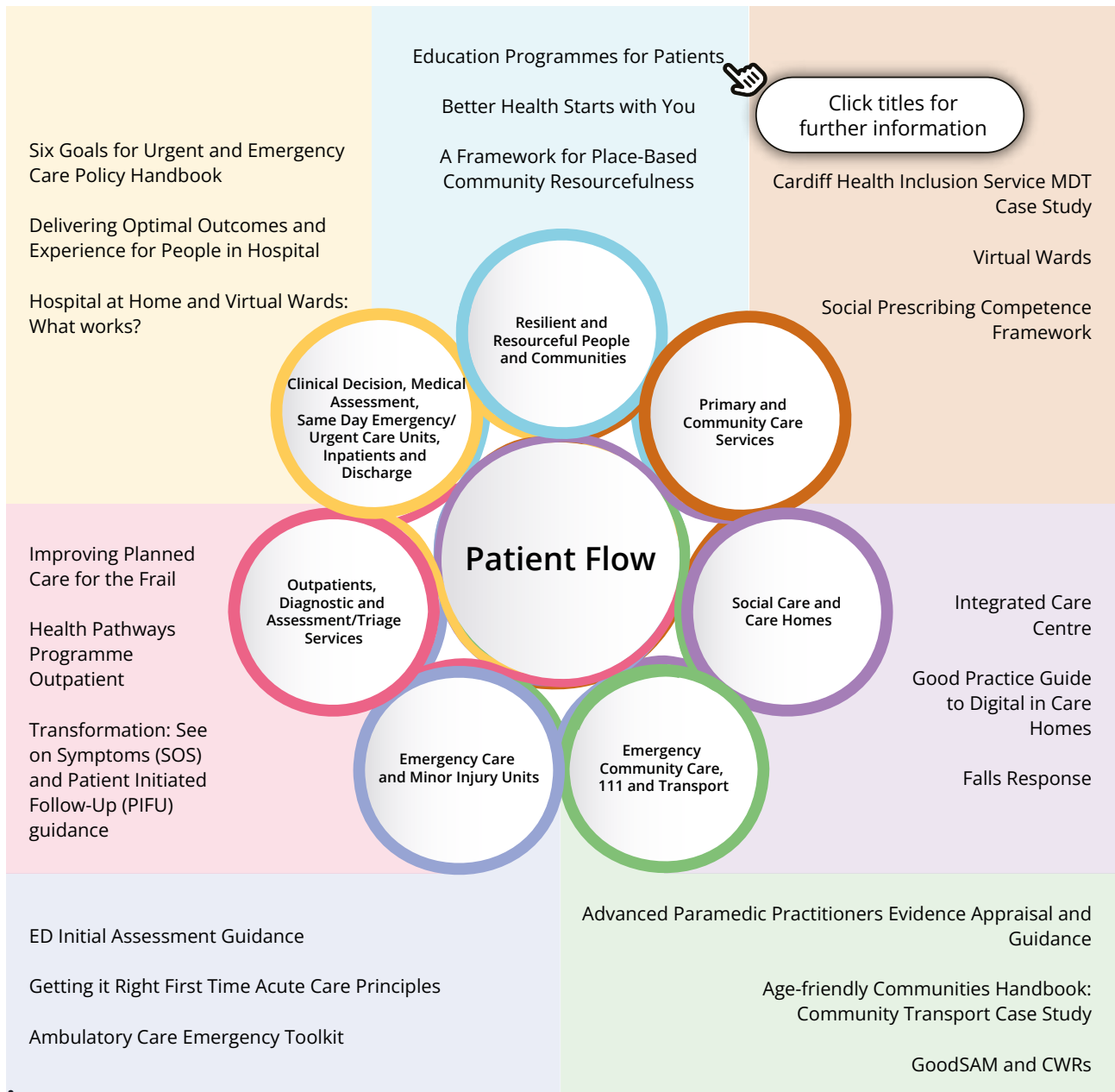
### 3. Informing the Flow:

- Patient voices are integral, providing the insight and lived experience of people to help co-design services to best meet their needs
- Real-time data and digital solutions are key to supporting seamless patient pathways and ensuring effective communication between care teams. This improves decision-making, patient outcomes and efficient service delivery.
- Interoperable IT systems that enable information sharing between care providers are essential for optimising service delivery and ensuring that patients access and receive timely and appropriate care.

### 4. Assuring the Flow:

- Continuous monitoring of system performance, key outcome measures, sharing information and addressing bottlenecks is essential for ensuring smooth patient flow. Targeted initiatives like Getting it Right First Time (GIRFT) and collaboration across sectors can improve patient outcomes.
- Innovations in financial and contracting models can incentivise better teamwork with shared budgets, collective accountability, and more efficient use of resources through alignment of planning, reducing pressure on services and improving patient outcomes.
- In summary, addressing these issues requires a transformation in whole-system, whole-person thinking, planning and delivery of services. This includes a shift towards prevention and a biopsychosocial model of health, more effective use of digital and data, and better whole-system coordination across the seven key components as outlined below.

**Figure 1** Seven key components with links to good practices, case studies and guidance



## Recommendations for Improving Patient Flow

Key stakeholders need to collaborate and align their efforts to ensure that health and care services are accessible, efficient, and responsive to the needs of the population through:

- **Flexible Health and Care Pathways:** enable seamless transitions, based on patients' health and social care needs within and between organisations, supported by

collaborative and multidisciplinary teams.

- **System and Service Integration:** develop holistic strategies that align patient needs and (local and high-level) system or service goals through real-time data analysis and predictive modelling.
- **Prudent and Innovative Use of Resources:** optimise resource utilisation, including patient involvement, other local assets and place-based care to improve equity and accessibility.
- **Synchronised Monitoring and Delivery:** enhance transparency, coordination, and long-term holistic planning to move beyond reactive, fragmented care to enabling outcomes for people.

## Future Considerations

Prudent and sustainable solutions require moving away from siloed and set approaches toward integrated, data-driven, patient focused systems and services.

Partnership and collaboration, shared accountability, and a focus on preventing unnecessary interventions and delays are essential to ensure prudent, effective and equitable patient flow.

This paper highlights the interdependencies of all parts of the system and the impact of one upon the other. It reinforces the urgency for whole-system planning and transformation built around patient needs. By connecting every part of care, we can reduce inefficiencies, improve outcomes and better meet the evolving needs of people now and in the future

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