

# One in 16 Northern Ireland people on hospital waiting list for year... in England it's one in 48,524

Co-author: Deirdre Heenan

By Gillian Halliday

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The shocking extent of Northern Ireland's waiting list crisis has been laid bare in a report that warns patients are 3,000 times more likely to wait over a year for treatment than their counterparts in England.

One in 16 people here is on waiting lists for 12 months or more, compared to one in 48,524 in England.

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The stark figure, which has been branded a scandal, is detailed in a study published today by the Nuffield Trust, an independent health think-tank,

It covers all planned inpatient and outpatient care here.

Co-authored by Ulster University's Professor Deirdre Heenan, the report cites the ongoing political deadlock at Stormont and a top-down approach as two key factors "frustrating efforts"

to improve waiting lists, which are already the worst in the UK.

Professor Heenan said 120,000 people here are currently waiting for more than a year for treatment.

"The equivalent of one person in five is on a waiting list in Northern Ireland," she explained.

"A citizen of Northern Ireland is more than 3,000 times as likely as a citizen of England to have been waiting more than a year for healthcare.

"How bad does it have to get before urgent action is taken?"

To highlight the disparity between the two regions, Prof Heenan pointed to an area of England which has a slightly larger population than here, but drastically shorter waiting times.

"Merseyside and Wirral has a population of two million and has 10 people on its waiting lists for more than a year," she said.

"The equivalent here - where there is a population of 1.8m - is 120,000.

"If that doesn't stop people in their tracks, I don't know what will."

Professor Heenan attributed the difference to a refusal by health trusts across the Irish Sea to accept patients languishing on waiting lists.

"In England there is a zero tolerance for someone waiting on a list for more than a year, people there would be held accountable," she said.

The report - Change or Collapse: Lessons from the drive to reform health and social care in Northern Ireland - is based on interviews with health service leaders, outside experts and clinicians.

It acknowledges that although the Civil Service is doing its best to provide leadership in difficult times, the collapse of power-sharing is "exacerbating already chronic problems". It also finds that historical failings in workforce planning for the health service here are still prevalent, resulting in a shortage of important staff groups and a costly reliance on temporary workers.

Professor Heenan, who co-wrote the report with Mark Dayan, a Nuffield Trust policy analyst, insisted that "inaction" here is an

important factor behind the disparity with the situation in England.

"The bigger issue for health and social care here, is how are we going to improve this," she continued.

"We can't stand by and wring our hands any longer... we need a long-term strategic plan to bring waiting lists down and sustain that."

She said increased funding would not reduce waiting lists alone, and "concerted effort" was needed.

Dr Alan Stout, a British Medical Association NI council member, said the report highlights the need for health service reform.

The Department of Health said that officials had repeatedly made clear that sustained and significant investment is required to address the waiting list backlog.

"The department cannot spend money it does not have. The causes of the waiting list backlog are clear," it said.

"Waiting times have been escalating since 2014, as growing pressures on the health budget meant limited funding was available to suppress waiting time growth.

"Alongside sustained investment, longer term transformation of services is required to prevent future backlogs.

"Transformation is under way and will undoubtedly involve some difficult decisions.

"Consolidating some hospital services in regional centres of excellence will improve capacity and help the health and social care system keep up with growing demand."

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