



The Royal College of Pathologists

Pathology: the science behind the cure

The Royal College of Pathologists' Priorities for Northern Ireland

August 2024

The Royal College of Pathologists (RCPATH) hosts Regional Councils, comprising specialty members, for the devolved nations. These Regional Councils provide professional leadership in their country and contribute at a national and UK level to the maintenance and development of pathology services and the quality of care that patients receive.

Pathologists are doctors and scientists who are experts in illness and disease. They use their expertise to support every aspect of healthcare from interpreting laboratory results to examining tissue and fluid for making diagnoses, to guiding treatment. They use cutting-edge genetic technologies to treat patients with life-threatening conditions. They play a critical role in education and research and devise new treatments to fight infections and diseases like cancer and diabetes.

Pathologists are essential to diagnosis and treatment to improve patient care. The work of pathologists supports patients throughout their entire life. Without pathologists we cannot understand what is making a patient unwell. In this priorities document we look at the key challenges facing pathologists and call on the new government to address these areas.

Investing in workforce for patients

- We are aware that the Department of Health for Northern Ireland is proceeding with a portfolio of pathology service transformation to ensure that the HSC has the capacity to address the challenges faced and fully embrace future development opportunities to support even better diagnostic outcomes for patients in the years ahead. And that this pathology transformation portfolio is a key part of the agenda to deliver the world class health and

social care service aspired to in [‘Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together’](#). It is evident that there is a vision for the delivery of modern, sustainable, world-class Pathology services and suitable investment in the pathology workforce must be a key objective for this so that significant patient benefits can be achieved.

- The [New Decade, New Approach agreement](#) in 2020 committed a restored Executive to the reconfiguration of hospital provision “to deliver better patient outcomes, more stable services and sustainable staffing”. As pathology underpins the vast majority of patient pathways through primary and secondary care, transformation of HSC Pathology services is considered to be a key enabler for the delivery of this commitment.
- The previously published [Elective Care Framework – Restart, Recovery and Redesign](#) sets out the Department’s five year plan to reduce the backlog of patients currently waiting for assessment and treatment in the HSC and how the Department proposes to invest and transform services to meet population demands in the future. The Framework includes actions to support the Pathology Network in ensuring that HSC Pathology Services are equipped to support delivery across all relevant programmes, in line with the modernisation and transformation of HSC Pathology Services. This will require significant investment in pathology services.
- The Pathology Blueprint Programme will explore options for moving the management of laboratory services from each Trust into a single regional pathology management structure, along with the entirety of the Northern Ireland Blood Transfusion Services (NIBTS), and the functions of the NI Pathology Network.
- Safe and effective high-quality patient care relies on the right number of skilled health staff in the right places. Northern Ireland, along with other the other nations across the UK, has an excellent reputation for producing highly qualified Healthcare Scientist and Medical staff, based in hospital laboratories, who become leaders regionally and nationally in research, service development, clinical liaison, clinical care pathway development and improvement, policy development, quality improvement and patient safety initiatives.
- The previously published [NHS Elective Care Recovery Plan](#) (Feb 2022) highlights new service transformations that should be implemented to increase capacity to diagnose disease more efficiently, with faster treatment and improved access for patients. The pathology workforce is a crucial factor in the successful delivery of this plan. It is vital that investment is targeted at pathology services to alleviate workforce pressure and meet increased demand.
- The Northern Ireland strategic workforce review for pathology services (2024) has highlighted that a significant gap exists between the current pathology workforce and the projected staff and cost requirements across each pathology discipline to deliver a world class sustainable pathology service for NI. The review, conducted by the NI Pathology Network Board and Department of Health NI, concludes that urgent action is needed and investment required to ensure that current and future pathology services align to the wider transformation agenda. Furthermore, this review noted that effort is needed to promote and attract more staff into a career in pathology and to retain current staff, who often seek to practice in other regions/countries with better pay and conditions. These are important issues that must be addressed to safeguard a viable pathology workforce.



- Our members tell us that patients wait longer for a diagnosis in rural areas in Northern Ireland. It can be hard to recruit and retain doctors and nurses who are willing to work in smaller hospitals, which means health boards rely more heavily on agency staff to fill gaps in rotas. This has a knock-on effect on patient care, with patients travelling long distances.

The College's calls for the reformed executive:

- The College calls for increased investment in pathology services, particularly in the recruitment and training of pathologists and scientists. More funded training places are needed to help meet the rising demand for cancer diagnosis. Specialist laboratories in larger centres need further investment in specialist equipment with improved sample transport into these specialist labs.
- HSC pathology services need appropriately trained scientist and medical staff who become pathology leaders and who can provide guidance on how to transform pathology services to improve long-term resilience. Unfortunately, Pathology staffing numbers have not risen in line with demand and some pathology services are unable to recruit to vacant posts. The recruitment, training and retention of such staff must be a priority.

Parity of pay – In recent years pay for pathology staff in NI, along with other HSC staff, has continued to fall behind their counterparts in other UK regions. The pathology workforce in NI rarely has full parity of pay with other NHS regions, as any agreed pay deals for other parts of the UK take much longer to be implemented in NI. It was only in June 2024 that NI pathology staff were awarded the 2023-24 pay award. NHS England have already agreed the pay uplift for 2024-25 so yet again NI staff have lost parity and are behind all other nations. There is also a difference in trainee doctor pay which means that trainees may also go elsewhere. Trainees tend to take up consultant posts in the region in which they train, so lower pay is highly detrimental in the long term as well as the short term. This issue needs to be urgently addressed. We are losing highly skilled staff to Ireland, where the pay is much higher, as well as to other UK regions.

IT and infrastructure for better patient care

- Pathologists need IT for day-to-day work, including modern, functional laboratory information management systems (LIMS), voice-recognition support, electronic patient records and remote-working software for multidisciplinary teams. We applaud the current initiative to replace the ageing Laboratory Information Management System, but the supporting IT hardware in both laboratories and clinical settings remains under-powered and slow.
- The new regional LIMS project requires a fully integrated pathology OrderComms for primary and secondary care to increase patient safety and to realise the efficiency benefits of both LIMS and the new regional automated laboratory management service contract. Unfortunately, this was not included in the current LIMS scope but instead in the regional Encompass project, where there are current issues with full delivery. It is essential that there is adequate investment in pathology IT to allow successful implementation of this fully integrated service



for pathology test requesting for both primary and secondary care.

- New regional LIMS and Encompass, a system for electronic patient records, is now live in two Trusts (BHSCT and SET). 2024-26 will see the continued roll-out of these across all Trusts. Such IT updates and modernisation requires significant investment of laboratory staff time and increased workloads for an already over-stretched pathology service, as pre-implementation regional standardisation work streams and post-installation review of system capabilities and required fixes require pathology staff time and input.
- Digital pathology – the collection, management, sharing and interpretation of pathology information in a digital environment – will improve patient care and support the pathology workforce by making the diagnosis and monitoring of disease much more efficient. It will bring faster and easier access to expert opinion and advice, with the rapid referral of cases between pathology networks or between organisations.
- The roll-out of digital pathology would benefit patients in rural areas in Northern Ireland by enabling the rapid referral of cases between organisations or across pathology networks, enhancing access to expert advice and opinion on diagnoses.

The College's call for the reformed executive:

- Further capital investment is needed to fully roll out digital pathology so staff can work more efficiently and flexibly. The move to digital pathology needs to be completed and followed through with the right infrastructure. There needs to be a capital investment in improving the IT resource nationally and on individual clinicians' desks.

Staff Wellbeing

- A well workforce working in a caring and supportive environment is a more efficient, cohesive, safer workforce and is better able to serve the needs of patients.
- The impact of the pandemic was hard on laboratory staff, given the huge effort to deliver rapid implementation of COVID-19 related testing. Trainees, in particular, suffered from reduced training opportunities, redeployment and professional exam disruption.

The College's calls for the reformed executive:

- Ensure a maintained focus on the day-to-day and longer-term wellbeing of all staff.
- Commit at every level to building a new culture to help build sustainability and resilience. This will prioritise the physical and psychological safety of staff as core values within the NHS to build loyalty, productivity and retention.
- Provide additional support to trainees to ensure they can re-start their training and provide a much-needed complement to the future consultant workforce.



- Support the older workforce to enable an ongoing contribution to the NHS in the later stages of their career – such individuals will be a vital resource in the coming years.

Learning from the pandemic

- Workforce pressures were compounded by the pandemic. There were reductions in patients seeking help for general symptoms, including a huge decline in referrals from primary care and substantial delays in diagnosis due to interruption of some services. A recent UK study predicted that for four common types of cancer (breast, bowel, lung and oesophageal cancers), delays in diagnosis due to the COVID-19 pandemic will result in approximately 3,500 avoidable cancer deaths, equating to 60,000 years of life lost, reflecting the younger age profile of many cancer patients.²
- Many district general hospitals have been unable to fill microbiology posts over recent years, and workforce pressures are keenly felt. This is important as these members work on infection control and diagnostic testing. This will not be the last pandemic – capacity will always be needed for major incidents and disease outbreaks.
- It is also critical to have good stewardship of antibiotics, and clear leadership on vaccination and disease prevention. The College is ideally placed to contribute to this, as shown in the last year.
- Health screening programmes are vital to finding out if people are at higher risk of a health problem, so that early treatment can be offered or information given to help them make informed decisions.

The College's call for the reformed executive:

- The College calls for a minister in Stormont to be given specific responsibility for infection, antimicrobial resistance and stewardship and for prevention of infectious disease.

References

1. The Royal College of Pathologists. *Meeting pathology demand: Histopathology workforce census*. 2018. Available at: <https://www.rcpath.org/discover-pathology/news/college-report-finds-severe-staff-shortages-across-services-vital-to-cancer-diagnosis.html>
2. Maringe C, Spicer J, Morris M, Purushotham A, Nolte E, Sullivan R *et al*. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on cancer deaths due to delays in diagnosis in England, UK: a national, population-based, modelling study. *The Lancet Oncology*. 2020;21(8):1023–1034.



Contact details

This document was authored by Dr Gareth McKeeman, Chair of the Northern Ireland Regional Council and Janine Aldridge, Public Affairs Officer.

E: janine.aldridge@rcpath.org

T: 020 7451 6769

About the Royal College of Pathologists

The Royal College of Pathologists is a professional membership organisation with more than 11,000 fellows, affiliates and trainees. We are committed to setting and maintaining professional standards and promoting excellence in the teaching and practice of pathology for the benefit of patients.

Our members include medically and veterinary qualified pathologists and clinical scientists in 17 different specialties, including cellular pathology, haematology, clinical biochemistry, medical microbiology and veterinary pathology.

The College works with pathologists at every stage of their career. We set curricula, organise training and run exams, publish clinical guidelines and best practice recommendations, and provide continuing professional development. We engage a wide range of stakeholders to improve awareness and understanding of pathology and the vital role it plays in everybody's healthcare. Working with members, we run programmes to inspire the next generation to study science and join the profession.

