

Primary and Community Care

(England)

September 2024

Older people must be able to expect healthcare, close to home, that meets their needs and supports them to stay well. This includes timely, accessible and proactive GP services as well as community rehabilitation and joined-up support to prevent or recover from spells in hospital.

Primary care in England includes GP services, dentistry, pharmacy, and eye health, set up to keep people well and to respond to non-emergency health needs. Community care encompasses various specialist services including community nursing, allied health professionals, long-term condition management, palliative care, integrated services like falls prevention, and public health initiatives such as smoking cessation and sexual health services.

Around 90% of patient interaction with the NHS is with primary and community care. Older people struggle to access primary care, with 49% of those aged 50 and over being concerned about their ability to access their GPⁱ. Accessing community care is also a challenge, with 33% concerned about their ability to access services to help them stay well or recover, such as physiotherapy and occupational therapy.ⁱⁱ Access to rehabilitation services like these is also essential to good health outcomes, yet access is difficult and inequitable.ⁱⁱⁱ

Without these services, older people are at higher risk of needing hospital care that could have been avoided. In 2022/23, at minimum 575,000 hospital admissions of people over 65 should have been prevented with right care in the community^{iv}. Older people will then often end up staying in hospital longer than is clinically necessary, or need readmitting to acute care because they have not been supported to recover at home.

NHS England published a vision for *Transforming Primary Care* in 2014^v. The then Chief executive described how 'the future of the Health Service largely depends' on how well it serves older people. The 2019 NHS Long Term Plan made further commitments through its Ageing Well programme, yet the element relating to primary and community care has never been fully implemented^{vi}. This is consistent with an approach to the NHS that prioritises hospital care that has seen investment in both staff and funding in the acute sector far outpacing that experienced in primary care^{vii}.

In late 2023, NHS England published the framework *Proactive care: providing care and support for people living at home with moderate or severe frailty*^{viii}. This focuses on identifying, assessing and proactively planning care to keep older people safe and well at home. These principles must now be aggressively implemented by Integrated Care Boards and fully funded.

This framework, alongside wider transformation efforts, requires investment in the primary and community care workforce, as well as in premises and systems to enable co-location and cooperation. This must include social care and the voluntary and community sector. Investment in primary and community care has been shown to deliver significant benefits compared to

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focusing solely on acute care, supporting the idea that investing here not only improves health outcomes and patient satisfaction but also reduces overall healthcare costs and alleviates pressure on acute care services.

Public Policy Proposals

- NHS England, supported by Government, must oversee transformation in primary and community care services. This must be underpinned by:
 - financial and practical investment in primary care services and workforce;
 - a commitment to accessible GP appointments that includes non-Digital options for those digitally excluded;
 - improvements in data collection and sharing, including with voluntary and community sector partners; and
 - significant investment in estates to ensure GP practices and other community buildings are both fit for purpose and fit for the future.
- The Proactive Care Framework should be fully implemented across England and fully integrated with other core services such as *Urgent Community Response* and *Enhanced Health in Care Homes*.
- All GP practices must be equipped to deliver the electronic frailty index 2 (efi2) to better identify and support older people with frailty in their communities and to understand their longer-term needs.
- As a member of the Community Rehab Alliance, NHS England must support our call for the Right to Rehab, embedding community rehabilitation in the delivery of local services and enhancing the physical and mental health of older people at risk, or recovering from, sickness or injury.

Want to find out more?

Age UK has agreed policy positions on a wide range of public policy issues. Our policies cover money, health and care, housing and communities, and equalities issues. See <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/policy-positions/> for more information.

ⁱ Age UK 2024, It's a struggle to be seen. Results of Age UK's research into the experience of people aged 50 and over accessing health and social care services. Available at: [struggle-to-be-seen \(ageuk.org.uk\)](https://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/policy-positions/)

ⁱⁱ Age UK 2024, It's a struggle to be seen. Results of Age UK's research into the experience of people aged 50 and over accessing health and social care services. Available at: [struggle-to-be-seen \(ageuk.org.uk\)](https://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/policy-positions/)

ⁱⁱⁱ [Community rehabilitation \(csp.org.uk\)](https://www.csp.org.uk/)

^{iv} NHS Digital (2024). *Unplanned hospitalisation for chronic ambulatory care sensitive conditions; and Emergency admissions for acute conditions that should not usually require hospital admission*

^v DHSC/NHS England (2014). *Transforming Primary Care Safe, proactive, personalised care for those who need it most*

^{vi} NHS England (2019). *NHS Long Term Plan*

^{vii} Age UK (2024). *The State of Health and Care of Older People in England*

^{viii} [NHS England » Proactive care: providing care and support for people living at home with moderate or severe frailty](#)