

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON ACCESS TO CARE FOR PEOPLE WITH NEUROLOGICAL CONDITIONS IN IRELAND

The Neurological Alliance of Ireland, the national umbrella for over thirty neurological charities, commissioned research between August 2022 and February 2023 involving people with neurological conditions and family carers, service providers and health professionals from across Ireland. Overall, the research found evidence of a significant ongoing impact on access to neurological care services due to combination of service disruption due to COVID-19 and underinvestment pre- pandemic.

Key Findings

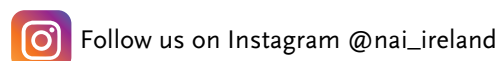
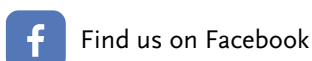
- A nationwide survey of nearly 200 people with neurological conditions and family carers found that nearly 50% of the family carers surveyed reported that access to a range of essential therapies such as physiotherapy, speech and language therapy and neuropsychology, had not returned to pre COVID-19 levels, while more than half reported that access to consultant neurology and nurse specialist services had not returned to normal.
- One in 5 people with a neurological condition had found it difficult to access an appointment with a consultant neurologist over the 12 months August 2021 to August 2022, rising to one in four among family carer respondents. 14% reported difficulty in accessing all services while one in ten respondents had resorted to purchasing services on a private basis because of the challenges in accessing care.
- More than one third of respondents were very concerned that they would not be able to access essential services over the next 12 months (September 2022 to Sept 2023) while nearly one in 5 family carers feared a deterioration in their family member's neurological condition due to a lack of access to services.
- Respondents self identifying as long COVID patients reported a critical lack of access to supports with 96% unable to access neurorehabilitation services.
- Interviews with clinicians working across neurological care services highlighted the lack of investment pre pandemic as a significant factor in the ability of services to respond to the backlog post pandemic. Demand for neurorehabilitation services, for example, has increased significantly due to the combined needs of patients who were discharged early and missed out on rehabilitation during the pandemic, those who deteriorated due to lockdown and those requiring rehabilitation after long COVID.

Recommendations

The Neurological Alliance is calling for a set of measures to specifically address the findings of this report, in line with the overall recommendations outlined in the HSE COVID-19 Recovery Plan published in 2021¹.

- A specific assessment and recovery plan for neurology and neurorehabilitation services to address the critical capacity issues in these services which predated the pandemic and continues to impact significantly on the ability of these services to respond post pandemic.
- Engagement with voluntary providers to address the impact of the pandemic on both existing and emerging groups of service users with neurological conditions
- Priority resourcing of specialist supports for service users with neurological consequences from long COVID. Immediate investment should focus on the expansion of the only dedicated long COVID neurology service in Ireland to include a full multidisciplinary team and action to address the critical lack of community neurorehabilitation services by fully staffing nine community neurorehabilitation teams around the country (as promised in the 2019-2021 Implementation Framework for the National Neurorehabilitation Strategy²)
- Targeted supports to address the mental health impact of the pandemic on people with neurological conditions and their families.

THE FULL REPORT IS AVAILABLE AT WWW.NAI.IE



¹ The impact of the COVID19 pandemic and the societal restrictions on the health and wellbeing of the population, on our staff and on health service delivery and capacity: A plan for healthcare and population health recovery (May 2021) Health Services Executive

² National Strategy & Policy for the Provision of Neurorehabilitation Services in Ireland: From Theory to Practice: Implementation Framework 2019-2021 (February 2019) Health Services Executive