



The **Regulation** and
Quality Improvement
Authority



2023-24

Annual Quality Report

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Foreword

This is the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority's (RQIA's) tenth Annual Quality Report, covering the period April 2023 to March 2024.

This report provides an overview of how RQIA, as Northern Ireland's independent regulator of health and social care services, aligns its quality improvement activities to the Department of Health's Quality 2020, a ten-year strategy designed to protect and improve quality in health and social care.

Encouraging and supporting quality improvement is central to all the work that we do. As Northern Ireland's regulatory and improvement body for statutory and independent health and social care services, RQIA has a key role in providing assurance to the Department of Health, seeking to evidence that care is safe, effective, compassionate and well-led. We publish our reports so that the public can access our findings across the range of services we inspect and review.

RQIA assesses quality across health and social care through inspection of individual services and review programmes that may include key themes and standards that crosses organisations or service boundaries. We examine arrangements in place to assess if the delivery of those services is meeting the quality standards expected of including best practice, as well as the quality of leadership and governance in those services.

The lived experience of service users, patients and clients, is a key aspect of seeking evidence of the quality of services, and critical part of our work is listening to the experience of service users, and their loved ones.

Listening to staff and hearing their experience and concerns adds further insights. All of these help us in cross referencing information from a range of sources including : statistics and data; reports, logs, incidents and registers; what we observe when we are out in inspection and reviews; and the experience of those in receipt of services and staff directly involved in its delivery.

During the year, RQIA's Guidance Team responded to around 1,000 contacts by telephone, email or in writing from families, the public and service providers. Some 60% of these were from service users, relatives and members of the public wishing to discuss queries or concerns about care services. The individual experiences of care adds to our assessment of the risks when deciding what action may be required to respond to concerns about a service. We use our independent role , set out under the regulation legislation, to challenge poor practice, and to seek improvements.

RQIA continues to strengthen our work by building effective partnerships and collaboration with others: with other statutory organisations, and with professional and systems regulators. Through improving our joined-up approach, there are opportunities for learning, sharing experience and skills, and for improvement through collective approaches.

Throughout this time, we continue to carry out the work of regulation, supporting health and social care providers and staff to achieve and maintain standards and improve quality and safety for both service users and for people working within these vital services.

Briege Donaghy
Chief Executive

Introduction

RQIA's Annual Quality Report 2023-24 provides an overview of how its quality improvement activities are aligned with the five strategic goals of Quality 2020: A 10-Year Strategy to Protect and Improve Quality in Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland:

- **Transforming the Culture**
- **Strengthening the Workforce**
- **Measuring the Improvement**
- **Raising the Standards**
- **Integrating the care**

This report describes RQIA's progress in the areas of quality and continuous improvement to support the delivery of Quality 2020's strategic goals. It highlights RQIA's significant role in assuring the quality of health and social care for all those in receipt of these services.

RQIA has adopted the HSC regional Core Values. These are: working together; excellence; compassion; and openness and honesty. RQIA also values:

- Putting those impacted by the health and social care system at the heart of all that we do;
- Using evidence as the foundation for all our actions;
- speaking and acting independently, and with integrity; and
- Working in partnership with others.

These values underpin all our actions and decisions. As Northern Ireland's health and social care regulator RQIA has a clear vision for how its activities ensure care is safe, effective, compassionate and well-led.

RQIA works closely with providers of health and social care services in order that people in Northern Ireland can experience a better quality of health and social care services.

RQIA registers and inspects a wide range of independent and statutory health and social care services. Through its Review Programme it assures the quality of services provided by the HSC Trusts and agencies. It also undertakes a range of responsibilities for upholding the quality of care for people with mental ill health and those with a learning disability.

RQIA is also committed to hearing and acting on the experiences of patients, clients, families and carers. It is only by working in partnership with service users and providers of care that RQIA can effectively encourage and influence improvement in direct care experience.

This report sets out progress made under each of the five Quality 2020 strategic goals.

Theme 1: Transforming the Culture

Objective 1: We will make achieving high quality the top priority at all levels in health and social care.

Objective 2: We will promote and encourage partnerships between staff, patients, clients and carers to support decision making.

Governance and Assurance

The RQIA Governance Framework sets out in an accessible manner the roles, responsibilities and procedures for the effective and efficient conduct of these arrangements by RQIA's Authority, its committees and Executive Management Team.

RQIA's Authority, supported by its Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) and Business, Appointments and Remuneration Committee (BARC), are responsible for the oversight of corporate performance and governance arrangements within the organisation. Through regular meetings, arrangements for financial probity, risk management and audit are assessed. The Authority also oversees corporate performance reporting of RQIA's progress against strategic and operational aims and objectives and its commitment to quality improvement.

RQIA manages its activities through three directorates, supported by Business Services, and during the year the Office of the Chair and Chief Executive was established. The directorates are:

- Adult Care Services
- Hospital Services, Independent Health Care, Reviews and Audit
- Mental Health and Learning Disability, Children's Services and Prison Healthcare

As part of RQIA's Performance Management Framework, regular performance management meetings took place, reporting against key performance indicators and progress in meeting set objectives for each Directorate.

On a quarterly basis, an Activity Performance and Outcomes Report is presented to the Authority, via BARC, for discussion and approval, which enables Authority members to assess how RQIA is performing.

This report is complimented by the Financial Performance Report, presented to the Authority via ARAC on a regular basis.

RQIA's Performance Management Framework brings together the corporate Strategic Plan, Annual Business Plan, Risk Management Strategy and the Activity Performance and Outcomes Report.

RQIA's Strategic Plan 2022-28 includes four strategic objectives:

1. Scrutiny: register, inspect, report and enforce
2. Improve: safety and quality;
3. Build: partnerships to strengthen safety;
4. Inform: service transformation.

These are underpinned by three enabling priorities:

- Excellence in collective leadership and effective governance;
- Develop a confident, competent, supported and enabled workforce
- Ensure effective management of our resources, including finance, information technology and accommodation.

RQIA's programme of internal audit provides the Authority Members and the Department of Health with assurance on governance arrangements. During the year, the following areas were audited: Financial Review; Complaints Management; Inspection: Nursing Homes; Risk Management; Intelligence Monitoring.

In each case a satisfactory level of assurance was received. RQIA's response to each audit are shared with Authority Members through ARAC which monitors progress through its meetings, providing assurance to the Authority.

Living our Values



Together with the shared HSC values of working together, excellence, openness and honesty, and compassion underpin all RQIA's actions and decisions, as the independent system regulator, RQIA's values are:

- Putting those impacted by the health and social care system at the heart of all that we do;
- Using evidence as the foundation for all our actions;
- Speaking and acting independently and with integrity; and
- Working in partnership with others.

Public Involvement in Inspections and Reviews

RQIA is committed to increasing effective engagement with the public and stakeholders to achieve improvements in the safety and quality of health and social care services. In April 2023, RQIA commenced the recruitment processes for the Inspector Support Volunteer role (previously known as lay assessors) to involve health and social care service users and members of the public in RQIA's inspection and review activities.

The aim of this programme is to bring an independent, lay perspective to our assessment of services and to hear about the experiences of those availing of the services we inspect and review. In partnership with Volunteer Now and University of Ulster we developed on-boarding processes, induction and training to support the new cohort of Inspector Support Volunteers. We began piloting this role in our care homes inspections in late 2023-24, and following evaluation will further develop this approach.

Public Consultations

From April to July 2023, with support from the Business Services Organisation's Equality Unit, and in partnership with 10 other Health and Social Care organisations who we work with on equality and disability matters, RQIA undertook a 13-week public consultation on its draft Equality and Disability Action Plans for the period 2023-28.

The draft Action Plan built on RQIA's previous progress in this area and set out planned actions to tackle inequalities across all equality categories, and to promote positive attitudes towards disabled people and encourage their participation in our work areas. During this time, we welcomed written submissions and held a number of consultation events to discuss the plans and to invite comment and feedback.

Taking on board feedback from consultees a final draft to RQIA's Authority for approval in September 2023, and following approval this was shared with the Equality Commission and published on RQIA's website.



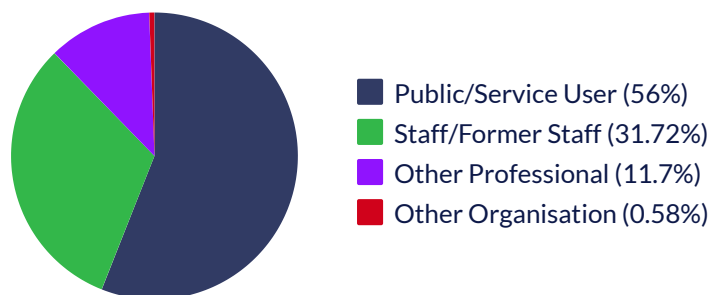
Action on Concerns about Health and Social Care Services

Throughout 2023-24, RQIA's Guidance Team service responded to over 1,000 contacts from families, the public and service providers. The majority of these contacts (around 60%) were from service users, relatives and members of the public wishing to discuss queries or concerns about care services.

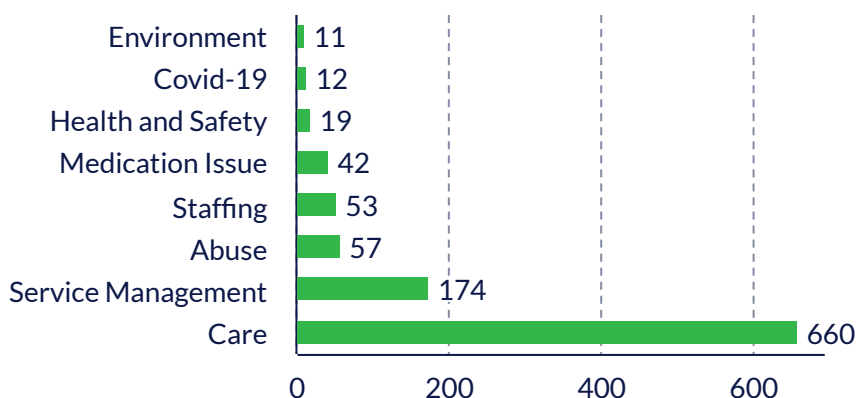
In each case RQIA's Guidance Team established the nature of the issue or concern, and provided appropriate advice. Where specific concerns are raised the information provided is assessed and a decision reached on how best to respond. This may include following up the issues raised with management of the service; conducting an unannounced inspection to investigate the concerns; and where necessary, taking enforcement action.

RQIA's Guidance Team also received contacts from health and social care staff, management and from HSC Trusts seeking advice and guidance.

Contacts to RQIA Guidance Team, 2023-24



Concerns Raised with Guidance Team, 2023-24



Complaints about Health and Social Care Services

One of the most important ways for RQIA to help ensure that care services improve is by listening to the people who use the services or have family and friends who avail of these services. Where concerns are received by telephone, in writing or in person, RQIA takes these very seriously and carefully considered and assessed to determine if there are any issues that require our immediate action. RQIA may take a range of actions, from recording the information to help inform our knowledge of a service; following up these concerns with the relevant health and social care trust or organisation; to conducting an inspection of the service to follow up the concerns raised.

RQIA's provides leaflets and online advice and guidance to support the public in raising a complaint about health and social care service. While RQIA does not have legal powers to investigate complaints about services, RQIA provides contact details for organisations that can support the public through health and social care complaints processes, including the Patient and Client Council and health and social care trust complaints teams.

Every health and social care service is required to have its own arrangements in place to manage complaints. RQIA checks that these are in place during its inspections of services. Where a complainant is dissatisfied with the service's response to their complaint, they may raise this matter with the Northern Ireland Public Service Ombudsman.



Complaints About RQIA

RQIA welcomes contact from people with concerns about its actions or how it conducts its work and considers these as a valuable source of learning for the organisation. The learning from individual complaints is applied to help improve RQIA's systems and processes.

During 2023-24, 16 complaints were received about RQIA. Following a review of the issues raised, two complaints were managed through RQIA's Inspection Policy, one was managed as a concern about a service and another could not be progressed.

Complaints were received in relation to how RQIA carried out its oversight of health and social care services; the recruitment process for Inspection Support Volunteers; and Guidance team approach.

Learning from individual complaints is applied to help improve our systems and processes and during 2023/2024 this learning for RQIA was around: Inspection Support Volunteer recruitment; Adverse Incidents and SAIs; RQIA's inspection approach - raising awareness; Guidance team approach.

Where a complainant remains dissatisfied with RQIA's response, they are advised of their right to take their complaint to the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO).

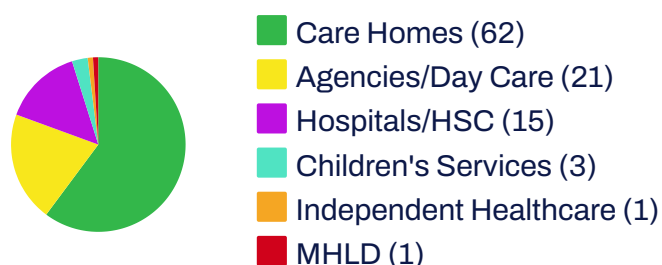
Whistleblowing

Under The Public Interest Disclosure (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, anyone currently working within a health and social care service can make a disclosure to RQIA about a concern or wrongdoing within that service. This legislation protects workers and details the type of disclosures that may be protected; the circumstances in which such disclosures are protected; and the persons who may be protected.

During the year, RQIA was contacted on 103 occasions by current staff from a range of statutory and independent health and social care settings, who wished to 'speak up' (whistleblow) about their workplace. Around one half of these disclosures were from care home staff, while one sixth were from HSC trust services, including mental health services and HSC hospital staff. Over half of disclosures related to care issues, and one third related to staffing and service management issues.

While some staff wished to remain anonymous, others provided their name and contact details, allowing RQIA to follow up their concerns more fully. In each case RQIA carefully considered the information to determine what action was required. Where necessary, unannounced inspections were conducted to follow up on concerns, and to drive improvements in quality for those using these services.

Whistleblowing: By Source, 2023-24



Whistleblowing: By Issue, 2023-24



Supporting Improvements in Services

In Northern Ireland, services that are listed under Part III of The Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 (the 2003 Order) must be registered by RQIA before they can legally operate.

Prior to registration, each application is subject to a rigorous examination process to ensure the service provider and manager can demonstrate a clear understanding of the requirements of relevant regulations and standards, and that the proposed service meets these requirements.

RQIA's inspections of regulated services are undertaken in line with Part III of the 2003 Order and in line with Fees and Frequency of Inspections regulations.

Under these regulations RQIA is required to inspect each nursing home, residential care home and children's home at least twice each year; private dental services once every two years, voluntary adoption agencies once every three years and all other registered services (adult placement agencies; day care settings; domiciliary care agencies; independent health care services; nursing agencies and residential family centres) at least once each year.

In advance of every inspection, inspectors review information held on RQIA's i-Connect information management system about that service's regulatory and inspection history.

This includes a wide range of intelligence: statutory notifications from the service relating to specific categories of incidents which may have occurred; details of serious concerns or enforcement action; complaints or compliments from service users, their families or advocates; whistleblowing from staff members; information from other statutory organisations such as HSC trusts, the Patient and Client Council, the Commissioners for Older People and for Children and Young People.

Under Part IV of the 2003 Order and a range of other legislation, standards and guidance, RQIA inspects, and has oversight of, mental health and learning disability services; services using ionising radiation treatments; children's services; and health care in secure settings including prisons.

RQIA's inspection teams comprise experienced nurses, social workers, pharmacists, estates and finance officers, who assess service provision and delivery. During the year RQIA conducted a total of 1,792 inspections, compared to 1,722 in 2022-23. Over three-quarters (76%) were unannounced (79% in 2022-23). In addition, 183 'desktop assessments' were completed - comprising 90 finance, 89 pharmacy, two estates and two care 'desktop assessments'

Each inspection considers the quality of leadership and management within each service, observes practice and reviews records of care. RQIA examines the arrangements in place to ensure the delivery of safe, effective, compassionate and high quality care, in line with relevant legislation, standards and guidance.

The most important people in any service are those in receipt of care, and where possible, inspectors also speak with carers, friends and relatives about their experience of the services they receive.

To ensure a fully rounded view of the service, inspectors talk to management, staff and health care staff such as GPs, tissue viability nurses, social workers and care managers to hear their views and experience of the service.

Sharing Information: Digital Communication

Throughout the year RQIA continued update the content of its website www.rqia.org.uk to ensure it provided information to support service providers and the public alike. During 2023-24 RQIA received around 190,000 visitors, resulting in over 660,000 webpage views.

To date, over 19,000 inspection reports for independent, voluntary and statutory health and social care services have been published on RQIA's website, www.rqia.org.uk/inspections and are available directly through the search function on the RQIA homepage or via an interactive map.

RQIA's inspection reports continue to be the most visited pages on the website, accounting for almost half the total number page views during the year (300,000).

Web pages providing advice and support to members of the public who wish to raise a concern about a health and social care service were accessed over 5,000 times throughout the year.

RQIA also directs traffic to the website via [@RQIANews](https://twitter.com/RQIANews), RQIA's X (formerly Twitter) account, where new content added can be notified immediately to over 6,000 followers.

Political Engagement

Throughout the year, RQIA continued its engagement with representatives from the main political parties. This included regular one-to-one meetings involving RQIA's Chair and Chief Executive with each party health spokesperson, to discuss our Management Plan; current priorities; and specific issues including the actions RQIA was taking following the publication of the outcome of the judicial review in respect of RQIA's role in community mental health services.

At a constituency level, we also engaged directly with Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) and councillors where we were taking significant actions in respect of particular services that were likely to result in local interest or concern.

This aimed to ensure they were fully briefed on the issues raised and on the carefully considered steps being taken by RQIA to ensure the ongoing wellbeing and safety of those in receipt of these services.

Following the re-establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly in February 2024, RQIA provided written submissions to the Assembly's Committee for Health in relation to: RQIA's statutory role in the regulation of community health services; and an update on the Expert Review of Records of Deceased Patients (Neurology), November 2022 (also referred to as the Deceased Patients Review (DPR)).

We have also provided the Department of Health with input from RQIA to support their preparation of responses to Assembly Questions.

Theme 2: Strengthening the Workforce

Objective 3: We will provide the right education, training and support to deliver high quality service.

Objective 4: We will develop leadership skills at all levels and empower staff to take decisions and make changes.

RQIA Staff Profile

The RQIA's staff are responsible for the achievement of corporate objectives and the effective delivery of the work programme are the organisation's most valuable asset. As at 31 March 2024, there were 132 staff in post (124.61 whole time equivalent including those on temporary contracts), excluding Authority Members, bank and agency staff. The staff composition, by headcount, is 75% female and 25% male. During 2023-24, there was an average staff absence rate of 7.01% against a regional key performance indicator of 4.45% set for RQIA by The Department of Health.

During the year, there was a turnover in permanent staff of 5.96%, with 12 permanent members of staff leaving RQIA through retirement or taking up new opportunities. At 31 March 2024 RQIA had 13 vacant posts in its staffing complement.

During the year RQIA advertised for a range of administration and inspector positions, which attracted a high level of interest, with 10 permanent new staff joining the organisation. In addition, seven people also joined as 'bank' staff. All vacancies were advertised on jobs.hscni.net, the official website for HSC Jobs in Northern Ireland, and promoted on RQIA's 'X' social media account.

The RQIA Pilot Hybrid Working Scheme introduced in late March 2023, following RQIA's move to permanent offices at James House, Belfast, continued to operate. The majority of staff choose to work part of each week in the office and the remaining time at home.

Investing in RQIA's Staff

RQIA initially attained Investors in People (IIP) recognition in 2014 and was successfully reaccredited in 2017. A further formal assessment was conducted in 2021, which resulted in an IIP Silver award. In late 2023, an IIP survey was conducted to help evaluate progress against people priorities and provide trend data on staff perceptions and organisational culture to support action planning for a further assessment scheduled for 2024-25.

INVESTORS IN PEOPLE®

We invest in people Silver

RQIA continues to engage with Trade Unions. including through its Joint Negotiating Forum, on a regular basis when topics relating to our workforce are discussed, such as: vacancies; active retention and recruitment; organisational development; workforce resources and capacity.

During the year, RQIA's staff Health, Safety and Wellbeing Group met on a regular basis to further develop the RQIA Staff Safety, Health and Wellbeing Programme, to include: Mental Health Wellbeing; Emotional Wellbeing; Physical Wellbeing; and Financial Wellbeing.

Staff Training and Development

RQIA is committed to supporting and developing its staff, and we ensure that staff have access to training opportunities to enable them to contribute fully to achieving RQIA's organisational objectives. During the year we developed a training calendar for staff highlighting training opportunities available to all staff. This included training to support understanding of a range of human resources and finance policies; and job-specific training to support staff in their daily work: including human rights, safeguarding and Mental Capacity Act training sessions. During the year, all staff were also required to undertake the following mandatory training:

- Cyber Security Awareness
- Display Screen Equipment Awareness
- Engage and Involve: Personal and Public Involvement
- Fire Safety Awareness
- Fraud Awareness
- Infection Prevention and Control (Tier 1)
- Information Governance Awareness
- Risk Management Awareness



Supporting Leadership Development in Care Homes

The My Home Life Leadership Support Programme is an internationally recognised educational programme, delivered by Ulster University for care home managers and staff in leadership roles. This programme recognises the important role of care home managers and their staff in supporting people living in Northern Ireland's care homes. My Home Life aims to improve the quality of life for people living, dying, visiting, and working in nursing and residential homes. The programme runs over a 10-month period during which participants are guided by professional facilitators to advance their skills, engage with evidence-based relationship-centred practice, and resolve the very complex issues that impact upon the quality of their service.

During the year, senior inspectors from RQIA's Care Homes team supported the delivery of this leadership programme through their attendance and participation in a face-to-face meeting with each of the cohorts throughout the year. RQIA will continue this ongoing partnership in the 2024-25.



Theme 3: Measuring the Improvement

Objective 5: We will improve outcome measurement and report on progress for safety effectiveness and the patient/client experience.

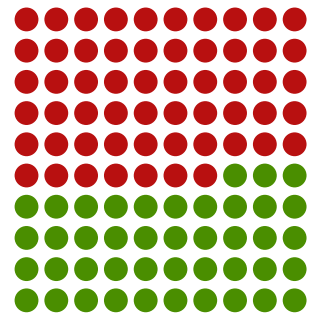
Objective 6: We will promote the use of accredited improvement techniques and ensure that there is sufficient capacity and capability within the HSC to use them effectively.

Registration and Inspection of Health and Social Care Services

1,792 Inspections conducted by RQIA during 2023-24



76% of inspections were unannounced
24% of inspections were announced

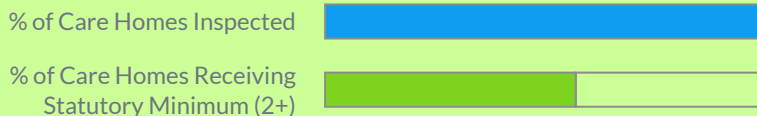


43% of inspections resulted in no requirements or recommendations for improvement

Care Homes

100% of all operational care homes were inspected

56% had received the statutory minimum of inspections (2+)



12 Acute Hospitals inspected

Domiciliary Care Agencies, Nursing Agencies, Adult Placement Agencies & Day Care Settings



92% of these services inspected at least once

10 Ionising Radiation (Medical Exposure) Regulations (IR(ME)R) Inspections conducted

Registration

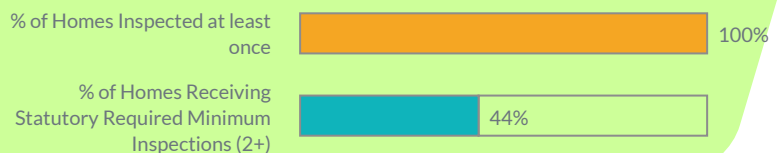
1,563 services were registered with RQIA

1,794 registration applications were received

Children's Homes

100% inspected at least once

44% received the statutory required minimum inspections (2+)



19% of inspections at nursing, residential care and children's homes took place out of hours

Mental Health (NI) Order 1986

During the year, RQIA reviewed **7,473** assessments forms and **1,107** detention forms

Mental Health and Learning Disability

81% of Mental Health and Learning Disability Wards inspected at least once



2944 Concerns contacts/concerns were recorded and individually case managed



42% of these calls related to Nursing and Residential Care Homes

RQIA's Programme of Reviews

Using legislative powers under Article 35 of the 2003 Order, and in response to current events, or to examine emerging issues, RQIA may conduct reviews of health and social care services. These are generally initiated by RQIA or commissioned by the Department of Health. In planning reviews and reporting on the findings, RQIA focuses on safe, effective and compassionate care; and on the quality of leadership within a service.

The purpose of the review programme is to provide independent and professional assessments to Northern Ireland's Minister of Health, through the Department of Health, and to the public about the quality, safety and availability of health and social care (HSC) services in Northern Ireland. It also aims to drive continuous improvement in these services and to ensure the rights of service users are safeguarded.

In each review RQIA aims to identify areas for improvement, make recommendations, and highlight examples of good practice. RQIA shares lessons learned and supports and drives quality improvements for service users across the sector. Where relevant, RQIA also provides evidence to form a basis for future policy development in the areas under review. The findings of each RQIA review are reported to the Minister and Department of Health and published on the RQIA website, with the aim of further improving and developing leadership, patient safety, service delivery, and compassionate care for service users.

Review of Governance Arrangements in Place to Support Safety within Maternity Services in Northern Ireland

In May 2023 RQIA published the findings of a review of the governance arrangements in place to support safety within Maternity Services in Northern Ireland. The review, conducted during 2022, focused on the effectiveness of HSC trust governance processes, clinical governance arrangements and focused on the key elements that support safe patient care, including safety culture.

The review highlights how increasing complexity, compounded by significant staffing shortages, pose considerable challenges for service delivery. Despite these challenges, the Expert Review Team also saw examples of good practice, strong teamwork, and commended the dedication of midwives, doctors and staff in maternity services who work on a daily basis to ensure the delivery of safe and effective care to women and babies.

This review makes 23 recommendations to strengthen the systems and processes that support the delivery of care within HSC maternity services. Key areas for improvement include:

- A regional approach to assuring and improving safety within Maternity Services - including the need for a co-produced regional Northern Ireland Maternity Strategy.
- Effective leadership structures and reporting arrangements - to ensure oversight and assurance of quality and safety in services.
- Safe Staffing in HSC Maternity Services - to explore ways to improve recruitment and retention of staff, and support staff wellbeing.
- Systems for Safe, Effective and Compassionate Care - Improvement of systems in place to support patient safety, multidisciplinary governance and staff training.
- Safety Culture - Ensuring governance arrangements are underpinned by a culture of safety, encompassing psychological safety, just culture, and learning culture.
- Interfaces with other services - Ensuring arrangements support good communication, safe patient referral / transfer between maternity services and: Primary Care, Emergency Departments and Neonatal Services.

RQIA System Inspection of a Local Health and Social Care System “Working Collaboratively to Reduce Harm”

In January 2024, RQIA published the findings of its ‘System Inspection’ in Southern HSC Trust area, undertaken in autumn 2023 as a response to the ongoing and persistent system pressures, particularly those affecting acute hospital services. The Inspection looked particularly at patients who were delayed in their discharge from the acute hospital, and the effectiveness of collaboration between acute services, community and social care services in meeting service user needs.

The inspection makes recommendations for improved communication and collaboration, within acute services, between the acute and community sectors; and with patients and families. It also identified that services that were well placed to meet the needs of patients beyond their hospital stay were in place, but did not have the capacity that was required to meet patients’ needs.

This inspection recognises the immense efforts being made by staff throughout the health and social care system to maintain services and provide safe and caring treatment. It also recognises the distress endured by patients and families, as emergency services across Northern Ireland continue to face severe and sustained pressures. This impacts on the delivery of safe care to patients; and on the wellbeing of staff.

It is critically important that the whole health and social care system, both public and independent sector, acute and community services, work together. Patients must be able to access emergency care when this is needed, and be provided with timely access to the care and support they need in the community, once acute treatment has been completed.

The Inspection adds to the evidence of the harm that is caused when there are delays in patients accessing acute care. It shows the impact of delayed discharge on those patients ready to leave acute care, to be supported at home, in a care home setting or other community care. The two aspects are very much linked – if patients cannot leave hospital, new patients who need care urgently cannot get access to the acute care they need.

The inspection found examples of effective care outside hospital, including acute care at home, step down services in community care settings, and local care homes with bed availability. However, there was not sufficient capacity, through sufficient staffing, to cope with the number of patients who needed such care outside of the hospital. This inspection makes 11 recommendations for improvement, for implementation by those providing hospital, community, social care and primary care. Health and social care services are delivered through a mixed model of providers, the HSC Trusts, independent providers - particularly in care homes and domiciliary care - and General Practice. While each is commissioned and paid for in different ways, they must be equal partners in delivering local health and social care services.

The workforce challenge dominated RQIA’s findings, with all the services examined needing more staff. RQIA considers that the work of the Department of Health in reforming adult social care services and developing the totality of the health and social care workforce, is absolutely critical. This must be coupled with service reform to ensure sufficient capacity in community, social and primary care to meet population needs; and make effective use of resources. Without this, the pressures will continue across the system, particularly in acute hospitals and ambulance services, and experienced by patients and by emergency care staff.

Other Review Activity

During the year also worked on a review and "look back" exercise into urology services in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust Report. During 2024-25 a report of RQIA's findings will be shared with Department of Health.

Theme 4: Raising the Standards

Objective 7: We will establish a framework of clear evidence-based standards and best practice guidance.

Objective 8: We will establish dynamic partnerships between service users, commissioners and providers to develop, monitor and review standards.

Public Involvement in RQIA Work

RQIA is committed to increasing effective engagement with the public and stakeholders to achieve improvements in the safety and quality of health and social care services. RQIA's Service Improvement Officer represents the organisation at the regional Personal and Public Involvement (PPI) Forum, which aims to support HSC organisations in the active and effective involvement of service users, carers and the public in decisions that affect their health and social care.

Meaningful Engagement Service User During Inspections

During 2023-24 RQIA continued to focus on improving how we receive feedback from service users and providers during inspections.

RQIA recognises the importance of hearing the about the lived experiences of those in receipt of care services during inspections, including those in living in dementia care settings.

In response to feedback from service providers, the Dementia friendly questionnaire developed in 2022-23, has now been renamed 'User friendly', as providers advised that they felt other service users would benefit from this approach/style of questions in providing their experiences of care. This questionnaire is now being used during RQIA's inspections of care homes and domiciliary care agencies.

Following engagement with an end of life service within the agencies team we adapted our approach to gaining feedback and came away from the generic questionnaire and created a letter which is more personal in our approach which gives the person several options on how to engage with us if they wish to do so.

During the year we held focus groups to improve how we gain feedback during our inspections of learning disability services from providers and service users. Further work will progress during 2024-25. We also developed and introduced a medicine focused questionnaire in consultation with service providers. The effectiveness of this tailored approach to medicines inspections will be evaluated in 2025. These approaches will form part of a toolkit for inspectors to ensure we receive a fully rounded view of services.

Engagement with Peer Organisations: Partnership Working

During 2023-24 RQIA also engaged with partner organisations. This included module content development work with NISCC on its Safe and Effective Care Certificate; Safeguarding Board of Northern Ireland on the development of a trauma informed organisation approach; and the introduction of a Dysphagia checklist for RQIA inspectors, co-produced with the Public Health Agency, which forms part of RQIA's inspectors tool kit.

Theme 5: Integrating the Care

Objective 9: We will develop integrated pathways of care for individuals.

Objective 10: We will make better use of multidisciplinary team working and shared opportunities for learning and development in the HSC and with external partners.

Partnership Working

RQIA is committed to maintaining its positive relationships with the Department of Health, and the wider health and social care system, including: HSC Trusts; Northern Ireland Guardian Ad Litem Agency; Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency; Northern Ireland Practice and Education Council for Nursing and Midwifery; Northern Ireland Social Care Council; Patient and Client Council; Public Health Agency; and Strategic Planning and Performance Group.

Through a regular programme of meetings, RQIA engages with these organisations to discuss common interests, share learning and areas of concern. These include quarterly liaison meetings with HSC Trusts focusing on a range of service-specific operational issues.

RQIA is committed to strengthening effective partnerships with its peer organisations – including health and social care systems regulators, inspectorates and professional regulatory bodies across the UK and Ireland to share best practice and benchmark its work. These included the Care Quality Commission; the Health Care Professionals Council; Professional Standards Authority; Care Inspectorate Scotland; Healthcare Improvement Scotland; Health Inspectorate Wales; Improvement Cymru; the Health Information and Quality Authority; The General Medical Council; General Dental Council; Nursing and Midwifery Council; and the Health and Safety Executive.

RQIA also works closely with other inspectorates and representative bodies including: Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland; Education and Training Inspectorate; His Majesty's Inspector of Prisons; The Prisoner Ombudsman for Northern Ireland; The Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland; The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People.

RQIA also continued its constructive engagement with a range of stakeholder representative organisations, including: Association for Real Change; British Dental Association; Independent Health and Care Providers (IHCP); Royal Colleges of Nursing, General Practitioners, Physicians and Psychiatrists; and the UK Homecare Association.

RQIA has a range of information sharing protocols and memoranda of understanding with a range of partner organisations, to support information sharing and cooperation in joint working, and transparency when working on areas of common interest.

RQIA Round Table Event: “Speak Up” Regulation in an 'Open' Health and Social Care System

In November 2023, RQIA held a Round Table event brought together senior leaders from across health and social care services, from professional regulators, commissioners, professional bodies, academia and from systems regulation across the UK and Ireland, along with service user representatives. The purpose of the event was to listen, reflect, and learn how to improve RQIA's performance as the health and social care regulator in an 'open' health and social care system.



Speaking up, both for patients and families, and for staff, is a vital part of securing patient safety and improving service quality.

Following the event, RQIA shared learning from the discussion focusing on: Speaking up; listening, hearing and acting; and changing the culture.

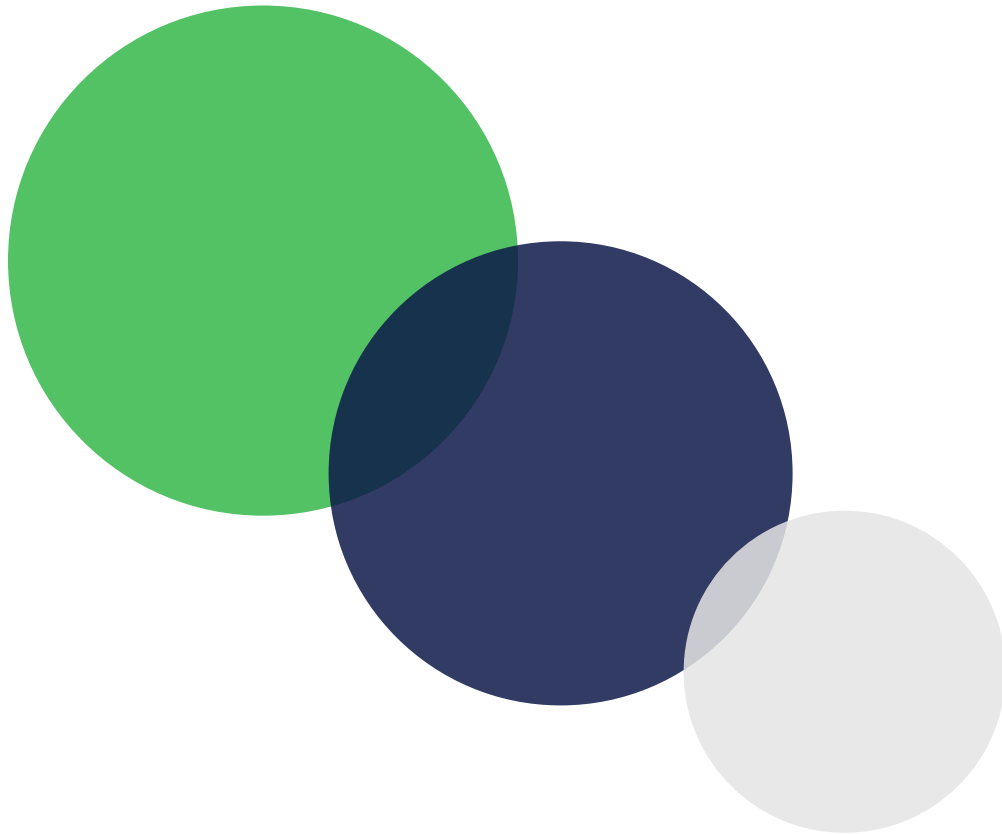


Learning from the Covid-19 Pandemic

Since its establishment in 2022, RQIA has engaged with the UK COVID-19 Public Inquiry, chaired by the Right Honourable Baroness Heather Hallett DBE.

Under Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006, which sets out the requirements for obtaining evidence in a public inquiry, RQIA submitted statements to the Inquiry in February, August and September 2023. These were in relation to Module 2C (Core UK Decision-making and Political Governance) and Module 3 (Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Healthcare Systems in the 4 Nations of the UK).

RQIA is also now a Core Participant for Module 6 (Care Sector) and attended a Preliminary Hearing in March 2024 to support the preparation of the further organisational responses to the Inquiry.



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