

## Update on Pressures Facing the Somerset Minor Injury Unit Service

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### 1. Summary

- 1.1. This report highlights describes the current pressures being experienced by the Somerset Minor Injury Unit (MIU) Service, the impact of these pressures and the actions being taken to mitigate this. The service is currently experiencing a significant rise in demand across the MIUs against a background of local, regional and national shortages of Emergency Nurse Practitioners (ENPs).
- 1.2. The report highlights which areas of the county are being impacted upon at present, and also some of the work being undertaken within local communities to try to address the challenges of recruiting and retaining ENPs.

### 2. Issues for consideration / Recommendations

- 2.1. Members are asked to consider and note the actions being undertaken to manage the current staffing shortages across the 7 MIUs in Somerset. The report does not make any recommendations regarding the long-term configuration or operation of the MIU service, which is work that will be undertaken by the Urgent Work Stream of the Fit For My Future programme. .

### 3. Background

- 3.1. Somerset Partnership operate seven MIUs across the county of Somerset as illustrated in Table 1 below:

EAST				WEST			
Location	No. of Patients (01.04.18-31.03.19)	Opening Hours	X-ray	Location	No. of Patients (01.04.18-31.03.19)	Opening Hours	X-ray
Frome	21,246	0800 -2100, 7 days a week last registration 20.30pm)	Mon-Fri 09,00-17.00	Bridgwater	22,063	0800 -2100, 7 days a week last registration 20.30pm)	Mon-Fri 08.30-17.00 Weekend 09.00 17.00
Shepton Mallet	11,937	0800 -2100, 7 days a week last registration 20.30pm)	Mon-Fri 09,00-17.00	Burnham-on-Sea	7,863	10.00-18.00 last registration 17.30	None

West Mendip	18,621	0800 -2100, 7 days a week last registration 20.30pm)	Mon-Fri 09,00-17.00	Chard	10,863	0800 -2100, 7 days a week last registration 20.30pm	Variable, across 2.5 days per week
				Minehead	12,642	24 hours 7 days, 7 days a week	09.00-17.00 Mon-Friday

- 3.2.** All of the MIUs are co-located with Community Hospitals and between them, they see and treat in excess of 100,000 patients per year. The patient numbers seen by each of the MIUs in the year 1 April 2018 - 31 March 2019 are included in the above table and as can be observed there is significant variation in the number of patients seen. This variation reflects local demography, proximity to alternative local services and pressures being faced by other services such as Primary Care. For reasons that are not currently understood, activity within the MIUs is up 12% on last year overall, and in some parts of the county has risen by 27%.
- 3.3** Currently there is no national definition or specification for MIUs. Within Somerset, these services operate between the hours of 08.00 to 21.00 with the exception of Minehead MIU which is open 24 hours a day and Burnham on Sea which is open between the hours of 10.00am and 6.00pm. X-ray facilities are provided at all of the MIUs, with the exception of Burnham-on-Sea. Bridgwater has recently commenced a pilot offering X-ray services 7 days a week. The service operates on a walk-in basis and is available for patients of all ages including infants.
- 3.4** The term ‘minor injury’ is potentially misleading in the context of the service that the MIUs provide and which is much more comprehensive. Patients also attend with a full range of illnesses, sometimes serious, and the ENPs are required to be able to recognise potentially life-threatening conditions and to care for patients whilst arranging transfer by ambulance to the accident and emergency department. Whilst being busy all year round, the MIUs tend to come under the greatest pressure during the summer months when people are more likely to be engaged in outdoor activities. This is in contrast to emergency departments, which experience their greatest pressure during the winter months.

#### **4.0 Workforce Challenges and the Impact of Staff Shortages**

- 4.1** In keeping with modern approaches to healthcare, the MIU service is provided by a multi-disciplinary team of receptionists, healthcare assistants, registered nurses, radiographers, paramedics and ENPs. Bridgwater MIU is also currently piloting the use of GP sessions within the service.
- 4.2** At the core of this service are 36 ENPs who work either within a West or East of county rota system. ENPs are registered nurses who typically will have worked for at least 2-3 years in a hospital A&E department before undertaking an intensive two-year supervised post-graduate training to equip them with the skills necessary to work independently. Throughout their training period, trainees are required to be placed within a hospital emergency department or MIU service.
- 4.3** As highly qualified advanced practitioners who are able to work independently, ENPs are much sought after across the healthcare system. In recent years, the shortage of General Practitioners has resulted in some GP practices seeking to employ ENPs. In contrast to working within the MIUs, these roles often do not

involve working unsocial hours at evenings or weekends and sometimes higher levels of pay. ENPs are also highly valued by ambulance services which also seek to recruit them.

- 4.4 With numbers of qualifying trainees being limited, and with new opportunities having opened up for ENPs in recent years, the Somerset MIU service is currently experiencing significant shortages in its ENP workforce and particularly in the West of the county. Since March of last year, 10 ENPs have left the service whilst 6 have been recruited. Overall, on its total establishment of 36 whole time equivalent ENPs, Somerset Partnership has approximately 25% of its posts vacant. Staff shortages are particularly acute in the West rota (Minehead, Bridgwater, Burnham-on-Sea, and Chard) where the current vacancy rate is 35%.
- 4.5 In spite of the remaining ENPs and their clinical managers doing all they can to cover shifts through working additional hours, it has recently not been possible to fill all of the ENP rota slots. The backdrop of the regional shortage of ENPs has meant that the staffing agencies are mostly unable to provide suitably qualified staff to fill vacant shifts.
- 4.6 The impact of these unfilled shifts has been a series of unplanned temporary closures at Burnham-on-Sea, Shepton Mallet and Minehead MIU overnight. During the period of 1 July up until 15 August 2019, Minehead MIU has had to close on 16 occasions, Burnham-on-Sea on 22 occasions and Shepton Mallet on 5 occasions. These closures have undoubtedly impacted on patients who have presented at these services and found them to be closed. The extent to which patients are travelling to the next neighbouring MIU or seeking care from alternative services is not yet fully understood and it is currently being investigated.

## **5 Consultations Undertaken and Mitigating Actions**

- 5.1 In response to the emerging staffing difficulties in the MIUs, the Trust, in partnership with Somerset Clinical Commissioning Group commenced weekly Director led meetings at the beginning of July. More recently, commissioners and service providers from North Somerset have been invited to join this process. This is in recognition of the potential impact of North Somerset's residents who use Burnham-on-Sea MIU services and also on the A&E department at Weston General Hospital. This weekly meeting brings together senior clinicians, managers and commissioners to closely monitor the staffing situation and to make decisions on mitigating actions.
- 5.2 In seeking to minimise the impact of unplanned closures on the Somerset population, the weekly monitoring meeting has sought to concentrate temporary closures where they will have the least impact on the population overall. The guiding principles underpinning these decisions are partly illustrated by the configuration of the service as illustrated in Table 1 and are also based on:
- Protecting continuity of service delivery at the MIUs treating the greatest number of patients
  - Where possible, protecting the MIUs which also offer x-ray facilities as an alternative to attending the highly pressurised accident and emergency departments in acute hospitals.
  - Overnight activity at Minehead MIU which averages 2.5 patients per night

In the East, the vacancy situation has been slightly less acute with vacancies running at approximately 20% of ENP posts. Application of the same criteria has resulted in fewer closures overall, but with those that have been required being concentrated at Shepton Mallet which sees significantly fewer patients than neighbouring services at Frome and West Mendip hospitals.

**5.3.** In seeking to address the short term situation and the underlying issues, the Trust, with support from Somerset Clinical Commissioning Group, has undertaken a number of actions which include:

- 1) Weekly director led meetings have been established to make decisions and monitor progress on this issue. It is also seeking to improve communications to key stakeholders and the public via daily sit reps etc.
- 2) The Trust has commenced a strategic conversation with its partners regarding the impact of competitive recruitment of ENPs in the Somerset healthcare system via the Local Workforce Area Board (LWAB).
- 3) Recruitment and retention incentives across the alliance of Somerset Partnership and Taunton and Somerset Foundation Trusts are being reviewed. This is within a context of there being staff shortages across a range of professional groups beyond the ENP workforce.
- 4) The Trust has commenced meetings with partners in Primary Care in those areas impacted by unplanned closures to discuss opportunities for closer collaboration in making the service more resilient in the future.
- 5) A programme of rolling advertisements has continued, underpinned by the Trust's relatively generous approach to funding relocation expenses for staff moving into Somerset from other areas.
- 6) In the local areas most affected so far, the Trust has met with members of the hospitals Leagues of Friends and other community leaders. In follow up to these meetings, the Trust has also enlisted the help of these community leaders in reviewing its recruitment and retention strategy for ENPs and as part of this, its approach to promoting Somerset as a place to settle and live.
- 7) The Trust is now piloting the use of a full time Physiotherapist First Contact Practitioner, working alongside ENPs and GPs at Bridgwater Community Hospital. On the basis of this changed skill mix at Bridgwater, the Trust is exploring the option of piloting the provision of a reduced hours 7-day service at Burnham-on-Sea as a short term measure and as an alternative to the current pattern of sporadic full day closures.
- 8) Where possible long-term agency staff have been recruited from other parts of England and have been provided with accommodation free of charge.
- 9) At the point that this report is being written, the Trust is about to commence a survey to learn more about the needs of the population using the MIU service and to seek feedback action undertaken so far and how it might be made more resilient in the future.
- 10) The Trust is monitoring rotas carefully and working closely with the out of hours 111 service and media organisations in an attempt to improve communication with the public in advance of unavoidable closures. The timing of these communications have to be balanced with the Trust's commitment to avoiding closures wherever possible through giving staffing agencies sufficient time do all they can to fill shifts at short notice.

## **6 Implications**

- 6.1 These short-term mitigations have proved partially successful so far and at the point of this report being written no further overnight closures at Minehead are anticipated for the foreseeable future.
- 6.2 At the point of this report being written, the short-term outlook for Burnham-on-Sea continues to be challenging, as it does to a lesser extent in the East with further unplanned closures likely at Shepton Mallet.
- 6.3 The MIUs play an important role in the overall provision of same day healthcare for the population in Somerset and unplanned closures inevitably have a negative impact on patients. The knock-on implications of these closures are difficult to clearly identify, although a preliminary review of activity by postcode area undertaken so far suggests that a number of patients are seeking care from their next nearest MIU service. In the case of Burnham-on-Sea, some patients may well also seek treatment at the emergency department at Weston General Hospital. ENPs report the day after closures being exceptionally busy, and this suggests some patients are choosing to defer attendance until the following day.
- 6.4 The Trust and its commissioning partners within the CCG remain being committed to doing all they can to improve the current situation and to getting the MIUs back onto stable footing as soon as possible. None of the temporary mitigating actions described in this reported should be seen as being in any way being connected to the long term configuration of MIU services in the county. This work is being undertaken separately within the Urgent Care work stream of the Fit For My Future programme.