

Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board has failed the people of North Wales and should be disbanded into smaller units

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 15 Mai 2023
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Petition Number: P-06-1324

Petition title: Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board has failed the people of North Wales and should be disbanded into smaller units

Text of petition:

Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board (BCUHB) (Bwrdd Iechyd Prifysgol Betsi Cadwaladr) is the LHB of NHS Wales for the north of Wales. It is the largest health organisation in Wales, providing primary, community, mental health, and acute hospital services for a population of around 694,000 people across the six principal areas of north Wales (Anglesey, Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Gwynedd and Wrexham) as well as parts of Mid Wales. It has been in and out of special measures since 2015.

BCUHB has had a series of chief executives and executives who have without exception failed to grapple the huge organisational disaster that is Betsi care. Vascular services, stroke services, disastrous Accident and Emergency waits, Mental Health and crippling waiting times for planned surgery are not being dealt with sufficient urgency. The people of North Wales have been let down. The scrutiny of board decisions go unchallenged and patients are suffering unnecessarily.

It's time to admit that the organisation is far too big and unwieldy to respond



to the challenges it faces and break it up into smaller geographical units that respond to the needs of their local populations.

1. Background

Concerns about Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board (BCUHB) date back to its earliest years following NHS reorganisation in 2009, with a number of subsequent reports raising serious concerns about the quality and safety of care provided in some of the services. Some of the subsequent chronology is set out on the [BCUHB website](#) and in the Fifth Senedd's Public Accounts Committee (PAC) report [Governance Review of Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board: Lessons Learnt](#) (May 2019).

More recently, the Sixth Senedd's Public Accounts and Public Administration Committee (PAPAC) has undertaken [follow-up work on governance issues in BCUHB](#), including taking detailed evidence from BCUHB on [9 March 2022](#), correspondence with both BCUHB and the Minister for Health and Social Services, and on [10 November 2022](#), the Committee took [evidence](#) from the North Wales Community Health Council.

The Committee agreed to review and revisit progress being made by the Board in Autumn 2022 but [postponed this work](#) following the qualification of the Health Board's 2021-22 accounts and the errors identified in them by the Auditor General, which are subject to further investigation. The Committee has said that it will continue to closely monitor issues relating to the health board and will conduct its own comprehensive scrutiny of these matters in a timely manner.

2. Escalation and intervention

In June 2015 BCUHB was **placed in Special Measures** – the highest level of escalation under the [NHS Wales Escalation and Intervention Arrangements](#). There were five key areas identified in which improvement was needed; governance, leadership and oversight in the health board; mental health services; maternity services; primary care, especially out of hours; and public engagement.

In February 2018 Maternity services were de-escalated from special measures, followed by GP out of hours services in February 2019.

In November 2020 the then Health Minister announces that BCUHB would be **de-escalated from special measures** to targeted intervention with immediate effect. This was to be supported by a further £82m per year over three-and-a-half years. In March 2021 Welsh Government published the Targeted Intervention Framework, indicating the areas for improvement expected of BCUHB.

On 23 February 2023, Audit Wales published a public interest report: Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board – Review of Board Effectiveness. Audit Wales stated that:

Through routine audit work undertaken at Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board, growing concerns were uncovered regarding the cohesiveness of the board and working relationships at senior level. The extent and nature of these concerns led to the Auditor General for Wales completing an urgent and focused review of the collective effectiveness of the board at Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board.

The Auditor General’s report in the public interest has found that the breakdown in working relationships within the board at Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board is fundamentally compromising its ability to tackle the numerous challenges the organisation faces. The report also found that without some form of intervention to establish a more unified Executive Team and wider board, the current situation is unlikely to be resolved.

The report also identifies immediate actions Audit Wales believe are needed to address the concerns raised in the review and notes the significant turnover within the Executive Team. The report highlights the delay in recruiting a replacement for the substantive Chief Executive who left the organisation at the end of October 2022, “creating some immediate challenges for the organisation in terms of continuity and stability of Executive Team leadership”.

Following the publication of the report, on 27 February the Minister for Health and Social Services announced that BCUHB will be put into special measures “because of serious concerns about performance, leadership and culture”. The Minister also stated that “the Chair, Vice Chair and independent members of the Board have agreed they will step aside” and that a number of direct appointments to the Board had been made by the Minister to ensure stability including Dyfed Edwards

as the new Chair of BCUHB. The Minister also reported that the health board would be supported by an intervention and support team and made an oral statement to Plenary on 28 February in which she confirmed that this team will initially be contracted for six months, and will support the health board on board governance and other issues related to special measures.

3. Organisational structure of BCUHB

BCUHB states on its website that:

We are the largest health organisation in Wales, with a budget of **£1.87 billion** and a workforce of over **19,000**. The Health Board is responsible for the delivery of health care services to more than **700,000 people** across the six counties of north Wales (Anglesey, Gwynedd, Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire and Wrexham). The Health Board coordinates the work of **97 GP practices**, and NHS services provided by **82 dental and orthodontic practices**, **72 optometry practices** and opticians and **150 pharmacies** in North Wales.

For comparison, Cardiff and the Vale UHB employ approximately 14,500 staff, and spend around £1.4 billion every year on providing health services to a population of around 472,400 people in Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan as well as serving a wider population across South and Mid Wales for a range of specialties.

There have previously been questions raised about the size of BCUHB and whether it should be separated out into smaller bodies. In October 2020 Plaid Cymru called for a “new health and care landscape in north Wales describing the existing system as “too big and cumbersome”. In 2015 the then First Minister said there was an issue over whether “one single board is the way forward for the whole of the north”. The current First Minister also acknowledged in 2019 that he had considered whether to split the board up but concluded that another reorganisation would be a barrier to progress. However he noted this is kept under review and “if we thought the answer to Betsi's problems was a reorganisation we wouldn't stand back from doing it”.

Following a critical report into vascular services in BCUHB in March 2022 the outgoing Public Services Ombudsman for Wales said it could be the time to ask whether the north Wales health board was too large or could continue in “its current structural form”. There were calls from Plaid Cymru in Plenary in May 2022 - rejected by Welsh Government - for the health board to be “broken up”,

although the Plaid spokesman acknowledged “that a reorganisation is a big and complicated process”.

The call for breaking up the health board into “smaller, more manageable parts” was repeated in Plenary on 28 February 2023 (para.227). The Minister responded that “I want to make sure that people in north Wales can get the service they require, and I don't think that a massively distracting reorganisation is going to help in that task”. (para.234)

4. Welsh Government response

In her response the Minister for Health and Social Services states that:

I am not of the view that we should consider breaking the health board into smaller units. The health board is the largest in Wales and I believe that it benefits significantly from its scale. Its size means that it can deliver consistent services to the population of North Wales, by managing a single patient waiting list. It can sustain the critical mass required for most specialist services even as advances in professional standards lead to greater sub-specialisation, and it should therefore be able to deliver more resilient specialist services through working across locality boundaries as a single body.

Any significant organisational change or attempt to disband the health board into smaller organisations would only lead to further disruption in a health and social care system still recovering from the impact of the pandemic and may detract from my objectives of delivering improvements in care. It would also create additional management costs at a time when finances are tight.

What is important is to ensure there is appropriate leadership and infrastructure within the health board to meet the demands placed upon it. Therefore, it is essential that we support the health board to drive forward transformation and not undertake a disruptive re-structure that diverts resources from patient care.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these

P-06-1324 Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board has failed the people of North Wales and should be disbanded into smaller units

briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.