

Welsh Affairs Committee Enquiry: Impact of Population Change in Wales
RCGP Cymru Wales Response

RCGP notes the areas regarding which the committee calls for submission and will provide evidence on the impact of population change on the delivery of healthcare.

As highlighted by the Committee, the 2021 census noted that many areas in Wales are experiencing ageing and depopulation.

GP surgery closures:

An example of the effect of depopulation in certain areas is the falling number of GP practices. In the last 10 years Wales has lost 87 GP practices, with 21 of those closures happening since the COVID-19 pandemic. RCGP Cymru Wales is aware of some notable examples of this loss happening in rural and semi-rural areas. As noted by the census the populations in these areas tend to be older and therefore more likely to need to access primary care.

If surgeries are lost from these locations, patients will need to travel to neighbouring towns, often having to rely on public transport. Public transport options can be infrequent and inconvenient for a patient. This risk isolating the elderly or those on lower incomes.

We have called for the Welsh Government and NHS Wales to consider offering a greater scope for video consultations where appropriate to the patient to provide an alternative option. However, for the ageing populations in these areas, having a GP locally was of great reassurance and comfort, impacting the quality of life of individuals and the community. GP surgeries are not the only public services leaving these areas. While they are commercial enterprises at face value, post offices, banks, and pubs are also places where people benefit from social interaction within their community to the benefit of their health and wellbeing, albeit the health benefits are somewhat subject to what they choose to order while in the pub.

Caring for an ageing population

Part of the reason for the closure of GP surgeries may be as result of the increasing demand put upon primary care services by the complex needs of ageing the population.¹ Work life balance becomes harder to achieve if there are fewer GPs to meet demand and with many GPs themselves, reaching the end of their career, many may be opting for early retirement or may find themselves struggling with poor health. According to our recent members survey, 25% of GP respondents do not see themselves working in general practice in five years with a third of these citing retirement as the reason.

¹ BMA, 2023, Save Our Surgeries

This pattern is repeated across healthcare, with almost all services noting an ageing population as a key reason for the increase in workload.²

Medical Graduates

In 2022 the General Medical Council reported that half of medical graduates who graduate in Wales leave to practice in England due to greater availability of junior posts.³

It also noted that like in England, Wales's medical workforce relies heavily on international medical graduates. As the Committee may be aware international medical graduates are given leave to remain after five years. However, GP training concludes after three, meaning that newly qualified GPs must find an employer to sponsor them after this time.

This year the Home Office will grant an extension of four months, at the end of GP training, to allow the process to take place. This is welcome, but we would call for the same leave to remain to be provided for general practice graduates as is currently in place for other international medical graduates. Anecdotally, we have heard reports that Wales is particularly affected by this visa issue as in general terms the business operations of general practice in England tend to be larger, thus they are likely to be more familiar with the sponsorship criteria than their Welsh counterparts, who may be reliant on a smaller staff team to process sponsorship requests along with many other tasks.

² <https://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/guidelines-policy/people-who-care>

³ https://www.gmc-uk.org/-/media/documents/workforce-report-2022---full-report_pdf-94540077.pdf