



# South Wales Spinal Network

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This report provides an overview of the achievements, challenges, risks and priorities of the South Wales Spinal Network (SWSN) during the 2025/26 financial year (April 2025 – March 2026).

The South Wales Spinal Network has delivered significant progress during 2025/26 despite ongoing workforce, capacity and diagnostic challenges. Key achievements include the strengthening of regional clinical governance arrangements, implementation of new policies and pathways, substantial improvements in MSCC outcomes, successful national recognition for service innovation, and the securing of Welsh Government funding for digital patient monitoring. Whilst progress has been made in reducing waiting times and improving network collaboration, significant challenges remain relating to workforce vacancies, spinal theatre access, on-call rota resilience and equitable access to 24/7 MRI services. These issues will remain key priorities during 2026/27.

## **Strategic Delivery & Clinical Governance**

During 2025/26, the Network strengthened clinical governance through the review of seven core policies and guidelines, supporting greater consistency, resilience and patient safety across South Wales spinal services:

- Cauda Equina Syndrome CG01
- Spinal Trauma CG02
- Intradural & Complex Nuro-spinal Surgery CG04
- Acceptance & Transfer Policy P01
- Spinal Hubs Repatriation Policy P02
- Clinical Governance and Quality Improvement Policy P03
- Clinical Guidelines Framework P04

A new Surge Policy was approved during the year, enhancing the Network's ability to respond to fluctuations in service demand and capacity pressures.

Several major workstreams remain in development and will continue into 2026/27, including:

- Paediatric Spinal Deformity Pathway (CP02)
- Spinal Infection Clinical Guideline (CG07)
- Primary Sarcoma Pathway (CP03)

The Delivery Assurance Group (DAG) continued to provide oversight of system-wide challenges, with particular focus on:

- Persistent fragility within consultant spinal on-call rotas at both spinal hubs continues to present a significant risk to service resilience, workforce sustainability and timely access to specialist spinal care (SBUHB and C&VUHB)



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- Limited access to dedicated spinal theatre capacity remains the single greatest operational constraint impacting waiting list recovery, timely treatment and clinical prioritisation across the Network.
- Ongoing management of planned care waiting lists
- Operational Delivery Network (ODN) workforce gaps
- Health Board implementation processes

Additional strategic concerns routinely highlighted to DAG included the future commissioning arrangements for the C&VUHB paediatric scoliosis service, development of spinal hub and partner service specifications, and attendance at the Regional Neurosurgical Multidisciplinary Team (MDT). Of particular concern is the continuing absence of formal commissioning arrangements and recurrent investment to support the delivery of specialised spinal services across both spinal hubs. The resulting pressures on workforce, theatre capacity, service development and operational resilience are becoming increasingly apparent and present a growing risk to the sustainability of the Network's services. These concerns have been consistently raised through DAG and have been escalated to Welsh Government for consideration as a significant strategic risk requiring national support and intervention.

### **Risks and Issues**

The Network maintained active oversight of risks and operational issues through its Governance Group and Network Board.

As of April 2026:

- 7 active risks were recorded.
- 22 live issues remained under review.

One high-risk item (RAG 25) was escalated to the Network Board:

SWSN.022 – Long Inpatient Spinal Waiting Lists- Limited access to theatre capacity continues to create pressure to treat patients outside of clinical priority order, increasing the risk of neurological deterioration, including paralysis and poor patient outcomes. Elective bed pressures across the Network continue to exacerbate this risk.

One critical issue remains unresolved:

SWSN.001 – Delayed Access to MRI for Cauda Equina Syndrome- Variations in MRI availability and complex referral pathways continue to contribute to delays in diagnosis and treatment, creating the potential for avoidable harm and poorer patient outcomes.

The Network also remains concerned that the absence of a sustainable commissioning framework, combined with a lack of recurrent investment across both spinal hubs, is contributing to increasing operational and clinical risk. These pressures are evidenced through ongoing workforce fragility, constrained theatre capacity, challenges in maintaining on-call resilience, delays to service development and reduced capacity to meet growing demand. Collectively, these issues pose a significant threat to long-term service sustainability, equitable patient access and the delivery of safe specialised spinal care. The Delivery Assurance Group has formally escalated these concerns to Welsh Government and continues to seek national support to mitigate this risk.



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### **Spinal Incident Database**

The Spinal Incident Database (SID) continues to provide a valuable mechanism for capturing patient safety incidents and sharing learning across the Network.

A total of 35 incidents were reported during 2025/26:

- Quarter 1: 9 incidents
- Quarter 2: 11 incidents
- Quarter 3: 11 incidents
- Quarter 4: 4 incidents

Recurring themes included:

- Clinical handover and communication failures
- Delayed transfers and repatriation
- Referral pathway issues
- Out-of-hours MRI access
- Workforce pressures
- Transport availability

Lessons learned continue to inform governance discussions, education programmes and quality improvement initiatives.

### **Performance & Service Delivery**

Health Boards continued to submit quarterly activity and performance data, enabling ongoing monitoring through the SWSN governance structure.

Encouragingly, recent submissions demonstrate improvements in waiting list performance, particularly following implementation of the Adult Elective Spinal Pathway (CP01). Significant reductions have been seen in Stage 1 (new outpatient) waiting times across both spinal hub organisations.

However, concerns remain regarding the unintended consequences of the current focus on achieving ministerial waiting-time targets, particularly where clinical prioritisation may be affected. The Network has encouraged clinicians to report incidents where delayed access to treatment may impact patient outcomes.

Progress towards achieving 24/7 MRI access remains inconsistent across South Wales:

- Hywel Dda University Health Board continues to review interim arrangements at Prince Philip Hospital while progressing plans to establish permanent 24/7 MRI provision at Glangwili Hospital.
- Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board has yet to establish a formal service level agreement with Cardiff and Vale University Health Board, although provision has been identified as a priority within its Integrated Medium-Term Plan (IMTP).

### **Workforce & Capacity Challenges**



Workforce sustainability remains one of the Network's most significant risks.

During 2025/26, funding could not be secured for:

- A Quality, Safety and Improvement Clinical Lead
- A Training and Education Clinical Lead

In addition, the South East Wales Metastatic Spinal Cord Compression (MSCC) Coordinator post remained vacant throughout the year, creating challenges in maintaining resilience across the service.

The Network also submitted a successful-quality bid application to Health Education and Improvement Wales (HEIW) for participation in the Clinical Leadership Fellowship Programme; however, the application was unsuccessful.

These staffing gaps continue to limit the Network's ability to expand quality improvement, research, education and workforce development programmes.

### **Metastatic Spinal Cord Compression Coordination Service**

The South West Wales MSCC Coordinator Service has continued to demonstrate significant clinical value.

Key achievements include:

- The MSCC Coordinator Service continues to deliver demonstrable improvements in patient outcomes, increasing surgical conversion rates from a historical 1% to 10.5%, ensuring more patients receive timely specialist intervention and reducing unwarranted variation in care.
- Demonstrated equitable access to spinal surgery, with 67% of surgical patients referred from Hywel Dda University Health Board.
- Successful development and implementation of a postoperative radiotherapy pathway, with the first patient completing the pathway in February 2026.
- National recognition through Eleri Lewis receiving the Best Presentation and Poster Award at the 2026 UK Acute Oncology Service Conference.

Eleri Lewis (centre) receives her award from Philippa Jones MBE (left), Independent Acute Oncology Nurse Advisor & Founding Board Member of the UK Acute Oncology Society (UKAOS) and Jo Tutchener Sharp OBE, Founder & CEO of Scamp & Dude.





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### **Quality Improvement & Research**

The Network has delivered a broad programme of quality improvement, research and service development activities throughout the year.

Major achievements include:

- Completion of a regional Cauda Equina Syndrome pathway survey across CTMUHB, SBUHB, C&VUHB and ABUHB.
- Completion of the ABUHB Caudal Epidural Injection Service review, resulting in agreement to rationalise service provision.
- Delivery of the South Wales Spinal Injection Survey and presentation of findings at Network Board and the Annual Spinal Network Conference.
- Securing Welsh Government funding to pilot the Clinitouch remote patient monitoring system for patients awaiting spinal surgery.
- Supporting enhanced funding for paediatric scoliosis surgery to enable use of 3D surgical jig technology and improve patient safety.
- Ongoing development of the National Clinical Spinal Strategy for Wales, expected to be published during Quarter 2 of 2026/27.

Following implementation of the Spinal Bracing Guideline (CG06), several workstreams have been established to standardise practice, including:

- Referral documentation
- Patient information resources
- Training and education packages
- Discharge pathways and collar care clinics

In addition, a national spinal orthotics catalogue is nearing completion and will support standardised procurement and reduced variation in clinical practice across Wales.

### **Training & Education**

Education and workforce development have remained key priorities.

Achievements during 2025/26 include:

- Introduction of fortnightly virtual education sessions attended by participants from across Wales, with attendance exceeding 200 individuals at some events.
- Delivery of two Spinal Injuries Association (SIA) Study Days.
- Purchase and allocation of ASIA e-learning licences for all Health Boards.
- Continued delivery of MSCC education and training sessions across the Network.

### **Engagement & Collaboration**

The Network has continued to strengthen regional engagement and professional collaboration.

Highlights include:



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- Launch of the inaugural South Wales Spinal Consultant Forum in March 2026.
- Delivery of the first South Wales Spinal Network Annual Conference, attended by more than 120 delegates.
- Publication of regular Network communication bulletins and patient safety learning reports.
- Continued collaboration with Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board to support spinal referral pathways and inclusion within the Welsh spinal dashboard.

### **Key Achievements**

Despite ongoing workforce, capacity and diagnostic challenges across the region, the South Wales Spinal Network has delivered significant progress during 2025/26. Key achievements include:

#### *Strengthening Clinical Governance and Standardisation*

- Completed the review and update of seven core clinical guidelines and operational policies, ensuring regional consistency in the delivery of specialised spinal services.
- Approved and implemented the South Wales Spinal Network Surge Policy (P05), strengthening the Network's ability to respond to fluctuations in demand and operational pressures.
- Continued development of three major workstreams:
  - Paediatric Spinal Deformity Pathway (CP02)
  - Spinal Infection Clinical Guideline (CG07)
  - Primary Sarcoma Pathway (CP03)

#### *Improving Patient Outcomes and Access to Care*

- Continued successful delivery of the South West Wales Metastatic Spinal Cord Compression (MSCC) Coordinator Service.
- Increased MSCC surgical conversion rates from a historical baseline of approximately 1% to 10.5%, enabling more patients to receive timely specialist intervention.
- Demonstrated equitable regional access to spinal surgery, with 67% of MSCC surgical referrals originating from Hywel Dda University Health Board.
- Developed and implemented a new post-operative radiotherapy pathway for MSCC patients, with the first patient successfully treated via the pathway in February 2026.
- Supported implementation of the Adult Elective Spinal Pathway (CP01), contributing to improvements in Stage 1 outpatient waiting times across both spinal hub organisations.

#### *Driving Quality Improvement and Innovation*

- Successfully secured Welsh Government funding to pilot the Clinitouch Remote Patient Monitoring System for spinal surgery patients awaiting treatment.
- Completed a regional Cauda Equina Syndrome pathway review across four Health Boards, identifying opportunities for pathway improvement and service standardisation.
- Completed the Aneurin Bevan University Health Board Caudal Epidural Injection Service review, resolving long-standing concerns and supporting service



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rationalisation.

- Undertook the South Wales Spinal Injection Survey, with findings presented to both Network Board and the Annual Network Conference.
- Continued development of the SWSN Implementation and Monitoring Framework (IMF)
- Finalisation of National Clinical Spinal Strategy for Wales, scheduled for publication in 2026.

#### *Enhancing Specialist Services*

- Worked with Cardiff and Vale University Health Board to secure enhanced funding for paediatric scoliosis surgery, enabling the introduction of 3D surgical jig technology and improving patient safety and surgical precision.
- Progressed development of a national spinal orthotics catalogue to standardise procurement, reduce unwarranted variation and improve value for money across Wales.
- Established multiple workstreams following implementation of the Spinal Bracing Guideline (CG06), including standardised referral forms, patient resources, discharge pathways, and education programmes.

#### *Embedding a Culture of Safety and Learning*

- Investigated and shared learning from 35 Spinal Incident Database (SID) cases throughout the year.
- Continued dissemination of lessons learned across the Network to support quality improvement, service learning and patient safety.
- Maintained a robust governance structure with active management of risks, issues and service concerns through Governance Group, Delivery Assurance Group and Network Board arrangements.

#### *Recognition and External Achievement*

- Eleri Lewis, MSCC Coordinator, received the Best Presentation and Poster Award at the 2026 UK Acute Oncology Service Conference for the first regional evaluation of the South West Wales MSCC Coordination Service.
- The South Wales MSCC Pathway was shortlisted for a Moondance All Wales Cancer Award, recognising innovation and excellence in patient care.

#### *Strengthening Collaboration, Engagement and Education*

- Successfully launched the inaugural South Wales Spinal Consultant Forum, creating a new platform for strategic collaboration across spinal providers.
- Delivered the first South Wales Spinal Network Annual Conference, attracting more than 120 delegates from across Wales.
- Established a fortnightly virtual education programme, with some sessions attended by over 200 healthcare professionals.
- Funded and delivered additional Spinal Injuries Association (SIA) Study Days to enhance workforce knowledge and capability.
- Purchased and distributed ASIA e-learning licences across all Health Boards to support the development of specialist spinal assessment skills.

### **Looking Forward: Priorities for 2026/27**

The South Wales Spinal Network enters 2026/27 with a strong foundation of collaborative working, established governance arrangements and demonstrable improvements in service quality and patient outcomes. However, significant challenges remain in relation to workforce capacity, access to diagnostics, elective recovery and service resilience. The Network will therefore focus its efforts on the following strategic priorities.

#### **Strengthening Workforce Sustainability and Service Resilience**

Securing sustainable workforce arrangements across the Network remains a critical priority. Particular focus will be placed on addressing the fragility of spinal consultant on-call rotas within the spinal hubs, recruiting to vacant ODN leadership posts, and restoring resilience within the Metastatic Spinal Cord Compression (MSCC) Coordinator service. The Network will continue to work with Health Boards and national partners to develop sustainable workforce solutions that support safe and equitable service delivery.

#### **Improving Access to Timely Diagnostics and Treatment**

Timely access to MRI remains fundamental to the delivery of safe spinal services, particularly for patients with suspected Cauda Equina Syndrome and Metastatic Spinal Cord Compression. During 2026/27, the Network will continue to support Health Boards in progressing sustainable 24/7 MRI provision and reducing variation in access across the region.

The Network will also continue to work with spinal providers to improve access to theatre capacity and address the risks associated with long inpatient and elective waiting lists, ensuring that clinical prioritisation remains focused on patient need and reducing the risk of avoidable harm.

#### **Delivering Consistent High-Quality Care Across South Wales**

The completion and implementation of key clinical pathways and guidelines will remain a priority. This includes:

- Paediatric Spinal Deformity Pathway (CP02)
- Spinal Infection Clinical Guideline (CG07)
- Primary Sarcoma Pathway (CP03)

Alongside this work, the Network will continue to promote consistent adoption of existing pathways and standards across all partner organisations, supporting equitable access to high-quality spinal care regardless of geographical location.

#### **Advancing Quality Improvement, Innovation and Research**

Building on the successes achieved during 2025/26, the Network will continue to embed a culture of continuous improvement through audit, research, incident learning and service evaluation.

Key areas of focus include:

- Implementation and evaluation of the Clinitouch remote patient monitoring pilot.
- Continued development of national spinal data and performance dashboards.
- Expansion of quality improvement initiatives arising from audit and survey work.
- Sharing learning from Spinal Incident Database reviews across the wider spinal



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community.

- Continued development of the SWSN Implementation and Monitoring Framework (IMF)
- Supporting publication and implementation of the National Clinical Spinal Strategy for Wales.

### Enhancing Specialised and Regional Services

The Network will continue to work with commissioners and Health Boards to strengthen specialised spinal services across Wales. Particular attention will be given to the future development and commissioning of paediatric spinal deformity services, ensuring patients have equitable access to specialist care and the latest surgical technologies.

The development of spinal hub and partner provider service specifications will also continue to support clarity of roles, responsibilities and service expectations across the Network.

### Expanding Education, Leadership and Engagement

Recognising the importance of workforce development and collaboration, the Network will continue to expand its multidisciplinary education programme, consultant engagement forum and regional learning opportunities.

The success of the inaugural South Wales Spinal Network Conference demonstrated the value of bringing clinicians, managers and stakeholders together to share innovation and best practice. The Network will build upon this success through continued engagement events, educational programmes and strengthened partnerships across Wales.

The South Wales Spinal Network has continued to demonstrate the value of collaborative networked working in driving improvements in the quality, safety and consistency of specialised spinal services across South Wales. During 2025/26, significant progress has been made in strengthening governance arrangements, developing and implementing regional pathways, advancing quality improvement initiatives, supporting workforce education and improving patient access to specialist spinal care.

Notable achievements include the continued success of the Metastatic Spinal Cord Compression (MSCC) Coordination Service, implementation of the Adult Elective Spinal Pathway, approval and review of key clinical policies and guidelines, securing Welsh Government funding for innovative remote patient monitoring technology, and national recognition for the Network's work in improving outcomes for patients with spinal conditions. The Network has also strengthened its role as a forum for regional collaboration through enhanced engagement, education and multidisciplinary working.

Whilst these achievements are significant, the Network continues to operate within a challenging healthcare environment. Persistent workforce vacancies, fragility within spinal on-call rotas, constrained theatre capacity, variation in access to 24/7 MRI services, and ongoing pressures associated with elective recovery continue to present risks to both service sustainability and patient outcomes. These challenges require continued partnership working between Health Boards, commissioners and national stakeholders to ensure the long-term resilience of spinal services.

The Network is increasingly concerned that the longstanding absence of formal commissioning arrangements and sufficient recurrent investment in both spinal hubs is now manifesting in tangible risks to service delivery. Workforce shortages, fragile on-call rotas, limited theatre capacity, increasing demand and delays in service transformation collectively threaten the sustainability and resilience of specialised spinal services across South Wales. Given the scale and persistence of these challenges, the Delivery Assurance Group has escalated its concerns to Welsh Government and considers the establishment of an appropriately commissioned and sustainably funded service model to be essential for the future delivery of safe, equitable and effective spinal care.

Looking ahead to 2026/27, the Network's focus will remain on delivering safe, timely and equitable access to specialist spinal care for the population of South Wales. Key priorities will include strengthening workforce resilience, reducing waiting list-related risks, improving access to diagnostics and treatment, completing the remaining pathway development programme, and supporting implementation of the National Clinical Spinal Strategy for Wales. Alongside these priorities, the continued development of the South Wales Spinal Network's Implementation and Monitoring Framework (IMF) will be a critical enabler, providing robust oversight of pathway implementation, performance monitoring, assurance and outcome measurement to support consistent delivery of high-quality spinal care across the region

Through continued collaboration, innovation and a commitment to quality improvement, the South Wales Spinal Network is well placed to build on the progress achieved during 2025/26 and continue improving outcomes, patient experience and the sustainability of specialised spinal services across Wales.

## **Appendices**

Appendix 1- South Wales Spinal Network Annual Review 2025-2026

Appendix 2- South Wales Spinal Network Risk Register

Appendix 3- South Wales Spinal Network Issue Log

Appendix 4- South Wales Spinal Network Conference Programme 6<sup>th</sup> June 2025