

Press release

30 September 2025

Freedom of information disclosure by Ambulance Service contradicts Western Trust narrative

A freedom of information response from the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) has directly contradicted a statement by the Western Health and Social Care Trust (WHSCCT) that there have been no adverse incidents because of the 'temporary' withdrawal of emergency general surgery from South West Acute Hospital (SWAH). The freedom of information disclosure was made in response to a request from hospital campaign group Save Our Acute Services – which is campaigning for a ministerial commitment to the restoration of emergency surgery at the hospital.

The NIAS data confirmed that a total of 236 'adverse incidents' had been reported by NIAS staff as inter-trust incidents for investigation by the Western Trust. They include the period of the withdrawal of emergency general surgery at SWAH. While 157 of the total were attributable to delays in handovers of patients from ambulances to WHSCCT emergency departments, 35 were cases arising from adherence to agreed protocols for transfer of patients from SWAH ED to Altnagelvin hospital. The statistics are only those reported and are likely a significant underestimate of the real total.

The consultation documentation issued by the WHSCCT in July 2025 argued for the withdrawal of emergency general surgery at SWAH to be made permanent. In that document, the western trust claimed 'there is no evidence of any individual patient harm for a single patient or any evidence that in the absence of EGS on site has affected any patient outcomes'. That consultation was halted after an unprecedented intervention by the Health Minister.

SOAS spokesperson Donal O'Cofaigh said ***“The figures released by the ambulance service flatly contradict the claims of Western Trust management that there's no evidence of patient harm. But they will not come as a surprise to our community; indeed, they are likely a significant underestimate. How many more were discarded, or were not reported and how many more incidents occurred on private ambulances or while patients had to be driven up by relatives and on occasion have been told to drive themselves up? And that's not to consider the double ED wait or the wait for a bed when patients get to Altnagelvin.*”**

“SOAS has documented almost 600 individual adverse patient experiences following the withdrawal of emergency surgery from SWAH. A summarised form

was supplied to the Health Regulator, the RQIA, during its review of the safety of patient pathways - alongside very strong statements directly from patients themselves. However, RQIA did not consider individual testimonies adequately making its findings or recommendations.

“But the ten recommendations the RQIA did make have not been delivered, as has been recognized by Health minister Mike Nesbitt during the recent Stormont debate on SWAH. The absence of emergency surgery from SWAH compromises patient safety. Our community faces continued second class access to life-saving treatment in an emergency or trauma situation. The only acceptable option is for the Health Minister to intervene again and direct the Western Trust to include the goal of full-service restoration in its vision plan for SWAH.”

ENDS

For further information or to arrange an interview with the campaign contact Donal O'Cofaigh, SOAS spokesperson, tel. 07375 530941.