LLAIS
Eich llais mewn iechyd a gofal cymdeithasol | Your voice in health and social care

WHAT WE ARE HEARING: THE PAUSE TO GENDER-AFFIRMING SURGERY

October 2026

Accessible formats
This document is also available in Welsh. If you would like it in another format or language, contact us at enquiries@llaiscymru.org or on 02920 235 558.

SUMMARY

Summary

In late August 2026, referrals for gender-affirming surgery, surgical assessments and scheduled operations through the Welsh Gender Service were paused while an independent clinical review takes place. The decision was taken by the NHS Wales Joint Commissioning Committee (NWJCC), which commissions specialist services on behalf of Wales's seven health boards.

Since then, people affected, and the organisations that support them, have told us about severe distress, surgery cancelled days or hours before it was due, and months of not knowing what happens next. Some told us they first heard about the pause on social media. The health board that hosts the Welsh Gender Service wrote to 451 people. The first stage of the review covers around 60 people, so most do not yet know when their case will be looked at.

People told us they want:

- clear and regular communication about the review and its progress
- clear reasons for the pause, and the evidence behind it
- timescales they can plan around
- a real say in decisions about their care
- emotional and psychological support while they wait
- confidence that decisions are clinically led, transparent and based on evidence

This report sets out what people have told us. We are sharing it with the NWJCC to inform its Quality, Safety and Outcomes Sub-Committee meeting on 30 October. Llais will set out its own view on how the decision was made, and its formal representations to the NWJCC, separately.

OUR APPROACH

Our role and how we gathered this information

OUR ROLE

Our job is to listen to people, make sure their voices reach those making decisions, and hold services to account for how people are treated. Everyone who uses health and care services in Wales deserves to know what is happening to their care, to understand why, and to have a say. That applies to this service as it would anywhere else.

Between late August and early October 2026, we heard from:

- 27 people through our national survey
- 5 people in one-to-one interviews
- 7 representative organisations, which support and work with a large number of trans and non-binary people across Wales

Most of what we heard came from people directly affected by the pause, or from organisations supporting them. We did not hear from anyone who supported the pause.

This report reflects what people and organisations told us. It is not a survey of everyone affected, and it does not claim to speak for all 451 people on the surgical pathway or for the whole trans community. The representative organisations we met work with many people affected by the pause, so their views also reflect experiences beyond those who spoke to us directly.

HOW WE DESCRIBE WHAT WE HEARD

“Some” means a theme raised by a few of the people or organisations we heard from.

“Many” means a theme raised by a large share of the people we heard from, and by several organisations.

We do not use these words to estimate how common a view is across everyone affected.

With thanks to Trans Partnership Cymru, Cwiar Cymru, Pride Cymru, Umbrella Cymru, TransActual and everyone who gave their time to share their experiences with us.

WHAT WE HEARD

What people have told us

Distress, and lives on hold

The strongest message we heard was about the toll on people's mental health. Some had surgery cancelled after taking leave, travelling long distances, or arriving at hospital. Many had waited years. For them, the pause felt less like a delay and more like a loss of something they had worked towards for a long time.

> **“I have been waiting over ten years for surgery and it's left me feeling so hopeless.”**

People told us that not knowing what happens next has itself been harmful. They described being unable to plan work, study, relationships or money while their treatment is uncertain. Some older people worried that further delay could affect their health, their eligibility or how much they would benefit from surgery.

> **“We are stuck in limbo. I'm not living, I'm just surviving.”**

Some people were unsure what emotional and psychological support was available, and whether NHS and third sector services could meet the extra demand. People told us the Welsh Gender Service had been a support to them, but that it was hard to speak to someone because the phone lines were too busy for the volume of calls.

How people found out

Some of the people we heard from learned about the pause through social media, friends or community networks before any official contact, and some waited days for a letter. They felt strongly that those directly affected should have been told first.

> **“I first learned it had been cancelled through social media, and did not receive direct communication until the following Tuesday.”**

People told us they had struggled to get updates. Some were unsure which organisation is responsible for referrals, waiting lists, treatment decisions or communication, and some told us they had been passed between organisations without an answer.

Questions about the decision and the review

Many of the people we heard from told us they did not understand why surgery was paused before the review had begun, or why the pause covers the whole surgical pathway. Some noted that the concerns reported publicly related to recent referrals, while those first in line for review were referred around two years ago.

> **“I've already been assessed, I've already gone through the process, why is my case being reviewed again?”**

Organisations supporting people at review assessments told us some questions, about relationships, finances and social lives, felt unclear in purpose and unrelated to a clinical review. People told us they want to know what the review is for, how their information will be used, and whether it could create new barriers to surgery. Some worried about changes to eligibility, such as body mass index thresholds, or chest surgery being linked to other procedures.

Representative organisations raised concerns that family members' views were among the information that influenced the decision to pause services. They pointed out that many trans people experience family rejection and asked how adults' own choices are weighed against others' views. Anyone may raise a concern about a service. The question is not whether such concerns should be heard, but how they are weighed when decisions affect adults' own care.

Some people saw the pause in the context of wider debate about trans people's rights and healthcare and felt they were being treated differently from other patients.

> **“This would not have happened with other services.”**

Wider impacts

Some people described losing money on travel, accommodation and leave that could not be refunded, and putting back plans for work and study. Some told us they are considering private treatment, not by choice but because they cannot see an end to the wait. They pointed out that this is not an option for everyone, and worried it creates unfairness based on what people can afford.

The NWJCC has confirmed that these costs can be reimbursed, which we welcome. Some people told us that some expenses are difficult to prove, and that the system for claiming the money back could be made simpler.

Some people also worried that waiting lists elsewhere in the UK will keep moving while Welsh referrals are paused, leaving people in Wales further behind when surgery resumes.

Experiences of care

Many of those who talked about their care separated their concerns about the decision from the care they had received. They described Welsh Gender Service staff as professional, compassionate and supportive. Some told us they had moved to, worked in or studied in Wales because of this pathway, and worried that what works well could be lost.

> **“The Welsh Gender Service were professional and did everything by the book.”**

For some, the pause has affected their trust that their views will count when future decisions are made.

IMPACT STORY

One person's experience

She has known she was trans since early childhood. After several years on the pathway, and every assessment and approval the service requires, she was waiting for her pre-operative assessment when she heard about the pause.

> **“I've jumped through all of the hoops.”**
>
> **“It was like a punch in the stomach. I haven't come to terms with it.”**

Since then, she has struggled to sleep or eat, and worries about it every day. What hurts most is losing the certainty that kept her going.

She does not understand what the pause is for, given how thorough her assessment was. Her questions are the ones we hear most often:

> **“What patient safety issue is there? What other options were explored before pausing? Where is the communication? How long will the review take?”**

She has had peer support, but says there isn't enough mental health support for others in her position, and wants regular communication with the whole community, not just those first in line.

THE NWJCC'S RESPONSE

What the NWJCC has told us

The NWJCC describes the pause as a precautionary, clinically led step while it seeks assurance about the surgical referral pathway. Its Quality, Safety and Outcomes Sub-Committee put the service under formal escalation (Level 3) on 24 August 2026.

The committee has said:

- **Why it acted.** Data showed surgery referral rates from the Welsh service were significantly higher than in England, while fewer people referred for some procedures went on to have surgery. It considered this alongside concerns from clinicians and family members, and other correspondence. It says family concerns were not the sole basis for the decision.
- **What is paused.** New referrals, surgical assessments and scheduled surgery. Hormone therapy, psychological support, speech and language therapy and aftercare continue.
- **Who is affected.** The health board wrote to 451 people on the surgical pathway. Around 60 people were due surgery before the end of December; their cases are being reviewed first, in date order. People who can proceed after review will be prioritised.
- **The reviews.** Terms of reference and FAQs have been published. The case reviews are separate from a wider review of the service, planned since 2024, with initial findings due by the end of 2026.
- **Openness.** It has acknowledged that people were left with unanswered questions and apologised for the uncertainty and anxiety this caused. It has since shared with Llais the recommendation paper considered in private in August and the Chair's Action letter that approved the decision, and is publishing both.

We welcome these steps. Much of what we heard was gathered before some of them were taken. Even so, people continue to tell us they do not fully understand the reasons for the decision, do not know when they will hear about their own care, and do not feel involved.

NEXT STEPS

What happens next

We have met the NWJCC several times, raised people's concerns, and put their questions directly to the Joint Committee on 22 September. Since then, the NWJCC has apologised for the uncertainty caused, published the review's terms of reference and FAQs, committed to prioritising people who can proceed, and shared and published the recommendation paper and the Chair's Action letter.

Next, we will:

- set out our view on how the decision was made, and our formal representations to the NWJCC, in a fuller report
- share this report with health boards, the NWJCC, and NHS Performance and Improvement
- keep listening, and report again

SUPPORT

If you need support

If you are struggling, you do not have to wait:

- **NHS 111, press 2** for urgent mental health support, 24 hours a day
- **Samaritans** on 116 123, free, any time
- **CALL,** the mental health helpline for Wales, 0800 132 737, call@helpline.wales
- **Switchboard,** the LGBTQIA+ support line, 0800 0119100, hello@switchboard.lgbt
- **Cardiff and Vale University Health Board concerns team** (cav.concerns@wales.nhs.uk) for questions about your own care, or to ask for psychological support

If someone's life is at immediate risk, call 999.

Tell us about your experience

If you have been affected by the pause, we want to hear from you. Share your story online or contact your local Llais team. Whatever you choose, we're here to listen.

Contact us and accessible formats

This document is also available in Welsh. If you would like it in another format or language, or want to give feedback, please contact us. We welcome calls in Welsh. If you write to us in Welsh, we will reply in Welsh, without delay.

Llais
Crown Buildings, Cathays Park, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff CF10 3NQ
02920 235 558
enquiries@llaiscymru.org
www.llaiswales.org

Sources

- Welsh Gender Service update, 28 August 2026 (Cardiff and Vale University Health Board)
- Welsh Gender Service update, 11 September 2026 (Cardiff and Vale University Health Board)