Headway
the brain injury association

Brain injury survivors and services deserve better

Our manifesto for the 2026 Senedd Cymru election



Introduction

Brain injury can challenge every aspect of your life – walking, talking, thinking, and feeling – and the losses can be severe and permanent. It can mean losing both the life you once lived and the person you once were. We all think 'it will never happen to me', but a brain injury can happen to anyone, at any time. When it does, Headway is here to help.

Every 40 minutes, someone is admitted to hospital with a brain injury in Wales. That's 36 people every single day. In 2023/24 alone, there were 13,221 admissions. Whether resulting from head trauma, stroke, or another cause, a brain injury can profoundly alter how a person thinks, feels, and behaves. Yet access to specialist rehabilitation and support, both at the acute phase and in particular within local communities, is inconsistent, inadequate and underfunded, leaving brain injury survivors, carers and families without the help they need to rebuild their lives and regain their independence.

Together, 14 volunteer-led branches and one local Headway charity provide support to brain injury survivors across Wales, supported by Headway UK. Our volunteer-led branches run vital activities and social rehabilitation for survivors. While the charity Headway Cardiff and South East Wales supports 500 – 600 people each year who have been affected by an acquired brain injury through their independence and wellbeing centre, outreach, supporting families and carers, counselling and more.

Brain injury survivors across Wales face persistent barriers to timely and specialist rehabilitation, including community-based support, mental health provision, and help for the families and carers around them. These challenges are made harder by inconsistent data alongside limited awareness and understanding of brain injury.

Action is overdue – the Senedd and Welsh Government must act decisively to prioritise brain injury survivors and the lifeline services they depend on.

1. Fix and equalise access to rehabilitation

Everyone affected by acquired brain injury in Wales should have access to effective and timely specialist neurorehabilitation, community reablement and mental health support. But in practice, provision varies widely, due to a chronic lack of sustainable funding, meaning too often a survivor's recovery depends on where they live rather than on their need. The next Welsh Government should fix these postcode lotteries.

Postcode lotteries across Wales:

North, Mid and West Wales have no specialist neurorehabilitation unit, and a long-planned proposal is on hold. Many patients must travel long distances for support, often into England, creating significant financial and time-based costs. These issues are exacerbated for those who primarily speak Welsh. And while community support exists locally in some areas, including the North Wales Brain injury Service, these services need additional investment.

And in South Wales, access to community-based rehabilitation remains inconsistent, with notable gaps in south-west Wales that need to be addressed.

Volunteer-led Headway branches provide important services including drop-ins, social reintegration and family support. And while Headway Cardiff and South East Wales provides lifeline local rehabilitation, the charity is facing pressures due to inconsistent funding and local authority assessment issues.

These challenges are compounded by inconsistent mental health provision. Brain injury can directly cause poor mental health and isolation, yet 62% of people with neurological conditions in Wales report not being asked about their mental wellbeing in the past three years[1].This underlines the urgent need for local investment.

To support brain injury survivors, the next Welsh Government should:

1. Introduce a brain injury delivery plan to ensure consistent, timely, and high-quality acute, post-acute and community specialist rehabilitation support across Wales, including vital vocational rehabilitation.
2. Restart and fully fund the development of a specialist Neurorehabilitation Unit in North, Mid and West Wales.
3. Expand and invest in community rehabilitation services, including urgent investment in areas without support such as in rural Wales.
4. Guarantee consistent access to mental health support, including through recruitment of more neuropsychologists.

2. Enhance care and support to improve wellbeing and independence

People in Wales living with a brain injury often have complex, rapidly changing needs, yet social care is slow, confusing and hard to access. Long waits and inadequate support place huge pressure on families and unpaid carers. The next Welsh Government must ensure survivors receive better care and support to live well and independently.

Limited support for survivors and carers:

Many people with brain injury in Wales live independently for years, but others develop complex needs that can change quickly. Adult social care is often slow, difficult to navigate and disjointed, leaving survivors at risk of deterioration or avoidable hospital admission.

Alongside paid care, families provide vital daily support but often lack clear information and practical help. This strains relationships and carers' health, compounded by long journeys to specialist services. Since 2011, Headway's UK-wide Emergency Fund has given over £40,000 to families in Wales facing sudden post-injury challenges yet further support is needed.

Around 310,000 unpaid carers in Wales[2], including many supporting brain injury survivors, shoulder huge responsibilities at significant costs. Stronger support for carers is vital to protecting families and survivors' wellbeing.

To support brain injury survivors, the next Welsh Government should:

1. Commit to sustainable, long-term increased social care funding, alongside mandatory specialised training for staff, to ensure appropriate support so brain injury survivors live fulfilling lives.
2. Introduce a consistent and transparent process for referrals and financial assessments to access community-based rehabilitation across local authorities.
3. Establish an accessible grant scheme, based on Headway's Emergency Fund to assist families in the immediate aftermath of injury.
4. Enhance access to counselling, financial support and additional services for affected family carers.

3. Strengthening brain injury understanding, awareness and data collection

Wales lacks the consistent data needed to understand the true scale of acquired brain injury. Until this improves, services cannot effectively plan or deliver coordinated support. This data gap mirrors a wider lack of awareness, underscoring the urgent need for improving understanding, awareness and prevention of brain injuries.

Lack of understanding, awareness and data:

Wales needs much better data on acquired brain injury across health, social care and wider public services. Information gaps include how many people seek help from their GP, what happens after hospital discharge, and how many survivors access rehabilitation, social care or benefits.

This gap reflects a wider lack of awareness and understanding of brain injury in Wales, where its effects are often overlooked. In particular, the hidden and fluctuating impacts of brain injury could be better recognised across different settings, including education, sports, health and social care. Improving awareness is vital to preventing injuries, identifying needs earlier, and ensuring people get the right support in every aspect of life.

Data and awareness must also drive action, including more consistent identification of brain injury and better coordination between public services. Greater emphasis on prevention would reduce avoidable brain injuries and the long-term impact on individuals, families and public services.

To support brain injury survivors, the next Welsh Government should:

1. Introduce a single, Wales-wide framework to record brain injury consistently across Wales.
2. Carry out national mapping of NHS and non-NHS brain injury services, including community-based support, to identify gaps in rehabilitation.
3. Launch a public awareness campaign to educate people about the hidden and fluctuating effects of brain injury.
4. Ensure that frontline public service staff interacting with brain injury survivors receive specialised mandatory training on understanding brain injury, alongside accessible training for non-government organisations.

Headway Cardiff and South East Wales

Headway Cardiff and South East Wales, an autonomous charity affiliated to Headway – the brain injury association, delivers vital rehabilitation for local brain injury survivors but is facing increasing pressure due to systemic strains on health and social care.

Local brain injury survivors face lengthy local authority assessment delays, while confusing and inconsistent financial assessments leave service users uncertain about costs and, in some cases, facing unaffordable charges. The current assessments system also risks excluding individuals with more subtle cognitive or emotional needs.

Funding for the charity remains uneven, with a notable gap from Cwm Taf Morgannwg health board alongside ongoing uncertainty around time-limited funding initially from the Welsh Government.

Across south-east Wales, access to dedicated rehabilitation beds is increasingly limited, with many discharged to local hospitals lacking specialist services, highlighting the need for better matching of patients to appropriate care.

The next Welsh Government must support community-based rehabilitation services such as those provided by Headway Cardiff and South East Wales.

Conclusion

Brain injury can happen in an instant, but recovery and rebuilding a life takes years.

During the next Senedd, around 53,000 people will be admitted to hospital with an acquired brain injury. The new Senedd and Welsh Government must do more to ensure no survivor faces that journey alone. By investing in rehabilitation, supporting families and carers, and improving understanding and awareness, the next government can transform outcomes for thousands each year. Headway and our local network stand ready to help – but we cannot do it without national action.

Together, we can build a Wales where every brain injury survivor gets the understanding, support and opportunities they deserve.

References:

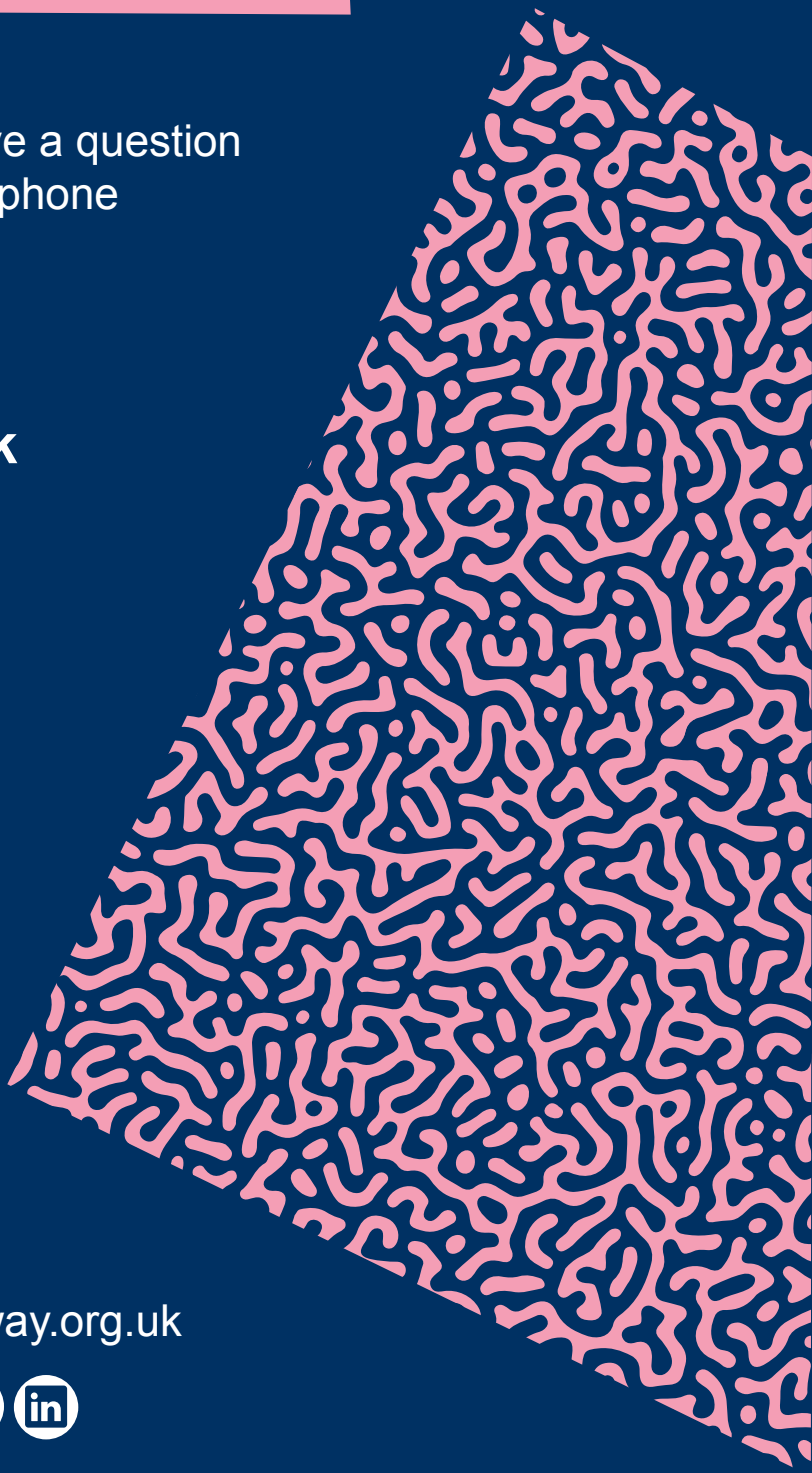
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Contact us about our 2026 Senedd Cymru election manifesto by emailing:
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If you need help or support, or have a question about brain injury, contact our freephone nurse-led helpline:

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Headway – the brain injury association is registered with the Charity Commission for England and Wales [Charity No. 1025852] and the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (Charity No. SC 039992).
Headway – the brain injury association is a company limited by guarantee registered in England [No. 2346893].