

Briefing on the 2017 party conferences

NHS Providers hosted a series of roundtables at the 2017 autumn party conferences. At the Labour and Conservative conferences, we focused on valuing the NHS workforce, and at the Liberal Democrat conference we partnered with the Royal College of Psychiatrists to discuss child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). This briefing sets out the key announcements made by the parties and the main discussion points from our events.

1. Key policy announcements

Conservative party conference

Health announcements

In his [speech to conference](#), health secretary Jeremy Hunt announced:

- An expansion of nursing training places, with an additional 5,000 student nurse placements every year, representing an increase of 25%, as well as plans to encourage nursing leavers to return to the profession.
- Increased funding to train a further 5,500 nursing associates a year by 2019.
- Steps to improve working conditions for the NHS workers, including new flexible working arrangements, a new system of staff banks and a scheme to give NHS workers first refusal on affordable homes built on surplus NHS land.

EU nationals working in the NHS

- Addressing the 150,000 EU workers in the health and care system in his conference speech, the health secretary said "you do a fantastic job, we want you to stay and we're confident you will be able to stay with the same rights you have now - so you can continue being a highly valued part of our NHS and social care family".
- In her conference speech the Prime Minister, Theresa May, stated that EU citizens are welcome here and she "urged the negotiating teams to reach agreement on this quickly because we want you to stay".
- In her subsequent [open letter to EU citizens in the UK](#) (19 October), the Prime Minister stated: "I want to give reassurance that this issue remains a priority, that we are united on the key principles, and that the focus over the weeks to come will be delivering an agreement that works for people here in the UK, and people in the EU...EU citizens living lawfully in the UK today will be able to stay... We are in touching distance of agreement. I know both sides will consider each other's proposals for finalising the agreement with an open mind. And with flexibility and creativity on both sides, I am confident that we can conclude discussions on citizens' rights in the coming weeks."

Other relevant announcements

In [her speech to conference](#), the Prime Minister announced:

- That the independent review of the Mental Health Act will be conducted by Professor Sir Simon Wessely and will bring forward its recommendations by Autumn 2018, “so that we can tackle the longstanding injustices of discrimination in our mental health system once and for all”.
- An opt-in system for organ donation.
- That the government would increase NHS funding per head for every year of this parliament.

NHS Providers’ view

Responding to the nursing workforce measures announced by the health secretary, the chief executive of NHS Providers, Chris Hopson, said:

“Worries over staffing are the number one concern for many NHS trusts. Over time, these changes should have a positive impact. We support the expansion of new routes into nursing. A flexible approach to staff training and development will be essential in meeting the difficulties we face. The planned increase in nursing students is timely given existing shortages and difficulties presented by Brexit. The NHS faces a range of workforce challenges. We look forward to working with the health secretary to address these in the coming months.”

Labour party conference

In [his speech to conference](#), shadow health secretary Jonathan Ashworth set out:

- A commitment that a Labour government would allocate an extra £45bn for health and social care, and a £500m emergency winter fund.
- Labour’s intention to end sustainability and transformation partnerships (STPs), bring back student nurse bursaries and end NHS pay restraint, as well as secure the rights of EU staff in the NHS.
- Plans to reinstate the secretary of state’s responsibility to provide universal care and repeal the Health and Social Care Act 2012, would fight sales of hospital estates and “privatisation”.

In [her speech to conference](#), shadow minister for mental health and social care Barbara Keeley outlined:

- A pledge to increase funding for child and adolescent mental health funding and ring-fence mental health budgets.
- Labour’s National Care Service plan – a service in which we pool the risk of high care costs – which would receive “an extra £3bn in public funds every year”

Other relevant announcements

In [his speech to conference](#), shadow chancellor John McDonnell announced:

- A review of existing private finance initiative (PFI) contracts with the aim of bringing them back into the public sector.

NHS Providers' view

Responding to Labour's call for a £500m winter bailout, the chief executive of NHS Providers, Chris Hopson, said:

"We hope all parties recognise the importance of taking seriously the added pressures on the NHS in winter. Over many months we have warned consistently of the urgent need to fund extra staff and beds in order to deal with the challenging months ahead. Unfortunately though, it is getting very late in the day to put in place the extra resources that will be needed. It is positive that planning for winter is considerably more developed than last year and that emergency care performance has been given greater priority. Underlying all this is the fundamental question of the level of funding needed to deliver the right quality of care to a growing and ageing population. All extra investment in the NHS and social care is welcome. But we know that the plans in all the main party manifestos fell well short of the extra funding the independent Office of Budget Responsibility estimated was needed."

2. NHS Providers events

Labour and Conservative roundtables

Our roundtables focused on valuing the NHS workforce. The discussions covered the pressures staff face, short and long-term workforce supply, the adequacy of current funding, winter planning, leadership development within the NHS, and opportunities for better local engagement.

Labour party conference

Chaired by *The Guardian* and *Observer* health policy editor, Denis Campbell, the shadow health secretary Jonathan Ashworth addressed our roundtable. He was joined by Meg Hillier MP (chair of the Public Accounts Committee), Sarah Jones MP, Karen Lee MP and Karin Smyth MP, in addition to senior health and care stakeholders.

Conservative party conference

Chaired by *The Times* health editor, Chris Smyth, the health minister Philip Dunne MP, addressed our roundtable. He was joined by parliamentary private secretary to the ministerial health team, James Cartlidge MP, as well as Jeremy Lefroy MP, Andrew Selous MP and Helen Whately MP, and senior health and care stakeholders.

Liberal Democrat roundtable

Our mental health lunchtime discussion was held in partnership with the Royal College of Psychiatrists and considered child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) and the government's forthcoming green paper. Health spokesperson, Norman Lamb MP, and Lords spokesperson on mental health, Baroness Jolly, addressed our roundtable.

Since the conference, the Liberal Democrat team has been reshuffled, with Norman Lamb stepping down as health spokesman, and being succeeded by Baroness Jolly.

3. Issues raised at party conference events

As well as hosting a series of roundtables, NHS Providers participated in several other events and meetings. A summary of those discussions follows.

Workforce

Issues raised by health and care representatives:

- The significant pressures on NHS staff and the adverse effect on the safety and quality of care
- The shortfalls of NHS workers in key posts and specialties, without clear plans to increase supply to sufficient levels to meet demand
- The importance of making roles attractive, citing ongoing pay restraint, stringent language tests, demand pressures and working conditions, as key issues
- The adequacy of workforce planning, both in relation to the ability to tackle short-term gaps and to increase system capacity in order to continue delivering high quality patient care in the future
- The fragmented nature of responsibility for workforce planning, and the implications of this for a coherent approach
- The importance of overseas recruitment both now and in the future, as well as the crucial role played by EU workers in the NHS, the need to make them feel welcome and clarify their post-Brexit status.

Party responses:

- Conservative representatives stressed the importance of providing safe staffing across the system and the role played by NHS leaders and managers to support and encourage staff. They also acknowledged the reliance on the NHS' international workforce and the need to make it easier for those who want to train in the UK to do so
- Labour representatives acknowledged the concern around staffing, particularly in relation to workforce pressures, pay, vacancy rates and said that Labour's priority in government would be to stabilise the service.

Finance

Issues raised by health and care representatives:

- The importance of framing funding initiatives as future investments to save money and improve outcomes, in a similar vein to how infrastructure improvements are communicated
- Pledged funding does not always reach the frontline, and cuts in other sectors also have a significant impact on health.

Party responses:

- Conservative representatives stated there was no reason why the government couldn't replicate current levels of NHS funding once we leave the EU
- Labour representatives stated they were very conscious about the overstretched nature of the system and that the system is being asked to meet various targets without requisite funding. They also acknowledged the importance of paying staff fairly and questioned whether the government would be pledging additional funding following the lifting of pay restraint.

Mental health

Issues raised by health and care representatives:

- Overarching themes of shortages in the mental health workforce, and the lack of investment, and the high thresholds and long waiting times for accessing care
- The importance of further investment in early-intervention and perinatal mental health and recognising the impact that hollowing out core trusts services would have on the delivery of mental health services
- The wellbeing of the workforce, including the high vacancy rates and sickness in absence rates amongst mental health staff
- The increased uptake of private care services, as a result of access challenges, along with concern about the quality of therapy and the adequacy of its regulation
- The importance of engaging with the voluntary sector, educational institutions and identifying a single mechanism to track service users as they move through a more integrated service
- The potential of engaging with digital channels and social media, as a gateway to services, and which offer a convenient, anonymous route into CAMHS
- The lack of mental health training amongst some sectors of the health service
- A focus on informing children and young people of their rights and outcomes, even in the event that practices were restricted
- The disproportionate detention rates for minority groups
- Preventing people getting into crisis and the importance of advocacy for those in crisis
- The Mental Health Act and the government's forthcoming CAMHS green paper were seen as a vital opportunity to make a lasting difference and to tackle longstanding concerns.
- Priorities for the CAMHS green paper included a focus on improving: wellbeing, waiting times, access and related data, workforce education, prevention and working across other institutions and government departments, such as education

Party responses:

- Liberal Democrat representatives were conscious of high thresholds for accessing care and long waiting times for CAMHS, and highlighted the importance of challenging CCGs on the provision of CAMHS. They also acknowledged the positive attitudinal change towards mental health and the vulnerability of children and young people with mental health problems and the need to speak up on their behalf.