

Parliamentary briefing: Government plans for changes to the NHS Long Term plan in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic

Oral question, House of Lords, 15 September 2020

NHS Providers is the membership organisation for the NHS hospital, mental health, community and ambulance services that treat patients and service users in the NHS. We help those NHS trusts and foundation trusts to deliver high-quality, patient-focused care by enabling them to learn from each other, acting as their public voice and helping shape the system in which they operate.

NHS Providers has all trusts in voluntary membership, collectively accounting for £87bn of annual expenditure and employing more than one million staff.

Key points

- The NHS Long Term Plan was published in January 2019, following an announcement in June 2018 from the then government of a £20.5bn annual real terms uplift for the NHS by 2023/24.
- NHS Providers welcomed the ambitious aspirations and wide-ranging vision for the future of the health service set out in plan. However, we have consistently stressed the need to prioritise the ambitions set out in the LTP and called on decision makers to clearly set out what should be delivered, by when, considering funding and workforce constraints.
- The combination of years of underfunding and rising demand; the current government's ambitious manifesto commitments; and the pressures and additional costs created by the COVID-19 pandemic, there is now widespread agreement that there is a significant mismatch between demand and capacity. While delivering the LTP as it stands initially seemed ambitious, we are now clear that reprioritisation is needed to ensure the 'ask' of the NHS is matched with appropriate resource

Developments since the publication of the Long Term Plan

Prior to COVID-19, the system's ability to deliver the aims set out in the LTP was dependent on ensuring sufficient funding, overcoming severe workforce shortages, and government setting out a plan to reform the social care system.

While the government's decision to increase frontline NHS funding by 3.4% a year from 2019/20 to 2023/24 is welcome, it is lower than the average increase of 4% across the period between the establishment of the NHS in 1948 and 2010. Vacancies in the NHS workforce still need to be addressed and staff burnout as a result of coping with year-round pressures and COVID-19 is a key concern for trust leaders. We have seen little progress on reforming social care, with the pandemic revealing the stark underfunding and pressures faced by the sector.

The NHS now finds itself in a position where there are more priorities than it can reasonably deliver given significant funding, workforce and capacity constraints highlighted above. Despite treating record numbers of patients, trusts in the acute sector were recording their lowest results against performance standards in elective surgery and emergency care in over a decade.

Alongside these pressures, the government has made a raft of additional announcements relating to the NHS. The 2019 Conservative Party manifesto pledged 20 hospital upgrades, 40 new hospitals, and 50,000 more nurses. The pandemic has added a new set of urgent priorities for trusts, such as addressing the backlog in elective care, coping with ongoing COVID related demand and the need to run COVID and non-COVID sites.

Expecting trusts and their staff to deliver on the aims set out in the Long Term Plan as well as manifesto commitments would always have been challenging but the emergence of COVID-19 has presented a brand new set of challenges to grapple with. We do not believe it is feasible or realistic to expect the NHS to deliver everything that has been asked of it. We would urge the government and the national NHS bodies to work with the sector to agree a realistic and funded timeframe to deliver key priorities for the duration of the parliament, aligned with the Comprehensive Spending Review.

Conclusion

The vision set out in the NHS Long Term Plan received widespread support but even before the pandemic, NHS trusts were grappling with rapidly growing demand for healthcare and facing significant pressures due to a constrained funding envelope, increasing demand and severe workforce shortages. We have consistently emphasised how ambitious the long term plan was to deliver in this context.

Since then, COVID-19 has inevitably placed significant additional pressure on the NHS. In our submission, and our influencing work ahead of the comprehensive spending review, we will be urging the government to offer a long term funding settlement for the NHS to support forward planning,

and to work with the NHS national bodies and the sector to ensure that the 'ask' of the NHS is matched with a realistic and funded timescale for delivery.