



7 September 2022

The Rt Hon Thérèse Coffey MP
Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

By email

Dear Secretary of State

Congratulations on your appointment as Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. NHS Providers has had close and positive working relationships with your predecessors, and we look forward to supporting you in your new role as you tackle the challenges ahead. We are keen to meet you as soon as possible to understand your priorities and how we can help deliver them.

NHS Providers is the representative body for frontline NHS acute, ambulance, community and mental health services. We have 100% of NHS foundation trusts and trusts in membership, accounting for £104bn of annual spend and employing more than 1.2 million staff. Our unique relationship with trusts gives us an unparalleled view of what is happening at the NHS frontline, and places us in a unique position to offer you support and insight as you and your team develop robust solutions to the strategic challenges currently facing health and care services.

An extraordinary National Health Service

The NHS is delivering extraordinary things in exceptional times. Despite repeated waves of Covid-19 and unprecedented care backlogs following the pandemic, in line with the NHS elective recovery plan, the number of people waiting two years or more has been virtually eliminated. Community diagnostic and surgical hubs are being created across the country to help the NHS carry out more diagnostic tests and planned operations. The NHS is exceeding pre-pandemic levels of activity in many services, underlining how hard staff are working to drive recovery during very challenging times. Critically, the NHS is seeing more suspected cancer referral patients than ever before; the ambulance service is responding to huge increases in demand, with a 38% increase in the most serious call-outs compared to before the pandemic; and mental health services are in contact with more people than ever before. Integrated care systems (ICSs) have been recently placed

NHS Providers

One Birdcage Walk, London SW1H 9JJ
020 7304 6977

enquiries@nhsproviders.org
www.nhsproviders.org
[@NHSProviders](https://twitter.com/NHSProviders)

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Registered office: One Birdcage Walk, London SW1H 9JJ

on a statutory footing to enable health and care partners to work better together to support healthier and more resilient and empowered communities.

However, there is no doubt that the health and care sector is under unprecedented pressure, with the elective waiting list at 6.7m, extreme pressures on urgent and emergency care, and care backlogs in primary care, community and mental health services. Growing operational demands, the ongoing prevalence of Covid-19, and the toll of the rising cost of living on the public's health, all alongside an early flu season, risk making this winter extremely challenging. Historical underinvestment in social care continues to have a serious knock-on impact on the NHS, making it more difficult for people to remain independent at home if they cannot access support and often exacerbating delayed discharges from hospital.

We set out below the immediate challenges and what we believe needs to be put in place to enable the NHS to deliver a world-class service.

Supporting recruitment and retention in the NHS

In a recent poll the public identified their top three priorities for the NHS. They want to see reductions in staff shortages, A&E and ambulance waiting times, and treatment backlogs. We agree with the public's analysis – and to make that a reality, we must boost staff numbers fast.

Since last year, the total number of full-time equivalent vacancies across the NHS has risen by 34%, reaching an all-time high of 132,139. That means that nearly one in ten posts are vacant in England, and one in eight posts are vacant in London. Colleagues in social care, with 165,000 vacant posts, are also struggling to recruit and retain staff, in part as other sectors offer better pay, terms and conditions.

This situation has developed in large part due to the lack of a funded, nationally led, workforce plan to ensure a pipeline of newly trained doctors, nurses and other health and care professionals. Against a backdrop of unprecedented pressures, including from the pandemic, staff have juggled unsustainable workloads for too long.

But there are solutions to mitigate these challenges, which we are keen to explore with you, for example:

- Your support for the continued development of the Department-commissioned workforce plan, due to be published this autumn, is vital. Taking this a step further, we would urge government to commission a fully funded, fully costed, workforce plan that sets out the necessary future shape and size of the health and care workforce.
- There are opportunities to address ongoing issues with the NHS pension scheme to avoid senior staff incurring unpredictable and punitive tax bills and to review flexibilities for lower paid staff. This is particularly pressing in the face of changes to pension contribution levels for NHS staff which will take effect from October.
- Pay, terms and conditions remain fundamental in enabling the NHS to attract and retain talented staff in sufficient numbers. Trust leaders understand the pressures on the public purse at the moment, however it is also clear that the recent, below-inflation, pay awards have been poorly received by a number of staff groups. Our

role in NHS Providers will be to support trust boards to support their staff, and to protect patient safety, during any potential industrial action.

Investing sufficient revenue and capital funding in challenging times

Trusts and the wider NHS are already working to deliver stretching efficiency targets and in the absence of a fully funded pay award, vital resources are being diverted from planned developments for frontline care at a time of unparalleled operational pressure.

Inflation is eroding the multi-year settlement confirmed at the October 2021 spending review, dramatically rising energy costs are a serious concern for trusts, and the rising cost of living is already affecting NHS staff and, by extension, the care that trusts can deliver. We are hearing reports from trusts about how the cost of living is impacting patients and exacerbating existing health conditions.

Access to capital investment is another pressing concern for trusts. Many parts of the NHS estate are in extremely poor condition, and in some cases, demolition and rebuild is the only viable way forward. Trusts must have access to the capital they need to replace reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete planks and to address other critical infrastructure risks which can compromise staff and patient safety. The government's New Hospital Programme (NHP) is a fantastic opportunity to transform the fabric of the NHS and the delivery of healthcare by providing much needed renewal for acute, mental health, community and ambulance services. If accelerated and delivered properly, it could also support the levelling up agenda by reducing health inequalities and driving improvements to patient safety, service capacity, and the recruitment and retention of staff.

The Prime Minister's planned Comprehensive Spending Review will be front of mind for the NHS as it navigates these challenges. This process will be essential in confirming funding for a multi-year people plan; much needed capital investment to ensure safe, high-quality care and to invest in digital transformation; and a funding settlement to meet rising demand, tackle the backlog of care and put in place plans to live with Covid-19.

Placing social care on a sustainable footing

Any long-term investment in the NHS must go hand in hand with a long-term funded plan for the future of social care. The pandemic has made plain the fragility of the sector and the interdependence of health and social care. For the NHS to succeed, so must social care. There needs to be a convincing plan, which works alongside the NHS settlement, to put social care on a sustainable footing. This would also give the NHS the best possible chance of clearing the care backlog and ensuring people can return home or to community settings in a timely way after a stay in hospital.

Embedding system working and reform of mental health legislation

As the government starts to prepare for its first Queen's Speech, trust leaders have made it clear that they see the value of changes brought about by the new Health and Care Act 2022. They are working hard to deliver on the core purposes of system working to improve outcomes, tackle inequalities, enhance productivity and value for money, and support broader social and economic development. We now need to ensure that trust

leaders and their teams have the opportunity to deliver for patients, without further structural upheaval. There is, however, broad support for the reform of the Mental Health Act 1983 which has already commenced its pre-legislative scrutiny.

Learning from the pandemic and tackling health inequalities

The pandemic shone a spotlight on inequality, with marginalised groups experiencing disproportionately higher infection rates and poorer outcomes. In addition to affecting access to healthcare directly, the pandemic also impacted the wider determinants of health such as employment, housing, education and social connection. As 'anchor institutions' for their local communities, trusts look forward to working with you to progress a system-wide approach to health as they seek to ensure services are preventative, accessible and person-centred, and to learn from the pandemic and the findings of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry.

We hope this has been a helpful overview of the key issues and opportunities facing NHS trusts in this critical year and beyond, and that we can meet in the very near future so we can support you as you develop and implement your plans for the health and care sector. We will shortly send you a formal invitation to address an in-person audience of over 600 frontline NHS leaders and stakeholders at our Annual Conference and Exhibition, which takes place on 15 and 16 November 2022 in Liverpool. This offers you the opportunity to engage directly with the leaders of NHS trusts and foundation trusts at a pivotal time.

Yours sincerely



Sir Ron Kerr
Chair

Tel: 020 7304 6805

Email: ron.kerr@nhsproviders.org



Saffron Cordery
Interim Chief Executive

Tel: 020 7304 6805

Email: saffron.cordery@nhsproviders.org

cc: Amanda Pritchard, Sir Chris Wormald