

Government policy paper: *Our plan for patients*

On Thursday 22 September, Thérèse Coffey, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, announced the government's new health policy paper, *Our plan for patients*. Ms Coffey said that her priority as secretary of state would be acting for patients, and that she would act proactively, not prescriptively. She committed to a relentless focus on "ABCD", with the plan setting out the government's priorities for health and care in four key areas: ambulances, backlogs, social care, doctors and dentists.

The plan is summarised below, followed by NHS Providers' press statements. If you have any questions or comments, please contact Joshua Edwards (Joshua.Edwards@nhsproviders.org).

Our plan for patients

The plan sets out four cross-cutting themes underpinning the proposals:

1. *Patients* will be empowered to play a greater role in decision making about their health and care
2. *Prevention services* will move closer to people's homes
3. *Primary care* will meet public expectations with regards to accessing appointments
4. A focus on *performance and productivity*, in partnership with NHS England, will help to deliver improvements in care.

Ambulances

Supporting ambulance services to operate more effectively is key to the government's plan for this winter and next. The plan is focused on response times for Category 1 and Category 2 incidents, enabled by quicker handover of patients so ambulances can get back on the road and respond to 999 calls.

To support delivery of urgent care in the most appropriate setting, the government is:

- working with NHS 111 and ambulance services to direct patients to the full range of services such as helplines for those experiencing a mental health crisis
- supporting the NHS to better redirect patients to appropriate settings such as urgent care centres, walk-in centres or minor injuries units
- expanding the use of remote monitoring of patients at home
- supporting local NHS services to expand falls prevention and falls response units.

The plan also focuses on increasing the number of NHS 111 call handlers and 999 call handlers by the end of December 2022.

To improve ambulance response times, the government is:

- setting an expectation that all hospitals will have clear escalation arrangements for when delays occur and can deploy hospital ambulance liaison officers (HALOs) if needed
- facilitating ambulance trusts to support each other during the busiest periods, including by rolling out a new digital intelligent routing platform and where necessary sharing call handling
- exploring establishing a new ambulance auxiliary service, building on initiatives such as the St John Ambulance auxiliary ambulance service.

The number of call handlers will also be increased to 4,800 in NHS 111 and 2,500 in 999 by December 2022, and this winter the NHS will open “the equivalent of 7,000 beds so that every hospital has space to see and treat patients more quickly”. This would include treating more people at home or in the community by enabling remote monitoring.

Backlogs

The government intends to build on the [elective recovery plan](#), with a particular focus on expanding capacity, including by:

- accelerating the hospital building programme and continuing the hospital upgrade programme
- maximising the use of the independent sector
- changing elements of the NHS pension scheme to help retain doctors, nurses and other senior NHS staff. This includes:
 - correcting pension rules regarding inflation
 - encouraging NHS trusts to explore local solutions for senior clinicians affected by pension tax charges, such as pension recycling
 - implementing permanent retirement flexibilities and extending existing temporary measures to allow staff to return to service or stay in service longer.

Additional capacity will also be created in hospitals by recruiting 50,000 more nurses, as well as increasing the number of clinical associates; increasing the use of virtual outpatient appointments; and enhancing the availability of mental health support (including in relation to talking therapies, children and young people’s mental health services, community support for adults living with severe mental illness, and support in schools).

Diagnosis

There are currently 92 community diagnostic centres (CDCs), and the government will prioritise delivering up to 160 in total, so that patients benefit from earlier tests closer to home. The centres will support the NHS to carry out up to 17 million tests by March 2025, with capacity for up to 9 million more per year once they are all fully operational.

Prioritising patients with the greatest need

Trusts will continue to prioritise patients who have been waiting longest and those needing treatment most urgently, including for cancer. The government will review how patients are categorised to better distinguish between patients whose care is delayed for clinical reasons or for reasons of patient choice and those who are ready to be treated.

Using joined-up data and digital tools

Patients will be enabled to make better informed choices based on information about their length of wait for treatment, and making waiting lists by speciality and by provider more accessible. High quality data platforms will support the management of waiting lists and theatre use, and the government will support all trusts to put electronic patient records in place by 2025.

Care

The government is launching a £500m Adult Social Care Discharge Fund. This will inform the government's "further action from next year to rebalance funding across health and care". The fund can be "used flexibly by local health and care systems, targeting the areas facing the greatest challenges and strengthening the sector's ability to recruit and retain staff". The government will hold the local NHS and local authorities to account for implementation.

The next phase of a national recruitment campaign to encourage more people to join social care will start ahead of winter. The Department for Work and Pensions will help to promote careers in adult social care to jobseekers, with improved resources for Jobcentre Plus work coaches.

To help boost international recruitment of care workers, £15 million will be made available. The government will also support care providers to digitise social care records and work with local government to deliver the cap and means test reforms by October 2023.

Doctors and dentists

Doctors

The government sets out its expectation that patients who need an appointment with their GP practice within two weeks should get one, and that patients with urgent needs should be seen on the same day. To support this, the plan sets out a number of measures to:

- *Make it easier to access general practice.* This includes:
 - the roll-out of new cloud-based telephone systems and 31,000 more phone lines to take calls from patients, provide information about their place in the queue, and direct them to the right place for help
 - changes to funding rules from October 2022 to enable GP practices to recruit extra support staff (such as GP assistants and advanced practitioners), with the aim of freeing up over one million appointments per year
 - digital tools and improving IT systems to ease administrative burdens, while GPs will be incentivised to stay in practice by correcting pension rules regarding inflation
 - integrated care boards (ICBs) being required to hold practices to account and provide support to those with the most acute access challenges.
- *Publish data to help patients make informed choices.* Appointment data will be published at a practice level from November 2022.
- *Launch a community pharmacy offer, reducing reliance on GPs.* Pharmacies will be able to manage and supply more medicines such as contraception without a GP prescription, and take referrals from emergency care for minor illnesses or symptoms. The government will look to go further in enabling pharmacists' prescribing powers and making more simple diagnostic tests available in community pharmacy.

Dentists

The plan's proposals for dentistry build on the changes to the dental contract announced earlier in the year, and focus on incentivising dentists to take on NHS work, improving online information around registration, and easing routes into NHS dentistry. Plans include:

- Enabling those who can provide more NHS care will be able to do so, through more proactive management of contracts by the local NHS and the reallocation of resource to willing providers
- Putting in place targeted funding for dentists treating patients with complex needs who take longer to treat
- ICBs will be held to account for the provision of dentistry in their areas

- NHS England issuing guidance in October 2022 to those who perform NHS dentistry on how to deliver care under the contract using a wider range of dental professionals
- Amending legislation to allow the General Dental Council to open up alternative routes to registration for international dentistry applicants, enabling them to practice more quickly, as well as reviewing the current NHS systems that authorise dentists to work for the NHS.

Enabling delivery

The government will support the health and social care system to deliver by:

- incentivising staff retention and the return of retired staff by creating additional pension flexibilities and correcting pension rules regarding inflation
- keeping the emergency registers of health professionals for two more years
- recruiting more skilled staff from overseas and making it easier for qualified health professionals to practice here
- recruiting more people to work in care, both from the UK and internationally
- supporting new models of care and new roles for frontline health professionals, including expanding the number of mental health practitioners in primary care and strengthening mental health support in schools
- supporting the NHS and social care to make the most of digital technology.

The government will design and deliver a long-term workforce plan, review education and training requirements and will come forward with proposals to meet the changing needs and expectations of patients in the future.

Press statements

NHS Providers responds to news of government's 'Our Plan for Patients' (21 September)

Responding to news that health and social care secretary Thérèse Coffey will unveil a new plan for patients, the interim deputy chief executive of NHS Providers, Miriam Deakin, said:

"Trust leaders will read carefully the detail of the secretary of state's plan for patients tomorrow, ahead of what will be a challenging winter.

"The next few months are going to be highly pressurised across all health and care services. Rising operational demands, a possible 'twindemic' of COVID-19 alongside an early flu season and a cost of living crisis risk making a challenging winter even more difficult for the health service.

“Colleagues across acute, mental health, ambulance and community services and general practice are striving to deliver high-quality care in challenging circumstances. We welcome the secretary of state’s recognition that high quality accessible GP services are a cornerstone of the NHS. Colleagues in primary care, however, tell us that more investment and support is needed to attract, retain and develop GPs and other essential primary care professionals.

“We have a staggering 132,000 vacancies across trusts and many more in primary and social care. Demand across all services is increasing, response times are deteriorating, and handover delays continue to be a huge problem for hospitals unable to discharge patients who are well enough to continue their recovery at, or closer to home, largely due to shortages of staff and funding in social care.

“While a short-term focus on winter is welcome, without a long-term workforce plan to recruit and retain staff across all parts of health and care, as well as reform of social care, efforts to improve patients’ access to care are going to prove challenging.”

Measures to support social care over winter welcome but must not be at NHS’ expense (22 September)

Responding to a statement in the House of Commons by the health and social care secretary, Dr Thérèse Coffey, on the government’s ‘Our plan for patients’, the interim deputy chief executive of NHS Providers, Miriam Deakin said:

“Leaders across the NHS will appreciate the prompt steps taken by the health and social care secretary today to address her ‘ABCD’ list of priorities as we head into winter.

“The announcement of a new £500mn adult care social care fund to help tackle delayed discharges is a welcome boost, which will free up much needed hospital beds for those that need them most.

“But trust leaders will be seeking categorical reassurances that this funding will not be taken from NHS budgets, which are already severely stretched by inflation, energy costs and unfunded pay deals.

“And there needs to be recognition that this is a short-term contribution whereas social care needs a long-term funded plan and reform to put it on a sustainable footing.

“Similarly, while proposals to address punitive pension taxation for senior staff and to increase partial retirement flexibilities are welcome, what we need are broader pension taxation reforms and long-

term solutions which address the causes of the issues and are fair for all staff across the NHS, rather than plastering over the cracks.

“Trust leaders would also have liked to see tangible progress to tackle significant workforce gaps across health and care, with over 130,000 vacancies across trusts in England alone.

“The next few months are going to be very tough across all health and care services. Rising operational demands, a possible 'twindemic' of COVID-19 alongside an early flu season and staff and patients struggling with the cost of living risk making a challenging winter even more difficult for the health service.

“And while additional call handlers for 999 and 111 services will help ease some of the pressure on ambulance services and urgent and emergency care, we need a substantial boost across all parts of the workforce if we are going to tackle the elective waiting list which now stands at 6.8 million alongside substantial care backlogs across mental health, primary care and community services.

“We need to see a fully funded workforce plan – and fast”.