



From the chief executive

9 June 2020

Dear Prime Minister,

I am writing on behalf of health leaders who provide and commission healthcare in England to ask for a number of assurances from the Government as you plan for the next phase in the battle against the virus.

We understand the need to ease lockdown and get the country 'back to work'. As part of this, we are keen to restart diagnostic services, routine operations, outpatient appointments and referrals for cancer and other major conditions. But, as you are aware, there is still significant transmission of the virus in the community and there remains a risk of another surge, with potentially severe consequences.

Before any further measures are taken to lift restrictions, NHS leaders want to see a robust rationale, including an honest reflection of risk and clear communication to health and care services and to the wider public. The fact that the current risk of transmission is higher in hospitals and other care settings levels means that we need particular assurance that the measures being taken will enable local services to prepare and adapt for change in a way that is safe for their staff and their patients.

There are three ways in which NHS leaders need your support in this next phase:

1. Understanding and supporting the next phase

At the start of this crisis, the NHS was able to prepare to manage increased pressures by pausing a range of services. In the absence of a vaccination and an effective treatment, we will be dealing with Covid-19 for the foreseeable future. This means that resuming patient services will inevitably be a slow and gradual process, especially given that hospitals are having to provide separate Covid and non-Covid services and must run at much lower rates of occupancy to support social distancing.

It will be important too to understand the context in which the NHS is managing this next stage in the emergency. We face backdrop of significant unmet need, a confused and deteriorating financial position, a fractured and fragile social care system, and a workforce which contains many exhausted and traumatised staff. The NHS is keen to resume as many services as it can, but we need a level of realism about what can and what cannot be achieved safely in the coming months. Before the pandemic, more than four million people were waiting for routine procedures, now that figure will have increased considerably. Among other measures, we strongly advise the government to extend the ongoing



arrangements with the independent sector until the end of the financial year. We need all the capacity we can get to begin tackling the backlog of treatment.

2. Managing expectations

Over the last 12 weeks, we have seen the public's admiration and appreciation for the NHS and care services. However, if that support is to be maintained we need to manage expectations, including how quickly we can restore key patient services. It will not be possible simply to 'switch on' NHS services. The Government has a vital role to play in making this clear and providing reassurance that every possible step is being taken to control the virus, as we start to resume routine services.

3. Optimising the systems that will support the NHS in moving into the next phase

While we are encouraged that the Government has placed the NHS at the heart of its five tests for the easing of lockdown restrictions, NHS leaders are making their plans to resume activities, acutely aware of the risk of a second peak. We believe it is right to start resuming routine care, but urgently we need to resolve a number of operational challenges. In particular, we need assurances that the test and trace service will be working effectively to identify and stamp out any outbreaks that occur. A specific and detailed assurance will also be needed that appropriate, timely and regular supplies of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) will be available in all care settings as services resume.

This is about hospitals, but it is not just about hospitals. Community and primary care services have alleviated pressure on hospital services throughout the pandemic and we need to see more of the focus and resources in this area, as for many patients this is where additional capacity will be required.

On finances, health leaders have welcomed the recent commitments to support the NHS, including through the coronavirus emergency response fund. Temporary arrangements are in place until the end of July to make sure any 'reasonable' excess costs faced by providers will be funded centrally. This arrangement must be continued for the rest of the financial year given the profound impact of dealing with the fallout from the pandemic.

Alongside this letter, I enclose a copy our report, "Getting the NHS back on track: planning for the next phase of Covid-19", which outlines some of the key challenges local NHS organisations will face in the next phase of the pandemic. It forms part of our NHS Reset campaign, which aims to support the NHS as it adapts to the ongoing crisis and to help shape what the health and care system should look like in the aftermath of Covid-19.



Together with our members, we would welcome the opportunity to discuss these concerns and opportunities with you and your team. In the meantime, we will continue to work closely with your officials and those in the arms-length bodies to provide support where we can.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Niall Dickson', with a horizontal line underneath.

Niall Dickson CBE