

Dear Prime Minister,

Priorities for the NHS

Congratulations on your success in the Conservative Party leadership election and on your subsequent appointment as Prime Minister.

We are writing from the NHS Confederation; the membership body that brings together, supports and speaks for the whole healthcare system in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The members we represent employ 1.5 million staff, care for more than 1 million patients a day and control £150 billion of public expenditure.

During an economic crisis that is leaving people extremely worried about their ability to support both themselves and their loved ones, we are reassured by your commitment to build a better and more prosperous country.

However, and while understanding the complexity of the current economic challenges, our members also feel trepidation in the face of touted cuts to public services. Without proper funding and support for the NHS and social care, and the communities they serve, NHS leaders are concerned that your ambition for a more prosperous country will not come to fruition.

The health leaders we represent are clear that investment in the NHS must be at the heart of yours and the Chancellor's drive for economic growth. Put simply, there can be no wealth without health.

Independent analysis we [published recently](#) reveals a direct correlation between an increase in NHS investment and the impact this can have on growing the country's economy. It shows that for every pound of public money invested in the NHS, £4 is recouped through gains in productivity and increased participation in the labour market. This includes supporting people on waiting lists to receive the treatment they need and allocating funding to fill the NHS's 132,000 vacancies. Our analysis showed that this is especially the case in areas of high deprivation which have greater rates of unemployment. Investing in health and care services is the only way to increase economic growth and truly level up the country.

Date

25.10.2022

For the attention of
Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP
Prime Minister

As you acknowledged over the summer, the challenges facing the NHS - many of which are outside of the services control - are unprecedented. This includes rising treatment backlogs, slipping waiting time standards, increasing staff vacancies, the growing threat of industrial action, and a social care system at the brink of collapse. These concerns are intensifying as we head towards winter and as Prime Minister, it is important that you begin your new role with your eyes wide open. The NHS is full of resilient, caring, and hard-working staff who are committed to doing what they can to address these issues, but with many staff across the service exhausted and having [very poor morale](#), they need to see that you understand what they are going through.

In order to mitigate the impact of the risks facing the NHS, its workforce and most importantly the communities it serves, we ask you to take action on the following issues without delay.

Support the NHS's workforce

Vacancies across the NHS are at the highest they have ever been, and this comes as more people need healthcare. The latest publicly reported figures on unfilled roles stand at 132,000 across England and on top of that, close to one in four GP posts are set to be vacant by 2030/3. The sector has been calling for a long-term and fully funded workforce plan for the NHS to ensure its communities can reliably receive the best possible care in the future, which must include a sharp focus on domestic training and supply.

When we surveyed our members [last year](#), nine in ten of them told us that a lack of staffing across the NHS was putting patient safety and care at risk. We welcomed the pay increase awarded to NHS staff in the summer, but we remain concerned that the NHS, and in particular primary care, has not been given with the extra funding to cover this which means it has to come from existing budgets which are already facing a [real-terms cut](#).

The likelihood of industrial action from frontline professions this winter over pay and working conditions are growing and for the NHS, how you choose to respond could well define your tenure as Prime Minister. We urge your government to do everything it can to listen and engage constructively in these conversations.

Urgently bolster social care capacity

Similarly, there are 165,000 vacant roles across the social care system in England, which [our members and partners tell us](#) are being compounded by poor pay in the sector and are leading to more people choosing to move to more competitive industries. This capacity crisis is contributing to thousands of medically fit patients occupying beds in hospitals when they are ready to go home or to receive further support in the community. Additionally, it is leading to primary care, community and ambulance services increasingly being left trying to support patients who have social care needs that cannot be fulfilled, and, in many cases, this escalates to people needing inpatient care when it could have been avoided.

The £500m Adult Social Care Discharge Fund has been welcomed but one month since it was announced, local leaders have not received a penny of it yet or any substantial details on where it will go. If you want to address the NHS's backlogs, improve flow in emergency departments and reduce ambulance delays, you need to be the Prime Minister that genuinely does 'fix social care'.

Protect the NHS's capital budget

The NHS has been warned to expect cuts to its budget as waiting lists are rising, the bill for the maintenance backlog stands at over £10 billion, and the NHS faces a £7 billion gap in its budget for next year.

You have spoken previously about needing to identify efficiencies across public spending and as Chancellor, you oversaw these commitments in the Spending Review last March. The NHS is already one of the world's most efficient health care systems and it will go further, where possible and feasible, so that it can deliver value for money. However, there is simply no fat left to trim: patient services, safety and its ability to drive down waiting lists will be at [real risk](#) if it is expected to find any further savings in this current economic climate.

A decade of underinvestment in the NHS's estate and infrastructure has left buildings crumbling, as well as poor IT services and equipment in need of modernisation. All of this affects how productive the NHS can be and the quality of care it can provide for its patients with nine in ten of our members [telling us](#) a lack of investment in capital is undermining their ability to tackle the elective backlog.

It would be short-sighted to think that these financial challenges can be circumvented by raiding its capital budgets to plug holes in day-to-day spending. To do so would simply shore up problems for the future and put patients at risk.

Support communities during the cost of living crisis

With inflation standing at over 10%, we know the rising cost of living to be detrimental to public health as we approach winter with many people facing the choice between heating their homes and feeding their families. Our members [are concerned](#) that this will lead to more illness and sickness, thereby putting more pressure on NHS and social care services. We understand that the current economic climate has meant that household support for energy bills can only be guaranteed until April but urge your government to consider how the impact on local communities – particularly the most vulnerable - can be curtailed beyond then, alongside wider support.

Similarly, NHS services are also seeing their budgets eroded by soaring inflation. Rising energy costs alone will add £2 million to monthly energy bills for some hospitals this winter and this affects mental health, community and primary care services too. We are keen to engage with your government on how to make these vital public services more sustainable in the long term, but that means investing now.

Assert the government's commitment to health protection and prevention

Finally, you have spoken previously about wishing to put the NHS on a 'war footing' to tackle its waiting lists. A key part of this must address the drivers that lead to people needing to access treatment and support in the first place.

Your predecessors in government seemingly turned their backs on the most vulnerable in our society by suspending the national obesity strategy, the tobacco control plan, the ten-year mental health plan, and the white paper on reducing health disparities – all of which would have a positive impact our most vulnerable communities if introduced. Greater rates of obesity, smoking and poor mental health will lead to more complexity of illness, poorer quality of life and so, more days lost to work and more pressure on the NHS, while undermining economic growth.

The 42 integrated care systems across the country, which are in our membership, have an important role to play in developing population health management strategies for their local communities but leadership is needed from your government, including a commitment to introduce a health in all policies approach across Whitehall. The health of the nation can no longer be seen as the sole preserve of the Department for Health and Social Care.

Without decisive action, you risk being another Prime Minister who stands watch while the NHS crumbles, leaving its staff and communities to suffer the consequences.

As the membership body that speaks on behalf of all parts of the NHS, we stand ready to work with you on these challenges and we look forward to your response. If you or your office would like to discuss these matters further, or your advisers would like to hold a private roundtable with a select group of our members from across the country, please do not hesitate to be in touch via external.affairs@nhsconfed.org.

Yours sincerely,



Lord Victor Adebowale CBE
Chair
NHS Confederation



Matthew Taylor
Chief executive
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