

Conservative Party manifesto: Health and social care analysis

The Conservative Party has published its full manifesto. The manifesto includes a series of commitments on the future of the NHS and social care system. This briefing assesses the key commitments against the issues that NHS Confederation members are most concerned about.

Key points

- **Confirmation of £34 billion per year by the end of the next Parliament in additional funding for the NHS**, with a commitment that this money will go to frontline services.
- **Commitment to build and fund 40 new hospitals over the next ten years**. This is in addition to the 20 hospital upgrades announced in the summer.
- **50,000 more nurses by the end of the next Parliament**. However, the NHS Confederation has concerns about how realistic this commitment is, with a lack of detail in the manifesto about how it will be achieved.
- **A continuation of the direction set out in the NHS Long Term Plan**, with a commitment to enshrine many aspects of it into law.

NHS Confederation analysis

As the membership body that represents leaders across healthcare providers, clinical commissioners and local systems, the NHS Confederation recently surveyed its members in England to gauge what they feel are their most critical priorities for an incoming government. This survey revealed that the most pressing priorities for members are **workforce**, **social care** and **capital investment**. This briefing therefore assesses the Conservatives' manifesto against each of these issues in turn, before outlining some of the party's other commitments.



Workforce

Supporting and growing the NHS workforce was seen by the vast majority (94 per cent) of health leaders surveyed as a key priority, with over half (56 per cent) ranking it priority number one. There are more than 100,000 FTE vacancies in England in hospital and community services alone. Shortages are particularly pronounced in mental health and learning disabilities services, which have a disproportionately high number of vacancies.

In response, the Conservatives' headline commitments are:

- **Delivering 50,000 more nurses by the end of the next Parliament**

It has been reported that 14,000 extra nurses are due to come from training, 18,500 from improved retention of existing staff, 12,500 from abroad and 5,000 from on-the-job apprenticeships that allow care workers to earn nursing degrees. To assist this, **nursing bursaries will also be reintroduced.**

While the reintroduction of bursaries is welcome, the NHS Confederation is concerned over the feasibility of the 50,000 nurses' commitment. No detail is provided on how exactly 18,500 will be retained and there is only £879 million of funding put against the commitment by 2023–24. If divided between 50,000 nurses, this amounts to £17,600 a year; the current starting salary for a nurse is £23,000.

- **Delivering 6,000 more doctors in general practice and 6,000 more primary care professionals (including physiotherapists and pharmacists) by the end of the next Parliament**

This will be on top of the 7,500 extra nurse associates and 20,000 primary care professionals already announced, with the new GP doctors to help deliver **50 million extra general practice appointments a year**, an increase of over 15 per cent.

Again, the ambition here is the right one but there is a distinct lack of detail over how exactly this commitment will be delivered. Ahead of the 2015 General Election, former health secretary Jeremy Hunt promised to increase full time GP numbers by 5,000. However, official figures for June 2019 show that the fully qualified FTE GP workforce dropped by 979 – a reduction of more than 3 per cent. It remains unclear how things will differ this time round.

On workforce, the Conservatives would also:

- **Introduce an NHS visa.** Qualified doctors, nurses and allied health professionals with a job offer from the NHS, who have been trained to a recognised standard, and who have good working English, will be offered fast-track entry, reduced visa fees and dedicated support to come to the UK with their families.
- **Improve staff morale** with more funding for professional training and more supportive hospital management.
- **Hold an urgent review of the 'taper problem' with doctors' pensions**, to take place within the first 30 days of the new government. This follows an announcement from the government that they will find a short-term funding solution to enable doctors to take on extra shifts this winter without fear of being penalised financially.

Social care

Social care is seen by more than nine in ten (92 per cent) of leaders as a key priority for the incoming government, making it the second most pressing concern for health leaders after workforce. A report last year commissioned by the NHS Confederation, and undertaken by the Institute for Fiscal Studies and The Health Foundation, calculated that social care funding would need to increase by 3.9 per cent a year to meet the needs of an ageing population and an increasing number of younger adults living with disabilities.

In response, the Conservatives' headline commitments are:

- **A three-point plan to develop a long-term solution to social care**

This plan includes: a commitment of **£1 billion additional funding** for each year that the government is in place starting from April 2020, **working with the other political parties** to build a cross-party consensus, and ensuring that nobody needs to sell their home to pay for care.

A cross-party approach to the future of the social care system has been advocated by the NHS Confederation and so this commitment is welcome. However, we have heard warm words about a cross-party approach to social care before. Funding is desperately needed in the short term to remedy the social care crisis. The Confederation leads the Health for Care campaign, which estimates that between £1.1 and £2.5 billion is needed simply to stabilise social care levels, and between £4 and £5.75 billion is needed to return to a model of social care that provides more universal access. The funding announced by the Conservatives falls short of both.

- **Extending leave entitlement for unpaid carers to a week**

Most unpaid carers across the country are women, with Carers UK arguing that carers need five to ten days of paid care leave. This is therefore a welcome commitment.

On social care, the Conservatives would also:

- **Increase funding research into dementia** to look for a cure and increase clinical trials to research new treatments.
- **Spend £74 million over three years** specifically to increase capacity within community settings for people with learning disabilities and autism.

Capital investment

Capital investment ranked as the third most pressing priority identified by health leaders, with over nine in ten (93 per cent) of those who responded telling us the commitments already made NHS are just the start of what is needed. Spending on capital investment in the NHS has fallen by 7 per cent in real terms from 2010/11 (£5.8 billion) to 2017/18 (£5.3 billion) according to research carried out by the Health Foundation. The UK currently has one of the lowest levels of healthcare capital funding in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation Development (OECD) countries.

In response, the Conservatives' headline commitments are:

- **Building 40 new hospitals and upgrading a further 20**

This pledge was made in August, prior to the launch of the manifesto. It was announced with £1.8 billion funding attached, however this figure subsequently rose to £2.7 billion in September. The amount of funding that should be considered 'new' has already been contested. With regards to the £1.8 billion, it has been highlighted that around £850m appears to be 'new money', with the remaining £1 billion coming from a pre-existing NHS capital fund that trusts were expected to contribute to.

To date, only six trusts have been allocated money to begin upgrade projects (somewhere around £2.7 billion), although a further 21 have been promised 'seed funding' from a pot of £100 million.

- **Investing in new cancer diagnostic machines to boost early diagnosis across 78 trusts**

This money is intended to both reduce waiting times and improve the reliability and success of cancer diagnoses.

Other commitments

Outside the three areas outlined above, the Conservatives also commits to:

- **Enshrining the NHS Long Term Plan in law** within the first three months of the new government. The Health Service Journal has reported that this would include NHS England's proposals to remove competition law and would also make integrated care systems (ICSs) statutory bodies.
- **Ending 'unfair' hospital car parking charges** by making parking free for those in greatest need, including disabled people, frequent outpatient attenders, parents of sick children staying overnight and staff working night shifts.
- **Extending the successful Cancer Drugs Fund** into an Innovative Medicines Fund. It is hoped that this will allow doctors to use the most advanced, life-saving treatments for conditions such as cancer or autoimmune disease.
- **Ensuring that the NHS is 'not on the table'** as part of future trade deals.
- **Improving NHS performance** by using new funding to bring down operating waiting times, improve A&E performance and increase cancer survival rates.

- **Clamping down on health tourism**, ensuring that those from overseas who use NHS services pay 'their fair share'.
- **Supporting hospices**, with a £25 million cash injection in August to support 200,000 people at the end of their lives.

Discussion

Our members will be pleased that the manifesto commits to continuing the direction of travel set out in the NHS Long Term Plan. There is no appetite among health leaders for another top-down reorganisation of the NHS and the NHS Confederation welcomes the commitment to enshrining aspects of the Long Term Plan into law. While the finer details will of course be key, such legislation may help to remove some of the current obstacles to integrated care. The Confederation has already contributed to NHS England and NHS Improvements' proposed legislative reforms and it is likely that new legislation will be structured around these proposals.

However, while many of the ambitions set out in the Conservatives' manifesto are welcomed by the NHS Confederation, further detail is needed with many commitments. More nurses would help to plug significant workforce gaps currently seen across the health service, but how exactly would a Conservative government improve retention? A cross-party approach to social care is welcome but how will this differ to previous attempts to foster cross-party support on a sustainable long-term solution to the social care crisis?

The proposed increases in capital are welcome, but the Conservatives will need to go further and make sure that all parts of the country benefit from this extra funding. This cannot be restricted to investing in hospitals alone, as vital mental health and community services also need major upgrades in technology and buildings. The manifesto makes no reference to investment in technology or digital transformation.

On social care, we support the short-term funding increases outlined in the manifesto, but it falls well short of the secure, long-term funding that is required.

With significantly less funding proposed overall than the other main parties, this should be considered a business-as-usual manifesto that sets out the 'what', but not yet the 'how'.

About the NHS Confederation

The NHS Confederation is the membership body that brings together and speaks on behalf of the whole NHS. We represent over 500 members across health and social care, including hospitals, community and mental health providers, ambulance trusts, independent sector organisations providing NHS care, and clinical commissioning groups.

To find out more, please visit www.nhsconfed.org or email enquiries@nhsconfed.org



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Registered charity no: 1090329.

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