

Health & Social Care

- 1. What lessons can we learn from this crisis to ensure the health and social care services are better prepared for the pressures it will face in the future?*
- 2. What drivers should underpin our approach to the healthcare policy development as we build towards the next General Election?*
- 3. What drivers should underpin a new settlement for social care?*
- 4. How can we ensure that health and care workers are properly valued and rewarded?*
- 5. Which areas of health and social care policy should the Labour Party prioritise for policy development as we build towards the next General Election?*

The health and social care system after coronavirus

In the aftermath of the Second World War, it was a Labour government that had the vision and determination to create the National Health Service providing universal healthcare for all on the basis of need, free at the point of use.

To this day, the NHS remains Labour's greatest achievement and the most effective engine of social justice our country has ever seen. Nobody should be denied health care because of lack of means. We remain determined to restore a universal, publicly funded and provided NHS. The coronavirus crisis has shown that public health care is needed more than ever.

We stand in solidarity with our healthcare workers who deserve fair pay, protection in the work place and a government on their side.

Coronavirus has shown yet again the unacceptable inequalities in accessing health care and outcomes. Health policy must ensure fair access and tackle the wider determinants of ill health.

This pandemic is a global health emergency the like of which the world has not seen since Spanish flu. In the UK, hundreds of thousands have contracted the disease and tens of thousands have died. Every single one of those deaths is a tragedy.

The pandemic has put health and social care services under unprecedented strain. It has led to a huge increase in demand for acute care and, in particular, intensive care facilities.

By international standards, we went into the crisis with low numbers of doctors, nurses and intensive care beds. Meeting the massive increase in demand has stretched our hospitals to their limits.

The Conservatives decision to scrap the nursing bursary means our workforce was already overstretched, while a single-minded drive for efficiency has left us without the spare capacity to handle unexpected shocks. The outsourcing of cleaning, support staff and care workers has also driven down standards, undermining the key principle of a public NHS.

Our frontline workers have risen to this unprecedented challenge. NHS and care staff have put their lives at risk to ensure people get the care they so desperately need. When we get through this crisis, it will be down to the inspiring and selfless work of our NHS staff, our care workers, our ambulance drivers, our emergency services, our cleaners, our porters.

We clap our carers each week with pride, gratitude and a deep sense of national unity and purpose. More than a hundred NHS and care workers have tragically lost their lives. We owe it to them to fight for a better future.

We all want the government's strategy to succeed: to save lives and livelihoods. And we must recognise the extraordinary collective national effort that is being made to overcome this crisis.

But we must also continue to highlight serious shortcomings at the frontline. The UK has been behind the curve and behind other countries on testing, on Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and on social care.

NHS and care staff have risked their lives by going to work with inadequate PPE. We have all heard the harrowing stories of the virus spreading through care homes, relatives unable to say their last goodbyes and staff poorly paid, equipped and protected to provide essential care. We have demanded immediate action from government to address these issues.

We have demanded a clear plan to address the disproportionate impact of coronavirus on certain groups, such as the Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) community, and those living in relatively deprived areas of the country.

The pressure of coronavirus has also meant non-urgent operations have been put on hold and treatment for cancer delayed, while evidence suggests that people are avoiding seeing a doctor or going to A&E. This will lead to a longer term wave of increased demand on NHS services, even after the immediate crisis has abated.

Labour will continue to challenge the government on these issues and put forward positive proposals to improve outcomes. We will always be clear that a public NHS is the safest and most effective way to deliver healthcare, in a pandemic and beyond. The crisis posed by coronavirus will fundamentally reshape the way people think about the role of government and our public services. In the longer term, we must

build a vision for the NHS and social care that delivers the best care anywhere in the world. This consultation considers the values and principles that must underpin our policy platform as we look towards the next General Election.

The challenges

Transforming our health and social care system after coronavirus requires us to think imaginatively about the principles and values that must underpin our most important public services. We must also demonstrate to the British public that change is not only necessary but that a Labour government can deliver it.

Though we must learn the lessons from the current crisis, we will also have to address the underlying problems we will inherit from this Conservative government.

Even before the impact of coronavirus, a decade of Tory mismanagement meant waiting times in overcrowded A&Es were the worst on record, a record number of people were on the NHS waiting lists and hospitals were facing huge financial problems.

The Tories have failed to give the NHS the funding it needs. At the 2019 General Election, Boris Johnson pledged to give the NHS an average increase of 3.3% per year - less than the historical average and, according to experts, only enough for the NHS to 'stand still'.

Last year, there were 100,000 staff vacancies in England alone, including a shortage of 43,000 nurses. There are over 4500 fewer mental health nurses than there were in 2010 and the number of NHS psychiatrists treating troubled children and young people is falling, despite a surge in demand among under-18s who need urgent mental health care.

Anyone trying to access mental health services faces an agonising process causing human suffering.

The continued chronic underfunding of the NHS has meant that NHS bosses have turned to the private sector to deliver contracts. The privatisation of the NHS, and the back-door attempts to privatise through wholly owned subsidiaries, have often had serious consequences, with weakened terms and conditions for NHS staff and millions of pounds wasted on failed public contracts.

Our hospitals are crumbling, equipment is outdated or unavailable, IT systems are inadequate and community facilities are neglected. There are 15,000 fewer hospital beds. Every winter, bed occupancy rates exceed dangerous levels. Patients now wait far too long to see their GP, for an ambulance or for treatment.

The Conservatives have slashed Public Health budgets, which will have inevitably

undermined our initial response led to the pandemic. Cuts to Public Health have also increased health inequality. For the first time in more than 100 years, life expectancy in the UK is stalling. Shockingly it is actually declining for the poorest 10 per cent of women.

The way forward

The priority for the country right now is simple – we must ensure the NHS and care services has all the support it needs to help us through the current crisis.

The number of new cases and deaths is falling thanks to a huge national effort from frontline workers and from those who have done their bit by staying at home. But there can be no room for complacency. It is essential that social distancing measures are lifted in a way that protects our NHS and care services.

The Labour Party will do everything it can to contribute to that effort. We will have the courage to support the government where we can on coronavirus. And we will continue to challenge them where we need to – on issues like testing, PPE and social care.

But as we emerge from this crisis, we must not return to business as usual – an under resourced and overstretched NHS, a social care system on its knees after a decade of savage cuts, and hardworking staff underpaid and undervalued.

We must create a new vision for the NHS and for social care that enables people to live longer, healthier lives and delivers the best care in the world now and in the future. We must also ensure the NHS can deal with the long-term implications of the virus, with the capacity to properly treat Covid-19 and all other ailments.

Ensuring the health and care systems have the funding they need after a decade of austerity is part of the story. But it is not enough. We must also focus on improving services – to bring waiting lists down, stabilise our A&Es and deliver the quality care for both physical and mental health that patients deserve.

For too long, social care has been neglected. Our care workers left underpaid and undervalued. Our relatives denied the dignity they deserve at the end of their life. We need a new settlement for social care. We cannot have another decade of it being thought ‘too difficult’ for politicians to solve.

We must go forward with the ambition and determination for a better society that puts dignity and respect at the heart of how we care for the most vulnerable – and how we properly reward our key workers and those who work in our public services.