



GENERAL ELECTION

What health and care need  
from the next government

# NHS staffing

Briefing

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# General Election briefings



Our briefings set out issues where we believe there is clear evidence that a government taking or returning to office in the next year must act to meaningfully improve health and care in England.



We are presenting a series of tests that any policy programme during the next Parliament should meet.



We hope these briefings will help political parties over the coming months as they draw up a platform to put to the British people – and give journalists, MPs and health organisations key questions to ask them.

# Test 1

## Improve the NHS pay review process to ensure it is fit for purpose

### What's the problem?

Recommendations are often late

Multi-year pay deals have been inflexible, causing problems when inflation rises instead of providing stability

There's a shortage of up-to-date facts on pay

"Affordability" is decided based on NHS budgets that already assume pay levels – not across government as a whole

The evidence base on how pay actually affects recruitment and retention is poor

There is a lack of consideration of how fair pay deals are between professions

### What needs to happen?

Recommendations should be published at the start of the financial year

Pay review bodies should consider longer-term deals

Government should commission research on the effect of pay on outcomes, including recruitment, retention and participation

The affordability of pay deals should be considered in the context of the whole public purse

Pay review bodies' remit should include the importance of fairness of pay between professions and staff characteristics.

# Test 2

## Bring enough staff through domestic training to deliver a sustainable workforce

### What's the problem?

The NHS is reliant on international recruitment, on a scale which may not be sustainable or ethical

Around one in five nurses have left NHS hospital and community employers within two years of starting work

Around one in eight nursing and radiography students do not gain their intended degree

There has been a 20% fall in the number of students accepted onto nursing courses in England since 2021

The number of new UK nurses joining the NHS in the year to March 2022 was a third lower than two years prior

### What needs to happen?

Government should back a campaign to attract a broader, more diverse pool of applicants to work in the NHS

There should be a plan for increasing the clinical placement capacity alongside expanded training places

Government should forgive or delay student loan repayments to encourage recent graduates to work in the NHS

Government should commission an independent review on degree-level clinical apprenticeships

# Test 3

## Make sure the deployment of different professional groups in the NHS is safe and efficient

### What's the problem?

There has been a proliferation in new roles – like physician and nursing associates – to deliver some tasks usually done by doctors or nurses.

Used wisely these emerging roles can add valuable skills, but regulation has been slow

Changes in the mix of staff can increase demand, cost more, threaten the standard of treatment and fragment care

There are growing concerns among NHS staff, which risk the loss of public confidence

Different professions are competing for learning opportunities. Mismatched subsidies skew the type of staff trusts hire

### What needs to happen?

Government must make urgent progress in appropriately regulating all new staff groups, through statute or otherwise

Government should launch an extensive campaign programme to improve public recognition and understanding of different roles

National bodies should look into whether heavy subsidies for training junior doctors are distorting staff mix

National bodies should aim to rebalance the funding attached to training different professions

# Test 4

## Eliminate the postcode lottery of NHS staff between services, settings and regions

### What's the problem?

There is persistent geographical variation in the number of GPs and NHS dentists per head in England

Growth in the number of nurses overall masks regional disparities, with some areas experiencing a two-fold variation

Numbers of learning disability nurses and health visitors have plummeted since 2019 and practice nurses have flatlined

Incentives like recruitment and retention premia are not widely taken up and not well researched

### What needs to happen?

Government should commit to precise goals to reduce disparities in staffing

Government should evaluate whether existing schemes to reduce differences in recruitment and retention are working

Government should identify best practice of the use of premia across different sectors and in different countries

Government and NHS England should encourage people to work in understaffed areas as part of plan to expand training numbers

As part of urgent reforms to dental contracts, Government should commit to a fairer distribution of dentists

# Test 5

## Retain as many as possible of the valuable staff currently working in the NHS

### What's the problem?

NHS trusts saw a record surge in staff quitting after the height of Covid-19, and the number of exits remains too high

Information on why staff leave is limited, but data shows that retirement is the most common single reason

Since 2011/12, the numbers pointing to health and work-life balance as reasons to leave have all roughly tripled

Reported levels of discrimination and bullying, harassment or abuse from colleagues remain troublingly high

Staff absences are estimated to cost the NHS £3.8 billion a year

### What needs to happen?

Government must urgently improve the data and insights available on reasons for staff leaving the NHS

Training should not only develop the clinical skills required in the future but also the core managerial and leadership skills

NHS England and Integrated Care Systems should lead by example to improve organisational culture across the NHS

Government should commission research on the retention effects of reward, staff engagement and flexible working

Plans to manage sickness absence and ensure greater flexibility for working parents should be prioritised