

Health and Social Care Secretary NHS Providers conference speech

It's a real pleasure to be closing this year's Annual Conference.

We're meeting at an important juncture in the history of the NHS, and our nation. As we strive to start a new chapter, restoring and renewing our health service while keeping this deadly virus at bay. The NHS is an organisation that has its roots in adversity. It was created after our shared experience of the strife and suffering of the Second World War with a noble mission to transform the nation's health. Just over seven decades later during one of the greatest emergencies this nation has ever faced in peacetime we've fought another adversary and the NHS has been there for us all, helping our nation to stand strong.

I'm so grateful to every single person in this wonderful institution for the heroics you've performed at this tough time. And now, just as we reflect on the hardship and suffering that this virus has brought us, we must also take what we've learnt from this time of national emergency and think with ambition and determination about the kind of health service that we want to see in the future.

Being able to work so closely with the NHS and the brilliant people who work there is a real privilege for me. I try and get on the ground as often as I can to listen and learn. My most valuable visit was just in the last few weeks when I had the chance to don scrubs for myself and spend a shift in a busy A&E and ICU.

I was blown away by the dedication and care shown by NHS colleagues and the wonderful team effort that sits behind health and care in this country. I feel this responsibility very deeply. And I will do everything in my power to make sure our health system is well equipped not just for this pandemic but for the other threats to our nation's health and happiness. So, I want to use this opportunity today to talk about my priorities for this role and the central part the NHS has to play in delivering them.

The first of these three priorities is – of course – the Covid pandemic. Because although we've made so much progress this virus is still with us and it is still a threat to us all. Last winter, the NHS was placed under the most acute pressure of the pandemic so far. The closest we've come to seeing the NHS being overwhelmed. But the British people came together to stop that from happening and in turn you did your utmost to protect them, through the acute trusts expanding critical care, community trusts that we are putting in place, enhanced discharge schemes and mental health trusts setting up wellbeing hubs for NHS colleagues.

And now a year later we're in a stronger position thanks to almost 110 million jabs that our vaccination programme has put in arms. And I'd like to take a moment to thank you all for the part you've played in this life-saving

programme. Especially the work that you've done to intensify our booster programme over the past few weeks with a million boosters given in the last 3 days. And it's fantastic that next week we'll be expanding the programme to people that are aged 40 to 49, and although I'm not quite 40 to 49 anymore, this morning I joined the over 13 million people who've had their top-up jab.

Every time I go to a vaccination centre, I'm always moved by the hope and the optimism that our vaccination programme has given to people in this country. Because of your work, we've been able to bring back cherished experiences to so many people and we can now approach this winter with the best chance of living alongside the virus. But as you know as well as anyone, this is not a time for complacency. Winter has always been a tough time of year for the NHS. In the past, we've seen flu seasons that have put the NHS under incredible strain and we now know that flu and Covid together can be formidable foes. So, we must of course tread carefully.

Every day, I look at the Covid-19 figures closely and I discuss this with my expert team of clinicians, along with leaders from across our health service. And although the vaccination programme is clearly having an impact, we've seen in the past how quickly things can change. So, as we approach this critical winter, we're throwing everything at our mission to keep the NHS standing strong. And we've given an extra £5.4 billion of funding for the autumn and winter, to boost our Covid-19 response.

This includes an extra £1 billion towards the treatment backlog, £2.8 billion towards Covid costs like infection control costs and almost half a billion pounds to free up beds through an enhanced hospital discharge programme.

And not only will patients be able to benefit from this investment, but they'll benefit from the world's most promising Covid-19 treatments too. Ronapreve, which has been specifically designed to treat Covid-19, is now being administered by the NHS. And earlier this month, we became the first country in the world to approve an antiviral for Covid-19 that can be taken at home, so we can do even more to protect the most vulnerable people in our country.

Because our fight against Covid-19 is not yet over.

It won't be a war where we can vanquish the enemy in one fell swoop but instead it's more of an ongoing counter-insurgency where we need to be ready to respond whenever we're called upon. And we can't do that without you. You've shown time and time again that you can rise to the most formidable challenges when the nation looks to you. And I'm determined to give you what you need to do your jobs and to stay strong this winter, and beyond.

But we must fight on many fronts. Not just fighting the pandemic, but what the pandemic has brought with it too. Because the almost 600,000 patients who've been admitted to hospital with Covid-19 in the UK aren't the only ones who've felt the impact. You've seen on the frontline how Covid-19 has brought with it less visible costs. Like, for example, the impact on our mental health. The proportion of adults experiencing some form of depression has nearly doubled since before the pandemic. And as well as the impact on mental

health services, there's also a striking backlog of elective care that has built up too.

In September this year, this reached almost 6 million and without taking action it risked going as high as 13 million. You all went into health and care because you want to help people. And I'm sure you find it as dispiriting as me to think about 13 million people having to endure lengthy waits to get the care they need. The first value of the NHS Constitution is how the "NHS provides a comprehensive service, that's available to all".

And now we have the defensive shield of our vaccination programme, we must be ambitious about restoring services and not let anything stand in our way. So, we're embarking on the biggest catch-up plan in the history of the NHS.

We've given £2 billion through our Elective Recovery Fund this year and £8 billion for the next three years, on 9 million more checks, scans and procedures. This means that the NHS in England can deliver significantly more elective activity by 2024/25 than it could even before the pandemic.

And just a few weeks ago, we announced another £5.9 billion of capital investment. A large part of that funding will go towards the creation of a network of community diagnostic centres which can provide a one stop shop for checks, scans and tests in the heart of local communities, bringing services closer to those who need them most. I think it's a brilliant example of some of the creative thinking that we've been using to get this backlog down and what we can achieve when different parts of the system work together. And I'm also really grateful for the way that you've embraced this hugely important work.

So that's Covid, and our recovery from Covid. My final priority is reform. Because we face a choice. Do we use this moment to put the NHS on the strongest possible footing for the future? Or simply return to what was there before the pandemic? Now, I know that different people hear different things when they hear the word reform.

So, let me set out where I'm coming from who I am and what I want to achieve.

I'm a child of public services. As a boy, I went to Dr. Gandhi's clinic on Bristol's Stapleton Road to translate for my mum. I studied in the local library because there wasn't enough space at home and I spent some of my uni days volunteering at a care home. My Dad drove a bus, my brother became a police officer and I went into public life. My family. My upbringing. It's all about public service. And the NHS is probably the best and greatest example of public service we have. So for me, this is not simply a "department that needs to be managed" – it's a lifeline for so many people in our country.

I believe in what the NHS stands for – the idea that we all share a responsibility for the health of one another and it's because I believe in the NHS that I want it to thrive. That means locking in the lessons of the pandemic. Like the incredible feats of innovation and integration that work behind our vaccination programme. But it also means applying what we've

learnt to some of the massive challenges ahead and make the lasting reforms that we know are needed.

The mental health reforms that will put it on a par with physical health at last, the public health reforms that will help us all to live healthier lives and the reforms to tackle the disparities in this nation's health. This would be an ambitious reform agenda even in normal times. But to do this while we are still fighting a pandemic and recovering from its impact, is of course a monumental feat. So, we'll need to make sure we're set up to succeed. This means a strong sense of direction, clear lines of accountability and looking at whether the NHS has what it needs to deliver this vital change.

Let's take digital leadership for example. Although we've seen phenomenal work on digital transformation during this pandemic from so many people it does strike me as odd that digital leadership is currently split across NHSE, NHSX and NHS Digital. And this is something that Laura Wade-Gery is looking at in her review.

I'm very interested in seeing how we can bring together critical decision makers, whether it's at a local or national level. Our Health and Care Bill is an example of that kind of shift. Bringing the right people and organisations to improve the health and wellbeing of their areas through Integrated Care Systems and giving them the funds and support they need to do just that.

Our White Paper on Integration which we'll be bringing forward shortly will go even further. It will set out our proposals for how health and care can work better as one. How we can stop patients from being bounced around different parts of the system, provide the right care, in the right place, at the right time and make it easier for all of you to do your jobs. I also want to see us planning more effectively for the long-term with shared strategies and clear accountability for delivery. And far-reaching plans that shun short-termism and look at what fundamental changes we need, looking far beyond the life-cycle of a single Parliament.

So, for example, I've already set in train a 15-year strategic framework for the health and social care workforce. But I want to look at what more we can do to equip the NHS for what lies ahead. So, we need the best possible leadership in place too.

The coronavirus pandemic has been a test of leadership in so many ways and so many leaders in the NHS have risen to the occasion.

We set up the Leadership Review led by General Sir Gordon Messenger and Dame Linda Pollard to take the very best of what we've seen and apply it to the new challenges that lie ahead.

To meet these challenges, we'll also need senior leaders with a whole multitude of skills. Not just managerial and clinical, but digital, and all of the attributes that will put us in strong position for the future. So, we can forge and drive this new era of recovery and reform, and give the best possible care now and for future generations.

And this is now more important than ever. We're at a pivotal moment in the history of the NHS. We've come so far in fighting this pandemic and we must never forget the part that the NHS played when our country called. Now, we have a chance to write a new chapter building on the new ideas and the momentum that we've seen, and I can't wait to work with you to write it.

Thank you very much.