

Oral statement on the NHS Delivery Plan for tackling the Covid-19 backlog

Mr Speaker, with permission, I'd like to make a statement on a new, ambitious Elective Recovery Plan...

... the NHS's Delivery Plan for tackling the Covid-19 backlog of elective care.

The NHS has responded with distinction during the country's fight against the virus.

Caring for over 700,000 people with Covid-19 in hospital in the UK...

...and delivering a vaccination programme that's helping this country to live with the virus...

...while at the same time doing so much to keep non-Covid care going.

Nobody, no institution, felt the burden of the pandemic more than the NHS.

There have been 17 million cases of Covid-19...

...and the NHS have had to respond to the original variant...

...the Alpha wave...

...the Delta wave...

...and most recently of course the Omicron wave.

But even in spite of these pressures, we had one of the fastest vaccination programmes in the world...

...and that includes one of the fastest booster programmes in the world.

Sadly as a result of focusing on urgent care...

...the NHS couldn't deal with non-urgent care as much as anyone would have liked.

The British people of course have understood this.

Despite these exceptional efforts, there is now a considerable Covid backlog of elective care.

1,600 people have waited longer than a year for care before the pandemic.

The latest data shows that this figure is now over 300,000.

On top of this, the number of people waiting for elective care in England now stands at 6 million, that is up from 4.4 million before the pandemic.

Sadly, [Mr Speaker], this number will continue rising before it falls.

A lot of people understandably stayed away from the NHS during the heights of the pandemic...

... and the most up to date estimate from the NHS is that that number is around 10 million people.

But I want these people to know that the NHS is open...

...and as Health Secretary, I want them to come forward for the care they need.

We don't know how many will now come forward – whether 30% or 80% will return...

...because no country, no country has faced a situation like this ever before.

So in developing this Plan the NHS has had to make a number of assumptions...

Even if half of these people come forward, this is going to place huge demand on the NHS...

...and we are pulling out all the stops so that the NHS is there for them when they do.

We have already announced that we're backing the NHS with an extra £2 billion of funding for elective recovery this year...

...and £8 billion on top of that over the next three years.

In addition, we are putting almost an additional £6 billion towards capital investment, for new beds, equipment and technology.

And today, we're announcing the next steps...

It shows how we will help this country's health and care system to recover from the disruption of this pandemic...

...but also how we will make reforms that are so important for the long-term.

It will allow the NHS to perform at least 9 million extra tests and checks and procedures by 2025...

...and around 30 per cent more elective activity each year in three years' time than it was doing before the pandemic.

This bold and radical vision has been developed with expert input from clinical leaders and patient groups.

It won't just reset the NHS to where it was before Covid...

...but build on what we have learnt over the past two years...

...to transform elective services and make sure that they are fit for the

future.

Mr Speaker, this Plan focuses on four key areas.

The first is how will we increase capacity. On top of enormous levels of investment...

...we are doing everything in our power to make sure that we have even more clinicians on the front line.

We now have more doctors and nurses working in the NHS than ever before...

... we have a record number of students at medical school...

...and a record number of students applying to train as nurses.

The Plan sets out what more we will be doing...

...including more healthcare support workers...

...and the recruitment and deployment of NHS reservists. We will also be making greater use of the independent sector, which formed an important part of our contingency plans for Covid-19...

...so we can help patients to access the services they need because of this high demand.

Second, Mr Speaker, as we look at the backlog, we will not just strive to get numbers down...

...but also to prioritise by clinical need and to reduce the very longest waits.

Assuming half the missing demand from the pandemic returns over the next three years...

... the NHS expect the waiting list to be reducing by March 2024.

Addressing long waits is critical to the recovery of elective care...

... and we will be actively offering longer-waiting patients greater choice about their care, to help bring these numbers down.

The Plan sets the ambition of eliminating waits in elective care of longer than a year by March 2025.

Within this, no one will wait longer than two years by July this year...

...and the NHS aims to eliminate the waits of over 18 months by April 2023...

...and of over 65 weeks by March 2024...

... which equates to 99% of patients waiting less than one year.

Mr Speaker, I've heard the concerns that some people have rightly raised, including many Honourable Members, about the impact of the pandemic on cancer care.

On Friday...

...World Cancer Day...

...I launched a Call for Evidence that will drive a new 10 Year Cancer Plan for England...

...a vision of how we can lead the world in cancer care...

...and this Elective Plan, too, places a big focus on restoring cancer services.

The NHS has done sterling work to prioritise cancer treatment throughout the pandemic...

...and we have consistently seen record levels of referrals since March 2021.

But waiting times have gone up and fewer people came forward with cancer symptoms during the pandemic.

The Plan shows how we will intensify our campaigns to encourage more people to come forward...

...focusing on areas where referrals have been the slowest to recover...

...like lung cancer and prostate cancer.

It also sets out some stretching ambitions for how we will recover and improve performance for cancer care.

Returning the number of people waiting more than 62 days from an urgent referral back to the pre-pandemic levels by March 2023...

...and ensuring that 75% of patients who have been urgently referred by their GP for suspected cancer...

...are diagnosed or have cancer ruled out within 28 days by March 2024.

I'm determined that we tackle the disparities that exist in this backlog – just as I have been determined to tackle disparities of any kind across this country.

Analysis from the King's Fund shows that on average, you are almost twice as more likely to experience a wait of over a year if you live in a deprived area.

And as part of our recovery work, we're tasking the NHS with analysing their waiting list data...

...according to factors like age, and deprivation, ethnicity...

...to help drive detailed plans to tackle any disparities.

Third, [Mr Speaker], this new chapter for the NHS provides an opportunity to radically rethink and redesign how services are delivered...

...to bust the backlog and deliver more flexible, personalised care for patients.

The pandemic has shown beyond doubt the importance of diagnostics.

But although over 96% of people needing a diagnostic test received it within six weeks prior to the pandemic...

...the latest data shows that that number has fallen to 75%.

Our aim is that we will get back to 95% by March 2025.

And a major part of this will be expanding the use of Community Diagnostic Centres, which have already had a huge impact.

These are one-stop-shops for checks, and scans and tests that will help people get a quicker diagnosis and therefore the treatment that they need earlier on.

69 Community Diagnostic Centres are already up and running...

...and the Plan shows our intention to have at least 100 in the communities, in local communities, and in High Streets over the next three years.

We will also keep expanding the use of surgical hubs, that will be dedicated to carrying out planned, elective surgeries.

They will allow us to do more surgeries in a single a day than in typical outpatient settings...

...so we can fast track operations and make sure patients are more likely to go home the same day.

We have already been piloting these hubs, and we will now be rolling these out right across the country.

And then finally [Mr Speaker], we will improve the information and support for patients.

I know the anxiety that patients feel when they are waiting for care...

...especially if they feel like they don't have the certainty about where they sit in the queue...

...and I am determined to make sure that as we enter this next phase, we will be open and transparent with patients.

We will be launching a new online platform...

... called My Planned Care...

...which will go live this month...

...offering patients and their carers tailored information ahead of their planned surgery.

They will be able to see waiting times for their provider, so that they can better understand their expected wait.

A third of on-the-day cancellations are due to people not being clinically ready for treatment...

...and this new platform will be able to link patients to the most appropriate personalised support ahead of their surgery.

This shows the approach that we will be taking in the years ahead...

...putting patients at the heart of their care...

...and giving people, giving them the support that they need to make informed decisions.

We will also put in place a payment system that incentivises strong performance and delivers value for money for the public.

Mr Speaker, just as we came together to fight this virus, now we must come together on a new national mission to fight what the virus has brought with it.

It will mean waiting lists falling by March 2024...

...strong action to reduce long waiting times...

...and stretching targets for early diagnosis for cancer care.

This vital document shows how we will not just recover, but also reform...

...and make sure that the NHS is there for all of us, no matter what lies ahead.

I commend this statement to the House.