



# NHS WINTER RECOVERY PLAN



**Scottish Labour**

Build the Future Together

# Introduction

The creation of our National Health Service over 70 years ago was undoubtedly one of the Labour Party's finest and proudest achievements. As a country we rightly value its founding principle: that access to health care should be universal and free at the point of need, not based on ability to pay. The pandemic reminded us all of the crucial value of our NHS. The need to prevent services being overwhelmed brought us together as a country. In the face of a deadly virus, health and social care staff worked tirelessly on the frontline, determined to care for the sick.

The threat of Covid-19 may have reduced, thanks to vaccines and new treatments, but the NHS is still facing pressure like never before. Waiting list backlogs and undiagnosed illness have placed a huge strain on services and an exhausted workforce, but this was not unexpected. As we emerged from the pandemic it was clear that Scotland's NHS would need support and a clear and realistic plan for recovery. Instead, staff and patients have been offered only empty promises and have been let down by a complete lack of political leadership.

The reality is that going into the pandemic Scotland's NHS was not in a strong position. Waiting time standards for A&E, hospital procedures, diagnostics, mental health and cancer treatment had been repeatedly missed for years. There have been frequent warnings of workforce burnout, a

lack of fair work in social care and unsustainable funding models.

In August 2021 the SNP published their NHS Recovery Plan with ambitious targets for increasing procedures, reducing waiting backlogs and increasing investment. In the time since, waiting lists have grown, vacancies have soared, patients waiting too long in A&E are repeatedly reaching record levels and the number turning to private healthcare is growing.

For months the SNP Government have been warned that their Recovery Plan was not working but their inaction has meant that our NHS faces its most challenging winter yet. Preventing a humanitarian crisis in our health service will require the Health Secretary to do more than narrating how bad things are. Unless decisions and action are taken, there is again a real risk that the NHS could be overwhelmed.

Scottish Labour is determined not to see this happen. We know that restoring the NHS and Scotland's health is key to Scotland's wider recovery, but we cannot merely go back to the way things worked before. True recovery in our health and care services will mean taking the necessary steps to set them on a stronger and renewed path for the future. First though, immediate action is needed to ensure that the NHS can continue to support patients through the winter months ahead.







## 1. REDUCING WAITS IN A&E

Patients faced long waits in Scotland's A&Es before the pandemic but in the 18 months since Humza Yousaf became Health Secretary, records for the worst A&E waiting figures have been broken again and again. Long delays in emergency departments are associated with poorer patient outcomes and higher levels of excess deaths so it is important that we reduce the time that people spend in A&E.

Scottish Labour want to see all 8-hour waits and longer eliminated over winter by:

- **Making sure we have the right staff in place** so that patients can be triaged and have tests carried out in the timely manner. By making sure we have enough of the right allied health professionals – such as phlebotomists, physiotherapists, and diagnostic radiographers – in A&E, we can ensure patients are seen by the right person at the right time.
- **Improving NHS 24 support.** Patients attend A&E when they cannot get help elsewhere. The Scottish Government tell us that they have invested an additional £20 million in NHS 24, yet we haven't seen the benefits. NHS 24 needs to be improved and better resourced to ensure that people can be directed to the appropriate place that will meet their healthcare needs in a timely manner.
- **Creating a target of 30-minute turnaround for ambulances.** It is unacceptable that ambulances are queued outside hospital with unwell patients awaiting admission. By setting a target for a 30-minute turnaround for ambulances, this will ensure that priority is placed on transferring patients into hospitals and ambulances are available to respond to new calls.
- **Increasing surge capacity in A&E departments.** Many hospitals have not managed to close their surge capacity from last winter due to the sheer volume of demand. Urgent steps must be taken to create temporary receiving areas and surge capacity – and where necessary, additional wards should be opened to alleviate pressures.
- **Properly collecting data on waits.** All patients waiting, whether in A&E, in ambulances or acute assessment units should be monitored against the 4-hour standard so demand and need can be properly measured.



- **Reducing delayed discharge to increase patient flow through the hospital.** Every day there are over 1,800 NHS beds occupied by people ready to go home. Reducing the delays to patients' discharge will free up bed capacity in the hospital to receive new patients and prevent them waiting hours in A&E or ambulances.





## 2. VALUING OUR NHS STAFF AND BUILDING A FUTURE WORKFORCE

Our NHS would be nothing without the skill, service and sacrifice of our staff. They are the backbone of our NHS and they worked tirelessly to protect and care for us during the pandemic but they deserve more than warm words or weekly applause. For too long NHS staff have been taken for granted, with the SNP government overlooking warnings of staff shortages and burnout. We will never be able to restore services and successfully tackle the backlogs without caring for those who care for us.

Scottish Labour's 2021 NHS Recovery Plan<sup>1</sup> set out proposals to support our NHS workforce and at our annual conference earlier this year, we published our charter for Valuing the Health & Social Care Workforce.<sup>2</sup>

We want to see NHS staff treated with respect and action taken to reduce shortages by:

- **Improving working conditions.** Our NHS staff should be treated with dignity, including listening to what they are asking for – protected breaks, access to basic facilities like hot food and rest areas, wellbeing support and protected training time.
- **Resolving pay disputes with a fair pay deal.** Our NHS services cannot afford yearly showdowns between Ministers and health workers over pay and conditions. The historic real terms decrease in the value of staff pay means there is a need for a sustainable and long-term pay deal for the workforce. This must prioritise lifting the salaries of the lowest paid and ensuring that NHS Scotland is an attractive place to train and work.
- **Retaining the skill and experience of existing staff.** We are losing too many skilled staff due to inflexible rules and processes. Scottish Labour have called for a working time review for every staff member considering retirement so that we can make use of their skills and experience for as long as possible.
- **Growing the workforce.** We need a sustainable workforce plan that builds capacity to meet future demand. That is why we have called for an increase to Scottish-domiciled places in medicine and nursing courses and for an increase in the training places for a number of allied health professional roles.

<sup>1</sup> <https://scottishlabour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/SCOTTISH-LABOURS-NHS-RECOVERY-PLAN.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://scottishlabour.org.uk/valuing-health-workforce/>



### 3. IMPROVING SOCIAL CARE

Most delayed discharge delays are due to social care reasons – often, patients who are well enough to be discharged but who are stuck in hospital wards because they need a social care package to return home safely. The health service relies on patients getting good care in the community but over the 15 years of SNP Government, Ministers have failed to invest in and support social care. Scottish Labour want to get social care right so we can get people safely out of hospital and help them to live their lives to the fullest.

To reduce delayed discharge and deliver better social care in the community we need to:

- **Increase step-down capacity.** During the pandemic delayed discharge was reduced by increasing the availability of step-down care in care homes. This **must** be done without putting the safety of patients at risk but done properly can mean patients get the care they need in homely and not hospital settings.
- **Prioritise implementing the Feeley Review recommendations** including removing non-residential care charges, which will help families who are struggling during the cost of living crisis.
- **Pause the National Care Service bill.** Instead of pursuing an uncosted piece of legislation that is littered with problems and does not command universal support, the government should redirect resources to delivering the Feeley recommendations above.
- **Support unpaid carers** including delivering both a minimum of two weeks free respite care and targeted funding to help with the cost of living crisis.
- **Value the workforce** by setting out a comprehensive and costed plan to deliver £15 per hour for social care workers.

## 4. SUPPORTING PRIMARY CARE

Primary and community care is crucial to the health and wellbeing of Scots and delivering on Scottish Labour's ambition for investing in a preventative approach to healthcare and improving wellbeing. Our GP surgeries are usually the first port of call for patients and play a key role in relieving pressure from other parts of our NHS. Unfortunately, the SNP has failed to appreciate the value of primary care, ignoring the warning from GPs and failing to deliver on the increase in GP numbers promised. The result is a workforce who feel let down and taken for granted.

We need to ensure primary care is equipped to support patients and meet demand by:

- **Restoring the funding that has been slashed.** The Scottish Government raided the Primary Care Improvement Fund budget in the recent round of cuts. This £65 million fund was supposed to support the recruitment of additional health care workers to support GPs and increase capacity in practices. This funding is desperately needed by practices and must be reinstated.
- **Reviewing the GP recruitment targets.** Despite the SNP promising in 2017 to deliver 800 additional GPs over the decade, the current number of Whole-Time Equivalent (WTE) GPs has declined since then. BMA Scotland estimates that Scotland is currently 1,000 WTE GPs short. The Scottish Government must urgently review its recruitment target to date and set out a clear timetable for increasing our GP workforce.
- **Ensuring that every GP practice has access to a Mental Health Worker.** Access to the right mental health support at an early stage is essential, but far too many general practices are going without this resource. It is vital that every GP practice has access to a dedicated Mental Health Worker, thereby providing immediate support to patients and speeding up referrals, where necessary.



## 5. MAKING MENTAL HEALTH A PRIORITY

Restrictions during the pandemic have increased stress for many and made life more challenging for those with pre-existing mental health conditions. Action must be taken to address the decline in mental health across Scotland.

To ensure that services can keep up with demand and deliver the support that people across Scotland need:

- **Restoring the funding that has been slashed.** The Scottish Government cut £38 million from mental health in the Emergency Budget Review. This funding is desperately needed and could be used to employ more mental health practitioners or to run more outpatient clinics and bring down waiting lists.
- **Guaranteeing funding for social-based counselling,** as it's vital that this service is not cut next year. Scottish Labour have long campaigned for access to counselling in schools so that children know that they can easily talk to someone if they are struggling and need help.
- **Create a new referral and triage system for mental health.** It is simply wrong that over 8,800 children and young people have had their referrals to CAMHS rejected in the past year. By redesigning the referral and triage system, we can ensure that no one is turned away.
- **Recording and publishing waiting times** from referral to diagnosis and the start of treatment for CAMHS, so that no child is left abandoned.
- **Committing to increase the proportion of the NHS budget being spent on mental health.** We want to see mental health spending increase to 11% of all NHS spending so that it reaches the same level as England and Wales.

## 6. RECOVERY FOR THE LONG TERM

If we can take the right steps to ensure that our NHS can survive the winter ahead, then we can start addressing the longstanding backlogs and inequalities that developed before the pandemic. This is not just about getting back to the way things were but modernising our health services and making sure they are fit for future generations, starting with:

- **Faster roll out of Rapid Diagnostic Centres.** Only three centres are currently operational across Scotland, which opened in 2021. This is despite similar facilities opening in Wales back in 2017. Cancer remains Scotland's biggest killer and it's vital that steps are taken to expedite the rollout of these centres to every health board in Scotland.
- **Screening catch ups** need to be accelerated and widened to tackle the stark health inequalities that are costing lives every single year.
- **Delivering on promised National Treatment Centres.** Despite first being announced back in 2016, the Scottish Government's timetable for the rollout of its NTCs has been marred by delay.<sup>1</sup> 1 in 7 Scots are stuck on waiting lists, and this backlog will never come down unless we get serious about delivering protected, designated elective care pathways.







