

January 2024

National Voices'
Manifesto for Equitable
Healthcare



Jacob Lant, Chief Executive of National Voice, said: “Our three general election priorities are supported by a common theme – ensuring that the NHS works for all, not just those who know how to navigate the system or who come from more privileged backgrounds.



Jacob Lant,
Chief Executive of
National Voices

“Our membership of over 200 health charities is behind these asks as we seek to remind politicians that adopting them will not just improve things for patients but will also help drive NHS stability and wider economic benefits.”

1 PIONEER A CROSS-GOVERNMENT STRATEGY TO REDUCE THE GAP IN HEALTHY LIFE EXPECTANCY

The gap between healthy life expectancy of those living in the most and least deprived areas is a stark marker of the inequalities faced in modern Britain.

In England, women living in the most deprived areas have a healthy life expectancy at birth of 51.4 years compared with 71.2 years for women living in the least deprived – a difference of 19.7 years. For men, the gap is slightly smaller, at 18.4 years (52.3 years compared to 70.7 years). While the current government has committed to reducing this gap by 2030, if we are to live in a healthier society which offers a fairer opportunity of good health for all, the next government must commit to a long-term plan with clear milestones that prioritises the reduction of this gap across all governmental departments.

The Department of Health and Social Care, the NHS and local authorities cannot reduce this gap alone. Tackling inequalities in healthcare while addressing prevention and the wider determinants of poor health requires a joined-up, cross government approach. Housing, education, air pollution and the justice system are all evidenced to impact healthy life expectancy.

Unless we act now to reduce this gap and slow down the projected growth of people living with major illness for long periods of their life, the future of the NHS will also be in jeopardy.

We are calling for:

- A high-level, centralised strategy, led by the Prime Minister, focused on ending, not just narrowing, the inequality gap in healthy life expectancy. This will ensure that tackling this vital issue gets the prominence it deserves across every government department, local council, and Integrated Care System.
- The strategy to develop a stretching, measurable goal of reducing the gap in healthy life expectancy, with a clear implementation plan on how it will achieve this.
- For all government departments to explicitly set out how they will work across government to embed preventative action and tackle the wider determinants of poorer health outcomes in way that works to improve the healthy life prospects of people across the whole country.

2 INTRODUCTION A PACKAGE OF MEASURES TO REDUCE THE HEALTH IMPACT OF THE RISING COST OF LIVING

The rising cost of living is taking a terrible toll on the health of people living in the most deprived areas of the country or from the most marginalised and minoritized groups. We are asking for an urgent package of measures to alleviate the financial burden for those most in need.

We are calling on all political parties to:

- Introduce free prescriptions for all, like in Scotland and Wales, starting with the immediate introduction of free prescriptions for people with chronic conditions.
- Guarantee an NHS dentist for all, to support the wider preventative agenda.
- Support with the costs of hospital parking, transport to hospital and overnight accommodation for patients and their carers, to reduce health inequalities.
- Extend Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) time periods, to support those off work for longer due to long NHS waiting lists.
- Reimburse energy costs for running medical equipment, like dialysis machines, at home, as well as costs associated with increased use of domestic appliances, such as washing machines, and heating where this is directly linked to the management of health conditions.

3

FOCUS ON GETTING THE BASICS RIGHT

From trying to get a GP appointment to accessing treatment in hospital, people's struggles to get the care they need are being exacerbated by poor communication and a lack of support while waiting. We hear too often from our members about appointment letters going missing, referrals not being followed up, and people being left in the dark about test results. This is made worse by a lack of clarity about who they can turn to for advice and support for matters like pain relief or support with their mental health whilst they wait.

There are also significant failures in meeting additional communication needs such as those with hearing or sight impairments, as well as those for whom English is not a first language.

To win back people's trust in the NHS, we need to get the basics right by ensuring we communicate with people in a timely way and in a format that works for them, alongside offering people meaningful support while they are waiting for treatment.

We are asking all parties to:

- Redress a crucial omission from the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan and develop a long-term plan to address the need for sufficient and better trained managerial, administrative and clerical "front of house" staff to ensure the needs of patients can be properly met.
- Regularly communicate with people on elective care waiting lists to ensure they understand the process (including any delays and disruptions) and provide adequate mental health and non-clinical support in a timely way to help improve their experience of waiting for care.
- Support people waiting for care by clearly signposting to non-clinical sources of support and pay, community groups and the VCSE to provide such support (e.g. helplines, peer support, advocacy).
- Work to build relationships with people and communities so the NHS no longer engages people on its own terms, but instead meets people where they are and works with them to establish trust. Good work happened during the pandemic to establish more trusting relationships with communities, often through trusted intermediaries, and this work should be learnt from and built upon.
- Enforce the Accessible Information Standard across the NHS so people who have additional communication needs know it is no longer acceptable for their needs not to be met.
- Stop people having to break devastating health news to their own family members by ensuring translation services are available in a timely and reliable manner.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our members for sharing their insights and helping us shape these manifesto asks.

National Voices is the leading coalition of health and social care charities in England. We work together to strengthen the voice of patients, service users, carers, their families and the voluntary organisations that work for them. We have more than 200 members covering a diverse range of health conditions and communities, connecting us with the experiences of millions of people.

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