

What do the main party manifestos say about the NHS?

Election Briefing Note June 2017

Introduction

This note compares the main health policies in the 2017 election manifestos of the Conservative Party, the Labour Party and the Liberal Democratic Party, on the following issues:

1. Competition and the Health and Social Care Act
2. Bed numbers
3. Staffing
4. Community-based care
5. Mental health
6. Public health, social determinants of health
7. What are the key promises?

Not included here is the issue of funding for the NHS. Experts have examined the parties' proposals for NHS funding and found them all to different degrees insufficient. See Denis Campbell, "NHS funding pledges by major parties would still fall short, experts say", The Guardian 22 May 2017, available here:

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/may/22/tories-labour-lib-dems-funding-pledges-leave-nhs-short-experts-say>

A separate CHPI briefing note on the parties' proposals on the funding of social care is available here: <https://chpi.org.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/CHPI-Election-Briefing-Note-May-2017.pdf>

1. Competition and the Health and Social Care Act

Conservatives

"If the current legislative landscape is either slowing implementation or preventing clear national or local accountability, we will consult and make the necessary legislative changes. This includes the NHS's own internal market, which can fail to act in the interests of patients and creates costly bureaucracy. So we will review the operation of the internal market and, in time for the start of the 2018 financial year, we will make non-legislative changes to remove barriers to the integration of care."

Labour

"The next Labour Government will reverse privatisation of our NHS and return our health service into expert public control. Labour will repeal the Health and Social Care Act that puts profits before patients, and make the NHS the preferred provider. We will reinstate the powers of the Secretary of State for Health to have overall responsibility for the NHS."

Lib Dems

No explicit reference to the Health and Social Care Act or competition, but would "Establish a cross-party health and social care convention, bringing together stakeholders from all political parties, patients groups, the public and professionals from within the health and social care system to carry out a comprehensive review of the longer-term sustainability of the health and social care finances and workforce, and the practicalities of greater integration."

Comments

The Conservatives propose to legislate where necessary to prevent existing legislation slowing the implementation of the 5 Year Forward View (5YFV). There is explicit mention of problems in bringing about more integrated service created by the internal market (the purchaser/provider split represented by CCGs and trusts), but not of the contracting-out of

work to private providers, the volume of which has grown significantly since the 2012 Health and Social Care Act. New informal structures have been established to create and implement Sustainability and Transformation Plans which cut across the existing system of public accountability and there is a promise to make changes, but it is unclear whether those changes will increase public accountability or, with the adoption of the Accountable Care Organisation model, reduce it.

Labour promise to repeal the Act and make the Secretary of State responsible for providing the NHS as opposed to “promoting” it, a key reinforcement of the system of public accountability, making it clear that it is the Secretary of State rather than the head of NHS England who is in charge. What is promised is a reversal of the contracting out of clinical services, though how is not specified. Confusingly, there is a reference to the NHS being the ‘preferred provider’, a term which has its origins in the market model which Labour is promising to abolish.

The Lib Dems don’t mention the Act but propose a cross-party “convention” to review the whole health and social care system. But it is evident from their emphasis on integration that they are not supporting the market model.

2. Bed numbers

Conservatives

“We will ensure that the NHS has the buildings and technology it needs to deliver care properly and efficiently” and “It is NHS England that determines how best to organise and deliver care in England, set out in its own plan to create a modern NHS – the Five Year Forward View. We support it.” But also “enable more care to be delivered closer to home, by building and upgrading primary care facilities, mental health clinics and hospitals in every part of England” (*italics added*).

Labour

“By properly resourcing the NHS, Labour will stop the routine breach of safe levels of bed occupancy, and we will end mixed-sex wards” and “Labour will focus resources on services to provide care closer to home and deliver a truly 21st century health system.”

Lib Dems

“Home not hospital: better integration of health and social care and limiting the amount elderly people have to pay for social care.” “Direct this additional investment [from a penny increase in income tax] to the following priority areas in the health and care system: social care, primary care (and other out-of-hospital care).” “Evaluate the valuable work of hospices with a view to putting them on a more sustainable financial footing and allowing them to expand their services.”

Comments

None of the three parties mentions bed numbers or addresses the question of how far it is possible to deliver good care for a growing population without increased bed numbers. They all endorse the policy of shifting care out of hospitals. But whereas the Conservatives say they back NHS England’s own plan [the Five Year Forward View (5YFV), for shifting care out of hospitals] and “will hold NHS England’s leaders to account for delivering their plan to

improve patient care”, they also promise to “build and upgrade... hospitals in every part of England”. This statement illustrates the public accountability gap which results from the 2012 Act, with the government of the day claiming that the main policy driving change in the NHS is not their own but that of the staff they appoint.

Labour say they “will halt and review the NHS ‘Sustainability and Transformation Plans’”, which are set to implement the 5YFV and the main driver of the reduction in hospital beds currently being carried forward. Labour thus support the objectives of the 5YFV while objecting to the means of bringing about the shift of resources from hospital-based to non-hospital care.

The Lib Dems endorse the shift of resources away from the hospital sector, and presumably are therefore willing to endorse the cuts and closures in hospital beds which inevitably result.

3. Staffing

Conservatives

“We will ensure that the NHS and social care system have the nurses, midwives, doctors, carers and other health professionals that it needs. We will make it a priority in our negotiations with the European Union that the 140,000 staff from EU countries can carry on making their vital contribution to our health and care system. However, we cannot continue to rely on bringing in clinical staff instead of training sufficient numbers ourselves. Last year we announced an increase in the number of students in medical training of 1,500 a year; we will continue this investment, doing something the NHS has never done before, and train the doctors our hospitals and surgeries need.”

“We will also help the million and more NHS clinicians and support staff develop the skills they need and the NHS requires in the decades ahead. We will encourage the development of new roles and create a diverse set of potential career paths for the NHS workforce. And we will reform medical education, including helping universities and local health systems work closer together to develop the roles and skills needed to serve patients. We want the NHS to become a better employer. We will strengthen the entitlement to flexible working to help those with caring responsibilities for young children or older relatives. We will introduce new services for employees to give them the support they need, including quicker access to mental health and musculoskeletal services. We will act to reduce bullying rates in the NHS, which are far too high.”

“We shall require all our medical staff to have a deeper understanding of mental health and all trainees will get a chance to experience working in mental health disciplines; we shall ensure medical exams better reflect the importance of this area.”

Labour

“Labour will invest in our health and care workforce. A Labour government will step in with a long-term workforce plan for our health service that gives staff the support they need to do the best for their patients. Labour will scrap the NHS pay cap, put pay decisions back into the hands of the independent pay review body and give our NHS workers the pay they deserve.”

“Labour will protect patients and legislate to ensure safe staffing levels in the NHS. Labour’s long-term ambition is for our health system to have the best trained staff in the world.... Labour will re-introduce bursaries and funding for health-related degrees. Labour will support doctors to deliver the best care possible by investing in the training, education and

development of doctors throughout their careers. Labour will immediately guarantee the rights of staff working in our health and care services. Labour will support NHS whistleblowers to make sure health service staff are able to speak up in support of the best possible standards for patients. Labour will make it an aggravated criminal offence to attack NHS staff.”

Lib Dems

“To support the NHS and social care workforce we will: Guarantee the rights of all NHS and social care service staff who are EU nationals to stay in the UK. End the public sector pay freeze for NHS workers. Reinstate student nurse bursaries. Support innovation in how organisations can empower staff and patients, including learning from innovative social enterprises delivering community and mental health services. Protect NHS whistle-blowers.”

“We will: Produce a national workforce strategy, ensuring that we never again experience a shortage in the numbers of GPs, hospital doctors, nurses and other professionals that the NHS needs.”

Comments

All three parties devote significant space to staffing - not surprising, given the number of voters who either work for the NHS or are related to them.

The Conservatives focus on the numbers needed, including “new roles” (presumably a reference to Physician Associates and the like), and on training them in England, , acknowledging that they have not ensured that this has been done up to now while they have been in office, and promise to prioritise the retention of EU members of NHS staff. There is no mention of removing the public sector pay cap, which has reduced NHS costs at the expense of its workforce and resulted in large numbers of nursing posts unfilled and record numbers of junior doctors opting not to go forward for senior training.

Labour has less to say about training but does tackle the issue of retaining staff by promising to abolish the pay cap, and is committed to unilaterally guaranteeing the right of EU citizens to remain in Britain after Brexit.

Lib Dems stress the need to retain EU-born staff who work in the English NHS.

4. Community-based care

Conservatives

“We will... enable more care to be delivered closer to home, by building and upgrading primary care facilities, mental health clinics and hospitals in every part of England.” “We expect GPs to come together to provide greater access, more innovative services, share data and offer better facilities, while ensuring care remains personal – particularly for older and more vulnerable people – with named GPs accountable for individual patients. We will support GPs to deliver innovative services that better meet patients’ needs, including phone and on-line consultations and the use of technology to triage people better so they see the right clinician more quickly. We will ensure appropriate funding for GPs to meet rising costs of indemnity in the short term while working with the profession to introduce a sustainable long-term solution.”

“We will introduce a new GP contract to help develop wider primary care services.”

“We shall support more integrated working, including ensuring community pharmacies can play a stronger role to keep people healthy outside hospital within the wider health system.”

Labour

“Labour will focus resources on services to provide care closer to home and deliver a truly 21st century health system. We will work towards a new model of community care that takes into account not only primary care but also social care and mental health.”

“We will increase funding to GP services to ensure patients can access the care they need. And we will halt pharmacy cuts and review provision to ensure all patients have access to pharmacy services, particularly in deprived or remote communities.

Lib Dems

“We will: Promote easier access to GPs, expanding evening and weekend opening to meet the needs of local patients, encouraging online, phone and Skype appointments, encouraging GPs to work together in federations, and allowing people more choice. Provide national support to struggling GP practices, preventing mass practice closures. Support GPs to come together to collectively provide services such as out-of-normal-opening-hours appointments. Use innovation funding to promote GP-led multi-disciplinary health and care hubs, including mobile services to keep people out of hospital. Encourage GPs and other

community clinicians to work in disadvantaged areas through our Patient Premium – which would give incentive payments to clinicians.”

On pharmacy services, they will: “Ensure that any changes to the way pharmacies are funded do not leave local areas without reasonable access to a community pharmacist. Review the rules for exemption from prescription charges to ensure they are fair to those with long-term conditions and disabilities.”

Comments

The Conservatives’ promises on community-based care need to be read in light of their reminder that “It is NHS England that determines how best to organise and deliver care in England, set out in its own plan” – which is correct, given the formal independence of the NHS created by the 2012 Health and Social Care Act. They promise to support the Five Year Forward View’s plans but will “hold the NHS’s leaders to account” for delivering them. They promise to provide the infrastructure needed. They also refer to GP appointments increasing as a means of achieving a 7-day NHS, and their expectation that GPs will change their way of working and contracts. These promises have to be seen in the light of the steadily diminishing proportion of the NHS budget which has gone to GPs over most of the years since 2010 and the GP staffing crisis which prevails in many parts of the country, with an imminent surge in retirements, difficulties in recruiting young doctors to work in general practice, and big shortages of key GP staff such as practice nurses.

Labour supports the consensus about the need for more care closer to home and promises more money for GP services

The Lib Dems go into more detail on the provisions that need to be made at community level and the mechanisms needed to secure them, and they are the only party explicitly to address the need for stronger community services as a means of reducing pressures on NHS services. Only the Lib Dems offer clear ideas about what kinds of changes might help to relieve the GP crisis with explicit suggested interventions.

5. Mental health

Conservatives

“We will make sure there is more support in every part of the country by recruiting up to 10,000 more mental health professionals. We shall require all our medical staff to have a deeper understanding of mental health and all trainees will get a chance to experience working in mental health disciplines; we shall ensure medical exams better reflect the importance of this area. And we will improve the co-ordination of mental health services with other local services, including police forces and drug and alcohol rehabilitation services.”

“A Conservative government will publish a green paper on young people’s mental health before the end of this year. We will introduce mental health first aid training for teachers in every primary and secondary school by the end of the parliament and ensure that every school has a single point of contact with mental health services. Every child will learn about mental wellbeing and the mental health risks of internet harms in the curriculum. And we will reform Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services so that children with serious conditions are seen within an appropriate timeframe and no child has to leave their local area and their family to receive normal treatment.”

Labour

“Labour will work to reverse the damage done to mental health services under this Tory government, which is particularly hitting services for LGBT and BAME communities.”

“In order to protect services, we will ring-fence mental health budgets and ensure funding reaches the frontline.”

“We will end the scandal of children being treated on adult mental health wards and stop people being sent across the country, away from their support networks, to secure the treatment they need by bringing forward the ending of out-of-area placements to 2019.”

“Labour will also bring an end to the neglect of children’s mental health...Labour will invest in early intervention by increasing the proportion of mental health budgets spent on support for children and young people. We will ensure that access to a counselling service is available for all children in secondary schools.

“Labour will ask the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) to evaluate the potential for increasing the range of evidence based psychological therapies on offer. “

Lib Dems

"We will: Ringfence funding from within the one penny Income Tax rise, to provide additional investment in mental health. Continue to roll out access and waiting time standards for children, young people and adults. This will include a guarantee that people will not wait more than six weeks for therapy for depression or anxiety, and no young person will wait more than two weeks for treatment when they experience a first episode of psychosis. Increase access to clinically- and cost-effective talking therapies so that hundreds of thousands more people can receive this support."

"Examine the case for introducing a dedicated service for children and young people based on the Australian 'headspace' model and building on many excellent Youth Information, Advice and Counselling Services. Transform mental health support for pregnant women, new mothers and those who have experienced miscarriage or stillbirth, and help them get early care when needed."

"Ensure that no one in crisis is turned away, with new waiting time standards and better crisis care in Accident and Emergency, in the community and via phone lines. This will enable us to end the use of police cells for people facing a mental health crisis. End out of area placements, ensuring those admitted to hospital for mental ill-health are able to be treated close to home. Ensure that all frontline public service professionals, including in schools and universities, receive better training in mental health. Roll out the Liaison and Diversion programme nationally, helping to identify people who have mental health problems, learning disabilities, substance misuse or other vulnerabilities when they first come into contact with the criminal justice system. Tackle stigma against mental ill-health, including by building on the good work done by organisations like Heads Together and changing the standard of proof in suicide conclusions in the Coroner's Court. Ensure that LGBT+ inclusive mental health services receive funding and support."

Comments

All three parties acknowledge mental health as an important unaddressed challenge. Labour and the Lib Dems devote significant portions of their manifestos to this question; the Lib Dems offer the most detailed plans. Labour and the Lib Dems promise ring-fenced funding, while the Conservatives promise to provide more mental health staff. Apart from children, to whose needs all three parties refer, Labour and the Lib Dems, but not the Conservatives, make reference to vulnerable groups such as pregnant women and the LGBT population.

6. Public health, social determinants of health

Conservatives

“We will take action against poor air quality in urban areas. In addition to the 11 million trees we are planting across our nation, we will ensure that 1 million more are planted in our towns and cities.” And that “We want to reduce levels of child poverty, and have high ambitions for the quality of childcare, children’s health and support for vulnerable children for whom the state acts as a parent.”

“We will continue to take action to reduce childhood obesity. We will promote efforts to reduce unhealthy ingredients and provide clearer food information for consumers, as our decision to leave the European Union will give us greater flexibility over the presentation of information on packaged food. We shall continue to support school sport, delivering on our commitment to double support for sports in primary schools.”

Labour

“We will fight health inequalities to break the scandalous link between child ill-health and poverty. We will introduce a new Index of Child Health to measure progress against international standards, and report annually against four key indicators: obesity, dental health, under-fives and mental health. We will set up a new £250 million Children’s Health Fund to support our ambitions. As part of a preventative healthcare drive, Labour will increase the number of health visitors and school nurses. We will publish a new childhood obesity strategy within the first 100 days, with proposals on advertising and food labelling. We will make a concerted effort to address poor childhood oral health in England. Labour will implement the Soft Drinks Industry Levy, commonly known as the ‘sugar tax’.”

“Direct [the promised] additional investment to the following priority areas in the health and care system: social care, primary care (and other out-of-hospital care), mental health and public health”

Lib Dems

“We will publish a National Wellbeing Strategy, which puts better health and wellbeing for all at the heart of government policy.”

“Keep public health within local government, where it is effectively joined up with preventive community services, and reinstate the funding cut from public health budgets by the Conservatives. • Develop a strategy to tackle childhood obesity, including restricting the

marketing of junk food to children, restricting TV advertising before the 9pm watershed and closing loopholes in the sugary drinks tax. 22 Save our NHS and Social Care Services 2 • Encourage the traffic-light labelling system for food products and publication of information on calorie, fat, sugar and salt content in restaurants and takeaways. • Introduce mandatory targets on sugar reduction for food and drink producers. • Reduce smoking rates, introducing a levy on tobacco companies so they fairly contribute to the costs of health care and smoking cessation services.”

“Introduce minimum unit pricing for alcohol, subject to the final outcome of the legal challenge in Scotland. • Develop a public health campaign promoting the steps people can take to improve their own mental resilience – the wellbeing equivalent of the ‘Five a Day’ campaign. • Support good practice among employers in promoting wellbeing... with a ‘wellbeing premium’ to reward employers who take clear action to measurably improve the health of their employees.”

Comments

The Conservative manifesto does not refer specifically to public health and its references to social determinants of health are primarily about prosperity to be achieved by reducing taxes and better regulation of markets, reducing the gap in incomes and living standards between the south and the north, and increasing the supply of housing. Labour and the Lib Dems have much more to say about public health interventions and the Lib Dems go into more detail on these.

Labour talks about fighting health inequality and commits itself to developing a strategy for improving child health and transparent public reporting of the impact of action in this area. Its wider commitment to a more progressive system of taxation and to ways of improving the incomes of poor families, such as increasing the minimum wage and providing free child care, show some thought on how best to impact on the wider determinants of ill-health.

The Lib Dems present an extensive and well developed set of proposals for improving public health, including leaving the function within local government.

7. What are the key promises?

Election manifestos are always vague on how most of the promises they contain will be delivered, and the more likely a party is to form a government, the less detailed and specific its promises are likely to be. The promises listed below are those that seem specific enough for the party in question to be held accountable for them if it is elected.

Conservatives

- “We will make it a priority in our negotiations with the European Union that the 140,000 staff from EU countries can carry on making their vital contribution to our health and care system.”
- “We will increase the Immigration Health Surcharge, to £600 for migrant workers and £450 for international students, to cover their use of the NHS.”
- “We will retain the 95 per cent A&E target and the 18-week elective care standard”
[but note that the 18-week waiting time has been downgraded from a target to a standard]
- “We will deliver the new promise to give patients [suspected of having cancer] a definitive diagnosis within 28 days by 2020.”

Labour

- “By guaranteeing access to treatment within 18 weeks, we will take one million people off NHS waiting lists by the end of the next Parliament. We will guarantee that patients can be seen in A&E within four hours.”
- “We will deliver the Cancer Strategy for England in full by 2020, helping 2.5 million people living with cancer.”
- “Labour will fund free parking in NHS England for patients, staff and visitors – by increasing the tax on private medical insurance premiums.”
- “Labour will implement the Soft Drinks Industry Levy, commonly known as the ‘sugar tax’.”
- “Labour will scrap the NHS pay cap, put pay decisions back into the hands of the independent pay review body.”

- “Labour will repeal the Health and Social Care Act... and make the NHS the preferred provider.”

Lib Dems

- “An immediate 1p rise on the basic, higher and additional rates of Income Tax to raise £6 billion additional revenue, which would be ring-fenced to be spent only on NHS and social care services.”
- “Establish a cross-party health and social care convention, bringing together stakeholders from all political parties, patients groups, the public and professionals from within the health and social care system to carry out a comprehensive review of the longer-term sustainability of the health and social care finances and workforce, and the practicalities of greater integration.”
- “Introduce a statutory independent budget monitoring agency for health and care, similar to the Office for Budget Responsibility.”
- “End the public sector pay freeze for NHS workers. Reinstate student nurse bursaries.”
- “Ring-fence funding from within the one penny Income Tax rise, to provide additional investment in mental health.”