

## The NHS: what are the UK's political parties promising?

The UK's National Health Service is a top priority for voters ahead of the general election in May. What are the key political parties pledging for the health service? Emma Wilkinson reports.

The UK National Health Service (NHS) is always a political hot potato, but with patient satisfaction at a record high in 2010, it was not top of the agenda ahead of the last general election. Fast forward 5 years and the continued fall out from the Coalition Government's Health and Social Care Act, rising pressures, falling staff morale, and growing financial problems mean that health and the NHS are likely to dominate in political debates in the run up to the UK general election on May 7.

The Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition is defending a tough record. Although the NHS purse has largely been protected, at least in relation to other parts of the public sector, the health service has in essence had to manage on a frozen budget. In his politically astute *Five Year Forward View* for the health service, NHS chief executive Simon Stevens said although the NHS has managed to deal with a larger, sicker, older population with flat funding, “service pressures are building”.

And the cracks are starting to show. The past year in particular has seen patients unable to get appointments, emergency departments struggling to cope with demand, and an increasing number of trusts failing to balance the books.

There remains a great deal of anger over the NHS Health and Social Care Act, passed in 2012 with a majority of 88, bringing in its wake a change in structure so large it was “visible from space”, as the then NHS chief executive David Nicholson famously described it.

The Act paved the way for a greater role for competition and the private sector, an issue that politicians will be at loggerheads over in the coming weeks. Not least as it is the first general election to involve the National Health

Action (NHA) Party—founded 3 years ago to campaign against privatisation of the NHS and cuts in funding.

Yet, unless they work in the NHS, the electorate might largely be unaware of these mostly behind-the-scenes organisational issues. The topics they will of course care about are access, quality of care, safety, and funding.

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Several polls have pointed to the NHS being a top issue, including one BBC survey of more than 4000 adults, which placed it higher up the agenda than the economy or immigration.

Analysts have warned that continued flat funding and a growing demand could lead to an annual mismatch of nearly £30 billion by the end of the next parliament. So, what are the parties offering (panel)?

### Conservative Party

Commitments already announced by the Conservatives include 7-day-a-week access to a general practitioner (GP) between 8am and 8pm by 2020, training 5000 additional GPs, and an annual review of avoidable deaths.

In his 5-year plan, Stevens called for an extra £8 billion by 2020, bringing the NHS budget up to £120 billion. This, he predicts, in addition to 2–3% annual productivity gains, would close the funding gap. In response, the Conservatives promised to ring-fence and protect the NHS budget, increasing spending in line with inflation. Added to this is an additional £2 billion a year from 2015/16 for front-line health services, which includes a

£200 million “transformation fund” to kick-start Steven's proposals. Chancellor George Osborne called it a “down payment” on the NHS's own plan but came under criticism for reallocating existing funding. They also recently announced a £1 billion investment in primary care with GPs in England receiving £250 million a year for 4 years.

It does seem that the Tories are not keen to battle with the NHS. Health is not one of the top six election priorities announced earlier this year and as yet there are few concrete plans or numbers for the electorate to latch on to. Yet the announcement in February that Greater Manchester was to become the first region in England to get full control of its £6 billion health and social care budget seemed to catch the other parties off guard and shows that the party might still have some tricks up their sleeve when it comes to the NHS.

### Labour Party

First and foremost at the top of Labour's plans for the NHS is the pledge to repeal the Health and Social Care Act. The party have been consistent on this pledge since 2012 when the bill passed. In summer 2014, Shadow Health Secretary Andy Burnham

Election  
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Adrian Roots

For *The Lancet's* 2015 UK general election web page see <http://www.thelancet.com/UKelection2015>

For the Commission on the Future of Health and Social Care in England see [http://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/files/kf/field/field\\_publication\\_file/Commission%20Final%20%20interactive.pdf](http://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/files/kf/field/field_publication_file/Commission%20Final%20%20interactive.pdf)



Christopher Furlong/Staff

Greater Manchester is being handed full control of its health and social care budget

### Panel: Summary of the UK political parties' pledges for the NHS

#### Conservative Party

- Ring-fence National Health Service (NHS) budget
- £2 billion additional funding from next year
- £1 billion investment in primary care
- 8am–8pm general practitioner (GP) access 7 days a week
- 5000 extra GPs trained

#### Labour Party

- £2.5 billion additional funding
- Repeal Health and Social Care Act
- More nurses, GPs, midwives, and home-care workers
- Integrate health and social care
- Prioritise mental health
- Vote against the EU Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP)

#### Liberal Democrats

- £8 billion additional funding by 2020
- £500 million extra a year for mental health
- Review of NHS and social care finances
- Local agreement on integrating health and social care
- Overhaul the NHS payment system

#### Green Party

- Cash injection plus annual uplift
- Free social care for people older than 65 years
- Support the NHS Reinstatement Bill
- Private companies the exception
- Expand primary and community care

#### UK Independence Party (UKIP)

- £3 billion extra a year
- Health insurance for overseas visitors, students, and migrants
- £130 million a year for dementia
- Scrap the Care Quality Commission
- £1 billion a year for an elderly social care fund

#### Scottish National Party (SNP)

- £100 million to tackle delayed discharge
- Integrate health and social care
- Protect NHS from privatisation
- Vote against TTIP
- Keep free prescriptions

#### Plaid Cymru

- Recruit 1000 extra doctors
- Increase ambulance capacity
- Integrate health and social care
- Restore NHS reputation
- Oppose TTIP

#### National Health Action Party (NHA)

- Minimum 4% annual uplift
- Back the NHS Reinstatement Bill
- Moratorium on service closures
- NHS as preferred provider
- Abolish prescription charges

called for a ban on all NHS contracts with private providers until after the election. More recently, he accused the Coalition of sneaking out legislation, forcing all contracts worth more than £625 000 to be put out to tender.

Placing themselves firmly in the public's minds as the party responsible for creating the NHS, Labour's plans include replacing competition with an NHS-preferred provider policy and restoring the accountability role of the Secretary of State.

**“What is as yet unclear is what the plans for scrapping the Health and Social Care Act and integration of health and social care will mean for an NHS desperate to avoid any further reorganisation.”**

In a 10-year plan announced in January, there was a fair bit of detail for an NHS it describes as presently “going backwards”. Labour have promised an additional £2.5 billion on top of the NHS ring-fenced budget for a Time to Care fund, paid for by a tax on homes worth more than £2 million, cracking down on tax avoidance, and a new levy on tobacco companies. The extra cash—which is over and above current budget promises but seems not to be available for the first year of the new parliament—will be spent on recruiting more staff, with plans for 20 000 nurses, 8000 GPs, 3000 midwives, and 5000 home-care workers.

Labour also plan to integrate health and social care with a budget covering a single year of care (physical, mental, and social) for those with complex needs. There are also plans to boost the priority of mental health by including a right to access talking therapies within the NHS Constitution and invest in mental health services for young people. Labour also plan to set up a wide-ranging review of the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, which includes tougher rules on implementing its guidance.

For the party who will be forever linked with introducing a raft of targets when in government, it might not be surprising to see they are also promising a guaranteed GP appointment within 48 hours—and on the same day for those who need it. And, by 2020, for patients to wait no longer than 1 week for vital cancer tests and results.

What is as yet unclear is what the plans for scrapping the Health and Social Care Act and integration of health and social care will mean for an NHS desperate to avoid any further reorganisation.

#### Liberal Democrats

As yet the only party to agree to the NHS call for £8 billion of additional funding by 2020, the Liberal Democrats have said the extra £2 billion promised by the Coalition for 2015/16 will be baselined into the NHS budget. An additional £1 billion for the following year is proposed to be paid for by capping pensions tax relief for the richest pensioners, aligning dividend tax with income tax for those earning more than £150 000, and scrapping George Osborne's shares for rights scheme, which allows workers to give up employment rights in return for company shares. The party have pledged to increase health spending in line with growth of the economy in subsequent years.

Plans they announced at the beginning of the year also include commissioning a non-partisan review of NHS and social care finances in 2015 to identify pressures and set multiyear budgets.

The Lib Dem view for NHS sustainability focuses on two areas; the first being mental health, for which they have pledged an extra £500 million a year from 2015/16 onwards and the second being prevention—keeping people healthier and providing care closer to home. Both these issues were also raised in Labour's 10-year plan and are integral

to Steven's NHS proposals. Detail from the Lib Dem camp includes a 6-week standard wait for access to psychological therapies from April, 2016, and access to treatment within 2 weeks for a first episode of psychosis.

They too have plans for better integration of health and social care—an issue laid out as a priority for the next 5 years by the UK health policy think tank The King's Fund—through local agreement. And have announced that a single government department for health and social care should be created immediately after the election.

The NHS payment system, long criticised for incentivising hospital treatment, would also be targeted by the Lib Dems who want to see it better encouraging integration between primary and secondary care.

### Green Party

Although specific detail on costing has not yet been announced by the Green's, they have said they want to end NHS austerity with an immediate cash injection followed by annual uplifts in funding. Health spokesperson Jillian Creasy said they would be making investment at the "kind of level" set out in the *Five Year Forward View*. Previously announced proposals have included better funding of the NHS through changes to general income and other taxes.

They also go further than the Labour Party in pledging to reverse changes introduced in the Health and Social Care Act and "return the NHS to its founding vision" by supporting the NHS Reinstatement Bill. Under these plans, the legal duty of the Secretary of State to provide the NHS would be reintroduced and current organisational structures returned to a system of local health authorities. This process would be bottom up, determined locally, and could happen over a 3-year period, Creasy said.

Under plans laid out by the party, private companies would only provide NHS services as an exception.



Several parties have pledged to increase the number of general practitioners in their plans for the NHS

The Green Party has also identified mental health as a priority for additional funding. And they have pledged to prevent illness and expand community and primary care (there is much in the wider manifesto about improving health and wellbeing through tackling issues such as inequality, poverty, and housing).

**"As much as the main political parties talk about the NHS as a UK-wide entity, in reality devolution means it is four organisations under one umbrella."**

They too want to integrate health and social care, pointing to their support for the Barker Commission on the Future of Health and Social Care in England, but this does not have to be a "big bang" approach as is happening in Manchester, says Creasy. A core pledge announced by leader Natalie Bennett is to make social care free for people older than 65 years. They say this in turn would relieve pressure on NHS activity and budgets.

### UK Independence Party (UKIP)

The UK Independence Party (UKIP) launched their party's health policy in February and with a fair amount of

detail. Although leader Nigel Farage has in the past alluded to his preference for an insurance-based health service, and in January said "it was a debate we're all going to have to return to", the party has promised to keep the NHS free at the point of delivery. UKIP will require all migrants, students, and visitors to Britain to have medical insurance, which they calculate will save the NHS £2 billion a year. NHS numbers will only be available to overseas visitors who have contributed to UK taxation for 5 years.

Overall, UKIP is promising £3 billion more a year for NHS front-line services, with dementia receiving £130 million a year. They have also pledged £1 billion a year for an elderly social care fund and want to bring social care back under the control of the NHS. Other promises include scrapping hospital parking charges and tuition fees for medical students on a means tested basis.

On staffing they say the £3 billion additional funding—much of it coming from Britain leaving the European Union (EU)—will be spent on 20 000 new nurses, 3000 midwives, and 8000 GPs.

UKIP want to encourage GPs who have left the profession back into work and say they will scrap unnecessary data collection, target chasing, and



Gail Orenstein/NurPhoto

Thousands of people joined a public march and rally against NHS privatisation in September, 2014

revalidation and appraisal work to free up surgeries to open 1 night a week and 1 weekend a month.

The party has also pledged to spend more money on mental health—something that seems to be a strong recurring theme across many manifestoes.

Under UKIP plans, the Care Quality Commission—the independent regulator of all health and social care services in England—would be scrapped with local health boards given the power for unannounced spot checks.

### Scottish National Party (SNP)

As much as the main political parties talk about the NHS as a UK-wide entity, in reality devolution means it is four organisations under one umbrella.

The Scottish National Party (SNP) has put protecting the NHS at the heart of its election campaign. The party has promised £100 million to tackle delayed discharge from hospital and also has plans to integrate health and social care provision to improve community care for those with long-term disorders and disabilities. This includes the setting up of Health and Social Care Partnerships to oversee care services by April, 2016.

There are no prescription charges in Scotland, a policy the SNP say they are determined to keep.

First minister Nicola Sturgeon has said SNP Members of Parliament

would be prepared to vote on English NHS matters to protect the Scottish NHS budget from privatisation, patient charging, and austerity.

**“Having a party whose main purpose is to oppose NHS privatisation and funding cuts is one way to keep the health service at the top of the agenda.”**

The party would vote in favour of any proposal to repeal legislation that opens the door to private providers in the NHS. This includes calling for a specific provision that excludes the NHS from the trade agreement being negotiated between the EU and the USA—the EU Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP)—a promise Labour has also made.

### Plaid Cymru

The NHS in Wales has received some fairly negative coverage over the past few years. Stories of financial difficulties, underperforming hospitals, and staff shortages have all hit the mainstream media.

In announcing its plans for the NHS in Wales, Plaid Cymru said they want to increase capacity, bring down waiting times, and improve patient flow through hospitals and beyond. Their commitment is to save and strengthen services to “restore the reputation of the NHS in Wales”.

More specifically they will recruit a 1000 extra doctors to keep the NHS sustainable, improve access to GPs, and cut waiting times.

The party also wants to see fully integrated health and social care services. Other plans include increasing the capacity of the ambulance service and nursing and paramedic staff. And Plaid Cymru is also opposed to the TTIP trade deal that they believe could privatise the NHS.

### National Health Action (NHA)

Having a party whose main purpose is to oppose NHS privatisation and funding cuts is one way to keep the health service at the top of the agenda. Now boasting nearly 5000 members, the NHA Party is fielding 13 candidates in the election, including Louise Irvine a GP who chaired the successful Save Lewisham campaign against local service closure, who is standing against current Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt.

Like the Greens, the NHA back the NHS Reinstatement Bill and want to see an end to NHS privatisation—with the NHS once again becoming the preferred provider—as well as opposing the TTIP. Their proposals would mean restoring the role of Secretary of State, reducing dependence on management consultants, and increasing the influence of health-care staff and patients.

They also want to see an end to flat funding, increasing the NHS budget by a minimum of 4% per year with a 1 p rise in income tax to boost the health service coffers. Other plans include calling for a moratorium on local accident and emergency and hospital closures, halting any further private finance initiative deals, and renegotiating existing ones. And an urgent injection of funding into general practice is also needed to address the current crisis, they say. They also want to abolish prescription charges.

Emma Wilkinson