

Debate Pack

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Backlogs in the NHS

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Summary

There will be a debate on backlogs in the NHS on Monday 6 January 2024. The debate will take place in the House of Commons Chamber. Helen Morgan MP will lead the debate.

This debate pack covers what backlogs the NHS is facing, government activity to address backlogs and stakeholder commentary. Health policy is devolved, this information applies to England.

1 Background

1.1 What backlogs is the NHS facing?

[Health services are under pressure](#) and face significant capacity issues. An ageing population with increasingly complex care needs, high demand and inflation are all contributing to a [reduction in timely access to services](#). Sources of pressure in the NHS include declining productivity, issues around capital investment, high rates of bed occupation and delayed hospital discharges.¹ The Library has published an [article on factors that could be contributing to capacity pressures](#) in the NHS.

Backlogs in the NHS were recently highlighted by Lord Darzi in his September 2024 report on the [Independent Investigation into the NHS](#) (see ‘Darzi report’ in section 1.2 for further details).

Before 2020, the NHS in England experienced increasing demand and declining performance on its main waiting time measures.² Many of these pressures have increased following the covid-19 pandemic.³

[Key NHS waiting times standards are not being met](#). For example:⁴

- In England, the 18-week treatment target has not been met since 2016 and waiting lists for hospital treatment rose to a record of 7.7 million people in September 2023.
- The percentage of patients waiting over 4 hours in hospital A&E rose consistently between 2015 and 2020. A new record high was reached in December 2022.
- The 62-day waiting time standard for cancer treatment has not been met in recent years.

For full details of key NHS statistics in England, including on A&E waiting times, hospital waiting lists, ambulance response times, staffing levels and more, see the Commons Library briefing on [NHS key statistics: England](#).

¹ House of Commons Library, “[Capacity pressures in health and social care in England](#)”, published 16 July 2024, accessed 2 January 2025

² House of Commons Library, “[NHS key statistics: England](#)” CBP 7281, 25 October 2024, accessed 2 January 2025

³ As above, reference 2

⁴ As above, reference 2

1.2

Government policy on NHS backlogs

Government health mission and Autumn Budget 2024

The government has said it intends to [end hospital backlogs this parliament](#) by meeting the target that 92% of patients should not wait longer than 18 weeks from referral to starting consultant-led treatment of non-urgent conditions.

In the 2024 Autumn Budget, the government announced funding to support 2 million extra NHS operations, scans and appointments a year in England to help reduce waiting times for elective care. [It has said that its next steps to end backlogs](#) will be to:

- **“Transform how elective care is delivered**, improving productivity, and the way in which patients receive care, including more direct and timely diagnostic test referrals and results, increasing the availability of testing in communities and neighbourhoods. The capital investment provided in Autumn Budget 2024 will fund new surgical hubs and diagnostic scanners to build capacity.
- **Transform patients’ experience of care**, by embracing technology. Care will be centred around patients’ lives and choices, as opposed to being inflexible and outdated. We will transform the NHS app, giving users the information they need to navigate and take control over their care.
- **Transform the model of care to make it more sustainable**. There will be an increased focus on prevention throughout a patient’s care journey, dealing with issues earlier when they are easier to treat or cure. Siloed models of care will be reformed to improve patient experience and outcomes.

Referral processes will be effective and informed, with GPs having easier access to specialist clinical advice, and the priority will be to provide the right care, in the right place, at the right time, which may not be in a hospital setting.”

10-year health plan

The government said it will publish a [10-year health plan](#) in spring 2025 to “reform” healthcare by shifting from “hospital to community” care, rolling out new technologies and focusing on preventing illnesses by identifying and managing issues earlier.⁵

⁵ Prime Minister’s Office, “[Build an NHS Fit for the Future](#)”, accessed 2 January 2025

The [Labour Party election manifesto promised to cut NHS waiting times](#), deliver 40,000 more appointments a week and double the number of cancer scanners.

Darzi Report

In July 2024, Wes Streeting, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, commissioned Lord Darzi to carry out an independent investigation into the NHS in England. The [final report of the investigation \(‘the Darzi report’\)](#) was published in September 2024.

Lord Darzi ultimately concluded that the NHS is in “serious trouble”,⁶ and he noted issues around poor access and quality of care. He said various factors had contributed to the current state of the NHS, including low capital investments, the covid-19 pandemic, patient and staff disengagement and the “constant reorganisation” of NHS structures and systems.

The [Library debate pack on Lord Darzi’s Independent Investigation into NHS performance](#) discusses in more detail the findings of the report, recommendations it made and how it was received.

The Darzi report noted various issues around NHS backlogs. It [highlighted issues with poor and varied access to GPs, growing waiting lists and long waiting times](#). In particular, the report noted the backlog in adult ADHD assessments and said at current rates it “would take an average of 8 years to clear” and for many trusts “the backlog would not be cleared for decades”.⁷

Lord Darzi acknowledged the impact of the pandemic on increasing the NHS backlog. However, he also said countries who had invested more capital on health as a share of GDP in the 2010s and that more effectively contained the covid-19 pandemic were “in a better position to cope with care backlogs ... and recover from its consequences”.⁸

Lord Darzi emphasised that [resources must be shifted into community health services](#) and social care to reduce the strain on hospitals. He argued that whilst this has been a central tenet of health policy for some time, it has been undermined by financial flows and “knee-jerk” responses from ministers that focus spending on hospitals. He said this funding distribution is reinforced by performance standards that focus on hospitals.

Lord Darzi also noted [disparities in access to and outcomes of care for some ethnicities](#), highlighting longer waits for elective care for Asian people.

⁶ Lord Darzi, “[Independent investigation of the NHS in England](#)”, published 12 September 2024, page 1

⁷ Lord Darzi, “[Independent investigation of the NHS in England](#)”, published 12 September 2024, page 34

⁸ Lord Darzi, “[Independent investigation of the NHS in England](#)”, published 12 September 2024, pages 8, 101 - 105, 107 (quote on page 107)

1.3

Stakeholder Commentary

A report published in October 2024 by the Nuffield Trust highlighted how [headline figures on NHS backlogs can hide demographic disparities](#) in access to NHS care. The report analysed how NHS waiting times can vary by age, sex, ethnicity and level of deprivation and found:⁹

- Waiting list sizes and times for planned NHS care, and how they have changed over time, vary by what people are waiting for. For example, trauma and orthopaedic services, and ear, nose and throat services, had the largest waiting times in May 2024 and made up nearly a fifth of the total waiting list size. Respiratory medicine services saw the largest increase in total waiting list size in the past decade (263%), and gynaecology services had the second largest (223%).
- Older people are more likely to be waiting for planned NHS care, but younger people are more likely to say they have longer waits for planned care.
- People from the most deprived areas are more likely to be waiting for care.
- Experience of waiting varies between ethnic groups.

Commenting on the government's plan in the October 2024 budget to reduce the backlog through funding to support two million extra yearly appointments and diagnostics, the King's Fund said the investment was "[much needed and to be welcomed, particularly to unlock productivity gains](#)". However, it also said that "without further commitments" the NHS may struggle to meet rising demand for care.¹⁰ It pointed to rising NHS buildings and equipment costs to be addressed that it said stands at £13.8 billion and a need for enough NHS staff to help bring down waiting lists.¹¹

In June 2024, [The Health Foundation said that there "are no quick fixes" to solving the backlog](#) in the NHS. It recommended the government "to make better use of existing hospital capacity and invest in expanding capacity for the longer term".¹²

In February 2024, the Institute of Fiscal Studies said that reducing waiting lists for elective treatment in England to pre-pandemic levels was going to be "[highly unlikely within the next parliament](#)". It highlighted a need for

⁹ The Nuffield Trust, "[NHS hospital care: Who is waiting and what are they waiting for?](#)", published 10 October 2024, accessed 2 January 2025

¹⁰ The King's Fund, "The King's Fund responds to HMT announcement of new funding for two million extra NHS appointments", published 29 October 2024, accessed 2 January 2025

¹¹ As above, footnote 10

¹² The Health Foundation, "[How can the next government improve hospital waits in England?](#)", published 25 June 2024, accessed 2 January 2025

dedicated additional funding to the health service and increased NHS productivity.¹³

¹³ Institute of Fiscal Studies, "[Getting English NHS waiting lists down to pre-pandemic levels is highly unlikely within the next parliament](#)" Press Release, published 29 February 2024, accessed 2 January 2025

2

Parliamentary material

2.1

Parliamentary questions

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: Waiting Lists

20 November 2024 | UIN 13859

Asked by: Luke Murphy

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what steps the Department is taking to reduce (a) the backlog of ADHD diagnosis and (b) improve waiting times for assessments.

Answering member: Stephen Kinnock | Department of Health and Social Care

The Department is currently considering next steps to improve access to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) assessments. It is the responsibility of integrated care boards to make appropriate provision to meet the health and care needs of their local population, including ADHD assessments, in line with relevant National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines.

We are supporting a taskforce that NHS England is establishing to look at ADHD service provision and its impact on patient experience. The taskforce will bring together expertise from across a broad range of sectors, including the National Health Service, education, and justice, to better understand the challenges affecting people with ADHD and to help provide a joined-up approach in response to concerns around rising demand.

Alongside the work of the taskforce, NHS England will continue to develop a national ADHD data improvement plan, carry out more detailed work to understand the provider and commissioning landscape, and capture examples from local health systems which are trialling innovative ways of delivering ADHD services to ensure best practice is captured and shared across the system.

General Practitioners: High Peak

17 September 2024 | UIN 2602

Asked by: Jon Pearce

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what (a) support and (b) resources his Department has provided to help support GP surgeries to (i) clear patient backlogs and (ii) reduce workloads in High Peak constituency.

Answering member: Stephen Kinnock | Department of Health and Social Care

We know that patients are finding it harder than ever to see a general practitioner (GP), and we are committed to fixing this crisis in GPs to secure the long-term sustainability of the National Health Service. High Peak sits within the NHS Derby and Derbyshire Integrated Care Board (ICB), where the percentage of appointments delivered within two weeks of booking is 12.7% lower than the national average.

This government has committed to fixing the front door to the NHS by shifting the focus from hospitals and into the community. We know that if patients can't get a GP appointment, they will end up in A&E, which is worse for them, and more expensive for the taxpayer.

NHS England is working to address training bottlenecks so the health service has enough staff for the future, and we are providing £82m to fund the recruitment over 1,000 newly qualified GPs, to increase capacity and reduce workloads.

We are pleased to announce that newly qualified GPs will be included in the Additional Roles Reimbursement Scheme as part of an initiative to address GP unemployment, with additional funding over 2024/25.

Cancer: Health Services

14 May 2024 | UIN 25388

Asked by: Ian Byrne

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what steps her Department is taking to increase the proportion of people who receive treatment for cancer within 31 days of a decision to begin that treatment.

Answering member: Andrew Stephenson | Department of Health and Social Care

The Department is taking steps to reduce cancer diagnosis and treatment waiting times across England, including the time between an urgent general practice referral and the commencement of treatment for cancer for patients. The Government is working jointly with NHS England on implementing the delivery plan for tackling the COVID-19 backlogs in elective care, and plans to spend more than £8 billion from 2022/23 to 2024/25 to help drive up and protect elective activity, including cancer diagnosis and treatment activity. Additionally, as outlined in the 2024/25 NHS England Planning Guidance, NHS England is providing over £266 million in cancer service development funding to Cancer Alliances, to support delivery of the operational priorities for cancer.

To help achieve the cancer waiting times standards, NHS England is streamlining cancer pathways. This includes implementing non-symptom

specific pathways for patients who present with non-specific symptoms, as well as timed cancer pathways focused on the most challenged pathways, such as lower gastrointestinal and skin cancer. The pathways aim to support improvements in operational performance and patient experience, as well as providing models to support sustainable improvement.

Furthermore, to improve cancer treatment we are maximising the pace of the roll-out of additional diagnostic capacity. We are currently delivering the second year of the three-year investment plan for establishing community diagnostic centres (CDCs). We are ensuring timely implementation of new CDC locations and upgrades to existing CDCs, with capacity prioritised for cancer diagnostics. As of April 2024, 160 CDCs are operational, and have delivered almost 8 million tests, checks, and scans since July 2021. Additionally, we are supporting advances in radiotherapy. Since 2016, we've invested £162 million into cutting-edge radiotherapy equipment to replace or upgrade over 100 radiotherapy treatment machines.

We are committed to delivering the best possible outcomes for patients, and our approach is seeing success. Almost 344,000 people received their first cancer treatment in the 12 months to March 2024. Further, 2023/24 is the best year so far for the Faster Diagnosis Standard (FDS), with the latest performance data showing that NHS England hit the FDS target for the second month in a row at 77.3%, above the standard of 75%. We have also reduced the 62 day or over cancer referral to treatment backlog, to pre-pandemic levels.

[Surgery: Waiting Lists](#)

13 May 2024 | UIN 25263

Asked by: Rachael Maskell

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what steps her Department is taking to help reduce regional variations in the length of NHS elective care waiting lists.

Answering member: Andrew Stephenson | Department of Health and Social Care

Published management information from NHS England estimates that as of April 2024, three quarters of those waiting for 65 weeks are concentrated in 41 trusts. The National Health Service and Department are providing targeted regional and national intervention to these specific trusts with the largest backlogs, through a programme of challenge and support.

2.2

Debates

[NHS Waiting Lists](#)

11 December 2024 | House of Commons Chamber | 758 cc882-883

[“Get Britain Working” White Paper](#)

27 November 2024 | House of Lords Chamber | 841 cc696-711

[NHS Hospital Equipment](#)

19 November 2024 | House of Commons Chamber | 757 c135

[NHS Winter Readiness](#)

30 October 2024 | Westminster Hall | 755 cc293WH-312WH

[NHS Performance: Darzi Investigation](#)

7 October 2024 | House of Commons Chamber | 754 cc82-130

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Press and stakeholder material

The following is a selection of news and media articles relevant to this debate. Please note: the Library is not responsible for either the views or the accuracy of external content.

3.1

England

[NHS backlog data analysis](#)

British Medical Association

16 December 2024

[NHS waiting list finally starts to come down after backlog increased for over a decade](#)

The Mirror

14 November 2024

[Doctors paid up to £200,000 overtime to tackle NHS backlog](#)

BBC News

5 November 2024

[New backlog maintenance figures shows effect of starving NHS of vital capital](#)

NHS Confederation

17 October 2024

[Plan to hit 18-week NHS wait target 'set to fail'](#)

BBC News

10 September 2024

[Still waiting: Is it just England that still has a backlog problem?](#)

Nuffield Trust

11 July 2024

[Labour pledges to clear NHS waiting list backlog in England in five years](#)

The Guardian

28 May 2024

[NHS must treat 10% more non-urgent cases a month to reduce backlog – study](#)

The Guardian

11 January 2024

[Fall in waiting lists welcome but concerns remain over growing maintenance backlog](#)

NHS Confederation

14 December 2023

3.2 Wales

[NHS under pressure – Wales](#)

British Medical Association

[Wales to use private care to cut NHS waiting lists](#)

BBC Wales

19 November 2024

3.3 Scotland

[NHS under pressure – Scotland](#)

British Medical Association

5 July 2024

[Scottish NHS reform 'urgently needed' – watchdog](#)

BBC News

3 December 2024

[NHS Scotland backlog hits 840,000 as inpatient wait jumps](#)

The Herald Scotland

28 May 2024

3.4 Northern Ireland

[NHS under pressure - Northern Ireland](#)

British Medical Association

11 July 2024

[Waiting lists show 'precarious' NI health service](#)

BBC News

29 August 2024

4 Press releases and government publications

4.1 England

[Government takes first steps to fix the foundations and save the NHS](#)

Gov.uk

31 October 2024

[NHS waiting list continues to fall as staff continue to tackle covid backlog amid strikes](#)

NHS England

14 March 2024

[How we're tackling the NHS backlog](#)

Department of Health and Social Care

11 May 2023

4.2 Wales

[Welsh Government response to latest NHS Wales performance data: May and June 2024](#)

Welsh Government

18 July 2024

[Waiting well? The impact of the waiting times backlog on people in Wales \(PDF\)](#)

Welsh Parliament

April 2022

4.3 Scotland

[£30 million to reduce waiting times](#)

Scottish Government

25 July 2024

4.4

Northern Ireland

[Hospital waiting times statistics](#)

Northern Ireland Department of Health

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