

King's Speech 2026 | RCP briefing

The Royal College of Physicians (RCP) is the membership body for physicians, with around 40,00 members and fellows in the UK and internationally from over 30 medical specialties.

This King's Speech provides a vital opportunity for government to deliver on its commitments made in the 10 Year Health Plan and publish a credible 10 Year Workforce Plan that invests in the medical workforce and expands the number of medical specialty training places. The RCP is urging government to use this parliamentary session to prioritise action to bolster our NHS workforce and to close the gap in healthy life expectancy by focussing on prevention and tackling the wider determinants of health.

Summary

The RCP is calling on government to:

- Publish a credible, fully funded 10 Year Workforce Plan (and accompanying implementation plan) that invests in the medical workforce and expands specialty training places.
- Protect and strengthen clinical leadership in the NHS reform legislation.
- Deliver medical regulatory reform, including retaining the health grounds for fitness to practise procedures and implementing the Leng Review recommendations on the title of physician assistants.
- Deliver on commitments to tackle the social determinants of health to halve the gap in healthy life expectancy.
- Introduce a new Clean Air Act with stronger targets on air pollution and commit to a public health campaign on clean air.
- Expand access to obesity services and treatment while delivering stronger prevention measures such as strengthening measures to protect against the aggressive marketing and advertising of unhealthy foods, while increasing the availability and affordability of healthy foods from an early age.
- Strengthen the digital foundations of the NHS to support the safe use of AI, including better interoperability between systems, better data and standardising the electronic patient record so providers have a specification of NHS requirements that they must meet.

Workforce

The RCP welcomed the government's commitment to publish a 10 Year Workforce Plan. The NHS continues to face severe shortages across multiple medical specialties, alongside rising demand, increasing complexity of care and persistent challenges with doctor retention.

The RCP has called for the forthcoming workforce plan to:

- set out independently verified modelling of the workforce numbers needed to meet population need and address health inequalities, including projections of training places for the medical specialties
- expand the number of medical specialty training places to meet population demand
- deliver a plan to support educators, supervisors, mentors and trainers by working with employers in the NHS to increase capacity for medical education and training
- make long-term funding commitments for priorities that the plan sets, such as doctor expansion
- improve retention across the medical workforce, improving wellbeing at work
- maintain the commitment to grow the domestic medical workforce through an expansion of medical school places, with a new feasible plan and timetable for delivery.

The government previously committed to expanding medical school places. This commitment should now be reaffirmed with a new, realistic plan for delivery including creating a new foundation and specialty training post for every new medical school place created. We welcome the postgraduate medical training review led by Professor Jane Dacre as a key opportunity to improve training quality, flexibility and career progression for doctors.

The RCP is also calling for progress on regulatory reform. This should include enshrining in law the Leng Review recommendation to change the title of 'physician associates' to 'physician assistants' to reduce confusion for

patients and healthcare teams. The RCP also supports maintaining health grounds within fitness to practise procedures to ensure doctors experiencing ill health are appropriately supported.

The forthcoming NHS reform legislation is expected to include measures relating to the abolition of NHS England and wider structural reform. As these reforms progress, it is essential that clinical leadership is protected and strengthened across the NHS and DHSC. Clinical expertise must remain central to decision-making at every level of the system, up to DHSC, to ensure reforms work for clinicians on the ground and improve patient care, workforce retention and service delivery.

Digital to analogue

We frequently hear from our members about the frustrations of poorly functioning IT and its impact on their wellbeing and ability to deliver the best possible care to patients. Digital and AI transformation must be driven by clinical need, co-designed with patients and clinicians, and underpinned by strong clinical leadership, standards, infrastructure and training. The RCP is calling for:

1. Investment in IT hardware and the optimisation of existing digital systems, including an electronic patient record model content specification for suppliers to meet.
2. Clinician and patient involvement in all digital transformation so that digital and AI tools solve real world problems.
3. A bank of NHS approved algorithms, AI tools and patient facing apps.
4. Robust and joined up regulatory frameworks to ensure the safe and ethical use of digital clinical systems and AI.
5. The forthcoming Roadmap on AI to set out a plan for the safe and effective implementation of AI in the NHS, including how it can enable clinical research and tackle health inequalities.

Sickness to prevention: tackling health inequalities

The RCP welcomed the government's sickness to prevention shift as part of the 10 Year Health Plan, following the 2024 manifesto commitment to halve the gap in healthy life expectancy by tackling the social determinants of health. **46% of UK physicians responding to a February 2025 RCP snapshot survey said that at least half of their workload was due to illnesses linked to social factors.** Preventing ill health and reducing health inequalities is critical to improving outcomes for patients and ensuring the long-term sustainability of the NHS. **We need a cross-government strategy to reduce health inequalities that tackles the things that make us ill in the first place.**

Physicians are increasingly seeing the impact of preventable ill health in clinical practice. [A June 2025 RCP survey found that 94% of physicians regularly treat patients whose conditions are caused or worsened by smoking, obesity or alcohol dependence.](#)

Air quality

The RCP's 2025 report "[A Breath of Fresh Air](#)" highlighted the significant health harms caused by air pollution. Air pollution affects almost every organ in the human body. It has significant health impacts even at low concentrations, including on foetal development, diabetes, cancer, heart disease, stroke, mental health conditions and dementia. The RCP estimates that around 30,000 deaths in 2025 were linked to air pollution, with an annual cost of more than £27 billion. **The RCP is calling on government to introduce a new Clean Air Act during this parliamentary session, as it committed to in its pre-election health mission.**

The RCP is also calling for:

- A public health campaign so the public have accurate and trusted information about the health harms of poor quality air and how they can reduce exposure. **YouGov polling [commissioned by RCP](#) found that 61% of the British public would support such a move.**
- Stronger, legal air pollution targets aligned with the WHO 2021 global air quality guideline levels
- Expanded monitoring of indoor air pollution

Obesity

The RCP welcomed the government's "moonshot to end obesity" in the 10 Year Health Plan. Obesity is a complex and multifactorial condition influenced by health inequalities, social determinants, genetics, environment and wider societal factors. Tackling obesity requires a comprehensive approach that combines clinical treatment with

population-level prevention. The RCP is clear that medication alone will not be enough to make meaningful progress on tackling obesity.

The RCP is urging government to:

- Expand access to evidence-based obesity treatment services
- Implement stronger restrictions on the advertising and promotion of unhealthy food and drink
- Take action to improve access to healthy and affordable food
- Implement the recommendations made by the [House of Lords Food, Diet and Obesity Committee](#).

//

For more information, please contact Jacob Hayes, Senior Public Affairs and Policy Manager | policy@rcp.ac.uk