

# King's Speech 2023 | Building an NHS fit for the future

The Royal College of Physicians (RCP) is the membership body for physicians, with members and fellows in the UK and internationally from over 30 medical specialties from cardiology and gastroenterology to geriatric medicine.

With waiting lists in England at a record 7.8 million, workforce is central to ensuring the NHS can deliver care now and in future. [The RCP welcomed](#) the publication of the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan as an important first step towards a sustainably resourced NHS. Acting on retention must also be a priority to retain hardworking NHS staff.

Reducing avoidable ill health is key to reducing demand on the NHS and ensuring it is fit for the future. We welcome the Tobacco and Vapes Bill to create a smoke free generation. A healthier population will reduce the demand on our health service, reduce the number of people unable to work because of long-term sickness and help to build a more prosperous nation. Recent projections suggest 2.5 million more people in England will live with a major illness by 2040, placing additional pressure on an already strained NHS. Many factors driving illness and health inequalities are beyond the remit of the NHS and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC). That is why the RCP and the over 250 member organisations of the [Inequalities in Health Alliance](#) (IHA) are calling for a cross-government strategy to reduce health inequalities.

Given the significant health impacts of the climate emergency, government must take action to tackle climate change and sustainability must also be effectively prioritised in the NHS. Many of the things we need to do to tackle climate change will also have major benefits for improving population health.

## Summary

- Recruitment is central to ensure NHS staffing levels keep pace with demand – these efforts must be complemented by action to reduce attrition to ensure we retain the skilled staff we already have.
- Reducing health inequalities, and avoidable illness, is key to reducing NHS demand and improving the nation's health and productivity. The Major Conditions Strategy should include a cross-government strategy to reduce health inequalities.
- We welcome the Tobacco and Vapes Bill to create a smoke free generation.
- Given the public health impacts of climate change, prioritising a just transition from fossil fuels and ensuring a robust and credible plan to reach net zero by 2050 at the latest is vital for population health.

## Tobacco and Vapes Bill

Smoking is responsible for [64,000 deaths](#) in England a year. The RCP [welcomed](#) the Tobacco and Vapes Bill to create a smoke-free generation. We also welcomed measures announced to reduce the appeal and availability of vapes to children. We know e-cigarettes are an effective tool in the fight against tobacco dependency and are pleased to see measures being taken to curb their misuse among young people who have never smoked. It is key these measures are implemented in a way that avoids the potential unintended consequence of discouraging adult smokers from quitting.

## Supporting the NHS workforce

[The RCP welcomed](#) the publication of the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan as an important first step towards a sustainably resourced NHS. Findings from our 2022 census show consultants reporting widespread consultant vacancies, frequent gaps in trainee rotas and the workforce feeling their workload is unmanageable:

- 58% of consultant physicians reported having vacant consultant posts and 69% of consultant physicians were aware of gaps on trainee rotas either daily or weekly.
- Almost a fifth (18%) said they almost never feel in control of their workload, with 19% at risk of burnout.

Recruitment is central to ensuring NHS staffing levels keep pace with demand and is fit for the future. With [recent projections](#) suggesting that NHS waiting lists in England could exceed 8 million by next summer, action to retain the skilled staff we already have must also be a priority.

Staff across the system are working incredibly hard. It is vital they feel supported and valued. There are many measures that can be taken to improve conditions for staff. The RCP has [set out a range of short- and medium-term solutions](#) to make a difference now, including time off for significant life events, getting rotas in good time, rest areas, good IT equipment, ensuring the availability of food and drink and more flexible working and training.

## Reducing demand on the NHS

Reducing health inequalities, and avoidable illness overall, is key to reducing NHS demand and ensuring the health service is fit for the future. An [RCP membership survey](#) published earlier this year found just under a third (31%) that in the last three months they had seen more people with illness due to their living conditions. It may seem that health inequality is for the DHSC and NHS, but health and social care services can only try and cure illnesses created by the environments people live in.

The best way to improve health is to focus on the factors that shape it. To prevent ill health in the first place, we need to tackle issues such as poor housing, educational opportunity, employment (including how much money you have), racism and discrimination, transport and air quality. That is why the RCP and the over 250 member organisations of the [Inequalities in Health Alliance](#) (IHA) are calling for a cross-government strategy to reduce health inequalities.

It is vital that we take urgent action to reduce health inequalities and avoidable illness – projections from the [Health Foundation](#) suggest that over 9m people will live with a major illness by 2040. A healthy population and a healthy economy are two sides of the same coin. The OBR estimate that the increase in inactivity in the labour market over the past 3 years, coupled with the increase of ill health among those in work, means [that the government spent £6.8 billion more on welfare payments in 2023-4](#), while the total annual tax loss is estimated to have risen to £8.9bn.

The RCP's [new policy paper](#) calls for the government to maintain its commitment to publish the full report of the Major Conditions Strategy in 2024 and for that to include a cross-government strategy to reduce health inequalities.

## The impact of the climate emergency on health

The climate emergency is a health emergency. This past June was the hottest in the UK since records began. [More than 3,000 excess deaths](#) were recorded in England and Wales during heatwaves between June and August 2022.

National governments have the power to make the biggest impact on climate change and play a fundamental role in setting the direction and ambition of policy. It is concerning that the [Climate Change Committee's recent report](#) said that government efforts to scale up climate action as "worryingly slow". Replacement of fossil fuels must be the linchpin of our strategy to reverse and mitigate the impacts of climate change. In August this year, the RCP joined health leaders in [a letter to the Prime Minister](#) calling for the government to withdraw new licenses for north sea oil and gas given the impact of climate change on the NHS and patients.

The RCP's [policy paper on healthcare sustainability and climate change](#) called on government to:

- prioritise a just transition from fossil fuels, redirecting all funding and subsidies to renewable energy sources and technologies, alongside policy initiatives to ensure this process does not exacerbate health inequalities
- strengthen the Net Zero Strategy to ensure there is a robust and credible pathway for reaching the UK's emission reduction targets by 2050 at the very latest
- put prevention at the heart of health and wider government policy, recognising that reducing avoidable ill health and demand for healthcare will require cross-government action and bring environmental, health and economic benefits.

## Questions for the Minister

- Does the Minister agree that a supported workforce is central to the future of the NHS and that retaining existing, hardworking staff must be a priority?
- Does the Minister agree that reducing avoidable ill health is vital to the future of the NHS and that the Major Conditions Strategy should take action on the wider determinants of ill health?
- Can the Minister confirm when the government will publish the Major Conditions Strategy?
- Will government commit to developing a cross-government strategy to reduce health inequalities in the upcoming Major Conditions Strategy?

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