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GP numbers pledge: health secretary admits government won't deliver

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The government is not on track to hit its target of 6000 more GPs by 2024-25, health secretary Sajid Javid has admitted.

Speaking to the House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee on 2 November Javid said, "I'm looking at what more we can do. But I'm not going to pretend we're on track when we're not."

He went on to highlight the "unimaginable pressures" that general practice has been facing. "We've got to look at other ways we can support GPs, it's got to be about investment in recruitment as well," he said.

The Conservative party promised the additional GPs ahead of the 2019 general election, as part of a pledge to provide 50 million more appointments in GP surgeries every year.¹ This pledge followed former health secretary Jeremy Hunt's promise of 5000 more GPs by 2020—a target which was also missed.

The health secretary's admission comes as analysis by the Nuffield Trust found that while the number of GPs in England had risen by 1385 (as of June 2021) since the 2019 general election, the number of full time, fully qualified GPs had actually decreased by 105.

In a blog post on the figures Nuffield Trust researcher Lucina Rolewicz wrote, "At the time of writing, we would have expected an increase of over 1700 more full time, fully qualified GPs over this period for the government to be on track to meet its commitment." She wrote that historically there had only been a few instances where the annual increase in GPs had been greater than 1200—which is the average yearly increase needed to reach the target of 6000 more GPs over five years.

She said that national figures also hid substantial local differences in staffing levels. "For example, our analysis shows large differences in much of London and the south east compared with other regions in England," Rolewicz wrote. "Higher numbers of patients per GP are evident in areas such as Thurrock (2373 patients per GP) compared with the north west, where the Wirral has only 1318 patients per GP."

When pushed on what the government will do in the short term to relieve some of the pressure, Javid told the committee that there will be a plan released by the end of 2021 which will tackle both the NHS and social care workforce in the short term.

On 3 November the government was to launch the "Made with Care" recruitment campaign encouraging people to work in social care in England, where there are more than 105 000 vacancies.

The autumn 2021 budget, released on 28 October, was widely criticised after it did not tackle workforce shortages or the social care crisis.²

1 Iacobucci G. Tories promise 6000 extra GPs by 2024. *BMJ* 2019;367:l6463. doi: 10.1136/bmj.l6463 pmid: 31719121

2 Mahase E. NHS gets £5.9bn funding boost in autumn budget to tackle waiting lists in England. *BMJ* 2021;375.