Health policy priorities for the next prime minister: it’s time for Labour to step up

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As Alderwick points out, the health system is in flux. The current crisis in the NHS has long been evident to staff and is now becoming appreciated by the public. That Conservative politicians appear oblivious is a reminder of their antipathy to spending on public services, favouring instead redistribution of wealth to the rich. Also missing is a robust response from the main opposition party, spelling out what has gone wrong and setting out a coherent plan to put both health and social care back on their feet.

It is disappointing that the Labour leader and the shadow secretary of state for health and social care have talked positively about privatisation of NHS services. Just as there was little opposition to the Health and Care Act as it went through parliament, so Labour has said little about restoring NHS funding to pre-austerity levels and making good the accumulated deficit; dealing with the 110 000 vacancies in health and similar number in social care; supporting overworked and underpaid staff; the appalling management of the covid pandemic; and the need to abandon the notion that covid is over.

Vigorous opposition would enable the public to see more clearly the direction of the Conservative government and its undermining of the fundamental principles of the NHS; restore hope and inspire staff and public who are demoralised by years of austerity, impoverishment, and the decline in the quality of public services; counter the fear that there is no alternative to current government policies; sustain democratic processes by scrutinising government policies, articulating alternatives, and broadening the range of policy ideas; and assist in minimising the ongoing effects of covid. While Johnson’s legacy for the NHS has been disastrous, and both those contending to replace him are offering only more of the same, it is a crucial time for Labour to step up.

Competing interests: I am co-chair of Keep Our NHS Public.

4 Fund Our NHS. 10 years of record low funding rises. https://nhsfunding.info/underfunded/key-funding-facts/10-years-of-record-low-funding-rises.
6 Independent SAGE. A seven point plan to suppress covid infections and reduce disruptions. BMJ 2022;378:. doi: 10.1136/bmj.o1793 pmid: 35853631