



Kent

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New prime minister must prioritise NHS, say doctors' leaders

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Liz Truss, the UK's new prime minister, must act decisively on the key challenges facing the NHS and social care or face an "uncontrollable crisis" this winter, doctors' leaders have warned.

Truss became the fourth Conservative prime minister in six years after gaining 81 326 votes (57.4%) of Conservative party members, defeating her rival, Rishi Sunak.

The most pressing item in Truss's in-tray will be tackling soaring energy bills that will have severe health implications if people, particularly if they are elderly or clinically vulnerable, are forced to choose between food and heating.

During the leadership contest the NHS received relatively little attention, but in her victory acceptance speech Truss pledged to "deliver on the National Health Service." However, she will have to square this with her promise to reverse the rise in national insurance, which aimed to provide cash to help clear the backlog of procedures after covid and in the longer term to pay for better social care.

In a letter to the new prime minister the BMA's chair of council, Philip Banfield, outlined the extreme pressures facing the NHS, with record waiting times, ambulances stacking up outside emergency departments, patients unable to be discharged because community and social care services are overwhelmed, and plummeting staff numbers.¹

Banfield urged Truss "not to see this problem from Whitehall or through sanitised visits" but through the eyes of NHS staff, who, because of the pressures, were "taking the unenviable decisions over which patient to prioritise and which to leave waiting in distress."

Richard Murray, chief executive of the health think tank the King's Fund, also called for urgent action on the NHS and social care. "Not long after the new PM enters 10 Downing Street, winter will really start to bite," he warned. "If Liz Truss doesn't prioritise action to shore up health and care services, she can expect the NHS and social care to slide even deeper into crisis."

With more than 130 000 posts in secondary care in England vacant, the largest number of unfilled vacancies since June 2018, the BMA warned that more must be done to retain healthcare professionals. Banfield said in his letter to Truss that reconsidering the recent pay award and tackling pension taxation is critical to boosting staff morale. "The recent pay award was in reality, nothing more than another pay cut," he wrote.

The BMA acknowledged that Truss has said she will "sort out" the problems with NHS pensions which are driving senior doctors from the NHS, But Banfield said the scale of this problem cannot be

underestimated. "Suspending "retire and return" restrictions is just one small part of the problem and will have minimal impact on the overall numbers of doctors leaving as it will only help a small minority of doctors who hold mental health officer status," he said. "It will not address the problems faced by GPs or the majority of consultants."

Saffron Cordery, interim chief executive of NHS Providers, said, "We need to see a fully funded long term workforce plan for the NHS sooner rather than later. The government's failure to fully fund this year's below-inflation pay awards, coupled with a crippling cost of living crisis, and ongoing concerns over punitive pension taxation for senior staff, is making it increasingly difficult for trusts to recruit and keep vital health workers."

Cordery also called on Truss to deliver the government's commitment to build 40 new hospitals by 2030.

1 BMA urges new prime minister to tackle NHS pressures, or face an uncontrollable crisis this winter. BMA. Sep 2022. <https://www.bma.org.uk/bma-media-centre/bma-urges-new-prime-minister-to-tackle-nhs-pressures-or-face-an-uncontrollable-crisis-this-winter>.