

**What patients
want: a vision for
the NHS in 2030**

Preface: The future patients want



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It's 2030. I'm looking back on what has, in many ways, been an amazing six years. There's finally greater global stability, progress on climate change, and we're still basking in the glow of the Lionesses winning the 2027 FIFA World Cup.

The NHS has made similar strides. People are getting planned operations within a few months now that the post-pandemic waiting lists have been eliminated.

The public finds it easier to get timely appointments at their GP practice, thanks to fully funded plans that have bolstered the medical workforce. People with mental health conditions have their needs taken as seriously as those with physical conditions and are expected to be seen just as quickly for assessments and treatment. NHS dentist appointments aren't as rare as hen's teeth, thanks to a deal agreed in 2025 to radically reform the dental contract.

The NHS of 2030 feels like a modern service at every patient touchpoint. Whether using the NHS App, making a phone call, or turning up at a reception desk – people can easily book and manage appointments, track referrals, or get hold of those responsible for their care. It's not a daunting, uphill struggle of making multiple calls and repeating stories. People have support to navigate the system at each turn from friendly, empathetic and efficient care coordinators.

This modernisation is matched with an ethos of inclusion. A person with learning disabilities gets more time to explain needs and understand treatment; a Deaf person has an interpreter arranged as a matter of course. Tackling health inequalities has become everyone's business, cost-of-living pressures have subsided, and people with disabilities and long-term conditions no longer face additional barriers to accessing care.

There has also been a shift in NHS culture. People and communities help shape priorities, feel listened to when they give feedback and are taken seriously when sounding an early alarm on safety concerns. Patient experience is given equal weight to spreadsheets of figures when assessing NHS performance.

Above all, the NHS of 2030 is our NHS – one that still holds to its core principles of providing healthcare to all, free at the point of delivery.

Introduction

The aim of this report

With our health and care system facing significant challenges and an election on the horizon, organisations across the health sector are setting out their ideas and plans for a future NHS. They'll contain many figures on the numbers of extra doctors, nurses and other staff needed for the NHS and bid for the level of investment they think is required to put the service on a sustainable footing. They'll debate whether we need more hospitals or community clinics and try to predict the impact of technological or medical advances. The role of this report is to shift our focus from the needs of the health system to the needs of the 56.5m people living in England who rely on the NHS throughout their lives.¹

Healthwatch puts people's voices at the heart of care. Since our network was launched in 2013, over 10 million people have received our help or shared their health or social care stories with us.²

By listening to patients, we can establish where things are going right and where they aren't, evaluate whether policies, plans and strategies are making a difference, and hold services accountable where they aren't meeting the standards we'd expect.

The wealth of feedback we receive also helps us to look forward and set out this vision for the future of the NHS. This report uses two national polls conducted at the start of 2024 and stories about patient experience we've collected over the past decade.

Later this year, we'll also separately focus on changes people want to see in adult social care. Again, this will be informed by our large library of people's experiences augmented by new polling.

Where we are now

This vision is presented at a time when the NHS faces the most significant pressures in its history. These include pandemic backlogs for elective care, scarce NHS dental appointments, struggles to get through to your GP surgery and excessively long waits for mental health assessments.

It is little surprise that confidence in the NHS to provide for all is being undermined.



43%

of people do not agree that the NHS is able to meet the needs of the country as a whole.

More than four in 10 people have told us in a new national poll that they do not agree the NHS is able to meet the nation's needs, while 27% disagree that the NHS is able to meet the needs of themselves or their immediate family or friends³.

In response to widely reported pressures and reduced confidence, those who can have started voting with their feet, bypassing long waits by seeking private treatment. Research for our 2023 report, [**The Public's Perspective: The State of Health and Social Care**](#) found that as many as one in seven patients were advised to consider paying for a private health service by an NHS professional.⁴

Restoring confidence and arresting the slide towards a two-tier system now requires a sustained focus on improving NHS performance and ensuring sufficient investment in the health system. The Government has started by publishing pandemic recovery plans for primary care, urgent and emergency care, elective treatment, and more recently, dentistry. Ministers also set bold ambitions in the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan in mid-2023, albeit only partly funded.

A chorus of voices across the healthcare sector has also recommended a long-term approach to investment and improvements to the NHS estate, equipment, and digital systems. We echo these calls to get the building blocks right. However, we want to see policymakers go further on behalf of patients.

The drive to restore the performance of the health service should be an opportunity to put patients at the heart of the NHS. Rather than positive patient experience being considered a 'nice to have' or a distraction from 'real business', it should be seen as a crucial litmus test of how the NHS functions and whether it delivers high-quality care. Patients also want to be active partners in their care, not just passive recipients of a service. They want the NHS to see them holistically rather than as 'units of activity'.

Our vision, therefore, calls for a focus on three key themes:

1 Making the NHS easier to access and navigate

We argue that the NHS needs to get the basics right to make getting help and the onward patient journey as hassle-free as possible.

2 Tackling health inequalities

The NHS must put in targeted measures to remove barriers and improve outcomes for those who need care the most.

3 Building a patient-centred culture

We need a greater focus on listening to patients and acting on their experiences to improve care today and in the future.

For each chapter, we describe current challenges, our latest findings, our 2030 vision and the steps needed to make this a reality for patients.

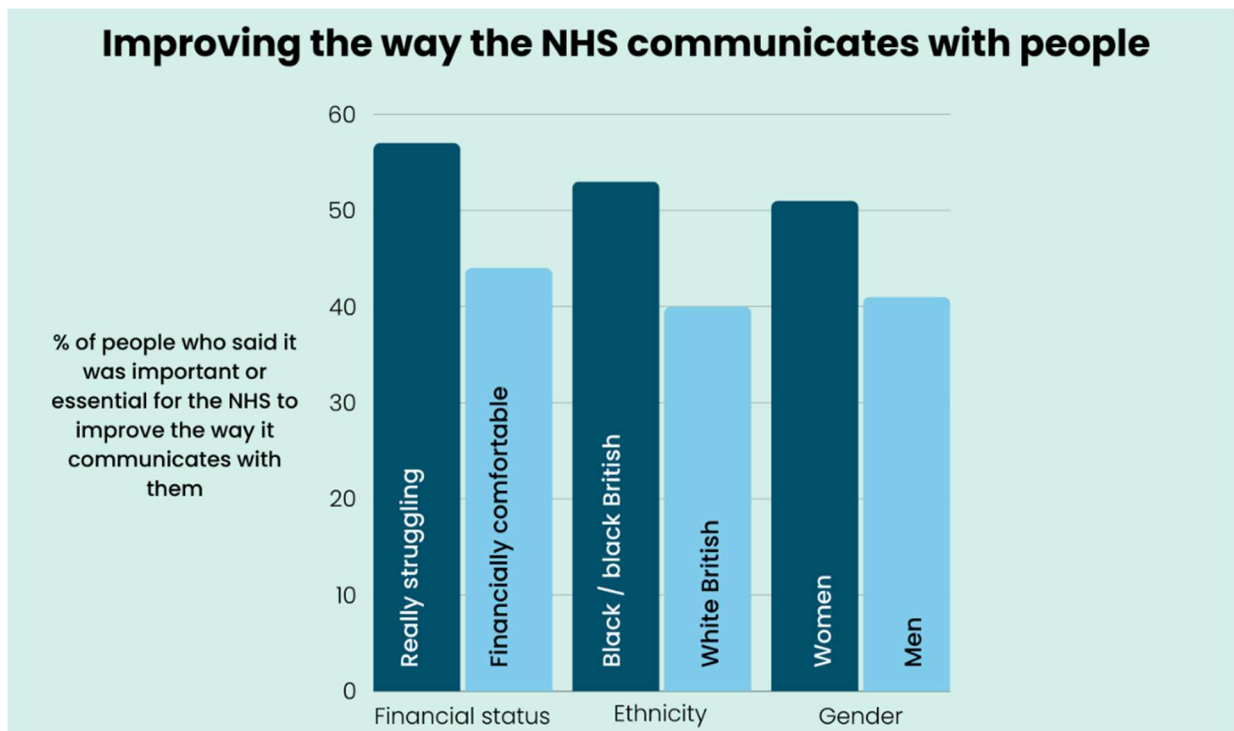
1 Making the NHS easier to access and navigate

The challenge

We all want to be seen quickly when we have new symptoms or concerns about our health. Our poll on the future of the NHS confirms this, with quicker care among the top three priorities for the public over the next five years.⁵ Timely care is even more important for older people (77% of those aged between 65 and 74 and 73% of those aged 75 and over) and those with a disability (72%).

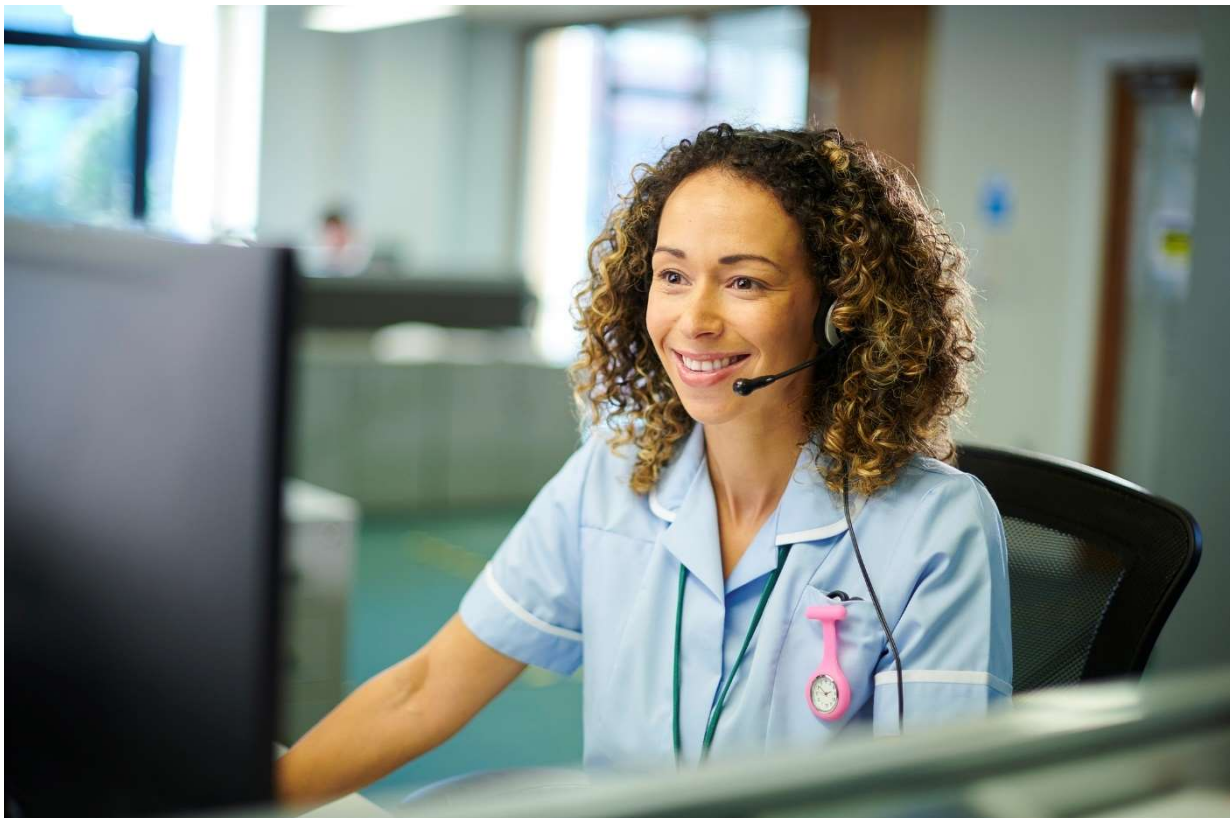
But alongside quicker access – which requires sustained investment, particularly to address workforce shortages – patients also want simplicity at each NHS touchpoint. Whether phoning a GP surgery, chasing up a date for an operation, or getting information about how to recover at home after time in hospital, people feel ‘admin’ and communication can be slow, inefficient, and sometimes lack empathy.

Ensuring the NHS improves the way it communicates is a bigger priority for some groups compared to others.



People living with long-term conditions – among the most frequent users of the NHS – also want more joined-up communication across the NHS, with almost two-thirds (64%) saying it's very important or essential to ensure they don't have to repeat themselves to different parts of the NHS.

In a second national poll, on patient rights and the NHS Constitution, over half (56%) said hospitals should be required to give regular updates on waiting time for people due to have operations or procedures.⁶ This was even more important for people over the age of 55 (60%) and women (61%).



The vision

By 2030, the NHS will be consistently adopting an 'excellent customer service' ethos. Regardless of how they access the NHS, people will get their queries answered, have an appointment booked, or be signposted to the correct service immediately.

Patients can access real-time information about their care and interact with services via the NHS App. If they are digitally excluded, they can access the same level of information through other means (such as via a care coordinator).

Static, one-way communication channels will be replaced with genuine two-way dialogue. Patients will be able to contact those responsible for their care to get swift advice or information about their lifestyle, medication, symptoms or condition.

How we get there



A new NHS Admin Transformation Plan.

Like the NHS Long-Term Workforce plan for clinical staff, an admin transformation plan will set out goals to increase and train a modern army of care navigators and other admin staff to streamline all patient touchpoints as people interact with the NHS.

The NHS App becomes a one-stop patient portal.

The app will expand from being a tool mainly used to book GP appointments or order repeat prescriptions to a digital portal through which people can view records, receive screening and health check reminders, send in med-tech readings and get trusted self-help advice.

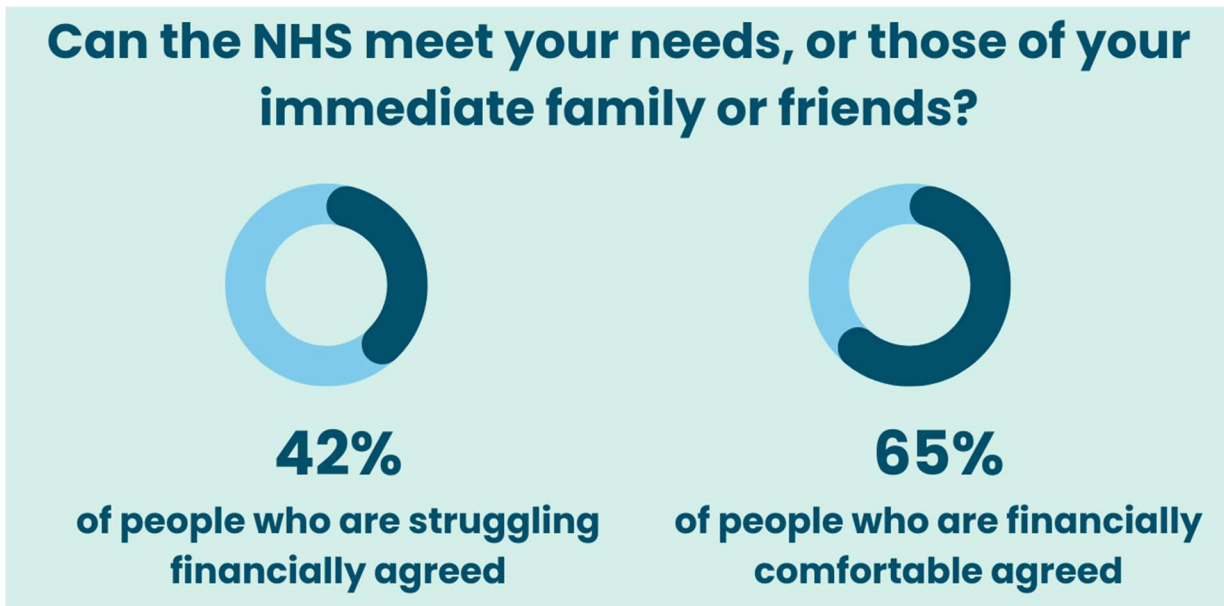
'Off-line' channels are available to people with no internet access.

Phone or in-person communication and administration channels will be retained for patients who are digitally excluded due to cost, low skills, disability or other factors.

2 Tackling health inequalities

The challenge

Health inequalities in England are stark and growing.⁷ Those living in the most deprived areas can expect to live for a far shorter period in good health compared to those in the least deprived areas.⁸ The infant mortality rate for black children is twice as high as it is for white children.⁹ And people with learning disabilities die on average almost two decades earlier than those without them.¹⁰



Inequalities result from a complex web of factors relating to the conditions in which we are born, grow up, live and work. In healthcare, there is diversity of experience, as our polling shows: 40% of people with a long-term condition and 42% of people with a disability said they found it difficult to access a GP compared to 32% of those without extra needs.

Our previous work also showed 28% of people with hearing, sight or learning disabilities said they had been refused help when requesting accessible information from the NHS¹¹, while women, people from ethnic minority backgrounds, on lower

incomes or with disabilities, have also reported to us longer waits for planned NHS care, including more frequent cancellations.¹²

Looking ahead, more than half of people we polled (55%) wanted the NHS to give them the tools to live a healthy life. Three-quarters also want the NHS to remain free at the point of entry – a safety net even more important for more than 80% of people aged 55 and over with long-term conditions or disabilities.



The vision

By 2030, gaps in life expectancy and healthy life expectancy between the most well-off and deprived areas will be falling. The decline will be partly due to the NHS England initiative Core20PLUS5¹³, which aims to improve health in the most deprived communities, and a cross-cutting Government-led strategy.

England's 42 Integrated Care Systems (ICSs) will work through their councils to ensure communities get advice and support to prevent ill health. Decisive action will be taken to ensure that those struck by cost-of-living pressures can access the care they need.

People with extra communication needs will receive full support every time they interact with the NHS and receive information about their care.

How we get there



National and local action to reduce health inequalities.

A new cross-Government national strategy will set plans to address social determinants of health and reduce inequalities, supported by local goals.

Disparities are measured, understood and improved on.

Data will be collected and published on disparities in waiting times, experiences, outcomes and improvements that diverse groups are reporting.

An accessible NHS for anyone with extra communication needs.

Regular patient-verified audits will be undertaken to demonstrate compliance by providers with the refreshed Accessible Information Standard.

Sustained action on cost-of-living pressures.

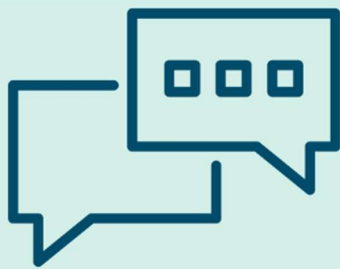
Government will freeze NHS dental charges after the 2023 record 8.5% increase. It will also improve the Healthcare Travel Cost Scheme so people get financial reimbursement quickly, and Statutory Sick Pay duration will be extended for people on long waiting lists.

3 Building a patient-centred culture in the NHS

The challenge

On an individual level, patients paint a positive picture, with the vast majority (78%) saying they feel respected by healthcare professionals.

But digging deeper, we see that the care experience, just like access, varies considerably. While most patients (69%) say that healthcare professionals involved them in decisions about their care, almost a quarter (24%) of neurodivergent respondents didn't. Nearly nine in ten people aged over 75 felt listened to, compared to 63% of young people aged 16 to 24.



Fewer women (67%) than men (78%) said they felt listened to by healthcare professionals.

Beyond the doctor-patient relationship, the NHS still has a “culture focused on doing the system’s business – not that of the patient’s”. That conclusion – made a decade ago by Sir Robert Francis KC, chair of the public inquiry into care failings at Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust – called for “real involvement of patients and the public in all that is done”.¹⁴ However, subsequent scandals, particularly in maternity and mental health, show that complaints or other early warnings from patients are still routinely ignored.

A key post-Francis reform has been the introduction of the Healthwatch network to provide a statutory patient and public voice in every community. Yet the network’s effectiveness has been hampered by real-terms funding cuts of 43% since 2013, making our presence at NHS decision-making tables variable. When pressures rise, engagement and patient-led evaluation of services are often considered ‘nice-to-have’, rather than opportunities to improve quality.

Finally, there needs to be more public awareness about NHS patient rights. Only 33% of people in our second poll were familiar with their rights, and even fewer (24%) had heard of the NHS Constitution.



The vision

By 2030, a fundamental shift in the culture of the NHS will have occurred, thanks to a major public conversation launched by the Government with the public to inform a new NHS Patient Promise. This affirms principles like the NHS remaining free but also sets new standards and rights on waiting times, experience and complaints handling.

Trust in individual healthcare professionals has gone from strength to strength, particularly among people who didn't always feel listened to in the past.

The system joins up sources of patient feedback and quickly escalates the most severe cases to the right bodies. Patient experience is treated on a par with other quality indicators such as safety, clinical effectiveness, and efficiency.



How we get there

A new NHS Patient Promise is introduced.

Government and the public agree a new Promise setting out principles, rights, mutual responsibilities, and culture. This Promise will update the current NHS Constitution, following a major public conversation about the future of the NHS, by 2025.

Commissioners will be mandated to show how the Promise drives their decisions and how services perform against its pledges. The NHS will ensure providers promote how they 'live the Promise' to patients and run a national campaign to raise awareness of patient rights.

A simplified and more effective NHS complaints system.

The government will have a single NHS complaints service that triages people to organisations like NHS trusts, regulators or safety bodies. Services will collect more data on who is reporting poor care and follow new standards on complaints handling, reporting and learning.

Stronger patient voice at every level of the health service.

Healthwatch will receive protected and increased funding to build capacity to increase engagement with the public, champion their views with commissioning bodies and shape future delivery of services. Commissioners will track patient experience as a matter of course and use it as a key measure of improvements, alongside other indicators like wait times.

Conclusion

This report sets out an unashamedly bold vision for the NHS in 2030. We encourage all decision-makers to demonstrate they are listening to the public's experiences as they develop future policies and plans.

Our new polling shows that the public still wants the founding principles of the NHS to remain – for care to be universal, equitable and free at the point of delivery. However, the challenge now is to work towards a positive experience of services for all.

To achieve this, we need improvements in how patients access and navigate the system, decisive action on health inequalities and to build a culture that puts patients first.

As the NHS works to make care better, we will use this report as a benchmark against which to track progress in improving patient experience. We will draw on the asset of our nationwide network of local Healthwatch – rooted in 153 communities – who help champion the voices of those interacting with services daily.

We urge all stakeholders, whether patients, professionals, policymakers or politicians, to support and play their part in implementing this vision. We must unite behind the common goal of a modern, caring and effective NHS in years to come.

Join the #PatientVision2030 conversation on social media or by emailing policy@healthwatch.co.uk

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