

Hearts need more focus

Prioritise NHS heart care to minimise the time it takes to get help

We are in the grip of a heart care crisis.

Over the past six decades, we've made huge strides in improving outcomes for people living with heart and circulatory diseases. Today, this progress is at risk. We knew things were challenging before the pandemic. But now, in its wake and with unrelenting pressure on NHS services, the situation is far worse. We have reached an impasse.

Our hearts need and deserve more

If we want to stop this heart care crisis in its tracks, we need the UK Government to take bold, co-ordinated action on three fronts:

Protection. Better prevent heart disease and stroke by addressing drivers like obesity and smoking.

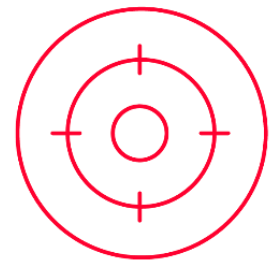
Focus. Prioritise NHS heart care to minimise the time it takes to get help.

Breakthroughs. Supercharge research to unlock future treatments and cures.

Why our hearts need more focus

Even before the pandemic, there were long waiting lists for heart care, and insufficient cardiologist and cardiac physiology posts to meet the demand for heart care over the next decade. Subsequently, the pandemic has had a devastating impact.

Despite the best efforts of NHS staff, disruption has been felt in every corner of the health service, and every month, we're seeing record numbers waiting for heart tests and procedures in England alone. This ongoing disruption is likely to be one of the contributing factors to more than 100,000 excess deaths in England involving cardiovascular disease (CVD) since the beginning of the pandemic. The scale of the challenge is also increasing; we have an ageing and growing population, and prevalence of CVD risk factors like obesity and high blood pressure, remain stubbornly high.



Focus

The NHS cannot successfully address the heart care crisis without greater support from UK Government. By prioritising the right action we can transform heart care across the system, reducing the growing pressure on the NHS, improving people's health, and growing the economy. These priorities must be to:

1. Deliver and build upon the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan for England

Workforce shortages are a key limiting factor in tackling long waiting lists for heart care. The NHS Long Term Workforce Plan is therefore a welcome and ambitious first step in recruiting the necessary staff to ensure the NHS can meet the needs of future heart patients. However, we need to see sustainable funding to support the Plan's implementation, alongside more urgent measures to retain the current NHS workforce to help heart patients who need time-critical care now.

Additionally, the lack of available data on the cardiac workforce in England, as well vital data on trends in workforce supply and demand, makes long term workforce planning extremely difficult. Government must commit to developing a more robust process for the collection and analysis of NHS workforce data across all settings to help inform future planning.

2. Maximise NHS capacity to tackle cardiac waiting lists

Record numbers of patients are waiting for heart tests and treatment. As of July 2023, 402,793 people were on a cardiac waiting list in England alone, a rise of 73% compared to pre-pandemic numbers. Long waits for cardiovascular care are dangerous; they can increase the risk of permanent disability due to heart failure and even lead to premature death. We know there is also considerable variation in NHS waiting lists across England, with people in the most deprived areas twice as likely to be waiting more than a year as compared to the least deprived areas.

Government should build on programmes that make cardiac services more accessible in the community, such as Community Diagnostic Centres, with resources targeted to areas of greatest need. To ensure these and wider NHS services are successful in helping to reduce long waits for diagnostics and care, they must be provided with the necessary investment, infrastructure and equipment.

3. Recommit to CVD aspirations in the NHS Long Term Plan

In 2019, NHS England published the NHS Long Term Plan, which highlighted CVD as a significant priority and committed to prevent up to 150,000 heart attacks, strokes and dementia cases within 10 years, and established an effective structure in which to deliver these ambitions.

The pandemic has disrupted progress towards Long Term Plan targets, but it is important that these are not lost. Instead, UK Government must include a recommitment to all CVD aspirations in the NHS Long Term Plan within its efforts to recover NHS services, alongside a revision of more granular delivery targets to reflect ongoing disruption and identify priority areas for acceleration. We also need to see Government build on pandemic innovations in CVD service delivery such as the use of digital technology to aid patient self-management at home.

How you can help

The scale of the challenge facing heart care is immense. We need your support to ensure this remains a cross-party, parliamentary and Government priority. Below are some actions you can take:

- **Call on the UK Government and your Party to prioritise cardiovascular care**
Please consider writing to the Health Secretary to stress the need for action as outlined above. We would be happy to assist with draft messaging and supporting evidence.

Additionally, write to your Party policy team to urge them to prioritise action to tackle the cardiac waiting lists as they develop the manifesto ahead of the General Election.
- **Be a voice for heart patients in Parliament**
Submit a question during Health and Social Care Oral Questions or a Written Parliamentary Question and advocate for one of our three key asks about how we can ensure heart care gets back on the front foot:

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care:

1. What steps he is taking to improve the collection of speciality-specific data to inform long term workforce planning, particularly where there are significant backlogs, like cardiology.
2. What steps his Department is taking to address growing backlogs and waiting times for heart patients.
3. What assessment he has made of the impact of the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic on progress towards cardiovascular and stroke ambitions outlined in the NHS Long Term Plan; and if he will recommit to these ambitions in full.

- **Meet with us to find out more**
Contact westminster@bhf.org.uk to arrange a meeting to discuss the campaign in more detail.

Only with more protection, more focus and more research breakthroughs can we give people hope for a brighter, healthier future.

Please email Henry Tyrrell at westminster@bhf.org.uk or visit bhf.org.uk/HeartsNeedMore for more information.