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Delays to Cancer Care:

I believe that we need urgent action to tackle cancer waiting times and ensure everyone gets the care and treatment they need, when they need it.

Early diagnosis and treatment are key to improving survival. But our health service is under immense pressure: cancer referral and treatment targets are repeatedly missed and NHS waiting lists have risen to over seven million – the highest ever on record. The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee report into NHS backlogs finds that waiting times for cancer are “at their worst recorded level”.

Ministers point to the impact of COVID. But we entered the pandemic with record waiting lists, cancer patients waiting longer for care every year since 2010, and 100,000 staff vacancies.

I welcome the long-awaited NHS workforce plan, which mirrors commitments I have been calling for. But ministers have not set out how the measures will be paid for, whether through higher taxes or higher borrowing. I supported a workforce plan that was, in contrast, fully costed, paid for by ending the non-domiciliary tax regime.

The Government has had 13 years to address these problems. Instead, I am concerned it has weakened standards for patients, who are paying more in tax but getting worse care. The workforce plan should have happened a decade ago, to ensure our NHS has the staff it needs now. Instead, our health service is short of 150,000 staff. Meanwhile, ministers have dropped their plans for a dedicated cancer strategy.

I support a 10-year plan of reform and modernisation that will make serious improvements to cancer pathways. In the short term, we must prioritise reducing the NHS backlog by using spare capacity in the private sector, while ensuring long term reform of our NHS to make it fit for the future: shifting the focus to early diagnosis and intervention, as well as preventing ill health in the first place.

Alongside providing the NHS with the staff and resources it needs, we must harness technology to fight disease, diagnose cancers sooner, and reduce missed cancer diagnoses and delayed treatment. Taken together, the plan will ensure that 75% of all cancers are diagnosed earlier, at stages one or two, and improve survival rates by hitting all NHS cancer waiting times and early diagnosis targets within five years, so no patient waits longer than they should.

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