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Community Pharmacies:

I recognise the concerns raised about the challenges facing pharmacies. Demand for pharmacy services is rising, yet there has been no increase in core funding since 2014, and there have been cuts of over £200 million since 2015/16.

Research by the Company Chemists' Association finds that between 2015 and 2022, 670 pharmacies closed permanently in England, with 41% of permanent closures falling in the most deprived areas. Meanwhile, workforce shortages remain a significant concern, with the vacancy rate doubling to 8%.

I welcome the long-awaited NHS workforce plan, which mirrors commitments I have been calling for since last September, and which ministers have been repeatedly urged to adopt. As part of the plan, NHS England aims to expand training places for pharmacists by 29% by 2028/29.

But I am concerned that the plan does not include details of how the measures will be paid for, whether through higher taxes or higher borrowing. Therefore, I have only supported policies that are, in contrast, fully costed, paid for by ending the non-domiciliary tax status regime.

On pharmacy reform more widely, I am concerned that the Government has only offered sticking plaster solutions.

In my view, we need to build an NHS fit for the future, ensuring it has the staff, resources, and modern technology it needs. Reforming and modernising our NHS will ensure it can meet the health challenges of the 21st century: shifting the focus of care out of hospitals and into the community, so that our NHS becomes as much a Neighbourhood Health Service.

This includes allocating a greater proportion of NHS funding to community services and expanding the role of community pharmacy to make primary care fit for the future: cutting unnecessary red tape and accelerating the rollout of independent prescribing to establish a Community Pharmacist Prescribing Service. Supported by greater digital interoperability, this will enable pharmacies to support GPs in the management of long-term conditions.

Pharmacies are an essential part of our health service. Their work is more important now than ever. I believe it is the responsible thing to do to plan for the future and ensure pharmacy services are secured for the long term.

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