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Covid-19: NHS will get £3bn of “recovery” funding to tackle pandemic fallout

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The NHS will receive an additional £3bn (£3.4bn; \$4bn) next year to help services recover after the covid-19 pandemic, the UK chancellor has announced.

In his spending review setting out investment plans for 2021-22,¹ Rishi Sunak said that the extra £3bn would include around £1bn to begin tackling the elective backlog and cut waiting lists, around £1.5bn to help ease existing pressures in the NHS caused by covid-19, and around £500m to improve access to mental health services and invest in the NHS workforce.

The review, published on 25 November, said that there would be a £6.3bn cash increase in NHS spending in 2021-22, compared with 2020-21.

Andrew Goddard, president of the Royal College of Physicians, said that the recovery funding was welcome but would not solve longer term problems.

“While this targeted funding will support clinicians to get by in the next 12 months, many of the pressures they face are caused by workforce shortages,” he said. “There is no quick fix to this. It will require long term funding commitments, including for a significant expansion of medical school places. The most effective way to reduce NHS backlogs and ease pressure is to increase the workforce that is available to treat patients.”

Chaand Nagpaul, BMA council chair, said that the £1bn allocated to tackle the backlog of non-covid care was nowhere near enough.

“The BMA estimates that this alone will cost almost £11bn to fund, so the £1bn pledged today is beyond inadequate and will mean that patients will continue to suffer,” he said. “While the injection of £1.5bn to the NHS this winter may go some way to alleviate some pressure in the immediate weeks, we need guarantees that increased spending this year will be sustained in the long term if it is to undo the damage wrought by years of underinvestment.”

Nagpaul added that the £500m allocated for mental health services would not make up for historical cuts combined with the impact of the pandemic on mental health.

Sunak also announced that £4.2bn would be allocated to 70 hospitals to allow them to refurbish. But Nagpaul said that the money pledged was nowhere near enough for such ambitious projects, “while the funding for repairs to NHS buildings will not even cover the existing maintenance bill of £6.5bn.”

John Appleby, chief economist at the Nuffield Trust, said that it was not clear whether the £3bn would be enough to meet the “enormous challenge” faced by the NHS.

“Waiting lists will continue to grow as hospitals continue with time consuming infection prevention and control measures which significantly reduce the rate at which patients can be seen and treated,” he said. “That will create real pressure, requiring extra staff and capacity which will need to be fully funded if the NHS isn’t going to spend the next decade running to catch up.”

Correction: We amended this story on 26 November 2020 to show that the £6.3bn is the increase in NHS spending and that the £3bn for covid recovery is additional to this.

1 HM Treasury. Spending review 2020. Nov 2020. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/938052/SR20_Web_Accessible.pdf.

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