

It's a pleasure to be here today. The majority of my career has been in NHS commissioning and I'm more used to sitting where you are listening to politicians than standing up here speaking. If I was being mischievous, I could ask if I'm actually needed - as the Minister's speech outlined in some detail how the Government has already "fixed" the social care crisis!

The simple truth, of course, as we all know in this room, is that the proposed "fix" for social care in England is nothing of the sort. For those following legislation I set out why in the House of Commons on Monday in the debate on the Health and Care Bill.

While I commend the Government for at least shining a light on the manifold unfairness and iniquities that blight social care provision in England, the solution they brought forward somehow manages to set the bar absurdly low.

And then fail to clear it.

It has all the pain of a massive tax hike for the poorest, without raising anywhere near enough to fix the problems identified. It is in every way imaginable the worst of all worlds.

And the politics of this matters, not just in the Commons chamber, but across the sector. Because if we pretend that a remedy has been found - when it so obviously has not - we are in a real danger of doing all those receiving care and all those involved in delivering it a huge disservice.

And we soon find ourselves at a stage where people are conditioned to accept what is, by any measure, unacceptable.

And as much as the Prime Minister is trying to make accepting the unacceptable the norm - in many ways, and in many settings - we cannot allow this to become the norm in social care.

It is something of a cliché to reference "lessons learned" throughout the most invasive and restrictive period of the pandemic. But in this instance, the cliché holds true - it was a period that fundamentally shifted the public's views on what social care is - and also what it should be, and can be.

As well as the experience of community voluntary support to help people with shopping or picking up prescriptions, the dedication of those working across the care sector had never been more valued

But the disparities between them and their colleagues in the NHS never better understood.

When families couldn't visit their loved ones - as they were following the law to keep the country safe - care professionals moved heaven and earth to provide the compassion and warmth needed.

Alongside their usual work, extraordinary in itself, they became proxy children, friends, counsellors and confidantes.

But this dedication was not met then, and has not been met since, with the respect or reward it deserves from Government. Care staff worked tirelessly to show the compassion and care that the most vulnerable needed in the most testing of times.

People were reminded about the pressures home care brings on them, their communities and social care workers. They saw what happens when social care cannot cope: the NHS falls over.

This is no fault of social care or the NHS.

The blame lands squarely with governments - of all stripes and for many decades - to not only not properly address shortcomings in the social care system, but to fail to give social care the respect, status and focus it deserves.

And you can see this manifest itself in so many ways

Most obviously in the judgement we have this week. What happens to people outside hospital, in social care, was an afterthought- with tragic results for so many.

But also take for example the preponderance of Ministers - and, in fairness, politicians and pundits from across the political spectrum - who talk of social care solely through the prism of elderly residential care.

It is maddening. Social care supports people of all generations, backgrounds and with all needs. Like the NHS, it is a service required by, and delivered to, every person in every corner of the country. The public know this, yet all too often the Government still acts as if elderly care is the only show in town.

And this narrow thinking, a leaning into tropes and stereotypes, has bred a dangerously incurious approach from Ministers. They pay little attention to how other countries, including other parts of the UK, are trying more seriously to address the wider issues.

I am a member of a parliamentary assembly that brings together politicians across Britain and Ireland. I also have experience as a carer in England and Northern Ireland. Systems that have the same origins but are now diverging.

In Wales there has been for a decade at least a more determined effort to address the real issues. They are further from the threat of collapse than the horrendously unstable residential care market in England.

We are all grappling with similar problems, namely the quantity and quality of care received by people in need. A willingness to look across borders needs to be matched by a willingness to look inwards - and to acknowledge that our social care workforce is overwhelmingly made up of poorly-paid women. Yet when the Government talks about "levelling up", it focuses solely on geography, while ignoring the individual.

Improvement in those geographical areas that need it most is a laudable objective, but any attempt to deliver this change is doomed to failure if it does not also address the shared challenges, obstacles and ingrained discrimination that a majority of the workforce face. And we must be honest - these are issues faced in far greater measure and to a far greater extent by women. We know it, and we are obligated to call it out.

A superb example of policy tinsel is the introduction of the new 'Trailblazers'. This is manna from heaven for ministers. It's catchy, go-get them, proactive and... utter bereft of any detail. The perfect policy for the minister that has it all.

I pushed the Government to elaborate on the proposals on Monday. Even a crumb of information would have been useful, but sadly silence followed. On Tuesday a brief missive to the Lords showed - we don't know what reforms will be trialled, how long for, what the measures for success will be, how much it will cost. If you can hear the exasperation in my voice right now, that's because it is there.

It is relatively easy, of course, to offer a critique of our opponents. But what would a Labour government do differently? How would we chart a path forward for social care in England?

We would start by acknowledging that demand for social care is rising at a rate that the system as is cannot currently cope with - and by acknowledging also that this demand will rise further in the years ahead. And for me, we start to deal with this not in the care home, treatment centre, hospital, but *at* home. We need a cross-government focus on housing.

We currently have housing stocks that are desperately depleted, poorly constructed for those who live in them, and which act as an anchor for those who wish to move to more appropriate homes but can't. The Department for Health and Social Care and the Department for Housing, Levelling Up and Communities need to get their act together. And quickly.

But bricks and mortar do not a social care system make. A well resourced, well respected and properly sized workforce do. The staffing shortages in our social care systems long ago reached a tipping point. The warning lights have stopped flashing, but only because the bulbs have all blown.

Staffing shortages not only undermine service provision, but create a vicious circle for a workforce that feels undervalued - and becomes increasingly unattractive to the new recruits needed to fix the problem in the first place. And we should never forget the millions in the other workforce – the unpaid and informal carers – who deserve better support.

Nowhere is the workforce problem clearer than in the waiting lists for NHS services - they are a symptom of a social care service struggling to cope.

But more than this is the need to overcome society's attitude to social care. In Britain we hold dear the idea that we have access to health and care when you need it. Based on need and not ability to pay. It comes as a great shock to so many that it is not true.

But not only are the public more alive to the reality of the social care system after the pandemic. I think we are seeing a shift across the NHS as Chief Executives and commissioners look at the rising number of 'medically fit' people in hospital awaiting discharge. The conversations you're having, and the newly created "Integrated Care Systems" offer the potential to move systems away from episodic reactive hospital based care.

It is my contention that we can only properly address the systemic challenges facing the NHS if we adopt a "social care first" approach.

The NHS was an institution built to solve the health crisis of early 20th century Britain. And it did. And it has been at the vanguard of delivering the advances that we all enjoy today - a time where vaccines for viral diseases can be discovered within months, and where most of us expect to live well into our old age.

So for me, the way forward is a no-brainer. We need to take a social care first approach if we are to protect and sustain an institution that means so much to all of us. Because if we fix social care we unleash the potential of the NHS and crucially all our communities.

As my colleague Liz Kendall said at this meeting last year, Labour knows how to do this. Our 5-point plan would transform social care provision, empower those accessing care - and their families - to live the life they choose.

1. Labour will transform access to care - ensuring every older and disabled person who needs care and support gets it when and where they need it.
2. Secondly we will shift the focus of support to prevention and early intervention, with a new principle of Home First. Whilst we are always going to need residential and nursing homes, care should be about supporting people to live in the place they call home, with the people they love, in communities that look out for one another, doing things that matter to them.
3. We will support Independent living, guaranteeing working age adults with disabilities have choice and control over the support they get, and that their views drive change throughout the system.
4. Labour will ensure staff get the pay, terms and conditions they deserve, tackling high vacancy rates, and transforming training to improve the quality of care.
5. Finally, People should not be putting their own health and livelihoods at risk just for looking after the people they love - Labour's plan will make sure England's 11 million unpaid family carers get proper information, advice and breaks and more flexibility in the workplace to help them balance their work and caring responsibilities.

Only Labour can deliver a modern care system after recovery from pandemic and a decade of neglect and austerity funding. We did it in 1948 and did it in 1997. It will take time and no magic money tree or miracle solutions are available.

We can't avoid the facts of underfunding, demoralised workforce, and rising and unacceptable inequalities but we need solutions not just another round of blaming and shaming. This is the cycle we have found ourselves in for over a decade.

Everyone in this room knows that the needs are great, but the necessary resources are not there. So public money needs to be spent wisely in the places it does the most good. That means having a laser focus on fairness to support those with the greatest needs and the least resources. That was what the NHS was set up to do and it's what a modern social care system should be based upon.

In 1948 the story of the NHS was of resources and structures. But this decade is all about workforce and investment. Not big shiny reorganisations or grand new ministries of state. User focus and personalisation of service is what we need to place at the heart of what we do. This can only be done through greater local accountability and empowerment and switching towards prevention and early intervention.

Credible improvements to our social and health care systems are crucially dependent on wider solutions and have to address demand issues as well as supply. There is a lot we can learn from other nations and from our own workforce.

We must deliver a system which has improved support for the long-term disabled, enhancing independent living. Residential care has become the go-to for policy makers – mostly due to a lack of understanding – but independent living is where we need to be. Independent living combined with service user wishes must be the watchword of modern thinking.

The theme that runs throughout Labour's thinking is that of elevating social care.

We believe that those with knowledge and understanding of the sector are best placed to know how services should be provided. Locally driven services always produce the best outcomes. Diktats from Whitehall have a tendency to echo against the hollow walls within which they were shouted.

Local Government has a statutory duty to provide mandatory services including social care, but it is watered down in importance by being incorporated into other policy areas like education and waste collection.

This means social care budgets are diluted within a huge swathe of policies. The pressure local government is under means that the Government have created a system whereby the NHS becomes the safety net to a collapsing social care system. It then acts as a black hole of political interest diverting solutions away from social care.

We must lift social care out of the melange of mandatory services.

It must gain a unique prestige of 'vital service' in all our communities. Good social care is fundamental to the success of the new Integrated Care Systems, and this will be a real test of Integrated Care System. Promoting social care as a vital service within the whole system will allow local government to focus on the funding that must be allocated first to social care.

This will secure a more stable social care system, free up the NHS and allow councillors more power to demonstrate the gap in funding between what is allocated and what is needed from central government.

Working with partners in the social care sector, achieving the five principles of care set out by Labour and elevating social care as a vital service will ensure families and care providers have a future based upon respect and prosperity.

Thank you for listening. We look forward to working with all of you to deliver a brighter future for social care.