# Public prioritises improved GP access over hospital waiting times amid NHS confidence crisis



A recent public poll underscores that improving access to GP appointments is the foremost priority for the NHS in the eyes of the public, surpassing other key concerns such as A&E waiting times and staff retention. This insight comes from research conducted by the Health Foundation, which surveyed over 2,200 UK adults in May. While the Government’s flagship policy—cutting waiting times for routine hospital treatments like hip and knee surgeries to a maximum of 18 weeks by 2029—features prominently in official plans, it ranks only fifth in public concern, far behind the desire for easier GP access.

The survey reveals a generally pessimistic mood about the NHS’s performance and future. A significant 83% of respondents feel that the standard of NHS care has either stagnated or worsened over the past year, with 41% anticipating further decline in the next 12 months. Furthermore, public confidence in the Government's NHS policies remains low, with just 16% agreeing that the right policies are in place compared to 53% who disagree. Despite these concerns, there remains strong support for the NHS’s foundational principles—that it should be free at the point of delivery, provide comprehensive services to all, and be primarily funded through taxation. However, there is unease about the NHS’s future sustainability, with a quarter of those surveyed doubting that comprehensive services will remain universally available in five years, and over 20% sceptical that the service will remain free at the point of use.

The report’s authors note that this polling preceded the Government's unveiling of its 10-Year Health Plan, which focuses on reforming and strengthening NHS services, particularly by shifting more care into community and neighbourhood settings. Despite this, public awareness of the plan appears limited, with one Ipsos survey finding that nearly three-quarters of the English public are unaware of the Government’s 10-Year Health Plan. The plan includes expanding primary care and aims to reposition GPs at the heart of neighbourhood health services.

Supporting the public’s priorities, NHS England reports that access to general practice is improving, driven largely by technology. Nearly 75% of patients now find it easy to contact a GP, a 10% increase since last summer, supported by the adoption of digital telephone systems and innovative triage methods. For instance, some practices offer total triage, ensuring patients receive timely and appropriate consultations, including face-to-face appointments and continuity of care with the same GP when necessary. This has led to a rise in patient satisfaction, with some practices reporting total satisfaction increasing from 73% in 2023 to 88% in 2025.

Addressing GP access, the UK government and British Medical Association have agreed on significant reforms to modernise general practice and improve patient experience. Starting from October, GP surgeries will be mandated to allow online appointment requests throughout working hours, aiming to eliminate the problematic '8am scramble' for appointments. A 7.2% increase to the GP contract budget, outpacing overall NHS budget growth, is part of this effort—along with a commitment of nearly £900 million extra funding for GP services in the 2025/26 financial year. The reforms also reduce bureaucratic burdens so that GPs can dedicate more time to treating patients.

Despite these efforts, public scepticism remains strong. A separate recent survey found that almost half the public doubt that the Government’s 10-year plan will improve GP access or A&E waiting times, with some fearing conditions could worsen. Nevertheless, there is wide support for specific elements such as new neighbourhood health centres, the NHS app expansion, and increased mental health support in schools.

Social care also figures prominently in public concern, with many believing the state should play a larger role in funding care services. Half of respondents disagree that the Government currently has the right policies for social care, reflecting widespread pessimism about this sector's future.

Healthcare stakeholders have responded to the poll's findings, urging policymakers to prioritise public concerns. Professor Kamila Hawthorne, chairwoman of the Royal College of GPs, emphasised that the Government should “take note” of the public’s desire for better GP access and timely, personalised care. NHS Providers’ chief executive, Daniel Elkeles, acknowledged the immense efforts by NHS staff to improve care despite challenges. Patricia Marquis of the Royal College of Nursing highlighted that nurses deliver a substantial proportion of appointments in both general practice and A&E, and stressed the need for sufficient staffing and investment to meet demand and achieve the public’s priorities.

A Department of Health and Social Care spokesperson stated that the Government is focused on "turning around over a decade of neglect," prioritising easier access to GPs through investments, recruitment, surgery upgrades, and cutting red tape to free up doctors’ time.

The Health Foundation’s Tim Gardner summarised the challenge facing the Government: while there are encouraging signs that services are recovering, “the risk is that slower progress is made on delivering the priorities that matter most to the public.” For the Government, bridging the gap between public perception and actual service performance will be crucial to demonstrate tangible benefits and secure political support amid ongoing NHS reforms.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/improving-gp-access-top-priority-for-the-public-poll-INKOJBL7NNNNROLH5RONW7V3DE/), [[2]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/improving-gp-access-top-priority-for-the-public-poll-INKOJBL7NNNNROLH5RONW7V3DE/), [[7]](https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/easier-access-gp-practice-appointments-now-publics-top-priority-nhs-overtaking-resolving-staffing)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/improving-gp-access-top-priority-for-the-public-poll-INKOJBL7NNNNROLH5RONW7V3DE/), [[2]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/improving-gp-access-top-priority-for-the-public-poll-INKOJBL7NNNNROLH5RONW7V3DE/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.england.nhs.uk/2025/06/gp-practices-improve-access-embracing-technology-increasing-appointments/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[4]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-deal-for-gps-will-fix-the-front-door-of-the-nhs)
* Paragraph 5 – [[6]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/health/keir-starmer-nhs-government-gps-britain-b1239144.html)
* Paragraph 6 – [[2]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/improving-gp-access-top-priority-for-the-public-poll-INKOJBL7NNNNROLH5RONW7V3DE/), [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/improving-gp-access-top-priority-for-the-public-poll-INKOJBL7NNNNROLH5RONW7V3DE/)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/improving-gp-access-top-priority-for-the-public-poll-INKOJBL7NNNNROLH5RONW7V3DE/), [[2]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/improving-gp-access-top-priority-for-the-public-poll-INKOJBL7NNNNROLH5RONW7V3DE/), [[5]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2025/01/08/public-rather-working-nhs-than-free-health-service-poll-policy-exchange/), [[6]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/health/keir-starmer-nhs-government-gps-britain-b1239144.html), [[4]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-deal-for-gps-will-fix-the-front-door-of-the-nhs)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/improving-gp-access-top-priority-for-the-public-poll-INKOJBL7NNNNROLH5RONW7V3DE/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/improving-gp-access-top-priority-for-the-public-poll-INKOJBL7NNNNROLH5RONW7V3DE/> - A recent poll by the Health Foundation reveals that the public's top priority for the NHS is improving access to GP appointments, followed by enhancing A&E waiting times and reducing NHS staff turnover. The government's 'Plan for Change' aims to reduce routine hospital treatment waiting times to 18 weeks by July 2029, but this ranks fifth in public concern. Public confidence in the government's NHS policies remains low, with 53% disagreeing that the government has the right policies for the health service. The survey also indicates that 83% feel the NHS's standard of care has stayed the same or worsened in the past year, with 41% anticipating further decline in the next 12 months. Despite these concerns, the majority still believe in the NHS's founding principles, such as providing a comprehensive service for all and being funded primarily through taxation. The polling was conducted before the government's 10-Year Plan for the NHS was unveiled. Additionally, the public is largely pessimistic about social care, with many believing the state should have a bigger role in funding care than it currently does. Half (51%) disagree that the government has the right policies for social care. The authors suggest that the government's prospects of re-election could depend on the public seeing and feeling the benefits of its vision for the health service. Even if recent signs of service recovery can be sustained, policymakers need to close the gap between public perceptions and actual health and care service performance.
3. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2025/06/gp-practices-improve-access-embracing-technology-increasing-appointments/> - NHS England reports that nearly 75% of patients find it easy to contact a GP, a 10% increase since last summer, as practices adopt digital telephone systems. In April 2025, there were 29.3 million GP appointments, a 19.1% increase from April 2019. Dr Amanda Doyle, National Director for Primary Care and Community Services, highlights the importance of improving access to general practice, noting that GP teams deliver over 29 million appointments monthly. The Village Health Group in South Nottinghamshire has implemented a total triage system, offering more face-to-face appointments and ensuring patients can see the same GP when appropriate. This approach has led to increased patient satisfaction, with 88% of patients being totally satisfied in 2025 compared to 73% in 2023. The practice uses e-consultations, with all requests triaged by a doctor and same-day responses provided. Patients without internet access can still call for an appointment, and receptionists assist them in filling out a triage form. The NHS continues to focus on making it easier for patients to contact and see their local GP teams, including better use of new technology to improve patient care.
4. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-deal-for-gps-will-fix-the-front-door-of-the-nhs> - The UK government and the British Medical Association (BMA) have agreed on reforms to GP contracts to modernise general practice and improve patient access. Starting in October, GP surgeries will be required to allow patients to request appointments online throughout working hours, aiming to end the '8am scramble' for appointments. The reforms are part of the government's Plan for Change to make general practice fit for the future and will support GPs in focusing more on patient care. The new contract includes a 7.2% boost to the GP contract, faster than the 5.8% growth to the NHS budget as a whole, helping to reverse the decade-long trend of GP practices receiving a decreasing percentage of NHS funding. The reforms also involve reducing red tape by removing nearly half of the current targets that GPs must report progress against, allowing them to spend more time treating patients. The government has committed an additional £889 million to GP services for 2025/26, bringing the total spend on the GP contract to £13.2 billion in 2025 to 2026.
5. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2025/01/08/public-rather-working-nhs-than-free-health-service-poll-policy-exchange/> - A Policy Exchange survey reveals that 61% of the public prioritise improving access to GPs over the NHS providing all services free at the point of use. The survey asked participants to select their top three NHS priorities, with 61% choosing improved GP access, 44% selecting good treatment for life-threatening diseases, and 41% prioritising free services. The findings suggest that the public is more focused on the functionality and quality of NHS services than on the principle of free healthcare. The survey also indicates that young and urban respondents are more open to major reforms in primary care, such as enabling direct access to secondary care. The report highlights a shift in public opinion towards prioritising effective healthcare delivery over traditional models of free service provision.
6. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/health/keir-starmer-nhs-government-gps-britain-b1239144.html> - A recent survey indicates that nearly half of the public believe the government's 10-year health plan will not improve GP access or A&E waiting times. The plan, unveiled by Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer, aims to bring care closer to people's homes and reduce reliance on hospitals. However, 25% of respondents think the measures will make no difference to patients, and 9% believe it will worsen the situation. Despite this, there is strong support for specific proposals within the plan, such as the creation of neighbourhood health centres, expansion of the NHS app, and increased mental health support in schools and colleges. The survey reflects public scepticism about the plan's effectiveness in addressing key healthcare concerns.
7. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/easier-access-gp-practice-appointments-now-publics-top-priority-nhs-overtaking-resolving-staffing> - An Ipsos survey reveals that making it easier to get appointments at GP practices (38%) is the public's top priority for the NHS, surpassing improving A&E waiting times (33%) and reducing staff turnover (29%). The survey also shows that 73% of the English public are unaware of the government's development of a 10-Year Health Plan for the NHS. Despite this, there is strong support for the government's focus on prevention (86%) and moving more care from hospitals to communities (82%). The findings highlight the public's emphasis on accessible primary care and preventive measures in healthcare reform.