

The Health Inequalities Policy Map



What are health inequalities?

Health inequalities are unfair and avoidable differences in health across the population, and between different groups within society.

Health inequalities arise because of the conditions in which we are born, grow, live, work and age.

These conditions influence our opportunities for good health, and how we think, feel and act, and this shapes our mental health, physical health and wellbeing.

Influencers

Department of Health & Social Care

- Through the NHS mandate the DHSC instructed NHS England to ensure that national and local plans include 'measurable ambition' in setting out how inequalities are to be tackled
- The greatest pressure on the DHSC is how to reduce the elective backlog and cut waiting lists, with concerns that existing inequalities will be exacerbated through the recovery period
- Ministers are particularly focused on reducing race inequality from a wider health inequality perspective with a white paper expected in 2022

No 10

- There is a need to show tangible action on the 'levelling up' agenda in order to meet manifesto commitments
- No clear political wins in health on the horizon with waiting lists expected to expand until 2024. Because of this No 10 have pushed responsibility for improved outcomes to NHS England who can align tackling the backlog with the health inequalities agenda
- Hard to show progress in an issue as deep rooted as health inequalities ahead of the next election so looking for quick wins

HM Treasury

- Want to see NHS efficiencies that deliver more for less, and expecting clear return on investment from NHS levy
- Battling with No 10 against increased spending on major projects; focused on targeted investment rather than more ambitious spending

Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities

- Strong ministerial team, tasked with defining the agenda through the Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper and policy included in the upcoming Queens Speech. However with no new money attached meeting new ambitions may be difficult
- Primarily focused on the steps to address geographic disparity from a skills, productivity and infrastructure perspective; i.e the causes of health inequalities

Implementation

NHS England

- Ongoing commitment to tackling health inequalities through the NHS Long Term Plan, focused on prevention
- Amanda Pritchard has said focus on health inequalities is 'new number one' priority
- Eight urgent actions on inequalities were set-out in 2020, but were knocked off course by further Covid-19 waves
- Delivery against Core20PLUS5 which provides a clear focus on maternity, severe mental illness, chronic respiratory disease, early cancer diagnosis and hypertension case-finding
- Elevated focus on enhancing digital offer following the pandemic and merge of NHS Digital and NHSX to improve monitoring, access to care and better outcomes

Office for Health Improvement & Disparities

- Specifically set up following the Covid-19 pandemic to tackle 'health disparities'
- Particular focus on how to prevent health disparities that exist in priority conditions such as cardiovascular disease and cancer
- New organisation with new leadership will want to show quick wins aligned to Government ambitions ahead of the next election

Integrated Care Systems

- Local approach to implementing integrated working can ensure the needs of diverse populations and health inequalities are targeted
- Integrated Care Boards to be given a statutory duty to reduce inequalities between patients, which they will be judged on
- However the inequalities duty remains unchanged from the 2012 Health and Care Act – incentives for action will be imperative

Primary Care Networks

- Covid-19 and high workload has derailed PCN's existing and planned work programmes
- With little capacity and incentivisation PCNs may struggle to tackle inequalities but may be best placed to do so because of closer links to their communities than secondary care

Influences



1. Levelling up

While still an amorphous term, it is accepted that this agenda is largely focused on reducing economic rather than health disparities.

2. Race and ethnicity

COVID-19 has brought into stark focus the racial and ethnic impact of inequalities. Having not been a particular area of focus, a PHE report in June 2020 on disparities in the risk and outcomes of COVID-19 forced the issue into the public consciousness.

3. Integrated care

ICSs are also expected to act as local drivers to reduce health inequality, through both NHS led Integrated Care Boards (ICBs), and the Integrated Care Partnerships (ICPs) which bring together local authority as well as health stakeholders.

4. Digital innovation

The pandemic has condensed the learning curve for the adoption of new technologies, raising digital literacy and confidence across the NHS. This speed of innovation provides an opportunity to bring about a new digital era in the NHS, with tackling health inequalities a main objective.

5. The impact of COVID-19

COVID-19 has brought into stark focus the racial and ethnic impact of inequalities and government has been forced to respond. The establishment of the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID) to replace Public Health England was an attempt from government to show that it is putting health inequalities at the heart of healthcare improvements.

