

Almost half of NHS authorities to cut hospital beds and third to close A&E

 [telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/30/almost-half-of-nhs-authorities-to-cut-hospital-beds-and-third-to/amp/](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/30/almost-half-of-nhs-authorities-to-cut-hospital-beds-and-third-to/amp/)

Laura Donnelly

Almost half of NHS authorities are drawing up plans to cut hospital beds, and one third intend to close Accident & Emergency departments, it can be disclosed.

New research shows the full extent of measures planned to tackle the greatest financial crisis in the history of the NHS.

It comes as the Tory head of the influential [Commons health select committee](#) made an unprecedented plea to the Chancellor, calling for a major cash injection to prevent the collapse of the NHS.

[Dr Sarah Wollaston](#) urged the Treasury to step in, to ensure the long-term survival of the health service and tackle a "severe" crisis in social care.

Last night, senior doctors expressed alarm about the NHS plans which they described as "desperate measures" which would damage patient care and risk safety.

Patients' groups said the intentions were "immensely troubling" and said the NHS had not been open about the scale of closures ahead.

Health officials have ordered every part of the country to draw up sustainability and transformation plans (STPs) in a bid to cope with mounting pressures across the NHS.

The health service recorded its [largest ever deficit last year, at £2.45billion](#), and in recent months, different areas have tightened restrictions on care, despite fears from surgeons that increasing numbers of patients will be left in "crippling pain".

Now, findings from a poll of 99 clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) – around half of those in operation across the country – reveal the extent of the cutbacks planned within 18 months.

One in three intend to close or downgrade Accident and Emergency departments, while one in five expect to close consultant-led maternity services, forcing women in labour to travel further.

More than half intend to close or downgrade community hospitals, while 46 per cent are planning an overall reduction in inpatient NHS beds.

One quarter anticipate job cuts in hospitals, and almost as many intend to close inpatient paediatric departments, the research found.

Dr Chris Moulton, vice president of the [Royal College of Emergency Medicine](#), said the disclosures were "extremely worrying".

"They are desperate to save money but these are truly desperate measures," he said.

He expressed particular alarm about the threat to cut bed numbers, with latest figures showing hospitals have some of the highest occupancy levels on record.

A Department of Health spokesman said:

"We know the NHS is under pressure, and to ensure the best standards of care in the future we need an updated system which even better prioritises GP access, cancer care and mental health

treatment.

"The NHS is using sustainability and transformation plans to help deliver this change. No decisions have been made and none will occur without local consultation."

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development statistics show that among 23 European countries, the UK now has the second lowest number of hospital beds per capita.

In the last decade, more than one quarter of hospital beds have been closed, with 37,000 fewer general and acute beds now than in 2006/7.

"We already have one of the lowest numbers of beds in the developed world – we need more beds, not fewer of them," Dr Moulton said.

"We already have occupancy at record levels and it's too risky to go further. As well as the risks of crowding and of delays on trolleys and ambulances, there are the extra infection risks that come with it," he said.

Widespread A&E closures, forcing patients to travel further, is a "dreadful" idea which would meet much opposition, the senior A&E consultant added.

Health services have been ordered to draw up 44 STPs, which were submitted earlier this month, in order to redesign services and tackle widespread financial problems across the NHS.

It follows warnings from Simon Stevens, the head of the health service, that "bloody tough" times lie ahead, with per capita health spending due to fall by the end of the decade.

The letter to the Chancellor, Philip Hammond, by Dr Wollaston, a former GP, is also signed by other Conservative, Labour and SNP members of the select committee.

It is the first such intervention by the committee in recent history. In it, the MPs say the plans are "doomed to fail" without financial investment.

The letter urges the Chancellor to reconsider the NHS funding settlement and to "address the crisis in social care provision which is impacting so severely both on vulnerable people who require care, and on NHS services for the wider population".

Senior officials have insisted the plans do not amount to cuts. But the findings of the research show widespread closures planned.

The survey of CCG chairmen and accountable officers found that almost half of the senior figures polled by *Health Service Journal* said they expected political opposition to their plans, while 40 per cent expected local GPs to try to block their plans.

Three quarters of those who took part in the survey said they thought that lack of funding would present a significant barrier to the success of their plans, while half said the inability to control patient demand would be an obstacle.

Katherine Murphy, chief executive of The Patients Association, said the disclosures were "immensely troubling" and would damage patient care.

"Cuts will only put even greater stress on services already buckling under the pressure of continual cuts, poor workforce planning and lack of proper long term investment," she said.

Mrs Murphy urged the Government "to be clear and honest about the cuts they are handing down" to NHS services. She raised particular concern about closures of maternity units, forcing many mothers-to-be to travel further.

Cathy Warwick, chief executive of the Royal College of Midwives, said: “The proposed cuts across many services look alarmingly like cost-savings disguised as service improvements. This is no surprise given the huge pressures on the NHS to save money.”

Any proposals to close consultant-led maternity units must be fully discussed with clinical experts, and with the public, she said, raising concern that current plans were being rushed through.

“We do have real reservations about the speed of these changes,” she said.

“Organisations are being asked to respond with plans for major changes very quickly and I have real concerns that this will lead to service change without meaningful involvement and careful consideration about the impact this could have on service users.”

Janet Davies, chief executive of the Royal College of Nursing, urged the NHS to learn from the lessons of the past, when job cuts among nurses left patients suffering.

“With NHS finances in such a perilous state, there is a real risk that cuts to staffing and services will be made as a short-term budget fix with little regard for the longer-term consequences for patients,” she said.

“Staff, patients and their loved ones can already see that hospitals are working at full stretch, and it is very difficult to see how beds can be cut without having a real impact on care.”