

# BUZZ-ONOMICS

A CLEAR AND ACCESSIBLE GUIDE  
TO THE STORIES THAT MATTER



One of the biggest stories over Christmas and into the new year is the pressure facing the NHS. The media are reporting that the NHS is facing its worst winter in a generation. A&E waits and ambulance delays are the worst on record.

COVID, flu and strikes are part of the reason but the NHS was already under significant pressure before this.

One of the key factors is that people are living longer as the top chart shows. In the UK over-65s are responsible for two-thirds of all hospital admissions.

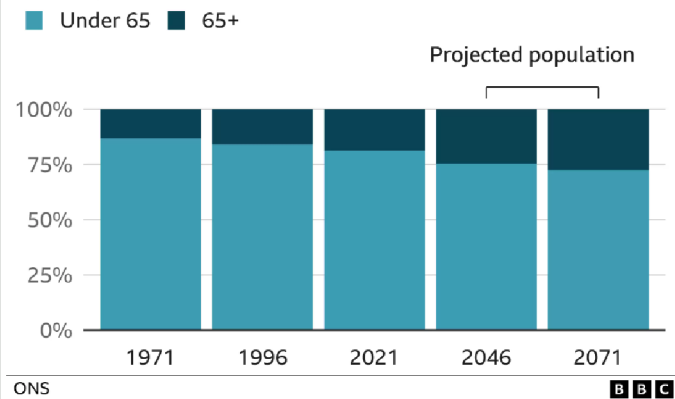
Partly because of these demographic changes and also advances in medicine, spending on the NHS has in the past risen by around 4% pa in real terms. Real terms means above the rate of inflation. You can see from the middle chart that this hasn't been the case over more recent years. Governments do of course recognise the impact this will have but government finances have been under particular pressure especially since the financial crisis of 2007/8. The recent Autumn Statement did announce increases in health spending, but this is a big gap to fill.

One of the results has been an increase in staff shortages. Currently around one in ten NHS posts are vacant leaving the UK well down the rankings of doctors and nurses per 1000 of the population (see bottom chart). This staff shortage is one of the key reasons nurses and ambulance crews report they are on strike. The Royal College of Nursing say there are going on strike to "rectify the years of real-terms pay cuts that are pushing people out of the nursing profession and putting patient safety at risk".

There is one more factor that is particularly important in explaining the pressure facing the NHS and that is social care. Social care is the help given to people who need it with day-to-day tasks such as washing, dressing, food and medication. Social care operates differently to the NHS. It is funded either by a local authority, or by the person themselves or some combination depending on the person's assets. This sector is under as much strain, if not more strain than the NHS (in part due to the ageing population). What this means is that wait lists for care are growing. One impact is that people in need of care who are not receiving it are far more likely to end up in hospital. It also means that some people in hospital cannot be discharged because there is not adequate social care for them to be safe. The BBC claim that every day more than half of patients who are ready to leave hospital cannot because of lack of care in the community.

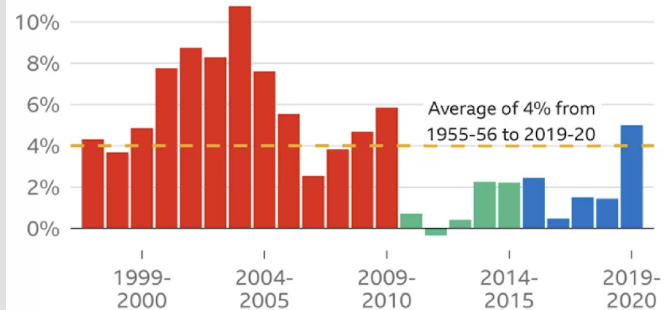
On Saturday 7th January the Prime Minister along with the health secretary and other colleagues met health experts to help tackle crucial challenges. This will not be a simple problem to fix.

UK population by age category, historical estimates and projections



## Annual changes in health spending

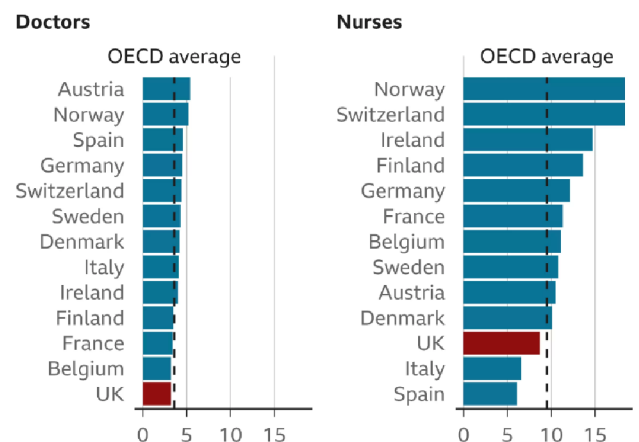
UK health spending under **Conservative**, **Labour**, and **Tory-Lib Dem coalition** governments



All figures are by financial year and in 2019-20 prices. Years are categorised by when a government could control spending

Source: Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS)

## Practising doctors and nurses per 1,000 population, 2021



Note: OECD average calculated using figures from 2021 or latest available data for each nation

Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)