Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health Committee

I will try to be mindful of those comments, Madam Deputy Speaker, as I follow Dr Whitford, my colleague on the Health Committee. As always, she made thoughtful and thought-provoking comments, and I would like to endorse her points and expand on some of them.

First, I thank NHS and care staff. We have heard that they are facing unprecedented demand over the winter, but it is not just winter pressures that they face now—the pressures extend into the summer. As we have heard, that is not just about numbers but about the complexity of conditions and the frailty of those presenting in our accident and emergency departments. The Health Committee heard in its recent inquiry that the trusts that are most successful in getting close to the four-hour target are those that see it as an entire-system issue, and in which both health and care staff contribute to the effort, not as a tick-box exercise but because they recognise that it is fundamentally about patient safety and the quality of patients' experiences. That is why the four-hour target matters, and the Secretary of State is right to endorse it.

The Secretary of State is also right that we sometimes need to be more nuanced about our targets, and that he needs to be open to listening to what clinicians are telling him about how we can improve the way in which targets are applied. It would be a great shame if we in this House prevented those sensible discussions from taking place because of political furore. I urge him to continue to have them, and to take advice and listen to clinicians about how we can improve the use of targets, but he is absolutely right in being clear that he will keep the four-hour target.

We must talk about this as a whole-system issue. Accident and emergency is a barometer of wider system pressures, as has been pointed out, and I want to focus my remarks on the integration of health and social care.

I agree with colleagues throughout the House who have called for a convention on reviewing funding as a whole-system issue. We have heard that next year is the 70th birthday of the NHS, and what could be a better present than politicians changing the debate and the way in which we talk about the funding of health and social care, so that we do so in a collaborative manner that works towards the right solution for our patients? The consequences of our not doing that would be profound for our constituents, who would not thank us for not being prepared to put aside party differences and work towards the right solution.

Ultimately, this issue is about a demographic change that we are simply not preparing for adequately. In the case of the pension age, we recognised that there had to be a different debate given the change in longevity. Over the decade to 2015, we saw a 31% increase in the number of people living to 85 and older. Of course, that is a cause for celebration, but there has not been a matching increase in disease-free life expectancy.
I welcome the Prime Minister's focus on tackling inequality, but unfortunately we are not making sufficient progress on that, either. In her very first speech in the job, she talked about tackling the "burning injustice" of health inequality. We in this House have a role in doing that together in a consensual manner.

Norman Lamb Liberal Democrat Spokesperson (Health)

I very much agree with the hon. Lady. Does she share my welcome for the Prime Minister's response today in which she stated that she was prepared to meet us and other Members of Parliament from across the House, and my hope that it might start a more constructive approach?

Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health Committee

Absolutely. It was extraordinarily encouraging to hear the Prime Minister say that she was prepared to consider that and to meet Members from across the House. I urge colleagues who feel that this is a better way forward to sign up to it, speak to their party Whips and make it clear that it has widespread support.

Barbara Keeley Shadow Minister (Mental Health and Social Care)

I wonder, on this vital issue, whether the hon. Lady wants to say something about what her own party did on the two previous times we tried to get important cross-party working on health and social care: it made it an election issue, producing posters about a "death tax"; and on the second occasion the Secretary of State just walked away from the talks.

Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health Committee

I am afraid that that intervention is exactly not the kind of debate we want to be having. Let us look to the future. We are in a different part of the electoral cycle. I accept the hon. Lady's comments—I was still an NHS clinician when that happened and, like many of those working in health or social care, I looked at the yah-boo debate in this place and thought that surely there had to be a better way—but I ask her to put them aside and to look to the future rather than backwards, otherwise we will not get anywhere. I think our constituents want us, as politicians, to recognise the scale of the challenge and to get to grips with it.

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