

Looking back on the “Five Year Forward View”

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2019 will mark the fifth anniversary of the Five Year Forward View (FYFV), effectively Simon Stevens’ manifesto as the incoming chief executive of NHS England.

It was uncritically embraced at the time by all main political parties as a visionary effort to modernise the NHS and to bridge the rapidly growing gap between the pressures and demands on the NHS and the post-2010 NHS budget.

On the other extreme a handful of conspiracy theorists laboured gamely through the largely abstract and waffle-strewn document to prove it was all coded messages pointing to the privatisation of the whole NHS, led by Stevens’ former bosses in the US health corporations.

Both these views hold up badly now. Looking back at the 44-page FYFV is like stepping into a museum: most of the key commitments have long ago been sidelined or reduced to token gestures, not least the insistence that:

“The future health of millions of children, the sustainability of the NHS, and the economic prosperity of Britain all now depend on a radical upgrade in prevention and public health.”

Public health

While the concept of improving public health to reduce demand on the NHS is a good one to which nobody could object, it was hardly new at the time.

But since 2014 we have seen year after year of cuts to public health budgets which are supposed to fund schemes to help tackle obesity and reduce consumption of alcohol, drugs, and tobacco.

Many more FYFV ideas have also remained little more than words.

For instance patients were to be given control over shared budgets for health and social care: Stevens in a July speech in 2014 even suggested “north of 5 million” such personal budgets might be operational by 2018, sharing £5 billion between them.

This apparently bold proposal would have meant average payments of just £1,000 per year, £20 per week – well short of the amount required to secure any meaningful care package for any but the most minor health needs, even if the services required were available and the patient/client was confident enough and able to sort out their own care.

However the latest figures show that the vision was unrealistic on almost every level: the number of personal health budgets has apparently been rising each year since they launched in 2014, but there were fewer than 23,000 people receiving one in the first nine months of 2017/18 – a long way short of 5 million.

Carers, too, were promised new support by the FYFV (not for the first time, and no doubt not for the last).

Yet the plight of carers remains desperate, with increased misery for many of them hit by the succession of welfare cuts and the nightmare of universal credit.

Barriers to be broken

According to the FYFV, barriers between GPs and hospitals, physical and mental health and health and social care were going to be broken down.

There was going to be a “Forward View” for GPs, and a shift of investment from secondary care into primary care (how many times have governments proposed that since the 1980s?).

There were bold promises to invest in more staff and improved services for mental health.

Predictably none of these things have happened.

Barriers are still intact. Overworked, under-staffed GPs face ever-increasing demands, with no sign of the promised increase in numbers or resources.

In mental health there are thousands fewer mental health nursing staff than there were in 2010, and the performance on almost every measure is as bad or worse than 2014.

After such a comprehensive failure to deliver almost any significant element of the FYFV, the likelihood of making a TEN year plan any more than a wish list or a pious declaration seems to be vanishingly small.