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Improving and protecting health in England needs more than the NHS

We welcome the Editors'¹ call for a long-term strategy for a resilient health system for England. However, the Editors do not seem to recognise that the system to protect and improve the health of the population is led by local authorities and Public Health England, not the National Health Service (NHS). Local authorities and Public Health England lead communicable disease control and have led regional and local responses to the pandemic. The NHS has not, because it has not been responsible for health protection and health improvement since the 2012 Health and Social Care Act. Meanwhile, the local authority public health grant fell by £850 million (in real terms) from 2015 to 2019, and despite an increase in March, 2020, it is still not at 2015 levels. Another key issue that the Editorial does not mention is social care, which is a key part of the health system. A long-term strategy must aim to achieve a resilient health system that includes and coordinates social care and public health agencies as well as the NHS. If we do not conceptualise the health system more broadly, and ensure the different parts work together effectively, the strategy might just be a sticking plaster, rather than a real attempt to build a system that prioritises prevention and disease control in addition to offering efficient and compassionate services, and that is worthy of one of the richest countries in the world.

We declare no competing interests.

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¹ The Lancet. Building a resilient NHS, for COVID-19 and beyond. Lancet 2020; 396: 935.