

Forum welcomes Health Inequalities Strategy for London but calls for Mayor to champion core issues

The Mayor recently published his long-awaited report, *The London Health Inequalities Strategy*, as well as an 'action plan' for implementation (*First Steps to Delivery*). Many of the key issues surrounding healthcare in London which the London Health Forum set out in its manifesto for the Mayoral elections in 2008 are addressed in the final *Strategy*. However, the Forum has some concern about the Mayor's role in implementing the *Strategy*.

The Mayor's *Strategy* to tackle health inequalities in the Capital is an ambitious and far-reaching plan which focuses on five broad objectives and 30 key commitments. The recently published *Health Profile of England 2009* clearly demonstrates the importance of the *Strategy*. The *Health Profile* illustrates that stark inequalities in health outcomes still exist in London. For example, in 16 London boroughs, male life expectancy is better than the national average, but in 14 boroughs it is worse. The rate of teenage pregnancy in Richmond falls within the lowest national category (15.0-25.5), but in neighbouring Wandsworth, it falls within the highest (49.8-79.1).

The London Health Forum's *A Health Manifesto for London* aimed to gain support for seven key health-related pledges from candidates standing in the London Mayoral and Assembly elections in 2008. The pledges cover those areas of healthcare in London which the Forum regards as central, including preventative healthcare, community services, outreach, medical research, commissioning, working in partnership and the Olympic legacy.

The importance of preventative strategies for London not only plays a key part in the Forum's *Manifesto*, but has informed its work on debt and health and childhood immunisation. The Forum is therefore pleased to see that commitment seven of the *Strategy* states that the Mayor will work with partners to '[...] increase investment in public health, prevention, and early years intervention.' The Mayor also calls on all Londoners to recognise the importance of preventative services such as immunisations for children and older people, as well as dental check-ups.

The London Health Forum was established with the specific purpose of promoting partnership with the statutory sector to improve the health of Londoners. Our report in December 2008, *Commissioning Excellence*, highlighted considerable weaknesses in commissioners' understanding of the range of service providers available to them. The

Forum's *Manifesto* called for better partnership between the NHS, local government and the voluntary and private sectors, not only with regards to commissioning, but at all levels of service delivery.

It is very pleasing to see, therefore, an emphasis on the importance of partnership working across all sectors in implementing the Mayor's *Strategy*. The Mayor's commitment to 'broker a lasting relationship between key public sector organisations and the VCS (Voluntary and Community Sector) to enable both parties to learn from and shape each other's work' is also very encouraging. In addition, the *Strategy*, in addressing commissioning specifically, highlights the importance of service commissioners and providers working closely together so as to focus on shared evaluation and learning.

The *Strategy* usefully stresses that areas of London with the highest levels of need are more likely to suffer from relatively poor access to GPs and other primary healthcare professionals. The Forum recognised this issue in its *Manifesto*, calling for an increase in access to primary care and community-based services. The Mayor's *Strategy* presents polysystems as one method of moving care into the community. The Forum, however, was disappointed to see the removal from the final *Strategy* of the reference in the Mayor's draft strategy to a rebalancing of mental health services from secondary to primary care.

London's mobile and diverse population contributes to the city's character, but it also presents unique challenges. The Forum's *Manifesto* called for new ways of working across healthcare services which encourage greater contact with hard-to-reach groups. A similar emphasis can be found in the Mayor's *Strategy*, which recognises that excluded groups of Londoners require a special focus from commissioners and that these groups are often excluded from services for various reasons, including stigma and a lack of understanding of healthcare services. The *Strategy* calls for action to ensure that all Londoners are aware of the care to which they are entitled, suggesting that information can often be usefully distributed at points of transition in people's lives, such as on leaving prison or rehabilitation.

While the Forum commends the ambitious scope of the final *Strategy*, it is concerned that the Mayor's personal involvement is largely bureaucratic. The Forum considers that, in addition, it would be beneficial for the Mayor to champion a smaller number of core issues, ideally relating to his personal interests. The Forum would especially advocate:

- Safer communities;
- Fair funding for London;
- Better access to services; and

- Walking and cycling.

The London Health Forum, however, welcomes the publication of the *Mayor's Health Inequalities Strategy* and stands ready to work with others in helping to deliver the *Strategy*, drawing on the highly relevant expertise of its members.

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