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# 2019 PREDICTIONS: HEALTHCARE

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2019 started off with a bang with the publication of the NHS' Long-Term Plan, which was a pleasant surprise for many.

It was particularly pleasing for those who have campaigned hard for mental health issues to be given as much attention as physical issues, with £2.3 billion of extra funding promised. Many campaigners would argue there is still a lot more to be done, but it is at least a step in the right direction, and mental health providers, and those who are waiting for treatments, should start seeing some positive outcomes as a result from this year.

The Long-Term Plan also showed a welcome attitude towards the importance of preventative and community care with £4.5 billion promised to GPs and community care services. Part of this will go towards ensuring everyone has access to an online GP within the next five years, which presents a nice opportunity for the likes of digital healthcare apps Push Doctor and babylon.

A not so welcome proposal in the Long-Term Plan for private providers was the call for government to scrap the part of the Health & Social Care Act 2012 that obliges NHS commissioners to put all contracts worth over £600,000 out to tender. This will be a setback for the likes of Virgin Care, Care UK, United Health UK and Circle Health among other private firms that include outsourced NHS work amongst their growth strategy. Stevens' reasoning is that it is onerous, expensive and a hindrance to quality care provision.

There's no telling if this is something Theresa May will revoke this year, but at the very least Stevens' pronouncement has stirred up further ill-will towards private sector companies and reinforces the barrier against them winning more NHS work. 2019 is unlikely to provide them with any respite in this battle to win more work then.

The Long-Term Plan failed to really address two elephants in the room though - social care and workforce issues. The Social Care Green Paper does not look likely to emerge any time soon after multiple delays. Theresa May's 'dementia tax' debacle still haunts her and any meaningful pronouncements on the funding of social care are unlikely to emerge with Downing Street's approval anytime soon.

The Long-Term Plan meanwhile did not have any detail on workforce strategy, which is pretty crucial to ensuring its ambitious aims can be achieved. Social care providers, who lose many nurses to the NHS will be keen to get eyes on this workforce strategy, too. Undoubtedly government will face a lot of pressure from health and social care stakeholders to address this as soon as possible, however Brexit is probably affecting government's ability to do so. A strategy could therefore not appear until late in the year.

For the social care sector though, there is a small light midway through the tunnel of gloom it faces, the Department for Health & Social Care is launching its care sector recruitment campaign this year. How effective it will be given a lack of dialogue between DHSC and the providers themselves about what the campaign should look like, remains to be seen.

So, while it looks like 2019 has started out with a promising bang, Brexit and government indecision poses the risk that the year will end with a whimper.