Building a healthier Scotland

The Scottish National Party wants to see adults and children swapping the crisp and couch for fruit, fibre, and physical jerks. **Bryan Christie** reports

Annual health checks for all school pupils, free fruit for pregnant women, and the development of rural hospitals are promised in the Scottish National Party's election manifesto to help make Scotland a healthier country. The party's health proposals are based around giving greater priority to the prevention of ill health while reshaping the NHS to improve local access and accountability.

Providing services over large and sparsely populated geographical areas has always been a challenge in Scotland. At the moment there are proposals to centralise many services, such as

Alex Salmond: "The SNP will focus on treating people... closer to home"

emergency departments and maternity care, by removing these from smaller hospitals. The Scottish National Party (SNP) says that it would reverse this trend by maintaining such core services at a local level.

The party supports the

development of rural general hospitals and plans to train more generalist doctors to staff such hospitals. Incentives would be offered to doctors to train in rural medicine and work in rural areas. The party also wants to see rural medicine developed as a distinct specialty by establishing a faculty of rural medicine at one of Scotland's medical schools.

Local accountability for running health services would be strengthened through direct elections to NHS boards. Elected members would be given half the places on these management boards, with managers, clinicians, staff, and local authority representatives making up the remaining places.

Staff shortages in the NHS would be tackled by training an extra 100 doctors a year, through increasing the number of undergraduate medical school places. A recruitment campaign would also be developed to attract qualified nurses who do not work in the NHS back into the service.

An action plan would be put into place to create fit healthy young Scots. Every school pupil would receive an annual fitness test to identify any problems at an early stage. There would be a

minimum of two hours of physical education in schools a week. The party is also committed to providing free nutritious school meals for all pupils, although this will be piloted in the first two years of primary school. Free fruit through a supermarket voucher scheme is also planned for pregnant women and for preschool children.

Other proposals include the scrapping of the controversial use of public-private partnerships to fund new hospitals and their replacement with not for profit trusts. Waiting times will be reduced through the establishment of a network of fast track diagnostic and treatment centres run by the NHS, not the private sector. Prescription charges would be abolished immediately for patients with chronic conditions and phased out for the rest of the population.

The party's leader, Alex Salmond, said that improving the Scottish NHS will be a top priority for the party: "Scotland's health service has been let down by the Labour Party. They have failed hard working staff and long waiting patients. The SNP will focus on treating people faster and closer to home. We will sort out Labour's health failures."

Bryan Christie *Edinburgh*

Expanding the Welsh NHS

Plaid Cymru says that the NHS in Wales is in crisis and that it is all Labour's fault. **Roger Dobson** reports

Reducing waiting lists, increasing intensive care beds, setting up new walk-in diagnostic centres, and banning adverts for unhealthy food on children's television are among the election health policies of Plaid Cymru.

A 12 point action plan for health and social care is at the heart of the party's strategy for what it describes as a crisis in the Welsh health service. Four months ago, Plaid Cymru tabled a vote of no confidence in the health policies of the Welsh Assembly after concern about

waiting lists and the findings of a report commissioned by the assembly that warned that demand for health and social care services in Wales could overwhelm the system.

"We have a crisis at present because the Labour government's promise to clear the waiting lists in Wales has been broken. Between 2000 and 2003, the number of hospital beds fell by 3% while the number of inpatients receiving treatment fell by 4%. At this election, we will be campaigning for a 12 point action plan to tackle the current crisis," said Rhodri Glyn Thomas, shadow health minister in the Welsh Assembly.

Plaid Cymru is the main opposition party in the Welsh Assembly, in which the Labour Party has a majority of one. Responsibility for the NHS in Wales is divided between the Welsh Assembly and central government.

The party's plan, much of it designed to reduce hospital waiting lists and waiting times,

includes the development of new capacity in GP surgeries, and the setting up of new NHS walk-in diagnostic and treatment centres to take pressure off hospital emergency departments.

Plaid Cymru say that no more operations would be cancelled on the day and that there would be an increase of 50 in the number of intensive care beds, along with better use of existing capacity where necessary. "Urgent steps also have to be taken within hospitals to improve on the way they currently operate, so that more patients can be treated. We want to see more use of the skills of nurses, physiotherapists, and social workers; more availability of training for them; and improved working conditions," says the plan.

Every pupil would have access to a school nurse to avoid hospitals becoming involved in the treatment of minor problems, and there would also be a campaign to combat methicillin resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA). Free eye tests and den-

tal checks would be reintroduced, and the party says that payments to nursing homes should be increased.

The party says that in the longer term, the structure and financial organisation of the NHS in Wales would be changed to rid it of anything connected with the internal market approach.

In the bigger picture, the party is also pledging to tackle the causes of ill health: "These include not only longstanding causes such as poverty and unhealthy working and housing conditions, but increasingly also the misuse of drugs, lack of exercise, and exploitative marketing to young children," says the strategy.

"Plaid Cymru will seek a ban on the advertising of unhealthy food and drink on children's television and encourage schools to get rid of junk food vending machines. We will work for a ban on smoking in public places, in the interests of children's as well as adults' health."

Roger Dobson *Abergavenny*