Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today.

I am proud to stand here as Labour’s Shadow Health Secretary and to have the opportunity to address colleagues from all parts of our health service.

I want to start by saying something that politicians don’t say anywhere near enough, but which I know from my short time in this job to be patently true:

**Health service staff are the lifeblood of our country.**

You demonstrate compassion and dedication in incredibly challenging circumstances.

You help alleviate pain and suffering on a daily basis.

And you keep going despite everything that this Tory Government throws at you.

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Colleagues, I know we meet today in difficult times.

But my message to you is this: I will defend and speak up for health service staff with everything I’ve got.

And that starts today.

If anyone has borne the brunt of the Tory government’s funding squeeze, then it is those who work in our National Health Service.

I don’t need to tell you how this Tory Government choses to thank the NHS workforce:

Pay freezes or pay cuts

Car parking charges

Rising registration fees

And from next April cuts to tax credits that will leave an average nurse with two children £1,200 worse off a year by 2020.

At the same time as all this, staff numbers have not kept pace with demand

Staff are working longer hours, with terms and conditions being whittled away.

Sometimes it must feel like the more you give, the more they take.
Let me read you an email I received yesterday from a hospital worker in Merseyside – she said this:

*I am an extremely concerned NHS worker.*

*I have not had a real pay rise for 5 years. I pay to maintain my professional registration. I pay to park at my place of employment. I never know what time I will finish work as it’s not a factory or shop with specific finishing times. I am on call at weekends, bank holidays, and Christmas.*

*I love my job. I’m privileged to provide amazing patients with care, empathy and compassion during their time in the operating theatres. I work with fantastic skilled people who give their all to their patients. But when honest, dedicated hardworking people have to work themselves into the ground just to get by, it breaks my heart!*

*I fear for my patients, I fear for my colleagues and I fear for myself.*

*I say to you:*

What kind of Government treats staff in this way?

What kind of Government goes out of their way to pick a fight with the very people who keep our health service going?

It’s a Tory Government that should be ashamed of themselves.

The sad thing is: you know, as well as I do, that the Tories’ attack on workers is about to get even worse.

Friend of the Chancellor, Sajid Javid is in the process of pushing the partisan and divisive Trade Union Bill through Parliament.

We all know that Tory claims to be the party of working people are laughable, but this Bill is no laughing matter.

It’s a gagging bill – that when considered alongside the government’s wider agenda - essentially amounts to curbing of democratic rights, a suppression of civil liberties and a cynical attempt to silence the voice of ordinary working people.

Only the Tories would have the gall to try and establish thresholds for strike ballot that half the Tory Cabinet didn’t even reach at the general election.

So let me give you this commitment today: Labour will oppose the Trade Union Bill at every step of the way and, should it become law, we will repeal it in government.

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2020 seems a long way away though and I am clear that between now and then, part of my responsibility as Shadow Health Secretary is to lead the campaign against the damage that this Tory Government is doing to the NHS right **NOW.**

I won’t be doing my job properly if I sit in Westminster behind my desk all day.
I won’t find the solutions to the problems the NHS is facing there.

I will find them in the hospitals, care homes and GP surgeries across the country.

I will find them by speaking to people like you – people on the frontline who know your jobs better than anyone and people who will know what works and what doesn’t.

Last month I spent a morning shadowing a junior doctor at Lewisham Hospital.

It was the single most powerful experience I have had since taking on this job.

The junior doctor I was shadowing was working a gruelling 11-hour night shift.

I left the hospital feeling blown away by the skills, knowledge, humanity and professionalism that I saw.

But it was the healthcare assistant I got chatting to who affected me just as much.

She told me she would take home just £13,000 a year for working weeks of long, demanding shifts.

And it reminded me why the current fight for junior doctors is so important.

It’s because we know that if Jeremy Hunt gets his way with junior doctors, he will come for everyone else next.

The health visitors, the nurses, the paramedics, the porters, the clinical psychologists, the pharmacists, the mental health workers and the maintenance staff.

And that’s why this cannot just be a fight between junior doctors and the health secretary.

It must be everyone’s cause. Everyone’s fight.

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Ultimately this Government has a choice.

On Wednesday, George Osborne will stand up to deliver the Government’s spending review.

He does so at a time when the NHS is facing its most difficult winter in a generation.

Hospital finances are in crisis.

More patients are waiting longer for vital operations.

And social care services are close to collapse.

The NHS needs a rescue plan.

On Wednesday, it needs an urgent and significant injection of cash.

And it needs that money now, not in four years’ time.
It’s no use underfunding the NHS for four years and then throwing money at it in the year before the next election.

But the rescue plan for the NHS, must be accompanied by a rescue plan for social care.

The neglect of older people’s care is a scandal that has gone on for far too long.

300,000 fewer older people are receiving care compared to when David Cameron became Prime Minister.

Too many older people are left suffering in silent misery.

And they’ve been let down by broken promises from this Government. No surprises there then.

Before the election this Government promised to introduce a cap on the costs of care, and they put aside over £3 billion to pay for it.

Straight after polling day, Ministers kicked the cap into the long grass, and they’ve yet to say what’s going to happen to the money.

My demand of George Osborne is this.

Instead of using that £3 billion pounds for more tax breaks for the rich, use this cash to boost the council budgets that pays for the care of our poorest pensioners and disabled adults.

This money could help give older people that bit of extra support they need to keep their dignity and independence, and it could help them avoid having to end up in hospital for no good reason.

Once upon a time the Tories promised to protect the NHS.

They now need to get their heads out of the sand, admit the scale of the problem and on Wednesday put their money where their mouth is.

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I want to finish by saying something else about staff who work in the health sector.

And that’s about mental health.

I am proud that it is the Labour Party, under Jeremy Corbyn, who appointed the first ever shadow cabinet member for mental health. And I can think of no-one better for that job than Luciana Berger.

If we don’t get serious about mental health now then society could be paying the price for many years to come.

We need to do much more to care for those who do so much to care for us.

According to the NHS staff survey the proportion of staff who say they suffer from work-related stress has increased from 29 to 38 per cent since 2010.
Within the NHS, poor mental health accounts for over a quarter of sickness absence.

The number of working days lost because of sick leave is up on last year, and sickness absence costs our health service a billion pounds a year.

Unmanaged long term stress is the biggest cause of staff permanently leaving the NHS.

That's not good for staff, and it's certainly not good for patients either.

The NHS chief executive Simon Stevens recently said ‘When it comes to supporting the health of our own workforce, frankly the NHS needs to put its own house in order.’

I agree, but I'm not sure his solution is the right one.

When you are stressed, rushed off your feet, seeing a system under so much strain that you know standards of care are being compromised, do you really need to be told you have a free Zumba class?

No. You need to know that you are valued, that you are supported, and that the people at the top understand the pressure you are under.

And not only that – but that the people at the top are doing all they can to make things better for you.

And colleagues, that will be my promise to you.

The mental and physical well-being of staff will be at the top of my agenda. Because staff who feel valued, provide valued services.

For as long I am in this job, I will do all I can to improve working conditions, to ensure staff are respected and supported, and that YOU are enabled to deliver the world-class care that everyone wants to see.

No-one working in the health service should suffer ill-health as a result of their work.

This should be true of any workplace but it must especially apply to the NHS - our proudest institution and the biggest employer in our country.

And I don't just say that because it is right for staff, I say that because it is right for all of the patients who use the NHS every day and deserve the very best care possible.

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So thank you for listening to me.

And I look forward to working with you all over the coming months.