

Head of UK's failed track and trace operation Baroness Harding considers running NHS England

Robert Stevens
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Conservative Party peer Dido Harding is considered to be a leading contender to take over NHS England following the announcement of the retirement at the end of July of chief executive Sir Simon Stevens.

NHS England oversees the budget, planning, delivery and day-to-day operation of the commissioning side of the National Health Service in England. The NHS is the largest employer in Europe, with about 1.5 million staff and an annual budget of £150 billion.

The *Sunday Times* cited a source close to Harding that she was “seriously considering” a bid to head NHS England, “but has not reached a final decision” ahead of applications closing on June 14.

That she has the gall to consider a run confirms that Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government of Thatcherite scoundrels have never abandoned their goal of ending universally available public health-free at the point of delivery. Their aim is to cut services to the bone, allowing corporations to loot the existing system while continuing to privatise any potentially lucrative area of provision.

In May 2020, Johnson appointed Harding to lead what he described as a “world beating” Covid-19 Test and Trace programme. The National Health Service Test and Trace Service (NHST&T) was a disastrously expensive £37 billion failure which only succeeded in making a lot of private sector contractors even richer at the expense of the public purse. Harding stood down from heading NHST&T in May this year.

Stevens was appointed head of NHS England in 2014 by then Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, after serving as health policy adviser to Tony Blair's Labour government and as a Labour councillor. The *Spectator* described him as a “golden boy” hire for Cameron and his austerity imposing chancellor, George Osborne.

Stevens was at least formally qualified for the job, with a background in NHS management and policy stretching back to 1988.

Diana Mary “Dido” Harding, aka Baroness Harding of Winscombe, daughter of Lord Harding, granddaughter of Field Marshal John Harding, 1st Baron Harding of Petherton, is the wife of Conservative MP John Penrose. Her only involvement in the NHS prior to overseeing the track and trace system was as the head, from 2017, of NHS Improvement, devoted to the privatisation and break-up of the NHS.

Harding openly backs the expansion of private health provision and their access to the NHS budget. Asked by MPs if she would relinquish her own private health insurance before taking the NHS Improvement role, Harding refused, saying, “not least because a very large number of the trusts that NHS Improvement regulates do private business as well as NHS business. I don't think we should be demonising one over the other. I think the NHS itself is absolutely a pillar of British society but as I've said I think it's pretty obvious from the outside that the system needs more money. I think we'd be cutting off our hand to spite our face if we demonise private healthcare.”

After graduating from Oxford in 1988, where she studied alongside Cameron, Harding took up a consultancy post at McKinsey & Company. In 1995, she became marketing director of travel agent Thomas Cook before moving to employment agency Manpower and Kingfisher and the high street retailer Woolworths. The UK's largest supermarket chain, Tesco, employed her services from 2000 to 2004 as “commercial director for value added foods” and “international support director.” Harding moved to another supermarket giant, Sainsbury's, in 2007 as convenience store director, and held a seat on its operating board. Following this she became CEO of the telecommunications giant TalkTalk in 2010.

Harding was appointed by Cameron to his 2010-2015 government's Council of Business Leaders. In 2014, she was appointed a non-executive director on the Court of the Bank of England.

In August 2020, the government announced its plan to scrap Public Health England (PHE) to be replaced with a new body, the National Institute for Health Protection (NIHP). Harding was announced as interim executive chair of NIHP, with a remit to bring together several organisations, PHE, NHS Test and Trace, and the highly secretive Joint Biosecurity Centre, as the “first step towards becoming a single organisation.”

The WSWS reported at the time, “PHE, established by the Cameron led-Tory government in 2013, is the national public health body and executive agency of the Department of Health and Social Care. Its scrapping seven years later is part of efforts by the Tories to scapegoat PHE for the government’s catastrophic response to the coronavirus pandemic that has cost tens of thousands of lives. But its replacement by NIHP has a broader aim as well, accelerating the privatisation of the National Health Service...”

Seeking to justify the failure of the track and trace system, Harding told the BBC Radio’s *Woman’s Hour* this week, “If there’s one regret I have, it’s that those expectations [for track and trace] were set too high...”

No. What the population expected was that £37 billion from the public purse would fund a reliable track and test service and not be used to hand out billions in lucrative contracts to Tory Party insiders and their mates in the private sector.

To put the scale of this disaster in context, at present only 20 percent of the world’s population has been vaccinated. It is estimated that the cost of vaccinating the rest would be around \$50-70 billion dollars. The cost of the UK’s track and trace system (£37 billion pounds) is just over \$52 billion.

Of the 35 “data processor” bodies involved in NHS Track and Trace, just four were even NHS organisations. Dr. David Wrigley, deputy chair of the British Medical Association, told the *Huffington Post*, “NHS Test and Trace—despite its name—is not an NHS service, it’s a largely outsourced programme that sees numerous private companies given billions of pounds to run testing sites, process samples and manage contact tracing call centres.”

NHST&T is principally run by 22 private companies, including Serco, Deloitte, Boots, DHL and Amazon. In all, £17 billion worth of contracts to purchase Personal Protective Equipment alone were awarded to private companies, including those run by Tory party cronies.

By last August, approximately £56 million had already been handed over in contracts by the government to at least 16 consultancy firms—many with links to Tory ministers and advisers—including Deloitte, PWC, and Harding’s former employers, McKinsey. These were for track-and-trace contracts, the purchase of personal protective equipment and

a largely abortive effort to produce ventilators.

By last October, as the recently detected Kent (Alpha) variant of COVID-19 was rapidly spreading throughout the UK, laying the basis for the second wave of the pandemic to take more lives than the first, it was reported that Serco and Sitel—involved in non-complex contact tracing—had managed to reach only 60 percent of contacts of those infected. The government’s Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies stated at the outset that for any track and trace system to be effective, at least 80 percent of the contacts of an index case would need to be contacted. Serco was still expected to rake in a £165 million profit out of these contracts.

In March, Parliament’s Public Accounts Committee (PAC) issued a report on NHST&T, which stated that it had failed, albeit in the politest possible language. It said, “It is unclear whether its specific contribution to reducing infection levels, as opposed to the other measures introduced to tackle the pandemic, has justified its costs.”

The PAC noted that by the end of October 2020, “NHST&T had signed 407 contracts worth £7 billion with 217 public and private organisations, of which 121 (or 70% of the contract value) were assigned as direct awards without competition under emergency measures.”

In November and December, the Department of Health and Social Care awarded a further 207 contracts worth £1.3 billion. “By the end of the year, DHSC had signed over 600 contracts for NHST&T-related services.”

The PAC’s chair, Labour MP Meg Hillier, felt obliged to make a stronger condemnation of NHST&T, saying that “despite the unimaginable resources thrown at this project, NHST&T cannot point to a measurable difference to the progress of the pandemic.”

As the WSWS noted, Hillier’s remarks were self-serving. The government was only able to put in place a test and trace operation that, led by Harding, served as a piggy bank for corporations because Labour was operating in a de facto government of national unity with Johnson, based on offering only “constructive opposition” to the Tories.



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