

Dear Prime Minister,

Date

07.09.2022

Critical priorities for the NHS ahead of winter

Congratulations on your success in the Conservative Party leadership election and subsequent appointment as Prime Minister.

For the attention of the Prime Minister

Rt Hon Liz Truss MP

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We were pleased to hear you set your intention to put the NHS on a 'firm footing' as one of your three top priorities in your speech on the steps of Downing Street yesterday. We look forward to working with you and your newly appointed Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on this critical issue.

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Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

We are writing to you on behalf of leaders and the people who use the NHS to raise the most critical priorities facing the service that need urgent attention.

Chancellor of the Exchequer

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You will know that you have inherited an NHS in the most challenging state it has been in for decades, with front-line services facing considerable pressures and public satisfaction at the lowest point in 25 years. It is clear that without urgent action this winter, the health service will face extreme pressure.. That is why we were pleased to hear the NHS is one of your top three priorities.

While there are obvious challenges, there is also much consensus to build on. The NHS reforms your government legislated for earlier this year are widely supported by NHS leaders and public faith in the founding principles of the NHS remains strong. And, with the right support, the NHS is an investable proposition that can drive economic growth in local communities and be a key part of levelling up the country.

But the health and care system has suffered from under-investment, widespread staff shortages and the shock of the pandemic which has exacerbated the growing care backlog that was evident as we entered Covid. That's why the NHS and social care services need the right support and investment now to make it more sustainable in the future.

It's also critical that the support you provide is underpinned by the principle that local health leaders and communities know best the health and care needs of their local population. Health leaders will rightly be held to account for the care they provide, but they need the appropriate funding, resources and autonomy to make decisions about delivering care in partnership with the people they serve

We ask you to take action on the following issues without delay to mitigate the impact of the risks that communities, NHS leaders and their teams are currently facing and which we expect to worsen during the winter period

- 1) **Workforce** – last week data was published that showed a record new high of 132,000 vacancies in the NHS. These vacancies are spread across the NHS and this figure doesn't capture the thousands of vacancies across primary care. You will know that this is not a new issue and that for many months and indeed years, the sector has been calling for a long term, fully funded workforce plan to ensure communities can reliably receive the best possible care in the future. We were heartened by your comments on addressing the NHS pension tax issue and ask you to urge your Chancellor to take action on this immediately.
- 2) **Social care** – there are even more vacancies in the social care sector with 165,000 roles that are unfilled. This is being compounded by poor pay for roles in social care which is driving more and more people to other sectors for better pay in the context of a tight labour market. Currently, one in seven patients in hospital are medically fit to be discharged but cannot be because of the lack of available care packages in the community. This means people aren't in the place they want and need to be, and it also interrupts the flow of patients through hospitals and other parts of the system, compounding pressures in emergency care and contributing to lengthening ambulance handover times. Primary care services are increasingly left trying to support patients who have social care needs that cannot be fulfilled. Increasing investment in social care is vital as a matter of urgency to improve flow through the system and to ensure people can be cared for in a way that enables them to live their lives in the way that they want to, with meaning, purpose and connection.
- 3) **Capital funding** – a decade of underinvestment in the NHS estate and infrastructure has left buildings crumbling and poor

IT services and equipment that are undermining the quality, safety and efficiency of care, and efforts to tackle the backlog. The maintenance backlog must be addressed, while capital funding that has already been promised for new builds must be unlocked. Those areas that have benefited from extra capital investment are usually able to deliver care more efficiently and effectively and that's what we need to see across the service.

- 4) **Rising cost of living and wider impact of inflation** – we expect the rising cost of living to be detrimental to public health as we approach winter with many households facing the choice between heating their home and eating. This will lead to more illness and sickness, thereby putting more pressure on NHS and social care services. We also urge you to bring forward the cross-government strategy on mental health given the numbers of people needing access to treatment and the clear links between poverty and mental ill-health.

In addition, NHS services are also seeing their budgets eroded by soaring inflation. Rising energy costs alone will add £2 million to monthly energy bills for some hospitals this winter and this affects mental health, community and primary care services, providers of social care and health and care charities too. Another cost pressure that wasn't budgeted for is the much needed pay increase for NHS staff, which, for secondary care, is being funded from existing budgets with no additional funding for primary care. The combination of these factors means the NHS is now facing a real-terms funding cut of up to £9.4 billion this year.

We urge you to use your emergency budget to provide much-needed support to households – targeted to give the most help to those most in need – and to top up the NHS budget to address the real terms reduction in its budget. Support for those community organisations at the front line of meeting people's needs also needs to be addressed. Additionally, the government needs to fully fund this year's pay rise for NHS staff for all sectors on Agenda for Change and across the entire spending review period. This is likely to cost a minimum of £2bn per year and will avoid cuts having to be made to frontline services.

- 5) **Strengthening the voice of people living with ill health in decision making** – ensuring people experiencing ill health are at the centre of decisions about the care they receive on the community and individual level is critical to ensuring taxpayers money actually achieves the outcomes people need and want. Giving people experiencing ill-health a say in their care is one important part of reducing health inequalities, and we also urge you to commit to publishing the Health Disparities White Paper.

Many promising new models of care – such as virtual care, anticipatory care, patient initiated follow-up and shared care rely on a great level of patient and carer engagement. It would be very powerful for you and the Secretary of State to acknowledge and encourage greater patient and public empowerment as crucial to the future of health and care.

Without urgent action on the above five priorities, we risk failing to support the NHS to meet rising demand, with demand for general practice services and lengthening waiting times two of many consequences. We know this winter is going to be an extremely challenging period for staff and patients. We owe it to them to take the short and medium term steps required to ensure the NHS is not put in this position again going into next year's winter period and beyond.

As you take up the office of Prime Minister we urge you to level with the public about the scale of the challenge facing the NHS and to offer hope that your government will support the NHS to address its systematic challenges.

As leaders of the health and care system, representing service providers and users, we stand ready to work with you on these pressing challenges.

Yours sincerely,



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NHS Confederation



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