



5 July 2024

Rt Hon Wes Streeting MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
Department of Health and Social Care

By email

Dear Secretary of State

Congratulations on your appointment as Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. We have valued our discussions with you in your shadow role and look forward to supporting you further now. We are keen to meet you as soon as possible to begin working with you on addressing your immediate concerns and long-term priorities.

NHS Providers' members – comprising 100% of the NHS hospital, mental health, community and ambulance trusts in England – are the key frontline organisations responsible for implementing the government's public commitments on the health service. NHS foundation trusts and trusts account for £124bn of annual expenditure and employ 1.5 million people. We work closely with them to understand how patient needs are changing and how they are responding, along with the challenges they face and the support they would welcome. This unique relationship with trusts gives us an unparalleled view of what is happening at the NHS frontline, and places us in a unique position to offer you support and insight as you and your team develop robust answers to the strategic questions facing health and care services.

Over the course of the election, you set out a vision of building an NHS fit for the future – one that is responsive and effective, meeting the current and future health needs of patients and communities. It is a vision that we share, and we are committed to working with you to deliver it. We have a track record in working constructively and successfully with ministerial teams and officials across government and the arm's length bodies.

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Looking ahead and enabling high-quality patient care

Trust leaders are committed to delivering for patients and for the populations they serve. They are doing all that they can to achieve value for money for taxpayers and are at the heart of many of the innovative solutions across the NHS. Vital gains have been made across cancer, urgent and emergency care and elective targets, with activity higher than pre-pandemic levels in many areas.

However, patient demand and acuity are outpacing NHS capacity. We see the worst implications of this in those services where quality of care has seriously fallen below what patients need and should be able to expect. Urgent and emergency care, maternity services, and mental health inpatient care must be front of mind. It is clear that new approaches are needed not only to enable consistently safe, high-quality patient care but to assure you, as Health and Social Care Secretary, of that care. We set out below areas that need your early attention: creating a thriving workforce; delivering safety and quality of care; building an NHS infrastructure that works; and recognising health as a public good.

Creating a thriving workforce

People are the backbone of the NHS and there is a wealth of evidence to show that a happy and healthy workforce leads to better patient outcomes. Nurturing a thriving workforce, focusing on staff wellbeing, morale, retention and making the NHS a great place to work is essential. The work underway to improve the equality, diversity and inclusivity of the NHS and tackling discrimination is essential. Trusts are focusing on what they can do locally to support wellbeing and skills development. Their efforts here can only go so far without sustained national support to reduce the vacancy rate and settle the question of pay, terms and conditions. There are two immediate priorities:

- Resolving the junior doctor pay dispute
- Early announcement of the public sector pay awards for this year

Finally on workforce, implementing the long-term workforce plan, to develop the workforce, is key to achieving “the left shift” in care. This is critical for the whole health and care workforce, but we need a particular focus on community and mental health services.

Safety and quality of care

Supporting the right cultures, and enabling the right behaviours to support safety, quality and improvement, is one of the biggest and most important challenges in healthcare. We know quality of care is greatly enhanced by building a closer connection between senior leaders and frontline staff, empowering staff, and involving patients in decisions about their care.

We hope you will engage early with NHS IMPACT colleagues on the benefits to organisational culture of a structured approach to improvement and co-production.

We would also welcome:

- An early conversation on regulation of managers in the NHS, further to our earlier letter to you, to explore how this supports quality of care and patient safety and complements ongoing work to develop NHS managers and leaders
- Discussion on the role regulation can play in championing a culture of safety, learning and openness within the NHS, particularly given recent developments in quality regulation.

An NHS infrastructure that works

A return to sustainable productivity growth depends on capital investment in infrastructure and digital technologies, which has been long neglected. Here there are two priorities:

- Urgently addressing the maintenance backlog – which stands now at nearly £12bn – to mitigate the risks it presents to patient and staff safety, and help boost NHS capacity
- Transforming the NHS estate and digitising on an industrial scale with an integrated capital strategy. This will deliver operational efficiencies, improve care and place the NHS at the forefront of innovation.

Trusts are ambitious and dedicated stewards of public funding and want to work with you to ensure they maximise the long-term value they can realise.

Health as a public good

Finally, we recognise that the NHS is one element of the national health, wellbeing and prosperity of our population. There are two pressing issues where we are keen to work with you:

- Reform of social care, including funding to put it on a sustainable footing with its own workforce plan, is essential. It is only through this that we together will be able to ensure the right care in the right place at the right time, and a sustainable NHS.
- Collective action to support children and young people. We want to work with you to improve outcomes and tackle long waits, as well as focusing on prevention to improve life chances and create a healthier population. We will report more fully on the pressures and solutions shortly.

Beyond this, we must elevate health as a public good, vital to a thriving economy and to our wellbeing as a society. The wider determinants of health and the levels of deprivation experienced have the most profound impact on a person's wellbeing and lifelong health. We need to think in terms not just of treatment when we are sick, but of healthy lives, with cross-departmental accountability for the health of the population.

Next steps

Working together, the government and the NHS can achieve the greatest social and economic value, and with patient and community needs sat the centre of every conversation and decision. This will enable the NHS to play its vital role in creating a healthy, equitable and productive society as part of a strong network of public services.

We will write to you again shortly to invite you to address the provider sector at our Annual Conference and Exhibition in Liverpool, 12-13 November. We look forward to meeting you shortly and picking up our conversation again.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ron Kerr".

Sir Ron Kerr
Chair

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Julian Hartley".

Sir Julian Hartley
Chief Executive

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Saffron Cordery".

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