

11 November 2022

Rt Hon Steve Barclay MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
39 Victoria Street
Westminster
London
SW1H 0EU

Dear Secretary of State,

Congratulations on your reappointment as Secretary of State for Health and Social Care at this critical time for services, staff and people who rely on our health and care system. National Voices is a coalition of health and social care charities who work to make what matters to people matter in health and care. We have 200 members covering a diverse range of health conditions and communities, connecting us directly with the experiences of millions of people.

The timing of your appointment comes as we prepare to face potentially one of the toughest winters in NHS history. You will be aware of the results of the British Social Attitudes Survey which show a huge and unprecedented decline in public satisfaction with the NHS, despite widespread support for the fundamental principles behind it¹.

We are deeply concerned about what we see as a material deterioration in access to health and care services. We regularly hear accounts from across our membership of the significant waits people are experiencing in access to diagnosis and treatment, as well as delays in routine care for long term conditions.

We hope to be able to work with you throughout your time in office, sharing insights from people living with ill health and disability, and our member charities, to support you in your important work overseeing the Department. I want to take this opportunity to raise some of the key concerns we hear from our members.

1. Workforce

One of the key issues we hear from our members currently is about how workforce shortages are impacting upon people's care. Addressing workforce challenges, including bringing forward a comprehensive and funded long-term workforce plan is vital to deliver on key challenges such as elective care backlogs. As a previously stated priority for the Department and with over 7 million people on an NHS waiting list in England, this cannot wait.

2. Cost of living

In May we published a report on rising cost of living and its impact on people living with ill health and disability². The cost of living continues to be a key concern of our members and those they work with. People with disabilities and long-term conditions who already face significant additional costs are often at the sharpest end of the current crisis. Every day we hear new insights from members on this – about people

who cannot afford to run medical devices because of energy costs, about people who are considering skipping vital medication because they can't afford their prescription, and much more. We ask you to work with the Chancellor and Prime Minister to ensure targeted support is provided to disabled people and people living with ill health, and also work to ensure that health and care leaders do everything within their gift to support people during these difficult times.

3. Social care

Another key challenge is social care. Previous commitments to fix social care including through a cap on lifetime care costs were welcome but uncertainty around the future of these plans has increased. The workforce crisis mentioned earlier is similarly acute in social care with an estimated vacancy rate in 2021/22 of 10.7% and more than 9 in 10 NHS leaders warning of a social care workforce crisis in their areaⁱⁱⁱ. There are also specific challenges facing working age adults who require social care services, a group who are often overlooked in policy discussions. Alongside the significant impact of a lack of social care provision on delayed discharge, people who require social care are increasingly unable to access the care they need to live well in the community.

4. Health inequalities

Along with our members and other health and care leaders, we are concerned about the lack of clarity around the future of the Health Disparities White Paper. Reducing health inequalities is vital to delivering on the levelling up agenda at the heart of the 2019 Conservative Party manifesto. We would urge you to commit to publishing the white paper as a priority and to deliver a cross-government strategy to reduce health inequalities across all departments, as recommended by the Inequalities in Health Alliance.

5. Living with Covid

We must highlight significant concerns of many members about the current response to COVID-19, particularly in relation to the half a million people who are immunosuppressed or immunocompromised. The 'Living with COVID' plan affords little protection or reassurance to those who are at significantly increased risk, many of whom continue to shield or isolate. The hope previously offered by the approval of Evusheld has been dashed by the subsequent decision not to roll it out as an additional safeguard for this group during winter. We would encourage you to review the protections available to those who are most at risk of Covid.

It is fair to say that politics within recent months have been very turbulent. Within our membership, this has caused concerns about the Government's commitment to various work streams, such as the 10 Year Cancer Plan, the 10 Year Dementia Plan and the 10 Year Mental Health and Wellbeing Plan, as well as vital public health and prevention approaches such as the anti-obesity strategy and commitments to the smokefree 2030 target. Additional clarity from yourself and the Department about the future of these programmes is desperately needed.

This is yet another critical time for the health and care system, those who work in it and the people who rely on it. Despite the scale of the challenges, our members and the people and communities they work with stand ready to provide the vital insights necessary to deliver in the interests of those who should matter most, people who regularly rely on health and care services.

There is also an important role for the voluntary and community sector. Not just in highlighting the challenges and inequalities prevalent in the health and care system but also in co-designing the necessary solutions. That's why we would like to invite you to meet with us and our member organisations to discuss how we can work together to deliver on this vital agenda. We look forward to hearing from you soon.

Kind regards,

Sarah Sweeney

Sarah Sweeney
Interim Chief Executive
National Voices

ⁱ <https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/research/public-satisfaction-with-the-nhs-and-social-care-in-2021-results-from-the-british-social-attitudes-survey>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.nationalvoices.org.uk/publications/our-publications/behind-headlines-unequal-impact-cost-living-crisis>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.cqc.org.uk/publication/state-care-202122/workforce>