



25 October 2022

Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP
The Prime Minister
10 Downing Street

By email

Dear Prime Minister

We would like to congratulate you on becoming prime minister and to offer our support in shaping and strengthening the NHS to best serve the health and prosperity of the country.

NHS Providers is the representative body for frontline NHS acute, ambulance, community, and mental health services. We have 100% of NHS foundation trusts and trusts in membership, accounting for £104bn of annual spend and employing more than 1.2 million staff. Our 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 health and social care secretary, develop robust solutions to the strategic challenges facing the health and care sector.

An extraordinary National Health Service

The NHS is delivering for millions of patients in unprecedented times. Despite repeated waves of Covid-19 and increased care backlogs following the pandemic, in line with the NHS elective recovery plan, the number of people waiting two years or more has been virtually eliminated. Community diagnostic and surgical hubs are being created across the country to increase capacity to help the NHS carry out more diagnostic tests and planned operations. The NHS has also consistently exceeded pre-pandemic levels, seeing more suspected cancer referral patients than ever before, demonstrating yet again how hard and effectively staff are working to drive recovery during very challenging times. The ambulance service is responding to huge increases in demand, treating 38% more of the most serious incidents compared to three years ago, and mental health services are in contact with more people than ever before. Integrated care systems (ICSs) have been recently placed on a statutory footing to create healthier, resilient and empowered communities.

The NHS remains a cornerstone institution of British society with widespread support for its founding principles of care, free at the point of need. Our health is inextricably linked

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to our nation's wealth and economic prosperity. The NHS is rooted in communities, generating benefits through its purchasing power as well as directly addressing health inequalities and treating those who are unwell. As the country's largest employer and an attractive site for investors in research and medical innovation, the NHS is well placed to support wider plans to address the economic challenges facing the country and a vital partner in securing our long-term future.

Tackling the challenges we face

Rising operational demands, the ongoing prevalence of Covid-19, the increasing cost of living, and widening health inequalities - all alongside the likelihood of an early flu season – risk making this winter extremely challenging. The long-overdue need for significant investment in social care and its workforce is having a serious knock-on impact on the NHS, making it more difficult for people to live independently, and often exacerbating delayed discharges from hospital which are a pressing problem.

We set out below the immediate challenges, and what we believe needs to be put in place to enable the NHS to deliver a world-class service.

Workforce shortages: Workforce pressures are growing and require urgent attention if the NHS is to address care backlogs and transform care as planned. Since last year, the total number of full-time equivalent vacancies across the NHS rose by 34% reaching an all-time high of 132,139. That means that nearly 1 in 10 posts are vacant in England, and 1 in 8 posts vacant in London. Social care, with 165,000 vacant posts, is struggling to recruit and retain staff. We urge you and the health and social care secretary to continue to prioritise the development of a fully funded, fully costed, workforce plan that sets out the necessary future shape and size of the health and care workforce.

We welcome recent progress on changes that would allow doctors to continue working after reaching their lifetime pension cap, without facing tax bills that mean thousands choose early retirement. We would be keen to see continued commitment to these changes, which would help the NHS retain a group of clinicians whose experience, skills and commitment are essential if we are to reduce waiting lists and meet the public's expectations.

Beyond this, it is critical that the NHS receives adequate funding for current and future pay awards to bring stability to the system. Trusts and the wider NHS already face stretching efficiency targets and in the absence of fully funded pay awards, health budgets will be reduced with cuts passed on to frontline care. Trust leaders understand the demands on the public purse but pay is the bottom line when it comes to recruiting and retaining the NHS workers we need.

On workforce, there is no single solution. Together, pensions reform to retain senior clinicians; fully funded pay awards which keep pace with inflation to value the workforce; and a long-term costed and funded workforce plan will enable government and NHS leaders to overcome this significant challenge. Alongside this, there needs to be a convincing plan, which works alongside the NHS settlement, to put social care on a sustainable footing.

Delivering the government's new hospital programme (NHP), and capital investment: The NHP is a fantastic opportunity to transform the very fabric of the NHS and the delivery of healthcare by providing badly needed renewal for acute, mental health, community and ambulance services. If delivered properly, it could help reduce health inequalities and drive long-overdue improvements to patient safety, service capacity and the recruitment and retention of valued staff. Your support for the programme during your time as Chancellor was invaluable, however the pace of progress urgently needs to accelerate. A multi-year capital settlement is vital to meet immediate needs of technological transformation and backlog maintenance and would make an important contribution to the levelling up agenda.

The challenge of the rising cost of living: Inflation is eroding the multi-year settlement confirmed at the October 2021 spending review. Dramatically rising energy costs are a serious concern, and the increased cost of living is already affecting the care that trusts can deliver with some reporting tangible impacts on the health of the patients they serve. Trusts leaders would like to see realism from government about how cost of living pressures and inflation are affecting workforce capacity and the delivery of key financial and operational targets, as well as recognition of the scale of the issue across acute, ambulance, community, and mental health services.

Improving population health and making best use of collective resources: Trust leaders have made it clear that they value the changes brought about by the Health and Care Act 2022 and they are now working hard with local partners to deliver on the core aims of system working to improve outcomes, tackle inequalities, enhance productivity and value for money, and support social and economic development. We now need to focus on embedding these recent and far-reaching changes for the benefit of patients.

We have always valued our strong relationship with government, and with officials based in Number 10. We look forward to continuing to support you and your team by focusing on how we can work together to come up with solutions to sustain the NHS for the future.

Yours sincerely



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