

Dear Prime Minister,

Industrial action in the NHS tomorrow

As the leading membership bodies that represent NHS organisations in England, we are talking to NHS leaders across England on a daily and now hourly basis about the preparations for the strikes and the impact industrial action has had on local services so far.

It goes without saying but the first priority for NHS leaders is to ensure the safety of their patients, staff and local communities. They know that the decision to strike is not one that their staff, who were balloted, will have taken lightly. This isn't just about pay but about working conditions: many have said they are doing this because they no longer feel able to provide the level of care that their patients need and deserve. In the context of more than 130,000 vacancies across the NHS, the elective backlog growing to over 7 million people and urgent and emergency care, mental health, community and primary care services all under extreme pressure, this concern is more than understandable.

With less than 24 hours to go until the ambulance strike, there is deep worry among NHS leaders about the level of harm and risk that could occur to patients tomorrow and beyond. We've rarely heard such strong and urgent expressions of concern from those running our hospitals, ambulance services and other vital health services. The NHS is already under significant pressure with all ambulance trusts in England having declared the highest level of alert, and added to that, services in the community, including GP surgeries and walk-in clinics, will almost certainly face even higher demand. We are specifically concerned about the risk of category 2 call-outs not being sufficiently staffed.

The fear of NHS leaders is that the risk to patients is only going to get worse with future strikes planned. That is, unless your government is able to reach agreement with the trade unions to bring a swift end to the dispute. We urge you to do all you can to bring about an agreed solution, otherwise more members of the public will suffer unnecessarily.

Date

20.12.2022

For the attention of

The Prime Minister
Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP

CC.

Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
Rt Hon Steve Barclay MP

It is clear that this situation cannot be allowed to drift, especially when faced with the prospect of further strikes in the new year, which could go on for longer and cover more areas and services. We therefore urge you to negotiate on the substantive issue of pay awards, in order to avert planned and future strikes. And we will continue to repeat our message to trade unions that a national resolution is needed as swiftly as possible.

In the meantime, NHS leaders and their teams will continue to do all they can to mitigate the risks to patient harms. We believe trade unions, for their part, must always act to meet the same objective, which so far we have seen. The arrangements in response to the strikes will vary locally, and leaders are committed to ensuring their communities understand any changes to their services.

As part of this, NHS leaders have finalised their response plans, which will see the military, independent and voluntary sectors being called to support emergencies, in addition to hospitals reviewing their outpatient appointments and seeing where patients can be discharged safely from hospital to free up beds, as well as making use of virtual wards. The national advice from NHS England remains that people should continue to call 999 in emergencies and, for less urgent care, to use NHS 111 and primary care – we will continue to get that message across to the public.

We understand your position and the wider economic factors that your government will be taking into consideration. But on health grounds alone, it is clear that we have entered dangerous territory and we hope this warning from NHS leaders should serve to focus minds in government that a swift resolution to this damaging dispute is needed, and that opening negotiations on pay is the way to achieve that.

We would be more than willing to meet with you and your advisers to discuss this further and can convene a group of our members to meet for a private roundtable if that would be helpful. Your team can contact externalaffairs@nhsconfed.org to arrange.

Yours sincerely,



Lord Victor Adebawale CBE
Chair
NHS Confederation



Matthew Taylor
Chief executive
NHS Confederation



Sir Ron Kerr
Chair
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Saffron Cordery
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