

18<sup>th</sup> December 2023

Dear Secretary of State,

We are writing to you regarding on-going industrial action in the NHS. We have also addressed this letter to the British Medical Association.

As organisations representing both patients and NHS leaders, we are seriously concerned about plans for industrial action set to take place between 20<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> December, and for a further six days in early January. The timing, duration and fact that – as yet – no national derogations have been agreed is cause for alarm. As a minimum, we are calling on all parties to take a step back and agree national derogations in our most vital ‘life and limb’ services so they can continue to operate in full over the period.

It is well understood that this is already a time of year when services come under immense pressure. There were 13,000 patients – many older people – waiting to be discharged in the first week of December. Strike action in the run up to Christmas could see these numbers increase, leaving patients stranded in hospital over the holiday period despite being medically fit for discharge. At the same time, a combination of seasonal pressures on primary and community care, staff absence and high levels of patient demand mean the first weeks of January are typically one of the busiest times, particularly for urgent and emergency care services. Taken together, our concern is that, despite the best efforts of hard-working NHS staff, it will be extremely difficult to ensure safe and effective care during this period for all patients that need it.

Already over the course of 2023 we have seen more than 1.2 million operations and appointments cancelled and £1.4 billion spent by NHS organisations, including on additional staff costs, as they have sought to keep essential services running. Meanwhile, waiting lists have increased by 510,000 from 7.2 million in January to 7.71 million in October 2023. There are currently 9,000 referrals on the list that have been waiting for more than 18 months. We are deeply concerned about the consequences for patient care.

We have all heard from and seen the impact on patients, families and carers whose health has deteriorated while they, or their loved ones, wait for essential treatment or struggle to access the on-going support they need to manage their health condition. We are also keenly aware that it is our most disadvantaged communities and vulnerable patients who pay the highest price for disruption and delays. Work by the King’s Fund found that those living in the most deprived communities already wait around twice as long for elective care, with further work by Healthwatch England highlighting that longer waits have a more detrimental impact on the physical and mental wellbeing of women, people with disabilities, those on low incomes and those from ethnic minority communities.

This position is clearly unsustainable for staff, NHS leaders and patients alike. Nine months have now elapsed since the BMA Junior Doctor's Committee first embarked on industrial action in March 2023, with negotiations and discussions taking place for some time before that. It is now imperative that both Government and the BMA find a resolution and bring an end to their dispute.

Further strikes would be a major blow to a service already grappling with record waiting lists, winter pressures and the financial fall out of previous industrial action.

We are collectively calling on both Government and the BMA to get back to the negotiating table. It is not too late to restart talks and avert further disruption.

Yours sincerely,



**Paul Farmer**  
Chief Executive, Age UK



**Mathew Taylor**  
Chief Executive, The NHS Confederation



**Louise Ansari**  
Chief Executive, Healthwatch England



**Rachel Powers**  
Chief Executive, The Patients Association



**Jacob Lant**  
Chief Executive, National Voices