



Department
of Health &
Social Care

From Neil O'Brien MP
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The Rt Hon Sir George Howarth MP
By email to: george.howarth.mp@parliament.uk

13 January 2023

Dear Sir George,

Thank you for your correspondence of 28 October on behalf of a number of your constituents, about GP services and NHS funding. I apologise for the delay in replying.

I am grateful to you for raising your constituents' concerns.

General practice teams worked incredibly hard during the pandemic to support their patients by adapting and changing their ways of working to ensure they delivered routine appointments, and they supported their communities by helping to deliver the largest vaccination programme in NHS history.

The outstanding efforts of general practice teams continue. We know that GP surgeries remain under huge pressure and demand for their services is high. In November, excluding COVID-19 vaccinations, there were on average 1.42 million general practice appointments per working day. This is an increase of 5.1 per cent compared to November 2021 (1.39 million), and an increase of 8.9 per cent compared to pre-pandemic levels in November 2019 (1.31 million).

It is vital that we continue to support general practice teams to provide the best possible care to patients. We made £520million available to improve access and expand general practice capacity during the pandemic. This was in addition to at least £1.5billion announced in 2020 to create an additional 50 million general practice appointments by 2024 by increasing and diversifying the workforce.

Our plan for patients, published on 22 September, aims to help patients to access general practice and make informed choices about which practice is best for them, and to give them more options when they need care.

The plan sets out a package of measures to improve access to general practice and help practices run more efficiently. To help patients make informed decisions about the right practice for them, we have begun publishing appointment data for all practices in England showing the time between booking and appointments taking place. This data will also help practices to understand their appointment demand levels and ensure they can better plan their staffing capacity. We will also increase the clinical services available from community pharmacy so that patients have more choices about where they receive care.

To bolster general practice teams, free up clinical time and reduce the administrative burden on GPs, we are giving primary care networks greater freedom to recruit new roles such as GP assistants and digital transformation leads, allowing general practices to employ the right staff with the right skills. This will mean GPs spend their time delivering appointments and tasks only a GP can do. To encourage and incentivise our most experienced clinicians, including GPs, to stay in practice, we will make changes to correct pension rules regarding inflation.

We estimate that the measures in *Our plan for patients* will free up over a million appointments this winter, so that all patients who need it can access an appointment within two weeks and those with urgent needs can be seen on the same day.

Remote consultations – online or by telephone – can provide flexibility for patients, and many people find them more convenient and accessible. However, they are not appropriate for all patients or in all circumstances. NHS England guidance has been clear that GP practices must provide face-to-face appointments alongside remote consultations. Patients' input into consultation type should be sought, and practices should respect preferences for face-to-face care unless there are good clinical reasons to the contrary. In November, 69.1 per cent of appointments were face-to-face, up from 62.6 per cent in the same month in 2021. We expect patients to experience the same high quality of care regardless of how they access their GP surgery.

There are a number of ways that patients can contact their GP surgery, including by telephone, in person or using a secure online form. NHS England has distributed communication tools for practices to help ensure patients are aware of how they can access services.

We know that people have been struggling to get through to their practices on the telephone. That is why NHS England has already put in place a short-term telephony solution that enables practices to use Microsoft Teams telephone functionality for outbound calls, freeing up lines for incoming calls. This is at no additional cost to practices and will run until the end of April. In addition, as announced in *Our plan for patients*, we will accelerate the delivery of cloud-based telephony, which will bring benefits for practices such as additional telephone lines, detailed information on patient demand and automated queuing. This will support practices to improve call handling and better plan staff coverage during busy periods.

If your constituents continue to struggle to access GP services, they should raise this with their practice, which will be able to provide details of the complaints process. If they are not comfortable raising a complaint direct, they can raise their concerns with their local NHS integrated care board, with NHS England or with their local Healthwatch, the independent consumer champion for health and social care. Further information about the NHS complaints procedure and Healthwatch can be found at www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/about-the-nhs/how-to-complain-to-the-nhs and www.healthwatch.co.uk respectively.

There have been big changes to the way that much of healthcare operates, but I can assure you that we are committed to supporting general practice teams so that they are ready to see, diagnose, treat and vaccinate local populations. GPs and their teams will always be there for their patients, and it is important that people do not delay in coming

forward with health concerns. General practice is the cornerstone of our NHS, and the Government remains committed to helping staff deliver for patients.

Funding confirmed at the Government's autumn statement, on top of the historic long-term NHS settlement announced in 2018, means that the NHS resource budget in England will increase to £165.9billion in 2024/25, up from £123.7billion in 2019/20. This funding is in addition to the £39billion made available in 2021 to support health and care services in dealing with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, we announced in the autumn statement that we are investing an additional £3.3billion in each of 2023/24 and 2024/25 to support the NHS in England to bring emergency, elective and primary care performance back to pre-pandemic levels.

As part of our investment in elective recovery, £5.9billion in capital investment will be provided over the 2021 spending review period (2022/23 to 2024/25) for the NHS to tackle the backlog of non-emergency procedures and modernise digital technology.

We will continue to prioritise funding for the NHS to recover from the pandemic, while ensuring it continues to deliver our necessary and ambitious reforms.

I hope this reply is helpful.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Neil O'Brien', with a stylized, flowing script.

NEIL O'BRIEN