



20th December 2023

Rt Hon Victoria Atkins
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
Department of Health and Social Care
Richmond House
79 Whitehall
London
SW1A 2NS

Dear Secretary of State

Re: NHS Workforce Priorities

Thank you for scheduling the meeting earlier this week for GMB and other Staff Council Executive Unions to meet with you and discuss our members priorities.

I wanted to re-confirm some of the points that were raised and offer to provide more information later if that would be useful. We can also arrange for you to meet with GMB National NHS & Ambulance Representatives in person so you can hear from them direct.

Pay

The Pay Review Body (PRB) remit has still not been issued and there are concerns that this will lead to a delay in staff receiving their pay increase in time for the April anniversary date. GMB has committed to not engaging with the PRB until significant reform has happened and our concerns regarding the independence, appointments, lengthy process and timing have been addressed. We have welcomed the DHSC review of the pay setting process but are disappointed that progress hasn't yet been made.

We continue to have concerns about the lowest paid and pay differentials. The delayed pay round will see the lowest paid once again watching as the living wage gets closer.

Retention

For several years we have been asking that retention of existing staff is a priority focus for the government. Staff are continuing to leave as their pay and working conditions deteriorate. Low staff morale, stress and burnout need to be addressed urgently, as does committing to restoring a decade of lost earnings.

Ambulance Delays and Handovers

Ambulance workers are exhausted already and it's only the start of winter. GMB members tell us they are frustrated at the amount of wasted time sat outside A&E Departments waiting to safely handover patients. The impacts of long hours in the cold, breathing in petrol fumes from other ambulances, and feeling like they are not providing safe patient care is having serious impacts on our members' mental health and wellbeing. It impacts their physical health and home life too, as meal breaks are missed, and shifts are late to end. Much more needs to be done to address the handover delays and consideration given to the workers' wellbeing, including making sure they have access to better facilities whilst waiting.

Flexible Working / Retirement

GMB has been actively involved with the work of the NHS Staff Council to introduce better guidance and support for employers and employees wanting to access their day one right to flexible working. However, not all employers are acting in a reasonable way when it comes to considering requests. This has proven to be especially difficult in the ambulance services where flexible working and retirement requests are being refused for no good reason.

Retirement Age and Unsocial Hours

GMB has long campaigned for a retirement age for ambulance workers that is in line with their emergency service workers colleagues in the Police and Fire. The mental and physical demands of the job make it extremely difficult for ambulance workers to continue working until their normal retirement age, particularly so for ambulance crews. There are also very limited suitable redeployment options. This means trained health and medical professionals are leaving the ambulance service as they approach retirement. They are taking up job offers that provide stable hours and less physical demands in private ambulances, GPs, community, and teaching. This needs to be a priority for any government that wants to ensure we keep valued and experienced staff working in the NHS.

GMB has also campaigned against the two-tier contracts for ambulance workers unsocial hours enhancements. The introduction of Section 2 Agenda for Change for new ambulance staff and the forced transfer from Annex 5 for those who seek to change their jobs has had a detrimental impact on ambulance workers career progression. No worker should be penalised for taking annual leave or sick leave and yet ambulance workers who are forced onto Section 2 suffer a financial detriment, unlike their colleagues who remain on Annex 5. If the government want to demonstrate to ambulance workers that they truly are valued and respected, offering Section 2 workers the option of transferring to Annex 5 would be an easy option with little financial impact.

We also share the concerns of sister unions who spoke in more details about Minimum Service Levels Legislation, Apprenticeships, Equality, International Health and Care Workers, Bank Staff Contracts and the wider Social Care issues.

If you would like to arrange a meeting with GMB and our National Representatives we would be happy to arrange it.

Yours sincerely



Rachel Harrison
GMB National Secretary