



Northern
Ireland
Office

The Rt Hon Chris
Heaton-Harris MP

Secretary of State for
Northern Ireland

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4 September 2023

Our ref: MC/23/361

Simon Hoare MP
Chair, Northern Ireland Affairs Committee
By email: northircom@parliament.uk

Dear Simon,

Thank you for your letter dated 20 July 2023 detailing transformation priorities for the health service in Northern Ireland which was provided by experts, as part of the Committee's ongoing inquiry into the funding and delivery of public services.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Committee for the work they have undertaken in this inquiry and others who have provided written or oral evidence on this important issue.

The absence of a Northern Ireland Executive is exacerbating the severe challenges that the healthcare system in Northern Ireland was already facing. Health is devolved and therefore the UK Government is limited in its powers to act, however, the Prime Minister is clear that cutting waiting lists is a priority to ensure people across the UK get the care they need more quickly, and he is committed to taking steps to support the NHS and reduce waiting times to ensure no part of the UK is left behind. This includes inviting senior NI officials to attend a UK summit to examine how waiting lists could be tackled.

However, you kindly ask me to give 'the Government's view on the potential effectiveness of the solutions' suggested to you. I'm afraid my Department does not hold the expertise to do this.

I have taken action to ensure governance can continue, including through setting two Northern Ireland budgets, but this position is not sustainable. Executive restoration is crucial for local politicians to take difficult and strategic decisions on an affordable and deliverable plan for the reform and transformation of public services, including health services.

Successive reviews on Northern Ireland's health service have stressed the need to reform and modernise. Despite the best efforts of healthcare staff, the current healthcare structure and systems generate persistent inefficiencies.

In recent months I have met with the joint secretaries of the Health Trade Unions on multiple occasions to discuss the Northern Ireland budget for 23/24. I am acutely aware that the 2023-24 Budget means Northern Ireland departments face very difficult decisions in difficult circumstances. We prioritised health in the 2023-24 budget. This budget allocation gives the department of Health a total allocation of £7.3 billion, an increase of £20 million above 2022-23.

The Department of Health's Departmental Strategic Business Plan for 2023/24 sets out a number of strategic objectives including: maximising what can be delivered from within the resources available; reviewing, re-designing and transforming services to deliver improved access to health and social care services; improving the use of data to become an insight led health service; developing a Department of Health strategy to address wellbeing issues, resilience, people and workforce; leadership; skills and development, and better governance.

The health service is yet another example of the increasingly challenging situations caused by the absence of a Northern Ireland Executive. It emphasises the urgent need for the return of Northern Ireland Ministers so that matters such as these can be decided by those elected to do so. This remains the Government's top priority.

I look forward to reading the full report when your inquiry is completed.

Yours sincerely,

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

**THE RT HON CHRIS HEATON-HARRIS MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND**