

Leading Primary Healthcare Associations unite together in a “golden opportunity” to help the Government avoid a “disintegration of primary care”

In an unprecedented move, primary care organisations representing pharmacies, dentists, optometrists, and GPs have joined together to call on the new Government to deliver action and sustainable funding to fix primary care and ease pressure on the rest of the NHS.

In a letter by the Independent Pharmacies Association, NHS Confederation’s Primary Care Network, British Dental Association, and the Association of Optometrists to the new Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Rt Hon Wes Streeting MP, the associations emphasise an “unprecedented opportunity for change”. They seek a meeting to discuss their proposals for a new Neighbourhood Health Service to avoid a “disintegration of primary care”. The group writes that as “the front door to the NHS, embedded within the communities surrounding our practices,” they are best placed to help the new Government understand and address local healthcare needs.

The letter points out that “health outcomes generally have suffered at the hands of recent administrations”. Broken funding systems in their sectors are reducing access to patient services and leading to pharmacy closures, problems getting GP appointments, and patients arriving in A&E with urgent dental and eyecare problems. They highlight that a new, united approach to primary care is needed to ensure patients get the appointments they need and argue for proper support and funding in their sectors. As a result, the NHS will be able to detect problems early, leading to better health outcomes, reduced pressure on hospitals, and reduced costs for the NHS.

Dr Leyla Hannbeck, Chief Executive of the Independent Pharmacies Association, said:

“There is a golden opportunity to reshape primary care around patients and their communities. Without change, we face further disintegration of vital primary care services and a decrease in health outcomes across society. That is why the leading healthcare bodies are united as never before, offering our support and collaboration to the new Government. It sounds like the Secretary of State means business when he says the NHS is broken and needs fixing. And so do we. Patients rely on their local pharmacies; we are accessible and professional and together with our other colleagues in primary care we are the front door of the NHS. But without action, we’ll continue to see pharmacy closures, medicine shortages, and a Pharmacy First project that is held back by a broken funding system. Our sectors stand ready to meet with the new Secretary of State to ensure every opportunity to improve primary care is taken and we deliver an NHS fit for the future.”

Prof Aruna Garcea, Chair of the NHS Confederation’s Primary Care Network, said:

“Our members are heartened by the government’s early acknowledgement that the NHS is in need of intensive support, and they are keen to work constructively with the new administration to showcase what is working well across primary care and where national attention is needed. There is much that the new government has set out already that we strongly support, including the move towards Neighbourhood Health Services so that more people can be supported closer to or in their own homes. This is not just about improving patient access and staff experience but also about helping to support a healthier population and harnessing NHS investment as an explicit tool for economic development and prosperity. Our research with Carnall Farrar has shown that for every £1 invested in community or primary care, there could be up to a £14 return to the local economy through gross value added (GVA). We look forward to engaging with the new ministerial team on these priorities.”

Eddie Crouch, Chair of the British Dental Association said:

“Years of neglect have pushed primary care to the brink. There’s a chance now not merely to rebuild but to redesign services fit for the 21st century. Where integration and prevention are a reality, not mere buzzwords.”

Carolyn Ruston, Policy Director at the Association of Optometrists, said:

“Alongside other primary care colleagues we have a real opportunity to reduce waiting times and improve access to care for patients, ending avoidable sight loss due to delays in care. In Optometry we have the clinical pathways, the clinical teams and the capacity to help make a massive difference quickly and cost-effectively. We are ready to make the long overdue shift from an NHS model overly reliant on secondary care to a more preventive primary eye care service, which delivers more care closer to home. We can achieve this quickly, through greater optimisation of optometry, using the skills and training of optometrists for diagnosing, treating and managing eye complaints whilst addressing capacity in other parts of primary care.”