

15 November 2023

Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer
1 Horse Guards Road
Westminster
London
SW1A 2HQ

cc: The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Victoria Atkins MP

Dear Chancellor,

We are writing to you ahead of the Autumn Statement to note our deep concern regarding the impact the ongoing cost of living crisis is having on people living with health conditions and disability, and their carers.

We urge the Treasury to recognise the specific and growing financial crisis in this cohort with an immediate support package to help those at the sharp end to alleviate their suffering and the serious impact this will have on an NHS which is facing unprecedented demand over the winter period.

We would also like to welcome and congratulate Victoria Atkins MP on her appointment to the role of Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. Her appointment comes at a critical time for the NHS and social care with widening health inequalities and people losing trust in the NHS to be there in their time of need. We hope to meet with her in the coming months to share the real-life concerns our 200 member charities hear from the people they advocate for. Our members represent a wide range of health conditions and disability and are a direct link into the people who should matter most, those who regularly rely on health and care services.

Impact of the cost of living crisis

National Voices is the leading coalition of health and social care charities in England. We have more than 200 members covering a diverse range of health conditions and communities, connecting us with the experiences of millions of people.

Many people living with health conditions already face unavoidable additional costs, such as for treatments and prescriptions, transport to appointments, hospital parking fees, greater domestic bills and insurance, as well as, for some, the knock on effects of not being able to work. The rising cost of living is particularly taking a toll on those who are already experiencing health inequalities, including people living in the most deprived areas of the country or from the most marginalised groups.

Every day we hear new insights from the people we work with and support which highlights the increasing financial burdens people are facing and the devastating impact this is having on their health. For example:

- Many people who rely on medical devices, report that the cumulative impact of higher energy costs to run these is becoming increasingly unaffordable.
- Research by Versus Arthritisⁱ found that nearly two thirds of people with arthritis or a musculoskeletal condition, whose surgery had been delayed or cancelled due to COVID-19, said they were living in pain because they can't afford the treatments they need.
- A recent study MS Societyⁱⁱ showed that 1 in 4 (23%) people with MS were worried about affording medication, therapies or treatments.
- Research from Co-op and mental health charities including Mindⁱⁱⁱ highlighted that a fifth (22%) of UK adults are seeing their support network less due to the cost of living crisis and a quarter (24%) expect this will soon be the case.
- Many people on low incomes will struggle to eat a healthy and balanced diet because of rising food costs, especially those with specific dietary needs.
- 1/3 of people with cystic fibrosis said they couldn't attend a medical appointment because they couldn't afford transport^{iv}.

Poverty and health are closely linked. People living in poverty are more likely to be living in poor health. The opposite is also true – lack of support for people living with health conditions and disability can make people poorer. The impacts of childhood malnutrition, the mental health burden of increased isolation and the health and wellbeing impacts of living in a cold home will be felt for years to come unless the Government act now.

Urgent support needed

With this in mind, we are seeking an urgent package of measures for those most in need to alleviate the impact of the financial burden on people's health. We believe the following measures will stem rising demand on the NHS, make a meaningful difference to ensuring people stay healthy during this economic squeeze and ensure costs to the NHS and wider economy, such as through unemployment due to ill health, do not continue to rise. We ask you to commit to:

- **Introduce free prescriptions for all**, like in Scotland and Wales, starting with the immediate introduction of free prescriptions for people with chronic conditions. Last winter alone the number of people not fulfilling prescriptions due to unaffordable costs almost doubled in December, which could create unwarranted demand on unplanned hospital admissions.
- **Guarantee an NHS dentist for all**, to support the wider preventative agenda, with an emergency winter fund set up to support additional dental activity over winter and prevent people resorting to visiting A&E
- **Provide more support with the costs** of hospital parking, transport to hospital and overnight accommodation for patients and their carers, to reduce health inequalities. Many of the current initiatives are not well publicised, or only offer to reimburse expenses creating a barrier for those who cannot afford the upfront costs.
- **Extend statutory sick time periods** to support those off work for longer due to long NHS waiting lists.
- **Reimburse energy costs** for running medical equipment at home, as well as costs associated with increased use of domestic appliances and heating where this is directly linked to the management of health conditions.

This is a critical moment for many in our society and decisions taken now will have a significant impact now and for years to come. We hope you will use this opportunity to support those who need it most.

With kind regards

Jacob Lant
Chief Executive
National Voices



With the support of 75 National Voices member charities, as follows:

Adfam
Age UK
Allergy UK
Arthritis Action
Arthritis and Musculoskeletal Alliance
Aspergillosis Trust
Asthma + Lung UK
Behçet's UK
Blood Cancer UK
BME Against Cancer
Borderline Support UK CIC
Bowel Cancer UK
British Dupuytren's Society
British Geriatrics Society
Cardiomyopathy UK
Carers UK
Centre for Mental Health
Children's Liver Disease Foundation
Compassion in Dying
Crohn's & Colitis UK
Diabetes UK
Disability Peterborough
Disability Rights UK
Dystonia UK
Ectodermal Dysplasia Society
Endometriosis UK
Equally Well UK
Forgotten Lives UK
Friends, Families and Travellers
Furness Mental Health Trust (FMHT)

Groundswell
Guillain - Barre & Associated Inflammatory Neuropathies
Harry's Hydrocephalus Awareness Trust
Hope 4 The Community CIC
ICUsteps
Juvenile Arthritis Research
Kidney Care UK
Long Covid Kids
Long Covid SOS
LUPUS UK
Macular Society
Marie Curie
Mind
MS Society
Muslim Doctors Association & Allied Health Professionals CIC
National Axial Spondyloarthritis Society
National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society (NRAS)
National Survivor User Network
National Ugly Mugs
Nutriri
Our Time
OUTpatients
Pain UK
Pancreatic Cancer UK
Parkinson's UK
PBC Foundation
Positively UK
Pregnancy Sickness Support
Rare Autoinflammatory Conditions Community UK
Rethink Mental Illness
Scleroderma & Raynaud's UK
SignHealth
SimPal
South Asian Health Action (SAHAUK)
Stroke Association
The Hibbs Lupus Trust
The Lymphoedema Support Network
The Thyroid Trust
Thyroid UK
Time To Talk Mental Health UK
Triangle Consulting Social Enterprise (Outcomes Star)
Turning Point
Urostomy Association
Versus Arthritis
Viewpoint



ⁱ <https://www.versusarthritis.org/news/2021/september/hidden-cost-of-covid-19-bbc-panorama-nhs-wait-or-pay/>

ⁱⁱ https://www.mssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-09/MS_REPORT2022_84pp_DIGITAL.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.mind.org.uk/news-campaigns/news/a-fifth-of-uk-adults-are-seeing-members-of-their-support-network-less-due-to-the-cost-of-living-crisis/>

^{iv} <https://www.cysticfibrosis.org.uk/news/1-in-3-people-with-cystic-fibrosis-miss-critical-hospital-appointments-due-to-cost-says-cystic>