



Edward Argar MP
Minister of State for Health
Department of Health and Social Care
39 Victoria Street
London, SW1H 0EU

23 March 2020

Dear Minister,

As you will be aware, Healthwatch England is the independent champion for patients, care users and the public. As part of our statutory role, we are a consultee on the Department's Mandate to NHS England (NHSE). In 2019-20, this role was extended in practice, with Healthwatch also advising on the Department's instructions to NHS Improvement (NHSI) as part of the new joint working arrangements for NHSE and NHSI.

Every year we work with your team, using the insight we gather from across the country (749,000 people last year) to help set the objectives for the NHS and to support the Secretary of State's [assessment](#) of how well the NHS is performing against those objectives.

As in previous years, this letter sets out the headlines of our discussions with officials over the last few months, including our views on the Department's overall approach to developing the Mandate, as well as some of specific areas for attention.

Responding to Covid-19

First and foremost, we agree wholeheartedly with the Government that responding to the Covid-19 situation has to be the priority for the NHS for the next period. We therefore understand the pragmatic and streamlined approach the Government is taking to setting this year's Mandate to the NHS. This is completely right and appropriate given the challenge we face as a country.

Healthwatch England has also issued our own guidance to the Healthwatch network advising them to put aside their local work programmes and work with colleagues across health and social care to ensure we keep our communities safe and get help to those in need.

Looking beyond the immediate response to Covid-19, it is also sensible that Government is not setting expectations regarding the amount of progress against any other Mandate objectives for 2020-21.

The approach for setting the NHS Mandate in future

To help inform the first Mandate-setting process back in 2012, the Government carried out a 12-week public consultation held between July and September of that year. This provided the framework within which the Department set NHS England's objectives from April 2013 to March 2015 (later extended to March 2016).

In late 2015, the Government carried out a second consultation on the Mandate, looking at how the objectives should be set for the period from April 2016 to March 2020. The extended time period set out here was designed to give the NHS greater certainty over the



longer-term goals it was being set by the Government, a move welcomed by Healthwatch England.

During last year's process we highlighted that the term covered by the previous consultation was ending, and whilst Healthwatch was able to support the annual refresh process, our role is not a substitute for the Department undertaking direct engagement with the public. We suggested in our [advisory letter](#) that the Department set out how the process would work in future, including any plans to consult more broadly. In response the Minister said:

"We intend to set multi-year objectives for NHS England and Improvement in a further accountability framework to cover the year between 2020-21 and 2023-24 ... We will ensure the that these multi-year objectives reflect the needs of patients and the public and look forward to further discussing our approach to this with Healthwatch England."

Given the immense pressure on the Government and the NHS at the moment due to the Covid-19 response, we understand why this discussion has not taken place. However, ahead of next year's process we urge the Department to publicly set out how it will do the above.

Whilst we recognise there is no statutory obligation on the Department to consult on this matter, there is clear precedent. It is also clear from the Prime Minister's inaugural cabinet meeting that this Government is keen to "deliver on the priorities of the British people". I am sure both you and the Prime Minister will agree that ensuring people can have their say on issues that matter to them in health and social care is therefore crucial to this Government achieving its objectives. We suggest this will be even more important as our country recovers from the health, social and economic effects of Covid-19.

Healthwatch England and our network of 151 local Healthwatch of course stand ready to assist the Government as it takes this conversation forward with the public.

Specific areas for further consideration:

Throughout the process this year we have raised a number of specific areas for the Department to consider. These have been highlighted to ensure NHSE and NHSI deliver the sort of care people tell us they want. These will hopefully prove useful as you develop your further considerations for the Mandate once Covid-19 has been effectively managed.

The Department should:

- Set a clear expectation that NHSE and NHSI will continue involving the public as the Long Term Plan (LTP) is delivered. Plans for this should be clearly set out in the National Implementation Plan, which we now expect to be published later in the year.

Further public involvement will be essential following the Covid-19 response, as timelines for the LTP will inevitably need to be revisited and in other areas elements of the plan will have been implemented faster than expected without the level of public involvement normally expected.

- Encourage the NHS to refocus performance management and metrics around what matters to patients.
- Ensure the NHS is learning from complaints and feeding this back to staff, patients and the wider public.



Providing clarity around the plans and priorities for social care

The utility of the NHS Mandate is that it clearly sets out what the Department expects the health service to achieve over a particular period, as well as outlining the Government's longer-term objectives for the NHS. This helps to give the system direction and makes it easier to communicate to the public about what the NHS is focusing on and the changes they might expect to see.

Unfortunately, there is no equivalent process for social care. There is no national body responsible for delivering on policy in social care in the same way. However, we suggest it would be a boost for the process of integration for the Department to set out similar high-level objectives in social care on an annual basis. This could be given some consideration as the Government works up its long-term approach to fixing some of the big challenges in social care.

We recognise that this will be out of scope of the process for setting the NHS Mandate. However, we would appreciate a response to this point, of creating an equal level of objective setting in health and social care, in your response to this letter. Ultimately, this sort of thinking will be key to the joint planning needed to deliver a truly integrated health and social care service.

We appreciate the involvement in this year's process and would like to thank officials for taking on board our feedback and suggestions throughout.

I look forward to your response about how the Department will be taking onboard this year's contributions.

Yours sincerely,

Sir Robert Francis QC
Chair - Healthwatch England