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Michael Matheson MSP,
Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care,
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
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By Email

30 January 2024

Dear *Michael,*

AFC REVIEW AND BUDGET DRAFT RESPONSE

We refer to your letter of 18 January concerning Agenda for Change Review and 2024/25 Pay. Trade unions and Professional Organisations representing Scotland's Agenda for Change workforce have now met to consider your letter.

Whilst we welcome your gratitude for the work undertaken to review key elements of Agenda for Change, NHS unions and their members will judge this government on what they do.

On the issue of Agenda for Change Review, it is widely accepted that the current Agenda for Change agreement is out of date and that it is in need of modernisation. That modernisation process is required to ensure that the NHS in Scotland remains an exemplar employer and is the employer of choice for staff who want to work in the health economy.

During the later part of 2023, Trade Unions and Professional Organisations entered into formal discussions to review key aspects of the current Agenda for Change agreement against a backdrop of the majority of unions on Staff side recommending the 2023/24 pay deal, that pay deal included a commitment to;

“...modernise priority areas and supplements previously agreed reforms to the working week; protected learning time and a review of band 5 job nursing profiles.”

The 2023/24 pay agreement was not arrived at easily, some unions had active industrial action mandates and there was a general unease that Government would seek to stall the implementation of the priority areas identified above.

In reaching our decision to accept the offer, NHS unions and professional organisations were mindful that:

- The then Deputy First Minister and First Minister were involved in the negotiations.
- Throughout the negotiations the Cab Sec for Health (now FM), FM and DFM were clear that they could not commit to an agreement that they could not fully fund – government accounting rules were cited as the reason,
- Mr Youseff in his then role as Cab Sec for Health was clear that the 24/25 budget gave the Health Dept the money that was needed to make good on the pay deal.
- The Heads of Agreement which supported the agreed claim, clearly commits to a delivery plan by September 2023.
- In reaching agreement around the reduced working week, the employers side Chair stated on more than one occasion that the proposed year one reduction of 30 minutes per week was achievable without too much anguish.

You should therefore be under no illusion that there is significant unease amongst unions and professional organisations that as we enter February 2024 and the new financial year your government has failed to provide the agreed delivery plan as referred to in the Heads of Agreement.

For the avoidance of doubt, we expect to receive an implementation plan without further delay and that the elements identified above are in place by 1 April 2024. Any delay will significantly damage the trust our members have in the government.

Whilst STAC staff side noted your offer to meet with the Chair and Secretary if STAC Staff side, the joint unions and professional organisations feel that it would be more appropriate to meet with the full committee.

On the issue of pay for the coming pay round, we note your letters reference to the Governments current financial challenges. Our members are acutely aware of the pressure that successive governments have created. It is their schools which are understaffed, their communities which do not have adequate social housing, their roads which are potholed, their wards and services they deliver which are being chronically underfunded by this Government.

It is our NHS members who are being asked to pay more in all walks of life whilst being expected to work harder with diminishing resource.

Set against those demands and pressures our members will have little interest in the Scottish Government blaming the most recent funding settlement for a delay in dealing with their negotiated pay increase.

Government is about decision making and priorities. Choosing to delay NHS pay talks for 24/25 in hope that a failed UK Government will provide funding for NHS pay is disrespectful and will find no sympathy amongst our membership who expect a pay rise negotiated and agreed for implementation by 1 April 2024.

Whilst there is a genuine anger within STAC Staffside, we still feel that the current apparent paralysis over pay for 2023/24 and 2024/25 can be rescued and are willing to discuss how that can be achieved.

However, we need actual progress without further delay and Government must commit to meet with STAC Staff side to table an implementation plan for a reduced working week; band 5 nursing review and protected learning to be in operation no later than 1 April 2024 with no impact on the 2024/25 quantum.

Further we require a clear commitment to timely and meaningful talks on NHS pay once we have submitted our 2024/25 pay claim.

We look forward to an urgent meeting with staff side and a response to our letter within the standard 10-day period.

Yours sincerely,



Matt McLaughlin
Staffside Secretary – STAC
Head of Health UNISON Scotland



Colin Poolman
Staffside Chair – STAC
RCN Scottish Secretary

Cc Staffside unions, MSG