



2 September 2020

Ms Nicola Sturgeon MSP
First Minister
The Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
EDINBURGH EH1 3DG

Dear Nicola

Review of Social Care in Scotland

As you know, GMB Scotland is the largest private care trades union in Scotland, and the UK, with members across all residential care settings as well as home-care and we also represent thousands of care workers working for local authorities and third sector providers.

As you also know, we have as a union been critical of the Scottish Government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic in social care, and especially about what has been allowed to occur in care homes. I am not going to apologise for that because our interventions have been driven by our members, who were left frightened to do their jobs, but neither will I rehearse the litany of issues about which our members on the ground, and through their union, had to ring the alarm. GMB Scotland has called for the Lord Advocate to investigate the circumstances surrounding deaths amongst social care workers, including our own members, and we continue to call for a fully independent public inquiry to examine in detail why so many things went so badly wrong. The sooner these lessons are learnt the better.

You will recall, although you did not reply, that I first raised concerns about how social care was going to cope with you back in March, before lockdown, when we made clear our keenness to work with the government, and employers, to make a national plan for social care. You opted not to do this and instead the approach of the Scottish Government through April and May was to respond to our concerns with day-to-day political rebuttals most of which gave way as the weeks went on. However, let's be clear that the concern about the fitness of our social care system did not begin in March 2020, your own Fair Work in Scotland's Social Care Sector report was published more than a year before that. Numerous other reports detail the deficiencies in the care system going back many more years and I have lost count of the number of government groups that have been created or are ongoing to talk about the problems facing our members in social care, and those they care for.

GMB SCOTLAND – PROTECTING YOU AT WORK

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I therefore find it hard to understand why the Scottish Government at the point of the outbreak shunned offers to work together with representatives of the workforce but nothing is more puzzling to me than the insistence of the government at that time that the social care system was somehow well prepared to deal with such a pandemic. No one who knew the reality of working in social care could have believed that to be true. This is a system in which the government trumps the payment of £9.30 an hour to workers caring for our most vulnerable citizens as an achievement rather than a scandal. A system in which we cannot even guarantee decent sick pay to allow the same care workers to keep away from our most vulnerable, whether they have COVID symptoms now or flu in any other year.

I note that in your statement to the Scottish Parliament yesterday you announced a panel of people chosen by you to advise you on what needs to change in the social care system, including considering the merits of a “National Care Service”. Just as with all of the other previous exercises the intent is welcome, but I do doubt that there is much new to learn about what is wrong with the existing model of social care. I note that you have decided not to include any voice of the social care workforce in this exercise but I hope that you will ensure that GMB Scotland’s “Show You Care” report which was sent to the Health Secretary last month will be shared with those you have chosen to work with. This report was based on testimony from thousands of care workers detailing the daily reality of working in social care system in Scotland during and before the current pandemic. In absence of an effort from government to reach out to the social care workforce, perhaps this testimony will be of assistance.

I recall that earlier in the Summer you used to talk about the opportunity to do better by care workers, mostly low paid women, who went through hell in order to keep the system functioning at all. Let’s be clear, that starts not with more committees of inquiry but with valuing these workers properly, paying them at least the average wage of £15 an hour, creating collective structures that allows the voice of workers and their unions to be properly heard and; yes, treating those who work in the system as experts rather than forever looking to whichever uncritical experts we prefer to tell us what is staring us in the face. Proceeding without the co-design of the workforce is not just unfair on those who work in this sector it is also likely to be counterproductive, because that lack of insight into the reality of these jobs will result in flawed outcomes even if these eventual recommendations are ever implemented.

The real test of reform, or indeed of any “National Care Service” is not the radicalism of politicians words, of whatever party. Rather it can only be whether it actually delivers the solutions that address the recruitment and retention crisis in the sector - sufficient time to consistently provide the dignified care that service users deserve, and to be properly valued - starting with pay and properly respected – with a collective voice and the ear of those with power.

In short, professional terms and conditions for the professional and heroic job that they do.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gary Smith', written in a cursive style.

GARY SMITH
GMB SCOTLAND SECRETARY