

**Daniel McCrossan MLA**  
Chairperson,  
Northern Ireland Assembly Public Accounts Committee

VIA EMAIL: [committee.publicaccounts@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:committee.publicaccounts@niassembly.gov.uk)

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## **RE: Inquiry into access to General Practice**

Dear Daniel,

Thank you to you, the Committee team and Committee members for the opportunity for the Northern Ireland General Practitioners Committee to give evidence to the Public Accounts Committee on Thursday 27 February as part of the inquiry into Access to General Practice. I trust the Committee found our evidence useful ahead of the production of the inquiry report.

We note the publication of the online survey into GP access which closed on 27 March. Unfortunately, during the first weekend of it being open, we were contacted by several BMA members who were concerned that, for a number of days after the survey going live, Question 7 did not initially contain an option of '*I have not experienced challenges*' when asked '*What are the main challenges you have faced when trying to access GP Services*'.

We note, from discussion at Committee on 6 March, that the Committee had also been contacted by members of the public citing the same concerns, and we were pleased to hear that the question had been amended on Monday 3 March. However, given the Committee noted there were over 10,000 responses to the survey in its first week, we remain concerned that efficacy of the survey could be affected due to the number of days it was open in its original form. We trust this will be acknowledged in the inquiry report.

The Department of Health, during its evidence session on 6 March, made a number of comments which we address in this letter.

Firstly, we welcome the comments from the Permanent Secretary when he said that staff working within general practice "*work extremely hard to ensure that people get access in a timely fashion.*" This acknowledgement is hugely welcomed by our members, who, despite the challenges, continue to see approximately 10% of the population each week via patient consultation.

**National director (Northern Ireland):** Claire Armstrong  
**Co-chief executive officers:** Neeta Major & Rachel Podolak

Secondly, on GP Trainees, the Permanent Secretary stated that:

*“We have substantially increased — by 86% since 2015 — the number of GPs in training. This year and last year, 121 places were offered. We filled all the places this year and 119 of them last year. We recognise the importance of making sure that we have the right range of skills.”*

We believe a number of these places have been filled by GPs-in-training who are domiciled in the Republic of Ireland, and many will return to work within the Republic's health system once qualified. For this reason, the Department of Health should clarify how many GPs-in-training are not domiciled in Northern Ireland.

Thirdly, the figure of roughly 2,000 registered GPs on the performers list quoted by the Department during the course of their evidence on 6 March, is not broken down by the number of sessions they provide. It also includes those who work less than full-time and GPs-in-training meaning this is not a true reflection of the workforce.

Finally, there was discussion during the Department's evidence session around the 5.4% funding figure for general practice provided by the Audit Office report. The Permanent Secretary said that the data in the Audit Office report took a percentage of the overall health **and** social care budget, and, when taking the health-only spend into account, the amount would be higher.

Since the Department appeared at the Committee, an answer from the Health Minister to an Assembly Question ([AQW 23003/22-27](#)) has provided clarity that general practice spend as a percentage of health-only budget spend was 6.1% in 2023/24. The BMA believe this figure still falls far short of what is required for stable general practice provision in Northern Ireland, and it should also be noted that funding is down 0.3% from the previous year. One of the key frustrations for us is the lack of robust, transparent and up-to-date figures on GMS, and this was also highlighted by the Permanent Secretary.

I trust the Committee finds this follow-up letter helpful as the inquiry progresses, and I am happy to clarify further if necessary. The Public Accounts Committee serves an important role in terms of scrutiny of public finance and value for money. If any members of the Committee, including yourself as Chair, would like to meet with me to discuss general practice-related matters in more detail, or indeed engage in any other meaningful way, the BMA would be more than happy to arrange this. If so, please contact our Senior Public Affairs Officer, Phil Mynes at [pmynes@bma.org.uk](mailto:pmynes@bma.org.uk).

Yours sincerely,

**Dr Frances O'Hagan**

Chair, BMA Northern Ireland General Practitioners' Committee