

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Health

BMA JUNIOR DOCTORS' STRIKE ACTION

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Mr Swann (Minister of Health): The following statement provides an update in relation to the strike action being undertaken by BMA Junior Doctors.

The BMA Junior Doctors' Committee have informed of their intention to stage two 48-hour periods of strike action, one of which commenced today, and the second scheduled for 22 June 2024.

My officials have been actively engaged with BMA representatives to seek to find an acceptable path forward. I have also written to the Junior Doctors' Committee setting out my Department's position, I have offered independent arbitration in these talks. That offer has not been taken up to date.

There is no doubting the absolutely vital contribution of junior doctors to our health service, their commitment and expertise and the long hours their jobs have long involved. It has always been a tough and very demanding job and the current extreme pressures on our hospitals have undoubtedly exacerbated that significantly.

I also fully understand the frustration behind the latest phase of industrial action.

However, I deeply regret the decision to strike again. It will cause serious disruption to patient care at a time of already significant and prolonged stress on services.

I would also again question what this industrial action can hope to achieve in a Northern Ireland context. This is a national dispute that will only be resolved at a national level. At the heart of this national dispute is a demand for pay restoration – for a landmark pay settlement that reverses below inflation increases over the past decade and more. That is the BMA demand for all doctors, not just junior doctors.

It must be remembered that public sector pay restraint has been a core element of UK government policy for 15 years and more. It has been a centerpiece of austerity. And that has inevitably impacted on all public sector pay awards in Northern Ireland over that time.

While all possible preparations have been made, Trusts and my Department are working closely to mitigate, as far as possible, the detrimental effect strike action will inevitably have on the health service, and our population. I met with representatives of the Committee yesterday morning to hear their concerns and have an open and honest exchange of what may be achievable.

Members will know that my options are severely limited, the proposed budgetary settlement for my Department does not provide scope for pay awards, rather it proposes a real-terms cut of 2.3%. I shall, however, continue to pursue any and all avenues to dissuade the BMA from their planned strike action, and would invite all Members to join me in that endeavour to prevent serious and lasting damage to the health and well-being of those we serve.