Dear Secretary of State

We are writing to you as members of the Inequalities in Health Alliance (IHA) to welcome you to your new role as Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. Your appointment comes at a critical moment in our efforts to tackle health inequality, and while we understand you will have much to do, reducing the avoidable differences in health across the population must be a priority.

Before COVID-19, health inequalities were estimated to cost the UK £31bn to £33bn. The health inequalities that were exacerbated by the pandemic now risk being further engrained if bold, ambitious action is not taken quickly.

A healthy population is central to economic growth. We urge you to maintain the commitment to publishing the Health Disparities White Paper by the end of this year.

The IHA’s over 200 member organisations represent patients, communities, doctors, nurses, psychologists, public health and social care professionals, dentists, pharmacists, academics, local authorities and others. They have seen first-hand how the physical and mental health of people of all ages is shaped by their environment.

The cost-of-living crisis is yet another reminder of this. Polling published by the Royal College of Physicians in May 2022 found that 55% of people felt their health had been negatively affected by the rising cost of living, with the increasing costs of heating (84%), food (78%) and transport (46%) reported as the top three factors. The health concerns surrounding the recent rise in energy bills again shows the link between people’s circumstances and their health.

We were pleased to see government announce a Health Disparities White Paper earlier this year, signalling that the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) would work with the ‘whole of government to consider health disparities at each stage at which they arise, from the wider determinants of health, to the behavioural factors that influence health, to the health services that people access and receive.’

As your Department rightly set out in ‘Our Plan for Patients’, a lot of poor health is preventable. But while a crucial part of the picture, focusing on individual behaviours and access to services alone will not be enough to close the almost 20-year gap in healthy life expectancy that exists in England between those from the least and most deprived communities.
To prevent ill health in the first place, action needs to be taken on issues such as poor housing, lack of educational opportunity, child poverty, the commercial determinants of health (such as the availability of tobacco and marketing of alcohol), communities and place, employment, racism and discrimination, transport and air pollution. Without a cross-government focus on these issues, the DHSC and NHS will be left in the ultimately unsustainable position of trying to treat illness created by the environments people live in. We need to end this cycle and tackle the social determinants of health that present a barrier to good health for so many.

That is why the over 200 member organisations of the Inequalities in Health Alliance are clear that the Health Disparities White Paper must be delivered with a clear commitment to cross-government action, including a cross-government strategy to reduce health inequalities. A cross-government strategy would be a significant step forward in reducing health inequalities in the UK, which so often start in childhood, and in the long-term provide savings to the NHS and the wider economy by reducing avoidable illness. More than a third of people aged 25 to 64 are economically inactive due to long-term sickness or disability in places with the lowest healthy life expectancy in England.

The government must recommit to narrowing the gap in healthy life expectancy between areas where it is highest and lowest by 2030. Delivering the Health Disparities White Paper by the end of 2022 as planned is a significant opportunity to commit to clear, cross-government action and reform our approach to improving the health of the nation. We urge you to seize it.

Yours sincerely

The Inequalities in Health Alliance

1. Academy of Medical Royal Colleges
2. Action on Smoking and Health
3. Alcohol Change UK
4. Alcohol Health Alliance UK
5. Arthritis and Musculoskeletal Alliance
6. Asian Breast Cancer Support Group
7. Association for Palliative Medicine of Great Britain and Ireland
8. Association for Young People’s Health
9. Association of Ambulance Chief Executives
10. Association of Anatomical Pathology Technology
11. Association of Cancer Physicians
12. Association of Directors of Public Health
13. Asthma + Lung UK
14. Bedfordshire and Luton Fair Play
15. Better Breathing
16. Blood Pressure UK
17. Breaking Down Barriers
18. Breastfeeding Network
19. British Association for Cytopathology
20. British Association for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition
21. British Association for Sexual Health and HIV
22. British Association for the Study of the Liver
23. British Association of Audivestibular Physicians
24. British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy
25. British Association of Dermatologists
26. British Cardiovascular Society
27. British Dietetic Association
28. British Fluoridation Society
29. British Geriatrics Society
30. British Heart Foundation
31. British Infection Association
32. British Islamic Medical Association
33. British Medical Association
34. British Nuclear Test Veterans Association
35. British Pharmacological Society
36. British Psychological Society
37. British Society for Allergy and Clinical Immunology
38. British Society for Haematology
39. British Society for Immunology
40. British Society of Gastroenterology
41. British Society of Physical and Rehabilitation Medicine
42. British Society for Rheumatology
43. British Thoracic Society
44. Brook
45. Catalyst Health Solutions
46. Cancer Research UK
47. Centre for Ageing Better
48. Centre for Ethnic Health Research
49. Centre for Health and Society, Aston University
50. Centre for Mental Health
51. Centre for Perioperative Care
52. Changing Lives
53. Chartered Society of Physiotherapy
54. Citizens Advice Sheffield
55. Clinical Genetics Society
56. Collective Voice
57. College of Paramedics
58. Consensus Action on Salt, Sugar and Health
59. Covid Aid
60. C2 National Network of Connected Communities
61. Crisis
62. Crohn’s & Colitis UK
63. Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance
64. Cystic Fibrosis Trust
65. Diabetes UK
66. Doctors’ Association UK
67. Doctors of the World UK
68. Equality Trust
69. Faculty for Homeless and Inclusion Health
70. Faculty of Intensive Care Medicine
71. Faculty of Occupational Medicine
72. Faculty of Pharmaceutical Medicine
73. Faculty of Physician Associates
74. Faculty of Public Health
75. Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Health
76. Faculty of Sport and Exercise Medicine
77. Fairness Foundation
78. Feed
79. First Steps Nutrition Trust
80. Gambling Education Network
81. Groundswell
82. Groundwork UK
83. Growing Against Violence
84. Health Action Campaign
85. Healthworks
86. Health Creation Alliance
87. Health Equalities Group
88. The Health Foundation
89. Herpes Viruses Association and Shingles Support Society