

Our ref: TO00000604163

Richmond House
79 Whitehall
London
SW1A 2NS

Tel: 020 7210 4850

Ms Judy Robinson
Suite 10D Joseph's Well
Hanover Walk
Leeds
LS3 1AB

16 APR 2011

13 April 2011

Dear Ms Robinson,

Thank you for your letters of 21 March to Andrew Lansley, Paul Burstow and Anne Milton about the representation of voluntary and community groups on health and wellbeing boards. I have been asked to reply on behalf of the ministers.

The Department agrees with your assessment of the valuable contribution the voluntary and community sector can make to strategic decisions and assessment of need. These groups have a particularly important role in giving voice to those people who may not be in contact with services and so you are right to highlight input into the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) as a key role.

It is important to be clear that the fact that the voluntary and community sector is not included in the minimum membership of health and wellbeing boards does not mean that the Department views the contribution from this sector as less important. Responses to the Department's consultation on Local Democratic Legitimacy last year were extremely supportive of the minimum statutory membership, so that boards have the flexibility to engage those groups that are most relevant to them. As you note, the Department wants local membership to be determined locally, rather than impose the exact membership from central Government.

The fact that the community and voluntary sector does not have a prescribed member also reflects the fact that in many areas there will not be a natural choice for a single representative to sit on the board. Accordingly, prescribing the community and voluntary sector as part of the minimum membership would risk forcing local services to give unfair primacy to one or two particular organisations.

Nonetheless, the Department is concerned to read that the community and voluntary sector is seen as a provider only in some areas, as this indicates that its contribution, whether as a member of the board or through other mechanisms, could be overlooked. Policy officials think that the Department can work together with the sector to address this in the following ways:

- using the early implementer network for health and wellbeing boards to share the lessons learned on how the sector can contribute to the boards. Engagement with community and voluntary groups and ensuring JSNAs are robust and representative of the whole population have already been identified as key areas of learning for the network;
- inputting into development of tools to support local government and their partners on JSNAs and joint health and wellbeing strategies. The Department is aware that it needs to ensure that these tools and related messages emphasise the importance of engaging with the sector to ensure that assessments and strategies are based on robust intelligence and take account of both the needs of those who are harder to reach, and the contribution the community and voluntary sector can make; and
- exploring with both the early implementer network and existing LINKs how the new HealthWatch organisations can link boards with the sector. Ministers see HealthWatch as having a broader role than LINKs in terms of coordinating intelligence on the ground and it will be vital for the community and voluntary sector to work together around this. For example, ministers can envisage a process where HealthWatch can nominate representatives of particular organisations to attend board meetings to speak to specific agenda items.

Working together, officials are confident that the Department can ensure that the community and voluntary sector has a robust role in both the strategic thinking and the day-to-day running of health and wellbeing boards.

If you would like to discuss this in more detail, you may wish to contact the following policy officials in the Department of Health in the first instance:

Kathy Wilson
Local Government Policy Lead
Department of Health
Email: Kathy.Wilson@dh.gsi.gov.uk
Telephone: 0207 972 4200

Phillip Anderson
Local Government Policy Manager
Department of Health
Email: Phillip.Anderson@dh.gsi.gov.uk
Telephone: 0207 972 3998

I hope this reply is helpful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'RIP'.

Rahul Patel
Customer Service Centre