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Steve Brine MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Public Health and Primary Care
39 Victoria Street
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10th December 2018

Dear Steve,

I am writing to you regarding patient travel from the Isle of Wight.

I enclose work prepared for you by our Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG).

As discussed, I am concerned about the costs of patient travel. As you may be aware, the Isle of Wight is the only UK island with no subsidised ferry travel to support local residents in accessing healthcare services on the mainland. I believe this is both unfair and, in the long run, costs the NHS a considerable amount of money in lost appointments.

In Cornwall, by contrast, the National Health Service (Travel Expenses and Remission of Charges) Regulations 2003 set out that any resident of the Isles of Scilly who is not entitled to payment in full of NHS travel expenses in accordance with low-income criteria (as is the case across England) will pay a maximum of £5 for their travel costs. A document from CCG Kernow (covering Cornwall and islands), sets out that residents of the Isles of Scilly have to pay only £5 towards the cost of NHS-funded patient transport to the mainland. Furthermore, if it is deemed necessary that the patient needs an escort to accompany them, a further maximum payment of £5 will be applicable.

Such a system does not apply to the Isle of Wight. Although some on the Isle of Wight meet the narrow definition of being on a low income and would benefit from having such costs met, many residents have to regularly access healthcare treatment on the mainland – such as those with prostate cancer, who may need 40 trips, and face difficulty in affording the associated and oft repeated costs.

I believe it is inequitable and unfair for one set of English islands to enjoy such a benefit when others do not. It is yet another example of the Isle of Wight not being treated fairly.

The arrangements for Isle of Wight residents traveling to the mainland for operations and medical appointments are much less generous, and exist only due to the co-operation of our three cross-Solent operators. Red Funnel offers a special return ferry fare; Wightlink offers a discount for both vehicle and foot passengers plus a patient escort; and Hovertravel offers a 20% discount on day returns. I am grateful to those operators for putting those arrangements in place, and to the NHS on the Isle of

Wight for negotiating them, but the reality is that even with such discounts, the cost of trips to access healthcare on the mainland can place a great financial burden on patients, which is at odds with the NHS's founding principle of being free at the point of delivery.

I am therefore asking you to amend the 2003 regulations to extend that statutory requirement to the Isle of Wight, as well as the Isles of Scilly. That would be a significant step forward and would have a transformational effect on the lives of many of my constituents who go to the mainland for treatment. We are talking about numbers in the low tens of thousands, and funding those visits would require relatively small amounts of money.

There is no doubt that Kernow CCG and the Isle of Wight CCG are unique, in England, in facing an "offshore" element of travel costs. For Kernow, this is meeting both the requirements of emergency / medical, low income and statutory requirements (the £5 policy); whereas for the Isle of Wight this is currently just for the emergency / medical and low income elements. Clearly if the latter were to extend to include a universal statutory element, it could add a significant financial burden to what is already a stretched CCG budget.

It would be unfair if both Kernow and Isle of Wight CCGs had to absorb the additional costs associated with an "offshore" element of patient travel without this being explicitly recognised within their funding settlements – which inevitably impacts on the remaining funds available for frontline services. I would therefore like to propose that the Department decides – when looking at any changes to the 2003 Regulations – that the funding for any offshore patient travel (i.e. travel to and from the Isles of Scilly / Wight and the mainland) is provided directly from the overall NHS England budget, rather than the funding for the respective CCG areas. Such an approach would mean that both CCGs achieve broad parity with their counterparts, only having to fund mainland-based travel out of their overall budgets, rather than the additional costs associated with transporting patients to and from islands. I believe this would be a fair and reasonable gesture for the Government to make, and would ask that it is brought forward along with changes to the 2003 Regulations to allow the Isle of Wight to benefit from the statutory obligations for a maximum payment of £5 for patient travel, irrespective of income.

There is also the issue of travel for families. Staying overnight in a mainland hospital brings about financial pressures for my constituents. I appreciate that the 2003 regulations do not provide for support in these cases, but if the Minister was generous enough to consider those changes, and to find the small amount of money to fund directly the £5 fare for people seeking treatment, I could go back to the ferry companies serving the Isle of Wight and see if they would be generous enough (as part of their corporate social responsibility) to make similar provision for patients' visitors. Someone from Ventnor, Cowes or Ryde who was going to hospital in Southampton on the mainland would pay £5 to get to the hospital, but their families often pay the full amount on the ferries. That is often not cheap. If we changed those arrangements, we could talk to the ferry companies about providing properly recognised and organised support to families visiting their loved ones in hospital. That would be a generous gesture to the Isles of Scilly and the Isle of Wight.

Thank you for your consideration of this proposal, and I would be pleased to discuss further in the near future.

Kind Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bob Seely', with a horizontal line underneath.

Bob Seely MP