The health minister’s vision for health and social care in Northern Ireland briefing paper

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The health minister, Simon Hamilton, outlined his vision for health and social care on 4 November 2015. The vision was in response to the Sir Liam Donaldson’s report and a DHSSPS review into commissioning and the administration of the health and social care system. The vision proposed:

- closure of the HSCB (Health and Social Care Board) and the commissioning functions being transferred to the DHSSPS (Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety)
- a specific directorate to be set up in DHSSPS to monitor finances and performance of HSCTs (Health and Social Care Trusts)
- increased freedom, independence and flexibility for HSCTs, who will be expected to deliver greater outcomes for the public
- the PHA (Public Health Agency) will be retained but will work more closely with departments on early intervention and prevention
- a greater level of accountability back to the health minister

Background
In April 2014 Sir Liam Donaldson was commissioned by the health minister to review governance arrangements across health and social care in Northern Ireland. BMA Northern

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1 The full Ministerial statement can be found here: https://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dhssps/hamilton-announces-vision-for-hsc-in-ni.pdf
2 The Health and Social Care (Reform) Act (Northern Ireland) 2009 created a single HSCB responsible for commissioning secondary care. The HSCB also administrators primary care through general medical services.
Ireland undertook extensive work to engage with the review and feed in member experiences.

In January 2015 Sir Liam Donaldson’s report, ‘The Right Time, The Right Place’, was published. The report proposed change in a number of areas, including:

- reconfiguration of services
- commissioning processes
- governance
- political leadership

BMA Northern Ireland welcomed the recommendations made by Sir Liam Donaldson. The changes would help increase quality and standards in the system. We also welcomed the report’s recognition that more genuine clinical involvement and engagement in delivering safe and effective care for patients is needed.

Health Minister’s vision for health and social care
The health minister has stated that the administration of health and social care in Northern Ireland is too big, too bureaucratic and doesn’t deliver the best value. The minister has also been clear that the health and social care system is full of talented and committed professionals. However the system controls and constrains these professionals rather than supports them. The minister’s vision aims to address this.

The health minister’s vision includes significant changes to health and social care in Northern Ireland. The vision proposed:

- closure of the HSCB and the commissioning functions being transferred to the DHSSPS
- a specific directorate to be set up in DHSSPS to monitor finances and performance of HSCTs
- increased freedom, independence and flexibility for HSCTs, who will be expected to deliver greater outcomes for the public
- the PHA will be retained but will work more closely with departments on early intervention and prevention
- a greater level of accountability back to the health minister

In addition the vision also set out plans to:

- create a local panel of experts to lead the debate on re-configuration of health and social care in Northern Ireland. This will be clinically led, evidence based and use international expertise as appropriate

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- convene a cross-party summit to help create consensus on the outcomes of the panel
- and create a shared vision for the future of health and social care in Northern Ireland
- implement a health and social care transformation fund to ensure the vision is properly
  resourced. It will be a dedicated source of funding that supports innovation,
  collaboration and prevention. A sizable amount of additional funding received by the
  DHSSPS as part of the budget process will be earmarked specifically for the fund.

The minister referenced GP federations⁴ in his statement as a good development and
example of where people in a geographic area know what is best for health and social care
provision. The vision set out that HSCTs should work more closely with primary care
practitioners to achieve this as well.

The vision also suggests an important change in the commissioning model, from a
purchaser/provider split to a planning model, which would be similar to that in Scotland.

Following the minister’s announcement, a consultation was launched on the future shape of
the administrative structures of health and social care in Northern Ireland. The consultation
will run from 15 December 2015 to 12 February 2016⁵.

**Why is this important to the BMA?**
The BMA has always said that Northern Ireland needs the right services, in the right place, at
the right time for patients. The minister’s vision seems to agree with this.

The vision proposes significant changes to health and social care in Northern Ireland. It also
suggests an important change to the commissioning model, from a purchaser/provider split
to a planning model. These changes will have fundamental implications for health and social
care in Northern Ireland, patients and BMA members.

BMA Northern Ireland has welcomed the Minister’s vision and its aims to reduce
bureaucracy⁴. There are however many points of clarification and areas for further
consideration needed on the vision. Therefore engagement and involvement of the medical
profession in implementing the vision will be very important.

**What are the next steps?**
BMA Northern Ireland has welcomed the minister’s vision and stated its hope to be closely
involved in the next steps. We have asked to be on the panel of experts who will lead the
debate on re-configuration of health and social care in Northern Ireland as we are well

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⁴ The idea and formation of federations in Northern Ireland has been driven by the Northern Ireland general
practice committee.
⁵ Further details on the DHSSPS’s consultation can be found here:
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placed to highlight the clinical issues facing our members. The BMA will also respond to the consultation which was launched on 15 December 2015.

In addition, BMA’s GP committee have asked for an early meeting with the minister to ensure the position of GPs as an independent contractor is maintained within these changes.

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2 Donaldson L (December 2014) *The right time, the right place: An expert examination of the application of health and social care governance and arrangements for ensuring the quality of care provision in Northern Ireland* Belfast: Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
