



GMB union - response to Department for Health & Social Care Consultation on Extending Free PPE to the Health & Care Sector

Submitted to: PPE.strategy@dhsc.gov.uk

To what extent do you agree that free PPE should be extended beyond 31 March 2022 for 12 months?

STRONGLY AGREE

GMB believes that free PPE should continue to be provided after 31st March 2022 and should in fact become a permanent provision. We have concerns that there is not sufficient money in the health and care system for employers to continue providing PPE for as long as is needed.

It is a fundamental health and safety right for workers to be provided with PPE at work. There cannot be a position where employers say they are unable to buy PPE and workers are pressurised to buy their own. We also cannot risk a repeat of what happened at the start of the pandemic where employers, desperate to get PPE for the workers, sourced it from unreliable sources. This only results in inferior PPE of low quality and with no CE markings, which provides a dangerous false sense of security

Are there other options you think we should consider?

YES

If yes, please describe alternative options and why these might be helpful and provide any supporting evidence.

A windfall tax on PPE profits made during the pandemic. There have been numerous reports of rampant profiteering from 'PPE Suppliers': see <https://goodlawproject.org/case/procurement-case/> and Private Eye on Supermax Healthcare

During the Pandemic we saw what impact the extent of privatisation and fragmentation of the social care sector had on the ability of the sector to respond and protect vulnerable people and workers. There was no central point of contact or oversight for social care. They were forgotten and treat very differently to the NHS. Social care deserves parity with the NHS and no less. At the start of the Pandemic, when the social care workforce were excluded from PPE guidance and supplies, GMB was contacted by numerous providers in a panic as to what to do for the best to protect their service users and workers.

GMB is calling for a universal national care service which is funded from the public purse through taxation, that formalises a universal pay structure with excellent terms and conditions. A system that is focussed on care and not on profits.

Hospices currently receive free PPE via a series of regional hubs which are largely reliant on volunteers, rather than via the PPE portal or local authorities or LRFs. Instead, hospices could use the PPE portal to access their COVID-19 PPE needs from 1 April 2022. To what extent do you agree that the regional hubs should be stood down and hospices onboarded to the portal?

NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE

It would only be successful if the resources from the regional hubs were put into the PPE portal to ensure there were still sufficient supplies and organisation to allow for distribution.

GMB also has concerns regarding the increasing use of volunteers in running these vital services. Persons carrying out these roles should still be trained to set standards required.

Do you have any other views related to this consultation that you would like to express?

YES

If 'yes', please explain.

We can't have a situation where workers end up having to pay for their own PPE because it stops being provided for them. GMB has concerns that without the provision of free PPE there may not be sufficient funds within the system to ensure it continues to be provided by employers. The provision of PPE to health and care workers must remain an issue of utmost priority and is a fundamental health and safety right and should be a permanent provision.

Many companies made huge profits throughout the pandemic by supply PPE to government. There was little (if any) transparency to how contracts were awarded and not all PPE supplied was to the quality and safety standards that our members deserved.

GMB is concerned that as we see more of the population being vaccinated against Covid-19, this will lead to a decrease in the amount of other risk mitigating measures that will be taken. The vaccine is just one part of trying to control Covid-19. PPE and social distancing will continue to be essential for a long time to come and it is concerning that Government are considering removing access to this most vital of protections for our key workers in health and care.

As Tom Hunt's recent paper on mandatory vaccination in care homes explains, *"worries have been expressed about the risk that the [vaccination] policy may be seen as a 'silver bullet' against COVID-19 and could lead to less emphasis being placed upon other important safety and infection control measures such as the provision of adequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)."* (See Hunt, T. (2021) *Under-paid and under-valued: assessing mandatory vaccination for care home workers in England. Sustainable Care Paper4, CIRCLE, Sheffield: University of Sheffield.*)

GMB also have concerns that this consultation is not considering the views and opinions of those directly impacted by this - the workers.