



MSP Briefing

Health Boards (Membership and Elections) (Scotland) Bill

Introduction

This briefing sets out UNISON Scotland's position on the **Health Boards (Membership and Elections) (Scotland) Bill** that will be considered at Stage 1 on Thursday 15 January 2009.

UNISON is Scotland's largest public sector trade union representing over 50,000 members working in health related services. UNISON Scotland fully supports the principles of this Bill, which was a commitment in both the Scottish Labour and SNP manifestos for the 2007 election.

The Case for Democracy in NHS Scotland

- Democratic structures create public bodies which are more open and transparent in their dealing with the public. Scottish Health Boards are responsible for spending around £8bn of public money and local democratic accountability is essential for expenditure of this level.
- This Bill also provides an excellent opportunity to encourage active participation from patients and the community. There is a general perception that health consultations are a cover for decisions that have already been made and that local views are not taken into account.
- Responses to the consultation on this Bill and the earlier non-executive Bill indicated widespread support for this approach from patient groups in particular. It also offers routes for a better understanding of healthcare provision amongst the public. The recent community anger and campaigns around changes to health service provision show clearly that the current process is not working and that there is real interest in health issues locally.
- Of course democracy costs, but the costs are small in the context of the sums of money spent by health boards. If this was a criterion then we would replace councils with regional governors.
- The Bill does not change the 'national' accountability of ministers to parliament. Many local government services are subject to national guidance and direction. It does enable appropriate local priorities to be decided locally. One person's 'postcode lottery' is another's 'local priority'.
- Directly elected members complement other public engagement initiatives, they do not replace them. What they should do is assist in changing the culture of health boards so that meaningful public engagement becomes the norm.

Opposition to the Bill

Opposition to the Bill in the main comes from the health establishment that believes health is too complex for mere mortals to comprehend. This reflects the 'we know best' top down health management culture that needs to be changed.

UNISON believes that the current Bill has some failings. In particular we would not count councillors as part of the directly elected majority because their primary focus is representing the council. We would also end votes for paid health managers on health boards.

Conclusion

Introducing directly elected members is not a panacea for improving health engagement. However, it is an important step in changing the culture of engagement within health boards. **We would therefore urge MSPs to support the Bill at Stage 1.**

For further information contact:

Dave Watson, Scottish Organiser d.watson@unison.co.uk Tel. 07958122409