- Sent via e-mail -

1st April 2020

Dear Nicola,

Covid-19 – Local Government Response

It is with regret that we write to you regarding the response to Covid-19 in local government.

As you may be aware UNISON, Unite and GMB represent over 120k members employed in local authorities across Scotland, many of whom are on the frontline delivering essential services and providing care to vulnerable groups. We have sought, at all times, to work with COSLA on their response to this crisis but we are now so concerned that their lack of movement is now putting service users and our members at risk that we feel we have to ask you to intervene.

National Co-ordination

There needs to be greater co-ordination from COSLA on the response to this at a national level. It is recognised that some solutions may necessarily need to be different in different places but this virus does not discriminate according to locality so there is, and has been, an urgency on producing some nationally agreed standards/principles. The SJC Circulars (SJC-60 on Pay and Sick Leave Provisions, SJC-61 on Homeworking) and our recently agreed FAQs were a good start but they do not go far enough.

- Key Workers: The unions have been pressing COSLA in excess of a week now for greater clarity around who meets the definition of a 'key worker'. Colleagues in England and Wales have been able to agree this and provide greater assurance to their workforce as a result. The unions shared is agreement with COSLA but to date no additional clarity has been provided and there are many situations where some workers in some authorities are being deemed 'key workers' and others are not. This has created an unnecessary degree of concern and uncertainty amongst members who do not know whether they should be turning up for work and if so whether they will get childcare provided to them. This could be easily and quickly rectified.

- Waste Collection: The unions have on a daily basis been raising the point about having a Scottish-wide policy on the essential service of residential waste collection so we don't end up with a scattergun approach. Our suggestion is that, for a temporary period until the virus is under control, authorities move to general waste collections only. This would provide clarity to the Scottish public that waste will continue to be picked up, preventing a public health crises of a different nature, and would allow councils to manage their fleet and workers better to protect staff. To date we have 32 local authorities doing different things on this – some maintaining a full service, others closing all waste and recycling centres.

Health and Safety

- PPE: The unions have consistently raised concerns regarding the availability and quality of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for our members. In particular, specific issues regarding the

availability of PPE for members working with vulnerable users in homecare settings and need urgent clarification over self-isolation for workers who have been in close contact with service users who have been confirmed as having the virus. It is not just in homecare though – reports of shortages of hand sanitisers and soap in schools and members working in waste and burial services, where they have had to interact with members of the public/waste that could be contaminated, with no PPE. This needs a national procurement plan urgently.

Additionally we believe that the current Health Protection Scotland guidance that states PPE should only be used in homecare settings where a service user is symptomatic is misguided and creates the possibility of workers contracting the virus from asymptomatic service users or inadvertently spreading the virus to vulnerable service users if they themselves are asymptomatic. In the absence of testing for frontline users this risk is difficult to quantify but is a source of great concern amongst the workforce and the families of those being cared for.

- Testing: There is an urgent need for testing of frontline workers to be rolled out across Scotland. You will be aware that some social care workers in Tayside, and we believe soon Ayrshire, are being tested, but we have no consistency of approach or clear rationale being explained to front-line health or social care workers about why they aren't being tested or why Scotland is performing so few tests compared to other countries and why we are still ignoring the World Health Organisation's call to "test, test, test". If the results in Tayside are replicated across Scotland with the lack of proper PPE and breaches of social distancing, the outcome to COVID-19 to the workforce, their families and communities will be devastating.

- Social Distancing: The unions have raised serious concerns about the ability of our members to observe social distancing measures at work. There are particular difficulties with workers being told to travel to sites in the same vehicle – in waste and homecare services in particular – who cannot therefore observe social distancing guidance. This issue has been raised on a daily basis but no guidelines have been issued despite us sharing with COSLA similar guidance that the NJC in England and Wales were able to produce, which they could have easily replicated. All unions are informed of up to 4 workers in cabs, daily team meetings and lunch breaks in canteens where social distancing is not being observed. This is against the Government advice and will only lead to greater spread of the virus. However councils are responding in the absence of guidance from COSLA and some of those responses are misguided.

There are additional issues in care homes with a lack of guidance to service users' families regarding the observation of social distancing from care providers. Again, some councils have issued guidance to their local communities on this whilst others have not.

- Mental Health: Understanding the immense pressure under which union members are working we have asked that there is Scottish-wide guidance and support for LG workers in relation to their mental health. To date this has not been progressed.

Care Provision in the Third and Private Sectors

We have raised concerns about the sustainability of care provision in the third and private sectors and the importance of the continuing flow of money to those organisations who have local government contracts – this is now urgent and we have not yet had an answer.

Again different local authorities are taking different approaches to this – some are suggesting that if the number of hours of care is cut back, as pressure on the workforce due to demand and sickness absence become acute, that their funding will be cut accordingly. Other local authorities are guaranteeing that funding throughout this period of crises. There is a very real danger that third and private sector providers will not be able to sustain their organisations if their funding dries up – this will create greater problems for the public sector in the long term and needs urgent attention.

We have also sought parity of treatment for our members in the third and private sectors with delivering these services for local authorities with their local government colleagues in terms of their sick pay and protections should they have to self-isolate or become unwell. Again, some local authorities are providing such an assurance, others are not.

The trade unions appreciate that this is an unprecedented time but the advice and guidance that is currently being issued is not being properly communicated to a large swathe of the public sector and as a result, we need an emergency conference call meeting with representatives of the Scottish Government who have locus in this area, to provide the impetus needed for action on these issues - they are nation-wide, need a national response and lives depend on them.

We look forward to hearing from you as early as practicably possible.

Best wishes,

Johanna Baxter	Drew Duffy	Wendy Dunsmore
UNISON	GMB	Unite