Dear Angela,

Thank you for your recent letter to the Rt Hon Theresa May MP, Prime Minister, about NHS nursing. I am replying as the issues raised fall within my ministerial portfolio.

I appreciate your concerns about financial support for student nurses and the future of the nursing workforce. We see the NHS workforce as our most valuable asset and appreciate the work done by our nurses, midwives and allied health professionals.

From August 2017, all new students studying nursing, midwifery or one of the allied health profession subjects will access funding through the Department for Education’s student support system. This change will typically provide students with at least 25 per cent more living cost support whilst they study, create up to 10,000 more university training places over this Parliament, and open up more places so that those with the aptitude and desire to train for non-medical degrees will now be able to do so.

Rather than denying thousands of UK applicants a place to study nursing at university and then being forced to hire new nurses from overseas and others from expensive agencies, we will be boosting participation and securing the future supply of nurses to the NHS. This will open up opportunities for the 37,000 nursing applicants universities were forced to turn down in 2014.

The current system of financial support for nursing, midwifery and allied health professional students is not considered to be sustainable. Currently, people studying for a degree in nursing, midwifery and the allied health professions receive bursaries
to cover tuition and living costs. These bursaries are paid from general taxation and are not recoverable from the student after they graduate. The number of students trained can therefore be restricted by the Government’s finances. Whilst planning is carried out to try to ensure resources are allocated to areas of greatest need, funding limits constrain the number of places which can lead to an undersupply of NHS staff, and more reliance on expensive agency workers and/or overseas staff.

Since the increase of tuition fees for students undertaking other university degrees, evidence has shown that young people are more likely to enter higher education than ever before, including record levels of disadvantaged young people applying to higher education – the most disadvantaged students are 22 per cent more likely to be accepted to university than in 2010.

Overall, while at university, the majority of students will be better off under the student loans system, and we are making additional offers on childcare, travel, dual accommodation and provision for hardship funding in appropriate circumstances.

The terms of repayment for the loan will be the same as all other graduates who have taken out a student loan when at university, including those who have studied in order to teach, a profession with comparable earnings to healthcare professionals. At present, repayment starts once a graduate is earning £21,000 and the repayments are 9 per cent of income over £21,000.

For universities, the combination of tuition fees and additional teaching grant funding that the Government has allocated to the Higher Education Funding Council for England will increase the resources available for teaching. In addition, universities can now increase their student numbers, making their provision more sustainable. It is now up to universities to recruit more students.

Based on the experience of the higher education system generally, the combination of an increase of typically around 25 percent or more in support for living costs and bringing these students under the access agreement system will support widening participation from disadvantaged groups.

Under both the NHS bursary and student support systems, students who have additional financial responsibilities because they have other adults or children dependent upon them can apply for additional funding.

We consider that increasing the living cost support available, along with the additional allowances available, would continue to ensure that students from diverse backgrounds consider applying to train as a nurse, midwife or allied health professional.
Under the reformed system, all nursing, midwifery and allied health students within the scope of these reforms will be under the purview of the Director for Fair Access if they find themselves in severe financial hardship during the course of their studies.

More generally, we are working with Health Education England and other stakeholders to address the shortage of nurses through a combination of increased training places, encouraging nurses to return to practice, and improving retention of experienced nurses in the workforce.

Despite the challenging economic climate, we are investing in the nurse workforce so that the overall package remains competitive. This year we announced an above inflation pay increase of 1 per cent and many nurses receive an in-year incremental pay rise that averages at around 3 per cent. Nurses also have access to a very competitive reward package that goes beyond those offered to many other graduates. This includes a defined benefit pension scheme and generous leave and parental leave entitlements.

I also note your concerns about nurses from overseas. Until exit negotiations are concluded, the UK remains a full member of the European Union and all the rights and obligations of EU membership continue to apply. Overseas staff have always played an important role in the health and care system and it is currently estimated that there are around 53,000 workers from EU member states in the NHS, and 80,000 in the social care system, including many dedicated healthcare professional staff.

It is important that these staff are not unnecessarily concerned about their future and a message of reassurance to all NHS staff has already been sent, emphasising the vital role played by EU nationals working in our health and care system.

I hope this reply is helpful, and would be grateful if you would share it with your co-signatories.

Yours sincerely,

PHILIP DUNNE