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Thank you for your letter of 25 November enclosing West Lothian Council's motion relating to Boots' decision to charge for home delivery of prescription medicines. Please accept my sincere apology for the delay in responding, this has been due to a technical issue with our correspondence system.

You will be aware that the Scottish Government abolished prescription charges in 2011, not least as prescription charges are a tax on ill health, but Scottish Ministers believe that NHS services should be free at the point of access, a founding principle of the NHS. This ensures that everyone can access the vital medicines they need and make choices about managing and improving their health, whatever their health condition, age or income.

Community pharmacies such as Boots are independent companies which are contracted to provide pharmaceutical care services on behalf of the NHS. Each community pharmacy contractor is responsible for its own day-to-day operational processes taking into account their business model. While some pharmacies will deliver prescribed medicines to patients' homes, this is not provided as an NHS service. Community pharmacy contractors who offer such a service do so at their own cost, taking a business decision based on their own commercial judgement. Some may therefore choose to apply a charge for their home delivery services.

The Scottish Government's Chief Pharmaceutical Officer met with a representative from Boots recently to discuss a number of issues including the impact that the home delivery charge may have on patients in Scotland. While the company stated that they understand the concerns of patients, the introduction of these charges was not taken lightly and is a direct result of the impact on the company's financial accounts in both their UK and Global operations, making the continuation of free home delivery unsustainable.



While I understand this decision has been taken due to the impact on company finances, I do not believe it fully considers the impact on those patients where free prescriptions means they do not need to make decisions about the affordability of their healthcare.

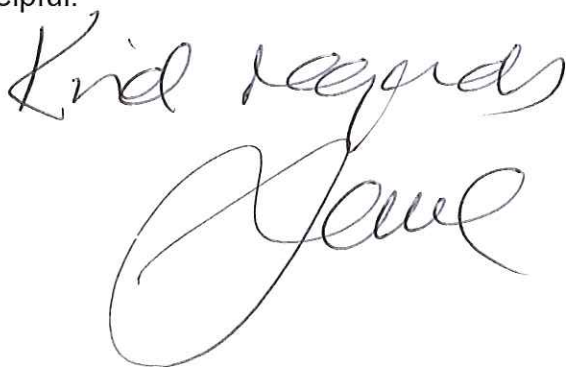
Tackling inequalities and ensuring we are a healthy and active nation are key priorities for Scottish Ministers, and form part of the Scottish Government's National Performance Framework. However, disappointingly, the decision by Boots UK to charge patients to have their free prescribed medication delivered undoubtedly places a barrier against those who rely on these services to obtain their medication. It also imposes a choice on where some individuals spend the limited money they have, thereby promoting inequality between those who can easily receive the treatment they need and those who cannot through illness, disability, age or income.

I understand that Boots will not charge patients for delivery if they sign up to their online repeat prescription service. The Scottish Government does not support pharmacy managed repeat prescription services such as these as they do not form part of the NHS pharmaceutical care services provided by community pharmacies in Scotland and have the potential for unnecessary over-ordering of medicines and waste. In addition the elderly or those on low incomes are less likely to have regular access to the internet and so cannot rely on online services to provide them with access to their medication, or they have no alternative local community pharmacy to have their prescribed medicines dispensed from – a particular issue in remote and rural communities.

Patients may still have concerns about delivery charges because they do not wish to sign up to online services or cannot access their local pharmacy. I suggest they speak with the pharmacist or pharmacy manager to see if an alternative solution can be provided. I understand that in many places in Scotland there is no pharmacy other than Boots in its locality and so therefore patients are limited in their choice of pharmacy provider.

In December of last year the Chief Pharmaceutical Officer wrote to Boots UK's Managing Director highlighting my concerns and asking him to reconsider this policy decision. Mr James has responded, stating his regret that Boots UK has had to take this decision to charge but that they have no plans to review the policy. I would be interested to hear how Mr Pessina responds to your letter if you are agreeable.

I hope this reply is helpful.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Kind regards" followed by a large, stylized signature that appears to be "Jeane".

JEANE FREEMAN