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Rt Hon Patricia Hewitt MP
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Please ask for : Jo Howes

Our ref : jrh/com10b

Your ref :

3 May 2007

Dear Mrs Hewitt

Re: NHS Service Reconfiguration in Wiltshire

I am writing to you, in light of recent decisions regarding changes to community services made by Wiltshire PCT Board in January, to inform you of the position taken by the Wiltshire Health Overview & Scrutiny Committee in relation to this.

In essence the changes will lead to the permanent closure of six community hospitals in Wiltshire, to be replaced with a variety of Primary Care Centres, enhanced GP services and 24 hour community nursing teams, which are yet to be developed.

On 1 March the Health OSC met and, following a long debate, agreed to endorse these proposed changes and to continue to monitor development of new services during the implementation process, to ensure they meet the needs of the population served.

The Committee also resolved to write to you and to the Strategic Health Authority, setting out the work undertaken by the Committee in for it to reach its decision, and to stress the importance of sufficient resources being made available to the PCT in order for these changes to be successfully delivered, giving due attention to the rural nature of the county.

I have written to you previously, setting out the concerns of the Committee and the local Patient & Public Involvement Forums regarding the PCT's engagement process. I have attached my previous letter here for accuracy. The actions taken by the PCT early on in the engagement process, outlined in my previous letter, gave rise to a degree of public disillusionment which hampered its effectiveness, giving rise to a level of cynicism from which the PCT has struggled to recover.

In reaching a decision not to formally challenge the proposals made by the PCT the Health OSC gave consideration to national policy and guidance documents which deal with the commissioning and delivery of community services.

The Committee has also been deeply concerned about the relationship between the NHS and social care in Wiltshire. During the last two years increasing financial pressures for both the County Council and the PCT had led to a major breakdown in relationships, culminating in a withdrawal from joint working and commissioning. This has not led to the development of good services for the residents of Wiltshire. We are pleased that work is now well underway to rebuild lines of communication with a long term aim of re-establishing joint working and commissioning practices.

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There has been strong resistance to proposals for change to NHS services in Wiltshire. This is due, in part to a lack of clarity or appreciation about the concept of taking more services into the community and away from acute hospitals. There are ongoing public concerns about maternity services, hospital closures, inpatient bed numbers, transport and community nursing teams. However, the major concern underpinning all of this is the PCT's ability to deliver the changed services given the precarious financial situation under which it is operating.

The Health OSC's research resulted in a detailed report, the conclusions of which I have attached with this letter. We have stressed to the Board of the PCT that stakeholders must be actively involved in the planning and delivery of the new services and the PCT has committed to making this happen. The Committee will continue to hold the PCT to account throughout the implementation process to ensure that the services promised are indeed delivered.

The people of Wiltshire have gone through a long period of unrelenting uncertainty regarding their health services, since PCTs were formed in 2001 and 2002. It has been an unsettling time for all concerned. There have been many meetings, some controversial, and many questions asked and answered. Many people find it hard to believe that the PCT will be able to achieve financial recovery and deliver the services they have now been promised. They must not be let down.

Yours sincerely

Roy While
Chairman, Wiltshire Health Overview & Scrutiny Committee

cc. Sir Ian Carruthers, South West Strategic Health Authority
Jeff James, Wiltshire Primary Care Trust