

Briefing paper for Overview and Scrutiny Committees, April 2005

Update on the Ambulance Review in Avon, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire

1 Purpose

This purpose of this short paper is to brief you on the Ambulance Review being undertaken by Avon, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire Strategic Health Authority in partnership with the three Ambulance Trusts and commissioning Primary Care Trusts across our region.

2 A time for change

The style of Ambulance Service is changing. As part of a new national agenda led by the Department of Health, ambulance services will change as part of the modernisation of the NHS.

These changes will mean that patients benefit further from the continual reform of Ambulance Trusts, as they play a bigger and more central role in the NHS.

In order to make the most of these changes locally, we must ensure we have the most effective structures in place.

3 The national agenda

The launch of the new national agenda is expected in the summer, and means big changes ahead for Ambulance Trusts.

The changes will mean better services for patients, including:

- A greater focus on clinical results and care, as well as speed of service.
- Stronger integration with other parts of the health service, rather than with other 'blue light' services (such as fire and police).
- Helping patients get the right treatment, rather than just transporting them to hospital Accident & Emergency.
- Better trained ambulance staff, who are recognised even more for their professionalism.
- Better use of new technology to speed up services.

4 Local improvements already under way

The three Ambulance Trusts in Avon, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire have already made great improvements to the services and care they provide to patients.

Some of these improvements fit directly with the direction of the national agenda and include:

- A greater role in providing care to patients as part of the new Out of Hours arrangements.
- More paramedics in the community, such as in GP surgeries, where they can provide fast and effective care to patients.
- Better access to coronary care – ensuring that facilities are provided in the community to help those who suffer a heart problem.
- Wider access to minor injuries – which help those who need help with minor injuries are treated and not just transferred to hospital.

5 Why the Ambulance Review started

The Review started in May 2004 and was focused on Wiltshire Ambulance Service.

It was necessary because of major operational challenges in Wiltshire – difficulties in meeting key national targets, the findings of an assessment by the Healthcare Commission, and growing demand on services.

The conclusion was that the best way forward for Wiltshire Ambulance Service was integration with another organisation or organisations. It was agreed that ‘no change was not an option.’

In January 2005, discussions widened as it became clear that, although there are considerable strengths in each service, the Trusts could potentially do more together than apart.

A new Steering Group was formed of the Chairs and Chief Executives of the three Ambulance Trusts, commissioning Primary Care Trusts and the Strategic Health Authority.

They will work together as a team to determine the best way forward for patients within the context of the radically changing national agenda for Ambulance Trusts.

6 Aims of the Ambulance Review

The Ambulance Review aims to find out whether the right ambulance structures are in place to meet the new national agenda.

Three options are being evaluated:

- Retain existing arrangements, but with some possible improvements.
- Create a single merged management team across all three Ambulance Trusts.
- Establish a single, new Ambulance Trust for the whole of AGW, with distinct divisional structures.

The review will recommend organisational solutions for the best way forward. There are no plans to change services for patients as part of the Ambulance Review.

The Steering Group has appointed consultants, Price Waterhouse Coopers to undertake an independent and thorough review of each of the three options. They have an excellent reputation, as well as experience of dealing with ambulance services in other parts of the country.

Price Waterhouse Coopers are currently undertaking an intensive information-gathering exercise with all interested parties so that they gain a full understanding of the issues. They aim to present their initial findings to the Steering Group on 23 May. The Group will then recommend the next steps for action.

7 Our plans for involving staff and stakeholders

A plan has been drawn up by officials from the Ambulance Trusts, Primary Care Trusts and the Strategic Health Authority to engage with staff and stakeholders.

A two phase approach will be undertaken:

- Phase 1

Between now and late May, the NHS will inform important stakeholders – such as MPs, Overview and Scrutiny Committees and Patient Forums – about the national strategic direction for ambulances and the Ambulance Review. Ambulance Trusts will also actively communicate with staff and with Trade Unions during this time.

- Phase 2

If merger is recommended by the Steering Group, we would then begin a period of communicating with the public, patients, staff and other stakeholders to seek their views. This would be an intensive process lasting until September.

This would not be undertaken as part of formal 'consultation', given only structural options are being considered as part of the Review. This approach has been endorsed by our legal advisors Capsticks and the Department of Health.

However, should the scope of the Review widen to cover possible service changes, full and formal consultation would be done in accordance with Section 11.

8 Meeting demand and national standards of performance

As I have mentioned, the Ambulance Review will help us decide if we have the right organisational structures in place to meet the new national agenda.

The Review will also help ensure we can have the right structures in place to meet the huge demand from the public for ambulance services, which is growing at almost 10 percent each year.

And, whilst the performance of the three Ambulance Trusts is improving, not all national standards are currently being met. Therefore, the Review will help us decide if we have the most effective organisational structures in place to continue to enhance service performance for the benefit of patients.

9 Summary

Ambulance staff across Avon, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire are hard working, professional and play a vital role in delivering emergency NHS services.

There is a huge national drive to modernise ambulance services, and we have to be confident we have the most effective organisational structures in place to meet this agenda.

The Ambulance Review is looking at organisational options, not changes to services.

Independent consultants have been appointed to explore three clear options for the way forward.

The NHS has started to talk with key stakeholders about the Ambulance Review.

Proposals from the consultants are expected next month, and the Steering Group will then recommend the best way forward.

If they recommend that merger of the three Ambulance Trusts is the best way forward, we will actively engage with the public, patients, staff and other important stakeholders as part of an open communications approach.

Nothing is yet decided, and I am clear that we will only make changes if it is in the best interests of patients across Avon, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire.

Trevor Jones
Chief Executive

29 April 2005