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Dear Peter

Healthwatch Sunderland (HWS): Response to the Merger of South Tyneside Foundation Trust (STFT) and City Hospitals Sunderland Foundation Trust (CHSFT) as outlined in the presentation to the HWS Board (10th September 2018).

Introduction

Whilst viewing the reasons behind the merger proposals, the strategic case for going ahead seems quite compelling, and there seems to be support for the move from NHS improvement for the proposal to go ahead. There does however seem to be significant opposition from staff represented by Unison to the potential of using an independent company such as “Choice” to run the pharmacy, cleaning, maintenance, catering and porter services at STFT. There is also the outcome of the judicial review (Path to Excellence programme) to be considered, and whilst not directly linked to the merger, the outcome may impact on the attitude of the people of South Tyneside to the proposal to merge the two organisations.

Healthwatch Sunderland (HWS) seeks to determine the views of Sunderland people and influence the development of health and social care services for the positive benefit of the population. It has a large stakeholder membership and excellent networking relationships with Healthwatch South Tyneside and Healthwatch Durham alongside Healthwatch England.

HWS will oppose changes that do not represent improvements to services on behalf of the people of Sunderland, and will seek a fair and equitable representation for the Sunderland population on bodies involved in the merged organisation, as a means to ensure that there is no reduction in the level of influence that people of Sunderland have in the operation of CHSFT in its merged format.



The response from HWS is divided into the following sections:

1. Engagement and consultation with the merged organisation.
2. Due-diligence risks associated with merger.
3. Public Governance of the merged organisation.
4. Impact of South Tyneside opposition on the Merger Proposals.
5. Concluding response comments

Outline of response:

1. Engagement and Consultation with the Merged Organisation

HWS has appreciated the extent of engagement it has had on the merger proposals and is aware of the many benefits that exist including, improved IT, coordinated appointments, the aim to minimise movement of patients between the two trust hospitals and not least the administration cost savings that will be accrued and can be invested in improving services alongside potential recruitment of staff, and best practice benefits that will occur.

With membership of the stakeholder advisory groups for Path to Excellence (PtE), and the associated transport sub-group, HWS is pleased to be well represented to influence proceedings and seeks to continue with this level of involvement as service changes take place. The merged trust will have involvement to a degree in care in the community, self-care in the future, and potentially in on-line consultations for follow up outpatient appointments where appropriate to the patients' condition and capabilities.

HWS seeks continued engagement in these areas as the merger goes forward and requests that presentations in relation to the merger progress are given to the HWS board when changes are planned. The ratio of social deprivation in both trust communities is similar and the merger should not impact on or increase inequality risks in the population, especially the people who use public transport to and from the hospitals.

The ring fencing of some of the savings from the merger to finance a shuttle bus between the hospitals and would help guarantee at least no increase in inequality risk and the potentially associated DNA's would not happen. HWS requests that this suggestion is considered.

2. Due-diligence risks associated with merger.

Whilst it is appreciated that the two trusts have been working together for some time, there have been shocks during this period. For example, in relation to maternity services at South Tyneside, during the last HWS Board presentation by CHSFT, a statement was made that indicated that there was potential for South Tyneside to go into special measures without the involvement of CHSFT. With this in mind, HWS seeks assurance that there is no major due diligence issue in the financial, operational, quality, estates and clinical performance areas that could impact on patient services as the merger goes forward. If such an issue is uncovered HWS would wish to be informed of any risk mitigation action to enable it to communicate the issue to its stakeholders' and the



Sunderland public. It also seeks an assurance that there will be no reduction in services or merger inspired increases in waiting times in any area that will impact on the Sunderland population.

3. Public Governance of the merged organisation.

There is a major disparity in the number of governors on the board of STFT compared with CHSFT and with due consideration to the population of South Tyneside (150K) and Sunderland (285K), and a significant proportion of the South Tyneside using services at Queen Elizabeth hospital and the RVI in Newcastle.

With almost twice the population and with more services centred on CHS there is a logical, democratic and compelling argument that there should be more public governors from Sunderland than South Tyneside and the makeup of the Board of Governors should reflect this situation. HWS and Sunderland LINK prior to disbandment has been represented on the CHS board of public governors by volunteers with dual roles for 10 years and does not wish to lose this area of influence. With any reduction in the number of Sunderland public governors the likelihood of continuance is diminished.

With this in mind HWS seeks a role as a stakeholder governor and as outlined in the introduction HWS would be by far the best organisation to give an independent voice to the board and requests due consideration of this request. HWS would oppose the appointment of any “independent governor” from an organisation there was a suspicion of “conflict of interest”.

4. Impact of South Tyneside opposition on the Merger Proposals.

The South Tyneside protest group has been very vocal in its opposition to any merger or service change despite the parlous state of services in STFT before involvement of CHSFT and noted the “detailed” knowledge of merger procedures available to them in their last press statement. The Unison opposition as mentioned during the presentation to the extension of “Choice” is a concern to HWS since there could be an impact similar to that shown in York where services were disrupted by strike action. Whilst it is hoped that similar action will not occur in STFT this factor needs to be considered and dealt with.

With significant media involvement and associated pressure on decision makers by the actions of the STFT pressure group HWS seeks assurances that any changes that would impact negatively on the services to the people of Sunderland or in public representation apportionment on the board governors will not occur.



5. Concluding response comments

HWS along with LINK before has a long history extremely good relationships with CHSFT, with any issues being dealt with effectively during a period when major improvements have been achieved in the key service performance areas including: quality, operational, clinical, IT, financial. By responding to the merger presentation as shown above it will support any actions in the interests of Sunderland hospital service users and seeks to influence the decision makers to ensure that the merger does not in any way impair on going service improvement activity.

HWS wishes to ensure that the people of Sunderland are represented in a fair and equitable basis in the governance of the merged trust where there is a requirement for public representation. It will oppose any changes that take place due to the activities of the South Tyneside Pressure Group that are not in the interests of CHS service users.

Yours sincerely



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