

MEDIA RELEASE

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MP PRAISES COURAGE AS CAMPAIGNERS SCENT VICTORY OVER THAME HOSPITAL

News that the Buckinghamshire PCT has been sent back to the drawing board over its plans to reduce the medical cover at Thame Community Hospital has been greeted with delight by John Howell, the town's MP.

John has campaigned strongly against the PCT's plans to prevent the reduction of medical hours to four per week which would have reduced the service the hospital could offer the community.

Buckinghamshire Overview and Scrutiny Committee for Public Health Services ruled on Friday (11 September) that the change being proposed by the PCT was a "significant change in service." As a result the PCT should have undertaken public consultation before making the changes and should be sent back to undertake that consultation now.

John said:

"I would like to praise the courage of Cllr Mike Appleyard, the chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and his committee members for taking this decision. It is never easy to stand up to the big guns of the NHS but this was the right thing to do and they did it.

"The PCT too now needs to do the decent thing. Having rushed with unseemly haste into taking the contract for the hospital's medical services away from Thames GPs, it now needs to re-instate the GPs until the consultation has been undertaken and the results assessed.

"The PCT cannot hide behind the fact that it has already entered into a new contract for medical services at the hospital with The Practice Plc. The truth is that it should not have done so as this decision shows."

The MP also praised the local GPs who had spoken out on this issue and the people of Thame, 3,300 of whom had signed a petition calling on the PCT to keep local GPs providing medical care at the hospital.

He commented:

"Standing amongst the market stalls collecting signatures for the petition you could feel the enormous affection which the town has for its hospital and the appreciation people have for its GPs and the volunteers who look after the hospital's interests in the League of Friends. I am glad I was able to play my part but we have not yet finally won and the fight must go on."

The MP released extracts of his letter to the PCT supporting the hospital.

NOTES TO EDITORS

Extracts from letter to Buckinghamshire Overview and Scrutiny Committee dated 8 September 2009

BEGINS

“Delivery of service

The PCT has maintained that the changes proposed for Thame Community Hospital will make no change in service levels. I find that difficult to believe. We are talking of a cut in the number of medical hours per week to only four.

Whilst I am not a medical expert, the GPs in and around Thame are and have a knowledge of the needs of this particular hospital. It is their view that this number of hours is inadequate to provide an acceptable service. Given that decisions such as these should be clinically driven and locally led I am struggling to see how what is proposed under the new contract is not a diminution of service.

The fact that over 2,500 local people have signed the petition on this issue suggests that they feel that there would be a real diminution in service too.

Significant change in provision

I take the view that the reduction of medical hours to four is a significant change in provision and that there should have been consultation. In judging whether this is so, I am mindful of the extent of the impact the change will have on patients.

Whilst a level of eight medical hours (as the contract alternative) would not have been the best solution, it was considered workable; just. However, a reduction to half of this has an impact beyond the significantly reduced amount of medical attention which can be provided in the hospital itself to, for example, the ability of the NHS locally to react to patients' needs.

In a letter to me dated 31 July, the PCT talks of the need to consult this autumn on how it is going to approach the wider relationship between key partners in the NHS including the community hospitals and including local groups. Part of the purpose of that debate is to 'maximise the effective use of community hospitals'.

I question how such a consultation can now proceed given that the PCT has rushed into defining and restricting the role which one of the key partners can play in the broader picture.

In addition, if it was felt right to have a consultation in such general terms on the role community hospitals play it must surely have been right to have had a consultation on changes which affect the hospitals themselves and the contribution they can make.

You might want to look at what activities four hours of medical cover are likely to include and to test just how much of these activities are what a layman would understand as medical as opposed to the preparation of associated paperwork and similar activities.

It is much to be regretted that the PCT has chosen to colour the actions of Thame's GPs in challenging this contract as self-interest. Whatever may or may not have been the circumstances surrounding earlier attempts by the PCT to change provision in community hospitals, the effects of this contract must be judged on their own merits.

In addition, I think we would all like to understand the circumstances in which the number of beds at the hospital has been reduced, what the temporary time period on this is and to receive assurances that the hospital will be kept at its full strength.”