

Members of HOSC
Via Email

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22nd December 2010

Dear HOSC Member

As you will be aware, in February this year the proposed reconfiguration of women and children's services across Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells was referred to the Secretary of State for Health for a decision on the future of the plans. I am writing to inform you that the Secretary of State has agreed that the NHS plans should go ahead.

In July, the Secretary of State, supported by advice from the Independent Reconfiguration Panel, indicated the plans should proceed. He also asked for a report from the Strategic Health Authority, NHS South East Coast, so he could be fully assured the plans were compatible with the future needs of the local population and to consider the coalition government's new tests on reconfigurations. These tests related to GP support, robust engagement with local people, clinical evidence, and patient choice.

A copy of the report that was submitted by the SHA (on September 30th) can be found on their website at <http://www.southeastcoast.nhs.uk/Report-on-changes-to-womens-and-childrens-services-at-MTW.htm>.

However, to briefly summarise the report's conclusions, the SHA found the government's tests for clinical evidence, choice and engagement had been met, and the test on GP support was met with the caveat that most GPs in the Maidstone area had significant remaining concerns about some elements of the changes.

The Secretary of State sought a wide range of views on the proposed reconfiguration, including visiting the Maidstone services and meeting with West Kent GPs last month. He has now said he supports the SHA report in full, and that the work to centralise consultant led maternity services and inpatient paediatric services at the new Pembury hospital should continue.

Further to this, he has asked that the local NHS should consider the possible increases to the level of paediatric input to Maidstone Hospital's A&E. He has reinforced his desire that the NHS continue to engage with GPs as the future commissioners of services regarding the appropriate level of specialist input, whilst not prejudicing the planned centralisation of inpatient services. The decision will not affect any consideration of future services by GP commissioners, if in years to come they consider that some population needs are unmet by available services.

Naturally, the NHS believes this decision is the right one for local people. However, we understand there is still some concern about the plans in parts of West Kent. We want to ensure that we continue to address those concerns and communicate with local people about the changes so everyone can have confidence in the services.

The local NHS has been undertaking an intensive programme of engagement with local people and key stakeholders since July when the Secretary of State asked for his report. This process is essential to ensure we identify and address the concerns and suggestions that have been raised by local people, Kent County Council's Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee, maternity and patient groups. The co-design event in September helped to develop numerous solutions and improvements in the implementation of the plans that will help to address outstanding concerns. In October we wrote to you to set out the engagement that had taken place so far in this ongoing work.

We are committed to continuing this joint working with local people and stakeholders to ensure there is full confidence in the services that are put in place. The next session to explore and develop these solutions is on the 17th January 2011 at The Hop Farm, Paddock Wood, from 1pm to 4.30pm. We would welcome your input, please contact Ferne Haxby on ferne.haxby@wkpct.nhs.uk if you wish to be involved.

This has been a challenging and dynamic process and many parties have fought hard for what they consider to be the best outcome for the local population. I hope that now we have a decision from the Secretary of State for Health that all parties can move forward with the implementation of the excellent services that we all want to see for women and children.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Julia Ross', written in a cursive style.

Julia Ross
Director of Strategy and Communications
NHS West Kent