

To: Cabinet – 15 October 2007

By: Paul Carter, Leader of the County Council

Subject: Clostridium difficile outbreaks at Maidstone & Tunbridge Wells NHS Hospitals Trust – report by the Healthcare Commission

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary: This brief report comments on the findings of the report published on 11 October and proposes some urgent actions by the County Council to help restore public confidence in local health care services

FOR DECISION

1. Members of the County Council will have been shocked and concerned by the findings of the report, published on 11 October by the Healthcare Commission, of their detailed investigation into two outbreaks of *C. difficile* at the three hospitals managed by the Maidstone & Tunbridge Wells NHS Hospitals Trust. The outbreaks, the first of which was not identified at the time, occurred between October 2005 and September 2006 and in total over 500 people were infected.
2. Out of 345 patients who died during the relevant periods who had been infected with *C. difficile*, the Healthcare Commission estimate that there were approximately 90 deaths where *C. difficile* was definitely or probably the main cause of death. It needs to be noted that many of the 90 may well have died of other causes had they not acquired the *C. difficile* infection and some would have died of the infection even if they had had the best of care. Nevertheless, the situation indicates a serious and systematic catalogue of continuous failings in the operation and management of all 3 hospitals – Maidstone, Pembury and Kent and Sussex.
3. The report cites a number of factors as having contributed to the outbreak – for instance, old buildings in a poor state of repair; shortages of nursing staff contributing to pressured staff taking hygiene short-cuts; consistently high bed-occupancy rates limiting opportunities for “deep cleaning”; reliance on agency staff causing discontinuity of care. In a broader context, reorganisation issues, ‘distraction’ by national performance targets and PFI developments at Pembury have been variously cited. However, these sorts of issues are by no means unique to Maidstone & Tunbridge Wells NHS Hospitals Trust and the overall message from the Commission’s report is one of an enduring failure of focus and leadership on hygiene and infection control, with some broader concerns around governance and risk management at Board level.

4. Public and media reaction has been extensive, swift and critical. There is evidence that public confidence in local hospital services has been badly shaken by the Healthcare Commission's findings. It must be a paramount concern to this authority to help NHS colleagues restore that confidence. In calling for reassurances that improvements will be real, sustained and verifiable, it is recognised that quick fixes will not be adequate. Accordingly, we are offering the skills and human resources of the County Council to the Chief Executives of both the Primary Care Trust and Hospital Trust to assist on a continuing basis what will clearly be a difficult challenge.
5. Senior NHS colleagues have been invited to attend this morning's meeting and they will be asked to share their latest assessment of the current situation and their plans for moving forward. Of course, the work need to bring this wholly unsatisfactory state of affairs to a safe on positive conclusion will continue for many weeks and months ahead.

Recommendation

Cabinet are asked to:-

- (i) AGREE the Leader negotiating with NHS colleagues a package of measures through which the County Council can help provide public reassurance on long-term improvements;
- (ii) APPROVE a feasibility study for setting up a local "Health Watch" which provides the public an independent route for registering concerns about their local health services.