



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Cllr Yvonne Constance
Chairman
Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Oxfordshire County Council
County Hall
New Road
Oxford OX1 1ND

Friday, 3rd March 2017
Ref: RAC/eq/S

Dear Cllr Constance,

I am writing to you ahead of the special meeting of Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (HOSC) on 7th March at 2017. I understand that the HOSC will be scrutinising the Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group's (OCCG) first phase of consultation on the Sustainability and Transformation Plan.

As the Member of Parliament for Witney, and West Oxfordshire, my constituents will be directly affected by these proposals. As this meeting will no doubt form the HOSC's formal response to the consultation, which closes on 9th April 2017, I would like to make you fully aware of my concerns about the nature of this consultation.

I have been on record, along with other MPs, strongly opposing the split in the consultation. It is not possible to look at the proposed changes in isolation. Inevitably, changes proposed in the first phase will have a significant impact on decisions made in phase two. The example where this is most damning is the review of maternity and obstetric care.

As you will know, phase one looks at the downgrade in maternity services at the Horton General. I do agree with the CCG that this matter needs to be resolved and a long term solution found; a temporary closure of obstetrics has been in place for a number of months, leading to uncertainty for doctors and expectant mothers alike.

The first phase looks to make the downgrade to a midwife-led unit (MLU) at the Horton permanent, as the hospital is not able to recruit the required staff to make a full obstetric service safe. In the consultation document, future examples are given which include a proposal to close the existing MLU in Chipping Norton. This is because if the downgrade of the Horton was made permanent, there would be two MLUs in the north of Oxfordshire, which OCCG believes is unnecessary and unsustainable. It goes without saying that I am wholly opposed to the closure of the MLU at Chipping Norton, in any event.

However, the question of the future of maternity services in Chipping Norton is matter for phase two, despite being specifically outlined in the current part of the consultation. This has resulted in great confusion, concern and uncertainty amongst my constituents. Only looking at half of the issue now is irresponsible; the first part of the proposals inevitably begs the question of the impact on wider maternity services in Oxfordshire.



This leads to my second major concern about the splitting of the proposals. As you know, the first phase is taking place now until 9th April 2017. I have already made clear my concerns about this taking place during purdah, to which OCCG responded by extending the consultation period by one week. However, I am further concerned about when the second phase will take place.

There is currently no clear timeline in place as to when this second phase would begin. Indeed, due to the large amount of services and facilities to be considered, OCCG has made clear at the public meetings I have attended that the work for phase two is far from being completed.

I am sympathetic to OCCG that this is a large undertaking. However, surely this alone is a strong argument for a delay in consultation until this necessary preparation is complete. At present, phase two looks likely to start in the summer or autumn of this year, which of course may be subject to delay. I am sure that the HOSC will agree with me that this is an unacceptable length of time for concerned mothers in Chipping Norton to be waiting to know whether the MLU in Chipping Norton will remain open.

I would also like the HOSC to consider the timings of the public meetings being held by OCCG, where they are inviting residents to respond to the consultation. I have been very vocally concerned that the public consultation meeting held on 2nd March 2017 in Chipping Norton took place in the afternoon, at a time when many residents, especially young mothers, were not able to attend. This neither enables residents to understand these proposals nor OCCG to hear and respond to residents' concerns. Although the public is able to respond to the consultation online, the importance of a public face-to-face meeting cannot be overestimated when there is such emotionally charged subject matter. I offered to host a further public meeting myself at a time which worked for my constituents. I am pleased that OCCG have now agreed to hold a further evening public consultation meeting on Thursday, 9th March 2017.

The above example further shows why I would like to impress upon the HOSC that there has been a major lack of consideration for how these proposals will be interpreted and responded to by the public, both in content and how these are being communicated to residents. It does not offer realistic options to my constituents, focusing on one proposal and not outlining other options in detail. This process is a further example of my concerns about OCCG's relationship with the public and other key stakeholders, which were first raised with regard to the handling of the proposed closure of Deer Park Medical Centre in Witney.

Regarding the proposals included in the consultation, my constituents are particularly concerned about the travel times between the Horton and the John Radcliffe. I would strongly query the travel times provided in the consultation, as these seem extremely optimistic. The Pre-Consultation Business Case states that the "maximum time for all the population to reach a suitable hospital by blue light is 31 minutes". I am strongly inclined to question this statement; particularly in winter, blue light times from Chipping Norton and the surrounding villages to the Horton or the John Radcliffe are likely to easily surpass this time.



The north of my constituency has always been a difficult area for ambulances to access, due to its geography and infrastructure; I feel the amount of time it would take for an ambulance to travel to Chipping Norton to collect a patient has not been fully considered. As ambulances are not currently regularly meeting response time targets in this area, this would significantly lengthen the transfer time, which is likely to cause undue stress to the patient. If the Horton was to be permanently downgraded to an MLU, and the MLU at Chipping Norton was closed, this would leave many of my constituents in the nightmare scenario of having to travel from Chipping Norton and the surrounding villages to the Horton, only to then be transferred to the John Radcliffe should their delivery require a consultant.

It is worth noting here, that I do not feel it has been made clear to the public through the consultation what types of deliveries would be required to be transferred. For example, pain relief options are significantly different between MLU's and consultant-delivered units; mothers requiring an epidural would have to deliver at the John Radcliffe, and so many would have to be transferred during labour to receive this treatment. I will further point out that there has not been a clear statement from OCCG whether a static ambulance for blue-light transfers would remain at the Horton, should it permanently become an MLU. I will of course be going into these matters in greater detail in my formal response to the consultation, and I would urge the HOSC to consider these specific points in your own response.

I appreciate the HOSC calling this special meeting and I would be grateful if the Committee takes on board my concerns. When combined with the contributions from my parliamentary colleagues, it is clear that some action should be taken to rectify these flaws as soon as possible. This is an unprecedented review into the future of healthcare in Oxfordshire and should be carried out with the upmost diligence, consideration and engagement.

Thank you for allowing me to voice my concerns to the committee and to highlight the concerns of West Oxfordshire constituents. I confirm that you are welcome to publish this submission alongside others and I would be grateful if this is circulated to all members of your meeting on 7th March.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Robert Courts".

Robert Courts MP