

Another nail in the Future Fit coffin

Tuesday night was a victory for the NHS, and an important victory at that.

Around 80 members of the public went to an 'Extraordinary Joint CCG Board Meeting' where health bosses were planning to sign off the blueprint for closing an A&E. The meeting, at Shrewsbury Town Football Club, was packed. People stood at the back of the room because there weren't enough chairs.

And what happened? The Board of Shropshire CCG voted **against** its Chair and Accountable Officer, and rejected the document before them, the 'Strategic Outline Case' that would have closed an A&E, downgraded a hospital, and shifted a lot of hospital activity out into the community, for GPs or the Community Trust to pick up – *without* providing the money and staff to do the extra work.

To have a CCG Board overturn its own Chair and Accountable Officer and reject a cuts and closure plan that has been the accepted wisdom for 2½ years – that's unprecedented. That just doesn't happen. This is a massive blow to the appalling 'Future Fit' project.

Congratulations are due to the Board members for taking their brave and principled decision. Huge credit goes too to the Shropshire Local Medical Committee – the body representing local GPs. They met with Accountable Officer David Evans yesterday afternoon, probably with some vigorous arm twisting going on. Their decision to stand firm and reject the Strategic Outline Case for a *second* time was tremendous, and the report of this yesterday had a powerful impact on the meeting.

However, behind these things lies an influential campaign! Today, every activist who has played a part in Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin Defend Our NHS should be very, very proud. This is a victory for the NHS, but it's been won by us.

We worked hard for Tuesday's meeting. 80 people there, from Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin and Powys. Placards, banners, a presence. This must have been one of the factors that gave Board members the confidence to vote the right way. Andy from Shropshire and Telford Trades Council argued that we need both A&Es and hospitals, and talked about the lack of vision from NHS leaders. A Councillor from Newtown talked about the consequences for the people of mid-Wales if Shrewsbury A&E closes, issuing a stark warning 'There will be deaths'. Pat from Wellington said 'The vast majority of people you're working for are *against* having one of their A&Es taken away. We deserve a Plan B'. John, from Oswestry, said 'This is nothing more than a cost cutting exercise'. He added, to laughter, 'You should be open and transparent with the public. Please tell us when that will be commencing'. A final contribution from Gill systematically took on the false arguments being used to justify signing off the plans.

The meeting slid into chaos at one point. Time allocated for public questions was cut short, much of the public's time was allocated to the Accountable Officer, and many of us there felt that the Chair had been picking and choosing who he would allow to speak. There was a high level of anger when he tried to close down debate and move to a vote – with heckling, a slow handclap, and one brave woman, Tess, standing up and challenging hard amidst rising chaos. She talked about her son being seriously injured, and the implications for children if an A&E is lost. In a very moving moment, other people appeared silently from the audience, almost like ghosts, to place baby shoes on the table in front of Board members. It would have cost nothing to allow another five minutes of public discussion. The attempt to silence people was unnecessary and confrontational.

When it came to a vote, a majority of Board members from Shropshire CCG rejected the 'letter of support' – and therefore rejected the Strategic Outline Case. Sadly, most members of Telford and Wrekin CCG voted to accept the plans. For now, Future Fit cannot go forward because it needed the support of both CCGs to be progressed. That is very, very important indeed. It's no wonder the meeting ended with people grinning their heads off and hugging one another as we went home.

We don't know what's going to happen now. From a regular meeting of Shropshire CCG this morning, it appears they don't know what's going to happen either! There's a Future Fit 'Programme Board' tomorrow (Thursday) where NHS bosses will meet in secret to begin to plan their next steps. It is clear that we have to remain vigilant. The fundamental problem, of course, remains. There is simply not enough funding to provide a decent NHS service in Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin.

In a sensible world, Future Fit would long since be dead and buried. The public are very clear. We have two A&Es, Shrewsbury and Telford, because we need them. We have two *hospitals*, Shrewsbury and Telford, because we need them. It is essential that both of them stay. GPs are equally clear. They are stretched to the limit now. It is incomprehensible that they can be expected to pick up large amounts of extra work without the funding and staff to do it. This is an unwanted project, built around completely flawed assumptions, that will lead to misery – and ultimately to unnecessary deaths – if it proceeds. It's time to call a halt.

There is always an alternative to NHS cuts. At today's CCG meeting we quite rightly offered to support NHS leaders, if they will commit to keeping two A&Es, and if they will work through 'bottom up' change, with the agreement of GPs, and with adequate funding for any work transferred to the community. We've also called for SaTH, the hospital trust, to solve its problems by working collaboratively with other organisations – just as hospitals the length and breadth of the country are doing already. There's a need now for two things to happen: for NHS leaders to have the courage and vision to fight for the NHS, and for local politicians – MPs and councillors – to acknowledge that the NHS is being starved of core funds and campaign hard for something better.

One final thing. We're not going away. One of our members posted a quick Facebook report on yesterday's meeting, in the car on the way home. In less than 24 hours, that has reached 25,667 people. Over 21,000 of those people are local. We care about our NHS, and we won't allow it to be destroyed.

Gill George, Chair

Julia Evans, Secretary

Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin Defend Our NHS