

North Devon's campaign group, Save Our Hospital Services (SOHS) celebrates 70 years of Our NHS with matron.

SOHS held their first 70th Birthday event at Petroc College on June 22nd with an NHS Question Time. On the panel were CEO Suzanne Tracey and Darryn Allcorn, Director of Nursing, from the Northern Devon Healthcare Trust, the Chief Operating Officer for Northern, Eastern and Western Devon CCG and local MP, Peter Heaton-Jones. The debate was attended by about 60 members of the public and provided an opportunity for them to express widely held concerns about reduced access to health services in North Devon. This included the loss of experienced staff and failure to fill medical staff vacancies at the most isolated general hospital in England. Campaigners and members of the public heard statements and commitments from managers and political assurances from Peter Heaton-Jones MP, which will be repeated back to them at every opportunity.

On Thursday 5th July, the NHS's 70th Birthday, North Devon played its part in thanking this amazing institution for all it has done, when SOHS took two enormous banners up to the hospital together with three appropriately decorated cakes, with messages of thanks to staff (see pics). The Director of Nursing accompanied by nursing staff, representatives who had drawn lots to represent the 'front door' staff of the hospital – MAU, Emergency Department and OPD, came out to see the banners of thanks and to receive the cakes. This event also reflected a welcome coming together of the campaigners and hospital staff, who had previously been discouraged by their managers from any association with the campaign.

A positive public response was received when SOHS campaigners marched with a samba band and 9 foot tall 'Matron' through Barnstaple on Saturday 7th July, a public rally to celebrate the NHS 70th birthday. In speeches made at the NHS Birthday rally we heard that there are 100,000 NHS vacancies across the country and that the government is relying on such vacancies to keep costs down! Tony O'Sullivan, the Paediatrician who successfully led the campaign to keep open Lewisham A&E Department, told us that 35% of NHS contracts now go to private companies. A thirteen year old, reflecting on the vast difference between her own life and that of another veteran NHS campaigner, urged us to be very careful to protect and maintain our NHS to ensure that the services he had good reason to value will still be available for her generation. An NDDH consultant paid tribute to advances made over the last 70 years but he also said NHS holds up a mirror to society and politicians. We should, he told us, be celebrating not only the staff and volunteers but also the campaigners. The NHS belongs to all of us and it must remain at the centre of the argument on how we debate the values in our society.

Campaigners formed the SOHS Devon campaign in 2016 and can claim wide public support with 5000 residents attending their rally in Barnstaple on October 2016, highlighting the value and also the risk to Emergency Services, Consultant led Maternity Service, Paediatrics and Stroke services in Northern Devon. STP proposals indicated a loss of these services and by moving them to a centre of excellence 55 miles away. The successful campaign for acute services to remain in North Devon is now focusing on accessible services at community hospitals and the quality of the substituted system of 'Care Closer to Home'. Recent challenges against a proposed ICS, without public involvement and NEW Devon failure even to respond to the Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Committee now provide a new focus.

SOHS can now report that the Devon CCGs have invited the campaign to a joint meeting in recognition of the campaign's role in calling for better funding.

In recognition of the importance of sharing campaign methods and support, SOHS North Devon has affiliated to Health Campaigns Together and engages in the national meetings and demonstrations.