

Basic summary of briefing for a press release

Testing Times for South East London Pathology Network

In 2016 NHS Improvement instructed Sustainability and Transformation Partnerships (STPs) to build into their plans the Carter strategy for 29 Pathology Networks to cover England. At that time SE London Pathology services were contracted to Viapath, a private partnership of Kings College Hospital (KCH) and Guy's & St. Thomas's (GSTT) Foundation Trusts and **Serco**, and additionally the Lewisham and Greenwich Trust (LGT). Pathology services cover both hospital based care and primary/community health services, the latter is designated the Direct Access Pathology Service. Generally, the direct access service for the boroughs of Greenwich, Lewisham and Bexley was commissioned from LGT and Viapath provided the service for the other three SEL boroughs.

The Viapath contract was due to terminate on 31 August 2020, therefore OHSEL (the SEL STP) had to begin the process of re-tendering the contract, planning to award the contract by August 2019. The contract is valued at £2.25bn over a 15-year term.

Three companies, all **private**, were shortlisted: Viapath, Integrated Pathology Partnerships (IPP), a UK subsidiary of Synlab Group, and Health Service Laboratory (HSL).

There were obvious **conflicts of interest**:

1. Lord Carter, author of the network strategy, is paid chair of HSL and is also on the board of NHSI
2. KCH and GSTT FTs, who are represented on the OHSEL Pathology Programme Board and whose trust Boards chose the preferred bidder were partners with Serco in Viapath.

Throughout the process there has been no commitment to public consultation and FOI requests went unanswered on the grounds of commercial sensitivity.

Synlab(IPP) was eventually chosen as Preferred Bidder in early 2020, many months behind programme.

Over the following months it slowly emerged that **Serco** had parted (at what cost?) from Viapath and KCH and GSTT had formed a new joint venture with Synlab. It also became clear that the Final Business Case would not be viable unless it included the Direct Access Service to all six SEL boroughs for the financial year 2012/22. The SEL CCG Board agreed at its Sept. 2020 meeting to commission all SEL Direct Access Pathology from the new joint venture and in doing so side stepped the standard annual commissioning process and reneged on a commitment made to a Lewisham Council committee in Oct. 2019.

Hiding behind the cloak of commercial confidentiality and the COVID pandemic, it would seem that publicly accountable bodies have failed to carry out due diligence with respect to conflicts of interest, have manipulated contract and commissioning processes and have failed to disclose full expenditure of public funds.

LGT, having taken a principled decision to be part of an NHS delivered service, is pursuing a network partnership with other NHS providers and is reported to be making good progress in this regard.

Meanwhile, the future of the SEL Pathology Network is becoming uncertain as COVID testing is carried out by the Lighthouse laboratories and there are reports of plans to introduce Lighthouse networks across the country.

Has the SEL Pathology project been a horrendous waste of public resources all to the detriment of health services and democratic processes in SE London?