

Newton Poppleford Annual Parish Meeting – April 2018

Report of Devon County Councillor - Claire Wright

I was delighted to be re-elected to Devon County Council and return to West Hill as your county councillor again last May.

NHS

During my tenure on Devon County Council (from 2013) in addition to my daily casework, I have focused largely on two areas. These are the NHS and Environmental issues.

This report seeks to record the work I have done as a member of Devon County Council's Health and Adult Care Scrutiny Committee.

As a member of Devon County Council's Health and Adult Scrutiny Committee since first elected, I have sought to hold the NHS to account in relation to the many cuts that continue to be made because budgets are expected to be in the red by around £500m by 2020. Devon is one of three most financially challenged health areas in the country.

In around 2010, the Coalition government reduced the annual growth funding rate from around six per cent a year to around one per cent. This along with a whole host of other pressures, including a growing older population with complex health needs, has contributed to the financial difficulties.

I have asked many questions, proposed countless resolutions at the Health and Adult Care Scrutiny Committee, asked for investigations, further information, organised public demonstrations, written letters, supported petitions and sat on working groups, in an effort to fight community hospital bed closures at Ottery St Mary, Honiton, Axminster, Seaton, Crediton, Whipton and Okehampton.

Sadly, I was unsuccessful and am now focusing my efforts on retaining the hospital buildings by not allowing them to be sold off by NHS Property Services, which took acquired 12 local community hospital buildings last year.

Half of community beds in northern Devon are now shut, and maternity units at Honiton, and Okehampton Hospitals remain temporarily closed, with a threat of permanent closure.

The Royal Devon & Exeter Hospital has struggled more than any other hospital in Devon with delayed discharges and community hospital bed closures surely cannot have not helped matters. There is now a new discharge system in place and it is resulting in more people being sent home earlier. I have asked for more information about this.

Dr Mike Slot – A GP from Sidmouth - attended the January Health and Adult Care Scrutiny Committee meeting and expressed concern about the care at home system which has replaced the lost community hospital beds. He said that there wasn't enough carers available to look after people in their own homes.

As a result of his speech I proposed a spotlight review, which is set to take place at the end of May, following a survey of local GPs.

My work to retain NHS services is not always been easy. My proposals have often been voted down by Conservatives who sit on the committee. It can also be incredibly difficult to extract information from NHS officers and I am frequently met with a blank wall.

Even asking for the winter pressures data (how local hospitals are coping with the winter) earlier this year was refused and I resorted to a Freedom of Information request. This was also blocked on the basis that the data was “not validated.”

Instead, I have been referred to incomprehensible vast spreadsheets of national data. Not acceptable in my view for a health scrutiny councillor.

There is no news yet on the plans of NHS Property Services, a private company set up under the 2012 Health and Social Care Act, which owns 12 local community hospitals. It is charging rents of over £3m a year for 12 community hospitals in Eastern Devon. But so far NHS England is paying.

I can only assume that at some point NHS England will no longer be prepared to pay the rather extortionate rents (which is surely robbing Peter to pay Paul) and that is when the NEW Devon Clinical Commissioning Group may be tempted to declare them surplus to requirements, in order that they can be sold off.

In November last year, the county council solicitor, Jan Shadbolt, reminded the Health and Adult Care Scrutiny Committee of its responsibilities at my request, after the Conservatives voted down my proposal to refer the Seaton, Okehampton, Whipton and Honiton hospital bed closures to the Secretary of State for Health, last July.

Mrs Shadbolt reminded the committee of the Mid Staffordshire Public Inquiry following tragic deaths at Mid Staffordshire NHS Trust. The local health scrutiny committee there was held to account by Sir Robert Francis QC, who oversaw the subsequent inquiry.

It was the first time non-executive members of a local authority were held to account over the failure of local health services. Councillors were deemed to have failed in their duty to act in the public interest.

Health scrutiny powers were strengthened, as a result.

The county solicitor told the committee that the Health and Adult Care Scrutiny Committee has a “very powerful role to play within the community” and that it is “unique in scrutiny committees” on that basis.

She said that the primary reason for the committee’s existence is to take up, and act on, issues of public concern.

The latest threat to our NHS is a scheme from Jeremy Hunt, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. The system, which is being brought into Devon at the moment, was previously known as an Accountable Care System.

We are told that it is just another step in the direction of joining health and social care... yet it has prompted a major legal challenge nationally, which Sir Stephen Hawking was involved with before he died.

One of the main problems with the ICS is funding. We are told by the NHS that East Devon is over funded so may see deeper cuts under the new funding arrangements of the new

Integrated Care System. There are also fears of more privatisation and the possibility that the NHS could become no longer free at the point of use because social care is means tested and bringing both services together may threaten this.

Myself and other councillors, mainly my Independent colleague, Martin Shaw, pushed for this item to be properly scrutinised. It was brought before the Health and Adult Care Committee last month and I proposed a series of recommendations which sought to clarify and provide a range of assurances before any implementation could take place.

My proposal was supported by the majority of the committee but unfortunately was overturned by Devon County Council's cabinet on 11 April.

I keep my blog updated with news on the NHS and other areas I am working so please do feel free to take a look at www.claire-wright.org