

THE THREAT TO ALDEBURGH HOSPITAL

AN UPDATE FROM JOHN GUMMER

Right up to the Election, we were promised that there would be improved facilities at Aldeburgh. There was no question of reducing the number of NHS beds or of seeking private sponsorship of some of the present service. Now, in order to meet impossible financial targets, the Primary Care Trust is proposing to reduce the NHS provision from 36 beds to something around 20 and to close the Minor Injuries Unit. How, when, or why, is far from clear. It seems a panic proposal resulting from the Government's insistence that the PCT balance its books within the year at whatever cost to patient services.

Immediately these proposals were mooted, I had discussions with the PCT and the Strategic Health Authority. I wrote a preliminary letter to Patricia Hewitt, the Health Secretary and asked for a meeting. She wanted me, instead, to join in with my colleagues who were protesting on behalf of West Suffolk provision. I believed that the problems of Aldeburgh and Felixstowe are different and would be submerged by the very real concerns in the West of the county, so I pressed for a separate discussion. As a result Mrs Hewitt and I spoke for nearly half an hour by telephone and she accepted that, despite her extensive briefing, she was not aware of the serious issues stemming from the promises made to me and to my constituents. As she will be the final arbiter, after the consultation process is complete, she could not, of course, comment on the issues involved but she is now absolutely clear about the strength of feeling and our determination to fight any proposals that diminish Aldeburgh's services.

After the League of Friends met the Chief Executive of the PCT on Wednesday July 27th, I had a full report from the Vice President, Mrs Jean Flick and then wrote the confirmatory letter to Patricia Hewitt which I reproduce on the other side of this note. I am, sadly, unable to be at the public meeting because I shall be abroad for a few days on holiday but Mrs Flick has promised a full run-down of the outcome on my return. I shall be happy to continue to work with you all to defend the NHS services provided in the Aldeburgh Hospital which is an essential part of medical provision in the town and surrounding area.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

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28th July 2005

Dear Patricia,

Thank you for allowing me to explain the seriousness of the position of the NHS in Suffolk Coastal. It was generous of you to give me so much time so that you could understand these serious concerns. The first issue is financial. The Primary Care Trust has been under funded, yet has still been required to provide a full service to a population which is disproportionately old and frail. As a result the PCT is in debt and is running a deficit. On Government orders, the Strategic Health Authority has insisted that the situation be brought into balance before the end of the financial year. That is an impossible task without selling off capital assets and using the receipts to cover running costs. In other words, we are forced to turn capital into revenue - a very questionable exercise economically. It would mean that, at a time when the Government claims to have increased national funding dramatically, the service provided in East Suffolk would be worse than it has been for many years. The proposed closure of Felixstowe Bartlet hospital, the restriction of NHS beds in Aldeburgh, the cuts in services in Ipswich Hospital, and the reduction of NHS dental services are all deeply damaging.

It is made worse by the total lack of trust in the NHS management. Within the last year, I have in effect chaired two meetings at which I and my constituents have been promised publicly two wholly different plans but in both, the NHS provision in Aldeburgh and Felixstowe was to be extended. Now, after the election, I personally have been betrayed because I was given absolute assurances on the last plans and I, therefore, told my constituents they could rely on the word of the PCT. Those promises, given in April have now been totally disowned. Aldeburgh is to lose NHS beds instead of gaining services and one of Felixstowe's hospitals is to close instead of being refurbished.

In 30 years, I can think of no comparable circumstance. I must therefore ask you to ensure that the solemn undertakings given by the PCT to me and to my constituents be carried out in their entirety. If we cannot trust the word of those who are in charge of our public services, the whole basis of trust in our national institutions is undermined.

Yours ever,
John Gummer

The Secretary of State for Health

- Representing the Suffolk Coastal Constituency in Parliament -
Aldeburgh, Felixstowe, Halesworth, Leiston, Saxmundham, Southwold, Woodbridge and surrounding villages.
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