

NHS Scrutiny - Amalgamation of the South Bucks and Stoke Mandeville Hospital Trusts

Introduction

This short paper is intended to remind members of the background to local authority scrutiny of the NHS. It refers particularly to a proposal to merge the two hospital trusts.

Members will recall that the NHS Bill gives local authorities the power to scrutinise the NHS at the local level. This is part of the process of modernising the system of patient and public involvement in the NHS. The Government clearly sees this as an extension of the powers that local authorities already have to scrutinise the local health economy. For example, the work already undertaken by the Partnership Select Committee is very much in line with the role that the Government sees for local authorities. In addition it will strengthen local government as a strategic leader in the community.

Briefly, the scrutiny process will contain the following:

- ✧ The ability for local authorities to call in and examine any decision, policy change etc. made by any of the NHS bodies in its area
- ✧ A power to refer to the Secretary of State any proposal that is considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee not to be in the public interest or where the committee considers that adequate public consultation has not been carried out
- ✧ NHS bodies would be expected to take account of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's view and would have to explain why they had chosen to set their opinion aside
- ✧ Chief Executives of NHS bodies or any other NHS staff as appropriate could be expected to attend Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings
- ✧ Committee members will be able to visit premises and talk to patients, the public and staff

Developing the scrutiny role

The powers referred to above have yet to be vested in local authorities. Originally it was expected that this would happen from April next year but there may be some slippage in this timetable. However, it is important that the Committee begins to develop mechanisms with the NHS whereby the LA is involved in all major changes and policy decisions. Furthermore, some consideration will need to be given to the skills and expertise needed to support the scrutiny role. It also needs to be recognised that health organisations may not be familiar with the democratic processes and some bridge building will be an essential part of a partnership approach.

The local health authority is also keen to begin developing the scrutiny process. Hence the opportunity is being taken to enable both the Committee

and the health authority to begin to develop the process by using an important and very live issue as a pilot.

The issue to be considered

The NHS locally is considering a proposal that the South Bucks and Stoke Mandeville Hospital Trusts should be amalgamated. It is anticipated that the proposal will go to the Under Secretary of State in the near future. Formal public consultation cannot begin until that time. However the proposal provides an excellent opportunity for the Committee to begin to develop an understanding of NHS scrutiny. It will also enable the NHS to understand more about the process and how it can assist the development and improvement of the service.

Therefore senior staff from the local health service are attending this meeting to explain the thinking behind the proposal and how the wider consultation process is likely to develop. The consultation is likely to be in two stages. The first stage will be to consult on the proposal. Then, if the amalgamation is to go ahead, there would be consultation on the shape that the amalgamated trusts should take. This can be seen as providing a good learning opportunity for both the Committee and the NHS.

The objectives

The objectives of the meeting then are:

- To clarify the purpose of the amalgamation
- To establish what the advantages are seen to be (management, financial, clinical etc.)
- To test the thinking behind the proposal that suggests that they are likely to achieve their objectives
- To begin to explore the consequences of these changes for the people of Bucks

Later the exercise should enable the Committee:

- To seek to use the pilot as a guide towards future scrutiny of the Health Service
- To provide Health with the results of the enquiry and any recommendations and conclusions

To achieve this, committee members views will be vital and also the views of their constituents. However the work must concentrate specifically on the issue of the amalgamation and the purpose of scrutiny of this proposal. The committee must also bear in mind that this is a pilot exercise, that local authorities have not yet formally taken over the scrutiny role and that the health authority is seeking the Committee's assistance with the consultation process.