

HEALTHY HALTON POLICY AND PERFORMANCE BOARD

At a meeting of the Healthy Halton Policy and Performance Board held on Thursday, 3 September 2009 at Council Chamber, Runcorn Town Hall

Present: Councillors E. Cargill (Chairman), J. Lowe (Vice-Chairman), Austin, Gilligan, Higginson, Horabin, Lloyd Jones, Philbin and Wallace

Apologies for Absence: Councillor E. Ratcliffe and Swift

Absence declared on Council business: None

Officers present: E. Bragger, L. Derbyshire, D. Hall, A. Villiers and A. Williamson

Also in attendance: Catherine Beardshaw and Mr Massey – Warrington and Halton Hospitals NHS Trust

ITEMS DEALT WITH UNDER DUTIES EXERCISABLE BY THE BOARD

HEA13 PROPOSED BUS CHARGES FOR NORTH CHESHIRE HOSPITAL TRUST

Action

The Board received a verbal presentation from Catherine Beardshaw, Chief Executive of Warrington and Halton Hospitals NHS Trust and Mr A Massey regarding the proposed charges to the shuttle bus service between Warrington Hospital and Halton General Hospital.

The Board was advised by Ms Beardshaw that the free hospital shuttle bus service for patients and staff had been trialled for a period of nine months and as a result in the increase in demand a new larger bus had been leased and had been in operation for a year. However, due to an increase in pressure on the service, at peak periods, staff had experienced difficulties in gaining access to the bus between the two sites.

The Board was further advised that as part of the Trust's financial plan, consideration had been given to charging certain groups of people for this service. Patients and staff, children under 16 years of age or any one else with a free bus pass would continue to receive a free service, but all other categories of people would be asked to

pay £2 per single journey. In addition, it was reported that the Trust had kept their promise made in 2006 in providing a free service between the two sites to staff and patients.

In response to the proposal to charge visitors to use the hospital shuttle bus between Warrington and Halton Hospitals, Members of the Board raised the following questions/comments:-

- Members raised concern that a decision to charge visitors on the hospital shuttle bus had been made by the Trust without any consultation with them and clarity was sought on who had been consulted;

In response, it was reported that the Trust were not obliged to consult on issues outside the original promise i.e. that patients and staff would receive the service free, and it was merely a new approach. In addition it was suggested that a year ago, during a one to one informal meeting with the Chief Executive of Halton Borough Council the pressures on the service had been raised.

Members in reply indicated that the Chief Executive had stated that charges had not been raised or discussed at the informal meeting, merely that it had been mentioned that the bus service was experiencing capacity pressures.

- It was emphasised that there had been an understanding that visitors would travel free on the bus and to date this had been the case. It was also emphasised that Elected Members should have been consulted on this matter as they only found out via a press article. It was also highlighted that the bus was mainly for people who did not have access to private transport and that there was no public transport available between the two sites.
- It was reported that information on the Trust's website was misleading as it stated that there was a free bus for people visiting Warrington and Halton hospitals, and the new larger bus had been launched last year with full wheel chair and disabled access;
- Clarity was sought on when the decision had been taken as it was reported that a representative had attended the Board in March to give an update on the Trust and there had been no indication that

charges would be established on the bus service;

In response it was reported that discussions had taken place in May/June and a decision taken in June/July 2009. The information on the website related to the previous year and had not been updated. However, assurance was given that this would be completed next week.

- In relation to the information on the website being misleading in that there was an assumption that visitors and patients would travel free on the bus, and that they had travelled free for three years and the lack of any consultation with Halton Borough Council or its Members – Members asked whether the Trust felt that the process had been transparent?

In response, it was reported that the demand on the service had significantly increased and that the Trust had kept their promise of a free service for patients and staff. It was highlighted that the Trust were not a transport organisation and did not have sufficient funds to keep up with the increased volume of activity and demands on the service. It was also suggested that people were using the service for personal shopping. It was also reported that the £2 per single journey would contribute towards the running costs of the service and visitors on shopping trips were displacing staff and patients.

In reply, it was highlighted that there was no other public transport service operating between the two sites and it was suggested that it was unlikely that people were using it to shop because of the distance from the sites to the town centre, but that it was visitors transporting patient's laundry to and from the hospital.

- Clarity was sought on whether the Trust consulted with the Governing Body when making a decision to charge for visitors on the bus service;

In response it was reported that the Trust had authorisation to make such decisions without consulting the Governing Body. However, the Governing Body received regular information to keep them up to date on such matters. In addition, it was highlighted that there was only a problem with the service during the day at peak times and

that the Trust had to consider how to fund the increase in the cost of the service whilst keeping the promise that it would be free to patients and staff.

- It was emphasised that visitors were an important part of a patient's recovery and that the area the bus serviced was a deprived area and the charge would result in people not being able to visit due to the cost. Clarity was sought on whether any other options had been considered i.e. limiting the service to one visitor per patient and the patient would decide which visitor received the free service;

In response it was reported that the bus driver would not be able to undertake the task of who was eligible to use the bus free of charge. It was also reported that the Trust only received funding to service the population in health care services not transport.

- Members of the Board emphasised that the population of Halton would feel that the Trust had broken a promise as visitors had always travelled on the bus free of charge. They also indicated that they were unhappy with the decision of charging for visitors, particularly as they had not been consulted on the proposal and highlighted that they were not in any way responsible for these charges;

In reply, it was reported that there had been no explicit agreement that visitors would use the service free of charge and that the free transport was for patients and staff and the Trust had not reneged on any agreements. It was also reported that the Trust were happy to support any action that Members wished to take to say that it had been a decision made by the Trust alone and Members had not been part of the consultation process.

- It was emphasised that the service was mainly used by people on low wages and that £2 per single visit was excessive, especially when the service had been free previously. It was also highlighted that the charge would seriously affect people on benefits who had to visit every day as transport costs would be at least £24 per week;

In reply, it was reported that the Trust had been instrumental in moving acute care back to Halton Hospital resulting in fewer people having to travel to

Warrington Hospital. It was also reported that a discount scheme would be available to relatives who had to visit patients on a regular basis. Details of the discount scheme would be circulated to officers and attached to the minutes for information.

- Clarity was sought on the increase in car parking charges and whether the additional money could be used to subsidise the shuttle bus service;

In reply it was reported that all NHS Trusts in England were facing the pressure of making efficiency savings and finding contributions to increasing challenges as a public sector. The funding from the additional car parking charges would be used to invest in security and maintenance of the car parks, and there would not be enough to subsidise the shuttle service.

- It was noted that Whiston Hospital operated a free bus service and the car park was only £1.50 p;
- Clarity was sought on what other options had been considered before a decision to charge for visitors on the service had been determined. Members also raised concern that public perception for three years was that the service was free to patients, staff and visitors. It was acknowledged that this issue would be raised at Councillors surgeries and they had not been part of the consultation process and did not agree with the decision to charge for visitors;

In reply it was reported that a huge range of options had been explored one of which was restricting clinical services. However, it was highlighted that the Trust were open to suggestions. In addition, the website would be updated next week, information would be placed on the bus and a leaflet would be distributed to explain the new charge and how/who and why a decision had been made to charge visitors for the service.

In conclusion, the Members of the Board requested that they take the comments back and review their decision / look at other options to charging visitors on the hospital shuttle bus service.

The Chief Executive of the Trust indicated that the decision could not be reviewed this year but consideration would be given to comments made as part of the 2010/11

planning process.

The Members of the Board thanked the Chief Executive and Mr Massey for their attendance.

RESOLVED: That

- (1) the Chief Executive and Mr Massey, Warrington and Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust be thanked for their attendance and verbal presentation;
- (2) it be noted that Halton Borough Council has not been consulted on the proposal to charge visitors on the hospital shuttle bus service between Warrington and Halton General Hospitals; and
- (3) although it is too late to review the decision to charge visitors this year, that the Trust, when undertaking the 2010/11 planning process consider other options other than charging to subsidise the hospital shuttle service.

Meeting ended at 7.20 p.m.