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TOWN HALL
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23rd October 2020

Dear Councillor Taylor

Access to emergency health services for Swanage residents

The Town Council has instructed me to write to you, as Chair of the new People and Health Scrutiny Committee, to raise its concerns about local residents' access to emergency health care. This has been copied to the other committee members for their information.

The Town Council thought it would be helpful to give some context regarding our situation and events to date, before making a number of requests.

Background

The Town Council has set up a Working Party to address the issue of access to emergency health services under the Clinical Commissioning Group's hospital reconfiguration plans, whereby maternity and paediatric services, oncology beds, and the local accident and emergency department, will be relocated from Poole Hospital to Royal Bournemouth Hospital. The remit of the Working Party is to consider mitigations for the longer travel times that residents of Swanage will face in emergency cases.

Swanage is a popular holiday resort at the end of the Purbeck peninsula, accessed via the A351, which becomes a 10-mile corridor between Wareham and Swanage. Swanage is 20 miles from Poole Hospital, 26 miles from Dorset County, and 28 miles from Royal Bournemouth Hospital. The A351 is a single lane road, and can be slow, particularly in Summer, as it winds through villages such as Corfe Castle on the way to Wareham. Our isolation is recognised in the adopted Swanage Local Plan. Paragraph 125 states: "Due to its isolated location the Swanage community is concerned about the potential loss of key services," while Paragraph 130 states that "Maintaining facilities and services in a relatively isolated location is one of the key challenges facing Swanage, and this is particularly true for a number of publicly-owned services which are currently located in the town."

South West Ambulance Trust data records the average blue light journey time from Swanage and neighbouring parishes to Poole Hospital at 41 minutes, and the average time between a category 1 imminent danger of death call to the Ambulance Trust, and arrival of the patient at Poole Hospital, at 1 hour 43 minutes – including ambulance response time, and handover time at the hospital. The Council believes that any rise in these times will increase clinical risk for patients facing medical, trauma or maternity emergency.

In autumn 2018 the Town Council wrote to Dorset Health Scrutiny Committee to draw attention to these concerns. The Council welcomed the Committee's decision to recommend to the Secretary of State that the proposals should be referred to an independent panel.

“A&E Local” at Poole, and Maternity at Dorset County

Whilst the Town Council recognises that the CCG’s proposals have now been approved by the Secretary of State, the Council’s attention was drawn to the possibility of implementing an ‘A&E local’ at Poole Hospital as a means of mitigating some of the increased risk for local residents. From the Independent Reconfiguration Panel’s report, it is understood that this is a ‘model between the standard urgent treatment centre and a conventional district general hospital A&E’, most likely operational for 16-hours a day. This would address the issue of chronic daytime congestion in the conurbation inhibiting access to RBH in an emergency from most of Dorset. On 14th February this year the Town Council wrote to Councillor Haynes, the then Dorset Health Scrutiny Committee Chair, in support of the “A&E Local” model for Poole Hospital, and we understand that this is due to be discussed.

Access to maternity care within reasonable times has been an issue of great concern to the Town Council. Dorset County used to offer newborn intensive (level 3) and high dependency (level 2) care, however in 2016 the unit was downgraded to offer special baby care services only (level 1). The reason given was there were not enough cases to maintain skills. However, with the loss of the maternity department at Poole, it is expected that more Purbeck mothers will choose Dorset County Hospital to have their baby. Under the current plans, the only high-level newborn services for the County will be located at Bournemouth Hospital, beyond reach of most Dorset mothers within the maximum ‘safe’ journey times cited by the Clinical Commissioning Group’s consultants of 30-45 minutes in maternity emergency.

The possible withdrawal of the Swanage Paramedic Car

Services currently remain open at Poole, however the issue of Swanage’s access to care in emergency became urgent earlier this year, when the Town Council heard that the ambulance resources based at Swanage might be decreased, as the Swanage Paramedic Car might be withdrawn. The ambulance resources based here are one 24/7 ambulance with two staff, and the Swanage 24/7 Paramedic Car, staffed by one paramedic. The Paramedic Car is the faster vehicle, and, unlike the ambulance, which can be outside Swanage taking patients to hospital, the car remains in Purbeck.

In an emergency, the car paramedic is most likely to get to Swanage within the Ambulance Trust’s target response time of 7 minutes, giving him or her the best chance to save life. In addition to maintaining life until the ambulance arrives, the paramedic can treat at the scene the 50% of patients who do not need to go to hospital, and s/he also supports Purbeck GPs with their home visits. The paramedic also continues to provide overnight cover for Swanage and neighbouring parishes. The paramedic car was allocated to Swanage in 2008 when the Cottage Hospital Minor Injuries Unit first closed overnight, in recognition of the distance from Swanage to Poole Hospital.

The Town Council was very surprised and concerned to hear about the possible withdrawal of the car, as Dorset Health Scrutiny Committee had previously received an assurance from the Clinical Commissioning Group that all ambulance services allocated here would be retained, and that travel times would improve, due to a new road network easing access to Bournemouth Hospital, and additional Dorset ambulance resources. Dorset Health Scrutiny Committee noted in the minutes of their 17th October 2018 meeting:

“In future it was anticipated by the CCG that ambulance times to the Royal Bournemouth Hospital (RBH) would be much quicker due to the major road improvements in that area and that this would assist in reducing ambulance journey times. The Group had also been promised that the Swanage ambulance station would remain open 24/7, fully manned with ambulances. There were also additional new ambulance vehicles in the pipeline for Dorset.”

Unfortunately, the spur road promised to ease access to Bournemouth Hospital from the west has since been cancelled, reinforcing the need for improved ambulance provision in remote areas such as Swanage.

The South West Ambulance Services Trust has advised that the funding for the Swanage Paramedic Car was due to end on 31st March 2020, and that the Ambulance Trust are prepared to maintain the Swanage Paramedic Car providing a funding solution could be found.

Following representations to Dorset Health Scrutiny Committee on 5th March, the Council welcomed the then Committee Chair, Councillor Haynes, offering to take this matter up with the Ambulance Trust, and with the Dorset Clinical Commissioning Group. The Town Council believes that it is at least in part due to this intervention that the car has not yet been withdrawn.

Whilst the Clinical Commissioning Group have promised to ‘engage’ with the Town Council, the Town Council has been unable, to date, to get an assurance that either the car will continue to be funded, or that there will be public consultation before any decision is made. A Swanage resident, Mr Melvyn Norris, Chair of the Swanage Area Forum, has started a petition to keep the Paramedic Car based here, which currently stands at 3,785 signatures.

Increased Dorset Ambulance resources

It is perhaps worth noting here that the Dorset Health Scrutiny Committee minutes of 5th March also note that Dorset ambulances are to increase from 36 to 45, with 2 of these new ambulances based in Dorset Council area. The Town Council has been advised that a second ambulance has been allocated to Wareham for 10 hours per day. However, the blue light journey time from Wareham to Swanage is, at an absolute minimum, 15 minutes, so that it will not be possible for the Wareham ambulance to respond to a Swanage emergency within the 7-minute target response time. Therefore, it is not clear, assuming Swanage is able to retain our current ambulance resources, how an additional part-time Wareham ambulance can mitigate the impact of loss of services at Poole for residents of Swanage and neighbouring parishes.

Requests of the People and Health Scrutiny Committee

Councillors were disappointed to hear that the Paramedic Car will not be on the 2nd November People and Health Scrutiny Committee agenda. Could you please confirm that it will be on the agenda for the following meeting of the Committee?

The Town Council is writing to request that the People and Health Scrutiny Committee continues, meanwhile, to make representations to the Ambulance Trust, and to Dorset Clinical Commissioning Group, in order to at least secure the retention of the town’s current ambulance resources.

The Town Council would also like to request that the Committee takes up the issue of further ambulance support for remote communities related to the planned loss of emergency and maternity care from Poole, and the issue of the promised road improvements, with a view to identifying any solutions that might help to reduce emergency journey times to Bournemouth Hospital.

Finally, at the time of writing, the Town Council does not know when the Committee intends to discuss “A&E Local”, or, indeed, maternity services; are you able to advise? Some advance notice would be of assistance to enable the council and neighbouring parishes to make representations.

Many thanks for your assistance in these matters, which are of deep concern to our local community.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "M.K. Agnew". The signature is stylized with a long horizontal line extending to the right and a loop at the end.

Town Clerk

Councillor G. Taylor
Chair of the People and Health Scrutiny Committee, Dorset Council

By e-mail and cc. to all committee members