

Background information regarding Wirral Community NHS Foundation Trust's decision to give notice on its phlebotomy subcontracts with 22 GP surgeries

Background

Wirral Community NHS Foundation Trust (WCFT) has provided phlebotomy services since 2011. The most recent service model, running until 30 June 2018, focused activity for 42 of Wirral's 51 practices at four hub sites plus appointments at Marine Lake Medical Practice in West Wirral and provision for housebound patients. This hub model was a response to high volumes of activity and a desire to provide an efficient service to minimise waiting times. This service was contracted with WCFT directly by Wirral CCG.

In 2017, Wirral CCG decided to provide phlebotomy services differently, with the Wirral phlebotomy budget divided amongst practices on a pro-rata basis, based on weighted list size. Practices could then choose to offer phlebotomy individually or combine their resources to provide or buy phlebotomy services collectively.

The service model was agreed with Wirral CCG member practices and included the requirement to offer walk in appointments, plus booked appointments in practices and for housebound patients, in line with the service specification. This service is for both adults and children.

Since 1 July 2018, with the introduction of this new specification, each practice holds an individual contract with Wirral CCG to provide phlebotomy to this specification. WCFT's direct contract with Wirral CCG for phlebotomy services ended at the same time.

Subcontract arrangement and service model from July 2018

WCFT was subcontracted by 22 practices and agreed with those practices to offer pre-bookable appointments in the mornings at 13 locations and in the afternoons at three walk-in hubs (St Catherine's Health Centre, Birkenhead; Victoria Central Health Centre, Wallasey; Eastham Clinic) with pre-bookable appointments at The Warrens in West Wirral.

This service model was co-developed by WCFT and practice managers representing the 22 practices. The service was delivered by the same phlebotomy staff that had provided the previous service.

Over the course of this new contract, WCFT and the practice managers, working as a co-management group, have kept waiting times and staff distribution under review and reallocated staff to where they are most needed. Despite this close working, waiting times for pre-bookable and walk in appointments have been higher than anticipated and have not reduced significantly. These waiting times have been longer than WCFT believes is acceptable and do not provide a good patient experience. To compensate, some GP surgeries have been providing extra phlebotomy services within their practice.

Proposal of alternative model

In December 2018, the co-management group of WCFT and practice managers developed a proposal for an alternative model to improve capacity by co-locating pre-bookable and walk-in appointments at the main hub sites, and providing a greater proportion of walk-in access at hub locations. This model comprised three hub locations offering both walk in and pre-bookable access, and five practices in West Wirral offering pre-bookable appointments.

Though it would have reduced the total number of available locations from 15 to 8, we believe this model should have enabled more people to be seen by WCFT's phlebotomists leading to reduced waiting times, particularly for walk-in access.

This model, agreed in principle by 20 of the 22 contracting practices, was presented to Wirral's Primary Care Co-commissioning Committee (PCCC) in January 2019. The PCCC did not approve the proposal for a variety of reasons including a perceived inequity of access for people across Wirral and incompatibility with the service specification.

At this point, WCFT took the extremely difficult decision to serve notice on its contracts with practices and to cease the service on 30 June 2019. This was because the Trust felt that, without changes to the service model, it was unable to provide a sufficiently high quality service for patients.

Impact on patients

Practices are currently deciding how they will offer phlebotomy services to their patients from 1 July 2019. This will determine the service model from that date. WCFT will continue to work collaboratively with practices to ensure that patients are clear about how phlebotomy services will change after 30 June 2019, and will continue service provision until then.

Impact on staff

Alongside service quality, one of the Trust's overriding concerns has been for our staff. Sadly, a consequence of this process is that we have had to put our very dedicated and hardworking phlebotomy staff at risk of redundancy. We are, however, doing everything we can to identify suitable alternative employment within the Trust, in line with our Organisational Change Policy, with our StaffSide unions involved throughout.

We are also in discussion with practices who may wish to employ phlebotomists as they develop plans for providing their patients with phlebotomy services from 1 July 2019. Once we understand the approach practices have decided to take we will know whether TUPE rules apply.

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