

Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee

The year began with news of the launch of the Health White Paper - a major restructuring of health services and councils' responsibilities in relation to health improvement. The Scrutiny Committee contributed towards a North East Joint Scrutiny response expressing serious reservations about the proposal to transfer scrutiny powers away from health scrutiny committees. These concerns were mirrored by many other consultees resulting in revisions to the proposals which instead propose to extend councils' formal scrutiny powers to cover all NHS-funded services.

The transfer of Public Health responsibilities to the Council will allow scrutiny to have an 'overview' of health improvement and the Scrutiny Committee will be well placed to help to draw together the cross cutting issues such as education, transport, housing, leisure, planning.

Old relationships will need to be developed with the new players, including all the partners on the Health and Wellbeing Boards, and the GP consortia and this is a challenge for all of us. The Scrutiny Committee is eagerly anticipating the developing new relationships, being involved in the transition and taking forward the enhanced scrutiny role.

Our main project this year was an investigation of hospital food and the avoidance of malnutrition. The Age Concern campaign Hungry to be Heard was a key driver in taking forward this investigation. We were fortunate in being able to co-opt the Director of Age UK Sunderland onto the Committee to work with us on this review. We have been impressed the dedication of the hospital staff to patient care and to providing the best nutritional support and hopefully our recommendations will assist with improving and enhancing the service to patients.

The North East Region has operated strong regional scrutiny arrangements and this past year the 12 local authorities' Scrutiny Committees worked together on a project to examine the broad health needs of the ex-service community. This was an innovative project involving all health scrutiny representatives from across the region and will be used to seek improvements in service delivery in each local authority.

There are some cases that impact widely on service delivery across the country. The impact of the Francis Report published in February 2010 regarding the failings of the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust was such a case. The action and governance arrangements undertaken at City Hospitals Sunderland to ensure the Trust learns from the report were considered by the Committee. Scrutiny functions can also take lessons from such cases and take a more robust and proactive role in respect of scrutinising local health services. An example of this would be health scrutiny being more aware of complaints, serious untoward incidents and issues raised with patient liaison and advisory services.

The Committee was consulted on a number of service changes during the year including a new model of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, Pharmacy Services, Model of Mental Health Care, and Transforming Community Services (TCS). The South Tyneside Foundation Trust has been chosen as the management partner for TCS. Services include district nursing, health visiting, supporting patients with diabetes, community dentistry. The services to be affected are extremely important and the Committee was keen to point out that it is imperative patients do not notice any adverse changes in the services they receive.

The personalisation agenda highlights the importance of putting people centre stage of social care and it sets a challenge for the Council to provide a personal budget for everyone who is eligible by April 2013. The Scrutiny Committee asked challenging questions about meeting the milestone of 'everyone who is eligible' to have a personal budget, and indeed how do we know everyone who is eligible. We were also interested in the feedback from service users, and how has this been used to develop the system. Ultimately, service users must feel their lives have improved from having this budgetary freedom.

This brief report provides a summary of the scrutiny and review undertaken during the year, and I feel that along with the hard work of my colleagues we have had another successful year. I am looking forward with some eagerness and trepidation to the challenges that 2011/12 will bring, involving as it will a major transition for all of us in the health arena and beyond.

Councillor Peter Walker
Chair of the Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee