

Mr Mike Hedges,  
Chair of Petitions Committee

Dear Mr Hedges,

***Re. Petition p-04-564: Restoration of Inpatient Beds, Minor Injuries Cover and X-ray Unit to the Ffestiniog Memorial Hospital***

Thank you for forwarding to us a copy of BCUHB Chief Exec. Gary Doherty's letter whose comments are supported in *Appendix 1* by Lead Practitioner Dr Bill Whitehead. We assume that the Health Board was asked to respond to correspondence sent by us to your Committee on November 15th and also December 10th 2016. But it seems that Mr Doherty elected to ignore the first of those letters i.e. our correspondence with the First Minister (again attached for your convenience).

Suffice it to say, first of all, that many of Mr Doherty's statements are open to question.

(a) He again refers to a '*detailed wide consultation process*' but, from the outset, the Betsi's definition of '*consultation*' has always been – *We invite your responses but we have no intention of changing our plans, whatever you say!*

(b) his 3rd bulleted point on Page 2 – ***Moving care from acute hospitals to the community***. The fact is that, since closure of the Ffestiniog Memorial Hospital, **the Welsh Uplands no longer have a community hospital**. However, given that he hasn't acquainted himself adequately with the geography of the area, then Mr Doherty either doesn't realise, or prefers to ignore, that fact. Ysbyty Alltwn in Dwyfor is in a different locality to that of the Welsh Uplands, which are located in north Meirionnydd and South Conwy.

(c) 3rd par., same page – '***Meirionnydd locality began rolling out enhanced care in September 2013***'. Were he to consult previous correspondence between ourselves and every one of his predecessors, then Mr Doherty would know that we have always challenged such a claim. In fact, so-called '*enhanced care*' never really materialized in this community. It was intended to give weekday care from 8am to 5pm (but not at week-ends) and was **planned for just 8 patients across the whole of Meirionnydd**, with the service being limited to 2 weeks per patient. To claim otherwise would be disingenuous of him.

Our initial enquiries at the time revealed that this enhanced care was to be **undertaken by existing staff** who were already over-worked and unable to cope. So, whatever Mr Doherty (or Dr Whitehead in *Appendix 1*) may claim, the enhanced-care service here has always been patchy, at best.

There are several other statements in his letter which need to be challenged, possibly by someone other than ourselves:-

eg (i) the '***extended absence of the practice manager***' (Page 3). For whatever reason, this person has been suspended from his post, presumably on full pay, for the past seven or eight months! Why is that? Is it yet another example of the systemic failure of healthcare provision by the Health Board in this area?

(ii) '***3 beds in Bryn Blodau Residential Home in Llan Ffestiniog for 'respite care'***' – Because locum doctors serving the Betsi-run Practice are always unwilling or unable to answer house calls to this Old Peoples' Home, then this has often resulted in elderly residents being triaged directly to Ysbyty Gwynedd, a journey of 1hr+, for treatment that a practice doctor should otherwise be able to deal with (eg. monitoring glucose levels). One example, in this respect, is of a 92 year old lady having to endure such an experience 9 times in a matter of 4 months; only to be sent back from YG within 24 hours, often at the dead of night. She

was subsequently moved (against the wishes of her son it has to be said) to a private nursing home 17 miles away, where she died within two months.

However, despite receiving letters of concern and criticism from family members to such cases, the Board has continually refused to respond, preferring to hide behind the excuse of '*patient confidentiality*'.

Little wonder, therefore, that Mr Doherty's fine words cut no ice whatsoever with the people of the Welsh Uplands.

(iii) Mr Doherty claims a distance of *12.6 miles* to a minor injuries unit! (Up to now, the Board has been quoting 14 miles!) but he chooses to ignore the fact that the distance from outlying areas in the Welsh Uplands - such as Dolwyddelan to the north - can be 20 miles or more! Are we to assume that he considers that distance to be acceptable as well?

There are several other points of contention in Mr Doherty's letter which we would be quite happy to respond to, should members of the Petitions Committee require more detail.

In fact, BCUHB's Chief Exec. wasn't asked to provide a rosy picture of healthcare in the Welsh Uplands but rather to respond to matters raised by us through the Petitions Committee, and those include the 5 questions that we put to the First Minister in our November 15th e-mail. We have sought answers to those questions, time and time again, not only from successive Betsi Chief Executives, but also from successive Health Ministers and now from the First Minister himself. But we still await answers!

Our hope is that the Petitions Committee feels, like we do, that Mr Doherty needs to answer those questions once and for all, and to do so relevantly and honestly.

Question 3 is just such an example and has to be seen for what it is, namely a blatant attempt by the Welsh Government and by Health Board officials, to build a false case against the Welsh Uplands. Simon Dean, Mr Doherty's predecessor, made this claim - '*...it is noted that Tywyn as a community is viewed as being more remote than Blaenau Ffestiniog. In terms of accessibility, the **Welsh Index of Deprivation** scores Blaenau fairly well as it benefits from a train line, bus routes and good roads. This was an important factor taken into account by the Welsh Government when approving the Tywyn Business Case and also by the Health Board in its discussions with the CHC, culminating in the decision to retain the MIU in Tywyn.*'

In fact, as we pointed out in our letter to the First Minister, Tywyn scores as well, if not better, than the Welsh Uplands in this respect. So how did the *Welsh Index of Deprivation* reach its conclusion, unless it was deliberately fed with false information? Are we to believe that neither highly-paid Betsi executives nor civil servants in Cardiff knew that Tywyn also has a train line with connections to the Midlands and on to London Euston?

Hopefully, the Petitions Committee will see the need for a credible answer to Simon Dean's claim. As also to Question 1, '*Re. the appointment of Dr Whitehead as chair of the Project Group.*' You will note that Mr Gary Doherty chose to ignore this question as well, preferring instead to give that very same individual an opportunity to justify the actions of his Project Group (see *Appendix 1*).

### *Appendix 1*

The gist of Dr Whitehead's argument in *Appendix 1* is this:- Blaenau Ffestiniog - (still the third largest town in Gwynedd, although Dr Whitehead describes it as 'rural'!) - didn't need these services because villages along '*the coastal strip*' didn't have them either, thus implying that the Welsh Uplands, of which Blaenau Ffestiniog is the focal point, doesn't have

the same needs as the smaller towns of Dolgellau and Tywyn, where community hospitals have not only been retained but where services have been improved rather than decimated. What Dr Whitehead attempts here is to show that Blaenau Ffestiniog, in fact, **deserved** to have its services removed, whilst at the same time admitting *'that there are significant issues in Blaenau, it has higher rates of deprivation, poor diet, obesity and more older people living alone than in other areas of Meirionnydd ... delivering health and social care in Blaenau must recognise these issues.'* (*Appendix 1 page 3 last par.*)

Muddled thinking, if nothing else!

He also claims that *'Full MIU services are provided by the practice in Blaenau'*. **This, again, is not true**, and we have provided the health board with several examples to prove as much. Surely, Dr Whitehead, as Lead Practitioner, should be recognising that fact, rather than turning a blind eye and seeking excuses.

And finally, he claims that *'the Blaenau Ffestiniog Town Council and the Gwynedd County Council are **fully supportive** of the plans for Blaenau.'* What he fails to mention, however, is that in a recent referendum - **organised by the town council itself, no less!** – in which 52% of the electorate voted, 99.6% were in favour of restoration of the services that are listed in our petition.

Again, as with Mr Doherty's letter, there are several other points in *Appendix 1* that we could challenge, if called upon to do so.

Yours, most sincerely, on behalf of the Ffestiniog Memorial Hospital Defence Committee,



Geraint V Jones (Chair)