

Statement from Shropshire Council Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Proposed changes to the bases used by the Welsh Air Ambulance

Shropshire's western geographic boundary is the border with Wales. The area is significantly rural with a number of the communities located closer to and looking toward services in Wales to meet their needs, including health services.

In terms of people being able to access the support, advice and services that they need, the border with Wales is largely a political distinction. It is not and should not be a barrier to people having their needs met and having their voices heard, especially where this relates to emergency services such as the Welsh Air Ambulance.

The Welsh Air Ambulance is highly valued by the communities that live in western Shropshire where the very rural nature of the place means that the speed of response by road ambulance is significantly longer than in more urban areas, let alone the time to travel to the hospital setting with the appropriate level of emergency and/or specialist care.

The value of the Welsh Air Ambulance Shropshire communities. This is demonstrated by the amount of fund raising that takes place, and the level of concern about the proposed changes. This latter point is evidenced by the more than 1200 signatures (and rising) collected by a local resident confirming people's concerns about the impact of the proposed changes to the Welsh Air Ambulance base in Welshpool, which have been collected from people living across southwest Shropshire. The former point is reflected by a recent example of a local community that donated £600 in the memory of a community member. Whilst this is not a large sum in itself, it was raised by a small community, and this takes place many times over. Town and Parish Councils are also consistent in their contribution to the Welsh Air Ambulance and to the Air Ambulance based in Cosford.

Neighbouring Air Ambulance provision. The Committee are interested to understand what engagement and conversations have taken place to understand the implications and impact of the proposed changes on neighbouring geographies and services. What would the changes to coverage mean for the Marches area, and for demand on the England based Air Ambulances that provide reciprocal cover into mid Wales when there is availability and demand?

Planned engagement and consultation. The Committee is concerned that any engagement and consultation on proposals that impact on the current provision of the Welsh Air Ambulance affecting Shropshire communities must be accessible to those communities and that their voices will be heard. This is particularly relevant to those that may be directly affected in the west of the county. Access will be in terms of

- physical access to engagement and consultation events that are taking place in communities in the area, or are being held in places that people living in their communities can easily travel to e.g. using public transport and not just by car.
- paper, telephone and/or digital access opportunities and awareness raising need to be designed with a clear understanding of the communities being engaged and consulted with. Rural areas do not have consistent or good mobile or broadband coverage which can limit people's access ability to get involved. Populations in rural areas are older than those living in more urban areas in Shropshire. Whilst this doesn't mean that all older people wouldn't use digital engagement opportunities,

alternative opportunities for them to share their thoughts need to be included. This might be through face-to-face opportunities, the ability to make representation using telephone calls, or in writing by post.

- If there is a genuine interest in and commitment to learning what all people and communities think and have concerns about in relation to the proposed changes to the service, then working with the Council and the local Shropshire Councillors will be valuable. This will provide the reach into these communities and the benefit of local knowledge and understanding on what would work best to hear from those communities.

The members of the Shropshire Council Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee are concerned that communities in Shropshire should be able to take part fully in any engagement and consultation on changes to services that will directly impact them, and that they have equal opportunity to be heard and what they have to say valued. Failure to meaningfully engage with these communities means that the views of almost 20,000 people (mye 2019) will not have been listened to. These are people who live in significantly rural communities where populations are older and access to health services is limited. Timely responses to emergency calls by land ambulances within the target timeframes is challenging at best. In addition, data trends confirm that if you are involved in a road traffic accident in Shropshire you are more likely to be in one where casualties are killed or seriously injured rather than slightly injured, compared to other areas of the country. This reflects the types of roads and those who use them and the very real need for robust Emergency Medical Retrieval and Transfer provision.

Members of the committee are also concerned that the change to bases may also result in changes to the hospitals that patients are flown to. Many people in Mid Wales and along the Shropshire side of the border who need the Emergency Medical Retrieval and Transfer provision offered by the Air Ambulance are flown on to Shropshire's acute hospitals. Would the changes to the bases result in different acute hospitals being the destination for patients? If so, Members are interested to understand what assessments have been carried out into the impact such a change could have on these patients and their families and friends in terms of recovery, mental health and anguish, the financial costs and travel time? What engagement has taken place to inform such impact assessments, and what actions are being planned to mitigate any issues that have been identified?

The demography and geography of West Shropshire means that the communities there deeply value the Welsh Air Ambulance and particularly the speed of response to emergencies that the base at Welshpool airport provides. This is evidenced in the public fundraising for the service and the concern now being demonstrated by the ongoing collection of signatures.

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