

# Surgery slammed for cutting opening hours without proper consultation

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A DOCTORS' surgery has been criticised for drastically slashing its opening hours without carrying out a proper consultation with patients.

Haygarth, which has surgeries in Hay-on-Wye and Talgarth, has decided to close early on some days in a bid to save money and keep its triage service running.

The new opening hours - which came into force on October 1 - have been slammed by patients, politicians, councillors and Powys Community Health Council.

Critics fear the reduction in opening hours will have a negative impact on residents at a time when they need care the most.

Calls have been made for the introduction of the new opening hours to be delayed until a "full and meaningful" consultation had been carried out.

Talgarth has started closing at 1pm on Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays instead of its current 6pm closing time.

It will carry on opening at 8am on weekdays and will close at 6pm on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. And Hay-on-Wye will shut at 1pm on Tuesdays and Wednesdays instead of 6.30pm.

Hay-on-Wye will keep opening at 8.30am on weekdays and will shut its doors at 6.30pm on Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays.

In a letter, seen by the Brecon and Radnor Express, Haygarth Doctors said the move will mean its Total Nurse Triage scheme will be able to keep running.

The triage service sees patients receive remote support via telephone which means the patient is able to see the most appropriate clinician within a suitable timescale.

It's understood the medical centres were forced to find money to keep the service going because Powys Teaching Health Board stopped funding it.

But questions have been asked about whether it's worth cutting opening hours to save a service that has received mixed reviews.

One patient said the triage system had "revolutionised" the surgeries with another saying it worked well.

However seven patients said they had experienced difficulties with the system.

The telephone answerphone system - which has long messages and different buttons to press - causes confusion and distress for people, according to a Powys Community Health Council document.

Some patients said they had to wait two days for a phone call from the surgery with another saying it has been "virtually impossible" to speak with or see a GP.

Members of Powys Community Health Council's Executive group are calling for the new hours to be postponed until a thorough consultation has taken place.

They say that there had not been "adequate content or time" allowed for the consultation that had already taken place.

A report, which went before the council's executive, explained: "Powys Community Health Council received a letter from Haygarth Doctors on July 9 2020 in which the practice advised of its intention to reduce the opening hours for Hay and Talgarth Medical Centres."

"On September 2 2020, Haygarth Doctors posted an article on its Facebook page advising



of the application to reduce hours and inviting people to send their comments to Powys Teaching Health Board and to Powys Community Health Council.

"The closing date given for comments was September 18. A notice was also placed on the practice website.

"Unfortunately, the Community Health Council email address in the website notice was incorrect and it was only corrected on September 18."

Members raised a string of concerns at their recent meeting including the wrong email address being used and expressed fears that the decision to cut hours had already been made before the consultation.

The executive unanimously voted that the consultation was inadequate, that it was bad the health council hadn't been consulted at the



beginning and that there wasn't enough information and data to assess the impact the changes would have on people.

Minutes of the meeting explained: "The committee discussed the significant numbers of negative comments that have been received on the nurse triage service and anticipated reduced hours. The committee believed that the triage service had been developed without patient involvement."

"The committee voted unanimously that they did not currently agree with the proposal to reduce hours at Haygarth Medical Practice."

"The committee voted unanimously that the proposals for this substantial change would not be in the interests of health services in Powys on the basis of the information that was provided."

"It was agreed that the Executive Committee would request that the introduction of the reduced hours be delayed until end of March 2021 to allow a full and meaningful consultation and engagement process."

"It was also agreed that Powys Community Health Council would retain the right to refer to the [health] Minister if a full and meaningful consultation and engagement was not undertaken."

William Powell, Welsh Liberal Democrat County Councillor for Talgarth, said: "I congratulate the Executive Committee of Powys Community Health Council for its robust response to what the Haygarth Practice has now implemented, in reducing opening hours and therefore access to medical treatment at both Talgarth and Hay sites."

"The health council is right to point out that the triage model itself, which the Practice regards as an unqualified success, has in fact received very mixed reviews locally, partly attributable to its development with limited patient involvement."

"The council has supported the views expressed by Talgarth Town Council as early as July, in criticising a continued lack of engagement locally over the proposals, combined with negligible consultation."

"In fact, there is arguably evidence of predetermination on the part of the Haygarth Practice, leaving it an open question as to whether there was ever a plan to consult in a meaningful way."

"It is also a matter of public record that an incorrect email address was displayed for the CHC on the Haygarth Practice website calling for patient comment. Clearly, whether cock up or conspiracy, this was not designed to maximise feedback."

Cllr Powell added: "The key issue here is the total inadequacy of the consultation and engagement process."

"There is a significant level of disappointment and anger amongst patients who have contacted me in recent days - many of them totally unaware of the proposed changes, until they had been implemented."

"There should have been a robust equality impact assessment made to accompany these proposals. The health council and locally elected representatives are right to point out this fundamental flaw."

"I support wholeheartedly the health council's call for the matter to be referred to Vaughan Gething MS, Welsh Minister for Health."

"It is a case study in how not to manage change, even in challenging times. The people I represent in Talgarth and patients further afield deserve better than this."

A spokesperson for Powys Community Health Council said: "Following the recent engagement by Haygarth Medical Centres, Powys Community Health Council has received a high volume of enquiries from the public about the reduction of opening hours at the Hay-on-Wye and Talgarth Medical Centres."

The health council is in active discussions with the Health Board to identify and agree a way forward to ensure that the concerns received are mitigated and to ensure that the views of the community can help shape plans for services moving forward."

The Brecon and Radnor Express tried several times to speak to somebody at Haygarth, but the attempts were unsuccessful.

## Overwhelmed GPs fear not everybody will get a flu vaccination

GPs in Powys have been overwhelmed by demand for flu vaccinations this winter and fear that not everyone who wants a vaccination will get one.

Each year the Chief Medical Officer identifies the priority groups for vaccination - the over 65s, those with certain long-term health conditions and children.

In response, GP practices in Powys plan a military style operation to deliver flu vaccinations to their vulnerable patients.

This starts in January each year when an order is placed for the vaccinations required the following autumn.

To reduce wastage, the size of the order is based on the number of patients who requested a vaccination in the previous year.

For the 2020 flu campaign, orders were placed at the beginning of the year, long before

COVID-19 was first in the news.

As part of the preparation for this year's campaign, GP practices were required to consider how they would deliver vaccinations to patients while addressing the additional complications associated with the need for social distancing, the wearing of protective equipment and the availability of sufficient staff.

As a direct consequence, each vaccination will take longer to deliver, and fewer patients will be seen at each flu clinic.

Taken together this has led to the perfect storm of more eligible patients than normal requesting a vaccination, an insufficient supply of vaccine due to the increased demand not being anticipated at the time of ordering and a shortfall in the number of staff in GP practices required to safely deliver the

additional vaccinations.

Dr Peter Horvath-Howard, Medical Director at Dyfed Powys Local Medical Committee said: "GPs and their teams have gone above and beyond to support patients throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and continue to support them as we face dramatically increased referral times for hospital treatment and backlogs across NHS services due to the impact of the virus."

Dr Horvath-Howard added: "GPs and their staff are working incredibly hard to rapidly embrace new ways of working to ensure both patients and the workforce are protected. GP practices have, however, limited resources to meet additional demand, while continuing to deliver routine consultations for their patients."



Health Minister Vaughan Gething getting a flu jab.