

LONDON HEALTH FORUM RESPONSE TO THE HEALTHCARE FOR LONDON CONSULTATION

The London Health Forum is a new and growing coalition and has been established to promote partnership between the voluntary and private sectors with the statutory sector in addressing the unmet health needs of Londoners.

The Forum welcomes this opportunity to provide an initial commentary on the vision set out in the Healthcare for London consultation document. We hope this response provides a starting point for ongoing collaboration between the London Health Forum and Healthcare for London and its member organisations. The Forum intends to make a significant contribution to ensuring the ambitions in this plan are translated in to real benefits for the people of London.

Principles behind Healthcare for London

The London Health Forum broadly supports the five principles which emerge from the proposals. It would, indeed, be hard to object to such laudable aims. However, we would caution that many of the principles have theoretically influenced health policy for at least the last decade and that translating ambition into reality will provide a significant challenge.

If this plan is to introduce more than another round of institutional reform to the London health system it will be necessary to work closely with partners in the private and voluntary sectors. This is recognised in broad terms, but there is very little detail as to how it can be achieved in the more detailed chapters of the report. The London Health Forum would welcome the opportunity to liaise more closely with the Healthcare for London team in order to identify opportunities for partnership working across a broader range of organisations.

In addition, it is important that this plan complements and supports the activities of other statutory bodies and in particular local government and the Greater London Authority. It would be useful to receive more information about how both the strategic direction of health policy as set out in this document and specific areas of policy coalesce with the vision set out in the Mayor's London Plan.

Resources

The Forum recognises the anticipated pressure on London's future health resources. We therefore believe that Healthcare for London and the associated organisations should work to ensure that London receives a fair allocation of resources. It is widely recognised that the challenges represented by London's diverse and mobile communities are not always reflected in the share of funding the capital, jointly and severally, receives.

In addition, the Forum believes that in order to succeed the NHS in London must undergo a step change in its attitude to allocation of resources and understanding of costs. The disadvantages of silo budgeting have been recognised for some time, but continue to persist. If there is to be true preventive, joined-up care, costs must be calculated across different agencies encompassing health and social care and over a longer timescale. We recognise that this will represent a challenge but believe it is essential if the ambitions of the plan are to be realised.

Structural Change

The Forum recognises that some structural change is necessary in London and would result in both better patient care and a better use of resources. However, the NHS has undergone significant organisational changes over the last ten years. The Forum believes that any future structural or organisational changes should be considered on a case by case basis and that evaluation be based on benefits to patients rather than inflexible doctrines of ideal service structures.

In relation to the two main changes proposed:

1. Polyclinics

The Forum believes that polyclinics, either on a single site or in a network, could significantly improve service provision in London. In particular, it is likely to be beneficial in areas where patients have difficulties accessing presently scant services.

We strongly believe that the introduction of polyclinics should be based on patient need or gaps in service rather than simply because of suitable sites; for example the introduction of a polyclinic in every hospital A&E may not make a worthwhile contribution to provision in an area that already has good primary care services, including walk-in centres. The most immediate need is to address the shortages of primary care services that exist in many areas.

While the Forum recognises the benefits of providing a range of services on a single site, it would be concerned if this was adopted as the primary model without thorough evaluation. The consultation document claims that most Londoners would be within 1.5 miles of a polyclinic, but this can represent a considerable distance for those with mobility issues.

The Forum would be interested to discuss what additional services could be provided in a polyclinic and would welcome the opportunity to be involved in the pilot projects.

2. Concentration of specialist care

Again the Forum broadly supports the concentration of specialist care in a smaller number of specialist hospitals. It would be hoped that these proposals will enable faster uptake of new treatments and better standards of care for patients.

The Forum recognises that the London Ambulance Service has demonstrated its ability to identify suitable patients and transport them to the most appropriate hospital. We are confident that appropriate guidance could be developed to extend this role, particularly in the case of patients who have experienced stroke or major trauma. However, we would have reservations if the principle were extended to the point where the Service was expected to provide the equivalent of a full triage service. In particular, the responsibility placed on crews to take patients to the correct hospital and the consequences of their failure to do so might become insupportable.

Communicating the need for change

The Forum notes, and welcomes, the recognition in the consultation document that clinicians have an important role in explaining the need for change.

However, it would hope that commissioners in London aim to forge alliances and partnerships more widely than this and encompass a range of private sector and voluntary organisations who can play a significant role in communicating the need for change.

Effective commissioners will be the driving force behind the implementation of this plan and the Forum was disappointed by the lack of detail regarding how commissioners should work together, how this plan relates to the World Class Commissioning document and how patients and the public can be more effectively engaged in the commissioning process.

The Department of Health has considered the need to improve commissioning skills within the NHS, and it is important the Healthcare for London programme recognises this as being essential to delivering change.