

PPG MEETING MINUTES – 7TH MARCH 2024

PRESENT

Dr M Farrelly – Senior Practice Partner
Vernon Morgan – Chair
Nayib Ahmed – Practice Manager
Naym Ahmed – for the Reception
Beverley Saunders
Daniel Kruyer
Jerome Cotter
Anne Palmer
Angela Abeysinghe
Kit-Lian Chan
Hugh Maloney
Deborah Savage
Sally Unwin – Secretary

APOLOGIES

Mike Smith
Rose Edmands
Caroline Crowley

The Chairman opened the meeting with a quick update from yesterday's budget in which the NHS had been allocated a further £5.9bn to help cut waiting times with £3.4 billion of that sum allocated to new computer systems for hospitals and GP Practices to improve productivity, and make access to information central. The total funding for the NHS 24/25 is now a staggering £164.9bn.

A further £165m is being committed as capital investment in the Family Court Service. The objective, to encourage simpler family resolution courts; making the procedure less acrimonious, more equitable and fundamentally less costly. The plan is to create free mediation as part of the litigation journey for thousands of civil claims. Sparing the need for solicitors and barristers to achieve a financial outcome and access settlement where children are concerned. The measure is designed to improve backlogs and court capacity.

Matters Arising from Minutes 11th January 2024:

A) **Item 5: St Georges Swimming Pool:** Following information disseminated on 27th February, 2024, in a public consultation hosted by Cratus at St George in the East Church, the third Pool allocated for parents and for learners is no longer in the project. (**Footnote: Since the PPG Meeting, The Chairman has been in contact with Cratus, Communications acting for LBTH and they have confirmed that there has been no fundamental change to the original plans we were given at the presentation on 11th January 2024, and that the developers are committed to the construction of a sizeable parents and children's pool to facilitate learning and teaching infants to swim. They believe that confusion may have arisen because the toddlers play pool is incorporated in the shallow end of the learner's pool and is not a separate or third entity. This area has been referred to as a third pool in certain early documents, to architecturally differentiate and maintain an equitable representation across all the age groups, including facilities for babes in arms and very young infants wishing to bathe with parents.*) The Chairman thanked the Council for their positive response.

B) **Item: AOB – Correction** – Wapping Group Practice has enrolled in the administration scheme for patients to book appointments within the NHS App on mobile devices. However, functionality is compromised slightly because very few appointments will be visible, as these time slots are normally already gone, and as a consequence are not visible through the NHS App. This is particularly relevant given the effectiveness of the online eConsult appointment booking service and the main-stream telephone system, currently operated by the surgery. It has to be remembered that there are only a

finite number of appointments available each day and once they are taken or booked, they are no longer visible.

Practice Report.

Dr Farrelly reported on the Practice staffing levels. A replacement Nurse, Majreha Shams has been recruited. Dr Ricardo is reducing his sessions from 8 to 6, beginning in May. A newly qualified doctor, Dr. Sheikh, who was a registrar at the practice has completed his training and will join the Practice from 4th April. He will pick up 4 sessions, which will more than compensate for the reduction, mentioned above.

The Chairman mentioned that he is still receiving reports and experiencing problems with the queueing system to the new telecomms service. The system suddenly drops the call. Other callers hear a message that asks them to call back after 11.00am, shortly before the call is halted abruptly. For many patients ringing back is not convenient. **ACTION: Nayib will investigate the problem.**

Regarding the multidisciplinary services offered through the Practice, such as physiotherapy, alcohol & substance abuse, podiatry and other specialist GP services, the Chairman commented that many patients seem unaware of these services. **ACTION: Nayib – to flag more clearly on the Practice Website.**

The Practice Manager confirmed that he had received a dossier from the Chair with links and details on where information may be sought that can be passed to patients who may come to their GP seeking help regarding Cost of Living and Energy Poverty assistance. The patient Personal Assistants can now signpost to LBTH Welfare and Social information and advise upon access to local foodbanks where appropriate, and offer welfare assistance. Details available here:

[Cost of Living webpage \(www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/costofliving\)](http://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/costofliving)

The ongoing industrial action is causing ambulance handover delays which continues to cause concern for hospital administrators. NHS Management also have plans to discharge patients earlier; citing that hospitals are “dangerous places”, and that for some vulnerable elderly individuals or, for patients who require considerable rehabilitation or nursing care, they believe they are at greater risk from being in hospital than being at home. It is a difficult truth, but private community care agencies are at capacity, and Gp’s do not have the resources necessary to look after sick patients who would ordinarily be in hospital for another 2 or 3 weeks. It is unfair for stakeholders, including NHS Management, to place the emphasis for patient care back with GP’s, again and again without the resources to do so.

Access to Mental Health Services, is in demand by parents and particularly for young people.

Advice on access to Mental Health Services and signposting to MIND and other prescribers. Currently, referrals to NHS Counselling are limited, because this area of medicine has grown exponentially since lockdown. It is now particularly difficult for 14–24-year-olds who are seeking access to specialist services. It was suggested that simple leaflets in the surgery or on community noticeboards would help raise awareness of these services. **Action: Nayib** to ask his reception staff to contact some charities and specialist agencies, such as Diabetes UK, Mind, and particularly mental health charities focusing upon youths and young people. Contact: 020 8475 8080

[Mind in Tower Hamlets and Newham](http://www.mind.org.uk) is a community mental health charity that provides advice and support to anyone with a mental health or emotional issue. They also provide free counselling for Tower Hamlets residents.

Contact: 020 7510 4247/4248 or email info@mithn.org.uk.

The list of anxiety related conditions is growing with eating disorders, depression, OCD, bulimia, self-harm, and gender dysphoria the most commonly reported in young people. In adults, a new development exists, fuelled by the broadcast media's attention being drawn to adults receiving a diagnosis later in life for Dyslexia, ADHD, and Autism, often their symptoms having been ignored or neglected in their youth. This is placing a further burden on mental health services.

Report on E consultancy, telephone consultations and benefits of triage services.

General administration and operational difficulties arising.

It is feared that there is an emphasis on the use of eConsult services as the primary pathway to engage with the Practice. With an ageing population, who are 10 times more likely to need access to GP Services, these are the very group who tend to struggle to use the tech platforms and online facilities. Indeed, the eConsult providers believe that there are currently too many face-to-face appointments in general practice, and that there are more productive methods of signposting patients through the healthcare system. Dr Farrelly confirmed that there is no current push to change the way appointments are made across the wide range of options available to our patients, in Wapping including the main-stream telephone which remains, thankfully, a method of contact for those who wish to use it. We also see a drive to introduce Ai (Artificial Intelligence) services, via touch screen monitors into some A&E departments to assist with the triaging of walk-in patients, and in turn assist with the acute pressure on staffing levels. This system is part of the expansion of eConsult system, allowing patients to be identified and for their medical records to be accessed by doctors in attendance.

3. Chairman's Review.

A discussion ensued on the development of eConsultation and Ai in healthcare.

Vernon reiterated his long-held belief that the march of technology excludes those who cannot afford digital connections, broadband services, smart phones. The NHS and UK Government agencies are complicit by assuming that all citizens have equal access and knowledge. The ability for people to engage on computer technical platforms, is not only limited to resources, but may be limited to geographic coverage, mobile phone signals and patient's ability to receive text messages. There is a misinformed, but widely held opinion that everyone has access to send and receive SMS messages and connect to the internet. Utilising this technology as a method of filling in government forms, benefit claims, or accessing information more generally, is not only not possible for a significant number of people, but they are being shoe-horned into compliance, because it economically expedient for corporate organisations. Bank statements are by default no longer sent by post and are only accessible online, making money management for those without access at home, challenging.

As artificial intelligence permeates more and more of society, we will see the wider expansion across healthcare. 1 in 4 practices in the UK are now using eConsult as a method of booking appointments. In the future, the software will interrogate the problem the patient is presenting with and act on the possibilities or outcomes, referring the patient on to a specialist, creating an instant diary appointment with that individual and managing the follow-up.

I can see the many advantages in the use of Ai across medicine, but for me, it is not the panacea to everything. Because it makes economic and commercial sense, it should not be at the detriment of human interaction for staff and patients alike. NHS Digital has already spent vast sums on eConsult, and the new version is doubtless the future of patient care, as will be the new roll out of the NHS App. Purportedly, now having achieved over 33.6 Million registered users. When you consider that

against Netflix and their subscribers at only 16 million, the take up in 5 short years has been significant.

4. Information for Patients

There was a discussion concerning changes to the Wapping Group Practice Patient Catchment Area, and how this has evolved over many years. In recent months letters have been sent to patients informing them about necessary changes. Dr Farrelly explained that where a patient lives outside the practice catchment area, they are receiving letters to remind them that some services offered by the group cannot be delivered as they once were; particularly outside this demarcation area. This is due to time pressures on GP/Nursing staff not having resources to travel at distance outside the Wapping area, particularly when some staff do not drive. The letters sent, also enclosed a “disclaimer” to be returned, signed by the patient to ensure that they understood. If they wish to remain as patients with the Wapping Group Practice, then some of the services they previously enjoyed, can no longer be provided to them. The letter obviously flagged up that they were at liberty to seek an alternative GP Practice within the area in which they now live, to ensure they can benefit from the full range of services offered by NHS England. The services affected include: GP domiciliary or home visits, Community Care District Nursing, and specialist neuro services, including speech and language, diatetics and nutrition service, nurse led Community Heart Failure Teams, and Community ENT Services.

The recent Lancet report has raised concern over the rise in childhood obesity and the major impact it can have on all the major organs of the body. The NHS has created 30 specialist obesity clinics to treat children across England, but this number is small geographically. The NHS is also demanding more action from wider society and industry to try and improve the problem. Furthermore, access to Diabetes Awareness Groups should be better signposted and it was suggested that leaflets in the Practice on these issues could help raise awareness with Patients.

ACTION: Nayib: Please procure these leaflets for the Reception.

5. Community Update.

Community Update from the St Katharine & Wapping Ward Panel indicated that the local Safer Neighbourhood Police team have been successful in seizing 19 vehicles after Sec 59 Warnings were issued to dangerous drivers, who ignored them.

Bike Crime continues to blight us, with 55 bikes stolen in the last 9 months, with 9 in February alone.

Three Cannabis Café's in Whitechapel have been closed which has had a positive impact on the streets of Wapping.

The Ward Panel are opening discussions with TFL about the inadequate pedestrian crossing erected on the Highway, for students starting at the new Mulberry School at London Dock. The purpose-built premises are due to open in the coming months with a phased intake of pupils. The proximity and location of the site directly on The Highway is considered detrimental to the health for all of those attending (staff and pupils) as this is recognised as one of the busiest arterial routes in London and has the highest recorded rates of Nitrogen Dioxide (NO₂) and Particulate Matter (PM_{2.5}.)

Talks with the Council about the use of LIME and other electric cycle providers seems to indicate that they are now trying to find a standardised approach across all London Boroughs for the use of e-Bikes and Scooters. The issue of the cycles discarded on our streets remains an issue.

6. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

1. Citizens Advice Service.

The face to face consultation service provided by The Citizens Advice Bureau that was widely used and previously accessed through the practice, has been withdrawn. Much to the complaint of our patients, Citizens Advice personnel are no longer able to visit the practice in person, citing budget cuts, and they will no longer see patients face to face offering free legal advice. The Reception staff are willing to assist patients making telephone only appointments with the CAB, if they do not have personal online access, or if assistance is needed. Cuts in CAB service personnel now mean regular weekly consultations have ceased, and the Chair has reported that unfortunately, even when telephone consultations are secured patients are experiencing last minute cancellations by the CAB because they do not have the staff to fulfil their diary commitments. One patient had four appointments cancelled, which was deemed unacceptable, because people using the service are doing so because they cannot afford legal representation. **Action: VM to monitor** and write to Citizens Advice CEO if matters deteriorate further.

2. **Young Tower Hamlets (YTH), the council's youth service**, has been awarded a £488,000.00 Youth Investment Fund (YIF) Refurbishment Grant to renovate youth centres across the borough. The YIF Grant funding will be used alongside YTH funding to refurbish four buildings. (Wapping Youth Centre is one of the four beneficiaries) The objective, to create modern, inclusive and safe spaces for young people. Funding is from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the charity - Social Investment Business and Resonance. This is a welcome step for Wapping's young people, and hopefully will attract further corporate investment with IT technology and gaming.

3. The LBTH Council has approved annual budget.

The Council has approved new investment in public services and support for residents. The Mayor announced, new revenue investment includes the popular Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and University Bursaries; free swimming for women and girls over 16 and men over 55; (although we don't know where they are to swim, because the local Swimming Pool and Leisure Centre in Wapping is closed and due for redevelopment and reconstruction over the next 3-5 years.) A new Women's Resource Centre is planned; new funding for street cleansing and waste management. Housing also remains a top priority for the council, and significant investment in the development of affordable, family-sized homes continues, with the council on target to deliver 4,000 homes over the course of this term, both council-led and through various partnerships, while improving the condition of existing stock. It is not known if improvements to existing housing (however minor,) will eventually count towards the ambitious target of 4000 homes. This number otherwise seems ambitiously high, across the 4-year electoral term, which began in May 2022.

The general council tax element was frozen last year, and for 2024/25 it will increase by 2.99%. Tower Hamlets currently has the 6th lowest council tax in London and one of the most generous council tax reduction schemes for those who are less well off.

4. Air Aware.

People in Tower Hamlets, Hackney, and Newham are now able to check live air pollution levels near them on a new online tool developed by the three boroughs.

The tool, known as *Air Aware*, shows live particulate matter and nitrogen dioxide levels, helping people to make informed choices about their exposure to air quality. While air quality has improved significantly in London over the last decade, people's hearts and lungs are affected if they are exposed to harmful levels of air pollution, particularly over longer periods of time. Asthma rates are also significantly higher for residents in Tower Hamlets than other London boroughs.

Air pollution has been associated with low birth weights, poorer academic performance and a decline in cognitive abilities, linked to dementia. To help reach a wide audience, publicly accessible screens have also been installed at various locations across the project area, including Idea Stores and Tower Hamlets Council's Town Hall.

New air quality sensors have been installed across the boroughs. In our area, they are at Tower Hill, and along The Highway near Tobacco Dock and at King Edward Memorial Park and at Limehouse Tunnel. For further information visit: <https://www.air-aware.co.uk>

Meeting Closed at 19:30 hrs.

NEXT MEETING DATES for your diary: Thursday May 2nd & Thursday July 4th