

PRESS RELEASE – Thursday 18 January 2018

South Tyneside and Sunderland Healthcare Group outlines next steps for strategic alliance

Almost two years on since coming together with an ambitious vision to transform local healthcare services, the South Tyneside and Sunderland Healthcare Group* has today outlined the next steps for the strategic alliance.

The Boards of both South Tyneside NHS Foundation Trust and City Hospitals Sunderland NHS Foundation Trust, following discussions with Trust governors in South Tyneside and Sunderland, have today shared a mutual desire to begin exploring the possibility of becoming one organisation in the future.

Both NHS Foundation Trusts have already been working very closely together since March 2016 and signed a formal partnership agreement in April 2016 which committed both organisations to transforming the way local services are delivered for the benefit of patient care.

A single executive management team has been in place at both NHS Foundation Trusts since November 2016, led by Chief Executive Officer Ken Bremner who was appointed as CEO across both Trusts in September 2016.

The strategic alliance between the two NHS Foundation Trusts has already brought many benefits with shared clinical expertise helping to improve access, quality of care and outcomes for patients. For example:

- Patients in South Tyneside requiring specialist cataract surgery can now have all of their pre-operative assessments done locally in South Tyneside thanks to investment in new equipment and joint working between staff. This is saving unnecessary travel to Sunderland for approximately 400 South Tyneside patients every year.

- Whilst long-term arrangements for acute stroke care are yet to be determined, improvements have already been seen since interim changes took place in December 2016 to centralise all acute stroke admissions at Sunderland Royal Hospital. With stroke experts now readily available seven days a week, more South Tyneside and Sunderland patients are now getting the right treatment sooner, with improvements in clinical quality indicators for both localities.
- The appointment of the first ever kidney consultant at South Tyneside District Hospital has taken place thanks to the strong clinical links with City Hospital Sunderland. This means, for the first time ever, patients with kidney problems living in South Tyneside are now able to attend a clinic locally, rather than travelling to Sunderland for routine appointments.
- Improved efficiency through joint working and streamlining of 'back office' functions to develop shared support services for staff. The introduction of a single management team alone, for example, has generated initial savings of over £500,000.
- Sharing learning and standardising policies and practice across both Trusts to improve patient safety and quality of care. For example, a shared ambition to reduce avoidable pressure ulcers by 25% over the next two years has seen new mattresses introduced at South Tyneside District Hospital which are greatly improving comfort for seriously ill patients, as well as saving around £136,000 a year to be reinvested in patient care.
- A £5 million investment at South Tyneside District Hospital has been secured as part of the national 'global digital exemplar' (GDE) programme thanks to joint working with City Hospitals Sunderland who are already recognised as digital leaders in the NHS. The 'fast follower' GDE status for South Tyneside means the Healthcare Group can build on work underway in Sunderland, which has already brought £10 million into the local NHS, to develop a single IT solution across both Trusts to help improve data flow and patient care.

- Greater flexibility in managing pressures across the system – most recently demonstrated by the surge in winter related emergency admissions and embedding of new ‘point of care’ testing for flu in both South Tyneside and Sunderland which is greatly improving patient flow within both emergency departments at this busy time of year.
- Strategic planning on a bigger scale to ensure the sustainability of services, including a large scale recruitment exercise planned for 2018 to help improve workforce capacity; new joint committees structures now in place across both Trusts and a shared vision for the future which is being embedded to develop a shared culture of high quality, safe patient care.

Whilst both organisations continue to operate as statutory NHS Foundation Trusts, each with its own Board of Directors, a Group Board has also been operating since May 2016. Leaders now share the unanimous view that it is the right time to start thinking about what a possible merger of both organisations might look like and, importantly, what further benefits this could bring for both patients and staff in future.

Both Trusts have today signalled their intentions to explore whether a possible merger would bring further benefits for patients and to begin a detailed strategic business planning process looking ahead to the next three to five years. This will help outline the potential next steps to bring both organisations together as one and secure a sustainable and resilient healthcare system for the population across South Tyneside and Sunderland.

This work will take place alongside ‘phase two’ of the Path to Excellence clinical transformation programme which will begin in earnest later this year looking at a number of clinical pathways across both organisations and how services can be best planned and ‘futureproofed’ to meet the rising demands on the NHS and local workforce.

Chief Executive Ken Bremner said: “We have made great strides since coming together to form the South Tyneside and Sunderland Healthcare Group with many

clear benefits for our patients. We know, however, that there is still much more to do and this starts with exploring whether we should cement the relationship between our two Trusts for the long-term.

“It is important that our patients, staff and stakeholders have a very clear message about what we envisage for the future and both Boards felt the timing was right to share this ambition now so that we can begin to openly discuss what a possible merger between our two organisations might mean.

“The strengths of working together across a greater geography are already abundantly clear and our aim is to make it as easy as possible for our teams to work effectively together without unnecessary organisational boundaries.

“As we look to the future and phase two of the Path to Excellence programme in 2018, I want everyone to feel confident and assured about the long-term organisational intentions of both Trusts and our commitment to working together for the benefits of our patients and staff.

“This is really just the start of that conversation and we are committed to engaging with patients, staff and stakeholders as this work progresses over the year ahead.”

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Media contact: Nichola Taylor - Nichola.taylor@chsft.nhs.uk / 0191 565 6256 (ext 42902)