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Local NHS partners back proposed merger of South Tyneside and Sunderland hospitals

Local NHS partners across South Tyneside, Sunderland and County Durham have unanimously backed plans for the proposed merger of South Tyneside NHS Foundation Trust and City Hospitals Sunderland NHS Foundation Trust.

NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) in South Tyneside and Sunderland have given their 'wholehearted support' for what was described as a 'compelling case' to merge and praised the 'forward-thinking leadership' of the Trusts. North Durham and Durham Dales, Easington and Sedgefield CCGs have also fully supported the merger proposals with local authorities in both South Tyneside and Sunderland confirming they understood the strategic case for the proposed changes to organisational form.

At a joint meeting of the Trusts' Council of Governors held in Hebburn today, leaders at South Tyneside and Sunderland Healthcare Group* thanked staff, patients, members of the public and stakeholders for getting involved and sharing their views as part of the '*Stronger Together*' engagement process.

Between 30 July and 28 September, a widespread period of engagement activity took place to share the strategic ambition of both Trusts and to outline the expected key benefits of the proposed merger for patients and staff. Over 1000 feedback responses were received throughout the nine weeks.

Around 60% of all online survey responses were from staff, with 69% understanding the strategic rationale for the proposed merger, 18% feeling unsure and 13% who did not understand why the Trusts would like to merge. Overall, staff recognised the likely key benefits with the following top three themes identified to:

- Improve patient care and clinical services
- Improve sustainability and create a more resilient organisation
- Share best practise across both Trusts.

Staff were also asked to openly share any concerns about the proposed merger with the following top three themes recorded:

- Clarity needed over HR process, location of work and job security
- Concerns over travel and transport between South Tyneside and Sunderland
- Concerns over the potential for reduced local services, particularly in South Tyneside

Around 40% of online survey responses were from patients and members of the public, with 55% understanding the strategic rationale for the proposed merger, 17% feeling unsure and 28% who did not understand why the Trusts would like to merge. Patients and members of the public also recognised some of the likely key benefits with the following top three themes identified to:

- Improve patient care and clinical services
- Save money

- Improve staff recruitment and retention

Patients and the public were also asked to openly share any concerns about the proposed merger with the following top three themes recorded:

- Concerns over travel and transport between South Tyneside and Sunderland
- Concerns over the potential for reduced local services, particularly in South Tyneside
- Potential for longer waiting times

Whilst the proposed merger is **not** about any changes to clinical services, patients and the public found it difficult to distinguish between proposed changes to organisational form and the Path to Excellence clinical transformation programme.

Healthcare leaders have been repeatedly clear that the proposed merger of the two Trusts is a completely separate process and that any future significant changes to hospital services as part of Phase Two of Path to Excellence will be subject to full formal public consultation planned for summer 2019.

The Council of Governors of both Trusts today welcomed the engagement feedback which also included responses from Unison as well as local campaign groups. All feedback will now be considered as part of the Full Business Case submission at separate statutory Trust Board meetings next month before being submitted to regulators NHS Improvement in December.

Both Trusts today also confirmed the 'interim board' arrangements to oversee the merger process**. The interim board includes members of the single executive management team already in place across both Trusts and has equal representation of non-executive directors from both South Tyneside and Sunderland. Both NHS Foundation Trusts will continue to have separate statutory Boards until any merger transaction takes place.

Chief Executive of South Tyneside NHS Foundation Trust and City Hospitals Sunderland NHS Foundation Trust, Ken Bremner, said: "We are very encouraged at the level of engagement and would like to thank everyone who took the time to share their views. It is clear that there is a broad understanding, particularly amongst our staff and stakeholders, as to why we feel a formal merger will help us make further quality improvements in patient care and this is very positive to hear.

"We recognise that our teams are now eager to learn more about what the proposed merger would mean for them individually and we are fully committed to beginning an open and transparent HR consultation process, working with our staff side representatives, following approval of the Full Business Case by both individual Trust Boards.

"We have also heard loud and clear from staff, patients and members of the public that people are concerned about travel and transport between our hospitals. I want to give strong reassurance that we are continuing to work very closely with our CCG and local authority partners to actively consider travel and transport implications as we move forward and will provide further updates as this work progresses.

“I also want to take this opportunity reassure people, once again, that our hospitals in South Tyneside and Sunderland will absolutely continue to exist and will continue to play key roles in our local communities, both now and in the future, regardless of whether or not a merger takes place.”

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Notes to editors

***About South Tyneside and Sunderland Healthcare Group**

- South Tyneside NHS Foundation Trust and City Hospitals Sunderland NHS Foundation Trust have been working closely together since March 2016. They signed a formal partnership agreement in April 2016 to form the South Tyneside and Sunderland Healthcare Group and 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.

****Interim Board Arrangements**

As part of the process of merging two NHS Foundation Trusts, there is a requirement to have in place interim management arrangements prior to the substantive appointment of the Board of Directors for the newly established NHS Foundation Trust. The Interim Board will fulfil two core functions:

- Provide oversight of the transaction process, receiving assurance on the delivery of the Full Business Case, pre and post-transaction integration planning, and ensuring associated risks are appropriately managed, leading up to the completion of the transaction; and
- Provide the leadership function for the newly established Foundation Trust from ‘day one’, until the appointment process for the substantive Board of Directors is complete (anticipated to be during April 2019 – August 2019).

Next steps

- The Full Business Case for the proposed merger will be considered by each individual statutory Trust Board in November 2018.
- Subject to approval from both Trust Boards, the Full Business Case will be submitted to regulators NHS Improvement for consideration in December 2018.
- Between January and March 2019, a detailed approvals process will take place with NHS Improvement.
- In March 2019, final approval for the proposed merger will be via each individual Trust Board and Council of Governors.
- From 1 April 2019 the newly merged Trust will come into operation and detailed work will continue to deliver post-transaction implementation plans.