

Brynmawr Town Council

Brynmawr Town Council, Council Offices, Orchard Street, Brynmawr Gwent. NP23 4ET
Mrs. A. C. Davies, Town Clerk/RFO & Miss. N.J. Williams, Assistant Town Clerk

Date: 13/01/2010

F.A.O. Judith Paget / Chief Executive, Aneurin Bevan University Health Board
C.C. Dr Liam Taylor / Interim Director of Primary Care and Community Services
C.C. Vaughan Gethin / Minister for Health and Social Services
Aneurin Bevan University Health Board
Lodge Road
Caerleon
Newport
NP18 3XQ

Dear Judith,

I hope this letter finds you well.

We, the Town and Borough Councillors that represent the Brynmawr wards in Blaenau Gwent are writing to you to express the extreme concern we have, firstly in relation to current Hospital and A&E access for Blaenau Gwent residents and those in the surrounding Boroughs, and secondly in regard to insufficient staffing levels across the Grange, Nevil Hall and Royal Gwent sites. While we welcome a new state of the art critical care facility, evidence suggests that it doesn't warrant the downgrading of provision across the other sites, which is having problematic consequences. With direct 'in confidence' discussions and complaints from staff based in the Borough that work across The Grange, Nevil Hall and the Royal Gwent sites in conjunction with the concerns, experiences & worries of the local populous that use the service, we felt compelled to write to you.

As with the many concerns raised by DR Deborah Wales (divisional director of unscheduled care at the health board), which were highlighted on BBC Wales News on the 12th of November 2020, the members and many constituents (a broad selection of whom are frontline staff at the health board) are incredibly concerned with the current provision. DR Wales' concerns regarding patient safety in regard to the lack of doctors and nurses to staff the new Grange University Hospital in Cwmbran and existing hospitals is once again consistent with the views of the staff, patients and constituents that have contacted us.

The statements below made by DR Wales, have also been echoed by individuals that we represent.

- The workforce was "depleted, stretched, tired" and unprepared for the opening of the new hospital, she said, and highlighted a staff sickness rate "in excess of 15%". (Which is now in excess of this figure)
- There was a shortage of doctors, she said, but that was "dwarfed by the nursing deficit".
- Efforts had been made to block-book temporary nursing staff, she added, but that there "remain many wards with inadequate/no staffing" at all at the health board's major hospitals including the new hospital.
- Trying to cope with the inpatients across four sites will inevitably reduce the ability to continue with elective work such as endoscopy. This presents further risk to our patients particularly in cancer work, where delays in diagnosis and treatment will cause increased mortality,"

With two of the Minor injury units virtually empty (as experienced by members of the council themselves), the A&E burden of the five Boroughs that feed the facility is weighing heavily on the shoulders of the Grange Hospital.

Your own staff update letter, from Health Board Corona Virus Strategic Group dated Saturday 12th of December 2020 states that *'we do not have enough staff to open more beds and we will be working with the emergency planning team to identify staff and ask if they are able to attend and support this weekend'*

It also says: *'we have consultants at GUH / RGH / NHH & YYF looking at discharging as many patients as possible – this is crucial to release capacity in the system'*

In respect to the above statement, the members were informed that the above has included patients who weren't well enough to be fully discharged. Could you elaborate on this?

It's also been stated that the Grange is operating on a staffing capacity of 50%, with Nevil Hall and the Royal Gwent also severely understaffed. This apparently resulted (with additional sickness leave) in only one nurse covering an entire ward at NHH on a particular evening during the Christmas period. Could you once again confirm or deny this statement? Any figures collated in terms of staffing during this transition period would be helpful in terms of developing an accurate picture of the situation.

We totally understand that a substantial number of staff are self-isolating due to COVID, but even prior to this many staff at the other hospital sites were making complaints due to colleagues being moved to the Grange leaving the existing hospitals/wards etc short-staffed with low morale, making certain situations

untenable. Several staff also informed us that they had taken early retirement rather than move to the new facility therefore exasperating the burden even further.

Many of the complaints that have been forthcoming in Blaenau Gwent are in terms of provision and servicing of the upper Valleys, with the distance to the Grange and inadequate & poor road systems proving to be an impediment for the population of this area. Additional conversations have taken place with constituents, staff and members from bordering areas that have equal concern, such as those based in Monmouthshire and Brecon, which also saw complaints in terms of service and distance along with difficult country road access. One complaint highlighted an Ambulance journey from Abergavenny to the Grange, which saw an inability to access the quickest route due to rural flooding at Llanover. This resulted in a forty-minute detour, one that could have had dire ramifications if the nature of the journey had been more serious.

Additional complaints included:

- Another pre-Christmas incident reported to one of the Borough Councillors involved a Doctor calling 999 for a patient in their late 70's at 10.30am, with an Ambulance turning up at 7.40pm. The driver then explaining that they had been gridlocked at the Grange with 17 other Ambulances while a patient was in the back during most of that period due to the sole A&E at the GUH being overwhelmed with general accidents.
- Staff expressed concern that the A&E department was overwhelmed by Tuesday on the first week of opening, with Ambulances dispatched to other areas. This has followed suit with between fourteen and seventeen ambulances parked outside gridlocked in the weeks following. One gentleman who had travelled from the Pandy area never even entered accident and emergency but, was treated in the Ambulance prior to being taken back home.
- Dragon Taxis being called by Hospital staff to pick up patients as there were no Ambulances available.
- A senior Doctor confided in a member of the Borough Council stating 'that the only way in which an Ambulance would attend a home with any urgency is if the ailment is cardiac arrest based.
- Wards closed in existing hospitals due to lack of staff
- Other complaints referred have included local staff regretting the move or putting in requests to move back to their original bases.

- Additional complaints raised have also included a distinct lack of public awareness and consultation prior to the downgrading of existing sites.

Overall, there seems to be a distinct lack of capacity, with many of the individuals that have spoken to members presenting themselves or family members to the Grange only to be turned away without being seen by a healthcare professional. Therefore, we can agree with the concerns of DR Wales with regard to the premature opening of the facility.

Closing two very in demand accident and emergency centres and replacing them with one unit that has extreme geographical challenges was always predicted to have major issues with capacity, with or without the COVID pandemic. After speaking to a consultant involved in the planning of the GUH, it transpired that this aspect had been brought to the table by senior clinicians.

We are well aware of the issues that A&E centres throughout Wales have during the winter periods as highlighted in the Wales online articles featured below:

BY CAITLIN O'SULLIVAN
17:10, 7 DEC 2017 | UPDATED 07:52, 8 DEC 2017

BY CLAIRE MILLER, MARK SMITH
18:00, 25 NOV 2018 | UPDATED 17:53, 25 NOV 2018

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Ambulances queue outside A&E department at Morryston hospital (Image: Jonathan Myers)

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Ambulances queuing outside the University Hospital of Wales in Cardiff (Image: Richard Williams)



📷 Ambulances wait outside the accident and emergency department of the Royal Gwent Hospital in Newport on July 7, 2019. Six ambulances are visible in the picture with another four waiting in another part of the car park (Image: Rob Norman)



Nevertheless, any major incidents that occur in the future we feel would not be aleatory in nature, but merely an indicator of the lack of sufficient local provision, multiplied by distance, single lane and rural road provision and congested traffic indicators.

One A&E department covering such a vast area which includes: Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Monmouthshire, Newport, Torfaen and South Powys it seems is an incredibly insufficient response to patient need and emergency care response. Although the new Hospital is state of the art and very welcome, staff levels and moral are heading in the opposite direction. Add to this the removal of staff from two existing hospitals to populate a third, leaving inadequate staffing across all three sites especially in the advent of COVID), is in the opinion of many NHS staff negligent and myopic. Opening the Grange in advance, without the correct staffing levels and downgrading existing operational facilities is it seems only going to cause more serious issues in the long term.

On a final note, the full ITU unit in Nevil Hall currently empty and unused, with many of the beds from this area being taken to the grange for emergency use only recently. Staff have conferred in confidence to the members that utilising this facility could have lessened/mitigated the burden on the Grange hospital's struggling services, which are under severe COVID and standard winter A&E stress simultaneously? We are firmly aware that the majority of staff that pollinate the Grange have been moved from the Gwent and Nevil Hall to the new hospital, but nevertheless, with emergency bank nursing protocols in place, this must surely be an option to lessen the burden on the Grange.

There is no malice, prejudicial views or ill reasoned thinking in this communication, but we write to you with good motives for 'bonum commune communitatis', as we firmly believe that the downgrading of the Royal Gwent and especially the more Rural & Valleys based constituency of Nevil Hall, will be of further detriment to the local populous. We primarily fear that with no remedial actions implemented, these serious concerns will not be addressed until a tragedy has struck that shakes the community.

I know your incredibly busy and may think that this letter doesn't require a thoroughly adequate response. Previously we have received Insufficient replies with previous community concerns raised with the health board and also with added extreme condescension in regard to feedback from the Health Ministers office. But we hope that on this occasion that a more conciliatory response is more forthcoming.

Kind regards.

Councillor Julian Gardner (On behalf of Brynmawr Town Council)

Members

Councillor D Lyn Elias (Borough & Town)

Councillor O. M. Swales (Town)

Councillor W.K Hodgins (Borough & Town)

Councillor B.M. Sutton (Town)

Councillor R.J. Hill (Borough & Town)

Councillor T S Hughes (Town)

Councillor Mrs. D. Brown (Town)

Councillor M.I. Morgan (Town)

Councillor Nigel Boyd (Town)

Councillor Andrew Talbot (Town)

Councillor G.D. Jones (Town)

Councillor Mrs. J. Boyd (Town)

Councillor J. Sutton (Town)