

Chair
Dr Tom Frawley, CBE

Chief Executive
Mr Neil Guckian, OBE

18 November 2025

Dear Helen and members of the SOAS Committee

Re: Your letter of 13 November 2025

Thank you for your recent correspondence. I want to ensure that our planned meeting on 21 November proceeds on a constructive and transparent basis, and I would like to clarify the Trust's position on the points you have raised.

Meeting Purpose and Agenda

I acknowledge your view that the meeting was originally intended to discuss questions raised in your letter of 28 July. As confirmed in my letter of 17 October, the Trust has always been willing to address these questions and will continue to do so.

However, given the scale of the issues raised publicly by SOAS, and the importance of ensuring that the meeting gives an opportunity for both SOAS and the Trust to engage on a range of important and relevant issues, it is appropriate that both parties agree a full and balanced agenda. This is standard practice in engagement of this nature.

The additional agenda items proposed by the Trust relate directly to the context, evidence, and information that must be considered in any meaningful discussion regarding the current cessation of emergency general surgery services at SWAH, which has been in place since December 2022.

These matters are central to the concerns SOAS has raised, as SOAS has repeatedly questioned the safety of the current service and we will offer information which should provide SOAS with evidence that the service now provided for inpatients at Altnagelvin, and for ambulatory (day) surgery at SWAH are safe, and provide improved outcomes for the people of Fermanagh and West Tyrone. For these reasons, while we believe that the adjusted agenda is both appropriate and necessary, in order to ensure balance and meaningful engagement I would therefore recommend a 3 point agenda on this occasion:

1. Advise you of Western Trust's position in respect of the SOAS Roadmap document, and listen to your views on this.



2. Respond to the enquiries raised in SOAS' letter of 28 July 2025: You have stated this in your letter of 2 November 2025 as (i) Development of a Vision Plan for SWAH, (ii) Progress on RQIA Recommendations; (iii) Recruitment of Surgical Consultants and Workforce Planning; (iv) Engagement with Non-Executive Directors; (v) Ministerial Correspondence and Transparency;
3. Take you through the evidence we have which shows that the emergency general surgery service today is safer for all of the people in Western Trust area, with improved patient outcomes, and deal with any questions you have on that important issue;

Openness and Transparency

We understand SOAS's emphasis on transparency. For this initial engagement meeting, however, it would not be appropriate to livestream the discussion. We remain open to considering livestreaming for future sessions once both parties have had an opportunity to establish a constructive dialogue and agree a suitable format and provided that the arrangements would support balance, openness and transparency for both parties.

We therefore welcome an initial engagement meeting with SOAS on Friday 21 November and believe it to be very important as we hope to build the opportunity to work respectfully and constructively for the benefit of South West Acute Hospital moving forward, which can be beneficial for everyone. A live streamed meeting is something that may detract from that initial engagement, so perhaps we could look at a different approach if this is something which does not work for the SOAS Committee. May we suggest that after the initial engagement meeting on Friday 21 November, we could engage with the Fermanagh and Omagh Council to look at both SOAS and the Western Trust attending a Council meeting. To be mutually agreeable, this could be designed to allow both parties to present important information in the context of Emergency General Surgery and also any broader plans for Health and Social Care in the Fermanagh and Omagh area, which could help everyone understand the current position and future provision.

Attendance and Chairing

This first meeting will be an Executive-level engagement, which is standard practice.

While I must again state that the appointment of an independent chair is a most unusual request for a meeting with the Trust Executive, you have also rejected the Trust's view that the Chair of Fermanagh and Omagh District Council could not act as an independent chair.

We value our constructive relationship with the Council across a range of committees, including the Health and Social Care Sub-Committee. We recognise the important role of the current Council Chair, as well as his contribution to the SWAH Strategic Development Group and the Area Integrated Partnership Board and we value his contribution in all our meetings, engagements and collaborative work which has taken place over a considerable period of time.

Whilst SOAS have proposed the unusual step of having an independent chair for this first meeting, we are content to proceed without one if that becomes contentious. If however SOAS feel it is necessary, we do believe it is essential that both parties are satisfied as to the Chair's impartiality. We would like an open, balanced discussion with you about the recommendations in the SOAS Roadmap document. While the Trust values the Council Chair's contribution in all matters relating to the delivery of health social care, the Chair has also publicly supported SOAS and endorsed the SOAS Roadmap.

In light of this, we do not see how Cllr McElduff could be considered impartial, and take on the role of an impartial and independent chair for this particular engagement meeting and I have written directly to Cllr McElduff, explaining our position on this matter.

Given that this is the first time SOAS has agreed to meet members of the Trust Executive team, we are keen to share our views on the Roadmap document with you, and we hope that you will take the time to listen to them given our statutory role in the delivery of health and care services.

We had previously proposed **Martin Quinn**, Public Health Agency, as an appropriate independent and impartial chair. Mr Quinn is a senior officer in the Public Health Agency (PHA) and very experienced in the field of engagement. As you may also know the PHA is a multi-disciplinary, regional body within the Health and Social Care (HSC) system. The PHA's purpose is to work with the Department of Health (DoH), local health and social care (HSC Trusts), and other partners to improve and protect the health of the population. We feel Mr Quinn has relevant experience and credentials, and that the impartiality of the PHA on matters affecting the health and wellbeing of the population of NI is above question.

We would welcome SOAS's agreement to this proposal so arrangements can be finalised.

Restoration of Emergency General Surgery

We acknowledge SOAS' position in respect of the re-instatement of emergency general surgery in SWAH, and the strength of feeling within the community. While the ongoing engagement and visioning work as directed by Trust Board progresses, the Trust will not re-launch any consultation on a permanent change, and the temporary suspension of inpatient Emergency General Surgery at SWAH will remain in place.

As you know, Minister Swann's 2022 Review of General Surgery introduced new standards to ensure safe, high-quality care. The current clinical pathways meet those standards. Independent data show improved outcomes for Western Trust patients treated at Altnagelvin since December 2022 - including lower mortality, fewer complications, and reduced readmissions. This evidence demonstrates that the temporary arrangements are safe and effective, and we will continue to monitor them closely in line with clinical standards.



Western Health and Social Care Trust

Finally, I would like to emphasise that SWAH continues to operate as a key acute hospital within Northern Ireland's network, providing a 24/7 Type 1 Emergency Department, maternity services, full resuscitation and intensive care, and a wide range of medical specialties including respiratory, gastroenterology, and cardiology, which are so important to a growing aging population.

Next Steps

We look forward to meeting on **21 November at 2.30pm in the Fermanagh and Omagh Council Chamber**, with the arrangements proposed:

- Venue: Council Chamber
- Chair: Martin Quinn (PHA)
- Agenda: As outlined above

Thank you once again for your correspondence. We look forward to a constructive discussion.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Neil Guckian'.

NEIL GUCKIAN OBE
CHIEF EXECUTIVE