

28th July 2025

To: Neil Guckian, Chief Executive, WHSCT

Re: Paused Public Consultation

Dear Neil,

Save Our Acute Services (SOAS) notes with interest the pausing of the recent public consultation on a permanent change to emergency general surgery at SWAH.

We can genuinely claim to represent the voice of a significant section of the community which it is your responsibility to provide health and social care services for:

30,286 supported our response to the 2023 Public Consultation on the temporary suspension of EGS in SWAH

19,011 supported our response to the 2024 Public Consultation on Regional Obesity Management Service

28,494 supported our response to the 2025 Public Consultation on 'Hospitals – creating a network for Better Outcomes'

There is undoubtedly a significant amount of uncertainty and confusion among the public. We would like to ask a number of questions to enable us to feedback to our local community.

[a] Vision Plan for SWAH

We note below from the statement issued by the Department of Health on 17th July 2025

"The Minister has asked the Trust to use this time to act quickly to restore confidence by producing a vision plan emphasising how the South West Acute Hospital will be supported to meet both the needs of its current and future population."

We note your own statement also it should on 17 December 2025 -

<https://westerntrust.hscni.net/emergency-general-surgery-consultation-update/>

We are concerned that there is a differing emphasis in the two statements.

The minister was very specific in suggesting that your trust use this time to produce a 'vision plan for SWAH'.

The minister also referred to the challenges – particularly for smaller hospitals like SWAH – in maintaining and re-organising services.

Questions:

[1] Can you confirm that you do intend to take this time to develop a vision plan for SWAH as the minister has suggested - before you consider re-launching any public consultation on permanent change to surgical services?

[2] Can you also provide detail as to the actual steps that will be involved in developing this 'vision plan for SWAH':

- How long is it expected this will take?

- How will you ensure that the public are appropriately consulted?
- Will you have a public consultation on developing this vision plan?
- Will this vision plan involve updated information and feedback being gathered from the key stakeholders (other arm's length bodies, Royal colleges, community and voluntary sector, staff in both northern and southern sector, et cetera)
- Will you liaise with all relevant politicians on this?
- Will the spare bed and theatre capacity in SWAH be examined with a view to identifying how a vision plan can help assist in reducing regional waiting lists?
- Will consideration of potential cross border development, for both elective and emergency care, be considered when developing this vision plan for SWAH?
- Will you be undertaking to take detailed advice from the Patient Client Council with regard to ensuring our community fully understand and accept the basis on which a vision plan for SWAH will be developed?

[b] RQIA

Many in our community are keen to be updated on the implementation of the 10 RQIA review recommendations. We do know that your public consultation documentation included an update on this.

However, we do want to specifically ask a question in regard to some of the key updates that you gave to your various stakeholder groups during June and July this year.

We understand that a number of the 10 recommendations were given an RAG status of Green (Achieved) status – including Recommendations #1, 3 and 5. Our understanding also is that the urgent recommendation (#4) relating to Ambulance Capacity was given an Amber (Almost Achieved) status.

Question:

[3] Can you confirm what RAG status has been given to each RQIA recommendation that you have reported to your staff/unions – and that Recommendations #1, 3 and 5 have been given RAG status of Green and that Recommendation #4 has been given an RAG status of Amber?

[c] Recruitment

Again, one of the main areas that we get consistently asked questions about is with regard to the actual attempts that are being made to employ consultant general surgeons on a full-time permanent basis to the substantive positions in SWAH.

As a campaign, we know and understand the position of the Western Trust with regard to employing consultant surgeons on a 'Trust Wide' basis. It is our understanding that all such advertisements on a 'trust wide' basis have been with a base in Altnagelvin – and that none of the advertisements have been on a 'Trust wide – based in SWAH' basis.

We also do understand the statements in the Review of General Surgery with regard to clinical independencies and the importance that is attached to this.

You stated in your consultation documentation from January 2023 (on the Temporary Suspension) that in July 2021 the Trust commenced a recruitment process for consultants in SWAH. However,

from a simple 'attempt to recruit' point of view it is important for us to be able to confirm the current status of your recruitment efforts to the public.

Questions:

[4] Can you confirm the number of the attempts that have been made since July 2021 to recruit full-time permanent consultant surgeons that would be based in SWAH?

[5] Can you also confirm what is the current number of consultant surgeons – inclusive of breast consultants and any further consultants who are awaiting start dates – who provide surgical services across the Western Trust?

[d] Non-executive Directors

You will note that we have sent a number of communications to your non-executive directors in the recent past. We genuinely feel that it may be a benefit to the non-executive directors engaging with SOAS directly on a face-to-face basis.

We think that an open and frank exchange of information and views would serve to help improve the governance and accountability around specifically the organisation and delivery of surgical services across the Western Trust.

We genuinely look on this as something that would only be an aid in the development of a 'vision plan for SWAH'.

Question:

[6] Can we ask that you discuss the possibility of a direct meeting between SOAS and the non-executive directors with those non-executive directors and get back to us with a response on the outcome of that discussion?

[e] Letter from the Minister.

We do have a copy of the statement that was made from the Dept of Health on 17th of July 2025 regarding the public consultation.

We also have a copy of the article that appeared in the Impartial Reporter on 17th of July. It is clear from the contents of the Impartial Reporter article that there was more information contained within the actual letter than was referred to specifically in the ministerial statement. Again, it is important that – in the context of having a fully involved public feeding into a vision plan for SWAH – that all available information is presented to them.

Question:

[7] Can we request that you provide us with a copy of the letter that was sent from the minister for health to the Western Trust regarding the proposal to pause the consultation process?

In conclusion:

These are genuine questions.

It has long been the view of SOAS that SWAH has the potential to significantly assist in the development of the elective care framework across Northern Ireland as a whole. It is also long been our view that the barriers to the recruitment of consultant surgeons – including for emergency work – in SWAH can certainly be overcome with appropriate commitment and dedication.

We are very aware of our conversation with yourself on 10th March 2025 with regard to the difficulties you encountered with getting the North West Cancer Centre up and running and developing that key cross border element to ensure that it was viable.

You will recall our response was that we feel the same effort should and could be applied to the development of appropriate surgical services – covering both elective and emergency – in a vision plan emphasising how the South West Acute Hospital will be supported to meet both the needs of its current and future population.

We believe it is important to note that the development of a vision plan for SWAH that fully involves all stakeholders is something that we believe our community could really get behind. We think that the suggestion from the Minister presents a genuine opportunity to develop a vision plan that fully acknowledges smaller hospitals like SWAH that serve rural populations.

We look forward to your considered reply.

Yours

Helen Hamill (secretary)

SOAS Committee