



**COUNCIL MEETING
17 SEPTEMBER 2020**

QUESTION FROM MEMBER OF THE PUBLIC

Question by Tony Dowling

I speak on behalf of "Keep Our NHS Public North East", and my question relates to the alarming increase in the privatisation of our NHS.

Firstly, however, I wish to commend councillors from Gateshead for taking the lead in formulating the recent letter to the Prime Minister and Secretary of State regarding the Government's plans to restructure Public Health England. The Government's intention to create a new body in the middle of a pandemic and just before the winter months is unacceptable – there are no clear plans of how this new organisation will function, and the focus on independent private organisations instead of the existing expertise of Council and NHS professionals is negligent. Gateshead Council has taken the lead in the North East in co-ordinating this letter and standing up for the protection of the public.

Moving onto my question. You will be aware that the privatisation of the NHS has been a steady and insidious process over a number of years, and therein lies the danger. This privatisation is not happening in one fell swoop – rather a chipping away action, with an increasing number of NHS services being lost to the private sector. Here in the North East the local CCGs are awarding more and more health contracts to private sector organisations, taking nursing, medical and other direct health care away from the NHS and putting it into the hands of profit-making companies.

To give you examples:

- Vocare Ltd is a private limited company based in the North East and, over the past four years, has steadily increased in size; it now provides Urgent Care Centres at most hospitals across the North East, including Westgate Road (Newcastle), South Tyneside District Hospital, North Tyneside General Hospital, Hexham General Hospital, Wansbeck General Hospital and Pallion Health Centre (Sunderland) – Vocare shows the NHS logo in its promotional material.

- more recently, the pandemic has provided an opportunity for even more health funding to be funnelled to big business – Serco has been awarded a contract for track and trace, Deloitte has the contract for Covid 19 testing sites, and questionable contracts relating to NHS data are being made with tech companies such as Palantir, Google and Microsoft. It is clear that the sudden onset of the virus has provided cover for many private contracts to be awarded without scrutiny or competition, and there remains a danger that these quick fix solutions will remain.

- more locally, two weeks ago, our group was alarmed to learn that North Tyneside CCG had awarded a contract to a private firm called "Livi"- they will carry out virtual consultations in Primary Care across North Tyneside. Whilst this is claimed to be a pilot scheme, and to be seen as an addition to the usual GP work, it is undoubtedly part of a very slippery privatisation slope. The CCG did not inform North Tyneside Councillors of this development.

This insidious privatisation is not helped by the new "Integrated Care System", which fails to address the problems created by the 2012 Health and Social Care Act and the market economy. The long-term threat is obvious – this new mega "Integrated Care System" which spans from Cumbria across to the North East and down to Whitby will prove very attractive to multinational corporations.

At the present time in Gateshead it is yourselves, the elected members of Gateshead Council, who are jointly responsible for this plan alongside Newcastle Gateshead CCG. As CCGs are under instruction from NHS England, all Gateshead Councillors, especially those sitting on the "Health and Wellbeing Board" and the "Health Scrutiny Committee" provide the only democratic accountability within the local ICS. We are aware of the ongoing support of individual Councillors for a publicly funded and publicly provided NHS, and we ask that you are on your guard against inadvertently colluding with the political decision to dismantle our NHS.

My questions to Gateshead Council are as follows:

What is the council doing to prevent the steady and insidious NHS privatisation process as mentioned, and what will Gateshead Council do to ensure that the local "Integrated Care System" involves changes based on health and social need, rather than being driven by financial considerations that lead to further outsourcing to the private sector. We would appreciate details of your actions so far, as well as future plans.