

Petitioner submission of 12 June 2022

PE1915/D – Reinstate Caithness County Council and Caithness NHS Board

I would like to thank the Petitions Committee for the opportunity to give evidence in support of the petition.

I am here as a concerned member of the public and have no involvement in politics or council matters.

[information in italics also provided during oral evidence on 8 June 2022]

Prior to 1995 Caithness was in control of its own Council and NHS. There was shared consultant led maternity services in the Towns of Wick and Thurso (21 miles apart) and a first class general surgeon in the Wick hospital. Other than for highly specialised treatment there was very little requirement for patients to travel out of the county to access NHS services.

Caithness had its own council so had control over the budget and could make sure that the money was spent where it was needed.

Over a period of six years Caithness lost all control over its Council and health services when the Highland Council (1995) and NHS Highland (2001) came into being. Both based at Inverness.

From that point on at a local level there has been a deterioration in the services provided in Caithness by both these agencies.

The bullying culture that exists in NHS Highland is well documented in the Sturrock report and unfortunately Caithness has been at the sharp end of this culture for years.

Prior to removing our consultancy led maternity service there was a public meeting which NHS Highland attended. Unfortunately they simply did not listen and the concerns expressed were ignored and they went ahead and removed the service anyway.

NHS Highland stated that there was no clinical objection to the downgrading. This is untrue, but typical of NHS Highland culture at this time.

NHS Highland did not even listen to their own staff, one who said (and I quote) the geographical distance and transfer times between Caithness and Raigmore is greater than that accepted for a primary birthing unit and that Raigmore is absolutely not suited to the additional workload generated by these proposed changes.

The consequence of this had an enormous impact on Caithness mothers and babies and eventually resulted in babies deaths.

After the babies deaths a report was commissioned entitled "Caithness Maternity and Neonatal Services - a Public Health Review" published in 2016. One of the findings was that the babies died due to suboptimal care. It also stated that Caithness, as an area, is socio-economically deprived.

So this is what NHS Highland left us with when as they say they "redesigned the service." What a damning indictment on NHS Highland. As an aside no-one was held accountable.

One of the recommendations made in the report was that first time expectant mothers should travel the 120 miles to give birth at Raigmore hospital at Inverness.

The report completely ignored the risk to mothers and babies travelling this distance. It also stipulated that no caesarian operation should be carried out at Caithness General. So, if someone requires an emergency caesarian what happens?

The people of Caithness are desperate for this situation to be changed before we have another fatality.

We had a close call last year when a Wick lady started the journey in labour and had to stop at Golspie (1 hour away from Inverness) and gave birth to the first of her twins. She then went on to give birth to her second baby in Raigmore. It was a miracle that both mum and babies were well. There is another case of a lady giving birth in a layby also near Golspie.

This could happen again in the present circumstances.

What trauma these ladies suffered at what is supposed to be one of the happiest time of their lives.

Is this really the best outcome for our Caithness mums.

It is interesting to note that when the Scottish Health Secretary was invited to experience the journey from Caithness to Inverness in the back of an ambulance he refused, and last winter the Head of NHS Highland cancelled her trip north because of the bad weather forecast. The irony is not lost.

The statements made so far do not take into account the number of patients travelling to Inverness to attend Out patients clinics. This was averaging 14000 per year but has reduced lately due to NEAR ME.

Petition PE1845 created by Gordon Baird provides a number of suggestions for the health care needs of rural Scotland. I was particularly impressed by the following statement which I fully endorse, “**however compelling the data, managers should be driven by common sense and compassion, a value that should above all underpin any public service**” This is sadly missing in Caithness.

As of Wednesday 30th March the health secretary announced that a Consultant led maternity service will be reinstated at Dr Gray’s in Elgin after a campaign of four years. He completely ignored the plight of Caithness mothers who have to travel three times the distance of Elgin mothers to have their babies. During this time how many Elgin babies died? In Caithness 2 babies died but nothing has been done.

In the Deputy First Minister’s reply to my petition he stated that “the Board has been clear that there has been no closures of palliative care beds locally rather there has been a strengthening of services locally”. This statement is misleading as we are struggling to find any evidence to back up this statement. it seems that whenever NHS Highland have to make savings the first port of call is Caithness.

In our view, Caithness was bullied again by NHS Highland when with no consultation they attempted to close the only hospital in Thurso (Dunbar)

and then backed off after the population demonstrated their anger at more cuts to our local NHS but this did not stop NHS Highland from trying again when they tried to close the Town and County palliative care unit in Wick. There was an outcry, local feeling was very strong as this unit was a much needed resource for local families. There is no doubt that the amount of publicity generated by the local people was instrumental in NHS Highland backing off.

The Highland Council looks after an area the size of Belgium, this massive area is dominated by members from Inverness and there is no doubt where their priorities lie and it certainly is not Caithness.

What other council in Scotland is responsible for running services 120 miles away from where the council is based.

Has any other area in Scotland had to set up campaign groups in an attempt to get fair treatment? Caithness has done this with CHAT, Caithness Health Action Team, and Caithness Roads Recovery as we seem to have to fight for improvements to services that we had before we became part of Highland Council and NHS Highland. Unfortunately these groups are struggling to make a difference but will keep trying.

Our roads and pavements are in the worst state in living memory. We are told by Highland Council that the Scottish government does not give them enough money to maintain our roads but there seems to be plenty money to look after the roads in Inverness.

How in 2016 in one of the richest countries in the world did Caithness get into this situation and what has been done to rectify it? I am afraid the answer is nothing and sadly things are only getting worse despite the fact that the people of Caithness have been campaigning for years for improvements in our NHS and Council services but no-one is listening.

The local government review of 18th March 2021 said, democracy works best when built on firm foundations from the people up, and that the true measure of democracy is how well power is shared out so that the bodies charged with running the servicing of our villages and towns, cities and country do so in the interests of those who live there. We can state categorically this is not happening in Caithness under a Highland Council.

We look with envy at Orkney (our close neighbour over the Pentland firth) with their new £65 million pound hospital, their state of the art sports centre, no potholes on roads and with a budget to spend on services of 83 Million and why can't Caithness be afforded the same opportunities?

More recently Emma Roddick MSP stated publicly that there was a need for an Inverness city council, distinct from the highland council, as she felt this would better serve all areas. This was also, we understand, raised by her in Holyrood. Additionally, at the end of 2021 councillor Struan Mackay raised a motion in the highland council, seeking the "breakup of the Highland Council" saying "the motion brands regionalisation a failed experiment" and calls for ministers to "return local authorities to their most localised form possible". We gather that the motion was only very narrowly defeated and I suspect that with more preparatory work such a motion would succeed in the future.

To sum up – The Highland Council has become in our view totally divorced from the reality of life in Caithness. We have not! We urge the Scottish Government to implement changes in our local NHS services and to Highland Council to enable the people of Caithness to get the services they deserve.

Successive Scottish governments and NHS Highland and the Highland Council should hang their heads in shame over the way they have treated and are still treating the population of Caithness.