

20.10.2022

To the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee Members

Public petition PE1924

Firstly, thank you for taking the time to sit and discuss this petition at committee. The world is a crazy place just now and I can't explain how grateful the Women of the Highlands and their families are that this issue is being taken seriously.

To keep you in the loop, since the petition was heard at the Citizens Petition Committee in the spring, myself and two other ladies passionate about Women's Health, Kirsteen and Claire, established the North Highland Women's Wellbeing Hub.

Through this, we support over 500 women across the Highlands, raise awareness of medical conditions, working closely with NHS Highland and government representatives, for example Maree Todd and Jamie Stone.

The stories of postcode lottery care and inaccessibility to care are only getting worse, with accidents closing the A9 North almost daily due to increased traffic. This issue is compounded with our one and only Gynaecologist for Caithness General Hospital, going on long term illness leave in early September, without any scheduled return date. Emergency cover is still being sourced.

A recent Freedom of Information request uncovered that in the last year (29.08.2021 to 29.08.2022) a gynaecologist was available at Caithness General Hospital for 59.45% of the year. In stark comparison to 100% coverage during the same timeframe at the Balfour Hospital in Orkney.

Caithness especially, is often closed off by snow gates, accidents, lack of public transport or poor weather conditions. On these occasions the county becomes cut off, much like Orkney and therefore I believe it should be treated the same as Orkney, year-round to avoid discrimination of its residents. A recent meeting with the Scottish Air Ambulance team confirmed that the weather is indeed sometimes too poor to carry out emergency medical evacuation, especially with Wick airport lacking de-icing facilities for aircraft.

Basic diagnostic laparoscopies are, despite promises for them to return to Caithness General Hospital, still only being performed in Raigmore Hospital, 100+ miles away. Interestingly however, men can still undergo their vasectomies in Caithness, nice and close to home. Only fair enough, when sitting in a car after surgery is agony - but women should be afforded the same basic rights.

Mr Yousaf (Cabinet Sec for Health & Social Care) was kind enough to sit down with myself, Kirsteen, Claire and Mike Hayward from the NHS in the summer to discuss the Women's Health situation in the North Highlands. He agreed that something has to change, as the current state is sub optimal. However, even the Cab Sec for Health struggled to keep the specialisms of Gynaecology and Obstetrics separate in conversation. I will repeat it again - Not all women will need an Obstetrician, but almost all women in their lifespan will need to see a Gynaecologist. The Best Start North review is great, but it's not a Women's Health Review as it is Maternity based.

Without adequate Gynaecology cover for Caithness General Hospital, diagnostic scans are rarely ordered and regularly, women are discharged with opioid medications and no answers. I myself had to travel to Raigmore by car (4 hours each way and 2 overnight stays) just to be seen by a Gynaecologist and receive ultrasound scans and blood tests for acute pelvic pain.

believe the Accident and Emergency department should be utilising diagnostics far more than it does currently, at the detriment to the patient.

In my opinion we desperately need an urgent review of the Women's Healthcare services in the North Highlands (Caithness and Sutherland). Listening to women's lived experience, across all backgrounds and ages; Kirsteen, Claire and I all believe that an avoidable death will occur in the near future if the provision does not change very soon.

We are working closely with Making Rights Real and The Scottish Human Rights Commission as the current access to Women's Health care in Caithness and Sutherland appears to be in breach of the following;

- CEDAW – Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women
- ICESCR - International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights
- CRPD – Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.

Credit has to be given to the Highland Sexual Health Team for their improvement on rural access to services and the NHS Highland for rolling out the new patient hub system. Gynaecology is next on the list for digital hub access and having instant access to appointments and wait times will make patients' lives a little easier to plan while the situation hopefully begins to change.

We will not stop fighting for a positive change for the women of Caithness and Sutherland. If you wouldn't find a return journey from Edinburgh to Newcastle acceptable for routine care - why should we be expected to make a journey of the same distance on worse roads with Caithness General Hospital accessible for the vast majority of north highland patients.

I look forward to working closely with Humza Yousaf and Maree Todd in the near future, alongside the NHS Highland managers and of course, Kirsteen and Claire.

Warmest,



Rebecca Wymer



NHWWH
North Highland Women's Wellbeing Hub