**The Value of Community Hospitals**

*30th September 2016*

Throughout England, plans for transforming health and social care services for a more sustainable NHS have been prepared.

Plans released so far signal the most dramatic changes in the 150 year history of community hospitals. For instance, in East Devon, it is proposed that just 3 of the 12 community hospitals will offer inpatient beds in the future. With this change will be a reduction in community hospital step-up and step-down beds from 244 (2012) to 72 (proposed). Another example is West North & East Cumbria, where the proposals set out a rationale for closing beds in 3 community hospitals. Consultations on these Sustainability and Transformation Plans (STPs) are being held over the Autumn.

The role and function of community hospitals is being carefully scrutinised as part of this process, along with all health care services. Views vary. Some view services in small local hospitals as invaluable, particularly for rural communities, offering diagnostics, clinics, urgent care, rehabiitation and a wide range of intermediate care services. Others view community hospitals as unaffordable in todays NHS, and because of additional factors such as staffing are looking at alternative provision. Where there are bed closures proposed, some community hospitals may close altogether, and others may develop as a "community hub," with an increase in ambulatory and diagnostic services and a greater presence from associated partners such as local voluntary agencies.

The debates over the coming months will need to be informed by a full understanding of the role, contribution and potential of community hospitals with changing clinical practice, increasing needs and new technologies. The debates need to be informed by research evidence, particularly on outcomes for rehabiltation and on patient experience. Innovations and good practice need to be shared, with clear measures of impact on individual patients, the community, and the local health and care system. And there needs to be a full understanding of what the community hospitals contribute to the health and wellbeing of their communities, and how local people support their hospitals.

Citizens and community groups, such as Leagues of Friends, are already contributing to this vital debate on their local health care, and are hoping to help shape the plans for their local health services that provide "care closer to home."