

The future of NHS services at Guildhall Walk Healthcare Centre

Questions and answers

Q. Why are you closing Guildhall Walk Healthcare Centre?

A. We're not. The GP practice on the site (with about 6,000 patients) will stay in place for at least a year, until April 2017. After that time, the location of the practice will depend on which company wins the contract to run it. That could be the Somerstown Hub, John Pounds Centre, another city centre site, or even Guildhall Walk again – nothing is ruled in, or ruled out. The only certainty is that it will continue to be in, or very near to, the city centre. The other service currently based in Guildhall Walk, the 'walk-in' minor illness service, is being moved to St Mary's Treatment Centre. It will no longer be in the same place, but the service is not being lost.

Q. So what is going to happen to walk-in services in the city?

A. Currently, there are two urgent care walk-in services on Portsea Island. There is the nurse-led facility at St Mary's Treatment Centre (which can treat both minor illness, and minor injury), and the GP-led facility at Guildhall Walk (which is for minor illness only). These services were both opened within the last 10 years or so, but pressure on the local A&E service has continued to grow. Now, the proposal is to transform the St Mary's service into a single urgent care centre for the city – it will have GPs and nurses working together, it will offer care for both illness and injury, with modern facilities, diagnostics such as ultrasound and x-ray, and strong links to the ambulance service and A&E. This change will take place on 1 July 2016. The intention is that St Mary's will offer people the best-possible alternative to A&E for all health conditions except genuine medical emergencies. This change will mean that - also from 1 July 2016 - Guildhall Walk will no longer offer walk-in services to people who are not registered as patients there.

Q. And what is happening to the GP practice (as opposed to the walk-in service) at Guildhall Walk?

A. The way the practice works for its registered patients (between 6,000 – 7,000 people) will not change immediately, but there are changes ahead. Until 30 June, registered patients will see no change to their service. Between 1 July 2016 and April 2017 the opening hours are likely to reduce (although they will still be significantly greater than traditional GP opening

hours) and the option to 'walk in and wait' for an appointment will now only be available to registered patients. The practice will no longer operate as a walk-in service for the wider population – if people feel that a city centre GP service offering walk-in appointments is valuable to them, they will simply need to register there. After April 2017, a new contract for a city centre GP practice will come into effect – following the outcome of a competitive tendering process which will begin shortly. The location of the practice after this date has not yet been fixed – it will be determined by the organisation which wins the contract. The CCG will insist that it must be within, or near to, the city centre area but whether that is in the same location as now, or another site, is still open.

Q. You say that walk-in appointments at Guildhall Walk will still be available for people who register there – how does that help me, when I don't live near the city centre?

A. The rules about registering at GP practices are less strict than they used to be. If you live in Portsmouth, you can register at Guildhall Walk if you think that practice offers the right service for you. Until recently the practice was only allowed to have a maximum of 6,000 registered patients – that cap on numbers has now been lifted entirely, so the practice is able to register new patients should it wish to.

Q. Why not just leave things as they are?

A. Guildhall Walk Healthcare Centre was not set up in the same way as 'traditional' GP practices. Unlike almost every other practice, it is run by a private organisation which was given a fixed contract to deliver healthcare – funded by the NHS. Now that the fixed contract has run its course, the CCG cannot simply let that contract roll on forever – doing that would risk a legal challenge from other groups or companies keen to win the contract themselves. Therefore, it has always been a case of 'doing nothing is not an option'. Given that some change was required, the NHS decided to try to take an opportunity to improve urgent care services in the city (which are under huge pressure currently), and also start the process of making it easier for people across the whole city to see a GP seven days a week, rather than only those registered at one practice.

Q. What is happening to pharmacy services in the city?

A. Pharmacy services have changed hugely in recent years – and further improvements are now on the way. Gone are the days when a pharmacist read your prescription, and handed over medication. Pharmacists are highly trained, experienced health professionals, who can advise people, assess problems, and provide medications. Most pharmacies now have private consulting areas, too. In Portsmouth there are already 36 pharmacies which operate the 'Pharmacy First' scheme – this means that trained staff there can diagnose a host of common, minor illnesses and offer treatment to eligible patients as well. Now, these pharmacies will be able to treat an even wider range of conditions, and a wider range of people (including students, importantly) will be eligible. This improvement – particularly in

the city centre area – will mean that many people have more choice and convenience in terms of getting the help they need. It is important to note that many of the people going to walk-in centres have health concerns which can easily be addressed by a pharmacist, without needing a GP or nurse.

Q. What happens to the Guildhall Walk building after April 2017?

A. Depends on outcome of procurement process (see above). The NHS currently rents the building from a private landlord – if the provider which wins the new contract to provide GP services chooses to stay in Guildhall Walk, then they may be able to arrange that. If, however, the new provider intends to use another city centre location, that would be for them to decide.

Q. Where will you find the doctors to work at St Mary's?

A. The company running the St Mary's Treatment Centre will be in charge of recruiting the necessary staff, and is confident that it will be able to do so.

Q. Is this actually all about money?

A. The planned changes will save the local NHS an extremely small amount of money – in the region of 0.1% of the CCG's annual budget for health services. Given that, it is clear that this is not motivated by saving money – this process was initially driven by two factors. Firstly, it was known that the contracts for NHS services at Guildhall Walk were about to run out, and so had to be looked at again. Secondly, it is clear to all that emergency care services in Portsmouth are under pressure, and that new solutions are needed to make sure that local people can get the help they need, when they are facing a medical crisis. Those two factors led the CCG to start exploring ideas for improving the way NHS services work.

Q. How will these changes help to ease pressure on A&E?

A. It seems obvious - open walk-in centres and you ease pressure on A&E. Except that it doesn't seem to work like that. The St Mary's Treatment Centre was only opened in 2005, and Guildhall Walk Healthcare Centre didn't exist until 2009. So in 11 years the local NHS has opened two major walk-in services in the city, and the result...? A&E at QA is under as much pressure as ever, perhaps more so. Given that, a new approach is needed. The NHS will now create a single 'urgent care centre' at St Mary's, and the idea is that this will give people the best-ever alternative to A&E. It will have both GPs and nurses, diagnostics, long opening hours, modern facilities – in short, for anyone with an urgent health problem who doesn't need A&E, it will offer a clear, high quality option.