

## A new regime for Stockport health care

From April 1 a new body officially heads the NHS in Stockport as part of a national reorganisation that spreads market competition in health care. Stockport Clinical Commissioning Group takes over responsibility from Stockport Primary Care Trust for arranging medical and related services for local residents. Disruption has been reduced by a phased changeover. The Clinical Commissioning Group has been operating as a shadow board for a year while the Primary Care Trust faded out and its staff moved across.

The new organisation's biggest challenge is running commissioning and contracting in a new and more burdensome way. Regulations currently being appended to the Health and Social Care Act compel all CCGs to open contracts to competitive bids. Last December, Stockport NHS Watch presented a petition to the shadow CCG signed by 1,100 local people calling for the NHS to be kept as a public service and defended from privatisation.

The CCG has an annual commissioning budget of £357 million and a total of around 1,500 contracts to spend it on. While all these contracts could be opened up to private-sector bids in the long term, the core expenditure on hospital services, notably at Stepping Hill, is least likely to face imminent threat. Hospital bills take around half of the budget.

As yet, the CCG has not revealed how the process of letting contracts can be monitored by the public. A spokesperson for the CCG said recently: "Once there are procurements we will publish the notices in line with our constitution." The spokesperson said the CCG had not yet made any contracts public firstly because it had not yet been a legal entity. "Secondly it is in the process of agreeing them, and thirdly it will have to give further consideration on what is published."

Alongside the new contracting situation, the second big change brought in with the CCG is increased power for GPs. In formal terms the CCG is accountable to Stockport's general practice doctors, unlike the previous set-up whereby the Primary Care Trust was in a chain of responsibility from central government. Eight of the 15 members of the CCG's governing board are GPs chosen by their local colleagues. In addition the CCG has an annual meeting made up of one representative of each of Stockport's fifty GP surgeries. The CCG's governing board meets monthly, partly in public.

Though the GPs have the votes, their room for manoeuvre is tightly constrained by the NHS regulator Monitor and the NHS Commissioning Board, working to rules and finances set by the government.

At a time of austerity, the CCG's governors and officers face a difficult challenge in trimming budgets while improving Stockport's health record. The borough is polarised between well-off suburbs and areas of low incomes and much poor health.

A particular concern of the CCG is that people are being rushed into hospital in Stockport at 25% more than the national rate. Better primary care for people with such conditions as diabetes and asthma would reduce hospital stays, and free up some of the money the CCG currently has to pay for hospital services.