

January 6th 2014

Arriva Late & Lamentable

Arriva's privatised patient transport service kept 8,460 passengers waiting more than two hours in the first six months of its contract for Greater Manchester starting last April. Manchester Central's Labour MP Lucy Powell gained access to the bus company's records through a Freedom of Information request.

The MP told Manchester Evening News: "Arriva owe all those affected an apology and if the service is not urgently improved, then they should lose their contract."

The first few months of the privatised service are known to have been particularly difficult with Arriva resorting to taxis to augment its own vehicles. The non-emergency service is available to patients regarded as too sick or immobile to make their own way to and from hospital appointments.

Arriva won the contract from North West Ambulance Service (NWAS), the NHS organisation which continues to provide patient transport elsewhere in north-west England. Arriva is paid £10.5 million for the service annually – £3.5 million less than NWAS received previously.

An investigation by Manchester Evening News revealed almost 150 official complaints in the first month that Arriva transported patients. Complaints to Arriva continued at a high level in May, totalling 89, before gradually declining to 32 in October. One hundred and fifty complaints may not seem many from 48,000 patients transported each month, but complaints about non-emergency operators are usually at a low level which flatters the service provided.

Official complaints from NWAS's non-emergency transport elsewhere in the north-west work out at 28 per month per 48,000 passengers.

Manchester Evening News says that 250 of the complaints in the first six months of Arriva's contract were for unacceptable waiting times while 70 were because no ambulance turned up at all.

In a further indication of long waits for non-emergency transport, Wythenshawe and Oldham Hospitals have started making their own arrangements for sending some patients home more quickly. Oldham is training some of its auxiliary nurses for the work while Wythenshawe has contracted help from St John's Ambulance.

At Wythenshaw Hospital last autumn, a frail 86-year-old woman and her blind 95-year-old husband waited unsuccessfully for eight hours for Arriva transport to arrive. The case came to light because the couple are related to a journalist who publicised their ordeal.

A petition opposing the Arriva contract was signed by more than 14,000 people in 2012. The company is owned by the German government's Deutsche Bahn railways. It runs eight other patient transport services in England. Its Leicestershire service was slated by the Care

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Quality Commission in 2012 and the county's Clinical Commissioning Group docked it £12,000 early last year for poor performance.

Non-emergency patient transport in the north-west including Greater Manchester was reorganised under the leadership of Bury and Blackpool Primary Care Trusts in a process beginning in 2008. One of the aims was to 'consolidate' the service which at that time was split into 70 different contracts.

All the region's NHS ambulance operators had been united into one body, NWAS, in 2006 so the way was open for one NHS-provided service throughout the region operating to improved common standards. But, instead, the primary care trusts said they needed to carry out 'market testing' involving the private sector to achieve the best price.

Because the timetable for the reorganisation started to slip, NWAS was offered an interim contract for the whole region for a year in 2010. The temporary arrangement sparked a challenge from the private sector to the NHS's Co-operation and Competition Panel, and full competitive tendering was ordered with the region split into five contracts to assist non-NHS bidders.

All five contracts set improved standards for non-emergency transport, but the 'key performance indicators' remain unambitious. For example, it is acceptable for 10% of patients to be collected from hospital more than 90 minutes after the ambulance service is told that they are ready to travel. Thus the 8,460 patients discovered by Lucy Powell to have been left waiting more than two hours may not be a breach of Arriva's contract.