



PERTH AND KINROSS INTEGRATION JOINT BOARD

26 OCTOBER 2022

CONSULTATION ON ATHOLL MEDICAL PRACTICE APPLICATION TO NHS TAYSIDE BOARD TO AMEND THEIR GMS CONTRACT AND TO CLOSE THE BRANCH SURGERY IN BLAIR ATHOLL

Report by Head of Health
(Report No. G/22/160)

PURPOSE OF REPORT

The purpose of this report is to inform the Integration Joint Board (IJB) of the request by Atholl Medical Practice to NHS Tayside Board to vary their General Medical Services (GMS) contract to allow the permanent closure of the Blair Atholl branch. This report sets out the findings of the consultation and engagement exercise.

1. RECOMMENDATION(S)

It is recommended that the Integration Joint Board (IJB):

- Note the application made by the Atholl Medical Centre to close their branch surgery premises in Blair Atholl in accordance with [Part 8 - Variation and Termination of Contracts of the National Health Service \(General Medical Services Contracts\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 2018](#);
- Note the outcomes of the consultation carried out by the Atholl Medical Centre supported by the Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP);
- Note the recommendations within the report that a full Equalities Impact Assessment is carried out in advance of the decision by NHS Tayside along with exploration of the potential for the provision of community transport to alleviate transport difficulties; and
- Provide comment for NHS Tayside to take into account in its decision.

2. SITUATION / BACKGROUND / MAIN ISSUES

Atholl Medical Centre wrote to NHS Tayside in June 2021 and submitted a formal application in September 2021 to request a contractual change and to close the Blair Atholl branch for the reasons described in the report. The practice informed the HSCP that representatives had engaged with local elected members, Member of Scottish Parliament and the Blair Atholl and

Struan Community Council in November 2021 to present and update them regarding the proposal and consultation.

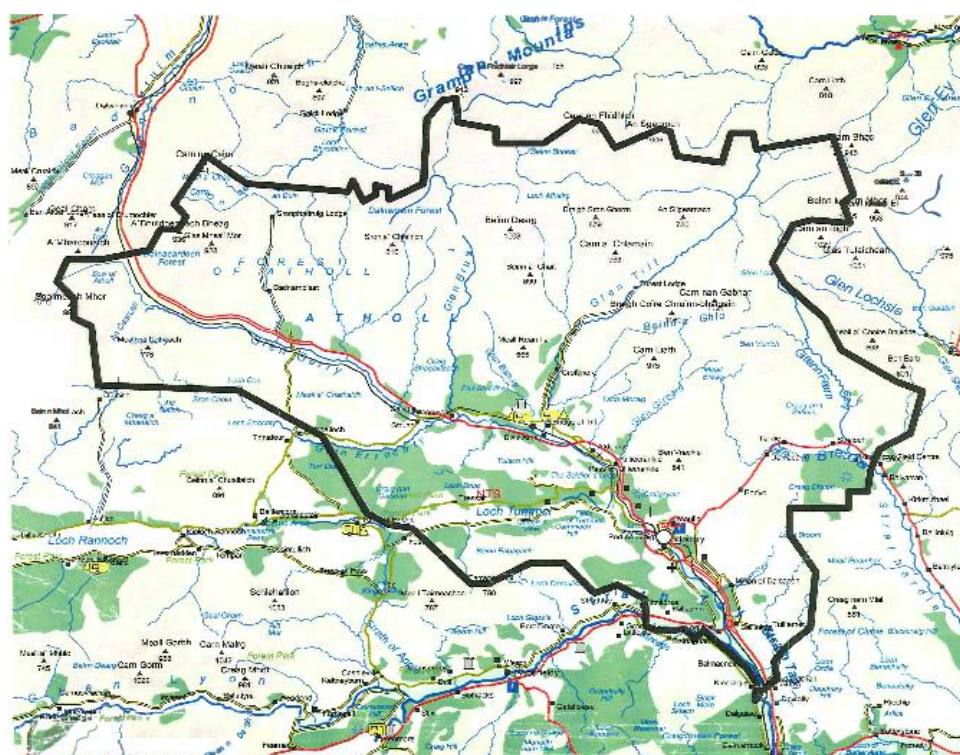
In March 2022, it was agreed with the practice that they would carry out a consultation with patients and that this would be supported by the HSCP. This work commenced in June 2022 and was completed in September 2022 with the outcomes of the consultation presented in this report.

The Tayside Primary Care Improvement Plan outlined the challenges for delivery of general practice services. The General Medical Services contract and related memorandum of understanding proposes plans to improve this situation over the coming years.

Some of the service developments outlined will replace services currently provided by General Practitioners (GPs) but GPs remain at the core of general practice. The aim to recruit more doctors into the profession is one which is unlikely to change significantly in the next two to three years.

There are a number of practices in Perth & Kinross, and more widely in Tayside, which have been unable to recruit to GP vacancies, including those who would normally attract a high number of applicants. Atholl Medical Practice is one of those practices which has experienced a difficulty in recruitment since 2017.

Atholl Medical Centre GP practice boundary is as below:



The Dunkeld and Aberfeldy GP practices accept patients in some parts of the practice boundary for Atholl Medical Centre.

3. REASONS FOR THE PROPOSAL

The reasons for the application arise from the following:

- the increased workload across the Primary Care Team, which has been exacerbated by the impact of Covid 19 on the practice;
- lack of available permanent GP sessions to cover the Blair Atholl branch surgery;
- increasing concerns regarding the safety of GPs lone working when at Blair Atholl branch surgery;
- the inappropriate accommodation at the Blair Atholl branch surgery due to outdated, confined and dilapidated premises;
- the service provided at Blair Atholl branch surgery was already limited to a maximum of 6 hours per week dependant on the number of appointments requested.; and
- there is the full range of GP and community based services provided from the large modern purpose-built premises in Pitlochry.

The practice has a patient list size of 4,923 patients. There is a significant expansion of temporary patients during the summer season. Approximately 841 patients have an address in Blair Atholl or the area to the north thereof. There is no Chemist, Optometrist or Dentist in Blair Atholl, with all these services being provided in Pitlochry.

Due to the pandemic and pressures on the practice there have not been any services at the Blair Atholl surgery since 10th March 2020. By comparison, between 60 and 90 patients are seen in Pitlochry each day.

Atholl Medical Practice has had two Partner GPs leave the practice, which has had a significant impact on their ability to provide GP appointments. The Practice has been unable to recruit new permanent GPs / partners to the vacancies, despite several attempts to do so. This has been ongoing since November 2017. These difficulties will be further compounded as a result of an anticipated GP retiral scheduled in about 12 -18 months. If no permanent replacements are found by that point the Practice will be in real crisis.

Atholl Medical Centre currently has one full time and three part-time GPs providing 26 sessions per week (one session equates to 4 hours). The practice has now been successful in securing a locum for 6 month's duration providing for 6 sessions per week (24 hours) due to start in October 2022.

The practice is proposing to continue to consolidate all services on one site, this model of delivery was implemented from March 2020 as a result of the pandemic restrictions and according to the practice has proven to maximise the limited GP resources available, whilst ensuring the safety of both patients and staff. All staff will continue to work from the main site in Pitlochry.

Although there has been no direct increase in staff numbers in this context, it has been found that having staff on one site increases the flexibility to support

the range of demands on the team, reduced travel time and therefore increased available appointments for patients whilst allowing all team members to have consistent support on site.

There has not been regular services provided in Blair Atholl other than GP consultations prior to March 2020. All other aspects of primary care for patients residing in Blair Atholl have been provided through Atholl Medical Centre in Pitlochry including; all telephone enquiries, all acute consultations, all telephone consultations, all repeat prescription requests, home visit requests, all intimate examinations and all practice nurse appointments, chronic disease clinic appointments etc. The Blair Atholl premises were not staffed. There is no telephone line to the surgery, although there is a remote IT link in the premises.

During the pandemic, Atholl Medical Centre Practice has continued to provide all these services for all residents of Blair Atholl. The patients will remain registered with the Atholl Medical Centre and will continue to see the GP team they have been seeing. The Practice has concluded that the safest option is to remain with consolidation of all of their services on one site and proceed to request approval to secure the permanent closure of the Blair Atholl branch surgery.

4. FEEDBACK ON PROPOSAL TO CLOSE THE BRANCH SURGERY

In order to assess the impact of the proposed closure, a range of methods have been used to seek feedback from patients about any concerns they have about this proposal and any mitigation they would like to be put in place. Perth & Kinross Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP) and the Practice wrote jointly to all patients registered to receive services from Blair Atholl branch surgery. This covered all patients who would be directly affected by the proposed changes, to seek feedback and to advise of 4 comment box locations in Blair Atholl and Pitlochry. The letter was supported by a frequently asked questions (FAQ) a postage paid envelope to provide a written response. Social media was used to promote the consultation and the letter and FAQ were also posted on the practice website.

Posters and a feedback form were developed and made available at Atholl Medical Practice and at 3 community venues (Atholl Stores, The Square, Blair Atholl, Tilt Stores, Main Street, Blair Atholl and at Pitlochry Community Hospital.)

An email address was made available for electronic written responses.

A total of 22 written comments either through comments cards or email were received. The Practice did not receive any phone enquiries or comments on social media.

Feedback was very positive about the services people receive from the practice with 3 out of the 22 responses expressing no concerns in the closure of the Blair Atholl Surgery.

Reasons for Blair Atholl residents' objections to the proposed permanent closure of the Blair Atholl Branch Surgery:

Public transport infrastructure: 18 out of the 19 remaining comments raising objections raised concerns regarding the lack of public transport between Blair Atholl and Pitlochry and growing concerns over the potential for some people to put off seeking medical attention if they must travel to Pitlochry, causing more serious health issues in the longer term.

Aged demographic: 15 out of the 19 remaining comments expressed concerns regarding there being an unusually high percentage of elderly population in Blair Atholl, which results in it being more difficult to access public transport, especially during the winter months due to mobility issues. An aged population also results in it being less likely that these individuals have access to their own private transport.

The need for proper consultation: 3 out of the 19 remaining comments were concerned that the decision had already been taken to permanently close the Blair Atholl Surgery before a proper consultation has taken place, therefore fear their comments will not have an impact.

Limited Access to IT: 1 out of the 19 remaining comments expressed concerns over the predominately elderly population of Blair Atholl not having the resources to access help online, therefore the closure of the surgery would increase the risks of more serious health issues.

Blair Atholl & Struan Community Council raised an objection to the proposed permanent closure of the Blair Atholl Surgery. The Community Council indicated that they were concerned that moves to secure a permanent closure had been taken by the Medical Centre team before a consultation had taken place. The Community Council wished to note the following concerns:

"Transport issues: It is difficult for residents to access the proposed surgery by public transport, given the restricted bus service and the almost non-existent (and expensive) train service. Many of those who need medical care do not own or drive cars; the Blair Atholl & Struan catchment area has an unusually high percentage of older people (and especially, very elderly people and people living with infirmity). It is also extremely difficult for parents with young children to manage appointments in Pitlochry. Residents have advised them that while it is ok to ask for help from a neighbour occasionally, this cannot become a regular occurrence when repeat visits to see a doctor or nurse are needed.

Medical issues: Without a local branch surgery, two outcomes seem likely, both of which will place significant pressure on the NHS. Firstly, more people will ask for home visits, and at the same time, more people may put off asking for help until their conditions are so advanced that they have become more serious.

Environmental issues: All residents agree that it would be much better for the environment if routine vaccinations (for example, for the flu or pneumonia) could be conducted in the village, instead of potentially hundreds of patients making separate journeys into Pitlochry.

Public health issues: It is widely accepted that those who are able to access care close to home are likely to make a speedier and better recovery from illness or a traumatic event. With this in mind, keeping provision as local as possible is always to be encouraged (and in line with Scottish Government policy).

Financial/IT/practical issues: Blair Atholl and its hinterland have a high percentage of residents living in old, draughty houses that they can ill-afford to heat adequately. They need to be able to access help locally because they cannot afford to do anything else. The community also has a lot of people who have no access to smart phones, tablets and computers. This means that online support is simply beyond the means and experience of many. It is vital that the NHS finds helpful ways of caring for people in isolated, rural areas such as this one.”

5. CONSIDERATION OF OPTIONS

The practice has requested to vary their General Medical Services (GMS) contract to allow the permanent closure of the Blair Atholl branch. The Perth & Kinross Health & Social Care Partnership has worked with the practice in order to support an effective and robust consultation with patients and has considered the potential options.

The responses to the consultation indicate that this proposal has a potential negative impact for some protected characteristic groups. Those with a physical disability, along with older people and those with young children (who are more likely to have mobility issues) may be negatively impacted because of the additional travel from Blair Atholl to Pitlochry that would be required.

Those on low incomes may also be impacted negatively because of travel costs at a time when the Cost of Living is also increasing. It is anticipated that the number of people affected will be small for the former, and limited for the latter.

The practice has recognised the associated requirement to provide more home visits as a result of the proposed change. District Nurses also provide cover and Vaccination of housebound in the local area is also in place. It is recommended that a full Equality Impact Assessment is carried out by NHS Tayside in advance of the Board’s decision. It is also recommended that there is consideration of the possibility and resources required to implement community support for travel to GP appointments such as a volunteer driver scheme.

6. CONCLUSION

Atholl Medical Centre wrote to NHS Tayside in June 2021 and submitted a formal application in September 2021 to request a contractual change and to close the Blair Atholl branch for the reasons outlined in Section 3 of this report. It was agreed with the practice that a full consultation with patients would be carried out, supported by the HSCP. The outcomes of the consultation are set out in this report. The Practice has reviewed the consultation comments and wishes to proceed with the application for branch closure and to amend the contract; Part 8 - Variation and Termination of Contracts of the National Health Service (General Medical Services Contracts) (Scotland) Regulations 2018

It is recommended that the IJB notes the reasons for the request by the Atholl Medical Centre to permanently close the Blair Atholl branch and acknowledge the outcome of the consultation and the support provided by P&K HSCP. It is also recommended that the IJB notes the recommendation for an Equalities Impact Assessment to be carried out in advance of the decision by NHS Tayside and for further exploration of the possibility of support for local transport in a rural location.

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NOTE: No background papers, as defined by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (other than any containing confidential or exempt information), were relied on to any material extent in preparing this report.

1. IMPLICATIONS, ASSESSMENTS, CONSULTATION AND COMMUNICATION

Strategic Implications	Yes / None
HSCP Strategic Commissioning Plan	NO
Transformation Programme	NO
Resource Implications	
Financial	NO
Workforce	NO
Assessments	
Equality Impact Assessment	YES
Risk	NO
Other assessments (enter here from para 3.3)	NO
Consultation	
External	YES
Internal	YES
Legal & Governance	
Legal	NO
Clinical/Care/Professional Governance	NO
Corporate Governance	NO
Directions	NO
Communication	
Communications Plan	NO

1. Strategic Implications

1.1 Strategic Commissioning Plan

N/A

2. Resource Implications

2.1 Financial

N/A

2.2 Workforce

N/A

3. Assessments

3.1 Equality Impact Assessment

Recommendation that this is carried out by NHS Tayside in advance of their decision in relation to the application.

3.2 Risk

N/A

3.3 Other assessments

N/A

4. Consultation – Patient/Service User first priority

4.1 External

Perth & Kinross Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP) and the Practice jointly wrote to all patients registered to receive services from Blair Atholl branch surgery who were directly affected by the proposed changes, to seek feedback and to advise of 4 comment box locations in Blair Atholl and Pitlochry. The consultation reflected the limited use of the branch surgery in Blair Atholl. The letter was supported by a frequently asked questions (FAQ). Social media was used and the letter and FAQ were also posted on the practice website.

Posters and a feedback form were developed and made available at the Practice and at 3 community venues. An email address was made available for electronic written responses

4.2 Internal

NHS Tayside Communications Team have assisted with the communications and responded to media enquiries in relation to the application.

4.3 Impact of Recommendation

N/A.

5. Legal and Governance

5.1 N/A

6. Directions

N/A

7. Communication

7.1 N/A

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS/REFERENCES

N/A

9. APPENDICES

None