

STATEMENTS MADE AT PUBLIC MEETING ON 1ST AUGUST BY BLAKENEY PARISH COUNCIL AND DISTRICT CLLR

STATEMENT FROM ROSEMARY THEW, CHAIR OF BLAKENEY PARISH COUNCIL

‘I am Rosemary Thew, chairman of Blakeney parish council and I am delighted to introduce Nigel Sutcliffe, our vice chairman and Victoria Holliday, our District councillor. Both have worked tirelessly to campaign to keep Blakeney surgery open.

As Nigel will say, Blakeney parish council has been campaigning, for some years now, against the closure of the surgery. We are very grateful to Victoria for all her help and have also had support from other parish councils whose residents will be affected. This isn't just an issue for Blakeney.

Blakeney surgery provides an essential service. It serves a rural population who should enjoy the same level of support as those living in Holt. You will hear about the impracticability of getting to Holt, or worse, Melton Constable, by public transport. And a high proportion of those living locally are older and do not have access to a car or family to drive them.

I personally have driven a disabled patient, needing medical care, from a point very close to Blakeney surgery and taken them to Melton Constable. That is manifestly silly. There is an impact on the carbon footprint and the journey is not easy. When one finally arrives at Melton Constable, the car park is inadequate. I regularly take patients from Blakeney-often in their 80s or 90s, for flu or covid jabs. They need to go to Holt. Again, the effect on the environment is adverse, plus the inconvenience. They often tell me that the effort of going to Holt, and, sometimes, having to stand in long queues has wiped them out for the day.

This campaign has the support of our local MP. Unfortunately, Duncan Baker can't be here this evening, but he has provided a statement. He has also mounted a survey across his constituency which overwhelmingly demonstrated the concern about closure. Healthwatch have done a further survey with exactly the same result. Some of the comments made by respondents are very sad and show just how badly the closure would hit them.

Nigel will now tell you about some of the work done to prevent what many believe to be a badly thought out decision.’

STATEMENT FROM NIGEL SUTCLIFFE, VICE CHAIR OF BLAKENEY PARISH COUNCIL

'The Future of Blakeney Surgery

The background to this issue starts in 2018 when Holt Medical Practice was subject to its last Care Quality Commission Inspection. The report from that, published on the 24th August 2018, showed that its overall rating was good. At that time Blakeney branch surgery was opened all day Monday, Tuesday and Friday and for a half day on Wednesday and Thursday. It had a dispensary and provided a full range of medical support.

At some stage since that report, but before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the dispensary was withdrawn, and this was followed by the removal of all face-to-face consultations with either a doctor or a nurse.

Clearly Covid-19 happened, and everyone understood the need to respond to that. However, what was happening was that the facilities at Holt Medical Practice and Melton Constable surgery were being improved whilst Blakeney surgery had no investment made into it.

I brought this issue to Blakeney Parish Council and the result was that a letter dated 25th November 2021 was sent to Holt Medical Practice to seek a date when Blakeney surgery would return to the provision of a level of medical service that it used to provide to the community.

Other issues identified in the letter were that many members of the community are elderly, or infirm. It is worth noting that North Norfolk has the highest proportion of population that is over 65 years of age in England and Wales. In addition to that to get from Blakeney to Holt or Melton Constable the distance is either 6.5 miles or 9.5 miles respectively. This creates a more difficult journey requiring patients to drive, take a taxi (which is expensive) or rely upon a friend or family member to take them. Public transport is virtually non-existent. It was also pointed out to them that this impacted adversely upon their patient's individual carbon footprint at a time when we were all expected to be reducing it and not increasing it!

This reduced use of Blakeney surgery also impacted on other communities who used it such as at Cley, Morston, Stiffkey, Salthouse, Wiveton, Langham, Binham, Field Dalling and Letheringsett.

It should be noted at this point that the other Parish Councils that represent these villages are supportive of our actions with some having written to Holt Medical Practice to express that support and raise their own concerns at the reduction in

the medical services provided at Blakeney surgery. The local MP Mr Duncan Baker was included in our original circulation list and he has also been very supportive of our campaign.

Holt Medical Practice replied in a brief letter dated 6th December 2021 where they identified "...staffing inconsistencies due to Covid.." as being the main issue.

A further letter was sent to Holt Medical Practice on the 18th January 2022. It noted their reply but sought clarity on issues they did not answer in the original letter.

A reply to this was received dated 28th March 2022. It identified mainly the problems with funding and stated that "Sadly, at this time, we cannot guarantee the future of Blakeney Surgery, either in terms of it re-opening for regular face-to-face appointments or what services will or will not be offered there should it re-open".

The next action taken by Blakeney Parish Council was to prepare a template that all parishioners could complete and send to the Executive Partner GP of Holt Medical Practice to express their concern at the current lack of medical provision at Blakeney surgery and seeking a return to a full range of such services. This template was published in the December 2022 edition of the Glaven Valley News. It is unfortunately not known how many parishioners replied.

It is worth noting that Blakeney Parish Council was concerned that the current level of service provision at Blakeney surgery was already a de facto closure of the surgery. Research identified a manual titled 'The NHS Primary Medical Care Policy and Guidance'. This stated that "...branch services should be held to the same standard level as a 'main surgery'.." It also identified that if a branch is to close then a 'Commissioner' is appointed for full consideration of the impact of such a closure which includes a consultation with the public. Holt Medical Practice, at this point, had not complied with these requirements.

On the 8th December 2022 our MP Mr Baker organised a 'zoom' meeting with representatives of Blakeney Parish Council, Holt Medical Practice and himself. It was clear that Holt Medical Practice were not aware of the above mentioned manual and they repeatedly stated they lacked the funding to resume providing the level of medical services to Blakeney surgery that they used to have.

On the 2nd February 2023 Blakeney Parish Council received an e-mail from Holt Medical Practice indicating that Blakeney surgery is to close. In that regard they will now be complying with the manual mentioned earlier. That process is overseen by the NHS Norfolk and Waveney Integrated Care Board.

On the 23rd February 2023 a letter was sent to the Integrated Care Board signed by the Parish Council and our MP Mr Baker outlining what has transpired so far and seeking our active involvement in the process.

A letter dated 15th March 2023 has been received from the Integrated Care Board in response to the above letter which confirms that Holt Medical Practice want to close Blakeney surgery on the grounds it is no longer economically viable. That decision is why this open meeting is taken place as part of their consultation process to close it.

It is worth noting at this point that Blakeney Parish Council made an application to North Norfolk District Council for Blakeney surgery to be considered as an Asset of Community Value. North Norfolk District Council rejected the application but quoted several issues raised by Holt Medical Practice that impacted on their decision process to our application. These included the lack of face-to-face consultations since 2020 was used as a reason why the surgery building could not be considered as an Asset of Community Value. In addition Holt Medical Practice used the Chaplin Farrant report, dated 20th July 2021, on the condition of Blakeney branch surgery as a reason to support their case in that the report said that the condition of the surgery advocated for ceasing its operation for public use and this was another reason for opposing our application.

I mentioned earlier that no investment has been made by Holt Medical Practice in Blakeney surgery despite the fact they receive a rental income for it.

Our concern is that the whole attitude of Holt Medical Practice is fixed upon the closure of Blakeney Branch Surgery at all costs with their being no room for compromise and little regard for the wishes of patients or their overall welfare for the reasons already outlined.'

STATEMENT FROM DR VICTORIA HOLLIDAY, DISTRICT CLLR

'There has been a doctor in Blakeney since 1912. Before that, Blakeney residents were looked after by the CLEY doctor, we think from 1839. So, for over 180 years, there has been a local doctor looking after Blakeney and surrounding villages. I was one of them.

Now it's proposed to end this tradition. If Blakeney surgery closes, the nearest medical care for Blakeney residents will be a 14-mile round trip to High Kelling or a 20-mile round trip to Melton Constable.

Almost a fifth of Blakeney residents don't have a car. My interrogation of Sanders Coaches timetables indicates it will be an almost 4hr round trip from Blakeney by bus with two changes to High Kelling. It will be a 5 1/2 hr round trip to Melton.

It's similar or worse for residents in nearby villages. For MORSTON, which is 3 mins by bus from Blakeney, it would be more than a 2 1/2 round trip with four changes to High Kelling (hopefully just squeaking in before morning surgery closes) and It's not even possible to get to Melton.

For those living in Weybourne, who are an 18 min bus journey to Blakeney, it would be an almost 2hr round trip to High Kelling or a 3hr plus round trip to Melton.

Sanders do their best, and we're lucky to have them - it's just that these trips are very cross country.

85% of England's population live within a twenty-minute walk of their GP practice, so these long journeys are inequitable.

Over 40% of Blakeney residents are over 65 and over a quarter of these live alone. Over a tenth of residents say their day-to-day activities are limited a lot, and 6% say they are in bad health. How will these residents cope with a three, four- or five-hour bus journey with multiple changes? It's not just older residents. How could a young mother manage with two children in a pushchair? These patients will be disenfranchised and unable to access health care.

Under the NHS constitution, patients have the right not to be unlawfully discriminated against in the provision of services on the grounds of age and disability, and the NHS pledges to provide 'convenient easy access to services'. I argue the closure of Blakeney Surgery won't comply with the NHS Constitution and patients' rights. Patients' health will suffer.

And what about the impact of this closure on climate change? I calculate the carbon footprint of patients travelling from Blakeney and surrounding villages to High Kelling or Melton to be almost 19 tonnes of carbon dioxide a year, or more than three return trips from London to Sydney. This would need to be offset by planting 732 trees annually. The planet will suffer.

We wait to hear the reasons for closing the surgery. The practice may well say they don't have enough doctors to staff Blakeney. However, I am told there are 8 full time equivalent GPs. My understanding is, that in areas with the highest number of over 65 yr olds (such as Blakeney), the average qualified GP looks after just less than 2000 patients. 8 GPs should therefore be enough to look after the approximately 14,500 patients in the practice, especially as there are also 10.5 full time equivalent clinical staff, such as nurses and paramedics.

The practice may possibly tell us it's too expensive to maintain the branch surgery. I notice from the accounts which have been provided to us that the overall premises reimbursement to the practice last year by the NHS was more than the actual overall cost. I may be misinterpreting the figures, but that would seem to indicate the premises - which I would understand to include Blakeney - are paid for.

My contention is that Blakeney surgery could and should remain, and I hope you will support me.'