TravelWatch – *ISLE OF MAN*

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Representing and promoting the interests of Isle of Man Passengers

The New Patient Transfer Contract: Notes from Public Meeting on 18 March 2017

Introduction:

Some six years ago, the then newly appointed patient transfer firm failed to perform satisfactorily, and after several weeks was replaced by Bridgewater Cars, who have provided an excellent service. Their contract ends during March 2017, and the public expects the Dept of Health's new firm to deliver a quality caring service.

What Patient Transfer Involves:

When the Isle of Man NHS decides to send a patient for treatment in a NW England hospital, the appointment details are sent to the Dept of Health's Patient Transfer Office who book flights or sea crossings, and then they send a travel warrant to the patient. The patient transfer contract comes into action when patients arrive at the UK airport or port, ready for transfer to hospital.

The contract requires a flexible service using caring drivers and the right vehicles. Typically, several dozen patients arrive at 8am at Liverpool airport, where they are met and escorted to the relevant taxi or minibus. Destinations can include hospitals in Liverpool (Royal, Women's, Aintree, Broad Green, Alder Hey) or further afield such as Clatterbridge (Wirral) or Wrightington (near Wigan). If the Liverpool flight is full, patients may have to be met at Manchester airport. Requirements can include wheelchair accessible vehicles, child seats, and sometimes the patient numbers can differ from what was expected. Patients must be taken promptly to the correct hospital entrance, not by circuitous routes, in order to be in time for appointments. At the hospital drop-off, drivers must agree pick-up times for return journeys, to fit in with expected discharge times and check-in times for the return flight or crossing.

The return from hospitals is more complex as patient appointments sometimes run late, or patients are discharged later than expected, and it is not always possible to notify the taxi firm in advance. Therefore, drivers are expected to show initiative and to take reasonable steps to find their passengers and transport them in time for the return to the Island.

Start of New Contract Service:

The award of the new contract to ComCab (Liverpool) was on Thursday 16 March, for the new service to start on Monday 27 March. Does this eleven day mobilisation period allow sufficient time for the new contract holder to train a pool of staff (from their 350 taxi fleet) to become fully familiar with the service requirements?

When will full information be sent to patients re the new service date, service provider and contact phone number, so that they know what to expect? Travel warrants are issued up to 4 weeks in advance, and so what is the Dept of Health doing to update patients who already have travel warrants for journeys after 27 March, which only have Bridgewater contact details?

TravelWatch urges that the Dept of Health issues the following information to all patients:....

----ComCabs 24/7 telephone number, in case problems arise. (Their "customer service" number is only available 0900 - 1700 Monday – Friday.)

----Dept of Health out-of-hours contact number (before 0900 and after 1700) in case problems are not resolved when the Patient Transfer Office is currently closed.

----Contact details for patients to provide (non-urgent) feedback, such as on helpfulness of staff, to Dept of Health (ie telephone, email and post address. This telephone number should not be to the Patient Transfer Office, as this could be a distraction for the hard-working staff.)

Monitoring the Contract:

At the start of the contract, will there be a Dept of Health representative in Liverpool to resolve problems, so that vulnerable and stressed patients are not used as guinea pigs? How does the Dept of Health intend to monitor the contract, with weekly meetings, for a service 70 miles away?

To Summarise:

Mistakes were made some six years ago, when the appointment process resulted in a contractor who failed to deliver, and who had to be replaced at short notice. Minister Beecroft was made aware in ample time, when she took office in 2016, of the sensitivity of the patient transfer contract, and of the need to ensure the tender and contract process produces a quality of service no less than that provided by Bridgewater. It is to be hoped that lessons have been learned, and that the new service will be a success.