

Having been through a similar process in South Woodham Ferrers (SWF) as the one proposed in Burnham, I think the advice is 'learn from our mistakes.' In our case, all the facilities in the town were closed (against the wishes of the patients) and relocated to a new health centre on the northern perimeter of the town.

**Closure of Healthcare Facilities in SWF:** In addition to the closure of all the GP practices, the town centre Health Clinic (which was very popular with patients - see <http://www.woodhamhealthcare.co.uk/>) was closed without any form of public consultation. This was despite strong opposition to the closure by the Patient Participation Groups (PPGs) but, unfortunately, patient representation was fragmented and another 'Group' (which did not canvas patient opinion) raised no objection to its closure - so it ended up being sold off to the private sector and the sum raised appears to have disappeared into an NHS black hole.

In Burnham the town councillors are taking an interest (the GPs weren't aware of any involvement by the SWF Town Council) and the patients have organised an effective action group - so, unlike us, you appear to be presenting a united front.

**Promised Transport:** Patients in SWF were promised that transport would be provided in order to take those who were potentially disadvantaged by the changes - e.g. those without their own transport, the elderly and those with mobility problems - to the new health centre. A mini-bus was mentioned and a fairly substantial sum of money was provided by the developer. Needless to say the mini-bus didn't materialise and patients were then told that a payment had been made in order to bring about an improvement in the bus service. Nobody noticed any improvement ... indeed the bus service is now far worse than it was previously.

**Promised Services:** Patients were also told that all the services that were available within the town prior to the reorganisation would continue to be available in the new medical centre. Here's what was said in answer to a list of 'frequently asked questions'...

Q: "Will all current medical services on offer by the three current surgeries be offered at the new surgery?"

A: "Yes, services will remain the same. Opportunities for improvements through closer cooperation and through other medical and community services also being based in the building should arise, however."

What's more: "Services currently based in the SWF Clinic have all been invited to move to Crouch Vale Medical Centre as noted in the answer to question 23 to offer more joined-up care for local patients." (See: <https://www.mysurgerywebsitemobile.co.uk/website/F81721/files/9th-january-2019-supplimentary-questions.pdf>)

This appears to have been somewhat of an exaggeration. Here's one example: spirometry, a basic test of lung function (see: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/spirometry/> for an explanation) At one time, at least two of the surgeries in SWF offered spirometry. I heard from two patients, one of whom is having to wait a long time for an appointment as she's been told the service is no longer available here, and from another who had to go to Braintree (and on a 'bad traffic day' the round trip took her an hour and 50 minutes for a test that only takes a few minutes). It has now been officially confirmed that the plug was pulled on the SWF service at the end of last year.

Minor surgery, seemingly, is another example. This used to be readily available in the area but is no longer.

The closure of St Peters Hospital without first having put an alternative in its place (which is inexcusable given the fact that decades have passed since this was first mooted and vast sums of taxpayer's money have been wasted) makes the lack of facilities in SWF even more of a problem.

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**Surveys:** A mini-survey of SWF patients conducted by a Burnham resident when the possibility of a rejigging the healthcare services in Burnham first came to light, showed that a majority of the patients who responded preferred the system as it was to the new 'out of town' facility. There is a wide gulf between what patients think makes a good practice and what the NHS thinks a practice should be like.

Another relatively recent survey (conducted in SWF for the benefit of SWF patients) showed that the vast majority of the elderly patients who responded were extremely dissatisfied with the new arrangements. This was because Essex County Council, which was responsible for the development of the new town, had a 'vision' for a central 'medical hub' - and, accordingly, many of the residences for the elderly were grouped around this 'hub.'

Many elderly patients moved in because they could easily access healthcare - only to find, when the nearby facilities were closed, that they became dependent on relatives or a very expensive taxi service to get them to and from the new health centre.

*The problem was that, in SWF, nobody tried to formulate a cohesive plan that would bring benefits to the majority and disadvantage nobody.* The new building should have been considered as one constituent of an integrated and well thought out plan for the future, rather than a 'like-it-or-lump-it one-size-fits-all' facility. Given our 'not fit for purpose' planning system, nobody at any stage asked: "Is this going to work?"

I, for one, take a share of the blame. In common with some of my colleagues I woke up too late to the fact that the plan was to close ALL the health facilities within the town.

**Negotiation:** So, the bottom line is: continue to discuss the options and then decide what is best for Burnham (which may involve a new facility as part of the plan for the future) and agree where the facility or facilities should be situated. It goes without saying that you'll have to involve all the key parties, such as 'the local' NHS and the practice personnel (trying to deal with the friction which is a feature wherever you go) - and maybe compromise a bit, but not too much.

I wish you luck - but, judging by standard of the comments here and the publicity generated, you won't need it.

**Dr John Cormack**