

Opinion

Keep up good work on crime

TODAY'S crime figures – which show offences falling across the county – make very good reading.

To see such dramatic reductions in crimes such as robbery and burglary, which have a truly devastating impact on victims, is particularly encouraging.

The statistics, however, will be little consolation to the thousands of people who have been targeted by criminals in the last year and we should not become complacent.

The force – and the incoming chief constable – must build on this result and continue to wage war on those who think they can get away with breaking the law.

Support Cycle City

IT is always good to put Oxford in its place.

We beat the old enemy in the Boat Race – now we can trounce them again in the Cambridge Cycle Challenge.

It's simple: we need to recruit more people to cycle to work – which brings health and environmental benefits – than the 'Other Place'.

So our message to readers is: "Get on your bike!"

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Could private prove better?

FIRMS bidding to take over Hinchingbrooke Hospital will soon present their plans in public. JACK GROVE asks what Britain's first privately-run NHS hospital could mean for patients.

WHEN David Cameron unveiled his "Big Society" idea, it may have seemed familiar to people in Huntingdon.

Because the idea that business or individuals could run public services better than state-paid managers has been on the agenda for some months at Hinchingbrooke Hospital.

Since it racked up a crippling £40 million debt in 2006, Hinchingbrooke has been on course for a private takeover – with NHS staff working under the direction of a profit-making company. Indeed, with a new Tory-led government welcoming more private involvement in the NHS, Hinchingbrooke could be the first of several privately-run general hospitals springing up across the UK.

Andrew MacPherson, director of strategic projects team for NHS East of England, which is running the tendering process for the franchise, believes Hinchingbrooke's "pioneer" status will ensure clinical standards remain high.

He said: "If you are running the first franchise in Britain, there will be huge pressure to demonstrate you are doing well.

"The chosen firm will firstly need to meet the benchmark of NHS standards and, if anything, an independent firm must reach even better standards than this.

"If the successful bidder can achieve this and make a decent return, patients will benefit.

"It will be a question of working better and faster. The franchise will combine NHS skills and experience with the best practices from the independent sector.

"There may be a degree of anxiety among staff at the moment, but people, especially clinicians, see some really exciting chances to work with some of the best practitioners in the world."

Mr MacPherson dismissed suggestions that clinical care could suffer in the drive to turn a profit for shareholders.

"If anything, the new concept of the franchise will result in a pressure to do even better than a normal hospital," he said.

As part of the next stage of public consultation, NHS East of England has attempted to dispel

certain 'myths' about the Hinchingbrooke situation.

Among the "top 10 facts", a spokesman for NHS East of England said Hinchingbrooke was not being privatised and that: "patients will continue to receive NHS services, free at the point of delivery".

NHS East of England also maintained "Hinchingbrooke's buildings and assets will remain within the NHS, as will any benefit derived from them" while "A&E and maternity are not

earmarked for closure".

But Mike Gough, of campaign group Save Hinchingbrooke Hospital, said public opinion was strongly against the move, which he believes is the first step in plans to privatise the NHS.

He said: "The people of Huntingdon do not want it.

"We collected 500 signatures in a single afternoon and others are planning marches against it.

"The problem with the profit-making in healthcare is that business doesn't like unknowns. You don't know exactly what will happen between conception and birth, or how many people will come through the doors of A&E each day. There are always complications or uncertainties, which is why they will want to cut maternity and A&E.

"They will only want to deal with things that are cut and dry, so lots of people are coming through the doors and they can pocket money for these things."

"It will be NHS pk and, with the Tories back, I predict we will all need insurance policies within 10 years."

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– Andrew MacPherson

How Hinchingbrooke Hospital will eventually become a franchise

THE three firms bidding for the Hinchingbrooke franchise – Circle Health, Ramsay Health Care UK and Serco – will introduce their organisations at a public meeting on May 26.

The 'stakeholder panel meeting' will

take place at the Assembly Rooms in Hinchingbrooke House, Brampton Road, Huntingdon, at 2pm.

While the bidders will not discuss their plans for the hospital, which are still subject to commercial confidentiality, they will talk about their organisations,

their ethos, skills and experience.

A further meeting will take place at the same venue on Monday, July 5 at 2pm.

Bidders approved to go through the final tender stage will be announced by

August 11 and the preferred franchisee appointed on October 4.

The contract is set to be awarded by January 4 and the franchise, which will last between five and seven years, will begin on May 2 2011.