

NHS Croydon former chief executive must answer £23million question

THE Advertiser today calls on Caroline Taylor to explain NHS Croydon's £23 million deficit.

The primary care trust's (PCT) former chief executive will not give evidence before a scrutiny committee established to get to the bottom of the scandal.



Caroline Taylor, former chief executive of NHS Croydon, has refused to answer questions about the trust's finances

She has refused to answer any questions since it emerged NHS Croydon posted a surplus of £5 million in 2010-11, when it had actually overspent by at least £22.73 million.

An independent investigation found that deputy interim [finance](#) director Mark Phillips, whose work Ms Taylor was supposed to oversee, made unwarranted adjustments to the accounts while working "largely unsupervised".

The Advertiser believes the health chief, who was paid £145,000 a year, has a duty to respond to allegations that she ignored concerns about Mr Phillips, who was given the job even though he was not a fully qualified [accountant](#).

But, more importantly, she needs to justify her actions in light of the impact on health [services](#), such as a screening programme aimed at detecting early warning signs of heart disease and stroke, which had to be scaled back.

Our call is backed by members of the scrutiny committee who have been told Ms Taylor will not be appearing before them.

Chairman Jason Cummings is to contact the Department of Health, to see whether the panel can compel her to attend.

He said: "At the moment we are only getting one side of the story. If she does not attend we will draw our own conclusions.

"For her own – and the PCT's – benefit, she should come and speak to us."

NHS London will only allow Ann Radmore, chief executive of NHS South West London, to give evidence on behalf of NHS Croydon.

Ms Radmore became the accountable officer for the trust – signing off the [accounts](#) in question – when Ms Taylor left in February 2011.

Last week, Ms Radmore told the committee the deficit had been "consciously" hidden within the trust's accounts.

Internal auditors Deloitte and the Audit Commission both missed the hidden expenditure.

Several months later, Mr Phillips' successor began to uncover the extent of the trust's deficit.

NHS London commissioned an independent report but when Ernst & Young published their findings in June they found no one responsible.

To date, no one has been disciplined or dismissed.

Peter Brambleby, Croydon's former director of public health, who resigned because Ms Taylor ignored his concerns, branded the report a "whitewash".

NHS London, which continues to maintain the matter has been fully investigated, refused to confirm whether it decided to block her appearance or whether she personally turned down the invitation.

Cllr Cummings said the trust was misinterpreting the committee's powers.

"The NHS is required to send an officer but the exact interpretation of that is a source of some debate," he explained.

"It's not the end of it. In the spirit of openness and accountability one expects that anyone we call would agree to give evidence."

The committee, which is made up of councillors from five boroughs across south-west London, has invited Mr Phillips to give evidence but has yet to receive a reply. Ms Taylor has not responded to the Advertiser's repeated request for her version of events.

Since leaving NHS Croydon, she was appointed chief executive of North Central London NHS Trust, and later employed Mr Phillips.

Addiscombe Councillor Sean Fitzsimons, Croydon's other representative on the committee, said her non-appearance did not mean the review would fail.

He added: "The committee might not have the **power** to force people to speak but the fact it is in public makes me think we have a chance of getting to the bottom of what happened.

"I think people are going to find it difficult to clamp down and be obstructive."

Questions for Ms Taylor

- 1: How did NHS Croydon run up a deficit of £22 million on your watch?
- 2: Why did you ignore warnings of senior colleagues, including Dr Peter Brambleby, director of public health, about the management of the trust's finances?
- 3: Did finance officer Mark Phillips "consciously" hide the trust's deficit?
- 4: What checks did you do on Mr Phillips' background and qualifications when he was appointed deputy interim director of finance?
- 5: Why did he work "largely unsupervised" while in this position?
- 6: Why did you fail to act when questions were raised about his methods?
- 7: Why did you reemploy him when you moved to North Central London when serious concerns had surfaced about NHS Croydon's finances?
- 8: Why have you declined to face questions from the joint-scrutiny committee?