

Questions from the public

Three questions were received ahead of the meeting, which are detailed below and on subsequent slides:

Question 1: At the ICB meeting on November 28th, the Board committed to a public engagement exercise to decide the future of Benjamin Court in Cromer, following the submission of a petition with some 3,600 signatures calling for it to be reopened . Nearly two months on, no details of this exercise have been announced, with Benjamin Court standing empty despite the urgent need to support those waiting to be discharged from hospital and many other pressing needs. Can the ICB please reaffirm its commitment to a genuine public engagement programme, offering the opportunity for the whole community in North Norfolk to have their say about the future of this vital facility, and can we have dates as to when this will happen?

Questions from the public

Norfolk and Waveney
Integrated Care Board

Answer 1: We are committed to discussing this with members of the local community. Our primary focus during December and January has been to ensure we manage the winter period and industrial action effectively, which has taken-up a significant amount of staff time. We are now in a position where we can start talking with members of the community and partners organisations about Benjamin Court.

The ICB has already written to local NHS organisations, Norfolk County Council, North Norfolk District Council and Broadland Housing Association to ask them if they would have a future use for the vacant part of the building. We will also raise the issue at the next meeting of the local One Public Sector Estate Group. We have asked partners to confirm by the end of February if they think they would have a future use for the building.

Our next step is to organise a meeting with members of the local community. At the meeting we will be able to provide some more detail about the building, finances and the lease arrangements, as well as other factors that need to be considered, such as changes to health services we have recently made or we are planning to make, for example the expansion of the virtual ward and improvements to ambulance response times. The meeting will be an opportunity for local people to share their ideas about how the building could potentially be used.

Our hope is that we can find an alternative use for the site, however it is important to acknowledge that there are constraints we will need to take into account, including financial and workforce challenges.

Questions from the public

Question 2: Has the ICB got a plan for Benjamin Court? It is such a waste of a building. The longer it remains empty the more it will cost to get it up and running again. What money, if any, has been saved with its closure? How many failed discharges have there been? How many 'blocked beds'? Has there been a recruitment drive for staff to work at Benjamin Court? How many people would have benefited from Benjamin Court in the last 6 months. Is the 'virtual ward' now being used in Norfolk?

Questions from the public



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Integrated Care Board

Answer 2: As noted in the response to the previous question, the ICB does not have a plan for Benjamin Court, however we are considering how it could be used in future. Please note that the NHS hasn't closed Benjamin Court and so hasn't saved any money. Norfolk County Council did stop using part of the site last year because they wanted to start providing the service in people's homes instead. We don't have the information to tell you how many people could have been cared for at Benjamin Court over the past six months if the council hadn't made this change. However, the reason the council made the change was because it enabled them to care for more people than they could just by operating out of Benjamin Court.

We have a programme of work called 'RightCareNow' which is focused on improving discharge and ensuring people are cared for by the right person, at the right time and in the right place. Working together, we have been able to transform complex discharges. There are still too many patients who no longer meet the criteria to reside in an acute bed and who are awaiting support to go to the right place. However, this number is down by around 200 compared to this time last year.

To put this into context, for the week of 8 January 2024, we had a total of 434 people who no longer met the criteria to reside across the three acute providers, compared to 640 last winter. Similarly, last winter, we tended to achieve around 30 complex discharges in a day, but during the industrial action, we hit a new record with 72 complex discharges in one day in the centre of our patch with 58 of them from the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital.

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Answer 2 (contd): We are continuing to work on this. A new unified digital system, OPTICA, should be live across all three acute trusts from the beginning of February which will help speed up the transfer of care processes even more.

The NHS does not currently have any services operating from Benjamin Court, so we are not trying to recruit staff. At the moment part of the building is used by Broadland Housing Association and the rest is empty. It should be noted that in the past when NHS services operated from the building it did prove to be very challenging to recruit the right staff to work at Benjamin Court.

We do run virtual wards in Norfolk and Waveney, and one of our three key objectives for this winter is to increase the capacity and use of virtual wards. We are doing this both by increasing the number of patients who are monitored at home following discharge from hospital, as well as starting to use virtual wards as a way of preventing emergency admissions to hospital. This is benefitting residents from North Norfolk and indeed across all of Norfolk and Waveney.

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Question 3: Since the closure of Benjamin Court in Cromer, the use of short-term care beds has significantly increased, whilst the overall usage of community rehabilitation facilities does not appear to have reduced. This is seen within the figures of for delayed discharges published monthly by the NHS. Can this significant increase in the use of short-term care beds in Norfolk since Spring therefore be explained? It must be having a significant financial impact.

It would also be useful to have an explanation on strategy for the usage of community rehabilitation facilities for discharged patients, and how this has changed over the last year.

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Answer 3: The use of short-term beds across the Norfolk and Waveney system has in fact reduced from last winter by around 50 percent. The number of beds utilised is typically much lower during spring and summer months and increases moving into winter. This is in line with system wide winter planning.

The short-term beds used have been typically targeted towards a patient's needs, mainly for those with an element of cognitive impairment. Where there are gaps in the care market, spot purchases of beds have also been utilised.

Norfolk Community Health and Care NHS Trust will be working to increase the amount of therapy led rehabilitation beds with the opening of the new Willow Therapy Unit, which will be a state-of-the-art, therapy-led centre providing a supportive and comfortable environment for 48 patients. This is due to open at the end of Quarter 1 in 2024-25.

Moving forward we are committed to reviewing intermediate care provision with our system partners, this work will commence in April 2024.