

Anne-Marie Trevelyan MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Ms Gayle Skelly

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Dear Gayle,

I am writing to you because you have been in touch to voice some concerns and anxieties about plans for the new multi-million pound hospital planned for Berwick. I have been meeting with our NHS Trust management to understand more fully about the plans, and I am now able to update you on where I believe we are at.

I have detailed what I understand of the new plans so far, and hopefully it will answer your questions. If you still have concerns, please do feel free to contact me again and I will do my best to get you the answers.

Background

The present Berwick Infirmary site is not fit for purpose and does not deliver a building that meets the needs of the service providers and users. Before I was your MP, I was very involved for many years as a public governor in the campaign to get our local NHS to launch a large-scale consultation for a new hospital, which local people took part in. We saw the outcome of that full consultation in the plans approved to rebuild on the existing Infirmary site, as you will recall. There was an overwhelming request at the time from those who participated in the consultation that the new build should be in the centre of town so that elderly patients and families had easy access.

When I was elected in 2015, it was clear that although there were advanced and resident-approved plans for a new hospital, and a real need and desire in the town for the new building, plans had stalled. I tried to get to the bottom of why, and push for our new Berwick Infirmary to get back in track. The Labour administration at Northumberland County Council was not keen to release the agreed funding for our new hospital, and there was a real push from the Labour Council, whose then Chief Executive controlled our local NHS finances, to centralise services.

There was a concerted effort by that administration to move many of our services away from small, more remote locations, towards centralised hubs, located in the south of the County by virtue of population numbers. I fully support specialist services being in one place – for example, if you suffer from a stroke or a heart attack, you want to be treated in the centre that specialises in stroke or heart care – and the drop in mortality rates for these illnesses shows that this is the right way to manage acute problems. Medical treatment begins when the ambulance paramedics begin their treatment.

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*I send a regular e-newsletter to keep residents informed of the work I do in Parliament and locally.
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However, for non-emergency services, recuperation and palliative care, I am convinced that there is a vital need to retain that service and care in our smaller towns, such as Rothbury, Alnwick and Berwick. I started to make that case in Parliament, and locally, and in May 2017 our Council, which helps direct how the CCG funding is allocated, became Conservative. The new administration agreed with me that those local service hubs are vital, and the plans for a new hospital for Berwick were back on track.

Last month, the Council reconfirmed the funding of £25 million for our new Berwick Infirmary, and have also now approved an investment of £20 million for a new leisure centre as a commitment to investing in Berwick residents and visitors' wellbeing. They have proposed that, in keeping with Government policy to join up health and social care, there should be health and wellbeing on one site.

Since that decision was taken, I have received emails and letters from people with specific concerns which have not been raised with me before. I have therefore been investigating both specific and more general issues raised. I am going to try to answer those concerns.

ENGAGEMENT AND CONSULTATION

In my meetings with our local NHS bosses over the last few weeks, I have made it clear that our CCG's communication with the public on what was happening has been seriously flawed, and it is no wonder local residents are concerned. The message seems to have been given of some fully finalised plan, when in fact the hospital plans are, in service provision very similar to 2014 agreed plan, whereas the leisure investment has only just received finances allocation and no detailed plans exist yet. The Hospital Trust are keen to ensure that on the hospital side residents understand service provision, and have assured me they will now be embarking on a series of engagement events, so people can get answers to their questions.

Will there be a full public consultation for the new hospital, as there was a few years ago?

As the plans are the same, and this is part of the same scheme, there does not need to be a second full consultation on the plans, but the NHS trust is going to hold a full programme of engagement events so everyone knows what is happening and why. Those events will be a good opportunity for people to ask questions to the NHS team directly, and clear up anxieties.

SITE LOCATION AND PLANS

When the full public consultation was held for the new hospital site in 2014, there was an overwhelming response from residents that they wanted the hospital to remain in the centre of Berwick. The main reason given was ease for people to get to the hospital, which is an important consideration.

What does it mean that there will be a leisure centre on the site?

The existing Swan Centre site is large, and the plans so far indicate that the leisure centre will be next door to the new hospital. This will provide doctors & their medical teams the ability to refer people for wellbeing activities.

Does that mean I will be waiting for my appointment alongside families going for swimming lessons?

No. The only shared facility will be the main entrance door, after going through it you turn one way for the hospital and the other way for the leisure centre as they are two separate buildings with separate reception desks.

What facilities will be in the new leisure centre?

There are no plans at all yet for the leisure centre, as the Council has just approved the money for it. I am waiting to hear what plans the Council has for consulting on the new facilities.

HOSPITAL SERVICES

I have heard rumours that the new hospital will not be better than the old one, and there will be a loss of services – is that true?

No, the new hospital will be equipped with state-of-the-art equipment and maintain all the services presently on offer.

In addition, it will be able to offer new services, as there is a lot more space. For example, ophthalmology is a new service that will be available at the new hospital as well as all the current services. The local NHS team hope to offer even more in due course. If you would like a list of all the services, do let me know and I can send you one, but if something is currently available at the old Infirmary site, it will also be available in the new hospital.

This latest engagement has brought to my attention individual cases of medical treatment which have been delivered away from the Infirmary when that service should be available in town. I am investigating each of these to get to the bottom of medical decisions or failures. If you have felt that you have been forced to have medical care which can be given in Berwick further away despite asking for local treatment, please contact me confidentially.

I heard that the maternity unit was closing – what is the truth?

The maternity unit will not be closing, and there will continue to be a midwife-led birthing centre, as well as the normal outpatient maternity care, at the new hospital, despite there being a very low number of births in Berwick. This is a choice which mums-to-be take with their GP and midwife.

What about during the build – won't services be "relocated"?

No services will have to close during the build, they will simply move over to the new hospital site once it is ready. That is one of the main benefits of the site move over the original plan to build on the existing Infirmary site.

I have heard there will be a loss of beds, why is that?

The present Berwick Infirmary has 20 beds, with an average occupancy rate of 76%. That means the NHS is paying to have beds which aren't in use. The CCG, which pays for services, have decided they can spend that money on new services for Berwick, whilst making sure the new hospital will still have enough beds (16) for everyone who needs them locally.

My firm hope – and I have already started to campaign for this – is that the old Infirmary site can be used for some extra care style of housing, and for sheltered accommodation, which will hugely increase the town's capacity to look after its ageing population, and free up more bed space whilst ensuring people are getting the right care for them.

I also believe that we need to ensure that those who need palliative care can access nursing home provision in town rather than hospital beds if possible.

What about an A&E, why can't Berwick have that?

The population of Berwick and the surrounding area is not large enough to qualify for an A&E, but there is a minor injury unit open 24/7 to treat most problems people associate with going to an A&E: broken bones, cuts, fevers, minor head injuries, burns and scalds etc.

My key priority is ensuring that for those with serious injuries or conditions, an ambulance reaches them quickly, so treatment can begin at once before they get to the specialist A&E unit at Cramlington. I will continue to work with North East Ambulance Service to ensure everyone in Northumberland gets the treatment they need in an emergency.

I hope that this has answered your questions and I want to reiterate that final decisions have not yet been taken. Most importantly please do tell me if you or your family have not been able to access existing services at the Infirmary so that we can work out what has gone wrong.

Yours sincerely,

