

## **Response to the Healthwatch Norfolk report about the future of Benjamin Court**

### **Introduction**

We would like to thank everyone who took the time to share their views about the future of Benjamin Court, as well as those who shared their experiences of being cared for there. It is clear the services that have been provided from Benjamin Court in the past have been highly valued by the local community.

The report by Healthwatch Norfolk contains three recommendations. This document takes the recommendations in turn and provides a response to each, and it sets-out the ICB's decision about the future of the building and the next steps.

### **Recommendation 1**

**The recommendation:** "The majority of respondents asked for the reinstatement of the re-enablement service to Benjamin Court. The role of Healthwatch Norfolk is to represent the views of the public and, with such overwhelming support, we would recommend investigation of this as an option for the future of the building."

**Our response:** We have looked at the recommendation to use the building to provide reablement care again. As part of this, we have talked to Norfolk County Council who provided reablement from Benjamin Court until June 2023 when they moved to caring for people in their own homes instead.

We have shared Healthwatch Norfolk's report with Norfolk County Council so that they could see the feedback from the community. In return, they have provided an update on the Norfolk First Support service and the impact that providing reablement in people's homes has had.

The change to supporting people in their own homes has meant that Norfolk First Support has been able to care for more people in North Norfolk. In July 2024, 213 people in North Norfolk started to receive care from Norfolk First Support, compared to 163 in July 2023. This marks a c.30% increase, and is part of a wider rise in the number of people receiving care from the service across Norfolk over the last two years (from a baseline of c.5,000 to achieving a target of c.8,000 county-wide).

The service is making a real difference to people by being provided at home. 39% of people receiving home based reablement have been fully reabled, compared with 13% when bed-based reablement was delivered at Benjamin Court. By refocusing the service so that it is home based, more people are being helped to be independent.

Given that the service is now helping more people and is proving to be more effective at fully reablement people, the council intends to continue providing reablement care in people's homes.

Some of the responses to the engagement exercise proposed that an NHS-led reablement service should be established at Benjamin Court, rather than a council run service. The Norfolk First Support staff who were employed by the council to run the previous service at Benjamin Court did not have nursing or medical skills. It was felt by some people taking part in the engagement exercise that establishing a service at Benjamin Court employing people with nursing or medical skills would help to meet the needs of the local population.

We have considered this proposal too and how it fits with the model of care we want to provide. We know that most people want to return to their own home after a stay in hospital and so we have a 'home first' approach as an Integrated Care System. People recover well in their own home in familiar surroundings – they want to be in their own bed. That is not to say there aren't times when people do need bed-based care, but where we can care for people at home, that is what we want to do.

One change we have made that supports the 'home first' approach is the introduction of virtual wards. The virtual ward has 'step-down' beds which care for people at home following treatment in hospital. While the community virtual ward has 'step-up' beds that allow patients to receive hospital monitoring and treatment at home to help prevent avoidable admissions to hospital. We know from experience that recruiting staff in north Norfolk can be difficult. The virtual ward helps with this as staff can care for north Norfolk residents while being based elsewhere.

The virtual wards are looking after similar groups of patients as could be looked after by an NHS-led reablement service at Benjamin Court. The community ward has three treatment pathways for patients over 18: respiratory, frailty and heart failure, with the 'step-down' ward looking after those who've been treated in hospital.

There were some questions raised through the engagement exercise about the effectiveness of virtual wards and whether they provide value for money. Virtual wards are relatively new and services across the country continue to learn and adapt. The latest evaluations are showing that virtual wards are providing real benefits and represent good value for money. For example, the 'South East Region Virtual Wards Evaluation Report' provides more detail and can be read here: <https://ppl.org.uk/what-we-do/virtual-wards-consultancy/>.

There are challenges with the virtual wards for people who are digitally excluded and we recognise that in north Norfolk there is an older population, some of whom may find the technology difficult. Virtual wards are a part of how we want to care for people and overall they receive positive feedback from patients, but they are of course not the only service available.

In summary, there are reablement services already in place supporting residents of north Norfolk. We have looked at the case for establishing an NHS-led reablement service at Benjamin Court, however it does not fit with our model of care. We will

continue to keep under review the services available in north Norfolk, as well as across the rest of Norfolk and Waveney, and if other opportunities arise we will explore them, as we have with Benjamin Court.

Through the engagement exercise there were some mentions of the new Willows Unit being constructed in Norwich. We just wanted to note that the new therapy-led centre is not and was never intended to be a replacement for the reablement service that was provided at Benjamin Court by Norfolk County Council. The replacement for the service provided at Benjamin Court is the service being provided in people's homes by Norfolk First Support.

The Willows Unit will provide some additional bed-based capacity. It will care for people from north Norfolk, as well as those living in and around Norwich and south Norfolk. For those living further away from Norwich, including north Norfolk residents, we know that transport to and from the city can be difficult. We understand this and know it is not a perfect solution, but it being located in Norwich makes it more accessible for a greater number of people.

## **Recommendation 2**

**The recommendation:** "Mindful of the brief to ensure any future use can be both funded and safely staffed, the majority of all respondents suggested Benjamin Court should be the home of a facility or service relating to health and care for North Norfolk residents. We would recommend that all avenues are explored to explore the feasibility of such a service."

**Our response:** There were a range of ideas put forward as part of the engagement exercise for the future use of Benjamin Court, from support for carers to health hubs. We have considered these in the round, however the estimated revenue costs for the building alone are £353,000 per year, on top of which would be the costs of actually running a service, and we have not been able to identify a way the ideas put forward could easily be funded.

The NHS has an underlying deficit in Norfolk and Waveney of over £200m – if we didn't change anything, over the course of this financial year we would spend over £200m more on services than we have in our budget. We have a big programme of work ongoing to improve the efficiency and productivity of services, but the financial challenge is very difficult.

That said, we will keep the ideas put forward in mind and in particular we are very conscious of the need to support carers. We know that people do tend to recover better in their own home with familiar surroundings, but this can put pressure on carers. We are committed to continuing to work with Norfolk County Council, carers organisations and others to see what more can be done to support carers.

## **Recommendation 3**

**The recommendation:** "A lack of communication is a common thread within the feedback, and we would recommend clear communication around whatever decision

is made about future use to ensure those living and working in North Norfolk understand the reasoning and rationale behind it.”

**Our response:** We are very grateful for the time and effort that people have put into sharing their views about the future of Benjamin Court. We hope that this document clearly sets-out our response to what people have told us. We will endeavor to keep north Norfolk residents and stakeholders informed about the next steps with Benjamin Court and developments with other services too.

## **Conclusion and next steps**

We know the people who have taken part in this engagement exercise care deeply about their local community and some will likely be disappointed that we are not taking forward the ideas they have put forward. We ran this exercise because, like those who took part in it, we wanted to find a solution that would mean the building could continue to be used to support the health and wellbeing of north Norfolk residents.

We have tried hard to find a solution. In addition to the public engagement exercise, we also asked local NHS trusts, Norfolk County Council, all the local district, borough and city councils, the police service, the fire service and a local housing provider if they might have a future use for the site.

Unfortunately we have not been able to find a solution that fits with the other services available and the model of care we want to provide, or which is financially viable. As a result, we have decided we have no future use for the building and so we will return the site to NHS Property Services. The ICB has to pay some money to NHS Property Services even when the building is vacant, so given the challenging financial position, we will return the site to them immediately.

This will enable NHS Property Services to look for alternative tenants. If they are unable to find an alternative use for the building, NHS Property Services could look to sell the site. If they were to sell it, then half of the proceeds from the sale would be available to reinvest in other NHS Property Services sites in Norfolk and Waveney.

Our decision to return the site to NHS Property Services does not in itself mean that the building will not be used for public services or to support the local community in future. When we asked local partners earlier in the year if they had a potential use for the site, we did receive an expression of interest from one of the local housing providers. The organisation was clear that a full feasibility would need to be undertaken and they would only do this if the decision was made that the NHS did not have a use for the building. The idea of using the building for key worker accommodation is one we would support if it was possible to achieve.

In line with the third recommendation from the Healthwatch report, we will ask NHS Property Services to keep us and the local community informed of progress with the site. As noted above, we will continue to keep under review the services available in north Norfolk, and if other opportunities arise to invest in services we will explore them fully, as we have with Benjamin Court.