Making Whipps Cross Hospital work well into the future
There has been a hospital at Whipps Cross in Leytonstone for over a hundred years. The present district general hospital is proud of its roots in the community, and proud of its record of service to local patients. It treats more than 1,600 patients every day, providing a wide range of health services to residents of Waltham Forest, Redbridge and beyond.

Barts Health NHS Trust is committed to maintaining a thriving acute hospital on this site, including both an emergency department and a maternity unit. Yet the current hospital is increasingly challenged to provide the breadth and depth of health services that people expect in the 21st century. In particular, the fabric of the ageing buildings and their sprawling layout no longer works for patients or for the 3,500 staff who work there delivering quality care.
The Trust has been working with partners - including the local authority, clinical commissioners and the local mental health and community trust - to find a long-term solution. All of us want to improve the facilities for our patients and provide extra capacity to meet the health needs of a population that is growing and getting older. This initiative is a key ingredient in the Sustainability and Transformation Plan, under which local health and care organisations are working together to ensure the NHS continues to provide high quality, safe and sustainable services for the whole of north east London.

As part of this exercise, a team of experts was asked to review the future of the Whipps Cross site, and devise a plan that will serve the health needs of local people well into the future. The review team has engaged with patients, the public and staff to begin to explore what options for transformation are affordable and deliverable.

The aim is to make a compelling business case to government for a significant capital investment to improve facilities and increase capacity. This document summarises the strategic outline case that is the first stage of the approvals process.

All the partners involved see this as a unique opportunity to transform healthcare in the area in line with national policy, and build on work already under way locally to meet the changing needs of patients, users and carers in the future. The prize is the potential co-location of acute hospital care with some community, primary care and social care, with an explicit focus on the needs of older people and a tie-in with wider social care, including housing.

While further detailed work is being done on a business case, Barts Health and its partners will be involving local people and community groups to help design this development, shape the scope and scale of the services it could offer, and ensure the final proposals enjoy the broadest possible degree of public support.
Whipps Cross hospital provides care to about 209,000 individual people each year, not only from Waltham Forest but also from the neighbouring borough of Redbridge and district of Epping Forest. Many of these patients will visit the hospital several times. In a typical year, it admits just over 70,000 in-patients to its 600 beds, deals with over 150,000 A&E attendances, and hosts more than 400,000 outpatient appointments.

Although currently rated as “requires improvement” by the Care Quality Commission, the hospital has improved significantly since inspectors first visited in 2014, and one-third of quality indicators are now rated as “good.” A new leadership team is mobilising staff on a journey of improvement that is steadily raising morale, lifting standards, and providing better care and a positive experience for patients.

Unfortunately, a significant proportion of the Whipps Cross estate is not fit for purpose. It is one of the largest hospital sites in London, yet also one of the most inefficient. Some of the buildings date back to the beginning of the 20th century and many pre-date the formation of the NHS in 1948.

Some space has been condemned, but wards and departments are not configured to meet modern standards for space or dignity, and carry clinical or safety risks.

For example, to transfer a patient from A&E to an operating theatre or critical care ward means taking them along the main public corridor of the hospitals. The location of the maternity unit, away from the main hospital building, means that pregnant women requiring emergency treatment have to be transported across the site by ambulance. Improving the estate is critical to tackling a number of the issues raised in CQC inspections, yet it is estimated that the site needs £88 million worth of spending on critical maintenance to bring it up to an acceptable level.
Despite these constraints, demand for services at Whipps Cross is increasing. The A&E department is already one of the busiest in the country, and over the last year has seen urgent and emergency attendances increase to more than 450 a day. The potential changes to emergency services at the King George Hospital in Ilford could add an extra 50 patients a day and require Whipps Cross to provide additional in-patient capacity.

Meanwhile, the population of the Barts Health catchment area as a whole is forecast to increase by an extra 270,000 residents over the next 15 years, the equivalent of a new London borough. In particular, Waltham Forest is expected to see significant and disproportionate growth in the numbers of people over 60. Patients admitted to Whipps Cross are already more likely to be over 80, and more likely to be suffering from dementia, than other hospitals in the Barts Health group.

The combination of a growing and ageing population puts a premium on medical services that treat multiple chronic conditions, and care services that support people to manage with functional and cognitive impairments. We know older people are heavy users of health services, but the NHS was not designed to cope with the numbers of elderly or vulnerable patients we are likely to see in the near future.

Without investment in new facilities or the development of new ways of working, the healthcare system is unlikely to be able to manage both the higher demand and the increasingly complex needs of users. Hence the national drive, kick-started by the NHS Five-Year Forward View in 2014, to design new models of care and develop new ways of working.

Working with our commissioners, significant progress has been made towards ensuring that people are treated in the most appropriate care setting for their condition, whether in or out of hospital. These efforts have seen a significant reduction in the number of patients that experience delays in their care being transferred to another service where they may continue to require packages of care and support.
We have also continued to invest in the hospital, with recent developments including the development of a new theatres suite, the establishment of a one-stop breast service, the opening of a new high dependency unit, and further investment in the electrical infrastructure of the site.

Given the age of the Whipps Cross estate and its state of disrepair, doing nothing is not an option. The review team established early on that long-term investment is required to maintain patient safety, manage clinical risk and ensure operational sustainability. Otherwise, in due course, some services would have to be reduced, and some areas of the hospital closed down completely.

In order to comply with Treasury guidelines for investment approvals, a “do minimum” option must be examined, and this will form part of the options appraisal of a business case. Nevertheless, from the work undertaken so far it is already clear that essential investment in maintaining the most high-risk areas and operational running of the site would actually be significantly more expensive in the long-term than other development options.

An opportunity and a vision

All of these factors present a golden opportunity that Barts Health and its partners are eager to grasp. Here is a popular local hospital, serving a growing population of older people, with proven medical expertise in the treatment and care of the elderly, in desperate need of investment in modern facilities, at a time when the NHS is looking for new and sustainable ways of providing care.

We recognise that an acute hospital is not always the right environment for patients, and they can be helped to manage some conditions more effectively and appropriately in alternative care settings. The redevelopment of Whipps Cross offers a historic opportunity to build on the work underway locally and transform the provision of healthcare in line with emerging best practice.

This is about more than rebuilding or repairing a hospital: it is about creating a health, care and wellbeing campus on the Whipps Cross site. There would be a core set of emergency and specialist services, including an A&E department, a maternity unit and supporting clinical and surgical teams.
The site could also be home to some community, mental health and social care services. It would further seek to co-locate primary care facilities and dedicated rehabilitation, nursing and palliative care services.

This vision of a campus of co-ordinated, connected and communicating services is what excites and unites all parties in the area – not just the Trust, clinical commissioners, and the local council, but also voluntary sector organisations, social care providers, GPs and other health professionals.

Putting this vision into practice would bring a number of other tangible benefits, both for the hospital and the community. The redevelopment of Whipps Cross would make it easier to recruit and retain staff at the hospital, which currently suffers from a high vacancy rate.

Patients would be treated in a high-quality, safe environment, ensuring a positive experience of care. Clinical pathways would be more efficient, and estates running costs reduced.

For a site as large and as well-situated as Whipps Cross, there are huge opportunities to create a truly mixed-use and multi-functional space, with housing, leisure facilities, shops, businesses and cultural amenities alongside health and care services. Redevelopment of the site would contribute to the economic growth of the local area, bringing jobs and homes and generating wider business and economic opportunities. There may also be an opportunity to enter into an innovative partnership with Waltham Forest Council and other bodies to realise the economic growth potential of the site.
The review team is now exploring the development options in more detail. This work includes examining the potential costs and benefits of refurbishing part of the site gradually, as opposed to rebuilding it in one or more stages. At current prices a full redevelopment could cost in the region of £520m, and any future business case would have to examine how that level of funding could be found in the current economic climate.

In addition to capital investment from the government, there may be opportunities to enter a research partnership with a university, lease or sell space to other NHS providers, or dispose of surplus land for commercial development. All these are issues for the future, and will only be resolved if NHS Improvement gives its blessing to the case summarised here.

Next steps

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