

Update: 9th May 2024

Introduction

This briefing provides the latest on the Mount Vernon Cancer Centre (MVCC) Strategic Review.

Latest developments

Following news last year that proposals to relocate Mount Vernon Cancer Centre had not been selected to join the New Hospitals Programme, work has continued to discuss possible ways to meet the urgent need to re-provide MVCC services on an acute hospital site.

NHS England's Chief Finance Officer has provided a commitment in writing to work jointly with commissioning teams to identify the necessary local and national money for the scheme which has been confirmed as a regional priority. The scheme will still require capital funding to be made available before building could begin.

At this week's national Strategy, Planning and Investment Committee, it was agreed that public consultation could go ahead on proposals to relocate MVCC. This is subject to the normal NHS England assurance processes for schemes requiring public consultation.

Planning for public consultation

A revised draft of the Pre-Consultation Business Case (PCBC) and draft consultation documents are being developed with a view to beginning the assurance process to undertake public consultation this financial year. The exact timeline of a public consultation will be dependent on the assurance process and could also be affected by other factors such as a general election.

There is still a lot of work to do, and there will need to be further patient and clinical engagement before public consultation to ensure that the proposals are right for patients and can be clearly explained to the public.

This is a significant step forward. Further information about timescales and opportunities to get involved will be available soon.

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Why consult now?

It is widely accepted that there is an urgent need to re-provide Mount Vernon cancer services on an acute hospital site. This has been the preferred long-term option for some time and provides the best option for patient care.

The dedicated staff at Mount Vernon Cancer Centre have been working extremely hard over many years to maintain services despite the challenges of poor buildings and a lack of other medical facilities on the same site which has meant patients can't always be treated at MVCC and staff have had to oversee their treatment across a number of different hospitals.

As time goes on this becomes more challenging and staff and patients need some certainty about what the future is for their services. It is important that any future plans have been thoroughly tested with patients and the public before being agreed by stakeholders.

Agreement on the future proposals will also mean short-term investment decisions can be made to address increasing estates challenges and improve cancer care in the context of the long-term future plans.

What happens now?

There will need to be an assurance process to approve the business case, consultation document and plan.

Patient, public and staff engagement sessions will take place to help finalise the proposals and develop the plans for consultation.

Discussions have been underway for some time about the forming of a Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (JHOSC) to scrutinise the consultation. This will be led by Hertfordshire HOSC as Hertfordshire has the largest number of patients at MVCC.

Public consultation is expected to begin during the second half of this financial year.

What are the proposals?

The proposals involve relocating MVCC to a new, purpose-built cancer centre adjacent to the Watford General Hospital. This would give the cancer centre access to clinical support services including critical care that are not available on its current site, which would increase the number of treatment options and enable the team to care for more unwell patients than they can at the moment.

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The proposals include an option to have a networked radiotherapy unit at either Luton or Stevenage. This would be in addition to radiotherapy at the main cancer centre and would improve access to radiotherapy to patients living in the north of the area served by MVCC.

The proposals will include small changes to London patient flows, with a new chemotherapy unit at Hillingdon Hospital (which does not currently provide chemotherapy), additional chemotherapy chairs at Northwick Park, and increased radiotherapy capacity at Hammersmith Hospital.

Are there any alternatives?

The team has looked at possible alternatives but believes relocation to Watford provides the best opportunity to improve care for patients. The current site simply does not have the medical or estates infrastructure to continue providing specialised cancer services in the long-term. There is not the capacity at other cancer centres to take on the number of patients currently treated at MVCC and doing so would increase travel and waiting times for patients too much, making access to cancer treatment worse.

Background

MVCC provides non-surgical cancer treatment to a population of circa two million, across six ICBs in three regions. The majority of patients are from the East of England, with most of the remaining patients from London and the South-East. Services are provided by East and North Hertfordshire NHS Trust (ENHT) from a site in Northwood, owned by Hillingdon Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust.

In 2019 an Independent Clinical Review was carried out to address clinical concerns about service sustainability. The review concluded that in addition to the problems of the dilapidated estate, the current clinical model is not fit for purpose. Over time, the supporting clinical services on the site have closed (for example A&E and ITU), resulting in limitations to treatment options and fragmented pathways. Should a patient's condition worsen whilst at the site, or require input from other clinical specialties, they need to be transferred to an acute hospital. The review recommended immediate actions to strengthen current services and to re-locate MVCC to an acute hospital site.

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