
Public Questions as specified in the Council's Procedure Rules of the Constitution

Item (A)

Health and Wellbeing Board Meeting on 6 March 2025

(A) Question submitted to the ICB Chief Medical Officer by Dr Meg Thomas:

“What plans are there to increase the limited range of services provided at West Berkshire Community Hospital and local GP surgeries, and thus reduce the need for patients to travel to Reading (or another hospital) for routine investigations and procedures?”

The ICB Chief Medical Officer answered:

Thank you for the question. As I mentioned, I'm a GP by background, so these services are close to my heart

A central theme of our System Strategy is that we want everyone who lives in West Berkshire to be able to receive the right support, and to see the right healthcare professional. As part of this approach, we've commissioned a range of new BOB-wide services from practices over the past year to provide care on a more local basis. In West Berkshire, this includes phlebotomy, spirometry, ECGs, and diabetes services, and I understand there may be even more than that since this list was compiled. Phlebotomy is a great example where people who need regular blood tests can access these locally rather than travelling to the hospital for tests.

Our ambition is to increase the range of services provided by local GP surgeries further in the coming two years. Areas currently being developed include PSA monitoring, more minor surgery, more memory assessments of people at risk of dementia, and tests for deep vein thrombosis, which can avoid trips to the hospital. Our intention is to level up the services across BOB to ensure equity of access for all of the population, and that includes funding things in West Berkshire that weren't being funded in the same way as in other parts of BOB.

Referrals into secondary care take place in accordance with the clinical guidelines and providers are continually trying to balance the impact on patients of having to travel distances against the availability of that capacity in the community. We're keen to work with partners to plan for more community outreach services to be delivered locally, and West Berkshire Community Hospital is a fantastic example of that.

I was pleased to discover that there's recently been an increase in service provisions, particularly around diagnostic imaging radiology services, and it's being designated as a community diagnostic centre, which is a great step forwards for cancer diagnosis, as well as additional access to bone scans and ultrasound scans. This is an addition to the existing services there, including palliative care, rehabilitation beds, dietetics and nutrition, and minor injuries unit services. They're also planning for the introduction of MRI scanners later in the year. I'm not aware of any other community hospital in BOB that has that level of diagnostic facilities so that would be a real jewel in the crown for West Berkshire.

As a result of the increased access to scans, local patients can now receive earlier diagnosis on a range of important health conditions such as breast cancers and osteoporosis due to the DEXA scanner, the mammography unit, and additional ultrasound capacity. That's also going to provide a better experience to patients undergoing diagnostic tests, and that increased access and speed

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will lead to better patient outcomes. I hope that's a useful tangible example of delivering services locally and reducing the need for patients to travel. Our aim will be to build on that progress over the coming year.

Dr Meg Thomas asked the following supplementary question:

"I just wondered how much research had been done in this area. Have we actually analysed GP referrals - for example, where are they going and what for?"

The ICB Chief Medical Officer answered:

I'm aware that the team does look at that data, but it's something that we could probably build on further in terms of the planning process. I've recently come from Oxfordshire, where we've taken that very seriously around the Wantage Project. That led to a big piece of co-development work which is changing the services that are being provided at Wantage Community Hospital. I would envisage a similar approach being taken in West Berkshire. This would involve working with the data, and also local people and representatives to steer things in the right direction in terms of the services that are offered locally, because each population has slightly different needs. That's definitely an approach that that we want to take forward.
