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HSJ

Hospital with 600 estate 'incidents' demands 'urgent' government decision

By Henry Anderson | 1 November 2022

Problems at 1960s hospital “absolutely” affecting waiting lists, admits estates director

Completion date could be as late as 2030, five years later than first planned

A trust has called for ministers to make an ‘urgent’ decision on funding for a new hospital, as a raft of maintenance problems such as leaking roofs and overflowing sewage pipes are hampering efforts to tackle waiting list backlogs.

There was a surge in estates’ incidents reported by Princess Alexandra Hospital Trust last year — to an average of nearly 12 each week — and the Essex trust is calling for clarity on whether it will be given the green light to build a new hospital.

The trust is one of eight given priority status under the government’s new hospitals programme, but there has been speculation in recent weeks the programme could be scaled back as departments are told to find spending cuts.

Michael Meredith, estates director at PAH, said patients still received good care, but admitted the problems – which include sewage overflow, outdated electrics and theatre roofs leaking – were “absolutely” affecting the hospital’s ability to recover elective care.

He told *HSJ*: “It means you have to cancel some of your elective work. And at the moment that is critical, because we know [we’ve] got a long waiting list, we know we need to recover, we know we’ve got people waiting longer than they need to...”

“That has a real impact on our staff morale, and a real impact on patients waiting to be seen.”

Although infrastructure-related clinical disruption across the NHS fell during 2021-22, after years of increases, according to NHS Digital figures published this month, the number of incidents at Princess Alexandra surged from 175 to 631 after staff were asked to capture “every single estate issue”.

The oldest parts of its main Harlow site in Essex were built in 1962.

PAH was first promised a new hospital in 2019, with the project folded into then prime minister Boris Johnson’s “40 new hospitals” pledge.

There have been various reports of delays and funding cuts to the national programme.

PAH has not had confirmation that its project will be fully funded, with inflation already increasing the estimated cost to £825m, which is £250m more than original estimates.

Mr Meredith said the trust was in the “extremely difficult” position of spending significant amounts on a rolling repair and upgrade programme to keep the 60-year-old site safe without knowing how long it has to last.

He said: “If you go back to risk-based decision making, am I managing a risk up to 2030, or am I managing a risk up to 2040? [Because] I would make very different decisions about how much money I would invest.”

The trust is currently working on the basis that it will be off its current site and in the new hospital by 2030, but Mr Meredith warned any further delays would have a “significant impact on our ability to deliver long-term sustainable care”.

He said: “You’re then getting into 70 or 80 years old [for the current site] and there’s no way that’s going to last that long, or be suitable to deliver modern healthcare.”

Mr Meredith said the trust had a supportive working relationship with the NHP, which had given “every indication” that the bid for a standalone new hospital would be approved.

However, a final decision on funding for PAH and other trusts in the scheme is set to be made by the Treasury at the end of the year.

Mr Meredith said: “If we don’t get that [decision] in December, it makes it extraordinarily difficult for us to plan... We need a decision on the funding of our new hospital urgently.

“The full funding for the site, reduced funding for the existing site, or somewhere in between that, it’s really important that we get that [clarity]... There are some big decisions we need to make on our existing site to keep it fit for purpose and keep making sure it meets the needs of a growing population.”

A Department of Health and Care spokeswoman said: “We are committed to delivering 40 new hospitals by 2030, backed by an initial £3.7 billion. The scheme for the Princess Alexandra Hospital is one of eight ‘Pathfinder’ hospital schemes, which will be the first of the larger and more complex schemes within the New Hospitals Programme to be taken forward. We continue to work closely with the Princess Alexandra Hospital NHS Trust on the development of its scheme plans.”

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