

Temporary changes at Sevenoaks Hospital

The purpose of this paper is to provide Kent Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee members with a briefing on the decision to temporarily move inpatient beds from Sevenoaks Hospital in June, due to a fire safety risk.

Sevenoaks Hospital is made up of two buildings: a main building with a 19-bedded inpatient ward and an outpatient building. It is only the inpatient ward on the first floor, which is affected as many of our patients are frail and elderly and would need support to evacuate, in the event of a fire.

Three stroke patients were transferred to Tonbridge Cottage Hospital for ongoing rehabilitation and a phased opening of a 15 bed-ward at West View Integrated Care Centre, in Tenterden is underway to support the system.

When the decision was made

Following a planned fire evacuation exercise at Sevenoaks Hospital, KCHFT's Executive Team took the decision on Friday, 14 June to make urgent temporary changes to move our inpatient rehabilitation ward to other local hospitals.

This was not a decision KCHFT took lightly, however the safety of patients, staff and volunteers will always be the trust's first priority. The HOSC's chair, Cllr Paul Bartlett, was informed on the same day.

At the time of the decision, there were 11 occupied beds and over the week of 17 to 24 June, staff, patients and stakeholders were spoken to about the decision. Three stroke patients were transferred to Tonbridge Cottage Hospital, all other patients were ready and well enough to go home, through routine discharges.

Why the decision was made

Together with Kent Fire and Rescue Service (KFRS), KCHFT carried out the evacuation exercise on Friday, 7 June 2024. The exercise followed a survey by KCHFT and a fire safety audit by KFRS, which highlighted issues with fire compartmentation.

Once initial issues were highlighted, the trust acted immediately to ensure the safety of patients, staff and volunteers in the short-term, while it investigated further. The trust reduced the number of patients receiving support on the ward, increased staffing levels to allow faster evacuation in the case of a fire and used the planned evacuation exercise to test the robustness of these measures.

After the evacuation exercise, it was clear the speed and ease at which staff could safely evacuate frail, elderly patients from the first-floor ward of the 100-year-old hospital in the event of a fire, was not fast enough.

As a result, to ensure their safety, KCHFT made the decision to temporarily move inpatients to other hospitals to continue their rehabilitation. Kent Fire and Rescue Service put plans in place to increase its response to the hospital in the event of a fire, should this occur before patients could be moved.

Chair John Goulston Chief Executive Mairead McCormick

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In an opinion letter from KFRS, the service said they would inspect the building on 22 October to ensure compliance.

What is being provided now and where will patients be cared for

The majority of people who are cared for at Sevenoaks Hospital for rehabilitation are discharged from Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust.

As soon as we were aware of the increased fire risk, KCHFT took the decision to stop inpatient admissions and worked with our acute colleagues to manage any potential impact.

Many patients were fit and well enough to go home, therefore, three stroke patients were transferred to Tonbridge Cottage Hospital, which has eight specialist beds and staffing to support stroke care, plus additional beds for fractured neck of femur (hip) patients.

It should be noted that Sevenoaks Hospital provides rehabilitation support for people across west Kent, and outside of west Kent where appropriate or needed, not just for Sevenoaks patients. None of the three stroke patients who were transferred to Tonbridge live in Sevenoaks. We liaised closely with patients being cared for on the ward and their families and carers, as well as our staff, to make their moves go as smoothly as possible and put in additional plans to carefully monitor their care.

All our other services, including the Urgent Treatment Centre, and outpatient clinics remain on the Sevenoaks site.

KCHFT is in the process of opening 15 frailty beds at West View Integrated Care Centre, in Tenterden. This has been a phased opening, during the past couple of weeks. In addition, in west Kent KCHFT also runs the community hospital in Hawkhurst.

Communications and engagement with patients, public, staff and stakeholders

While the temporary move was made swiftly due to the risk to health and safety, every effort has been made and is continuing to be made, to inform and involve patients and carers, staff, public and stakeholders. Patients, carers and staff welfare has been carefully considered.

During the week of the move, our communications and involvement plan, included:

- individual conversations with patients, families and carers impacted by a senior member of the team, supported by letters explaining the rationale for the decision
- briefings to our lead governor and letter to our full council of governors
- our chief executive attended Sevenoaks League of Friends and members understood the rationale for the decision
- letters and conversations to our volunteers who support us on the ward and across the hospital's service
- briefing to our staff unions
- 10 face-to-face and virtual briefings with KCHFT and Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Foundation Trust staff (who provide specialist stroke rehabilitation), FAQs, follow up one-to-one meetings and tailored support to enable staff to continue to provide care at alternative hospitals
- letters and briefing to key stakeholders

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- open and honest communications with the public through the media, stakeholder and member bulletins, as well as our website www.kentcht.nhs.uk/sevenoaksward.

A patient reference group is being set up to look at the impact and any action that can be taken to mitigate while the temporary move is in place. We will continue to monitor NHS Friends and Family Test data and matrons and operational leads are monitoring feedback on a daily basis and continuing to engage with patients, carers and their families. We have followed up with all patients transferring to ensure there has be no issues with visiting by carers and families and will continue to monitor this.

Next steps

We need to make significant upgrades to our building to stop fire and smoke spreading quickly, and make it easier to evacuate people. This means the building will need substantial investment and moving the ward is a temporary measure, while we consider the options available to us. It should be noted that the Kent and Medway system faces unprecedented financial challenges and system capital has been reduced. We estimate the temporary move is months, rather than weeks.

KCHFT would like to reassure HOSC that safety of our patients and staff will always come first and that we are doing everything possible to keep any disruption to a minimum, while we look at the options for the future.

We are committed to keeping patients and carers, public, staff and all stakeholders informed and involved as we progress with the next steps.

Pauline Butterworth

*Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Operating Officer
Kent Community Health NHS Foundation Trust*