

Chief Executive of the Northern Health and Social Care Trust

16th of October 2024

Dear Ms Welsh,

**DRAFT RESPONSE TO NHSCT TRANSFORMING GENERAL SURGERY
CONSULTATION**

Thank you for presenting to the Council's Corporate Policy and Resources Committee on the 24th of September 2024 and for the opportunity to respond to the proposed service changes within the Northern Trust area. You will have noted the sincerity in the engagement with local elected representatives on this important matter and the cross-party interest in your "Working with you to Transform General Surgery" proposals.

Councillors were reassured that you concur with the view of Professor Chris Whitty that future services must take into account the changing age demographics that are occurring outside the major cities because that is certainly impacting on this Council area. However, there is some apprehension that health resources are migrating to centralised urban areas. Obviously Elected Members expressed concern about the planned transfer of acute surgery from Causeway Hospital to Antrim Area Hospital and would seek reassurance that the new operating model will address the existing rural inequalities, in particular with regards to waiting lists which are longer in the Northern HSCT than in the Belfast HSCT.

A further fear is that removing acute surgery from Causeway will risk the sustainability of the other acute services as it is well known that the viability of an acute hospital requires the maintenance of the five key service "pillars" to remain effective (ie acute medicine, acute surgery, A&E, intensive care unit, and investigations such as Xray, CT and MRI).

The challenge of recruitment of consultant surgeons to Causeway is again presented as a problem, but it is understood that this is exacerbated by over-recruitment in the Belfast HSCT resulting in much easier on-call requirements and opportunity to 'double job' within the Independent Sector. Perhaps there could even be opportunity to readjust the Northern HSCT boundaries in Newtownabbey to help to balance the workload on your surgeons even if they are centralised within the Antrim Hospital.

The proposals that you presented appear to align with the recent "Hospitals - Creating A Network For Better Outcomes" report from the Health Minister, and backed up by the return visit of Professor Raphael Bengoa. The rationale for change is well understood within the so-called 'burning platform' of resource pressures, however, it unfortunately plays to a Belfast-focused agenda. It is noticeable within the report that twenty percent of the least deprived areas in the Province largely surround the Greater Belfast Area.

In summary, the Council simply seeks reassurance that these proposals will improve the health of its rural community and not disadvantage citizens because of the distance to the Regional Centres and Area Hospitals.

Council would be happy to discuss further any of the points raised.

Yours sincerely

David H Jackson

D H Jackson
Clerk and Chief Executive