Woodstock Surgery: Update

Summary

- Real progress has been made towards delivering a new surgery for Woodstock.
- The GPs have developed a specification for a new surgery building, which the NHS has approved in principle.
- An in-principle commitment has been secured from the NHS to provide finance for the running and operation of a new surgery.
- Three potential sites have been identified on Blenheim owned land for a new surgery, with the Hensington Road site ruled out because it does not have the expansion potential to cope with the anticipated growth in patient numbers.
- Work is underway to draw up outline plans for the surgery.
- Viable funding models to deliver the new surgery are being reviewed and finalised.
- If progress is maintained, we could expect planning permission by late summer 2026 and a new surgery to be opened by the end of 2028.

Why is this an issue?

In June 2024, the GP partners at Woodstock Surgery wrote to all patients warning that the surgery might have to stop accepting new patients due to its longstanding capacity constraints. According to NHS guidelines, the current surgery is only 38% of the size it should be for the number of patients on the current roll. The GP partners would like to hire more doctors and healthcare professionals to support patients but are unable to as there is no space. There have been efforts to develop a new surgery for a decade or so, yet none has been delivered due largely to funding constraints.

Who has been working on it?

In November 2024, a public meeting was convened by the Town Council to discuss the future of Woodstock Surgery. The panel was made up of those organisations that have the decision-making capacity and resources to deliver a new surgery: the GPs, the local NHS health board (the BOB Integrated Care Board, ICB), Blenheim Estates, Oxfordshire County Council and West Oxfordshire District Council. Calum Miller MP undertook to convene these parties in a steering group to deliver by summer 2025 a plan for a new surgery. The steering group has met regularly since November and minutes of those meetings have been shared on each occasion with the Town Council and interested residents.

What is required?

The GPs have worked with the ICB to agree the requirements for a new surgery. This will provide new accommodation of a more appropriate size for the existing doctors and staff with additional space for a further doctor's consulting room and other treatment rooms for patients so that a wider range of primary healthcare services can be offered.

Where can it be located?

Many residents at the meeting in November raised the Hensington Road site. The steering group reviewed the history of this proposal at its first meeting. In 2017, Blenheim Estates developed a proposal for a surgery on the old Thames Valley Police site, but the proposal was not prioritised by NHS England and no funding was allocated to the scheme. In 2022, the site was revisited but the GPs and Blenheim found that it did not comply with the new NHS standards for surgeries set

out nationally. In particular, it did not have the expansion potential to cope with anticipated growth in patient numbers. For this reason, the Hensington Road site remains unviable.

The steering group has identified three options for a new surgery, all on Blenheim land.

1. The Owen Mumford site. Blenheim purchased this building recently and intends to repurpose it over time. Preliminary designs are being drawn up for a surgery in one of the buildings on this site so a full feasibility assessment can be carried out.
2. Banbury Road. Blenheim have planning permission from WODC for a development on this site. They have identified a location on the site where a surgery could be built.
3. Land south-east of Park View development. Blenheim have applied to CDC for permission to develop this site. If planning permission is granted, an area within the site has been identified where a surgery could be built.

The principal criteria that the steering group used to consider sites were:

1. Viability: is there suitable land or a suitable building that could be developed to provide a surgery that meets the national requirements?
2. Affordability: can this be built and operated with the funding available?
3. Adaptability: does the site allow for expansion to reflect future demographic change and population growth?
4. Immediacy: how quickly could a surgery be delivered on this site?

How will it be funded?

There are two elements to the project: the capital investment to secure land and build (or adapt) and fit-out a surgery; and the ongoing revenue to pay for the building. The ICB does not provide capital. **It is important to note that the project cannot proceed without an organisation willing to invest capital to build the surgery and without the ICB's agreement to fund the rent and operational costs of the surgery.** The proposal for a new surgery building is based on the assumption that agreement can be reached for Blenheim Estates to provide land and build (or adapt) a surgery, that the ICB will give approval to fund the rent and operational costs of the surgery for a long period (e.g. 25 years) and that an appropriate planning consent is secured.

The ICB has made a decision in principle to provide funding for the running and operation of a new surgery building subject to value for money and affordability assessments. To make the project affordable, the ICB has to be willing to meet the rent required to make a commercial return on the capital investment. The ICB will be guided in this by the District Valuer (DV - an agent of the Valuation Office, a government agency) who will determine their view on a value-for-money rent. However, in other surgery projects, this value has proven to be an obstacle as the DV has historically been very conservative in its assessments, resulting in rents being proposed below market rents (and so below the required return of investment), making it a challenge for the capital investment to be justified.

The steering group has identified two alternatives that could help to bridge a gap between the rent approved by the DV and that required by the capital investor to show an economic return. First, it might be possible to inject some "section 106" money held by the district council from previous developments in the area that is ear-marked for health. This would reduce the amount of capital that Blenheim has to invest, and therefore the amount they needed to recover through rent. Second, Blenheim might ask WODC to reduce the number of affordable homes required on its other developments so that it can make a higher return from market-value homes;

Blenheim would then off-set the lower rent for the surgery against this higher return from house sales.

What happens next?

The project will follow these steps:

- Blenheim Estates, the ICB and the GPs are assessing whether the sites meet the viability test.
- If they do, preliminary designs will be drawn up (in order of immediacy) and costings will be developed.
- The proposal (design and funding) will then be submitted to the DV for their consideration.
- Once a financial arrangement is agreed, the proposal will go to the ICB for approval.
- A detailed planning application will be prepared and submitted.

The goal is to obtain planning permission by late summer 2026. If this is achieved, it should be possible to proceed to complete a new surgery by the end of 2028.

The Steering Group will continue to work to achieve this goal and to share information regularly with the Town Council and other interested groups. The GPs will continue to consult their Patient Participation Group on the developing plans. If you have feedback or views on the proposal, you can share these with Calum Miller MP: calum.miller.mp@parliament.uk