

Hospital closures are a “betrayal”

Plans to close two community hospitals and a care home to help plug a £10.8m funding gap in East Lothian have been approved despite being called a “betrayal of local communities”.

East Lothian Integration Joint Board members agreed plans to close Belhaven Hospital and its care home facility Blossom House, in Dunbar, as well as the Abbey Care Home and the Edington Community Hospital’s vacant ward in North Berwick.

Fiona Wilson, the board’s chief officer, told the meeting the closures, along with cuts to funding for community services were the “least worst decisions” possible for the cash-strapped health service.

Board convenor Councillor Shamin Akhtar told the meeting she was supporting the plans with “disappointment and great regret”.

The board heard that in total 60 beds were being taken out of circulation as it looked to fill the funding gap for the coming year.

The Abbey Care Home has 30 beds but was described as no longer being ‘fit for purpose’. Residents are being supported to find alternative places to live with the aim to move them out by the end of the summer.

The Edington Hospital saw its nine bed in-patient ward close 'temporarily' in 2021 as staff were transferred to East Lothian Community Hospital because of staffing issues there.

The ward will now shut permanently and the Edington site will continue to offer community health services.

Belhaven Hospital had six hospital beds, an NHS managed nursing home at Blossom House with 11 beds and community health hub.

Marilyn McNeil, a non-voting member of the board, pointed out a consultation on provision of care for older people, started before Covid, was still ongoing and people had been told no closures would be made until alternatives were in place.

She said: "Is this a betrayal of the communities because they were told no decisions would be made until the consultation was complete."

Officers acknowledged that the consultation had not been completed but said they had been forced to make the decisions faster than planned insisting feedback from the ongoing discussions with the communities had led their findings.

Councillor Akhtar told the meeting that she agreed with the feelings of the community.

She said: "Talking of betrayal, I feel the same, I am bitterly disappointed. We continue to be one of the fastest growing areas in Scotland but also continue to be one of the worst funded.

"We are not asking for special treatment, we are just asking for fair funding."

Councillor Akhtar said concern over the lack of funds for services in East Lothian had been raised with the Scottish Government over the last year in the hope some additional support would come but nothing had.

And she criticised the decision to push ahead with a National Care Service, telling the meeting: “We do not need a National Care Service which needs £14million to recruit 100 bureaucrats.”

The board was told failing to approve the cuts as part of a budget proposal for the year ahead would leave it unable to balance its books.

The board voted by seven to one to approve the recommended budget including the closures with only Councillor Carol McFarlane voting against it.

by Marie Sharp Local Democracy Reporter

