Dear Mrs Barker and Ms Loader,

Healthcare Commission’s Annual Health Check 2008-2009
Heatherwood and Wexham Park Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

The Joint East Berkshire Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee have the following comments to contribute to the Heatherwood & Wexham Park Hospital Trust’s Annual Health Check Declaration to the Healthcare Commission for 2008/09.

Due to the wide range of health services delivered by the Trust, limitations on Councillors’ time, and the number of organisations within the Committee’s purview, we have necessarily confined our enquiries to a small number of discrete issues.

Domain 1, Safety, C4:

  a) The Joint Committee is concerned about the Trust’s interpretation of acceptable levels of Clostridium Difficile (C. Diff). Although it is acknowledged that national targets have been set for the reduction of C. Diff cases, the Joint Committee is firmly of the opinion that those national targets do not go far enough and therefore the Trust should be setting its own locally set “Gold Targets”. The Joint Committee acknowledge that eradicating C. Diff is a major challenge for the Trust, and expect to see much more solid progress on the control of C Diff infections in 2009/10.

Domain 4, Patient Focus:

  a) C13 – The joint Committee is concerned that facilities for visitors are not always as good as they should be. Admission to hospital is a stressful and anxious event for most people and patients receive a great deal of benefit from the support and encouragement they receive from visitors. The Joint Committee consider that
operating a rigid and restrictive visiting schedule is not in the best interest of the patient and fails to recognise working pattern of patient’s families and friends, the parking difficulties that is created etc. The Trust should therefore carry out a re-assessment of its visiting times policy and should change the mindset of administrators/clinicians so that visiting is to be generally allowed except at those times when it is considered necessary them to be excluded. The Joint Committee believes that more effective Ward management would enable the adoption of a more flexible approach to visiting that took into account the needs of all patients, visitors and health professionals.

b) C13 – The Joint Committee is not satisfied with the accessibility of car parking at Heatherwood Hospital. The lack of car parking space and cost of parking has led to patients having to park on the road outside the hospital. In one case, a Member receiving physiotherapy had to arrive at least half an hour before each appointment began in order to wait for a car parking space to become available.

c) C13 - The Joint Committee considers that there is no justifiable reason why the Trust should charge patients and visitors for parking in the hospitals’ car parks. The joint Committee believes that there are adequate technological solutions available to allow patients and visitors to park free of charge whilst controlling the use of the car park from abuse by other motorists and which would not be a financial burden to operate. Furthermore, charging for parking undermines the general principle that the National Health Service should be free at the point of delivery.

d) C15- The Joint Committee has some concerns about the standard of food provided to patients at Heatherwood Hospital. Anecdotal personal evidence showed a low level of patient satisfaction with the meals provided and concerns were raised about the long distance from which the meals were sourced and delivered. Patients were told that meals are transported from Wales. In addition, the Joint Committee is aware that a particular patient that had to stay unexpectedly overnight following a procedure had to go without an evening meal and breakfast as the patient was not present on the Ward when the meal booking sheets were processed. The Joint Committee considers that this may not be an isolated case.

Domain 5, Accessible and responsive care C18:

a) The Joint Committee are concerned about the shortage of special care baby beds at Heatherwood and Wexham Park Hospitals. The Joint Committee is aware that, due to lack of available facilities, some premature babies are being hospitalised up to 2 hours from where they live.

Domain 6, Care environment and amenities:

a) C21 - From direct personal experience of in-patient service at Heatherwood Hospital the Joint Committee are concerned that the arrangements to facilitate and encourage personal hygiene were lacking, for example a Member was asked to provide their own soap and towels and had to share one shower between a ward of 20 patients. The condition of the shared toilet and shower facilities are considered to be well below acceptable standard and the offensive smells make them uninviting. There is no evidence to suggest that visitors and medical personnel are actively using the anti-bacterial gels on the wards and more should be done to encourage their use.

b) The Joint Committee considers that the general dilapidated nature of Heatherwood Hospital makes cleanliness difficult to achieve to a standard that would normally be expected.
c) C21, The joint Committee is concerned about the investment of people and other resources in Heatherwood Hospital, both in absolute terms and relative to the investment at the Trust’s other hospital at Wexham Park. It seems to the Joint Committee that in all important decisions on the relative disposition of resources between the two sites, Wexham Park Hospital is favoured over Heatherwood Hospital. From direct observation this is apparent in the poorer physical condition of the buildings and facilities, the investment in staff and the standard of equipment.

The approach taken by the Trust to the Heatherwood Hospital maternity unit, whilst bolstering the Wexham Park maternity operation further demonstrates the Joint Committee’s concerns about the imbalance in investment between the two sites. Furthermore, the Joint Committee were concerned that the conversion to a midwife-led unit at Heatherwood might mean that expectant mothers feel pressured to go to Wexham Park hospital instead.

We note that in the Heatherwood and Wexham Park hospitals ‘health matters’ news letter it is stated that the Trust ‘believe that to build on the success we have already achieved, major investments in new buildings and refurbishments are required at both Heatherwood and Wexham Park’. Members expect to see that investments are proportionally distributed between the two sites, and that Heatherwood Hospital is properly resourced to provide the services expected of it in a sustainable way. Specifically, we would like to see clearer and more precise investment plans for Heatherwood Hospital, to demonstrate that it has an assured role in providing important health services into the future.

With kind regards,

Cllr. Simon Meadowcroft
Chairman of the Joint East Berkshire Overview & Scrutiny Committee