

# Ideas for the future of Benjamin Court

Survey report September 2024

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# Who we are and what we do

Healthwatch Norfolk is the independent voice for patients and service users in the county. We gather people's views of health and social care services in the county and make sure they are heard by the people in charge.

The people who fund and provide services have to listen to you, through us. So, whether you share a good or bad experience with us, your views can help make changes to how services are designed and delivered in Norfolk.

Our work covers all areas of health and social care. This includes GP surgeries, hospitals, dentists, care homes, pharmacies, opticians and more.

We also give out information about the health and care services available in Norfolk and direct people to someone who can help.

At Healthwatch Norfolk we have five main objectives:

1. Gather your views and experiences (good and bad)
2. Pay particular attention to underrepresented groups
3. Show how we contribute to making services better
4. Contribute to better signposting of services
5. Work with national organisations to help create better services

We make sure we have lots of ways to collect feedback from people who use Norfolk's health and social care services. This means that everyone has the same chance to be heard.

# Summary

The Norfolk and Waveney NHS Integrated Care Board (ICB) asked Healthwatch Norfolk to seek the views of the public about what should happen to one of the buildings at Benjamin Court in Cromer.

The building has previously offered reablement, rehabilitation, respite, palliative care services, and was most recently used for short-term rehabilitation, usually for people leaving hospital.

The ICB approached a range of organisations to see if they could use the buildings. Two ideas came forward – one from an NHS trust who could use a small area for nurses to be based in between visits, and a local housing provider whose use would be subject to a feasibility study and the NHS saying it could no longer use the site.

Healthwatch Norfolk was asked to carry out engagement in person and online to find out what ideas people had for the future of the Benjamin Court building, bearing in mind the current constraints around funding and staffing.

Healthwatch Norfolk received full or partial responses from 295 people, with the majority living in the Cromer (NR27, 131 people) and Sheringham (NR26, 49 people) areas.

The most popular suggestion was the reinstatement of Benjamin Court as a reablement (or rehabilitation/convalescence) centre, with 79 per cent (232 people) giving this response. This is despite Norfolk County Council mostly delivering this type of care in people's homes.

A total of 21 per cent of respondents (63 people) suggested other ideas relating to health and care including palliative care, respite facilities, specialist clinics, community projects, and a Day Centre. Some also suggested re-purposing the building to offer either housing for keyworkers in health and care, or for assisted living/sheltered housing flats.

The majority of respondents asked for the reinstatement of the re-enablement service to Benjamin Court. As Healthwatch Norfolk's role is to represent the

views of the public, we would recommend investigation of this as an option for the future of the building.

Mindful of the brief to ensure any future use can be both funded and safely staffed, the majority of all respondents suggested Benjamin Court should be the home of a facility or service relating to health and care for North Norfolk residents. We would recommend that all avenues are explored to investigate the feasibility of this.

A lack of communication is a common thread within the feedback, and we would recommend clear communication around whatever decision is made about its future use to ensure those living and working in North Norfolk understand the final decision made by the ICB when it has considered all representations.

# Why we looked at this

The NHS Integrated Care Board (ICB) for Norfolk and Waveney asked Healthwatch Norfolk to seek the views of the public about what should happen to one of the buildings at Benjamin Court in Cromer. Benjamin Court is made up of two buildings joined by a corridor. One of these buildings (building two) is let to Broadland Housing Group, and this is not set to change. Building one is mostly empty, however, and it is this building that the ICB sought the public's views on.

Until 2014, the buildings were used by Norfolk Community Health and Care (NCHC, an NHS organisation), and provided reablement, rehabilitation, respite, and palliative care services. Most recently, building one was used by Norfolk County Council (NCC) for people across Norfolk needing short-term rehabilitation, usually after leaving hospital. However, NCC has changed the way that it provides support for people needing this kind of care, and this is now mostly provided in people's own homes. The building has therefore been largely empty since June 2023.

The buildings are owned by NHS Property Services and any tenants lease the buildings from them. The estimated revenue costs to lease the vacant building are around £353,000 per year. The ICB was keen to hear ideas which could be sustainably funded, and which could be staffed, bearing in mind that it can be hard to recruit health and care staff in North Norfolk.

The ICB asked local organisations whether they would have any use for the building, including local NHS trusts, NCC, all the local district, borough and city councils in Norfolk, the police service, the fire service, and a local housing provider. The only ideas that were put forward were from an NHS trust that said their nurses could benefit from space to use between visits (although this would only need a small space, and could be located elsewhere); and a local housing provider which said that they might be able to use the site, but only subject to a feasibility study and only if the NHS formally says that it will have no use for the building.

Healthwatch Norfolk was asked to carry out engagement both online and in person to find out what ideas people had for the future of the building. It was set up as a one-question survey to give people the opportunity to make suggestions, which could then be considered.

Healthwatch Norfolk has analysed all the feedback we received around these ideas for a future use for this report, which has been presented to the ICB. The ICB

will review the report and then take a decision. They are looking for a solution that is financially viable, can be staffed, and will benefit as many people in Norfolk and Waveney as possible. If no viable alternative can be found, the ICB will return the building to NHS Property Services, who would find an alternative site, or sell the site. Half of any proceeds from the sale would be available to re-invest in NHS Property Services sites in Norfolk and Waveney.

# How we did this

Healthwatch Norfolk undertook a number of engagement visits in north Norfolk, to try to understand the public's views. During these visits we asked people to fill in a short survey, asking them to give their suggestions on what they thought the building should be used for, and asking them for some demographic information. The survey questionnaire is included in the Appendix to this document.

We carried out engagement visits at the following locations:

13/05/2024	Sheringham Library
14/05/2024	Sheringham Little Theatre
15/05/2024	Roys of Wroxham back foyer
16/05/2024	Green Park Rural Centre Wicken Green
16/05/2024	Fakenham Market Place
17/05/2024	Cromer Library
21/05/2024	North Walsham Community Centre

We were initially asked to carry out two in-person engagement visits, one in Cromer and one in Sheringham. We decided to increase the number of locations based on the interest in the engagement. Following representations from the Save Benjamin Court campaign, we also added an additional date in North Walsham.

There was also the opportunity to leave feedback digitally through an online survey hosted on the Healthwatch Norfolk website, and people could also telephone Healthwatch Norfolk to share their suggestions.

Finally, a public meeting was held at the North Norfolk District Council offices in Cromer on 16<sup>th</sup> July, where feedback was also collected. This event was delayed by the need for Healthwatch Norfolk to observe purdah restrictions because of the general election.

The consultation was affected by an organised campaign (the Save Benjamin Court Campaign) which encouraged people to ask for the reinstatement of the service for reablement purposes. The campaign encouraged people to make certain arguments, including that re-opening Benjamin Court would lead to quicker hospital discharge and reduce 'bed blocking' (sic), cut hospital re-admissions, allow older people to return home safely, and avoid long travel times.



The campaign also encouraged people to complain about what the campaign saw as a lack of notice for the workshops, and about their chosen locations. This campaign also submitted a case document laying out their argument for Benjamin Court to be reinstated as a reablement centre, and a dossier of personal testimonies from people in North Norfolk. The Chief Executive of North Norfolk District Council, Cromer Town Council and Trimingham Parish Council also submitted statements in support of re-opening the building for its previous use. These documents are available on the Healthwatch Norfolk website here: <https://healthwatchnorfolk.co.uk/formal-reponses-to-benjamin-court-engagement/>.

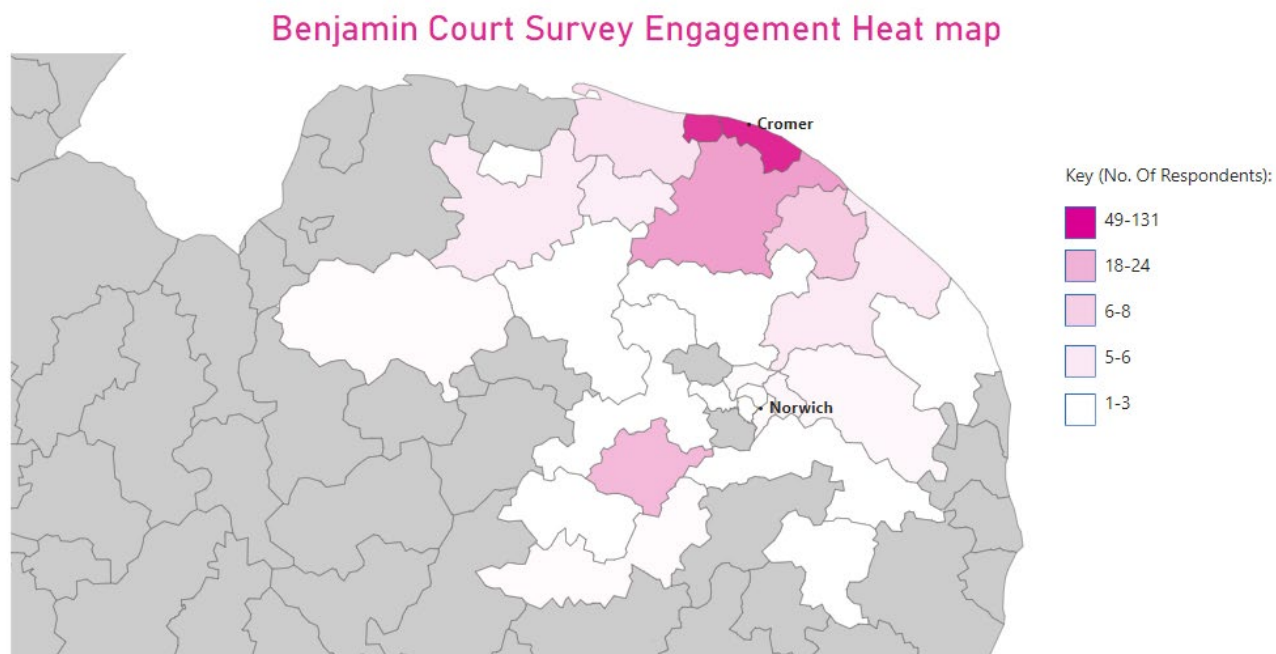
The representations from those supporting the campaign and the return of a reablement service were considered alongside other suggestions made for the future of the building, to match the brief we had been given by the ICB to discover what ideas people had for its future use.

## **Who we received responses from:**

We received full or partial responses from 295 people. Of these, respondents told us, based on answers for each individual demography question, that:

- 70 per cent were female (202 people)
- 39 per cent were aged 66-75 (101 people)
- 94 per cent were White- British/English/Northern Irish/Scottish/Welsh (217 people. For comparison, 94.7 per cent of Norfolk's population were recorded as 'White' in the 2021 UK census, Norfolk Insight).
- 20 per cent were a carer (46 people), 22 per cent had a long-term condition (50 people), 13 per cent had a disability (29 people)
- 31 per cent had heard about us via social media (72 people)

The majority of survey respondents lived in the postcodes of Cromer (NR27, 131 people) and Sheringham (NR26, 49 people). The remaining respondents lived in the surrounding North Norfolk area – see the map below.



*Figure 1* Heat map of Norfolk displaying data of where respondents reside.

Below are some graphs and charts highlighting the demographic data in further detail:

## Respondents' Ethnicities

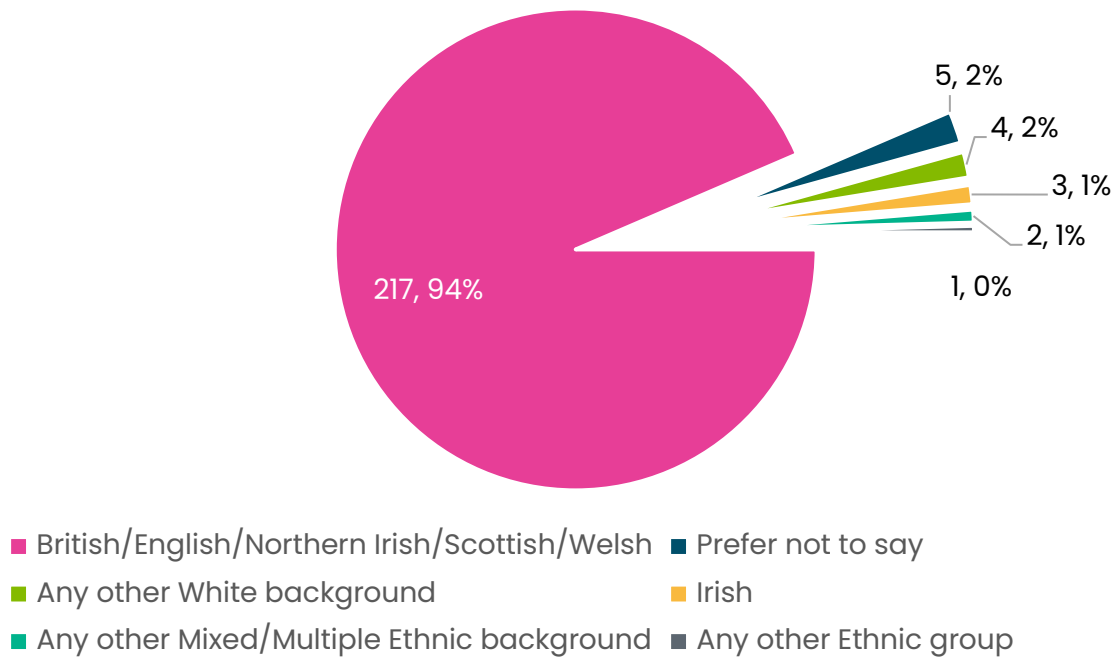


Figure 2 Pie chart displaying the ethnicity breakdown of the survey population. Total responses for this question numbered 232

## Age Range Statistics

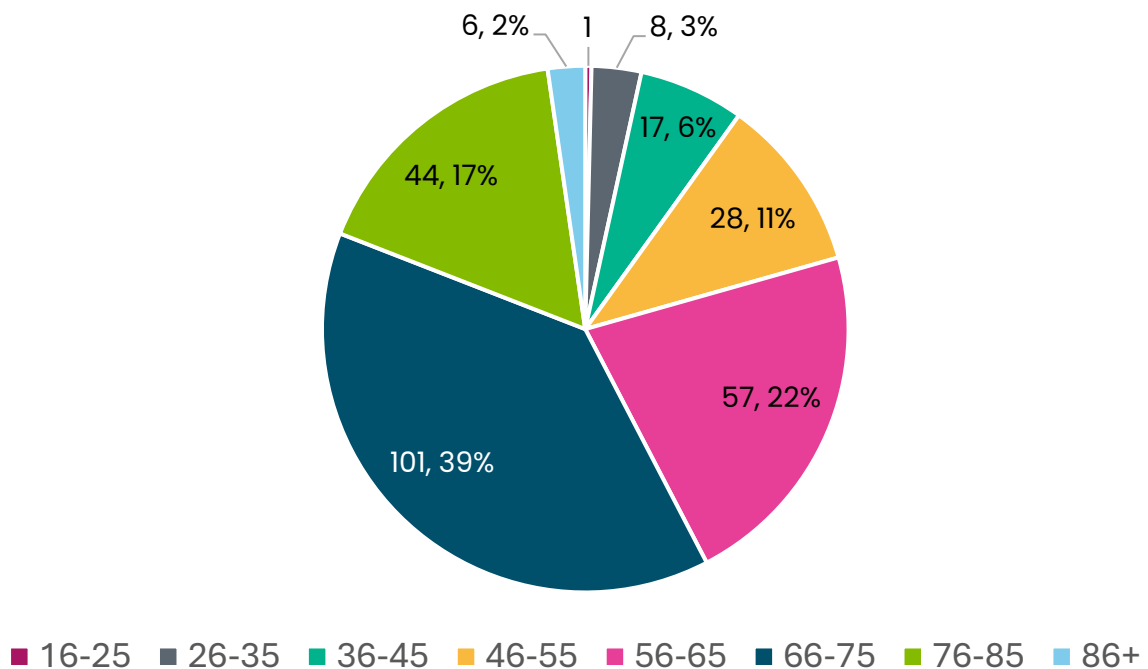


Figure 3 Pie chart displaying the distribution of age ranges within the survey population. Total responses for this question numbered 262.

## Other information on respondents

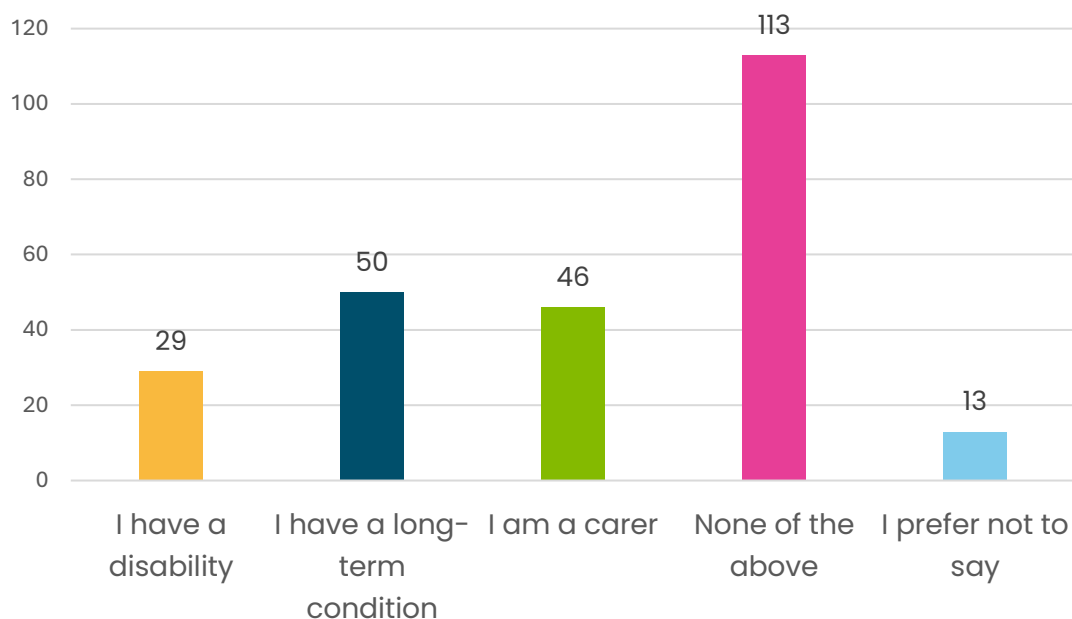


Figure 4 Chart displaying other information on the survey population. Note that users could select multiple options here, with the number of respondents totalling 226.

## How did you hear about us?

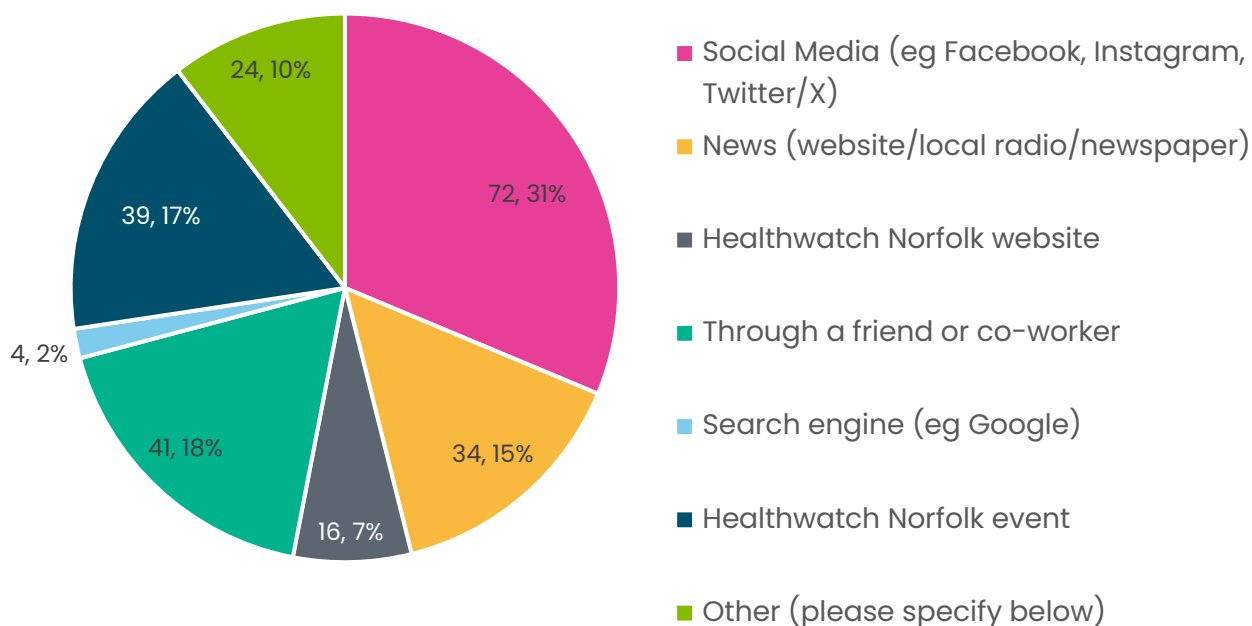


Figure 5 Pie chart displaying the breakdown of how survey respondents became aware of HWN. Total responses for this question numbered 230.

# What we found out

The spread of responses is shown in the table below. Respondents made many different suggestions, and often made more than one suggestion. The table shows how many people made each suggestion and omits suggestions that were made by fewer than ten people, to make it easy to read.

Table 1 *Main suggestions for the future use of Benjamin Court*

Response	Number of people
Re-open as reablement centre	232
Palliative care	22
Respite	24
Specialist clinics	16
Community projects	11
Day Centre	10

As can be seen, the most frequent response by far was that people wanted to reinstate Benjamin Court as a reablement (or rehabilitation/convalescence) centre – 79 per cent (232 people) of respondents gave this response, with 21 per cent (63 people) making alternative suggestions.

People highlighted the need for such a facility in North Norfolk due to the area's ageing population and what they saw as the lack of adequate alternatives, and the difficulty of travelling further afield, especially to Norwich, for care. As one person told us:

As a family we were indebted to Benjamin Court for the wonderful care they gave to Mum. Living in [North Norfolk], it was also such a relief to us, as pensioners, that we did not have to do a round trip of 50 miles a day to see Mum. Thank goodness that we have a car, I cannot imagine how people cope using the bus.

Some of the strength of feeling in favour of re-opening Benjamin Court seemed to come from the perception that North Norfolk has few healthcare facilities

compared to other parts of the county, and that facilities have been closing in recent years.

People also highlighted the former service's compassionate care, supportive environment, and effective rehabilitation services, which enabled patients to regain independence and confidence after hospital stays. Many people recounted their or their family members' positive experiences of the service, for example:

My mother was at Benjamin Court having been discharged from Norfolk and Norwich. As a family it was an absolute lifesaver and for her, she was in her local environment, and it therefore aided her recovery greatly.

I spent several weeks there a few years ago after joint surgery. I was looked after exceptionally well. If I had to stay in hospital I would have been taking a bed up.

My 83-year-old husband experienced the wonderful work of Benjamin Court two years ago following a six week stay in N&N hospital ... The last three of those weeks, he was a 'bed-blocker' ... At last, he was told a bed was available in Benjamin Court in Cromer ... At last, he was given his own room, private bathroom and toilet, peace and quiet, and excellent care from staff, visiting GP and nurses. At last, he could sleep, and he began to eat proper food again. I was able to visit several times a day. It was heaven compared to the hellish hospital ward. Even though he was still very unwell, he slowly regained some mobility and strength after being bedbound for so long. He started to become more like his old self until after two weeks convalescence in Benjamin Court was able to return home ... We cannot praise the staff and running of Benjamin Court enough and are devastated that this centre of excellence is closed.

These kinds of personal experiences seem to have made many people feel passionately that the facility should be re-opened for reablement. For others, their

strength of feeling seemed to come from worries about what would happen to them if they had to go into hospital, if Benjamin Court was not there for them after they were discharged:

The ICB are trying to bring people into their own homes but that is not working in North Norfolk. I would rather see NHS staff looking after our patients. Care does not stop at 5pm. Virtual wards are really great, but what happens when someone falls out of bed or needs to go to the toilet? Benjamin Court is one of the solutions. For people who are worried about coming out of hospital, it is essential they have that 24-hour care. We care about the residents, and this is the right thing to do to find them somewhere safe.

Numerous comments emphasized that a reablement centre would alleviate delayed discharges at the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital (NNUH) and provide a local, accessible option for patients and their families. Some of the people giving this response criticised the newer model of providing care at home after a hospital admission, expressing scepticism that it could provide 24-hour care in the way that a reablement facility can. As these two people said:

Reablement at home may be a satisfactory alternative for some, but many others, especially the oldest and most vulnerable, need the intensive support that only a unit like this can provide, to enable them to regain their confidence until they feel able to go home.

My aunt was discharged from hospital with carers coming in, it did not work out, she felt scared and eventually had another fall and went back into hospital for another two months.

Several respondents expressed a lack of trust in the decision-making process at the Integrated Care Board (ICB). The closure of Benjamin Court without prior public consultation was criticized by several people who felt that this decision was made unilaterally and without considering the community's needs and opinions. Some people expressed concern about what they said was a lack of transparency in the

consultation process, feeling that the decision to close Benjamin Court may have already been made. They questioned the purpose of seeking public input if the outcome was predetermined. As one person wrote:

I do not know why any of us bother to write all this as those at the top, those making the decisions neither care, nor listen to our opinions. I expect despite the big show of "tell us what you want," the decision is already made.

A few people questioned why the public was being asked for their opinions when the ICB should have the expertise to determine the best use of the building based on data and needs assessments. They suggested that the ICB should present viable options based on their knowledge and then seek public feedback on those options.

People made a number of alternative solutions, which are detailed below:

- **Respite Care:** 22 people suggested using Benjamin Court for respite care, providing short-term breaks for both carers and those they care for. People suggested that this could include day visits and overnight stays, addressing carer burnout and offering a safe environment for individuals needing temporary assistance.
- **Community Health Hub:** People suggested a range of different health services that could be provided from the building. The most popular suggestion (from 16 people) was to provide specialist clinics (such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy, etc.). Other suggestions were for an NHS drop-in centre (similar to the one in Norwich), wound care, diabetes clinic, vaccination centre, GP services, and musculo-skeletal support.
- **Palliative/End-of-Life Care:** Mentioning what they saw as the lack of such facilities in the county, 13 people proposed turning Benjamin Court into a hospice, providing dignified end-of-life care and easing pressure on hospitals.
- **Community Hub:** Ten people suggested opening the space for various community groups and activities, such as youth groups, social clubs for isolated individuals, and support groups for specific needs (e.g., carers, mental health).
- **Day Centre:** Ten people suggested that it could be used as a day centre for people, providing daytime care and activities for older people, disabled people, or other vulnerable groups.



- **Carer's Hub:** This suggestion involves creating a central resource for carers, offering information, support groups, respite services, and a space for connecting with others in similar situations.
- **Mental Health Services:** Nine people suggested that it could be used for mental health services, either as a bedded unit, or a drop-in centre for receiving therapy, or attending support groups.
- **Dental Practice:** Five people specifically mentioned the need for an NHS dental practice in the area, given the existing shortage.
- **Housing Options:**
  - **Key Worker Housing:** With the difficulty of attracting and retaining healthcare staff in North Norfolk, some suggested converting Benjamin Court into housing specifically for these essential workers.
  - **Assisted Living/Sheltered Flats:** A few respondents proposed creating assisted living units or sheltered flats for elderly individuals, providing a supportive environment with access to care.

# Conclusion

Healthwatch Norfolk was tasked with collecting ideas for the future of the Benjamin Court building. The most popular suggestion was to reinstate the reablement service. Additional proposals included providing short-term breaks for both carers and those they care for, creating a Community Health Hub where support services and clinics could be offered, establishing a site for palliative/end-of-life care, and setting up a day centre. Respondents felt it provided a vital service in an area which they felt lacked some services, and many had personal experience of the care given there.

Other suggestions included repurposing the facility to provide housing for key workers in the health and care sectors of North Norfolk or converting it into additional assisted living or sheltered housing flats.

Some respondents expressed concerns about the decision-making process regarding the closure of Benjamin Court and feared that their views might be disregarded during this engagement process.

The decision by the Integrated Care Board (ICB) will need to balance public opinion with considerations of funding and staffing sustainability and be communicated to the public effectively.

# Recommendations

1. The majority of respondents asked for the reinstatement of the re-enablement service to Benjamin Court. The role of Healthwatch Norfolk is to represent the views of the public and, with such overwhelming support, we would recommend investigation of this as an option for the future of the building.
2. Mindful of the brief to ensure any future use can be both funded and safely staffed, the majority of all respondents suggested Benjamin Court should be the home of a facility or service relating to health and care for North Norfolk residents. We would recommend that all avenues are explored to explore the feasibility of such a service.
3. A lack of communication is a common thread within the feedback, and we would recommend clear communication around whatever decision is made about future use to ensure those living and working in North Norfolk understand the reasoning and rationale behind it.

# Formal response

## **Tracey Bleakley, chief executive of the Norfolk and Waveney Integrated Care Board, said:**

“I would like to thank everyone who took the time to share their views about the future of Benjamin Court. We spent time talking with the local community because we wanted to find a solution that would mean the building could continue to be used to support the health and wellbeing of north Norfolk residents.

“Unfortunately, we have not been able to find a solution that fits with the other services already available and the model of care we want to provide, or which is financially viable. As a result, we will return the site to NHS Property Services, which will enable them to look for alternative tenants.

“In line with the recommendations from Healthwatch Norfolk, we have asked NHS Property Services to keep us and the local community informed of progress with the site. We will continue to keep under review the services available in north Norfolk, and if other opportunities arise to invest in services, we will explore them fully, as we have with Benjamin Court.”

# Appendix



## Benjamin Court survey

Please note that you can complete this survey online by visiting:  
<https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/BenjaminCourtFuture/>.

1. **What ideas do you have for how Benjamin Court could be used in future? Please write your answer in the box below.**

The following questions are optional but completing them helps us to understand if we have heard from a good cross section of the population and whether particular groups of people might be affected differently.

2. **What is the first half of your postcode? (e.g. NR18)**

3. **How old are you?**

4. **What is your gender?**

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Genderfluid
- Genderqueer
- Intersex
- Prefer not to say
- Prefer to self-describe:

**5. What is your sexuality?**

- Bisexual
- Gay or Lesbian
- Heterosexual or straight
- Pansexual
- Prefer not to say

If you feel the choices do not provide a suitable option, please write how you would describe your sexual orientation:

**6. What is your ethnic group?**

**Arab:**

- Arab

**Asian / Asian British:**

- Bangladeshi
- Chinese
- Indian
- Pakistani
- Any other Asian / Asian British background

**Black / Black British:**

- African
- Caribbean
- Any other Black / Black British background

**Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups:**

- Asian and White
- Black African and White
- Black Caribbean and White
- Any other Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups background

**White:**

- British / English / Northern Irish / Scottish / Welsh
- Irish
- Gypsy, Traveller or Irish Traveller
- Roma
- Any other White background

**Other:**

- Any other Ethnic Group
- Prefer not to say

If other, please specify:

**7. Please select any of the following that apply to you:**

- I have a disability
- I have a long term condition
- I am a carer

None of the above

I prefer not to say

**7. Where did you hear about Healthwatch Norfolk?**

Social Media (e.g. Facebook / Instagram / Twitter)

News (website / radio / local newspaper)

Our Website

Through a friend or co-worker

Podcast

YouTube

Search Engine (e.g. Google)

Healthwatch Norfolk Event

**Returning your completed survey**

Please send your completed survey to Healthwatch Norfolk, Suite 6, The Old Dairy Elm Farm,  
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