

In our first five updates, we talked about the process of how we design an updated service model and a new hospital, however we've focussed less on the question of when this will be delivered so that's what this column will concentrate on.

In terms of the hospital, we included estimated dates in the Initial Agreement, setting out roughly a year between each business case stage with construction starting in May 2024. This was based on experience with the new hospitals recently constructed at Broadford and Aviemore.

As discussed with the Lochaber Stakeholders Group at the last meeting however, it's clear that this was an underestimate. We now expect to complete the Outline Business Case (OBC) for submission in August 2024, and the Full Business Case in April 2025. Allowing time for approval, this would allow construction to start in June 2025, completing towards the end of 2027 and opening in spring of 2028. It's important to note that these dates will depend on the contractor and design team, and this may need to be adjusted (in either direction) following their appointment in March 2023.

We are very conscious that the project taking longer is not what the Lochaber community will want to hear, and it's important that we explain why these longer timescales are necessary.

The first, straightforward, reason for the extension is that we've increased the construction time from 24 to 30 months, based on a review of other projects.

A more complex factor impacting timescale is the new NHS Assure process, set up following well-publicised issues in new central belt hospitals. Key Stage Assurance Reviews (KSARs) are now mandated at key points in the project. These focus on technical design and compliance with standards, as well as governance and ensuring formal recorded sign-off from key contributors. Each review should take no more than 12 weeks, although these have been taking longer in practice. This alone adds at least 36 weeks to cover the three reviews needed pre-construction. Another impact of NHS Assure is that we need to complete more design work earlier, which extends the OBC period, and leaving less to be finalised during construction.

A third factor is the new national requirement to meet net zero carbon standards. This applies to operational emissions such as power for heating and lighting, but we're also required to minimise embodied carbon which is the carbon released in the manufacture of construction materials. For example, steel and concrete are very carbon intensive to produce but are also the materials we usually construct hospitals with. Meeting net zero will mean we can't simply design 'as usual' but will need to be more innovative during the design process, modelling different solutions and adjusting the design based on the outcome. This takes time.

It's also vital that local, front-line staff are able to contribute to the design of new services and the new building, however they also need to provide care for patients and this has to be balanced, especially in small teams and departments, and this means there's a lower limit to how quickly we can progress design work.

To address a question raised by the Stakeholder Group, we'd like to clarify that the timescales are not related to the funding timescales advised by Scottish Government. As explained previously, we've been advised that funding may not be available until 2026, however we'll continue to work on the basis that funding is going to be available when needed. We'll see increased certainty on this once we submit the OBC.

Finally, although it will be disappointing that the hospital will take longer, it is very important that we build the facilities that Lochaber needs for the next 50 years or more, and don't rush to the wrong answer. It's important too to remember that while the new hospital may be the most tangible aspect of the project, buildings won't make people better on their own, and we will continue to deliver service improvements before the new hospital where we can.

If you'd like to contact us, you can do so via the NHS Highland Feedback team Nhshighland.feedback@nhs.scot or 01463 705997, or our project email address on nhsh.nhshighlandestatesprojects@nhs.scot. We're also planning to attend the Fort William 2040 consultation event on 2nd November and hope to meet some of you there.

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