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The NHS Nightingale Hospital Exeter will now provide a range of services from autumn 2021 to help tackle waiting lists across Devon and the wider South-West region.

After being decommissioned as a COVID-19 hospital earlier this year, the Nightingale was purchased by NHS organisations across the South-West. It has since been used to provide diagnostic scans to local people, host a COVID-19 vaccine trial and train overseas nurses.

Local health bosses confirm that plans are well underway to extend these services later in the year, to include planned orthopaedic surgery, ophthalmology and rheumatology services, as well as increasing the range of diagnostic services such as MRI scans.

In May 2021, it was announced that Exeter's Nightingale would receive funding from the National Accelerator Systems Programme, which has been awarded to Devon to increase capacity to further reduce waiting times for certain types of operations. As part of this programme, work is underway to redevelop the former COVID-19 inpatient hospital into:

- two operating theatres for day case/ short stay elective (planned) orthopaedic procedures.
- high volume cataract and diagnostic hub for glaucoma and medical retina
- a community diagnostic hub to include CT and MRI
- an outpatient rheumatology and infusions centre

Dr Elizabeth Wilkinson, Consultant Medical Ophthalmologist at Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust (NDHT) and Clinical Lead for Ophthalmology at NHS Devon Clinical Commissioning Group said: "During the pandemic, many NHS organisations across the country had to postpone planned procedures so that we could care for patients with COVID-19 and continue to treat those with urgent care needs.

"Ophthalmology, orthopaedic, rheumatology and diagnostic testing services have been particularly affected across Devon, and so despite our best efforts, our waiting lists have grown. This means that many of our patients are waiting longer for treatment now than before the pandemic.

"We know how difficult postponing or cancelling surgery can be for our patients and their loved ones, so developing new innovative services in the Nightingale will help us to better prioritise the most urgent patients and those who have been waiting the longest."

Chris Tidman, Deputy Chief Executive of the Royal Devon & Exeter NHS Foundation Trust (RD&E) and NDHT said: "Over the last year, the NHS Nightingale Hospital Exeter has been an invaluable resource, supporting care across Devon and wider South-West community.

"As well as caring for nearly 250 patients with COVID-19 from across three counties in the height of the pandemic, the NHS Nightingale Hospital Exeter has also provided over 6,000 important diagnostic scans to local people, supported the delivery of two COVID-19 vaccine studies and hosted overseas nurse training for three local NHS Trusts.

"Our staff and volunteers created an exceptional facility that was much needed to manage COVID-19 demand, and we are delighted that the Nightingale's legacy of outstanding care will now continue, helping us to find new ways of working to further reduce waiting times for patients across the South-West.

"To support this work, we will be recruiting additional medical, nursing, AHP and support staff over the coming months to work across orthopaedics, ophthalmology and imaging, with opportunities across both the Nightingale and our main hospital sites."