

WHY WATFORD?

WEST HERTS TRUST MUST THROW OFF THE SHACKLES OF THIS SLANTED DEAL

The critical decision about the site for major new hospital services in West Herts will shape healthcare across the area for decades to come. This paper explains why west Watford was chosen for new hospital services for West Hertfordshire – and why this decision should be reversed.

West Herts NHS Hospitals Trust insists on the Watford General Hospital site as the only option for major new hospital services for the whole area covered by the Trust. This is despite many problems resulting from this decision. The New Hospital Campaign has been examining legal and other official documents to find out why the Trust is so insistent on the west Watford site. The findings give rise to very serious concerns:

- The health needs of people across West Herts are being marginalised by the priorities of one Borough Council and its commercial partners.
- Consequently the decision about the site for new hospital services for West Herts should be re-considered as a matter of urgency.
- The health interests of people across West Herts should be the sole basis for this decision, not the regeneration concerns of one borough.

Why west Watford doesn't make sense for a hospital

Watford General Hospital is in an already congested area right next to Watford Football Club, it's built on a slope, and the site is getting more and more squeezed by housing and commercial development.

West Herts needs a new hospital that everyone across the area can get to easily. But Watford General simply doesn't fit the bill. It's very hard to travel there from other parts such as Dacorum and St Albans, which have far larger populations than Watford. Difficult enough if you can travel by car because of the distance and often heavy traffic. If you have to rely on public transport, getting there for appointments can be extremely difficult and stressful. For people with mobility or other health problems, trying to travel there and back can be immensely challenging. It's no surprise that public frustration with the poor access to Watford General has emerged in survey after survey.

Doing major rebuilding on the Watford hospital site also makes little sense. It carries many risks and the work will cause years of disruption for patients, staff and local residents.

So, why stay at west Watford?

The answer is that West Herts Hospitals NHS Trust (WHHT) has been working with Watford Borough Council and the Council's commercial partners for years on plans to regenerate West Watford and secure and redevelop Watford General Hospital. This is clear from a complex web of longstanding agreements which involve Watford Borough Council, its partner - Kier Project Investment Ltd – and WHHT. Some, but not all, of the facts about this deal are now emerging from legal documents reluctantly released by WHHT.

Watford Health Campus and the masterplan

Retaining and developing hospital services at Watford has been a key aim of the Borough Council's regeneration plans for a long time. To achieve its objectives, the Council set up legal and financial arrangements, rooted in a masterplan for what is called 'Watford Health Campus Partnership'.

The aims of the masterplan are to deliver a new hospital on the Watford General hospital site, provide regeneration and help boost Watford's regional status as a major business centre.

To help achieve its aims, Watford Borough Council set up a Joint Venture with Kier Project Investment Ltd on 18 June 2013 – the 'Watford Health Campus Partnership LLP' (through what is called a Local Asset Backed Vehicle or LABV). On the same date, a Collaboration Agreement was signed between WHHT and Kier. Redacted versions of these agreements have now been made public through Freedom of Information requests by a member of the New Hospital Campaign.

Watford Riverwell

The project was re-named as 'Watford Riverwell' in 2017 because it "*was about building a new community with high quality space and multiple uses*" (Watford Borough Council [Cabinet meeting 5 June](#)). Extraordinarily, at the time of writing this paper in October 2021, the Trust's website was carrying [a link to the Watford Riverwell](#) website, a marketing site for apartments [Go to '*More About the Trust*'].

The Trust's involvement

The Trust is not formally a partner in the Campus Partnership as it needs Foundation Trust status for this to happen, which it has so far failed to secure. But it's clear that the Trust has been very closely involved for a number of years. For instance, [a paper to the hospital trust's board in 2009](#) refers to a Memorandum of Understanding that has bound the Health Campus Partners since 2005. And a [report to Watford Borough Council in 2015](#) said that

***"WHHT will be fully involved** (our emphasis) *in the development of the Campus through the Campus Forum, as defined within the Campus Agreement.*"*

One may well ask: what about the people of West Herts?

Where does our healthcare figure in all of this? The answer is depressing. The amount of land for hospital services at Watford is being squeezed by other building developments linked to the Council's regeneration plans. The number of new homes planned for the site has grown over the years. There are already several commercial units on site – and well-advanced plans for more retail units, a hotel and much, much more.

The latest design plans show that the space for a major new hospital facility at Watford will be halved from the Hospital's current 'footprint'. This is why the Trust is proposing to build three tower blocks - in order to get all the required hospital services into the reduced space. As the projected costs have soared, and the Trust is highly unlikely to get government funding for these plans, the likely outcome is some refurbishing of Watford hospital's main shabby building, together with minimal work at St Albans and Hemel Hempstead hospitals.

Altogether a shabby outcome, and a far cry from the new state-of-the-art and accessible hospital that people in West Herts desperately need.

Conclusions

- **A legal entity was set up a number of years ago to try to ensure that Watford hospital stays in a particular location and is redeveloped within the area of one Borough Council as part of its regeneration plans.**
- **WHHT has allowed the health needs of people across West Herts to be marginalised by the interests of Watford Borough Council and its commercial partners. The Trust's close and longstanding involvement in the Watford Health Campus has seriously compromised a fair and objective assessment of more suitable locations for a new emergency and specialist hospital to serve the whole of west Herts.**
- **What has happened in West Herts violates crucial principles of public administration and forward planning. There has been clear 'bias toward preconceived solutions', which the Treasury's Green Book of rules on public investment warns against. The principle of objectivity – one of the Nolan principles of public life – has been flouted. And the principle of accountability – enshrined in the NHS Constitution – has been ignored.**
- **The Trust has failed to manage properly the impact of Watford Council's plans and that of the Watford Health Campus Partnership. As a result, it has failed to reach a solution for new hospital services that meets the needs of people across west Herts.**

What needs to happen now

The future of major hospital services in West Herts must not be decided and distorted by the interests of one borough council and its commercial partners.

The NHS must now take action to ensure that the plans for major new hospital services are re-assessed objectively and openly, free from the influence and shackles of the Watford Health Campus Partnership. The only consideration should be the health needs of people across West Herts.

Further detailed information can be found by clicking [HERE](#)

New Hospital Campaign
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