

MEDIA RELEASE 13 October 2021

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PATIENTS LOSING OUT TO DEVELOPMENT IN KEY ‘NEW’ HOSPITAL PROJECT

Devastating report published today: how West Herts patients’ interests have been pushed aside by land deals and political pressures

- Spiralling out-of-control costs
- Reduced land available
- A web of complex and secretive deals to rule out other options
- A time frame that now exceeds by five years the original government target

A complex web of commercial land deals and management indecision have left plans for one of the first ‘Pathfinder’ wave of Government’s new hospitals in disarray, as building delays increase and costs run out of control. Crucially the local NHS Trust has allowed local political and commercial pressures to over-ride patients’ interests.

Work to redevelop emergency care facilities at the crumbling Watford General Hospital should have been completed by 2025, but now it looks as if it could take until 2030.

West Hertfordshire NHS Hospitals Trust (WHHT) insists that the Watford General Hospital site is the only option for major new hospital services for the area. This flies in the face of the facts - West Hertfordshire has a number of potential sites away from west Watford and far more accessible to much of the population, but the Trust has not properly assessed them.

The Trust’s current plans for Watford General, featuring three high-rise blocks, will cost over £900 million – nearly twice the likely allocation. But this is not going to be affordable under the Government’s New Hospital Programme which is capping capital costs for the ‘Pathfinder’ hospital projects.

New report reveals how an NHS Trust allowed land deals to take priority

The Trust's troubles deepen today with the publication of a devastating report by local health group - the New Hospital Campaign - which describes the Trust's involvement in long-standing agreements with developers Kier Property and Watford Borough Council. It shows that the Trust:

- Failed to move quickly enough between about 2013 and 2017 to make use of the opportunity to expand the Hospital onto nearby land;
- Since then, has allowed the increasingly intrusive development of up to 1000 'residential units' and commercial buildings very close to the existing Hospital, to the potential detriment of patients. Watford's new hospital facility will now be forced onto half the area of the current Hospital;

The report is based on documents, obtained under Freedom of Information legislation, which show that health priorities have come second in the push for development in west Watford. They demonstrate the need for an urgent re-think of where new hospital facilities for West Herts should be sited.

The New Hospital Campaign, which believes that a clear central new site would be a far superior solution, has been looking into the reasons behind the Trust's decisions.

For two decades or so, complex understandings and agreements have tied the Trust to these bodies, whose main interests are in regeneration and redevelopment. The 'Watford Health Campus Partnership' - involving Watford Borough Council and Kier Property - was signed in 2013 and has been driving the changes around the Hospital ever since.

The findings of the NHC's report are extremely worrying. They show that:

- Watford Borough Council and its commercial partners have implemented many of their plans to develop the site around Watford General Hospital. But little progress has been made by the Trust on improving the Hospital. Credible options for an emergency care hospital sited away from west Watford have been rejected - despite persistent problems with the Watford General site;
- Over the years politicians in Watford and planners have stated that one of their key aims in developing west Watford is keeping the Trust's emergency care hospital within the Borough of Watford, rather than allowing it to be sited elsewhere in West Hertfordshire. To its discredit, the Trust has gone along with this objective, which has nothing to do with rational planning of health services;
- As the ambitions of developers for building around the current site have grown, the space available for hospital facilities at Watford has been squeezed – leading the Trust in 2021 to opt for the unaffordable 'preferred option' – featuring three high-rise tower blocks.

Developers' growing ambitions add more pressures on the Hospital

The NHC paper gives startling evidence of the growing ambitions of the WHC's developers and the dramatic impact on the plans for the west Watford site over the last decade. Demands on the space in and around the Hospital have grown substantially. Whereas in 2010 there were plans for 500 residential units on the 'Health Campus', now the target number is nearly 1000.

But the Trust has also added to the development pressures on the site. In 2010 the Trust planned to build a hospital on the Health Campus with 600 beds – now it looks to accommodate up to 1000 beds. There are also plans for moving the Mount Vernon Cancer Centre to the west Watford site – which makes good clinical sense but would put even more pressure on available hospital space.

According to Philip Aylett, the Campaign's Co-ordinator:

“Despite the Trust's public engagement exercises, it's clear that there has never been a real choice about the site for an emergency care hospital in West Hertfordshire.

“The NHC has had to use Freedom of Information requests to bring to light the legal agreements tying the Trust to work with developers and Watford Council on regeneration of the west Watford site. They raise serious doubts about the priorities of the Trust; there should be no doubt that the interests of health – in particular the provision of a healing environment for patients – should come first. The west Watford site, subject to the increasing ambitions of commercial developers, can never provide that healing environment.

“Despite nearly two decades of trying and much cooperation with the developers and the local authority, the Trust has failed to come up with a credible and affordable plan for the Watford General site – but the Trust still insists that the alternative of a new hospital on a clear, central new accessible site is out of the question.

“The critical decision about where new hospital services are located will shape healthcare across the area for decades to come. This marginalisation of the interests of patients must end now. The options must be re-considered as a matter of urgency”.

How did west Watford become the only option?

According to the recently obtained legal documents and other official records, Watford Borough Council developed a series of masterplans for what it called the 'Watford Health Campus'. **The aims of the masterplans 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 further its objectives, the Borough Council set up a Joint Venture with Kier Project Investment Ltd on 18 June 2013 – the 'Watford Health Campus Partnership LLP'. On the

same date, the NHS Trust signed a 'Campus Agreement' with the Borough Council and a 'Collaboration Agreement' with Kier. The architects who designed one of the masterplans, in 2014, say today that the aim of the partnership was to "keep the Watford General Hospital in the centre of the town". This echoes an earlier statement put out by Watford Borough Council.

Although the Trust is not a full member of the Campus Partnership, as it does not have the necessary Foundation Trust status, it has clearly been 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.*"*

The project was re-named as 'Watford Riverwell' in 2017. Unbelievably, at the time of writing in October 2021, the Trust's website has [a link to the Watford Riverwell](#) website, which is actually a marketing site for apartments [Go to 'More About the Trust']. As Philip Aylett remarked: *"It is extraordinary that you can't easily visit the hospital, or see a GP, but you can book a viewing of a flat with the help of an NHS Trust!"*

Why not the west Watford site?

It's difficult to get to for many people: West Herts needs a new hospital that everyone across the area can get to easily. But Watford General doesn't fit the bill as it's very hard to travel there from other parts of West Hertfordshire, such as Dacorum (which includes Hemel Hempstead) and St Albans.

It's very congested: Watford General Hospital is in an already congested area right next to Watford Football Club. And the space available for future hospital services on the site is being squeezed by building developments linked to the Council's regeneration plans including new housing. There are already several commercial units onsite and well-advanced plans for more retail units, a hotel and much, much more.

The hospital is hemmed in: The latest design plans show that the space for a major new hospital facility will be halved from the Hospital's current 'footprint'. The Trust has been proposing to build three tower blocks to get all the required hospital services into the reduced space. The projected costs have soared, and the Trust is now highly unlikely to get government funding for these plans. In October 2021 the Trust revealed that, instead of a floorspace of 120,000 square metres, the new Watford General facility will likely have between 80,000 and 90,000 square metres – a drastic reduction of at least 25 per cent.

What's likely to happen

As the projected costs of the three Watford towers have become unaffordable, the likely outcome is some refurbishing of Watford hospital's main shabby building. **This will be very**

disruptive to the operation of the hospital and a far cry from the new facilities that are desperately needed.

It doesn't have to be like this

This project is one of the 'Pathfinder' front runners being considered for funding under the government's New Hospital Programme. This opportunity should not be missed.

Major new state-of-the-art hospital services should be built on a clear site that is accessible for everyone across West Herts.

As Philip Aylett stated on behalf of the New Hospital Campaign:

"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, which local NHS bodies unwisely bought into. The NHS must now take urgent action to ensure that the plans for these new hospital facilities are re-assessed objectively and openly, free from the influence and shackles of the Watford Health Campus Partnership. The only consideration for the Trust should be the health needs of people across West Herts."

NOTES FOR EDITORS

The summary NHC paper on the Watford Health Campus can be found by clicking [HERE](#).