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*For further information, contact Philip Aylett on 07984 181135 or at  
Philip.aylett@gmail.com*

## ***CRUCIAL HERTS FLOOD RISK WORK HAMPERED BY STAFFING SHORTAGES***

### ***Key questions about Watford plans for ‘extreme’ flood risk hospital go unanswered***

The system for managing flood risks in Hertfordshire is in trouble. ‘Severe’ staff shortages have forced Hertfordshire County Council’s flood planning risk experts to admit they are ‘unable to take on any new work except in the most exceptional of circumstances’.

And the Environment Agency admits it often can’t meet crucial consultation deadlines on Hertfordshire planning applications.

In an astonishing email, the County Council says that ‘for most planning applications [it] will be unable to provide any comments’ on flood risks from new developments.

This is despite clear duties on the Council to manage flood risk. As a Lead Local Flood Authority (LLFA), Hertfordshire County Council has statutory responsibilities to protect the county’s million-plus people from flooding, by developing, maintaining and applying a strategy for local flood risk management.

The Environment Agency ‘Sustainable Places’ team covering Hertfordshire and North London tells people who contact it about flood risks that it is ‘unlikely to respond to planning consultations within the usual 21 days’.

A local group today called the situation ‘unsustainable’ and urged the Council and the Agency to act quickly to restore confidence in the system to protect the public from damaging developments.

## **Who is checking on the flood risk at Watford General?**

Doubts about the effectiveness of the system are surfacing even in relation to major projects that could cause severe flooding.

One example is the highly controversial high-rise hospital planned for Watford by the West Hertfordshire Hospital Trust. When the Trust was given outline planning permission by Watford Council for the 1000-bed 120,000 square metre building in July 2021, a series of crucial questions about flood risk and management put by the County Council were left unanswered. But serious flooding could undermine the viability of the whole project, one of the biggest in the whole programme of new hospitals. The blue light approach to the hospital has been badly affected by flooding.

Among other things, the Council demanded that the Trust should reduce the planned final discharge rate of surface water from the hospital site by a whopping 75 percent, and asked it to explain how it would manage the increased surface water runoff from the site.

The new hospital would be squeezed in as part of the 'Riverwell' development, which will see up to 1500 flats and houses, retail units, industrial buildings and a hotel added to a sloping site in crowded West Watford – an increasingly ambitious project, in itself presenting a raised risk of flooding.

## **Where are the answers to flood risk questions?**

Three months have passed since the permission was given, but the Trust have not answered the County Council's questions - and that body seems unable to remedy the situation.

People who contact the Council about flood risk are told in a standard email: 'Due to current on-going recruitment challenges in the LLFA, we are needing to prioritise our work'. The Council acknowledges it 'cannot respond to any queries' on correspondence outside of the normal planning consultation process. But most startling is the admission that the Council is:

'unable to take on any new work except in the most exceptional of circumstances so for most planning applications will be unable to provide any comments.'

The blame for the pause in most new work, it said, lies with the LLFA's 'significantly increased workload alongside severe staffing shortages'.

It has also become clear from papers submitted as part of the planning application<sup>1</sup> that the Trust plans to build part of its new west Watford hospital on or very close to an area categorised as meriting an 'Extreme Hazard' rating on a map for surface water risks.

### **West Herts situation beggars belief**

Philip Aylett, Co-ordinator of the New Hospital Campaign, which supports the idea of a new hospital on a clear new site accessible to all in West Herts, said:

"The situation in West Hertfordshire beggars belief. Planning permission has been given to a massive hospital project on Vicarage Road, Watford with serious questions about flood risks left unanswered. The Trust's plans for such a huge structure should never have been given the green light, in view of the uncertainty over flood risk.

"Supporters of the Vicarage Road hospital project have made much of a single, flawed feasibility study which purported to show that a new hospital would be built better and quicker there than on a new site elsewhere. The seriousness of the Watford General flood risk shows the weakness of the Trust's arguments - and the crying need for a proper appraisal of all alternative new site options

"Flood risks of this magnitude threaten the viability of the whole Watford General project, and need to be professionally assessed *before* any further work is done. The Trust shows no signs of recognizing that, as it presses ahead despite the conclusive evidence that climate change will worsen the risks.

"There are also serious doubts over whether Hertfordshire County Council and the Environment Agency have the capacity to rein in the Trust's ambitions. While individual officials are no doubt doing their best, the whole system for managing flood risks from development is in a critical state, raising questions as to whether statutory responsibilities are being fulfilled. This is quite unsustainable, and urgent action must be taken to restore confidence in the ability of the authorities to protect us from damaging development."

**ENDS**

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<sup>1</sup> Watford Borough Council: Planning Application 21/00765/OUTM: See pages 12 and 24 of the Flood Risk Assessment

