

New Hospital Campaign

NHC

For *real* transformation in West Hertfordshire

NEWS RELEASE 29/07/20

HOSPITAL TRUST'S 'ENGAGEMENT' BRANDED A FARCE AS HIDDEN LETTER IS PUBLISHED

The New Hospital Campaign (NHC) has succeeded in obtaining a crucial letter about hospital redevelopment in West Herts which the West Herts Hospitals Trust (WHHT) has received from the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC).

This has been disclosed to the NHC's solicitors Leigh Day and Co as part of the current judicial review process against the Herts Valleys Clinical Commissioning Group (HVCCG). The letter, which is attached to our covering email, was sent on 16 June and neither the Trust nor the CCG has previously made it public despite referring to it in meetings with stakeholders which could later be viewed on the Trust's website, and in public statements.

The letter is quite explosive. It seems to instruct the Trust to put only three options on the shortlist, all involving the Watford General site as the main A+E hospital for the area. The shortlist is to be drawn up in the autumn as part of what is known as the Outline Business Case (OBC). These options were decided by the Capital Delivery Committee, a group apparently composed of civil servants from the DHSC and NHS England and Improvement.

There is no mention in the letter of any option involving building on a new, clear, more accessible site which many thousands of local residents have asked for in two petitions on the parliamentary website. Many members of the public believe this is the only viable approach for the decades to come given the dilapidated state of the Vicarage Road site, its inaccessibility to many parts of the area and the great risks to safety in rebuilding on a site where patients are currently being treated. Given also that only part of the estate would be rebuilt this cannot be a solution offering taxpayers value for money or the flexibility needed for the future.

The DHSC have said that cases which are complex and politically sensitive can receive extra support and the approvals process can be

'streamlined'¹. However, while we know that Watford is a sensitive marginal constituency, critical long-term plans for hospital provision must not be decided on political grounds.

The Trust have commissioned an 'independent' feasibility study of a small number of possible sites for a new hospital based on carefully selected plots of land. They are also running a process of stakeholder 'engagement'. It seems highly likely that these exercises are simply window-dressing and that the outcome is predetermined. This would be unforgivable.

We call on the Trust to act fully in the interests of local residents and to include realistic and viable new hospital options – which may be single site or have planned care on an existing site – on the short list. A complete rebuild of Watford General would take far longer than such options and cost considerably more. Recent experience suggests it could take seven years or more to build anew at Watford while still operating Watford General as an acute site.

Edie Glatter of the NHC said "If the Trust keeps a new A+E hospital on a clear, central site off the shortlist it would make a mockery of any meaningful involvement of patients and the public in health service provision. The engagement programme would be a farce and a waste of everybody's time and money. It would create a lack of trust in our decision-making processes".

The NHC will be putting a number of questions to the Trust including these:

- *The Trust told the Stakeholder Reference Group [SRG] only a small part of what is contained in the Williams letter – the large amounts of extra money that might be available for the Watford new build. This was obviously intended to influence the Group in favour of that option rather than helping them to make informed decisions. How can the people of West Herts be expected to contribute to the debate on the future of their health services when they are being fed information in such a selective and biased way?*
- *What does this episode say about the quality of the Trust's engagement with its public?*
- *The Williams letter makes it clear that officials on the Capital Delivery Committee would only support options based on Vicarage Road. What right do civil servants, meeting behind closed doors, have to dictate to the*

¹ *Health Infrastructure Plan A new, strategic approach to improving our hospitals and health infrastructure*, DHSC 2019, para. 43.

people of West Herts the range of options for the future of their local health services?

- *Isn't this exactly what the Treasury's Green Book criticises as restricting project choices to a 'narrow set of options or a pre-determined solution'?*
- *How did the 'streamlined' process carried out in this case take account of value for money, for instance by assessing all site options using the same criteria?*
- *Has the letter from David Williams been shared with the National Audit Office?*
- *What reasoning did the Capital Delivery Committee use in deciding that three Vicarage Road options must be on the list for the OBC, but that no others need be included?*