

## **WEST HERTS TRUST ONLINE SURVEY – 9 MAJOR FLAWS**

- The survey was issued without advance notification in the late afternoon of 4 September and gave a deadline of midnight on 15 September – it was therefore live for a mere 11 days.
- It was issued at the same time as the proposed short-list and recommended preferred option were published. The public were therefore not presented with genuine options, despite the fact that very large numbers of the local public, as demonstrated in a petition on the parliamentary website which drew over 10,000 signatures, favoured a new hospital on a clear, central site
- This was a last-minute exercise: no survey of public preferences had been carried out in the 4+ years leading up to this point, despite a formal request in 2019 for one to be conducted based on a pilot survey by NHC. This was refused by the then CEO of the Herts Valleys Clinical Commissioning Group (HVCCG) whose response stated that “we are aware of the views of local people on these issues”
- It is a self-selection survey – these are notoriously prone to bias and depend entirely on who happens to find out about it. The respondents form a sample that is neither random nor representative of the whole population so no firm conclusions from them can validly be drawn.<sup>1</sup> The survey ‘tool’ used by the Trust is

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<sup>1</sup> On this point, one respondent contacted us as follows: “Without your e-mail I would not have known about it. My partner’s surgery has just today sent out notification of the survey but I have received nothing from mine. Nor have we seen anything via the Dacorum BC or HCC newsletters. The person organising the survey is either incompetent or there is no intention of taking the results of the survey seriously if it doesn’t give the desired answer – or both. There are so many neighbourhood groups and other organisations that communicate via

not designed to assess public opinion, but is intended to gather feedback from stakeholders.

- The survey is open to manipulation – anyone can complete it several times – reducing its quality and reliability even further.
- The information provided in the summary document, which respondents are asked to read before completing the survey, and they are required to say whether they have done so, contains seriously inaccurate material about the nature of the site review (which is given a central role in the decision on the proposed short list) and also about the organisation that carried out the review, masking questions about the review’s adequacy and independence
- At least two of the statements under the heading “We want to understand your views in more detail” raise major problems. “It would be worth waiting longer (and accepting a degree of risk) for new hospital on a new site” is clearly biased, implying for example that the recommended preferred option and the other options on the proposed short-list carry no risk. “It’s important to me that hospital services are delivered in all three towns”: the response to this could be interpreted in different ways and its purpose in this context is therefore questionable. Also using the emotive phrase “...can deliver a really good solution” in the first statement, regarding the preferred option, is clearly leading the respondents and therefore inappropriate.
- The questions relating to those working for the NHS raise concerns. These are mandatory, and although there is a ‘prefer not to say’ option in the question ‘Do you work for the NHS?’ the next question requires respondents to say which NHS organisation they work for, and it is mandatory to give a postcode. This could enable the West Herts Hospitals Trust (WHHT) or the HVCCG to identify the respondent, and awareness of this could affect their response. It is very poor practice.
- Information available to the public about the survey, in the very short time that it was live, appears highly skewed. For example a letter from the CEO of the WHHT urging readers to complete the survey appeared in the Watford Observer but we understand not in

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e-mails that a really extensive coverage could have been achieved by anyone who really wanted to”.

the equivalent newspapers covering the St. Albans and Dacorum areas.

**In summary, the survey does not reach any accepted standard of objectivity and it would be highly misleading to use it in the decision process regarding the proposed short-list and the recommended preferred option. It must not be presented as an accurate representation of public opinion.**

*September 2020*