

MEDIA RELEASE 15/09/20

TRUST'S SURVEY 'WIDE OPEN TO MANIPULATION' SAY CAMPAIGNERS

New Hospital Campaign reveals flaws in biased online questionnaire

Local campaigners today criticised a rushed, flawed and biased online survey promoted by West Herts Hospitals Trust. The survey is due to be a key part of the evidence at a decisive joint meeting of the Trust and Herts Valley Clinical Commissioning Group on the redevelopment of local hospitals on October 1. But the New Hospital Campaign (NHC) say it is unfairly designed to favour development at the ageing and inaccessible Watford General Hospital in Vicarage Road.

The campaigners also say that the survey, on the Trust's website, is wide open to manipulation.

The NHC are campaigning for a new A+E hospital on a clear central site convenient for all of West Hertfordshire, but the draft shortlist drawn up by the Trust has no fewer than six options at Vicarage Road in Watford – and none anywhere else. The Trust's recommended preferred option includes some new building on the fringes of the current Vicarage Road site. The NHC say the Trust's online survey:

- Fails to provide the public with genuine options - it was published the same day as the narrow draft shortlist;
- Was hastily put on the Trust website and gave respondents just 11 days to complete it;
- Is wide open to manipulation because the online form can be filled in multiple times by the same person at the same computer;
- Contains leading questions encouraging the public to support options at Vicarage Road

The Campaign notes that the survey is a self-selection exercise which can only reflect the views of those who happen to find out about it – so cannot be representative of the opinions of the people of West Herts. Research by the NHC reveals that the 'survey tool' used by the Trust is designed only to support 'stakeholder engagement' – it is not intended to assess public opinion. There are also concerns that the survey could enable the Trust to identify NHS workers who fill it in.

A paper analysing some of the problems with the online survey is attached.

The NHC point out that the information provided by the Trust with the survey fails to give the full picture. A major part of the evidence for the decisive October 1 meeting is a Site Study which is described as 'independent' by the Trust. But the Study was drawn up largely by a company wholly-owned by London's Royal Free Hospital, which has a close and developing partnership with the West Herts Trust.

NHC member Jean Ritchie commented:

'The Site Study purports to give an independent technical assessment of the various options for the new hospital facilities, but it contains a number of flaws and doesn't mention the key fact that there is a close relationship between West Herts Trust and the Royal Free. That all casts doubt on the quality and independence of the process'

The campaigners say that one of the survey's questions in particular shows bias. It asks for comments on the statement, 'It would be worth waiting longer (and accepting a degree of risk) for a new hospital on a new site' but doesn't mention risk when talking about the Trust's preferred option. That option, which would use part of the new Riverwell development, suffers from the presence of a large sewer, reported 'hotspots of contamination', a sloping site and the likely building of a primary school which could complicate blue light ambulance access – but none of these serious risks are mentioned in the Trust's survey.

The campaign's analysis concludes:

'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'.

Jean Ritchie commented:

'We are coming to the crunch point for the future of hospital services in West Herts. The October 1 meeting will decide on the shortlist for

redevelopment. If the Trust try to make out that this inadequate, easily-manipulated survey truly represents the views of the people of West Herts, the whole process will be in crisis, with the credibility of the local NHS leadership in tatters'.

NOTES FOR EDITORS

New Hospital Campaign paper on *West Herts Trust Online Survey: 9 Major Flaws* is attached below.