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PUBLIC DELIVERS 'STUNNINGLY NEGATIVE' VERDICT ON PLANS FOR WATFORD GENERAL

Survey contains damning criticism of Trust's stewardship of West Herts hospitals

Plans for redeveloping Watford General Hospital would make a bad situation worse, according to a damning survey of local public opinion. Less than 10% of public comments about the West Herts Hospitals Trust's proposals for the Vicarage Road site were completely positive.

The survey also reveals that many local people are deeply unhappy with the current performance of the West Herts Trust in trying to provide a caring environment for patients and staff at Watford.

The New Hospital Campaign (NHC), which wants a truly new emergency hospital on a central site accessible for the whole area, says the survey, carried out in February and March this year, proves a complete reassessment of the project is urgently needed.

Key public concerns about Watford General in the Survey include:

- **Poor access**, the most common complaint, including: problems with traffic congestion on the M1 and near the hospital, inconvenient and unreliable public transport links, and meagre and poor quality parking.
- **Anxiety for patients** because many do not know how to get to the site on time for appointments, or what to expect on arrival or during any treatment. This problem is especially acute for elderly people and those (the vast majority in West Hertfordshire) who do not live in Watford;

- **Uncertainty** about the meaning of the Trust's planned so-called 'Three-Site Model' which is supposed to share improved services between Watford, Hemel Hempstead Hospital and St Albans City Hospital, The Survey suggests that people need this to be explained better, saying 'They want to know how [the model] 'affects them personally and locally';
- **Very negative public attitudes to Watford General.** The Survey is blunt: "The fact is that very, very few people like Watford General Hospital in its current state. Whilst care provision is rated positively, survey respondents considered the building itself to be extremely rundown, unclean, unattractive, hard to access and disorganised."
- The heavy Watford bias of the redevelopment plans have caused a **North-South divide**, with people from Three Rivers and Watford keen to see the proposed redevelopments at Watford General but Dacorum residents being 'far more negative about the redevelopment plans than respondents from all other council areas'. St Albans people asked for reassurance about the local services that would remain available to them and had concerns about travel to Watford General.

Ron Glatter of the NHC commented:

"This survey shows the depth of the crisis of confidence which faces the West Herts Trust. It is doubly disturbing, revealing not only that many people are unhappy with the present environment at Watford General, but that the Trust's expensive and impractical plans for the future inspire little faith in many West Herts people."

The most serious problem at Vicarage Road is access, Mr Glatter continued. "The Trust have try to play down access issues, claiming that distances to Watford are 'reasonable'. But that misses the point. People find it hard to get to Watford General because of traffic congestion and poor and confusing public transport, with rail stations inconveniently situated and bus services and parking dire.

"The Trust's redevelopment plans offer no help here – there will be restrictions on the number of car parking spaces, and no improvement on bus access. Trust plans for a new 500-space bike park suggest absurd over-optimism about the numbers of acute patients and staff who will brave dangerous local roads to cycle to Watford General."

Mr Glatter said that the survey authors' suggestion of further research into access would be of no help. " Given the site they have chosen, how

can further research resolve the problem? Access will get worse, not better, with traffic congestion bound to rise in the next few years as nearly 1000 dwellings, a hotel, large primary school and other buildings cluster round the constricted tower blocks of the redeveloped Watford General. Further research would just be window-dressing.”

“The survey demonstrates clearly that access obstacles are especially concerning for people with special issues such as mobility and other problems. The report says that such people are caused ‘additional anxiety and/or high uncertainty above that created by any health concerns for themselves or others they may be visiting’ by the environment of Watford General. One lesson from the survey report is that ‘accessibility design’ is crucial, but this has been largely ignored in the redevelopment decisions taken so far.”

Other issues include a failure by the Trust to explain clearly where services are going to go after redevelopment. The so-called ‘Three-Site Model’ attempts to provide services across Watford, Hemel Hempstead and St Albans hospitals, but it is poorly understood by the people surveyed.

Mr Glatter continued: “The report says that the model needs to be better explained. This isn’t surprising because many respondents will have realised that this term isn’t a fair or accurate representation of what is intended when, in 2020, it was made clear that around 90% of the redevelopment funding would be spent on Watford General Hospital with just 10% divided between the other two hospitals. The “three site model” phrase is designed to give a false impression of the relative importance attached to the hospitals, and that they might all be given a significant upgrade through the redevelopment. That simply won’t happen, and people in much of West Herts are beginning to realise that.

“All in all, the public have delivered a stunningly negative verdict on the stewardship of the Trust and their plans for the future. Action is needed now to put this right. The option of building a new hospital on a clear central site, along with good facilities in all three towns, must be properly and honestly explored”.