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Rush to meet election promise risks hospital rebuild ‘disaster zone’

By Sharon Brennan | 10 September 2020

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- **West Herts announces preferred rebuild option for £590m project**
- **Local Conservative MP warns of “years of disruption” at Watford general**
- **A rush to meet political deadline is coming ahead of the right decision, he argues**

A major hospital rebuild may become a ‘disaster zone’ because of a rush to meet the government’s election promise to deliver new facilities quickly, a Conservative MP has warned.

West Hertfordshire Hospitals Trust has opted to carry out a major rebuild on its existing main site - Watford General Hospital - rather than seek to build on a greenfield site. Hemel Hempstead MP Sir Mike Penning this week said it would be better to delay development, rather than try to stay among the government’s first rebuilds, “if that meant we get the best result”.

Local campaigners argue the latter would provide better value for money and access.

This follows the Department of Health and Social Care stressing to the trust that it should prioritise speed of delivery in a letter sent this summer. The DHSC’s second permanent secretary, David Williams, said: “Our appetite for deliverability and timelines, particularly in the current climate, remains high. With this in mind, we would not expect you to undertake options appraisal on any proposal that significantly increases the timescales for delivery of the scheme beyond 2025.”

[Justifying its decision to stick with the current site, in its latest planning document](#), the trust emphasises that the first trusts which will receive money for builds under the government’s HIP (health infrastructure plan).

One scheme is “expected by the government to be up and running by 2025 or soon after”, and adds: “We have been advised by regulators not to consider any options that significantly increase the timeline for new facilities to be ready.”

It also says: “An independent site feasibility study concluded that the most acceptable of the several options is to use the Watford site and adjacent land for emergency and specialist care. This is because it will take longer and be higher risk to try to develop a new hospital on a new site.”

However, Sir Mike warned in a letter to the trust dated 7 September and seen by *HSJ*: “It will be a disaster zone to keep the WGH fully functioning whilst rebuilding.

”There will be years of disruption... I believe it will be possible to remain in HIP One with a new site as we all know that at least one of the possible sites is ‘shovel ready’, as it were.”

He said he understood the desire to remain in the first wave of the building programme.

But he added: “I do not agree that the benefits of remaining in HIP One outweigh the benefits of ensuring we make the right decision. It would be better to drop to HIP Two [phase two of HIP programme for which no capital budgets or projects have yet been announced] if that meant we get the best result.”

The [delivery of six new hospitals by 2025](#) is a key promise by the Conservative government and has been repeated extensively by prime minister Boris Johnson and health secretary Matt Hancock since it was first announced in September 2019. The six are currently those which are part of HIP One.

The preferred option

The trust’s preferred option is the most expensive of three options the Department of Health and Social Care said it should consider in June, and involves a major rebuild on the existing Watford site.

The DHSC has indicated funding may be available for this, although it is not guaranteed, even though it exceeds the previously discussed envelope. It would require an additional £170m, taking the total budget to £590m.

Sir Mike, whose constituency covers one of the trust’s other two sites, has previously raised concerns about the project in a letter to the National Audit Office last month.

He said: “It seems clear that the trust’s priority, and that of the [joint Department of Health and Social Care/NHS England and Improvement] cabinet delivery committee is to create the impression of speedy delivery of hospital infrastructure with value for money a secondary consideration.”

Sir Mike said the “implied judgement that [Watford] options will always be faster than others is based on no real evidence”.

Local lobby group the New Hospital Campaign group also accused the trust of short termism. A spokeswoman for the group said: “The [site] report displays the worst possible form of short-termism for a vital facility that is meant to last for at least 30 years and hopefully longer.

”Despite the inclusion of other criteria, it is obvious that the delivery target of 2025 is the key driver behind the whole exercise.”

The trust’s response

The trust said it was [conducting a survey](#) of staff and West Hertfordshire residents of the rebuild options, with a shortlist to be announced at the start of next month. An outline business case is to be completed in 2021.

A spokeswoman said: “The trust is committed to the timeline set by DHSC for HIP One redevelopment schemes to be up and running as close to 2025 as possible. While the timeline is challenging, there is an urgent need to improve our facilities.”

However, *HSJ* understands the trust is in discussions with DHSC about an extension to the 2025 deadline, as a [review in August](#) said none of the hospital sites could be built until January 2026 at the earliest.

Asked how the trust assured itself that the additional money on the table for the WGH rebuild option did not influence the shortlist, a trust spokeswoman said: “The potential increased funding outlined in the letter is not guaranteed and must be justified and agreed with regulators based on the detailed analysis at shortlist stage, in line with the [Treasury] Green Book process.”

The rebuild is also the subject of a judicial review that is expected to be answered next month.