

## HEALTH

# Campaigners urge NHS to keep Whipps Cross end-of-life unit

## Activists handed in a petition signed by 6,449 local people calling on the health body to keep the provision

by Marco Marcelline

**C**ampaigners handed in a petition to NHS North East London (NHS NEL) head office in Stratford on 16th November that calls for the only end-of-life facility in Waltham Forest to be included in plans for the Whipps Cross Hospital rebuild.

Specialist palliative care unit The Margaret Centre currently provides eleven beds to patients who are coming to the end of their life or have a life-limiting disease, such as cancer, neurological conditions and end stage heart or lung conditions.

The petition, signed by 6,449 local people, has signatories including Wanstead and Leyton MP John Cryer, as well as Chingford MP Iain Duncan Smith and Waltham Forest councillors.

In the last five months, Action4Whipps held street stalls across the Whipps Cross catchment area in a bid to draw attention to the uncertain future of the Margaret Centre.

In a speech, Ann Gross, a representative from Action4Whipps said: “As local people, we were shocked and disappointed when we first discovered that the plans for the new hospital did not include the re-provision of the Margaret Centre. Its high quality NHS services are greatly valued in the local community.

“There is no other hospice provision in Waltham Forest or Redbridge and Waltham Forest doesn’t even have a hospice at home service, so the Margaret Centre as a specialist NHS unit on the hospital site brings many strengths and advantages for patients and staff alike, and should be enhanced and not abandoned.”

Ann added: “The Margaret Centre has touched the lives of so many, and people just cannot believe that the current plans for the



new hospital mean it will not exist in future. It is both a scandal and a missed opportunity.”

At the hand-in, Chingford resident Tessa Shelley told the *Echo* how the Margaret Centre had been of help to her when Whipps Cross consultants informed her elderly father was close to death following a sudden health issue.

“We had very difficult end-of-life conversations in an open A&E ward [with consultants] about whether or not they could go ahead with surgery for him. I said I want him to go to the Margaret Centre because I knew it was there for end-of-life support.

“They got him to the Margaret Centre, I stayed there all night, there brought me a toiletry set. I was there for two days almost, and I was able to lay and sleep next to him in a chair there.

Tessa explained: “We had end-of-life challenges in terms of the pain relief and

the things they [health workers] had to do but the conversation was person-centered and it was about making sure that my dad was comfortable and we were alright. It wasn’t about freeing a bed, which was how it was in A&E.”

Previously, NHS NEL had argued that staffing a small, specialist team in a new community end-of-life unit like the Margaret Centre would be “more expensive than other options”.

No decisions have yet been made on the future of end-of-life care provision in Waltham Forest, Redbridge or West Essex.

A secondary phase of engagement on end-of-life care is currently underway, which NHS NEL has said will hear a “a broader range of voices in order to ensure services work in the right way for local people” and “will enable previous proposals to be developed and refined ahead of a further consultation process”.

Dr Sarah Heyes, clinical director for Whipps Cross End of Life Care Transformation, said: “We know it’s important to get end-of-life care right. People should die in dignity, comfort and with their wishes respected – whether they want to die at home, in hospital or at a hospice.

“We are talking to local people about their experiences and working together with them to develop proposals for improving end-of-life care in the area around Whipps Cross Hospital, and we acknowledge that this petition highlights the strong local interest in our plans.

“No decisions have been made and we will continue working with the communities we serve to ensure future services respond to the needs of local people. This includes members of the campaign group who we have involved in our work with residents, and we remain willing to meet them to discuss their concerns.”

The campaigners had expected to present the petition in person to Zena Etheridge, CEO of the NHS North East London (NHS NEL), and described it as “disappointing” and “disrespectful” that she had not received the petition in person.

In early 2022 campaigners presented a petition with over 2,000 signatures in-person to Alwen Williams, the then-CEO of Barts Health NHS Trust.

A spokesperson for the NHS NEL said: “We offered to meet representatives from the campaign group [on 16th November] to discuss the issues raised in the petition but they declined and chose not to attend. However, we acknowledge the petition highlights the strong local interest in our emerging plans and we remain willing to continue talking to them about their concerns.”

# COMMENT



## Why we're fighting to save the Margaret Centre

*Mary Burnett, from Action4Whipps, sets out why the only end-of-life facility in the borough needs to stay*

**W**hy is the Margaret Centre at such risk? On 16th November, 35 people braved the cold to hand in a petition signed by nearly 6,500 residents to save the Margaret Centre at Whipps Cross hospital, which is the only specialist, in patient, end-of-life unit in Waltham Forest and Redbridge.

In the same week the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), which scrutinises the work of the government, published a damning report about Boris Johnson's 2019 "40 new Hospitals" pledge. Whipps Cross is one of those hospitals.

The programme to build the new hospitals has been dogged by uncertainty, delays and such a squeeze on funding that the need to keep costs down has pretty much trumped everything else. And this has put both the Margaret Centre and the viability of our new hospital at risk. It is no accident; we've had a decade of governments underfunding the NHS while promoting an increased reliance on the private sector.

The 40 hospitals have been divided into groups. Whipps Cross is in a group of eight so-called "Pathfinders", or guinea pigs, for a standardised, off-site method of construction called Hospital 2.0, which is largely untested in the hospital sector.

The model for Hospital 2.0 services – a "minimum viable product", or MVP model, is truly scandalous. It is a commercial model for piloting new products. Applied to Hospital 2.0 it means a "minimum viable set of services, in the minimum viable building size, to the minimum viable specifications, and at the minimum viable time and cost to build."

It is assumed that MVP will reduce the cost of building some of the new hospitals by anything between 27% and 43%. So, the primary consideration is very clear. The model has been criticised by the National Audit Office, a government spending watchdog, and the PAC. Both say it will result in hospitals that are too small, with insufficient beds, and unable to cope with increases in need – like flu epidemics, or another pandemic.

Funding for the new Whipps Cross Hospital is being cut to the bone. When it is finally rebuilt, the Margaret Centre itself will be demolished, because it sits on land that will be sold with planning permission for 1,500 homes. Standardised plans mean that Barts Health, who run Whipps Cross, have neither the flexibility, nor the funding, to rebuild the Margaret Centre.

Proposals for end-of-life care in the Whipps Cross catchment area are now being led by NHS

North East London, a new organisation that plans and pays for our health services.

Their initial proposal in January this year for people who are dying and are too ill to be cared for at home, or whose home circumstances mean they cannot be supported there, was to designate part of a ward in the new hospital for end-of-life care. This is despite them acknowledging that reserved beds may be needed for other emergency admissions, especially in a new hospital with too few beds.

Our petition called on Barts Health and NHS North East London to include rebuilding the Margaret Centre at Whipps Cross when the latter's plans go out for formal public consultation at some point in the next few months.

However, NHS North East London is also grossly underfunded and by September this year it had an "unplanned" deficit of over £70million.

So what chance does our campaign have to save the Margaret Centre? It can only survive if we continue to fight and also if we get a government that reverses the entrenched practice of increasing the role of the private sector while downgrading the capacity of the NHS. What we need is a government that is truly committed to funding the NHS and its buildings, its staff and its services.