

Watford's £900m plan for 'pie in the sky'

West Hertfordshire Hospitals Trust is one of the original six "pathfinder" schemes promised priority funding ahead of the pack as part of Boris Johnson's election pledge to build "40 new hospitals".

But like the other "pathfinders", not a brick has been laid: the West Herts project has remained stuck in a limbo of denial of the likely cost, and dispute over the plans – not least where the new hospital should be built.

Campaigners from the New Hospital Campaign (NHC) have consistently argued that rebuilding on the existing Watford General site – right next to Watford football ground – would result in delays, constrain the size of the new hospital, inflate the cost, and deliver a centre that would be hard to get to from St Albans and Hemel Hempstead – and especially hard to reach by public transport.

They argue that the Watford site has remained the preferred option, despite Watford having a population of only 100,000, only because the Trust back in 2005 signed a 'memorandum of understanding' tying it in to a legally binding agreement with Watford Council and commercial Health Campus Partners. This included a commitment to contractual agreements for "disposal of surplus land."

The proportion of "surplus" land has grown as plans to build housing on the so-called Health Campus have become more ambitious, now standing at up to 1,000 'residential units:' under the design produced by the Trust the hospital would take up 3.67 hectares, half the current hospital 'footprint'.

Hospital or housing?

So large have the non-health elements of the project grown that in 2017 Watford Borough Council agreed the name Health Campus should be changed as it "had implied something to do with the hospital exclusively whereas the site would have a mixed use with a high proportion of residential and business development." The name Riverwell was adopted "to reflect the importance of the river and link to neighbourhoods such as Holywell and Brightwell."

Campaigners point out that as of October 2021, "the Trust's website was extraordinarily carrying a link to the Watford Riverwell website, a marketing site for apartments."

Meanwhile the projected scope of the hospital has been increased to 1,000 beds – leaving the only option as building upwards on the available land, to produce three tower blocks of up to 18 storeys – and a sky high cost, which campaigners, backed by Hemel Hempstead Tory MP Sir Mike Penning now warn is likely to exceed £900 million.

The campaigners argue that this estimate leaves out any non-construction costs including inflation on the equipment to be used to fit out the buildings, and inevitable extra unknown costs from building on a sloping, difficult site with some parts at high risk of surface water flooding.

But while West Herts plans head towards double the initial projection of £540m to rebuild Watford Hospital, the financial brakes have come on at national level.

Pathfinder schemes have been called on by NHS England's New Hospital Programme to submit plans limiting the cost of each development to just £400m – less than half the likely Watford cost – and campaigners warn the delays already make it unlikely that any significant new build could be completed until 2028.

Concerns are also being raised by campaigners in Hemel Hempstead over the reduction of their former hospital into a clinic, quite possibly with no beds at all, and large parts of the building boarded up. They warn that a similar fate could also be in store for St Albans if acute care is increasingly concentrated on the Watford site.

But at the current rate of progress there will be many more years of arguments before any real change occurs.

John Lister

