

Merton Conservatives response to the Improving Healthcare Together consultation March 2020

Introduction

St Helier Hospital has been in desperate need of investment to upgrade its services for decades. As such Merton Conservatives strongly support the proposals to improve St Helier and build a centre of clinical excellence accessible to all local residents. Regardless of which of the consultation options are taken forward, these proposals will produce a great improvement in the level of clinical care and specialist treatment that Merton residents can access. Whilst our preference is for the new centre of clinical excellence to be based at St Helier, the overriding necessity is for the investment to take place to upgrade the health outcome of the London Borough of Merton and the surrounding areas. For this reason, Merton Conservatives would not seek to block any of the consultation options from being pursued if this is deemed to be in the best interests of residents.

St Helier Hospital at present

The main hospital building at St Helier was built before the creation of the NHS, making it very difficult to provide modern levels of care at the site. Overall the trust is rated as 'good' however Epsom and St Helier Hospitals are rated as 'requires improvement' for emergency services. It is clear that without investment standards will not be able to improve.

The buildings are simply not fit for their current purpose. There are not enough single rooms with just one in 10 beds in single rooms, this is well short of the current recommendation of one in two. This state of affairs is undignified for patients and causes unnecessary concern for their families. The trust must have the proposed investment as soon as possible. In addition, lifts at the site are too small, with patients often transferred from one wing to another outside via ambulances.

Unsurprisingly, staff retention is a major problem for the trust and both hospitals run with gaps in their rotas, this makes it very difficult to provide many of the services that are needed for local patients. As a result, many staff are temporary, causing increases in staffing costs.

What the experts say

With an issue of this magnitude, which will vastly improve the health outcomes of the borough, it is important to listen to the views of local NHS professionals who have spent their careers looking after the health of local people. Understandably, the overwhelming view of the experts in the Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals Trust is in support of the proposals to upgrade the provision available to local people.

Daniel Elkeles, chief executive of the Epsom and St Helier University Hospital Trusts has spoken about the threat that not receiving the proposed investment would pose to the future of both Epsom and St Helier. On 4th March Mr Elkeles gave an interview to the Wimbledon Times (which can be accessed [here](#)) and said, "If we get to the point where [an emergency hospital is not built] the goodwill will run out and we can't go on running services on both sites. There will be unplanned service closures because we can't recruit – it is a probability not a possibility if this doesn't happen."

It is vital that we enable Merton residents to access improved healthcare facilities, whether at St Helier Hospital or at a new purpose built hospital nearby. Addressing the question of distance Mr

Elkeles rightly said, “a few extra miles in an ambulance with paramedics doesn’t make your chances worse. It makes all the difference, arriving at a place with the right services.” The principle of using specialist facilities to access the best level of care already occurs in Merton in a number of areas. For example, if you suffer a stroke, even if you live closest to St Helier Hospital you will be taken to St George’s Hospital in Tooting as this is the closest specialist care centre for stroke patients.

The fact that St Helier is in a more deprived area than the proposed new facility has absolutely no bearing on the level of care it can provide to residents. The presence of an accident and emergency alone would not help reduce deprivation, as evidenced by the fact that the area around St Helier has continued to suffer from this throughout the time it has had an accident and emergency treatment unit. What all our residents need is the best health and care provision possible, alongside the improvements in those policy areas which can genuinely lift people out of deprivation – such as environmental, economic and social factors.

Mr Elkeles is not the only NHS professional in favour of the proposed investment, Dr Ruth Charlton is the medical director of the Epsom and St Helier Hospital Trust, speaking about the need for specialist treatment she said, “over the past 10 years it has changed from being taken to your nearest hospital. Now we get taken to a major centre. The reason for doing that is because these centres have staff who can treat you within minutes of your arrival.”

It is clear that the NHS professionals are in favour of the investment, we feel they are the best placed people to act in the interests of local residents and Merton Conservatives will support their recommendations.

Conclusion

The current state of affairs means that standards of medical care are well below the level they should be, especially for emergency services. The proposed investment would allow for improvements in the standard of care, a new centre of excellence, and would put the trust on a financially secure footing allowing for all hospitals to remain open for many years to come. We are extremely concerned by the approach by some, and the risk that this poses to any investment in St Helier Hospital. Whilst we would prefer the new centre of excellence to be built at St Helier Hospital, the most important thing for local residents is to have access to the highest quality of care and this means that it is imperative that the proposed investment goes ahead.