

COUNCILLOR ROSS GARROD
LEADER OF THE COUNCIL
(Labour, Longthornton Ward)



London Borough of Merton
Merton Civic Centre
London Road
Morden SM4 5DX

020 8545 3424 (Civic Centre)
ross.garrod@merton.gov.uk

Natalie Forrest
Senior Responsible Owner
Health Infrastructure Programme
Department of Health and Social Care
39 Victoria Street
SW1H 0EU

By E-mail

27 March 2023

Dear Ms Forrest,

Re: ST HELIER HOSPITAL

I am writing to you as the Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) of the Health Infrastructure Programme in my role as the elected Leader of Merton Council.

As you are aware, at a joint meeting on 3rd July 2020 of NHS Surrey Heartlands and NHS South West London clinical commissioning groups, a decision was made to proceed with plans to close the emergency, maternity and children's in-patient services at both Epsom and St Helier Hospitals and to build a new facility for the provision of these services in Belmont.

Since this decision was taken in 2020 the health landscape, both nationally and locally, has dramatically changed as a consequence of both the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing demands on existing health service capacity, particularly over the last 12 to 18 months.

The pandemic placed unprecedented pressure on healthcare systems and while we as a Council have worked closely with our health partners to understand the impact of the pandemic on our residents that impact is yet to be fully understood, particularly in the medium and longer term.

We do know, however, that COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on a number of ethnic minority groups, those living in areas of deprivation, those with underlying health conditions, older people and residents with a learning disability. In Merton, those whom are most impacted live in the communities closest to St Helier Hospital and the impact on those already vulnerable

residents of the proposed downgrading of the St Helier hospital will now be even greater.

National data indicates hospitalisation rates, and mortality rates in non-white populations have been higher compared to white populations throughout the pandemic. Similar patterns have been observed in London and Merton, where hospitalisation and mortality rates have been consistently higher among Black, Black British, Asian, and Asian British ethnic minority groups during the pandemic compared to other ethnicities. At a local level hospitalisation and mortality rates were highest among people in the most deprived areas of Merton throughout the pandemic, again including those most deprived communities closest to St Helier who will be most impacted by the planned relocation of services away from those communities. The gap in hospitalisation rates has increased over time, notably widening from January 2021 and this clearly indicates to us an urgent need to reconsider the impacts of the planned move on already disadvantaged communities.

Turning to demand pressures, ICB colleagues have consistently described the pressures on St George's hospital in Tooting over the most recent winter period as unprecedented. Going into the winter period we know that St George's was already struggling to cope with local demand as well as being one of only four trauma centres covering the whole of London. While bed occupancy has generally remained steady for the first 9 months of 2022/23 we are aware that pressure on ED provision has increased significantly. In contrast to the bed occupancy position at St George's, bed occupancy levels at the Epsom & St Helier's hospitals have continued to increase during 2022/23. There were 590 (night) bed occupancies in Q1 increasing to 615 (night) bed occupancies in Q3 and 129 (day) bed occupancies in Q1 increasing to 139 (day) bed occupancies in Q3.

This increasing bed occupancy, combined with the increasing pressures on the front door at St George's, gives us significant concerns that the capacity modelling underpinning the original decision regarding the consolidation on the Belmont site is no longer fit for purpose. In particular we note that there have been a broad range of developments in out of hospital care locally since the original DMBC was agreed, which clearly have not led to reductions in required bed capacity or front door pressures – quite the opposite in fact.

In light of the above concerns related to the changed landscape since the original DMBC was signed off in 2020 I am formally requesting that a new Impact Assessment pursuant to the Public Sector Equality Duty is completed before any decision is taken to proceed with the planned downgrading of St Helier Hospital.

I look forward to a speedy reply to my letter given the uncertainty in the local communities.

Yours sincerely,



Councillor Ross Garrod
Leader of the Council

CC Jacqueline Totterdell Group Chief Executive of the St George's and Epsom and St Helier hospitals group

CC Sarah Blow CEO, Southwest London ICS

CC Councillor Ruth Dombey Lead on health and social care across the Southwest subregion

CC Mike Bell, Chair of Lewisham & Greenwich NHS Trust