

20th August 2007

Rt. Hon Alan Johnson MP
Secretary of State for Health
Department of Health
79 Whitehall
London SW1A 2NS

Dear Mr Johnson

Bolingbroke Hospital, Battersea

Last month Wandsworth Council's Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee referred the decision of the local NHS Trusts to close the Bolingbroke Hospital to you. I hope that you will give serious consideration to overturning this short-sighted decision.

Although we represent different political parties we surely have a common interest in retaining people's faith in the process of decision-making and public consultation in the NHS. However, sadly, from the outset the way that the proposal for the Bolingbroke Hospital has been handled has had the very opposite effect.

The original intention to close the Bolingbroke was announced against a backdrop of record financial deficit in our local NHS Trusts and, given the highly desirable location of this 100 year old building on Wandsworth Common, this led to some cynicism about the reason for the closure. Local frustration was only increased by the fact that large amounts of public money had been spent on subsequently unused facilities in the Bolingbroke in recent years and the knowledge that a 2004 consultation had identified the site as the most suitable site for a care hospital in the North Wandsworth area.

From the outset those opposing closure of the Bolingbroke have been characterised as sentimental and irrational by local health chiefs and the range of options for the imaginative mixed use of the site have not been given serious consideration. However, opponents of closure have always argued that to decide on the fate of the Bolingbroke before the planned wider consultation on health services for this area made no sense. This is particularly true given the shifts in health policy priorities.

For example it was suggested by the current MP for Battersea in Parliament, at Prime Minister's Questions, that a new hospital was in the pipeline and indeed local people were asked by him, via 35,000 colour leaflets, to tick a map indicating where they thought it should be. He also drew attention to a Department of Health fund of £750m which had been made available for new Community Hospitals in August 2006. Indeed I wrote to your predecessor in January asking what bids had been submitted and what discussion of a Battersea hospital had taken place. My questions were not answered.

During the course of the consultation on the Bolingbroke it was obvious that the attitude to new local hospitals was shifting. It was confirmed by health officials at the meeting which voted for closure that a new hospital for Battersea is not now on the agenda, Government policy having changed in the interim period. We will never know how many more people would have responded to the consultation on the Bolingbroke had they not been reassured by their local MP that the hospital was to be replaced.

The Chief Executives of both the local PCT and St George's NHS Trust asserted in a recent letter to the local paper that St John's Therapy Centre (their preferred site for some of the current services to relocate to) offers 'purpose-built' premises. They also asserted that it is 'as a result' of the public consultation that the move to St John's Therapy Centre is to be made. This inconsistency goes to the nub of the problem and explains much of the local cynicism. Was it a done deal and if so what was the point of the £35,000 public consultation? Or if the idea was to act as a result of the public consultation why ignore the clear conclusions one could draw from it?

The overwhelming number of people who responded to the consultation opposed the closure of the Bolingbroke and rejected all four relocation options offered to them by the Trusts. The numbers are a matter of public record; 13,956 signatories to petitions, 440 local newsletter respondents, 1,679 supporters of the 'Give us 5' campaign (for the 5th option, to retain services at the Bolingbroke), 44 individual letters or emails and 249 respondents to the MP's survey. Of these 16,368 respondents only 91 favoured a move at all and of these 67 favoured moving to St John's Therapy Centre. So 0.4% of total respondents to this expensive consultation favoured the option preferred by the Trusts. Hardly a public mandate!

I asked the question of the joint meeting of the Trusts' Boards – did they think this consultation had left local people with a higher or lower degree of confidence in the value of such exercises? The chairman of the joint board meeting was honest enough to say he thought confidence was diminished. The fate of the Bolingbroke is now in your hands and if you want to restore some of that lost public confidence you would keep the hospital open whilst it is properly established what part the Bolingbroke might play in the future of a remodelled health service for Battersea.

I look forward to your response which I am sure will be of great interest to the residents of Battersea. The Bolingbroke has a proud history and it could have an exciting future as part of our local NHS - please help us to keep it open.

Yours sincerely

Jane Ellison
Conservative Parliamentary Spokesman
Battersea, Balham and Wandsworth