Britain: Closure plans for Trafford General Hospital's Accident & Emergency unit approved

Tony Robson
5 February 2013

The closure plans for the Accident & Emergency (A&E) unit at Trafford General—the birthplace of the National Health Service (NHS)—have been approved by NHS Greater Manchester. The go ahead was given at its board meeting on January 24 based upon recommendations from the Trafford Strategic Programme Board (TSPB)—the panel overseeing the overhaul of the hospital.

Under the plans, the A&E unit is to be downgraded to an Urgent Care Centre closed from midnight to 8 a.m. and the Intensive Care Unit, acute surgery and children's services withdrawn.

The implementation of these devastating measures will be merely delayed by the Joint Health Scrutiny Committee (JHSC) of Trafford and Manchester City Council decision to refer the planned closure to Conservative Party Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt. The move by the all-party committee, consisting mainly of Labour councillors, is an attempt to revive some credibility in the face of growing public opposition to the health cuts nationally.

The JHSC decision is a farce, as earlier in the month Hunt had already ruled out any intervention to stop the A&E closure plan at Trafford General.

The JHSC has called for the Trafford plans to be postponed so they can be considered alongside NHS Greater Manchester's so-called "Healthier Together" review, due to start in spring. The review is based upon a far wider restructuring plan of hospitals across a region of more than 2.6 million people, aimed at reducing the number of existing A&E units and provision of eight other services by concentrating them on fewer sites.

Healthier Together is the cuts at Trafford General writ large for Greater Manchester. As with Trafford General it is packaged as a means of improving patient services but the cost cutting motive is unmistakable. The main paper for Healthier Together describes current levels of health spending in the region as "unsustainable", under conditions in which £1.3 billion worth of cuts are planned in the Greater Manchester NHS budget by 2015.

In Trafford, the public was provided with just the single "option" of whether to support the closure plans. Only 1,900 response forms were received out of a population of 231,000 people and 90,000 households. A petition to oppose the plans was signed by 12,500 people. But as far as NHS Greater Manchester is concerned, the consultation criteria have been met and the closure plans should proceed.

This experience is not the exception but the rule, as the consultation process has been utilised as a veneer behind which A&E and other NHS department closures have been imposed nationwide.

The JHSC call for a postponement does not amount to an opposition to the closure of the A&E unit. Vice Chair Judith Lloyd stated, "The committee feels strongly that the reduction of accident and emergency services at Trafford General Hospital should not be implemented without proper measures in place to redirect patients."

The reality is the measures cannot be carried out without compromising patient safety. Many of those requiring emergency treatment at Trafford General would have to be transferred to the A&E unit at Wythenshawe hospital some 10 miles away. The risk posed to those in need of urgent medical attention will not only be increased by longer journey times but also delays in receiving treatment upon arrival. According to local clinicians, the A&E unit is over capacity and not suitable for increased activity.

Those arguing for the closure plans to be implemented without delay have let it be known that a predetermined course has been set. Leila Williams, from NHS Greater

© World Socialist Web Site

Manchester, stated during the Joint Health Scrutiny Committee that even if the closure plans for Trafford General were delayed for consideration in the context of Healthier Together, the outcome would be the same.

The call for a single review has become a bandwagon requiring no opposition to imposing health service cuts in general. This was the content of the letter sent by Labour Party shadow Health Secretary Andy Burnham to Hunt requesting that he hit the "pause button" on the closure plans. His criticism was restricted to how the cuts were being managed.

"In conclusion, I wish to make it clear that I am not setting my face against service change. In the last Parliament, we did bring through a major change to maternity and children's services in Greater Manchester. What I am against is a piecemeal approach to service review that fails to see things in the round and does not command public confidence", said Burnham.

The "service change" to which Burnham refers is the "Making it Better" review which led to Trafford General losing its maternity unit in 2010 and reduced the number of maternity hospitals in Greater Manchester from 12 to eight.

The attempt to portray the cuts as simply a local initiative by health chiefs is a cynical exercise. They are driven by the £20 billion cuts demanded by the coalition from the NHS budget by 2015; cuts agreed by the previous Labour government when Burnham was Health Secretary.

The Save Trafford General campaign has applauded the decision by the local councils to refer the closure plans to the government. Its chair Matthew Finnegan stated, "This is a huge step forward for our campaign in halting the plans to close A&E and other services at Trafford General, by putting the final decision in the hands of the Government."

Why the fate of the hospital should be considered safer in the hands of a government intent on the dismantling of the NHS is not explained. The calls to apply pressure on the government on this basis represent a dead end for those genuinely seeking to oppose the closure plans. It further illustrates the role of the Save Trafford General campaign in dissipating opposition.

Save Trafford General won support locally on the basis of petitioning and holding a few protests but from the outset this has been based upon keeping it under the thumb of the political establishment from which its leading figures are drawn. Finnegan worked in the communication's team of former Labour prime minister Tony Blair in 1997 and has stood as a parliamentary and local council candidate for the Labour Party. At the same time he has pursued a career in consultancy and public relations work in the public and private sector. Save Trafford General co-ordinator Jo Harding is a local labour councillor and chair of Stretford and Urmston Constituency Labour Party.

The main calculation in promoting the referral to the Health Secretary is that it will serve as a delaying tactic to enable the closure plans to be reviewed as part of the Healthier Together. Finnegan is on record that Trafford General should be "in the mix", meaning it will be pitted against other local hospitals to determine where the axe will fall.

Save Trafford General's promotion of the JHSC also offers a reprieve to the Conservative and Labour authorities as they confront opposition to their own cuts. Tory-led Trafford Council is planning to withdraw frontline services in order to implement £34 million worth of cuts over the next two years. This includes proposals to close 10 of its 16 children's centres, end its meals on wheels service and shut the sole remaining council-run residential care home, as well as making 180 redundancies. Labour-controlled Manchester City Council is planning to axe 830 jobs in a bid to implement a further £80 million worth of cuts, including the shutting of five swimming pools and five libraries.

The trade unions at Trafford General have functioned as apologists for the cuts and fully co-operated with the downgrading and withdrawal of services. A TSPB meeting held November 29 last year, reported that Unison Staff Side Lead, Margaret Rodgers said she was "closely involved since the proposals were first discussed" and "confirmed the process as open and transparent and that the Trade Unions were and remain committed to the proposals", claiming "it was the long term view that this would be the best way to safeguard jobs."

The fight against the dismantling of services at Trafford General underlines the importance of the NHS FightBack initiative taken by the Socialist Equality Party. We call on Trafford General health workers and all those opposed to the NHS cuts to join and support the www.nhsfightback.org campaign.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site