

NHS Queen Elizabeth Hospital held up by props as national maintenance bill reaches £9 billion

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The Queen Elizabeth Hospital (QEH) in King’s Lynn in the East of England is appalling proof of the state of the National Health Service (NHS) in the UK. It is having to bid for government funding to survive.

The hospital opened in 1980 and was cheaply built as a “best-buy hospital” from prefabricated sections, only meant to last 30 years. Over the decades it has become a major hub for around 250,000 people in the communities it services. The hospital currently provides 515 beds for an area of approximately 1,500 km² encompassing the West Norfolk area, South Lincolnshire and North East Cambridgeshire.

It has now been standing for over 40 years and is in dire need of replacing. An anonymous trust employee said that the situation at the QEH is like a “Grenfell waiting to happen”.

The horrific state of the building is such that there are temporary supports (acrow props) holding up the roof in wards. There are now a staggering 194 props holding up the hospital, after a further 60 had to be installed in April.

Some wards have had to be closed due to structural safety concerns. The roof was originally built with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC) planks, which only have a lifespan of 30 years, and is now showing cracks. The planks cannot bear the weight of the roof. The hospital’s risk register in March 2020 stated that “there is a direct risk to life and safety of patients, visitors and staff due to the potential catastrophic failure of the roof structure due to structural deficiencies.”

Residents from the local community have organised a campaign to raise awareness of these issues. Thousands have signed petitions for a rebuild of the QEH and for a

new hospital for the Norfolk area. One petition, signed by over 6,200 people, was addressed to the constituency office of then health secretary and West Suffolk MP Matt Hancock. The petition was delivered, along with two metal roof poles—similar to those supporting the hospital roof—to Hancock’s constituency office in May. Hancock’s staff refused to accept the petition, reported the *Eastern Daily Press* who organised the petition as part of its “Rebuild the QEH campaign.”

At a July 6 rally in King’s Lynn in support of the NHS, part of a nationwide “NHS “Day of Action”, Pallavi Devulapalli, a Norfolk GP, said, “Norfolk county council have a budget shortfall so they have decided to cut adult and children social services and instead are spending £50 million on a new road that cuts down travel time. It is shocking that we must stand up here and ask for a new hospital to be built. The QEH is crumbling before our eyes. It’s an absolute disgrace.”

According to Professor Steve Barnett, chair of the trust running the hospital, “living with the risks” associated with the building and to maintain the roof will cost £554 million over the next decade. To build an entirely new hospital from scratch would cost an estimated £679 million.

Barnett has warned that 11 other best-buy hospitals, including the James Paget in West Suffolk and Hinchinbrooke in Cambridgeshire, are under “heightened scrutiny”. This follows the collapse of a school roof made from similar materials two years ago.

He stated, “If there is a failure in any of the best-buy hospitals, then there will be significant consequences for all of these hospitals—involving the closure of

hospitals.”

The terrible state of King’s Lynn is the most grotesque expression of the situation in NHS hospitals nationwide. Urgent repairs to the tune of £3 billion were already required by January 2019. NHS Providers, representing hospital trusts, revealed this January that backlog maintenance in the NHS has risen from £6.5 to £9 billion in the space of a year. Over half of the maintenance required is of “high” or “significant” risk, meaning that patient safety could be jeopardised if not addressed.

The government have agreed to shell out an insulting £20 million for urgent repair work at the QEH. To add insult to injury, the QEH now must beg for funding to keep the building running.

This is the result of the government scheme that will see the Tory manifesto commitment of 40 “new hospitals” completed across England by 2030. What are being designated new hospitals are nothing of the sort. According to NHS Providers, 40 new hospitals would cost around £20 billion. Just £3.7 billion is being allocated to the Tories’ scheme and most of this will be spent on six main sites. A pot of just £100 million will be for seed funding to be shared among 34 hospitals.

In October 2020, the government named 32 hospitals to be funded, from which the QEH was excluded. The government is demanding NHS trusts compete against each other to be one of the final eight hospitals, to be decided in November.

The state of the QEH has made it a cause celebre among sections of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, who are seeking to keep all opposition to the smashing up and privatisation of the NHS within safe channels.

At the July 6 rally, former Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn addressed a crowd of 150 people, declaring, “This is absurd that in the 21st century anyone should expect to work or be treated in a building held up by props. This is a disgraceful state of affairs.” But after mouthing such truisms, he had nothing to offer beyond pleas to a Department of Health run by fanatical Thatcherite Sajid Javid: “Say to the NHS or Department of Health—pull your finger out, put the money in, fix the roof or build a new hospital, we can’t let this crazy situation go on any longer.’

Corbyn suggested, “The only way we can beat these people is by using humiliation and humour. How about

we start a campaign, ‘Sponsor a new prop!’, ‘prop up the NHS, here is some money for it!’.”

No confidence should be put in petitions, based on making pleas to Conservative politicians who consider the ethos of the NHS as an affront. The same holds true of the Labour Party, which has been working with the trade unions in a de-facto government of national unity with Prime Minister Boris Johnson. The unions have suppressed and betrayed every struggle by health workers over the last decade, as they have deepened their relationship with management and successive Tory governments.

The millions opposed to the break-up, privatisation and literal collapse of the NHS must turn to a strategy based on mobilising the working class in to defend the right to decent, free and fully-funded health care for all.

In an article on the NHS “Day of Action”, the NHS FightBack campaign, established by the Socialist Equality Party, wrote, “The defence of the NHS cannot be left in the hands of the trade unions and their cheerleaders in the pseudo-left groups. The unions’ avowed aim to find ‘common ground’ with the employers and government is a strategy for workers’ defeat.

“The working class must act independently in defence of its own interests. For this, new organisations of struggle are required ... rank-and-file workplace committees, led by the most trusted workers and independent from the trade unions.”

Health workers who agree with the need for such a struggle should contact NHS FightBack today .



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