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Campaign to keep local child cancer services local

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Wandsworth Council is leading a campaign against the NHS decision to move children's cancer services from two South London hospitals into Central London and the new Labour Government will be asked to step in. NHS England announced its decision to move the children's cancer centre based jointly at St **George's Hospital, Tooting**, and **The Royal Marsden, Sutton**, to Evelina London Children's Hospital, Lambeth, in March.

Wandsworth has now confirmed it will refer the decision to new Health Secretary Wes Streeting in a bid for him to intervene. The council is particularly concerned about the prospect of parents having to travel via public transport into Central London with immunosuppressed kids to reach the Evelina.

The authority said Richmond, Kingston, Merton, Sutton and Surrey councils are set to join the cross-party campaign, as children in their boroughs currently receive care at the existing children's cancer centre. Richmond approved plans to challenge the decision in May.

Opposition to the plans began to grow after the NHS launched a consultation on two options for the future location of the centre last year – either moving it entirely to St George's or to the Evelina. The centre has provided specialist children's cancer services to those aged 15 and under living in South London, Kent, most of Surrey, Brighton and Hove, Medway and East Sussex for 25 years.

The NHS said it has to move the centre as a new national service specification in 2021 outlined very specialist children's cancer treatment services must be on the same site as a paediatric intensive care unit and other specialist children's services. The Royal Marsden does not have a paediatric intensive care unit, meaning a small number of children with cancer requiring intensive care are transferred safely by ambulance to St George's every year.

Labour Wandsworth Council leader Simon Hogg urged Mr Streeting to work with local authorities challenging the decision to find ways to keep services at St George's. He said: "We have opposed these plans to move specialist children's cancer care from St George's from the start. Our serious concerns remain – getting to Evelina hospital through Central London traffic will be challenging at the best of times. Travelling by public transport is not an option for vulnerable children who are on immunosuppressant medication. So there has to be a better solution to these plans."

Local MPs have also publicly opposed the plans. Tooting MP Dr Rosena Allin-Khan described the decision to move services from St George's as 'deeply disappointing' when it was announced in March, and signed a letter to previous Health Secretary Victoria Atkins asking her to review it. The letter was also signed by Putney MP Fleur Anderson, Mitcham and Morden MP Siobhain McDonagh, Richmond Park MP Sarah Olney and Twickenham MP Munira Wilson.

Services are not expected to move until 2026 at the earliest. An NHS London spokesperson said: "Evelina London has been chosen as the future location for the children's cancer centre following a rigorous process, including involving clinical advisers, parents, charities, nurses and research staff. The future centre will stand ready to give cutting-edge treatments that require intensive care on site, like other major centres worldwide.

"Service reconfiguration is rarely easy and we recognise that during consultation, parents and families raised a number of concerns about the change in location, including about travelling further into London, and what that will mean for them. Our focus now is on detailed implementation planning which takes all of these concerns into account to support families and staff."

An Evelina spokesperson added: "We are fully committed to working with patients, their families, staff from the current service, and other partners to design the new service with children, young people and staff at its heart. This will ensure continuity of care during the transition period and a plan for the safe transfer of the service."

A St George's spokesperson said: "We understand the concerns being raised by our communities who want to keep specialist children's cancer care at St George's. We are working with NHS England and our partners and will continue to provide outstanding care to children and their families throughout this process."

Charlotte Lillywhite – reporter.

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