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New hospital programme called “HS2 of hospitals”

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The government’s hospitals programme has been called the “HS2 of hospitals” as “quite intense” discussions continue about how to take it forward.

Epsom and St Helier had its plan for a new site agreed by the NHS in 2020, with an original date for opening set at 2025, now pushed back to 2027 “at the earliest”. A health liaison panel at **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council** heard from **James Blythe**, managing director at the trust, who said adapting the current buildings to modern healthcare standards was becoming “increasingly difficult year on year”.

The national programme was announced as delivering 40 hospitals by 2030, with Epsom and St Helier one of eight “pathfinder” hospitals due to be at the top of the list, Mr Blythe told the meeting. But he said there were “quite intense discussions” going on at government level about the programme and how to take it forward.
Mr Blythe said: “What the government, the Treasury and the Department [of Health], are working through is basically how do you go about building 40 hospitals? Clearly what don’t you do is say to 40 schemes: ‘Go and design something completely different, go out to the construction market and try and procure it.’

“This has sort of now become the HS2 of hospitals. Let’s think about how we do this as a single scheme. Let’s think about how we do this consistently, how we procure consistently, how we design consistently.”

With St Helier hospital “very evidently crumbling” and problems with buildings at the Epsom site too, the trust plans to build a new specialist emergency care hospital on the old Sutton Hospital site, next to the Royal Marsden Hospital. Mr Blythe said: “We know that if we build a modern hospital to modern standards, we can do better for our patients, including local Epsom residents.”

But he said with the move from one financial year into the next, there were questions about where future works might sit in relation to other capital projects. He added: “Clearly what the construction market can’t take is 40 new hospital schemes trying to do the same thing at the same time.”

The meeting also heard that the trust was expecting feedback on its plans “very soon”, hoping it would then be able to get on with the planning process. Mr Blythe said: “As you can imagine, planning for a hospital which is going on to the land adjacent to Royal Marsden in Belmont in a mature and developed residential area, that planning process will not be insignificant. So we know that that will take some time”

Epsom and Ewell Borough Councillor **Liz Frost** (Residents’ Association, Woodcote Ward) asked about plans for the new multi-storey car park due to be built at the Epsom site, which was granted planning permission on appeal in December. She said she received a lot of complaints about roads surrounding the hospital being clogged up as people queued for spaces.

Cllr Frost said: “I have in the past spent quite a lot of time at Epsom Hospital when car parking has been horrendous and everybody was turning up late for clinics because they couldn’t actually get in.”

Mr Blythe said work should start in the autumn to build the new car park, and that options being looked at to minimise disruption during the nine-month build included possible park and ride schemes and using town centre car parks.

Saying he would bring back a plan later in the year for how the project would be handled, Mr Blythe also said the “flip side” was parking should be “substantially better once it’s built”.

He added: “We’re hoping that by [building the new car park] we will prevent some of the build-up of traffic from backing up into the town centre, which has sadly been a feature of the hospital for the last few years.”

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