

THE RED HOUSE RE-VISITED
AN UPDATE ON EFFORTS TO MODERNISE THE HARPENDEN MEMORIAL HOSPITAL SITE

Brief History

1. As long ago as 1920 the people of Harpenden invested in their communal health. In commemoration of those who gave their lives in World War I, the Memorial Nursing Centre was established at 40 Luton Road. Some health services continued from this site until 2002 when it was sold off and became a luxury residential property known as St Helena's Court.
2. Sir Halley Stewart, founder and chairman of the London Brick Company, bequeathed his home the Red House and 7 acres of land to the people of Harpenden in 1930 for the purpose of becoming a hospital. He continued to live in the property until he died aged nearly 100 in 1937. He had a lifelong interest in scientific and medical research.
3. In 1941 most the medical services from the Luton Road site were transferred to the Red House which became the Harpenden Memorial Hospital. The Stewarts, a 24 bedded inpatient assessment unit for the elderly mentally frail, was built in the grounds in 1995.
4. Responsibility for the Red House was taken over by the NHS following its formation and the property transferred into its legal ownership. Over subsequent years the health services gradually reduced and the building was allowed to deteriorate.
5. There has been much scandalised anger in the town as a result and anxious worries about the future of this cherished site, so much so that in the autumn of 2011 The Harpenden Society, the town's civic watchdog, issued a proposal, *Red House Revivified*, that detailed the reasons why and the process by which the Red House might be transformed into a well being centre for the locality.

Red House Revivified

6. In summary the paper asserted that: 'The Red House should be developed as a 'Wellness Centre.' It should be the 'one stop shop' for all the information about the health and welfare services available in the town. It should offer many such services to young and old. It should be a welcoming spot for the townspeople of Harpenden. It should be run and funded by a partnership of the National Health Service, the local authority social and care services, the local health and welfare charities and the people and businesses of Harpenden.'
7. Crucially, it was an argument for the local provision of services. It served as a critique of the inexorable drift of a large national entity like the NHS to cluster resources in fewer and fewer citadels. The economies of financial scale rarely factor in how it will affect the customers. We otherwise face being left with a bleak landscape of scattered outposts, aloof, forbidding, gaunt and inhospitable.
8. In the spring of 2012 The Harpenden Society, encouraged by the public appreciation of its stance, decided to form what became known as the Red House Forum, a ginger group comprising a wide range of interest and experience, medical, charitable, municipal and so on. Its purpose was to attempt to encourage a practical way ahead for the refurbishment of the facilities. The Forum is chaired by Chris Marsden, chairman of The Harpenden Society, with County Councillor Teresa Heritage and Eric Midwinter, Convenor of The Society's Health and Social Welfare Working Group, as its Co-organisers.

A Business Plan for the Red House

9. In mood and aim the Forum found common ground with the newly established Hertfordshire NHS Community Trust and its Chief Executive David Law. Constructive talks ensued, alongside efforts to consult the community with public meetings, press reportage and other means.
10. Mark Carman was recruited as the consultant to draw up a business plan. This he energetically did and in the December of 2013 this was completed. The Red House Forum was delighted to act as the conduit for the excellent scheme. Its announcement included the following comments:

'The Red House Forum is proud to announce the NHS plan to transform the site of the Harpenden Memorial Hospital into a 'Health and Wellness Campus'. This will provide a much-needed localised facility offering health and welfare services, including some in-patient care, to the town...'

11. The concept had been heartily approved by the Hertfordshire Community Health NHS Trust. After the legal, architectural and financial details had been ironed out and the range of services agreed, the approval of the Secretary of State would be sought in the summer of 2014. If all went well, the new campus should be up and running by the autumn of 2017.

Mark Carman, project manager for the NHS, described the project as 'a game changer', while David Law, Chief Executive of the Hertfordshire Community Health NHS Trust, claimed that this pioneer Harpenden development could prove to be a model for the rest of the county. Chris Marsden, Chairman of the Harpenden Society, who chairs the Red House Forum, said 'this is one project that has the unqualified backing of everyone in Harpenden'.

12. A schedule was presented to the Red House Forum in the January of 2014 that offered a most detailed almost month by month programme for the new development. The public response was enthusiastic. A public meeting to welcome the plan was packed solid with many either standing or unable to obtain entry. A print and online petition was heavily subscribed. Two or three public events featuring a presentation of the plan were busily engaged. It was recognised that Harpenden, a town of some 30,000 inhabitants but with satellite village communities and with its three general practice surgeries having lists totalling over 50,000 patients, was ideally placed for this pioneer project.

The Gateway Review

13. As part of the process of taking the business plan forward it was reviewed by external consultants in what is known as a Gateway Review in February 2014. Chris Marsden, Teresa Heritage and John Harris were interviewed by these consultants. In March the Hertfordshire Community NHS Trust received a written report from the Gateway Review which encouraged more emphasis in the Business Plan on the various options for delivering services in Harpenden and the wider Hertfordshire community to meet the identifiable needs.
14. The legal ownership of the Red House was transferred from the NHS Primary Care Trust to Hertfordshire Community NHS Trust in April 2014.
15. In June 2014 the Forum was made aware that there were moves to assess how a refurbished Red House might best fit into the wider picture of county-wide provision. We became aware

that, as well as other partners such as the Clinical Commissioning Group and the Hertfordshire Health and Wellbeing Board needing to give consent, there was ongoing a major estates strategy review. This was going to take a considerable time to reach fruition. Nonetheless, there was optimism that the Secretary of State might be approached in late October or early November of 2014 regarding the development.

16. Indeed, further optimism followed the agreement of the Hertfordshire Community NHS Trust in late 2014 for a member of the Red House Forum to join their project team but no meetings have yet been held due to lack of project resources within the Trust. John Harris the Forum's nomination for this role looks forward to the first meeting in due course.

The Latest Position

17. By the end of 2014 it was apparent that these wider stratagems were proving worthy but long winded, with the ever-present risk of loss of momentum. Then there were whispers that nothing now of import would be decided by the Secretary of State before the next general election, a frozen political waste of five or six months.
18. So some four years will have passed since this campaign was launched. One of its justifications was that a lively and functioning public health hub such as this would be a likely model for change elsewhere. Despite, therefore, its being a promising scheme, the continuing wider review and assessment of the project grinds on. By the time the task is complete the original conditions will already have altered and in any case we shall probably be close to the following general election in 2020.
19. For these are human matters, not just measures of land and the fabric of buildings. The Red House complex continues to crumble; the site is ideal for the ascertained purpose; both the public need and the public aspiration have been sufficiently identified; the plan is available, yet a rigid system is able to delay the development, maybe to extinction. After such a promising start Harpenden has the means, the motive and the opportunity to create a Health and Wellness Campus of value and distinction. The authorities should take immediate steps to revert as far as possible to the original schedule. The hazard of losing the chance of so doing is a frightening and dangerous one. Sometimes the demands of a perfect solution are the enemy of the practical way forward.

John Harris and Eric Midwinter
For and on behalf of the Red House Forum