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New delays raise fears that plug will be pulled on scheme

Hitches halt hospital plan

PLANS for a major new hospital for Bicester have again been delayed – and there are now fears it may never go ahead.

The scheme has been put back three months because of changes to financing rules and because it now needs to be signed off by Ministers.

This has raised fears that the Department of Health will pull the plug on the scheme – for which planning started in 1997 – because of public sector cuts.

MP Tony Baldry has now

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pledged to call for the scheme – which would replace Bicester Community Hospital – to be debated in Parliament.

Dr Michael Curry, a retired Bicester GP who is chairman of the Community Hospital Engagement Forum, which represents patients for project negotiations, hit out.

He said: "After 14 years of

planning a new hospital we are nowhere. The people of Bicester have a right to be very disappointed.

"We hope this latest delay is not the end of the road, and that the Department of Health is not planning to pull the plug on the whole scheme, or block it for bogus financial reasons."

He said he feared Ministers would have to choose between Bicester and another hospital scheme in Henley.

The 66-year-old said: "Both options are running neck and neck."

In April, plans to replace the existing hospital had moved a step forward after NHS Oxfordshire, the primary care trust, agreed to take proposals to the next stage.

It was due to get further approval from NHS South Central, the strategic health authority this month but this has now been put off.

Mr Baldry is seeking an adjournment debate in the Commons to "focus the minds of ministers".

In a letter to NHS Oxfordshire chief executive Sonia Mills, Mr Baldry said he was considering changing his will to donate his body for research at Oxford University.

He said: "I would like to feel there is a fighting chance of the new Bicester Community Hospital being built before the Oxford University medical students start to get their hands on my liver!"

Mrs Mills said the delay was because of the need for Ministers to sign off the plan and because of changes to national finance rules.

In a letter to Mr Baldry, she said: "The delay has been caused by two factors; the adoption nationally of financial rules, which place externally-funded schemes on the public balance sheet,

and the requirement for any capital expenditure within PCTs to have SHA and DoH approval.

"This is new and represents concerns for the future about PCT commitments to estate developments that may be inherited by other bodies as successor holders of PCT NHS estates."

Judy McCulloch, a spokesman for NHS Oxfordshire, said: "Given the additional work required, the PCT and the SHA agreed that it would be appropriate to ensure that the business case was adequately updated and submitted to the July board.

"This has created a delay to the programme of three months. However, it is the intention of the PCT project team to make up this time during the procurement process as far as possible."

Three possible sites are the hospital's current base in Kings End, land at the Kingsmere housing development, or the former claypits site off London Road, where a care home is currently being built.

The authority has said the likely option is for NHS beds to be provided in a care home with services, including therapies, first aid and X-rays, in a new hospital on the same site.



Dr Michael Curry, who fears the Bicester Community Hospital scheme may never go ahead