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Colm McCarthy: Children's Hospital - should we think again?

By Colm McCarthy on 15
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Should we think again? If the Connolly site is likely to be cheaper, this really matters in an over-borrowed country.

The Government appears hell-bent on going ahead with the National Children's Hospital in an inner suburb of Dublin, adjacent to the existing St James's Hospital.

The site is restricted and in a part of the city (not far from the Guinness brewery) inaccessible from out of town and which experiences all-day traffic congestion.

A previous inner suburb site at the Mater Hospital on the

A previous inner-suburban site at the Mater Hospital on the north side of the city was abandoned due to planning objections, but was also less than ideal from a traffic and accessibility angle.

The cost of the project now envisaged will apparently reach almost €1bn, compared with the €650m estimate on which the Government decision was based as recently as 2012.

I wrote about this shocking cost escalation last week and have since received communications from medical professionals unhappy with the chosen site.

They believe that the ultimate cost will be higher and that an alternative site beside Connolly Hospital, close to the M50 – considered and rejected by the Government – would be superior on medical grounds.

They note that the Rotunda maternity hospital is due to relocate to the spacious Connolly site and that all necessary medical specialities for a children's facility can readily be accommodated there.

The cost overrun revealed two weeks ago, before a sod has been turned, is reason enough to reconsider the Government's commitment. It makes a mockery of Government financial planning if cost estimates are so untrustworthy.

There is a long and sorry record of cost overruns in major public construction projects in Ireland, and it is a pity the Garda controversy has consumed Dáil and media attention since these shocking figures came to light. In any other week this cost overrun would have dominated political debate.

I am not competent to assess the medical arguments, but the location issue is straightforward. Any single national facility is convenient for the greatest number of people if located somewhere to the west of the city of Dublin, ideally

outside but close to the M50 motorway.

There is no intention to replace the out-dated Crumlin Children's Hospital with anything other than a single national facility. The Government's chosen site at St James's is even closer to the city centre than Crumlin and hence even less convenient for users from the provinces. It is not an easy place to get to even for Dubliners – the local street system is inadequate for current traffic volumes.

The alternative site at Connolly – favoured, it would appear, by at least some medical experts – is located at the intersection of the N3 route from the Cavan direction and the M50.

It is just a few intersections along from most of the other motorways feeding into the M50 from around the country – the only longer trip would be off the M11 from the Wexford direction.

It is worth having a look on Google Maps. If you were trying to pick a single location most convenient to a national base of users it would be hard to beat the Connolly Hospital at Blanchardstown.

The apparent willingness of Government ministers to push ahead regardless appears to be based on a perception that public weariness will tolerate the overrun already admitted in the interests of finally getting the project under way.

The ministers concerned will be retired by the time the final bill arrives, but it is never too late to reconsider an unwise project. It may appear to readers in the provinces that the Dublin-area location chosen for this facility is a matter of indifference: it is going to be in Dublin anyway, so who cares which Dublin location is selected?

This is foolish for two reasons. The cost at a constricted site will be higher than at a greenfield location and the design

will be compromised. If the Connolly site is likely to be cheaper, this really matters in an over-borrowed country. Every extra million in cost is a million which will not be available for urgent public capital projects elsewhere.

The €300m overrun already admitted would make a useful contribution to the cost of the Cork-Limerick motorway, for example. Moreover, the choice of an inner suburb site, in a notably congested part of the city, means extra cost and inconvenience for provincial users.

Dublin Airport is popular with users from around the country precisely because it is located close to an M50 intersection. If the argument is correct that the St James's site confers no advantages in medical terms over the Connolly alternative, the case for a re-think is complete. Even if it delays the project for another few years.

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