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The Lord Ribeiro, CBE,
Chairman
Independent Reconfiguration Panel
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Dear Lord Ribeiro,

Horton General Hospital

I understand that the Secretary of State for Health has referred to the Independent Reconfiguration Panel (IRP) the issue of the withdrawal of Consultant-led Maternity Services at the Horton General Hospital.

From 1983 until 2015, I was the Member of Parliament for Banbury.

On standing down from Parliament, Banbury Council elected me as High Steward of Banbury, a role which goes back to the original granting of Borough status to Banbury, and so it is in my capacity as High Steward of Banbury that I write this letter.

The IRP will recall that it was not so long ago that the IRP in a Report recommended the retention of Consultant-led Maternity Services at the Horton General Hospital and the IRP's Report was followed by some very hard work on the part of the Oxford University Hospitals NHS Trust and others to ensure that Consultant-led Maternity Services could continue at the Horton General Hospital.

At the time of the last IRP Report, 86 local GPs, i.e. every GP within the Horton General Hospital catchment area, had written a joint letter declaring that the then Oxford Radcliffe NHS Hospital Trust's proposals to remove Consultant-led Maternity Services from the HGH were "unsafe and unsustainable".

In practice, absolutely nothing has changed since local GPs wrote that letter and since the last IRP Report.

I suspect that the Oxford University Hospitals NHS Trust will argue that this time a majority of GPs locally have supported their proposal.

However, I think that vote has to be qualified in a number of ways.

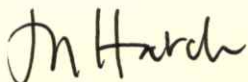
Firstly, the majority was an extremely slim one and, as it happens the vote was taken the week after three very long-serving and senior GPs in Banbury retired, and their positions were temporarily replaced by locums.

The Oxford University Hospitals NHS Trust has not been willing to provide voting information, but I think it is a reasonable inference that those locums, recently arrived in the town, may have voted, and if the vote had been taken even a week earlier, the result would almost certainly have given a majority of GPs against the Oxford University Hospitals NHS Trust's proposals.

Secondly, there seems to be very considerable peer pressure on local GPs to suggest to them that in some way they were not being "collegiate" if they sought to support the retention of key services at the Horton General Hospital.

So whilst I appreciate that the IRP cannot entirely ignore the vote of GPs, I would suggest that it should in no way be seen as being in any way conclusive, and I would suggest that the IRP revisits its own very detailed and comprehensive Report just a few years ago, and consider that in practice nothing has changed so far as the needs of people living in Banbury and the surrounding area are concerned; indeed, those needs have simply grown, given the very considerable actual proposed growth of population in and around Banbury, North Oxfordshire and surrounding counties. And I would very much hope that the IRP would find that the conclusions that the IRP came to the last time the IRP considered this issue, are as valid now as they were then.

Yours sincerely,



pp Rt. Hon. Sir Tony Baldry
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PS. As I am travelling overseas on business for a while, I have asked my secretary if she will "pp" this letter on my behalf.