

SUPPORT LETTER – Lakeland Hotels

From: Lakeland Hotels <nilhasecretary@gmail.com>

Sent: 01 September 2025 22:40

To: Neil.Guckian@westerntrust.hscni.net

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Subject: URGENT: The Impact of Rural Healthcare on Fermanagh's Tourism Economy

Dear Mr Guckian,

As representatives of the Fermanagh Lakeland's Hotels Association, we are writing to express our profound concern regarding the proposed service changes at the Southwest Acute Hospital, particularly the permanent removal of Emergency General Surgery. While we recognise the broader community's distress, our primary focus is on the significant and direct threat these changes pose to the local tourism and hospitality sector, which is a cornerstone of the Fermanagh economy.

Our industry thrives on attracting visitors and staff to our beautiful region. A robust, reliable healthcare system is not a luxury; it is a fundamental pillar of our destination's appeal. The ongoing degradation of services at SWAH, extending beyond the EGS department, creates a powerful negative perception that Fermanagh is not a safe or well-supported place to visit. This is not just about the loss of one service; it is about the broader decline in healthcare provision that we are witnessing.

Our members are already facing an increasingly difficult tourism market. The 2024 NISRA Local Government District statistics show Fermanagh and Omagh saw 313,717 overnight trips in 2024, generating £65.5 million in spending. However, recent reports, citing the same data, indicate a significant decline in visitor numbers between 2023 and 2024, equating to a loss of approximately £17 million to the local economy. This data shows a market that is already in a vulnerable position. The perception of inadequate local healthcare adds a new, significant barrier to attracting both visitors and the skilled workforce our businesses rely on. The tourism and hospitality sector is a major employer in our area, representing over 9% of all jobs in Fermanagh and Omagh, and we have a duty of care to ensure our employees have access to appropriate medical services.

We are concerned about the well-being of our customers and our staff. Tourists, who are often unfamiliar with the local area, need assurance that high-quality emergency and non-emergency medical care is easily accessible. The geographic isolation of Fermanagh, with travel times often more than two hours to the nearest major hospital, makes any reduction in services at SWAH acutely felt. Furthermore, our ability to attract and retain staff—from front-of-house to senior management—is directly tied to the availability of local amenities, including reliable healthcare. As employers, we have a duty of care to our staff and are deeply worried about their access to essential services.

It is critical to be clear that our concerns are not a rejection of progress or a modern, networked health service. On the contrary, we fully support the SOAS (Save Our Acute Services) integrated roadmap for SWAH. This evidence-based document offers a forward-thinking, viable vision for the hospital's future, centred on the restoration of emergency surgery and the development of SWAH as a "Rural Area Hospital" of excellence. This positive plan demonstrates a clear path to building a sustainable, resilient health system for the region and we believe it deserves to be fully considered.

The challenges we face in Fermanagh are a stark example of a larger issue: systemic regional imbalance in healthcare provision. While other major urban centres are seeing investment and service growth, rural areas like ours are disproportionately affected by a decline in critical infrastructure. Geography is the differentiator—the two-hour journey from SWAH to Altnagelvin is not comparable to the commute between other hospitals. Rural healthcare needs must be recognised and responded to accordingly, ensuring the people of Fermanagh and the wider Southwest are treated equally with other parts of Northern Ireland.

As business leaders with a significant stake in this community, we feel a professional and civic obligation to highlight the direct link between rural health and rural wealth.

We are keen to meet with you and other key stakeholders from the Western Trust to discuss these concerns in person and to understand how future plans will reflect the distinctive needs of our rural communities and deliver services that are suited to our specific needs.

In our industry, these are not just abstract concerns about public services; they are real-world matters of life and death. Just yesterday, a staff member at one of our member hotels suffered a severe heart attack. They were rushed to the emergency department at SWAH, where they received immediate, life-saving care that stabilised their condition. This single event underscores the critical importance of a full-service, fully staffed acute hospital with a functioning emergency department. It provides a powerful, tangible example of why a robust, reliable healthcare provision is non-negotiable for the safety of our staff and customers alike.

The Fermanagh Lakeland's Hotel Association.

The Belmore Court

Lough Erne Resort

Manor House Country House

Westville Hotel

The Enniskillen Hotel

Lusty Beg Island Resort and Spa

The Valley Hotel

Killyhevlin Hotel

The Silverbirch Hotel