

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

30 April 2019

Nadine Crook – statement and question regarding agenda item 11 - Children's Centre Buildings Consultation

To Councillor Laura Mayes – Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Skills

Statement

I'm Nadine Crook, a mum of 2. I live in Warminster.

I started the campaign to save Westbury's Children centre because of my experience in Warminster when our children's centre was closed in 2016. When the centre closed we were promised that groups and services would continue to be run in alternative community buildings. I have set out in my report to scrutiny, which is in the cabinet report appendix, that the promises were hollow. After the centre closed the universal provision disappeared. I now use Westbury's children's centre. The Council referred to its "successful use of wider community venues" in the Children's Select Committee Report on 5th March. This couldn't be further from the truth in Warminster.

When I queried the abandonment of virtually all support in Warminster, I was told that there were plenty of good toddler groups in the town. Unlike children's centre groups, they are mainly run by volunteers not trained staff. They focus on social support rather than early education, have no early intervention remit, cannot signpost those in need and are run in church halls or a private school – not neutral locations.

A good level of open access support, not just 1 ½ hours per week on the same day each week at a breast feeding group, which is the case in Warminster now, is essential to identify people needing further help.

You cannot rely on, for example, health visitors to pick up on people needing help as visits are so infrequent now. Only groups and a base where people know where to go to get advice, support and if needed referral on to other services can pick this up.

The Council states that the White Horse Children's centre is being closed because it is underused. This is not because of lack of need. It is because the council chose several years ago to stop some groups and push most groups out of the centres. Advertising of what is available has been poor too. This situation could easily be reversed and the centre could be used far more effectively to reach out to the local community. Running groups at the centre would also encourage people to drop-in for

advice more often. This is a model that has successfully been used by other authorities.

The council has already closed nearly half the children's centres and drastically reduced the number of open access groups. The key reason given is to focus staff resources on "outreach support to the families most in need". Appendix 18 of the cabinet report says that only 4 families are receiving outreach support by the children's centre service in Westbury at the moment. This is a staggeringly low number in one of Wiltshire's most deprived areas. There must be more families than this who could benefit from support by children's centre staff who simply have not been picked up.

I understand that times are very tough for the council and why it would often seek to focus limited resources on those most in need. However, if it focuses so strongly on those who are already "in the system" and virtually abandons any open access groups run by children's centre staff, it is inevitable that people needing help will not be picked up right at the start.

To conclude:

- the area immediately around the White Horse Children's Centre is one of the most deprived in Wiltshire
- the centre is in a town, there is a high concentration of people needing help from the children's centre staff. This is in line with offering services "in places that are accessible to families", as the Executive Summary in the cabinet report says
- the community venues model is failing parents in Warminster, it will fail Westbury too
- the level of outreach service in Westbury, with nearly half of the centres already closed is minimal. This is despite staff, in theory, being "freed up" to do this work
- the closure would be contrary to several of the council's Business Plan objectives and statutory requirements
- the Sutton Trust's 'Stop Start' report found that the most disadvantaged will be the worst affected by the closure of the children's centre

Unfortunately it can only be concluded that the starting point for the closure proposal is "we will show savings of £22,000".

No consideration appears to have been given to:

- research into the effectiveness of children's centres particularly in deprived areas,
- the effectiveness of the Council's proposed model in reaching those in need,
- the council's statement that it will spend a little now to save a lot in the future

A well run, active children's centre gives a tremendous opportunity to improve the life chances for those most in need. The proposed alternative model has been shown to

be flawed and it will miss people in need. They will only reappear later at far greater cost to the state.

Please could Wiltshire Council see the wider picture and not plough on regardless. The local community would be very happy to work with the council to promote and maximise the opportunities of our children's centre.

Question

Prior to the Cabinet meeting, can the council please provide detailed evidence to show how, through the proposals put forward in Westbury, it will be meeting its statutory duties under the Childcare Act 2006

NB: I have also provided some comments relating to policies, research and legislation, please see the Appendix below.

Response

The Childcare Act 2006 states that a Local Authority must –

- a. improve the well-being of young children in their area, and
- b. reduce inequalities between young children in their area in relation to the matters mentioned in subsection

a service is made available—

(a) by providing the service, or

(b) by providing advice and assistance to parents and prospective parents on gaining access to the service.

Wiltshire Council will continue to provide a service which meets these requirements through the delivery of appropriate services which parents will have advice and assistance on how to access.

Appendix

Wiltshire Council's Business Plan states that:

“At times, we all need support. We will protect the vulnerable by intervening early, where possible, and working with partners and local communities to ensure everyone gets the support they need as soon as possible. For children, this will mean a clear focus on work in the early years.” i

One of Wiltshire Council's 4 key priorities is “Protecting those who are most vulnerable... We want to build communities that enable all residents to have a good start in life... investing in early intervention, prevention and promoting community inclusivity.” ii

I believe the council's proposals for the White Horse Children's Centre are contrary to its Business Plan:

- it will not protect the most vulnerable
- the current targeted system is reaching a minimal number of families in need in Westbury – one of the most deprived areas in Wiltshire
- removing virtually all open access opportunities will close a key opportunity to pick up on those in need
- it is not investing in early intervention and prevention, the only focus has been to save the £22,000 per year it costs to run the centre. There has been no consideration of the savings to social services and other public services a well run centre can bring further down the line for this very small initial investment. Research has demonstrated these benefits

A recent report by the Sutton Trust said:

“The major national evaluation of children's centres and their impact (2009-14) found positive effects, especially improvement in family outcomes; these were linked to family engagement with children's centres and service use. Families registered to centres that had experienced reductions in resources (cuts to staff and/or services) were associated with poorer effects on family outcomes, whereas effects were positive for families registered with centres that had increased resources (expanding services and/or staff) between 2011 and 2013. Positive effects were also associated

with greater service use by families. The most disadvantaged groups showed stronger positive effects, and were more likely to use services at their registered local children's centre rather than services at other centres or institutions. They might thus be more affected by cuts to provision at their local centre." [emphasis added] iii

It went on to recommend that:

“Children’s centres should reconnect with their original purpose. Shifting the balance too far towards referred children and families, away from open access, and merging children’s centres into preventative teams working with a very much wider age group, serves a very different function and requires very different skills. It does not seem to fit well under the label of a local ‘children’s centre’. A good mix of children is important for social mobility and children’s social development.”

Again, the proposals for the White Horse Children’s Centre act against these recommendations as they:

- almost wholly focus on referred children and families
- remove any open access to the facilities and staff at the centre
- will only allow open access to staff for a specific session a week (e.g. Little Learners - assuming this group continues). Many people will not be able to attend at that specific time so will therefore have no access to the staff

The 2013 Children’s centres statutory guidance for local authorities states:

“Local authorities should not close an existing children’s centre site in any reorganisation of provision unless they can demonstrate that, where they decide to close a children’s centre site, the outcomes for children, particularly the most disadvantaged, would not be adversely affected and will not compromise the duty to have sufficient children’s centres to meet local need. The starting point should therefore be a presumption against the closure of children’s centres.” iv

The proposed closure is against this statutory guidance because:

- the starting point of the proposals has been to save £22,000 in the case of Westbury
- there has been no presumption against closing the children’s centre
- the council’s rudimentary impact assessment in Appendix 1 is based on no statistics. Either they have not been considered or the council just does not know the reality of the impact. They are unable to demonstrate that outcomes for the residents in this deprived area will not be adversely affected. Under the Mitigating Action Plan it says “Outline activities you plan to undertake to mitigate impact on particular groups” there is no mention of deprivation. This is possibly because the assessment is to cover all proposed closures, half of which are not in areas of deprivation
- it will therefore fail its duty to meet local need

i P18. Business Plan 2017 – 2027. Wiltshire Council

ii P2. Ibid

iii P8. Stop Start. George Smith, Kathy Sylva, Teresa Smith, Pam Sammons and Aghogho Omonigho.
April 2018

<https://www.suttontrust.com/research-paper/sure-start-childrens-centres-england/>

iv P9. Sure Start children’s centres statutory guidance. For local authorities, commissioners of local health services and Jobcentre Plus. DfE. April 2013

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/678913/childrens_centre_stat_guidance_april-2013.pdf