



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

AM/JJM/12/050419

(Please ensure that the letter reference is quoted on return correspondence).

05 April 2019

The Baroness Scott OBE
Cabinet Office
Wiltshire Council
Bythesea Road
TROWBRIDGE
Wiltshire
BA14 8JN

Dear Jane,

I have received the attached letter from my constituent Nadine Crook of 71 East End Avenue, Warminster, BA12 9NF which is self-explanatory. I would be very grateful if you could say what you are able to do, to either look again at the planned closure of this much valued Children's Centre or say what alternative provision is envisaged. It could be that the plans are wrapped up with the new provision you and I discussed in Westbury with Richard Hatt.

I do appreciate the constraints on resources that you have to operate with.

Thank you for your help.

*Yours ever,
Andrew*

Copy to: Ms Crook

Enclosure

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71 East End Avenue
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BA12 9NF

15 MAR 2019

Dr Andrew Murrison
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Dear Dr Murrison,

Re: Wiltshire County Council's proposal to close the White Horse Children's Centre, Westbury

I am writing to you because I am extremely concerned about Wiltshire Council's plan to close White horse Children's centre.

I have 2 young children (aged 3 ½ years and 8 months). I live in Warminster and I used Happy Feet Children's Centre very regularly (usually twice a week) for over a year before it was closed in 2016.

Westbury Children's Centre is now my closest centre.

The children's centre in Westbury is one of 6 centres earmarked for closure. This will continue the Council's service redesign, which in 2016 saw 13 of 30 centres closed across Wiltshire.

I have attended Westbury Children's centre for antenatal classes, used the bookshare scheme and regularly attend the Little Learners group at Westbury Leigh community centre. I can not praise the staff there enough, I have felt immensely supported.

I have huge concerns about the consultation process! It is not being carried out as a proper consultation where the views of respondents are genuinely listened to and the feedback gathered is considered. Rather the consultation meeting and the questionnaire felt like a tick box exercise (no pun intended!)

I was the only person to attend the consultation meeting on 26.2.2019. I am sure that Wiltshire Council will conclude from this that there is little interest in what happens to the centre, but I couldn't disagree more! We weren't told about the meeting happening at the Little learners group and many of the Mums I know that use the centre were also not aware that the meeting was happening. I couldn't find it on the Children's centres facebook page. It just wasn't advertised well enough.

The consultation questionnaire is very biased and starts with a leading question. *'Do you support the decision to offer children's centre services in the community and therefore invest in staff rather than buildings?'* The questions are not designed to find out what people would like to see happen but rather to rubberstamp the Council's plan. Who in their right mind would respond "no keep the building and get rid of the staff"?!

The closure of the centres has already been decided upon, it's a fait accompli. Westbury children's centre would be used as a private nursery to expand childcare provision for the 0-2 year old group. This is despite the fact that it is located in an area which is in the top 10% of most deprived areas in the whole country (on the national Indices of Multiple Deprivation) according to Wiltshire Council's own Joint Strategic Assessment document, and the population in Westbury according to the same document is set to grow!

So why is it being closed now in spite of the clear need for it to remain there, to meet financial targets of course!

Due to these financial constraints the decision has been made to focus resources on the hard to reach groups by increasing targeted provision and 'referred to' groups e.g. increasing home visits, focusing services on the most vulnerable e.g. those at risk from domestic abuse. But in doing so it is very likely that soon all universal provision that was core to the work of the children's centres service will be lost. Universal early years support is so crucial. It's arguably the most important thing we can do for our children.

Children's centres provide that safe space that anyone can go to for advice or just reassurance. The groups are an absolute lifeline to new parents! It's at these groups that you meet other new parents and realise that you aren't the only one struggling and that being a parent is hardwork, you build a network of friends that will see you through the tough times and you learn how to really nurture your child's appetite to learn.

The staff are non-judgemental, highly trained and they support you to play with your child, which is absolutely essential in developing their communication skills. This will later have a huge impact on their social relationships with other children at school and their literacy. Early vocabulary is one of the best indicators of later academic success, but whilst the government is putting millions into projects to "close the word gap" to enable social mobility, local authorities are closing down the very centres that would show parents how to help.

Before Happy Feet Children's Centre closed we attended a New Mum/ New baby course, baby massage sessions, and messy play sessions and used the sensory room regularly. We also attended fire safety and first aid sessions, did a hands on cooking class where I learnt how to make bread without salt in it, and found out about the hidden sugars in many baby foods and got also got advice on teeth cleaning.

There is a huge risk that if all provision is solely focussed on targeted services that many vulnerable parents and children will not be identified. Staff often identify people who need extra support when they attend the centre or attend groups. Health visitors are great but they are not always available and it's a very long time between scheduled visits after your baby is past the newborn stage! This unmet need will not be measured, so the problem will not be apparent until years to come when children/ young adults have much most serious problems e.g. when youth offending increases. Aren't we creating a ticking time bomb?

It was promised at the consultation meeting on 26 February, 2019 that Children Centre groups will continue to be held in other local community venues in the localities where the centres are closed. However the reality is that many groups will be lost as was the case when Warminster's Children centre closed. The only group that continued was the breast feeding support group which is run by volunteers rather than Children's Centre staff. Only recently (2 years after the closure) has a new Mum and baby course started and I attended this with my baby in September.

When a Children's centre closes it's not just the building that is lost. You gain so much by attending Children's Centre groups and courses, skills that stay with you for life and that have definitely made a massive difference to the way that I parent.

So I would urge you to do everything that you can do in your power to stop the closure of the White Horse Children's centre. It is absolutely crucial that it stays open to provide that essential safety net for the many obviously and the not so obviously vulnerable families.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter.

Yours sincerely,



Nadine Crook

Warminster Resident, Mother, Previous User of Happy Feet Children's Centre in Warminster and Speech and Language Therapist!