

Ian Cunningham – Mayor of Westbury statement and question regarding agenda item 11 - Children’s Centre Buildings Consultation

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

Statement

The decision to close the White Horse Community Centre is not a good one. The centre is in an area of high deprivation particularly from the point of view of education and skills. The Ham area rates in the bottom 10% in the educational domain of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation. One of the key aims of a children centre was to ensure that children arrive at school with a good level of development (GLD).

The area of Westbury the children’s centre sits in was mistakenly described as an area of low deprivation in the original plans and justifications for closure. The rapid scrutiny committee have recently corrected this but all previous work was done with this misunderstanding of the true nature of the centre’s immediate locality in place.

We are told that the cost of running the centre is about £22,000 per year. This seems to be a very small amount of money saved for a significant loss for Westbury. Social aspects are important for new Mothers. A place that is well-recognised, conveniently located, “always there” and non-judgemental, where you can arrive for one reason and then discuss other issues is important. Relying on targeting can miss people.

We are concerned that social media is proposed as the main method of “advertising”. In an area of low educational achievement, it is likely that there are many with no or low reading skills. How likely are they to find services advertised on the web or through social media? Services that move or have to be asked for are not as easy to find as a building that everyone knows about.

The centre is ideally located next to an infant & junior school, both of which have high levels pupil premium and are a natural gathering place for parents with children. This makes access to the children centre’s services for those who also have pre-school children particularly easy.

The Town Council was concerned to hear of the experience of Warminster, where very quickly, support groups disappeared and we would like to see some guarantees around services and funding. We also note that after the closure of Westbury’s youth centre, with the promise of targeted services, the staff resources were gradually chipped away until there are now none. This is a problem in an area where there are few people with the resources or abilities to offer services even when some funding

may be available. Youth services were “cast adrift” by the loss of their building. We would like to see some guarantees that the same will not happen to the services that are in the children’s centre.

Given the small cost involved and the earlier mis-representation of Westbury as a low deprivation area (this has been corrected since the scrutiny committee) perhaps Westbury could continue as is as useful comparison between the current and proposed new way of working?

We have already reported our concerns about the consultation in that so few people knew it was happening – even volunteers at the centre were unaware. With a question like the first one, which forced people to state a preference between buildings and staff (as though they were mutually exclusive) it is hardly surprising that in the small number of responses given (relatively speaking) staff “won”; there was no option to say that both were important, as the town council said.

Question

The report says that under the new provision, only deprived families will be specifically targeted. The current system gives more opportunities for people to self-present for help, regardless of status. A key aim of the children’s centres was that they were there for everyone. Wiltshire Council’s Business plan also acknowledges that “At times, we all need support.”

Does the cabinet then agree that deprivation, rather than specific need for services, should be the main factor for receipt of support?

Response

Specific need for services is the main factor considered but there will always be a need to focus on those who are more deprived as they do not always have access to support that other members of society do.