

# The Closure of Whitstable Children's Centres :

## Background

On the 17th January Kent County Council launched a [public consultation](#) on the future shape of its Community Services. The consultation proposed the closure of the Joy Lane & Swalecliffe Childrens' Centres and relocation of these services to the Whitstable Youth & Community Centre which would be remodelled as a Family Hub serving children and families of those 0-19 years old.

We are a group of young parents who have come together to oppose the closure of vital services in Whitstable and in particular the relocation of services from primary school provision and the highest areas of deprivation in our town. [We speak on behalf of over 500 local parents who have signed out petition to save both of these vital services.](#)

Our consultation response includes detailed data collected from 142 carers and parents in Whitstable who completed an online survey. This survey was distributed and completed face to face by our volunteers visiting local parent and baby groups, with the aim of testing the rationale presented in the consultation (Appendix 1).

In summary, we believe that the council's proposed cuts seek to prioritise money over mothers - that the need to save money across the council's estate could be done by looking at other buildings and that removing services from the areas of highest deprivation in our town will cost and not save the council money in the long term.

We reject the rationale presented in the consultation and will present evidence to show that:

1. services at both Joy Lane and Swalecliffe have been in a phase of managed decline for some time - their poor utilisation is reflection of mismanagement and not the scale of local need. Need post pandemic is actually higher than before than it was before and as such change now is wrong.
2. the plans for parents to travel on public transport for up to 30 minutes are unworkable and will further reduce usage. Parents in the areas of highest deprivation in our town will be most affected by the need to travel by public transport
3. the lack of clarity or assurances as to what will be located in the Family Hub is worrying and as such does not allow people to adequately give their opinion on options available to them

The consultation may explain the rationale for change as driven by the cost of servicing its estate but the fact that it expects to have almost three times as much from service delivery as it will in maintenance lays bare that this is a cut to vital children's services in the immediate aftermath of a pandemic.

### **1. Young parents in 2023**

For many of us with older children it is clear that current children's centres offer a fraction of the support than they used to. Real term funding to children centres has been [cut by 62% since 2010](#) and budgets have been stretched to breaking point.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a lasting effect on young children and young mothers specifically. Evidence presented to the Government's COVID-19 Enquiry highlights how younger mothers and

those with pre-school age children were [disproportionately furloughed during the pandemic](#) and that those furloughed have been more likely to be made [unemployed since](#).

Kent County Council's continued investment in the Reconnect programme is evidence that they believe that the pandemic has had a lasting and negative affect on [some children's wellbeing, independence and ability to socially engage with others](#). OFSTED has shown how many children have returned to [early years provision less confident and more anxious](#); and within schools the National Education Union and government, have seen this manifested in [worsening behaviour](#). No additional national programme of support for parents managing this behaviour has been commissioned.

National mental health charities recorded a rise in mental health crisis amongst [young mothers during lockdown](#) and since then there is evidence that [peri-natal mental health has continued to deteriorate](#).

The need for support post pandemic is strong.

The timetables at Joy Lane and Swalecliffe are a shadow of what they formally were. In November 2016 there were [26 ½ hours of structured activity](#) at Joy Lane. By January 2019 this had dropped to [19.5 hours of structured activity a week](#), in [March 2023 it was 9.5](#). Outreach sessions in areas of high deprivation on the Grimshill and Lucerne Estates no longer run and the relocation of the community midwives from both services to Estuary View Medical Centre has led many parents to no longer consider them a place they can just 'pop in' for a chat with staff.

One mum, when asked said:

*"I used to go to Joy Lane a lot with my daughter when they were a baby. I was desperate for company and support, and always received a warm welcome. However when the breastfeeding support service left I stopped going, it felt more like a place for classes rather than somewhere I could drop in unannounced"*

31% of our parents said that they believed that services in the local area had been poorer since the pandemic. Whole rooms in Joy Lane Children's Centre haven't been reopened and with a limited timetable 1 in 5 reported that they had been turned away from services in the last year because of their limited capacity.

Limited usage of the current services is a deliberate result of reducing the level of provision and there is no detail as to whether the new family hub will meet, or exceed the hours available on both sites combined.

Current utilisation figures are an inaccurate measure of need as the pandemic has left many feeling isolated and unable to ask for or seek help. Articles in the British Medical Journal show that the withdrawal of community midwifery services in the pandemic has [left many parents to disengage with services](#) because they are unaware of, or unwilling to engage with, support which is available to them.

35% of people we surveyed said that they were less confident accessing services post COVID a figure which supports anecdotal evidence from local mother and baby groups has seen some groups report 50% less parents.

## **2. The model for Family Hubs**

This consultation asks parents to consider the suitability of a Family Hub model without any assurances as to what services we can guarantee are in them. The fact that the transport modelling identifies not one, but two or three potential hub locations which are accessible by public transport indicates that they intend to run each service quite differently and parents in Whitstable can reasonably be expected to travel to services in Herne Bay, Canterbury and Whitstable. The people they meet in these services will not be able to provide a coherent network of peer support in the way that would happen if you were meeting regularly with people who live closer to your own home.

The consultation considers change to be justified if 85% of the population can access the alternatively listed services within 30 minutes by public transport. However we believe that the unwillingness to guarantee 100% of people can access services is because people in areas of greater deprivation will disproportionately suffer.

The consultation suggests that parents using Joy Lane could reasonable be expected to travel to both Briary Children’s Centre (5.8miles away) and the Riverside Youth Centre (6.9 miles away). Parents accessing Swalecliffe Children’s Centre can be expected to travel to Riverside Youth Centre/Briary Children’s Centre (3 miles away).

The table below lists the 14 highest areas of deprivation in Whitstable as identified in the 2021 Census - output areas in which at least 40% of the population have [one measure of household deprivation](#). Using the tool [TravelTime](#) we identified a starting point within each area and plugged in the recommended alternate venues they may have to travel to outside of the town.

In 6 of the 14 areas residents were not able to travel to the recommended alternative provision listed below within the 30 minutes - not accounting for any delay in the bus or waiting time. We would thereby call on Kent County Council to guarantee that all services will remain in the town and parents will not be expected to travel outside of it.

Deprivation Output area	Starting Point	Ending Point	Within 30 minutes
E00122392	28 Ladysmith Grove, England, United Kingdom	Riverside Youth Centre/Briary Children’s Centre	No
E00122391	Ingle Nook, 5, Milner Road, Mariner’s View, Seasalter, Whitstable, Kent, England, CT5 4SH, United Kingdom	Riverside Youth Centre/Briary Children’s Centre	No
E00122393	45, Thistle Drive, Mariner’s View, Seasalter, Whitstable, Kent, England, CT5 4UL, United Kingdom	Riverside Youth Centre/Briary Children’s Centre	No
E00122401	Glebe Way, Lower Island, Seasalter, Whitstable, Kent, England, CT5 4LW, United Kingdom	Riverside Youth Centre/Briary Children’s Centre	No
E00122159	Wicketts End, Thurston Park, Tankerton, Whitstable, Kent, England, CT5 1WD, United Kingdom	Riverside Youth Centre/Briary Children’s Centre	No
E00122165	20, Gordon Road, Lower Island, Seasalter, Whitstable, Kent, England, CT5 4NF, United Kingdom	Riverside Youth Centre/Briary Children’s Centre	Yes
E00122161	7,9, Hillview Road, Thurston Park, Tankerton, Canterbury, Kent, England, CT5 4HX, United Kingdom	Riverside Youth Centre/Briary Children’s Centre	Yes

E00122135	Rayham Road, South Street, Whitstable, Kent, England, CT5 3DZ, United Kingdom	Poppy Children's Centre	Yes
E00122146	Ham Shades Lane, Church Street, Tankerton, Canterbury, Kent, England, CT5 1UJ, United Kingdom	Poppy Children's Centre	No
E00122427	St. Swithins Road, South Tankerton, Tankerton, Whitstable, Kent, England, CT5 2HT, United Kingdom	Poppy Children's Centre	Yes
E00122434	Swalecliffe Community Primary School, Bridgefield Road, South Tankerton, Swalecliffe, Canterbury, Kent, England, CT5 2PH, United Kingdom	Poppy Children's Centre	Yes
E00122155	The Leas, Chestfield, Swalecliffe, Canterbury, Kent, England, CT5 3JX, United Kingdom	Poppy Children's Centre	Yes
E00122151	Maydowns Road, Chestfield, Swalecliffe, Canterbury, Kent, England, CT5 3LW, United Kingdom	Poppy Children's Centre	Yes
E00122137	Kite Farm, Studd Hill, Swalecliffe, Canterbury, Kent, England, CT5 2PB, United Kingdom	Poppy Children's Centre	Yes

In March, Kent County Council's Children and Young People's Education Cabinet Committee received an [Equality Impact Assessment](#) specifically on access to the Start for Life Outreach service. It indicated that people accessing Swalecliffe Children's Centre could access the outreach team at Sturry Surgery. However we contend that people living the last seven output areas in the earlier table cannot reach this location within 30 minutes on a bus.

If Kent County Council continue to encourage people to travel by public transport we believe attendance will drop. Our survey shows that only 4% of parents believe it is reasonable to travel 30 minutes or more and only 2% of parents currently use public transport to get to centres.

85% believe that how long they have to travel will affect their willingness to use the service. 97% of people believed that centres should be located less than 30 minutes walk from their home.

60% of parents we asked preferred to walk to services, noting that buses in our area were expensive (an average return fare from Whitstable to Canterbury cost up to £7 last year). If services were moved we believe that parents would be more likely to drive and as such face high car parking charges.

Buses are notoriously difficult to navigate with a push chair, many of our parents highlighting how they had frequently had to catch the next bus because disabled or elderly passengers were in the space priority groups such as people with small children.

### 3. The model for family hubs

This public consultation looks a foregone conclusion when Kent County Council have passed a budget including the proposed savings and the model for family hubs is less than clear. Whilst we

welcome the opportunity for service to remain in town we believe that locating services within primary schools has benefit.

[A 2018 paper on the role of of Children's Centres](#) highlights that originally children's centres were not just located within schools because of the infrastructure already existed, but because they provided a way to deliver services with minimal disruption and social stigma to parents. 71% of those we surveyed said that locating services at primary schools was either very important or important in their decision to use them.

Nowhere in this paper is it even considered that the youth centre may be a more appropriate place to close and have a higher book value for potential sale. There is little consideration for the suitability of any of the particular sites for the proposed task.

Whilst we appreciate that the youth centres activities are predominantly during the evening there has been little consideration for how co-location will work in the summer holidays or affect professionals ability to utilise the youth centre for multi disciplinary meetings during the day.

1 in 3 of our parents said that they would be less willing to use a service used by teenagers.

## **Summary**

In summary we believe that the proposal to create a family hub will likely reduce people's willingness to use services who prefer that they are at a neighbourhood level, a short walk away.

We believe that the lack of assurances as to what will be provided in Whitstable are deeply worrying and that the idea that people may have to travel by bus up to half an hour disproportionately affects deprived communities, especially the Lucerne Drive Estate.

We believe that people are largely unwilling to use public transport and travel as far as is proposed.

We have entered into this consultation in a pragmatic way and would encourage the council to do similarly by:

- publishing details of the unsuitability of co-locating services on existing sites
- explaining why they would not consider a hubs and spokes model by which at least some services could be provided on an outreach basis at community services (St Andrews Church, The Lucerne Neighbourhood Centre)
- guaranteeing all services will be provided in the town and that parents won't be expected to travel to Canterbury and Herne Bay.

Finally we implore you to put mothers before money and invest in services post pandemic; we believe our town will be a more the worse for the proposed changes.

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