



25th September 2013

Mr M Fallon MP
House of Commons
London

Dear Mr Fallon

KCC Consultation on the future of Children's Services – effect on Westerham

You will no doubt be aware of the current Kent County Council consultation on the future of Children's services within the county. Against a background of budget and central government cuts, Kent is seeking to make savings of £1.5m (current figure) from their Children's services costs.

The full consultation document is at

http://www.kent.gov.uk/education_and_learning/childcare_and_early_education/childrens_centres/shaping_the_future_of_centres.aspx. However the key sections relating to Westerham read:

'Merry-go-round is proposed for closure: the rationale given is:

'•Merry-Go Round Children's Centre serves an area where smaller numbers of children and families need early support services. The majority of Centre users also attend another Children's Centre. Merry-Go Round Children's Centre is near Westerham Library. The library will be used to support families to access services.'

There has been considerable concern in the town over this proposal (see attached press articles and link to Westerham's website <http://www.visitwesterham.org.uk/>) Both Westerham's full Town Council and its Youth and Community Committee have discussed this in detail. Their conclusion is that they will respond opposing the proposal to close Merry-go-Round.

In writing to you we ask for your support in this response, you will doubtless be aware that several of your conservative MP colleagues have already expressed their opposition to KCC's proposal, and hope that you will join them in persuading KCC to alter their view.

The grounds for opposing the proposal which Westerham Town Council will be putting forward are:

- 1. The proposal to close Westerham Children's Centre deprives those in**

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greatest need, and with least ability to access alternative services, of services aimed at the most vulnerable, children below the age of 5

2. It is based on aggregated data for the entire catchment area of Merry-go Round, and ignores the fact that within a comparatively affluent area, there is an area in the heart of Westerham (Sevenoaks LSOA 013E) of deprivation.
3. Within that area, 14% of children are assessed as living in poverty, a level higher than the average for Sevenoaks DC (12%) 145 children (29%) are in workless families. This compares with a Sevenoaks DC average of 24% and a KCC average of 25.7% 100 of these children are in lone parent families. (source ONS, Ward profile Aug 2013)

Although the Westerham and Crockham Hill ward as a whole falls within the 20% least deprived areas of the country, LSOA 013 falls between the 20th and 40th percentiles of **most** deprived areas in England.

4. While there is an exhaustive impact assessment of the effects of closing Westerham Children's Centre, it fails to include an assessment of the impact on those who have no access to transport. 10% of households in Westerham and Crockham Hill have no access to car or van, rising to 15% in the LSOA 013E Anecdotally we understand that of the families who attend the Children's Centre in Westerham a high proportion do so because they have no transport. This is especially significant in an area poorly served by public transport. Any thought that those currently using Westerham Children's Centre can easily access services provided elsewhere is unrealistic. (source Census 2011)
5. Any proposal to increase the use of the library would need to address the fact that 74% of Children's Centre attenders are non-library members, and would also have to take into account the physical limitation of Westerham library, which is a small single story multi use 1930's building. The future of the library service is already the subject of a separate KCC consultation. (source: supporting information to KCC Children's Centre consultation document. July 2013)
6. It is concerning to see that volume by numbers rather than by need has been used as a criterion for the proposal to close Westerham Children's Centre. In a rural area, where the total population is 4,500, large volumes are never likely to be generated. However, the need as demonstrated above is nonetheless there.
The rationale for closure states that 'the majority of users attend another Centre. On the figures provided, the 'minority' who use only Westerham's Centre represent 48% of total users (source: supporting information to KCC Children's Centre consultation document. July 2013)
7. The building from which Westerham Children's Centre operates its major

sessions is not owned by KCC. Rooms are leased from Westerham Hall, an independent Charity, on a sessional basis. On enquiry as to what 'closure' meant, WTC received the response that 'the closure of a building does not mean the loss of services' (Letter from Jenny Whittle, Cabinet Member for Specialist Children's Services). WTC fails to understand how this existing low cost option for the location of Children's Services can provide further savings, especially bearing in mind the restriction of the library.

8. While WTC would never oppose a proposal aiming to reduce management and administration costs while preserving front line services, it believes that Merry-go-Round in Westerham already operates on the 'hub and spoke' model recommended by the consultation document. All management and administration is provided by Merry-go-Round's parent organisation, Spring House, from their base in Sevenoaks, and it is hard to see how further significant savings can be made.

Overall WTC believes that KCC's proposal in respect of Westerham is open to challenge on the above grounds and on the grounds that it fails to meet the objectives of the review in that it

- **Does not protect services which improve health, education and social care to those who need it most**
- **It removes choice on which centre many users can access**
- **It removes support from those children and families who are the most vulnerable and in greatest need**
- **It significantly worsens access to a range of services for families.**

The Town Council is already aware of several other organisations within the town who are expressing their concern, and trust that you will be able to give these strongly held views your support.

Yours sincerely

Mrs Angela Howells
Town Clerk