

## **MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL**

### **RECORD OF DECISION OF THE EXECUTIVE**

Decision Made: 22 March 2023

#### **Response to Kent County Council's Community Services Consultation**

##### **Issue for Decision**

Kent County Council are consulting on proposals which will affect the way in which Community Services are delivered across districts in Kent.

The proposals affect Maidstone with the closure of two Children's Centres and the change in location for Adult Education.

The existing provisions for Public Health Services for Children and Families (which includes Family Hubs), Community Services for Adults with Learning Disabilities and Gateways will not change for Maidstone as part of these proposals.

In order to make a response to the consultation, the Policy, Engagement and Governance team have evaluated the proposals and their impact on Maidstone residents. An assessment has also been made of the consultation process and supporting data.

As a result, it has been determined that the impact on Maidstone has not been properly evaluated and a response should be made to ensure that Maidstone residents have the access they need to vital community support services.

The main areas that the consultation response seeks to respond to are:

- The impact on vulnerable residents in Marden & Yalding and East Ward
- The wider impact of the proposals on High Street and Shepway North wards (as a result of the closure of the two children's centres).

The consultation questionnaire is aimed at service users so there are limited questions the Council can respond to. It is therefore proposed that the consultation be responded to via email letter which is also permitted. The consultation response will be structured around the consultation questionnaire questions and the Council's concerns are substantiated with data from the 2021 Census and health inequalities data.

##### **Decision Made**

That the amended response to Kent County Council's Community Services Consultation, published as an urgent update to the report, be approved and be submitted on behalf of the Council.

## **Reasons for Decision**

- 1.1 A Community Services Consultation is being undertaken by Kent County Council. It proposes changes to the way it uses its buildings to deliver some community services.
- 1.2 The reasons, outlined in the consultation documents by KCC, for the proposed changes are to:
- Tackle the rising costs of maintaining its many buildings
  - To find savings to balance its budget
  - Reduce its carbon footprint to achieve NetZero
- Whilst ensuring effective support for residents who need its services.
- 1.3 Services that will be affected in Kent are:
- Children’s Centres and Youth Hubs
  - Public Health Services for Children and Families
  - Community Services for Adults with Learning Disabilities
  - Community Learning and Skills (Adult Education)
  - Gateways
- 1.4 The proposals affect Maidstone with the closure of two Children’s Centres and the change in location for Adult Education (Community Learning and Skills).
- 1.5 In order to make a response to the consultation, the Communities, Insight and Governance team have evaluated the consultation proposals and their impact on Maidstone residents. An assessment has also been made of the consultation process and supporting data. Discussions have also been held with the Executive to develop the response led by the Lead Member for Communities and Public Engagement.

## **How the proposals affect Maidstone**

- 1.6 The table below summarises the impact of the changes for Maidstone. Two ‘service types’ will be affected in Maidstone; Children’s Centres and Youth Hubs and Community Learning and skills Adult Education. There are no other changes proposed to the remaining provisions in Maidstone.

Service Types	Impact for Maidstone	Proposal
Children’s Centres and Youth Hubs	Proposed closure of 2 children’s centres – 1 in Marden and 1 in East ward	Nearest alternatives for East ward - Sunshine Children’s Centre (1.6 miles away) - Greenfields Children’s Centre (2.4 miles away)  Nearest alternatives Proposed Community Hub at Cranbrook Library (7.4 miles away in Tunbridge Wells)

		- Greenfields Children's Centre (8.1 miles away)
Public Health Services for Children and Families	No change	N/A
Community Services for Adults with Learning Disabilities	No change (current provision to remain at Maidstone House)	N/A
Community Learning and Skills (Adult Education)	Proposed move of Adult Education from Faith Street (High Street ward) to Oakwood House (Bridge)	Moving from a Town Centre location and an area of deprivation to a less accessible location
Gateways	No change	N/A

### **Closure of Children's Centres in Maidstone**

- 1.7 The Children's Centres that are proposed to close are in Marden & Yalding and East Ward.

#### Marden Children's Centre

- 1.8 The alternative Children's Centre for Marden, as indicated in the consultation document, is Cranbrook Library or Greenfields in Shepway (North). However, the co-location of the Children's Centre in Cranbrook Library is not confirmed, therefore the confirmed alternative Children's Centre for Marden Residents is Greenfields in Shepway North.
- 1.9 We have evaluated the impact of the proposals on Marden residents in terms of actual journey times and options. This is outlined in our response (Appendix A). In summary the two alternative Children's Centres for Marden residents are not accessible by public transport. Journey times by bus and train to Cranbrook Library and Greenfields are unfeasible and walking the distance of 7.4 miles and 8.1 miles respectively is not an option.
- 1.10 We have been told anecdotally that Tonbridge Youth Hub could be an alternative for Marden residents as Tonbridge is accessible by train (22 minutes). However, further investigation has found that Marden station is completely inaccessible for buggies and pushchairs. Car journey times are 20 minutes for both Marden to Cranbrook and Marden to Greenfields.
- 1.11 However, whilst Marden as a whole, isn't an area of deprivation, there are areas which are significantly less affluent. The 2021 Census data tells us that there is significant, growing need in the ward for the affected demographic. This information is detailed at Appendix A and is missing from Kent County Council's Needs Assessment.

1.12 The proposals will have a detrimental effect on the most vulnerable, for example, non-drivers in Marden & Yalding will no longer have access to a children's centre. This will have an immediate and longer-term effect on the children and families.

#### East Borough Children's Centre

1.13 The alternative Children's Centre for East Borough users, as indicated in the consultation document is Sunshine Children's Centre which is an approximate 27-minute walk from East Borough Children's Centre. The other alternative is Greenfields in Shepway which is an approximate 45 to 48-minute walk from East Borough Children's centre.

1.14 Whilst both alternative options for East Borough users are more accessible in terms of transport links than Marden, the change is significant.

1.15 An issue that needs to be highlighted regarding East Borough Children's Centre and has been overlooked in the consultation is East Borough's location on the periphery of High Street Ward. Its users are not going to be geographically ringfenced to East Ward. Its service users are most likely are mostly to come from High Street ward which is the highest deprived ward in Maidstone borough with significant and growing need in the demographic affected by the proposals.

#### Impact on areas of deprivation – High Street Ward and Shepway North

1.16 Greenfields's Children Centre is identified in the proposals as an alternative Children's Centre for both users of Marden and East Borough Children's Centres. Greenfield's is located in Shepway (North), one of the top three deprived Lower Super Output (LSO) areas in Maidstone.

1.17 Sunshine Children's Centre is identified as the primary alternative for users of East Borough's Children's Centre. Sunshine Children's Centre is located in High Street Ward which is the most deprived LSO area in Maidstone.

1.18 The existing need and cumulative impact of the proposals on residents in High Street Ward and Shepway North does not appear to have been considered.

#### **Community Learning and Skills (Adult Education) – Impact of proposals**

1.19 Community Learning and Skills (Adult Education) is to be relocated from High Street Ward to Bridge Ward as part of the proposals.

1.20 The current location in High Street ward is served well by public transport. The new location can be reached by public transport but would be an additional journey/cost to High Street Ward residents. For users travelling into a central Town Centre location from other areas of the borough, the

additional journey cost could be prohibitive to them continuing to access the services.

### **Other Issues Identified/concerns**

1.21 The Consultation proposals also asks for comment on the following areas without explaining what this would mean for Maidstone (or other districts):

- Co-location of services
- Outreach
- The Family Hub model
- Accessing Service online

1.22 These areas are all mentioned as supporting the current proposals at some point in the future, but the consultation documents do not provide details on how these will be developed, nor does it provide a timeline. The draft consultation response identifies the Council's concerns that a decision that will have such a significant impact on residents in Maidstone is missing the next steps in terms of identifying alternative service provision and access to service.

1.23 An assessment of the consultation process has also been included (in the draft response) as the engagement events being held for Maidstone are both at Sessions House which isn't in line with the offer for other districts.

### **Recommendation - The Council's Response**

1.24 The impact of the proposals on Maidstone have not been properly evaluated and a response should be made to ensure that Maidstone residents have the access they need to vital community support services.

1.25 The main areas that the consultation response seeks to raise are:

- The impact on vulnerable residents in Marden & Yalding and East Ward
- The wider impact of the proposals on High Street and Shepway North wards (as a result of the closure of the two children's centres).

1.26 The Consultation Questionnaire is aimed at service users so there are limited questions the Council can respond to. It is therefore proposed that the consultation be responded to via email letter which is also permitted. The consultation response will be structured around the consultation questionnaire questions and the Council's concerns are substantiated with data from the 2021 Census and health inequalities data.

1.27 At its meeting on 14 March 2023 the Communities Housing and Environment Committee considered the proposed response and recommended a number of amendments to strengthen it:

*"The committee expressed support for the comments made by the Visiting*

*Members, emphasising the points raised, including: the proposals would reduce KCC's carbon footprint, but would increase Kent's carbon footprint as the number of journeys to the alternative sites proposed would increase; the significant costs, increased travel time and unreliability associated with using public transport to access the proposed alternative sites; the lack of and increased age of the data accompanying the proposals and the detrimental impacts that would be experienced by vulnerable individuals and families, particularly in areas of deprivation, through moving the facilities."*

These changes have been incorporated into the amended urgent document attached to the report on the Executive agenda and approved for submission.

### **Alternatives considered and why rejected**

Available options were:

1. That the consultation be responded to as at the amended urgent update attached to the report;
2. That no response be made to the consultation; or
3. To make an alternative response which may include the addition of further points to include in the consultation response.

The preferred option is as set out in the decision above.

### **Background Papers**

None

I have read and approved the above decision for the reasons (including possible alternative options rejected) as set out above.



Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Leader of the Council

Full details of both the report for the decision taken above and any consideration by the relevant Policy Advisory Committee can be found at the following area of the [website](#)

Call-In: This decision is urgent as the consultation closes on 26 March and the response approved in this decision needs to be submitted immediately. It is therefore not subject to call-in (and meets the requirements of Part C3 Rule 7).