

Response to Kent County Council's Community Services Consultation

| Timetable | |
|---|---------------|
| Meeting | Date |
| Communities Housing and Environment Policy Advisory Committee | 14 March 2023 |
| Executive | 22 March 2023 |

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|---------------------------------------|--|
| Will this be a Key Decision? | No |
| Urgency | Urgent The deadline for the consultation is 26 March 2023 and in order for Council to meet this deadline and make a response, the decision must be taken as urgent. |
| Final Decision-Maker | Executive |
| Lead Head of Service | Angela Woodhouse, Director of Strategy, Insight and Governance |
| Lead Officer and Report Author | Anna Collier, Information, Engagement and Governance Manager Orla Sweeney, Senior Policy and Communities Officer |
| Classification | Public |
| Wards affected | Marden & Yalding, Shepway North, East and High Street |

Executive Summary

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 (as shown at Appendix A).

Purpose of Report

To consider Council's draft response to Kent County Kent County Council's Community Services Consultation and any changes that may be required. Recommend to the Executive that the response be submitted s on behalf of the Council.

This report makes the following recommendations to the Executive

1. To consider the Council's draft response to Kent County Council's Community Services Consultation and approve the response to be submitted on behalf of the Council at Appendix A.

Response to Kent County Council's Community Services Consultation

1. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

| Issue | Implications | Sign-off |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|
| Impact on Corporate Priorities | We do not expect the recommendations will by themselves materially affect achievement of corporate priorities. However, they will support the Council's overall achievement of its aims in the delivery its strategic plan objectives. | Insight, Communities and Governance Manager |
| Cross Cutting Objectives | The report recommendations help deliver the achievement of cross cutting objectives: Health Inequalities are Addressed and Reduced and Deprivation and Social Mobility is Improved. | Insight, Communities and Governance Manager |
| Risk Management | Please refer to paragraph 5.1 of the report. | Insight, Communities and Governance Manager |
| Financial | There is no direct budgetary impact from the Kent County Council proposals described in this report. However, by reducing support for vulnerable families, they are likely to increase budgetary pressure on District Council services including homelessness. | Director of Finance, Resources and Business Improvement |
| Staffing | We will deliver the recommendations with our current staffing. | Insight, Communities and Governance Manager |
| Legal | A failure to respond to the consultation which impacts on Maidstone residents could create reputational issues for the Council and could potentially limit any further steps the Council might wish to take. | Mid Kent Legal Services Interim Team Leader (Contentious and Corporate Governance) |
| Information Governance | The recommendations do not impact personal information (as defined in UK GDPR and Data Protection Act 2018) the Council processes. | Information Governance Officer |

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| Equalities | Whilst the decision isn't the Council's responding to this consultation would be acting in accordance with the Councils Equalities Objectives, in ensuring that the needs of our communities are considered. | Insight, Communities and Governance Manager |
| Public Health | We recognise that the recommendations will have a positive impact on population health or that of individuals. | Housing & Inclusion Team Leader |
| Crime and Disorder | No impact identified | Insight, Communities and Governance Manager |
| Procurement | No impact identified | Director of Strategy, Insight and Governance |
| Biodiversity and Climate Change | There are no implications on biodiversity and climate change. | Biodiversity and Climate Change Officer |

2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

2.1 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.

2.2 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

2.3 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

2.4 The proposals affect Maidstone with the closure of two Children's Centres and the change in location for Adult Education (Community Learning and Skills).

2.5 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

2.6 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

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

Marden Children's Centre

- 2.8 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.
- 2.9 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.
- 2.10 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.
- 2.11 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.
- 2.12 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

- 2.13 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.
- 2.14 Whilst both alternative options for East Borough users are more accessible in terms of transport links than Marden, the change is significant.
- 2.15 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

- 2.16 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.
- 2.17 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.
- 2.18 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

- 2.19 Community Learning and Skills (Adult Education) is to be relocated from High Street Ward to Bridge Ward as part of the proposals.
- 2.20 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

- 2.21 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
- 2.22 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.
- 2.23 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

2.24 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.

2.25 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).

2.26 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 (as shown at Appendix A).

3. AVAILABLE OPTIONS

3.1 That the consultation be responded to as at Appendix A.

3.2 That no response be made to the consultation.

3.3 To make an alternative response which may include the addition of further points to include in the consultation response.

4. PREFERRED OPTION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 The preferred option is outlined at 3.1 of this report, to respond to the consultation and highlight the significant and detrimental impact of the proposal on Maidstone residents and vulnerable groups in Maidstone. This is recommended based upon the findings of the assessment of the proposals and the insights provided by Census and Health Inequality data.

5. RISK

5.1 The Council has an opportunity to respond to Kent County Council's Community Services Consultation. The proposals will have a significant, detrimental impact on Maidstone residents and are likely to affect vulnerable groups in Maidstone's most deprived wards. Not taking this opportunity to respond to this could cause reputational damage to the Council.

6. CONSULTATION RESULTS AND PREVIOUS COMMITTEE FEEDBACK

6.1 This report is being considered by the Communities, Housing and Environment Committee on 14 March 2023 and their comments and recommendations will be reported to the Executive.

7. NEXT STEPS: COMMUNICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISION

7.1 The approved response will be submitted to KCC via email, as the deadline for consultation is the 26 March this will be taken as an urgent decision by the Executive as there will be insufficient time for call in.

8. REPORT APPENDICES

- Appendix A: Draft Response to Consultation
 - Appendix B: Consultation document Maidstone Design Handbook
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9. BACKGROUND PAPERS

See Appendix B