****

**Stratford-upon-Avon Town Council’s response to Warwickshire County Council’s consultation on Children’s Centres**

This issue was considered by Stratford-upon-Avon Town Council at its meeting on 25 July, 2017. There was unanimous condemnation for the proposal to close all the centres with the exception of one in the Stratford district, and it was also unanimously believed that if there is to be but one centre, this should be located in the main town for the area, which is Stratford-upon-Avon.

Detailed below, is the Minute from the meeting on 25 July, together with a precis of comments made by members that evening:

*41) Warwickshire County Council Children’s Centres Public Consultation*

*It was considered absolutely essential that the Town Council responded to WCC’s consultation on the closure of Children’s Centres in the district, and in particular, the potential closure of the Centre in Stratford-upon-Avon, with the Family Hub being retained in Alcester.*

*Every Member was asked to express their view on why Stratford should be retained, and these opinions will be captured in the Town Council’s response to the consultation.*

*In essence, the Town Council was not convinced that the reorganisation is in the best interest of children, but if inevitable, WCC should locate the Hub for the district of Stratford-on-Avon in line with geographic centrality. It was also considered that demographically, Stratford-upon-Avon, as the main town within the district, has the most effective public transport service, and is the most accessible location for those travelling from all the other affected locations.*

*The Mayor closed the debate stating that any further thoughts on this issue should be forwarded to the Town Clerk to assist in the compilation of a comprehensive and robust objection to the proposal to potentially retain the Hub in Alcester and close the Centres in Stratford-upon-Avon, Shipston, Clopton, Lighthorne Heath, Southam, and Wellsbourne.*

**Precis based on Members’ comments:**

With an ever growing population, going from twelve centres to one is a drastic step. There should be a happy medium. Perhaps we could manage with less than twelve in the Stratford district, but WCC needs to re-think their locations. So far, we have only been given one option to consider rather than a range of options. Do the statistics showing where people live match the current locations of these centres? What is the reason for siting the hub in Alcester when there is a central location which already has a population 4.4 times the size of Alcester, as demonstrated by the 2011 consensus?

Stratford-upon-Avon - 27,445

Southam - 6,567

Alcester - 6,273

Studley - 5,879

Wellesbourne - 5,849

Lighhorne Heath - 898

If there is no alternative for anything other than one centre, The Town Council unanimously believes that the central hub has to be based in Stratford-upon-Avon, on grounds of the size of the population and the geographic centrality. Alcester has fewer new housing proposals than elsewhere in the district. Demographically, the hub should be in central Stratford-upon-Avon, or even Wellesbourne which is also faced with significant housing development. In terms of the current population and the projected growth in housing developments, siting it in Alcester is completely the wrong side of the district.

The town of Stratford-upon-Avon has the most effective public transport

service, and is the most accessible location for those travelling from all the other affected locations.People in Southam who want to get to a hub in Alcester will have to travel approximately 30 miles. Without their own transport, people are going to find it incredibly difficult to travel from Southam to Alcester – it would require getting a bus from Southam to Leamington Spa, then to Stratford-upon-Avon and then another bus from Stratford-upon-Avon to Alcester. Not ‘all roads lead to Rome’ but they certainly seem to be leading to Stratford-upon-Avon, so why not just let the bus stop here?

As it stands, the distances people would have to travel on public transport means that most probably, they are not going to use the Children’s Centres at all, and the people that need these centres the most, are probably the people who can least afford the travel costs. Even if a bus is available, will these run at times that will sync with the opening times of the hub, and can these bus services be relied upon in the future, or will these too be subject to cuts?

Children’s Centres are not just geared towards parenting projects but if the centres are closed, where do parents go to have their baby weighed? For those really struggling with parenthood, where will they receive reassurance and support, which is vital to an inexperienced or vulnerable parent? Without this support, which has been described by many as a ‘lifeline’, there will be an additional burden on the NHS with parents having to see a doctor for something that could have been so easily and quickly dealt with at a Children’s Centre. If this support is not available for children of an early age, their problems will become more apparent as they start their primary education and tackling these issues at a later stage will ultimately cost more to resource.

The support given at these centres by the CAB, the health and social care teams, which includes dealing with mental health issues, is of paramount importance. These vital services should remain in one central point. Many mothers come to the centres suffering from post-natal depression. Over time, there is a build-up of trust and personal support, and many of those who came in the first instance seeking help and support for themselves, go on to assist and mentor other people. That valuable peer support and trust will be totally lost.

It is understood that if the main hub is to be in Alcester, there will be district wide outreach posts, which will be located in community buildings such as church or parish halls and community centres. If a professional has to go out to a community centre in Shipston, for example, they will have to go from Alcester to Shipston via Stratford-upon-Avon, for what could be no more than a half an hour visit with a client. In terms of time and motion, this is a complete and utter waste of a counsellor’s valuable time.

Additionally, finding community venues for these outreach sessions will be problematical. Presumably the existing Children’s Centres premises will be sold? If that is the case, then alternative venues will need to be sought. Community venues are generally booked, and it is likely that there will never be a day when they are completely freely available for hire. Hiring a hall comes at a price, they are not free of charge so there will, no doubt, be a significant cost in providing such outreach facilities.

The strength of feeling by the community of Stratford-upon-Avon, who came together at Holy Trinity Parish Centre on Monday 24 July to hear WCC controversial plans, will no doubt be replicated at all the other consultation meetings held in the affected areas across the district. The Town Council fully supports these residents and anxious parents in their quest to prevent wholesale closure, and would urge WCC to ‘think again’ and retain more than just one ‘lifeline’ centre in the district. In the event that saving money has to prevail, then site the hub centrally in Stratford-upon-Avon for the good of the locality as a whole.

Sarah Summers

Town Clerk

**Stratford-upon-Avon Town Council**

3.8.17