

Early Help Call In – A District Councillors perspective

Consultation

The Children's Centre in Micklefield has effectively already been closed for several months without any consultation. There are no council commissioned services operating there other than an infrequent volunteer led support group for breast feeding. The phone line has been cut off.

As one of the two District Councillors for Micklefield we have received no notification of changes to services there. We had membership of the Advisory Board but this disbanded when the contract was awarded to Action for Children from Barnados. This has had a significant negative impact with how the Children's Centre connects with the wider community. The Advisory Board meetings were a focal point for multi-agency and cross partner working.

As District Councillors we had no prior notification that the Consultation was to take place and we have had no correspondence from officers to seek information or views on how service changes may impact on the Micklefield community. Our County Councillor expressed concerns to us after a change in the Consultation on 4th September 2017.

Deprivation in Micklefield and East Wycombe

Micklefield is one of the two most deprived areas in Buckinghamshire according to the data in the Strategy. These two areas are the only ones in IDACI decile 2. The neighbouring area of Totteridge is in decile 3.

The Strategy repeatedly states that the proposed Early Help Service will focus on prioritising resources to the areas of greatest need. The strategy identifies a range of factors which might indicate a greater need for Early Help provision including crime, school attendance, employment, health, child poverty and obesity. All of these are significantly worse in the East Wycombe wards of Micklefield, Totteridge, Bowerdean and Ryemead. (Refer to attached statistics)

To conclude that no hub should be placed in this locality, where there is a clear spike in all indicators of deprivation, is unjustifiable even against the Strategies own criteria. There are no details whatsoever as to how a streamlined Early Help Service would deliver services or engage with the deprived communities of East Wycombe despite this apparently being a priority.

The Strategy also identifies the voluntary sector as being a key partner within the proposed new service. Less deprived areas have a much greater prevalence of voluntary and charitable organisations. In a 2011 study from Southampton University it was noted that areas of deprivation have a significantly lower level of volunteering and social capital and concluded that policies based on self-help would be unlikely to succeed. There has been an historical difficulty in recruiting volunteers in a number of organisations in East Wycombe. In Micklefield the only voluntary run parents and toddlers group closed several years ago due to a lack of volunteer support and there is no volunteer led youth provision. Micklefield Library has never been able to sustain a volunteer staffing approach despite their being considerable support in the

community for the facility. The Eastside Youth Club in Totteridge is at risk from lack of volunteers.

The Strategy refers to these voluntary run groups as being “free or low cost”. The reality is that there is considerable cost to the organisations running these services both financially but also in time and skills often. These resources are often not readily available in more deprived communities and voluntary run activities can be precarious and quickly become unsustainable.

Oxfordshire County Council put £1 million on the table for the voluntary sector when it closed Children’s Centres.

<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/generic/tsrc/documents/tsrc/reports/PatternsOfSocCap-Article.pdf>

The need for a Children’s Centre in East Wycombe

It is imperative that we retain a Children’s Centre in East Wycombe. As outlined above there is a concentrated area of deprivation in East Wycombe, particularly in Micklefield.

Public transport connections across High Wycombe are not good with many journeys through the town centre requiring a change of bus. This would mean that Early Help staff members would be dependent on a car for community outreach and their work impacted by the frequent congestion on Wycombe’s roads. The amount of time taken travelling would need to be considered when planning the size of the workforce.

The cost of public transport is high at £3.70 for a day ticket. Many buses are still not accessible for pushchairs or have limited space. Services within walking distance are surely more preferable.

Hampden Way is an established and well used centre which is within easy reach to residents of both Micklefield and Totteridge. It is a modern facility with level access and has all the necessary facilities for pre-school children.

The Children’s Centre building at Ash Hill Primary School is inadequate as it is a temporary building which is approaching the end of its useful life. The school would be prepared to provide the space for a new facility on the site.

Particularly in Micklefield there is a lack of good facilities for services for young children. Micklefield Library is probably the best but can only accommodate small groups. St Peter’s Church has some baby change facilities but is simply a large hall so gives no opportunities for privacy. Another venue is booked up with older adult services. A community café exists but is small and would offer no privacy for unexpected disclosures and sensitive work.