

Romsey Mill Trust

Formal Response to Cambridgeshire County Council's Consultation on Children's Centres

The views expressed in this letter are the formal response of Romsey Mill Trust on the outline proposals in the Children's Centre Consultation Document, and as such Romsey Mill's Board of Trustees and Leadership & Management team ask that they would be taken into account in determining next steps in the Children Centre Consultation process.

Romsey Mill Trust agrees with some of the principles articulated in the Children Centre Consultation

- We agree that it is important "to make the most effective use of our available resources" (page 3 of consultation document).
- We concur that services need to be continually improved so that they are "the most efficient and have the biggest impact on improving the lives of Children, Families and Communities across the County." (page 5 of consultation document)
- We agree that it is important "to meet the needs of our most vulnerable families by ensuring our services are targeted at those in greatest need" (page 3 of consultation document).
- We subscribe with the approach that "puts 'family friendly' at the heart of service changes (from online Frequently Asked Questions document).
- We are supportive of the proposal to extend the age range of children engaging the facilities and services currently provided within Children's Centres, recognising the need for suitably trained and experienced staff and appropriate differentiation in engagement and delivery to support those age groups.

Financial Pressures, Early Intervention, Escalating Social Care Costs

We recognise the financial pressure that Cambridgeshire County Council, like all authorities, is under due to reductions in central grant funding from the Government. Recent Local Government Association analysis (9th August)¹ shows that government funding for the Early Intervention Grant has been cut by almost £500 million since 2013, and is projected to drop by a further £183 million by 2020 - representing a 40 per cent reduction by the end of the decade. Romsey Mill understands that without this funding, councils have found it increasingly difficult to invest in the early help services that can prevent children entering the social care system, and help to manage needs within families to avoid them escalating.

However, Cambridgeshire County Council can still take the decision to continue to invest in Children's Centres at the same level or higher, as Local Authorities in other parts of the country are doing, by allocating money from another budget. The July Finance & Performance Report to the Children & Young People's Committee confirms the GPC decision to allocate additional demography funding of £2.913m to the LAC Placement budget to off-

¹ <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/childrens-social-care-breaking-point-council-leaders-warn>

set the huge overspend.² Why can't some funding in the Demography and Demand budget be allocated to Children's Centres?

Romsey Mill Trust thinks that a significant contributing factor behind the unprecedented surge in demand and cost for children's social care support over recent years is the cuts to preventative services beginning as far back as 2011. It is a false economy to take further funding out of the early intervention work of Children's Centres as it carries the high risk that costs of Social Care and LAC will escalate further year-on-year.

Romsey Mill Trust thinks that the consultation process has been imbalanced and that the consultation documents lack vital information

Under United Kingdom Supreme Court judgement, a fair consultation must:

- take place while the proposals being consulted on are at a "formative stage";
- give sufficient reasons for any proposal to allow for intelligent consideration and response;
- allow adequate time for consideration and response;
- ensure that the "product" of the consultation is "conscientiously taken into account" in finalising the proposals.

Romsey Mill Trust is concerned that some of the proposals being consulted on are already beyond the "formative stage". For example, it is being proposed that current Children's Centre Services provided from Romsey Mill Centre close and a Child & Family Zone is located at Brookfields (potential shared building with health). Signage erected at the Brookfields site seems to indicate that this proposal has moved beyond a formative stage. Why haven't Cambridgeshire County Council offered any alternative locations for Child & Family zones in the consultation document?

The level of pre-consultation discussion with existing Children's Centre staff and delivery partners was substantially lacking. Prior to the public launch of the consultation document, no one from the County Council had spoken with Romsey Mill Trust to enquire about the impact we think the proposals could have on the families we work with and services we provide.

The lack of any financial facts and figures or details on level of service and staffing being offered through new Child and Family Centres/Zones/Outreach /Online, means that there is insufficient information to allow for meaningful consideration and response to proposals. The timing of the consultation during the summer holiday period did not allow adequate opportunity to engage families for consideration and response especially as a large number of centres are located within schools which were closed during the summer.

The full consultation document and district level documents are misleading in the way they represent information about the 'redesignation' of certain Children's Centres - the diagrams in the consultation document indicate that those existing Children's Centre buildings not being identified as bases for new centre/zone services are still added in as part of the proposed offer.

²<https://cmis.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/ccclive/Meetings/tabid/70/ctl/ViewMeetingPublic/mid/397/Meeting/630/Committee/4/SelectedTab/Documents/Default.aspx> accessed on 20th September 2017.

The district level consultation documents are very misleading in not mentioning at all the cuts in funding that the proposals are predicated on.

Parents who are currently using Children's Centre services and other members of the public have voiced their concern that the structure of the online questionnaire and composition of the questions lead people to unintentionally supporting the full proposal, whilst the specific plans for each district only has one question. As a result, Romsey Mill Trust is concerned that the County Council may not receive the quality of responses needed to effectively inform major changes to service provision.

Focusing services on those families that need them most whilst nurturing community resilience

One of the consultation questions asks 'To what degree do you support the proposal to focus services on those families that need them most?' However, nowhere in the document is there any explanation of levels of 'need' or thresholds/stages of intervention.

As there is no detail of current and future service delivery including levels of needs met and range and number of activities provided it is not possible to make any comparison of level of need and positive impact in the proposed configuration.

The benefits of Children's Centre services supporting families from a range of situations and circumstances and providing a positive place to grow community resilience amongst families are totally lost in these proposals. Cambridgeshire County Council published a strategy on early intervention and community resilience in 2015/16. Romsey Mill Trust thinks that the proposals in this consultation to reduce the total centre/zones to the number indicated runs counter to this strategy as it underestimates the importance of physical meeting spaces as contexts for growing community resilience.

Health services and Child and Family services

The consultation asks – 'How important is it to have health services in the same place as your Child and Family services?'

- Health services are already being delivered from Children's Centres i.e. in the same place/building as child and family services. This includes antenatal sessions with midwives, child / baby clinics with health visitors, linking with mental health workers, which are already being delivered from Romsey Mill Centre and Cherry Hinton Children's Centre alongside parenting courses, new parent groups, stay & play sessions, pre-school care and adult education etc.
- The consultation document contains no information about the new health services to be delivered from the Child & Family Centres/Zones, so we do not know whether the proposals offer anything different from/additional to what is currently being delivered from Children's Centres and working well for families.
- The ethos and culture of a building/centre is very important and some families are put-off accessing certain places when they seem too 'statutory' or are perceived to be places that only support those families with specific problems. For this reason, we think

Brookfields may be an inappropriate location for a Child & Family Zone when compared with a building like Romsey Mill Centre, which has proved to be an effective community child and family centre linking closely with health and early years care and education provision.

To what degree does Romsey Mill Trust support our proposals for Cambridge City & South Cambridgeshire?

- As already stated, the diagrams in the consultation document are misleading. Re-designation of Romsey Mill and Cherry Hinton Children’s Centre, and others, may well mean closure of existing Children’s Centre services at these sites – but this is being portrayed as a positive in the documentation.
- Romsey Mill Trust has significant experience of operating as an effective child and family centre, but the proposal is to close integrated delivery of services at Romsey Mill Centre in favour of a new site at Brookfields – less than a quarter of a mile away. No rationale has been provided for this in the consultation document. The discussion paper from the Children’s Commissioner for England on Family Hubs states “The ideal family hub should be a friendly, accessible, community-based hub from which to be sign-posted to the most appropriate services. At the core of a Family Hub is its all-encompassing, community-based nature and as such there is great potential for a wide range of provision”.³ This describes very well the current offer from Romsey Mill Centre.
- The data on numbers of families regularly attending a full range of activities at Romsey Mill and Cherry Hinton Centres and benefiting from family support through outreach and home visiting strongly demonstrates the effectiveness of the centre and staff and yet the future of Romsey Mill Trust’s experienced and highly valued team of family workers is at best uncertain, and seemingly threatened, under these proposals.
- Page 14 of the data briefing confirms that high numbers of families experiencing deprivation currently exist within Romsey Mill Children’s Centre reach area and Cherry Hinton Children’s Centre reach area. With new housing developments planned for the Ridgeons site on Cromwell Road and the old Mill Road Depot this is only likely to increase need in the south city.
- There is no assessment of the suitability of the library in Cherry Hinton as a location for providing an alternative venue for proposed services for families.
- Given the above points we think that the current proposals for Children’s Centre Services in South city need to be revisited with alternative, more robust, proposals put forward.
- We strongly disagree with the high number of Children Centres proposed for re-designation (closure of Children Centre services) in South Cambridgeshire. Children’s Centre buildings serve as vital hubs, where families connect, engage and then community resilience is nurtured. Outreach Programme venues will not provide the same effective opportunity for family connection, engagement and growth because they are not settled sites.

³ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Family-Hubs-A-Discussion-Paper-2016.pdf> page 7.

Costs unaccounted for in the proposals

The consultation document doesn't mention the 'Young Parents Support Contract' that Romsey Mill Trust has with Cambridgeshire County Council through the Children's Centres in City and South Cambs. These Children's Centres part fund the work with Romsey Mill Trust drawing in over £70k of additional funding to add significant value to the County Council contract. We can only assume that there is a risk to the future funding of this work to support vulnerable teenage parents and their children.

It is remiss of the County Council that they have not engaged with Romsey Mill Trust about this service prior to consultation launch, as the non-continuation of this contract would leave many teenage parents unsupported in the immediate/short-term and cost the County Council considerably more money as needs and problems escalate. A sudden end to this contract would result in immediate impact on other public services, and increased costs to the public purse.

Romsey Mill Trust thinks that cutting further funding from Children's Centre preventative and early intervention services for children and families in Cambridgeshire is short sighted and detrimental to the wellbeing of communities. What are the real life costs of these proposals? There is no acknowledgement of these in the consultation document. The costs of likely additional referrals to social care, mental health services, counselling, etc, because of the withdrawal of early intervention support, will quickly become greater than the 'savings' made from closing Children's Centre services.

Conclusion

With the serious limitations and omissions of the consultation process and documentation to date, including the lack of financial information, the absence of any clear link between the data set and proposals put forward, and the non-existence of any comparative analysis of future service offer (and cost) to current services being delivered, Romsey Mill Trust would recommend that the Children & Young People's Committee of Cambridgeshire County Council, should direct officers to initiate further discussions with existing partners and providers ahead of a new public consultation being launched on the future of Early Intervention Child and Family Services.

21st September 2017