

Children's Centres and Family Hubs Community Consultation

Healthwatch Birmingham and Solihull welcome the opportunity to respond to Birmingham City Council's consultation: Your Input, Our Future: Children's Centres and Family Hubs Community Consultation Survey. Our key role is to make sure that patients, the public, service users, and carers are at the heart of service improvement in health and social care. In line with our role, we have focused our comments on:

- Ensuring that the public are equipped to make informed decisions regarding changes to children's services in their communities
- Ensuring that the views captured as part of the consultation process are representative of the people who currently utilise these services

Consultation process

Whilst we are pleased to see that this consultation is taking place through both online and in person engagement, we have several concerns relating to the implementation of the feedback collection process. The first of these concerns relates to the late upload of the supporting documents included as part of this consultation. Whilst we are pleased to see that the online response deadline was extended to reflect this delay, we are concerned that this will impact the quality of discussions that have been possible at the drop-in sessions. Social media posts shared by the affected centres themselves were also not clear that the consultation taking place relates to the potential repurposing of these venues. This may have led people to ignore these drop-in sessions only to realise that these changes have a more significant impact than they thought. Information regarding the purpose of this consultation should have been made clearly available online well in advance of the first drop-in session taking place for people to properly understand how these changes are likely to impact them and adequately prepare questions and concerns. Each centre only offering drop-in sessions on one specific date may also be limiting the number of people who are able to share their concerns regarding these changes. People who rely on these centres are likely to have commitments which may limit them from being able to attend these sessions and have a back-and-forth discussion regarding the changes. We also note that Public Health interventions are currently being delivered by these centres which are being actively promoted to families through



ongoing campaigns encouraging them to access these centres for the first time. It is therefore confusing to see that these services are being promoted at these venues whilst changes are being proposed to their continued function.

Supporting documentation

We are also concerned that the information provided within the supporting documents is not sufficient to enable the public to properly understand these changes and engage in informed conversations regarding them. Whilst the briefing documents state that services will be moved to family hubs and other local venues, details have not been provided regarding how exactly this will be supported or any planned dates of service change. If services are going to be unavailable for a long period of time during this transition, information should be provided regarding the interim support to families during this period. Further to this, we have concerns regarding the capability of these venues to provide these services due to funding limitations and issues with capacity more broadly. As stated in the briefing document, family hubs are funded separately to children's hubs and budgets have not yet been finalised. The brief is also not explicit regarding the changes to services within each specific centre which is being considered for repurposing. Changes to specific services may be more impactful to some communities than others. Therefore, specific changes should be clearly communicated on a per venue basis as part of this consultation process. We also feel that without clear information on how these services will function within these new venues and what the transition process will look like, the public are not properly informed to give feedback on the proposed changes and how they are likely to be impacted as a result. It is important to make clear at this stage how members of the public will be notified of changes to services so that they are able to plan ahead of time if it will cause significant disruption to their current way of accessing services.

Impact of proposed changes

We have several concerns regarding inequalities which are at risk of being deepened by the repurposing of these children's centres. We know from previous work that these centres have a significant impact on outcomes for children aged 1-5 years old. As such, a formal Health Impact Assessment should be undertaken alongside this engagement to fully understand the impact that these closures or



service changes may have on the communities that use them regularly. Work should also be done to consider the impact that past changes and closures have had on these communities to ensure that inequalities and long-term outcomes are not being worsened by these proposals.

We are concerned that the proposed changes may disproportionately impact the people of Hodge Hill compared with other communities across Birmingham. Hodge Hill has been identified as an area of increased deprivation, as displayed by the indices of multiple deprivation for Birmingham. By removing 2 children's centres within this area there is an increased risk of creating additional barriers to access for people with a higher level of deprivation. Currently there may be people within these communities who are only able to access these services as they are within walking distance. By moving these services to family hubs which may be further from their home, these people may no longer be able to access services which are known to be important for their child's long-term health due to associated travel costs. It is therefore essential that people are properly informed and engaged with regarding changes of venue and availability of transport and outreach assistance to fully understand the impact that this could have.

We look forward to understanding how this consultation process has shaped and influenced the council's decision-making and to seeing the ongoing engagement with the community and stakeholders as the project progresses into its implementation phase.

Yours Sincerely,

Adam Cooper
Project officer

