



Cabinet Member
Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council
Riverside House
Main Street
Rotherham
S60 1AE

Our Ref: SC4354

10 October 2018

Dear

Re: Implementation of the Early Help Strategy 2016-2019: 'Phase Two & Phase Three'

I am writing to you regarding the proposed implementation of phases two and three of the Council's Early Help Strategy. I understand that, following the recent publication of the report of the connected public consultation, the Council's cabinet is to vote on the proposals on 22nd October. As you may be aware, I submitted a response to the consultation stating my objections to the deregistration of two Sure Start children's centres within my constituency (Broom Valley Children's Centre and Park View Children's Centre), as well as the closure of Herringthorpe Youth Centre. I am contacting you ahead of the vote to restate my objections and to urge you to vote against the proposals.

I am concerned that further closures of children's centres in Rotherham would represent a step back in provision and in the council's ability to pursue early intervention and to appropriately support families, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. These closures would follow previous reductions in the number of both children's centres and youth centres as a result of ongoing reductions in council spending.

As you may be aware, the proposals are under consideration within a context of growing national concern at the loss of children's centres since 2010. Since that time, according to official figures more than 500 centres have closed. Figures collated by the Sutton Trust have suggested the number may be as high as 1,000 centres lost since 2010. Research by Barnardo's has found that funding for children's centres has halved from £1.2bn in 2010, to £0.6bn. This huge loss of both capacity and funding to early help has been widely discussed both in Parliament and in the national media. It is also worth noting that the introduction of Sure Start is one of the proudest

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achievements of the last Labour government and one that the current leadership of the party are highly supportive of.

It is therefore extremely disappointing that Rotherham is to pursue further closures.

In addition to providing valuable support to children and families in Rotherham, children's centres represent a crucial gateway to other council services, as well as direct, regular contact between families and staff who are both known to them and trusted by them. This allows staff to spot any changes that may indicate a problem early and to deliver appropriate support, which plays an important role in both safeguarding and child development.

The council's approach to early help focuses on a reduction of 'bricks and mortar' facilities and instead aims to deliver a more centralised service. I am concerned that this approach will inevitably erode the strong relationships between staff and families and that the trust that is so important to the delivery of services will be irretrievably lost. Furthermore, by removing a visible, permanent presence located within communities, the link between those communities and council services will be severed. I acknowledge that it is possible to provide some services on an outreach basis in community settings. However, given the wider loss of bricks and mortar facilities, such as community centres, I am concerned that communities may become increasingly distant from local authority services.

Children's centres as originally conceived were of course intended to provide every child with the proper start in life, whatever their background. Research has shown a six month developmental gap emerging between lower income toddlers and those with higher income by the age of two, whilst children from lower income families start school with skills five months behind those of their more affluent peers. There is a strong correlation between educational attainment at five and in later years. Early years services are vital in providing children the best possible start in life. As such, considerations of deprivation are hugely important in deciding on future provision. I am therefore troubled by the council's rationale in pursuing the closure of both Park View and Broom Valley Children's Centres. While neither site is amongst the most deprived areas of the Borough, both contain significant areas of deprivation. However, both also contain more affluent areas. I am concerned that the disparity between these areas may skew statistical analysis and lead to the real level of deprivation being underestimated.

In the case of Park View Children's Centre in particular, the proposals would leave a significant geographic gap in provision. Should the centre indeed be closed, there would be no centre in Keppel or Wingfield wards, with the remaining Central Children's Centre located to the east of Rotherham West Ward. This would in effect leave the western half of the Borough with no facility at all.

The proposals have been presented as an effort to improve efficiency and therefore to improve the service offered to families in the Borough. However, for the reasons



outlined above, I do not accept that they will do so. As such, I am forced to conclude that the proposals as they stand are driven by the need to reduce budgets. Whilst I do of course recognise the huge financial pressures placed on RMBC by central government spending decisions, I believe that seeking to reduce spending in this manner will ultimately be self-defeating. I am concerned that any reduction of the service currently provided will result in increased reliance upon statutory services, with cost increases potentially significantly higher than proposed savings. In summary, I believe that the proposals as outlined will lead to an erosion of existing service and the severing of a crucial link between RMBC and local communities.

I would therefore urge you to vote against these proposals.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'S' followed by a long, sweeping horizontal stroke.

Sarah Champion MP
Member of Parliament for Rotherham