

Seashells Commissioned Family Hub Petition Debate – Lead Petitioner Statement

KCC's proposals threaten the existence of Seashells. If KCC goes ahead then Seashells will no longer be a Family Hub from next April.

Together with the 1,100 consultation responses, and the 6,000 petition signatures, it's been made clear by children, families, professionals and residents that they oppose the proposal. Swale Borough Council Members are unanimous in calling on KCC not to cut funding to Kent's flagship centre, and the former Children's Commissioner Anne Longfield OBE, along with many others, has called upon KCC to reconsider.

Sheerness has more than 800 children in poverty, more than any other ward in Kent, but this wasn't considered in the consultation. As a true single point of support, Seashells provides and hosts 44 relevant Family Hub services, and reached 2,000 different children from across Sheppey in the last year. The proposal puts 34 of those services at risk. KCC proposes bringing just five in-house to sit alongside another five to be delivered from the Sheppey Gateway. There's no costed provision in the proposal to re-home seven key services delivered by partners from Seashells.

Seashells delivers the depth and breadth of service needed for the largest group of disadvantaged children in Kent. In 2023/24, the nine centres in Swale saw 2,793 different families. Seashells alone saw 1,869 (67%) of that total. It cost KCC £47 per client contact in Swale, compared to £10 per client contact for Seashells. KCC would need to spend £1.7m to sustain the same level of service in Swale if it delivers Seashells services in-house. This is £1m more than it proposes to spend in the district as a whole.

Seashells provides rooms free of charge for Health Visiting, Social Services and a range of partners. KCC's anticipated £100,000 annual saving would be lost or shunted to other KCC budgets:

- £80,000pa of room hire fees needed for those services currently delivering from Seashells free of charge, including Health Visiting and Social Services.
- £800,000pa of lost service delivery. The proposal would lead to a significant drop in service levels which would translate into significant but undefinable costs being shunted onto KCC CSC, schools and several other public sector services.
- £211,000pa retail food value, provided by us through free food boxes delivered to the Kent Family Hub network.

Despite the enormous need in Sheerness, Sheppey Gateway will become an outreach venue for services. The only remaining dedicated Family Hub left on the Isle of Sheppey will be nine miles away at Leysdown, itself earmarked for closure last year due to lack of usage by families.

Sheppey Gateway isn't a suitable alternative venue: It's not accessible for buggies; there's no dedicated parking; it's open plan, open access design gives rise to safeguarding concerns which have led to security guards being used on occasion, and relate to mobile phone use and children escaping onto a busy High Street; there's no outside space for play; limited hours of operation mean families won't be able to access the support they need when they need it.