

Call-in Request for Executive Decision 24/00093 - Future of Commissioned Services at Seashells and Millmead Family Hubs

Proposer: Ms Mel Dawkins

Seconder: Mr Barry Lewis

Reasons for calling in the decision:

Reason one: The decision is not in line with Council's Policy Framework.

This decision is not in accordance with the Council's primary Policy Framework, Securing Kent's Future, which states that the 'statutory Best Value duty must frame all financial, service and policy decisions, and services must pro-actively evidence the best value considerations in all decisions.' This decision's report mitigated data relating to service usage within Swale and Thanet, therefore not evidencing all best value considerations as the Best Value Duty is also concerned with 'efficiency and effectiveness.' ^(OBJ) Best value does not simply mean the cheapest option, it should also focus on maximising public benefit.

Through data provided by CYPE it is clear via footfall that Seashells and Millmead provide the best value to their local communities when compared to the alternative local Family Hubs. Between 1st April 2024 and 30th November 2024, Seashells reached 1,820 clients between 0 – 19 years old, totalling 25% more clients than the surrounding 6 Family Hubs in Swale combined. Within the same period, Millmead reached 731 clients of the same age range, whilst the surrounding 7 Family Hubs reached a combined number of clients of 729. Although the individual contracts for Seashells and Millmead are larger than the neighbouring Family Hubs, the data provided by CYPE, available in the table below, clearly demonstrates that the average cost per client, attendee, and session at Seashells and Millmead are significantly lower than the neighbouring Family Hubs. This demonstrates that, through resident popularity, Seashells and Millmead provide the best value to KCC financially and the best value to residents though the number of families reached.

Swale	Average cost per client per centre	Average cost per attendee per centre	Average cost per session per centre
Surrounding 6 Family Hubs	£666.98	£213.61	£1,829.52
Seashells	£117.58	£31.75	£547.31

Thanet	Average cost per client per centre	Average cost per attendee per centre	Average cost per session per centre
Surrounding 7 Family Hubs	£1,016.46	£349.53	£2,259.15
Millmead	£318.88	£128.86	£1,099.53

Furthermore, KCC has received significant community response to the proposed ceasing of funding for these services with the consultation, receiving 1,016 responses and the *Save our Seashells* petition receiving over 6,000 signatures, triggering a debate at Full Council. During this debate at Council, it was agreed by Members that the:

Council recognises that this petition represents significant local opinion regarding the proposed decision to not recommission Family Hub Services at Seashells and asks the Cabinet Member to take that into consideration in addition to the consultation report, and detailed financial analysis, before taking the decision.

As demonstrated above, the decision report fails to consider Best Value outside of contract value and fails to consider which Family Hub residents believe to provide Best Value to their community. The decision does not actively consider or demonstrate the other methods, such as footfall, which could be used to establish whether a service is providing, or even exceeding, its expected value. To add to this, although the Council agreed that the Cabinet Member should consider the significant local response demonstrated by the petition and consultation responses, this does not appear to have been considered within the Council's evaluation of best value. It is clear how important and valuable both Millmead and Seashells Family Hubs are to their respective local communities, and how effective their work is, yet the decision report fails to adequately take this into account under the statutory best value duty.

Reason two: The decision is not in accordance with the Council's Budget.

This decision is not in accordance with the Council's Budget as although the decision report states that through the ceasing of these individual contracts, the Council will save £426k annually, it does not consider any of the additional financial pressures KCC will incur as a consequence, contradicting the previously mentioned agreed motion for the Cabinet Member to provide a 'detailed financial analysis'. Moreover, the agreed Council budget in February 2024 did not include the ceasing of these commissioned services in Millmead and Seashells and instead stated that the focus would be on the delivery of the Government's Family Hub Programme and services would be 'developed in partnership with parents and young people', which is in contrary to this decision.

The average wage for a Family Hub Support Worker and Practitioner is £26,386, therefore the cost of an additional worker for Cliftonville, Northdown and Six Bells alone in Margate would be £79,157. Based on the figures provided earlier in this document, if those that currently attend Millmead Family Hub move to another Family Hub in Thanet this would create a service pressure that would require extra staff members to manage. Similarly, the surrounding Family Hubs in Swale will require additional staff members to manage the additional pressure these services will incur following the closure of Seashells. Following on from this, although it has been stated that infant feeding support for mothers will be provided for those who are impacted by this proposal, no clear plans regarding this additional support have been outlined. As the comparative services are not ready as demonstrated in the service offer comparison, this could lead to further inequality, pressures on other services and financial impacts to KCC.

Additionally, in response to the concerns expressed during the consultation period regarding the cost of travel being a barrier for those currently attending Millmead, KCC has offered to pay the bus ticket price for those unable to do so themselves. The decision report states that at Millmead, 1,449 clients attended a session in 2023/24 - if the same number of clients attended a session at another centre in Margate following Millmead's closure, this could cost KCC an additional £5,796 (based on a £4 ticket price), plus the administration fee of providing this refund.

Furthermore, an additional grant of £4.1m has recently been provided to KCC by central Government to 'continue delivery of a network of Family Hubs' and to deliver on the governments ambition 'to give all children the best start in life',¹ and could therefore be used to assist with funding this vital service to the local community and achieving the Council's ambitions as set out in the budget agreed in 2024. Should KCC require further detail on the purpose of this funding, this decision should be postponed until certainty can be provided to Members.

Reason three: Due consultation and the taking of professional advice from Officers and presumption in favour of openness.

As previously referenced, during Full Council on the 7th November 2024, the Council agreed that to make an appropriate decision, the Cabinet Member must have 'all of the information before her', which included 'Any of the unknowns that may come forward from government', along with the *Save our Seashells* petition, KCC consultation, the Full Council debate and discussion at CYPE Committee.² However, this information has not been presented in the covering report and associated information. This, as a result, does not provide assurance to the Council that the Cabinet Member has all the information before them to take an informed and transparent decision.

Furthermore, the record of this County Council discussion and proposal is missing from the record of decision, along with its associated request. A brief statement is made in the report to the CYPE Cabinet Committee discussion, but comparison of the paperwork presented on the financial assessments shows no material difference between the Proposed Record of Decision, the Cabinet Committee Report, and the final Record of Decision (ROD) paperwork. It is understood that further financial assessments are available but have not been presented to Members and may require further transparent scrutiny to ensure that the Cabinet Member is informed and that they are taking the decision in line with the constitutional principles of decision-making.

Reason four: The decision is not taken in accordance with the legal arrangements in Section 12 of the constitution:

During the discussions at CYPE Cabinet Committee, the Cabinet Member agreed to review any legal advice in relation to a further extension of contracts to provide greater clarity on this option. However, any advice or reasoning established has not been provided to Members, other than through very minimal reference within the ROD which states, 'it is not possible for KCC to unilaterally extend the current contracts as there is no power to do so.' This is an incomplete statement, which provides no further clarification or reasoning for Members other than a reference to 'no power.' Numerous contracts across KCC Directorates have had extensions in the past,

¹ HM Treasury (2024), *Autumn Budget 2024 – Fixing Foundations to Deliver Change*, pg. 84.

² Kent County Council (2024), *County Council Minutes*. Available at: [Printed Minutes 7th-Nov-2024, County Council](#)

therefore the exact limitations in relation to this contract must be detailed to Members, and shared if possible, to allow for transparency and demonstrate informed decision making.

Reason five: Explanation of the options considered and giving reasons for decisions.

Following on from the concerns discussed above, this call-in seeks further information and clarification on the below queries and asks that these be provided in writing to explain the options considered and the reasoning behind this:

- Complete funding plans and analysis which details the cost of service delivered at the proposed new family hubs for the number of service users at Seashells and Millmead, including the capital spend to make the buildings fit for purpose.
- Full disclosure regarding the existing contracts and contract extension requirements.
- Full details regarding what the £4.1 million additional family hub funding can be used for, including all correspondents.
- Full disclosure regarding all the advice Officers have provided the Cabinet Member, including the risk analysis for the proposal.
- Detailed information regarding what services will be provided, including outreach provision, if this decision is actioned.

This decision and the associated decision report lacks transparency without the above information being clearly provided to Members, and we therefore do not believe that an accurate and informed decision can be made. This is particularly important following the additional funding provided by central government which may result in further options emerging, which have not yet been outlined or fully considered by Members.

Desired outcome of this call-in:

We request that the Scrutiny Committee recommends that the implementation of the decision be postponed pending review or scrutiny of the matter by the full Council.