Overnight unit-based short breaks consultation
Meeting with families, Artrix Arts Centre, Bromsgrove, 8th March 2018

Present: 8 parent carers, 2 family friends
Councillor Andy Roberts, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families
Debbie Herbert, Lead Commissioner for Vulnerable Children and Families
Jennie Leeson and Bethany Wilkinson, Commissioning Officers for Vulnerable Children and Families (note takers)

Andy welcomed everyone to the meeting and provided some information about the political and professional side of this consultation:

- Political: a paper was agreed at a Cabinet meeting in December 2017 to start a consultation about a package of four proposals around overnight unit-based short breaks provision. There have been briefings for councillors and a Scrutiny exercise. This involves a cross party group that has been looking at whether the process has been followed in the proper way, to ensure that the decision is made in the proper way.
- Professional: this was around engaging with families and other stakeholders (providers other professionals etc.) to find out how these proposals would affect families

Andy confirmed that the intention had been for us to go through this consultation process, make a recommendation, meet parents and then make a decision about the proposals. However, during a conversation with some parent carers after a Council meeting in February, Andy was told that families wanted to have a meeting together and have their say before the recommendation report is put together.

Andy explained that what Debbie and other officers are looking for at this point is a solution to enable the proposals to be introduced. We've got limitations in terms of funding but are looking for a sustainable solution that meets the needs of the families that receive support and is the best possible answer.

Below are the questions, comments and discussions that carried out during the meeting:

Consultation process

Letters

Comments:

- It was commented that a lot of parents can't access the internet or don't get letters until late, or can't make phone calls to get information. Another comment was that the letters are too technical and jargonised and that information has not been explained enough.
- A question was asked to confirm whether parents at Osborne Court and Providence Road have been offered 1:1 meetings.

- It was also mentioned that Osborne Court and Providence Road parents only found out about the consultation in February and some parents didn't get letters until after the consultation had closed and then was only given a week to provide a late response.
- There was concern about County Hall post system as parents are getting letters at different time and some details on letters are incorrect (i.e. who they are addressed to)
- There was also a comment about Ludlow Road parents getting told about the consultation over Christmas which is a difficult time for families.

Response:

- It was said that the County Council is trying to make information as accessible as possible and can meet with anyone that wants to. It was confirmed that we've met with everyone that accesses Ludlow Road as it is these families that would be affected the most if the proposals go ahead.
- 1:1 meetings weren't specifically offered to families who access the other units but that all the letters had contact details in for any parents to ask for more information or request this if necessary.
- The County Council can provide copies of the letters that were sent and confirm when they were posted but cannot explain why some letters arrived later than others

About today's meeting

Comment:

- Some parents have had to come from Evesham and this meeting is not suitable in terms of location and time and parents have not been given enough notice to attend the meeting.
- Parents said it was important for all parents to be given the opportunity to voice their concerns and it was even more important when it concerns children with disabilities as they struggle to get their voices heard. Parents expressed that they were the advocates for their children.

Response:

- Bromsgrove is as central as possible for the large county of Worcestershire. The meeting was arranged at the request of parents to have a meeting before the recommendations were made so it was brought forward to allow time for this.

The overall process

Comments:

- There were comments around the fact that Worcestershire County Council was aware in 2015 that the money would be stopped by March 2018 and families should have been consulted with then.
- Comments were made around wanting to trust Worcestershire County Council that there will be provision and needs will be met but don't have that trust because of

the way the consultation has been carried out. It was commented that the process has been "cruel" because there hasn't been enough time to talk to families.

- A parent added to this and said she was here as a representative of all 21 families that access Ludlow Road because they can't attend the meetings. "There are ordinary people at the end of this process and I've had to put everything else on hold because of this." She also echoed that there hasn't been enough time to look at this properly – for Worcestershire County Council or for families.
- Parent asked why Worcestershire County Council would send out letters with proposals to close something without gathering the information about costs first
- Parent asked when the recommendations will be made

Response:

- Andy added that in terms of meetings it was anticipated that Ludlow Road would be the area of biggest concern. So we offered families 1:1 meetings, then parents said they wanted a group meeting so that's why today's meeting was arranged. Andy said he was happy to do a later meeting too but this meeting is what families have asked for.
- Debbie explained that we had initial costs which were presented at Cabinet and the next stage of the process was then to begin a consultation phase to find out more before the recommendations and final decision is made
- It was confirmed that the timing of the recommendations depends on if we agree to enter into a second phase of consultation. Andy confirmed that the decision can't be made until recommendations are made and recommendations can't be made until we've got all of the information.

Information from Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust

Comments:

- There was a question about why Worcestershire County Council wouldn't send them a copy of the consultation response from the Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust
- Parent commented that they've got a copy of the Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust's response and believed that the response agreed with what parents are saying about capacity issues. They asked Andy and Debbie for their take on the Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust's response.
- Parents commented that most parents would be happy to have their personal details published and about their children
- There was also a question about the Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust not answering the freedom of information request submitted by families regarding a cost breakdown for Ludlow Road and why the information is 'commercially sensitive'.
- There was a comment that staff at Ludlow Road wouldn't get involved in the consultation to help parents communicate with each other. A question was asked around how Worcestershire County Council can close Ludlow Road if it's owned and run by Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust.

Response:

- In regards to the Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust consultation response, Debbie said that at the time we were looking at all of the responses and redacting personal information before publishing it all
- Andy confirmed that he hadn't read the Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust consultation response in detail as all the responses and information will be presented to him as part of the recommendation report – it wouldn't be appropriate for him to read things in 'real time' as they are sent in as he has to look at things in one go as part of a balanced decision making process
- Debbie confirmed she has read and taken on board the Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust comments and is in discussion with them about the points they've made and clarifying the questions they asked around data
- If parents want to share their notes or information about their children they were welcome to do that however the County Council cannot share personal information due to data protection laws
- Families were advised to follow up about the freedom of information request at the meeting with the Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust scheduled for 9th March.
- Debbie clarified that Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust is Worcestershire County Council's provider. The County Council commission (fund) Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust to deliver short breaks provision at Ludlow Road. One of the proposals is for the County Council to no longer fund the provision at Ludlow Road, however it would be the Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust's decision what to do with the building.

What should/is happening next?

Second phase of consultation

It was explained that following meetings with families and other feedback received through the consultation, the thought was that we need to look in more detail around the proposal to stop delivering respite at Ludlow Road. One of the options being looked at is going in to a second phase of consultation as the County Council have to find a solution that is acceptable, that meets need and that we can do it in the best and most cost effective way.

Debbie responded to the comments around not having enough time to do the consultation and explained that this is one of the reasons we're looking at going in to a second phase of the consultation. It was also confirmed that the Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust can extend its contract and continue delivery short breaks provision at Ludlow Road to allow us to do the second phase of consultation. This would be extended over the summer holidays and until the end of September 2018.

Andy supported this and confirmed that we've heard what families have said about timing, needing more information and the pressure that families are under. This second phase of consultation would allow us to stop and look at whether there are better ways to continue delivering support to families.

Suggestions from families

Comments:

- There was a suggestion that 1:1 sessions should be offered to Osborne Court and Providence Road parents too. This was in addition to speaking to all parents that need any sort of SEND support to see if their needs are currently being met. It was also suggested that the County Council needed to speak to staff at the units and other professionals involved.
- Additional funding sources such as charity grants (Lottery funding, NSPCC etc) were mentioned by parents as ways of keeping Ludlow Road open.
- One idea was discussed around letting Adult services fund beds at Ludlow Road for young adults – this would allow more provision for adults and a smoother transition for young people reaching 18
- A question was asked that if the 2 bed bungalow at Osborne Court wasn't being used effectively then why isn't this closed and Ludlow Road kept open?
- A question was asked whether the County Council is looking at an option to keep Ludlow Road open

Response:

- The County Council is happy to speak to more families and this is something that could be considered
- It was confirmed that Local Authorities can't apply for most of the grants available to charities, as well as the fact that the majority of them provide funding for a short period of time and we needed to provide a long term solution.
- The idea around Adult's services funding beds at Ludlow Road is already being discussed within the County Council but we can't confirm if this is a viable option yet. This could respond to the concerns raised by families around young people accessing Ludlow Road who are close to 18 having to transition to new provision twice. Adult's services have currently just started some engagement work with families around their short breaks provision.
- The County Council confirmed that lots of options have been and can be looked at and any further suggestions or ideas for families or providers are welcomed

Information in the recommendation report

Comments:

- Families confirmed that they want information around the different options for families accessing Ludlow Road and the costs (e.g. to use the extra beds at Providence Road, get any additional staff/training or equipment etc)

- There were lots of questions and comments around whether the other units would have capacity to include families currently accessing Ludlow Road
- Questions were asked around what will happen if the other options are more expensive than keeping Ludlow Road open or there isn't capacity in the other units

Response:

- It was made clear that the recommendation report would include complete financial analysis about how much things will cost and complete capacity calculations in terms of space available at other units. The County Council confirmed it is still working with the Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust around the pattern of usage and number of nights that are currently accessed so we can put this forward as part of the recommendation report.
- Andy confirmed that Worcestershire County Council has a statutory legal duty to provide this support so if the proposals don't deliver this then they won't go ahead. The recommendation report will provide information about whether these proposals will meet need and be sustainable to continue meeting need. At the end of the consultation process the Council will be able to say whether or not we can meet the needs of families on a sustainable basis. If it comes back that the needs can't be met then we'd need to look at if the money could be found to continue things the way they are, or in another different way.

The proposals

Can these proposals meet the needs of families?

Comments:

- Parents asked how we could provide what families have now within the proposals.
- Concerns were raised that there will be no flexibility at other units in terms of accessing the unit on different days – because the units will be used by more families
- Concerns were raised about the mix of children at different units
- It was said that the manager at Osborne Court said they hadn't been consultation with around whether they have the space to take Ludlow Road families. Also that we haven't done the costings around whether these proposals can work.
- Families said that there is different information coming from people on the ground at the units and from the officers/councillors running the consultation
- Families were concerned that there is only health provision in Osborne Court and Ludlow Road and not in other units so questioned how health needs could be met
- There were also comments that the bungalow at Osborne Court is already used and that Osborne Court, and other units, already have waiting lists.
- Families were concerned that using the 2 bed emergency bungalow at Osborne Court as a regular respite unit wouldn't meet the social needs of their children.

- Families are concerned about there not being enough or sufficient provision
- Parents were concerned that they could be getting less care at Osborne Court in the future because of the proposal to stop delivering services in Ludlow Road and taking money away from short breaks services.
- Families are worried about how long it is until the same 'closure' happens to Osborne Court or the other centres

Response:

- The detail of each proposal was discussed in more detail and it was confirmed that the needs of all families will still be met.
- It was discussed that the initial calculations showed that these proposals could meet families' needs. The purpose of the consultation was to speak to all the families to find out what would be suitable and appropriate. The work we're doing at the moment is to look at the response from families, look at what children and young people get now and what is available. This is part of the process and we won't go to Andy with the recommendations until we have all of this information, which will be published.
- It was confirmed that managers at all the units work hard to ensure there is the right mix of children accessing the unit at any one time; ensuring they are safe and that their needs are always met
- It was confirmed that we've looked at what is currently delivered in terms of the number of children and the number of nights they currently access, as well as predictions about future demand. A set of proposals was then put together and we went out to families to look at whether families' needs could be met in other ways such as Providence Road or Osborne Court with the right training/staffing/equipment as well. We're now looking at this information as well as gathering more information about costs and the capacity at other units.

About the proposals

Comments:

- There was some confusion about what each of the proposals were and around what the two extra beds at Providence Road are currently used for
- Other questions were around where the money has been cut from
- Alternative options for families was discussed and comments were made around the options to provide Direct Payments to families which is not sustainable for a lot of families
- Using Osborne Court's emergency and assessment bungalow to deliver short breaks was discussed and parents commended that it would be expensive to operate a 2 bed short breaks unit.
- Additional comments were made around the proposals not looking at the other centres and only looking at the medical units (Ludlow Road and Osborne Court) because they cost the most money

Response:

- More information was given about the proposals and families were referred to the consultation document which is available at www.worcestershire.gov.uk/SENDupdates or can be posted/emailed to people on request
- It was confirmed that the funding we're talking about is the Public Health Ring Fenced Grant which is funding direct from the government which has now gone. This means that the County Council has to look at how we can continue to fund the support that is currently delivered with the money that's available within Children's Services.
- It was confirmed that Providence Road has two extra bedrooms that aren't used at all and it's these two bedrooms that the Council is proposing to use. At Osborne Court there is one bedroom in the main unit and two in the emergency and assessment bungalow that aren't funded for full time short breaks so we're having this conversation with the Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust about how these could be used more effectively.
- The four proposals were explained in more detail to clarify that we could be reviewing the needs of all families accessing overnight unit-based short breaks so clarified that the consultation was not just around health-run provision (Ludlow Road and Osborne Court). It was also discussed about the proposal around using the two extra beds at Providence Road.

Other questions and concerns

- There was a lot of discussion about the value of the provision that families currently access and how difficult it is for families to cope on a day to day basis
- There was a suggestion that County Councillors and/or officers making these decisions should spend a day with families to experience the difficulties faced each day
- Families said how comfortable they are with the provision they access at the moment. It was mentioned that the first proposal to review the needs of all families is only a red herring as needs are already being met.
- It was asked why the County Council is taking money away from children with disabilities as they're the most vulnerable.
- There was another comment to say that MPs got a pay rise this week yet children's services get cut
- Parents want to know facts and specifics around where the beds are going to come from.
- Parents said all they want is more choice to make the right decisions for their children.

Summary points

Andy summarised that the points that had come through during the meeting are that there's a fear that after this consultation process there won't be sufficient and appropriate respite provision for families. He said that in previous meetings the emphasis had been on the transition to new provision. Families confirmed transition was still a concern.

Debbie confirmed that these issues came across in the meetings with families and all these points will be shared in the recommendation report. This will also include information about the costs and what provision is available at the other units.

Debbie asked the question of the group as there were conflicting comments around wanting a decision to be made quickly and wanting more time to talk to families and gather more information. The options were:

1) Have a second phase of consultation in April/May
2) Continue with the current process and make a recommendation and decision on the current proposals

The response from the parents in the room is for Worcestershire County Council to get the information and figures together to understand if the proposals could actually work. They could then like the County Council to speak to parents again about what they think.

There was agreement to the extra consultation time if it meant that the County Council could come up with some new solutions to continue to meet the needs of families. However if, after the extra time, the same proposals are made then parents would rather have the decision made now.

It was added that if the County Council can come up with a solution to offer everyone the same support they get at the moment and it can be met at other units then that's fine. Families said they have had to fight for what they've got and what they do receive is just about enough so it can't be shaved off anymore.

Solution and outcome from today's meeting:

The County Council agrees to:

- Present the options and hard facts around costs and capacity in terms of if there are solutions for families and the options are sustainable
- Provide the time for these options and facts to be challenged by families and other stakeholders

Andy confirmed that he understands that this is a difficult time for parents but respectfully said that whatever the County Council did or suggested would be wrong and understandably every parent thinks their child is the most important. He stated that councillors and officers are doing their best with the money and time they've got and to ask families to work with us by providing information, ideas and allowing us the time to do this. Debbie agreed to this and said we would present honest, open facts and families confirmed that's all they ask for.

Andy closed the meeting to say that the Council's aim is to come up with a solution that's appropriate and viable for everyone involved.