

Submission to Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee

01/08/2017

Joanne Murray

Dear Committee,

I have become involved in Coordinating the grassroots Save Our Sure Start Children's Centres in Medway campaign, due to my passion for children's welfare and hearing from parents the devastation that they feel, in common with me about the proposed changes to Sure Start Centres. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak here today.

Testimonials

I firstly direct you to the testimonials I have gathered, from Sure Start users. These people give valid reasons for the current Sure Start model meeting their needs and why a Superhubs model would not meet their needs.

A teenage single mum pops in on her way home, to do her homework while staff look after her child and then talk through issues with her and speak to her teachers. She could not pop in to a Superhub in this way.

New mums, recently moved to the area and knowing nobody. They can pop in when it isn't a session, to just spend time in the reading and soft play area and see familiar faces.

The new mum, with a child with a medical condition whom she was scared to take out of the house until her Sure Start around the corner helped her.

The many, many parents who were isolated, in their houses but have this place, around the corner, where they have built a strong and close network of friends for themselves and for their children.

The children who lacked confidence and would not have engaged in a busier environment.

The new dad, embarrassed to be taking parenting classes and finding this local haven, where there is no judgement but just support.

The mothers suffering from post-natal depression and struggling to leave the house but venturing a few steps to their local Sure Start.

The relationship between excellent, professional staff and service users. This is personal and highly beneficial and valuable to these service users.

Flaws found in the formal Consultation document:

- It would have been better if there were one question/ Field to enable responders to say in their own words what they thought of the proposals, rather than have free text spread across various answers provided to the various questions posed.
- The questionnaire did not indicate clearly that the four hub solution would be supported by ' a number' of satellite centres.

- With hindsight officers would have enabled more people to respond and indicate they were responding as professionals.
- Mention is made in the report of the various consultation meetings officers held with the local NHS, however the report does not enlarge on what our health colleagues had to say.
- It is unclear whether or not a submission was made by Public Health. Surely if changes to the current system are for the benefit of the people, it should follow research.
- There was no facility in the questionnaire for people to indicate they were responding as a foster carer or as a childminder.
- Inviting people to rank services they have experienced in children's centres seemed fruitless, as parents clearly valued all services they have received.
- Most responders refused to suggest where the hubs should be located. Access within pram-pushing distance and/or close to public transport was seen as important. Transport providers such as Arriva seemed not to have been consulted. Cost and time factors of using public transport were perceived as barriers.
- Councillors have not had sufficient time to view notes from the public consultation meetings held.
- At the time of writing (01/08/2017), Councillors have still not been sent the notes from the consultation meetings at children's centres.
- The council decided to run statutory consultations with staff alongside and separately to the public consultation. Scrutiny members have not received feedback from the staff consultations to consider along with the summary from the public consultation. A 5 minute appeal from a Unison representative at this evening's meeting is not sufficient.
- Healthwatch have just confirmed they are only sending to Ian Sutherland today a number of testimonials they have gathered. There clearly won't be time for members to access these prior to this evening's meeting.
- There was nowhere in the Consultation document, to relate the option of retaining the status quo.

Flawed Consultation process:

- The formal process for the Council answering public questions has not been followed correctly. The Council has not fulfilled their part of this formal process. By not adequately answering the public questions, with stock answers and references to details being unavailable until after the Consultation Report has been analysed, how can the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee (CYPOSC) and the Cabinet form a decision?

What are "Satellites"?

Discussions with Sure Start users have highlighted that People had not heard of "satellites" and there has been no sufficient explanation of what these are. This was an issue that came up repeatedly. What will the provision be? How can a decision be reached, when the public have not been adequately consulted on this aspect of the proposition?

Therefore, the Council's proposal was neither effective nor representative, for the following reasons:

- Looking at other Councils, which have moved to the Superhubs model, there have been no Ofsted inspections but there have been inspections on their provision for Looked After Children. They have failed them. There is no evidence that the Superhubs model is effective and in fact only evidence to the contrary. There is no successful example in the UK.
- What is the benchmark for improving this service? How is Sure Start failing?
Medway Sure Starts are performing at above national average. Therefore, like with best practice in schools, Medway Sure Start could have "Beacon Status" and charge other authorities to come in and shadow / learn from Medway's model of Sure Start. Therefore, it is in Medway's best interests to keep them as they are and use them as a national standard, to which others can look to emulate. There is evidence for this is in Ofsted Reports, as well as the following:
 1. Professionals, working within Sure Start: many spoke at the meeting on 30th May and evidence should be in the minutes for that meeting.
 2. Cluster Hub Managers' submissions to the Consultation.
 3. Head of Service submission to the Consultation.
 4. Schools' submissions to the Consultation.
 5. Nurseries' submissions to the Consultation.
 6. Foster parents' submissions.
- 94% of people consulted said NO to closures – so how can that be a rubber-stamped YES?

In terms of the evidence upon which such a change should be made, I have only found evidence that the status quo is effective and of benefit to the people of Medway. I have found no evidence at all that the proposed Superhubs model is an improvement.

The Council appears to be making a decision, based on no evidence. We offer to gather the evidence that the Council has failed or been unable to gather, upon which an informed decision can be reached.

In conclusion, if an "against" vote is not taken today, then we request more time, in order to perform our own formal consultation. We are also still waiting on related Freedom of Information requests, made three months ago.

Thank you again for your time today and please check our Facebook page @SaveMedwaySureStart. We are holding a fun family event at the Command House in Chatham, 11.45-13.45 on 8th August. It would be great to see you there!

Joanne Murray

Testimonials for Medway's Sure Start Centres

Gathered by Joanne Murray

Please find below testimonials gathered from Sure Start Users. If you compare these experiences with the proposed changes to the Sure Start Centres in Medway, you will see that the needs of users would not be met. The testimonials below indicate that the status quo for the service is productive for the people it serves. There is no evidence, nor research suggesting that it would be in the best interests of the people of Medway, to restructure Sure Start Centres to a Superhub model. In fact, for the people of Medway who have spoken below, it would indeed be to their detriment.

“Sure Start has kept me sane! It’s made friends for both me and my child. The baby thing is a whole new world and I didn’t know anything about it, until I came here.

The staff are lovely. They’re very kind, thoughtful and always very happy, which helps when you’re having a bad day. There is a really lovely community here. They put on so many events for the kids. I wouldn’t be able to afford to go to paid-for groups.”

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“Sure Start has made a big difference to my two-year-old, who is a very shy child. Sure Start helped so much in preparing her for school and I want the same opportunities that she had with Sure Start, for my six-week-old son.

Superhubs would be so much busier. She would have felt so much more uncomfortable there and would not have engaged.”

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“We moved here from London and I didn’t know a single person in Medway. I spent months alone in the house, with my first child. With my second pregnancy, I came to Sure Start, to see the midwives and they suggested to come along to some of the groups here. I did and it got me finally out of the house and kept the kids entertained.

The staff are amazing! They know our names, birthdays, books they liked, what groups they go to... Everything! One time, when I had a problem, I left here in tears, because the staff were so kind. They really do go above and beyond.

This place [Sure Start] saved our lives. We’ve met so many people that live close by to us. They’re so encouraging here. Four years down the line and now I know so many people! I have already said hello to over half the people here, because we are now friends. This place is now home and for it to close would be devastating.

Superhubs would not have that community feel. It wouldn’t be so personal and the staff could not know everybody’s names, etc.”

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"The best thing about Sure Start is that it's local.

Their fun day events are great and bring people together. I came to prenatal groups and I watched my first giving birth video here, with my husband.

We moved here from Surrey and didn't know anyone here. If not for this place around the corner, I'd have been lost when I found out I was carrying and don't know what I'd have done."

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"I'm a childminder and I used to access Sure Start a lot but since the cuts there have been fewer things to bring them to. Childminding can be isolating. Sure Start gets them out, to mix with other children and try out new things. We come to theme days too.

Superhubs would be too far away, to bring the children I care for to them."

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"I feel so sad that Sure Start Children's Centres may be limited for lots of families, as when my son was a baby, I used them a lot for support and making friends. This is so important for new mums.

Keep them open!

What they offer now is limited, since cuts to staff. There are fewer sessions already and that's having an impact.

A lot of people suffer from depression. Lots of people don't have big families, so Sure Start means they have somewhere to go, to see people they know and have support.

Superhubs would be too overcrowded and not easily reachable for a lot of people."

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"Sure Start has done a lot of good for her [granddaughter]. She mixes with children now. Before Sure Start, she wouldn't at all."

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"Sure Start has brought the confidence out in her [daughter], from being there. She absolutely loves her Teacher and has made lots of local friends there. I wouldn't want her to go anywhere else. She's due to be here for another year.

It makes me happier, knowing that she's a lot happier, more confident and made friends.

She wouldn't be as confident at a Superhub. There would be more children and she would not get the time from the Teacher that she gets."

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"I moved to the area and they've [Sure Start] been brilliant, from day one! They're always so welcoming – fantastic. They have helped my child build confidence. If there are any problems, I know I can just come down here, round the corner and they will help me.

My son has acid reflux and speech problems. They helped me so much with him. And for me, they're reassuring and so supportive. We've been to Under Ones and Next Steps groups, as well as just popping down when there's not a group on.

Sure Start is brilliant. I get to meet new mums, and build a foundation here, for real friendships. I still talk to and I'm friends with mums from the Under Ones group. It's a really tight community here.

Superhubs wouldn't be as close. So many people means it wouldn't be as tight a unit you should get from Sure Start. This is a safe place for kids and that's what you need. It would also be a lot harder, to travel with kids to a Superhub. Knowing myself, I wouldn't go. Here, it's around the corner and I feel safe.

We are losing our community in general and this is keeping it alive and that's what you want in society."

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"I had my little one when I was 15. I was very young. They [Sure Start] were my support network. We used to go to a young parents' group, which was great. Also, I would pop by Sure Start on my way home from school and the staff would look after her [daughter], while I got some schoolwork done. They helped me by talking to my teachers for me, to help them understand my situation. I made friends in similar situations and we got to support each other.

Superhubs would not be as close and they probably wouldn't have the time or resources to help as closely as they did – there wouldn't be so much one-on-one, as there would be so many people, from so many areas. Also, if you're in a difficult situation, you might not want to share it in a big group, so the staff would pull you aside for one-to-one help but that's more difficult, with all being dealt with in one place.

I don't think a lot of young parents can afford to learn to drive or get a bus, so probably wouldn't go at all, as you use what you've got locally, when you're in that situation."

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"Sure Start is close to me. I can walk down here with him [son]. He absolutely loves it here! He asks, "When can we go to the Sure Start Centre again?" He's been coming here since he was born – he's been to all the groups. He did use to be quite a shy boy. Sure Start has brought his confidence out and he's made friends here. I've made friends too. We do anything and everything here, just to get out.

I don't think you'd get as many services at Superhubs, I wouldn't be able to walk down and couldn't afford travelling expenses."

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“Sure Start has meant for me making friends and the children making those lifelong friends that they’ve now gone to school with and live in this local area.

My youngest was born with Cerebral Palsy and we came here for baby yoga, baby massage and baby sign language. These have been really useful and the staff have been so helpful. I’ve been able to speak with other parents too – it’s a really sociable place to come!

For people who don’t have much family or close friends in the area, this [Sure Start] can become their family.

A problem with Superhubs is if you don’t feel confident and it’s further away to travel to it – especially with a new baby! You couldn’t just pop down either. I pop down here all the time, we sit in the reading and soft play area, even when there’s nothing on. Then, I see people here or can ask staff for advice on things. I wouldn’t do that, if I had to travel.

Things like this give a sense of community, coming together and having fun.”

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“Sure Start means socialising with other new parents. It’s advice and socialisation for the children as well as parents. The staff are all nice, friendly people. You don’t get judged here.

With Superhubs, it would be expensive, if we had to travel. It would mean having to travel, with a new born baby! You’re frightened, travelling anywhere with a new born baby!

At the local Sure Start, you can come to lunch club and get to know the same people, who live round here. With a Superhub, it would be different people, every week!”

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“I’ve been coming to Sure Start since my son was a baby. The groups have been very helpful.

With a new baby, they weigh the baby, give a check-up, you can ask questions and there’s someone to talk to about things. You also make friends and have people to talk to.

Children socialise in groups, the clothes swap is handy and there’s loads of help here.

Superhubs would be overcrowded. I don’t drive, so getting there would be a problem.

Would there be enough groups? Would there be enough space? Will it still be free? [*she could not know, because the Public Consultation was inadequate, without any required details for the proposal, upon which to base a decision.*]

With the Summer Holidays, Sure Start is somewhere to go to. There are cooking groups, teaching about healthy eating and lots of other activities.

My daughter was born six weeks premature and she had a heart condition. When I got her home, I was so worried and worried to take her out. I took her round here to Sure Start and it was good to have somewhere close to bring her and talk to someone, get advice, feel less worried and get out.”

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“I like the support Sure Start gives. I’m a single mum of four and there are lots of things here to bring the kids to. There’s Stay and Play, Cooking, Little Cooks. The girls really love it here and I really like the support network here. I know all of the ladies who work here and they’re all lovely and a great support!

Superhubs mean I won’t have anywhere to take them, I don’t have a lot of money, to take them all on the bus to a Superhub.

Sure Start is where you meet other single mums and talk about things. And there’s all of the fun days – it’ll stop.

It won’t be the same.

It’ll be sad for the kids.”

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“At the moment, we use Fun to Ones and that’s my only bit of socialising with other mums and for her [daughter] with children her own age.

With Superhubs, it would depend on where they were and whether I could get to them, whether I’d use them. Superhubs wouldn’t have the same personal feel and a Sure Start Centre.”

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“I’m new to the area. I literally knew no-one, before I came to these Sure Start sessions. It’s a good place for my son to meet other children that he’ll grow up with.

Less people would go to Superhubs, as here we know the staff – they’re very friendly and it’s so personal. The staff here, they care – you can’t care for that many people, in a Superhub.”

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“I had learnt parenting in the wrong way due to a pretty tough upbringing and past relationship issues. Also I was worried that I was not a good enough parent due to what I had been told during a previous relationship. Due to this I volunteered to go on a course called Dynamic Dads.

I was very dubious at first because I thought that they were going to tell me that I did everything wrong and judge me. To be honest it was completely the opposite. The ladies explained that from what I told them I was a pretty good parent and that I just needed to learn to deal with a couple of situations differently.

I learnt so much over the 6 week course. They taught me some the "kind hands" techniques, to ignore the bad behaviour unless it was something that puts the child in danger and to praise the good behaviour. I could go on and on. Above they made me feel like a more confident and competent parent and helped me to understand that there is no such thing as a text book child and each child has their own traits.

All in all the small group meetings in one of their children's centres made you feel welcome and comfortable. I think when you start looking at these Superhubs you start to lose that feel of a kind, comfortable, relaxing environment. It becomes more like you are visiting some sort of surgery or something along those lines.

I mean due to fighting depression and anxiety, it was hard enough for me even going to a Sure Start centre which felt extremely welcoming. If the course had been in some sort of superhub, I would have struggled to attend.

Superhubs generally have a lot more going on than just what you may be going there for. So the feeling of being judged as you walk through god knows how many people on the way to the Sure Start centre and having the overwhelming feeling that you are being judged would not be a great one. Basically your confidence is shot before you even walk through the door.

Sure Start centres need to stay open because they are there to focus on the one thing and that is children and the relationships between parents and children etc. If it is all dealt with in Superhubs I believe that the focus on what the service is there for will be lost.

I suppose to add to that is that the awesome staff that work at these Sure Start centres, what happens to them? They will not be able to put all of them into these hubs."

Statement from Lead Petitioner (Katie Clifford)

Council meeting re sure start 1st August 2017

I stand here before you today to state that we, the parents who use Sure Start, do not accept any alteration to the current model, as we do not feel that it will meet the requirements of your duty to secure sufficient childrens centres accessible to all families with young children as quoted from the Statutory guidance relating to Sure Start centres published in April 2013.

Even after all of the testimonies and statements you have heard you may still wonder why we feel the centres in their current format are so vital. Why we are so passionate about this cause that we shout, march, stand up and speak when it is something many of us have never done before. I shall attempt to explain this one last time.

I wear different hats in this cause. One of a teacher and deputy head teacher who has worked in the Medway towns for most of her career. One of a parent who has used the services before and after having my daughter Willow. One of a resident of Medway who wants the best possible future for the citizens who live here. One of a human who wants the best possible outcomes for the children in our society.

So what do I and we as parents feel the impact of sure start has been and why are we concerned that the changes you propose will be so devastating?

One of the core principles of the sure start provision from the guidance I related to earlier is school readiness. That is that when children reach school age they will be ready for school. This has many facets. It means that yes, they have basic academic knowledge which will enable them to learn well. They will have had books read to them by parents who understand this is important. They will have heard and learnt nursery rhymes which help with language patterns, speech sounds and early maths skills. They will have social skills so that they can function in a classroom with many other children and no parent present. They will be able to speak and understand what is being asked of them. All incredibly important skills. Many of which were lacking in the areas of Medway I taught in prior to Sure Start. Then the children were joining school aged 4 already 2 years behind in their development, with many high level speech and language problems which had not been picked up on before and which impeded their learning further, with parents who often were not interested what happened to them between 9 and 3 because they didn't understand the impact that they, as parents, could have on their child's education.

I, as an educator am horrified that this is the model we could return to. This was many years ago, the demands on children are now much greater. The curriculum is more advanced and schools have not the resources, money or time to pick up the slack that will be there if the current model is not maintained. And, although since the beginning of this process the idea of satellite centres have been suggested, there is no five or more years evidence from the other local authorities which have adopted the model, that show that it is not detrimental to children's chances when they reach school. This means that we are experimenting on our children's futures in the hope that it will work out alright. Are you really happy that this is a viable risk to take.

Other core purposes of the sure start provision are improved child development and better health of all children. There is a duty to improve the well-being of young children in the area and to reduce

inequalities. In Medway there is a wide range of family income from those who can afford to send their children to several paid activities each week where they can develop their social and educational skills to those who have no spare funds for what would be seen as luxuries. This means that the gap between the haves and the have nots grows. When they start school this gap grows larger and larger until it is difficult to breach. Activities such as the singing groups, stay and play, story sack and reading areas aid brain development as well as helping children and parents understanding the benefit of these activities which improves engagement when children begin school.

Aiding health development are the breastfeeding services. Currently if you are a breastfeeding mother who is finding it difficult and considering giving up for whatever reason, there is somewhere you can go most of the week to get support from trained breastfeeding workers and other breastfeeding mothers. Britain has some of the lowest figures for continued breastfeeding in the western world, despite the health benefits which are well publicised and the fact that it is a free source of food. Do you think that by cutting services, which would have to happen as with the proposed model you could not possibly provide the same level of support, that it will help more people to consider breastfeeding as an option and to continue doing so until a child's second birthday as current guidelines suggest is best for a child's health?

A further core purpose is to support parents to develop parental aspirations and skills. Many people have not had a positive parental role model. All parents want to do a 'good job', most of us feel we are not. Parenting is tough, rewarding but tough. It is filled with non-stop provision of care, generally on little sleep and these days often with no family nearby to fall back on for support. People feel isolated which has an impact on the mental health of the entire family. Sure start gives us a place to go to ask questions, to get support, to feel that we are doing a good enough job and to get advice from experts, and the key there is experts, not volunteers, so that we can do better. You wonder why we are so passionate that we wave our banners and shout at times. It is because we want the best for our children, we feel like we need to do more, and you are taking away our lifeline, you are taking away our children's life chances and yet ensuring that all children have good life chances is another of the core purposes.

You would say, I expect in return, that there will still be provision, that there will be hubs where groups will be run, that there will be satellite groups. But this is not the same as getting to know a group of people and feeling like you can trust them. This is not the same as having somewhere that you can walk to when you've only had an hour's sleep again, when you've had a c-section and cannot drive, when you just need to see a friendly face but even walking for 10 minutes is a huge physical and mental battle, let alone having a catch a bus, train or walk for even longer. This is aside from the fact that in the last year there have been 240,000 visits to sure start by over 30,000 people. How can this possibly be catered for in such a reduced service as is proposed.

If you have antenatal depression (as I did), postnatal depression, have suffered abuse, have medical issues to contend with, or any other myriad of additional challenges, how many times do you want to explain that over and over again to a new set of people. Will these problems only be a challenge to you on the one time in the week that a satellite group may run in your area. Or do we need somewhere where we can just go, see a friendly face, get support and come away able to face another day. How many people would I want to turn around and say to (for yet another time), yes today I am struggling because I don't know how to be a good enough mum to my daughter that she won't take her life as my first child did. How do I do better when I felt I was doing well the first time? How many different people do you think I have the strength to say that to?

Mental health has become a greater and greater public debate in recent times. Having children, whilst wonderful is overwhelming and isolating and even when they are planned and you feel ready, you never know how you will manage until they are here. And then you try to cope. Hour by hour, sometimes minute by minute. The more isolated you are, the greater the risk of mental health problems. A parent who has mental health problems does their best just like any other parent, but the impact on a family where mental health problems are not diagnosed or adequately supported are vast and again can impact on the development and life chances of a child. By attending Sure Start regularly, which you are much more likely to do when there is one local to you, the qualified staff get to know you. They see when something is wrong that you may not realise because you're just trying to manage and function. They provide support, ideas and a listening ear. They help you feel like you can do it which is worth its weight in gold. Everyone knows the power of the right words said at the right time. Those wonderful Sure Start staff, I don't know where we would be without them. Yet you are planning to cut 2-3 play workers from each centre so that we have just 2 per hub. Volunteers are a great support, but they are not the same as qualified staff. They should not be responsible for the child protection issues they will see, they should not have to have the pressure from the challenge that arises from working with people in challenging circumstances. They are purely a support to people who have been fully trained.

Now these are points you have heard in one way or another, which I wanted to remind you of and put together in one place. But you have said that we have been fully consulted. You have provided data following the questionnaires and other parts of the consultation. However the process has not been what it should have been if you truly wanted to explore the full needs and impact on the community.

I am well educated in that I have a degree and a post-graduate qualification and have worked in education for 14 years. However I found your questionnaire challenging to answer at points. It was loaded with bias to get the responses that you required. It was not an open ended document which enabled all to answer it. It was not easy for anyone for whom English is an additional language, of which there are many in Medway.

You have banded the satellite model around, mainly as a defence it feels of closing the majority of the centres as they currently run. But there is no full explanation of what the satellites will provide or when they will be available. How can we, as users, possibly comment on a proposal when there is no true proposal to comment on. There is nothing concrete to make a comment about. How can you say if you agree something will work if you don't know what that something will look like?

The consultation process has not been adequate to ensure that all people get a voice in a way they understand. It has not been adequate in that all evidence has not been returned in enough time for it to be reviewed fully before any decisions are made. The times of the meetings were very difficult for many parents to attend when you take into consideration work commitments, children's mealtimes and bedtimes, travel limitations and there should have been more times available in each area if you wanted maximum parental engagement, though I fear you did not wish this.

You say that money needs to be cut as you do not have the resources that were previously there. What you actually have is a certain amount of money coming into the council for use in Medway. You get to allocate the money in the best way you see fit. Children are Medway's future. Is it really so difficult to see that this should be at the top of your agenda? How much crime is attributed to poor life chances and education? How many people fall into drugs because they do not see a

future? How many problems would be solved if all children were able to reach their full potential? Yet if you take away the support they receive through sure start from before they are even born, you are limiting the life chances of these children and therefore the future of Medway.

Yes, heritage events are lovely, yes making areas beautiful is nice. But are they a priority? Should they be a priority? It is our children who will grow to make an area beautiful and lovely. What is the most important?

We also feel that you did not fully answer the public questions put to you, but rather gave stock answers and references to full answers not being available until after the consultation report had been analysed. Therefore how, when many questions have been left unanswered, can this committee and the cabinet make a fully informed decision, which is crucial when our children's future is at stake.

There is evidence that more information needs to be analysed, more research carried out, further consultation to include parents, education and health professionals, in a more open ended manner in order to get a fully rounded view with enough time for all of the committee members and cabinet to review and assess the outcomes. Therefore we ask that the consultation duration be extended.

Our children's outcomes and Medway's future is not something to experiment on. Whatever decisions are made, you each need to realise that it will have an impact on our children's futures. The question is, what type of impact do you want to have?