

**TRANSCRIPT OF PRESENTATION TO EARLY YEARS, CHILDREN & YOUTH
POLICY DEVELOPMENT & SCRUTINY PANEL
SUBMITTED BY JOHN HACK ON BEHALF OF
CHEW VALLEY CHILDREN'S CENTRE**

OCTOBER 14TH 2013

For a majority of parents, the perceived disadvantages of living in rural area – isolation, poor public transport, lack of choice regarding goods and services and housing shortages – are outweighed by the surroundings, clean air, reduced crime levels and a more peaceful environment. For those with cars, access to the internet, a reasonable income and family and friends close at hand, the disadvantages are regarded as occasionally troublesome but no more than that.

However, for a minority, the disadvantages are significant, causing some of them to miss out on basic and primary health care, continuing education, the opportunity to have social relationships, childcare and even employment. For some the realities of day-to-day living are extremely harsh and the impact of the recession continues to make life even harder.

Poverty is rising, employment in rural areas is often part-time, involves shift or seasonal work and may be low-paid, while basic goods and services are often more expensive and fuel costs are rising. Suitable affordable housing is in short supply and poor transport is a barrier to accessing services, or finding and keeping employment or training.

This rural poverty is often hidden and unacknowledged. Low population densities in rural areas mask the fact that poorer and more affluent families live in the same area. The effects of rural poverty on family life may also be hidden as families are reluctant to ask for help because of the fear of loss of privacy.

In its short life, the Chew Valley Children's Centre and its dedicated staff, have been able to engage and gain the trust of many of the families who find it hardest to access services, whether because of transport problems, lack of information about the services on offer, or because they are reluctant to ask for help.

Their success in doing so is achieved by a combination of practical help, combined with an approach which was frequently described by parents as welcoming and inclusive.

We acknowledge that the cost of delivering services in rural areas is higher and services may be thinly spread and the Council needs to take steps to address the financial situation. In our time with the members of the panel, we hope we were able to highlight first hand some of the issues we faced and we welcome the opportunity to explain an alternative solution.

Rather than becoming a spoke from a 'hub' in Keynsham we would wish to develop the Chew Valley Children's Centre to itself become a specialist rural hub using outreach at a very local level to help deliver and coordinate service delivery in partnership with other existing organisations or agencies.

Rural outreach though is not only about taking services out to satellite venues or to people's homes. As the Chew Valley Children's Centre currently covers over 86sq miles, equivalent to approx 65% of total land area of B&NES (135sq miles), we think it should be explicitly connected to wider community development, building the capacity of people in the local community and supporting community providers to develop their services across the rural area.

We see the link between this offer and the Councils own emerging Connecting Communities agenda for service delivery and the new national Community budget pilot programme as a mechanism by which an inclusive wrap-around service can be co-produced with B&NES.

In a national study of rural Children's Centres in 2009, parents highlighted their need for activities for individual older children and for the whole family; activities scheduled at times suitable for working parents, in the evenings and at the weekends. Many felt that the ring-fencing of centres for under-fives was not in sympathy with the realities of family life or the practical difficulties of having to transport children of different ages to separate locations.

These needs were particularly acute among those parents who had to travel some distance to attend children's centre activities and those reliant on public transport.

In addition to adopting a Multi Agency approach including continued integration of Health Workers, Social services, Educational specialist and medical staff, we can specifically identify the following issues that we would want to be addressed as part of a wider holistic approach to the successfully delivery of services in rural Bath & North East Somerset;

- Access to transport (capable of taking buggies and car seats including families with disabled children)
- Childcare or services allowing parents to work or train
- Availability of information, which includes access to the internet
- Training and mentoring (co-location of adult learning opportunities in children's centres could complement other activities and make basic skills and vocational training more accessible to families in need)
- Housing advice (and including energy efficiency and fuel poverty alleviation)
- Drugs and Alcohol support
- Advice on Universal Credit and other benefit programmes
- Access to outreach services from Job Centre
- Domestic violence support
- Financial inclusion (through Credit Unions and advice)
- Support on food, diet and fitness (addressing obesity and other childhood issues)

Our offer is to work with the Council, its commissioners, partners and providers, to co-produce a solution which best adapts the established children's centre model to meet the requirements of our rural communities and to support those families most in need, whilst at the same time, drawing on innovative and inclusive models of rural service delivery.

Central Government is actively seeking ways that 'freedoms and flexibilities' can be introduced at a local level to help deliver services and provide genuinely joined up provision. Through our offer, we would work with the Council, Government and partners to identify, address and remove these barriers, to deliver an effective user focused provision for those most in need in our rural communities.

We are all working towards achieving a fair and inclusive society where every child is given the best start in life and an equal opportunity to fulfil their potential. To ensure this happens it is vital that the issues we have highlighted are addressed to ensure that the children in the rural parts of Bath & North East Somerset are not left behind and are given every opportunity to be part of, and contribute to, their community and wider society into the future.

Thank you for your time and understanding.