

Gemma Day

Toybox Toy Library

I am speaking on behalf of Toybox Toy library based at Weston Children's Centre. We are an independent, small registered charity. We offer a toy-lending library service which was set up by parents in Bath 25 years ago to provide access to a range of fun and educational toys at very low cost, as well as an opportunity for social interaction for families. We work with Weston Children's Centre providing this service as parent volunteers. We run a weekly stay and play session and are the only toy library that caters specifically for those in the north of Bath. We currently have 80 active members and 15-20 families attend our weekly sessions. Since being based at Weston Children's Centre our membership has increased by over 200% demonstrating the clear need for the service we offer in Weston.

Being based at the Children's Centre enables local families to access us easily. Many discover we are there because they have come to use another group or come to the Centre and its staff as a source of information and support. Our relationship with Weston Children's Centre is mutually beneficial as we signpost our members to other groups and Centre staff signpost to us. The loss of council staff at the Centre, would not only effect the provision that children's services offer but compromise the provision of privately funded services, such as ours, due to the withdrawal of support for volunteers.

Toybox Toy Library is a volunteer led organisation and we understand the need to support volunteers. Most volunteers also have 'day jobs' and the support from our employed staff and Children's Centre staff enables us to provide an improved service. The physical presence at a Children's Centre of council staff is being massively underestimated and devalued by this proposal. Volunteers are extremely valuable but they cannot function without adequate support. Given the level of support we believe they should receive to offer a safe service to vulnerable groups, elements of the proposal appear to represent a false economy. Volunteers also often attend groups with their own children and therefore cannot act as effectively as a staff member whose sole concern is the group member's welfare. The proposed hub system with one staffed Centre in Bath will automatically compromise services due to the reduced support provided for locally run groups.

We are also concerned that if we were asked to pay rent for the building use we would not be able to offer our current service due to financial restraints. We would struggle to find an alternative venue to store our library stock, or another building designed for use by children that is as safe as the children's centre.

We understand the council needs to make savings but withdrawing support in Weston will have long lasting effects for young families. More money will be spent in the long run because of a council decision not to invest in our children whilst they are children. It also concerns us that council funded work in the proposal will focus only on families considered vulnerable. The loss of core non-targeted groups, open to everyone, will remove a major opportunity to identify families considered vulnerable in the first place.

We have a petition that has over 200 signatures and the handprints of 30 children showing support to keep the Children's Centre open along with the services it offers. Our petition demonstrates that Weston Children's Centre services are an invaluable resource in our community.