

Council – 16 September 2019

Response to the Petition: “Save Walsall Acorns Children’s Hospice for the Black Country”

Service: Children’s Services

Wards: All

1. Summary

A petition was submitted to council at its meeting on 15 July 2019. The petition, containing approximately 1706 signatures, calls on the Board of Acorns Charity to “save Walsall Acorns Children’s Hospice for the Black Country”.

A meeting of Acorns Board of Trustees also took place on 15 July to decide the future of the hospice. As a result of feedback received and positive funding developments, the decision to close Acorns Black Country Hospice in Walsall was placed on hold.

This means the hospice will remain open until at least the end of the financial year, allowing Acorns, working with the community, major funders, businesses and philanthropists, to launch an urgent fund raising appeal.

This report references the collective effort and activity that took place between the public announcement of the proposed closure on 3 June (which was the first time the council was made aware) and the decision by Acorn’s Board of Trustees on 15 July. It details the positive changes to local and national funding and the next steps intended to secure the future of the hospice in Walsall for children and families across the Black Country who use it.

2. Recommendation

That the council recognises and thanks all those that have helped bring about the decision taken by Acorns Board of Trustees

That the council continues to use its influence to support the ‘Save Acorns Black Country Hospice Appeal’.

That the council’s £100K contribution is noted subject to CCG providing its contribution and a formal grant agreement in place.

3. Report detail

3.1 Statement of Petition

'The Board of Acorns Charity is called upon to grant a 'stay of execution' to allow time to work with interested parties to plan and identify funding for keeping Walsall Children's Hospice as a substantial going concern'.

3.2 Response to the Petition

3.2.1 The decision

As a result of feedback received and positive central and local NHS funding announcements, the decision to close Acorns Black Country Hospice in Walsall was placed on hold for a further four months by Acorns Board Trustees at its meeting on 15 July 2019.

This lifeline means that the hospice, located in Walsall, can stay open to offer care to local Black Country children and families until at least the end of March 2020.

3.2.2 What changed?

When the proposal to close the Walsall hospice was announced on 3 June, families, MP's, councillors, commissioners, the local community and the local business community contacted Acorns, keen to prevent the closure so that children and families could continue to receive their children's hospice care locally.

a) Response to consultation

As soon as the council became aware of the proposed closure (3 June, the same time as the public announcement), Councillor Wilson, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, arranged a meeting with the Chief Executive and the Director of Care of Acorns. Invites were extended to Cabinet and the leader of the Labour party. A cross party group of councillors then met with senior leaders from Acorns on 11 June to oppose the proposed closure of the hospice and call upon Acorns to stop, rethink and explore alternative options. Members shared:

- their disappointment about the lack of timely communication with the council
- their collective dismay about the potential loss of such a valuable resource
- explained the impact the closure would have on Walsall and the wider Black Country's most vulnerable children and families.

Councillor Wilson also wrote to key stakeholders and partners including schools, West Midland Authorities, Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCG's) and Safeguarding Partnership Board members, urging them to register their opposition to the proposed closure and respond to the formal consultation.

A mum whose daughter attends Acorns in Walsall set up an on line petition that was signed by over 30,000 people

Another parent travelled to Westminster in June with senior leaders from Acorns Charity, to meet with a large group of Black Country MP's and a senior Director from NHS England, with responsibility for children's hospice funding.

A deputation by SWAT, the 'Saving Walsall Acorns Team' set up to oppose the closure, addressed Acorns Trustees at the start of their Board meeting on 15 July, calling on the Charity to look again at the proposal to close the hospice.

b) NHS England announcement on July 2

Board Trustees also reviewed external developments over the previous month, at their meeting on 15 July, specifically the announcement by NHS England that they will double their central funding to the country's children's hospices, including Acorns, over the next five years. This increase is phased over the next five years, with the full amount reached by 2024. This might mean up to £1m a year in additional long term Government funding for Acorns by 2024, which would almost close the current gap between what is currently spent on care and the overall income received by the charity.

c) Additional support from local commissioners: on July 12

Acorns received confirmation of an additional £568K funding; £468K of which was NHS funding from the Black Country Sustainability and Transformation Partnership (STP) CCG's for the Walsall hospice, and £100K from the Council. This funding is designed to keep the Walsall hospice open until at least the end of the financial year, which allows time to launch an appeal. It should be noted, in order for the Council's funds to be released, a detailed grant agreement will be required, both to reflect the CCG's contribution along with statutory requirements for Acorns to provide supporting information on the use of this funding.

3.2.3 Next steps

The decision to close Acorns Black Country Hospice in Walsall has been placed on hold by Acorns Board of Trustees for a further four months.

To keep the hospice from closure altogether, the Board has confirmed it needs to raise £2million and has launched a 'Save Acorns Black Country Hospice Appeal' to raise the funds that will safeguard the Walsall hospice for the longer term. All funds donated to this appeal will be held in a designated fund appeal and spent only on delivering care from the Walsall hospice.

Acorns are working with the community, major funders, businesses and philanthropists.

Councillor Wilson has written to neighbouring local authorities whose families use and benefit from Acorns Black Country hospice in Walsall to match our 100k contribution so that its future can be safeguarded.

Trustees will make a decision in November about whether there is sufficient visibility of £2m being achievable. The aim is to provide enough compelling evidence of there being sufficient money, commitment and a pipeline of pledges and activity to reassure Trustees when they assess the situation again in November that the £2 million needed can be found.

Author

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'SARME'.

Sally Rowe

Executive Director

6 September 2019