

**To: Lisa Sparks, Commissioning Manager – Housing Related Support**

**Cc: Cllr Simon Bywater, Chair, Children and Young People Committee**

**Cc: Cllr Anna Bailey, Chair, Adults Committee**

Cambridgeshire County Council

Shire Hall

Cambridge

CB3 0AP

Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> March 2019

**Re: Whitworth House**

We are writing in response to the proposal to cut funding to Whitworth House, as part of the County Council's strategic review of housing-related support provision across Cambridgeshire. This proposed funding withdrawal, which amounts to £65,000 per year, has led Orwell Housing – the service provider that owns, staffs and manages the House – to announce that they can see no other solution than to close the service and sell the property.

We the undersigned are both hopeful and determined that something can be done to keep Whitworth House open.

Whitworth House is a unique, effective and inexpensive service. For women aged 16-25 who are at risk of homelessness, often because of domestic violence and/or the breakdown of family relationships, it provides a secure and supportive all-female environment, of a size and capacity available nowhere else within the housing system in Cambridge.

Spread across 15 residents, the £65,000 that the council spends on the service per year works out at just over £4,300 per resident per year, or £11.87 per resident per day. This moderate investment, which we understand costs less than other supported housing services in Cambridgeshire funded by the Council, provides a safe and stable living environment. Crucially, it also offers high-quality pastoral care that supports young women to develop their skills, pursue training and employment opportunities, and eventually move on to more permanent accommodation.

By offering early intervention to a particularly vulnerable group of people, Whitworth House is highly effective at preventing the downward spiral into long-term homelessness. It equips residents for independent living while also providing a structured and supportive environment that is appropriate to their age and circumstances. An 18-year old current resident says, "I don't want to be that statistic, that care kid that didn't make college, that ends up doing drugs, or dead: I want to succeed - but you can't do it without help and guidance."

Whitworth House does far more than keeping people off the streets: it turns lives around. For one 19-year-old current resident the positive impact of the House has been enormous: "I had nothing – then I came here, and I got everything back. Since I moved here they never let me give up: I'm better than I've ever been before. I'm really stable and happy."

The House is widely endorsed by the local community and is an important local asset. Local charities, companies, community groups and residents donated approximately £750,000 to

enable the House to be set up in 1998. The response from the public and the press to the announcement of the House's closure has been overwhelming: the [petition](#) started by a resident of the House is now at ~39,000 signatures, and news of the House's closure has been reported on BBC Look East, in the [Cambridge Independent](#) and [Varsity](#).

We are pleased that as part of its review of service provision across the county, the Council is open to dialogue with providers and other interested parties, including charities like The Whitworth Trust. Trust committee members look forward to meeting with representatives from the Council and from Orwell Housing in mid-March. We hope that there can be a constructive discussion about ways to keep Whitworth House open, and that the rationale of the proposal to cut its funding might be reviewed and reassessed. Ahead of this meeting, and with the support of the undersigned, we would like to raise the following questions.

**Q1. RE: the rationale for the Council's proposal to cut funding to Whitworth House**

Following the Council's strategic review of housing provision, we understand that Whitworth House was judged unable to demonstrate full 'strategic relevance'. Could you tell us more about how reviewers arrived at this judgment, and on what it is based?

**Q2. RE: services for young people**

We understand that the review also led to the conclusion that there is a surplus of supported housing units for young people in Cambridge city, and that the Council is now seeking to reduce this number.

How did reviewers arrive at this conclusion, and on what it is based?

**Q3 + Q4. RE: the provision of all-female space**

Was the fact that Whitworth House provides a secure and staffed all-female space to its residents factored into the proposal to cut its funding?

Moreover, was the decision supported by an impact assessment, to show that there would be no disproportionate adverse impact on specific groups of people? In this particular case, we understand that it is the duty of the council to produce a gender impact assessment on its decision.

Research by the Equalities and Human Rights Commission has shown that many women in difficult situations would not have accessed support services if they had not been women-only.<sup>1</sup> For many women facing homelessness, including a number of those who become residents at Whitworth House, their past life experiences make sharing hostel-type accommodation with men a difficult and threatening prospect.

The Women's Resource Centre has calculated that the 'social value' generated by women's services is 5 to 11 times greater than the amount of money invested in them.<sup>2</sup> We hope that

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<sup>1</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission Research Report 86 (2012), '[The impact of changes in commissioning and funding on women-only services](#)'. See also Women's Budget Group, '[Life-changing and life-saving: funding for the women's sector](#)' (2012)

<sup>2</sup> See '[Hidden Value: Demonstrating the extraordinary impact of women's voluntary and community organisations](#)' (2011).

the Council will consider factoring in the social value that Whitworth House generates, as well as the money it saves the state in the long term, into decisions surrounding its funding.

**Q5. RE: the consultation process leading to the proposed funding cuts**

Were representatives from the wider women's sector consulted about the funding cuts to Whitworth House, and how such cuts would affect the existing network of homelessness services in Cambridgeshire? What attempts were made to understand the specific provision that Whitworth House provides as part of the bigger picture?

It is worth noting that following the Homelessness 'Summit' held in Cambridge in November 2018, a specific 'Women and Homelessness Action Group' (WHAG) has been formed with the intention of producing an action plan for homeless women in the city. WHAG is not only committed to supporting existing provision for this group (including Whitworth House) but is looking into the possibility of providing more services, at a time of ever-increasing need.

**Q6. RE: the 'short term' nature of accommodation in Whitworth House**

The BBC Look East feature on Whitworth House incorporated a quote from the Council, suggesting that it aims to "move away from hostel, short term accommodation... and is looking at models...that help vulnerable homeless people regain their independence".

Is it the view of the Council that the two-year residency period allowed at Whitworth House is not long enough to effect measurable positive change in the circumstances of its young residents? If so, how was such a view arrived at?

**Q7. RE: alternative provision**

If cuts are made to this service, what alternative provision do you envisage being put in place for this particular population of vulnerable young women in Cambridgeshire?

**Q8. RE: the transition plan for current residents**

Our most urgent, and final, question concerns those women currently resident at Whitworth House. What is the transition plan for current residents, and who will be responsible for rehousing them? How much will it cost to supply alternative, safe accommodation for these young people?

For dozens of women over the last two decades, Whitworth House has been a safety net, enabling them to build a support network and (re)gain their independence despite the loss and trauma they have suffered early in life. We strongly urge the Council to look again at its rationale for cutting Whitworth House's funding, giving due consideration to the uniqueness, effectiveness, and excellent value for money offered by this service. We also value the opportunity for dialogue, before a decision is arrived at and voted on by Council members.

We are grateful for your time in responding to this letter and our questions.

Yours Sincerely,

Ruth Jackson, Chair, and the Trustees, The Whitworth Trust  
Rowan Williams, Patron, The Whitworth Trust

Nicola Padfield, Master, Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge

Melissa Fielding, Department of Geography, University of Cambridge

Jane Dominey, Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge

Members of the Women and Homelessness Action Group (WHAG) in Cambridge:

Emma Hyde

Anna Gilchrist

Diana Minns

Angie Stewart

Maggie Bending

Alice Rowley

Annie Sam

Kate Sharkie

Chris Jenkin

Kristian Claxton