



# Muddeford Wood Preschool

Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> November

Dear Parents and Carers,

It has been drawn to my attention that the Muddeford Wood Community Trust has posted a statement online. I was heartbroken and dismayed to read the baseless allegations made in their statement, and I feel it is necessary to address them immediately.

I would like to thank again all the parents and carers who have given us their support and contacted the Trust, our local MP, Councillors, and those who have defended us online. Your support has been outstanding and has shown me what a special community we are. I'm sure that you share my disappointment and frustration, that rather than engaging positively with the preschool, concerned parents and community members to try to find a solution, that they have instead chosen to attempt to smear our preschool's reputation.

Our absolute priority is your children's safety and wellbeing, so the Trust's statement that we are breaking Health and Safety and Fire Regulations was very upsetting. I think it is important to draw a distinction between 'statutory' health and safety (i.e., the law), and what the Trust considers to be matters of health and safety, and fire safety.

I want to assure you that we do NOT break any statutory Health and Safety or Fire Regulations. We are heavily regulated by Ofsted and the DfE, and we have Ofsted Inspections and regular visits from the Early Years Team at BCP to ensure that we are meeting all statutory requirements. They ensure that our room, policies and procedures and risk assessments meet with the standards set in law and keep the children safe. I am pleased to say that at our last Ofsted inspection a year ago, we were rated good in all areas, the Inspector had no concerns about any aspect of Health and Safety, and commented in her report.

'Staff teach children about risk and safety and allow them the independence to have a go and explore things for themselves. This helps children to flourish in their physical and personal development.' Ofsted Report, 02.11.2023

When the Trust have raised concerns in the past, for example that pushchairs and our lunch trolley were partially blocking a fire exit, I have acted immediately to ensure that the fire exit was clear. The reason they originally gave us for ending our hire of the room was that we had broken our lease terms and conditions by leaving our playhouse in the room, which is not a breach of any statutory Health and Safety or fire regulations, and had been agreed with the Chair of the Trust. We have previously spoken to all other users of our room, who all agreed that the equipment in the room does not cause them



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any issues, so for the trust to claim that we are impacting other hirers is simply untrue, in fact, every day our staff go above and beyond to tidy away all of our equipment, and sweep and vacuum in preparation for the next hirer.

Sadly, despite invited the Trust in on many occasions, all members of the Community Trust have declined visiting the preschool during operating hours, so they have not seen our robust Health and Safety procedures in place.

The Trust have stated that local councillors have been fully involved. At this point it is relevant to draw attention to the fact that our local Councillor, and current Christchurch town Mayor Paul Hilliard is also the Treasurer of the Muddeford Wood Community Trust, and as such has a major conflict of interest. He is also someone who in his role as the Mayor of Christchurch has a responsibility to ensure that he listens to and advocates for all members of the community, particularly for our children, who rely on adults to represent them. We have approached Lesley Dedman, our other Muddeford Councillor, on several occasions, but she has refused to meet with us or visit the preschool. We are really concerned and dismayed that the needs of our youngest members of the community are not being taken account of by our two councillors. I was further concerned to hear that Lesley Dedman has been commenting on this matter on social media, and that some comments made in support of the preschool had been removed. She has never visited our preschool or met with us, so she does not have an informed or balanced view.

The Trust are right to say that we are working closely with colleagues at BCP, who are supportive and taking this very seriously, trying to find a resolution. Our MP Sir Christopher Chope has also been supportive and will be visiting on Monday.

The Trust has also claimed that they match-funded the building of the dedicated preschool room in 2017. This is simply not the case. The cost of the build of our room was £210,368.74, the Trust managed the build, and this figure was given to us by the Trust themselves. Muddeford Wood Playgroup received a grant for £171,500 from the DfE, specifically to fund buildings for Early Years spaces, we also contributed £15,000 from our own reserves. The DfE grants were only available to Early Years settings, so Muddeford Wood Preschool put in the bid, with trust input, rather than the other way round. The Trust received a £50,000 grant from the Talbot Village Trust to put towards the preschool build. The total of the combined grants and our contribution is £236,500. We are not aware of the fate of the remaining £26,131.26 of grants and monies from our reserves.

The Trust has said that they will rent out the preschool room to a 'superior' provider that will operate 52 weeks of the year. Our preschool has approached the trust in the past about extending our hours, but unfortunately our expected rent of £39,330 for the



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2024/25 academic year is already three to five times the typical amount paid by local preschool providers, and to extend our provision to 50 weeks a year and lengthen our day to 8am-6pm (plus set up and pack away time) would increase our rent to £63,250, or five to eight times the typical amount, which I am sure you all understand is completely unaffordable for us, or any other preschool. We asked the Trust about negotiating a lower rent for the proposed new hours, but disappointingly they turned this down.

The most heartbreaking thing about the Trust's statement was their lack of care or empathy for our children and families. I am horrified on your behalf that they have not taken the time and care to think about the impact that moving our preschool may have on your settled and happy children, and the worry that this unnecessary uncertainty is causing for you. I want to reiterate that your children are our absolute priority, and that this situation, however upsetting and frustrating for us, has served to underline how precious our community is. Our staff team are more passionate than ever about your children's happiness, safety and development, we will not let the Trust's behaviour impact them in any way. We know that our future is bright, whether it is here or in another local location.

Please come along to talk to Sir Christopher Chope at 9am on Monday morning if you can. We are also front-page news of the Echo today, and they have published a short online article. Your voices and opinions are important, together we are strong! We will keep you updated with progress, and please let us know if you have replies from anyone that you have reached out to. Please feel free to contact us via email or talk in person at drop off time, and I will be at parents evening on Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> November as well.