

## **Derby City Council: Consultation on Care Home Closure Proposals**

### **Report on consultation at Merrill House**

**Prepared for:**

**Phil Holmes  
Head of Strategic Commissioning  
Older People and Physical Disabilities  
Adults, Health and Housing  
Derby City Council  
29 St Mary's Gate  
Derby  
DE1 3NU**

**Tel: 01332 716985**

**Email: [Phil.Holmes@derby.gov.uk](mailto:Phil.Holmes@derby.gov.uk)**

**Prepared by:**

**Agencia Consulting Ltd  
8 Waterside House  
Livingstone Road  
Hessle  
East Yorkshire  
HU13 0EG**

**Tel: 01482 649900**

**Fax: 01482 649939**

**Email: [info@agenciaconsulting.com](mailto:info@agenciaconsulting.com)**

**Website: [www.agenciaconsulting.com](http://www.agenciaconsulting.com)**

**Date: 9<sup>th</sup> March 2011**

## 1. Introduction

Agencia Consulting was commissioned by Derby City Council (DCC) in November 2010 to support consultation on DCC proposals to close two of their care homes; Merrill House and Warwick House. Agencia was to provide a neutral and independent role in supporting current residents of the two homes and their families to discuss the proposals and submit their comments to the Council for consideration as part of the decision-making process. Full details of the Agencia plans for undertaking this role were agreed with DCC in November.

The consultation process was launched by DCC on 1<sup>st</sup> December 2010, with documents setting out the proposals being issued to residents and their relatives and discussed at brief meetings at each home. This was followed by opportunities to respond through further meetings and in writing, as outlined in section 3.

This final report on Merrill House summarises the consultation process, analyses the main points arising from meetings and responses received and identifies the principal issues to be considered and addressed by DCC in deciding the way forward. This report is to be considered by Council Cabinet on Tuesday 12th April 2011. It is only at that point that a final decision will be made.

Throughout this report and the supporting documentation, the Agencia team has sought to record and present accurately the nature of the comments made by respondents. We were not, however, in a position to verify or comment on the validity of the views expressed to us. During the consultation period, DCC responded to some requests for additional information, both in meetings and in written papers. We have not reflected that additional information in this report as it would be outside our brief of reporting the views of residents and their families and carers.

The Agencia team would like to thank all those who responded or participated in any way to the consultation process, for taking the time to share their experiences and views with us. We recognise that many of those involved have been very concerned and emotional about the proposed closure of Merrill House and we have tried to reflect their views as clearly and objectively as possible in this report.

## 2. Background to the proposals and consultation

### 2.1 The DCC proposals

On 23rd November 2010 Derby City Council Cabinet made a decision to allow consultation on a proposal to close Merrill House care home for older people. The consultation process began on Wednesday 1st December 2010 and ended on Wednesday 23rd February 2011.

**DCC issued a consultation document setting out their proposal, the main points of which are summarised in the box below:**

Merrill House provides residential care. It does not regularly provide intermediate care or respite care. Merrill House has 40 bedrooms: at the time of writing 36 bedrooms are occupied and four are vacant.

The Council has been considering changes to care home services for some time. Reports were presented to Council Cabinet on 17<sup>th</sup> March and 27<sup>th</sup> October 2009 setting out the reasons that changes needed to be made and the time over which changes should take place.

The main reasons set out for change were:

1. Fewer people were moving into care homes each year because they were now better supported at home
2. This meant there were too many care home places in Derby as a whole
3. There was very little Extra Care Housing in Derby and older people said they wanted this as an alternative to care home places
4. There needed to be a clearer focus on dementia and on intermediate care (short-term rehabilitation designed to help people return home)
5. The Council's care homes were built in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s for more able people than currently live in them. Although staff are generally excellent, the design of the homes do not support good care.

On 27<sup>th</sup> October 2009 Council Cabinet said that residential care should be provided at Merrill House until Extra Care Housing was developed in the area.

However, like many other Local Authorities, the Council's financial situation has changed a great deal in the last year. The Council can no longer justify running all of its care homes if there are too many care home places in Derby as a whole.

There are two ways that closing Merrill House would help the Council:

1. Day to day running costs will be saved
2. The selling of the site will give the Council money to help develop more Extra Care Housing. The Council is having to rely more and more on its own funding for these developments since other Government funding has dried up.

The Council's financial situation has speeded up the need for change, but the principles set out still stand. In particular, there are still too many care home places in Derby. The report shows that the numbers of beds could be reduced by 78 and there would still be enough places for older people who need to move into residential care.

This principle of making sure there are enough places for older people is extremely important. Care home beds cannot be cut so much that vulnerable older people have nowhere to move. Although money is clearly an important factor, the overriding consideration is that there are enough care home places for older people at any given time.

Another principle of the previous work that is still very important is to look at the different needs of different areas and not treat Derby in a "one-size-fits-all" way. Merrill House is one of two sites chosen out of the Council's seven homes because there are enough local alternatives to support the area if the home is closed in September 2011.

Ensuring older people have proper access to good dementia care is still essential although the approach to achieve this has changed. The Council's commitment to providing Intermediate Care that helps people regain confidence and skills to return home when it is safe also remains strong.

## 2.2 Impact of proposed changes on residents at Merrill House

The Council recognises that closure of the home would be extremely difficult for residents, family members and friends, as well as staff working in the home. If closure was confirmed the Council would work sensitively with affected people, exploring good quality alternatives over a manageable period of time that minimises the stress of moving.

- Council Care Managers will work very closely with residents and their families, looking at how needs have changed and making sure the wishes of residents and the people who care for them are central to decisions.
- Residents without involved family members or friends will be offered advocacy by an independent organisation that can help them express their wishes.
- Permanent residents will be supported to move to care homes that meet their needs in locations they prefer.
- Some residents may prefer to move to other Council-run care homes. This may be an option but extreme caution needs to be exercised: the Council has made it clear that other care homes will undergo consultation on closure as the demand for places falls further.
- Approximately six months will be allowed between any decision to close Merrill House and its actual closure.
- If residents wish to make new arrangements well ahead of the final home closure date this can of course be supported.
- Some people will have developed friendships at Merrill House and may prefer to move in groups. This will be accommodated when at all possible.

## 2.3 Scope of the consultation

The current consultation relates to the proposal to close Merrill House and is limited to people directly affected by the proposed changes to Merrill House. These include:

- Residents of Merrill House
- The families, carers and advocates of the above
- Council staff who work in Merrill House

- Wider stakeholders who have an interest in the development of older people's services in the area including local residents and community groups.

The current consultation is not an attempt to provide a comprehensive picture of plans for care services across the whole City of Derby.

#### 2.4 Agencia's role in the consultation

The Council recognises the significance of these proposals and has therefore recruited Agencia Consulting as an independent organisation to facilitate and report on the consultation for them. Agencia Consulting has considerable experience of ensuring that people affected by change and their families are properly engaged in consultation. All responses to the consultation have been directed to Agencia Consulting.

Agencia's role in the consultation was:

- to advise DCC with regard to the consultation process;
- to arrange, run and facilitate a programme of consultation meetings in the care homes, for those using the services and their families;
- to support residents, service users and relatives in giving feedback on the proposals, both through the meetings in homes and directly to Agencia by telephone and in writing;
- to receive and report on responses from other organisations and individuals expressing views on the Council's proposals;
- to record and analyse the feedback received through the consultation process, and
- to produce a report to the Council, highlighting the main issues for consideration.

*(Based on the consultation document issued by Derby City Council)*

### 3. The approach to consultation

#### 3.1 Launch Meetings

The consultation was launched at meetings held at Merrill House and Warwick House on Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> December, and these were well attended. Each commenced with a brief summary of the DCC proposals and the consultation process, followed by discussion of issues raised by those present, including both residents and their relatives, together with some community representatives. Similar points were raised at both initial meetings and these are summarised below:

- Why were external consultants being used to run the consultation and at what cost? Why was money being spent in this way when it could be better used on the care of older people? Many suggested they would rather speak to DCC representatives directly to express their views. People criticised the fact that DCC Councillors were not present to hear their views and requested that they attend meetings in each home as soon as possible (subsequently arranged for 11th January at Merrill House).
- Had the decision already been made to close these homes?
- What was the rationale for the closure of these homes and where was the evidence to support the proposals?
- Both homes were seen to be very well used and popular – why was DCC seeking to close them?
- Concerns were expressed about the standard of care in other local care homes, where DCC had suggested alternative places were available.
- Information was requested about the cost of running the homes and potential savings to be made – why was it not viable for DCC to continue running homes which were well occupied, if private homes were able to make a profit?
- People were strongly critical of other DCC spending plans and felt more priority should be given to looking after vulnerable older people.
- Some respondents questioned why DCC had spent money recently on improving the decorations and furnishings in the homes if it was intended to close them.
- Some residents had already been moved from other DCC homes which were threatened with closure and strong concerns were expressed about the impact of such disruption and repeated moves on their health.
- Participants requested that the Agencia report on the outcomes of consultation with residents and their relatives should be made available to them, prior to it being presented to the Cabinet for decision.

#### 3.2 The consultation process

Immediately following the launch meetings in each home, arrangements were made for meetings to be held in January for residents and their relatives to meet the Agencia team and discuss their views on the DCC proposals for each home. Dates were agreed and publicised and a process was established for people to book meetings directly with Agencia, or through care home staff where appropriate.

The booking for these meetings was slow at first, with some people expressing concerns about meeting an external consultancy paid for by DCC. However, initial meetings were held in Merrill house on 6<sup>th</sup> January and were reasonably well attended. Further meetings were held on the 19<sup>th</sup> January and attendance proved much greater. Summaries of the main points raised at these meetings are given in chapter 4.

In addition, many families responded to the consultation proposals in writing and by telephone. These responses have also been collated, analysed and reported later in this report.

### 3.3 Responses to consultation

The nature and scale of responses to the proposals through the different media varied significantly, but the following summary will provide an indication of the numbers directly involved in each way. However, it should be borne in mind that many others were informed and chose not to respond, often having spoken informally to staff or other contacts.

In total, the Agencia team met with 29 residents and relatives (excluding staff) representing 19 residents during the consultation meetings at Merrill House.

In addition, 15 written responses (11 comments forms and 4 letters) were received in relation to Merrill House.

### 3.4 Recording and analysis of comments

The Agencia team kept a written record of the main comments made in meetings with residents and their relatives. All comments were coded and summarised in a spreadsheet to assist analysis and comparison of issues arising from the various meetings.

A log was maintained in the Agencia office of all comments received from individuals or organisations by telephone or in written form (by letter, email or comments form). Acknowledgements or specific responses, where appropriate, were sent to those respondents who had indicated they wished to receive a reply. Again, all comments received were summarised, entered onto a spreadsheet and analysed in compiling this report.

The fact that responses were being recorded and analysed throughout the consultation process allowed issues to be identified and considered as they arose, rather than waiting until the consultation period had closed before doing so. This enabled issues to be picked up in correspondence and discussions as appropriate. It also enabled DCC officers involved in the process to assess the issues raised and decide on any further action required during the consultation period (e.g. meetings with Councillors and provision of additional information). Nevertheless, this present report was only produced following the end of the consultation period and every effort has been made to ensure that all issues have been given a fair hearing and equal weighting, however and whenever they were raised.



## 4. Findings: meetings with residents and their families

The Agencia team visited Merrill House on Thursday 6th and Wednesday 19th January, when meetings were held with individuals or small family groups representing 20 residents. A similar semi-structured agenda was followed in each meeting and the main points were reported back on 1<sup>st</sup> February to a group of 26 (residents, relatives and staff) for validation and refinement. The DCC lead officer was in attendance at this meeting and provided additional information in response to questions raised in the earlier meetings.

Given the nature and content of the consultation process outlined above, and the level of detail emerging from meetings, every comment cannot be presented in full in this report. In this section, therefore, we have attempted to summarise the main findings from the meetings with residents and relatives.

To reiterate the point made in the introduction, throughout this report and the supporting documentation, the Agencia team has sought to record and present accurately the nature of the comments made by respondents. We were not, however, in a position to verify or comment on the validity of the views expressed to us.

### 4.1 Understanding of the consultation process and Derby City Council (DCC) proposals

- Some relatives commented about the order in which the consultation had been planned and organised – *“why have the Council said they will close it and then run the consultation? It’s the wrong way round.”*
- Most people had been informed about the proposals directly by a phone call from Merrill House. This was because the proposals were to appear in the paper. However, others had heard the news from people at Warwick House, who had already seen it in the paper.
- There was widespread criticism regarding the timing of the announcement on the proposals – *“within 24 hours of announcing the proposals, the Council announced that they were going to borrow £40 million to re-do the Council House.”*
- Some residents reported that they had not had the consultation document and would like it – *“as a resident I have not been given the paper work about what’s going on...”*
- The proposals in the document were generally understood by relatives who had seen them, but were considered to be too vague on the rationale for the proposed closure and the implications for residents. More information was needed on the rationale for the proposal and how the planned closure would be implemented. (N.B. Some additional information on the issues raised was handed out by DCC at the feedback meeting on 1 February).
- One relative said that the way that the consultation documents were written suggest that Merrill House will close – *“it is totally leaning towards what will happen when it closes.”* Similarly, another relative said *“it feels like it’s already a done-deal.”*
- One relative said that whilst the papers were well written, there was nothing in the documents that addressed the emotional impact of the proposals.
- One relative suggested that the consultation meetings should have been hosted by the Council rather than consultants – *“the Council bosses should be here not consultants. Why won’t they face us?”*



- There was anger amongst relatives that meetings with DCC Councillors regarding the proposals had been organised at short notice and inconvenient times – *“the letter about the meeting with Councillors gave us no notice to prepare things or get time off work.”*
- Several people had attended the meeting with local Councillors, but there was a perception that this had not been well run: *“it was just a shouting match” “the meeting with Councillors was heated, personal and not handled well.”*
- There was a strong demand to have the opportunity to review the Agencia consultation report before it went to DCC, both to ensure that it fully reflected what had been said and to ensure that DCC did not change the report. There were also requests for the Agencia final report to be posted to participants, as many could not access it on-line.

#### 4.2 Proposed closure of Merrill House

- What was the rationale for the proposal - why choose Merrill House, of all the DCC homes, when it was virtually full (36 of 40 beds) and everyone was very happy with the standard of care provided? Many relatives asked to see further evidence upon which the closure proposals had been based *“we have not seen any evidence that people want Extra Care Housing. We want to see it”* and *“I’ve been asking about the survey for 12 months and haven’t seen it.”*
- Most people did not believe that there was a surplus of provision and a diminishing demand for the services of Merrill House – one relative stated that he had rung round and found only 4 Council-run vacancies in the city. How had the Council established that there was a surplus of 78? Where was this data obtained from and who produced the figures? *“I don’t believe the numbers!”* Additionally, one relative commented that planning permission had recently been granted for private homes and that this implied that the private sector must perceive there to be a demand for care homes.
- Several questions were asked about the closure being driven by the need to cut costs rather than it being in the best interests of older people, including whether the value of the site was the real reason why Merrill house was now being proposed for closure – *“at the Councillors’ meeting, they admitted that Merrill is breaking even, not making a loss, so why close it?” “all the messages from the press are about money,” “the Council are targeting children and old people – it’s just part of the government sexy cost cutting policy” and “a saving of £300,000 is only 300 houses’ council tax.”*
- Some questions were raised about the running costs of Merrill House and the anticipated savings if it closed (especially if people had to be looked after in more expensive private homes). Had the Council really thought through the consequences? Why not close a smaller home, with fewer residents, which would reduce the scale of impact, whilst still leading to financial savings?
- Most relatives made reference to the level of spending being undertaken by the Council on improvements to the Council House offices. It was suggested that spending on the Council House was ‘over the top’ and this money could be saved, to allow older people to continue to receive good quality care. Anger regarding Council spending on the Council House had increased with the knowledge that (including the cost of the loan), the total spending would be £90 million.

- A suggestion was made that Merrill House should be developed as a centre of excellence, building on the good staff and family ethos, to show what good quality care could be provided.
- Many concerns were expressed about the suitability of Extra Care Housing for the current residents of Merrill House – *“Mum has dementia. A retirement village would be no good.”* *“most would prefer not to have en-suite/5 star care as this can be very impersonal.”* Concern was also expressed about the way in which the Extra Care Housing survey had been conducted, particularly the fact that residents and families from Merrill House had not been included in the sample.
- Some residents had only just moved to Merrill House, and felt they should have been made aware of the proposed closure at the time, to avoid the further move and associated disruption now required.
- Several relatives voiced concerns about care home sites becoming derelict once they had been closed – *“a lot of these places closed last year and are now just derelict because they haven’t got the money to build retirement villages.”*
- There was a feeling that the consultation and Agencia report would not stop Merrill House from being closed – the consultation was widely perceived to be a ‘rubber-stamping’ exercise.
- The home had close links with the local community and there was a strong plea to the Council to think again and keep Merrill House open.

#### 4.3 Impact of proposals on care of individual residents

- All families felt the proposal and associated anxieties were already having an adverse impact on residents and they raised serious concerns about the adverse impact of the inevitable disruption on the health and mortality of residents, if the closure was pursued - *“mum has said for weeks, ‘I wish I was dead’,”* and *“moving mum from upstairs to downstairs here unsettled her. What would she be like moving homes?”*
- Most participants expressed concern at the Council’s apparent lack of a long term plan / strategy on what they would do with the residents if the home was closed. Most believed DCC had not got a plan. If there was a plan, DCC had not discussed it with anyone, compounding the fears of those affected: *“it feels rushed and ill-conceived. Was it conceived over a long lunch?!”* and *“they need to build the new place first before closing the old.”*
- More information was requested about what the options would be for residents – what places were really available and in which homes and at what cost – would they offer anything like the same quality as Merrill House? Residents, and especially those with little family support, would need real help and support from the Council in looking at the alternatives. Would they have real choice in terms of new homes?
- Two residents said that they did not understand why they might have to leave Merrill House *“is it because we’ve not paid the rent?”* and *“it’s wonderful, its perfect!”* Other residents were clear that if they had to move, they would want to move collectively. This included one gentleman who was due to marry a fellow resident and did not wish to be separated.
- Several individuals said that they did not have an advocate or other representative such as a social worker/key worker. Clarification that this form of support was available and how it could be accessed would be welcomed.

- Questions were asked about how furniture and personal belongings would be moved – furniture helped to provide a sense of continuity to residents.
- What would the financial impact of any move be for residents and their families? – would DCC support any additional fees or costs involved in people moving to more expensive private sector homes? If so, would this support be available for anybody choosing to move at an earlier stage?
- Some people had previously had poor experiences of other homes and care settings and felt that Merrill House had offered them something special – they had real concerns about having to move back to these other homes or homecare *“home help is abysmal; they put them to bed at 5pm and dad worried about who was coming in and out of his house”* and *“private homes are all staffed by foreigners; they’re very difficult to understand. Is that why private homes have vacancies?”* Additionally, some residents had moved to Merrill House from other DCC homes because of earlier closures or proposed closures, so they were now facing a double move, which was very worrying for them. Some relatives questioned whether the Councillors really understood the impact of their decisions.
- Some relatives raised their rights of choice and asked what would happen if they chose not to move their family member to one of the other homes on offer. However, they were also concerned that once a decision was reached, there would be a scramble for the available places and Merrill House would run down quickly – *“what will happen as staff and residents start to leave? They will have to use agency staff.”*
- One relative queried the phrasing in the consultation document that DCC would move residents together ‘wherever possible.’ It was felt that residents should be moved together whenever that was their wish.

#### 4.4 Important issues to be addressed if decision is reached to close the home

- Many questioned the speed of the proposed closure and questioned whether it could be done more slowly, allowing many residents to live out the rest of their natural lives in Merrill House.
- Participants felt that choice would be limited, because of the higher fee levels involved in many private sector homes – would DCC support any additional cost? One relative claimed that *“Phil Holmes said each person would be assessed on a case by case basis and that DCC would pay the difference if it costs more. How does this save money?”* Relatives requested *“reassurance that no one will have to pay more, including self-funders.”*
- Families expressed real concerns about the loss of security and familiarity for people involved in the proposed closure and the associated anxieties, especially given their previous experiences.
- All spoke very highly of the staff group and their commitment, but recognised that once a decision was reached, they would need to look after their own interests and the best staff members might well move to other jobs - *“I can’t fault the staff; they are our family.”*
- Many questioned why DCC appeared not to value older people and respect their needs and wishes – *“where is the Council’s duty of care and how does this fit with the strategy for older people?”* and *“people’s liberties and human rights have suffered. Old people are being discriminated against. Is it legal?”*

- One relative asked whether DCC had made any contingency plans (e.g. in case a safeguarding issue arises).

#### 4.5 Any other comments or suggestions

- Several suggestions were made as to how DCC might capitalise on and expand the Merrill House site, including one relative suggesting that Merrill House might also be used for youth services which would facilitate intergenerational mixing. Another suggestion was the inclusion of day care on the site or the strengthening of existing long term provision. Alternatively, it was suggested that if the Council was looking to save money, this could be done by reviewing other service areas such as leisure facilities for younger people, rather than targeting the elderly and vulnerable.
- Many said that they thought the council would change to Labour on May 4<sup>th</sup> and it was hoped that this would save Merrill House from closure.
- Some expressed concerns about extra-care housing and the potential for people to be isolated in their flats, in contrast to the social contacts available in a care home.
- People questioned what the DCC plans were for dementia care – this was not clear from the document and it was felt to be an important issue, both for current residents and for the future.
- Some people mentioned that the Council were not demonstrating the care and respect for older people that they claimed to have – *“the Council’s strap line is something like ‘we care for you.’ This is rubbish.”* It was said frequently that residents had worked / fought to give this country freedom / free speech and were owed some consideration / debt. There was a feeling that the Council had demonstrated little regard for this. One group of residents and relatives said that they considered the Council to have removed their rights and choices and that the proposed closure constituted age discrimination. Another relative expressly stated that *“I am asking the Council for empathy and compromise in this matter. There is a third way on this.”*
- There was strong support for the perceived quality of care in the DCC homes and people requested information from inspections and satisfaction surveys, to help them decide if other homes could meet their needs.
- A point was made by relatives that *“not all of us are on the internet. How do we get access to all of the information we need?”* In some instances, information being available on paper was preferable.
- Various requests were made for specific documents, including minutes from the Councillors’ meetings, ECH survey results, and the Agencia consultation report when it was published.

## 5. Findings: comments forms from residents and families

This section sets out details of the issues raised from comments forms received by Agencia. In total, 11 comments forms were received and of these, 5 were anonymous. The most frequently raised issues have been summarised below.

### 5.1 Understanding of the consultation process and Derby City Council (DCC) proposals

- Most respondents who completed comments forms reported that they understood the consultation process (8 out of 11). The other 3 respondents did not provide a response to this question.
- Five respondents reported that they understood the DCC proposals, 5 did not provide a response to the question and one respondent said that they did not understand the proposals.
- Among those who also commented on the consultation process and DCC proposals, the most common comment focused on the desire for more information. In particular, this included requests for more information about alternative provision:

*"I understand that Derby City Council is considering closing Merrill House as early as September 2011 and moving the residents to other facilities. I do not know if this is to other council run facilities or private ones?"*

*"Are there other facilities in the area similar to Merrill House? My cousin knows Allenton well so obviously has common ground with other residents."*

*"What is going to happen to people who need constant care 24 hrs a day?"*

- There was some suspicion about the value of the consultation, since some respondents believed that the decision had already been made:

*"I feel the decision has already been taken as councils are closing and knocking down care homes throughout the area. Spending £20k on consultants is a total waste of money when the outcome is already cut and dried."*

*"Changes? Closure seems the only change being offered."*

- A further theme that emerged from the comments forms was the evidence base upon which the proposals had been developed:

*"Merrill House is running at 90% occupancy most of time so why the urgency to close it down within 6 months?"*

*"Proposals are not backed up by true facts and figures."*

## 5.2 Proposed closure of Merrill House

- Respondents strongly disagreed with the proposal to close Merrill House and anger was expressed by many:

*"They are disgusting."*

*"I am devastated by the proposal as my father has been given excellent care by all the staff."*

- There was a real lack of understanding as to the rationale for closure:

*"I think that the proposals take insufficient account of the residents' needs. By choosing a home to close which has a 90% load factor (36 of 40 rooms occupied) the proposal is maximising the number of residents that will be distressed."*

*"Why are you thinking of closing Merrill House when 36 bedrooms out of 40 are occupied? Also the area around Merrill House is such that you could develop the facilities if necessary."*

- This was reinforced by the belief held by some that the proposal was not in the best interests of residents, and a feeling that the Council did not understand the consequences that a closure would have on those effected:

*"Not good and certainly not in my mother's best interests."*

*"I have my doubts that the council fully understand the implications and affect these proposals will have on residents and staff."*

- Extra Care Housing was a strong theme, with many expressing negative comments about both its suitability for the residents of Merrill House and the financial feasibility of being able to build such housing in the current economic climate:

*"The residents at Merrill House need 24 hour residential care, many will not benefit from Extra Care Housing as are incapable of living on their own, despite extra help."*

*"Council care alternatives should be in place before closing Merrill. Where are the so-called extra care houses? If there's no money to keep Merrill open there's no money for new build extra care."*

## 5.3 Impact of proposals on care of individual residents

- Less than half (4 respondents) reported that they understood the proposals for their or their family member's care, 2 reported that they did not understand and 5 did not provide a response.
- Of respondents who understand the proposals, the overriding theme amongst comments made was that residents did not wish to leave Merrill House:

*"I am not leaving Merrill House. It is my home."*



*"I would like Dad to stay at Merrill House for his final years as moving out would unsettle him."*

- Concerns were expressed about the impact on residents' health, should they be moved out of Merrill House and into Extra Care Housing:

*"...concern is that even though my Mother has dementia and an eating disorder she will be placed in a wardened apartment / complex to fend for herself instead of a care home with 24 hour care which she is getting now."*

*"She is incapable of living on her own and needs 24 hour care. She does not adapt to change easily, as like many of the residents with dementia / Alzheimer's change of surroundings can be very hazardous to health for those people."*

- There was a view that the proposals did not take account of an individuals' circumstances and that the proposals had taken a 'one size fits all' approach:

*"No proposals have been given to each family personally. What might be right for one resident may be totally wrong for another."*

- Of respondents who reported that they did not understand the proposals for their own or their family member's care, the main source of confusion laid in the uncertainty that existed about alternative provision:

*"I do not know which care home my uncle would move to if the proposal goes ahead in its current form. I do not know if there are other similar facilities in this area."*

- Relating to the options for possible alternative provision, specific concerns were expressed about private care homes:

*"If private homes, how will the standard be monitored?"*

*"Would like it in writing that Council will pay the extra money needed for private care."*

- Several respondents raised questions about how the process for moving residents to alternative accommodation might work:

*"The proposals do not really say what is going to happen to my Father. I feel the staff, who are excellent, may be unable to help each resident; therefore it will be left to the relatives to do the finding of alternative homes."*

*"What criteria will be used to determine which available places are offered to which Merrill House residents? Will acceptance of places be on a first come first served basis? Will couples be guaranteed that they can stay together?"*



#### 5.4 Important issues to be addressed if decision is reached to close the home

- The overwhelming concern here was the impact of the changes on residents and carers alike. High levels of stress were being experienced, and would be expected to rise as the proposals continued to be considered and implemented. Furthermore the disruption was seen to be dangerous, and for some residents life threatening.

*"The stress of moving home. I visit him weekly and he has only just stopped asking me "Have you come to take me home?" He gets distressed just talking about Merrill House closing."*

*"Obviously the stress of moving to a strange environment and having to get used to new residents around him."*

- Respondents were clear that their preference was for Merrill House to stay open:

*"The residents and carers do not want any changes."*

*"Nothing you can do will soften the impact of her being uprooted again."*

- Several relatives expressed their worry about the impact of the proposed closure of Merrill House on themselves and other relatives. It was stressed that the impact would reach beyond that of the residents:

*"They (new homes) would need to be local to relatives, as any move will have an impact on families of residents, not just on the residents themselves."*

*"The people using the current services are unable to look after themselves and it gives great peace of mind to relatives to know that their relative is safe and warm instead of receiving telephone calls in the middle of the night informing them that their mother is in the street in all kinds of weather!"*

*"Didn't get any help finding a care home in the first place, so don't hold out much hope for any future help in finding any alternative care."*

- A further consideration in this category was that the good relationship with staff and residents should be maintained, as this would ease relocation, ensure continuity of care and maintain friendship groups. The suggestion here was that, should change and moves be necessary, then groups should move together to maintain those relationships.

*"..what about the staff. My Father has taken some time to settle down and he is now happy and this is down to the staff. We will have to find him another home and he will have to get used to strange people taking care of him..."*

*"Ease of relocation and support from Care Manager / Merrill House staff / council staff to make this worry free as possible. Reassurances that couples / groups can still remain together..."*

## 5.5 Any other comments or suggestions

- There was a large body of opinion that standards of care in Merrill House were excellent, and that the services suited residents' current needs. Mention was made of the excellence of the current staff group. Building on this, there was a suggestion that Merrill House should be further developed and retained as a centre of excellence:

*"The quality of care is excellent and the staff are caring and considerate to their elderly residents. Why close a good residential home where all the residents are happy and well cared for?"*

*"...retain it as a centre of excellence. Develop a plan to upgrade the facilities when the overall financial climate has improved. Given the amount of spare land available, expand Merrill House in the fullness of time when the finance is available."*

- Many respondents reiterated that they failed to understand why the Council was proposing to close Merrill House. In particular, points were made regarding the financial and lack of demand reasons given.

*"...they said it was to make space for more modern accommodation later it was revealed that the Council haven't the funds to put this into practice. Two previous homes have closed with no rebuilding in progress for lack funds, so why close two more homes?..."*

*"As a care home with 40 beds, of which only 4 are vacant, and having a good reputation for the care staff I see no need to close Merrill House just because the council want to save the money."*

The financial point was further compounded by the belief expressed by some that the Council's spending priorities were misguided:

*"It seems to me that the council are closing homes for the money. Maybe to modernise the Council House!!!"*

- Several respondents raised queries about the consultation process. This included the timescales involved, but also scepticism about the nature and value of the consultation:

*"6 months from decision date to final closure date does not seem very long, what happens if residents haven't found suitable alternative accommodation in this time span?"*

*"Have attended all Council / Agencia meetings, not once have I felt we were being listened to..."*

*"Were you asked by Derby City Council to look favourably on their behalf into closing homes because it always seems that when assessments are made on these sort of matters it always goes in the direction of closing the homes instead of the other way round? Have any homes remained open after an assessment by you?"*

- A significant number of respondents (including residents) made comments regarding the human rights of the elderly people involved and others queried whether the Council was adhering to its policies regarding the care of older people:

*"Council should honour their promise to look after the elderly."*

*"I found some people in Social Services very unhelpful. My Father being referred to as an 'end user'! He is not a number, he is a person with specific needs! I hope Social Service staff will be sensitive to this, but I have reservations."*

*"I've moved once because they were closing from Bramblebrook, and it is still open. I missed my friends there. It's like changing your life: mine not yours."*

## 6. Findings: letters from residents and their families

Four letters were received in relation to Merrill House, including one from a solicitor representing three residents. The main issues are summarised below:

### 6.1 Understanding of the consultation process and Derby City Council (DCC) proposals

- Two letters received expressed dissatisfaction about the way in which the consultation process was run. Respondents questioned whether this was a genuinely open consultation, saying that they felt that the decision had been predetermined. Other process concerns included the insensitivity of using consultants from outside the area to undertake the exercise. There was some feeling that the consultation process should have started at an earlier date, whilst others felt that the consultation meetings had been badly organised.

*“Extremely displeased with the way the consultation meetings have been set up and handled. One meeting (1st December) was held during the severe weather conditions - some found it impossible to attend, and there was little notice, having received invites two days prior to the date, to make arrangements to attend the other meeting (11th January). Cabinet members did not even attend the first meeting”.*

- As a result, one letter concludes that the consultation process was flawed, citing the following reasons:
  - *“Lack of transparency i.e. information had to be asked for – people did not understand what was available.*
  - *Not everyone is computer literate, so unable to access information.*
  - *Conflicting information in DCC’s documentation therefore lack of clarity.*
  - *Information asked for and not provided in a timely manner.*
  - *Presentation not aimed at an audience of residents. If not relatives / friends available they would get steamrollered.*
  - *Advocacy should have been provided throughout to protect residents’ interests*
  - *No councillors in attendance at first meeting. When they did subsequently attend excuse given was that it would have politicised the meeting.*
  - *Councillors did not seem well versed in the subject matter and seemed to talk down to the audience.”*
- Echoing the feedback from the consultation meetings, the letters queried the rationale for the proposal. This was linked with the confusion perceived to have been caused by inconsistent messages from the Council over the last 2 years.

*“DCC’s proposals seem to lack any real substance. They are flawed and, against the overall background from which they stem, raise more questions than answers. We still await satisfactory answers and clarification on a number of points.”*

*“DCC has a poor record of home closure, leaving buildings derelict, saying a home is safe and another is not then changing its mind resulting in people moving when there was no need.”*

- Related to the way in which the consultation process had been conducted, there was a call for additional information and written documentation of meeting notes to be made available:

*"Would like to receive written updates, feedback, etc. from the meetings."*

## 6.2 Proposed closure of Merrill House

- As witnessed in the consultation meetings, there was much comment by respondents about the high quality of the services currently provided by Merrill House:

*"Merrill House is a well run home, with supportive, caring and hard working staff."*

*"Merrill House is efficiently run and the care from staff is second to none."*

*"My mother is content and secure and loves the staff."*

- Relatives did not think that the Council's proposals to close Merrill House made sense and did not understand why the Council would wish to implement the proposed closure.

*"Full to capacity, why close?"*

*"It is said there is surplus provision of homes in the area, but my understanding is that these are predominantly private."*

*"Where are the 78 vacancies available?"*

- One letter acknowledged that Merrill House was not a new building, but said that this did not constitute a barrier to good delivery of care:

*"...may not be the most modern facility of its type, however what it provides is the best caring environment for its community and that you cannot build or buy."*

## 6.3 Impact of proposals on care of individual residents

- Two letters supported comments made in the consultation meetings about the breakdown of trust between the Council and relatives and residents. This stemmed from the confusion perceived to have been caused by inconsistent messages from the Council. Some commentators reflected their understanding that they had been assured that Merrill House would be a home for life.

*"When our mother moved to Merrill House we were told she would not have to move again."*

- The stress and anxiety being caused to residents and their families by the proposals was uppermost in respondents' minds, coupled with a fear that a move might prove fatal to residents:

*"Worried that another move could possibly be fatal."*

#### 6.4 Important issues to be addressed if decision is reached to close the home

- Little comment was made in letters regarding important issues to be addressed if a decision was reached to close Merrill House. However, one letter highlighted the reassurances that relatives would want, if a move were to go ahead:

*"I don't live nearby so it is a relief to know that my mother is happy and well looked after."*

#### 6.5 Any other comments or suggestions

- A number of other comments and suggestions were made:

*"The current residents have given up so much for us. In consequence, the very least we can allow them, with what little time they have left, is to remain in the home of their choice with the community they know and love."*

*"Get the private sector to build ECH."*

*"It will be a travesty of justice if such a decision is made. The only acceptable decision other than not closing the home, would be for it to continue to operate for the current residents' lives."*

## 7. Findings: letters from advocates

One letter was received from a firm of Solicitors representing three residents at Merrill House. Again the main points of their comments are summarised below.

- Given the advanced age of clients, and given the fact that they moved to Merrill House within the last 2 years, a move from their home was a disproportionate and inappropriate response to the problem identified by the Council.
- Clients and their families were all under the impression, when the move to Merrill was made, that it would be the last move they had to make. They felt very badly let down.
- The extra care model would be unsuitable for their clients.
- Their clients were concerned that the cost of accommodation and care at an independently run home was likely to be more than the cost at a Council run home and although the Council stated that it would cover the difference, their clients believed that they would not have the means or the wish to do so.
- Clients did not believe that there would be sufficient beds available to give every resident sufficient choice to be with their friends.
- Clients regarded Merrill House, the residents and staff as their family home, and considered it their human right to remain there.
- The Council had given priority to renovating its own premises at a cost of some £40 million, whereas that project should have been postponed during the course of their clients' lifetimes so as to make funds available to enable them to remain in their home.
- The families of their clients were concerned about how special problems would be dealt with if their mother were in extra care housing, whereas at Merrill House they knew she was safe and constantly attended to by staff.
- Clients did not understand why Merrill had been selected because their understanding was that it broke even last year.