

Minute extract - Meeting of Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Monday, 5 March 2018 1.30 pm

Consultation on the Proposed Early Help Review.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which sought its views on the proposed changes to the Early Help Service. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 11' is filed with these minutes.

The Committee also received a presentation from the Director of Children and Family Services which provided additional information regarding the current location and usage of Children's Centres and Supporting Leicestershire Families (SLF) Centres, areas of deprivation and the proposed location and rationale for the proposed family centres. A copy of the slides forming the presentation is filed with these minutes.

The Committee then considered a petition, signed by 204 people and presented by Councillor Mary Draycott, Lead Petitioner, in the following terms:-

"We oppose Leicestershire County Council's proposal to close the Cobden Sure Start Centre, Hastings Ward, Loughborough".

At the invitation of the Chairman, Councillor Draycott set out her objections to the proposal. In summary, she felt that Children's Centres provided valuable services which benefitted vulnerable and potentially vulnerable people. Closing them would have a disproportionate impact on women and children in areas of deprivation and poverty. She also felt that, through cutting preventative work, there could be additional service pressures and costs to mainstream care service in the long term.

The Committee also noted that a representation had been received from 'Save Our Children's Centres Leicestershire', a group of Leicestershire parents, volunteers and community groups who were concerned about the proposed closure of 24 Children's Centres across Leicestershire. A copy of this representation is filed with the minutes.

The Cabinet Lead Member advised that he was seeking to influence the Government with regard to its proposal to cease the Troubled Families Grant in 2020, especially as the programme, called 'Supporting Leicestershire Families' in Leicestershire, had been very successful. However, he felt that the County Council was acting correctly in planning for the funding to be withdrawn.

Arising from discussion the following points were raised:-

- (i) Given the financial pressures that were facing the County Council, members felt that the proposed changes to the early help service represented the best option to provide a sustainable service in the future. It was understood that the removal of a building would not prevent services from being provided in that area. There was a need to balance a reduction in the number of buildings with savings from the staffing budget, so as to have the least impact on service provision. Through integrating four separate services,

there would be some opportunities for efficiencies through reduced management and back office staff, thus providing further protection to frontline services.

- (ii) It was recognised that the requirement for the Early Help Review to make a £3 million through staffing reductions would mean that thresholds for accessing the early help service would have to be reviewed. The service would become more targeted and would see a reduction in the number of families it could support, estimated at 290 families.
- (iii) The costs that had been provided in Appendix 3 to the report related to the total running costs for the buildings and would depend on the size of the building and the other activities that were provided from it. It would be possible for a breakdown of these figures to be provided.
- (iv) The deprivation level of Braunstone Town did not include the area of Braunstone in Leicester City, although it was possible that City residents used the Braunstone Town Children's Centre. It was suggested that further consideration be given to the Braunstone area to ensure that deprivation was fully taken into account.
- (v) A view was expressed that Children's Centres were important buildings for local communities, especially where there was a level of deprivation in the area. However, the Committee was reminded that not all areas currently had access to a Children's Centre and that current location was not based on deprivation levels. It was proposed that, for the new model, the hub and spoke buildings would be located in areas where there was a high density of early help service users. Where service users were not able to travel to services, transport or an outreach service could be provided.
- (vi) The proposed location of the hubs had been chosen to take into account their role as a base for members of staff, from which outreach work could be delivered in communities. Group work and other building based services would also be delivered from the hubs. The spokes would only be used for delivery of services and would generally be smaller buildings. In both Loughborough and Coalville, it was proposed there would be hub as well as a spoke building in fairly close proximity. This was because there was a large number of service users in these areas and the locations were felt to be accessible.
- (vii) One of the proposed ways in which services would be delivered in the new model was through renting rooms in community centres. The cost of this was not yet known, but it would not outweigh the cost of running a building. It was confirmed that, where health services were provided from a Children's Centre, this was on the basis that it was a shared community building rather than a tenancy arrangement. The health service would address this in its response to the consultation. Where Children's Centres were located in community libraries, work was being undertaken with the library to understand the impact that withdrawal of services would have.

- (viii) Alternative options for the buildings that the County Council was proposing to cease using were being considered. For example, where the buildings were on school sites, discussions with the schools were taking place to see if they could use the buildings for early years provision. The terms of the Government grant that had been used to create Children's Centres required 60 percent of the buildings' use to be for early years so this could help ensure that the terms of the grant continued to be met. It was recognised that this might not be possible but the risk of clawback of the grant was not considered to be significant. In any case, the savings would be achieved through a reduction in the ongoing revenue costs of the service and would not be affected by any clawback of capital funding from the Government.
- (ix) Some concern was expressed that the Impact Team, which was part of the Youth Offending Service and dealt with low-level anti-social behaviour, was included in the Early Help Review, particularly as any reductions in this area would result in increased pressure on the Police. However, the Committee was advised that no decision had been made regarding whether savings would be required from the Impact Team.

RESOLVED:

That the Cabinet be advised of the views of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the proposed changes to the Early Help Service.

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