

COORDINATING COMMITTEE

Thursday, 12 February 2015

Present: Councillor M McLaughlin (Chair)

Councillors P Doughty KJ Williams
P Brightmore J Williamson
W Smith T Anderson
M Sullivan P Gilchrist

Deputies: Councillors R Gregson (In place of A Leech)
I Williams (In place of C Muspratt)
L Fraser (In place of A Hodson)
D Elderton (In place of M Hornby)
B Berry (In place of S Williams)

37 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor C Blakeley.

38 CODE OF CONDUCT - DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST RELEVANT AUTHORITIES (DISPOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS) REGULATIONS 2012, INCLUDING PARTY WHIP DECLARATIONS

Councillor Anderson declared a personal interest by virtue of being a Director of Overton Community Centre that ran a nursery and by virtue of being a signatory to the called-in decision.

Councillors Berry and Fraser declared a personal interest by virtue of them being signatories to the called-in decision.

It was noted that no Member of the Committee was subject to the Party Whip.

39 CHAIR'S BRIEFING NOTE

The Chair announced that this was now the second time this meeting had been reconvened following the last adjournment on 12 November, 2014 and despite rigorous attempts to find a date when the witnesses and Members were available this was the earliest date that had been possible.

She thanked all those Members in attendance who had to be the same Members as had started hearing the call-in, some of whom had had to re-arrange their diaries.

A briefing note had been circulated with the agenda to act as an aide memoire due to the considerable time which had elapsed since the last meeting.

Councillor Fraser then raised the point that she and her colleagues, Councillors Berry and Blakeley had not received an agenda at all for this meeting, and Councillor Elderton had only received his on Tuesday 9 February. She suggested that the meeting should be postponed until a later date. Other Members confirmed that they had received their papers almost two weeks ago.

The Head of Legal and Member Services outlined the process for the electronic publication of agendas which would normally also generate an email alert. Paper copies of agendas were also provided in the courier delivery on a Friday, the delivery of these agendas was made on 30 January. He could not offer any explanation as to why these agendas were not received, the process that was normally followed had been followed.

Councillor Fraser cited examples of other Committees which had adjourned and suggested that because of such a time gap since the last meeting this Committee should adjourn to enable Members to consider the briefing note which formed part of the agenda. She also suggested that the Head of Legal and Member Services should investigate as to why some members had not received their agendas.

The Chair suggested that the Committee could adjourn for two hours.

Councillor Fraser suggested that it would be unacceptable for members of the public to have to wait two hours for the Committee to reconvene and moved,

“That the Committee adjourn for half an hour”.

Having been seconded by Councillor Sullivan, this motion was put to the vote and agreed unanimously.

Resolved – That the Committee adjourn for half an hour.

40 **CALL-IN OF A DELEGATED DECISION - MINUTE NO. 54 - EARLY YEARS AND CHILDREN'S CENTRES**

The meeting resumed at 6.45pm.

The Chair informed the Committee that one of the witnesses, Lynn Loughran was unable to attend. She then invited Cathlyn Hughes, Head of Leasowe Early Years and Adult Learning and Steve Vasey, Children and Family Services Manager, Wirral Autistic Society to make their opening statements again.

Evidence from Call-in witnesses

Steve Vasey - Children and Family Services Manager, Wirral Autistic Society

Steve Vasey stated that he was representing the Wirral Link Forum and read out a statement. He welcomed the sentiments expressed in the review document and understood the austerity measures imposed by central Government had led to the need for savings. He expressed concern that the review process had not involved the voluntary, community and faith sectors and hoped that the proposed six week consultation process would remedy this. There was a need to focus on those families most in need of help with more outreach work being developed.

Cathlyn Hughes, Head of Leasowe Early Years and Adult Learning

Cathlyn Hughes stated that she understood the need to make budget cuts but that these needed to be made whilst protecting the most vulnerable in the community. There had been a lack of consultation and clarity about the review. There was a need to use models of best practice such as the outstanding leadership at Leasowe. The proposals would decimate the service leaving Moreton bereft of children's services.

The Committee then asked Cathlyn Hughes and Steve Vasey some questions and their responses included the following comments:

- How the consultation took place was the reason for the call-in.
- A review was needed as to how money was spent but in times of austerity there was a need to hang on to those 'little gems' the Authority had rather than ignore them.
- What had taken place leading up to the review was not consultation, but the consultation that was now to take place would only be on a limited number of recommendations from a document that was limited in scope.
- Steve Vasey stated that he was the only person from the community sector involved in any pre-consultation.
- Of the 107 World Café events which took place, there were none explicitly in the Moreton area. Cathlyn Hughes was aware of one such event in Wallasey at which families from across Wallasey were invited but the families were not aware of what they were being asked about.
- She stated that having been at Leasowe for the last three years she had felt very included in the first year but that in the last 14 months or so she had felt totally excluded even though she had expert knowledge herself.
- There was a lack of leadership from the Local Authority.
- The current staffing structure meant that too much of the budget was taken out of the Children's Centres and there was little evidence that gateway referral provided value for money.

- There was a need to allocate proportional to need with more staff in Birkenhead and Leasowe.
- There needed to be more clarity for people taking part in consultation and more specific feedback.
- The review did go some way to addressing proportionality and need but not in Leasowe as there would be nothing between Seacombe and West Kirby.

Evidence from Cabinet Member's Witnesses

Julia Hassall, Director of Children's Services

Julia Hassall outlined the reasons for the review including addressing the need to make the agreed budget savings and to effectively consider the changes to the statutory guidance for Children's Centres introduced in 2013. In 2013 the Children's Centres were clustered into the four constituency area footprints, which was a positive step forward, however, significant further work was needed to change how the Early Years service and Children's Centres did their business.

The configuration of the Advisory Boards had changed and clarity was required as to what services were needed in each locality. Whilst recognising some quality services were provided through Wirral's Children's Centres some challenges needed to be addressed such as, understanding who the targeted groups of children were and the need to provide consistent and sustained access to services by young children and families from targeted groups.

The methodology for the review has been as broad and inclusive as possible to ensure it covered the original ambition for Early Years and Children's Centre services to make them central to reducing child and family poverty and in supporting families by making better use of joined up resources. In future Early Years and Children's Centres had to be flexible to respond to changing agendas and priorities such as closer partnership working with the troubled families programme. Whilst there was a noticeable shift taking place away from a universal service to a more targeted provision and increasing support for those families on the edge of crisis, the review was clear that the Early Years service would continue to support a universal service offer from which a whole family approach to service delivery could be built. Children's Centre staff and their partners were trusted within communities and they were able to recognise, support and intervene when it became necessary to do so.

Deborah Gornik, Head of Targeted Services

Deborah Gornik outlined the review process which she had project managed. The review of Early Years and Children's Centres progressed through a strategic core group of cross organisational representatives (25), who had

attended four workshops, held a month apart. The core group had considered the review against a backdrop of internal (to Wirral) and national developments and the required financial efficiencies of £2m. Key requirements to the review were to establish how the service would target and ensure access by those children and families most in need of the service and to develop the future offer as part of the early help approach, to manage demand by intervening before children and families were at crisis point and to demonstrate impact and improved outcomes.

The review considered the future use of the children's centre buildings and outreach, ensuring borough coverage for a children's centre offer. It considered future governance arrangements to future proof the services and the centres. She gave details of an extensive list of objectives for the review.

Local (not public) consultation took place in the form of 'world cafés', an informal process to raise awareness and for individuals and groups, through collective discussions, to tell the Authority what was important to them and to gain information from a wide audience and over a controlled timeframe. The specific question asked to support the delivery of all café events, 'If we are to continue to give children and their families the very best start we can, what will a reduced Early Years and Children's Centre offer look like?'. Desktop research of other Local Authorities was also considered.

The Committee then asked Julia Hassall and Deborah Gornik some questions and their responses included the following comments:

- The consultation would be responsive and a draft programme was being produced for the six week consultation which would be extensive across the borough both online and through 24 meetings.
- There would be an opportunity for the review document to be scrutinised by the Families and Wellbeing Policy and Performance Committee.
- Consultation took place at a community level to raise awareness.
- Deborah Gornik stated that she was confident that the Head of Leasowe Early Years was invited to sit as part of the core group.
- A model had to be developed to consult on and this had taken place looking at neighbouring authorities and national research; views would then come back testing the efficiency of the model and this would be presented in a report to Cabinet.
- A single point of contact / referral was the best way forward to protect the most vulnerable and a targeted approach fulfilled this approach.
- With reducing resources a targeted offer focussing on families least likely to engage was the best approach and helping children in need and looked after children who were seriously under achieving.
- The Ofsted inspection in May 2014 in Birkenhead had helped in highlighting some of the key issues to be addressed.

- Julia Hassall stated that if the review had lasted six months she didn't know whether it would have led to a different conclusion but she was not sure it had suffered from the timescale.
- Some people might have been inadvertently missed during the consultation but it was certainly not deliberately intended.
- The Wirral Link Forum had definitely been invited.
- The consultation process would be publicised in the local press and information posted in local venues as well as through the Children's Trust and Deborah Gornik stated that she would also be happy to speak to people in person.
- Funding would be proportionately allocated based on need and also on pockets of deprivation.
- The results of the public consultation would be published.
- Deborah Gornik agreed that the recommendation within the report should, rather than say, '...to progress the recommendations...' say '...to progress and test the recommendations...'
- There was a need to track and target the borough's most vulnerable children.
- The reduced £2.3m Children's Centres' budget needed to be seen in a partnership context, in that health visitors would be coming over to the authority with a budget of £5m and there was £16m available for nursery provision for the most vulnerable youngsters aged 2,3 and 4 years old.
- Those excluded from the pre-consultation would be involved in the full consultation process.
- All views would be considered in testing out the hypotheses and proposals put forward in the review.

The Chair referred to the report commissioned by Suffolk County Council from the Right Honourable Frank Field MP into their Children's Centres review and Deborah Gornik acknowledged a lot of similar considerations were taken into account. Though Suffolk CC had asked a single question, not about buildings but about services to be delivered and the Suffolk report was much more ambitious.

Summary of the Lead Call-In Signatory, Councillor Paul Hayes

Councillor Hayes stated that the call-in process had been an extremely useful exercise. He made reference to the Director's comment that she was not sure if they had had longer they would have come to a different conclusion with the review. The review document had come out of a consultation process which was seriously flawed. Those at the 'world café' events did not understand they were at a proper consultation exercise. Officers had prepared a draft timetable for consultation but six weeks was not long enough to consult. All staff should have been fully consulted and there was now a need for a full consultation with the voluntary, faith and community sectors.

Summary of the Cabinet Member, Councillor Tony Smith

Councillor Tony Smith, in summing up, assured the Committee that there would be adequate and proper consultation on the review document. The landscape had changed nationally and the focus needed to be on specific outcomes for children and not on buildings. Not having had a review since 2002 it was imperative that this one was undertaken. It was his hope that the views put forward on both sides of the debate formed part of the consultation as it was his hope that nobody was excluded from the consultation. He would welcome the review coming to the Families and Wellbeing Policy and Performance Committee.

The Chair then opened the matter for debate.

Councillor Anderson thanked all the witnesses and stated that he was unhappy that the pre-consultation did not reach out to everyone. He then moved and it was seconded by Councillor Elderton, that –

“This Committee believes that given the importance of this decision an extended period of consultation is now needed, as the Cabinet Member indicated he was open to at the previous meeting. This Committee now urges Cabinet and its officers to consult on these plans for 12 weeks, not 6, and ensure that the consultation is open, transparent and inclusive.”

The motion was put and lost (5:8).

Councillor Brightmore suggested that the consultation process on the review should be allowed to take its course over a six week period.

Councillor Doughty congratulated the officers on the work put forward in the review and on the recommendations and on a motion by him, seconded by Councillor Sullivan, it was –

Resolved (8:5) – That this Committee upholds the decision of the Cabinet of 11 September, 2014 on the Early Years and Children’s Centre Review and that officers implement it without delay.