



CHILDREN & LEARNING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

6 March 2013 (Special)

Subject Heading:

Review of Children's Centres

CMT Lead:

Joy Hollister, Group Director, Social Care & Learning

Report Author and contact details:

Sean Cable
Committee Officer
sean.cable@havering.gov.uk

Policy context:

See Cabinet Report attached

In accordance with Paragraph 17 of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Rules, a requisition signed by two Members representing more than one Group (Councillors Keith Darvill and Gillian Ford) has called in a decision of Cabinet dated 13 February 2013. The text of the requisition appears at the end of this report:

CABINET DECISION

At its meeting on 13 February 2013 Cabinet considered a report on proposals for the merger of Children Centre activities around 6 hub sites. Alternative operators (such as Schools and Libraries) would run and maintain the other smaller and less-used sites, which would be decommissioned as Children Centres, but continue to provide early years services such as pre-school provision. Cabinet made the following decisions:

1. Approved the decommissioning of the following Children's Centres and the services currently provided within them to be transferred to the remaining hub sites by 2 April 2013, subject to receiving final approval from the Department for Education:
 - Airfield
 - Harold Court
 - Hilldene
 - Pyrgo
 - South Hornchurch
 - Thistledene
 - Upminster

2. Approved the continued provision of services from the following larger hub centres:
 - Collier Row
 - Chippenham Road
 - Elm Park
 - Ingrebourne
 - St Kildas
 - Rainham Village
3. the commencement of a tendering process for construction/ refurbishment works at issue of tenders for Harold Court Primary, Harold Wood Primary, Mead Primary, Parsonage Farm Primary, Rise Park Infant and Junior schools, Towers Infant and Junior schools, together with all associated investigations e.g. soil survey
4. that the final allocation of available Capital funding as detailed within this report be delegated to the Lead Members for Children and Learning and Value, and the Group Directors of Children's Services and Finance and Commerce.

Reasons for decisions:

Alongside the background evidence base, feedback from the consultation suggested support for the merger of Centres as indicated. Consultation feedback as detailed in stakeholder consultation minutes attached also indicated that Chippenham Road should remain open as a Children's Centre.

The implementation of the proposals would continue the delivery of service provision to a high standard without affecting current staffing levels and allow for closer co-location of staff to deliver targeted and preventative services for families.

Children's Centres would still offer free services to all, although resources would be mainly focused on more targeted and specialist work with families. Wherever possible, the voluntary sector and parent volunteers would continue to be encouraged to deliver these services, supported with training where necessary or families signposted to other opportunities in the area.

The proposals would ensure:

- Havering still meets its statutory duty to have sufficient centres to meet local need (demand at the larger Hub Centres is far higher as detailed in the evidence section, and positive informal feedback has been received from Department for Education on initial proposals).
- That the impact on local communities will be minimal, due to the provision of alternative early years services from former sites. Increased outreach provision will also ensure that services are accessible and all communities can be served.
- Provision of local childcare, particularly given significant recent increases in the early years population in Havering are likely to increase placement

demand¹. The proposals will also help the Council implement its Childcare Sufficiency Audit Objectives² and provide additional free places for two year olds from vulnerable families.³

Other options considered and rejected:

Alternative options considered have included:

1. Keeping all centres open - this is not a long-term option. It would mean staff resources remain over-stretched across multiple sites and are unable to deliver a new targeted and early help service. In addition, this option would not allow the Service to make financial savings.
2. Keeping Hilldene Children's Centre rather Chippenham Road open. This would be unattractive because
 - Consultation findings and background evidence reveal the Chippenham Centre is well use, popular and should remain open.
 - It is in a central and densely populated area.
 - Due to the high rent costs, alternative early years provision (such as pre-school provision) is not financial. Without alternative early years provision from the site, DfE would be entitled to claw back Sure Start capital grant.
 - In comparison, Hilldene Primary School is interested in using Hilldene Children's Centre for pre-school provision and family activities.

REASONS FOR REQUISITION

The reasons for the requisition were detailed on the formal notification and were detailed as follows:

1. The decision appears to be counter to Central Government and the Councils policies on early intervention
2. The decision does not appear to have taken due consideration to the rise in the birth rate
3. To allow Overview & Scrutiny Committees to consider the impact of the Council taking responsibility for Public Health Policy before the closure of Children's Centres.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Committee considers the requisition of the decision of Cabinet and determine whether to uphold it.

¹ Havering Joint Strategic Needs Assessment 2011/12, Demographics Update. Available online at <http://www.haveringdata.net/resource/view?resourceId=JSNAtwentytwelveDemographicsUpdate>.

² Havering Childcare Sufficiency Review 2011/12. Available online at: http://www.havering.gov.uk/Documents/London_Borough_of_Havering_Childcare_Sufficiency_Review_2010-11.pdf

³ Further information on the new Two year old offer and eligibility criteria are available at <http://www.havering.gov.uk/Pages/Services/Education-early-years-grant.aspx>