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MINUTES OF A SPECIAL MEETING OF THE CHILDREN & LEARNING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Town Hall
6 March 2013 (7.30 - 9.30 pm)

Present: Councillors Sandra Binion (Chairman), Gillian Ford (Vice-Chair), Nic Dodin, Robby Misir, Pat Murray, Garry Pain, Frederick Thompson, Keith Wells and Becky Bennett (In place of Melvin Wallace)

Co-opted Members: Philip Grundy, Jack How, Anne Ling and Garry Dennis

Non-voting Member: Bev Whitehead

The Chairman advised those present of action to be taken in the event of an emergency evacuation of the building becoming necessary

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Melvin Wallace and co-opted member Julie Lamb.

23 REVIEW OF CHILDREN'S CENTRES - CALL-IN OF CABINET DECISION

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) had called in a decision of Cabinet dated 13 February 2013.

The requisition concerned a decision made by Cabinet on 13 February 2013 regarding 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
 - Hildene
 - 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 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.

In discussions, the Committee was asked to note that the proposals sought to ensure that children's centres would be aligned to early help measures. The emphasis on early help had arisen following the report by Frank Field, which highlighted the imperative for early intervention. The benefits of the new 'hub and spoke' model for children's centres would mean that outreach work was improved and would mean that resources would be more targeted and focussed on services.

Members raised concern about the continued existence of some of the smaller centres, which, it had been proposed, would be closed and this was a matter of deep concern as it was suggested that these centres were crucial to the community despite decreased footfall or use of them. There

was concern that the closures were taking place at the wrong time and without detailed consultation. With a developing local health agenda it was suggested that the proposed policy had not been sufficiently considered. Officers stated that the changes would make children's centres at the heart of the new integrated approach to health and social care.

Some members continued to state that there were significant reasons why a decision should be delayed. Amongst other things, it was suggested that there was no evidence in the report of substantial savings, as those identified only amounted to £130k from a multi-million pound budget. Members stated that early intervention was a key policy of the Council and that there was therefore an argument to at least maintain if not increase spending on children's centres as these were the key part of early intervention.

Officers explained that the decisions being taken would not impact on the actual service provision; indeed it was argued that the changes would enhance the service. The reductions in the budget arose from removing the number of managers through the reduction in the number of children's centres. Front-line services would not be impacted as measures were being taken to protect these members of staff. Further, the Council sought to invest in people and services and not buildings.

Members continued to express concern that the decision was being taken too early, it was contended that delaying the decision by a year would mean longer savings in the long-term. The decision was being made before public health had fully transferred to the Council and public health would constitute a major part of the early intervention agenda. The decision was too early as there was no consideration about how the new model could facilitate effective public health initiatives.

Discussions moved to consider promises and commitments that had been made by senior officers at a meeting of the Committee in 2011, at which members had been reassured that prevention would be the focus of children's social care and that the heart of this focus would be a concentration on family services. It was contended that the report moved away from that model. Officers explained that children's centres being grouped into pairs with youth workers covering the entire borough (but in 3 localities: North, Central and South) supported by satellite services. The idea of family services was that all services would be located in one centre.

The Committee sought reassurance that the changes were consistent with the early help policy and officers were asked how confident they were that families wouldn't be left out of the offer. It was explained that none of the centres being closed offered midwifery services and there was a massive emphasis on the importance of universal services and work was underway with partners to ensure that those in need would be identified. Where universal services worked well the pressure on children's centres would decrease. The decision was not sudden, obtained advice and information from health and other partners. The decision was about consolidating

services not reducing them. Some of the centres ear-marked for closure acted merely as sign-posting facilities without providing actual services.

Moving on to the issue of birth rates, officers reassured members that the decision had been taken with respect to reducing sites and not services and there was no link, therefore, with birth rates. Members expressed concern that the remaining centres wouldn't be able to cope with the increased demand arising from the centres that would be closed. It was stated that families were also coming into the borough, a phenomenon linked with the rising birth rate. Officers explained that there were alternative existing facilities that could do the same thing as centres.

On the final issue regarding there having been a lack of regard for public health policy before making the decision, officers explained that there would in fact be a two year delay before public health for 0-5 year olds came to the Council, in April 2015. It was argued by some members that public health was being democratised by transfer to the Council and that a detailed report should have been submitted which would take public health into account. The decision should have waited until the full transition of public health.

In ending the debate, Cllr Darvill expressed his disappointment that the Committee did not listen to a final summary from him, as one of those who had called-in the decision.

All questions having been asked and the debate being finished, the Chairman asked members to vote on whether or not they would like to uphold the requisition.

The proposal that the requisition be upheld (and therefore that the matter be referred to the Cabinet for further consideration) was LOST (by 9 votes to 3 with one abstention).

The voting was as follows:

FOR: Councillors Murray, Ford and co-opted member Jack How

AGAINST: Councillors Binion, Bennett, Misir, Pain, Thompson, Wells and co-opted members Garry Dennis, Anne Ling and Philip Grundy

ABSTENTION: Councillor Dodin

The requisition was not upheld.

Chairman