

CABINET NOVEMBER 13 2013

My first task tonight is to present a petition of over 1000 signatures (with over 200 more on line) asking for a reversal of the planned 38.8% cut in Children's Services funding , with its devastating effect on Children's Centres. Significantly these signatres were mostly not collected electronically but gathered in the course of talking to local people in the street and outside the centres, from Keynsham to MSN and points in between. We found a high level of anxiety about the likely impact on the work of the Centres and certainly I myself found no-one who was unwilling to sign.

Liz has already eloquently described how inadequate has been the response of the Early Years and Children's Panel to the planned cuts. Instead of looking closely at the impact of various levels of reductions in funding they have meekly come up with a plan to implement the full 38% cut, effectively doing the work of officers rather than scrutiny members. Interestingly the ruling LD Group were represented at the relevant meeting of the panel by one substitute member and two others drafted in at the last moment who confessed publicly that they were not properly prepared to make the recommendations asked for.

Children@s centres were set up originally by the Labour Government as Sure Start centres, modelled on the American Headstart programme, because it was recognised that children from disadvantaged backgrounds were in danger of falling well behind their peers , in development, before they even started school. At Children's Centres however the aim was to reach all families to offer activities such as parenting skills,

positive play, and pregnancy and breastfeeding advice. As a result there would be no stigma in attending Centre activities and the net would be cast as widely as possible. The proposal before the Cabinet to target only the most vulnerable section of the population therefor undermines this concept.

Our Group believes that reducing funding for the centres by over 38% will make many Centres unviable and we are not convinced by waffle about finding other sources of funding or rebnting the premises to other organisations. We believe the Early Years panel should reconvene and look again at the impact various levels of cuts will have on the Centres and at what level it will still be possible to run a meaningful service.

At the last meeting of the Panel I was moved by the personal stories of some of the parents and volunteers at the centres and what the Centres meant to them, for example in helping to overcome post-natal depression and encouraging them to enter into the life of the Centres as volunteers. We risk throwing all that away as well as invaluable work such as support for breastfeeding. We have all heard about the scheme in another part of the country to reward breastfeeding mothers with shopping vouchers. I hope it is successful but how much better to encourage breastfeeding by persuasion and example.

On ehalf of our the labour Group I therefore call upon the Cabinet to send this report back to the panel to do their work in a proper way which will result in a meaningful future for the Centres.