

**Re-structuring of the Early Years, Children's
Centre and Early Help (0-11 Years) Services
2014-2016**

**Minority Report of the Early Years, Children
and Youth Policy Development and Scrutiny
Panel**

Cllr Liz Hardman

November, 2013

1 Introduction

At the Council budget meeting on 19 February, 2013 Council was asked to agree an overall saving of £2.3m from 2013-2016 to the Early Years and Children's Centre Service.

The profile of the proposed savings was as follows:

2013-14	£273,000
2014-15	£228,000
2015-16	£1,834,000

An amendment was agreed deferring the implementation of the budget reductions until 2014-15, leaving the revised savings profile as follows:

2013-14	£0
2014-15	£501,000
2015-16	£1,834,000

It was further agreed that:

the Early Years and Children's Centre savings in Years 2 and 3 are still subject to a detailed plan and would require a Budget vote in future years and that officers be instructed to provide a report to the Early Years, Children and Youth (EYCY) PDS Panel to allow further consideration of the implications of these savings and for potential alternative options to be reviewed.

As a result of the Council decision, the EYCY PDS Panel considered the matter and subsequently established a Task and Finish Group which produced recommendations for consideration by the full Panel.

Throughout the period of the review, I have expressed concern about both the process adopted by the Task and Finish Group and the recommendations produced as a result of that process and subsequently agreed by the EYCY PDS Panel. It is my contention that a flawed process resulted in a flawed model and that the EYCY PDS Panel missed an opportunity to develop a model for Children's Centres for B&NES in a principled way.

As will be made clear, the EYCY Panel manifestly failed to implement the resolution as agreed by Council. It is as a result of this failure that this Minority Report has been produced. It is hoped that this Report will serve as a vehicle for ensuring that both the Cabinet and, ultimately, the Council at its February, 2014 budget-setting meeting, have the opportunity to consider both the implications of the savings and review potential alternative options.

2 Recommendations

That Cabinet:

- a) Asks the EYCY PDS Panel to consider the implications of the proposed Early Years and Children's Centre savings and review potential alternative options with a report back to the December meeting of Cabinet identifying the following:
 - (i) The detailed implications of the proposed savings for frontline services under the proposed 38% cut to the budget of Children's Centres;

- (ii) The potential for management and efficiency savings that would have no effect on frontline services;
- (iii) A recommended model for the future of Children's Centre services based on management and efficiency savings; and
- (iv) In light of (iii), a request to Cabinet that, should the recommended model be undeliverable within the proposed budget for Early Years and Children's Centres, resources are identified from elsewhere in order to offset the proposed savings target.

3 A Flawed Process

The recommendations (above) arise from the need for the EYCY Panel to look again at the work it was asked to do by Council at the February 2013 budget-setting meeting. Despite the acknowledgement by Council that the savings for Years 2 and 3 would require a budget vote it is regrettable that both the full EYCY Panel and the Task and Finish Group set up by it, took it for granted that the savings target had been agreed. They assumed that Early Years and Children's Centres would have to carry the full burden of the cuts, and that any recommendations had to be deliverable within the proposed resources.

It was in that context that the Task and Finish Group undertook its work: instead of doing as Council had asked and considering the implications of savings of this scale, the meetings of the Task and Finish Group were focused on producing a model (The Children's Centre Hub Model) which would allow delivery of these savings.

The final meeting of the Task and Finish Group on 2 October, 2013, made recommendations to be considered by the full EYCY Panel at its meeting on 14 October, 2013 for agreement and onward transmission to the Cabinet. The Task and Finish Group agreed, amongst other things, to recommend the Hub model. I was unable to accept the recommendations and made my position clear at the meeting. Regrettably, I was the only member of the Task and Finish Group to do this.

The Liberal Democrat Group has three places on the EYCY PDS Panel. One of these places is vacant and was filled on a temporary basis at the meeting on 14 October, 2013 which considered the recommendations of the Task and Finish Group. Both of the two permanent members were absent with their places filled by substitutes. Whilst it was disappointing that these two substitutes had been poorly briefed in advance of the meeting, both also made the entirely reasonable point that the papers available to the meeting were inadequate and provided insufficient information, particularly financial information, upon which to make a decision. It is regrettable that despite making this point, the two substitutes proceeded to participate in both the discussions and the voting as if they were in full command of the facts.

Such was the inadequacy of the information available to the meeting on 14 October, 2013 that before considering in detail the recommendations of the Task and Finish Group, the Panel resolved the following:

“that there remain a number of questions over what services will be provided at the Children's Centres under the proposed new model, who will run the various Children's Centres, and to whom these services will be available. Noting these continued uncertainties...”

In view of the fact that the EYCY had been tasked with considering the implications of the savings, it is beyond belief that the Panel felt able to make any

recommendations at all when questions about the implications (i.e. what services would be provided, by whom, and to whom the services would be available) remained unanswered at the Panel meeting.

4 The Recommendations: The Emerging Hub Model

In spite of the request by Council to consider the implications of the savings, from the outset the Task and Finish Group was focused on how to deliver the savings.

This initially involved three options for delivering the service as follows:

Option 1: to reduce all budgets as proposed with existing services scaled back accordingly, offering targeted services only;

Option 2: to reduce budgets and identify a health provider to run an integrated model of delivery of all services;

Option 3: to reduce budgets and outsource all services to the third sector.

Questions were raised about all of these options, but the debate moved on without ever fully identifying the implications for the service of any one of these options. By this stage, the Hub model (with four hubs, although this was subsequently reduced to three) had emerged and was being promoted as the model for the future commissioning of Children's Centre services, delivered either by the Council, or by a Health-led provider, or by the voluntary sector. This model was not developed in a principled way as the best means of delivering Children's Centre services. Instead its main advantage was that it delivered the proposed cuts. I couldn't possibly support it.

At the eleventh hour, a further advantage of this model – that it can be scaled up or down according to the funds available – was identified. Again, this supposed advantage had nothing to do with the best means of providing Children's Centre services. Instead, it was an advantage entirely related to financial considerations.

Whether members of the Panel understood what the Hub model would look like in practice is unclear. The papers themselves gave no indication of which Children's Centres would remain open as Hubs (expected to be Keynsham, Parkside or possibly Weston and Radstock) and which would be subject to a reduced service. The Panel did, in its agreed recommendation (4) give a nod to the effect of budget reductions on non-Hub Children's Centres "*recognising that the number of hubs, and the level of service at the non-hub Children's Centres, will be dependent upon the scale of budget reductions...*" and speakers from Chew Valley Children's Centre expressed their concern about the implications of the Hub model for services in their area and the lack of connection between the Chew Valley and Keynsham – which would become the Hub for the Chew Valley. However, this was never fully explored by the Panel.

There was also no acknowledgement in the emerging Hub model of the B&NES Children's Centres located in Twerton and Moorlands, which are delivered by First Steps, Bath and are run as a local charity but are also funded by B&NES.

In respect of those Children's Centres which would not be identified as Hubs, it was suggested that other partners, such as schools could be asked to consider running the Children's Centre buildings on behalf of Children's Services, sub-letting back to the Children's Centres for delivery of services on a part-time basis. To date, it remains unclear whether schools or other organisations have expressed a

willingness either to take on the buildings themselves or to take on responsibility for sub-letting.

Despite this degree of uncertainty, the EYCY PDS Panel recommended the Hub model as the basis for the future delivery of Children's Centre services.

5 The implications of the savings

At various points during the meeting of the EYCY PDS Panel on 14 October, 2013 the impression was given that cuts of nearly 40% of the budget for Children's Centres could be delivered through management changes and service efficiencies. As a result, and for the avoidance of any doubt, the Director of People reminded those at the meeting that the proposals are not about efficiencies: they would lead to service reductions.

Whilst it is clear that the Hub model would lead, at best, to a skeleton service in eight of the eleven Children's Centres, to date, the implications of the service reductions have not been subject to proper public scrutiny. They include:

An expectation that, in running universal services, centre staff would be replaced with volunteers with the risk that the identification of children and families needing help from a universal base would be lost;

Stopping funding to support breastfeeding with the risk that breastfeeding may decline further thereby impacting on obesity rates;

Stopping a contribution to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services with the risk that that children arrive at school with increased social, emotional and behavioural difficulties;

Stopping subsidies for the five nurseries that are attached to Children's Centres. Subsidies enable additional staff to be employed, offering a high quality setting to these nurseries which all take a high number of children with child protection plans, children in need and vulnerable children. These nurseries may restrict what they can offer and families will not access the support that is currently available, with the risk that some children will fall through the net and children at risk of poor outcomes will increase;

Stopping speech and language support to all early childhood settings, including Children's Centres, leading to a reduction in professional support for children with speech and language delay and the risk that children will arrive at school with poor communication skills;

Stopping all Children's Centres having a Children's Centre Co-ordinator thereby reducing the ability to plan services in a specific area, reducing the cover of buildings, and reducing the management to plan for Ofsted inspections;

Stopping automatic referrals from health visitors being picked up by Children's Centres leading to the potential loss of early intervention for children with emerging needs with the risk that children will slip through the net and not be picked up until nursery/school;

Restricting access to Children's Centres on a daily basis with the services less readily accessible for families leading to fewer families reached; and

Apart from at Hub buildings, stopping free access to Children's Centre buildings for integrated work by partner agencies and social care for contact with children and families. Appointments will be harder to arrange near where children live with the risk that families do not attend key appointments.

The EYCY PDS Panel should have had the opportunity to consider these implications. If it had done so, it is questionable whether the members would have supported the emerging Hub model as the means for delivering Children's Centre services.

6 An Alternative Approach

It is clear that there are insufficient resources available from within the proposed budget for Children's Services to offset the cuts to Early Years and Children's Centres.

However, an opportunity was lost. Had the EYCY PDS Panel spent its time working on the kind of Children's Centre service it would like to see delivered in B&NES, the case could have been made by the Panel for asking the Cabinet to identify resources from elsewhere within this Council to deliver this service.

Instead, the focus was on delivering the cuts.

There is still, however a chance to retrieve the situation: by asking the EYCY PDS Panel to implement the resolution agreed by Council at its budget-setting meeting. Until such time that the implications of the proposed savings are considered and potential alternative options reviewed based on management and efficiency savings there can be no confidence that the Hub model is anything other than a means of delivering huge cuts to this most vital of services.

7 Evidence

In producing this report, a wide range of evidence has been considered including:

- Visits to ten Children's Centres in B&NES;
- Further visits to those Children's Centres proposed to be Hubs;
- Discussions with parents and children;
- Discussions with staff;
- Discussions with health visitors;
- Discussions with members of the Children's Centre Advisory Boards;
- Consideration of documentation available to members of the Task and Finish Group;
- Presentations delivered by officers to members of the EYCY Panel in May and June;
- July 2013 Report from the All Party Parliamentary Sure Start Group; and
- October 2013 Children's Centre Census published by National Charity 4Children.

There are many people who feel passionately about the services we offer to the youngest and most vulnerable members of our community and I am grateful to those who have taken the time and trouble to discuss the future of Children's Centre services with me.

Liz Hardman
November, 2013