

## ENVIRONMENT AND LIVING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

12 February 2014

**PRESENT:** Councillor Hunter-Watts (Chairman); Councillors Mrs Brandis, Cashman, Foster, Miss Lewis (in place of Fealey), Mrs Phipps, Mrs Russel, Mrs L Smith, Stuchbury, Mrs Takodra, Vick and Winn. Councillors Beall, N Blake, Lambert and Mrs Polhill attended also.

**APOLOGIES:** Councillors Adams, Bond, Mrs Chapple, Fealey and Sir Beville Stanier.

### 1. MINUTES

RESOLVED –

That the minutes of the meeting held on 16 December 2013 be approved as a correct record.

### 2. CALL-IN: JONATHAN PAGE PLAY CENTRE REVIEW

In accordance with the Council's scheme for public participation at meetings, 8 members of the public made statements to the Committee prior to consideration of the call-in. All of the speakers opposed the decision to cease funding of services run at the Jonathan Page Play Centre (JPPC), at the latest by September 2014, and asked that funding continue to be provided up until April 2015 to make sure that the long term operation and viability of the JPPC could be ensured.

Cabinet had taken a decision at the 17 December, 2013, Cabinet – the responsible Cabinet Member is the Cabinet Member for Leisure – agreeing in principle to the cessation of the funding of services currently run at the Jonathan Page Play Centre, at the latest by September 2014.

Cabinet's decision was:

- (1) That That approval be given in principle to the cessation of the funding of services currently run at the Jonathan Page Play Centre, at the latest by September 2014.
- (2) That further report be submitted to Cabinet setting out options for the staff and the Centre.
- (3) That the Equalities Impact assessment forming part of the Cabinet report be noted.

That decision had subsequently been called in by Councillors Cashman, Mrs Smith and Vick. These Councillors explained the reasons for calling in the decision. In the Committee report, a detailed response had been provided to each of these reasons. The reasons for call-in and the responses were as follows:-

- (i) we are very concerned that the consultation that was carried out did not mention closure or ceasing funding.

*Response:* The consultation was focused around how the service could be improved, with the aim to increase income for the centre. There was no remit to consider closure or ceased funding for the centre at the time of the consultation.

The decision to withdraw funding was brought forward post this consultation. The decision was based upon the need for the Council to make considerable savings and the belief that the Centre was unlikely to cover its costs under the current model of operation, even with the measures which had been identified by officers and through the consultation.

- (ii) we feel that the decision is premature and alternative solutions have not been fully investigated.

*Response:* This decision was part of a council-wide budget saving process, including reviewing all services and their income and cost implications, and was one of many budget-saving measures being considered across the Council. Councillors were aware that the approved medium term financial plan for the Council indicated savings in the magnitude of between £1million and £2million had to be found each year for the foreseeable future.

Officers had been considering options to improve the financial performance of the Centre for some considerable time prior to the Cabinet report, and had eventually concluded that none of the options considered would have a good chance of significantly and sufficiently mitigating the financial losses being incurred by the taxpayer from this service. Officers were now working with parents, partners and the wider community to identify alternative models of operation which did not require ongoing taxpayer subsidy. A consultant who had expertise in the field of childcare had been appointed by the Council to support this process.

- (iii) the lead time of the implementation of the decision does not provide sufficient time for alternatives to be fully costed and developed.

*Response:* The cabinet decision gave 9 months notice that the council would suspend funding for the service. Officers believe that this should be sufficient for a business plan to be developed and begin to be implemented. Reference had been made to other child care facilities in the town that had been able to go from concept to live operation in a matter of months, also to social enterprises/trusts that the County Council had been able to launch within a relatively short period of time.

- (iv) the on-costs and maintenance of the site, once closed, had not been taken into consideration.

*Response:* It was noted that if no services ran from the building there would be costs for its maintenance. However officers were working with parents and the community to identify another model of operation and any other provider would have to take maintenance costs into account. Further work was also ongoing to consider the overall ownership, operation and management of all Community Centres that the council currently runs, of which JPPC forms part. This would be an important consideration if, for instance, a community run and funded successor operation decided that it wished to run a successor service from another venue. If the council was able to remove or avoid any ongoing maintenance costs from the building, then potentially the savings to the taxpayer would be greater than those shown in the original Cabinet report.

- (v) we are aware that the Jonathan Page Play Centre has had a year long plan to deliver service changes, yet there is no evidence that this has been taken into consideration. Therefore, this is not in line with the principles of the New Business Model.

*Response:* As noted above, officers had been considering options to improve the financial performance of the Centre for some considerable time prior to the Cabinet report being produced. Officers eventually concluded that none of the options considered would have a good chance of significantly and sufficiently mitigating the financial losses being incurred by the taxpayer from this service. The ideas considered

by officers for improving the service and encouraging more business would of course be shared with any potential successor provider.

The principles underpinning the New Business Model were that the Council should act more commercially and financially astutely, generating new products and services which customers value, and ceasing to subsidise services which customers do not place great value on. Whilst individual customers of JPPC clearly value the high quality service they receive greatly, the very small numbers of children attending in recent years (steadily reducing to just 17 children per day on average at the after school club) is indicative that, looking at and weighed against the interests of taxpayers across the Vale, this was not a service which district-wide was greatly valued. It was certainly the case that a commercial organisation would not have provided a loss-making service for such a long time.

- (vi) The withdrawal of funding will force closure of services to a deprived community. This will have a detrimental affect on the community it serves and this has not been considered in line with the AVDC Corporate Plan.

*Response:* The Cabinet decision was to withdraw AVDC funding. Officers and Members would support and encourage the community or another organisation to take the service on. Even if that were to prove impossible, given that on average only around 17 children attend the after school club service, the impact of this was limited and it was hard to argue that an entire community would be detrimentally affected by its closure. Bearing in mind the significant financial pressures facing the council and the limited and focused use in a small area of the district, the decision was taken to cease funding. This was in line with the Corporate Plan aims concerning the prudent use of taxpayers resources.

- (vii) the impact and outcomes of the charitable foundation (and origination) of the Jonathan Page Play Centre have not been given due consideration.

*Response:* The original Jonathan Page Play Centre was run by a charitable foundation but this burnt down. Following this, AVDC set up the Centre in its current location using the original name, but it had been owned, managed and run entirely by AVDC since that time.

- (viii) the impact and outcomes of the withdrawal of funding.

*Response:* The impact of the withdrawal of funding would save the council around £60K, potentially more depending on the future operation of the service and use of the building. Cabinet were keen to support parents, the community or partner organisations take over the running of the centre if at all possible. An Equalities Impact Assessment had been undertaken and this was found to have little impact.

Councillor Lambert then made a statement on this matter to the Committee, after which the Cabinet Member for Leisure Services elaborated upon the information in the report and thanked JPPC staff and people for all their efforts in running the centre. However, the Cabinet Member explained that while Cabinet would like the JPPC to remain open in the future, the Council was no longer able to provide funding for this, although a commitment had been made to continue current funding until September 2014. The Cabinet Member would be happy to put people in contact with organisations such as Community Impact Bucks and the Out of School Alliance who could provide further information and support to individuals and organisations interested in running the JPPC. He was also very willing to speak to any other people or groups regarding the future of the JPPC and how AVDC might offer support to them. Members were also informed that a further report on the JPPC would be submitted to Cabinet in March 2014.

The Cabinet Member for Leisure Services, supported by the Leisure Services Manager and the Community Development Manager, then responded to questions from Members of the Committee as follows:-

- (a) it was acknowledged that the JPPC was the only facility of its type in the Vale that offered such a range of childcare, out of school and school holiday activities and clubs.
- (b) that a consultation had been undertaken with JPPC users to get their views on how the centre might be improved, although there had been a low response rate. A second round of consultation had not been undertaken following the decision to cease funding for services from September 2014.
- (c) that consultants had identified a number of initiatives that could be put in place to brand, market the JPPC which would possibly improve overall attendance, although there had not been time to put these initiatives in place.
- (d) that AVDC had met 4-5 times with JPPC parent's group since the report to Cabinet, including discussions on the future operation of the centre.
- (e) that Equality Impact Assessment information had been included with the report submitted to Cabinet on 17 December 2013.
- (f) that information would need to be obtained from the Communications and Marketing Section on the cost of undertaking the consultation.
- (g) that the council was in an on-going dialogue with the County Council regarding the operation of Sure Start programmes.
- (h) that ceasing of funding or closing the JPPC had not been mentioned as part of the consultation, as these issues were not being considered at that time.

There were also a range of comments made by Members as follows:-

- that the Headteacher of Buckingham Park Church of England Primary School had written to Councillors stating that the school had partnered with JPPC since the outset, with the number of Key Stage 2 students (often the highest users of after school provision) set to increase from the current 23 students to 240 students in the next 5 years.
- that children came to the JPPC from Wards across all of Aylesbury and the rest of the District. In addition, 25% of these families could be classified as coming from 'urban adversity', i.e. people who were finding life the hardest and experiencing the most difficult social and financial conditions, which was five times the Aylesbury Vale 'urban adversity' average of 5%.
- there was a general feeling that 6 months might not be enough time for suitable arrangements to be put in place for a new operator of the JPPC.

Prior to finalising their considerations, the Scrutiny Committee heard from the Cabinet Member for Leisure who, whilst noting the views expressed for and against the Cabinet decision, stated that he believed that suitable arrangements for a new operator could be put in place by September 2014. However, alternative views were expressed by the callers-in that this timescale should be extended up until April 2015 to ensure that a new operator was definitely up and running.

Having considered all the information available and having discussed the concerns expressed by the callers-in, the scrutiny committee was asked to consider whether it wished to concur with Cabinet's decision or to refer it back to Cabinet for further consideration, with reasons, in light of the views expressed by Members at the meeting.

It was proposed by Councillor Vick, and seconded by Councillor Mrs Phipps:-

“To refer the decision back to Cabinet with a request to delay the funding cut to the Jonathan Page Play Centre until the end of the financial year in 2015. Further, Cabinet be requested to include full Officer assistance to any group taking over, to help them find and make use of external funding and information that might be available to them”.

Five Members present requested a recorded vote, and the voting for and against was as follows:-

**FOR** (concur with Cabinet decision): Nil.

**AGAINST** (refer decision back to Cabinet, as per Councillor Vick’s proposal):  
Councillors Mrs Brandis, Cashman, Foster, Miss Lewis, Mrs Phipps, Mrs Russel,  
Mrs L Smith, Stuchbury, Mrs Takodra, Vick and Winn.

**ABSTENTIONS:** Nil

As such, it was

RESOLVED –

That the Cabinet decision of 17 December 2013 relating to the Jonathan Page Play Centre be referred back to Cabinet for further and fuller consideration of the impacts that ceasing to provide funding from September 2014 would have on the operation of the centre and for the following reason:-

“To request Cabinet to delay the funding cut to the Jonathan Page Play Centre until the end of the financial year in 2015. Further, Cabinet be requested to include full Officer assistance to any group taking over, to help them find and make use of external funding and information that might be available to them”.

### 3. **SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME**

At the last meeting, the scrutiny committee had prioritised a number of issues for inclusion onto the work programme and had asked the Deputy Chief Executive and Senior Scrutiny and Democratic Services Officer, in consultation with the Chairman and Vice Chairman, to prepare a work programme taking account of the issues raised at the meeting.

A work programme covering the period up until March 2015 was submitted and Members commented as follows:-

- (i) that it would be prudent for the Committee to receive a report and look at the lessons learnt from the recent flooding in the District.
- (ii) that they would like to receive an update on the AVDC / TVP CCTV Partnership, including Member visits to the CCTV Control Room, Aylesbury.

RESOLVED –

That the work programme be agreed, as discussed to the meeting.