



Buckinghamshire County Council
Select Committee
Children's Social Care and Learning

Minutes

CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE AND LEARNING SELECT COMMITTEE

Minutes from the meeting held on Friday 2 February 2018, in Mezzanine Room 1, County Hall, Aylesbury, commencing at 10.30 am and concluding at 12.50 pm.

This meeting was webcast. To review the detailed discussions that took place, please see the webcast which can be found at <http://www.buckscc.public-i.tv/>
The webcasts are retained on this website for 6 months. Recordings of any previous meetings beyond this can be requested (contact: democracy@buckscc.gov.uk)

MEMBERS PRESENT

Mrs A Cranmer (In place of Mr A Collingwood), Mr D Dhillon (Chairman), Mr M Hussain, Mr P Irwin (In place of Mrs L Sullivan), Mr S Lambert, Mrs W Mallen, Mr R Reed (In place of Mrs I Darby), Mr B Roberts, Ms J Ward (Vice-Chairman), Ms A Wight (In place of Ms K Wood) and Mr G Williams

CO-OPTED MEMBERS PRESENT

GUESTS PRESENT

Mrs A Dass, Mr M Farrow, Julia Wassell and Mr W Whyte

OFFICERS PRESENT

Miss L Dale, Mr P Dart, Ms J Tisbury, Ms S Turnbull and Mr T Vouyioukas

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies had been received from:

- Mr A Collingwood
- Mrs I Darby
- Mrs L Sullivan



- Mrs K Wood

Substitutes present were:

- Mrs A Cranmer for Mr Collingwood
- Mr R Reed for Mrs Darby
- Mr P Irwin for Mrs Sullivan
- Mrs A Wight for Mrs Wood

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Ms A Wight declared to the Committee that she was a Member of the Corporate Parenting Panel.

Mr G Williams declared to the Committee that he was also a Member of the Corporate Parenting Panel and was present during the Cabinet meeting on 8 January 2018 as a deputy.

Ms J Ward informed the Committee that she was a Member of the Aylesbury Vale District Council.

Mr Irwin declared his work with the Waddesdon Children Centre with a devolved service.

Mr S Lambert declared that he was a former board member with the Quarrendon and Bearbrook Children's Centres and his role as District Councillor for Aylesbury Vale.

Mr D Dhillon declared his former position on the advisory board of the Farnham Common Children's Centre.

Mr R Reed declared that he was the former Chairman of the board for Denham Children's Centre.

3 CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION

The Chairman welcomed the public attending the meeting and those following the webcast.

The Chairman noted that, although the meeting would be held in public, it was not a public meeting and therefore there would be no questions from the public. He then went on to provide an explanation of how the committee meeting would be conducted.

4 VALIDITY OF THE CALL-IN

The Chairman welcomed Ms S Turnbull, Head of Democratic Services and Deputy Monitoring Officer to the meeting.

Ms Turnbull confirmed her advice that the call-in was valid and that Members should hear evidence from both parties.

5 CALL-IN REQUEST SUBMISSION

The Chairman welcomed Julia Wassell (County Councillor) who introduced her supporters and witnesses: Mr M Farrow (County Councillor), Mr M Knight (District Councillor) and Mrs A Dass (Member of the Public). The group were advised that they would have 20 minutes in which to present their case followed by questions from the Committee.

Julia Wassell opened with a presentation and made the following key points:

- There was a legal requirement for a proper consultation.
- There were three reasons why the decision process was flawed: a faulty consultation; shortcoming in the pre-scrutiny process and a failure to properly engage individual local Members.
- The consultation was misleading which lead to invalid results
 - The first phase of the consultation started on 14 July until 22 September 2017.
 - Subsequently additional information was made available to the public on 4 September 2017 because of feedback from members of the public who expressed confusion over the proposals being outlined in the original consultation document.
 - The deadline was then extended until the 16th October.
- People who responded to the first phase were then also able to respond in the second phase, therefore the final results would not reflect public opinion should voters have changed their minds as a result of the revised, additional information.
- Respondents in the first phase were not asked for their contact details so it would not have been possible to notify them of the additional information provided from 4th September.
- The additional information provided in the consultation was the first time there had been a reference to the reduction of 35 Children's Centres into 9 hubs. The initial consultation document was misleading and those who completed the first phase of the consultation should have had the information on Children's Centres on which to base their opinion.
- There should have been a question relating to how recently families had used the Children's Centre.
- The question numbers in the report did not relate to the actual questionnaire which was misleading and called the report into question.
- Page 250 of the Cabinet report from 8 January stated that access and availability was among the most important considerations but it was not clear what this referred to.
- There was a legal duty to consult when closing Children's Centres and it was not clear from the consultation that this was part of the redesign of Early Help.

Julia Wassell then handed over to her witness Ms A Dass to present her case to the Committee, the following points were made:

- Having spoken with users and staff members, Ms Dass had received feedback that the consultation document did not make it clear that the proposal was to lose services. Instead, the users and staff members believed that the 9 hubs were going to be an additional service.
- The consultation was deliberately vague, heavily biased and not clear.

- It was not explicitly clear that children's centres were under threat of closure

Julia Wassell then went on to outline the next point of her case which was the failure to properly scrutinise the decision during the meeting of the Children's Social Care and Learning Select Committee on 17 October 2017. This was also the day after the consultation ended so members were not privy to the final outcome. Ms Wassell explained that: The time frame did not allow a proper challenge from the Select Committee for the proposals.

Julia Wassell outlined how in her view the consultation had been inadequate in engaging local Members, Local Area Forums and other stakeholders. She explained that:

- In the report template for the Cabinet decision, section H entitled 'Feedback from consultation and local Members views'. The document states in bold that this particular section must be completed in full otherwise the report cannot progress for the decision to be taken.
- Section G has been deleted from the Cabinet report from 8 January 2018.
- Only three of the 19 Local Area Forums had received a briefing on the Early Help Review.
- There was no summary of local Member views and Members had not been fully briefed or fully engaged.
- Some stakeholders had shared concerns but the Cabinet Member had not responded to these fully.
- There had been no audit of the work carried out at the Buckingham Children's Centre and no mention of the hubs in phase 1.
- There had been a failure to define what the hubs would be, which caused confusion.
- Many stakeholders would be let down by the proposed closures and letters had been received from Children's Centre advisory groups, schools and Local Members expressing deep concerns about the proposed closures. These had been shared with the Cabinet Member who had responded to this.
Other concerns raised were
- in relation to being able to deliver services in a confidential environment should the Children's Centres close; and Point 6 in the Cabinet report from 8 January 2018 analysed that one of the reasons for the rise in demand was the reduction in universal services which would call in to question what was being proposed. (*'...The reasons for these increases in demand are complex, but include demographic changes and pressures and reductions in universal services provided by the Council and other partners.'*)

Julia Wassell then handed over to Mr Farrow to present his evidence. The following points were noted:

- In light of the recent Ofsted report, more time should have been taken to consider the findings. Despite the £3.3M savings from closures which had been reported in the Early Help for Children and Families paper presented to Cabinet on 8 January 2018, the decision was short sighted and it appeared that no work had been done to explore other possible improvements in service delivery.

- A study commissioned by Oxford University showed that the outcomes for children from poorer socio-economic backgrounds were compromised when Children's Centres were closed.
- The £3m of savings the Council was aiming to achieve would lead to deterioration in outcomes for children and therefore an increase in future cost. The Local Authorities that were used as best practice examples were not comparable to Buckinghamshire. North Lincolnshire had an Ofsted rating of 'outstanding' and had retained their Children's Centres.
- No other Local Authority used a 2 stage consultation process.

Mr Farrow handed over to Mr Knight who made the following points:

- The Cabinet report stressed that resources would be prioritised in areas where there would be the greatest need. However there was no indication of what the strategy would be in order for this to happen.
- When the contract for Children's Centres changed from Bernardo's to Action for Children, Mr M Appleyard visited the Centres and spoke with parents. This has not happened with the Early Help review.
- The Children's Centres in Mr Knight's District were underfunded. One of the Centres was being run by a voluntary group. Centres had become run down with staff feeling unsupported. This was a sign that these Centres were not being run well.
- The services provided by the Children's Centres were being reduced without consultation and the Advisory Boards were not attended by the public or local Members.
- Mr Knight had heard about the Early Help Review Consultation from Julia Wassell.

Julia Wassell then summarised the case made by her group as follows:

- The consultation was flawed by the additional information provided part way through. The results therefore would be skewed. In addition to this, there had not been proper analysis on the results presented in the corresponding Cabinet report which was therefore inaccurate and misleading.
- The proposals had not been fully scrutinised or challenged and the concerns raised had not been fully addressed.
- There had been insufficient direct consultation with local County Council Members.
- There had been a lack of transparency and accountability around the financial implications.
- Areas with high levels of deprivation and pockets of deprivation had not been given sufficient attention.

The group therefore requested that the Committee consider the following actions to be undertaken by the Cabinet Member:

- The consultation to be re-run with clearer information and more input from the Children's Centres
- An audit to be completed of the Children's Centre staffing and services including outreach work.
- Further engagement to take place with Local Members and, in particular, those with Children's Centres in their district.

- Written feedback to be recorded from key stakeholders, schools, charities and service users.
- Proposals to be provided for alternative uses and re-provisioning of the buildings.

Ms Dass asked the Committee on behalf of parents to consider the request to complete the Consultation properly.

The Chairman thanked the group for their presentation and invited Members of the Select Committee to ask questions. Questions were asked on the following issues:

- Clarification on the information missing from the Cabinet report in regard to consultation responses.
- Details of local member engagement and briefings that had taken place.
- The extent to which consultation flaws would undermine the validity of the decision.
- Questions on the future of Micklefield and Disraeli Children's Centres and how these, and other centres, could be run better.
- The clarity of information to the public and whether there was confusion about the terms 'Early Help Review' and 'Family Worker Model'.
- The phrasing of the consultation and approach to this.
- The number of responses to the consultation in comparison to the petition numbers.
- The safeguarding issues and need for confidential meeting space in the new proposals.
- The extent to which deprivation had been sufficiently considered.
- The nature/status of the 'hubs' and if they were service delivery points or office bases.

The Chairman thanked the group for their presentation.

Julia Wassell thanked the Committee for their time and questions.

6 RESPONSE TO THE CALL-IN

The Chairman welcomed Mr W Whyte (County Councillor) who introduced his supporting officers: Mr T Vouyioukas (Executive Director, Children's Services), Mr P Dart (Programme Director – Change for Children) and Ms J Tisbury (Project Manager – Early Help). The group were advised that they would have 20 minutes in which to present their case followed by questions from the Committee.

Mr Whyte made the following key points in his presentation, in response to the written call-in request made by Julia Wassell:

- **Response to point 1:**
Research had identified the key issues that were driving demand for children's services. Using advice and guidance, such as the Early Intervention Foundation, the view that the Troubled Family Outcome Measures were appropriate had been confirmed and these measures would be an appropriate delivery method. The Early Help Strategy contained other existing measures.

- **Response to point 2:**
The Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) was detailed and clear that the new service would provide enhanced outreach to families finding themselves in difficult situations.
- **Response to Point 4:**
As a corporate parent the County Council had a duty to make sure that Children's Services were as effective as possible with the resources available.
When the consultation started, Mr Whyte e-mailed all Members with details of the consultation and invited them to submit any questions.
All Member briefings were unfortunately poorly attended.
Members had the opportunity to present information on the Early Help Review at Local Area Forums.
- **Response to Point 5:**
Mr Whyte reiterated that workers had the discretion to meet in a place that would be agreed by the families.
- **Response to Point 6:**
Under the new model, families would engage with one professional rather than speaking to a number of staff at different agencies to receive support.
- **Response to Point 7:**
From mid-October Mr Whyte authorised formal fact-finding discussions with a number of sites, including schools, to consider how the Local Authority might make better use of the Children's Centre sites and service provided.
Cabinet report recommendation 2 was a direct result of the consultation process.
- **Response to Point 8:**
It was acknowledged that the initial consultation document was too high-level about the proposed outcomes and this was clarified later in the second stage.
The design of the new Early Help model would make it easier for workers to engage with families in areas of deprivation.
- **Response to Point 9:**
The consultation responses showed the importance people place on buildings as focal points for communities. The Early Help model was not a building specific service and would make use of community facilities.
The Cabinet decision authorised discussions over the next 6 months to explore how buildings could be re-purposed.
- **Response to Point 3:** While it was accepted that the consultation could have been clearer, it was evident from the representations received from the press and members of the public that there was an overall understanding of the proposals.

Mr Whyte confirmed that he was confident that the consultation process was robust and representative of the public's views. Mr Whyte reiterated the importance of recommendation 2 in the Cabinet report from 8 January 2018 that said that discussions would be held with key stake holders in relation to the utilisation of the Children's Centre buildings.

An in depth discussion took place regarding the work that had been done to engage the public in the consultation process, in particular with low-engagement families.

Mr Dart referred Members to page 10 of the consultation report which explained the actions taken to ensure maximum engagement. This included promotion through the Children's Centres, Buckinghamshire Family Information Service, Schools and published articles. Mr Dart went on to explain that:

- In terms of the 2 phases of the consultation and the subsequent responses, the consultation report articulated the differences between the levels of agreement. Additionally Local Government Association guidance on how local authorities consult advised about evolving the consultation if required.

An in depth discussion took place in relation to engagement with the Local Area Forums. During which it was noted that all Members were contacted and as such the Local Area Forum Chairmen would have had the opportunity to present the consultation to the Forums. It was noted that the timing of the consultation meant that the information would not have been provided to all Local Area Forums.

In response to questioning, Mr P Dart went into further detail about the Local Government Association guidance on running a good consultation and the steps taken in order to ensure compliance with this guidance.

An in depth discussion took place on the efforts that went in to ensuring that respondents at the first stage were contacted at the second stage to inform them of the new information and to encourage them to respond again.

It was confirmed that all recipients on the mailing list were emailed at both stages. The following points were made:

- The public's awareness and the response to the consultation in comparison with the number of signatures on the 'Save Buckinghamshire's Children's Centres' petition.
- Attendance levels at briefings and engagement in relation to the consultation.
- The best practice of at least 15 other Local Authorities was evaluated in order to achieve the best coverage from the hubs and decide on the location and the number. The initial number of 9 hubs was not definitive and Mr Whyte would be guided by officers should this require further review.

Mr T Vouyioukas informed the Committee that the Early Help models that had been evaluated as part of the compare and contrast exercise had taken into consideration statutory guidance written in April 2014 which talked about targeted interventions for families with the highest need. Although the current Children's Centres were highly regarded they were not necessarily offering a targeted service to those families who needed support the most.

The Chairman thanked Mr Whyte and his supporting officers for their presentation and response to Members' questions.

7 COMMITTEE DELIBERATION

The Chairman invited Members of the Committee to share their views on the evidence which they had heard, with a view to deciding whether to reject the Call-in request or to refer the decision back to Cabinet for reconsideration.

RESOLUTION

The Committee voted on whether to accept the call-in request and refer the decision back to Cabinet. The Committee by majority voted against this resolution and therefore rejected the call-in request.

8 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

6 February 2018, 10.30am, Mezzanine Room 1, County Hall

CHAIRMAN