

Minutes

**Petition Hearing - Cabinet Member for Education
and Children's Services
Wednesday, 1 February 2017
Meeting held at Council Chamber - Civic Centre,
High Street, Uxbridge UB8 1UW**



	<p>Members Present: Councillor David Simmonds CBE (Chairman)</p> <p>Officers Present: Tom Murphy, Head of Early Intervention Services Nikki O'Halloran, Interim Senior Democratic Services Manager Anisha Teji, Democratic Services Officer</p>
1.	<p>TO CONFIRM THAT THE BUSINESS OF THE MEETING WILL TAKE PLACE IN PUBLIC</p> <p>RESOLVED: That all items be considered in public.</p>
2.	<p>HILLINGDON CHILDREN'S CENTRE PROPOSAL PETITIONS</p> <p>Although not present at the meeting, Councillor Duncan Flynn had provided a written statement in relation to the Hillside Children's Centre petitions. He stated that the Council and the local community in Northwood Hills and the wider area would need to continue to work closely together in order for high quality early years support to continue to be provided in the local area.</p> <p><i>Concerns, points and suggestions raised at the meeting included the following:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Hillside Children's Centre had provided parents and their children with a lifeline. It was a warm and welcoming place that provided support to many families and which had provided early interventions to improve life chances to vulnerable children;</i>• <i>Hillside Children's Centre had strong links to four primary schools and 13 nurseries in the area, sharing crucial information in relation to children that were deemed to be 'at risk'. Petitioners were concerned that, if the Centre closed, many of these vulnerable children would slip through the net and could lead to their issues escalating as adults;</i>• <i>Each year, 100 families attended Hillside Children's Centre, 360 women received 1-to-1 breastfeeding support, 300 women attended Watford midwifery clinics and 500 women attended Hillingdon midwifery clinics. The Centre was currently managed really well with good relations between the Governors and the schools' Headteachers;</i>• <i>As there were no Children's Centres in Hillingdon (other than Hillside) that were within walking distance for residents of Northwood and Northwood Hills, parents would need to use public transport or a car to visit an alternative site. However, many residents in the area were unable to easily afford to travel elsewhere and concern was expressed that a greater distance to travel would prevent mothers who had had a caesarean section from attending, which could</i>

result in an increase in newborn hospital admissions for dehydration and weight loss;

- *Parenthood could bring with it a sense of isolation and a lack of support. It was suggested that the closure of Hillside Children's Centre could result in an increase in mothers in the area experiencing postnatal depression and might also contribute to the gradual erosion of community values;*
- *The north of the Borough had the highest concentration of under 5s in Hillingdon and a higher proportion of children with low development, single parent families and parents in receipt of workless benefits;*
- *The closure of Hillside Children's Centre would put additional pressure on the Children's Centres in Coteford, Harefield and South Ruislip;*
- *On 25 February 2016, Councillor Simmonds had stated that there would be 'no Children's Centre closures'.*
- *Hillside School had refuted the Council's claim that it would not sign a lease and had highlighted the fact that other Children's Centres had not yet signed a lease either and were still in negotiations but were not being closed down;*
- *Hillingdon residents had been advised that, despite there being no increase in Council tax, there would be no cuts to services either. Residents felt betrayed as this was a very clear cut to services which would lead to a reduction in the staff who delivered services, support, advice and hope at the Children's Centres;*
- *Many residents had found the online consultation undertaken by the Council to be inaccessible or complicated, confusing and restrictive and had been, in essence, a tick box exercise. It was suggested that residents had been deliberately misinformed, misled and manipulated into supporting a proposal which was not fit for purpose and, as such, the consultation process had been flawed;*
- *The Children's Centres in the Borough had felt that the consultation had been done to them rather than involving them. They also felt that there had been no transparency in the process which should have involved and taken account of the expertise of staff and service users;*
- *It appeared that the Council was putting its desire to have all Children's Centres in the Borough under its control ahead of the needs of residents. Although the Council believed that efficiencies protected services, there had been no evidence to support this;*
- *The six local authority run Children's Centres in Hillingdon had been rated as 'requires improvement' by Ofsted. The school run Centres had received higher Ofsted ratings, were more cost efficient, had more freedom to hire permanent staff and could procure new equipment/building work at the lowest market price;*
- *The closure of Children's Centres was a failure to deliver essential services to many of the youngest Borough residents at the most crucial stage of their development;*
- *Parents using Children's Centres tended to build relationships with the Centre staff and they needed and valued this continuity of support;*
- *A review of Children's Centres had been undertaken between March and June 2016 but, although a summary had been shared, the full findings had not been disclosed to the Centres or residents. Subsequently, the decision had been made to cut services;*
- *It was suggested that the level of cuts would be devastating at the Cherry Lane*

Children's Centre and would result in the closure of the Saturday playgroup. Hillingdon was a Borough of extremes and Children's Centres needed funding to help them continue;

- Charville Primary Academy School had worked in partnership with Charville Children's Centre for many years;*
- Petitioners felt that the children affected had not been given any support;*
- Residents' needs had increased over the years with staff delivering a huge range of initiatives in a one stop shop. Although the local authority could develop and improve services, petitioners doubted that this would happen;*
- It was understood that cuts were coming but petitioners were concerned that cutting the Children's Centre budget by 41% would have a devastating effect on the services that they provided;*
- Volunteers invested a lot of time at Harefield Children's Centre and regularly reviewed the impact reports produced. The work undertaken here was impressive and there was clear evidence of a solid track record of helping vulnerable families. All of the staff were familiar with the families so were able to identify those that needed to be targeted with specific interventions;*
- Concern was expressed that the proposals would eradicate the current levels of prevention and support provided to families and that this would prove more costly for the Council in the longer term;*
- It was suggested that the significant time contribution made by volunteers would be lost as a result of the proposals and that this would have an impact on the effectiveness of Children's Centres;*
- Although it was an opportunity to share expertise, concern was expressed that the new hub and spoke model was based on locality even though the three Centres proposed as hubs all required improvement. Petitioners felt that, given this poor performance, they were unable to trust the local authority to maintain the children's development and not run the Children's Centres into the ground;*
- A meeting, held in December 2016 to discuss the proposals, advised that many aspects of the decision would be non negotiable. Furthermore, there appeared to be no clear idea of how the new structure would be managed. However, the Council did appear to have a specific budget requirement;*
- Petitioners felt that Headteachers were in the best position to manage Children's Centres as they worked with children through SATs and beyond;*
- It was suggested that the 'Have Your Say' facility was not fit for purpose;*
- Coteford Children's Centre had provided many residents in difficult situations with support and guidance. This Centre was an integral part of the school and petitioners could not understand the logistics of how it could be run by the Council. Concern was expressed with regard to implementing staff vetting procedures to ensure that children were safeguarded and the procedure for splitting utility bills with the school;*
- If Uxbridge Children's Centre closed, petitioners questioned where the existing users would be able to go as well as those families that moved into properties on the new St Andrews Park development;*
- Although joined up services were thought to be a good thing, parents were either unable or didn't want to have to travel a significant distance;*
- Parents using Children's Centres had built up relationships with the staff and were anxious about job losses as these relationships would be affected;*
- Colham Manor Children's Centre had many positive stories regarding the*

services that it had provided to combat loneliness, anxiety, depression, etc;

- *It was suggested that many of the programmes that evolved from studies were not an effective use of funding; and*
- *Petitioners thanked staff at the Children's Centres for the support that they had provided.*

Councillor Simmonds listened to the concerns of the petitioners and responded to the points raised. It was noted that the points made by petitioners would be included in the analysis of the responses received in relation to the consultation that closed on 25 January 2017.

The Cabinet Member noted that the Council was looking to standardise services at Children's Centres across the Borough in the same way that every service provided by the Council needed to be reviewed to ensure that it was as financially efficient as possible. Consideration would be given to the impact on residents but also to the provision of better service delivery.

With regard to the safeguarding issue raised, Councillor Simmonds reassured petitioners that existing staff would continue to work at the Children's Centres. Furthermore, all Centre staff were vetted in the same way as school staff.

Councillor Simmonds acknowledged that there were good and bad programmes. However, he was involved with a national programme of research which included the early intervention work undertaken at Warwick University Centre. When funding was limited, it was important to concentrate on programmes that had proved effective in addressing issues such as deprivation.

Councillor Simmonds advised that he would look into the review that had been undertaken between March and June 2016. He thanked the petitioners for their comments and reiterated that these would be taken into account as part of the consultation process.

RESOLVED: That the Cabinet Member for Education and Children's Services:

- 1. noted the petitions received and listened to the views of petitioners; and**
- 2. consider the views offered by petitioners as part of the proposal consultation process.**

Reasons for recommendations

To receive, consider and listen to the views of petitioners.

Alternative options considered / risk management

None at this stage.