

Minutes

PETITION HEARING - CABINET MEMBER FOR CHILDREN, FAMILIES & EDUCATION

01 November 2022

Meeting held at Committee Room 6 - Civic Centre,
High Street, Uxbridge UB8 1UW



	<p>Cabinet Member Present: Councillor Susan O'Brien, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education</p> <p>Ward Councillors Present: Councillor Jan Sweeting Councillor Peter Curling Councillor Barry Nelson-West Councillor Tony Burles Councillor Elizabeth Garelick</p> <p>LBH Officers Present: Claire Fry, Head of Service, Child and Family Development Sandra Taylor, Executive Director - Adult Services and Health Steve Clarke, Democratic Services Officer</p>
1.	<p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST IN MATTERS COMING BEFORE THIS MEETING</p> <p>There were no declarations of interest.</p>
2.	<p>TO CONFIRM THAT THE BUSINESS OF THE MEETING WILL TAKE PLACE IN PUBLIC</p> <p>It was confirmed that all items were in Part I and would be considered in public.</p>
3.	<p>TO CONSIDER THE REPORT OF THE OFFICERS ON THE FOLLOWING PETITIONS RECEIVED:</p> <p>The Cabinet Member confirmed to those in attendance that the petition hearing was a meeting held in public but not a public meeting per se; those who were scheduled to speak at the hearing had been identified in advance and notified of their right to speak.</p> <p>It was noted that the petitions being discussed were considered 'Borough-wide Petitions' and as such, they were not ward specific and councillors did not have an automatic right to speak. However, the Cabinet Member confirmed that they would allow ward councillors, if present, to speak from the three wards containing Council run Early Years Centres, these were Pinkwell, Uxbridge and South Ruislip.</p> <p>It was also noted that, following the publication of the petition hearing agenda on 24 October 2022, the Council had received a further 94 paper petition signatures in support of the first petition highlighted in the officers report.</p>

4.

PETITIONS IN RELATION TO THE COUNCIL'S DIRECT EARLY YEARS PROVISION

The Cabinet Member welcomed all who were present to the hearing and briefly ran through the petition hearing process, further to this they introduced the officers present to assist with the hearing.

The first petition organiser was present and addressed the Cabinet Member. Within their address, the petition organiser raised a number of matters, these points included:

- It was stated that the service had been running at a deficit since 2017 and one of the primary factors in that deficit was inoccupancy of the service. The petition organiser queried what measures had been taken in that time to address the inoccupancy issues and what steps had been taken to recoup the deficit.
- The petition organiser queried the timing of the initial decision to cease provision of direct early years provision as it had followed a recent local election.
- Whilst the petitioner acknowledged that the provision of such a service was not a statutory requirement of the Council, the benefits of the service were clear to see as attending an early years setting provided a number of positive childhood outcomes, it was seen that investment in the childhood development of residents should be a worthwhile investment for the Council. It was noted that a number of Council run services were subsidised by local tax payers and it was felt that early years provision should be considered a necessary service that warranted subsidisation.
- Whilst it was known that without the Council run services, there would still be sufficient access to early years settings across the Borough through private provision, it was highlighted that these services were in some cases 50-80% more expensive than the Council run settings and parents would experience difficulties in meeting these additional costs, particularly in the current economic climate. Petitioners raised concerns that the Council had previously acknowledged that residents were facing higher living costs, yet were considering the removal of an affordable early years service which would put more pressure on the budgets of service users.
- Elaborating on their own experience of the early years service, the petition organiser noted that they had spent eight weeks settling their child into one of the Council run early years settings in late 2021, this was at a time where they could afford to spend eight weeks supporting the settling in process. If they were to repeat that process in a new early years setting, they would not have the same flexibility to support the settling in process.
- Petitioners highlighted that savings could be made elsewhere in the Council's budget to allow the continuation of direct early years provision; examples given included saving on floral displays across the borough and increasing parking charges.
- Petitioners urged Councillors and Officers to visit the early years centres themselves as the Council's provision of early years centres was highly regarded by parents and staff. The loss of this service would have a significant impact on those service users, their children and the staff at the centres.

A second nominated speaker, associated with the first petition, was present and also addressed the Cabinet Member. Key points raised within their address included:

- The speaker sought to share some experiences of those who had used the service, specifically those of individuals with challenging behavioural needs or special educational needs who had struggled to settle in private early years settings but had experienced no such issues with their experience of the Council run setting; highlighting the value and importance that the Council run early years provision had within their communities. Further to this it was queried what specific measures would be put in place for children with special educational needs in the privately available early years settings to ensure those children received a similar level of care.
- The loss of these irreplaceable experiences would have a huge impact on the long term development of children using the service.
- It was understood that financial viability was imperative to running the service but the importance of running such a valuable community asset should take precedence.

With regard to the second petition received, the petition organiser had nominated an individual to speak on behalf of petitioners. They addressed the Cabinet Member making a number of key points, these included:

- It was noted that the service had been making a loss since 2017, yet the decision to cease the provision of Council run direct early years care had come at a time when the cost of living crisis was having a real impact on service users. It was also noted that the service should not carry on as is, making a significant loss, but options needed to be explored for making the service more viable.
- Petitioners acknowledged that the current fees were well below market rate but highlighted that there were efficiencies and costs that could be addressed as a way of mitigating the deficit in running the service. Petitioners felt that these options had not been fully explored since 2017.
- It was noted that demand for the service was there and some suggestions from petitioners on improving the service's viability included increasing fees on a means tested basis, increasing capacity for younger infants in the early years settings, the use of apprentices, and reviewing the contract for early years provision.
- It was highlighted that it was not too late for the Council to change its direction on this matter and petitioners encouraged the Cabinet Member to do so for the benefit of the community.

Councillor Tony Burles, Ward Councillor for Uxbridge, was present and addressed the Cabinet Member in support of the petitioners. Key points of his address included:

- He wished to offer his full support to the petitioners and commended them on gathering a significant amount of support and galvanising the community.
- The Ward Councillor was surprised to hear of the Council's initial decision made in August 2022 to cease direct early years provision. Following the initial decision, the Ward Councillor started receiving emails from parents raising

	<p>their concerns regarding the availability of early years childcare and the significantly higher cost of private early years settings.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was noted that, although there was no statutory requirement to hold a public consultation on the matter, the lack of a public consultation on such an important issue was cause for concern. • It was noted that the three Council run early years settings delivered a very high standard of childcare and they were valuable community assets. The Ward Councillor urged the Cabinet Member to reconsider their initial decision. <p>The Cabinet Member thanked everyone in attendance for coming along to the petition hearing, particularly the petition organisers who had dedicated time and effort in putting together the petitions, as well as speaking in a public setting to put their views on public record. It was highlighted that, following the representations received at the petition hearing, the decision to cease the Council’s direct early years provision remained on pause and it was advised that a final decision on the matter would likely be forthcoming in December 2022.</p> <p>Petitioners sought to express their views that, should the decision be made to cease the operation of Council run early years settings, the sites should be considered for use as private early years childcare in an effort to retain the availability of early years settings in the Borough. There were concerns with regard to the Uxbridge and Nestles Avenue sites specifically that they would be sold to private property developers. The Cabinet Member acknowledged the petitioners’ concerns and advised that, although the Council’s land and property holdings was not a function of the Children, Families & Education Cabinet Portfolio, should they be minded to, they could write to the Leader of the Council and the Cabinet Member for Property, Highways & Transport with their concerns over any prospective land usage.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education met with petitioners and listened to their request for the Council to continue to provide early years childcare.</p>
	<p>The meeting, which commenced at 6.00 pm, closed at 6.40 pm.</p>

These are the minutes of the above meeting. For more information on any of the resolutions please contact Steve Clarke on 01895 250693. Circulation of these minutes is to Councillors, Officers, the Press and Members of the Public.