

Sheffield Early Years Children's Centre Cuts - GMB up-date and report to SCC Scrutiny Board meeting (January 9th 2013)

GMB members raised a number of questions (17 altogether) at the Sheffield City Council full Cabinet meeting 12th December 2012. Here are a few of the key questions that were asked at that meeting and the main points that we have picked out of the report that was approved by the Cabinet on the day:

1. Our Children's centres are often praised by Ofsted, Broomhall Nursery School & Children's Centre, for example, was recently graded as Outstanding in all aspects of its provision by Ofsted; one of just 2 schools in Sheffield since the introduction of the new framework in 2012. Broomhall work with above average numbers of children with complex special educational needs and provide support groups and services for families of these children. Who will carry on this specialist provision and where will these children go if Broomhall services are cut?
2. Early Years Children's Centres work with a large number of vulnerable families and they play an important role in safeguarding children. Their experienced, highly trained staff develop trusting relationships with these families. Who will see these children and parents **everyday** and offer early intervention if these services are cut?
3. How can Councillor Drayton, and this report to Cabinet, claim that the service that this Council will provide after the Children Centres are cut by anything up to 20 with the loss of 1/3 of the work-force, will still be maintained and improved?
4. Service users have to plan their lives and address this devastating cut to a service that in many cases will change their lives dramatically. Staff who will be losing their jobs also have to plan ahead and despite no real recognition in this report, also have legal and contractual rights. How can the Council or indeed any Councillor in this building claim to be carrying out any form of meaningful and proper consultation with service users, employees and their trade unions when it is clear from this report that the cuts will take place in March 2013?

The Cabinet report does not seem to be capable of uttering the words 'cut', 'close' or 'sack'. Instead the phrase; ***'The proposed cessation of grants to 16 childcare providers in the Private, Voluntary and Independent sector and 4 in the statutory sector'*** is used. These may be different words but they have the same meaning; funding will end and the centres will, more than likely close as a result.

The Council go on to say ***'Our approach will focus on organisations working in partnership and demonstrating commitment to this vision which will maximise positive outcomes in communities, and lead to improved universal services and better targeted resources.'*** This is then contradicted by the following statement; ***'As a result of the reduction in resources available the strategic vision will be more difficult to achieve.'***

The Council also state that they intend ***'achieving better value for money by procuring good quality services at the most economically advantageous price.'*** And, they go on to say ***'NHS Sheffield and Public Health play a central role in the delivery of these prevention and early intervention services, with health visitors and midwives in a key role. Therefore joint planning and commissioning of early health and support with our NHS partners will be a key feature in the future development of services. This will be supported by the City Council's procurement process which will deliver a broad range of family support services. This will allow the Private Voluntary and Independent sector (PVI) the opportunity to participate in planning and delivery.'***

The Council report does admit that we have 36 registered children's centre areas coming with management and administration costs and that they are ***'reducing this to 17,*** but, they say ***'we will have services delivered in the same number of areas across the city it is just the categorisation and organisation of this that is changing.'*** Can the Council be serious in its view that by changing the 'category' and the way it 'organises' these services that the size and capacity to deliver these services will not change?

Astonishingly the report then goes on to list how the service will be improved despite these huge cuts, they say ***‘Despite recent funding cuts, families will be able to access good quality services locally, (within a reasonable distance from their home).***

Reading the advantages to these cuts that the Council lists below in the report, we need to ask ourselves why we have a report to a Labour Council Cabinet that is clearly written in order to not only justify these cuts but to actually sell them to the people of Sheffield, service users and employees, as a positive and justified cut. In short, the report implies that the current service is and therefore must have been a gross misuse of public sector money.

The Report says:

- ***All three and four year olds will still be able to access 15 hours of free nursery education.***
- ***More two years olds from disadvantaged areas will access free early learning that will give them a better start in life and more generally families from low income households will be able to access the full range of children centre services.***
- ***Services will be accessible and flexible to meet modern family lifestyles in convenient locations where families want to access them.***
- ***Information will be accessible through the channels families want when they need it.***
- ***Services will be delivered more efficiently ensuring that resources meet the needs of families at the point when they are needed.***
- ***There will be better integration of services supported by the development of a family Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and integrated screening which will;***
- ***Reduce inequalities in child development and school readiness.***
- ***Improve parents aspirations, self esteem and parenting skills.***
- ***Improve child and family health life chances.***
- ***There will be a clear strategy for communication with parents and those key partners involved in developing services for***

early years will contribute to the planning and evaluation of services.

- ***We recognise that families will need to be supported through this period of change to early years services. Local forums and networks will be engaged and accessible to ensure that any impact will be minimal.***

Eventually even this imaginatively worded report cannot conceal the fact that our early years service is being cut to the bone and will be sold to the lowest bidder. The report finally concludes, just before bamboozling us with more wonderful reasons to cut, that;

The procurement process (SALE or AUCTION, to the rest of us) will identify organisations able to deliver the required good quality services at the most economically advantageous price, in line with Best Value Guidance. This will enable all providers to have the opportunity to participate and invest in their future sustainability and development of services aligning with the Government's aim to help the voluntary and community sector shift from a reliance on central and local Council grant based funding to be able to compete in open markets (Cameron's Big Society?).

- ***There will be increased benefits for children and families including;***
- ***More flexible, innovative services where families need them.***
- ***Improved reach and registration of the most vulnerable families.***
- ***Guaranteed "good quality" settings.***
- ***Better use of community assets.***
- ***Services driven by local needs.***
- ***Ability to monitor impact.***
- ***Economic and social benefits to families.***
- ***Provides a more accessible service for families including foster carers and where appropriate support contact arrangements between looked after children and their parents.***

- ***Ability to link flexible childcare support for parents/carers in Education, Training and Employment.***

We then read that all existing contracts for services will cease on March 31st 2013 and that the Children's Centre areas will be reorganised from 36 areas to 17. Although Jackie Drayton assured everyone at the Cabinet meeting that the Council were determined to carry out full and proper consultation with the public, service users and employees with regard to these proposals, an ending to funding in March will not allow that. We are now almost 1 Month in to this 'so called' consultation period and the trade unions have yet to meet the Council or management with regard to these proposals since it was initially announced.

As the report confirms, there are some potential legal implications from the proposed restructuring of Children's Centres as this will require the Council to undertake a statutory public consultation as part of the exercise. Section 5d of the childcare act 2006 requires consultation before providing or ceasing to provide children's centres and before making any significant change to the services they provide.

From a GMB perspective we cannot see how any of our members can be dismissed without their agreement by March 2013, we envisage the consultation, contractual and statutory processes that must be adhered to, lasting until at least July 2013. We have asked for clarity from the Council but that has not been forthcoming to date.

It is true that the government strategy and funding for early years provision is changing but this proposal to Cabinet does not give our Children's Centres, or most of them at best, an opportunity to move with and plan around that change. This cut has been rushed through and is being sold as a positive cut, a justified a cut, and it is a resounding pat on the back for the governments ferocious austerity measures and discriminating policies. It is an insult to those that have been working hard to provide this fantastic service and for those that so desperately need it.

The GMB will, of course, oppose this cut through every means at our disposal. In the mean time we would urge the Council to at the very least, postpone the proposed funding cut date (March 2013) to allow for meaningful and proper consultation to take place with service users, their communities, providers, employees and their respective trade unions. By extending the '**cessation**' date to November 2013, for example, we would not only be able to engage in the consultation process properly, we would also be able to assess how the switch in the way early years services are to be funded by the government would work in Sheffield and particular through our changing School environment and NHS.

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