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Cllr Caroline Woodley
Cabinet Member for Families, Early Years, Parks and Play
London Borough of Hackney,
Hackney Town Hall, Mare Street, London. E8 1 EA

Dear Caroline,

Consultation Response:
Early Years Strategy & Proposed Closure of Children's Centres

At its meeting on the 13th September 2021, Cabinet approved the new Early Years Strategy. Subsequent to that meeting (on the 15th September), a public consultation was launched on the Early Years Strategy and the proposed closure of two children's centres (Fernbank and Hillside), which is open for responses until the 16th November 2021.

To inform its response to this consultation, the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Commissions has:

- Received reports, and questioned officers and yourself on the Early Years Strategy and the reconfiguration of children's centres at its meeting on the [6th October 2021](#);
- Received submissions, and questioned parent representatives about the impact of the planned children centre closures, the mitigations put in place and the consultation process at its meeting on the [1st November 2021](#).

A full record of the above meetings and discussions on the Early Years Strategy and reconfiguration of children's centres are publicly available via the following links ([6th October 2021](#) and [1st November 2021](#)).

The Commission acknowledges that the Council is often required to take difficult decisions about the future of services, decisions which can have a significant impact on residents and local communities that use and rely on them. In this context, it is the role of the scrutiny commission to question and challenge decision makers, so that the community and other stakeholders are assured around the decision making process.

Overview & Scrutiny

Early Years Strategy

Access to good quality early years childcare and education can help children obtain the best start in life. Research has consistently shown that good quality early years education can have a positive effect on the educational, cognitive, behavioural and social outcomes of children, not just in the short-term but also much later on in life. It is also widely understood that effectively targeted early years education and childcare can offer vital support to some of our most vulnerable children and families, and therefore also contribute to wider efforts to address local inequalities.

The Commission acknowledges that, despite significant reductions in the government Early Intervention Grant and other austerity measures since 2010, Hackney has demonstrated an ongoing commitment to early years education and childcare services. This is exemplified through Hackney's 20 children's centres, a level of provision which exceeds most other local London boroughs. These children's centres play a key role in early years provision, not only as a provider of early education and childcare, but also as a link to a broader range of health and social care services which provide holistic support for local children and families. Children's centres also contribute to efforts to support community cohesion through opportunities for inclusive early education and learning as well as access to key universal services such as Stay and Play.

In the context of the above, the Commission broadly welcomes the new Early Years Strategy as this reaffirms the local importance and commitment to early years provision. The new strategy also provides an opportunity to further integrate and improve work with local partners (e.g. Public Health, Homerton Hospital and the voluntary sector). Close working relationships between Children Centre staff, Health Visitors, speech and language therapists and other early years practitioners may help facilitate data sharing and the ability of local services to identify and more effectively support those children and families most in need.

A key provision within the Early Years Strategy is to strengthen support for families of children with additional or complex needs, which again the Commission welcomes. The provision of two Early Years SEND Hubs will be a positive development as this may help to better plan and coordinate special needs support for local families across the diverse range of early years settings.

Whilst the development of six local children's centres into Family Hubs for children (aged 0-19) and their families is welcomed in principle, further detail may be required in these proposals and how this may impact on existing services. In particular, from the evidence submitted to the Commission by local parent representatives, further reassurance may be necessary to ensure that this service extension does not dilute on-site early years provision and is sufficiently accessible to families that need it.

Overview & Scrutiny

Closure of Hillside and Fernbank Children's Centres

In response to the need to make financial savings across the council, the Education Service has been required to identify £1m of cost saving measures from within its budget. On September 15th, Hackney Education announced proposals to close both Hillside and Fernbank Children's Centres, and that these proposals would also form part of the Early Years Strategy public consultation.

Officers attended a meeting of the Commission on the 6th October 2021 and were questioned on the financial rationale for the proposals to close the two children's centres. From this questioning the Commission noted that:

- Financial options to identify the necessary savings within the Hackney Education budget were limited given that the spend on children's centres accounts for a significant proportion of discretionary spending within that Directorate;
- Expected additional income from a previous increase to child care fees in children's centres had not fully materialised due to the impact of Covid, which had compounded pressures within the children's centres budget;
- The planned closures of the two children's centres was expected to release £1.2m of savings, which would meet savings requirements and help offset additional budget pressures set out above.

Officers acknowledged that the reconfiguration would mean a reduction in service provision, but the necessity to make financial savings had required difficult choices and that the closure of two of its twenty children's centres had been reluctantly proposed. Officers hoped that the accompanying Early Years Strategy would help mitigate the impact, where remaining children's centres and other early years services would be able to refocus local efforts to target those most in need of support and tackle disproportionalities across the service.

At its meeting on the 1st November 2021, members of the Commission questioned parent representatives on the impact of the planned children centre closures and the proposed mitigations put forward by the Early Years Service. In terms of the impact, parents indicated that the proposed closures would:

- Significantly impact on the availability of subsidised childcare in the locality directly affecting 90 families currently using the nursery facilities;
- Reduce access to universal services (e.g. Stay And Play) to much larger number of families;
- Disproportionately impact vulnerable and disadvantaged children and those families on low income families;
- Reduce opportunities to access high quality, inclusive early years education as offered by children's centres.

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Parents also cited a number of concerns about the proposed use of alternative children centres if their current centre was closed. Parents questioned whether there would be sufficient capacity to accommodate those families displaced by the closures (in suitably located centres), and whether some alternative children's centres would be appropriate given that these targeted provision for specific community groups. Additionally, it was noted that other alternatives to children's centre provision, such as independent nurseries or childminders, were not always affordable or suitable to the needs of children and families. Parents also emphasised that it would be difficult to replace the high quality services and support afforded to children and families through local children's centres within alternative nursery settings. Parents also sought to underline that their choice of setting for childcare and early education for their children, was informed by children's centres ethos and commitment to inclusive education.

Consultation Process

The consultation on the Early Years Strategy and the closure of Hillside and Fernbank children's was launched on 15th September 2021 and runs for just over 8 weeks to close on November 16th 2021. The consultation was supported by access to a summary of the Early Years Strategy, a consultation document and an on-line survey.

Parent representations to the Commission highlighted that the proposed closure of the two children's centres had come 'out of the blue' which had left many parents feeling anxious and uncertain about future childcare provision. In this context, parents felt that the 8 week consultation period was insufficient for parents to reflect on the proposals and to meaningfully engage in this process. It was also not clear to parents why this consultation was just 8 weeks, when other council consultations were open for responses over a longer period (12 weeks).

Whilst parents acknowledged that consultation information was clear, in plain English, and could be readily understood, given the nature of the proposals they had been expecting more substantive documentation. In particular, parents noted that other documents referenced in the consultation were not included (e.g. parental survey, childcare sufficiency assessment) and that the underpinning evidence to support the closure of children's centres had not been disclosed. The absence of such information has restricted parents' ability to engage within the consultation, and the parents have had to pursue more formal means to obtain this information.

Understanding that Cabinet approved the Early Years Strategy at its meeting on the 13th September 2021, it remains unclear to the Commission why a consultation on the Early Years Strategy was launched after that date on the 15th September 2021. Given that there is no notation to suggest that the Early Years Strategy approved by Cabinet on 13th September was in draft form, parents questioned what impact their

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contributions and feedback would have on the Early Years Strategy as already appeared to have been agreed. Despite the Early Years Strategy having been agreed, questioning within the consultation survey was focused on provisions within the Early Years Strategy rather than the proposed centre closures.

Parent representatives were also concerned that the consultation conflated two separate decision making processes in that it was seeking views on two unrelated decisions: the Early Years Strategy and proposals to close two children's centres. Parents were therefore not assured about the robustness of this process, particularly as no alternatives to the closure of children's centres had been forthcoming.

General

Children's Centres are a key universal service offering high quality, holistic and inclusive early education and childcare which is affordable for local families. In this sense, the offer of children's centres is unique and difficult to compare with other childcare and nursery settings. This point was made very clearly in parents' representations to the Commission, as alternatives that were being offered by way of mitigation for closures did not represent a 'like for like' offer. The Commission fully acknowledges that what children's centres offer might be considered a 'gold standard' but would welcome a greater narrative how such similar capacity can be developed outside of children's centres but in partnership with childcare settings more widely.

The Commission recognises that ongoing austerity is generating acute pressures within council budgets which is likely to require difficult decisions going forward. As has been acknowledged by officers, it is the discretionary spending of the council which will face particular pressure as these funds are used to support non-statutory services. Given that children's centres and most other preventative services are discretionary funded, it is clear that such services will remain vulnerable to future austerity measures across the Council. In the absence of any new central government policy announcements or additional government funding for this area, it is hoped that the new Early Years Strategy will provide a sustainable framework to support children's centres and other early years services going forward.

The Commission further notes the longstanding areas of overspend in both special educational needs and disability (SEND) and the commissioning of children's social care placements in the independent sector. These overspends are significant and ongoing and which ultimately impact on wider budgets for Education and Children and other children services funded from them. The Commission therefore hopes that necessary actions will be taken to develop and reshape these services to address these overspends.

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The Commission has invited you to attend its next meeting on the 6th December for your annual Q & A with members, where it is hoped that you will be able to provide an update on the consultation ahead of a final decision being taken by Cabinet on the 13th December 2021.

The Commission would like to thank you and all your officers for attending the scrutiny sessions outlined above, and for responding to questions raised by members in a frank and open manner. Likewise, we would like to extend our thanks to parent representatives from Hillside and Fernbank children's centres who attended our meeting, provided a submission to the Commission and for responding to members' questions. The Commission acknowledges that this has been an anxious time for those parents involved and are grateful for their participation.

Yours faithfully

Cllr Sophie Conway
Chair, Children and Young People
Scrutiny Commission

Cllr Margaret Gordon
Vice Chair, Children and Young People
Scrutiny Commission

Cc Jacquie Burke, Group Director Children & Education
 Annie Gammon, Director of Education
 Consultations