

ADULT SOCIAL CARE, CHILDREN'S SERVICES AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE MEETING
13 DECEMBER 2016

(5) QUESTIONS

1. Councillor Josh Williams to ask the Chair:
Arthur Hill Pool

With the sad news that the Arthur Hill swimming pool will be closing in less than a week, could the Lead Councillor for Education tell us how many school children swam there each week from the surrounding schools, and what provision has been made for their lessons next term and in future years ?

Please can the Lead Councillor provide a schedule with the answer to show which Arthur Hill classes will be transferring to which alternative locations, and at which time slots ?

RESPONSE by Councillor McElligott, Chair of the Adult Social Care, Children's Services and Education Committee

I invite Councillor Jones, the Lead Councillor for Education to make the response on my behalf.

REPLY by the Lead Councillor for Education (Councillor Jones):

I would like to preface my response by reiterating that because of Government funding cuts and the very large savings needed this year from the Council's budget it is simply not affordable for the Council to keep Arthur Hill Pool open. However, I wish the Community Group well with their efforts both to raise money and I look forward to discussing any future business plan with them.

With regard to the future we have clear plans to deliver new and much better swimming and leisure facilities in east Reading although we acknowledge the inconvenience to users of Arthur Hill Pool in the intervening period. The number of children attending each week varies so it is not possible to give exact numbers using the pool. The three schools that currently use Arthur Hill Pool have all been contacted directly and offered free transport and access to other Council swimming pools at a variety of times with or without teachers provided by the Council. No schools have taken up the offer made and all schools have confirmed that they are making their own arrangements. Should any of these schools with whom we have been discussing free travel decide to take up the Council's offer we will be happy to accommodate them.

2. Leslie Macdonald to ask the Chair:
Short Breaks Funding

Currently this funding is given as a grant to the Alafia BME service of the charity ACRE and it represents the ONLY funding given by the council to support the parents of disabled children with specialist information and advice in Reading.

In the past the council has always funded services to provide specialist information and advice to include disabled children and their families as well as adults. However, when the grant funding moved to a contract basis and, shortly thereafter, disabled children's services were moved out of the adult social care directorate, no services were commissioned for information and advice for disabled children.

The Council currently funds £57,000 on a two-year contract for Information and Advice for "vulnerable adults who have emerging or current care and support needs, taking a whole

family approach where relevant". The funding is shared by 4 charities supporting people with learning disability, the elderly and all other communities of need.

This appears to Reading Mencap to be an inequality of services between disabled adults and disabled children.

The funding of £23,000 as mentioned above, given to Alafia, was only for BME families of disabled children to age 25, and Alafia served this community for many years with this funding. However, of recent years and with the departure of their original, highly experienced, long-serving staff member, families have moved to other charities seeking help with their complex cases.

It is our feeling that, in the current economic climate the Council's funding is no longer providing good value and non-BME families of disabled children have no funded service at all.

Will the Council be even-handed and re-commission the £23,000, in an open tender, for information and advice services for all families of disabled children in Reading? This act would give parity to learning disabled children and their families with learning disabled adults, for help to navigate complex social care and other services.

RESPONSE by Councillor McElligott, Chair of the Adult Social Care, Children's Services and Education Committee

I invite Councillor Gavin, the Lead Councillor for Children's Services and Families to make the response on my behalf.

REPLY by the Lead Councillor for Children's Services and Families (Councillor Gavin):

Can I thank Ms McDonald for her question and offer her reassurance.

Reading Borough Council will start an exercise early in 2017 to identify the needs of the Special Educational Needs and Disabled child population of Reading. This information will be used to shape the commissioning process for services to meet the needs of children and families.

We recognise that the support offer for this cohort of Reading's population can be complex to negotiate and access and we will wherever possible collaborate with both service users and service providers in commissioning and providing the local offer.

It is not possible at this stage, without a needs analysis to identify the types of services that will be required. Nor is it possible to identify the value of services that will be commissioned. This level of detail will become clearer as Reading sets the Local Authority budget for 2017-18 and completes a needs analysis.

Reading Borough Council will work to ensure that no groups are knowingly disadvantaged and will attempt to achieve parity in the delivery of the support offer to children and families.

3. Ramona Bridgman to ask the Chair:
SEND School Transport

Firstly, the Forum welcome Ann Marie's proposal to continue the range of short break provision for children with Special Educational Needs and/or Disability (SEND) and look forward to working with the directorate to develop the details ready for April 2016 and the Local Offer.

Children with severe special needs start attending Brookfields, the Avenue and Addington Special Schools from 2 years until 19 years.

There are also a number of resource units for children at mainstream school which children travel to from other parts of Reading before the age of 5 and over the age of 16:

- Snowflakes Newbridge Nursery in Caversham - children aged 3 - 5 with autistic spectrum condition (ASC)
- Reception at the resource unit for ASC at Christ the King in South Reading for 4 - 5 year olds.
- The Visually Impaired Resource at Highdown in Emmer Green - young people aged 16 - 18 can attend.

Families on Universal Credit are unlikely to be able to afford the £500 pa proposed contribution to enable their children to attend these special schools and resource units.

Can the Committee please detail more clearly how it will ensure that children with SEND from poorer families have the best start in life through education and early help?

RESPONSE by Councillor McElligott, Chair of the Adult Social Care, Children's Services and Education Committee

I invite Councillor Jones, the Lead Councillor for Education to make the response on my behalf.

REPLY by the Lead Councillor for Education (Councillor Jones):

To ensure that pupils with special educational needs from poorer families will have the best start in life through education and early help the directorate will focus on a number of key issues.

The council is improving and strengthening the governance arrangements for the provision of special educational needs across Education, Health and Social Care. The council is ensuring that there is earlier identification and information sharing, including the use of data, to ensure a good match between need and provision and placement. The council is also developing a closer and stronger Joint Commissioning strategy for the delivery and provision of services to children and young people with special educational needs.

The contribution for transport to a special school or resource unit which necessitates transport is a request not a requirement. Furthermore, each case will be looked on an individual basis.

There is legislation to provide for the needs of pupils with special educational needs. This provides a clear framework for all local authorities to work towards with its children and young people. Part 3 of the Children and Families Act 2014 places legal duties on Local Authorities to identify and assess the special educational needs of children and young people for whom they are responsible. Local Authority's become responsible for a child/young person in their area when they become aware that the child/young person has or may have SEN. They then must then ensure that those children and young people receive a level of support which will help them "achieve the best possible educational and other outcomes" - Section 19 (d).

Every child with special educational needs will have an SEN support plan or an Education and Health Care plan. This will ensure that their needs are met irrespective of financial circumstances.

4. Ben Cross to ask the Chair:
Short Breaks for Disabled Children

In relation to Item 13 on tonight's agenda - 'Short Breaks for Disabled Children':

In recent weeks, I have specifically advised the Acting Director for Children's Services against having a fixed and rigid 'tender' process as it is highly likely to severely disadvantage or even exclude the smaller local groups which parents and children say so clearly that they value and trust. RCVYS supports any proposal to focus on outcomes and the effective monitoring of these. However, is the use of the word 'tender' in this report simply being used as a generic term, or does it mean that Reading Borough Council is intent on undertaking an expensive and time-consuming formal tendering process, rather than a simpler and effective bidding process which will enable these organisations to continue to deliver the services which families so clearly say that they want?

RESPONSE by Councillor McElligott, Chair of the Adult Social Care, Children's Services and Education Committee

I invite Councillor Gavin, the Lead Councillor for Children's Services and Families to make the response on my behalf.

REPLY by the Lead Councillor for Children's Services and Families (Councillor Gavin):

Can I thank Mr Cross for his question and express regret that Mr Cross feels that his advice on the proposed commissioned services for Short Breaks, which we will discuss later on this agenda have been ignored.

It is the intention of Reading Borough Council to secure services for children with disabilities and SEN through a commissioning process. Officers have learned during the recent experience of adult commissioning the value of coproduction in achieving well understood and accessible specifications. We will commission an outcome-based service, which offers the services that parents and children need, are the best value for money and will improve outcomes for Reading's children

Reading will commission the services required within the budget available and within the appropriate procurement and commissioning frameworks. We are spending public money on behalf of our residents so we will not compromise on ensuring a fair and legal process.

In early 2017 Reading Borough Council will ascertain the requirements of the local SEND population in order to secure the best possible offer to address the support requirements of our children and families.

5. Ben Cross to ask the Chair:
Proposal to Remodel Children's Centres

In relation to Item 16 on tonight's agenda - 'Proposal to Remodel Children's Centres':

I was pleased to read point 5.12 in the proposal document, in particular that *"RBC will actively seek opportunities to develop services for families in partnership with the voluntary and faith sector."* Having not had any conversation about this proposal, and given that there have been very few attempts to achieve this aim in the last 10 years, what does Reading Borough Council consider that 'success' looks like in this regard, and how will we know that this is happening?

RESPONSE by Councillor McElligott, Chair of the Adult Social Care, Children's Services and Education Committee

I invite Councillor Gavin, the Lead Councillor for Children's Services and Families to make the response on my behalf.

REPLY by the Lead Councillor for Children's Services and Families (Councillor Gavin):

Can I thank Mr Cross for his question and the opportunity to acknowledge the valuable work of the many local voluntary sector organisations we work with to deliver services to children in Reading.

I would suggest that we have been talking to our partners for some time now about the need to reshape our Family Support and Children Centres. At the start of the year this committee approved a review process which in Spring 2016 gathered over 300 responses from partners and families, through workshops, our Children's Centre Advisory Boards and 1:1 interviews with service users. It is these responses that have shaped the proposal to be discussed later this evening.

If Committee approves the report to consult on the future shape of our Children's Centre offer tabled on this agenda, as outlined in the report, from January 2017 for 12 weeks we plan to ensure that all stakeholder groups understand the proposals and can have their say. Key stakeholders are listed as parents, users, voluntary sector and Health sector partners, local schools and pre-school providers. There will be many opportunities for all interested parties to comment on the proposals to help shape the best offer possible for local families with young children within the context of a third less budget. We will organise an opportunity to have a specific meeting with interested voluntary sector parties during the consultation period.

There are currently over 60 activity and support groups in Reading for families with young children. Our Children's Centres work in partnership with many voluntary and faith groups to deliver services to children and families. Currently voluntary sector groups that work with and in our Children's Centre programme are

- Homestart
- Oxford Intervention Programme (OXPIP)
- Salvation Army
- St. George's Church
- Families Forum
- Tamba twins group
- The Warehouse
- Berkshire autistic society
- Lily Pad group
- Southcote Community association
- Coley Community Association
- Southcote IT experience
- Food for families
- Readifoods
- Launch Pad
- Christian Community Aid
- Childminders
- Reading Family Aid
- Reading Family Church

But there is always room for more, success in working with the voluntary sector in our vision of a remodelled Children's Centre offer would mean that the current relationships and extensive voluntary sector involvement in the current programme is built on and expanded. Meeting the needs of children, parents and local communities being at the heart of any co-working.

6. Alice Carter to ask the Chair:

Short Breaks

I am a parent of an 8 year old with a significant physical disability. I volunteer for Reading Families Forum and was involved in looking at the current short breaks arrangements with RBC staff around 18 months ago. I am very pleased that RBC is proposing a future plan for short breaks which offers parents the choice of a service or a direct payment, because I know from my own experience that the admin involved with a DP is disproportionate and places a huge burden on parents, many of whom will simply not cope. In addition, there is currently very little I can buy with my DP - we employ a carer for the 4 hours per week which the DP covers but there are no other short break services which could cater for my daughter apart from the Thumbs Up holiday club at Addington School which is supported by a RBC grant. TUC only runs for 6 weeks each year, and is usually oversubscribed, but it is the only provision which caters for primary age children who need personal care (ie help using the toilet). Using a direct payment to employ a carer directly or via an agency is also hugely expensive, because of the loss of economies of scale. My DP costs the council around £3200 per annum for 4 hours per week, ie around £61 per week. A whole day at TUC (9.30am - 4pm) costs £22, so I could have 3 days at TUC for the cost of a PA for 4 hours. Clearly the voluntary sector clubs are providing fantastic value for money, so any change to the present grant system needs to be carefully justified.

My concerns about the proposal are that it seems to me that it will take a significant amount of time and work to gather data on what provision is needed to meet demand, to draw up eligibility criteria, to arrange for providers to bid, to decide appropriate outcomes, and work out the logistics of how parents receive the service. This is before you even bring in the question of assessment. Currently most families eligible for respite are just offered one of a small number of options - ie either 2.5 or 4 hours per week from a homesitting agency or as a direct payment, with families with higher needs being offered overnight respite at Cressingham. The assessment involved to allocate a service is minimal and a full needs assessment is not always carried out. To move to a system where there is a range of services to meet need will be a huge change for CYPDT and will take time to implement. Evidence suggests that there is just not the resource to achieve this, as there are significant delays in CYPDT assessing children's needs at the moment, and there is no arrangement for needs to be reassessed at regular intervals and parents are used to long periods without contact from social workers. For example, it took me 6 months to get my daughter's needs reassessed recently when I needed increased social work involvement due to a deterioration in her condition and changes in family circumstances. In contrast, families accessing short breaks via voluntary sector clubs such as Thumbs Up are not assessed, because it is only the families who need this provision who apply. If families can no longer access such clubs without an assessment, this will create a large volume of additional work for CYPDT. The council should consider whether it is cost effective to require a robust assessment process when there is no clear evidence that those with a lesser degree of need are receiving inappropriate services. It seems to me quite likely that the cost of assessment would vastly outweigh any savings.

I would therefore like to ask:

Given the current situation with assessment, if councillors decide to proceed with a robust system of assessment and review, which is not currently in place, what measures will be taken to ensure families are able to access short breaks without long delays?

Given the amount of time (many months) it will take to set up this system, can councillors confirm that the current system will continue to operate in the meantime, and that clubs who currently receive funding will be given sufficient notice of any changes so that they will have time to adapt and families will not lose their short breaks as a result?

How was the figure of £95,900 for short breaks arrived at? This is not the previous figure for voluntary sector grants which was mentioned in the 2015 budget consultation which was substantially lower. If agency homesitting provided by Greenslade was also included, I believe the figure would be substantially higher. And clearly the cost does not include the cost of running Cressingham centre which is another in house provision from RBC. If additional resource is needed to provide a robust assessment process, can we have an assurance that this will not reduce the spend on short breaks?

RESPONSE by Councillor McElligott, Chair of the Adult Social Care, Children's Services and Education Committee

I invite Councillor Gavin, the Lead Councillor for Children's Services and Families to make the response on my behalf.

REPLY by the Lead Councillor for Children's Services and Families (Councillor Gavin):

Can I thank Ms Carter for her question.

The issues identified in the Ofsted inspection report relating to the timeliness and quality of assessments applies equally to the children within the disability team. Children's Services are working hard in line with the recommendations of Ofsted to raise standards of practice across the entire children's services department, including children in need with disabilities.

It is not possible at this stage to comment on the resource requirements of the children with disability team. Practice standards including the completion of appropriate assessments, the delivery of support and the scheduled review of assessments is the central focus of all children's improvement activity. There will be no need for any additional assessments to access either personal payments or a place at a 'short-break' provision. The entitlement will be part of the single assessment of the child in need and their care plan.

Arrangements will be made to ensure that there is not a gap in the provision of short break activity. Providers of short breaks are aware of the changes in the grant/commissioning arrangements though the exact detail is yet to be determined.

The figure of £95,900 does not relate to the previous grants programme. The figure was provided by the children's commissioning and finance teams and relates to the combined grant/commissioned spend on short break activity. The costs for the running of Cressingham are held separately.

The current financial position of Children's Services which is carrying a budget pressure of approximately £7m and the need to still identify several millions of cuts across the council to set a legal budget for next year means that Reading Borough Council is not in a position now to comment on the impact on individual service areas of the budget allocations for next year.

Our commitment remains that the right service is available to the right child at the right time to improve the outcomes for that child and their families.