

LONDON BOROUGH OF BRENT

Meeting of the Executive
12 September 2005

Report from the Director of Policy and Regeneration

For action

Wards affected:
All

Report Title: Increasing Childcare Places Task Group Report

Forward Plan Ref: PRU -

1.0 Summary

- 1.1 This report presents the recommendations of the Overview Committee's task group on 'Increasing Childcare Places' along with the service department's response and advice on the finance, legal, and diversity implications.
- 1.2 The service area accepts the task group's recommendations and is engaged in implementation.

2.0 Recommendation to the Executive

- 2.1 To note the recommendations made in this review, thank the task group for their work, and the service area for implementing the recommendations.

3.0 Key Points from the Task Group

- 3.1 This task group was set up to examine why there are early education places available in Brent that are not being taken up, how childcare and early education places are planned and provided for and how Brent employers can play a larger part in providing childcare and pre-school education facilities for the children of their employees.
- 3.2 The task group undertook a range of work including discussions with parents, daycare providers, childminders and the Children's Services

Advisory Partnership, and interviews with officers from Brent's Education, Arts and Libraries Service.

- 3.3 The key concerns for parents concerning childcare are affordability, flexibility, quality, location and type of provision. There are generally enough places available for those parents who can afford them. There are a large number of parents that cannot access childcare because it is too expensive, even with the financial support available.
- 3.4 Trust is vital to parents when choosing childcare, although many do not know a lot about the various options available to them. Parents tend to prefer provision in the maintained sector because they perceive it to be better. If parents are to be able to make good, informed choices, they need more information about the various options available to them.
- 3.5 Free early education places for three and four year old children (two and a half hours per day) is not enough to be a viable childcare option for working parents. Early education needs to be integrated with childcare and in convenient locations for it to be useful to parents. There is also a big demand for care outside normal working hours, during the weekends and respite care for short periods of time with limited notice.
- 3.6 There are not enough childcare places available for children aged zero to two years old. This is because it is not financially viable for day nurseries and childminders to offer many places to children in this age range. While most childminders do care for children aged two and under, it is less financially viable than looking after older children.
- 3.7 The biggest threat to the sustainability of private and voluntary sector daycare providers and childminders is competition with the maintained sector. Many parents falsely think that if they accept a place in a maintained nursery for their child while they are three or four, this will increase their chances of being offered a place at the same school when the child starts reception. This means that many parents remove their children from private and voluntary day nurseries when they are offered places in maintained nurseries. Private and voluntary day nurseries, however, are dependent on this group of children to make their business financially viable. There is scope for the voluntary, private and maintained sectors to work together to provide a comprehensive range of services to parents. Each is able to respond to parents needs to different ways – this should be capitalised upon.
- 3.8 The council should carefully plan where extra provision should go using information mapping demand and supply for childcare services. This will minimise the negative impacts of new childcare places on other providers in the area and will ensure services are provided where they are needed.
- 3.9 Other threats to daycare providers include the recruitment and retention of staff and the need for a more business-oriented approach.

- 3.10 Employers have a key role to play in the provision of childcare for their staff. While the council has some very successful family friendly policies which are widely promoted, more could be done to assist employees with their childcare needs. This is important as the council is one the largest employers in the borough and should be leading the way in terms developing and sharing good practice.

4.0 Recommendations from the Task Group

- 4.1 That all services are designed around the needs of children and families, including their health, welfare, education and employment needs.
- 4.2 That the Early Years Service develops material to communicate fully to parents the childcare options available to them, carefully outlining the benefits of each type of provision. This information should be impartial, comprehensive and focused on the needs of children and families. It should include an explanation that accepting a place in a nursery class or school when a child is three or four will not guarantee that child a place in the reception class of that school.
- 4.3 That the information be accessible from various locations, with an aim of ultimately offering or sign-posting the service from a neighbourhood level via schools, children's centres and health visitors.
- 4.4 That the Children and Families Department, build an evidence-base, mapping the childcare market against need. This information should be used when making decisions about where childcare places should go and where resources should be targeted and prioritised. This will help the council carry out its strategic role to ensure good quality, flexible choices are available to all parents.
- 4.5 That when new childcare places are planned, particularly children's centres and including places for children with special educational needs, their location is chosen based on good evidence about supply and demand.
- 4.6 That the strategic planning of childcare places be overseen by the Children and Young People Strategic Partnership Board.
- 4.7 That Brent Council embraces the extended schools programme working in partnership with the private and voluntary sectors and childminders to ensure provision meets the needs of parents. That the extended schools programme is developed in partnership with the Early Years Service.
- 4.8 That Brent Council fully involves on an area basis childminders and private and voluntary nurseries in developing children's centres. These sectors should be used to extend the hours childcare is available and the ages of children the care is for.

- 4.9 That Brent's regeneration team work in partnership with the Children and Families Department to attract regeneration funding to support Brent's low-income parents with their childcare needs. The impact of this funding should be monitored for its effectiveness. Regeneration funding should also be sought to fund summer camps for Brent's children.
- 4.10 That Brent Council considers linking training for childcare workers with the children's centres.
- 4.11 That the support to childminders be extended to include practical business support, such as a handbook. The childminders forum and networks could act to unite the childminders together to give them a sense of professionalism and to lessen the feeling of being isolated.
- 4.12 That childminders continue to be given equal priority in the council's advertising and marketing material.
- 4.13 That Brent Council's Human Resources unit should work towards extending the work already begun around "family-friendly" initiatives for staff and investigate and implement a childcare vouchers scheme for the council's employees. The scheme should compliment and not duplicate resources already available from the Government to assist with childcare. This practice, as well as other family friendly policies, should be promoted with other employers in Brent.
- 4.14 That the Overview Committee receives an update on progress with these recommendations at their February 2006 meeting. The Overview Committee will decide at this time if they need a further update in another six months.

5.0 Children and Family Department's Response

- 5.1 Plans are in hand to commission information material for parents that will set out their entitlements to early education and to financial benefits. This will be disseminated after September 2005 when the current national consultation on a new Nursery Education Grant Code of Practice closes. This information will be freely available from the Children's Information Service.
- 5.2 Impartial information on early education and childcare is currently available from the Children's Information Service based in Chesterfield House, Wembley. We will ensure that information and publicity material relating to school and nursery admissions makes it clear that securing a place at a maintained nursery does not guarantee a place in the Reception class at that school. All Children's Centres will have information points within them, and there will be telephone and internet access to the Wembley site. Children's Centres in the first round (2004-06) will be sited in South Kilburn, St Raphael's, Stonebridge, Roundwood and Chalkhill. Health Visitors, Community Development Officers and Family Support Workers will be attached to Children's Centres, and will provide further opportunities to pass on information of

all kinds within the community. Children's Centres will provide a range of training opportunities for parents, with crèche provision, enabling parents to access information on site.

- 5.3 The Children and Families Department is currently undertaking a needs analysis exercise which will provide a comprehensive dataset about areas in the borough with the highest concentration of children and families and their levels of needs. This rich data, along with information gathered from our Reference Groups (including one with parents and carers) established as part of the partnership arrangements of the new Department, will inform the basis for future planning of services. The development of Children's Centres in the second phase will be reported to the Executive and the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership Board.
- 5.4 Significant work has been undertaken with schools to develop seven extended schools clusters, which can support the development of Neighbourhood Learning Communities. For the 2005/06 period we have sufficient funding to pilot 3 clusters and are planning to appoint cluster co-ordinators to work in partnership with statutory and non statutory sectors to ensure provision is developed around the needs of children and families. The Early Years Service and Extended Schools activities are both located within the Strategy and Partnerships Division of the Children and Families Department and this will further support joint planning and service delivery.
- 5.5 Childminders will be fully involved in Children's Centres. Each Centre will have a quality assured childminding network within it, a part-time network co-ordinator will be attached to each centre, providing training, stay and play sessions, advice, guidance and quality monitoring. In phase one of the Children's Centres programme those childminders wishing to join a quality assured network but living outside the catchment areas for the first wave of centres will be supported by a part-time borough-wide co-ordinator. Good practice will be disseminated through networks, and comprehensive guidance, including practical business support, will be produced for all childminders.
- 5.6 Children's Centres have been designed to include training rooms. These will be used to provide courses for parents and carers in the catchment areas and as a venue for childcare training. Harmony Children's Centre will contain an NVQ assessment centre specialising in childcare training.

6.0 Regeneration Department's Response

- 6.1 The Regeneration Strategy for Brent sets out clear priorities for the borough's regeneration work. A key strategic priority is to reduce worklessness levels across the borough to the London average. Where childcare is a clear barrier to accessing employment, for example, for lone parents, we will seek resources to overcome this

issue. Regeneration resources will tend to subsidise the parent rather than the facility.

7.0 Human Resource and Diversity Department's Response

- 7.1 It is anticipated that staff will welcome a childcare voucher scheme. Feedback from the staff focus groups we conducted as part of the council's work-life balance project suggested that many employees find the cost of childcare burdensome. Childcare vouchers have been Tax and National Insurance (NI) exempt since April 2005, and as rule of thumb an employee taking £50 per week salary sacrifice to pay for registered childcare, will save around £800 per annum in Tax and NI. whilst the employer would also save around £300 in NI contributions.
- 7.2 Human Resources and Diversity are already in discussion with Brent Financial Services about a salary sacrifice scheme.

8.0 Financial Implications

- 8.1 It is anticipated the majority of actions required are already provided for in the 2005/6 budget.
- 8.2 The council's Human Resources and Diversity are in discussion with Brent Financial Services about the financial viability of the childcare vouchers scheme. It will be cost neutral to the council.

9.0 Legal Implications

- 9.1 Under the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 sections 117 to 124, and the Education Act 2002 sections 149 to 156, a Local Education Authority has duties to secure nursery education and to review the sufficiency of childcare in their area. Nursery education and childcare may be provided by the LEA itself or by other providers.

10.0 Diversity Implications

- 10.1 Recommendations from task groups are incorporated within service department's delivery or development plans and as such will be subject to the equalities impact assessments carried out by services as part of their work program. In addition, the annual review of Overview & Scrutiny activities includes an equalities impact assessment.
- 10.2 This report hopes to address equalities issues to help make services fairer and more easily accessible to all.

11.0 Staffing/Accommodation Implications

- 11.1 Staffing implications have been considered within the Early Years Service plan. Additional accommodation has been identified at Chesterfield House and some staff will be located within Children's Centres.

Background Papers

Report of the Task Group of the Overview Committee on 'Increasing Childcare Places in Brent'.

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