

Childrens Nursery & Bright Start Consultation

**18th January 2016 at 5.45pm
Civic Offices Committee Room 2**

The aim of the meeting was to communicate the steps in the process and to hold an informal question and answer session to gather views. The main recommendation under discussion was the proposed closure of the Children's Nursery. A formal decision will be made by cabinet at the meeting on March 16th 2016.

Background

- Options for outsourcing the two borough nurseries have been attempted before
- The borough is in a different financial position and doesn't have the capacity or expertise to continue delivering the nursery services. There is a statutory requirement for the council to provide early education spaces but it is not a requirement to supply a workplace nursery.
- A working party was set up to reconsider the future of the borough run nurseries
- A soft market test exercise was carried out in the summer of 2015 and the feedback obtained suggests that the Children's Nursery location and capacity is appealing to providers.
- However, the amount of capital needed to maintain the facility which is estimated at £250K, following a condition survey carried out in September 2014 is a barrier to future providers. The advice received is that the buildings are past their useful life and investment is not recommended.
- There is increased competition in the early year's market that can meet the need for places. There are significant numbers of vacancies for EY staff in the early years workforce locally.
- There is no plan for the land at Euclid Street at present, but the building would be disposed of by SBC if the proposal is approved.
- With regards to Bright Start Nursery, it is recommended that another provider will take over the setting. A tender process would be carried out to seek a high quality provider to take over the provision.

Feedback

Parents expressed how fantastic the nursery is and made glowing comments about the dedication of the staff and how well their children are taken care of. They strongly expressed how happy and settled their children are with their keyworkers and how well their children's individual needs are met. Parents feel let down by Swindon Borough Council. One of the reasons they take their children to the nursery is because it is run by the council and staff who work at the nursery are also employees of Swindon Borough Council. A service user said that the council are putting a price tag on the emotional wellbeing of her child/other children.

Parents implied that the Childrens Nursery is a workplace nursery, benefit to staff and places are allocated to the children of SBC employees as a priority.

HR had confirmed that the nursery is not a staff benefit and is not in the employees' terms and conditions of employment. The salary sacrifice scheme is not unique to the Children's Nursery and

any provision operating within SBC owned premises can offer this scheme. The nursery is open to all members of the public.

Parents felt that they were the last to hear about the recommendation of the closure of the nursery and that the soft market testing was noted in the June Cabinet report available on the internet before they had been informed. One parent had heard the news via another provider. Also, there was concerns raised that the staff at the nursery were told after the cabinet minutes had been released. Another rumour was that the land that the nursery sits on would be sold for a housing development. A parent also said that when they received their letter about the proposal it was too late to attend the cabinet meeting and raise their concerns.

All correct procedures have been followed by the SBC officers leading this work and this is the opportunity to inform parents about the process and gather their concerns.

The majority of parents attending the meeting are council employees, what do you want from us?

We want to help support you and take into account your thoughts and feelings and assess the impact potential closure would have. It was explained that, unfortunately, there have been some cases whereby nurseries have closed overnight, but this is not the case. We would be looking at a summer closure to lessen the impact on children that will be going on to primary school and to give plenty of notice to parents and to offer support to seek alternative provision if needed.

A parent explained that in the event of closure of the nursery it is written in their terms and conditions that 6 months notice was to be given.

This was confirmed by the manager of the nursery. Officers agreed to take this issue back to legal to be investigated.

(Update: The notice period exists within the contract, but Legal are confident that no loss would be incurred by families should the nursery close by August 2016. Therefore, no claim can be made against the Council, except for any fees that were paid upfront.)

Has outsourcing been considered?

Yes, this was investigated when doing the soft market test however the temporary nature of the buildings and backlog of repairs was a barrier to anybody wishing to proceed with this.

The nursery has been rated "good" by OFSTED would they not have this rating if they felt that the mobile units were inadequate and why was a government grant given to another provider (Trinity) and not to the Childrens Nursery for the repairs?

The mobile units at the Childrens Nursery were rated "met requirement" by OFSTED as they are classed as temporary buildings. The capital grant funding was specifically for the creation of 2 year old places and it would have been inappropriate to invest money into temporary buildings which are at the end of their life span, as advised by our property team.

Parents felt that this was a conflict of interest and their nursery is being undermined.

We are not here to push a particular provider on parents or undermine the Children's Nursery.

A parent asked about plans for expansion for early years and primary schools with a view to the housing developments planned for the town?

There is a school place planning strategy which is going to cabinet in February 2016, which will outline all plans for school expansion and will be available online. School expansion is based around catchment area and early year's provision is more difficult to determine as many parents opt for provision close to work as opposed to close to their home address. There are approximately 3000 births a year in Swindon and this information is used for projection of increase in early year's places. Currently, there is a sufficient amount of places/provision in the town centre.

Concerns were raised by parents about their positions within the workplace if they have to change provision. The concerns are:-

- *There is no access to after school clubs for children under the age of 4.*
- *If they are forced to use another provider this could affect their contractual hours and use of annual leave*
- *Parents may have to stop work*
- *They will need time off work to visit other providers*
- *Impact on other work colleagues*
- *Not being able to use their childcare vouchers*
- *Difficulty in speaking to their employers about childcare issues*
- *Making up the time whilst out during work hours visiting nurseries*
- *Settling in visits*

Parents felt that they were being influenced into using Trinity which is more expensive and there were overall concerns about financial implications, disruption to their children and family life.

A concern was also expressed that the 3 & 4 year olds development will suffer through having to make a transition to an alternative provider and maybe held back.

Officers acknowledged the changes in transition and agreed that it would not be without it's challenges but mostly it works well for children of this age.

Nursery staff leaving before closure, what provision will be in place?

The borough and the nursery manager are meeting on a regular basis and that they have been working hard on contingency plans and flexibility. They will keep parents informed and run within OFSTED ratio guidelines. There is also, the option of employing good standard of agency staff.

Who will pay for the agency staff?

The expectation is the loss of the member of staff salary will cover payment of the cover staff.

A parent raised the issue of medical needs and would staff in Trinity be trained to use specialist equipment?

The provider operating Trinity Day Nursery is not new to early years and that the company operate a numbers of provisions in Oxfordshire. (Abingdon Kindergarten Group).

Would the council consider a relocation of the nursery and staff i.e. Childrens Centre?

We are looking at every building that becomes available for possible use of early years provision.

It was felt that communication had been very poor and the parents would like this to be reported back to cabinet. It would have been a good idea to put the recommendation on the intranet so wider coverage before the cabinet meeting, this would have allowed parents to send written submissions.

It is planned to hold individual meetings for council workforce that are using the nursery to see how we can help support and reduce the impact. We will follow up parents that are currently on maternity leave.

Have any cabinet members had any experience with early year's childcare?

Officers with expertise in this area are in place to inform the cabinet members.

If a provider was to put an offer on the table to save the Childrens Nursery and make the necessary repairs, would the decision to close be reversed?

Yes consideration would be given

What parents would like considered by Cabinet in March 2016

- Lack of communication
- Challenge figures for work that needs to be carried out and provide breakdown of costs
- Challenge estimates
- Provide historical information
- To consider parents having to pay extra for childcare costs

Meeting closed at 8.30 pm

Repairs and maintenance

A commitment was given by officers to follow up on the estimates provided in the Cabinet report on the estimated investment required at the Childrens Nursery. As requested, a breakdown of the estimate repair costs is as follows;

Identified Works	Estimated repair/replacement Cost
Rewire	55,000
Upgrade of heating & pipework	40,000
Upgrade of Lighting	20,000
Backlog building fabric works	122,000
Re design to meet Ofsted requirements	40,000
Total	<u><u>277,000</u></u>

These have been provided by colleagues in our property team following a condition survey in 2014 which estimated the work involved in bringing the building up to a standard which would enable the provision to continue to meet Ofsted standards.

The Childrens Nursery is a prefabricated property (a mobile) that is long past its useful life, therefore the proposal is about suitable use of funds. Property would not recommend that we undertake the indicative backlog works to walls/windows/ceilings and services when the cost of this would be a significant amount of the cost of a replacement property and what we will end up with would still be considered an unsuitable provision in terms of layout and efficiency for its use. It will also not address the fact that we will still have a property that is poorly insulated and costs more than a new building to run.