

Committee	Date	Classification	Report No.	Agenda Item No.
Overview and Scrutiny Committee		Unrestricted		9.2
Report of:		Title:		
Service Head, Strategy & Performance / One Tower Hamlets		Reviewing the impact of the Children's Centres restructure - Report of the Scrutiny Working Group		
Originating Officer(s):		Ward(s) affected: All		
Vicky Allen, Strategy, Policy & Performance Officer				

## 1. Summary

- 1.1 This report submits the report and recommendations of the review on reviewing the impact of children's centres restructure Working Group for consideration by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

## 2. Recommendations

It is recommended that Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- 2.1 Agree the draft report and the recommendations contained in it.
- 2.2 Authorise the Service Head for Strategy & Performance to amend the draft report before submission to Cabinet, after consultation with the scrutiny review group.

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### LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT, 1972 (AS AMENDED) SECTION 100D

#### LIST OF "BACKGROUND PAPERS" USED IN THE PREPARATION OF THIS REPORT

Background paper	Name and telephone number of and address where open to inspection
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None

N/A

### **3. Background**

3.1 The Working Group was established in February 2012 to review the impact of the children's centres restructure.

3.2 The purpose of the review was to gain a strategic overview of the restructure of children's centres and to test the Council's assertion that it has impacted minimally on service users, and to ensure that this is communicated in an accessible way to parents / carers, other users and stakeholders and Members. The objectives of the review was to test the following perceptions for accuracy following the lack of clear communications about the changes:

- That service provision has become patchy, geographically less accessible to users and offers a smaller range of services than before;
- That the move to targeting the offer to more vulnerable families has led to a reduction in universal provision which has begun to impact on community cohesion in some areas;
- Whether a reduction in back office staff has resulted in frontline staff having to undertake administrative activities, and spending less time with service users as a consequence; and
- That it is difficult for parents to become fully involved as key stakeholders in children's centres (eg. Parent Networks are not fully used).

3.3 The report with recommendations is attached at Appendix A.

3.4 Once agreed, the Working Groups report will be submitted to Cabinet for a response to the recommendations.

### **4. CONCURRENT REPORT OF THE ASSISTANT CHIEF EXECUTIVE (LEGAL)**

4.1 The Council is required by section 21 of the Local Government Act 2000 to have an Overview and Scrutiny Committee and to have executive arrangements that ensure the committee has specified powers. Consistent with this obligation, Article 6 of the Council's Constitution provides that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee may consider any matter affecting the area or its inhabitants and may make reports and recommendations to the Full Council or the Executive in connection with the discharge of any functions. It is consistent with the Constitution and the statutory framework for the Executive to provide a response.

4.2 The Council is obliged under the Childcare Act 2006 to make arrangements, so far as is reasonably practicable, for sufficient provision of children's centres to meet local need. The Act defines the limits and extent of the Council's duty.

- 4.3 Pursuant to section 112 of the Local Government Act 1972, the Council is required to appoint such officers as it thinks necessary for the proper discharge of its functions. The Council is required to comply with employment legislation, the Equality Act 2010, national agreements and its own policies and procedures in appointing and managing its staff. In relation to the recommendations contained in the report, the Council's procedure on handling organizational change will be particularly relevant. Any consideration of grades will have to be supported by relevant evidence.
- 4.4 To the extent that staff have transferred to the Council, the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employees) Regulations 2006 will apply. Any proposed harmonisation of, or changes to, terms and conditions would have to be carried out in accordance with the Regulations, including by justifying any changes in accordance with the specified economic, technical or organizational criteria.
- 4.5 Any disclosure of information must be carried out having regard to the Council's information governance framework and the requirements of relevant legislation, particularly the Data Protection Act 1998 and the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

## **5. COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER**

- 5.1 This report describes the analysis and recommendations of the Working Group's review of the impact of the restructure of children's centres.
- 5.2 The Council's funding from central government has reduced since 2010-11 and will continue to reduce over the next four years. This will therefore affect any recommendations agreed and any additional costs that arise from the recommendations must be contained within directorate revenue budgets, specifically, recommendation R5 to review job grades for posts and R9 to introduce training programs. Consequently, officers will be obliged to seek the appropriate financial approval before further financial commitments are made.

## **6. ONE TOWER HAMLETS CONSIDERATIONS**

- 6.1 Children's Centres play a key role in delivering the One Tower Hamlets principles because their core offer, as outlined by the government, is to improve outcomes for young children and their families, with a particular focus on the most disadvantaged families, in order to reduce inequalities in child development and school readiness. The value of children mixing with others from different backgrounds and communities is viewed as positive by service users.

7. **SUSTAINABLE ACTION FOR A GREENER ENVIRONMENT**

7.1 There are no direct environmental implications arising from the report or recommendations.

8. **RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS**

8.1 There are no direct risk management implications arising from the report or recommendations.

9. **CRIME AND DISORDER REDUCTION IMPLICATIONS**

9.1 There are no direct crime and disorder reduction implications arising from the report or recommendations.

**Reviewing the impact of the Children's Centres restructure**

**Scrutiny Working Group Report**



**London Borough of Tower Hamlets  
April 2012**

## **Acknowledgements**

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The Working Group would like to thank all the officers and partners that supported this Review, particularly Vicky Allen for her ongoing support and diligence. Most importantly we would like to thank all of the Children's Centres users and staff who offered their input to the Review. These views and perspectives have been fundamental in shaping the final recommendations of this Report.

### **Working Group Chair:**

Councillor Amy Whitelock

### **Working Group Members:**

Councillor Carlo Gibbs

Councillor Zara Davis

Councillor Lesley Pavitt

Jake Kemp (Co-optee)

### **London Borough of Tower Hamlets:**

Anne Canning

Service Head Learning & Achievement

Monica Forty

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Mohammed Jolil

Children's Centre Locality Lead

Paula Holt

Children's Centre Locality Lead

Jo Freeman

Children's Centre Locality Lead

Amanda Hicks

Children's Centre Locality Lead

Sheikh Ahmed

Around Poplar Children's Centre Lead

Jill McGinley

Head of Parent & Family Support

### **Strategy, Policy & Performance:**

Vicky Allen

Chief Executive's Directorate

Harriet Potemkin

Children's Schools & Families

### **External:**

None, it was not possible to find an expert witness within the timescales of this review.

## Chair's Foreword

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Children's centres are one of our most important frontline services, bringing children and families together from across our communities and providing vital support for the most vulnerable. The extent to which children's centres are cherished and relied upon by parents and children was clear from the level of concern and confusion which arose surrounding the Mayor's decision to restructure the service in 2011.

I was therefore grateful to my colleagues on Overview and Scrutiny for agreeing to prioritise a scrutiny review into the process and impact of the children's centres restructure. Due to the speed of the change, the national climate of service cuts, and the difficulty many Members and parents had in accessing information about the restructure, it was important to shine a light on this area of service provision.

The review afforded the first opportunity for Members to access detailed information about the restructure itself, the services on offer and patterns of use before and after the changes, and the views held by parents and staff about the service. I am grateful to my colleagues on the review working group for their diligence and to staff and parents for their invaluable input. We were particularly impressed by the frontline staff we met who displayed such commitment and passion for their work.

Overall, our findings present a mixed picture. On the one hand, despite assurances at the time of no impact on the frontline, we observed a reduction in the number of classes on offer since the restructure of around a third. In addition, removing two levels of management has meant frontline staff are now performing additional back office responsibilities, which can take them away from their frontline duties.

However, it appears this impact has not yet been felt by parents, with the latest Parent Voice survey showing 94% of parents are happy with the activities on offer for families. We found this is down to staff in children's centres going the extra mile to continue providing an excellent service, so parents and children do not see the impact of the restructure. The flipside is that now staff are very stretched and there is less flex and capacity in the system.

The review working group recognises the pressures on the service and the drivers for the restructure, particularly in light of significant cuts to central Government funding for children's centres and the council's general budget. However, we are concerned about the impact that the service, and particularly staff, has already sustained.

In view of the demand and popularity of children's centres among parents and the existing pressures on staff, we strongly recommend the service is protected from further cuts, so it does not reach breaking point. We have also made recommendations to improve the process of communicating restructures internally and externally, address staff capacity issues and

strengthen parental engagement. We hope these will enable the service to sustain the high quality provision currently provided to our families.

**Councillor Amy Whitelock**  
**Chair of Working Group and Scrutiny Lead, Children's Schools & Families**



## Report Recommendations

- R1. Improve proactive communications to Members, by
- Democratic Services working with Corporate Communications to develop the Members' intranet pages as a dissemination tool for key ward-based and council-wide information, exploring the possibilities within the current IT system, and tying any full scale re-development in the upcoming refresh of the intranet by ICT.
  - Service areas working with the Internal Communications team to provide briefings and seminars at the start and end of future restructures.
  - Children, Schools, and Families to provide Members with information on the complaints mechanisms available to parents, and ensure this information is clearly available to parents via the internet.
  - The Early Years service to provide briefings and seminars on the extension of provision for disadvantaged 2 years olds.
- R2. Directorate DMTs to work with Communication Leads to improve proactive communications to residents, by
- ensuring user engagement is fitted into all restructure or review consultation periods where appropriate, recognising that this cannot be before consulting with the staff directly affected.
  - providing holding information to parents and other key stakeholders at the start of the review process in order to mitigate concern and rumours.
- R3. The Children, Schools and Families Directorate to sustain and enhance the excellent service provision on offer, by
- ensuring there are no further cuts to funding for the children's centres service.
  - considering how to increase the number of sessions which are both welcoming and suitable for parents with children of different ages
  - publicising the services on offer in new Children's Centres which could alleviate the distance some families have to travel
- R4. The Learning and Achievement Service to publicise the range of available sessions and the Council's policy for allocating spaces when there is high demand more clearly to parents.
- R5. The Learning and Achievement Service to review job descriptions, job title and salary scale of the Office Assistants / Receptionists posts, to ensure the grade is commensurate with the job activities and additional responsibilities, and recognises the front line nature of the job. Review the capacity across the service for 2012/13 and increase where necessary.

- R6. Recognising the importance of robust data collection, the Learning and Achievement Service to undertake a business process improvement exercise with the aim of streamlining what data is captured and how it is collected, input and analysed.
- R7. The Learning and Achievement Service to prioritise additional training to Children's Centres staff to build capacity and resilience during times of strain such as sickness absence and annual leave.
- R8. Whilst recognising the importance of traditional methods of communications, and the cut in the advertising budget, the Learning and Achievement Service to improve and expand communications to parents by
- increasing the use of creative communications such as e-mail, text and social media as an efficient and cost effective way of communicating with parents
  - using Parent Forums to review both printed communications and that which is displayed within Children's Centres, in order to ensure they communicate clearly the entire offer to both children and parents, including adults' services and children's sessions for mixed ages
  - widening the reach of written publicity to include more venues such as doctors surgeries, school noticeboards and chemists.
- R9. The Learning and Achievement Service to facilitate the engagement of a wide range of parents in governance, by
- providing a programme of training for Community Development Workers and other staff as appropriate, to become capable and confident facilitators of Parents Forums who can recruit and support a range of parents to become involved
  - providing a programme of training and capacity-building for parents, including understanding of their role and responsibilities within the governance model, with a particular focus on those less likely to come forward for such positions
  - ensuring the Governance Model is user friendly and not unduly bureaucratic.

## **Introduction**

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The national landscape has changed considerably since the introduction of children's centres. The coalition Government have reduced overall funding for family support services, and directed all funding through the Early Intervention Grant. It has also re-designed the early years curriculum to make it more focused on ensuring children start school ready and able to learn.

In order to respond to these changes and tailor services to reflect local needs, the council redesigned its children's centres to focus on providing increased support to the most vulnerable and hard to reach families while maintaining a universal offer, and has restructured the service by reducing the number of managers and administration support.

There has been significant national and local media coverage about the implications of reduced funding on children's centres. This national climate, coupled with uncertainty about the council's restructure and its impact, and lack of forthcoming information about it, led to a perception among residents that there had been cuts in service provision.

Members also received numerous questions and concerns from parents about the implications of the children's centres restructure on service provision. Many parents had felt ill-informed about the restructure and fearful about the future of provision for their children. Concerns related to potential reduction in access, patchiness of provision across the borough, reduced choice of services on offer, future sustainability of centres, and the apparent move away from universality which could undermine community cohesion.

Members did seek clarity from the council on various occasions, but found it difficult to get accessible and transparent information. Equally, communications directly to parents do not seem to have allayed concerns, and this has raised issues around parental engagement.

In recognition of this, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee prioritised the children's centres restructure for a thorough Scrutiny review. This provided the opportunity to review the process and impact of the children's centres restructure in light of the perceptions held by Members and residents on service provision and user engagement.

## **Purpose**

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The purpose of this review was to gain a strategic overview of the restructure of children's centres, to test the council's assertion that it has impacted minimally on service users, and to ensure that this is communicated in an accessible way to parents/carers, other users and stakeholders and Members.

The objectives were to test the following perceptions for accuracy, following the lack of clear communications about the changes:

- That service provision has become patchy, geographically less accessible to users and offers a smaller range of services than before;
- That the move to targeting the offer to more vulnerable families has led to a reduction in universal provision which has begun to impact on community cohesion in some areas;
- Whether a reduction in back office staff has resulted in frontline staff having to undertake administrative activities, and spending less time with service users as a consequence; and
- That it is difficult for parents to become involved as key stakeholders in children's centres (eg. Parent Forums are not fully used)

## **Methodology**

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The following methodology for the review was agreed by the Working Group:

### Introductory review meeting

- The Working Group received presentational evidence on the children's centre restructure in terms of delivery and staffing, from the Service Head Learning & Achievement, and Head of Achievement, Birth – 11, Learning and Achievement Service.
- This aided in formalising scoping of the review and enabled a thorough discussion on the process and communications around the restructure.

### Visit to Around Poplar children's centre

- The Working Group visited Around Poplar children's centre to have discussions with parents about their experience of the restructure, the service and the mechanisms of involvement, and speak to staff to hear about the restructure from their perspective
- Service users were consulted on their experience of children's centres and engagement

### Service use and provision before and after the restructure

- The Working Group reviewed service user data including attendance, equalities information and parent feedback, and analysed service provision, to look at patterns of use before and after the restructure
- The Working Group heard evidence from the Locality Leads and the Head of Achievement, Birth-11.

### Parental involvement mechanisms

- A presentation was received from the Head of Parent & Family Support on how the council engages with parents in general and specifically in children's centres Parent Forums
- The new governance framework for Parents and Carers Council and Parent Forums was discussed

## Parent Forum

- One member of the Working Group attended the Wapping children's centre Parent forum to see user engagement in action.

## Final review meeting

- Key findings were discussed, tested and agreed, and recommendations finalised.

## Key Findings

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The key findings arising from the review have been divided into five sections, including the background and process of the restructure, and the four key perceptions that the review sought to answer:

- That service provision has become patchy, geographically less accessible to users and offers a smaller range of services than before;
- That the move to targeting the offer to more vulnerable families has led to a reduction in universal provision which has begun to impact on community cohesion in some areas;
- Whether a reduction in back office staff has resulted in frontline staff having to undertake administrative activities, and spending less time with service users as a consequence; and
- It is difficult for parents to become involved as key stakeholders in children's centres (eg. Parent Forums are not fully used)

### 1. Background and process

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The Working Group heard that nationally, the number of children's centres has reduced from 3,631 in June 2010 to 3,507 in September 2011. Locally, in April 2011 (go live date June 2011), a restructure of the children's centre provision and staff was undertaken because of the reduction in funding to pay for services (the Early Intervention Grant was reduced by approximately £4m in 2011-12).

Children's centres contributed £2.7m towards the £100m savings for the council overall. The restructure decreased management and aimed to increase targeted provision while retaining the universal offer. The children's centres service was previously funded solely by the Sure Start Grant. This was a direct grant from government which ended on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012. The service is now funded, in part, from the Early Intervention Grant.

The children's centres have now moved from 23 'reach' areas, to 12 'community' areas meaning that the catchment area for each children's centre has now widened. For each of the borough's 4 administrative areas (paired LAP) there are 3 centres with full children's centre designation and a number of smaller centres providing a range of different services. The children's centre core offer is therefore delivered through a hub and spoke model. The core offer, as outlined by the government, is to improve outcomes for young children and their families, with a particular focus on the most disadvantaged families, in order to reduce inequalities in child development and school

readiness. This is supported by improved parenting aspirations, self esteem and parenting skills, child and family health and life chances.

The Working Group were advised that the drivers for the restructure of the service are identified as follows:

- Large cut to government funding of children's centres
- Large cuts to the council's budget
- The opportunity to look at the provision which has grown organically and unmanaged due to the original children's centres structures under Sure Start
- The importance of early years learning for children's future achievements.
- The opportunities of a hub and spoke model in helping keep management costs down and cutting premises costs while ensuring frontline reductions are kept to a minimum.

The Service management reported that, overall, they feel the restructure has improved the council's provision as there is now more clarity and harmonisation around job descriptions, structures, and governance. There is a mixture of locally and centrally provided provision to ensure the service is flexible to the needs of the locality. In comparison, provision prior to the restructure was inherited and had grown organically with ad-hoc structures in place.

However, Working Group members remained concerned about the ultimate impact of the restructure on service users and staff, which are explored in the following sections. Concerns were also raised about the process of the restructure, which was felt by parents and Members to be non-transparent, fuelling negative perceptions and concerns, for example when one group of very distressed parents took a petition to full Council.

The Service management explained their process of responding to the high volume of Members' and parents' enquiries, and also outlined the protocol in terms of consultation with affected staff before any public information can be released.

The Working Group still felt that there was a lack of proactive or detailed communication between Officers and Members which left some Members feeling that they are ill equipped to serve their residents effectively. It was felt that existing mechanisms of communications should be developed so that Members can be kept better informed of the council's business. Although this issue was explored as part of this scrutiny review, the Working Group felt that communications should be broadened to encompass the council as a whole.

#### **Recommendation 1**

Improve proactive communications to Members, by

- Democratic Services working with Corporate Communications to develop the Members' intranet pages as a dissemination tool for key ward-based and council-wide information, exploring the

possibilities within the current IT system, and tying any full scale re-development in the upcoming refresh of the intranet by ICT.

- Service areas working with the Internal Communications team to provide briefings and seminars at the start and end of future restructures.
- Children, Schools, and Families to provide Members with information on the complaints mechanisms available to parents, and ensure this information is clearly available to parents via the internet.
- The Early Years service to provide briefings and seminars on the extension of provision for disadvantaged 2 years olds.

Although the restructure was undertaken quickly because of the reduction in budget and national changes to children's centres, the Working Group felt that more could have been done to consult with parents, such as providing a holding notice to service users informing them of impending changes which would have been helpful in allaying fears and mitigating against rumours.

The Working Group was informed that views of staff and parents were sought on the specific service provision after staff had been consulted on the structure of the service. The service used the annual parent's satisfaction survey as an additional tool to help to understand parent's views.

### **Recommendation 2**

Directorate DMTs to work with Communication Leads to improve proactive communications to residents, by

- ensuring user engagement is fitted into all restructure or review consultation periods where appropriate, recognising that this cannot be before consulting with the staff directly affected.
- providing holding information to parents and other key stakeholders at the start of the review process in order to mitigate concern and rumours.

## **2. Consistency, access and range of services**

The Working Group heard verbal evidence and reviewed analysis undertaken by the Children's Schools and Families directorate as part of an ongoing equalities impact analysis of the restructure. The Working Group were concerned to note that (at the time of the analysis) there were 3,372 fewer children attending children's centres since the restructure. This was tested with officers, who confirmed that there was no drop in birth rate over that period, so this reduction in attendance was unlikely to be due to a sudden fall in demand. This therefore indicates some reduction in access.

The Working Group also analysed the data supplied by the directorate in response to a Members Enquiry about service provision and found that there had been a reduction in the number of sessions offered since the restructure, both in terms of the number of classes (153 fewer) and the number of hours (715 fewer). This amounted to around a third fewer services on offer, though

the data for the Members Enquiry was a snapshot comparing Q3 2010/11 to Q3 2011/12, and is subject to change dependant on demand and taking into consideration user feedback. Nevertheless, the available data indicates both some reduction in the number of services on offer and that provision has been spread more evenly across localities, as reductions in classes were greater in some areas, to even out provision geographically.

The reduction in the number of sessions was found to be largely due to decommissioning of sessions contracted out to health providers and run through children's centres. The Service Manager for Early Years explained that this reduction in health provision was in line with other local authorities. Staffing issues for some health sessions such as Midwife Services have aided the perception that there has been service deterioration within children's centres, which is borne out in parent surveys which show highest dissatisfaction with health-related services. The Working Group heard how the children's centres have been building capacity in order to deliver some services separate to the reduced offer from Health providers. Another area where there has been a particular reduction is in English Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) provision for parents.

The Working Group also heard evidence from a small sample of parents at Around Poplar children's centre. Parents reported they have built up strong relationships with the children's centre and appreciate the opportunity they bring in terms of meeting other parents, carers and professionals. Some parents appreciate the informal support networks that build up around the children's centres. However, parents raised the following concerns about the service:

- Some parents found that the distance to their nearest children's centre was unsatisfactory at over 40 minutes walk away, however some parents are also prepared to move around the borough in order to attend a mixture of sessions to suit.
- Some parents reported that it was difficult to find sessions which could adequately cater for siblings of different ages.
- There was frustration due to the lack of spaces in some popular sessions, and some parents had noticed that sessions were much busier than before the restructure. Parents reported that they had sometimes been turned away from popular courses due to demand and this upset both parents and their children.
- Some parents had been using the service for several years and did notice the impact of the restructure, regretting the closure of some smaller centres nearby.

However, the Working Group found that overall parent satisfaction with children's centres remains high, as borne out in parent satisfaction surveys and the independent Parent Voice report. 89% said services had made a positive impact on their relationship with their child or children, while 94% said they were happy with the activities on offer for families. Despite reductions of around third in terms of service availability, the Working Group acknowledged the efforts of staff to ensure in large part this does not impact on parents' and



children's experience of the service. Nevertheless, as outlined later, this has led to strain in the service.

Due to the high demand for and popularity of children's centres, the importance of the service in terms of early years' achievement, the existing pressures on staff and reductions in service provision already sustained, the Working Group felt strongly that the no further cuts to funding should be borne by the children's centres service.

### **Recommendation 3**

The Children, Schools and Families Directorate to sustain and enhance the excellent service provision on offer, by

- ensuring there are no further cuts to funding for the children's centres service.
- considering how to increase the number of sessions which are both welcoming and suitable for parents with children of different ages
- publicising the services on offer in new Children's Centres which could alleviate the distance some families have to travel

### **3. Targeted and universal provision**

The Working Group heard evidence from the Service Head and Service Manager for Birth-11 who advised that there had been no move away from universal to targeted provision and explained that the targeted offer is built into the universal provision. This method is seen as a more effective and efficient way of identifying those vulnerable families who could benefit from additional support, with universal services being an important referral mechanism into additional support services. It also means provision is less stigmatised, and parents, carers and their children can meet a range of different people from their community, rather than only meeting other vulnerable families. The value of children mixing with others from different backgrounds and communities was also mentioned by parents the Working Group spoke to. The Service Head and Service Manager reiterated the council's commitment to retaining universal provision as well as enhanced targeted provision, because of the positive impact universal provision has on targeted provision as well as community cohesion.

The Working Group recognised this commitment, but noted that disproportionately more hours had been lost in the universal service compared to targeted provision since the restructure. Service management reported this was largely due to reductions in the number of whole day drop-in sessions available to all parents.

The Working Group felt that there was a general lack of communication about how the service allocates session spaces, which had led to a perception of unfairness among some parents. In exploring the issue of lack of spaces on popular courses, the Working Group heard from the Service Manager for Birth-11 that on some occasions spaces were reserved for vulnerable families who had been encouraged to attend a specific session by Family Support Workers. The policy on allocating spaces, which includes reserving spaces for

local parents as well as vulnerable parents, has been in operation since before the restructure. However, because there are fewer sessions since the restructure, this policy has become more noticeable to parents, leading to greater frustration. The Service Manager described the equitable and robust measures in place to deal with high demand, which include directing parents to other activities, prioritising them for the next session, or referring those who become distressed to a Family Support Worker.

#### **Recommendation 4**

The Learning and Achievement Service to publicise the range of available sessions and the Council's policy for allocating spaces when there is high demand more clearly to parents.

The Working Group reviewed work undertaken by Children Schools and Families as part of an ongoing equalities impact analysis to assess the diversity of children using the children's centres, before and after the restructure. In comparing the percentage of under fives using children's centres per ethnic grouping in 2010/11 to 2011/12, there has been a drop of around 35% of Bangladeshi children attending since the restructure of the service (with the smallest decreases among White and Indian children). However, further analysis showed that this demographic had previously been over-represented as a whole, as Bangladeshi under 5's make up 42.8% of the borough population and post restructure, account for 41% of the total number of under 5's attending children's centres. This is more in line with other ethnic groups, where there is less than 2% difference between the overall proportion of the demographic and the proportion using children's centres. Officers confirmed that additional equalities analysis will be undertaken to explore further whether the children's centres are being accessed fairly by different groups.

#### **4. Reduction in back office staff**

The Working Group met a representation of staff from various job roles and centres at the Around Poplar children's centre who had been invited to share their opinion of the restructure process and impact. Staff confirmed that they had been kept informed about the restructure by their managers and felt that they had been professional in their attitude around reassuring parents about the future of the service.

Some staff talked about the positive outcomes arising from the restructure including the opportunity to improve their qualifications and reskill. However, there were some negative comments about the restructure including:

- the new data entry burden placed on all staff, especially Office Assistants / Receptionists
- Office Assistants / Receptionists undertaking duties that were previously a managerial responsibility
- the reduction in the number of staff leading to some staff feeling stretched and sometimes working above their grade, for example in order to cover annual leave and sickness
- impact on staff wellbeing of the increased strain and demand on the service

- Community Development Officers now have to work across different sites and this has led to a feeling that the service has been diluted, making it harder to build relationships and support parents

The Working Group felt that the restructure of the Service had led to the role of Office Assistants / Receptionists being under-estimated, both in terms of the grade and their importance as front line staff, being the first point of contact for parents and carers. The parallel review of the restructure by the Service has also recognised that there are too few Office Assistants / Receptionist posts and their job description should be reviewed.

The majority of staff interviewed felt that the data entry work was too time consuming and difficult to complete whilst performing front line duties, although all acknowledged the importance of collecting this data for reasons such as monitoring for grants, child safeguarding, management information and the future payment by results.

The Working Group noted the positive team spirit and generally good morale among staff, providing peer support and regular social activities for each other. However, members were concerned that staff have absorbed most of the impact of the restructure, going the extra mile and working more to ensure parents do not see a reduction in the quality of the service. While this is laudable, the potential impact on staff wellbeing is significant and the overall reduction in staff has led to a loss of flex and capacity in the system, so it is less resilient to staff absence, with potentially greater disruption to service provision at these times.

#### **Recommendation 5**

The Learning and Achievement Service to review job descriptions, job title and salary scale of the Office Assistants / Receptionists posts, to ensure the grade is commensurate with the job activities and additional responsibilities, and recognises the front line nature of the job. Review the capacity across the service for 2012/13 and increase where necessary.

#### **Recommendation 6**

Recognising the importance of robust data collection, the Learning and Achievement Service to undertake a business process improvement exercise with the aim of streamlining what data is captured and how it is collected, input and analysed

#### **Recommendation 7**

The Learning and Achievement Service to prioritise additional training to Children's Centres staff to build capacity and resilience during times of strain such as sickness absence and annual leave.

### **5. Parental involvement**

At the visit to the Around Poplar children's centre, the Working Group interviewed parents and found that in the main those who did not attend Parent Forums did so out of choice and still felt that their views were taken

into consideration and acted upon because of the openness and approachability of children's centre staff, and other mechanisms such as feedback forms. Parents confirmed that they were encouraged to provide feedback; at Around Poplar children's centre there is a suggestion box in reception. One outcome of a suggestion made by parents was that the dads only baby group was reverted back to a session for all parents and this session is now much better attended.

The Working Group also spoke to two parents who attended Parents Forums on a regular basis and reported that the parents found them to be informative and helpful, and covered a wide area of interest. However, one parent spoke of how much better his experience of the Around Poplar Parent Forum was compared to the Forum at another children's centre. The Working Group also noted differences in terms of how frequently Parent Forums meet; in some areas it is weekly, whereas in others only monthly. One of the Community Development Officers said that how well Parents Forums function depends on the size of the area the different CDOs have to cover and therefore how much time they can give to each Forum. The Working Group were concerned to address this inconsistency in terms of how parent engagement is facilitated across different children's centres.

The user survey identified that a large number of parents questioned were unaware of additional services offered by centres, especially those services available for adults. The Working Group felt that there is a need to publicise the offer and services of the children's centres more widely and clearly, and to increase the use of technology and social media to communicate with parents and carers, especially if savings made can be redirected to service provision. Data from the User Satisfaction survey showed that less than 10% of parents said they were kept informed via creative communications (such as text, e-mail, internet) however around 32% would like to receive communications that way. It was acknowledged however that there was also a need to retain more traditional methods of communication, such as leaflets and face-to-face, in order to avoid excluding any groups.

#### **Recommendation 8**

Whilst recognising the importance of traditional methods of communications, and the cut in the advertising budget, the Learning and Achievement Service to improve and expand communications to parents by

- increasing the use of creative communications such as e-mail, text and social media as an efficient and cost effective way of communicating with parents
- using Parent Forums to review both printed communications and that which is displayed within Children's Centres, in order to ensure they communicate clearly the entire offer to both children and parents, including adults' services and children's sessions for mixed ages
- widening the reach of written publicity to include more venues such as doctors surgeries, school noticeboards and chemists.

The Working Group heard from Jill McGinley, Head of Parent and Family Support, about how this service provides support to parents and schools. It was agreed that parents elected onto the Parents Forums within the new governance model should be provided with training, in order to build capacity and empower parents to become effective Forum Chairs. In addition, it was felt that there should be a programme of training for staff to assist them in their role as Forum facilitators and ensure greater consistency of parental engagement across different children's centres.

The Working Group also heard about the review of the governance framework from the Service Manager and how parents are being consulted around its terms of reference. Having observed current Parent Forums in action and from experience of other community governance structures, members felt that it was important to ensure representation from parents of all backgrounds in the new structures. Under-represented demographics and harder to reach groups should be actively encouraged to join, which may require targeted proactive outreach work by staff. The Working Group also raised issues around the accessibility of the new governance model – including the language and process.

#### **Recommendation 9**

The Learning and Achievement Service to facilitate the engagement of a wide range of parents in governance, by

- providing a programme of training for Community Development Workers and other staff as appropriate, to become capable and confident facilitators of Parents Forums who can recruit and support a range of parents to become involved
- providing a programme of training and capacity-building for parents, including understanding of their role and responsibilities within the governance model, with a particular focus on those less likely to come forward for such positions
- ensuring the Governance Model is user friendly and not unduly bureaucratic.

#### **Conclusions**

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- The Working Group welcomed the opportunity to investigate the impact of the children's centre restructure, with a view to assessing its true impact and improving communications to service users about restructure changes in the future.
- The Early Years Service also welcomed the opportunity for this timely review, because it enabled the service to ensure Members were updated on the service and provided a facility to test the outcome of the restructure. The service welcomes the recommendations which have arisen as a result of the review.
- This Review has focused on testing service perceptions for accuracy, and it is hoped that the adoption of the proposed recommendations will

improve both the provision for service users, support for staff, and future communications and engagement processes.

- In light of the continuing high demand for children's centre services, their popularity among parents, the service reductions already sustained and the resulting pressures on staff, the Working Group hopes that the recommendations will be considered and adopted by the Mayor and his Cabinet, to enable children's centres to survive and thrive in this difficult climate, for the families who cherish and rely on them.