

Committee: Overview & Scrutiny	Date: 9 April 2013	Classification: Unrestricted	Report No:	Agenda Item:
Report of: Cllr Amy Whitelock, Chair of Working Group,		Title: Reviewing the impact of the Children's Centres restructure – report of the Scrutiny Working Group Progress Report		
Originating Officer(s): Vicky Allen Strategy, Policy and Performance Officer		Ward(s) affected: All		

1. **SUMMARY**

- 1.1 This report follows up from the scrutiny review into the impact of the Children's Centres restructure which went to Overview and Scrutiny Committee on May 2012. This report reviews the progress against the original recommendations.

2. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is recommended to:

1. Note the report findings
2. Consider whether further scrutiny into Children's Centres is required at this time, and should therefore form part of the work programme or whether the outstanding recommendations should be revisited in 6 months.

3. **BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 The "Reviewing the impact of the Children's Centres review scrutiny report" went to Overview and Scrutiny Committee in May 2012. It scrutinised the following perceptions for accuracy, given 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).
- 3.2 Throughout the review it was found there was some truth to these perceptions, but the scrutiny review group welcomed the opportunity to hear from the service about how the changes were being communicated to service users and the staffing issues were being addressed. Their recommendations were aimed at addressing the outstanding issues. In following up on the review, members were particularly pleased to hear that some job descriptions had been upgraded to reflect the additional activities staff had taken on since the restructure.
- 3.3 The scrutiny review found that whilst some service users were unaware of the range of services available to them, in general they were very positive of the service provided and felt that their views were taken into consideration, as evidenced in the user satisfaction surveys undertaken by the services.
- 3.4 The report made 9 recommendations which were agreed by OSC. The body of this report outlines the progress against these recommendations.

4. **BODY OF REPORT**

- 4.1 **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 providing Members with information on the complaints mechanisms available to parents, and ensuring 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 year olds.
- 4.2 The council website and intranet is currently being upgraded and this is due to be completed in June 2013. The Internal Communications team and Member Support team are in discussions about new requirements for updated Members Intranet pages.
- 4.3 Members were allocated VPN keys at the end of March 2013 so that they are now able to access the Members Intranet pages from home. The Members Bulletin is circulated to all members by e-mail and the most current Members Bulletin is placed on the front page of the Members Intranet to facilitate easier reference to articles within.

- 4.4 Through regular meetings with Service Heads and Lead Members, directorate communications advisers are regularly promoting more detailed information, briefings and seminars through the Members Bulletin.
- 4.5 The complaints procedure was published in the Members Bulletin and placed on the Members Intranet and on the council website so that it is easy to find. It is also clearly displayed in individual Children's Centres and is available on request. An article was published in the December 2012 edition of the Parent Matters bulletin to offer advice, support and guidance for families who want to raise issues and concerns.
- 4.6 A briefing paper on the extension of provision for disadvantaged 2 year olds went to CMT for approval in December 2012 and was published in the Members Bulletin which became available on the Members Intranet in March 2013. Briefings have also been provided within the Members Bulletin on a range of issues such as schools funding reform, inspection outcomes, Children's Centres survey, and school consultations, all now available on the Members Intranet so that they are easy to find for future reference.
- 4.7 Scrutiny Comment: This review highlighted some concerns with communication to members about and during changes to services. The redevelopment of the intranet offers an opportunity to address these concerns and ensure the upgraded sites reflect the council-wide and ward-based information members need, in the most accessible format. It would be valuable to involve members, including backbenchers, in the redevelopment of the website and intranet. Members have also highlighted the need for further communication about how to access the Members Intranet as not all members are aware of this, even if they have VPN keys.
- 4.8 When significant changes are being made to front line services, members have asked that they are briefed as fully as possible to ensure they can give accurate information to residents and address any community concerns or misinformation about the change. The members bulletin provides an easy and useful mechanism of communicating this information to members and DMTs, Communications and Human Resources are encouraged to work in partnership to make sure all members get the information they need.
- 4.9 Members welcomed the increased promotion of the complaints procedure, but noted that it has not yet been linked to the Children's Centres web page on the council website which would make it more accessible for service users.
- 4.10 It was recommended that a members' seminar should be held on the extension of provision for disadvantaged 2 year olds. This will be provided to Members if there is an expression of interest arising from the publication of the briefing in the Members Bulletin.

Recommendation 2: Directorate DMTs to work with Communication Advisers to improve pro-active communications to residents by:

- Providing holding information to parents and other key stakeholders at the start of the review process in order to mitigate concern and rumours.

- Ensure 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.
- 4.11 The People Board are looking at reviewing the Organisational Change Procedure. They will look at the need to amend corporate guidance for managers around handling organisational change – to include our communications and engagement with key stakeholders and ways in which this can be monitored. It is expected that this exercise will be complete by July 2013.
- 4.12 Scrutiny Comment:
This was a crucial aspect of the review findings, as the uncertainty and worry many parents had at the time of the restructure was a key driver for undertaking the review. Members welcome this review of the Organisational Change Procedure and have requested an update on the review once completed.
- 4.13 **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 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.
- 4.14 A termly audit of provision is undertaken for each Children’s Centre to ensure that across the locality, a range of sessions are available to parents with children of different ages. This is an on-going activity. Services on offer in all Children’s Centres are publicised on the Children’s Centre webpage on the council website; this is updated every term. In addition, regular updates on services available are published in leaflets. Services are also advertised on banners outside Children’s Centres, and regular updates are published in East End Life where possible.
- 4.15 Scrutiny Comment:
Members welcomed that there were no further cuts to Children’s Centres in the recent budget, though OSC have previously noted significant concerns about the 6% reduction in the staffing budget for ESCW (the vacancy management savings). Any impact of this on Children’s Centre service, which could be evidenced through the Parents Survey should be closely monitored and reported back to OSC. Members have also expressed concerns with potential risks to communication given the recent budget decision in relation to East End Life. Members will be exploring this separately with the Communications Service.
- 4.16 **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.

- 4.17 The ranges of available sessions are published on the council website, and updates are publicised in leaflets and East End Life . The service's policy for allocating spaces when there is high demand is publicised and clearly visible in Children's Centres. In addition this policy statement will be published on the council website early in April 2013.
- 4.18 Scrutiny Comment:
Members were disappointed that the policy for allocating spaces when there is high demand is not yet clearly published on the council website, but recognised that regular users of the Children's Centres would be aware of the policy through publications within the Children's Centre. It's useful that some sessions are clearly identified on the Children's Centre activity timetables when they are targeted provision (marked invitation only) and where there are limited spaces (marked booking required), however members thought it could be useful to verbally explain the policy where necessary, for sessions that regularly have high demand and have to turn away parents.
- 4.19 **Recommendation 5:** The Learning and Achievement Service to review job descriptions, job title and salary scale of the Office Assistants / Receptionist 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.
- 4.20 The service undertook to update the job description for the office assistants to capture better the work they undertake, they also agreed to review and update them in terms of pay scales to ensure they accurately reflected the frontline nature of the job and the job activities.
- 4.21 As a result of this review, the salary scale was increased and the pay has been backdated accordingly. The job descriptions now reflect the front line nature of the job and activities. The service has also reviewed the job descriptions for the Play and Learning Leads and as a result the salary scale has increased and been backdated.
- 4.22 The budget settlement for Children's Centres has now been agreed for the new financial year 2013/2014. Though there is a need for additional office assistants there are insufficient funds to appoint more staff. If they were to prioritise the appointment of additional office assistants from the budget allocation it would necessitate a cut in services to residents; the service will not reduce further the services to families. As with other services in the ESCW Directorate they are also tasked with 6% vacancy management savings.
- 4.23 Scrutiny Comment:
Members very much welcomed the review of job descriptions and salary scales and that they have been upgraded for both the office assistants and Play and Learning Leads, as this was a key recommendation for the review group given the extra strain on staff. They acknowledged current budget constraints but are concerned to note that there is an identified need for

additional office assistants that cannot be met, particularly given the additional pressures created by the vacancy management savings, which OSC highlighted during the budget process. Members appreciate the drive to protect services, but highlighted that if there are insufficient Children's Centre staff to meet demand, this will ultimately impact further on services for families, particularly given the frontline nature of the role office assistants often play. Scrutiny members have requested that this situation is kept under review and an update provided to them on capacity of the service in 6 months' time.

- 4.24 **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 collected, input and analysed.
- 4.25 There was a focus on data collection at a leadership and management awayday for the service in February 2013.
- 4.26 The service reviews the data collected from the Children's Centres on a regular basis to ensure that it meets the needs of the service and provides information about how effective the service is. The Government is now not proceeding with Performance by Results. However, the review of Children's Centre data is now being informed by the new Ofsted Inspection Framework to ensure the service is compliant with the new requirements. Where there is any new data requirement they will try to ensure that this data capture, collection and analysis is streamlined alongside other data requirements.
- 4.27 Scrutiny Comment:
Members welcomed that work has begun on this and would appreciate an update, at an appropriate time, on the outcome of the business improvement exercise and what practical measures will be put in place to reduce the burden and time pressures on staff, taking into consideration the needs of the Ofsted Inspection Framework.
- 4.28 **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.
- 4.29 Training has been commissioned from the council's Human Resources service by the Learning and Achievement service which is building resilience within staff.
- 4.30 Training for leadership teams around coaching and mentoring of staff is in place and will be delivered to all staff through a cascading approach. It was successfully delivered to the first cohort of staff (Community Leads) on 26 February 2013 at the service awayday to 12 members of staff. The focus of the training was emotional intelligence. Each Community Lead is putting a plan in place to cascade this training to the next layer of staff – the Play and Learning Leads and Family Support Leads. The training will be delivered to Community Development Officers on 26 April 2013.

- 4.31 Every Children's Centre will be using two days of their training programme for team building and building resilience.
- 4.32 Scrutiny Comment:
Members very much welcomed the practical steps that have been taken to prioritise training on resilience, team building and emotional intelligence for staff at all levels. They hope that this will be maintained in future years to support existing and new staff in the service, as demand for the service is likely to remain high.
- 4.33 **Recommendation 8:** Whilst recognising the importance of traditional methods of communication, 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' service and children's sessions for mixed ages.
 - Widening the reach of written publicity to include more venues such as doctor's surgeries, school noticeboards and chemists.
- 4.34 The service is in the process of procuring a text messaging service. They have met all the requirements for procurement and have chosen the cheapest option that is most compatible with our E-Start IT software. Each centre has been allocated a budget for the text service and it will be operational for families in April 2013. A range of other communication methods have been explored in each Parent Forum and tailored as appropriate to the needs of the users. This is an on-going activity which will be reviewed on an annual basis by the Parent Forums.
- 4.35 An informal pairing up of Parent Forums to host visit to each other's Children's Centres to focus on how accessible information is displayed and made available to families and to act on findings has been established. Two visits have taken place and all the centres will have had visits by another parent Forum by the end of July 2013
- 4.36 The service has compiled a list of appropriate venues, with contact details, where publicity materials can be displayed. The service has also explored the option of using non-paper methods of communication, such as TV display screens in doctor's surgeries, Idea Stores and schools,. This approach is being used in some schools where they host children's centre activities, but is not possible in other external venues
- 4.37 Scrutiny Comment:
Members welcomed the introduction of a text messaging service but feel there is still scope to use email and social media more, with little additional costs.

They have requested an update on the findings of the review being conducted with Parent Forums once it is complete.

- 4.38 **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.
- 4.39 Four training sessions were delivered to Community Development Officers to support them in leading Parent Forums. The service has commissioned the Parent and Family Support Service to support the development of staff and Parent Forums. This training and support has taken place to develop the role of parents in the forums. However, they see the need for this work with Parent Forums to continue so they have commissioned the Parent and Family Support Service to deliver additional training and support this new financial year.
- 4.40 Training sessions and support for parents to take a lead in running Parent Forums are in place now and is being delivered by the Community Development Officers who have received their training. The service is currently working on an exit strategy for parents whose children have moved on from the Children's Centre. Parents will be encouraged to join other forums such as becoming a parent governor in their child's school.
- 4.41 The Governance Model in place was developed and agreed as a result of consultation from members of the Parent Forum. The model will be reviewed annually and will be reviewed next in January 2014
- 4.42 Scrutiny Comment:
It is welcome that this recommendation was delivered promptly and further work is planned. Members have requested an update on the new Governance Model after one year of operation including any analysis of the diversity of parents that actively engage and feedback from parents themselves on how they've found it.

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

- 5.1 This report provides an update of the review of the impact of the restructure of children's centres since the original report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee in May 2012.

- 5.2 The Council's funding from central government has reduced since 2010-11 and continues to reduce over the next five years as identified in the Council's Medium term Financial Plan (MTFP). This will therefore affect any recommendations agreed and any additional costs that arise from the recommendations must be contained within directorate revenue budgets, specifically: recommendations R3 future funding for Children's Services; R5 to increase 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. CONCURRENT REPORT OF THE ASSISTANT CHIEF EXECUTIVE (LEGAL)

- 6.1 The Council is required by section 9F 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. It is reasonable for the Committee to be provided with updates on any agreed action plan.

7. ONE TOWER HAMLETS CONSIDERATIONS

- 7.1 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 other from different backgrounds and communities is viewed as positive by service users.

8. SUSTAINABLE ACTION FOR A GREENER ENVIRONMENT

- 8.1 There are no direct environmental implications arising from the report.

9. RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 There are no direct risk management implications arising from the report. Risks relating to the recommendations will be monitored through the council's corporate risk register and directorate risk registers. Risks are assessed for likelihood and impact, and will have responsible owners and programmes mitigating actions.

10. CRIME AND DISORDER REDUCTION IMPLICATIONS

10.1 There are no direct implications of crime and disorder as a result of the recommendations of this review.

11. EFFICIENCY STATEMENT

11.1 One of the objectives of the review was to test the claim that the reduction in back office staff had resulted in frontline staff having to undertake administrative activities, and spending less time with service users as a consequence.

**Local Government Act, 1972 Section 100D (As amended)
List of “Background Papers” used in the preparation of this report**

Brief description of “background papers”	Name and telephone number of holder and address where open to inspection.
None	N/A

12. APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Scrutiny Review and Action Plan
