

PLEASE CONSIDER IN CONJUNCTION WITH ITEM 17 - MOTIONS REFERRED FROM COUNCIL ASSEMBLY ON MAIN AGENDA

AMENDED STRATEGIC DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES CONCURRENT IN RESPECT OF COPELSTON CHILDREN'S CENTRE

COMMENT FROM THE STRATEGIC DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

1. Copleston Children's Centre is a community nursery which has received grant funding from the council for many years. The council was formally notified of the Centre's decision to close in a letter received on Thursday 29th June 2006.
2. Following a Best Value Review (2002) the council agreed to a major realignment of funding to target council services for early years towards vulnerable children and those at risk whilst encouraging working parents to claim financial subsidy towards the cost of their childcare via the Government's Working Tax credit scheme.
3. As a consequence the council reduced funding to the community nurseries in 2004/05 and entered into discussions about the need to move to a service level agreement model of funding with them. The council's contribution to Copleston has not reduced further and £65,779 has been allocated to the nursery in 2005-6 and 2006-7. The council has also provided a further £4160 for business support to assist the centre to achieve long-term sustainability. Some of this additional grant was used by the Centre to pay an external consultant to advise on their long-term viability.
4. The on-going viability of the Copleston Centre is dependent on the centre attracting sufficient interest from local parents/carers to fill the places available. At the end of May, we understand, the centre had 14 of its 24 places occupied. One aspect that may impact on the Copleston Centre's ability to achieve sustainability is that it only offers a service to children under 5 from 8.30 to 3.30 whereas the service specification attached to local authority funding requires wrap around care 8.00-6.00. The shorter hours on offer from the centre are less likely to be attractive to working parents/carers, whether working full or part time.
5. The council is committed to ensuring the provision of quality education and childcare at an agreed and equitable price. The commissioning budget for community nurseries has been fully allocated on an equitable basis and other settings are successfully planning provision for the current and future years. The long term planning of childcare places rests with the local authority which has a duty to develop the childcare market to reflect any changes in local needs.

6. The Best Value Review of early years is now four years old and a further review of implementation, against a background of rapidly evolving national and local policies and priorities, would be timely. The review will need to cover the following key issues:
 - i. the council's statutory responsibilities;
 - ii. the current pattern of supply and demand and any changes to this pattern that may be predicted as a result of the regeneration activity in the borough;
 - iii. delivery of the minimum free entitlement to education for three and four year olds;
 - iv. the extent to which children with the greatest need are identified and are able to access appropriate support;
 - v. the basis upon which the council might support access to provision for the most needy, with particular attention paid to the criteria and its equitable application across all providers;
 - vi. the extent to which parental choice is being taken into account and the council's role in encouraging the market to develop to meet this pattern of choice; and
 - vii. good practice for Southwark in providing affordable, quality provision in the early years.

The report should aim to report back to Executive in time for any changes to be implemented in April 2007.