CHILDREN’S SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 22 January 2013
(6.40 - 8.19 pm)

Present: Councillor G Letchford (Chair), Councillor T Perry (Deputy Chair), Councillor P Burgon, Councillor A S Jamu, Councillor E Kangethe, Councillor B Poulton and Councillor A Salam; Mr Ishmael Ncube and Paul Cox

Also Present: Councillor E Carpenter, Councillor J R White, Councillor R Gill, Councillor J Ogungbose, Councillor L A Reason and Councillor D Twomey; Christine Pryor, Kevin Donovan, Helen Jenner, Erik Stein and Fiona Taylor

Apologies: Councillor L Butt, Councillor R Douglas, Reverend Roger Gayler and Mrs Ghadeer Al-Salem Youssef

33. Declaration of Members’ Interests

None.

34. Call-in on Budget Strategy 2013/15 re Integrated Youth Services

The Children’s Services Select Committee (CSSC, “the Committee”) convened to consider a call-in by Councillors Carpenter and Ogungbose of the Cabinet’s decision at its meeting on 19 December 2012 to make savings within Integrated Youth Services (code CHS/SAV/20) and the lack of a full Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) relating to these savings.

The call-in meeting was held accordance with Part B, Article 5A of the Council Constitution.

Councillor Carpenter and Ogungbose introduced the call-in and referred to the main reasons behind it, which included that:

- The savings under CHS/SAV/20 which relate to the Youth Service did not have an associated EIA in Appendix D when the saving was agreed by Cabinet in December. Councillor Carpenter noted that the £140,000 in 2013/14 and £460,000 in 2014/15 saving is the second largest frontline service cut in the report. Further to the lack of EIA, the paperwork at Appendix B did not detail on the anticipated redundancies and, further reducing the ability to fully assess the equalities impact.
- Councillor Ogungbose built on this element of the call-in rationale by informing the Committee how an EIA should be developed as per the process outlined to Members at the Extraordinary Assembly meeting held on 14 January 2013, and raised concerns about the EIA review process that had been outlined against this particular saving. He reiterated to the Committee that the EIA is a vital document and it’s omission from the Cabinet paperwork brought the legitimacy of the decision taken into question.
- Councillor Carpenter stated she was extremely proud of the Youth Service, and was pleased it was located in Becontree Ward. However, she asked
the Committee to be mindful that the service covers the whole borough and therefore, cuts to it, would have a wide impact.

- Councillor Carpenter expressed dismay that the cuts (totalling £600,000) amount to circa 42% of the entire budget and, as such, felt that the borough’s young people were being disproportionately affected by the budget cuts the Council is required to undertake due to reduced funding from Her Majesty’s Government.
- The Committee was asked to bear in mind that the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham (LBBD, “the Borough”) has the highest proportion of 0-19 year olds in the country at 31%, and this is likely to increase further with the anticipated demographic changes.
- It was noted that building trusting relationships between the Youth Workers and the service users is hard and takes a long time. The call-in argued that this saving would have a detrimental impact on these relationship and harm years of work to build trusting relationships with (often vulnerable) young people.
- This cut would have a big impact on young people with complex needs.
- Reducing the number of sessions offered by Youth Service would drive more young people to congregate on the borough’s streets, where they could either be more likely to engage in anti-social behaviour or become victims of crime themselves.
- The Committee was urged to petition Cabinet to focus on budget reductions in other areas before cutting here. It was suggested that
  - the Youth Bus was too costly and too big for many of the borough’s streets (and will soon be driven by a Youth Worker diverting resources away from where they’re needed).
  - The Access and Connect card was good, but too costly in the current climate at £361,000.
  - There is still scope to save money from central “back office” bureaucracy (e.g. business units).
- It was argued that the Vibe is the only dedicated youth centre in the borough. It was noted that its deficit (cost over income) is very small and, within a year, it could be made profitable saving it from cuts.
- Councillor Carpenter said she had seen for herself the health and wellbeing benefits that Youth Services work brings about

In support of the Cabinet’s decision to proceed with saving “CHS/SAV/20 – Children’s Services, Targeted Support, Youth Services”, the Cabinet Member for Finance, Cabinet Member for Children’s Services and the Corporate Director for Children’s Services (assisted by Divisional Director Targeted Support and Group Manager Extended Schools and Engagement) made the following points:

- The Committee was informed of the extremely difficult decisions Cabinet need to make to ensure the Council has a balanced budget, and these decisions will have to involve reducing services, such as proposed in CHS/SAV/20.
- The Council will be receiving considerably less money from Her Majesty’s Government (HMG) over the next few years, totalling circa. £90,000,000 between 2010-15 – roughly 40% of the overall budget. This has left the Council with no alternative but to prioritise the money they do have discretionary control over. He asked the Committee to note that a sizable proportion of the Council’s spending is statutory, meaning cuts had to be made to non-statutory spending. For example, the Council will have to
make very difficult decisions about its library service in the near future, as the Council can no longer finance the current service provision.

- The Council still has to find a further £7,000,000 of savings.
- The Cabinet Members stated unequivocally that none of the Cabinet entered public services wanting to make the cuts that were being proposed and he thanked officers for their studious efforts in assisting Cabinet to compile the budget options.
- The Council does remain committed to the Borough’s youth, as evidenced by the decision to replace Abbey Road Leisure Centre with the new £13,000,000 Axe Street Leisure Centre.
- The Cabinet members agreed with the sentiments expressed by Councillors Carpenter and Ogungbose that the service is wonderful and achieves a great deal but, unfortunately, the reality is they can no longer afford it. They disagreed that the Youth Bus is expendable, stating it can reach many different areas and, consequently, many different people. They also felt that the access and connect card has a great deal of added value and the majority of the cost is now directly incurred by the schools themselves (except for £40,000).
- While having a dedicated building for Youth Services would be nice, it cannot be afforded in the current climate. So to retain the use of the building it can be shared (during the day) with special needs services.
- As regards growing income to make it cost neutral, Cabinet Members are cautious of relying on projections as, if they fail to materialise, it will leave the Council in a vulnerable financial situation.

The Corporate Director of Children’s Services (CDCS) reassured the Committee that an EIA was completed for all of the proposed savings and each EIA was discussed and agreed at a Children’s Service’s Departmental Management Team (DMT) meeting. Following this they were submitted to the Equalities and Diversity Board for approval. The correct process was followed for all the savings, including CHS/SAV/20. Furthermore, the full EIAs were never presented to the Select Committees for their deliberation, summaries were used and the summary for CHS/SAV/20 was presented to the CSSC in November. Omitting the EIA detail from the Cabinet paperwork was an unfortunate administrative error, for which officers apologised, but it does not bring the validity of the ultimate decision into question.

- Public Health have been consulted on the risks that could result of implementing CHS/SAV/20, and the CDCS recommended the CSSC to monitor the situation independently also.
- It was noted that the majority of the saving is scheduled for 2014/15. This gives officers a window of time to try and procure other sources of money to try and mitigate any negative effects. For example, officers are currently working to secure new funding for the Summer Sorted programme.
- Volunteer programmes are good and the key to their continuing success is adequate support and mentoring.
- Through maximising the use of the Council’s buildings, the impact of cuts can be reduced. The Vibe will continue to be a youth centre, but will also run additional services where this is currently capacity in its timetable. There are no plans to cease youth activities at the centre.
- It was noted that 72% of the cut is to be achieved through reducing management posts, in an effort to protect the frontline services (and the relationships with service users) as much as possible. £159,000 of the total cut is cutting already vacant posts.
While the “back office” budget may still seem high, it is from these areas that the Council’s safeguarding work is directly funded. This cannot be cut.

At this stage of the meeting both the call-in side and the Cabinet side were invited to ask each other questions:

- Councillor Carpenter emphasised that the Youth Service brings benefits to all 17 wards, rather than just Becontree. It is also a key part of the preventative work, which proves cheaper to the public purse than reactionary work (especially in preventing Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEET) and drug and alcohol dependency work).
- Regarding the access and connect cards; the Cabinet rejected the idea of pursing using fingerprint technology (which could be cheaper than a card based system) as many residents would have civil liberties concerns.
- Councillor R Gill informed Councillor Carpenter that the Youth Service was not being singled out for more stringent cuts than other services and that, unfortunately, many other services are seeing cuts just as deep as the Council tries to ensure a balanced budget. For example, the ranger service in the parks and libraries will see a similar (if not greater) level of budget reduction.
- Lots of provision will remain. For example, there are a multitude of after school clubs in the borough.

At this stage of the meeting the members of the CSSC were invited to ask questions:

- Members enquired whether the Council was in a firmer financial position since the announcement of the Local Government settlement in December. Officers responded that this grant is specifically to support schools funding. Financial analysis and the detailed requirements of the Educational Support Grant are still to be announced.
- The Committee learned that, under the Troubled Families agenda, two targeted youth workers have been funded, but the budget for the work is very small.
- CSSC was concerned that young people had not been adequately consulted on the budget proposals. Officers outlined that the Barking and Dagenham Youth Forum (BAD YF) was made aware once the budget papers had been published and that several members attended the public select committee meetings in November 2012 to provide their feedback. Unfortunately, organising a question and answer session between Cabinet and the Youth Forum has been challenging due to timetable clashes. However, officers are hoping to arrange a session at All Saints School in the near future. Some Youth Forum members also attended the public Leader’s Question Time events. The Cabinet Member for Finance highlighted that announcements were made on Facebook and Twitter, showing the Council’s desire to engage in a dialogue with the public on this issue.
- The BAD YF representative, Mr Paul Cox, remained concerned at the perceived lack of consultation, citing anecdotal evidence that many young people were still simply not aware of how changes in Council budgets will affect them. He affirmed that, because of this, the council needed to explore different routes to engage. For example, most young people will not consult a council website. Officers accepted this and AGREED to consult with the
Youth Forum on who to engage young people further in budget discussions. Officers highlighted that CSSC is undertaking a borough-wide review of School Councils, and how young people are engaged on such issues could be included in that piece of work.

- Regarding marketing, the CSSC was pleased to note that the Summer Sorted programme saw a 14% rise in participants, despite no increase in the marketing budget. Searching for events has been improved and officers are using better communication techniques to reach more young people.

- Regarding comparisons, the Committee learned that this borough – generally speaking – spends more on targeted support (on average) and less on generic support (on average) than other comparable London boroughs. LBBD has a strong and well developed volunteer programme.

- Members asked that, if the Youth Service provision was cut, would there be an effect on statutory services. Officers outlined that there are to be zero reductions to statutory services and that there is £1,000,000 in the budget to ensure the Council can meet its statutory obligations. Officers emphasised that, even after the £600,000 reduction, the Council would still be providing Youth Services in every council ward.

- Mr Cox reiterated the concern that well developed relationships are threatened by this service reduction. Many service users are vulnerable, and jeopardising the relationships these people have with their youth workers could do serious and irreversible harm. Officers agreed with this concern, noting that due to the work that has been undertaken there has been a 60% reduction in first time entrants to the Youth Offending Service. Also, the number of new users is currently increasing and this could be threatened too. However, by focusing on reducing management posts, it is hoped that the impact has been minimised.

At this stage of the meeting other Councillors were invited to submit questions or comments:

- Councillor Twomey asked officers if the remaining service would be able to cope with the anticipated population boom this borough is due to have. Officers said it does create a pressure, the biggest concerns currently being the provision for the 0-7 age range. However, officers are designing their services to be adaptable and are planning for the future.

- Concerns were raised regarding the affordability of sports facilities in the borough, especially those operated by private firms. Officers acknowledged that this is a shared concern, but informed Members that “vulnerable groups” receive free access to many sports services.

- Regarding the anticipated impact of this cut, Councillor Twomey was informed that officers are hoping to retain the majority of the Youth Service’s work and the cuts only result in a small reduction in the number of attendances per week, rather than widespread disengagement of young people. There is a risk some young people will feel less supported.

- Officers were commended for developing a strong volunteer programme, but cautioned that volunteers, to be successful, require a lot of professional support, training, and mentoring. Officers were confident this is, and will continue to be, well managed. Officers are also bidding for some Lottery funding to further protect this important work.

At this stage of the meeting those in the public gallery were invited to participate:
A member of the public (who is also a Youth Worker in the borough) said the distinction between “Youth Workers” and “Social Workers” is becoming increasingly blurred, for example he works in the borough’s Multi-Agency Locality Teams (MALT) and undertakes Common Assessment Framework (CAF) tasks. It is becoming difficult to strike a balance between targeted and universal work. As such, cuts to this area will have a serious knock on effect.

There is already a lot of young people not engaged in youth activities who are potentially causing harm through loitering and anti-social behaviour. This cut could exasperate that situation.

While the BAD YF is an excellent Forum, it should not be the borough’s only form of young people engagement, as it’s felt the Forum is not representative of the borough’s young people as a whole. Officers noted that other groups are also regularly engaged, e.g. Skittlz, Disabled Youth Parliament, and Young Voices.

Closing the debate:
- Councillor Carpenter thanked all those who participated for a strong and impassioned debate and urged the CSSC to refer the decision back to Cabinet for further consideration.
- Councillor White said he and his Cabinet colleagues agreed with the arguments Councillor Carpenter had put forward, but that they have a duty to provide a balanced budget and cannot protect non-statutory services any longer. He urged the CSSC to dismiss the call-in.
- Councillor Reason thanked Councillors and officers for their hard work in managing this difficult process.
- Councillor Letchford thanked all those in attendance.

The CSSC dismissed the call-in.

35. Date of Next Meeting

Noted.

The meeting closed at 20.19.