



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Development Committee
Subject:	Deputation re Olympia After Schools Club
Date:	10 January 2010
Reporting Officer:	Tim Husbands, Acting Director of Development ext 3459
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Relevant Background Information

In response to a request from parents of children attending Olympia after-schools project to meet with the Development Committee to outline their opposition to the withdrawal of the dedicated play staff service at Olympia Community Centre, Members had agreed to approve the group's request to address the Committee in February, and in the interim period officers should meet the group again, together with the Chairman of the Development Committee (or nominee), in an effort to resolve the issues prior to the February committee.

The meeting with parents took place on 27 January with Councillor Stoker in attendance as the Chairman's nominee, together with the Community Services Area Manager (South) and the Children and Young People's Manager.

Councillor Stoker set out the context for the changes to the after-schools provision as follows:

1. The context for the proposed changes to the Play Service relates to a lengthy process of review which commenced in 2005 and involved Members, senior managers, operational staff and parents, children and volunteers associated with each of the six play centres.
2. The process led to the formulation of a robust, detailed and comprehensive review report and action plan which was endorsed initially by the Members in June 2008.

3. Since then, necessary preliminary work has been undertaken in mapping work in regard to play and related provision, identifying a range of need across the City and building the capacity of the Play Team to ensure that staff members have the knowledge and skills necessary to implement best practice as recommended within the Play Review. More recently, in March 2009, Members considered the findings of the mapping exercise and formally reaffirmed the recommendations and action plan as set out in the Play Review.
4. The review process concluded that Belfast City Council should continue to invest in play and the provision of a play service. However, in order to ensure that this investment has maximum impact, especially in terms of outcomes for children and young people, it is important that:
 - The service is needs-led with provision directed by regular (5 year) mapping and needs analysis processes
 - Service delivery should not be dictated over the medium to long term by the location of the six existing Play Centres. In response to needs analysis Council should examine the potential for flexible and outreach delivery of the play service, making it available in communities where there is limited existing provision for children and young people up to age 16 and where there are concentrations of children and young people
 - Council should focus its play service on the 4 - 11 year age group and explore options for provision for the 12 - 16 age group.
 - Council should recognise the fact that demand for its pre-school provision (3 - 4 year age group) has been reducing consistently over the last number of years. In addition, there are other providers for children in the community sector. It should aim to promote good play practice with existing providers for pre-school but to withdraw from direct provision.
5. Recommendations were developed across the short, medium and long term and the changes thus represented an important but planned operational shift towards a different model of service delivery.
6. It was also stressed that, in order to better manage the transition, support would be provided on a time bound basis to provide training, advice and capacity building to enable the continuation of the after-schools project on the same basis as in other Council Community Centres, namely, on a volunteer basis in conjunction with community development staff.
7. In turn, parents sought clarification on the practical operation of the changed services, the distribution of community and voluntary sector provision in the general area, and the nature and extent of support available in the short and medium terms.
8. The meeting concluded with the parents agreeing to discuss the matters further before confirming their request to meet with Committee. At the time of writing of this report there is as yet no confirmation of the request.

In a related development, Members should also be aware that a letter has been received from parents of the Whiterock after-schools project seeking clarification of several specific issues, many of which relate to the basis upon which the decision to make similar changes in regard to Whiterock has been taken. An acknowledgement letter has been issued, alerting parents to the forthcoming consideration of the changes by Committee and an undertaking to communicate the outcome of Members' decisions in that regard following the meeting.

Key Issues

The current discontent expressed by parents in each of the above Centres in relation to the implementation of the recommendations of the Play Review is understandable, given the perceived loss of direct service provision. It should also be acknowledged that such feelings have been heightened by weaknesses in the way in which the practical consequences arising from the proposed changes were communicated to parents by Council officers. While remedial action has been taken by holding a series of meetings and offering a managed transition in the form of support, training and capacity building, the failure to communicate in a more timely and direct manner clearly has undoubtedly made the process of change more contentious.

Nevertheless, in the overall context, three salient issues should be recognised. Firstly, in attempting to meet the demands of an increasing range of potential user groups on a wider geographic basis, there remains a fixed number of 16 directly employed Council operational staff. Their deployment, on a more flexible basis, inevitably means that new provision in one area will result in the redeployment of play staff from an existing facility.

Secondly, for those Centres directly affected by the proposed changes, direct provision is not being withdrawn in its entirety. The play facilities and equipment are retained at the Centres; play workers are continuing to be based in-centre for two afternoons per week; and as part of a managed transition, play workers will work with parents, volunteers and community development staff to build capacity, knowledge and skills thereby enabling the facility to be operated on a volunteer basis on those afternoons when play workers are deployed elsewhere.

Thirdly, in all other Community Centres, afternoon clubs are organised on a volunteer basis in conjunction with community development staff. The proposed changes in the Centres above thus make consistent the Council's approach in regard to wider community services provision.

While the immediate impact upon parents of the agreed changes should not be underestimated, it is also a logistical reality that with a staff team of 16, it is impossible for the Council to meet the demands for play provision across the City. Significant preliminary effort has been undertaken, with the involvement with Members over a period of years, to establish a framework for a more equitable, innovative and flexible response to demand across the City. Notably, some 'early wins' have been achieved, with provision being extended for the first time to the Chinese and Polish communities for example.

It is considered that to reverse the process of change, previously adopted by the Development Committee, at this point would thus appear premature and inappropriate. In seeking to address any concerns, officers will redouble their efforts to meet again with parents, volunteers and others to identify and implement tailored projects and programmes which maximise the resources available, meet demonstrable need and promote best practice.

Resource Implications

The retention of a Play Team operated service at one Centre will result in staffing implications for other projects and the effective and efficient delivery of a citywide service.

Recommendations

Members are asked to consider the following options with a view to agreeing to either:

Option 1. Reaffirm the recommendations of the Play Review, as previously endorsed by Committee in March 2009, and proceed with a managed transition to a more flexible, needs-led service.

or

Option 2. Reverse the decision taken at the meeting of Committee in March 2009 and return to a static facility-based form of provision.

Decision Tracking

Further to agreement the preferred option will be implemented (option 2) or continued (option 1)

Time line: March 2010

Reporting Officer: Catherine Taggart