

<i>item:</i>	4
<i>report:</i>	CYP09/08

EARLY YEARS REVIEW

By Bill Alexander

Summary

This report updates members and makes recommendations with regard to the ongoing Review of Early Years Services

1. Introduction

1.1 The Highland Council Programme for Administration has committed to review and consult on childcare and educational services for young children, to ensure that we deliver and support a sustainable network of quality wraparound childcare and educational services for young children and their families by 2010.

1.2 The rapid development in Highland of childcare and educational services for young children has been a significant success story. However, pragmatic and rapid decisions were made in the late 1990s, to respond to community demands to get services established quickly. This often involved separate provision of childcare and early education, and also separate provision for three and four year olds. Accordingly, the services that were established do not always meet the needs that are now being expressed by families, and there are major issues about the future viability of some services.

2. Background

2.1 There has been a concerted approach in Highland to provide education places for 3 and 4 year olds, and also to considerably increase the accessibility of childcare, including services for very vulnerable children.

2.2 Between 1995 and 2005, there was a rapid growth in these services. Accordingly, there are now 240 centres providing early education, which is around 60 more centres than there are primary schools, with a total capacity of 5300 places for around 4200 children.

2.3 Given the rapid growth of these services, perhaps inevitably there are now a number of issues that require to be addressed to ensure consolidation and sustainability.

- (i) There are many more early education places available than there are children.
- (ii) This over capacity contributes to a budget pressure, and this is an area of service where the Council has committed to achieve savings in the next year.

- (iii) There are changing demographics across the authority, involving fewer children (and hence smaller budgets) in many communities. There are increasing numbers of children in some communities, and a commitment to provide Gaelic-medium provision where there is evidence of demand – including for childcare and wraparound care
- (iv) Families increasingly express a demand for wraparound care, with childcare and early education at one location, across the age ranges. This was recently evidenced by the enormous response to childcare provision at Inshes Primary School and Bunsgoil Ghidhlig Inbhir Nis.
- (v) While the Council has an obligation to provide early education, it has neither the obligation nor funding to transport children to it. The transport of children to nursery, makes a considerable demand on many families, and has been a major issue when changes to provision have been suggested.
- (vi) Many voluntary sector groups are struggling to sustain provision from year to year. They have problems maintaining management committees, and recruiting and retaining staff. In addition, the Care Commission and the Scottish Social Services Council are making increasing regulatory demands, which are proving particularly onerous. It has been necessary to arrange dedicated, peripatetic management for a number of partner centres, through the umbrella organisation, the Care & Learning Alliance (CALA).

2.4 Accordingly, the Joint Committee agreed in September that the draft Pre-school and Childcare Framework is a model whereby agreement can be reached in local communities about the nature of the partnership arrangement between providers that is necessary to deliver on the Council's commitment.

2.5 It is was further agreed that services should be organised on an Associated School Group basis, such that the full range of provision is available within every ASG. It was recognised that this would mean some changes to current services, including amalgamations and closures, or changes to management arrangements.

2.6 It was also agreed that consultation should commence with ward members and local providers and parents, to enable recommendations to be made to the Joint Committee prior to enrolment in early 2008.

3. Financial Implications

3.1 2007/08 is the second and final year that was agreed for enhanced financial support from Highland Council to support the process of implementation of changes in Early Years services. This amounted to £450,000 last year, and £250,000 this year.

3.2 Because of this transitional support, there is not a projected overspend on this budget heading at the end of 2007/08.

3.3 As well as the loss of transitional support, savings of £240,000 have been agreed for this budget heading in 2008/09.

3.4 Any shortfall in meeting these targets will require to be made up from elsewhere in the Joint Committee's budget.

4. Process of the Review

4.1 As reported to the November meeting of the Joint Committee, Childcare and Family Resource Officers have completed an updated analysis of childcare and early education provision, and identified key communities with significant issues in discussion with Area Service Managers.

4.2 It was reported at the January meeting that discussions were being with members in at key local Business Meetings about the need for changes to provision, as well as the process for consulting with local groups. All of these Ward Business Meetings have now been attended. Childcare and Family Resource Officers have also met with parents and providers in all communities affected by the review – excepting two communities in Ross-shire, where meetings will be held before the March Joint Committee meeting.

4.3 These local community meetings have been managed where possible in a solution focussed way, considering four options;

- the Status Quo- retaining both voluntary and Local Authority groups;
- amalgamation of the 3 & 4 provision to be run by the Voluntary Sector;
- amalgamation of the 3 & 4 provision to be run by the Local Authority;
- other suggestions put forward by the community.

4.4 The meetings have also considered the potential within each option to develop and sustain wrap around care.

4.5 In some areas the consultation process has been difficult, with key stakeholders being unable to consider the wider picture or options other than the status quo, and retaining and protecting what is presently there. This stance has been taken, despite acknowledgement in discussion of the significant difficulties that some providers face in making services sustainable.

4.6 In this context, providers have found themselves in difficult positions. Some groups which have been encouraged to campaign to retain their status have struggling committees and unqualified staff. These groups may never be able to reach the qualification requirements expected by the Care Commission and Scottish Social Services Council. In addition, there is the possibility that they may be forced by these

pressures into a closure, and that the Council will be required to react in an adhoc as opposed to a planned strategic basis.

- 4.7 Albeit the funds paid to the Care & Learning Alliance (CALA) are presently sufficient to meet the demands on that organisation for the provision of management to around 30 partner centres, should any local parent-led groups seek additional support, including to prevent closure, funding to CALA would require to be increased.
- 4.8 A failure to respond strategically will undoubtedly foster inefficiency and high unit costs, and may threaten the improvement in overall quality of services and the long term sustainability of these and other groups . It is acknowledged that feelings and emotions are strong in some communities, where the focus is on the perceived immediate threat to local services, rather than a strategy which can deliver the optimum service in the longer term.
- 4.9 The recommendations which follow have sought to take account of local views. However, in order to rationalise capacity and deliver a sustainable and affordable model, some recommendations do not support the locally expressed views.

5. Review Recommendations

5.1 Combination of three and four year old provision

It makes good operational and educational sense to combine three and four year old provision. Such a move also makes it easier for busy parents, and it enables siblings to remain together in the same early years facility.

The review has been predicated on this, and the area recommendations below include reference to consideration of this option. Albeit this indicates that in some communities this will not be achievable in 2008, discussions with Area Education Managers confirm that all other providers (except Inshes, Crown and Rosebank Primary Schools, where there are capacity issues) can offer combined provision to 3 and 4 year olds.

Recommendation: Other than where it is stated that this is not achievable in 2008, all provisions should now be commissioned and operate with both 3 and 4 year olds.

5.2 Eligibility of 3 year olds

Many parents have campaigned for three year olds to have earlier access to pre-school education, whereas presently they are only eligible and funded from the full school term that follows their 3rd birthday.

Some partner centres have made this service available, and have charged a small fee to cover their costs. Until recently, this service was not available in any local authority nurseries, or in many such nurseries across Scotland.

However, following a successful pilot at Inshes Primary and Bunsgoil Ghaidhlig Inbhir Nis, it is proposed that it is possible for parents to pay for their 3 year old to attend local authority nursery provision from the week after the child's 3rd birthday. This would involve a charge that would be comparable with childcare fees in the private and voluntary sector.

In order to enable children to attend local authority nursery provision from the week after the child's 3rd birthday, staffing numbers across Highland may need to increase by 3 FTE nursery auxiliaries for a number of weeks each, at a cost of approximately £15,000. This cost would be met through parental fees of £6.00 per session.

Recommendation: where local capacity allows, local authority nurseries should accept 3 year olds from the week after the child's 3rd birthday, involving a charge that is comparable with childcare fees in the private and voluntary sector.

5.3 Area Proposals

5.3.1 Easter Ross, Skye and Lochaber

There has been recent local discussion about the future provision of primary education in Fort William, and the review of early years provision in the town has been based on a similar premise, that there are grounds for consolidation of provision.

Nevis Nippers playgroup/Caol Nursery

The Local Authority is able to run combined 3 and 4 year old provision. However, the current playgroup committee and parents of Nevis Nippers would prefer to maintain the status quo, and local Members support this. There will be no immediate cost savings to amalgamation, and there is evidence to suggest that the committee is sustainable for another year.

Recommendation - retain status quo at present but review in one year

Kilmallie Playgroup/Banavie Nursery

Although currently the Local Authority could accommodate both the 3 and 4 year olds, the playgroup could not. The playgroup is a well run and organised provision held in high regard within the community. They do not appear to experience recruitment or retention issues common with many playgroup committees. The group have very good support from local businesses and members of the community. With the proposed new house builds and no cost saving (a cost increase if run by the L.A) it would be premature to amalgamate at this stage.

Recommendation – retain status quo

Upper Achintore Playgroup/Upper Achintore Nursery

The Local Authority is able to run combined provision for 3 and 4 year olds. The playgroup committee, parents and members would prefer to retain the status quo, and are unable to run provision for 3 and 4 year olds. Upper Achintore playgroup has struggled to recruit and retain committee members and have a low staff qualification base. There would be no cost saving resulting from an amalgamation, but there are significant concerns about the sustainability of this service beyond the next 12 months.

Recommendation - retain status quo at present but review in one year

Inverlochry Playgroup/Inverlochry Nursery

The Local Authority is able to run combined provision for 3 and 4 year olds, or provide accommodation for the playgroup to run the provision from the nursery space. The Head Teacher has recently taken over management of the After School Club. The playgroup committee, parents and Members do not want to provide for 3 and 4 year olds and wish to retain the status quo. Like other playgroups they have struggled to recruit and retain committee members. There would be no cost savings in an amalgamation, and there are no immediate concerns about sustainability.

Recommendation - retain status quo at present but review in one year.

Elgol

Around eight children who will require 3 year old provision now live in this community. Transport facilities to other options are very poor. A new provision can be commissioned from the voluntary sector from Easter 2008.

Recommendation - commission new provision.

Thingvoller Tots/ Pefferside Daycare

As there are only sufficient numbers of children to justify one voluntary sector provider, the groups have agreed to amalgamate and operate from the Pefferside Daycare site, this will provide a saving of approx £16,000.

Maryburgh Playgroup/Maryburgh Nursery

(meeting scheduled – recommendation to be tabled at Committee)

Muir of Ord playgroup/Tarradale Nursery

The Local Authority now provides afternoon sessions for 3 year olds as the playgroup were not able to secure rental of the Pavilion beyond mornings.

5.3.2 Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross

Fearn Playgroup

Further to close local examination and consultation, it is recommended that this facility is retained.

Recommendation – retain status quo

Ankerville AIness

New full day care provision recently opened in Alesse providing commissioned pre school 3 and 4 year education places to working parents.

Norlin Playgroup/North Nursery

The playgroup has struggled to be sustainable in recent years. It presently has healthy numbers, and now has a stronger committee, who have not made a request to be managed by CALA. There would not be a cost saving in an amalgamation as although the Local Authority currently operates two sessions it will not from August 2008.

Recommendation- retain status quo

Thrumster Nursery

Thrumster nursery has seen an increase in local numbers and require to vary their registration with the Care Commission to expand provision.

Recommendation – retain

Lybster Lightbeams Playgroup/Lybster Nursery

The parents using the playgroup have stated that they wish to retain the status quo, and are unhappy about the pace of consultation. This provision is fully managed by CALA and currently offers a service to 6 children. The Local Authority could accommodate both the 3 year and 4 year olds and has recently varied its certificate of registration with the Care Commission to allow the use of a larger room, which will allow access to a dedicated outdoor play area. The village hall could also accommodate both 3 and 4 year olds, but has inferior space. Either CALA or the Local Authority, or a parent-led group, could run an amalgamated service. Amalgamation would result in a revenue saving of approximately £21,000.

Recommendation: 3 and 4 year old provision to be combined in one setting.

Brora Playgroup/Brora Nursery

The Local authority could provide for 3 and 4 year olds. The playgroup committee would prefer to retain the status quo although appreciate that unlike previous and possibly future committees, they currently provide a robust service. There would be no cost saving to an amalgamation, and the numbers of pre-school children predicted over the next five years is expected to increase. It would seem sensible to retain the two providers in the short to medium term as it is unlikely that one provider will be able to accommodate the predicted increased numbers.

Recommendation – retain status quo.

Reay Playgroup/Melvich Nursery

Numbers attending Reay playgroup has increased to the extent that they could not accommodate children from Melvich. The capacity in Melvich Nursery is lower still, making an amalgamation impossible at this time.

Recommendation - retain status quo.

5.3.3 Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey

Peter Pan Playgroup/Drakies Nursery; The Local Authority can provide for 3 year olds at Drakies Primary School and Andy Pandy playgroup, and 4 year olds at Drakies and Inshes Primary School. The accommodation occupied by Peter Pan is extremely poor, and parents have been consulted over a number of years about changes.

Recommendation: de-commission Peter Pan Playgroup

Recommendations

The Joint Committee is asked to agree:-

- i. (i) that, other than where it is stated that it is not achievable in 2008, all provisions now be commissioned and operate with both 3 and 4 year olds;
- ii. (ii) where local capacity allows, local authority nurseries accept 3 year olds from the week after the child's 3rd birthday, involving a charge that is comparable with childcare fees in the private and voluntary sector;
- iii. (iii) that in the Ross, Skye and Lochaber area
 - the status quo be retained at present at the Nevis Nippers Playgroup/Caol Nursery, Upper Achintore Playgroup/Upper Achintore Nursery and Inverlochry Playgroup/Inverlochry Nursery but that these be reviewed in one year;
 - the status quo be retained at the Kilmallie Playgroup/Banavie Nursery;
 - new provision be commissioned at Elgol
- iv. (iv) that in the Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross area
 - the status quo be retained at the Fearn Playgroup, Norlin Playgroup/North Nursery, Brora Playgroup/Brora Nursery and the Reay Playgroup/Melvich Nursery
- v.
 - the Thrumster Nursery be retained
 - and 4 year old provision in Lybster is combined in one setting
- vi. (v) that in the Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey area the Peter Pan Playgroup be de-commissioned.

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