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Agenda Item 16: Children's Centres – Sustaining and Developing the Provision

UNISON asks for recommendation 3 in the report to be withdrawn.

We believe that a decision to consider outsourcing or privatising the five remaining Children's Centres which are directly managed by the Local Authority is based on a misinterpretation of the Childcare Act, 2006; on which the report suggests the decision is based. We also believe that it will result in an unnecessary diversion of management resources and cause unnecessary disruption to service provision and quality of improvement.

The Children Centres in question are 5 out of the planned 18 in the borough. This means that only a minority of Children's Centres are run by the Local Authority. In turn, Children's Centres represent only a small minority of the childcare available in the borough. Other providers include schools (explicitly excluded in the 2006 Act from being considered as part of the Local Authority provision), voluntary sector and privately run childcare centres and childminders. Therefore the Council does not need to outsource its 5 directly managed Children's Centres, in order to ensure that the Local Authority is facilitating the childcare provider market.

It should also be pointed out that Section 8, sub-section 5 – explicitly excludes provision of childcare to "children in need" from the requirement of the Act to seek other providers of childcare. Many children at the 5 Children's Centre are "children in need".

Section 8 sub section 3 of the Act is the one that refers to the circumstances under which the Local Authority can and cannot provide childcare. This makes clear that even if there is another provider willing to provide the childcare the Local Authority can continue to provide the childcare if it concludes "that in the circumstances it is appropriate for the local authority to provide the childcare".

It has to be pointed out that that a decision to hand the Children's Centres over to another provider will be extremely disruptive. The energies of the Local Authority would be much better spent on developing the Children's Centres and working with partners and in the development of other childcare provided by voluntary, independent and private sectors.

Many providers may not be able to establish long term sustainable provision for childcare, particularly for children with disabilities or special educational needs. There is a pattern of childcare provision being set up, and then closing once subsidies or support ends. Therefore it is prudent for the Local Authority to maintain some provision – especially provision which can meet the needs of disabled and special needs children – so it can be assured that it has sufficient places to meet the needs of children in needs, disabled children and children with special educational needs.

Glyn Rowlands
Haringey UNISON.
13th JULY 2007.