

Briefing note
Children's Overview and Scrutiny meeting

20th March 2013

Briefing topic: Feedback on visits from Cllr Diana Hale, Chair, Children's overview and scrutiny and Cllr Halden, Vice Chair and Shadow Portfolio Holder for Children's Services

Briefing author: Carmel Littleton, Director of Children's Services, from notes of visit agreed by Cllrs Hale and Halden.

1. Introduction

1.1.1 This briefing has been produced to provide members of the committee with reflections following the visits of Cllr Hale and Cllr Halden to Children's Centres. This was arranged as a follow up to visits earlier in the administrative year to support the work of the committee on the Early Offer of Help programme.

1.1.2 Visits to Aveley, Stanford le Hope and Tilbury Children's Centres were arranged. A visit to Chadwell St Mary had to be cancelled owing to a temporary problem with the gas heating on the day planned. The visits took place on February 5th and 6th 2013.

2. Reflections and feedback

2.1 In order to structure our visits and get the most out of each visit, we agreed to consider what were our first impressions of each centre, what the highlights were, any disappointments (if only..) and any messages or learning points that emerged.

2.2 Aveley

2.2.1 Cllr Halden reported that the engagement of fathers at this centre was a pleasant surprise. There was real engagement from the all the team in the office and the Locality Manager, Laura Burroughs, demonstrated a real knowledge of all the user groups. This was all the more impressive as Laura hosted the visits at very short notice following unforeseen circumstances of another manager.

2.2.2 Activities were well organised and there was a more coherent offer than was evident on paper. There was a question about how well Job Centre Plus were engaged at the centre, despite an obvious welcome from Children's Centre staff. This was an area for further exploration and follow up.

2.2.3 Cllr Hale reported that the ambience had noticeably improved - much brighter and more welcoming than on a previous visit. The playing area was also better defined than at last visit. A totem pole which supplemented the tepee at the

centre was a lovely idea for the summer. The sense was of a very creative setting. Cllr Hale considered that Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) was perhaps even more relevant than Job Centre Plus and further links with the Thurrock Adult Community College and South Essex College were equally important to pursue. It was important for the emphasis to be on “Returning to Work” rather than “Jobless”

2.2.4 There was a welcome mix of private, charity and public sector groups amongst the providers at the centre.

2.2.5 In relation to the ambience and the feel of the place, there were informal opportunities for learning around the walls, especially around breastfeeding. This was sensitively managed and welcoming rather than off-putting. The presence of men at the centre in the fathers group gave the space a feeling of a club, rather than an unwelcome institutional feeling.

2.3 Stanford-le-Hope

2.3.1 Councillors reported that there was a sense here that staff gave their level best within a difficult building layout. It was helpful that the private play group and nursery now had a clearly defined space.

2.3.2 Councillors made some suggestions for further improvements to the centre:-

- Displays for the walls could be enhanced to develop further informal learning opportunities.
- The computer space looked welcoming but perhaps needed additional displays to the standard Chief Executive’s Council display
- The office seemed to be in the most attractive space in the centre and this might need reconsideration
- There were opportunities for the private play group to brighten their environment
- More could be done to make the most of informal learning opportunities
- More could be done to develop the look and feel of the Children’s Centre. More development work should be done to ensure it is the best possible environment for adults wishing to return to work or be sociable.
- Could a coffee bar area be added for day time use?
- Could more be done to ensure there is a clear ambience that would mean that adults, with or without children, could just drop in?

2.4 Tilbury

2.4.1 This is a centre that was purpose built for the original SureStart programme. On the day of the visit it was packed with children and parents; there was a real flurry of activity, the atmosphere exuded fun and

there were lots of fathers again. There was also a good use of the coffee bar.

- 2.4.2 Councillors loved the hen that a little girl had brought in which was moved around the different age groups to impressively quiet audiences, often right up against boisterous play activity.
- 2.4.3 Despite the centre being packed with children and families from tiny babies upwards, they seemed to be effortlessly well organised.
- 2.4.4 Councillors were disappointed with the sight of a blighted building, clearly visible from the Children's Centre. Officers were asked to follow up with information about the future of the building.
- 2.4.5 There were clearly evident good links with Palmer's College and their Social Care BTEC qualification. Students were clearly well integrated and supported.
- 2.4.6 Consideration needed to be given to whether the toy library could be reopened using alternative methods of funding. Officers were asked to look into this and report back on progress.
- 2.4.7 Councillors considered that that it felt like a building site around the outside of the centre. Councillors wanted to be assured about a guarantee of safe parking, and entry and exit for pedestrians while building works were in place around the outside of the site.
- 2.4.8 There was some evidence that Job Centre Plus seemed to have higher visibility than at Aveley or Stanford but activity was not seen on the day of the visit.
- 2.4.9 Councillors picked up concerns about a possible merger or amalgamation and possible loss of expertise from staff. Officers were asked to clarify whether this was a misunderstanding and to confirm that there would be no loss of expertise.

Summary

Councillors welcomed the chance to visit Children's Centres and recommended that members of Children's overview and scrutiny may wish to consider a wider programme of visits in future. This would strengthen personal first hand experience of their important overview and functions and pose further constructive challenge and support.

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