

CHILDREN AND LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL

PLAYSCHEME PROVISION FOR CHILDREN WITH COMPLEX NEEDS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

1. Following a request from a member of the public that this topic should be examined, the scrutiny panel sought to assess how the Council's summer playschemes make provision for children with complex needs.
2. In examining this topic, however, it was found that such provision is often closely linked to other, more general, play provision or to provision for children with other disabilities. Some aspects of the panel's investigation therefore inevitably involved a wider focus than children with complex needs and playscheme provision and these findings are reflected in this report.

CONCLUSIONS

3. Based on the evidence gathered in the scrutiny investigation the Panel concluded that:
 1. In accordance with the Council's Play Policy, it is important that play provision is welcoming and accessible to every child. This principle applies equally across all play provision and services, including summer playschemes. Provision should therefore reflect all needs - including children with disabilities and children with complex needs.
 2. Although every effort is made to encourage children with disabilities to access and engage in mainstream playscheme provision, this may not always be possible due to the particular circumstances of each child, their parents' wishes or the level of support which may be needed. Also, some parents may simply consider that mainstream provision is not appropriate for their child's needs. Some children with complex needs/disabilities have, however, attended mainstream play schemes with assistance from their own carers or with specialised 1:1 support.
 3. Playscheme charges are not equitable in that the cost of attending the two non-Council playschemes for children with complex needs/disabilities (at Beverley School and Priory Woods School) is considerably higher than that at Council-run playschemes.
 4. The opportunity for qualifying organisations to provide additional playscheme provision for children with complex needs/disabilities through the Government's 'Aiming High' funding (despite the funding's temporary nature) is to be welcomed. However, at the time that this was examined by the scrutiny panel (July/August 2009) it was unclear what impact this funding might have in this area.

5. Summer playscheme provision is only one element of support that the Council provides to families with children with complex needs and disabilities. It is important that families are aware of this alternative support and can access all other appropriate services/facilities.
6. Training on disability awareness is made available to playscheme staff and is also provided in a wider-Council context for other relevant staff.
7. There appears to be a match between the number of playscheme places for children with complex needs and disabilities and demand/requirements. The scrutiny panel found no evidence of unmet demand and concludes that current service provision (at both mainstream and specialist level) is adequate. However, the points raised by the Cleveland Unit in respect of the lack of specialist provision for under fives is noted as a possible issue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

4. Following the submitted evidence, and based on the conclusions above, the scrutiny panel's recommendations for consideration by the Overview and Scrutiny Board and the Executive are as follows:
 1. That, given the mixed range of service provision and funding arrangements in respect of playschemes for children with complex needs and disabilities, a review is undertaken with a view to rationalising such provision. This should include how the two non-Council playschemes for children with complex needs/disabilities at Beverley School and Priory Woods School can be better supported by the authority - for example by assessing the existing budget split, or determining whether the authority can make provision to offer activities such as free sports (for example swimming with appropriate support) within and outside the current playschemes' operation. It should also investigate the possibility of providing some form of playscheme facilities for children with complex needs/disabilities who are under five.
 2. That, within the constraints of the Aiming High funding regime, every effort is made to maximise the use of the funding to support playschemes for children with complex needs and disabilities - for example by encouraging relevant organisations to apply, assisting them with the application process and determining whether the requirement to offer new provision could be satisfied by offering playschemes in non-summer school holidays (subject to organisations wishing to do so).
 3. That efforts are continued to encourage children with complex needs and disabilities to access mainstream playscheme provision - such as by further publicising opportunities that are available, publicising success stories in appropriate media such as Disability Matters and Middlesbrough News and by highlighting that 1:1 support is available for these groups of service users.
 4. That Council Officers initiate discussions with NHS Middlesbrough (ie the former local Primary Care Trust) to ascertain whether that organisation can assist in any aspects of supporting playscheme provision for children with complex needs and disabilities.