

COUNCIL 28TH SEPTEMBER 2016

MOTION ON NOTICE - DECISION BY LANCASHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL TO CLOSE FIRBANK CHILDREN'S CENTRE ON THE RIDGE ESTATE IN LANCASTER

To consider the following motion submitted by Councillors Tim Hamilton-Cox, Abi Mills and Andrew Kay:-

This council notes:

That the level of deprivation on education and health measures in the lower super output area (LSOA) covering part of the Ridge and Newton places the LSOA in the bottom 10% in England;

the latest (2012) OFSTED report on Firbank which said of the staff: 'Their extremely caring, respectful attitudes and dedication to improving the lives of the most disadvantaged families is a seam of gold influencing all of this centre's work, inspiring loyalty, confidence and cooperation among professional partnerships and parents. Consequently, provision and outcomes are good.'

And further that the OFSTED report underlined the symbiotic relationship between centre, nursery and school: 'The onsite nursery, the centre and the adjacent school sensibly share the assessment and support systems for children. This eases the children's movement between settings, which is particularly important for children who are receiving additional support...The centre is becoming a real hub of the local community';

That closure is likely to impact on the viability of the nursery currently co-located in the building and which offers the only nursery provision in the area;

That closure is contrary to the statutory role of Lancashire county council 'to secure sufficient children's centres which are accessible to all families with young children, and targeted evidence-based interventions for those families in greatest need of support';

that the proposed alternative provision at Lune Park (in Ryelands Park) is not accessible to much of Bulk ward in the 30-minute pram-pushing time set as the accessibility criterion in the County property strategy, and that it is a pedestrian-adversive route;

That closure contradicts the leader of Lancashire county council's comment (May 2016) on the property strategy which has occasioned closure: that, "We are not cutting services but reducing the number of expensive buildings..."

This council acknowledges the unprecedented squeeze on council budgets caused by government funding cuts but calls on Lancashire county council to prioritise services to families in greatest social need in order to prevent future, more intensive and expensive intervention by children's social care services.

Accordingly, this council mandates the chief executive to write to Lancashire county council calling on it to reverse its decision to close Firbank children's centre at its next cabinet meeting on 6th October for the reasons set out above.

An officer briefing note is attached.

Officer briefing note

Lancashire County Council's Cabinet on 8th September 2016 approved a series of recommendations concerning property disposals and arrangements for some services that operated from those buildings. At the time of producing this briefing note, officers have been made aware that the decision has been called in and due to be heard by county's scrutiny committee on Thursday 22nd September. The terms of the call in are that "both the consultation and the Cabinet decision were based on incorrect financial information and the decision does not meet the Council's own priorities to support the needs of the residents of Lancashire, particularly the more deprived communities." In addition there is a specific point relating to Adlington Library.

Notwithstanding the outcome of this call in, in terms of the private nursery operating out of Firbank children's centre, officers understand that a Tenancy at Will has been granted for a further 6 months to allow the nursery to remain in occupation so the nursery is in no imminent danger of losing its premises. The most important development however is that the County's Schools Planning Team who estimate future school pupil place provision has identified a potential requirement for additional pupil places in the area and has requested ownership of the site be retained. This means that the County Council may decide to retain its freehold interest in case future development / expansion of the school site is required and instead could choose to lease the Firbank building to retain overall control of the site.

During the consultation, the Schools Forum expressed concerns about children's centres attached to schools and the potentially detrimental impacts this may have on school finances. As a result of this, Cabinet resolved to "note the request from the Schools Forum for transition funding for schools with attached children's centres and that this will be the subject of future discussion between officers and the Schools Forum".

Deputy Section 151 Officer comments:-

The Deputy Section 151 Officer has been consulted and has no further comments.

Monitoring Officer comments:-

The Monitoring Officer has been consulted and has no further comments.