

HEALTH AND LEISURE PORTFOLIO HOLDER DECISION: JULY 2015

PROVISION OF CHILD CARE AND CRECHE FACILITIES IN NEW FOREST HEALTH AND LEISURE CENTRES

ITEM FOR DECISION

There is a need to consider the provision of child care and crèche facilities in Health and Leisure Centres in order to ensure appropriate provision is being made. Having done so, some adjustment is needed in provision, which is covered in more detail in the attached report.

POLICY FRAMEWORK

Providing support for children and young people is a priority for the Council. However, provision needs to be appropriate and relevant, which will lead to some provision being made directly, some through partnerships and other aspects best led by other organisations.

BUDGET IMPLICATIONS

The principal motivation for considering provision was to ensure delivery was appropriate for children and the Council. With the decisions made there will be a saving in the order of £10,000 per annum.

PROPOSED DECISION

To implement the recommendations in the review report.

REASONS

It is essential that provision is made in a way which properly considers the needs of children and young people and meets the necessary standards.

ANY ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

Not to change Council provision: rejected on the basis that this is not best practice for the children concerned or the Council.

To cease provision all together: rejected on the basis that there are roles for the Council to make a contribution to the provision for children and young people.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DECLARED

There are none.

SIGNED: CLLR J E BINNS

Cllr James Binns
Portfolio Holder Health and Leisure

DATE: 3 JULY 2015

Date on which notice of decision given – 3 July 2015

Last date for call-in – 10 July 2015

CHILD CARE AND CRECHE PROVISION IN THE NEW FOREST HEALTH AND LEISURE CENTRES

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Council regularly reviews what is provided in the Health and leisure Centres, and this is reviewed in the context of constantly changing demand and trends.
- 1.2 Locally, the Council is the main provider of swimming pools and sports halls and programmes are based on providing activities that require specialist facilities, providing a broad range of opportunities for communities to be active and healthy.
- 1.3 Over the last 20 years, gyms and group exercise have replaced badminton, 5 a side and squash as the most popular activities and Centre programmes are a balance of industry led activities e.g. Group Cycling and community led activities e.g. health programmes and children's activities
- 1.4 The Service takes the approach, that our role is to provide access to leisure opportunities for all sections of the Community, and specifically children and young people, but where provision is well catered for in the private sector, the Service does not seek to 'compete' unless it is a core activity (swim lessons, gyms etc)

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Leisure Provision for children under 5 has changed significantly in the last 15 years. Play groups and creches were popular in the 1990's, however a number of factors have seen provision decline rapidly, and be replaced by Indoor Soft play facilities and Pre Schools.
- 2.2 Changes over the last couple of decades have had the effect of 'professionalising' childcare. The introduction of policies, qualifications and ratios increased costs significantly for providers and led to a rapid decline in crèches. New Forest Leisure services closed all of its crèches except Ringwood in the 1990's due to declining popularity and rising costs. Ringwood crèche was continued because of the Playsite Indoor Play area which was popular with families and provided a purpose built environment for young children
- 2.3 A play group was established at Applemore when it opened in 1975 as an income generating business area, however in the 1990's this became a Pre – School which was subject to OFSTED regulations alongside the Centre's holiday programmes. Staff with specific childcare qualifications were recruited to run the Pre school
- 2.4 The provision of free early years education for 3 and 4 years olds since 2000 (and some 2 year olds) has helped expand the growth of nurseries and pre

schools, and there is some possibility of this being extended to 1 and two year olds.

3 ASSESMENT OF CURRENT PROVISION IN THE FOREST FOR UNDER 5's

- 3.1 NFDC runs a Pre -school at Applemore health and Leisure which is staffed directly by the Service with a team of fully qualified and experienced childcare professionals.
- 3.2 The Service also offers, through its Under 5's provision, gym-tots and gym- minis programmes at all of its Centres and Aqua-babes at 4 Centres. These are very well attended and contribute positively to the net deficit.
- 3.3 New Forest Leisure Services provides 2 Indoor Play areas at Applemore and Totton which provide 'free play' opportunities for children, and there is a desire to offer this in the future at other New Forest Centres as part of larger capital schemes to extend facilities.
- 3.4 There are now 22 independent nurseries operating within the New Forest and a similar number of pre schools
- 3.5 There is a crèche at Ringwood within the Play site (indoor soft play area) to enable parent to take advantage of membership's and classes. It is able to operate outside of OFSTED regulations because sessions are under 2 hours; however, we still have a responsibility for the children in our care.

4 THE ROLE FOR LEISURE SERVICES WITHIN PROVISION

- 4.1 The pre-school at Applemore is well supported (20 children/day) and although financially it is 'cost neutral', it does bring families with young children to the Centre where they partake in other Under 5 activities like gym tots and Aquababes.
- 4.2 The crèche at Ringwood attracts less than 4 children/day and there is an operational concern that staff working in the crèche hold no childcare qualifications and this poses a 'risk' to the Council. Whilst staff are willing to undertake training to NVQ L 2 and L3 the time and costs required to maintain a fully qualified team is disproportional to the business, and whilst training which takes 18 months , is being undertaken the crèche continues to put the Council at risk should an accident or incident occur.
- 4.3 The Service has tentatively explored opportunities to partner with a private company to provide on- site child care as a commercial opportunity , but to date no projects have come to fruition and this is still a long term 'vision' as it has the potential contribute positively to the new deficit.

5. THE WAY FORWARD

- 5.1 Childcare is an increasingly specialised and professional industry and Leisure Services views its role with under 5's primarily to developing life skills, encouraging physical activity and establishing healthy lifetime habits from an early age. It is not felt that we need to be a part of this market, unless there are clear financial or service benefits or its fits with the Councils Strategic objectives.
- 5.2 Indoor Soft Play areas offer a safe play environment for young children , and can contribute positively to the net deficit with a relatively modest investment. Future plans for the Centres should give serious consideration to the inclusion of Soft play areas.
- 5.3 Discussions with Children's Services have identified that there is a shortage of pre -school places on the Waterside, and the Applemore Pre School is able to offer places to up to 80 children a week. Additionally, the Pre School introduces families to the wider range of facilities and activities on offer at Applemore and is thought to have broader business benefits .It is proposed to continue with Pre School provision at Applemore and also to continue to explore options of partnering with a private company to develop 'nursery provision' as the site is considered to be well located for many local workers, and we already have a 'base' of expertise.
- 5.4 The crèche at Ringwood is valued by the small number of parents that use it, however take up is very low, averaging less than 4 children per day. The main issue however, is that the crèche currently runs outside of OFSTED Regulations and staff are unqualified, which is placing the Council at risk. It is proposed that the 'creche' provision within the Playsite is withdrawn from 1 October 2015, although parents will be able to continue using the play area so long as their children are accompanied.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The Preschool at Applemore is OFSTED regulated and although it developed from the original Playgroup, it is professionally run, and able to accept Government funded nursery vouchers. The Pre-school 'breaks even 'or makes a modest profit for the centre which contributes to the reduction of the net deficit and it has broader business benefits.
- 6.2 The crèche at Ringwood is currently operating at a loss of approx. £10000 per annum. The closure of this specific service within the Play area would represent a saving to the Centre , however this would be partly offset by a small loss in 'activity' income or the possibility of some membership cancellations, however the savings overall are likely to be in the region of £8k per annum. To continue with this service and get staff qualified to meet nationally the recognised standard of qualification, would cost approx. £4000 in year 1 with an ongoing cost of approx. £1500 per annum.

7. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

There are none arising from this Decision.

8. CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

There are none arising from this Decision.

9. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

The Decision ensures provision is made in the most appropriate manner, to meet the needs of the users of services in an appropriate manner.

10. CONCLUSION

- 10.1 New Forest Leisure Services is tasked with reducing the net deficit year on year whilst maintaining a high quality service that is able to be accessed by their local communities.
- 10.2 The approach is to focus on doing the basics well i.e. quality facilities, excellent health and safety standards and friendly and knowledgeable staff. Due to the nature of many activities that require specialist equipment or facilities, New Forest Leisure Services is the main provider of many popular activities like Swimming, trampolining, swim lessons, gymnastics and gyms.
- 10.3 Childcare has evolved from a 'play' activity to a regulated and professional industry with an emphasis on early years' education, and it is felt that unless there are clear benefits to the service, this should remain principally in the private sector.
- 10.4 Leisure Services has reviewed its role and responsibilities within this sector and wishes to ensure that any childcare provision offered directly by the service is able to meet the key principles of our business strategy.

11. DECISION

In reviewing the provision that the service offers, to:

1. Continue to provide a Pre School at Applemore which is professionally run and meets a local recognised 'need' for pre-schools on the Waterside.
2. Continue to provide indoor soft play facilities at Applemore and Ringwood but from the end of September 2015, withdraw the provision of a crèche at the Playsite which will reduce any 'risk' to the Council and make a contribution to the reduction of the net deficit

3. Continue to consider the inclusion of indoor soft play areas in future capital schemes where it can be demonstrated that they will be well supported and viable.
4. Continue to explore options for business partnerships with the private sector to provide childcare within the Forest, where the Council provides facilities but does not provide direct provision.