

Mrs Katherine M Sumner

Southport  
Merseyside

Tuesday 6<sup>th</sup> December 2011

Dear Sir or Madam,

**Re: The Children's Centre Review and ahead of the  
Cabinet meeting on Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> December 2011.**

The statutory guidance on children's centres stipulates that all children should have access to a children's centre unless reasonably practicable and that the local authority has to demonstrate that families can access them.

"Section 5A of the Childcare Act now requires that as part of meeting their duties under section 3, local authorities must, so far as is reasonably practicable, include arrangements for sufficient provision of children's centres to meet local need. This means local authorities are now under a duty to secure sufficient children's centres provision for their area."

"Local authorities should be able to demonstrate through their performance management arrangements and review processes that all children and families can be reached effectively."

The statutory guidance also says:

“...local authorities should be guided by demographic factors and demonstrate an understanding of the different communities – both geographically and socio-economically – children's centres will serve. Local authorities should also take into account views of local families and communities in deciding what is sufficient children's centre provision.”

## **Deprivation and inadequate provision in Southport.**

As I'm sure you are aware the IMD2010 statistics were published in March 2011. They show that deprivation in some parts of Southport (Dukes and Cambridge wards) is in the top 20% nationally. Deprivation in LSOAs in dukes ward and in High Park is top 10% and is worsening (High Park E01007055 is -541 between 2004-2010, dukes E01006968 is -221). What is particularly worrying is that deprivation in dukes ward improved between 2004 and 2007 but has worsened to below 2004 levels in the 2010IMD.

Deprivation in neighbouring LSOA E01006948 is the next most deprived quintile and shows that it is worsening, a fall of 1660 between 2004 and 2010 (a 17.4% reduction in rank). Crossens, the rest of Marshside and some of Churchtown is middling to relatively well off but currently has no provision of children's centres at all.

## **Failure to take account of the geographical and socio-economic factors in North Sefton:**

## **Risks to centres in more deprived town areas.**

The council's merger proposal "to reduce overall management and running costs" I believe has not taken into consideration the special circumstances in Southport where the current provision is inadequate and poorly situated and there are 4 LSOAs in the most deprived quintile. I note particularly that Linaker children's centre, which is the only phase 1 children's centre north of Netherton, is situated in a LSOA which is not most deprived and is also in a place that requires that any families visiting the centre from the most deprived quintile LSOAs must cross the train tracks from either direction.

I don't believe it is reasonable to expect that Linaker truly serves the most deprived LSOAs. Especially when considering that it is poorly served by public transport, across a natural geographic boundary (the train tracks) and what public transport there is, is difficult to use and prohibitively expensive. The other children's centres which better serve those deprived communities (BDS and Parenting 2000) are phase 2s and therefore will be taking a bigger reduction in their budgets; disproportionately affecting those living in an equivalent (to the south of the borough) level of deprivation in Southport. I believe this has not been considered by the review.

## **Particular risks to centres in less deprived village locations.**

The fact that centres in Freshfield, Ainsdale and Birkdale, although serving less deprived communities, are in entirely separate geographical areas (the villages of Freshfield, Ainsdale and Birkdale) and therefore if merged and services reduced to avoid “duplication”, will be disproportionately affected - putting them at a disadvantage and risking interfering with their effectiveness (risking closure). I do not believe this has been considered by the review either.

### **Problems with the calculation of reach in Southport.**

Furthermore, I notice the reach for Linaker has been recently recalculated to include areas which previously belonged to parenting 2000. Significantly, this brings a large proportion of the most deprived LSOA into Linaker’s reach but it means that if you live in Gordon street (PR9 0BG), as I do, your nearest centre is Parenting 2000 at ½ a mile away - but Linaker gets the money for me attending there.

If I were to walk to Linaker I would have to walk more than twice the distance, cross the railway line and pass the bottom of the road Parenting is on. If you live in Knowsley Road (PR9 0HN), as I used to, which is also most deprived quintile LSOA (or any other road around the promenade) you are also now allocated to Linaker’s reach and have to walk up to 2miles, pass Parenting 2000 and cross the railway line. You are not served by a bus. This cannot be argued to be reasonable and I believe it is an attempt to manipulate the statistics and budgets.

I have never been to Linaker as I feel it is inaccessible, it makes no sense to travel there rather than Parenting and I certainly used to be counted in Parenting 2000's reach – the railway line forms a natural barrier to accessing Linaker children's centre and the reach should be calculated realistically, taking this into account.

I also notice from the data on 30% reach for each children's centre that no children's centre is currently given a 30% reach for the whole of the Fylde road estate in Marshside (from Marshside Road to Crossens). This effectively leaves this area without any provision at all, since children's centres will not get funding for outreach work done here. This is an area where a large number of families with young children live and is also therefore where a number of primary schools are situated in Southport.

### **Evidence of a consequential lack of engagement with Southport.**

I attend the parent forum steering group and feel this is a significant factor in the poor attendance from the north because we cannot engage with people in Southport through Children's Centres. I also attend the Maternity Services Liason Committee and the recent health equity audit was having difficulty getting responses from Southport too, this is significant given the PCT has a duty

to provide services through children's centres and would likely try to target families with under fives to fill in a maternity services questionnaire. It is not reasonable to suggest that the families living in Marshside are able to access the existing centres, which are a number of miles away and poorly served by expensive public transport (£2.40 one way on the bus from Marshside to town and no bus to BDS).

### **Specific problems with the merger between BDS and Linaker.**

The statutory guidance also stipulates that in more deprived areas the reach should be around 800 families, rising to 1200 in less deprived areas. The proposed merger of Linaker (with its current reach taking in large portions of the most deprived southport LSOAs) and BDS with its current reach which covers the most deprived LSOA in Southport (Wavell, Victory Ave etc) will have a combined reach of 2,296 families which is unacceptably high.

This merger also concerns me because there is a good possibility that BDS will lose its manager, leaving it with one permanent member of staff. The Council's own document reads "It was proposed that all bases remain open although a review of opening times and services will take place". After the merger it is reasonable to assume that not only will BDS have suffered a larger cut to its budget than Linaker, but that it will lose its manager rather than Linaker (with it being a phase 2 centre) and that its opening hours and services will be reduced due to lack of staff and management from another centre.

It is also likely that Linaker will have to charge BDS money for sending staff over to keep it open thereby filtering money away from the most deprived area with worse facilities and into a less deprived area with the best facilities north of Netherton (over 14 ½ miles away).

This cannot have, as the council has assessed in its impact assessment, a “positive impact”. It will have a negative impact, specifically in the places which are most in need and the places which currently have the least adequate provision in the North of Sefton.

### **Concerns with the quality of the Council’s review:**

#### **Lack of awareness of the parent participation meetings.**

The council’s review was conducted very poorly and I have raised my concerns with several people along the way.

Concerns I have raised include that the council has a database of the names and addresses of service users that it should have utilised when inviting parents to take part in the review process. The council had the funds to prepare colourful cards which were sent to all households inviting them to take part in the consultation part after the parent participation part had ended, and it should have sent a list of dates, places and times of the parent participation part of the review.

When I raised this point the response I received was inadequate; the council blamed CVS saying they were conducting the review and CVS blamed the centre managers saying it was their job to raise awareness. I object to that argument because it is the council not CVS which has control over the database containing names and addresses and the council who are ultimately responsible for the quality of the review even if they outsource the process.

### **Reliance on centre managers to raise awareness.**

The council employ the children's centre staff. I think it is unreasonable to expect that in a climate where the centre managers are unsure about the future for their staff and themselves, and have been reportedly told not to speak about the review with service users by council staff (although this is denied by the council), that they will be able to take initiative and advertise the review meetings. There is also a funding issue (does advertising come out of each centre's budget?) and an issue about patchy advertising (affecting the proportionality of the involvement) if it is left to centre managers to do – areas with less provision and community involvement will encourage fewer participants as will areas with frightened managers and centres with no budget for advertising.

When I asked Olive Carey if the centre managers had been told that they were expected to advertise the meetings and given support and peace of mind that this would not result in their centre being penalised she said they had



not. I don't see, therefore, how it is reasonable to expect that the centre managers would do this.

### **Exclusion from the review process and avoidable poor representation.**

The main issue with only advertising the parent participation meetings in the Children's Centres is that it excluded those in Marshside who are not included in any children's centre reach and can be assumed not to, on the whole, engage with a centre. It also excluded anyone else who doesn't regularly attend the centre for any reason; disability e.t.c.

The meeting I attended (the final one) was poorly attended from the north. Most likely because it was held in Thornton children's centre which is only accessible by a long and expensive bus journey. This further excluded anybody with a disability or difficulty travelling. At this meeting, run by Sarah Austin, there was an opportunity to see minutes from previous meetings and the review board meetings, many of which, I noted, still went ahead despite the apologies vastly outnumbering the attendance, and with very poor proportional representation.

### **Poor contextualisation and bias.**

At the meeting I attended we were asked to choose which services we thought were most important. I asked for clarification on what this was going to be used for but it was not given, we were told to answer just what we thought were the most important. I explained that it is

important to know the context of the question when providing an answer. I also objected to the lack of explanation of the statutory guidance and the council's responsibilities, which I felt would allay the fears of closure being vocalised by the parents in attendance.

The fact the parents felt if they didn't agree a proposal the council would close the centres is a significant potential bias, and I raised this point in the meeting, with Olive Carey individually, Peter Dowd e.t.c.

Also, the services listed were not all provided by all children's centres and the representation from the north was poor. Some services such as women's aid are vital, but used and valued by a minority. This question was asked in the consultation but again the context was not given.

### **What will this data be used for?**

I suspect this unrepresentative data will influence the reduction in services the council is planning. Asking parents to decide what services were important showed a lack of understanding about how children's centres work. They attract people with nice activities, facilities and highly trained staff and then they co-ordinate support and early intervention. Many people will not realise or value that these important support services are necessary if they have not used them and the groups thought of as unnecessary and nice are the way the centres reach families in need of support (which is most families at some time). If a children's centre is effective these things

should be unnoticed. The context of this question should have been better explained.

### **What should “accessible” be?**

Another objection I have is that during the parent participation part parents were asked to decide what “accessible” should be. Having already excluded people in various ways, including those who have mobility problems and those for whom the current arrangements are not accessible, this cannot be representative. The total size of the group was not more than 30 parents, all without mobility problems and who had travelled to a difficult to reach place. The most important people to ask about accessibility are the people who currently do not access a children’s centre. Will this data be used to determine need?

### **The general consultation.**

When the council moved on to the general consultation I was disappointed with the quality of the questionnaire. The questions were vague, they did not specify what type of merger the council was proposing or give information about the context and when I asked for clarification of this I was told that the council were not sure what kind of merger was being proposed. I stated that it is not possible to answer the question without knowing what is being proposed. This potentially accounts for the high number of people who answered “not sure”.

The question about the merger was worded “do you agree...” which is a leading question. You must overcome a psychological barrier to answer “no” and this renders the consultation ineffective and biased. I raised these concerns with the council in my consultation document and to Gill Cowley, Peter Dowd and others.

### **Potential bias in communications during the review.**

I also raised an objection to the council not having a back up plan to the plan to save money from the Children’s Centres budget as this would potentially bias the outcome of the review. The way the press reported (such as here <http://www.southportvisiter.co.uk/southport-news/southport-southport-news/2011/08/11/sefton-council-launches-consultation-on-children-s-centres-101022-29213385/>) the council’s proposals and the way people conducting the review spoke, implied the threat of closure, despite this not being a legal possibility. This was vocalised by parents and I raised it as an issue more than once. Olive Carey said she would issue a press statement stating the centres were not threatened with closure no matter the outcome of the review because they are protected by statutory guidance but this was not done, to my knowledge.

### **Failure to register objections and complaints or conduct a proper review.**

The consultation, in any case, received more responses than a similar review in Hampshire and returned a result which was against the council's proposal to merge centres. Given the council's duty to "take account" of the views of parents it seems inadequate to pass the proposed merger - this, combined with the fact the council had no back up plan, indicate the consultation was irrelevant from the start.

My final complaint is that having raised numerous complaints with CVS, my centre, Sarah Austin, Olive Carey, Gill Cowley, Hayden Preece and Peter Dowd, as well as having documented my complaints on my consultation document, my complaints were not documented in any way in the overview and scrutiny committee meeting on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2011 which I find to be absolutely unacceptable.

### **In conclusion.**

If the council pass this proposal in cabinet on Thursday I intend to seek a judicial review of the decision post haste with the aim of getting the decision overturned. The poor quality of this review potentially disadvantages the most disadvantaged people in Southport and the council has failed in its duty to take account of the geographical boundary of the train line to getting to Linaker centre, the high cost and poor provision of public transport and the lack of adequate children's centre provision in North Sefton (particularly Marshside, High Park and Southport) which is different to the south of the borough.

The council additionally needs to adequately justify why it has not been “reasonably practicable” to provide a centre, or some kind of provision, in Marshside and why it located the phase 1 centre in an area of comparatively low deprivation on the “wrong” side of the train tracks making it difficult to access to those in the most deprived LSOAs. Also, why BDS and Parenting 2000 centres were designated phase 2 despite being in LSOAs with high levels of deprivation equivalent to the South of the Borough.

I look forward to hearing how we can work together to avoid this.

Many Thanks,

Kat Sumner

Sources:

<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/SSCC%20statutory%20guidance-2010.pdf>

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[http://www.seftonpct.nhs.uk/your-health/public-health-information/Deprivation Mersey Cluster.asp](http://www.seftonpct.nhs.uk/your-health/public-health-information/Deprivation_Mersey_Cluster.asp)

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