

Joint Request from the Parents and Carers Councils of Braidburn, Oaklands and St Crispin's Special Schools Regarding Playscheme provision in Edinburgh

To: Education, Children and Families Committee, City of Edinburgh Council

Background: Families of children with disabilities across Edinburgh were informed by letter in September 2017 that from January 2018 the maximum number of playscheme weeks available to them would be reduced from 6 to 4 weeks per year. The contract for playscheme provision was re-tendered in 2017 and has now been allocated to a single provider, Fabb Scotland. It was previously provided by the INC Consortium (partners: The Action Group, Lothian Autistic Society, Kidzcare, The Yard and Fabb Scotland). The parents and carers councils of our three schools, whose intake comprises the most severely disabled children in the city who require significantly modified learning environments, approached Edinburgh Council to reconsider the decision to reduce the maximum number of weeks given the serious adverse impact on the children attending our schools and their families. We met with council officers on 4th October and 16th November but have, so far, had no response to our request. Additionally, we are very concerned that statements from the new provider, Fabb Scotland, suggest that the new contract for playscheme provision does not cover the provision of playscheme for very complex children or those with medical needs, despite assurances from council officers that the substance of the contract has not changed. This change potentially excludes all our children from playscheme provision.

Our request:

1. That funding be extended to ensure a full 6-week playscheme provision for all children with disabilities in Edinburgh.
 2. Or, if the above is not possible, that a third of playscheme places be protected to ensure the children and families with the highest levels of need continue to have access to a 6-week playscheme service per year.
 3. That it is clarified whether the contract for playscheme provision includes provision for those children with severe and complex needs and medical needs.
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The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states:

Article 23

1. States Parties recognize that a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community.

Article 31

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

The children in our schools are those with the severest impairments. They are likely to be those with the highest levels of needs. Research shows that families of disabled children are more likely to experience higher rates of poverty, poor mental and physical health and relationship breakdown. The impacts of a reduction in service will be felt most keenly among those families with the most severely disabled children.

Current recreation and leisure activities and facilities across Edinburgh are inaccessible to almost all children attending our schools. This includes those services for children with special needs. Developing more 'inclusive' services, allowing a wider range of children to access specialist provision, has had the effect of pushing out our children due to levels of noise, busyness and the level at which activities are pitched. Across Edinburgh, play facilities apart from playscheme are close to non-existent to the children attending our schools due to the severity of their impairments.

Current respite provision for families of disabled children is an inadequate substitute for the reduction in playscheme provision. Assessments for respite are currently predicated on the availability of 6 weeks playscheme. Securing additional respite services is unlikely as spaces are extremely limited with many families currently awarded respite waiting on services. Families from our schools with self-directed support find there are few appropriate services that can be purchased given the complexity of their childrens' needs, and, what can be purchased, does not provide their children opportunities to play with others.

Needs based allocation of playscheme places is possible and many indicators for making such assessments are already available to the council. Indeed, the council plans to assess transport provision for playscheme.

The consultation conducted on changing playscheme provision was inadequate on many counts. In particular: no impact assessment was carried out and there was no consideration of how to mitigate impacts on those most adversely affected. Survey responses on using the rate of disability living allowance to determine allocation indicate responses were guided by self-interest with those respondents with medium or low rates of DLA more likely to reject needs based allocation – only a minority of respondents would have had high rate DLA (which would be awarded to the majority of children in our schools). No effort was made to unpick these responses at the focus groups and the council gathered no data on the profile of the focus group participants making proper evaluation of their responses impossible.

The three reports we submit along with this joint request are a testament to the desperate need for 6 weeks or more playscheme provision among children in our schools and their families. They speak to the serious adverse impacts of the loss of this service on families already struggling to cope. They resonate with the research evidence of poor mental and physical health, severely constrained lives, crumbling relationships, struggling siblings and difficulties maintaining employment.

There is also the threat that playscheme may become completely unavailable to the children in our schools given Fabb's understanding of the contract for provision as excluding the most complex children and those requiring medical treatment. This would be a crisis for our families.

Finally, we believe this episode raises serious questions of the council's capability to provide services for those families with severely disabled children given the poor quality of the consultation, the lack of consideration of impacts, and possible deficiencies in tendering process and the contract with the new provider.

Date: 7th December 2017