



# **UNISON Bexley branch response to London Borough of Bexley Children’s Centre proposals 2020**

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## Introduction

UNISON believes that this was fundamentally not a meaningful consultation and that it was not made possible for unions, staff and public to provide any constructive feedback on the proposals.

## Scope of feedback

Our feedback relates primarily to the public consultation about the Children's Centres proposals.

Initially, this was the only consultation being held and the only thing being highlighted to staff and trade unions. We sought further clarity around timescales and how the public consultation related to the more normal kind of staff consultation we would expect to see around potential job cuts, and only then did unions and the affected staff receive a more staff-focussed consultation, consisting of a single email from HR.

The future of the staff's employment will be determined entirely by the outcome of the public consultation, and the staff consultation primarily suggested staff respond to the public consultation. Combined with our sense that no separate staff consultation may have been carried out if we had not queried this, we are therefore focussing on responding to the public consultation.

## No consideration of alternative suggestions

Despite repeated requests for further information about how the proposals were arrived at throughout the process, none has been forthcoming.

There is no sign that any options appraisal has been undertaken, nor that any evidence about what the most effective use of the service budget would be, through comparing the costs and benefits of different approaches to saving money, has been used to form the proposal.

We are told at staff briefings that senior management would welcome suggestions for money-saving from all staff. We understand that the affected staff have over a number of months and years offered up numerous ideas for how to save money on their service. These have never been pursued and no feedback has been given on them.

We asked the affected staff for some examples of the kinds of ideas they had previously put forward and were given a huge and detailed list. Examples of ideas staff tell us they have raised are:

1. Having three hub sites only, one in each locality, with the other sites closing. This would not be ideal as it could mean some redundancies, however it would mean that there would be a children's centre remaining in each locality to serve the families. There would be savings from staffing as well as building costs.
2. Looking at how the buildings could be used; for example, St Augustine's centre is leased from St Augustine's School so the centre could be moved to the empty part of the building on the same floor plan but at the other end of the school building and owned by LBB, meaning there would be no lease payment.
3. Using Northumberland Heath CC as the Central Locality Hub as this is owned by LBB and purpose-built.

4. Reducing to two hub sites, with one in the North of the borough and one in the South, meaning that support could continue for families in the areas of most deprivation.
5. Erith Youth and Family Centre could re-house West Street Children and Family Centre and the existing CC building leased to the day nursery on site or another organisation, creating further revenue.
6. Moving the Family Well-being team into each hub and looking at ways that that site could be leased out to generate an income.
7. Leaving the centres as they are but running more targeted services and generating income from existing partners, looking at other ways of generating income by renting out unused desk space.
8. Have parent-led groups.
9. Train Bexley's own staff to run workshops etc.
10. Finding ways to streamline the service to continue to support the most vulnerable families in a way that could be scaled up if and when more money became available in the future.
11. Raising prices of activities to generate more income – which may well discourage take-up and not work out but as with any of these ideas we would have expected to see it analysed.

Rather than offering evaluations of any of these alternatives for respondents to weigh up, this 'consultation' has instead been presented as a single-option proposal.

## **Lack of information, research and analysis**

There are a number of surrounding boroughs who operate Children's Centres which Bexley could research to provide alternative models for delivering the services without closing the centres altogether. Due to the lack of information shared it is unclear whether this research has happened.

We understand that under the proposed new structure, Danson Children's Centre would continue to operate. Members are concerned that no information has been shared which shows if there is capacity for this Centre to cover the needs of families in the whole borough. There is no detail which shows whether the differing needs of families who live with higher levels of deprivation or have English as a second language can be met by this one centre. Members have also shared concern about how the performance of this centre will be monitored and reported.

A further example of where modelling and investigation doesn't seem to have taken place is in relation to location of continuing services. The proposals suggest that activities currently being run from the centres will continue but from other venues. However, there is no information which shows any investigation has been done into the costs of running and establishing these activities in other locations and whether this will be viable for the businesses who currently deliver them, without increasing the costs and charges to families. Staff are therefore concerned that, despite the assurances in the papers that the activities will continue, this will not happen in areas that families need them the most.

Finally, members have told us that, during the course of the consultation, they have been asked to contact providers to enquire about running activities from alternative venues. The timing of these requests suggests this exercise was not undertaken in order to inform the proposals. They have also been asked to share ideas of how the service will look when closed and how to reach families

to consult with them. While we would support using staff's expertise in their field to improve consultations and proposals, we are concerned that this was done once the consultation had started, rather than while planning or working up the proposals.

All of the above suggests to us that this proposal is not an option which was chosen based on analysis or research, but rather the only idea ever under consideration.

## **Not a meaningful consultation**

The consultation about proposals for Libraries which is running at the moment involves over 170 pages of PDF documents full of data and analysis explaining why the ideas are being put forward and what the advantages and disadvantages of each individual element of the proposals would be. This enables respondents to engage fully with the decision-making process and weigh the options up in a constructive and informed way.

By contrast, this consultation appears to consist of a short press release and one page of a SurveyMonkey survey – plus only slightly more detail (but still no options appraisal) buried at page 32 of a 49-page appendix to an item on a council meeting agenda from July, with no direct linking/signposting from the consultation itself.

Some services users may not have access to the internet. Paper copies of the consultation have been sent to some libraries, but these are only open in a limited way at the moment. Staff asked if they could open the centres at certain times in order to have paper copies of the consultation available and support families to complete them, but they were told they could not do this.

## **No Equalities Impact Assessments provided**

We have not been provided with an Equalities Impact Assessment either for the staff nor for the proposals as they apply to the public, despite asking for these a number of times.

## **Covid-19 impact on families**

Staff have raised concerns that the proposals have not taken into consideration the increased needs of expectant and young families caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, the increase in behavioural and sleep issues, postnatal depression, need for breastfeeding support, mental health support and the alarming and documented increase in domestic abuse. There is no detail or information showing how families struggling with these issues will be adequately supported if the centres are closed.

## **Inability of management to answer our questions**

We were invited to a meeting with the affected staff, their manager and a representative of HR in late September. We raised many of the above issues and asked for more details about evidence, options appraisals, EIAs etc.

No-one at the meeting could answer any of our questions at and could only say they would need to refer them up to more senior managers and come back to us. We never heard anything further, despite chasing HR again last week.

We also pointed out at this meeting that decisions taken in the wake of the Covid-19 lockdown had now led to the proposed position being more or less implemented already, ahead of this consultation taking place; and that this gave an ideal opportunity to be gathering data and insights from Danson and from regular attendees of other centres about how this change had actually affected service use patterns in the real world. Again, there was no indication that this was being done in order to ensure any decision taken is based on any real-life evidence.

## Further concerns raised by staff

Staff have raised a number of other concerns with us which we have also not seen addressed anywhere during this process, including:

- It's not made clear in the consultation what is going to happen if the centres do close – what impact will it have?
- Staff say many of the families they have spoken to during this time did not understand that all services will stop if the centres close. This illustrates the point that the consultation has been run in a very unclear way.
- Staff say they know that Family Well-being referrals have increased and that this is the impact of not having Early Help showing up already. This will only get worse if the proposals are enacted.
- The most important years for a child's socialisation and development are 0-2 years – what will the impact be later if parents haven't got family support and would rely on being supported by a Children's Centre/meeting other parents/being part of a community?

## Conclusion

The problem with the minimal information given in this consultation is that what public feedback the council receive will now largely be able to fall only into two camps: either (a) yes, do close Children's Centres or (b) no, don't close them. We assume the latter responses will be larger in number, **and do not wish our dismissal of the validity of this consultation to in any way dismiss the validity and importance of those responses.**

However, those responses, however many there may be, will presumably be overridden as not delivering the necessary budget savings for the council. By not providing any breakdown of costs or benefits for how any other way of delivering these services could work, no meaningful opportunity for constructive consultation feedback that could lead to any other possible outcome has been provided.

In summary, the only options presented are an impossible one and a possible one, with no information provided to enable consultees to find any other possible options for themselves.

**This has not been a meaningful consultation and UNISON do not believe any decision should be taken on the basis of it.**