

## **Cabinet – 16 December 2009**

### **Early Years Capital programme – planned expenditure**

**Portfolio:** Councillor Walker, Children's Services

**Service:** Walsall Children's Services - Serco

**Wards:** All wards

**Key decision:** Yes

**Forward plan:** Yes

#### **1. Summary of report**

- 1.1 The report sets out the expenditure plans for the improvement to the outdoor learning environments for the existing Children's Centres in Walsall. The Department for Schools, Children and Families has allocated capital funding, over the financial period 2008 to 2011, for this specific purpose and the phased approach for development was agreed by Cabinet in October 2008.
- 1.2 **Appendix A** of this report details schemes funded under this grant already approved by cabinet.

#### **2. Recommendations**

That Cabinet approves:

- 2.1 That Cabinet approves the schemes and budgets set out in **Appendix B** of this report.
- 2.2 That Cabinet delegate's authority to the Executive Director for Children's Services in consultation with the portfolio holder of Children's Services to seek tenders and appoint contractors to undertake the work identified.

#### **3. Background information**

- 3.1 The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) has allocated funding to Local Authorities to develop and improve the quality of the learning environment in early years settings. The expectation is that the majority of the grant is to make improvements in the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) settings, although spending on the maintained sector is not precluded. The aims of the grant are:

- to improve the quality of the learning environment in early years settings to support delivery of the Early Years Foundation Stage, with particular emphasis on improving play and physical activities; and ICT resources;
- to ensure all children, including disabled children, are able to access provision; and
- to enable PVI providers to deliver the extension to the free offer for 3 and 4 year olds and to do so flexibly.

3.2 The DCSF guidance defines capital expenditure and gives a current capitalisation threshold (currently £2,500, including VAT).

### 3.3 The First Phase

In October 2008, Cabinet approved the phased approach to improve the quality of early years environments. The first phase was the bulk purchase of equipment to satisfy the grant definition for capital expenditure. Cabinet approved a budget allocation of £750,000 and the Early Years Team drew on the expertise of professionals and practitioners to prepare a list of equipment and resources that would improve the learning environment across all settings in Walsall that are delivering the Early Years Foundation Stage; including schools. The procurement of these items is now underway. It also approved £400,000 expenditure on the Park Hall Community association.

Children's Centres should be examples of best practice, including the provision of the highest quality outdoor environments. Cabinet has previously approved the use of Early Years Capital Allocation to enhance existing Children's Centres outdoor learning environments at the Brownhills Children's Centre site at St James' Primary School and the Bloxwich West Children's Centre site at Mossley. The total cost of these two schemes was £55,000.

### 3.4 The Second Phase

This report is seeking permission to progress to the second phase of using grant that has been agreed to improve early years environments in settings located in Council owned buildings. The benefit from the investment and corresponding asset remains in the ownership of the Council. A balance of £195,000 for the Children's Centre outdoor play environments in phase one remained unallocated. Proposed schemes for Children's Centres are listed in Appendix B

Following the completion of the Brownhills Children's Centre, an issue with access to the facility has been identified by service users. The original scheme was a refurbishment of surplus school accommodation which meant that the design was in part restricted because of existing structural features. Currently, the reception area is adjacent to the main entrance doors and the view is limited due to a meter storeroom which also restricts the natural flow of users to the centre. It is proposed that Children's Centre capital is used to modify and relocate the reception closer to the main entrance doors; the displaced multi-agency office is relocated through remodelling part of the main body of the centre. This will provide greater security and give greater operational capacity to the centre. The recommended budget for this work is £50,000.

Following a design workshop held for all Children's Centres, each centre was invited to submit a funding application. The needs of the centres were assessed by the Childcare Quality and Access capital working group and the recommended funding allocations, including the £50,000 required for the enhanced Brownhills scheme, are detailed in Appendix B.

### **3.5 The Third Phase**

The third and final phase will be to extend this to the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector by enabling them to access funding to improve the quality within more settings, requiring grant procedures to be established. This process will start with a design workshop to identify the requirements for a high quality learning environment. Settings will then be asked to submit a funding application, which will be assessed by the capital working group. Grant payments will then be made to the individual settings through appropriate legal agreements based on an amended version of the Disability Funding Grant to reflect the conditions of the Sure Start Early Years and Childcare Grant. A further report will be submitted to cabinet with details of the recommended grant awards.

## **4. Resource considerations**

### **4.1 Financial:**

4.1.1 A total of £3,045,651 capital has been allocated by the DCSF through the Sure Start, Early Years and Childcare Grant, across the financial years (2008-09, 2009-10, 2010-11). The allocations to Walsall is made in equal amounts of £1,015, 217 in financial year with payments made on quarterly basis, based on predicted expenditure and adjusted in the following quarter for actual expenditure.

4.1.2 No expenditure was incurred during 2008-09, however, the DCSF have confirmed that Local Authorities can carry-forward unspent capital both from 2008-09 into 2009-10 and from 2009-10 into 2010-2011. We are unable to approve carry-forward of unspent amounts beyond 2010-11. Local authorities will be expected to utilise all their capital funding by the financial year 2010-11.

4.1.3 The Sure Start, Early Years and Childcare Grant is not available for pooling in the Area Based Grant or Local Area Agreements.

4.1.4 The schemes detailed for the Children's Centre outdoor learning environments are to be managed by Walsall Council Property Services who will ensure compliance with all Walsall Council Finance and Contract Rules.

### **4.2 Legal:**

Walsall Council Property Services will manage the tendering process to ensure that procedures satisfy the financial and contract rules.

#### **4.3 Staffing:**

There are no direct staffing implications as a result of this report.

### **5. Citizen impact**

The adoption of this strategy will impact on the learning, health and social care of children, young people and their families in Walsall. It will contribute to make Walsall a place where “growing up is as good as it can be” by ensuring families can access high quality early years provision in their local area.

### **6. Community safety**

The EYFS includes numerous references to the provision of quality outdoor experiences for young children, to include risk taking in a safe and secure environment, giving children skills and the ability to protect themselves from harm both within a setting and in their wider community.

### **7. Environmental impact**

Being outside has a positive impact on children’s sense of health and well being and supports all aspects of children’s development. Quality outdoor environments give children the freedom to explore use their senses and be physically active and exuberant.

### **8. Performance and risk management issues**

#### **8.1 Risk**

Failure to procure and receive goods or complete capital projects within the DCSF prescribed timescales would result in loss of unspent grant funding.

There are specific grant criteria established by the DCSF that must be met.

#### **8.2 Performance management:**

Project management systems will be employed to ensure the DSCF requirements are met and progress will be overseen by The Capital Grant Steering Group.

The allocation of good quality resources and supporting settings to improve environments will have a positive impact on childcare practice; reflected in Ofsted findings and outcomes for children.

## 9. Equality implications

The Early Years Foundation Stage is for all children regardless of ethnicity, culture or religion, home language, family background, learning difficulties or disabilities, gender or ability. The statutory guidance states that children should have the opportunity to experience a challenging and enjoyable programme of learning and development in indoor and outdoor environment. The planned expenditure will impact directly on ensuring equality of opportunity for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage

## 10. Consultation

The implementation of this approach to the allocation of capital resources will require detailed consultation with individual settings in the maintained, private, voluntary and Independent sector, including Children's Centres. This will be conducted through a series of workshops to establish the requirements for high quality early years environments.

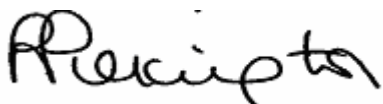
## Background papers

Report to Cabinet 22 October 2008 - Early Years Capital programme 2008 to 2011.

Report to Cabinet 15 July 2009 – Education Capital Programme – further schemes.

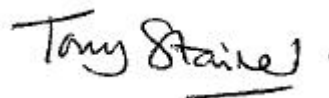
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Signed:

Executive Director: Pauline Pilkington  
Date: 7 December 2009



Signed:

Managing Director, Walsall Children's  
Services, Serco: Tony Stainer  
Date: 7 December 2009



Signed:

Portfolio Holder: Councillor R Walker  
Date: 7 December 2009

