

Sheffield Parent Carer Forum

Position Statement on Sheffield City Council proposals for changes to Short Break Services

Short breaks provide play and leisure opportunities where disabled children and young people can have fun, learn new skills, and gain independence. Exhausted families get a break, which can save them from going into crisis.

Sheffield City Council has identified a need to cut £550,000 funding from the short breaks budget. They propose to do this by changing the eligibility criteria for the short breaks grant, by asking families to choose between the grant and other short breaks services, and by introducing a charging policy for SNIPS clubs.

We understand the need to make savings, and we appreciate that the council has worked hard to protect these vital services over the past few years. We also commend the council for attempting to ensure that services are targeted at the most vulnerable.

However, we also have four serious concerns about the consultation and the proposals:

1. Methodological issues - respondents were not provided with enough information to give an informed response.
2. It is not clear how the council has reached the decision to implement ALL of the proposals without any changes. This makes it look like the consultation was just a box-ticking exercise for decisions that had already been made.
3. The impact of the proposals has not been properly examined.
4. There is a lack of clarity about some of the proposals.

We provide more detail about each of these points below.

1. Methodological issues

There was insufficient information provided in the consultation questionnaire and supporting documentation to enable parents to give an informed response.

- The information at the start of the questionnaire did not make it clear whether the council was planning on implementing **one, some or all of the proposals**. Respondents may have answered the questions differently if they knew that there was a possibility of all of the proposals being implemented. There was no question in the survey that asked about the cumulative effect of implementing more than one/all of the proposals. We pointed this out in our comments on the draft questionnaire.
- **Direct payments** were not mentioned at all in the consultation questionnaire or the supporting documents. Therefore, parents may have assumed that they would not be asked to choose between direct payments and the short breaks grant. However, the information which has now been published on the council website does indicate that families will not be eligible for the short breaks grant if they already receive direct payments.
- The consultation information for parents did not adequately identify **which benefits** (i.e. means-tested benefits) would qualify for payment exemption for services or eligibility for the short breaks grant. It simply stated: "Families in receipt of benefits or with a household income of less than £21,000 would be exempt". Therefore, parents may have incorrectly

assumed that being in receipt of DLA or Carer's Allowance (which applies to almost all of them) meant that they would remain eligible for the short breaks grant and would be exempt from the charge for SNIPS clubs. Again, we pointed this out in our comments on the draft questionnaire.

- Consultees were not provided with information about **alternative options** which were considered and rejected prior to the consultation, such as an increase in council tax or the use of unallocated reserves. Again, we pointed this out in our comments on the draft questionnaire.

2. It is not clear how the consultation responses have influenced the proposals.

The report states that the proposals were directly informed by earlier feedback from parents, but does not specify what that feedback was, or how it helped to shape the proposals. Indeed, some of the proposals run counter to the key messages that came out of the earlier consultation workshops.

For example, parents frequently complained about a lack of flexibility, stating that targeted holiday clubs allocate days with no option for parental choice, e.g. one day per week for the first five weeks of the summer holidays. Despite this feedback, information on the Council website states that parents will have to pay for sessions they have to miss due to going on a family holiday. This policy discriminates against families with disabled children. A family with non-disabled children would not choose to book their children into a holiday club when they knew they were due to go on holiday.

The report does not explain how feedback from the consultation contributed to the decision to implement the proposals as they stood, without any changes. For example, a majority of respondents (56%) thought that a £7 contribution was too high, and many respondents thought the threshold of £21,000 was too low. The council needs to explain how they arrived at the decision to disregard this feedback.

The report does not cover responses to questions 19-21.

3. The impact of the proposals has not been properly examined.

SPCF members have raised a number of concerns:

- The proposals disadvantage working families. Families receiving more than £21,000 in benefits would be exempt, but working families earning just over £21,000 would not.
- The more complex a child's needs, the more short breaks services they are likely to access, and the bigger the impact will be on the family.
- Similarly, the more disabled children a family has, the more short breaks services they are likely to access, and the bigger the impact will be on the family.
- Parents of disabled children accessing universal clubs through SNIPS can't "shop around" – they will have to pay the rate set by the club that can meet their child's needs, even if it is well above average. This is unfair, as non-disabled children can choose from a much wider range of clubs, many of which are free.

Families raising a severely disabled child and families who have several disabled children are amongst the most vulnerable groups in society, and yet they are the ones who would be hit the hardest by the proposals.

Although the report states that the implementation of the proposals may cause an increase in the number of families requesting a formal assessment of needs, there appears to have been no consideration of the impact this could have on the overall social care budget.

4. There is a lack of clarity about some of the proposals.

It is not clear which benefits, especially tax credits, would mean that families are exempt from payment and qualify for the short breaks grant. Tax credits rules are complicated, but there are situations where a family could have a household income well above £21,000 and still receive Child Tax Credits. Would such a family be exempt from payment and qualify for the short breaks grant?

The information on the Council website states that “families who have more than one disabled child accessing a daytime short break club would contribute a family payment capped at £10 per session”. It is not clear how this would work for families whose children attend different clubs at different times.

According to Chapter 41, Section 29 of the Children Act 1989, councils can charge for social care services, as long they do not charge families who are in receipt of means-tested benefits. Once a young person reaches the age of 16, however, the assessment should be made on the young person’s (and not the parents’) income. Therefore, it is likely that virtually all families of 16 and 17-year-olds would be exempt from payment and qualify for the short breaks grant. This is not explained on the Council website, nor does it appear to have been taken into account in the savings calculations.

Local authorities have a statutory duty to prepare, publish and keep under review a Short Breaks Services Statement, giving details of the local range of short breaks services and how they can be accessed, including any eligibility criteria. We contributed to a review of Sheffield’s statement in the autumn of 2017, but a revised version still hasn’t been published. The version that is available is very hard to find, and many years out of date (from 2011). It should be a priority for the council to get an up-to-date version published on the Local Offer website as soon as possible.

It is unclear whether the approved budget for short breaks for the 2018-19 financial year will be honoured, and if not, how the council have reached the decision that cuts need to be implemented with immediate effect.

Our recommendations

We feel that the council should delay the decision and not implement any changes until the issues outlined above have been resolved. This should best be done by amending the consultation questionnaire to reflect the concerns outlined above, and by re-running the consultation.

In addition, we recommend that:

- Families who have more than one disabled child should not have to choose between the short breaks grant and another short breaks service.
- Families of children with very complex needs (e.g. those who access overnight respite or an enhanced SNIPS service) should still be able to receive the short breaks grant.

- Families should not have to choose between a Direct Payment and the short breaks grant, as this was not part of the proposals that families were consulted on.
- The council should explain how they have arrived at their decisions, particularly where there was strong opposition to them.
- The income limit should be increased.
- The charge for universal SNIPS clubs should be capped. It should not be more than the average paid by families with non-disabled children, and not more than the contribution to specialist SNIPS clubs.

The Trustees of Sheffield Parent Carer Forum

25th July 2018