

# **Council contract failures missed due to lack of staff training**

**A “litany of failures” in the handling of a multi-million pound Edinburgh Council contract were not spotted for years because the officer who set it up left the organisation and then staff without the relevant “experience or training” were put in charge, it has emerged.**

The council’s £200,000-a-year contract with Capability Scotland to help after school care providers meet the needs of children with disabilities was abruptly ended just before the new term in August, as the authority said it was bringing the service in-house to achieve best value.

Affected families told a previous council meeting they were “blind-sided” by the decision, with some unable to send their child to after school club for weeks after school resumed.

A report has revealed why the deal with the charity was axed after 13 years – and lists repeated failures by council officers to identify major issues with how the contract was being delivered.

Senior Education Officer Donna Murray told councillors after

being put in place the contract was “extended and extended” which created “an assumption...that this would continue forever”.

She said a “Miss Marple job” was used to “join up the pieces” and determine what had gone wrong with the contract and why problems were not identified earlier.

The report said information gathered to “ascertain the impact” revealed the objectives were “not being met”, with several youngsters funded not meeting the criteria originally set out. Furthermore, it added since the service was outsourced in 2009 the number of children being supported dropped from 77 to 28 and the key function of charity “appeared to be distributing funding to services who applied” rather than “building capacity in the sector” as was specified in the contract.

Among the reasons given for why it hadn’t been terminated sooner was that officers involved in monitoring the contract “did not have contract management experience or training” and there were previously “no formal process in place” to inform bosses “of the performance of the contract”.

SNP councillor Simita Kumar said the reported contained a “litany of failures” during the Education, Children and Families Committee on Tuesday.

Ms Murray said a commissioning and contract team had since been set up “to support contract management”.

Cllr Christopher Cowdy said he was “slightly surprised that all of this was not picked up during an official CEC tendering process back in 2016”.

Responding, Ms Murray said that in the intervening seven years staff in the department had “moved on” and retired.

She added: “We’ve gone through quite a change in our central team. The contract management – the handover, the officer left

who had set up the contract and then that contract was put in place and extended and extended, creating that assumption...that this would continue forever and this service would go on.”

During the meeting she apologised to families for delays in being informed about the changes which Education Convener Cllr Joan Griffiths previously blamed on Capability Scotland for “failing to supply us with the necessary details”. She said families “continue to receive support if they wish to” and a further six children have begun accessing the service since it was brought back under council control.

Ms Murray admitted officers were “on the back foot” and “playing catch-up” to determine which providers were being helped by the service but many were difficult to contact as it was during the school holidays.

But Cllr Kumar said she was still getting emails from parents “who have received some confirmation verbally but not written,” adding there were still “lots of issues around it”.

She said the families had been through a “really really difficult time” as a result.

She added: “I appreciate that some of the providers were closed because of the summer holidays but that meant that a parent or single parents who are already juggling a million things, have pupils with additional support needs, were suddenly lost in terms of their provision.”

Ben Bradbury, Operations Manager with Capability Scotland, said: “Capability Scotland’s primary concern has always been to serve those living with additional support needs, and our commitment in delivering an exemplary service has been evident over the last decade through our work with Edinburgh Council.

“Despite regular communication with the council during our tenure, no concerns were raised to suggest we were delivering below the expected remit of the contract. In the year 2022/23,

48 children and young people were successfully included in mainstream childcare settings.

“We successfully procured the contract on two separate occasions through an open tender process based on meeting the local authority’s objectives, and our reliable track record. This year when we were informed that the contract would not be renewed; we were told that this was due to “other pressures within the Council”, at no stage to date have the Council approached us to discuss any of the perceived failings which have been set out in public.

“While we are saddened this contract has now come to an end, we will continue to do what we have done for 77 years – to deliver exemplary care, support and education.”

by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter



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