

# Parents fear 'underhand' education cuts could hit holiday clubs

Edinburgh parents of children with disabilities have criticised "underhand" council cuts they fear could lead to them losing vital support during school holidays.

Plans have been drawn up to slash up to £22.4m from the city's education budget, while the department's services are expected to overspend by £6m in the current year.

It comes as the council wrestles with a £110m deficit projected in the next five years, driven in part by increasing pressure on social care and homelessness services.

Local authority chiefs have presented the "least worst options" to councillors ahead of February's budget, and warned some teaching posts and school staff would likely be axed as a result.

They include a £4m reduction to inclusion spending, which supports children with additional support needs (ASN) and tighter caps on how much schools can spend on printing and stationery, which it's estimated could save £1m a year.

A £2m cut to contract spending for external services, which include the provision of 'holiday hubs' for children with a disability, is the proposal which has caused the most alarm.

Education services director Amanda Hatton said using a £900k

budget this supported 120 families for two days in 2021 and now supported 420 families over four weeks, telling councillors it was no longer “sustainable”.

She said: “We have got real challenges in continuing to deliver what is being delivered so far.

“None of us are suggesting we look at holiday hubs lightly, but they’re not statutory provision. Other authorities don’t do them in the way we do and my fear is that they’re not sustainable in their current form.”

She said the council would work with families on how the delivery model for holiday hubs is redesigned from next year.

“That might mean we have to organise them differently, it might mean that some children that currently get a hub don’t,” she said.

However parents of ASN pupils, who have previously hit out at changes to the provision of after school clubs and school support bases, fear the “lifeline” holiday hubs could be lost.

Caroline Samson, whose seven-year-old son Robbie has Autism and ADHD, said a troubling report on future education cuts “signalled they were looking to save the £900k and scrap holiday hubs”.

She said: “That would have a massive impact, I myself have a disability, I am a single mum so I have very little respite. During the holidays my child is out of routine, his behaviour goes off the Richter scale and without the four weeks holiday hub I would break.

“I think there’s been a lot of miscommunication, I think there’s been a lot of misinformation, and they haven’t communicated with the families that it will directly affect. We feel it was all very underhand.

“Our children are not coping in mainstream [education] and

they are looking to cut the one provision that helps them to flourish.”

Fellow mum Stephanie Spencer, whose autistic 11-year-old attends a special school in the city, said families like hers often rely on holiday hubs “because they have no other options”.

She explained: “They are often excluded from mainstream providers.

“The special needs sector often have nowhere else to go or are often told they’re unable to make adjustments.

“If this cut goes ahead there would be a severe impact and we would assess that statutory interventions would be needed, families would go into crisis, families would go into poverty, they would lose their jobs.

“The city does have to make cuts to their provisions – that’s an absolute certainty – but the most vulnerable is not the area to cut.”

Jane Geddes, speaking on behalf of 60 families who have formed the Protect Edinburgh Services for Disabled Children group, urged councillors to “keep this lifeline” and enhance it by providing transport for users as the cuts were discussed at the education committee on Tuesday, 3 September.

Some councillors said they would be unlikely to be able to stomach any reduction in the service.

The SNP’s Euan Hyslop said funding pressures “should not be balanced off the back of society’s most vulnerable groups”.

Cllr Lewis Younie added his Lib Dem group “don’t see how this savings proposal should be something we vote for in February”.

Other options to slash £12m education spending from 2025/26,

and rising to £22.4 from the following year, is to reduce the number of children in more expensive care placements outside of the city, and limiting the number of funded nursery placements in private settings while selling additional hours in council-run nurseries to generate income.

Furthermore £300k a year could be saved by reducing the council's Quality Improvement Service, a team focused on supporting schools to improve their practices and outcomes, from 14 people to 12 by "not filling vacant positions that open up naturally".

The report also says the level of business support in schools – staff who help with budget management, financial planning and human resources – is currently "generous" and it could be reviewed to save £900k.

And an additional £8.2m cut, which was already presented to councillors earlier this year but got postponed after emergency funding was identified, is likely to hit transition teachers, pupil support for P1 and P2 classes and devolved school management (DSM) funds, which is money given directly to head teachers to spend on anything from wages for additional staff to stationary and classroom supplies.

Allan Crosbie, president of the Educational Institute of Scotland union, said there had already been a "huge number of cuts to ASN and learning support teachers, EIL teachers, speech and language therapists, child psychologists".

He said EIS research showed on average Scotland's teachers were working 11 hours over their contracted 35 every week.

"That 11 hours of sacrifice is coming at a huge cost in terms of our well-being," he said.

"If loads of cuts go ahead that ill well-being amongst teachers will just get worse."

Education, Children and Families Convener Joan Griffiths said: "I understand that parents may have concerns over any changes to the Holiday Hub.

"I wish to reassure parents and carers that we will undertake a review of provision in partnership with them and come forward with proposals for service delivery. This work has already begun, and as we heard at Committee today, meetings with parent groups are arranged for later this month and will be ongoing as they work with us to identify different ways of delivering the service.

"The provision of the hubs has expanded in recent years, and unfortunately the growth is no longer sustainable nor equitable for the council. We want to work with families to consider how we can make savings in the future whilst still provide support for those who are most in need. We want to consider models from other local authorities most of whom no longer deliver hubs in the way we do and learn from their practice elsewhere. Any proposed changes will be considered as part of the Council's budget setting in February."

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter



Parents of children with additional support needs gathered outside the City Chambers while a meeting of the Education Committee convened to discuss making cuts to the education budget. PHOTO ©The Edinburgh Reporter