

Budget decisions yet to be made but cross party support to retain and strengthen services

Parents and councillors in Edinburgh have agreed to work together in a bid to save holiday hubs for disabled children in Edinburgh.

The agreement to set up a formal working group with parents came after an hour of often emotional testimony describing how much the service has helped children who have no other options.

But despite a cross-party commitment to retain and strengthen the service, the future of the hubs is dependent on decisions taken when the city's budget is decided in February.

Councillors on Edinburgh's Education, Children and Families Committee heard from five deputations representing children across a spectrum from those with complex disabilities to those with additional support needs.

All described how much happiness the hubs brought to lonely and isolated children who because of their needs, were excluded from the range of summer pursuits and clubs that are open to others.

Some were in tears as they described their experiences.

From a deputation representing parents of children who attend special schools across Edinburgh, Stephanie Spencer delivered a comprehensive 50 plus page study of a survey of 99 parents.

She told the committee: "Our children are the most complex and vulnerable young people, their voices are never heard but they have a right to be heard and we are their voices."

She added: "The report suggests council officers do not understand the value of the hubs to our families nor the devastating impact of their removal or reduction."

Parents highlighted the role of unpaid carers and savings it brought to the city council. They highlighted the demand that councils statutory care services could end up facing if the holiday hubs closed.

Many told the meeting they felt their ideas were ignored and that they were talked down to by officers after initial meetings on how holiday hubs could be saved and funded. No minutes of meetings were taken and at each subsequent meeting they felt as if they were starting from scratch.

Officers suggested in a report to committee that the service could only be retained if the number of weeks allocated to each child was reduced- something no parents felt they could support.

Ms Spencer said: "The recommendations including the reduction of weeks are based on a rushed consultation with parents – we feel strongly that these recommendations should not be followed through without a comprehensive consultation involving parents providers, council officers and councillors.

"We must pause before we remove a service that will have a catastrophic impact on the most vulnerable families in Edinburgh."

Many parents spoke about potential solutions and funding streams which either had not or could not be explored to enable parents to pay for Holiday hubs services. Other suggestions included changes to staff contracts that would stabilise staffing through the summer holidays.

Councillors around the chamber echoed the SNP's Euan Hyslop when they acknowledged the "raw emotion" of the evidence.

He told the deputations which addressed members of the committee that "it was hard not to well up", and that he had to fight back tears listening to how affected parents were by the threat of the holiday hub closure.

An SNP amendment later urged officers to look for funding to set up staff posts to manage the holiday hubs – a key demand from parents.

Councillor Hyslop told parents that he believed most members across the political divide wanted to see funding set aside for the continuation of the holiday hubs in the Budget.

Crucially, officers admitted that they would not know until next month or the start of January what the ramifications of the budget allocation from the Scottish Government would be before a budget could be presented to the council in February.

Chairing the meeting, Councillor Joan Griffiths proposed formalising the working group to include councillors and officers, parents and providers to examine wider options for the preservation of the holiday hubs.

This, with some amendments from the SNP, Lib Dems and Greens was backed, with a meeting scheduled for early January.

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter