

Fewer days may be option to save capital's holiday hubs

Holiday hubs for children with additional support needs in Edinburgh could be provided on fewer days, a review has suggested, as the current service is 'under-staffed, under-funded and unsafe'.

The proposals come after talks with parents who fear losing the service – which the council doesn't have to provide – and who have accused the council of “underhand tactics.”

Councillors will discuss options for the future when the Education Children and Families Committee meets on Thursday.

In working groups over the last two months parents have conceded that increasing demand makes it more difficult to fund places. Changes could retain services but likely cut the amount of time children can spend at hubs.

Proposals will go before councillors this week but no decision on funding will be taken ahead of February's council budget.

A report to be heard at Thursday's stated that “the lack of current resource presents a health and safety risk”, and said it also “increases inequalities ... and results in the service not being delivered within the available budget.”

“The priority condition to allow continuation of the Holiday Hub provision is that the service must be safe, fair,

equitable, and affordable. To ensure this, officers propose implementing the following process changes to take effect from summer 2025, subject to confirmation of budget availability through the Council's budget process:-

- we will no longer allocate spaces on a first come first serve basis, there will be a cut-off date for applications

- there will be no change to the criteria for accessing the service which will continue to be open to children with an additional support need.

- if demand exceeds available provision the number of weeks allocated to each child will reduce accordingly to ensure all eligible applications receive a service."

Some of the changes suggested were discussed with the parents' group who felt the rationale was clear and deliverable. The shift from a first come first serve basis was welcomed.

The February and Easter hubs will go ahead as planned, with changes made for the summer offering.

A report to the committee will say: "Going forward from there, the aim is to have a safe, achievable, sustainable and financially viable holiday support provision, subject to ongoing funding being approved through the Council's budget process."

It adds: "Options for a proposed sustainable operating model will be presented once we have agreement on the available budget. A decision will not be taken on this ahead of the February committee."

Demand has surged since the hubs were first introduced in 2021. The council has struggled to recruit and maintain staff to provide safe cover for the hubs, especially as numbers attending have risen. Regulations stipulate the level of staff cover needed for groups of children.

This has meant inability to maintain safe staffing ratios, with an over-reliance on Council staff to provide cover. In practice this means taking statutory workers from the core task of supporting the most vulnerable families. This is an additional uncosted budget pressure and is unsustainable.

The council has also found it difficult to sustain the hubs in school buildings when the holidays are normally times of scheduled building maintenance, and seen budgets squeezed by increasing numbers accessing the service.

There has not been enough of a budget for staffing and venues as well not enough in parental contributions to offset these budget pressures.

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.

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.

In September Education services director Amanda Hatton said using a £900k budget 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.

By Stuart Sommerville Local Democracy Reporter