

5 March 2009

Alison Annett
Head of Equality
NHSCT
Equality Unit
Route Complex
8E Coleraine Road
Ballymoney
BT53 6BP

Dear Ms Annett,

Magherafelt District Council recently considered your consultation document on 'Modernising Health and Social Care Services in Northern Health and Social Care Trust' and recommended that the following points be raised in response to your proposals to the Reform and Modernisation of Children's services.

The Council acknowledges that public services are being challenged to deliver quality needs based services whilst being required to make significant efficiency savings. Council was encouraged to receive commitment from the Trust that none of the changes would be implemented without the proposed alternatives being in place. However Council has significant concerns about the rationale for the proposals being made and the adverse impact these will have on the quality of service provided. In particular Council would make the following comments -

- Closing Cherry Lodge loses 20% of the residential respite beds in the Trust area. Council can see no evidence of an independent evaluation having been done of the advantages of community based respite care over residential care. Council is strongly opposed to the closing of Cherry Lodge as there is no evidence that community based respite care will be of the same quality or in the best interests of the child and family. Many of the children using Cherry Lodge have severe disabilities which results in significant behavioural problems and intensive care requirements. It is highly unlikely and council remains to be convinced, that foster carers will have the skills, equipment or facilities to adequately care for these children.
- Cherry Lodge is a controlled environment where the staff are appropriately skilled and vetted. Council feels very strongly that the most vulnerable in our communities must be protected. There is no indication given of how the foster carers will be vetted or how the environment of the carer's home will be controlled so that it is safe for the time that the child is there. It is unclear from the documents that the Trust has undertaken a risk assessment for community based respite care. Given the high needs of the children concerned Council would consider this to be absolutely essential.
- Recruiting and retaining salaried foster carers with the specialised skills needed to care for the children using Cherry Lodge will likely be difficult. This can only lead to a reduction in the level of respite care which is available. Council would be strongly opposed to this happening.
- Many of the children using Cherry Lodge require specialised equipment for their care. No costs are given for providing this to foster carers and so it is unclear if all options have been fully considered and costed compared to the refurbishment Cherry Lodge and Princess Gardens as the projected savings may not be as significant as planned.

- The Trust currently has a waiting list of 40 for family based respite care, 26 for residential care and 13 for Cherry Lodge. This indicates that there is significant demand for the service. The proposals will only put additional pressure on existing services and so fail to provide the service carers so badly need.

Overall Magherafelt Council recognises that the Trust is under pressure to make efficiency savings. However this must not be at the expense of service delivery. The council area is largely rural and does not have access to services that are traditionally provided in larger urban centres. The council feels that there is no overall strategy for the changes being proposed and that a full analysis of costs, benefits and savings has not been undertaken. There are costs associated with community based provision both financial and personal and the implications of these must be fully identified and examined so that the best option in terms of a quality service is implemented.

I trust that you find these comments helpful.

Yours faithfully

J A McLaughlin
Chief Executive