

## NORTH LANARKSHIRE COUNCIL

## REPORT

To: Education (Community Services Sub Committee)	Subject: The Future of Playgroup Support Services
From: Director of Education	
Date: 12 May 1997	
Ref: JMcG/LL	

**Purpose of Report**

This report provides background for members on arrangements for local support to playgroups in the voluntary sector. It proposes the creation of new fieldworker posts within the education department's establishment to work alongside early years officers in support of playgroups and other voluntary sector providers.

**Recommendation**

The sub committee is asked to:

- (i) note and approve the contents of the report
- (ii) authorise the director of education to take the necessary steps, in liaison with the head of personnel services, to fill the posts identified in this report.
- (iii) refer the matter to the personnel committee for its attention

Members wishing further information about this report should contact:

Michael O'Neill, Director of Education, at 01236 812336 or  
Jim McGuinness, Head of Service, at 01236 812280.

## NORTH LANARKSHIRE COUNCIL : DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

### The Future of Playgroup Support Services

#### Report by Director

#### 1. Background

- 1.1 In financial year 1996/97 North Lanarkshire Council honoured a commitment made by the antecedent authority to grant fund the Scottish Pre- School Association (SPPA). A total award of £182,394 was made to SPPA with North Lanarkshire's share amounting to £27,202 minus a 5% reduction agreed as part of the council's overall budget process. The purpose of this grant was to maintain support for SPPA and the fieldwork services operated by the organisation within the council's geographical area.
- 1.2 SPPA is an "umbrella" group which offers support to pre school playgroups. Individual groups are managed by committees of parents who also organise fundraising activities on their behalf. Most playgroups register with SPPA and in return for the subscription paid are offered policy direction, general advice and relevant training. SPPA registration is dependant on groups satisfying certain quality assurance procedures set by the umbrella group.
- 1.3 Members will recall that it has been recommended that no funding be awarded directly to SPPA for the financial year 1997/98. This paper summarises the current position in North Lanarkshire and presents proposals for future support for playgroups in our area.

#### 2. Developments since April 1996

- 2.1 In response to local government reorganisation SPPA decided to undertake an organisational restructuring which has resulted in North Lanarkshire being absorbed into an area structure for the Forth and Clyde Valley which also includes South Lanarkshire, West Lothian and Falkirk councils. Largely as a result of this restructuring it has been difficult for education department officers to ascertain what value for money has been achieved from the 1996/97 grant award to SPPA. In spite of meetings between officers and representatives of SPPA it has not been possible to quantify the extent to which the grant has been translated into direct fieldwork support for playgroups. Confirmation of the operational details of the restructured organisation was delayed until a late point in the financial year and indeed some of the posts in the new SPPA structure at fieldworker level have only been filled in the last few weeks. Officers have therefore concluded that a major

proportion of the grant award was actually used to support an overarching management structure at the expense of direct fieldwork support.

- 2.2 In its application for grant support in 1997/98 the structure proposed by SPPA was as follows:

- 1 area manager
- 2 fieldwork managers (part-time)
- 1 administrator
- 6 fieldworkers (part-time)
- 1 training officer (part-time)

The application indicated that the 3 managers and the administrator would each have responsibility across the entire Forth and Clyde Valley area. The total cost of the SPPA proposals for 1997/98 was £53,311 although an alternative option, costed at £42,172, was also submitted.

- 2.3 Given the difficulties which arose in the course of the past year and the scale of the grant application made for 1997/98 officers of the education department consider that an alternative means of direct support to playgroups should be considered.

### **3. Current council support to playgroups**

- 3.1 Early years officers, formerly known as pre school community organisers, are the main staff group within the education department involved with playgroups. They take responsibility for the initial registration of groups in terms of the 1989 Children Act and are then required to inspect individual playgroups on an annual basis. Aside from this formal requirement they are often the initial point of contact for playgroups seeking advice and their inspection role often makes them the initial identifier of particular problems.
- 3.2 In theory any problems related to playgroups could be passed to SPPA fieldwork staff but in practice some early years officers become much more actively involved with playgroups because of the lack of availability of SPPA workers. On a number of occasions early years officers have reported to the department a significant lack of enthusiasm amongst playgroups for the organisation of SPPA and the support on offer. In addition the level of training provided to playgroups by SPPA in North Lanarkshire has been low which has been a matter of significant concern. The most valuable support is perceived to be that which is provided at local level and this is seen to be the most vulnerable area in the context of the restructured SPPA organisation.

- 3.3 Early years officers, in their contacts with SPPA fieldwork staff, have also become aware that SPPA fieldwork staff are often expected to focus their efforts towards supporting the SPPA committee structure and this has also militated against an adequate level of involvement with playgroups locally. Playgroups have reported to early years officers a sense of frustration at the lack of speedy resolution of difficulties.

#### **4. Proposed future support to playgroups**

- 4.1 It is clear that the national structure of SPPA has worked against the development of a responsive and flexible service at local level. Various discussions held by officers of the education department with SPPA representatives have failed to allay the fears which persist in relation to the new structure of the organisation. Given this and the clear lack of value derived from last year's grant to SPPA the following steps are proposed for 1997/98.
- 4.2 It is proposed that the education department should provide direct playgroup support through the appointment of three workers based respectively in the Monklands, Cumbernauld/Kilsyth and Motherwell/Wishaw areas. Each post created would be for 20 hours work per week and would be appointed on APT&C conditions.
- 4.3 Each of the above workers would be available to offer direct support during playgroup sessions and would also have a role in the preparation and delivery of training packages. This training would be tailored to meet the needs of each particular area.
- 4.4 Each area worker would liaise directly with the local early years officer. It is anticipated that early identification of problems during annual inspections would lead to a speedy resolution of any difficulties and an overall improvement of services offered. Area workers and early years officers would also share the same priorities in resolving these difficulties and would be able to offer clearer and more consistent advice and support to playgroups involved.
- 4.5 Priority would be placed on direct work with playgroups so as to identify strengths and weaknesses. A local playleaders forum would be established to replace the much larger area forum which currently operates. Increased training and regular contact with playgroups would minimise problem areas and in the longer term the authority's staff would be in a better position to provide support to the early years voluntary sector in general including holiday playschemes and the various out of school care projects which are developing across the council.

## 5. Financial considerations

- 5.1 It is proposed that three new posts, each amounting to 20 hours per week, be created at a salary equivalent to AP1/2 grade. It is estimated that the annual salary bill for this part of the proposal would amount to £25,600.
- 5.2 Associated travel costs can only be estimated but would be of the order of £3000 per year.
- 5.3 The existing clerical support provided for early years officers would require to be enhanced. An additional 2 hours per week allocated to each of the posts in the three areas involved would incur a total additional cost of £2000 per annum.
- 5.4 A total of £5000 would be required for the preparation and delivery of training materials.
- 5.5 The total cost of the proposal is therefore expected to be of the order of £35,600 per annum. This is £16,300 less than the grant submission made by SPPA.
- 5.6 The above costs can be met from within the education department's early years budget from disaggregated funds formerly used to finance the SRC headquarters administrative structure.

## 6. Conclusion

- 6.1 The support arrangements for voluntary sector playgroups in 1996/97 have been less than satisfactory and value for money has clearly not been achieved in relation to the SPPA grant award. The proposal to offer direct support via the education department's own officers will enhance the support on offer to playgroups. It will be more responsive and can be expected to achieve significant improvements in quality through increased support, early identification of problems, the sharing of good practice and improvements in the relationship with voluntary sector providers. The potential to develop this partnership and indeed extend it to other areas such as playschemes and out of school care groups will be enhanced by the provision of direct council services. The new arrangements would also be simpler to monitor and evaluate.

## 7. Recommendations

7.1 The sub committee is asked to:

- (i) note and approve the contents of the report
- (ii) authorise the director of education to take the necessary steps, in liaison with the head of personnel services, to fill the posts identified in this report.
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