

## Draft Long Term Council Community Plan (LTCCP) 2009-19

26 March 2009

### Submission: PIONEER EARLY LEARNING CENTRE

Christchurch City Council has recommended that the operation of Pioneer Early Learning Centre be outsourced.

I am writing in support of maintaining the status quo, for the following reasons:

- 1. Pioneer Early Learning Centre currently offers casual vacancies for users of the Pioneer leisure facilities. This Centre and the Council-owned QEII Pre-School are the only centres in Christchurch that provide casual and flexible care facilities.**

Casual care is one of the operating conditions set down by the Council for each centre. Pioneer Early Learning Centre plays an important role for parents of pre-schoolers, giving them short-term childcare options so they can access the adjacent leisure facilities. Further, as the Council has approved the extension of the Pioneer leisure facilities, demand for casual hours at Pioneer Early Learning Centre is sure to increase.

- 2. The Council's revised Early Childhood Strategy (dated January 2001) is a current document that needs to be adhered to.**

This document includes, among others, the following objective (see page 8): *"To facilitate the provision of quality, accessible and affordable childcare services at Pioneer and QEII leisure facilities and within the inner city (for use by Council staff and other community users)."*

Outsourcing the Centre is inconsistent both with this objective and the broader Early Childhood Strategy. The Strategy cannot be changed without a proper consultation process, which must be undertaken prior to any decision regarding ownership or operation of the Council's early childhood centres.

- 3. The Council's Early Childhood Strategy (January 2001) aims to assist disadvantaged community members. If Pioneer Early Learning Centre's operational format were to change, its fees would be likely to increase, working against this strategy.**

The Council's Early Childhood Education Policy states (see page 6, Early Childhood Strategy, January 2001): *"The desired key outcomes of the policy include ... improving the position of the least advantaged."* Pioneer Early Learning Centre's fees are very favourable relative to many other Centres. With their 20-free-hours scheme, no strings attached—something very few Centres are actually doing—their service is extremely affordable, supporting parents on low incomes as per Council's Strategy. If the Centre were outsourced, these fees would be likely to increase.

- 4. The "Statement of Proposal for the future of the Council's involvement in three early learning centres" is a summary document for public consultation. But it contains misleading statements. Specifically:**

a) *"Changes in Ministry of Education standards ... means that it is no longer possible to offer casual access."* **This statement is false.** The Ministry of Education does not regulate on availability to casual access. Casual access is one of the operating conditions established by the Council for the Centre.

b) *"Only 18% of people enrolling children ... use the recreational facilities ..."* **This statement misrepresents the situation.** Pioneer Early Learning Centre is required by Council to operate with only 18-23% casual access.

c) *"New regulations announced in July 2008 introduce new standards, but without increased funding to assist with the cost of compliance."* **This statement is misleading.** With the change in Government, these new standards are now on hold pending review. Also, in the case of Pioneer Early Learning Centre, the new standards are already met so there would be no additional cost of

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compliance. Further, even if additional funding was required in the future, this statement ignores the ability of fee increases to meet any such funding needs.

5. **The Christchurch City Council's long-term strategic direction has a strong community focus, as outlined in its Long-Term Community Council Plan (LTCCP). Retaining Pioneer Early Learning Centre in its existing operational structure helps fulfil the Council's objectives.**

Pioneer Early Learning Centre, in its current form, directly helps fulfil two Community Outcomes:

- a) *"A city for recreation, fun and creativity"* – the Centre, by providing casual access, enables stay-at-home parents to use Pioneer leisure facilities when they otherwise would not be able to; and  
b) *"A city of lifelong learning"* – the Centre provides quality early childhood education services.

Further, in its current Early Childhood Education Strategy (January 2001), the Council states: *"Many of the benefits of quality childcare/early childhood education services accrue to the community or larger society; they are, in part at least, collective benefits."* I agree. The Council, through its involvement with Pioneer Early Learning Centre, is fostering several other Community Outcomes specified in the LTCCP: *"a safe city"*, *"a city of inclusive and diverse communities"*, *"a city of people who value and protect the natural environment"*, *"a prosperous city"*, and *"a healthy city"*.

6. **Pioneer Early Learning Centre is rates neutral. In other words, the Centre imposes no financial burden on the Council or ratepayers.**

Pioneer Early Learning Centre helps the Council achieve its Community Outcomes, which are the issues voiced by the people of Christchurch as being important to them. Further, it does so without any financial contribution from ratepayers. It is therefore *not* in the Council's long-term interests to remove such an innovation; rather, it should be celebrated and strengthened.

**Additional Comments (in black ink):**

*Please see enclosed letter*

I do NOT wish to discuss my submission at the hearing, and ask that this written submission be considered.

**OR**

I wish to discuss the main points in my written submission at the hearings to be held between Monday 11 May 2009 and Monday 18 May 2009

Are you completing this submission:  for yourself  on behalf of a group or organisation  
If you are representing a group or organisation, how many people do you represent? \_\_\_\_\_

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**Re: PIONEER EARLY LEARNING CENTRE**

We are writing about the council proposal to outsource or close the Pioneer Early Learning Centre. We strongly oppose any change to the status quo.

The Pioneer Early Learning Centre is an extremely successful childcare centre, well-respected in the local community. Although there are other childcare options in the area, we chose Pioneer ELC because of its superior childcare, educational support, facilities and management. The long waiting list to enrol children at the centre is proof of its superiority and testament to its success. This is an enterprise which the council should be proud to support, not one to disregard and abandon because it 'is not core business'. After all, what could be more "core" to the council than contributing to the city's future by providing a flagship for excellent childcare service in Christchurch. Surely providing a good example of leadership in childcare services is of the utmost importance.

We understand the original intention of the centre was to provide casual drop-in childcare for visitors using the Pioneer Leisure facilities. It is ideally situated for this purpose and does perform this function. However, we are also aware of the proviso that the casual drop-in facility comprise only a small percentage (18-23%) of the centre's overall child attendance. Therefore, as a logical result of this council policy, the majority of children attending Pioneer ELC are enrolled on a permanent basis. This makes sense, as it would be too difficult to manage staffing and facilities if the centre were to cater only for casual drop-ins, which would vary significantly from day to day and hour to hour. Outsourcing the running of the centre will not change this.

Nowhere in the 'changes and proposals' document is the welfare of the children mentioned. Yet this is surely paramount. This is not a proposal about carparking, or building maintenance, but one that (if the status quo is not maintained) will directly affect the children involved. The children are our community's future and their welfare should be considered. The children enrolled at Pioneer ELC are happy, cared for, supported and appropriately educated at the most vulnerable and impressionable time of their lives. There may be 278 other early childhood centres in Christchurch, but that is of no concern to the children – they are happy where they are. As adults, we may rationally understand that the council may wish to divest themselves of 'non-core business' – but how could I, and other parents, explain to our children that the preschool is closed because it is 'non-core business'?

The Pioneer ELC is a centre of excellence in early childhood education, a shining beacon of light amongst a sea of mediocrity - please do not extinguish it.

*Kevin R Berry*