

31 March 2009

Submission: QEII EARLY LEARNING CENTRE

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

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

- 1. QEII Early Learning Centre currently offers casual vacancies for users of the QEII 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. QEII 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.

- 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 QEII 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 QEII 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.*" QEII 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.** QEII 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 QEII Early Learning Centre, the new standards are already met so there would be no additional cost of 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.

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

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 QEII Early Learning Centre in its existing operational structure helps fulfil the Council's objectives.**

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

QEII 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):

I do not support the proposals as the current centres provide a high level care for our children at an affordable price. We are a family where both parents are in paid employment in order to make ends meet but we still want to know that our child is getting the best possible care while we do this. We have the luxury of enjoying this with our centre and I believe the current staff, the range of services and the council support have produced this environment. Outsourcing the operation of our centre would remove any certainty I have about the level of service my child is receiving.

Secondly, if the currently range of services are contractually retained I cannot see how the cost of maintaining these services would not require an increase in the current fee structure. This would prevent us, and possibly other parents in our situation, from being able to afford to use the centres.

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

_____ Heidi Tapper _____ (Name*)

_____ (Signature*) _____ 1st April 2009 _____ (Date*)

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* denotes: must be completed