

# HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

## CABINET

MONDAY 11 OCTOBER 2004 AT 2.00 P.M.

Agenda Item

No.

4

## WILBURY ROAD CHILDREN'S HOME: CAPITAL FUNDING REALLOCATION

Report of the Director of Children, Schools and Families

Authors:

Pauline Davis – Planning Manager

Tel: 01992 555865

Maureen Phillips – Head of Service: Looked After Children Tel: 01992 556938

Executive Member:- Jane Pitman

### 1. Purpose of report

- 1.1 To seek approval to the insertion of a new project in the County Council's 2004/5 capital programme for the refurbishment of the Wilbury Road Children's Home for a home for children with disabilities, using an identified underspend of £170,000 towards a total cost of £315,000.

### 2. Summary

- 2.1 The Wilbury Road Children's Home closed on 31 August 2004, due to incompatibility with neighbours, leaving the premises vacant and costly to secure.
- 2.2 There is a need for additional provision for disabled looked-after children which is planned to be made at these premises, with refurbishment estimated to cost £315,000.
- 2.3 No funding exists in the 2004/5 capital programme to take this forward earlier than originally intended.
- 2.4 A specific underspend of £170,000 can be identified in the 2004/5 capital programme.
- 2.5 This underspend could be used to insert a new project into the programme, as a means of making swift progress on the refurbishment of the Wilbury Road premises. It would require a commitment to 'top-up' funding of £145,000 within the following year. There are other urgent needs for capital funding, for example, to implement two new primary autism bases, but this project is considered to be the higher priority. The autism bases would need to be a priority call on the 2005/6 programme.

### **3. Conclusions**

- 3.1 Cabinet is asked to decide whether to insert a £315,000 new project into the 2004/5 capital programme to refurbish the Wilbury Road Children's Home to become a Home for Children with Disabilities. Funding of £170,000 has been identified from an underspend elsewhere in the CSF capital programme but there would need to be a commitment to 'top-up' funding of a further £145,000 from the 2005/6 programme.
- 3.2 Cabinet is also asked to recognise the need for funding for two primary autism bases to add to existing priority calls on the 2005/6 capital programme.

### **4. Background**

- 4.1 Wilbury Road Children's Home is a 6 bedded long stay home for young people aged 11 to 18. It opened in January 2002 and has been the ongoing subject of complaints from neighbours since 29 March 2002, culminating in a serious crisis during May and June 2003, and a repeat in the Summer of 2004.
- 4.2 The recent escalation of complaints resulted in a threat from the Letchworth Heritage Foundation that it was considering enforcement proceedings. Local members are involved and are very concerned about the reputation of the County Council.
- 4.3 It had already been decided to re-provide Wilbury within the proposed PFI project to build new and replacement Children's homes throughout the County. However, the situation became untenable and therefore a decision was made to cease the current service provided from the home with immediate effect, rather than wait for its PFI replacement. The children and staff have been relocated to the Burydale home in Stevenage. The likely timescale for the opening of the replacement home is July 2006.
- 4.4 This will leave the Wilbury Road premises vacant pending its planned alternative use.

### **5. Proposed alternative use**

- 5.1 It was intended to refurbish the Wilbury Road premises, upon completion of the PFI replacement home, to become a 6-bedded unit for disabled children, seeking capital funding at an appropriate stage. It would replace The Gables, a four-bedroom home for children with disabilities at Dobbs Weir, Hoddesdon, which closed in January 2004. Since that time children with those needs have been placed out-County provision which is not in their best interests.
- 5.2 Discussions with local residents and stakeholders has indicated that on the whole they do not object to the home being used to provide care

for disabled children. They have asked for written confirmation that the property would not revert to its former use at any time in the future.

- 5.3 The combination of factors such as the building being vacant much earlier than intended, the cost of securing it while vacant, and the need to make provision for children with disabilities leads to the desire to refurbish the premises as soon as possible. To achieve this in a meaningful timescale for placements, a start on site would be needed before the end of the current financial year to achieve a completion by June 2005. The intention is to provide for children with disabilities who are either placed in out-county provision or who would otherwise be placed out-county. This timing would allow sufficient time for: gradual acclimatisation during the Summer; notice to be given to current providers to avoid ongoing out-county costs for the next academic year; and for planned admissions to in-County schools to take place where necessary.

## **6. Financial implications**

### **Revenue**

- 6.1 The revenue budget will transfer to the newly provided resource.
- 6.2 The revenue costs of securing the property until building works start is estimated at £2,500-£4,000 plus an ongoing monthly charge of £600. This will be met from the current Wilbury revenue budget.
- 6.3 If the new provision is not ready for June 2005 additional or new out-county costs per placement would be in the order of £9,000 a month, compared with the in-county costs of £8,000 a month, plus some additional review and transport costs.
- 6.4 The total additional revenue implications of a delay would therefore be in the order of £75,000.
- 6.5 There is a much stronger argument to meet much better the needs of this young group (8-13) of vulnerable children by maintaining their significant links with family, friends and wider social circle, health professionals and local education provision.
- 6.6 Another consequence of the new provision not being ready for June 2005 would be new placements. It would be difficult to place children in specialist out-county provision with a planned removal back to in-County provision after one term. A June 2005 opening would allow us to comply with current contracting arrangements which usually ask for one term's notice.

## **Capital**

- 6.5 The estimated cost of refurbishing the Wilbury Road premises is £315,000, which is a category A estimate.
- 6.6 Under the original plan, a bid would have been made for funding the project in a future capital programme. Currently there is no provision within the County Council's 2004/5 capital programme to take this project forward earlier than originally intended. Consideration could be given to inserting this as an additional priority project into the current year's programme.
- 6.7 There is an allocation of £ 550,000 for the provision of Learning Support Units in 13 secondary schools across the County as part of the Behaviour and Achievement Strategy. This programme of schemes is complete and £170,000 remains unspent. The original allocation was based on a notional cost per unit but in practice not all schools required this level of investment to achieve their provision.
- 6.8 £170,000 would go part way to meeting the cost of refurbishing the Wilbury Road Children's Home. It would allow a swift start and a timely completion to enable children to be placed and settled into the home in time for the 2005/6 academic year and to avoid a lengthy period of unoccupation of the building. If Cabinet wants to re-use Wilbury Road in this way and use £170,000 as initial funding it would require 'top-up' funding of £145,000 to be made available in the 2005/6 capital programme to enable the project to be completed.

### Alternative options

- 6.9 It is recognised that there is considerable pressure on the County Council's capital programme and this underspend could form part of its overall programme management.
- 6.9 Alternatively, the Wilbury Road premises could be sold but the planned service need would not be met.
- 6.10 Alongside the Wilbury Road Children's Home there are other priority needs for funding e.g. to provide autism bases at two primary schools, which had gained Scrutiny Committee approval at the 19 March 2003 meeting but for which no capital allocation was made at the time. However, the Wilbury Road Children's Home is considered to be the highest service priority need.
- 6.12 Funding for the autism bases could then also be recognised as a priority call on the 2005/6 capital programme.

## **7. Staffing implications**

- 7.1 All the Wilbury staff have been redeployed within Children's' Residential Services. Staff will be appointed to the new home through preferential redeployment opportunities for former Gables Staff, and through new recruitment.