

Meeting: Executive
Date: 10 January 2012
Subject: Children Centres: Delivery in Central Bedfordshire
Report of: Cllr Mark Versallion, Executive Member for Children Services
Summary: This report outlines proposals for the reconfiguration of Central Bedfordshire Children Centres to be implemented by March 2012.

Advising Officer: Edwina Grant, Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Children Services

Contact Officer: Catherine Parry, Assistant Director Children Services Operations (Acting)

Public/Exempt: Public

Wards Affected: All

Function of: Executive

Key Decision Yes

**Reason for urgency/
exemption from call-in
(if appropriate)** Not Applicable.

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

Council Priorities:

This Report supports Priority 2 of Central Bedfordshire's Strategic Plan 2009-2011, Educating, Protecting and Providing Opportunities for Children and Young People. It also supports the delivery of the Children and Young People's Plan Priority; Reducing child poverty and the effects for those living in poverty and improving early intervention and prevention.

Financial:

1. The Children Centres budget is paid for out of the Early Intervention Grant (EIG). In 2011/12, this was £2,818,445 and will rise to £2,851,018 in 2012/13. Any efficiencies arising out of the proposals in this report will be held within the children centres budget to allow for further re-commissioning to meet target needs in the centres and hubs.
2. The EIG is not secured post March 2013, however nationally many local authorities have funded their Children Centres and other provisions to ensure effective use of the Grant and release base budget for other activities. In October 2011, the Children's Minister gave a verbal commitment to the continuation of the EIG until 2015.

3. The current contracts cease in March 2012 requiring new tenders and contracts to be completed and awarded from March 2012. The funding position will be made clear to new providers during this process.

4. None of the proposals would increase costs for the Council.

Legal:

5. The legal framework is set in the 2006 Childcare Act; this was amended by the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act (2009).

6. The 2009 legislation included a Sufficiency Requirement; this requires the Council to make sufficient provision to meet local need. The level of need is locally determined by partnership work and service user consultation.

7. Children Centres are subject to Ofsted inspection. To date, no Centres in Central Bedfordshire have been inspected.

8. The legislation requires local authorities to consult before making a 'significant change' to services offered through existing Children Centres. This has been completed and the findings presented to the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 29 November 2011.

9. There is a presumption against the closure of Children Centres as outlined in the updated Statutory Guidance issued by the Department for Education in 2010.

10. Following consultation, the recommended option ensures the Council is compliant with current guidance and legislation.

Risk Management:

11. There is the potential of financial risk as identified.

12. Regulatory risk; if the Council does not provide the statutory required services.

Staffing (including Trades Unions):

13. There are no staffing implications from these proposals.

Equalities/Human Rights:

14. An updated Equalities Impact Assessment will be carried out when proposals are agreed to take account of all relevant issues.

15. Option One does not discriminate and when approved will not cause any disproportionate allocation of services or unfairness in service provision for any member of Central Bedfordshire's Community.

Community Safety:

16. There are no implications from these proposals.

Sustainability:

17. If the EIG is not extended beyond 2013 the Council will need to review the funding source for Children's Centres. This will require a review of the provision. However, this likelihood is considered low risk.

Procurement:

18. The retendering process is subject to procurement regulations and guidance.

Overview and Scrutiny:

19. This matter was considered by the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 29 November 2012. The Committee recommended Option one, the reconfiguration of all existing Centres into 9 clusters, with an enhancement of resources available in the areas of greatest need, be endorsed for consideration by the Executive at its meeting on 10 January 2012.

RECOMMENDATIONS:**The Executive is asked to:**

1. **approve the proposals for the delivery of Children Centres in Central Bedfordshire as set out in this report and this approach remain in operation until such a time as the provision or contracts require a review; and**
2. **agree the proposal for the delivery of Children Centres as set out in the exempt papers on this Agenda.**

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| <i>Reason for Recommendations:</i> | <i>1. To ensure that the Council is compliant with Statutory Guidance and legislation.</i> |
| | <i>2. To ensure that there is a successful transition from the Children Centres contracts ceasing in March 2012 and new tenders and providers being in place by April 2012.</i> |

Executive Summary

20. The Council has a duty to provide Children Centres in Central Bedfordshire under the legislation laid out in this report.
21. The current provision was due for review by March 2012 as the contracts for them cease at that time.
22. To ensure a successful continuing of the service it was necessary to undertake a review of provision and identify potential models for delivery going forward that took account of current legislation and guidance.

23. Given this position a thorough review of provision has been undertaken resulting in the potential of three options.
24. Any changes to provision if 'significant' must be subject to public consultation and the three options were subject to this process between 14 September 2011 to 26 October 2011.
25. The Options identified were :
- Option 1:** Reconfigure all existing Centres into 9 clusters, with an enhancement of resources available in the areas of greatest need.
- Option 2:** Close eight Centres in areas of less need with the remaining open.
- Option 3:** Focus all resources on five areas with the highest levels of deprivation and remove all services from the remaining 13 Centres. Buildings would be made available for local communities to run services aimed at children.
- 90% of responses were in favour of Option 1; 9 Clusters across the Council with an enhancement of resourcing in the greatest areas of need.
- Appendix A** is the consultation document that was used, it outlines the three options including the advantages and disadvantages.
- Appendix B** is a map which demonstrates in which geographical areas the 9 clusters will be covering.

Background

26. Since the third and final national implementation phase of Children Centres was completed in March 2011, the Coalition Government have reviewed their approach to Children Centres.
27. The Government's published vision for the core purpose of Children Centres states that they should focus on improving outcomes for young children and their families. There is a particular focus on the most disadvantaged families in order to reduce inequalities in child development, school readiness, support improved parenting aspirations, self-esteem and parenting skills, child and family health and life chances.
28. These aspirations have been taken into account in these proposals.
29. This local reconfiguring exercise has enabled the Council to review its provision and consider how it can be enhanced. It will ensure the consolidation of Universal services and deliver enhancements that concentrate on the areas of greatest need and deprivation.
30. Central Bedfordshire currently has 22 Children Centres. All the Centres are commissioned out to external providers.

31. Managing Organisations are:
- Health.
 - Six individual schools.
 - Voluntary/Community Organisations.
 - Action for Children.
 - Children's Society.
 - Spurgeons.
 - Christian Family Care.
32. Many of the Centres work in collaboration with other agencies including health, education, job centre plus and early years teachers. They provide a community hub and are a valued resource as demonstrated by the consultation and its responses.
33. The Council's contracts for Centre management run until 31 March 2012. Management Organisations have been briefed to expect both a re-configuration and re-tendering exercise to take place during 2011/2012.
34. These proposals will ensure the Council is able to ensure the successful transition of the contracts to March 2012, and that the Council can respond to updated legislation and guidance.

OPTIONS

35. The three options subject to consultation are laid out in Appendix A – Consultation on proposed changes to Children's Centre. It highlights the disadvantages and advantages of all three options.
36. The consultation and preferred Option 1 states ;
- 'No centre would close and services would continue to be delivered in all parts of the authority but with a focus on areas of greatest need. This proposal will consolidate the Centres into nine clusters operating a 'hub and spoke' model of service delivery. The 'hubs' will be centred primarily in areas of greatest need, with the addition of three clusters which make geographic sense in order to maintain a universal service.'

THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

37. The public consultation ran for a period of 6 weeks, from 14 September until 26 October 2011.
38. The consultation took place through active use of questionnaires available both on-line and as hard copy. Information about the questionnaire was distributed through Children Centres, Schools and Early Year's education settings. Hard copies of the questionnaire were available at all Centres.
39. There were 3 Partnership events which took place in different parts of the authority, Stakeholders, Partners and other interested Parties were invited.

THE CONSULTATION RESULTS

40. 472 paper questionnaires were received and there were 249 online responses. (A total of 721). 50 people attended the three consultation events.
41. 91% of responses preferred Option 1
7% of responses preferred Option 2
1% of responses preferred Option 3
42. 66% of responses were received from parents who are currently using Centres, 7% from parents who did not use a centre, 4% from Children Centre Staff and 4% from schools and early years settings, 2% from health organisations.
43. The largest numbers of responses were received from the Wards of Stotfold (15%) and (Dunstable 11%).
44. 39% of respondees considered that Children Centres are a valuable asset for the whole community. 30% of respondees requested that Centres should remain configured as they are.

PROPOSED RECONFIGURATION

45. 90% of the responses supported Option One as the preferred delivery model for Children Centres in Central Bedfordshire.
46. This new configuration will enable Centres to deliver more targeted services to the most vulnerable, whilst maintaining a universal provision and ensuring the statutory duties of the Council are met.

TENDERING PROCESS

48. If Option One is agreed, the approval of the outcome of the tendering process is set out in the exempt papers on this agenda.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

The Executive is recommended to;

1. approve Option One as the preferred service delivery model of Children Centres in Central Bedfordshire Council from March 2012; and
2. agree the proposal for the delivery of Children Centres as set out in the exempt papers on this agenda.

Appendices:

Appendix A - the consultation document that was used; it outlines the three options including the advantages and disadvantages.

Appendix B - a map which demonstrates in which geographical areas the 9 clusters will cover.

Appendix C – exempt report setting out the proposal for the delivery of Children Centres (Report to follow)

Background Papers: (open to public inspection) None