

Consultation on proposed changes to Children's Centres



1. Introduction

Children's Centres have been developing over the last decade as part of the Sure Start Children's Centre programme.

The core purpose of Children's Centres is to improve outcomes for young children and their families by working with families with young children, often termed as "early intervention".

Children's Centres have a particular focus on the most disadvantaged families, in order to reduce inequalities in child development and readiness for school and to support parents aspirations, self-esteem and parenting skills, child and family health and life chances.

2. Background

Children's Centres were rolled out in three phases depending on local levels of deprivation. Centres were introduced first in areas with the highest levels of deprivation. Centres were created during each of the three phases in Central Bedfordshire.

Central Government funding for the establishment of Children's Centres was based on how many children aged 0-5 lived in a 'reach' area. Phase one and two of developing Children's Centres were intended to reach approx 800 children aged 0-5 while those in phase three were designed to reach up to 1,200 children because they tend to serve wider geographical areas (Population Numbers were based on estimates from 2005-6). Funding designated at the time this work begun specified how many Centres were to be created.

At the time of their establishment, Centres in different phases were required to offer services from amongst the following:

- Family Support
- Parental Outreach
- Local information on and signposting to childcare, early learning, information on parenting and drop in groups
- Opportunities to access parenting support and education
- Child and family health services – including children and families with disabilities
- Links with Job Centre Plus – information about employment, education and training

Health and Job Centre Plus colleagues are actively involved in Central Bedfordshire Children's Centres.

Unlike some Children's Centres in the country, none of the Children's Centres in Central Bedfordshire run childcare or early years education provision directly, but instead signpost users to local providers.

Central Bedfordshire currently has 22 Children's Centres. All the centres are commissioned out to external providers such as the NHS, some School Governors and some Voluntary Organisations, however the Council retains overall responsibility for their provision. Contracts to run the Centres all expire in March 2012, and a re-tendering process will take place.

The 22 Centres have varied accommodation. Some have a full centre with office, delivery space and consulting room, some just have a delivery space. Some do not have a permanent built base but deliver services across their areas using community buildings such as village halls or schools especially in rural areas. Several have a van in order to be able to deliver services to those who are most isolated.

3. Why is Central Bedfordshire Council re-organising Children's Centres?

The 2006 Childcare Act (amended by the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and learning Act (2009)) included a sufficiency requirement which means local councils are required to provide 'Sufficient Provision' to meet the local need. The decision on "Sufficient Provision" is taken by the Central Bedfordshire Council in consultation with Health Services, Job Centre Plus, other partners, local families and communities.

In Statutory Guidance which was re-issued to Councils by the Department of Education in 2010 the Government stated that whilst Children's Centres are a universal service there should be a targeted approach to vulnerable children and families.

There is a need for a more focused approach to early intervention in Central Bedfordshire which targets areas of greatest need. Our population continues to grow, there are health challenges ranging from infant mortality and teenage pregnancy to obesity and smoking. Educational achievement is not as good as we want it to be and child and family poverty is also an issue. Early intervention through Children's Centres is key to tackling some of these issues.

4. Options for the future

The proposals have been developed with a focus on providing services to the most vulnerable children and families who presently have the poorest life chances. This has involved consideration of the following:

- where current resources are
- current areas of highest deprivation (where there are differences from 2006)
- increasing focus on Early Intervention work
- numbers of children and future building growth.

As a result of this work, three alternative options for Children’s Centre organisation have been identified. These are set out below each followed by a table highlighting the main advantages and disadvantages of each option.

At present there are no plans to reduce the overall sum spent on Children Centre services. In all models financial resources will be focused on the areas of greatest need (highest deprivation).

None of the options will impact on the provision of early year’s education and childcare as these services are not delivered through Children’s Centres in central Bedfordshire.

OPTION 1 - Rearrange all 22 existing Centres into nine clusters

No centre would close and services would continue to be delivered in all parts of the authority but with a focus on areas in 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.

Below are the nine proposed Cluster Centres (hubs). All of these Cluster Centres are based at current Children’s Centres where performance is recognised as good.

| Cluster Hub | Hub Lower School: | Driver for Development of Hub: |
|------------------------|--|--|
| | | Area: |
| 1. Dunstable North | Beecroft Lower School | Deprivation |
| 2. Dunstable South | Downside Lower School | Deprivation |
| 3. Houghton Regis | Tithe Farm Lower School | Deprivation |
| 4. Leighton Buzzard | St. George’s Lower School & The Moorings | Deprivation |
| 5. Flitwick | Templefield Lower School | Deprivation |
| 6. Sandy | Laburnum Lower School | Deprivation |
| 7. Biggleswade | The Lawns Nursery School | Geographic need |
| 8. Shefford & District | Shefford Lower School | Geographic need and presence of 2 military bases |
| 9. Stotfold & Arlesey | St. Mary’s Lower School | Geographic need |

Below is a summary of the advantages and disadvantages of this model.

| Advantages: | Disadvantages: |
|---|--|
| No Centre would close. | There would be a reduced presence in some current centre bases that are not classed as Cluster Centre hubs. |
| All parents would be able to access services. | Some Centres (such as numbers 4 and 5) will have a very large reach serving large numbers of children (4000+). |
| Some services would be delivered across the entire area thus maintaining the universal services listed in the statutory guidance. | In some rural areas considerable distances will need to be covered by parents and children to access services. Public transport is poor in rural areas where travelling would be required. |
| Some services and financial resources would be refocused into the areas of greatest need. | |
| All previously funded buildings would continue to be used. | |
| Efficiency in size will produce some cost savings which can be used for other early intervention work with children and families. | |

OPTION 2 - Close Eight Centres in areas of less need and transfer these resources to the remaining 14 centres.

The eight Centres that would close are listed below. These were established in Phase 3 of the Children's Centres development and therefore are predominantly in more affluent areas of Central Bedfordshire.

- Ampthill
- Barton
- Cranfield
- Henlow/Stondon
- Icknield/Watling in Dunstable
- Linslade
- Silsoe
- Stotfold

Although the legislation and guidance says that there should be a presumption against closure it goes on to state that this does not mean a Children’s Centre should never close. It is intended that local authorities are able to make necessary changes, to forward plan and to re-shape services to make them responsive to need. It would not be possible to fully prioritise and deliver Children’s Centre services into our areas of greatest need, if the other centres remained open in the current configuration.

Below is a summary of the advantages and disadvantages of this model.

| Advantages: | Disadvantages: |
|---|--|
| Free up significant funding to use in areas of greater need. Funding per child in the areas of need would be increased substantially. | Recently funded buildings could be redundant (on school sites) if community groups did not want to use them. |
| Unused buildings could be used by local community groups for activities based around children and families and/or used to deliver voluntary services. | If the buildings are not used for activities with children and families the Department for Education may ask for the money back that was spent on creating the centre, this would come from the Council. |
| Some of the money saved in consolidating centres would be used to up skill voluntary and community groups to deliver services based around children and families. | Most of Central Bedfordshire would be considerable distances from Centres, including one of the two military bases. |
| | Approx 6,200 children and families would no longer be able to access services which could put some children at risk and increase the level and costs of later interventions required. |

OPTION 3 - Close 13 Centres in areas of less need and transfer these resources to the remaining five centres.

The five Centres that would remain open are listed below. These are in the most deprived areas of Central Bedfordshire.

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| | |
| 1. Dunstable | Using the resources of the current Downside Neighbourhood Centre and Beecroft Children’s Centre (including Icknield resources on the Downside site) |
| 2. Houghton Regis | Using the resources of the two current Centres in Tithe Farm and Parkside |

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| 3. Leighton Buzzard | Using the resources based at St. Georges Lower School and The Moorings |
| 4. Sandy | Using the existing Sandy Community Children's Centre |
| 5. Flitwick | Using the existing Flitwick Children's Centre |

Although the legislation and guidance says that there should be a presumption against closure it goes on to state that this does not mean a Children's Centre should never close. It is intended that local authorities are able to make necessary changes, to forward plan and to re-shape services to make them responsive to need. It would not be possible to fully prioritise and deliver Children's Centre services into our areas of greatest need, if the other centres remained open in the current configuration.

Below is a summary of the advantages and disadvantages of this model.

| Advantages: | Disadvantages: |
|---|--|
| Free up the greatest amount of funding to use in areas of greater need. Funding per child in the areas of need would be increased substantially. | Recently funded buildings could be redundant (on school sites) if community groups did not want to use them. |
| Unused buildings could be used by local community groups for activities based around children and families and/or used to deliver voluntary services. | If the buildings are not used for activities with children and families the Department for Education may ask for the money back that was spent on creating the centre, this would come from the Council. |
| Some of the money saved in consolidating centres would be used to up skill voluntary and community groups to deliver services based around children and families. | Most of Central Bedfordshire would be considerable distances from Centres, including the two military bases. |
| | Approx 11,400 children and families would no longer be able to access services which could put some children at risk and increase the level and costs of later interventions required. |

5. The consultation process

The Council is consulting with you now to ensure that parents/carers and the community are able to give us their views before the council's Executive make a decision about the future organisation of Children's Centres within Central Bedfordshire.

We are keen to make sure this consultation as broad as possible and we would like to hear from everyone with an interest in Children's Centres within Central Bedfordshire.

The consultation will be open between Wednesday 14th September and 12 noon on Wednesday 26th October 2011. You can respond to the consultation using the attached form, or you can respond through the Council's website www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/consultations

There will also be three consultation events for partners and voluntary organisations. These will take place in different parts of the authority and will be by invitation only.

The feedback from the consultation will be presented to the council's Executive on 10th January where a final decision will be made about the future organisation of Children's Centres in Central Bedfordshire.

Contact us...

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