

Central Bedfordshire Council

EXECUTIVE MEETING: 14 October 2014

Early Help Offer in Children's Services

Report of Cllr. Mark Versallion, Executive Member for Children's Services
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Key Decision

Purpose of this report

1. To agree the Early Help offer delivered through Children's Centres and the procurement process, due to the ending of the current contract on 31 March 2015, and the need to re-procure services.
2. The proposed model seeks to enhance service delivery and avoid duplication, whilst enabling maximum flexibility with minimum change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **That all current Children's Centres to be retained.**
2. **That the current services model be retained with enhancements as outlined in paragraphs 18-26 of the report. In particular:**
 - **services will continue to be available for 0 to 5 year olds;**
 - **there will be a greater focus on providing services to babies aged 0 to 12 months, the most critical time for new families; and**
 - **focus resources on those services that are not readily available elsewhere.**
3. **To agree the procurement process as set out in paragraphs 27-29 of the report.**

Background

3. The original Sure Start programme required delivery of services from 22 Children's Centres across the Council area. In 2012, following consultation, a reconfigured offer was put in place. This consolidated the service offer into 9 hubs with some services being delivered from the smaller satellite Centres. The 9 hubs are in Dunstable North, Dunstable South, Houghton Regis, Leighton Buzzard, Sandy, Flitwick, Biggleswade, Shefford and Stotfold with Arlesey.
4. The management of the Centres was commissioned out and the Centres have been run by a mixture of schools and two large national voluntary organisations since April 2012. The contracts for this model end in April 2015 and this has provided the opportunity to ensure that the Early Help offer made through Children's Centres meets the needs of the most vulnerable children and families.
5. Since 2012, there has been a growing awareness nationally of the importance of Early Intervention and Early Help with the most vulnerable families, and a number of other changes in the landscape have affected the services delivered out of Children's Centres.

Consultation Process

6. The opportunity offered by the ending of contracts led to a public consultation exercise which was undertaken for 12 weeks between 28 May and 19 August 2014.
7. The consultation took place through the active use of a questionnaire available both on-line and as hard copy. Information, including posters about the questionnaire, was distributed through Children's Centres, schools and Early Years education settings. Hard copies of the questionnaire were available at all Centres
8. Council staff attended a range of stakeholder meetings to discuss the options including a Children's Centres Co-ordinator meeting, meetings with all existing providers, the Bedfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group Board, the Healthy Child Programme Board, and the Acting Early group. Focus groups were held at a number of the Children's Centres.
9. Four options were offered in the consultation:
 - a. Option 1 Universal Services to children aged 0 - 5 (existing model)
 - b. Option 2 Offering services to children aged 0 - 3 within area with the highest levels of deprivation
 - c. Option 3 Offering services to children aged 0 - 5 within areas with the highest levels of deprivation
 - d. Option 4 Offering Universal Services to children aged 0 – 3.

10. Regardless of which model was adopted some universal services would be maintained at all Centres and these were outlined in the Consultation Document.

Consultation Results

11. 387 Responses were received of which 70% were from a parent or carer currently using a Children's Centre.
12. 301 responses preferred Option 1- 78.6%; 5 responses preferred Option 2 – 1.3%; 9 responses preferred Option 2 – 2.3%; 68 responses preferred Option 4 – 17.8%.
13. This means a total of 96.4% of respondents opted for one of the options offering a universal service. Some of the comments made in support of these responses were “some families in need are not necessarily deprived”; “highest need could feel stigmatised if it is only targeted”; “Support Network”; “Everybody will need support at some time”.
14. In response to the question “how far do you agree or disagree that Children's Centres should focus mostly on families who are in the most need?” 25% agreed or strongly agreed, whilst 54.4% disagreed or strongly disagreed.
15. The question which asked ‘How far do you agree or disagree that if there is a similar activity in the community, the Children's Centre should give families information about it, rather than running something similar themselves’ found 47.6% agreeing or strongly agreeing with 30.2% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.
16. Responders were asked which particular services they felt should be delivered at all Children's Centres. The highest preference was for breastfeeding advice at 19%, parent and baby group at 15% and parent classes at 10%. Weaning and healthy eating, new baby/new mum groups and then weighing clinics were all listed.
17. The Consultation asked for any other comments about the future of Children's Centres to which 41% said ‘don't close/cut/change services’, 31% said ‘great service’ and the third item in the list said that ‘Children's Centres are important to the community’ (12%).
18. The Consultation outcomes clearly support maintenance of a universal service and there is also strong support for helping families access similar services which are being run in the community rather than duplicating the service.
19. At meetings of groups of professionals some concern was expressed that the needs of some families may be missed if the universal offer was reduced to the levels outlined in the consultation paper.

Proposed Model

20. It is proposed that the Centres will focus on a universal service until a baby's first birthday. This will ensure that professionals have an opportunity to work with families throughout the first year, which is the most critical time for many new families, and is the period when working parents are often on maternity/paternity leave.
21. It will ensure that the most valued areas of Children's Centre work, as identified by the consultation, such as breastfeeding advice, parent and baby groups and weaning and healthy eating will be able to be accessed, as well as giving parents the opportunity to develop their own self-sustaining networks and groups.
22. A parenting course will also be offered to all families during the first year.
23. In order to enable enhancements to the service, and avoid duplication, at the end of the first year, when many families will have gained the confidence to access community groups and also built up their own networks, families will be given help to access these services or assisted to begin their own. Where these are not available we will seek to provide them at the Children's Centre.
24. All families with children up to age 5 will still be able to access universal services at the Children's Centres including Health Visitor clinics, two year old checks, advice on diet and oral hygiene, speech and language drop in, and possibly some immunisations and vaccinations, as well as meeting with job-centre plus to provide training and work readiness. We will seek to enhance these services when the Healthy Child Programme comes under the Local Authority and is re-tendered during the period of the next Children's Centres contracts.
25. Those families who still have identified needs where some Early Help interventions will benefit the family, will continue to access the Children's Centre, and more intensive and targeted work will be able to take place with these families.

Procurement Process

26. Work is presently being undertaken on drawing up the final specification.
27. The current contractual arrangements are that 4 Centres are run by the schools on whose site the Centre hub is sited. The remaining 5 Centres are currently run by two national Voluntary Organisations.

28. Following discussions with the procurement team, the following arrangement is proposed:
- a. Where a school has a Children's Centre on site, instead of going through a formal tendering process, the school will be asked if they are interested in providing these services.
 - b. If this is affirmative, they will be issued with a "Method Statement" (with the same details as a specification) which will require the school to respond in terms of how they would deliver the required services. This will form part of the selection process, but as schools would only be interested in the Centre on their site this is not a competitive process.
 - c. Following this process a robust Service Level Agreement will be developed with the schools in terms of performance management and monitoring.
 - d. The SLA will be in place for 01 April 2015.
 - e. For the remaining Children's Centres, where the 'host' school does not wish to manage the Centre, a tender process will commence week beginning 13 October 2014 to go out to advert and tender accordingly.

29. The timescale for this process is:

w/c 13/10/2014 – Issue Tender
w/c 10/11/2014 – Tender responses
w/c 17/11/2014 – Tender evaluation
w/c 24/11/2014 - Provider interviews/presentations
w/c 01/12/2014 – Contract award(s)

Reason for the decision

30. The proposed model is the most appropriate for Central Bedfordshire in order to get the best outcomes for children and families.

Council Priorities

31. Improved educational attainment.
32. Promote health and wellbeing and protecting the vulnerable.

Corporate Implications

33. None.

Legal Implications

34. The provision of Children's Services and the delivery of Early Help is a Part B Service and therefore subject to a more limited application of the E.U. Procurement Regulations and there is no requirement for the publication of an OJEU Notice. The Procurement Process outlined in the Report complies with the Council's Procurement Procedure Rules.
35. The award of a contract may trigger a TUPE transfer if a new service provider is awarded the contract and legal advice on this issue will be provided at a later stage.

Financial Implications

36. It is anticipated that the cost of delivering the service in the manner now proposed will be contained within existing budget.

Equalities Implications

37. Central Bedfordshire Council has a statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and foster good relations in respect of nine protected characteristics; age disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.
38. National research clearly indicates a case for focusing on children age two and under and for providing targeted support for families from deprived communities. However there is also evidence that a range of women can be at greater risk of experiencing mental illness in the post natal period and would benefit from being able to access a range of supportive services. The consultation exercise has highlighted that some families in need are not necessarily deprived and that those in highest need could feel stigmatised if they are the only ones targeted for a service.
39. The proposal to maintain a completely universal service until a baby's first birthday and to then undertake more targeted work with children will help ensure that all families will be able to access Children's Centres whatever their needs and that families with the greatest needs will receive increased support.

Conclusion and next Steps

40. Following consultation the proposed model and procurement method will give the most flexibility to Children's Centres to work with those families who most need their help whilst giving all parents an early opportunity to develop their own networks and groups. It will also enable a wider delivery of the Early Help offer within a universal environment, enabling the best possible outcomes for children and their families.

41. Following approval by the executive negotiations with host schools will continue and the necessary procurement process will commence.

Appendices – None

Background Papers - None