

REPORT OF THE Director of Children's Services

1. CHILDREN'S CENTRE BRIEFING NOTE

The following statement is a summary factual briefing on children's centres, their background and purpose, and the process of consultation to date.

- Children's centres (also known as Surestart Children's Centres) were first introduced in this country in the late 1990s based on the American model of Headstart. They are intended to provide family support for parents and children in the pre-school years, with a particular but not exclusive focus on ensuring that the children of more vulnerable or deprived families should be targeted to ensure the children are enabled to thrive and that they are well prepared for the start of their school life.
- Children's centres are different from day care or nursery settings where the children are in the direct care of staff for set periods. While some children's centres are connected to nurseries or incorporate early education and child care into their provision, the emphasis in all children's centres is the coordination of a range of various services, including health care, providing support and advice to parents. That includes access to employment advice through Job Centre Plus.
- Initially, Surestart Children's Centres were only situated in areas of high deprivation and therefore until 2005 Hampshire only had four such centres across the whole county. Between 2006 and 2010 there was a phased national programme to develop comprehensive access to children's centres to the point where there are currently 81 centres across Hampshire to ensure county wide coverage. Centres in areas of higher deprivation, sometimes called "full core offer" centres, include a fuller range of provision such as childcare on site and longer opening hours. Other centres are smaller and will have less direct provision. All centres have an emphasis on direct community involvement with services influenced by local need.
- Of Hampshire's 81 centres, 44 are currently directly managed by the local authority and 37 are managed by third parties, including schools or voluntary organisations.
- Each of the 81 centres is a discreet entity based in a particular location within a main site. However, most centres also operate from a range of different sites, using various community, education and health facilities at different times to enable more direct access, especially in more rural communities. So there are many more than 81 sites from which children's centres operate, the majority of which are county council owned. Hampshire is unusual as we have two mobile centres (buses) which serve a number of the existing centres and support their "reach" into the community.
- The total Hampshire spend for children's centres is currently about £17 million. Previously this money was ring-fenced in the Surestart Grant. That

grant was abolished this year and incorporated into the new Early Intervention Grant (EIG). This is a non-ring-fenced grant which serves a number of different purposes.

- In the light of the significant financial pressures faced by the Children's Services Department, and in the context of a financial framework previously agreed to protect children's social services and to a lesser degree, school improvement, the Executive Lead Member for Children's Services agreed a proposal in February to reduce this budget by £6 million as part of the departmental budget setting process. This level of reduction was judged to be commensurate with the level of saving required from those universal services not protected by the financial framework. Some other budgets, such as community education, are being completely withdrawn.
- A consultation commenced on 31 January outlining a set of proposals about how this saving could be achieved and seeking views from children and families and partners and other stakeholders. There is a legal requirement to consult if we are considering the closure of a centre – which we are not – or a substantive change to services – which potentially we are.
- The consultation was criticised, among other things, for the complexity of some of the communication material and therefore the period of consultation was extended until April 15th. Additional material was produced alongside the extension to better explain the existing proposals. The thrust of the proposals is to achieve the savings with the least possible impact on direct services but especially those services for the most vulnerable families. The proposals in essence are as follows.
- Substantial savings would be made from the reduction of central costs which were created by the rapid expansion of the programme, the demands of direct local authority management, and the previous government's prescriptive expectations.
- A number of individual centres would be **merged** managerially. This means the number of separate entities would reduce from 81 to 53 but it has been argued strongly that this does not mean, as reported, that 28 centres will close. All of those centres should continue to function, through their existing main locations and would remain locally identifiable as before.
- All centres would be **clustered** into local groups linked largely but not strictly to district council boundaries in order to enable more efficient senior oversight and management.
- All of the clusters would be offered for tender to the voluntary and independent sector so that no children's centre would be directly managed by the local authority.
- There would finally be a review at a local level in the provision of some services. Critical services to the most vulnerable children and families would be protected. More discretionary services including for families in less need would be of a lesser priority but may be retained through voluntary support or other means according to local determination. The service specification would protect core provision for the most vulnerable while allowing providers

room to develop services now and over time in accordance with local preference and need.

- Once implemented the proposals would result in a retained investment of £11 million in Hampshire children's centres. The 53 merged centres would continue to function through all of the existing 81 main sites together with the overwhelming majority of the existing satellite locations, though that dimension must be kept flexible and left to some discretion by the new providers.
- It is important to emphasise that at this stage these are merely proposals which have been the subject of a period of public consultation. No final decision has yet been made on whether these proposals, or any modification of them, will be adopted. The comments received in response to the consultation will be carefully evaluated and a report upon them presented for consideration by those responsible for determining the matter. It is only then that a final decision will be made.

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Director of Children's Services

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