

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet
30th April 2019

Children's Select Committee
15th May 2019

Report of the Rapid Scrutiny Exercise: Children's Centres Consultation

Purpose

1. To report to Cabinet and the Children's Select Committee (CSC) the outcome of the rapid scrutiny exercise established by CSC on 5th March 2019 and held on 15th April 2019 to consider the results of the consultation, the proposed closures and the plans for alternative venues.
2. To make recommendations to the Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Skills.

Background

3. The Children's Select Committee received a report outlining the Council's proposals for moving children's centre services from buildings to community settings and the consultation process at its 5th March 2019 meeting. Following discussion, the committee resolved that a rapid scrutiny exercise be arranged to examine the results of the consultation, the proposed closures and plans for alternative venues, and investigate the potential scope for further scrutiny.

Membership

4. The following Councillors were appointed:

Cllr Trevor Carbin (Lead Member)
Cllr Russell Hawker
Cllr Bob Jones

Evidence

5. The following paper was made available prior to the meeting:
 - [Report to Children's Select Committee – 5th March 2019](#)
 - Summary Report of the Results of the Children's Centre Consultation Survey
 - Consultation Response Data
 - List of alternative community venues

- Map detailing the locations and spread of provision
- Spurgeons Children's Centre Fact Sheets

Witnesses

6. Members of the rapid scrutiny would like to thank the following councillors and officers for attending the meeting and providing evidence:

Cllr Laura Mayes, Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Skills
 Helen Jones, Director of Commissioning
 Judith Westcott, Acting Head of Commissioning and Joint Planning
 Lucy-Anne Bryant, Lead Commissioner

Deliberations

7. The detailed proposals were presented to the scrutiny members. During the ensuing discussion, questions were asked and aspects of the policy further explored, including the following:

Consultation Results

8. Members were informed that a total of 262 responses had been received to the consultation run by the Wiltshire Council Commissioning Team during 23rd January to 20th March 2019.
9. Regarding changes to proposals following the consultation it was confirmed that the proposals to be included in the report to Cabinet would be the same as those referred to in the consultation, proposing the closure of the same 6 children's centres.
10. Scrutiny members noted that Pewsey was not listed in any responses to the question, "*Which of the following Children's Centres is the closest to where you live?*". Officers had visited the local area and engaged with the school where the Pewsey children's centre is located. They had also engaged with Pewsey Town Council and Royal Wootton Bassett Area Board. It was explained by officers that no services are currently run from the Pewsey children's centre and that it delivers its services through outreach work.
11. Some of the children's centre buildings were noted as having sensory rooms, and a number of consultation responses expressed concerns that this resource would be lost. It was reported that these resources were not consistently well used. Members also heard that sensory tents, such as the one available in Westbury, were now being used as they provided the opportunity to transport the resource to various locations.
12. Several responses to the consultation suggested that alternative income sources for children's centres could be sought through either voluntary "pay what you can" fees or charging small standard fees for services. Members

requested the views of officers and the Executive on this option. Concern was raised that either of these methods would inadvertently alienate the most vulnerable. Whilst the voluntary payment scheme would not oblige users to pay for services, those who could not afford a voluntary payment would potentially be discouraged from accessing services due to embarrassment.

13. Members queried the other children's centres located in less-deprived areas which were not included in the proposals, despite the report to Children's Select on 5th March referencing location in a less-deprived area as a reason for proposing closure of other centres. It was explained that the centre in Tisbury was retained for storage due to its size, at a rent of £600/year. The centre in Tidworth was retained to ensure ongoing provision due to significant army rebasing in the area. The centres in Calne and Chippenham were retained due to their strategic locations.
14. The members questioned the apparent reliance upon the deprivation indices in the proposals presented in the report to Children's Select Committee. It was reported that the criteria considered when developing the proposals included levels of deprivation in the local area, usage of the children's centre building and utilising outreach provision to reach the most vulnerable who are not using the children's centre buildings. Members requested that emphasis also be placed on the other rationale for the proposals, so that it didn't appear to rely solely on levels of deprivation. Officers accepted that the report to the Children's Select Committee appeared to incorrectly rely upon the deprivation indices and would make amendments following the member's comments and will be including in the Cabinet report the other reasons which included low usage particularly by families from vulnerable groups.

Consultation Reach

15. The consultation was advertised in children's centres and sent to all registered centre users who had provided an email address. This totalled approximately 5000 emails. The Facebook link had received around 1,500 click-throughs in total.
16. The face-to-face public meetings were similarly advertised however received low attendance with 10 parents and 14 professionals attending the 12 events. Comments from attendees to the events were recorded as part of the overall consultation feedback.

Alternative Venues

17. The research undertaken on potential alternative community venues was questioned by the scrutiny members. It was explained that the alternative community venues referenced in the list received by the members had been contacted in January 2019 and had expressed their commitment. Members questioned whether the list was still reliable as they had heard that some venues had more recently stated they would not be willing or able to host. It

was requested that further research be performed, and the list updated with greater detail. The suitability of using library space was also questioned. It was explained that library space could be used out-of-hours and objects be moved to create space if necessary (**recommendation 6**).

18. Members questioned what would be done to ensure support services continue to be accessed by those living in isolated areas. The charity-funded “Big Blue Bus” was referenced as an example of one method. It was explained that many people living in isolated areas already struggle to reach children’s centres due to the large distances involved.
19. Emphasis was placed by the members on ensuring that activities offered through alternative venues are visible to everyone who needs access, with a focus on the most vulnerable. Members questioned how this would be done. It was reported that the Community Engagement Manager and Local Area Co-ordinator roles were being utilised to develop a network of advertising the available outreach work to those who need it. Members asked how efficient this approach was and it was reported that the approach was consistently being developed and improved. Concerns were expressed by the scrutiny members regarding the coverage across the whole county, with specific concern regarding the northernmost areas.
20. Members queried whether it was possible to develop a comprehensive list of the community service activities available and to then incorporate this list into the network model mentioned above to improve the visibility of provision. It was requested that the planned approach to ensuring ongoing visibility of services be set out in the Cabinet report (**recommendation 5**).
21. It was reported that service users were increasingly accessing information through digital technology, including hearing about the services available through social media, rather than through a physical children’s centre building. The scrutiny members agreed that these changing needs needed to be met, along with avoiding the exclusion of others. It was felt that the definition of the services “meeting changing needs” needed to be properly defined within the Cabinet report.
22. Scrutiny members were particularly concerned that the removal of children’s centres and moves to alternative venues in the form of community-located outreach could be interpreted as a sign that the services currently available were being “run down”. Reference was made from the scrutiny members to services in the Warminster, where consultees claimed that promised services did not happen. Members were reassured that this was not the case. It was noted that previously children’s centre buildings were relied upon as a visible sign of the services. Officers were now working with families who utilise digital platforms, including social media, to access events and services. They explained that this allowed for flexibility in the choice of venues. Members sought assurance that there would be an appropriate balance between reflecting changing user needs and continuing to consider those who still valued children’s centre buildings.

23. Visibility of the services and the point of first contact were noted as key areas to address under the new way of working. Ensuring people know who and what to connect with to reach the services they require would be crucial to success.
24. The savings figure of £250,000 was equivalent to a total reduction of 7% across the budget area. Assurance was provided that the services could continue to be delivered through alternative venues under the new structure and it was confirmed that Spurgeons had agreed that they would be willing and able to deliver their work out in the community (**recommendation 1**).
25. Scrutiny members suggested that monitoring of the alternative venues be established using the baseline figures from 2018/19. It was requested that the monitoring should include activity usage and outcomes from usage, although it was acknowledged that the latter may present a challenge as it would require measuring the impact of early help and prevention (**recommendation 7**).

Other Considerations

26. Members sought assurance that the children's centre buildings would not be left vacant if the proposals were approved. It was confirmed that new tenants would be sought to avoid the buildings being left vacant. These would include childcare providers, with providers in the buildings paying rent to Wiltshire Council. Members were reassured that a strategic map was being developed and that it was not a case of closing those buildings that would be most profitable to lease (**recommendation 4**).
27. Members confirmed with the officers and the executive that maternity staff should be included in the list of key stakeholders referenced in the 5th March report to the Children's Select Committee. They also requested that the Health Select Committee be made aware of the outcome of the 30th April Cabinet meeting. Particularly regarding the addition of pre-natal as key stakeholders, along with the existing key stakeholders relevant to the Health Select Committee.
28. Members asked whether research into the work of other local authorities had been undertaken. Similar rural counties, including Somerset and Dorset, had been contacted regarding their experiences with these services. It was noted that physical children's centres worked better in urban environments, where issues of user transport are less of an issue.
29. There was concern that storage space for equipment would be lost with the closure of any of the children's centres. It was reported that leasing strategic storage locations was relatively cheap compared with whole buildings, and that equipment could also be kept with some service providers.
30. Responding to a question from the scrutiny members it was reported that a local area's town or parish council could open conversations with Wiltshire Council

regarding paying to keep their children's centre open. Officers confirmed that they would be happy to discuss the potential, but that areas would need to bear in mind additional staffing costs and outreach work. It was also noted that Wiltshire Council would not risk damaging the alternative venue approach..

Recommendations

The rapid scrutiny group recommends that the Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Skills notes the following recommendations with regards to the Children's Centres Consultation:

- 1. Provides reassurance that the current services will, at minimum, continue at the existing levels when moving to the alternative venues and confirms the commitment from Spurgeons and The Rise Trust to offer this level of services.**
- 2. Provides an outline of alternative venues and the approach for delivering alternative provision at the 30th April Cabinet meeting.**
- 3. Develop a comprehensive plan, including contract management, to ensure that the families with the greatest need are accessing a service**
- 4. Provides assurance and confirmation when available that the children's centre buildings will be used by alternative providers and will not be left vacant.**
- 5. Develops a comprehensive and evolving list of the community activities available and provide the list to the Community Engagement Managers and Local Area Co-ordinators to raise the visibility of services offered in the community.**
- 6. Undertakes further research into the list of alternative venues and update the list with greater detail, including detail on the venues and the commitment to the services they would host.**
- 7. Develops a monitoring framework for the alternative venues starting with the 2018/19 baseline data and report to Children's Select Committee 12 months from the commencement of that provision.**

Cllr Trevor Carbin, Lead Member for the Rapid Scrutiny Exercise

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Background documents

None