



Report to the Children's Social Care and Learning Select Committee

Title:	Children's Centres & Early Help
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Purpose of Agenda Item

The purpose of this short summary report to the Select Committee is to

- Confirm the current purpose of the 35 children's centres in Buckinghamshire
- Describe the current delivery model that has been in place since September 2015
- Provide some headline information on current performance
- Set out the main challenges facing the programme and how these are being responded to

This item is being brought to the Select Committee for information.

Purpose of Children's Centres

Children's Centres have always been required to work with families most in need of support. Since September 2015, under the new contracts with providers, there has been a requirement for children's centres to increase the proportion of work with families requiring early help and those with complex needs (including families where children are subject to a child protection plans and children subject to child in need interventions with social care). This in turn means a reduction in universal services for all families, because resource needs to be concentrated on the delivery of targeted interventions. The new delivery model being implemented by two new providers will be explained in more detail below.

As set out in the Council's specification, the purpose of children's centres is to provide access to support for families so that children under 5 are:

- In homes where families are able to provide a safe, secure and stable environment
- Ready to benefit from school

- Meeting the necessary development milestones for their age and for those who are not doing so to be identified and supported to access relevant services
- Are cared for by parents/carers who understand their parenting role and have the skills and knowledge to support their children to develop socially, emotionally and to be healthy

Delivery Model

After a tendering exercise last year, the providers operating the County's 35 children's centres are as follows:

- Action for Children- 25 centres
- Spurgeons- 3 centres in Aylesbury
- 6 Schools- running 7 individual centres

As a result of the tendering exercise, the commissioning model changed from a service which was partly operated by a Council based in-house team, to all of the centres now being outsourced to external providers. All providers are contract managed by Joint Commissioners employed by the Council.

The largest provider, Action for Children, has recently gone through a process of re-structuring the 25 children's centres into clusters in order to make the savings required from the tender process. Centres are arranged in groups consisting of 3-4 centres each, with a Centre Co-ordinator overseeing their management. In order to make best use of resources timetables are planned so that services cover each group of centres, to avoid duplication of services across centres. Advisory boards, which provide support and challenge from the community and partners, have been re-structured to fit the clusters.

Family Support Workers (FSWs) now work across their allocated group rather than being attached to one specific centre which allows greater flexibility to deploy resource where particular specialisms are required or to move staff to different centres to respond to different levels of need such as higher case-loads. The re-structure has also involved the introduction of two Family Support Worker roles. One FSW role solely undertakes the outreach targeted work with individual families and the other FSW role works in universal services to ensure that vulnerable families are being identified early-on and are referred through for more targeted support. All staff involved in working with families and children have particular training and skills on the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). So they can identify where children are meeting milestones and where there is some developmental delay, and to plan work with the family to support development (with relevant EYFS themed activities etc.) and support referrals to other services.

Families will have experienced some changes, both through a reduction in the number of universal ('open to all') sessions that they can access and also the introduction of a small

charge for universal services which all providers have been collecting from 1st April.¹ All proceeds from charges are re-invested back into children's centre services.

Volunteers have always been used by children's centres but this is being expanded with ambitious targets. For example, Action for Children currently have 30 volunteers within children's centres and are planning to increase this to 90 to support the delivery of universal services (registering families, answering the door, set up and pack-away etc.). Another development is the use of private providers who will be given access to use centre buildings in return for places in their sessions for target families identified by centres. This increases the number of universal sessions that centres are able to offer but without resource required from centres themselves (except the use of the site).

What does the family support from children's centres 'look like'?

FSWs provide outreach support in family homes, with families requiring early help and those needing targeted intervention to address more complex issues. This involvement starts with the use of the Family Star assessment and engagement tool which is used to work with the family to understand their needs and develop an Action Plan. Following this the FSW will use a range of different evidence based approaches, including parenting techniques, baby massage and play to stimulate development and attachment, to support improvements. As well as focusing on strategies to benefit the child, workers also work closely with parents to support benefit and housing applications, return to work preparation (accessing courses and arranging childcare) so as to build the resilience of the whole family. Ideally each intervention lasts for no more than six months with a review using the Star at three months and at the end to measure progress.

Performance Overview

The Council has regular meetings to hold children's centres providers to account and challenge performance, as well as to work together to understand how improvements can be made based on best practice. All children's centre providers receive contract monitoring on a quarterly basis from the Council and every centre has an Annual Review which focuses on the quality of the offer at each individual centre, including reviewing the impact that centre is having on its target groups of children. This is supplemented by regular update meetings, phone calls and provider forums so that dialogue about progress is continuous.

Almost two-thirds of under 5s in Buckinghamshire are registered with a children's centre (this is a figure which has increased since Quarter 1), which is a positive achievement given that there has been a large transfer of centres to two new providers during that time.

¹ Some centres already levied a small charge but now this has been introduced consistently across all centres. To ensure the charge is not a barrier to those needing a service, any family unable to afford the charge is asked to speak to their centre to explore how access can be supported.

As explained above, the children's centres programme is undergoing a considerable improvement journey in order to ensure centres are meeting the requirement to increase work with families requiring early help and more intensive support. Since the new contracts started in September 2015, with the impact of the transfer to new providers, it is early days in terms of expecting there to have been significant progress against targets.

However, there is some emerging evidence of positive increases in family support work with families. For example, across the County as at Quarter 4 (January-March 2016), there were 278 families receiving targeted case work that have had a minimum of 5 or more engagements with centres. This is an increase of 93 families from Quarter 1 (April-June). The majority of the work is with families requiring Level 2 early help (Thresholds Document). This is positive because it shows preventative work is being completed. From September 2015 the requirement has been to be working with more families at Level 3 Early Help and with families where there is a 'child in need' as deemed by the Children Act 1989. In Q1, centres were engaging with 50 families with early help requirements/complex needs, this has increased to 80 families in Quarter 4.

Some of the most common and inter-connected challenges facing the families receiving targeted support from the children's centres are issues with managing children's behaviour, parental/carer low self-esteem, mental health issues, post-natal depression, housing issues, debt and domestic abuse. Some examples of impact range from reports from a social worker that there had been a reduction in child protection incidents since a centre has become involved, identification of child neglect through a home visit or child attending a centre so the family get access to social care support and report from a health visitor that a centre has identified children with autism earlier than usual so appropriate plans can be put into place.

Key Challenges and Responses

- Current financial pressures mean that there are significant financial savings which need to be made over the next two years, whilst also ensuring that the children centre's focus on those children most in need.
The response to this challenge has been to set up an overall Family Support Review to ensure that there is a coordinated offer of services. The review will include looking at variations in need across the county and how these could be better met, good practice nationally and internationally, how buildings could be better utilised within the current challenging environment. The review will also take full account of the views of families and providers.
- To continue the focus on targeting the support for families by identifying children's needs at the earliest opportunity so they receive the right service at the right time.
- Whilst balancing the need for all families to have the opportunity to access some level of universal service