

Re-structuring of the Early Years, Children's Centre and Early Help

Summary of Consultation Results

Introduction

Between 25th April and the 6th June 2014, extensive consultations were undertaken with children, parents, stakeholders and relevant staff to seek views on proposals to save £1.5 million in the next financial year from the Council's Children's Centre and Early Years budgets. They fund a range of support services as follows:

1. Children's Centre services
2. Early Years Foundation Stage Team
3. Parent Support Advisors
4. Specialist Support for families with complex needs
5. Community Play services

Formal consultation took place for the changes proposed for Children's Centre services, the Early Years Foundation Stage Team and Parent Support Advisors where new service models are proposed. Informal consultation took place for Community Play and Specialist family support, as new models are still to be developed as part of the commissioning process.

1. Children's Centre Consultation

Views about the proposals were sought through a variety of methods in order to engage families and stakeholders in the consultation process.

- i) A questionnaire was designed to seek the views of families on the proposals and how they thought they may be affected. It was available on-line on the Council's website, and in paper form at Children's Centres, One Stop Shops, Libraries and Leisure Centres. A total of 298 questionnaires were received during the consultation period (122 postal/176 online). Over 70% of respondents were parents or carers with at least one child under 5, and just over 50% were currently using or had used a Children's Centre service.
- ii) Consultation also took place with parents attending groups run by the Children Centre Services. 29 groups were attended (14 universal, 10 targeted, 2 parent forums, 2 other organisation led groups and 1 parents volunteer training session). 274 families attended these groups. Group discussions included asking what families valued the most about the Children's Centre groups, what difference it had made to their family, explaining each of the proposals and then asking for feedback. The group consultations were also used as an opportunity to raise awareness of the consultation and to encourage families to share their views.
- iii) Children using Children's Centres were consulted and 4 children's groups were visited and approximately 40 children were asked what they enjoyed most

about the group they attended and the difference it had made. Responses were articulated and strengthened through art and crafts.

- iv) Key stakeholders were also consulted including Advisory Board Members, partners from Health, Education Groups using Children's Centres.

a) Service User feedback

- Proposal to commission and fund targeted services only

The biggest concern expressed by parents was the proposal to not commission and fund universal groups. 64% of respondents (96 families) who are current/ previous service users disagreed with this proposal (67% of questionnaire respondents overall). The key concerns were:

- i) The loss of peer support provided by the universal groups and not being able to access these when needed. Many parents described these services as a lifeline when they most needed them and feared this proposal would increase their social isolation.
- ii) The way in which families in greatest need would be classified and concern that they themselves would not meet the criteria.
- iii) The potential stigma attached to targeted groups which may be a barrier to families using them.
- iv) Opportunities for early help may be missed with universal groups.
- v) Reduction of the opportunity for children to mix socially, play and interact with other children and the loss to the wider community benefit this may bring

- Paying to attend groups

Nearly 80% of respondents said they would consider paying to attend some of the universal groups, with 27% willing to pay between £2 and £5 and 51% under £2.

- Proposal to creating two service groupings (consolidating management and administration)

40% of respondents (60 families) who are current /previous service users (and 40% of respondents overall) disagreed with the proposal to consolidate the management and administration of Children Centre services to reduce costs, however 32% did agree with this change. Of those who disagreed, the main concern was the potential impact on the quality of the service and the potential travel costs if families had to travel to one of the 4 main Children's Centres. This was a particular concern expressed in the group discussions, not just in the rural groups such as Chew Valley and Peasedown St John but also in Weston and St Martin's Garden Children's Centres.

- Proposal to reducing opening times of some Children's Centres

45% of respondents (67 families) who are current / previous service users (48% of questionnaire respondents overall) disagreed with the proposal to reduce the opening times to when the Children's Centre staff were running groups at the centre, whilst 25% agreed. The two main concerns expressed by parents were being unable to access the service when needed, with the effect that this may have on increasing isolation, and the cost of travelling to an open centre. Parents asked for more clarity about the reduced opening hours proposal.

b) Children's Centre Advisory Board feedback

The concerns raised echoed those of parents around the potential stigma associated with targeted groups and how universal provision is often the gateway to targeted support, as well as concern over the future quality and capacity of the service if the management is combined.

Concerns were highlighted such as managing the buildings and equipment, co-ordinating lettings to partner organisations and accountability for health and safety.

Specific concerns were raised about the proposed model by Chew Valley, particularly about the outreach/home visiting and the impact this may have on increasing isolation of families living in rural areas and the loss of peer support gained from interacting with other families in group settings. This was felt to be particularly likely where there is limited opportunity for them to develop naturally. The other concern expressed related to the coverage of Chew Valley and the need to consider cross boundary working with North Somerset.

Specific concerns were raised by the First Steps Board of Trustees that the proposals didn't fully reflect the First Steps model where much of the contact with families is through the delivery of their day care provision. Particular concern was expressed about the consequences of not having funding to provide a flexible day care model, which was felt might have an adverse effect on children.

c) Wider Stakeholder feedback

A common theme was concern over how those most in need will be classified, plus concern over reduced access to universal groups and opportunity to detect issues early. Schools and nurseries who are currently located on the same site as a Children's Centre expressed concern about the potential increase in footfall to their receptions, or enquires to the nursery staff if the centre is closed.

Concern that the Children's Centre buildings are currently underutilised as community resources and the ability to charge for the hire of rooms/office space was expressed by most stakeholders. Many useful ideas, offers and suggestions were made which will be explored as the new model develops.

Most stakeholders confirmed they would be happy to continue using the Children's Centre venues but would need to review lone working arrangements. Further issues raised included the capacity of health visitors if the support of Children's Centre workers was withdrawn and Social Care also expressed concern regarding their future capacity and how the proposals would affect their ability to "step down" families they are working with to universal provision.

d) Children's feedback

Children most valued the opportunity to play with other children and outside, particularly where the family home didn't have a garden.

2. Early Years and Foundation Stage Team Consultation

The Early Years and Foundation Stage (EYFS) team currently provide free training and support to over 300 early years and childcare settings across Bath and North East Somerset. In order to make the required savings to the Early Years budget, it has been proposed that the EYFS team focus their resources and services into the areas of highest priority which have been defined as:

- Ofsted graded “Inadequate” or “Requires Improvement”
- Settings supporting vulnerable children (in line with the Narrowing the Gap criteria)
- Support for children with special educational needs and disabilities
- Support for Equalities practice

An explanatory email explaining the proposal and questionnaire was circulated to all early year settings including infant and primary schools, group-based early years settings, childminders, out of school and holiday clubs, maintained nurseries and independent school nurseries.

Out of 21 responses, nearly 50% were from childminders, 32% from privately run groups (e.g. privately owned nurseries) followed by 11% from voluntary or committee run group based settings. Over 90% agreed that it is right to prioritise support to the above settings. 70% also agreed that it is reasonable to ask settings to pay for their training and development and the majority agreed that the current annual Early Years Hub Package Membership is affordable.

A quarter of respondents indicated that the reduction of subsidised support and training would have a high impact on their setting and comments reflected concerns about the cost of future training and how highly settings value support from the EYFS team. Additional comments from this consultation included concern about how the increase in costs for training could be passed to families and the possibility that some settings would take up fewer training opportunities.

A number of suggestions were made, including expanding on-line help and support, making compulsory training (such as safeguarding) free and only charging settings for those courses considered to be for enrichment purposes.

3. Parent Support Advisors consultation

The Parent Support Advisor (PSA) service works with parents/carers of children ages 5-11 and aims to build trust and positive communication between parents and schools to ensure children achieve better outcomes. Views from both schools and parents who have accessed the service in the past year were sought as part of this consultation.

a) Schools Consultation

13 schools responded to a Survey Monkey questionnaire which asked:

- How do you rate the PSA service?
- What are the benefits to children?
- What would be the impact on your school if this funded service ceased?

Over 60% of respondents described the service as excellent, 27% described it as good. 58% listed improved parental relationships as the most beneficial aspect to children followed by 33% improved engagement in school. Concerns were expressed that if the service should cease there was a danger of increased long term behavioural difficulties and difficulty in engaging with harder-to-reach parents.

Just over 90% of respondents indicated this service should be a priority for the Council and over 60% were of the view that the Schools Forum should pay for the PSA if council funding stops. Out of 8 schools that responded, 63% indicated they would not continue to “buy in” the service as a cluster if the service was not subsidised by either the Council or Schools Forum and 80% confirmed they would not be able to pick up funding of a minimum of 1 day per week to keep the PSA post available.

b) Parents Consultation

Five parents who had received or were still receiving support from PSAs were interviewed and asked:

- What work did the PSA do with you and your child?
- Has this support made a difference to the way that your child or you interact with the school?
- How could the service better reach people who need it?

All parents highly valued the service provided by PSAs and two parents commented how they felt it was the only service available to them to support communication with school and how they didn't feel judged. The interviews also revealed the flexible way in which PSAs work with families with varying levels of need, with parents from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities and with parents of children with learning disabilities.

Parents particularly valued help in navigating services to support them and their child as well as the co-ordination of practical support to apply for an SEN statement and organising Team around the Child (TAC) meetings.

4. Specialist Support for Families with Complex Needs consultation

Southside Family Project is currently commissioned to provide specialist family support for children aged 0-11 years and families who have not traditionally engaged with statutory services or who have entrenched complex needs. Issues may include; domestic violence, substance misuse, neglect, relationship conflict, loss and bereavement, adult mental health and fathers not engaged with their children.

This informal consultation focused on how to reshape services by asking:

- What do you value most about the services you received?
- What difference has the provision made to you and your family?
- How could the service better reach people who really need it?

a) Service User Consultation

A focus group was held with 16 parents from Southside Specialist Family Support (which supports 45 children from 0 up to 25 years of age).

Participants commented on how they value the whole family approach and how important it was being able to reach staff whenever they needed help. Many of the parents who took part had experienced traumatic events at home which had made it extremely difficult for them and their children to feel part of their community. Social isolation was a previous issue which had been overcome by staff initially visiting them at home. A high number of parents experienced mental health problems and described their experience of provision as a “lifeline” at a time of crisis which had developed into a trusting and longstanding commitment to subsequently train themselves to become peer parent support workers.

b) Children’s Consultation

One young person indicated how valuable it was that the whole family had received support.

c) Stakeholder’s Consultation

Professional play workers, family workers, social workers and the Connecting Families team were consulted for their views on how the service supported their work.

A key theme to emerge from conversations with stakeholders was the importance of both universal and targeted provision being available to complement each other. Concerns were raised about the potential for families being less likely to benefit from targeted groups and less likely to engage if there is not universal support, due to associated stigma. Social Care professionals refer to the service as a means of stepping down support to families who have been on child protection plans and universal provision offers a way for families who have previously received high level support, to touch base and for staff to monitor their progress.

5. Community Play Services

Bath Area Play Project and Wansdyke Play Association is currently commissioned to provide open access community play sessions to 5-13 year olds and their families, through play days, play rangers in parks, targeted one to one Family Play Inclusion work and Playful Families groups.

Again, this informal consultation focused on how to reshape services by asking:

- What do you value most about the services you receive?
- What difference has the provision made to you and your family?
- How could the service better reach people who really need it?

a) Service User Consultation

Visits were made to four universal community play sessions in Bath, Midsomer Norton and Clandown and three targeted Family Play Inclusion groups. 46 parents were consulted (45% from targeted provision) and 47 children (64% from targeted provision).

The targeted family groups commented on how they valued the whole family approach and being part of the group alongside their children as opposed to being separated as a family with children of different ages attending different groups. Several parents commented on how play, as an intervention, is accessible and easy to take part in.

Parents spoke about feeling isolated because of their lack of confidence in parenting and fear of being judged, due to their children's difficult behaviour. Parents also spoke about mental health problems and how they felt accepted and included at play sessions. A high proportion also confirmed that the sessions were the only opportunity they had to meet other parents and for their children to play with other children.

In four cases, parents stated they had received information from play workers that they had not had previously from schools, social care or primary care. This included how to access benefits for carers of disabled children and links to extra-curricular activities.

b) Children's Consultation

A key theme from conversations with children was how they valued time with play workers, could talk to them about any worries and how, if they didn't use play rangers or family play support, they would play indoors on their computer games and were not allowed to the park unless play rangers were there.

c) Stakeholder Consultation

Professional play workers, family workers, social workers and the Connecting Families team were consulted to gain views on how the Community Play Service supports their work. Visits were also made to Behaviour and Attendance Panels in each locality (primary and secondary) to inform them of the consultation and welcome feedback on how they worked with the service.

A key theme to emerge from conversations with stakeholders was that this was one of the only preventative services targeted at 5-13 year olds besides the Parents Support Advisor (PSA) service. Several professionals commented on how using play as an intervention is a positive and unthreatening way to establish relationships with both children and their parents. Schools represented on the Behaviour and Attendance Panels suggested that the Family Play Inclusion Service could continue to be funded through the Schools Forum. They reported on how the service offered an independent, family focused service which helped support their work with children and young people having difficulties with school as a result of their behaviour.