

Children's Centres – Statement from Cllr Liz Hardman

B&NES Children's Centres and Early Years have been targeted for one of the largest budgetary cuts, losing £2,337,000 over the next three years, or in other words, 40% of their budget. It is planned to cut £273,000 in 2013/14, £228,000 in 2014/15, rising to a massive £1,836,000 in 2015/2016. There will be a complete restructuring of services to move to a wholly targeted model. Children's Centres will cease all council funded "universal" access services, with services targeted upon the most deprived children and families. The cuts will lead to the loss of 30 full time jobs with the result that there will be huge cuts in the services they provide.

Whilst it is absolutely essential that the most needy families should receive our services, research has shown that where there are universal services, far more needy families are reached. These families do not feel "stigmatised". Evidence from the Children's Centres tells us that 50% of their referrals come from these universal services.

So what services are offered? Firstly a universal service for all children with their parents/carers under school age. These range from parenting groups, to a drop-in baby clinic, to a careers service, to a support group for families with children with special needs, a young parents' group and opportunities for pre-school speech and language therapy and much more.

They are working in partnership with health visitors, social workers, the CAB and job centres attracting these services to the Children's Centres so that families can readily access these services.

Social care thresholds are high. Children's Centres do the essential work which helps to prevent families requiring more help and support and costing more money further down the line.

So let me end with some figures: In B&NES the number of families seen from April 1st 2011 to March 31st 2012 were 3,374. For the same period, almost two thirds of the total estimated number of children aged 0-4, living in the 30% most deprived areas across B&NES have been seen by Children's Centre services.

On behalf of the Labour Group I'd like give notice that if these cuts remain in the budget proposal, the Labour Group will be moving an amendment seeking to put a brake on these cuts.

We would look at taking money as a one-off from reserves and from unexpected funding that we have received in the final settlement from the New Homes Bonus. We would pay the money back into reserves from cuts to other services that haven't borne the same level of reductions, for example Major Projects. We'd also like to see an increase in the income generated by the Children's Centre buildings.

On behalf of the Labour Group, I would urge you to support us in trying to prevent these cuts.

The Administration has promised us that it will be protecting frontline services. Tell me: How can cuts of this scale to services used by the youngest and most vulnerable members of our community possibly be considered anything other than a huge cut to a frontline service?