

<b>Meeting:</b>	<b>Children and young people scrutiny committee</b>
<b>Meeting date:</b>	<b>Tuesday 19 January 2021</b>
<b>Title of report:</b>	<b>Provision of children centre service in Bromyard area: pre-decision scrutiny</b>
<b>Report by:</b>	<b>Director of Children and Families</b>

## **Classification**

Open

## **Decision type**

This is not an executive decision

## **Wards affected**

Bishops Frome & Cradley; Bromyard Bringsty; Bromyard West; Hampton; Three Crosses;

## **Purpose**

To consider proposals for the integration of the council commissioned early help children's centre service for the Bromyard area (worth £25k per annum) with the existing in-house provision from 2021.

The Bromyard Reach area is the only part of Herefordshire where Children's Centre provision is externally commissioned. All other areas are supported via an in-house service which is centrally governed and managed. It is intended that all children centre services are integrated across Herefordshire.

## **Recommendation(s)**

**That:**

- (a) The committee reviews the proposals for the provision of the children centre service in the Bromyard area through the council's in-house service and determines any recommendations it wishes to make to the executive, which may enhance the effectiveness of the plans.**

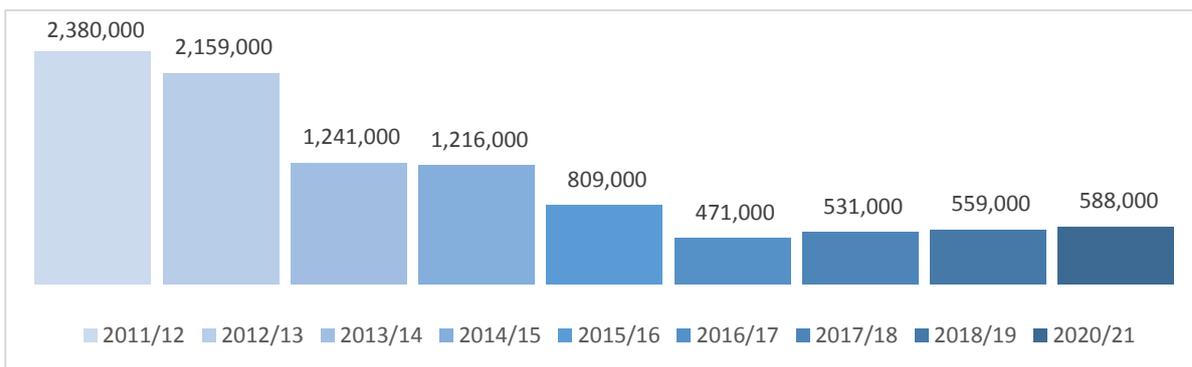
## Alternative options

1. Direct award of a new contract to the incumbent provider. Market testing undertaken in 2018 indicated that there may be other alternative providers which would require the council to undertake a competitive procurement process. A direct award can only be undertaken in line with the council's contract procedure rules.
2. Re-commission a new service to be delivered via an open procurement process in accordance with the council's contract procedure rules. Continuing separate provision in the Bromyard area will limit the council's ability to quickly and consistently adapt services to support vulnerable children and families with the most need for early help as demand fluctuates across the county.

## Key considerations

3. The Childcare Act 2006 sets out a duty for councils to improve the inequalities of young children in its area. The Act describes the duties of local authorities to consider providing services through a children's centre but does not prevent an English local authority or any of their relevant partners from providing early childhood services otherwise than through a children's centre. Statutory guidance describes children's centres as being as much about making appropriate and integrated services available, as it is about providing premises in particular geographical areas. Ofsted inspection of children centres was suspended in 2015 and the management of children's centre buildings was separated from direct family support some time ago.
4. Children's centre services operate as part of a strategic whole family and whole system approach to early help, supporting families with different levels of need that may require universal, targeted, multi-agency or specialist/statutory support (Appendix 1). The work of children's centre services is informed by the number of 'known' 0-5 year olds living in the reach area. The core purpose of children's centre services is about improving outcomes for young children and their families, with a particular focus on early help for the most disadvantaged families, in order to reduce inequalities in:
  - i. child development and school readiness
  - ii. parenting aspirations, self-esteem and parenting skills
  - iii. child and family health and life chances
5. A core purpose of children's centre services across Herefordshire is to provide appropriate support for families of children aged 0-5 who may need some extra early help or, in some cases, support those that need further or serious help (Appendix 1). Advice and guidance can be provided around healthy lifestyles, school readiness, managing behaviour, nursery education funding etc. or families can be signposted to appropriate support elsewhere such as breastfeeding, immunization, weaning, domestic violence services, and job centre plus. The range of support can include facilitating midwife and health visiting clinics, supervised contact, adult learning, and parenting support. As funding has reduced nationally since 2011, the council has increasingly focussed its children's centre activities on vulnerable families through a more targeted approach that is enhanced by partnerships across a breadth of early year's provision.

6. Investment in children's centre provision in Herefordshire has reduced significantly since 2011, although this has increased above inflation since 2016/17.



7. Bromyard is the only area in Herefordshire where children's centre services have been procured from an external provider. Services across the rest of the council are delivered directly by the council's Early Help team. In 2019 the council's in-house children's centre service for the rest of the county was revised to:
- ensure vulnerable families with children under 5 years are supported to bring about sustainable changes to improve outcomes for these families
  - ensure there is no 'postcode lottery' for vulnerable families
  - improve the knowledge of community assets available to all the family
8. This revision has underpinned the team's move to a more targeted and responsive approach to vulnerable families in line with 'right time, right place' principles described by Herefordshire's Children and Young People's Plan. Working flexibly across the county, the in-house team consists of two Early Years Senior Support Workers, three Early Years Family Connectors, ten Early Years Support Workers, and four Early Help Information & Signposting posts. The in-house service is overseen by an Advisory Group made up of key partners including CCG, Public Health, Early Years providers, and Wye Valley NHS Trust. Central management and oversight of delivery has ensured a focus on achieving sustainable change, consistency of support provided regardless of location, and reinforced the focus on maximising community assets. More recent developments as a result of the coronavirus pandemic include use of group chat platforms, virtual online sessions, social media and engaging with families face to face via doorstep/ garden visits.
9. Ensuring an efficient, continually evolving and responsive offer from the children's centre provision in line with the needs of local families, enhanced by existing community assets, is at the core of the proposed decision to deliver children's centre provision via the in-house team across the county.
10. Historically, the level of resource allocated to the Bromyard area exceeded that of other parts of the County. To bring funding into parity across the County, in July 2018 the then Cabinet Member for Young People and Children's Wellbeing made the decision for *resources for the Bromyard area be tapered to align with other parts of Herefordshire, based upon the population of 0-5 year olds, reducing from £65k in 2018/19 to £25k per year by March 2021*. The subsequent contract was expected to achieve greater take-up of nursery education funding, deliver a consistent countywide approach to formal requests for early help support and improve service performance reporting.

11. The Hope Family Centre in Bromyard via the existing contract between Hope for Children & Their Families Limited and the council supports local families through, for example, providing advice and information, running universal sessions such as 'let's play', providing healthy eating and weaning sessions identifying families who may benefit from early help assessments (EHA's), and supporting families (through EHA's) to achieve sustainable change. The contract value for 2020/21 is £25,000 for an average of 11hrs support per week, although hours delivered has averaged at 17.5 hrs per week over the first two quarters of this financial year.
12. The Hope Family Centre delivers this service alongside a broad range of other services and facilities based at the Hope Family Centre, including a Child Contact Centre, Early Years Nursery and pre-school, Hope Community Hub, a Community Café and facilities and venue hire.
13. There are a number of areas where the incumbent provider has performed well in comparison to other parts of the county, including the number of distinct adults given advice and guidance and the provision of Baby Lets Play and Lets Play sessions delivered, which should act as a key pathway into early help assessments. In addition, Nursery Education Funding take up has significantly improved for the Bromyard reach area over the last year, from 9 children in the autumn term of 2019, to 18 children in the summer term of 2020.
14. A key measure of whether services are delivering the objective of reaching vulnerable families is the number of formal early help assessments being undertaken with families in each area.
15. Herefordshire's successful Early Help approach has delivered evidenced sustainable change for many vulnerable families across Herefordshire in line with the National Troubled Families Programme. Despite the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic, quarter 1 and 2 of 2021 has seen Herefordshire perform exceptionally well in achieving family outcomes, ranked 32nd (Quarter 1) and 40th (Quarter 2) out of 140 LA's and top and second to top in the first two quarters for claims in the West Midlands. This has only been possible due to the positive and productive relationships developed with partners across the county. This can be illustrated by the fact that 75% of Early Help assessments have been completed by partner agencies during 2020, including health visiting, midwifery, schools and Early Years settings.
16. Although the service provider for the Bromyard reach area has worked alongside the council to better align performance information and, where possible, have flexed the way in which services have been provided within the confines of the contract, the strategic direction of children's centre services as part of Herefordshire's overarching Early Help offer is expected to be most efficiently and effectively delivered via a county-wide in-house provision. As a key community asset the council wishes to continue its positive working relationship with Hope for Children & Their Families Limited to enable effective partnership working in the Bromyard area.
17. This approach to delivery will be expected to enable more efficient and successful partnership working with key services such as health visiting and midwifery to ensure partners are fully engaged with Early Help both at strategic and local area level.
18. The in-house service ensures that its approach complements wider early help developments, can respond to the varying and changing needs of vulnerable families due

to its varied 'toolkit' of skills and techniques, and can evolve in line with the Signs of Safety model currently being implemented in Herefordshire.

19. The Bromyard area, alongside all other parts of Herefordshire will benefit from children's centre staff trained in Signs of Safety, ensuring an asset based approach to supporting vulnerable families is embedded. Children's centre provision delivered in-house will ensure that all children's centre staff have access to the necessary training, support (including peer support), tools, techniques and resources to develop this approach and again, benefit from learning in other parts of the county.
20. This approach will also ensure a countywide response to any legislative, strategic or policy changes. This includes local consideration of the Children's Commissioner Report: 'Best beginnings in the Early Years', such as integrated pathway development, any recommendations following the Early Years Healthy Development Review (report due in January 2021) and to respond to local intelligence (a recent example is the rapid development of an enhanced offer for parents aged under 21yrs involving partners across the Early Years arena).
21. Realignment of the £25,000 funding to the in-house service has the potential (dependent on TUPE, mileage requirements etc.) to increase the capacity for direct support that can be delivered. With no required increase to management costs, alignment to in-house provision aims to maximise the amount of children's centre funding that is used to directly support vulnerable families.
22. The in-house team now have trained workers to deliver Baby Massage so that they can deliver directly to those 1:1 with an Early Help Assessment and have the flexibility to deliver small groups if there is a cohort in the same area that need the intervention at the same time. The in-house team can also now deliver Solihull parenting courses termly as part of a county wide provision which complements the Early Help Family Support team who deliver Triple P. The in-house team deliver Let's Talk with your Baby and Lets Talk at Home while only Let's Talk is provided by the Bromyard service. The in-house service ensures that its approach compliments wider early help developments, can respond to the varying and changing needs of vulnerable families due to its varied 'toolkit' of skills and techniques, and can evolve in line with the Signs of Safety model currently being implemented by the council in Herefordshire.

## Community impact

23. The recommendations support the council's County Plan priorities, with particular reference to specific community priorities:
  - Ensure all children are healthy, safe and inspired to achieve
  - Protect and improve the lives of vulnerable people
24. The recommendations will also support the delivery of the Children and Young People's Plan across all pledges with a particular focus on safety:
  1. Keeping children and young people safe – BE SAFE FROM HARM
  2. Improving children and young people's health and wellbeing – BE HEALTHY
  3. Helping ALL children and young people succeed – BE AMAZING
  4. Ensuring that children and young people are influential in our communities – FEEL PART OF THE COMMUNITY
25. The number of known children aged 5 years or under in the Bromyard Reach area

is 507 (March 2020), with 188 children known as living in areas of deprivation. In 2019/20 where funding levels for the year were £42,642 for Hope for Children & Their Families Limited in Bromyard via the contract with Herefordshire council provided and average of 19 families with information and advice per month across the year, provided twice weekly 'let's play' sessions attended by an average of 59 families per month and provided two healthy eating / weaning sessions per quarter.

26. In light of the coronavirus pandemic, due to restrictions on face to face sessions with families, activity has focussed on provision of information and advice (213 contacts between April and September 2020) and delivery of online sessions for families.
27. The Hope Family Centre in Bromyard is fully recognised as a key community asset and the council wishes to work successfully alongside the current provider, as it does with other key partners across the county, to ensure that children and families are successfully supported to achieve their full potential. If children's centre provision is brought in-house, support worker resource would be allocated to the area, complemented by other in-house resource including Community Connectors and information and signposting roles. This will ensure that local families can benefit from the full range of support on offer, both within the Bromyard area and across Herefordshire.
28. Transition to the new arrangements will be carefully planned and communicated to families alongside the provider to ensure continuity for vulnerable families needing support during/ beyond the transition phase.
29. Upon confirmation of the decision, the council will work with the provider to confirm any TUPE implications and progress with consultation as appropriate. With the implementation of the Provider Portal as part of information technology developments at the council, case information regarding Bromyard families supported by the current provider can be recorded centrally from early 2021, enabling a timely transition of information relating to families requiring ongoing support. Family progress will be assessed alongside the provider during the transition period to ensure the timely identification of any families requiring ongoing support, and enable appropriate individual arrangements to be made in a timely manner. This process will also include reviewing need and availability of relevant group sessions in the Bromyard area.
30. The in-house team, with an existing infrastructure of information and advice and community connectors will be in a position to further build networks with the Hope Family Centre and wider Bromyard community organisations in readiness for the transition to in-house support. The transition process will be continually reviewed to minimise the impact on vulnerable families needing support.
31. In-house children's centre provision will aim to enhance the core Hope Family Centre offer rather than duplicating provision, whilst providing the flexibility and capacity where needed, to support families most in need at locations of their choosing, including within the home setting. The service will be able to draw on a team with a breadth of skills and experience in delivering children's centre services across the county, and the Bromyard area will be able to benefit from best practice approaches across the county.
32. In line with Herefordshire's approach to Early Help, the support provided will have a greater focus on those families most in need, therefore regardless of the model of delivery, there may be a reduced focus on direct delivery of universal provision unless gaps in local provision are identified. New arrangements will aim to ensure that the number of EHA assessments undertaken, and number of families

achieving sustainable change are maximised.

## **Environmental Impact**

33. The council provides and purchases a wide range of services for the people of Herefordshire. Together with partner organisations in the private, public and voluntary sectors we share a strong commitment to improving our environmental sustainability, achieving carbon neutrality and to protect and enhance Herefordshire's outstanding natural environment.

## **Equality duty**

34. Under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, the 'general duty' on public authorities is set out as follows:

A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to -

- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
- advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
- foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

35. The public sector equality duty (specific duty) requires us to consider how we can positively contribute to the advancement of equality and good relations, and demonstrate that we are paying 'due regard' in our decision making in the design of policies and in the delivery of services.

36. Children and families with emerging or additional needs will continue to be supported effectively through Herefordshire's approach to Early Help, with children's centre provision working alongside local partners to ensure a consistent approach to supporting vulnerable families across the County. With a greater focus on vulnerable and disadvantaged families, a positive impact will be expected in relation to the number of vulnerable families achieving sustainable change. Equalities monitoring of children's centre provision will be undertaken via council systems to ensure equality of access to support across the County. Equalities considerations will be a key part of transition planning. The council will continually monitor any impact of service changes to ensure that any mitigation against negative impacts are in place for children and adults with protected characteristics.

## **Resource implications**

37. There will be no change in the allocation of resources to children's centre provision in Herefordshire. The current annual investment of £25,000 to the Bromyard Reach area for children's centre provision will be transferred to the in-house children's centre team.

## **Legal implications**

38. Scrutiny committees have the power to undertake pre-decision call in of forthcoming decisions programmed on the forward plan. The constitutional rules concerning pre-decision call in are contained in the Scrutiny Rules under paragraph 4.5.90.

## Risk management

39.

Risk / opportunity	Mitigation
Developing new approaches to support could impact on some people with protected characteristics with emerging or additional needs	The council will monitor the service to ensure consistency and will work to identify and mitigate any impact of the change in delivery mechanism.
Given the current challenges of the coronavirus pandemic, a change to service delivery arrangements may cause disruption and negatively impact vulnerable families	The council will work alongside the current provider to minimise any potential disruption to service delivery. If it is deemed that this cannot be managed within the time constraints, a short extension to the contract may be sought to ensure a smooth transition of the service, which will include adherence to applicable TUPE requirements.
There is a break in service in the Bromyard area	Transition to the new model of delivery will be managed alongside the current provider, to ensure families are at the centre. Where timescales are considered insufficient to achieve a smooth transition, a short contract extension may be sought.
Children and Families in Bromyard receive a less effective service	<p>Performance management of the in-house team is in place and includes analysis against key deliverables. The team are also required to secure feedback from families receiving support and record numbers of Early Help cases where sustainable change has been successfully achieved.</p> <p>This data and intelligence will be monitored by the Children's Centre Manager and reported to the Early Help Strategy Board (which will be acting as the Advisory Board for Children's Centre provision) to ensure effective oversight and scrutiny. The board includes representation from the Hope Family Centre. Dependent on the nature of any areas of poor performance, actions may include further work with partners to overcome barriers, engagement with local toddler groups, multi agency groups etc to</p>

promote the Children's centre offer and delivery of universal sessions where there is no local group provision identified.

## Consultees

40. A summary of responses can be found in Appendix 2.
41. Prior to the award of the current contract, consultation was undertaken across the Bromyard children centre reach area, which involved an online survey and drop-in engagement sessions.
42. The on-line survey received 184 responses with 57% of respondents agreeing that children's centre services should be delivered in places where communities have the most vulnerable children. Most respondents (40%) thought that voluntary groups or charities would be the best type of provider for children's centre services in Bromyard. Although respondents liked services delivered from a children's centre building, there was a notable need for outreach services outside of Bromyard town centre in pre-schools, village halls and schools.
43. Engagement with the CEO of the Hope Centre was undertaken to discuss the potential future options for the delivery of the service. Given the reduced levels of funding through the contract lifetime, the provider was confident that they had delivered against the contract outcomes and brought a great deal of added value due to the wider Hope offer. The Hope Centre has good connections with local families and the wider community. Concerns about the long standing strategic value of the relationship with the council were raised if arrangements were to change alongside the need for a careful transition. Re-commissioning of the service was a clear preference for the provider.
44. Engagement with ward members for the Bromyard reach area has been undertaken where representatives articulated high regard for the Hope Family Centre and the wider role the centre fulfils in the Bromyard area. Any change to delivery should be focussed on delivering improvements in support for vulnerable families and there was concern regarding the potential loss of the added value delivered by the wider Hope Centre offer. Benefits of consistency in delivery of the council was however recognised.
45. Further correspondence has also been received from the Chair of Trustees for Hope for Children and their Families Ltd. Concerns relating to timescales for the decision were raised, alongside transition to new arrangements at a difficult time for families.
46. Political group consultation is underway and feedback will also help inform the decision taken.

## Appendices

Appendix 1: Early Help in Herefordshire

Appendix 2: Engagement and Consultation Summary

## **Background papers**

None identified.