

Title of report: Provision of children centre service in the Bromyard area

Meeting: Children and young people scrutiny committee

Meeting date: Tuesday 12 October 2021

Report by: Cabinet member children and families;

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 provision of the Council's early help children's centre service for the Bromyard area from 1 April 2022.

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.

Recommendation(s)

That:

The committee reviews the proposals to recommission the provision of the children centre service in the Bromyard area for two years, and determines any recommendations it wishes to make to the executive which may enhance the effectiveness of the plans.

Alternative options

1. Integrate the Bromyard service with the provision for the rest of Herefordshire, which is delivered in-house by the Council. Since the previous decision was made to extend the

existing contract there have been several local and national developments, described by this report, that provide a strategic opportunity to review the Council's approach to providing support to children in their early years and their families. The Council is planning to undertake further work to inform its future strategies around Early Years and Early Help, which will inform its plans for the future development of children's centre service across the County including services for the Bromyard area.

2. 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. Therefore, there does not appear to be a legitimate reason to seek an exemption from the Council's standing procurement rules.

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. Available 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.
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. Bromyard is the only area in Herefordshire where children's centre services have ever been procured from an external provider. Services across the rest of the county have been delivered directly by the council since their inception.
6. The last statutory guidance on the 'Core Purpose' of Children's Centre Services was published by the Government in April 2013 and Ofsted inspection of this provision was suspended in 2015. During this period, the level of resource available to provide Children's Centre Services significantly declined as a result of national funding reductions.
7. The last comprehensive review of Children Centre Service provision in Herefordshire was undertaken by the Council between 2012 and 2013. Subsequent decisions regarding the contract for the Bromyard area service noted the intention to strategically

review the County's Children Centre Service provision but the lack of updated national guidance made this difficult to achieve. In the intervening years, the local landscape in which Children's Centre Services operate has changed with the introduction of new approaches to Early Help and Talk Community and the move to agile service delivery that was less reliant on physical buildings.

8. In this context, the local Core Purpose of Children's Centre Services has evolved organically over time to target and meet need within the resources available. Currently in Herefordshire, the Core Purpose 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, speech and language therapy, 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.
9. In March 2021, the Government published its new review-led Policy Paper regarding The best start for life: a vision for the 1,001 critical days (from pregnancy to the age of two), which describes the following priorities:

Ensuring families have access to the services they need

- I. Seamless support for families: a coherent joined up Start for Life offer available to all families.
- II. A welcoming hub for families: Family Hubs as a place for families to access Start for Life services.
- III. The information families need when they need it: designing digital, virtual and telephone offers around the needs of the family.

Ensuring the Start for Life system is working together to give families the support they need

- I. An empowered Start for Life workforce: developing a modern skilled workforce to meet the changing needs of families.
- II. Continually improving the Start for Life offer: improving data, evaluation, outcomes and proportionate inspection.
- III. Leadership for change: ensuring local and national accountability and building the economic case.

10. Similar to Herefordshire's levels of need approach (Appendix 1), the Government paper considers a range of needs that might be supported by a tiered service model:
 - i. Universal services are those which are accessible to all, including health visiting and midwifery services.
 - ii. Universal+ services that are available to all families but may not need to be accessed by everyone

- iii. 'Targeted' specialist support for babies, children and families with severe and complex needs. They are usually only accessed via referral.

11. The Government intends to ensure councils understand how best to build a Family Hub network, including incorporating existing Children's Centres into their network where appropriate. What will matter is that every family knows where they can receive high-quality advice and support. A hub approach allows families to access face-to-face and digital support from public, private and voluntary organisations at a single place. However, the Government's review heard that it can be difficult for parents and carers to ask for help, in part because they fear they will be judged. Some people specifically mentioned that Children's Centres can be perceived as places for those who need help with specific problems. This can dissuade families from accessing services, as they fear being perceived as a 'bad parent'. Much more work needs to be done to make it easier for families to feel it is OK to need support and to ask for help – to remove the stigma many parents feel. One of the ways to do this is to make each Family Hub a place where you go to do the things that every parent does, including registering the birth of your baby.
12. In its Policy Paper, the Government has recognised that having a place to go to is important for families but a single, centralised location will not be able to meet the needs of all families in a community. More rural locations, as well as more diverse communities, will need different specialist or outreach services that can form a part of the wider Family Hub network but which are tailored for the particular needs of a community. Appendix 2 provides an extract of the Government review regarding providing Start for Life Services in rural areas. The Government review saw examples of local authorities using their Children's Centre estate to create a core of superb, multidisciplinary Family Hubs in the locations that best meet the needs of their communities. These Family Hubs sit at the heart of other physical and virtual services delivered in the community, in people's homes and in other locations such as GP surgeries and libraries.
13. Herefordshire's Early Years Partnership, which is led by the Council, will be developing the local strategy response to the new national policy. This work will dovetail with ongoing work to improve support for children and families via Universal services within the Talk Community approach, Universal+ services that are part of Early Help and Targeted specialist services that are part of the Council's children's services improvement programme. The new local Early Years strategy will help to inform a refreshed Core Purpose for Children's Centre Services across Herefordshire and subsequently inform future commissioning or service redesign proposals.
14. The current contract for Children's Centre Services in the Bromyard area will cease in March 2022. In light of the new national Best Start for Life policy and plans to refresh Herefordshire's Early Years Strategy, it is proposed to recommission the Bromyard Area service for a further two years through a competitive procurement process, which should be completed by the end of January 2022 or earlier. Operational priorities for all Children's Centre Services, including for the Bromyard area, are updated annually. Prior to tendering for a new Bromyard area contract for 2022/24, the Council will review and update the existing service specification as appropriate to ensure it continues to be aligned with plans for services in the rest of the county. Operational priorities will also

be kept under review during the contract period to ensure they remain appropriate and consistent with other Children's Centre Services.

Community impact

15. The recommendations support the council's County Plan priorities, with particular reference to specific community priorities:

- I. Ensure all children are healthy, safe and inspired to achieve
- II. Protect and improve the lives of vulnerable people

16. The recommendations will also support the delivery of the Children and Young People's Plan across all pledges with a particular focus on safety:

- a. Keeping children and young people safe – BE SAFE FROM HARM
- b. Improving children and young people's health and wellbeing – BE HEALTHY
- c. Helping ALL children and young people succeed – BE AMAZING
- d. Ensuring that children and young people are influential in our communities – FEEL PART OF THE COMMUNITY

17. At the end of August, 2021, there were 8,554 children aged under five years in Herefordshire, of which 403 lived in the Bromyard reach area. Within in these figures, there were 2,694 children that were living in areas that ranked among the 25% most deprived in England, including 151 in the Bromyard reach area.

Environmental Impact

18. 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

19. 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 –

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

c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

20. 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.

21. 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 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. 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

22. The historical value of the Bromayrd area contract was comparatively higher than the resources allocated to the service for the rest of the county. This in-balance was addressed with the resource allocation being realigned between the contracted and in-house services from April 2020, since when the annual contract value has remained at £25,000.

23. The amount of resource allocated per known child aged under 5-years has been reviewed (below), and it is proposed that the contract price is increased to £27,695 for 2022/23 and a 2% inflationary uplift is applied for 2023/24

2021/22 £resource per child aged under 5 years

	Known children (Aug 2021)	Budget	£ per known child
Bromyard Area	403	£ 25,000	£ 62
Rest of Herefordshire	8151	£ 560,157	£ 69

Proposed Bromyard Area Contract Value

2022/23 adjustment equal to rest of county (403 children X £69)	£ 27,695
2023/24 2% inflationary uplift	£ 28,249

Legal implications

24. 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

25.

Risk / opportunity	Mitigation
Given the potential challenges of the coronavirus pandemic, adaptations to service delivery may cause disruption and negatively impact vulnerable families.	The council will work alongside the contracted provider to minimise any potential disruption to service delivery.
The outcome of a competitive procurement process may result in a change of service provider for the new contract.	<p>Prior to commencing the procurement process, the council will work with the current provider to confirm any TUPE implications for its employees and progress with consultation as appropriate.</p> <p>In the event of a service transfer, the Council will work the current and new provider during the new contract mobilisation period to ensure that families receive good communications about any changes and that any family with an ongoing support package is transferred to the new provider as seamlessly as possible.</p>

Consultees

26. Political group consultation regarding this specific decision for the Bromyard area contract will be completed and feedback will also help inform the decision taken.
27. The best way to tell whether a service is meeting a family's needs is to ask the family themselves. The Government's vision is for Start for Life offers to be co-designed with Parent and Carer Panels and include a Universal offer for every family and a Universal+ offer to meet the needs of their specific local communities.
28. The development of Parent and Carer Panels will be promoted, where professionals and parents work together to co-design services and provide regular feedback on their

effectiveness and quality. These panels must include dads and other partners, so they get the chance to shape the services that are there for them. Parents and carers of disabled babies and professionals who deliver services for babies with additional needs should be represented on these Panels, also with input from existing Parent Carer Forums.

29. It is expected that the work described previously to develop a new Early Years Strategy for Herefordshire will support the national policy on Parent and Carer Panels and involve consultation and engagement activities with key local stakeholders across the County. The scope and timetable for the Early Years Strategy consultation and engagement work should be determined by the end of March 2022. The results of these activities will help to inform future commissioning or service redesign proposals relating to Children's Centre Services.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Early Help in Herefordshire

Appendix 2: Extract of the Government review regarding providing Best Start for Life Services in rural areas

Background papers

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-best-start-for-life-a-vision-for-the-1001-critical-days>