

**Overview and Scrutiny Management Board – 20<sup>th</sup> January 2014**

**Preliminary report of the Interim Director of Children's Services and the Lead Officer**

**Children's Centres in Dudley MBC**

**Purpose of Report**

1. To advise Overview and Scrutiny Management Board of the legal framework under which the Children's Centres offer is delivered, the background to Children's Centres service delivery and the consultation process which has taken place to inform future service delivery within a reduced budget. The report detailing the consultation responses and a proposal for a new model for the Children's Centres offer will be produced following the closure of the consultation period on 10<sup>th</sup> January and the analysis of responses.

**Background**

2. The provision of Children's Centres is a statutory requirement under The Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009. The Children's Centres offer is also underpinned by law in the Childcare Act 2006.
3. The Local Authority is the accountable body responsible for the delivery of the Children's Centres offer.
4. The overall aim of Children's Centres is to identify, reach and help those children under 5 and their families who are in greatest need of support. This should be achieved by providing a range of both universal and targeted services in partnership with both statutory and voluntary agencies.
5. In Dudley there are currently twenty Children's Centres which have been directly managed by the Local Authority since 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013. Up until 2013, all of the Centres were commissioned through contracts and performance managed by the Local Authority. **A list of Children's Centres is shown at Appendix 1**
6. All centres offer some basic accommodation but vary considerably in size. The 3 initial Sure Start local programme buildings (Brierley Hill, Kates Hill and Sledmere and Butterfly) are the most extensive as their funding was the most generous. Phase 1 Centres offer additional accommodation in the form of full day care provision. Standard accommodation for all centres includes:
  - Defined entrance and reception area
  - Multi-purpose room (for training, meetings etc)
  - Interview room (with facilities for health staff and others to do 1:1 work)
  - Small office
  - Kitchen
7. Facilities at centres can be used by staff from a range of agencies, for delivery of services and activities.

8. Children's Centres staff deliver their services in a variety of different places. All services are not provided within the confines of the centre building. Much of the one to one family support is provided through outreach in the families' own homes and some services such as Stay and Play sessions are delivered in primary schools sited within their Reach areas.
9. An immediate saving of £390k in 2013/2014 was made by bringing the direct management of Children's Centres back in-house to meet the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

### **Reach area**

- a. Each of our Children's Centres has a defined 'reach area' which is made up of a cluster of 'super output areas' (SOAs) containing around 900 children under 5. The numbers of Under 5's in the borough is rising year on year currently.
- b. These areas are not intended to restrict access of parents and children to services. Parents are able to access services at a location which is most appropriate to their needs. However, priority is given to children and families living within the Reach area and also family support/outreach workers are allocated according to Reach.

### **Core Purpose**

10. The latest guidance about the core purpose of Children's Centres was issued to local authorities in September 2011. The guidance requires Children's Centres to focus much more effectively on those families in greatest need with an emphasis on:
  - a. Child development and school readiness
  - b. Parenting aspirations and parenting skills
  - c. Child and family Health and life chances
11. Children's Centres provide significant support to children who are subject to Child Protection Plans and who are in the category of Children in Need.
12. In December 2013 government indicated that the core purpose of Children's Centres is to be reviewed and reshaped to focus on achievable outcomes, and to make clear whether centres should prioritise services for children or for parents.
13. Government is also developing a new national outcomes framework to increase the accountability of individual centres.

### **External Regulation**

14. Children's Centres need to evaluate the impact of the services they are providing. They are performance managed against the Local Authority service specification and Ofsted's framework.

15. In Dudley there have been 15 Ofsted inspections to date. One of them was judged to be **Outstanding**, eleven were judged to be **Good** and three judged to be **Satisfactory**.

### **Partnership Working**

16. Children's Centres have been established with the principle of Working Together with partner agencies to ensure that a holistic approach is taken to meet the needs of the children and families with whom they work. Due to the re-focussing of service delivery towards more targeted work with vulnerable families partnerships have become even more important as a means of identifying and engaging with these families through the universal services partners are delivering in Children's Centres e.g. Health Visitor clinics.
17. The recruitment of volunteers is of significant importance to the work of the Children's Centres and all of the centres have a thriving volunteer network. (More information is available in the Scrutiny Report of 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 2013 – see Committee Management Information System)

### **Children's Centre Consultation Process**

18. The consultation on the overall Council's budget proposal included the proposals around the restructuring Children's Centres.
19. As Children's Centres are a statutory provision, it is laid down in the legislation and guidance on Children's Centres that local authorities must conduct a consultation exercise 'before any significant change' is made to the services being provided by Children's Centres, which is why the Local Authority initiated the Children's Centres consultation process.
20. The consultation document was issued on 12<sup>th</sup> November 2013 and is shown at **Appendix 2**.
21. Children's Services Scrutiny Committee met on 19<sup>th</sup> November, 2013. (Background paper - Chair's report and resolution documents attached as **Appendix 3**).
22. On 26<sup>th</sup> November 2013, the Leader of the Council made the decision that no Children's Centres would be closed for the foreseeable future. This was as a result of initial feedback received from the consultation indicating public support for Children's Centres.
23. On 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2013, the Leader of the Council made the decision to extend the consultation period until 10<sup>th</sup> January 2014 to give the opportunity for as wide a response as possible.
24. At the time of writing this report the consultation is still live. A significant number of responses (in excess of 1000) have been received.

## **Finance**

25. To date, each centre has been allocated a revenue budget which has been based on a formula which takes account of the following:
  - Core budget (related to the running costs of the building and core staff costs) and a variable amount depending on:
  - Numbers of children in the 'reach area'
  - Level of disadvantage as indicated from selected factors in the Index for Multiple Deprivation
26. Dudley's funding formula has been replicated and used as an example of good practice in the audit office report (December 2009) submitted to the Scrutiny Committee reporting to Government.
27. Since their inception until the end of March 2011 funding for Children's Centre provision was ring fenced within the Sure Start Grant.
28. From April 2011, the funding transferred from the Sure Start ring-fenced grant to unring-fenced funding through the DfE's Early Intervention Grant. As the level of funding was reduced from April 2011, every Children's Centre in Dudley received a reduced budget. At that stage the total budget to support the provision of Children's Centres was £6,353,600 with £5,850,000 being earmarked directly to the Children's Centres.
29. For 2013/14 the revenue budget to support the provision of Children's Centres is £5,613,300 with £5,229,050 being earmarked directly for Dudley's 20 Children's Centres.
30. Since 2011/12 the overall Children's Centre budget has reduced by £740,300 as a result of either savings required to meet the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy or Central Government Early Intervention Grant budget reductions.
31. The proposals put forward in the consultation document were based on the need to make a saving of £2.3 million against the 2013/2014 revenue budget of £5.613,300. This would reduce the available budget to £3.3 million by 2015/16.

## **Law**

32. The provision of Children's Centres is a statutory requirement under the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009. Children's Centres service delivery is also underpinned by the Childcare Act 2006.
33. Section 5D(1) of the Childcare Act 2006 stipulates that the Local Authority must conduct appropriate consultation.

## **Equality Impact**

34. Children's Centres provide a range of services to every child under 5 and their family. The needs of the local community are clearly identified through consultation and partnership engagement and central analysis of data and ongoing needs assessment.

## **Recommendation**

35. That the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board
- Receives, discusses and reviews the report relating to Children's Centres consultation and interviews witnesses
  - Requests further evidence if required
  - Uses the Board's findings to make recommendations to Cabinet
  - Reviews the consultation responses and model proposed (Report to follow)



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### **Appendix 1 – List of Centres**

### **Appendix 2 – Children's Centres consultation document**

### **Appendix 3 - Children's Services Scrutiny Committee Chair's report and resolution of Committee.**

### **Background papers:**

**Chair of Children's Services Scrutiny Committee report – 19<sup>th</sup> November 2013**  
**Resolution of Children's Services Scrutiny – 19<sup>th</sup> November 2013**  
**Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held on 23rd September, 2013- papers available on Committee Management Information System (CMIS).**