

**APPENDIX 1 – Overview and Scrutiny Management Board – 20<sup>th</sup> January 2014**  
**Consultation Responses on the Future of Sure Start Children's Centres in**  
**Dudley - January 2014**

**Executive Summary**

There were 1,528 responses to the questionnaire, which was part of the consultation on the Future of Sure Start Children's Centres in Dudley. In addition Dudley Council received 4,118 petition names, 2 brainstorming sheets, 61 letters, 79 testimonials, 9 photos, 2 parents' views and comments, 12 media cuttings and 1 DVD. The deadline for completion of the consultation was originally 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2014, but then extended to 10<sup>th</sup> January.

The full responses to the questionnaire are contained in the document below but in summary:

- 94% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the proposal to close seven of the children's centres
- 75% disagreed or strongly disagreed with linking centres to reduce management and admin costs
- 81% disagreed or strongly disagreed to the proposal to reduce hours in some centres, although some of these comments related to the childcare facilities

**General comments from the questionnaires**

- the early years, learning and development of children should be a priority for the council
- there should be more integration and coordination across agencies
- there should be more sharing of resources
- there should be a greater recognition that children's centres are a key element to the partnership between professionals, families and the community

**Proposal 1: Reducing the number of children's centres**

Throughout the comments the staff were praised for their professionalism, support and advice in times of crisis and in the everyday issues of raising children. Many comments were along the lines that they "*had turned lives around*" and "*made a difference*". It was felt that they provided a support network and "*filled a gap*" that no statutory body had the time for and this was also appreciated by those professionals who completed questionnaires. There were many heartfelt responses of the effect that losing this support would have. It was the only social contact in many cases; and friendships had been made with other parents as well as benefiting from the professional support.

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Throughout the comments there was also an affinity with the building in which the children's centre was located as well as with the staff. The building was seen in some cases as the only hub of the community. It was seen as somewhere that families knew they could drop into and where they would be welcomed and not judged.

There appeared to be little support for the idea that families would travel to other centres. This was strongly emphasised because of cost, time, lack of knowledge of other centres, availability of transport, having several young children to transport on a bus and having older children at school locally. It was said that this would reduce numbers benefiting from the support and where people were able to travel this would put added pressures on already heavily subscribed services at the proposed hubs.

**Proposal 2: Linking children's centres to reduce management and administrative costs**

Some of the comments appear to have assumed that moving management and admin to a central office would mean that their roles would have to be distributed among the family support workers which would detract from their primary role. There were some comments that the role of the manager was directly linked to safeguarding and should not be diluted.

The receptionist's role was considered to be vital in helping people who dropped in so that referrals were appropriate and they were a source of immediate reassurance and care. There were examples given of the range of administration tasks and the support they gave to the number of callers who dropped in.

However a number of the responses accepted that if all the centres could be retained by reducing the numbers of managers then they were in favour of this.

**Proposal 3: To reduce opening hours at some children's centres**

There were strong feelings about the reduction in hours, particularly from working parents. Some commented that they would wait to see the actual hours proposed but the vast majority felt that services would reduce and they would lose support. Without somewhere to drop into and consistent staff one of the strengths of the current system would be lost. Comments centred on the slow build up of trust with staff and how they felt that this may be lost through potential changes.

Others felt that because centres were often close to schools many people took the opportunity to ask questions and sought advice when dropping off or collecting siblings from school and that reducing hours may restrict this opportunity.

**Other Comments**

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Although families in need may be referred to the children's centres many families responded to local advertising and self referred. The value of the stay and play and other general sessions were emphasised in many responses as they provided social interaction for both parent and child and enabled friendships to form that lasted. Many families had no other way of meeting people and creating support networks.

All of those responding welcomed the children's centres whether accessing universal services or services provided for those in greatest need.

**General comments from the letters**

There were 61 letters received in addition to the questionnaires.

Many of the letters were testimonials written by parents commenting on the very positive impact for them of the services provided by the centres. Others looked at the proposed changes and reflected on the effect these would have on the communities, on other partner organisations as well as on the proposed hubs and satellites. The comments in the letters supported the responses to the questionnaires and included the following:

- There was recognition of the pivotal role of children's centres in the community and the positive effect they can have. One comment summed up several letters *"without quality provision at this age children with poorer life chances, poorer language and social skills will be less well prepared for school, resulting in poorer academic outcomes. In the long term all of these aspects will affect the community with greater community problems."*
- The comments reiterated the value of family support and there was a hope that *"the maximum number of front-line staff and services can be maintained."*
- There were concerns about the lack of detail of how the hubs would manage the increased numbers of staff and what hours satellite centres may be and which services would continue to operate.
- There was support for the cluster model but some were concerned that there was no hub in the Halesowen area.
- There was also acceptance that management and admin costs are reduced and that the admin roles could be combined between centres. *"Cuts should focus on accommodation and administration efficiencies so that the maximum number of front line staff and services can be maintained."*
- The opening times of centres in the most disadvantaged areas should be maintained as much as possible and there was concern over making some of the other centres part time because they were satellites. There were concerns over security, safety and safeguarding with reduced reception time.
- Regardless of socio-economic background parents and children may need to access services provided *"neither financial stability or the access to education*

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*can preclude a person from PND, breast-feeding problems, isolation and resulting anxiety, domestic abuse or other such issues.”*

- It was considered advantageous to align clusters with other departmental structures.
- Partners are willing to work with the council to develop a more cost effective integrated locality based children's service.
- Centre managers were willing to look at individual savings that would help the total savings needed.
- Charging parents who can afford it for services should be considered as well as using centres for other activities/services.

### **Suggestions for the Future**

There were a number of comments about other ways of saving money or pooling resources from other parts of the Council or from other partners. Although this had not been asked in the questionnaire many considered that further research should be undertaken on alternative strategies, including the following:

- To look at the cost effectiveness of each centre in the light of its current expenditure and consider where savings can be made.
- To charge for some of the sessions where people can afford to contribute.
- To consider hiring rooms for schools, local community groups and partners.
- Research on the number of hours that centres currently operate and look at the most effective for each centre.
- More co-location and/or coordination of resources, and sharing of information with Health, Troubled Families' team, Fast team and Social Care etc where feasible.

*N.B. The overall suggestions are more fully listed at the end of the full document.*

### **Conclusion**

The emphasis of the responses was on the priority of the early years and how the centres improve the potential of the child and provided invaluable support to the parents, particularly the mothers.

The questionnaires and letters in general rejected the proposals as presented particularly the proposal around closure due to the importance placed on having a local resource.

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**Report on the Data and Comments from the Questionnaires**

**Background**

The Consultation on the future of Sure Start Children's Centres by Dudley Borough Council was in response to the need to make savings of £2.3 million on its Children's Centre budget of £5.6 million. The deadline for the return of questionnaires and other responses was 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2014, later extended to 10<sup>th</sup> January 2014.

The principles behind the proposals on children's centre services were:

- To continue to offer sufficient provision via children's centres to meet the needs of children and families in the Dudley area
- To ensure continued support was given to those children and families who are in greatest need
- To deliver savings of £2.3 million by April 2016
- To continue to work with partner agencies and organisations to access a range of services for families with children under 5
- To improve co-ordination and access to a range of services for families with children under 5

***3 proposals were put forward:***

1. To reduce the number of children's centres from 20 to 13 to save costs on buildings and utilities
2. To link the remaining children's centres into 4 clusters to reduce management and administrative costs (There would be a main centre or "hub" and linked centres or "satellites")
3. To reduce hours at some of the satellite children's centres (research has shown that the use of centres after 3pm is limited – excluding childcare)

***The new proposed model would operate as follows:***

- Each cluster to have a manager responsible for the 3 or 4 centres in the cluster to reduce management and administration costs.
- All staff to be based at the hub children's centre but work throughout the cluster offering services at the satellites
- The 4 hubs to have a core staff group consisting of a manager; deputy/family support lead; family support workers; early years practitioners; admin manager; admin/reception and part time teacher support
- There is to be one advisory board per cluster, responsible for providing advice, assistance and support to enable the planning, monitoring and evaluation of services
- Each of the individual localities to continue to have representation on the new

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cluster advisory boards including parents and partner agencies

- There is to be a single Ofsted inspection per cluster

### **Initial Responses**

It was immediately clear that the proposal to close 7 of the 20 children's centres was strongly disagreed with by the vast majority of families, centres and communities affected and there were articles and representations to the Council opposing the closures. The consultation was issued on 12<sup>th</sup> November but as a response to the initial feedback and the public concern about potential closures the leader of the council made the decision on 26<sup>th</sup> November that no centres would be closed for the foreseeable future.

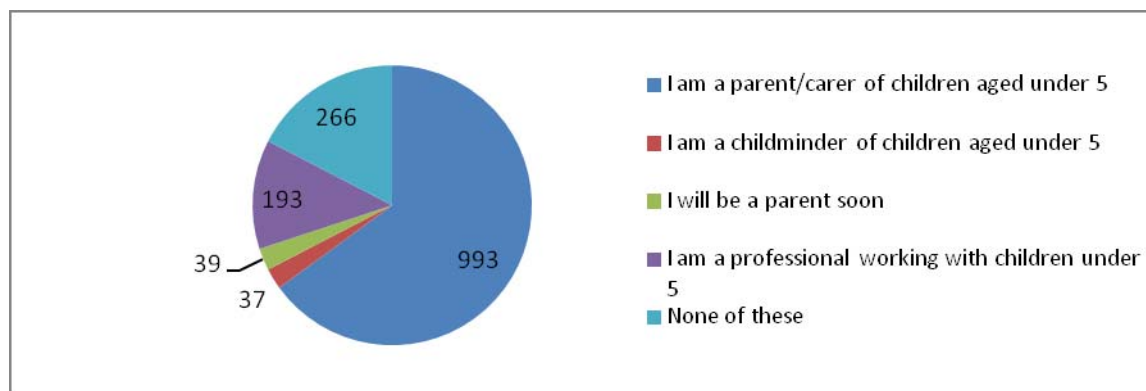
### **Responses from the Questionnaires**

The following information is a summary of the responses to the questionnaire including the proposal to close 7 children's centres as this gives insight into the valuable services that the centres provide and the difficulties that closures will have for families trying to access the provision outside their local community.

### **General Questions**

Q1 Status of responder

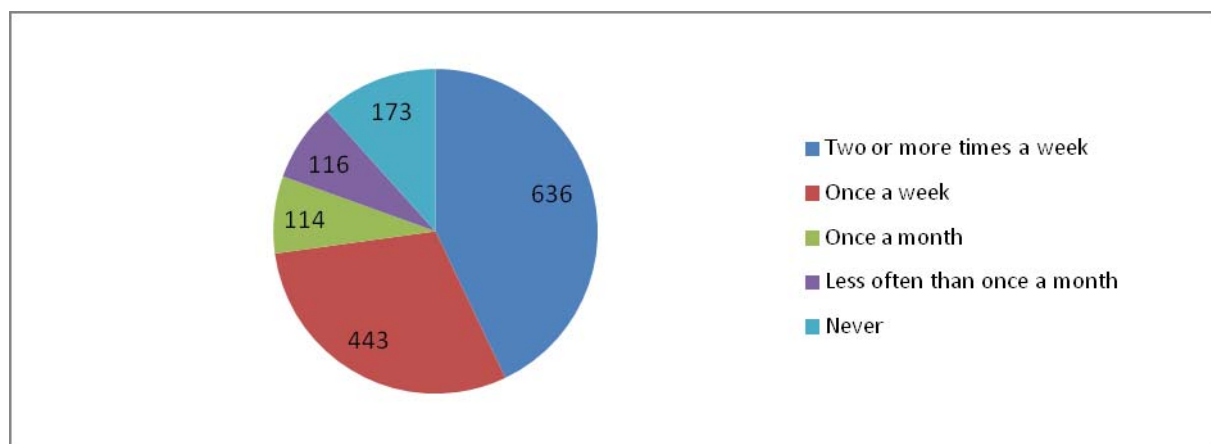
	Number	%
Parent/carer of children aged under 5	993	65%
Childminder of children aged under 5	37	2%
Parent-to-be	39	3%
Professional working with children under 5	193	13%
None of these	266	17%
	1,528	



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**Q2 How often do you use children's centre services in Dudley?**

	Number	%
Two or more times a week	636	43%
Once a week	443	30%
Once a month	114	8%
Less often than once a month	116	8%
Never	173	12%
	1,482	



**Q3 Which is the nearest children's centre to your home?**

**Q4 Which children's centre(s) do you use?**

	Centre Nearest Home	Centres Used	% difference
Brierley Hill	46	45	-2%
Bromley Pensnett	96	98	2%
Butterfly	54	60	11%
Coseley	48	55	15%
Gornal	80	78	-3%
Hob Green	179	157	-12%
Kate's Hill	42	45	7%
Kingswinford & Wall Heath	51	81	59%
Little Hands	45	52	16%
Netherton Park	116	110	-5%
Olive Hill	43	51	19%
Peter's Hill	37	42	14%
Priory	41	50	22%
Quarry Bank	139	129	-7%
Queen Victoria	76	92	21%
Stourbridge	45	68	51%
Tenterfields	184	153	-17%
Woodside	47	76	62%
Wordsley	56	74	32%
Wren's Nest	33	36	9%

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Total	1458	1552	6%
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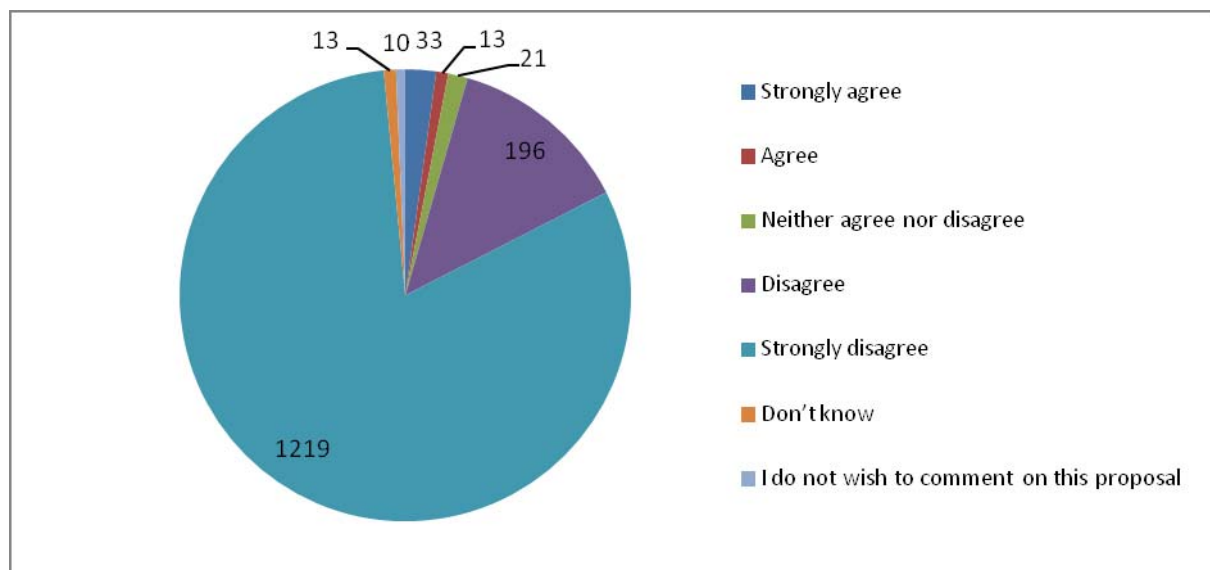
The data for questions 3 and 4 are set in the same table to see if there are any significant differences in the usage of the local centre. The difference in the totals can be explained by the fact that some families use 2 and occasionally 3 centres for different activities and some of the responses are from professional staff including CAB and Health who attend several centres. The figures seem to indicate, and are supported by the text, that the majority of people only use the centre that is closest to them and benefit from the community element that is developed.

It is not clear whether conclusions can be drawn from any of the percentage differences between the data for question 3 and question 4. Although the actual figures are very similar in the majority of cases with a few significant percentage differences. For instance Kingswinford, Stourbridge, Woodside and Wordsley appear to attract a higher proportion of families from outside the area. Tenterfields and Hob Green to a less extent do not.

**Proposal 1: Reducing the number of children's centres**

**Q5 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to reduce the number of children's centres? (Proposal 1)**

	Numbers	%
Strongly agree	33	2%
Agree	13	1%
Neither agree nor disagree	21	1%
Disagree	196	13%
Strongly disagree	1219	81%
Don't know	13	1%
No comment on this proposal	10	1%
Total	1505	





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**Q6 If you disagree with the proposal, is it the proposed closure of any particular centre(s) that you object to?**

	Numbers	%
Gornal	278	13%
Hob Green	288	13%
Kingswinford & Wall Heath	186	9%
Peter's Hill	136	6%
Quarry Bank	248	12%
Tenterfields	289	13%
Wordsley	151	7%
Objections don't relate to any particular Centre(s)	574	27%
Total	2150	

**Q7 What impact (if any) will the proposed reduction in the number of children's centres have on you?**

	Numbers	%
No impact	116	7%
Will use children's centre services less often	330	21%
Will not use children's centres at all	549	34%
Will attend alternative (non-children's centre) activities	156	10%
Will attend another children's centre instead	137	9%
Other	65	4%
Don't know	246	15%
Total	1599	

**Q8. The Comments on Proposal 1 are summarised as follows**

- 1415 people (94% of those who answered the question) strongly disagreed or disagreed with the proposal to close children's centres. All the centres that were in the proposals to close were objected to in equal measure and from question 7 a third of respondents (549) stated that they would not be using children's centres at all if the closures happened.
- The main reasons for the objections to closure were that the children's centres are local and accessible and have become part of the community facilities. (47% of a sample of 250 comments by those who responded specified that the accessibility was crucial).
- The vast majority of parents who commented cited the cost and difficulties of travelling to another centre as a severe problem by the vast majority of those who commented; and only 9% of those who completed Q7 would attend another centre. The following are an example of the many comments on the problems of travel:

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- *“Can't travel - not enough money for bus fare”*
  - *“Too far to travel. It took me a while to feel comfortable around others and I wouldn't want to feel like that again. I really enjoy using this centre and wish it not to be closed or reduced usage times.”*
  - *“Because the children's centre is local to us within walking distance and enables us to meet local parents and their children. If we are expected to go further to attend a different children's centre it is not worth while and then you run the risk of the children not being able to get a place because of increased numbers.”*
  - *“Due to being unable to drive and with four children it will be very difficult to get to a children's centre further away”*
  - *“Because none of them are within walking distance and as I do not drive. I would not be able to access any of them, due to financial costs of using public transport and also there are no direct bus routes”*
  - *“We are trying to reach the most hard to reach families and reduce isolation yet the proposal is to take a local service away to make it more difficult for families to access services in their local area. Local families will not travel to other children's centres which are classed as local but would take approx 45-60mins on foot from the centre..... Families continue to struggle financially and taking a bus to a group costing £3.40 per time will not be a priority for families.”*
- There was support for the quality of the staff of the centres (mentioned by 17% of the sample) and many stated that it was because of their patience, support and care that they have been able to make a difference in the lives of the families involved.
  - A number of people referred to their own emotional and mental issues including PND and that the staff have been able to slowly gain their trust and helped them through the problems, giving them advice and guidance; referring them to appropriate specialist support and provided a constant in their lives.
  - The availability of the staff on a drop in basis was felt to be of great benefit when there were crises in a family.

**Comments from professionals**

- The specialist professional staff who completed questionnaires also valued the children's centre staff because they were able to identify those in need of further help; they could help in child protection and they provided support alongside the specialist or as a back up to their services.

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- As one summarised it *"The families of Dudley will be deprived of valuable support within the community and for many it is a place of safety where they can communicate with professionals in their own language."*
- CAB stated *"Mostly they are overbooked at [children's centres]....[but] parents are unlikely to get the much needed, assistance elsewhere because of the difficulty accessing CAB in Bureaus with small children.....Often it is only because parents see CAB offering 'drop in' advice, that they tackle the issues that are concerning them there and then."*

Some of the individual comments represented the views of many.

- *"The children's centre provides an invaluable wealth of resources....in terms of safeguarding children this service provides frontline information which has been vital in safeguarding families and children who use our school..... where children have been removed from the parental home the centre has offered support to parents in order to prepare them fully to be reunited with their children."*
- *"links with other professionals including Speech and Language Therapy, Specialist Early Years, Occupational Therapy, Health Visitors to name just a few, who all hold clinic sessions / drop in sessions.... cater for all their needs, under one roof, they don't have to travel to different appointments on different days at different times.....families that will pop into the centre and seek advice and support on an ad hoc basis .....families who have built up relationships with staff at the centre would just not feel confident enough to access a different centre alone and start their journey again."*
- *"Some of our children are at a disadvantage when they enter our school; i.e. have dummies and have a low level of social skills. If the child has had intervention and the parents have been helped with parenting skills to play and stimulate the child at the CC it makes a difference."*
- Many parents felt less isolated and lonely because they had the opportunity to meet others as *"it was hard to cope with the pressures of being a new mum"*. Parents and children valued the stay and play sessions as *"this is my only form of social involvement...being a lone parent....is paramount to my mental well-being"*.
- The value to the children was shown throughout the responses as *"able to bond and experience new things"; "learn social skills"; "prepare for school" "learn to talk and play with others" and "making good mums and happy children"*.
- A number of respondents, both parents and professionals stated that the centre staff provided a confidential and non-judgemental service. They felt

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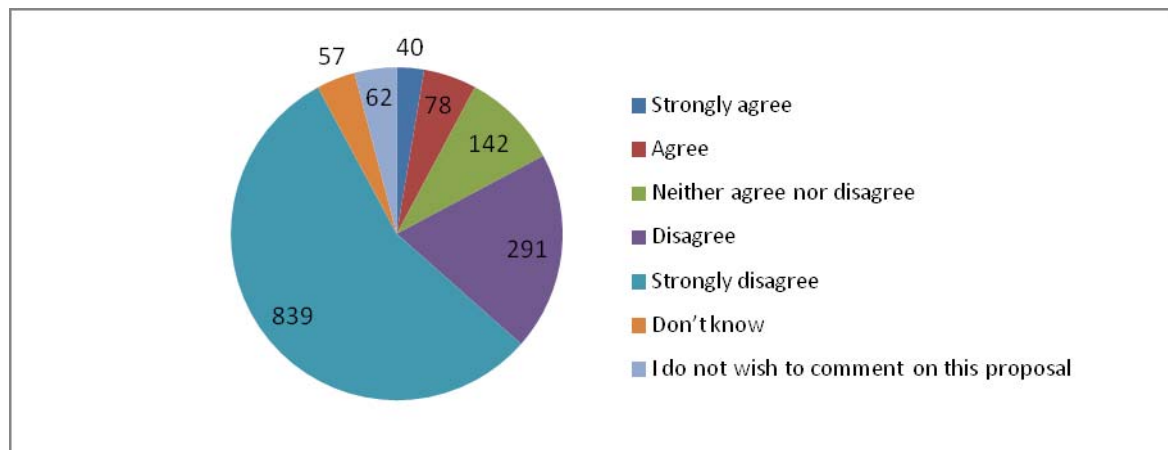
that their approach engendered trust and confidence in providing personal information, and that this has helped people to cope with abusive relationships, prevented children going into care and is critical to child safeguarding and the identification of children at risk.

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**Proposal 2: Linking children's centres to reduce management and administrative costs**

**Q9 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to reduce management and administrative costs through linking children's centres?**

	Numbers	%
Strongly agree	40	3%
Agree	78	5%
Neither agree nor disagree	142	9%
Disagree	291	19%
Strongly disagree	839	56%
Don't know	57	4%
No comment on this proposal	62	4%
Total	1509	



**Q10 The comments on Proposal 2 are summarised as follows:**

- 1,130 people (75%) strongly disagreed or disagreed with the second proposal, to link centres so that costs of management and administrative staff could be saved. A quarter therefore were in agreement, were ambivalent or made no comment.
- From those respondents who commented on the question of reducing the numbers of management and administration staff, the main objections were linked to the roles that they have in supporting parents when they drop in or ring for advice and guidance (28% of a sample of 250 respondents).
- It was considered that if the management and administration staff were removed then the centres would be less efficient (mentioned by 26% of the sample) and there would be a greater expectation that the support workers would take on the roles and this would distract them from their current roles

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(mentioned by 18% of the sample). These comments assume that the family support workers would take on the administrative role which is not stated as the case in the consultation document. Respondents felt that more use of the centres would mean that there was more need for administration not less.

Some of the comments which reflect the views of the majority are as follows:

- *“There needs to be a strong management team in place especially when children are involved, how can a centre be sufficiently run without proper management and administration. Staff need to be monitored making sure all children are happy and admin are keeping the centre running smoothly so there is no overcrowding but that's not going to be the case now.”*
- *“Managers and admin are just as essential as all the other elements/roles within a CC. With reduced staff not able to provide consistent cover but deadlines may not be met, remaining staff would have additional pressure/stress covering numerous centres, when a manager is not available what would happen if a safeguarding issue arose which needed immediate action.”*
- *“Services will become diluted with the major impact affecting the staff and the practical delivery of services....we must ensure our services are co-ordinated to enable a seamless service.....paperwork, monitoring, quarterly reports, day to day data collection and continual justification of the service cannot maintained with a reduction of staff.”*
- *“Supervision of staff will be compromise, caseloads will be higher therefore the quality of work will be reduced.”*
- *“You can see in our children's centre that the manager of the children's centre is interested in every child and family and employee that walks through the doors of the children's centres.....our family support worker has had assistance from her manager to improve our experience and access to services....The children's centre is inviting, engaging and makes you feel important. This is lost in big organisations. Our manager knows you by face and name and remembers you years later.”*
- *“I disagree with reduction of admin as phone calls will be unanswered, messages will not get passed on, the welcoming atmosphere when attending a centre will be missed. Reducing management will cause problems with safeguarding as management will be spread over a cluster of centres and will not be a constant present. If a family walk in to a centre then the manager may not be available to pass safeguarding concern by them.”*

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- Some responses did say that given a choice it would be more acceptable to reduce managers than reception staff and certainly more preferable than closing centres.
- There were some comments that removing the manager would cause the centre to close or reduce hours, and there would be a reduction in services and quality. They generally commented that management and admin provided in the individual centres supported the centres to be more efficient and meant that they were available to deal with crisis situations.

*N.B. There was some misunderstanding by some respondents of the use of the phrase "Linking children's centres to reduce management and administrative costs" as many assumed that it was a way of closing centres.*

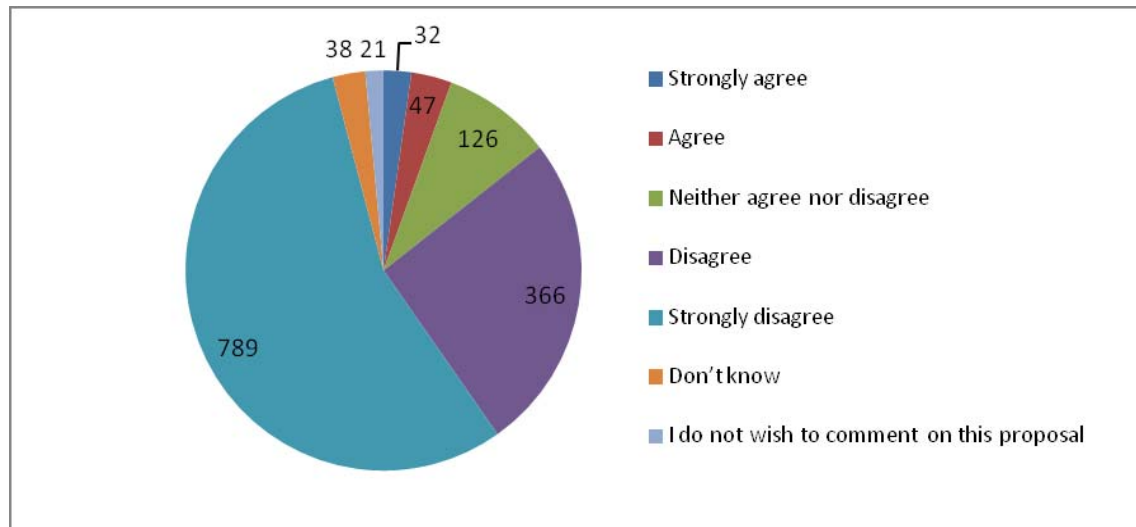
- There was not such a strong disagreement to this proposal and as it was linked to the proposal to close centres, it emphasised the distances between those centres that were left and the difficulties of staff not being locally based. If the centres were clustered as opposed to hub and satellite; the managers were not spread too thinly; and there were locally based staff then from the text of the comments the linking of centres under one manager may have some general support. However the idea of not having a reception/admin post for drop in support, as an information champion etc was strongly opposed in the comments.

**Proposal 3: To reduce opening hours at some children's centres**

**Q11 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to reduce the opening hours at some children's centres (Proposal 3)?**

	Numbers	%
Strongly agree	32	2%
Agree	47	3%
Neither agree nor disagree	126	9%
Disagree	366	26%
Strongly disagree	789	56%
Don't know	38	3%
No comment on this proposal	21	1%
	1419	

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**Q12 If you disagree with the proposal, is it the proposed reduction of opening hours at any particular centre(s) that you object to? (Please tick all that apply)**

	Numbers	%
Bromley Pensnett	153	9%
Coseley	108	6%
Little Hands	117	7%
Netherton Park	173	10%
Olive Hill	97	5%
Priory	125	7%
Queen Victoria	132	7%
Stourbridge	163	9%
Woodside	122	7%
My objections don't relate to any particular Centre	592	33%
	1782	

**Q13 What impact (if any) will the proposed reduction in the number of children's centres have on you?**

	Numbers	%
No impact	179	12%
Will use children's centre services less often	474	31%
Will not use children's centres at all	444	29%
Will attend alternative (non-children's centre) activities	115	8%
Will attend another children's centre instead	30	2%
Other	74	5%
Don't know	216	14%
	1532	



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**Q14 The comments are summarised as follows:**

- 1,155 respondents (81%) strongly disagreed or disagreed with this proposal to reduce the hours in centres and to open the satellite centres only when there were sessions taking place and not staff them throughout the day. Only 2% said they would use another centre and 29% (444) would no longer use the centres and a further 31% (474) would use them less often.
- From the comments written by the respondents to this question the fact that centres are open throughout the day means they have access all the time and can drop in before and after school or work. Parents who worked (of which there were estimated to be 15-20%) stated that reducing hours meant that they could not attend the centre as often. There would appear to have been some confusion around the impact on changes to the childcare provision, although it was stated in the documentation that childcare was not part of this review. -
- One quote from a professional worker seemed to sum up many of the comments from working parents who are also in need of support, *"People who work often need help to cope with their children and may also be in difficulties, financially, emotionally and physically. Children's centres are a lifeline to these people too! ....Children of parents who work and are on low incomes are often overlooked as deprived but can often be just as poverty stricken as those whose parents don't work. To close the centres early would deprive those families of the help they need. If centres are to work on limited hours then they should be varied hours, sometimes starting later and finishing later to accommodate those parents that work."*
- The main objection from 40% of a sample of 250 respondents was that the services provided by the centres would be diminished. Some of the comments that reflect the majority are that:
  - *"services will be affected and we may not be able to access the services we need at a convenient time"...*
  - *"there will be fewer groups available during my non working hours"....*
  - *"it depends on the new times but when I need help, I want the family support to be there"....*
  - *"Will mean we will no longer benefit here at CAMHS from the openly availability and the good work the children's centres do at present"....*
  - *"Sessions and groups would be oversubscribed and places may not be available for us"....*
  - *"less hours open would mean less choice/range of activities on offer"*

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- *"It will also limit any possible opportunities to develop further uses and/or services that could be offered. It will also, as a result, limit additional funding that could be generated by additional agencies utilising premises and thus providing further services to the surrounding community."....*
- *"Limited places to go and limited hours will leave users of the centres lost and the result could be devastating. Core opening hours are crucial so that families can access the centres at times which suit them and not just when staff happen to be there."*
- *"It is important that there are knowledgeable staff available who can help or signpost, rather than external agencies just using the building, who are unlikely to be able to provide the broad-ranging support needed."*
- *"Reduced hours will also make it difficult for mainstream Speech and Language Therapy services to deliver a service from centres, and to liaise with staff. This could impact on monitoring vulnerable children on Child Protection Plans."*
- *"At the moment families can use the services throughout the day to suit them and they are open all year round too. There will be even less chance of local families accessing services."...."It will make parents/carers isolated."...."It would not support the drop in facility that people found valuable and the quality would suffer."*
- As in the question on closures many felt unable to travel to another centre due to the cost and the inconvenience both in time and in transporting children and pushchairs. *"They may not have the resources or income to travel to alternative venues."*
- Only 5% of those who responded agreed or strongly agreed with the proposal, although some commented that it was *"better to keep them open on reduced hours than to close them completely."* However, the value of the local accessibility of the centre, the problems which would be created for working parents and the drop-in nature of the service means that this proposal was not favoured at all. The support given by the centres who offered open evenings on a weekly basis for all parents and to accommodate working parents as well as weekend sessions were welcomed by a number of respondents.

**Q15 Further Comments on the Proposals**

- The majority of the comments in this final summary section reiterated the comments against each of the proposals by requesting that there is a complete rethink about the nature of any changes to the centres. The reasons

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were eloquently and fervently expressed and contained over 900 individual written responses from across the whole of Dudley Borough.

- It would be difficult to include each argument for retaining the centres as they have become an integral part of the community. A considerable amount of resources and effort has been expended on their development, which would be wasted and the proposed changes would not only diminish the service provided across the Borough but would have a detrimental effect on the parents and children who are currently supported by them.
- In an assessment of the responses to question 15 there were a wide range of reasons given for supporting the children's centres.
  - 46% of a sample of 550 replies valued the support and services of the children's centres, with 17% calling it a lifeline due to its importance to them.
  - 30% made comments about the value of the services to the development of children
  - 14% wrote of the importance of there being a local accessible service and 14% of the impact that the centres have on the wider community.
  - The staff were commended in the comments by 14% of those responding but this was also implied in the support services and other comments.
  - Other points supported by at least 5% of the replies mentioned, the help in reducing isolation, making friends, and that all needed the family support at times. The value to child protection was also given and the help given to children in the transition to nursery and school.
- There were also a number of ideas put forward about other ways that could be explored that would help to retain the level of service provided by each children's centre. No level of importance or popularity has been attached to these ideas as they were all offered in a sincere attempt by those who responded to resolve the situation of budgeting for the children's centres without losing any centres or fundamental services. They are shown in the words of those responding with apologies for any that are not included.-
  - *"Other revenue sources need to be further explored. E.g. a very small charge for some activities".*
  - *"The use of volunteers in a limited way could reduce staff costs."*

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- *"Maybe some sharing of management in smaller clusters. The clusters suggested are far too big and inequitable".*
- *"Greater collaboration with maintained nurseries would aid in provision".*
- *"Reduce costs through sharing more facilities and resources with other agencies. E.g. health This would also facilitate greater information sharing".*
- *"Raise Council Tax but explain to tax payers that it is for the Children's centres and making the citizens of the future a top priority. People do not mind paying when they know what it is being spent on".*
- *"Surely this should be a top priority for the council as it is about the future of Dudley there should be more provision, not less! With all the Government studies on poor health and obesity and the push for breast feeding over bottle feeding children's centres are at the forefront of the battle and this should be reflected in the priorities and provision of the Council".*
- *"Aligning clusters with other departmental structures or the Townships, with an holistic service with Troubled families teams, fast team and social work".*
- *"Consistency and coordination across the clusters with all working within an agreed framework, with better use of data, improved purchasing".*
- *"More co-location of health and social care etc where feasible and the pooling of available resources so that other work with children is linked to the children's centres".*
- *"The centre building costs could be reduced by hiring out facilities at a cost. We are constantly being asked for the use of our rooms which we give if they are available. If these had been chargeable it would have brought in a fair revenue. Those attached to a school could hire rooms to the school. Schools are always desperate for rooms as are other professionals, social workers, health etc".*
- *"I think the proposal is too drastic and believe that there will be insufficient staff remaining in the hubs to offer a realistic service to the families in Dudley."*
- *"I believe that to cluster centres in their current form (instead of the proposed satellite and hub) would reduce costs by reducing some of the staff but would maintain functioning staffed centres".*

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- *"Schools fundraise for their own schools. Is there any reason why children's centres couldn't do the same? The staff are willing, and wouldn't this surely be better than closing a vital service".*
- *"Also, because the closure of children's centres will have so many long term health implications on the NHS would it be possible to ask if the NHS or other similar bodies could take over some of the funding".*
- *"What were the criteria for the choice of hubs? Are these the best choices for the needs of the people of Dudley?"*

### **Conclusions**

From the many comments it was apparent how much the work of the children's centre is valued and how much is done over and above the required targets and expectations:

- *"It saved my children from going into care"*
- *"No one knows why you are there. It is confidential"*
- *"It is a back up to specialist services"*
- *"It provides a safe environment"*
- *"It is critical to child safeguarding and gives stressed mums a place to go"*

The questionnaires and letters rejected the proposals as presented and the emphasis of the responses was on the priority of the early years and how the centres improve the potential of the child and provided invaluable support to the parents, particularly the mothers.

Children's centres have developed into hubs within their own communities and their local nature and accessibility are paramount to their success. The cost and difficulty of travelling with young children is cited as a major obstacle to the cluster model as outlined in the proposal which took into account the potential closure of some of the centres.

Many comments praise the managers and staff for their support and the way in which they had created an atmosphere in which parents and children felt comfortable and thus were able to have confidence to raise issues and trust the staff. Parents also liked the fact that at present they can drop-in to the centre when the situation arises. In many cases, they have made friends with others and most importantly their children are able to develop socially and practically in the welcoming environment.