

## **CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL**

**14 SEPTEMBER 2018**

### **UPDATE ON THE USE OF CHILDREN'S CENTRE BUILDINGS**

---

#### **Summary**

1. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families, and the Assistant Director for Early Help and Commissioning have been invited to the meeting to further update the Panel on the use of Children's Centre buildings and the related delivery of early childhood and early help services.
2. This report contains an update on the position of change to children's centres nationally, a detailed summary of provision at each centre in Worcestershire (Appendix 1) and a summary of the numbers using the centres that are run by the Council's commissioned services.

#### **Background and purpose of the report**

3. Members will be aware of the decisions taken in 2016 to transfer the leases of a number of Children's Centre buildings to schools and childcare providers, and the continued use of the buildings that were not transferred for the provision of services by the Parenting and Family Support service (formerly known as Early Help services). The proposals in 2016 formed part of wider decisions, including the reduction of funding and redesign of early help services, and were informed by the need for additional funded nursery places.
4. In March 2017 and February 2018 the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel received progress updates on these changes and requested further information relating to the use of the buildings and provision of related early help services.
5. A children's centre is defined as a place or a group of places:
  - which is managed by or on behalf of, or under arrangements with, the local authority with a view to securing that early childhood services in the local authority's area are made available in an integrated way;
  - through which early childhood services are made available (either by providing the services on site, or by providing advice and assistance on gaining access to services elsewhere); and
  - at which activities for young children are provided.
6. Early childhood services are defined as:
  - early years provision (early education and childcare);

- social services functions of the local authority relating to young children, parents and prospective parents;
- health services relating to young children, parents and prospective parents;
- training and employment services to assist parents or prospective parents;
- information and advice services for parents and prospective parents.

7. Local authorities must ensure there are sufficient children's centres, so far as reasonably practicable, to meet local need (Childcare Act 2006).

8. This report provides the additional information requested by the Panel, together with additional background information relating to a recent national study of the operation of Children's Centres in England. Additionally consideration is given to other implications on the use Children's Centre buildings including; the potential impact of the transfer of Children's Social Work Services to the wholly owned company Worcestershire Children First, and the re-commissioning of a 0-19 prevention and early intervention services, on the use of Children's Centre buildings going forward.

### **Children's Centres – the national picture**

9. A recent [report by The Sutton Trust and Oxford University](#) looked at new research investigating what has happened to Children's Centres across England since changes to national policy and reductions in national funding levels; which services are being retained and what new initiatives are being developed in order to comply with a local authority's duty to deliver early intervention services for families with children aged 0-5 years.

10. The report notes that nationally funding allocated by Local Authorities to Children's Centres has been reduced by 48% and this level of funding reduction has been reflected in Worcestershire resulting in service restructures.

11. The Sutton Trust report highlights a drop in attendance at Children's Centres nationally of 14% between 2009 and October 2017. In Worcestershire, recorded numbers of families and children using the Centres remained consistent until the service changes in 2016 outlined above. A comparison of attendance in centres where comparative data is available shows an overall reduction of 45% in the number of children attending centres and a 20% reduction in parents/carers attending.

12. It is important to note that the whilst Children's Centre buildings do continue to provide a range of early childhood services, additionally activities and support is provided through a range of other community venues. For example children's centre staff work in partnership to support early learning and activity sessions for families from The Hive in Worcester City. As well as supplying resources, the staff member responsible for supporting access to funded childcare places is available to answer questions and inform parents on their eligibility to apply for places. Comments from parents include "The Hive is so easy to get to, I come here regularly" and "This is a great activity for my child to prepare for school".

13. The Sutton report also states that some local authorities have closed as many as 50% of their Centres and six authorities have closed 70% of their Centres. Worcestershire is maintaining early childhood services in all Council owned centres with a continued focus on the provision of early years' services and the targeting of services to those most in need of support. One building (3% of total provision) previously leased by an Early Help provider from a private landlord did close in 2017, on the expiry of the lease, and service delivery moved to other community buildings in the area.

14. Ofsted inspections of Children's Centres nationally were suspended in 2013 and in August 2018 the Department for Education confirmed there are no current plans to review or consult on the future of children's centres. Instead, the government is to focus on implementing its social mobility action plan, which launched in December 2017 to improve early years provision in disadvantaged areas. The government will also focus on its early years social mobility peer review programme which is being designed to share good practice and inform the strategy for closing the development gap between disadvantaged children and their peers. The findings are also expected to inform a review of consultation of Children's Centres in the future.

### **Position statement and summary of changes since December 2016**

15. A detailed summary of each Children's Centre building in Worcestershire is included as Appendix 1 to this report showing who the centre is leased to, the provision at the centre in 2016 and current provision, and comparative 'footfall' figures where these are available. 'Footfall' is the number of individual visits to a centre and has traditionally been recorded by Children's Centre/Early Help providers. Since 2016 the centres that are run by schools and childcare providers are not required to measure usage in this way and therefore a full comparison of numbers using centres is not available. Details of childcare/nursery places available on the site of each centre are also included where this is relevant.

16. The table below summarises the lease arrangements for all centres (September 2018)

Children's Centre managed/occupied by:	Number of buildings
Parenting and Family Support providers	10
Schools	15
Childcare providers	5
Worcestershire County Council pending decision on transfer arrangements	2

17. The centres that are pending decision are Woodlands at Woodrow Primary. It is expected that the transfer will proceed Autumn term, 2018. The second centre is Bluebell at Perry Wood in Worcester where a decision was taken earlier this year by the school not to proceed with the transfer of the centre to the school. The centre remains open and consideration is being given to its future use and lease arrangements.

18. The focus of this programme of change remains the optimisation of the future use of all Children's Centre buildings, the integration of prevention and intervention services ensuring that services are delivered, where possible, in or close to the communities that need them. The centres currently leased to Parenting and Family Support providers, and those centres where there is capacity to host additional services, continue to be a consideration in the development of the model of delivery for early childhood services and is included in the property workstream for the transfer to Worcestershire Children First, the commissioning of 0-19 prevention and intervention service and development of locally delivered maternity services.

19. As noted above 'footfall' figures are recorded by Parenting and Family Support providers and a summary is contained in the table below showing footfall in 2016 (prior to reductions in funding and targeting of these services) and in 2018 where centres continue to be run by them. Changes in usage figures reflect not only the services delivered by the providers but also whether health services (health visiting and antenatal clinics and speech and language drop-ins) and other activity sessions continue to be delivered at the centre by other agencies and are not a reflection of the total number of families engaged with early childhood services.

	2016		2017	
<b>Children's Centres</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Carers</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Carers</b>
Pear Tree (Bromsgrove)	2204	2225	2939	4087
Holly Trees (Redditch)	2803	5723	2882	5231
Brookside & Half Crown Wood (Wyre Forest)	6753	10335	3308	7267
Tudor Way, Saffron, Buttercup (Worcester)	11058	17167	4440	13563
WANDS & Blossom Vale (Wychavon)	7105	7533	2192	3211
Sunshine (Malvern)	2388	4604	1873	4696
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>32311</b>	<b>47587</b>	<b>17634</b> (45% reduction)	<b>38055</b> (20% reduction)

20. The Children's Centres managed by the Parenting and Family Support Providers deliver a range of services (detailed in Appendix 1) including providing advice and guidance on a number of issues including assisting parents in finding and accessing childcare and nursery provision

21. Currently 71% of eligible disadvantaged 2 year olds in Worcestershire access their free nursery place which is equal to the national average. Additionally, 96% of three and four year olds are in nursery places and the new 30 hours offer has had an excellent take up with many children's centres now being used to meet this extra demand. These include those situated at Franche in Kidderminster, Charford First School in Bromsgrove and Stourport Primary in Stourport. Robust marketing strategies by the Parenting and Family Support providers, using social media and advertising to promote services in their area, means that families and professionals are kept informed of services that are available.

22. During school holidays, many term time activities cease to run at centres but in some cases additional services are introduced to support working families and to provide continuity for children. Each of the commissioned providers arrange and promote activities organised in their local area. These include day trips, sport clubs, and activity schemes amongst others. Most health services including ante natal and health visitor led groups continue to run through the holidays at designated children's centres, as well as targeted groups. Parenting courses continue but with reduced frequency as children are out of school and many people are on holiday.

### **Delivery of outcomes and narrowing the gap**

23. The core purpose of children's centres is to improve outcomes for young children and their families and reduce inequalities between families in greatest need and their peers in: child development and school readiness; parenting aspirations and parenting skills; and child and family health and life chances.

24. Early indications (August 2018) suggest that 71% of children in Worcestershire's state schools achieved a good level of development at the end of reception in 2018, a key performance indicator and a reflection of the combined impact of early childhood services including those delivered at or from Children's Centres. This figure indicates a slight improvement compared to 2017 and places the county as a whole in line with national performance.

25. Approximately half of Worcestershire children who were eligible for free school meals (an indicator of deprivation) achieved a good level of development in 2018 compared to almost three quarters of their peers in the county. Both groups appear to have improved slightly compared to 2017.

26. Historically, the gap between pupils eligible for free school meals and their peers has been wider in Worcestershire than nationally and this trend is likely to continue in 2018. In 2016 and 2017, only 49% of Worcestershire's FSM eligible pupils achieved a good level of development compared to 54% and 56% respectively at national level.

## Conclusion

27. In conclusion, the information contained in this report and the outline of provision contained in Appendix 1 demonstrates that Children's Centres continue to be used for their original purpose. Recorded footfall has fallen but centres continue to support delivery of a range of services including those delivered by Parenting and Family Support providers, Targeted Family Support provision (now managed directly by the Council but delivered from a number of centres) a range of health provision and increased childcare/nursery provision. Officers and partners continue to work to maximise the use of these buildings and to ensure that each building continues to deliver early childhood services and relevant outcomes for families, and is used effectively as part of the overall model of delivery of a range of provision in Worcestershire.

## Purpose of the Meeting

28. The Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel is asked to:

- Consider the information in the update
- Determine whether it would wish to carry out any further scrutiny, and
- Agree whether it would wish to make any comments to the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children, Families and Communities.

## Supporting Information

Appendix 1 – Detailed summary of each Children's Centre building in Worcestershire (to follow)

## Contact Point

Alyson Grice/Samantha Morris, Overview and Scrutiny Officers (01905 844962/844963)  
Email: [scrutiny@worcestershire.gov.uk](mailto:scrutiny@worcestershire.gov.uk)

## Background Papers

In the opinion of the proper officer (in this case the Head of Legal and Democratic Services) the following are the background papers relating to the subject matter of this report:

- Report by the Sutton Trust and Oxford University, [Stop Start: Survival, decline or closure? Children's centres in England, 2018](#)
- Agendas and minutes for the meetings of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel on 13 March 2017 and 7 February 2018

[All agendas and minutes are available on the Council's website here.](#)