

Budget Proposals 2016-17: Children's Centres

Summary of Feedback Received and Key Findings

Why we consulted?

Over the last four years we have had to make savings of £23m because we've received less money from central government. We have done this by becoming more efficient at what we do, by reducing some of our administrative functions and increasing our income. Throughout this period we have done our best to protect front line services.

We now have to find another £20m over the next four years, with almost £11m to be found in 2016/17. Much of this will come from further efficiencies within the council, but £4.6m will have to come from services that will impact the public.

In order to inform the budget setting process for 2016/17 we published a list of those proposals which would likely have a direct impact on service users, and sought the views from those affected and interested:

- to understand the likely impact
- to identify any measures to reduce their impact
- to explore any possible alternatives

Approach

All the proposals were published on the council's website on 3 November 2015 with feedback requested by 14 December 2015. Respondents were directed to a [central index page](#), with a video message from the Chief Executive outlining the background to the exercise.

Information relating to this proposal was linked directly from this index page. This contained more detailed information on what was specifically proposed, information on what we thought the impact might be, as well as what else we had considered in developing and arriving at this proposal. Feedback was then invited through an online form, four public meetings, twelve staff visits to centre buildings and outreach groups, and through a dedicated email address.

Each individual budget proposal was placed on our [Consultation Portal](#) which automatically notified those registered that an exercise had been launched. Members of the West Berkshire community panel (around 800 people) and local stakeholder charities, representative groups and partner organisations were also emailed directly, notifying them of the exercise and inviting their contributions.

Heads of Service made direct contact with those organisations affected by any of the budget proposals prior to them being made publically available.

A press release was issued on the same date, as well as publicised through Facebook and Twitter.

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Background

Children's Centre services provide 'early childhood services' to improve outcomes for young children and their families. These services include early education and childcare, health services, and training, information and advice for parents, some are provided by the council and some by partner organisations.

We recognise the important role Children's Centres play in delivering early childhood services and support for children and their families in West Berkshire. We know many families have positive experiences of Children's Centres and those that use them, value them.

West Berkshire has 10,000 plus children under the age of 5 and around 1750 to 1900 births each year. This has increased in the last five years with considerable new housing particularly in Newbury and Thatcham with more housing planned over the next three to five years, so we expect the numbers of young children to grow.

The four key strands of the proposal are:

- Re-design how we deliver our services so that we can make the biggest difference to families.
 - We will create 3 geographical areas for the planning and delivery of services. These will be called Family & Wellbeing Delivery Areas. The Children's Centres in each Delivery Area will become Family & Wellbeing Hubs.
 - We will reduce management, staffing and administration costs by removing duplication and integrating service delivery.
 - We will make more use of local community venues and work alongside partner organisations and community groups.
- Target support for parents and children who need additional help, including early childhood services
- Continue to offer popular early childhood services for families. We may start to charge a fee.
- Create a single governance group to oversee Early Childhood Services.

As part of this proposal it is proposed to close the following centres:

- Calcot
- South Thatcham (Lower Way)
- South Newbury
- East Downlands

This will save £300k.

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Summary of Key Points

Question	Number of responses received			
	Yes	Comments	No	Comments
Are you or anyone you care for a user of this service?	98		39	
Do you agree with the council's proposal to create three Family & Wellbeing Delivery Areas?	72	58	123	46
Do you agree with the council's proposal to have a rural and urban Family & Well being Hub in each of the three delivery areas?	90	45	107	88
Do you agree with the locations of the Family & Well being Hubs?	80	41	117	104
Do you agree with the council's proposal to extend the range of services we offer to include services for older children, youths and their families?	124	84	74	70
Do you support the council's view that we should deliver outreach services in local communities for local people?	167	91	32	28
Do you agree with the council's proposal for providing targeted family support?	156	106	32	25
In your experience and knowledge, what types of targeted family support services would make the biggest difference to families?	25 responded providing comments or lists of services.			
Do you agree with the council's proposal to keep some universal services?	136	101	14	11
Which services do you value most? (Please name as many as you wish)	160 provided comments or lists of the universal services they value.			
Do you agree with the council's proposal to charge £3.50 per family for some universal activities or sessions?	50	41	145	139
Which groups, organisations and services do you think are the most important to have representation on the strategic board?	20 provided comments or lists of representatives.			
Is there anything else you think we should be aware of in terms of how these proposals might impact people?	61 comments reiterated earlier concerns around cost, closure and travel for those on low incomes.			
Do you feel that these proposals will affect particular individuals more than others, and if so how do you think we might help with this?	87 comments repeated concerns raised earlier with particular reference to costs, closure and travel.			

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Question	Number of responses received			
	Yes	Comments	No	Comments
Do you have any suggestions as to how this service might be delivered in a different way? If so please provide details.	54 comments in the main reiterated earlier concerns, asking for no change or offering voluntary support.			
Any further comments?	39 comments			

The number of responses received on the formal consultation questionnaire was 256. These included responses from (multiple submissions are provided in brackets):

- A2 Dominion
- Burghfield and Area advisory Board
- Calcot Residents (2)
- Crabtree Toddler Group
- East Downlands Children Centre (5)
- Governing Body of Pangbourne Primary school
- Parents and Users (6)
- HQ 77th BDW Welfare
- Kennet School
- Pangbourne Children Centre
- South Newbury Children Centre (3)
- Thatcham Children Centre (2)
- Thatcham Health Visitor
- Theale Parish Council
- Tilehurst Parish Council
- Twins Club
- Unison
- Victoria Park Children Centre (5)
- Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust (3)
- Calcot Children Centre (2)
- Children's Centres
- East Downlands Benefice, Oxford Diocese
- Family Support Workers
- Headteacher of Victoria Park Nursery School and Children Centre
- Homestart West Berkshire (4)
- Hungerford and Area Children Centre (5)
- Newbury Cluster Children Centre (2)
- South Thatcham Children Centre (3)
- TCC Preschool
- Thatcham Youth
- The Den Childcare
- Tilehurst Children Centre
- Transport Services Team
- Twins Group Newbury
- Velvert Children Centre
- Volunteer, from Thatcham Children Centre

There were also 56 individual responses from users of Calcot Children Centre using their own letter format, these have been considered alongside the formal consultation questionnaire.

The notes from the public meetings, which were attended by 43 individuals, and the information gained from 146 individuals during visits to centres and groups have also been considered in line with the consultation document.

1. Are you, or is anyone you care for, a user of this service?

Of the total 256 responses 98 affirmed that they or someone they care for are users of the service, 39 were none users and 119 declined to respond.

2. Do you agree with the council's proposal to create three Family & Wellbeing Delivery Areas (please see map)?

- The budget restrictions are appreciated and if this is a way of keeping some children centres this seems the best approach in the circumstances.

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- Agreement that three areas is a good proposal but that the areas identified and the locations of the remaining centres are not the best sites to meet the highest needs.
- The delivery areas would work well as long as there is sufficient funding to support staffing levels to meet the needs of the areas.
- The plan streamlines services and costs
- The value of the plan can be seen, as long as it benefits the most in need.
- Concern that the identified areas are too big
- Transport issues for non car users and the cost of parking with the increased need for travel.
- The impact of the closure of their local centre on access to services and knowledge of the local area.
- Lack of access for those most in need

3. Do you agree with the council's proposal to have a rural and urban Family & Wellbeing Hub in each of the three Delivery Areas?

- Expertise to meet the needs of both urban and rural areas
- Coverage for the whole of West Berkshire
- Rural areas will cover a larger area so resourcing needs to be carefully considered.
- Ensuring that all needs are met regardless of locations.
- The proposal spreads resources too thinly resulting in a reduction of services.
- There need to be more centres which are local to areas, not closures.
- The implications of transport links
- The personal impact of local centre closures

4. Do you agree with the locations of the Family & Wellbeing Hubs?

- Locations are central to the proposed areas
- Yes but with some suggestions about better locations particularly in rural areas.
- Particular concerns over the closure of the four centres and if they are the correct ones to be identified.
- Has careful consideration been given to the increasing housing and resulting population.
- That the centres remain where they are.
- Transport and parking considerations across the hub locations.

5. Do you agree with the council's proposal to extend the range of services we offer to include services for older children, youths and their families?

- That the model would bring together services, support multiagency working and build communities.
- The proposal is good as long as it doesn't impact on the existing services for under 5s.
- This is a sensible suggestion as many families have older children and would benefit from the advice and support.
- Concerns that this is over stretching existing buildings and provision and those services for older children should take place at a different time to those for under 5s.
- Could schools offer some of this support for the older children

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- Could schools offer some of the support for older children
- The mixing of age groups would make the centres less comfortable for those with younger children. Bringing together different age groups has challenges.
- There needs to be more clarity about how this would be achieved.

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6. Do you support the council's view that we should deliver outreach services in local communities for local people?

- There is already outreach happening to a range of areas and this is seen as an important part of the current service. This can be built on by working with groups that are already running for families in communities. However there are concerns about budget implications, staff time and if this will generate savings.
- This is vital to support those who live in isolated rural areas where there is little access to transport links. Communities often feel more comfortable in their local venue, that they can walk to and where they meet with and build friendship groups. Allow local communities to have a say in what is run and how.
- Outreach activities are a good plan but not at the cost of losing centres.
- A dedicated welcoming place with consistent staff where users are able to build a relationship is important. Outreach can be infrequent with changing staff and in unfriendly venues.
- This approach will incur costs and therefore it is difficult to see how it will make savings. The staff will be further stretched having to transport resources and work in unfamiliar environments.
- Support needs to get people out, mixing and attending sessions.

7. Do you agree with the council's proposal for providing targeted family support?

- Targeted family support is something which the centre already does well and is appreciated. Families feel safe and secure and can build confidence in these groups at times of transition in their lives.
- Targeted support should not replace universal services which provide opportunities to build networks, form relationships and receive support in a welcoming and supportive environment.
- Targeted work needs to be carefully managed so that there is access to support for a whole range of families who may at time need support and advice but who may not be called 'in need'.
- Targeted smaller groups and one to one provide the opportunity to speak about issues and to build confidence as a parent.
- Concerns that universal health services may not be offered and these are vital to all families.
- Targeted work needs to be carefully managed so that there is access to support for a whole range of families who may at time need support and advice but who may not be called 'in need'.
- There needs to be more support for all families not less or just targeted.

8. In your experience and knowledge, what types of targeted family support services would make the biggest difference to families?

- Continue to provide the full range of universal services but there needs to be access to preventative services and universal health services.
- The services currently delivered in children centres need to be continually developed improved over time.

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- Every family is individual therefore a broad package of both council and other services is needed to meet needs.
- 1:1 Parenting Support
- Parenting Courses to build self-esteem, confidence, to help with behaviour, boundaries and routines
- Incredible Years
- Access to Family Support Workers
- Antenatal support
- Postnatal support – PND, breastfeeding, bonding and attachment, sleep, weaning
- Alcohol/drug misuse
- Family Fridays
- Literacy support and help with forms
- Domestic abuse support – signposting, courses e.g. Power to Change, DA Toolkit
- Mental Health
- Multiple Births,
- Young Parents groups,
- Dad's Groups
- Courses – BOOST, Healthy Eating, SHARE (supporting parents with children's learning & development),
- Paediatric First Aid,
- Baby Massage
- Debt/budgeting
- Accessing training/employment
- Family Break up
- Housing
- Children with additional needs
- Accessing services for family when English is an additional language
- Family Group Conferences
- Anger Management
- Speech and Language
- Antenatal support
- Postnatal support - post natal depression,
- Breastfeeding, bonding and attachment, sleep, weaning

9. Do you agree with the council's proposal to keep some universal services?

- Universal Health Services are valued as they are available to all families. They support the family providing advice at important stages, with the children's health and wellbeing and supporting the mental health of parents.
- The children centres currently provided a range of universal services which are valued as they provide opportunities for families to get advice and support in a non threatening environment where relationships can be fostered. Families are not stigmatised, can access activities they can't do at home and build networks within their local communities.
- Individual users commented that these sessions are less scary, are open to all and help them to build relationships with other new parents while socialising their child.
- All universal services should be kept; these are the services which have benefitted users most.

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10. Which services do you value the most? (Please name as many as you wish)

- All services have equal value; they encourage families into the centres and are developed on the basis of local need. They are open to a wide range of families and parents know they can get advice and support and gain in confidence.
- Some families have little space at home or don't have the facilities to provide 'messy' play. Some of the sessions give children this opportunity, the freedom to play and benefit from social interaction. Also the interaction for the parents, a friendly face.
- Family Support -Early identification of needs
- Play & Learn sessions,
- Adult Learning,
- Centre programmes
- Bumps & Babies
- Story time
- Family Champions
- Messy Play
- Toy Library
- Post Natal Groups
- Well Baby Clinic
- School Readiness
- Opportunity for children to learn independence & social skills
- Provision of a venue for other agencies e.g. Midwife, Health Visitors, Speech & Language. o
- Stay, Play and Learn o
- Well Baby Clinics o
- Post natal groups o Adult education o
- Adult and child centred groups o
- Mixed age groups o
- Working with Health Visitors and Social Workers
- Weigh in clinic
- Breastfeeding support
- Stay and play
- Twins and multiples group
- PAFT
- Bumps and babes
- On the move
- Ages and stages developmental checks
- Speech and language drop-ins

11. Do you agree with the council's proposal to charge £3.50 per family for some universal activities or sessions?

- We appreciate the savings that need to be made and if this keeps the centres open, however what contingency plans will there be for families who can't afford to pay.

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- Responses indicated that most were willing to pay; some would pay more if it meant that they were able to access a session. Others felt £3.50 was too high and that the charge should be £2.00, while others felt it should only be £1.00.
- Other responses suggested that the charge should be lower, say £1.00, but per child.
- There should be transparency about how the charges are collected and used.
- This should be a voluntary contribution as a charge is a barrier. Should be lower than £3.50, £1.00 seems fair.
- The pre booking system is not workable for families as children can be unpredictable and may not arrive for their session due to delays. Could book a block in advance and use on a session by session basis. An on-line system is not accessible by all families. The number limit of 15 is not workable.
- There should be no charge at all as a charge will create a barrier between those who have and have not.
- Those who can afford to pay should pay.
- £3.50 is a big increase and too much, £2.00 is a more reasonable figure per family.
- There could be fund raising events cake sales, fairs and sales to help.

12. Which groups, organisations and services do you think are the most important to have representation on the strategic board?

- Don't agree with the strategic board as each centre is different.
- Health visitors
- Social services
- Headteacher
- Family support workers
- Voluntary groups
- Domestic abuse workers
- Mental health workers
- Faith groups
- Maternity nurses
- Housing and welfare
- Pre schools
- Police
- Adult and family learning
- Educational psychologists
- CAMHs
- Job centre plus
- Community wardens
- Youth Groups
- Military welfare
- Homestart
- Medical profession
- Speech and language
- Users of the centres

13. Is there anything else you think we should be aware of in terms of how these proposals might impact people?

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- Concern at the closure of individual centres and the accessibility of the proposed areas particularly for those on low incomes or without transport.
- Concern regarding the impact of charging for sessions, particularly for low income families and those most in need. The view that the charges will put many families off attending.

14. Do you feel that these proposals will affect particular individuals more than others, and if so, how do you think we might help with this?

- Concern regarding individual centre closures in the four areas identified. Each centre having those who would propose that there is no change or that their particular centre should not close. That there should be more funding and more centres.
- Particular concern that charging for services will impact upon low income families. Therefore there should not be a charge but a voluntary contribution as there is currently.
- Concern that closures will make centres less accessible and that transport and parking costs will be a barrier. Keep the centres where they are.
- Impact on staff

15. Do you have any suggestions as to how this service might be delivered in a different way? If so, please provide details.

- Is there an option for a 'big society' type arrangement, where mums and dads can get involved to help deliver some sessions or services?
- User alternative venues like village halls and make the sessions more creative to attract more people.
- Embrace the voluntary and community sector to keep valued services running
- Keep more centres open
- Buildings earmarked for closure should be available for groups and course on some days
- Ring-fence the money for centres and allow each centre to make its own decisions about how to spend it.
- Delivery of some services could be outsourced
- On-line booking service and improved calendar format removing the need for a reception
- Charge small fees where appropriate, hire out rooms to other groups/organisations. Charge the health service for their use of the facility.
- Early years hubs / outreach programmes which are attached to nursery classes or preschool settings.
- Focus more on early intervention and supporting targeted groups to attend the universal service. This is an educational resource, and should be provided like education, universally.
- Ask existing successful groups to run satellite groups in these new area e.g. Reading Family Church run two good stay and play style groups in the town centre, give them a space and I am sure they would run a group.

16. Is there any way that you, or your organisation, can contribute in helping to alleviate the impact of this proposal? If so, please provide details of how you can help.

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- Parent runs sessions, volunteering and supporting existing services and groups.
- Health professionals to continue to work in close partnership with children centres.
- Continue to work closely with families, professionals and the local community to keep them up to date with information regarding any changes and supporting them to continue to access and promote services.

17. Any further comments?

- Keep the name as children centre.
- Don't close any centres.
- Reconsider the proposals as they will have a big impact.
- Charging for sessions will put people off

Conclusion

There is a clear appreciation of the need to find savings and that although many users would like no change, that this is not possible. The range of services offered both targeted and universal are valued and there is a clear need to keep a balance of these types of service as they meet a range of needs for all families.

The three areas proposed are generally understood although there are some suggestions that they could be refined further to ensure that there is a good balance of families within each area. The suggested new name of Family and Well Being Hub met with mixed reactions with there clearly being those who would like them to remain as children centres.

The proposed change to the age range was also met with mixed reactions. There is clearly some support for this but with strong reservations regarding older children receiving services alongside babies and under 5s. It is clear that there is some misunderstanding of what is proposed. The intention is to extend the range of advice and support to families as their children grow and develop, making the best possible use of resources across the authority.

The type and range of services and where they are to be delivered raised a range of responses. There is clearly a good understanding of the impact of both universal and targeted services and a wish to preserve as many of these as possible. There were also some strong views about the impact of closing centres and that this would limit access to these services. It is clear that closing a building was seen as there no longer being services in that area. However this is not the intention as outreach is also seen as an important part of future delivery. The proposals come from making the best use of expertise and resources while recognising the need to make efficiency savings.

The matter of charging for some sessions raised some strong objections and views. Clearly it is appreciated that these sessions have a cost and that some support in meeting that is one way of sustaining services. A voluntary contribution is viewed as being more acceptable than a charge and that £3.50 is too much where as £2.00/£1.50 would be more acceptable.

There are clearly some concerns also about any introduction of an advance booking system and that this is not realistic as getting to sessions with small children can be challenging.

The impact upon lower income families is raised in relation to charging for sessions, access to centres with particular focus upon the cost and lack of transport links. Some of this arises

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from the misunderstanding that closure of a building does not mean that services will no longer be delivered in a particular area.

Offers of support and suggestions for running services differently show that there is willingness for organisations to work together and for users to volunteer and run sessions. Overall the consultation didn't reveal any issues which would prevent the council from proceeding with the proposal.

Please note: *In order to allow everyone who wished the opportunity to contribute, feedback was not sampled. Therefore this wasn't a quantitative, statistically valid exercise. It was neither the premise, purpose, nor within the capability of the exercise, to determine the overall community's level of support, or views on the proposals, with any degree of confidence.*

The feedback captured therefore should be seen in the context of 'those who responded', rather than reflective of the wider community.

All the responses have been provided verbatim as an appendix to this report. Whilst this summary seeks to distil the key, substantive points made, it should also be read in conjunction with the more detailed verbatim comments to ensure a full, rounded perspective of the views and comments are considered.

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