

## Budget Proposals 2016-17 Phase 2: Children's Centres

### Consultation Summary Report

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#### Why We Consulted?

From 3 November to 14 December 2015, we consulted on the need to make £10.8m of savings in 2016/17. £4.6m of these savings affected frontline services. The consultation generated over 2,500 responses and covered [47 individual budget proposals](#).

Shortly before Christmas, however, the Government began a [public consultation](#) on local government funding and proposed to reduce our funding by 44% (Revenue Support Grant). This announcement was totally unexpected, and we were faced with the challenge of finding an additional £7.6m of savings, whilst also considering increases in Council Tax.

In order to inform this process, 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 15 February 2016 with feedback requested by 7 March 2016.

Respondents were directed to a [central index page](#), which outlined the overall background to the exercise, and provided links to each of the individual proposals.

Each individual page included further details on the specifics of what the proposal contained and what we thought the impact might be, along with any other elements we had taken into account.

Feedback was then invited through an online form, paper versions of the survey, 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 publicly available.

A press release was issued on the same date, and was further publicised through the council's Facebook and Twitter accounts.

The period in which we invited responses was reduced to three weeks in this case, instead of the usual six. This is because the funding announcement from government was both unexpected and very late in the financial year. It was not possible to extend the consultation period without negatively impacting the delivery of the 2016 council budget. In order to minimise the impact of this shorter timescale, we undertook extra activities to publicise the consultation in addition to our usual channels. This included making potential consultees

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aware of the impending exercise much earlier than normal via press releases and associated PR activities.

#### Proposal 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 over 10,000 children under the age of five and around 1,750 to 1,900 births each year. This has increased in the last five years with considerable amounts of new housing being built 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.

We consulted with you from 3 November to 14 December 2016 on the following Phase One proposals to:

- re-design how we deliver our services so that we can make the biggest difference to families
- 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

The council now faces further financial pressures and therefore has to find a further £150,000 of savings, in addition to the £300,000 already consulted upon.

#### Proposal Details

In addition to the proposals outlined in Phase One, we propose to reduce the number of buildings identified in each Family & Wellbeing Delivery Area from one rural and one urban site, to a single Hub. The Wellbeing Areas proposed are:

- **Newbury and West:** Serving Newbury and the West. Due to the large geographical area, we will need to identify key areas for outreach, including Lambourn and Kintbury.
- **Thatcham and Central:** Serving the Thatcham, Chieveley and part of the current East Downslands area.
- **Tilehurst and East:** Serving the Calcot, Tilehurst and Burghfield group and rest of the East Downslands Area.

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#### Consultation Response

##### Number of Responses

In total, 384 responses were received, including:

- 267 from individuals
- 14 from groups/organisations
  - Berkshire Healthcare Foundation
  - Burghfield and Area Children Centre
  - Calcot Governors Board
  - East Downlands Benefice
  - Health Visitors
  - Hungerford and area Children Centre
  - Hungerford Primary School
  - Ilsley's Under 5s
  - Pangbourne and Tilehurst Children Centre
  - Play Buddies
- Three from Town/Parish Councils
  - Hungerford Town Council
  - Theale Parish Council
  - Tilehurst Parish Council

We received two petitions from:

- Katherine Whitehouse, with regard to Burghfield and Area Children Centre
- Michelle Newland-Bragg with regard to South Thatcham Children Centre

##### Summary of Main Points

Responses to the proposal focused upon the closure of centres and the loss to the community a particular centre currently serves. This was linked to concerns about the impact upon particular services users and vulnerable groups. The loss of service to rural communities was highlighted and the associated isolation for families, particularly those without their own transport.

##### Summary of Responses by Question

#### **1. Are you a user of the service?**

306 of those who responded identified themselves as user of the service.

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2. **Which Children's Centre(s) do you, or someone you care for, usually go to? Please tick all that apply.**

Children's Centre	No. of respondents
Burghfield and Area	74
Calcot, Theale and Area	20
Chieveley	17
East Downlands	21
Hungerford and Area	41
North Newbury	10
South Newbury	8
Thatcham North	16
Thatcham South	18
Tilehurst and Area	107

3. **How do you think this proposal might impact people?**

- It was felt that the changes would impact on everyone, parents, carers and children.
- Responses identified the impact of the closure of specific centres and the loss to that community.
- Less access to local services for parents, carers and families.
- The isolation of new mothers and families was identified as concern. This was also linked to a concern that health services currently delivered in children centres; baby weighing, age and stage checks, speech therapy drop-ins and anti and postnatal services, would be lost to local communities and access to social and emotional support.
- Challenges of limited transport links for those without their own transport, many rural areas have limited bus services.
- Loss of the relationships, particularly trust which have been built over time.

4. **Do you think some people will be affected more than others, and if so, how can we change this?**

- Low income families
- Vulnerable families
- Transient families
- Families without transport
- Those affected directly by local changes to their centre.
- Specific valued groups: twins club and Dad's sessions.
- New parents and their children

Most put forward the view that the centres should remain as they are and that this would be the only way to mitigate for the impact on communities and individuals.

5. **Can you think of a way we can deliver this service whilst still saving the same amount of money? If so, please give details.**

- The main response being not to close centres. No full suggestion of how to deliver the service while achieving the same savings was put forward.

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- There were a range of useful suggestions which linked closely to those outlined in the proposal. These included:
  - Working with other established groups and organisations sharing sustainability costs and resources.
  - Fund raising events such as car boot sales, family fun days and barbeques.
  - Working with local communities to develop usage of a building by letting to individuals and community based groups. Diversify the use of the buildings so that full occupation is achieved.
  - Donations from users, increased voluntary contributions for 'stay and play' and 'messy play' and payment for some activities which are at cost rather than subsidised.
  - Use of volunteers for running sessions, manning buildings and to support regular activities.
  - Hire local cheaper venues for use only when activities are taking place.
  - Make the savings from other areas and services.
  - Approach universities offering social work, occupational therapy, teacher training and other related professions and offer student placements to gain funding streams.

**6. Do you know of any community spaces that we could look at as a place to deliver the proposed outreach services? If so, please give details.**

- Jubilee Hall
- Churches
- Croft Field Hall
- Village Halls
- Doctors Surgeries
- Adventure Dolphin
- Libraries
- Schools
- Community Centres
- Leisure Centres

**7. Do you know of any other organisations that we can work with that might help affected people adapt to the changes? If so, please give details.**

- Mother Tongue, Reading (counselling in different languages)
- Number 5 counselling agency (counselling for young people)
- Crossing Bridges Reading (Domestic abuse)
- The yellow suitcase project (mental health)
- Better links with Talking therapies and housing associations.
- GPs/Health Visitors/Midwives
- Reading Borough Council
- Church Groups
- Newbury Volunteer Service
- NCT
- The Government
- Charities such as HomeStart
- Army families federation
- Playgroups and toddler groups
- Nursery Schools

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#### 8. Any further comments?

- We must invest in our children and families.
- Concern that plans to build further houses across West Berkshire will put even more strain upon the remaining services.
- It is clear from the comments that individual centres are highly praised and valued and users are sad to be losing the services they provide.
- Consider other areas to make cuts instead.

Officer conclusion and recommendation can be found in the associated Overview of Responses and Recommendations document.

Avril Allenby  
School Improvement Advisor  
Education Services  
9 March 2016

**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.*