

**From: Peter Oakford, Cabinet Member for Specialist Children's Services,
Patrick Leeson, Corporate Director, Education and Young People's Services**

To: Education and Young People's Services Cabinet Committee – 15 April 2015

Subject: Update on Children's Centres

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary:

Children's Centres in Kent remain integral to delivering Early Help and Preventative Services, both through open access and targeted work with a core purpose of improving outcomes for young children and their families. They give greatest priority to supporting those families in greatest need. They work to make sure all children are properly prepared for school, regardless of background or family circumstances. They also offer a wide range of support and advice to parents, for example to develop their skills to access employment and to ensure maximum take up of benefits for poorer families.

The creation of the integrated Early Help and Preventative Services Division clarified the need for a review of the wider organisational structure, and this activity is an integral part of the 0-25 transformation programme. Children Centres have been included in this restructure and further managerial and front line delivery changes are being proposed as part of our current consultation proposals.

This paper sets out some of the proposals and management actions taken in regards to future delivery of the Children's Centres core purpose.

Recommendation:

The Education and Young People's Services Cabinet Committee is asked to consider and endorse or make a recommendation to the Cabinet Member for Specialist Children's Services on the proposals sets out in this paper and endorse the management actions taken in regard to future delivery of the Children's Centres core purpose.

1. Background and Update

1.1 There has been no further Children's Centre inspections in Kent so far during 2015. However all remaining hubs are still scheduled to be inspected prior to

July 2015. The ongoing review of current data sets and internal audits have highlighted that further work is required to be confident that all Kent Children Centres are consistently performing at a level that would be recognised by Ofsted as Good or better.

- 1.2 In an effort to consolidate our self-evaluation, the former Director of early Years at Ofsted has been commissioned to externally evaluate a number of Children Centre Hubs. The first of these took place in January in Dartford, the second in Swale in February and the third is planned for 30th and 31st March in Shepway. The learning from these reviews has been extremely valuable and has helped complement and strengthen the improvement work already being undertaken. Further reviews of more hubs are planned.

2. Key issues arising from recent internal reviews and externally commissioned audits

- 2.1 It is important to recognise that over recent years Children Centres have experienced a lot of change, enhanced inspection expectations, and a reducing financial envelope. It is therefore positive to note that the various inspection and self-evaluation work that has taken place over the past six months has identified significant strengths in Kent as well as confirming areas for improvement that remain broadly similar to those identified in previous Ofsted reports.

- 2.2 The following are an example of some of the strengths identified across the two hubs that have been reviewed to date.

- Careful evaluation of the work of the Children's Centres has taken place and appropriate action is being taken to address the key priorities.
- There is evidence that access for targeted groups is slowly improving due to an increase in activities.
- The staff have effective partnerships with Health professionals, schools and voluntary settings. This is enabling the Hub to provide better support for vulnerable and mainstream families.
- Overall access to the Centres' activities is improving.
- Staff teamwork is strong and much has been achieved in the past year.
- Working relationships with a wide range of external professionals are very good. There is evidence that their combined work is helping vulnerable parents to develop better levels of confidence, raised self-esteem and in some cases, a route to qualifications and paid employment.
- Staff are tracking children's progress well and aligning their tracking to Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) non-statutory benchmarks.
- Parents speak highly about the Centres' work. They report that staff are welcoming and friendly, that activities are well-planned and structured and that these help them and their children to gain independence.

Furthermore the improved collection, use and interpretation of data has also been recognised more widely with KCC having been recommended by the South East Ofsted regional lead for Early Years to support another Local Authority in this specific area of work.

2.3 The following are some of the key areas of development identified.

- Some Hubs have not yet formulated a strategic plan with targets for improvement across its Children's Centres; key priorities are not aligned to improvements in the early year's provision or to staff performance targets.
- The monitoring and evaluation of day-to-day practice is not sufficiently robust and does not satisfactorily inform the Hub's planning and self-review.
- The governance of the District Advisory Board (DAB) is not challenging enough.
- While relationships with parents, carers and other users are good and starting to influence the timing of sessions, users do not yet have sufficient influence on wider aspects of the work of the Hub.
- There needs to be better consistency across the county with regards to use of data to profile the work of the centres and monitor progress.
- Greater linking between Children Centre staff, Early Years teams, and Free for Two teams is needed to ensure joined working/planning to ensure the EYFS is fully embedded.
- A number of policies are out of date and require review.

3. Moving Forward

The model of how Children Centres are grouped, that came into effect in April last year (85 centres being grouped into 17 Hubs) is not coterminous with the proposed organisational structure within Early Help and Preventative Services. The newly proposed structure in the current consultation reverts to a model based on District boundaries and aligns with arrangements within other divisions of Education and Young People Services as well as Specialist Children Services.

- 3.1 The proposal recommends additional management capacity in all districts including the introduction of several KR9 posts to oversee the work of centres to a maximum of 2.5 full time equivalent centres.
- 3.2 The consultation concluded on the 20th March. Implementation of new arrangements will take place over the next few months and with as minimal impact as possible on current staff, the vast majority of whom have experienced recent change.
- 3.3 A further proposal is the creation of a dedicated central team in the Information and Intelligence team specifically dedicated to Children Centre Improvement. This team will oversee internal quality assurance and offer support and challenge to district management teams. This team will focus on:
- a) Standardising policies and process as well as training/supporting centres with compliance.
 - b) Establishing standard processes in regards to data collection, self-evaluation, monitoring, tracking.
 - c) Supporting effective performance management cycles including the annual conversation and strategic action planning.
 - d) Developing the work and function of the DABs.

- e) Carrying out a Quality Assurance function to monitor performance across all centres.

3.4 Other areas of development include;

- The opportunity for staff within Children Centres across the County to meet with the Children's Centre review team in May in order to understand and consolidate the learning from the recent reviews.
- The continued development of the role of the specialist advisers from the Early Years and Childcare Service so that this support becomes fully embedded across all centres.
- The continued refinement and use of data to improve outcomes.
- The transfer of commissioning responsibility for Health Visitors and the Healthy Child Programme later this year into the Local Authority which will enable further integration and improved information sharing which will undoubtedly result in improved outcomes for children.

4. Recommendation:

The Education and Young People's Services Cabinet Committee is asked to consider and endorse, or make recommendations to the Cabinet Member for Specialist Children's Services on the proposals set out in this paper and endorse the management actions taken in regards to future delivery of the Children's Centres core purpose.

5. Background Documents

[Kent Children's Centres Strategy April 2013](#)

[Early Help Prospectus June 2014](#)

[Surestart Children Centres Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities April 2013](#)

[EHPS Consultation documents; February 2015](#)

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