

REPORT FOR: **CABINET**

Date of Meeting:	18 October 2011
Subject:	Children's Centre Consultation Report
Key Decision:	No
Responsible Officer:	Catherine Doran, Corporate Director Children's Services
Portfolio Holder:	Councillor Mitzi Green, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services
Exempt:	No
Decision subject to Call-in:	Yes
Enclosures:	Appendix 1 – Children's Centre Consultation Report

[Due to the size, the appendix has been circulated to Cabinet and other Key Members and officers only. The appendix has been published on the Council's Website with this agenda and a hard copy is available on request.]

Section 1 – Summary and Recommendations

Summary

This report is written to present to Cabinet the report on the Children's Centre consultation that took place between May 17th and August 11th 2011. The consultation was carried out to examine how the centres can ensure that valuable services for families with young children can continue whilst making savings of £1.2 million. This research focuses on establishing how the children's centres are used, their value for parents, and residents' views on how the centres could continue to function efficiently in the future.

Recommendations:

Cabinet is requested to:

1. Note the Consultation Report;
2. Approve the development of an operating model for Harrow Children's Centres in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services and prepare a report to be submitted back to Cabinet for consideration.

Reason: (For recommendation)

Approval of these recommendations will allow proposals to be developed in order to support the sustainability of Children's Centre services in Harrow.

Section 2 – Report

Introduction

Harrow currently has 13 children's centres providing a range of early education, care and support services to young children and their families. By the end of the Autumn Term 2011 there will be 16 Children's Centres with Elmgrove, Earlsmead and Roxbourne Children's Centres which are attached to the respective schools being officially open and providing services.

Historically Children's Centres were funded from ring fenced Surestart grant however from 2011/12 this was replaced by a much reduced Early Intervention Grant. The reduction in grant funding has necessitated a review of the service.

Background

On May 17th The Portfolio Holder for Children's Services launched the consultation programme. Running until the 11th August the consultation programme ensured the views and opinions of children, parents and carers, potential users of children's centre services, partners who provide services and children's Centre staff were heard.

The consultation framework of questionnaires and focus groups provided opportunity for all users and stakeholders to hear about the current financial position for Children's Centres and provide their views about service priorities, service development and alternatives options. This information was captured into a full report which will provide the foundation for the future strategic model. The full consultation report is attached at appendix 1.

Options Considered

None.

The Consultation

Three focus groups were conducted with service providers and staff, and face-to-face interviews were conducted with parents in five different Children's Centres. The interviews took place in the following Children's Centres:

Whitefriars	Kenmore Park	Grange
Pinner Centre	Hillview	Cedars

In addition a further 26 groups were targeted by children's centre staff to ensure those attending knew about the consultation, had opportunity to complete a questionnaire or have their views captured and sent in.

1. Surveys

Paper questionnaires were distributed to all 13 Children's Centres. They were completed by 501 parents/guardians/carers, 30 partners and 39 staff. Additionally, 26 parents completed the questionnaire online, totalling 596 responses overall.

This report focuses to a greater extent on responses from parents as the sample is much larger and, therefore, signifies a more representative view of parents than is indicated in the relatively small number of responses from staff and partners. However, the latter results are included where appropriate.

Full results from the survey can be found in the full report, which is attached to this report as appendix one. A full list of verbatim comments is available separately.

2. Headlines

Parents, partners and staff all value the Children's Centres highly, and this opinion was repeatedly raised within questionnaires and during focus group and interviewing sessions. To support this, the questionnaire responses indicate that almost all (97%) parents say they value the Children's Centres either a great deal or a fair amount.

The value and benefits of Harrow Children's Centres to parents and children are frequently acknowledged and highly rated. Over three quarters (77%) of parents say what they most value about the Children's Centre is the helpful and welcoming staff.

The beneficial effects of the centre cited by parents, staff and partners are mostly related to child/self development. Therefore, the most common effect of the centre is cited by parents as allowing children to make more friends, at almost half (45%). A similar proportion, (44%) say that through attending the centre they have a better understanding of how to support their child.

Partners of Harrow Children's Centres are positive about the benefits of co-locating with the centres. Two thirds (70%) cite the main benefit being improving child behaviours. Similarly, three quarters (74%) of partners say the main reason they chose to deliver their service within a Children's Centre is for improved coordination between their service and other complimentary services.

Parents, staff and partners provide a number of suggestions on how the Children's Centres could be improved. Many of these were collected during focus groups and interviews, and mainly focus around attracting more underprivileged families to the centre, broadening the age range to provide a wider range of services for more children, and also advertising the services offered by the centres in public spaces, such as GPs waiting rooms and libraries.

A number of ideas to ensure the future of the Harrow Children's Centres were proposed within the questionnaire. On the whole, parents, staff and partners are positive about the suggestion of youth groups, voluntary groups/charities and local groups of residents using the centre, providing increased revenue and further establishing the centre within the local community. Of these groups, the incorporation of youth groups was the most popular, at over one quarter (28%) of parents when asked which *one* they would like to see the Children's Centres used for.

Over half (51%) of parents support charging for some services at the centre and although doubts are expressed by parents/staff/partners surrounding whether this measure would discourage underprivileged parents from attending sessions, they feel it may be an essential measure. To try and decrease this impact on less privileged families, some respondents suggest

implementing a membership fee in which parents pay an annual sum to attend any of the services available at the Children's Centres.

Of all these suggestions, parents were most positive about the idea of parents getting involved in helping run the service. Over two thirds (70%) of parents support this idea and the same proportion (70%) say they would be very/fairly interested in volunteering at the centre themselves. However, this type of volunteering would require a routine time commitment and during the interviews many parents explained that the practicality of this, while also looking after young children, may be difficult. Furthermore, respondents highlight that professional staff should not be replaced by volunteers, as parents should receive professional advice from trained staff during the sessions.

The research indicates that Harrow Children's Centres are a vital resource within the community as respondents repeatedly cite that they should not close. Although parents, staff and providers have concerns regarding the various proposals, such as excluding underprivileged families if charges are implemented, during focus groups and interviews the majority say they are willing to accept these changes to ensure the future of the Harrow Children's Centres.

Consultation Case Study

St Joseph's Children's Centre held a Family Fun Friday on the 3rd June and used the event to give families an opportunity to record their feedback and views in a variety of ways. Some chose to hand write them in both English and their home language while others chose to have them typed up and printed.

Families who attended the event spoke 12 different languages. English, Polish, Spanish, Filipino, French, Tamil, Gujarati, Urdu, Hindi, Persian, Brazilian and Japanese.

65 parents, carers and children attended the event in total.

Next Steps

Options for the future of Harrow's Children's Centres will be developed for consideration and a decision by Cabinet in December 2011. These options will include, but not limited to:-

- Best Value for Money (VfM) solutions
- Varied Outcome based Delivery models
- Maximising on our current highly qualified efficient workforce.

Each of the options will be presented with a 3 year costed plan, setting out best identified opportunities and risks.

Financial Implications

The 2011/12 revenue budget for Harrow Children's Centres is £3.3 million.

Approving the recommendations will allow a model of service delivery to be developed which develops vibrancy, maximises staff potential and works within a reduced but realistic budget envelope.

Financial issues arising from the consultation report including fees and charges and income generating opportunities will be set out in the proposed new model for service delivery

Performance Issues

The consultation report provides positive service user feedback on the Children's Centres and some areas for improvement. The performance issues for the future of the centres will be considered once the proposals for the new operating model are developed.

Children's Centres use is monitored on a monthly basis so that Centre managers can understand the numbers of individuals accessing each of the services. Reports show the types of people that have been reached at the centres by ethnicity and vulnerable groups such as lone parents and teenage parents. At the moment work is focusing on the 30% most deprived areas within reach of each of the centres to understand the numbers of children accessing centres from these areas so that Centre managers can target the groups that are not being reached.

Environmental Impact

N/A

Risk Management Implications

None at this stage.

Equalities implications

Was an Equality Impact Assessment carried out? No

Equalities implications were considered as part of the consultation process including translation of the questionnaire if needed, use of language line and use of specific staff skill and expertise to interpret for focus groups if necessary.

A full equalities impact assessment will be completed when proposals for alternatives service delivery models are developed. The results from the consultation will feed into this assessment.

Corporate Priorities

Please identify which corporate priority the report incorporates and how:

- Supporting and protecting people who are most in need. Children's Centre provides a range of services to vulnerable children and their families
- United and involved communities and a council that listens and leads. The Children's Centre strategy places children's centres at the heart of communities and they work to support community cohesion.

Section 3 - Statutory Officer Clearance

Name: Emma Stabler	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	on behalf of the Chief Financial Officer
Date: 16 September		
Name: Sarah Wilson	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	on behalf of the Monitoring Officer
Date: 22 September 2011		

Section 4 – Performance Officer Clearance

Name: David Harrington	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	on behalf of the Divisional Director Partnership, Development and Performance
Date: 16 September 2011		

Section 5 – Environmental Impact Officer Clearance

Name: John Edwards	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Divisional Director (Environmental Services)
Date: 22 September 2011		

Section 6 - Contact Details and Background Papers

Contact:

Wendy Beeton, Divisional Director – Children’s Services, Tel: 020 8416 8830

Background Papers: Children’ Centre Consultation Report

**Call-In Waived by the
Chairman of Overview
and Scrutiny
Committee**

NOT APPLICABLE

[Call-in applies]