

Children's Centre Contract Implementation

Report of the Chief Officer Children's Services

Please note that the following recommendations are subject to consideration and determination by the Cabinet (and confirmation under the provisions of the Council's Constitution) before taking effect.

1. Background/Introduction

Children's centres are a core service to support the best start in life for children. We have been working together with Health and Public Health to move towards an integrated system of delivery. This includes Public Health Nursing Services (PHNS) and continues to be an area of focused development.

We have been improving our early help offer with a focus on family support for the most vulnerable, increasing accessible self-help and early help support. The changes to children's centres were consulted in 2014 and the following principles agreed based on what families and communities felt were important to them; To focus services on the most vulnerable; reduce building costs; fund front line delivery; encourage others to deliver some universal services from Children's Centre buildings; and reduce the numbers of contracts aligning to city/council boundaries.

Children's Centres were tendered during summer and autumn of 2017 and the tender has recently concluded with contract award agreed at Cabinet on the 8th November. This was followed by five day call in, due diligence checks and ten day standstill which ended on 22nd December. This awarded the contract to Action for Children for three years with the option to extend for one year.

Under the new contract, Children's Centres will focus on delivering targeted intervention and support to children 8 years old and under, and in so doing help support families to prevent the need for statutory intervention.

This decision has been made to ensure support is available for families of primary aged pupils and coincides with a lowering of the age group supported by the Family Intervention Team from over 11 yr. olds to over 8 yr. olds. There has always been high demand in Devon for Children's Centre services, and it is expected that extending the age group will increase demand significantly from eligible families.

Children's Centres remain a really important part of our Early Help strategy in supporting vulnerable children and their families. They will continue to deliver a range of targeted services that support vulnerable children and their families, including working directly within schools to run parenting programmes that support parents. They will also continue to provide a range of universal services designed to help parents get back into employment, or training towards employment which will include offering volunteering opportunities through an accredited programme.

Where Children's Centres have previously hosted some non-statutory universal services, such as 'Stay and Play' and 'peer support groups', they will continue to encourage and support local groups with training to develop those services in the community. It is important to stress that Children's Centres will continue to have an "open front door" to all families with young children but rather than deliver everything themselves, they will signpost to more universal services such as stay and play activities.

The tender submitted by Action for Children showed a high degree of confidence in their ability to work collaboratively with partners during the contract term in order to manage the budget reduction alongside the increase in age range.

As part of the tender evaluation, bidders were required to submit a transition plan. This would set out how the successful bidder would change the service from the current delivery model to the new specification. At both market engagement and pre-tender award the Commissioners intentions, to enable a smooth transition of services, were set out. The provider proposals to achieve this reduction, whilst delivering an effective service, were tested and evidenced as part of the tender process.

2. Transition Phase

The transition plan includes:

- A transition team who will manage the changes operationally,
- A project plan and schedule of transition phase meetings with key stakeholders and commissioners to manage the process between January 2018 and the Summer.
- The timescale and process to withdraw from the delivery of some existing universal services.
- A consultation plan with families, partners and PHNS to ensure there continues to be a flexible and responsive universal delivery of services.
- The components of a communication plan that will be developed between the two providers of, PHNS and Children's Centres. To ensure clear communications on any changes are provided to families by all staff and any concerns or gaps in provision are identified early and resolved or escalated.
- Joint briefings have also been developed with the DCC communication team for Elected Members, Families, Schools, Partner Agencies and Children's Services and will be distributed via briefing papers, social media and face to face meetings.

3. Service Change Risks and Mitigations

The provider submitted a tender which was successful in describing the delivery of the service and transition plan with a £1.5m reduction. The provider has however set out the risks in this. Rapid change risks destabilising services, slower change could risk delivery of the reductions in the first year. The mitigation here is for very close working between commissioners and provider. The changes are to be implemented during the year one of the contract in negotiation with the commissioner to ensure that the speed of change does not disadvantage children and families whilst ensuring the re- focus achieves the necessary budget reduction for the provider.

However, the local authority and provider will need to balance the delivery of budget reductions and increased age range alongside smooth transition while mitigating risk of families not being identified early enough who in need of Early Help.

Action for Children stated in their tender response that they will be looking for external funding to enable them to directly or indirectly continue to deliver some universal group activities to support children's learning. However, these opportunities will need to be planned and not all can be guaranteed immediately. The question in the tender document asking how they would generate social value for the community received the highest score possible. These initiatives will be developed both locally and with their national commercial team.

4. Collaborative working with Public Health Nursing Service

Members will be aware that as a consequence of year-on-year reductions in the Public Health Grant from central government, the Public Health Nursing Service (PHNS) is also revising elements of its service model to manage a budget reduction of £1.5m for 2018/19.

These revisions include:

- a review of existing Community Health Clinics with the intention of providing a more efficient and equitable service across the whole of Devon,
- the development of PHNS Hubs in each of the four localities of Devon (of which two are in place so far with the other two on course for implementation during the first quarter of 2018) which will provide more efficient and accessible information, advice and support to families who need to speak to a Health Visitor or School Nurse,
- and the roll-out of the CHAT Health programme - a nationally recognised text-based information and advice scheme for children, young people and families.

Children's Centres work closely in collaboration with PHNS colleagues already, and in many cases, provide joint universal support activity to families within Children's Centre settings. In order to avoid any unintended consequences as each service revises its model, and to maximise the most efficient and effective provision of support to children, young people and families, a four-way integrated planning group has been set up consisting of commissioners for Early Years and Public Health Nursing, together with senior representatives from the two providers – Action for Children and Virgin Care Ltd. This group will provide essential oversight and a practical expression of the increasingly integrated model of working between Children's Centres and PHNS.

Electoral Divisions: All

Cabinet Member for Children, Schools and Skills: Councillor James McInnes

Chief Officer for Children's Services: Jo Olsson

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972: LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

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