

Report of the Head of Education and Learning

Re-Commissioning of Children's Centres

Recommendation: Update on future commissioning of the Children's Centre service being delivered under a single provider contract with an extension of the age range from 0 to 5, to children eight years and under.

1. Background/Introduction

The Local Authority continues to recognise the significant role that Children's Centres play in delivering services to families needing Early Help and, unlike some other Local Authorities, continue to invest significantly in the service within the overall context of budget constraints.

Children's Centres are currently delivered by one organisation in seven of the eight District Council areas in Devon. This organisation, which had successfully secured contracts in Mid Devon and part of East Devon and Exeter, has in the past two years also secured contracts for Northern Devon, South and West Devon and part of East Devon. This has been achieved through a competitive open procurement process over three separate exercises with multiple providers since 2014.

The insight gained by DCC over the last three rounds of contracting, culminating in one organisation managing a large number of contracts, is that significant efficiencies have been made in operational costs and we have seen improved performance in delivery and consistency for families.

The exception to the above arrangement is Exeter as this area currently operates under the previous multiple contract system with three providers delivering the Children's Centres in that area.

A decision was made to broaden the age range to provide targeted support for families with children eight and under. This was in recognition of the work already undertaken as part of the targeted families programme and through partnerships developed with primary schools in delivering evidenced based parenting programmes for families of school aged children.

Recent changes in government funding will impact on individual schools allocation with many schools having to manage reduced budgets through the Age Weighted Pupil Unit (AWPU). The re- design of the Children's Centre service is intended to support the pastoral role within primary schools for children transitioning from Early Years to Key Stage 1 who may be at risk of poorer outcomes. Devon Education Forum were consulted on the re-design principles and welcomed the new approach.

2. Main Text/Proposal

An options appraisal was undertaken by the Procurement Service, Early Years Service and Children's Commissioning to determine which tender process would best meet the needs of families, partner agencies and potential providers of the new service from 2018 onwards. This one contract principal was recommended in order to realise the Local Authorities requirement to ensure value for money and to ensure

vulnerable families receive a seamless Early Help service across Devon, regardless of where they live, removing the artificial barriers of geography.

The recommendation to procure the service under a single provider took into account that small providers may not be able to deliver the contract. However recognising the expertise of current providers of all sizes a Market Warming event has been facilitated by DCC where interested providers of all sizes looked at how they could develop partnerships/consortium bids. The event appeared to be very successful with a range of providers in attendance.

If the single provider contract is approved a specific question will be built into the award criteria about how the lead provider will work in partnership with both DCC and local partners in order to improve outcomes for families with young children.

The options appraisal and impact assessment took into account the constraints of the new specification including increases the age range of children from five years to eight years and under. The principles of the new specification align to the five key shifts in the Delivery Plan for Devon's Children's Services, focussing on strengthening our Early Help system.

By targeting services to families who, without an early help intervention, could escalate into statutory and specialist services we hope to build resilient families who are able to find their own solutions to the challenges they face.

Options/Alternatives

The alternative would be to align 4 new contracts to the four Early Help localities of Northern Devon, Southern, Exeter, East and Mid Devon. However to achieve consistency across the county and the increased delivery to families with children eight years and under, alongside a reduction in budget from 2019, further efficiency savings need to be made. Under one organisation this could be achieved by rationalising management support including the negotiation of management costs alongside aligning the services to families under one contract.

Consultations

Senior Officers from Early Years have attended a series of meetings with a range of children's centres through their strategic advisory boards which include staff, partner agencies, users of the service and local members. The re-commissioning of the centres including the single provider contract and increase in age group were seen as a positive way forward.

Financial Considerations

The current value of the contract is £7.3 million, with a reduction of £1.5 million by 2020 (£1m in 18/19, £0.5m in 19/20) giving a budget of 5.8 million in the second year of the contract.

Equality Considerations

An Impact Assessment has been completed with copy attached

Legal Considerations

There are no specific legal considerations

Risk Management Considerations

This proposal has been assessed and all necessary safeguards or action have been taken/included to safeguard the Council's position

No risks have been identified.

Public Health Impact

The re-commissioning under a single provider is expected to have a positive impact on Public Health. The Public Health Nursing Service is responsible for delivering the universal element of the Departments Healthy Child Programme and work very closely with Children's Centres in delivery. A single provider is expected to make this relationship more coherent

Conclusions

The proposed changes in procurement can only have a positive outcome for the county council's continuing support of the children's centre service. The increase in age range will ensure that families do not slip through the net in the very important transition into primary education and ensure that the current gap in support for children aged 5 to 8 years is closed.

We recognise the valuable work that the two smaller providers in Exeter have contributed towards improving outcomes for families with young children and we hope that they will be exploring the potential for a strong partnership with the single provider. However in order to increase the level of delivery to families in need of Early Help and the increase in age range, one contract is a logical way forward.

Dawn Stabb

Electoral Divisions: All

Cabinet Member for Children Services and Schools: Councillor James McInnes

Chief Officer for Childrens Services: Jo Olsson

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972: LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

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