

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

LEISURE and ARTS ADVISORY BOARD

16 September 2013

Report of the Chief Executive

Part 1- Public

Matters for Recommendation to Cabinet - Non-Key Decision (Decision may be taken by the Cabinet Member)

1 REVIEW OF CHILDREN'S CENTRES

Summary

To set out proposed changes to local children's centres in the Borough and to formulate a response to the consultation.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Kent County Council is undertaking a cost savings review involving the future provision of Children's Centres across the County. There are currently eight children centres in the Borough at Burham, Snodland, East Malling, Larkfield, Borough Green, Hadlow/East Peckham, Trench and South Tonbridge. The main centre is at East Malling (Woodlands) which is nominated as a 'Centre Plus' which provides the widest range of services. In general, Children's Centres provide a range of early years services to support the needs of the under 5s (and pre-natal) including nursery provision, health services, training and employment for parents and general information and advice on parenting and supporting a child's development.

1.1.2 The review is proposing to close 23 Centres in Kent, reduce the opening hours of a further 13 Centres and to revise management arrangements for those centres which are to be retained. Changes to the Centres have been based on an assessment of local need, seeking to focus existing resources more on those areas that need support, and a review of the current usage of Centres by families. The Review has found that some Centres are more popular than others, and many families access more than one local centre according to the types of events and services on offer at each. Most centres are rarely accessed after 3pm.

1.2 Proposed Changes in Tonbridge and Malling

1.2.1 The consultation proposes that the Children's Centres at Larkfield and Hadlow/East Peckham should be closed. No other local centres are proposed to have their hours reduced. Instead of a single District Manager for all Tonbridge and Malling's Centres, which is currently in place, it is proposed that Little Foxes

Centre in Trench ward and Borough Green are managed from Sevenoaks, the south Tonbridge Centre is managed from Tunbridge Wells and the Woodlands Centre at East Malling manages the Snodland and Burham Centres but also the Centre at Westborough in Maidstone.

- 1.2.2 The consultation document indicates the Hadlow/East Peckham Centre is currently only open part-time and serves an area with lower numbers of families in need of early years support services. A large number of users at the Centre are already signposted to other local Centres. It is suggested that Hadlow library will be used to support families as an alternative. No alternative provision had been suggested to meet local needs at East Peckham.
- 1.2.3 Similarly, the Larkfield Centre serves an area with lower levels of need and this Centre also mainly signposts customers to other Centres which provide a wider range of services eg Woodlands at East Malling. It is suggested that Larkfield Library is used to support families locally.
- 1.2.4 In terms of families formally registered at each Centre, Hadlow/East Peckham has 92 registered users of which 43 only access services at Hadlow. Larkfield has 143 registered users of which: 31 only access services at Larkfield; 59 use services at Burham; and 70 use services at Woodlands.

1.3 Response to the Consultation

- 1.3.1 Clearly, any closure of a local Children's Centre could have a detrimental effect on the regular users of that centre, in particular, those families who are known only to use that centre and not access other Centres. Those without access to transport, for example, and those who live too far away to walk to any alternative Centre, are likely to be most affected by the proposed closures.
- 1.3.2 The Hadlow/East Peckham and Larkfield areas both contain families in need of support. For example, a number of 'Troubled Families', ie those identified as part of the Borough-wide programme with most complex needs, are located in all three communities affected by these proposed closures.
- 1.3.3 The consultation has been suggested that local Libraries will be the new access point for children's services when the local centres are closed. Whilst this, in theory, might present an appropriate alternative for local families, it is not clear what role the Libraries will play with regard to future service provision and this is not explained in the consultation documents. If the role of the libraries is simply to signpost clients to other centres some distance away, then this is likely to be inadequate, given that the consultation has indicated that a significant number of clients for both Hadlow/East Peckham and Larkfield choose only to access their local Centre.
- 1.3.4 Further clarification therefore needs to be sought regarding what out-reach services need to be put in place to compensate for the closure of those centres. If the two libraries are unable to accommodate some form of out-reach support

themselves, then consideration should be given to the use of local community buildings for this purpose. Outreach services for East Peckham will also be important given the distances involved to other centres and the need to cater for those families without access to private transport.

- 1.3.5 An additional concern relates to the Hadlow youth facility. This building currently accommodates the local Children's Centre on a shared basis with the youth club. Funding is provided by KCC to the independent Trust which operates the youth facility to facilitate this arrangement. If the Children's Centre withdraws from this building, the loss of funding to the Hadlow youth trust might then affect the overall viability of the local youth facilities. This local issue of concern therefore needs to be drawn to the attention of the County Council as part of this wider review.
- 1.3.6 Local Members in areas affected by these changes have been made aware of this report and have been invited to comment on these proposals.

1.4 Management of Retained Local Centres

- 1.4.1 The management proposals, as set out at paragraph 1.2.1 of this report, are unnecessarily complex and cut across district boundaries. The lack of a single, overall district manager for the Borough could adversely affect local partnership working. Under the proposed arrangements, there will be three separate managers covering the six retained centres in the Borough, two of whom would be based out of the Borough. It will be important for future partnership working that a single point of contact for all children's centres in the Borough be retained.

1.5 Legal Implications

- 1.5.1 None.

1.6 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

- 1.6.1 Whilst the need for financial savings is acknowledged, there is a need to ensure that support for those families with young children who are most in need, particularly those who are unable to travel to nearby centres, can be provided via alternative means in those areas affected by the proposed closures. Further clarification of those alternative support services now need to be sought.

1.7 Risk Assessment

- 1.7.1 As above.

1.8 Equality Impact Assessment

- 1.8.1 See 'Screening for equality impacts' table at end of report.

1.9 Recommendations

- 1.9.1 The Borough Council invites the County Council to enter into further discussions regarding the need for Children's Centre outreach services to be provided in those communities affected by the proposed closures with a view to ensuring that any proposed alternative service provision meets the needs of local families most in need.
- 1.9.2 The potential adverse impact of the proposed closure of the Hadlow/East Peckham Children's Centre on associated youth facilities in Hadlow be drawn to the attention of the County Council.
- 1.9.3 The Borough Council considers that a single manager for all Children's Centres in the Borough should be retained.

The Chief Executive confirms that the proposals contained in the recommendation(s), if approved, will fall within the Council's Budget and Policy Framework.

Background papers:

contact: Mark Raymond

Nil

Julie Beilby
Chief Executive

Screening for equality impacts:		
Question	Answer	Explanation of impacts
a. Does the decision being made or recommended through this paper have potential to cause adverse impact or discriminate against different groups in the community?	No	Our contingent objection to these proposals seek to protect the needs of those most in need of local support services.
b. Does the decision being made or recommended through this paper make a positive contribution to promoting equality?	Yes	As above.
c. What steps are you taking to mitigate, reduce, avoid or minimise the impacts identified above?		N/A

In submitting this report, the Chief Officer doing so is confirming that they have given due regard to the equality impacts of the decision being considered, as noted in the table above.