

8. Children's Centres – More Than Just a Building

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Purpose of the Report

The purpose of the report is to explain the work of the Children's Centres within South Somerset and Area North in particular. This is to provide the basis for discussion of the issues raised from this report and presentation which in turn supports a better understanding of the opportunities and benefits the centres offer residents.

Public Interest

Sure Start Children's Centres are at the heart of the Government's Every Child Matters Change for Children Programme. They are the key vehicle for providing services for families with children 0-5 years within an area. Somerset County Council plans to have 41 Children's Centres in place by 31 March 2010.

Children's Centres have been developed in three phases with many phase one Children's Centres evolving from Sure Start Local Programmes. The map in Appendix A shows the Children's Centres most applicable to residents of Area North.

The report authors – Rachel Bailey and Karen Cooper will both attend the committee to introduce the report and make a brief presentation to illustrate the main themes within it.

Recommendation

Councillors are asked to consider and, if wished, discuss matters of interest to Area North, in particular to highlight any opportunities for future partnership working between SCC and SSDC to ensure the service delivers its planned benefits for residents.

Introduction

Children's Centres provide a range of services designed and developed to meet the needs of the communities it serves. Each centre's central purpose is to provide:

- Family support through groups or one to one work
- Access to healthy living support
- Pathways into employment or training
- Early years education and childcare
- Play learning and development opportunities

There is a range of management models used nationally and within Somerset which provides a rich mix for Children's Centre delivery. Services may look and feel different for families in different communities. This is because Children's Centres work to engage local parents and carers to help design and shape the services it offers.

Services and activities

The following paragraphs give a flavour of the work of the Children's Centres: -

(a) Family Support

Children's Centres provide information and support for parents and carers, this may be in the form of leaflets, newsletters or intensive one to one support. Family support staff are able to work individually with parents and their children to help improve outcomes. For example parents maybe struggling with their child's behaviour or routines and a member of staff would work with them to identify and develop strategies to improve the situation.

(b) Healthy Living Support

One of many roles for Children's Centre is to work with health professionals and other local partners to ensure parents and children have appropriate information advice and support to enable them to lead healthy lifestyles. This maybe ante or post natal support, co-ordinating well-baby clinics in outreach venues, or facilitating parent and child exercise and healthy cooking activities. Health visitors are key partners in identifying vulnerable families.

(c) Pathways into Employment or Training

Children's Centres work with Job Centre Plus and local training providers to ensure parents and carers have access to support to enable them to return to employment or training. For some parents it is important to help them develop basic skills including confidence and assertiveness.

(d) Early Years Education and Childcare

Part of the core offer is to ensure parents have access to high quality early years (ie: children under five years old) care and education. Not all Children's Centres provide childcare at the main premises, however they do work in partnership with all providers in the area served. Regular cluster meetings are being developed from each of the centres to provide a forum for peer support and professional development. Providers are being encouraged to work in partnership with the centre and to promote services to families.

(e) Play Learning and Development Opportunities

Children's Centres deliver a range of play learning and development opportunities to support parents. This work supports the preventative agenda and helps parents by providing good role models, strategies, tools and advice.

(f) Outreach Services (working directly in the community)

Each Children's Centre also provides outreach services such as "Little Explorers" in Ilton and the "PEEP" group in Tintinhull. Somerset County Council has recently awarded Action for Children an additional outreach contract. This service will recruit four part time workers to engage with the most vulnerable families in our communities who are currently not accessing services. The workers will work across South Somerset supporting parents to attend their local Children's Centre.

Outcomes and Evaluation

Children's Centre services aim to improve outcomes for all children in its geographical reach. Our services are measured across the Every Child Matters Framework, Being Healthy, Stay Safe, Enjoy and Achieve and Make a Positive Contribution and Achieve Economic Wellbeing.

Currently our services are evaluated by a Self Evaluation process followed by an Annual Conversation by Somerset County Council where Children's Centre, all partnership agencies, community and parents are invited to contribute to this process. From next year Ofsted will also form part of this process.

Service provision in Area North

In South Somerset West area there are five Children's Centres working in partnership to provide services for children and families (Langport, Ilminster, Chard, Crewkerne, Ilchester). Each centre covers a geographical reach area with approximately 800 children 0-5 years.

Staff teams are very small and the service is delivered through the development of robust partnership models with voluntary sector agencies, stakeholders, partners, early years providers and health professionals. Each centre has a building that provides the hub with outreach sites used to widen access for communities and encourage participation.

- The Levels Children's Centre in Langport is managed by a Somerset County Council manager, who works as part of the Local Service Team (based at Old Kelways, Langport).
- The remaining centres in South Somerset West, including Little Marsh in Ilchester, are managed by Action for Children.

Summary

Children's Centres provide a universal service for parents and carers in a geographical area. This ensures each parent has access to the information support and advice they need to be the best parent they are capable of being. The successes of Children's Centres are founded on effective partnership working with a range of stakeholders and the engagement and participation of parents.

Financial Implications

There are no financial implications for South Somerset District Council.

Corporate Priority Implications

- 3: Improve the housing, health and well-being of our citizens
- 4: Ensure safe, sustainable and cohesive communities

Carbon Emissions & Adapting to Climate Change Implications (NI188)

None

Equality and Diversity Implications

Open and available to all families.
