

Report to Cabinet

17 March 2021

Subject:	Recommissioning of Children’s Centres
Cabinet Member:	Cabinet Member for Best Start to Life, Councillor Joyce Underhill
Director:	Executive Director of Children’s Services, Lesley Hagger
Key Decision:	Yes The proposal exceeds the expenditure threshold for a key decision
Contact Officer:	Peter Forth, Senior Commissioning Manager. peter_forth@sandwell.gov.uk

1 Recommendations

- 1.1 That in accordance with the Council’s Procurement and Contract Procedure Rules and the Public Contracts Regulations 2015, the Executive Director of Children’s Services be authorised to award new contracts and any associated documentation for the provision of children’s centre services for a period of 3 years from 1 April 2022 (with the option to extend for a year).
- 1.2 That in connection with 1.1 above, the Director of Law and Governance – Monitoring Officer be authorised to enter into or execute under seal if necessary any related documentation in connection with the land and property as part of the children’s centre service on terms and conditions agreed by the Director of Regeneration and Growth.



2 Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 The current commissioning arrangements for children's centres end on 31 March 2022. Cabinet approval would enable the recommissioning process to be completed during 2021 so that the successful bidder is in place for 1 April 2022. This in turn will ensure a smooth transition between agencies where necessary and a resultant consistency of service provision.

3 How does this deliver objectives of the Corporate Plan?

	<p>Best start in life for children and young people</p> <p>Children's Centres provide a central point for the local delivery of elements of this objective within each of the towns in the borough.</p> <p>Centres are well established to be able to provide early help and support to families on a range of issues. They offer family support services including parenting courses and services promoting early language in young children.</p>
	<p>People live well and age well</p> <p>Centres work in conjunction with local maternity and health visiting services to provide antenatal education courses, baby clinics and development checks.</p> <p>In offering the range of services centres help families to live well whether this is providing access to welfare advice, practical support from early years practitioners or just a listening ear.</p>





Strong resilient communities

Children's Centres provide support for families within their local community. This process brings families together for mutual support and encourages parents to become volunteers with the service.

4 Context and Key Issues

4.1 Core centres

4.2 In Sandwell there are seven core children's centres in the borough with one based in each town and two in the West Bromwich area. The core centres provide the main base for staffing as well as providing facilities to run sessions and groups for families.

4.3 Summary of core centres

Name of centre	Address
Burnt Tree Children's Centre	20-25 Tividale Street, Burnt Tree DY4 7SD
Cape Hill Children's Centre	Corbett Street, Smethwick B66 3PX
Rowley Springfield Children's Centre	Dudley Road, Rowley Regis B65 8JY
Tipton Children's Centre	Glebefields Library, 24 Ridgeway Road, Tipton DY4 0TB
Friar Park Children's Centre	Priory Primary School, Dorsett Road, Wednesbury WS10 0JG
Hillside Children's Centre	Connor Road, West Bromwich, B71 3DJ
Greets Green Children's Centre	Ryders Green School, Claypit Lane, West Bromwich B70 9EZ

4.4 Services provided by core centres

- Information, advice and guidance about services to local families
- Antenatal education and support



- Early Years services
- Play, Talk, Read project to promote home learning by parents with young children
- Wellcomm speech and language screening
- SEND support to families as appropriate
- Family Support including welfare rights support delivered through Sandwell Consortium
- Providing access to health services by jointly working with midwifery and health visiting to provide baby clinics and development checks
- Providing the initial steps towards further education, employment and training for parents
- Childcare on site (in 6/7 core centres) operated by third parties.

4.5 **Covid 19** - During the Covid 19 pandemic children's centres were able to maintain their contact and support to the most vulnerable families, for example those who are subject to Early Help plans. Centres have adapted their approach to the delivery of parenting courses, antenatal education groups, etc to provide these virtually. This approach has brought some unexpected successes including the greater number of fathers engaging in some courses. It is expected as we move forwards that the centres will adapt again and offer a mixed programme of actual sessions and those delivered virtually.

4.6 Unfortunately it has to be acknowledged that the pandemic has had a negative impact on families with young children. There are, for example, high numbers of families not currently taking up the two and three years old places for their children. Centres (and other providers) have not been able to run play sessions for young children and their parents/carers so the opportunity for children to socialise and learn through play are accordingly reduced. The lack of contact also raises concerns that there may be issues with children that are not being identified.

4.7 Children's centres will have short-term plans to recommence play sessions, identify those children in need of additional support and to proactively encourage parents to utilise existing childcare places.



The centres will also be a part of the wider strategy for offering additional support to children and families. This is likely to include additional focussed sessions and even greater emphasis on reaching out to all children in the borough along with different partner agencies.

4.8 The core centres are grouped together in lots as detailed below in 4.11 to reduce management and administration costs.

4.9 There are other centres in the borough which are largely focussed on providing childcare places. These are operated by a range of agencies including schools, voluntary and private sector providers. These are largely self-sustaining.

4.10 Tender

Anticipated tender timeline

May 2021	Preparation of tender documentation
September 2021	Tender advertised
October 2021	Deadline for submissions
November 2021	Evaluation of tenders
December 2021	Award of contract
January 2022	Transition/operational issues
1 April 2022	Successful agencies commence new contracts

4.11 Tender lots

There will be 3 lots in the tender based on the current administrative arrangements as listed below

A	Oldbury & Smethwick
B	Rowley & Tipton
C	Wednesbury & West Bromwich

Agencies will be able to bid for 1, 2 or 3 of the lots. Each bid for each lot will be evaluated individually.



4.12 Interest in tender

It is anticipated that there will be interest from a range of national and local voluntary sector providers. Many of the agencies have operated children's centres in the borough previously through previous tender processes.

4.13 Scrutiny involvement

The matter was considered by Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board on 15 March 2021. Feedback will be tabled on the day of the Cabinet meeting.

4.14 Parents' views

Sandwell Early Years Transformation Academy undertook consultation in late 2020/early 2021 with local parents about their experience of bringing up children in Sandwell. That exercise highlighted a number of key issues which the children's centres need to address as part of the future delivery. Details of the issues and actions to be taken are listed in Appendix A.

5 Alternative Options

5.1 **Extension of contracts.** There is no option to further extend existing contracts as the current contracts expire on 31 March 2022.

5.2 **Shorten the length of contracts offered to two years.** It would be possible to go out to tender based on a shorter contract period eg two years. This would allow the matter to be reconsidered again in two years' time. This course of action however is likely to have a negative impact on the number of agencies bidding for the contracts and have an impact on staff retention as they look for more permanent positions.



5.3 **Bring the service in-house.** An alternative solution would be to bring the operation of core children’s centres into the local authority. This would require substantial input on a range of legal, financial and human resources issues. The TUPE transfer of existing staff that meet the TUPE requirements into the local authority would be a major undertaking.

6 Implications

<p>Resources:</p>	<p>Revenue funding. The maximum amount of revenue funding for the operation of the centres would be £3,194,920 per annum.</p> <p>The budget allocation for each town will be detailed in the tender documents and will be based primarily on the numbers of children in the respective towns. Agencies will make bids based on the maximum figure.</p> <p>Contract value The maximum contract value over 4 years would be £12,779,680.</p> <p>Staffing The staff of centres are employed primarily by the current lead agencies of the service. Where applicable those staff will have TUPE rights of transfer to the successful bidder organisation. These are issues that would be resolved between the existing employer and the successful agency.</p> <p>Leases A standard lease will form part of the tender pack. Successful agencies would need to agree to those leases as part of the application process. Where there has been no change of lead agency existing leases may be able to be extended.</p>
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<p>Legal and Governance:</p>	<p>Section 5A of the Childcare Act 2006 states that local authorities must make arrangements, as far as practicable, for ‘sufficient provision of children’s centres to meet local needs’.</p> <p>The proposals in this report do not conflict with that duty.</p> <p>As the maximum contract value for 4 years would equate to £12,779,680, it would be caught by the Public Contracts Regulations 2015. The tender would therefore need to be procured, and the contract would need to be awarded, in accordance with the Public Contracts Regulations 2015. In addition to this, compliance with the Council’s Procurement and Contract Procedure Rules would need to be ensured.</p>
<p>Risk:</p>	<p>The Corporate Risk Management Strategy (CRMS) has been complied with – to identify and assess the significant risks associated with this decision / project. This includes (but is not limited to) political, legislation, financial, environmental and reputation risks. Based on the information provided, it is the officers’ opinion that no significant risks have been identified.</p> <p>Funding</p> <p>There is a risk committing to the funding of the contract for 3-4 years when there is uncertainty about future government funding settlements beyond the first two years. To mitigate that risk flexibility will be included in the tender and contract documents to reduce the budget if necessary.</p> <p>Figures for funding in future years will be subject to change and confirmation.</p> <p>Bids</p> <p>There is always a risk that there will be a limited number of agencies coming forward to bid but given the involvement of a number of agencies previously the risk is seen to be very low. Agencies will be duly notified when the tender is released.</p>



	<p>Failure to gain Cabinet approval. If the report is not approved as scheduled it will negatively impact on the timescales for completion of the tender process. That in turn could lead to problems with the transition process between providers.</p>
Equality:	<p>An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) initial screening has been undertaken. The screening identified that there will be no adverse impact on people or groups with protected characteristics. The proposal will seek to maintain the current arrangements for the delivery of consistent services across the borough. A full EIA is not therefore required.</p>
Health and Wellbeing:	<p>Centres provide a local facility to access a range of services, including health services for young children.</p>
Social Value	<p>Providers seek to enhance the community aspect of children’s centres and to offer services at other venues to reach out to different communities.</p> <p>Centres have a good record of recruiting staff locally and there has been a steady flow of parents developing their knowledge and skills so that they have been able to take up posts within the service.</p>

7. Appendices Implications

Appendix A Parents feedback and implications.

8. Background Papers

List source/background documents



Appendix A

Consultation with parents

In the Early Years Transformation Academy (EYTA) report of consultation with parents that took place late 2020/early 2021 there were both specific references to children's centres and pointers for the way that parents would want to see future services developed. Some of the headline issues are noted below.

1. Support

- 84% of parents state that they would go to their family in the first instance 'especially mum' if they have a problem.
- If the problem was medical parents spoke about talking to their GP (62%) and their Health Visitor (46%). If it was about learning or child development 30% of respondents said that they would use their local children's centre.
- As one parent stated: "I will come to the children's centre first because I have been coming for a long time and staff have supported me so much".

Action

Further raise awareness of children's centres for advice and support for all families especially those without local support structures.

2. Parents listed a range of **different services in the community** that they use which is encouraging. Childrens centres were mentioned the most frequently especially in relation to attending baby clinics, play sessions and parenting courses.

Although the children's centres were mentioned frequently they were not mentioned by the majority of parents.

Action

Further work needs to be undertaken to proactively raise awareness of children's centres and their services in each town and duly monitor the effectiveness of the actions taken.



Links with other local services need to be further enhanced so that parents are fully aware of the options available and that services work in tandem to mutual benefit as part of the overarching Early Help strategy.

3. In terms of **services that parents would want to see developed** there were a couple of key threads. One was about availability in terms of providing more local, free or low-cost services at the weekend and in the evenings. The second thread was about parents wanting to work together for mutual support and enhancing the sense of community.

“Groups run by other parents not professionals. Somewhere where parents can go to chat without judgement,”

81% of parents stated that they are often approached by other parents for help and support.

Action

Centres to be more available for the delivery of services directly and/or indirectly in the evenings and at weekends.

Centres to work with local parents and grandparents to establish informal, self-help services operated by parents themselves. These groups would provide good avenues to cascade information and advice on a range of pertinent issues in the community.

4. Parents noted that they had **highs and lows** in the week as they juggled family life.

“Low times are when I’m overloaded as I work part-time then I have things to do with the children, housework and other chores. I feel overwhelmed. The high point is when I have free time and I can plan activities with the children and I don’t have other pressures.”

“My high times as a parent is having quality time with my children. I enjoy coming home from work to them so I can see what they have been up to and have that interaction with them. My lows are before bedtime when they are tired, cranky and unsettled. Everything just seems harder to do.”



Action

To look at running further informal, short sessions for parents about tackling such issues as routines, bedtimes, getting ready for school. This could be undertaken as part of the mutual support offer noted in an earlier point.

5. Aspirations

Every parent highlighted that they wanted the best for their children and would support them as much as possible to achieve that objective. Although some parents had specific goals for their children the majority stated that they their children to be healthy and happy.

“I hope they all grow up to be good kids and have a good education. I want them to be happy and be good people. I want them to be part of the community and have fun!”

Action:

Centres to maximise parents' aspirations in how they promote the importance of activities and specific initiatives for example play, talk, read. To further foster the community approach to the delivery of services.

6. Preparation for school

Parents talked about taking their child to playgroup or nursery so that they can interact with other children; teaching them independence skills eg doing up buttons, potty training. Others recognised the importance of reading to their child and singing nursery rhymes.

“Bring learning into everything that you do as part of your everyday routines and tasks eg cooking, gardening and even doing the washing up!!

Other parents perceived preparation for school as more focussed on the practical aspects eg buying a school uniform during the weeks before commencing,



“Buy them uniform to make them feel part of the school, talk about the school and their worries.”

Action

To proactively engage parents of children under 3 years in Play, Talk, Read projects. This will encourage parents to appreciate the importance of readiness for school commencing at the earliest point.

