

Fighting the Proposal to Cut Oxfordshire's Children's Centres

This briefing is from a group of Oxford-based Education professionals to help with responses to the consultation on children's centres (<http://bit.ly/1K93unb>). Oxfordshire County Council is proposing to shut all 44 of its children's centres and replacing them with 6 or 8 Children and Family Centres. These Centres will work with families referred to them because they have severe problems.

What is special about children's centres?

They offer *universal services*, such as early learning opportunities for children under five, and *targeted services*, such as support when a family has severe problems. They are open to everyone with young children and not just to families who are referred to them. Children's centres get to know children and families and staff are trained to act quickly when things are not quite right for a family, to put in support and prevent small problems becoming severe ones. Also, because problems don't last forever, children's centres make it very easy for families to move back from targeted support to using the services that are open to everyone. (Turn over to see what the centres do.)

Preventing problems which disrupt lives is a good thing; but it also saves money in the long run.

What will happen if children's centres are closed?

- Early problems will not be spotted and solved before expensive intervention is needed.
- Families will be helped when they are clearly in difficulty and not before.
- Staff will have to deal with more and more severe problems.
- Only eight Centres mean that many families will not be able to afford to travel to them.
- The early learning opportunities for young children will go.
- Social networks where parents support and learn from each other will be destroyed.

Why do we need to keep children's centres?

- Acting quickly helps families to solve their own problems, before they become too difficult.
- Young children need support to be ready to learn when they start school.
- Communities need social hubs where parents can meet and support each other long-term.
- Strengthening parents and preventing severe problems saves money.

Can Oxfordshire make these changes?

Guidance published by the government in 2013 (<http://bit.ly/1LZl4eQ>) says local authorities **must** ensure that there are sufficient children's centres, so far as reasonably practical, to meet local need; and **should not** close an existing children's centre site ... unless they can demonstrate that ... the outcomes for children, particularly the most disadvantaged, would not be adversely affected and will not compromise the duty to have sufficient children's centres to meet local need.

Can we think creatively about spending less on children's centres AND keeping them open?

There are other ways to save centres' costs: fewer activities, combining centres, letting premises out two days a week, volunteers helping with some activities. Bucks and Herts are not closing centres.

The Work of Children's Centres

A typical children's centre provides, locally and universally, the following services:

- social and emotional support for parents, carers and families with children under five;
- play sessions which support early learning and help carers learn about developmental play;
- opportunities to borrow toys, books and other resources for young children;
- safe outdoor play;
- opportunities for parents/carers and children to mix with a wide range of people they would not otherwise meet, identify with their local communities and learn from each other;
- information about a range of support services for parents and carers;
- access to and drop-in sessions with health visitors, citizens advice, speech and language therapy, midwives; counsellors, mediation, mental health support;
- antenatal, postnatal and breastfeeding support;
- courses in childcare, first aid, managing behaviour, weaning, healthy eating, literacy, numeracy, and local needs, such as English as an additional language;
- sessions for registered childminders and other paid carers;
- 'back to work' support for parents: confidence building, c.v. writing, interview skills etc.;
- home visiting and tailored 1:1 family support;
- sessions for families with children who have additional needs; and
- a safe contact place for children to meet with parents with whom they do not live.

A typical children's centre worker gives advice and support for, or can signpost help for:

- parenting and family support: informal, in groups and one-to-one;
- healthy eating and play opportunities;
- funding applications and benefit advice;
- housing;
- returning to work;
- referrals to food banks;
- debt and money management;
- support for children with special needs;
- learning and development; and
- domestic abuse.

Workers have the training and expertise to identify and respond to problems early. Because children's centres are local, universal, non-judgemental and in contact with the majority of families with under-fives, they can identify and support needs that are not serious enough to involve GPs and social services, but might become so. While some services (e.g. help with 'back to work') might be available elsewhere, parents will be unlikely to access them if it involves a journey that costs money, is awkward to make with small children, or is not in a child-friendly atmosphere. It has also to be borne in mind that many parents and carers do not have the time, resources, education, language and confidence to set up their own organisations to meet their own needs when they have children under five, and might be isolated from any family, ethnic or work-related support networks.