

PUBLIC CABINET – 1ST SEPTEMBER 2021

RECONFIGURATION OF BEXLEY CHILDREN'S CENTRE SERVICE

ISSUES

In July 2020 as part of a wider savings consultation the Council initiated consultation on a proposal for a substantial reconfiguration of Bexley's Children's Centres.

This consultation was successful in garnering responses from over 3,900 residents and a wealth of feedback into the future development of the Centres. Using this consultation feedback, we agreed to move to a second stage of consultation to further develop our proposals. To assist the development of the second stage of our consultation we have carried out an in-depth analysis of need across the Borough **Appendix 1** and a review of all the Children's Centre buildings **Appendix 5**. This work has shaped a new reconfiguration proposal, with a preferred model being put forward.

The core purpose of Children's Centres is to improve outcomes for young children and their families and reduce inequalities between families in greatest need and their peers in child development, school readiness, parenting aspirations and skills as well as child and family health and life chances.

The London Borough of Bexley is seeking to ensure services reflect the changing Borough demography and associated needs whilst also addressing financial challenges through the identification of new operating approaches for the Borough's Children Centre provision. The intention would be to adopt and build on new ways of working, including learning from the Covid-19 pandemic, meeting statutory guidance as well as offering a more targeted service to our vulnerable families. It is our intention to future proof the Children's Centre provision as much as possible so we can be confident that we are addressing the needs of our developing communities.

The revised model takes account of the key trends emerging from analysis of both stages of the consultation process, provides a response to identified needs, recognising resources available, whilst continuing to deliver the statutory function of providing a Children's Centre service. The proposal contributes to our public sector equalities duty and reflects the priorities of residents determined through the consultation. An Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) of the proposal has been carried out and is provided in **Appendix 4**.

This report shares our analysis of need and following the second stage of consultation, seeks permission to implement the proposed model.

OPTIONS CONSIDERED PRIOR TO DECISION TO CONSULT ON A PROPOSED MODEL BEING AGREED ON 26TH APRIL 2021

- (1) Option 1 – Current Children Centre model to remain retaining Children Centre status in all 9 buildings (one Children Centre being a designated Special Educational Need and Disability (SEND) hub).

- The Borough's changing demographics has meant that the current model is not reaching our most vulnerable families
- The Needs analysis indicated that only 74% of all under 5's in Bexley are registered with a Children's Centre and of that only 43% accessed a children's centre service on more than one occasion
- The data also indicated that the same families were accessing centres numerous times and that families who were in areas of greatest need were not accessing services at all and in some cases are not even known to a Children's Centre
- Approximately 3373 under 5's in Bexley live in the 0-30% most deprived LSOA's nationally. 2644 (79%) are registered with a Children's Centre of the total number who are registered only 1521 (57%) attended a Children's Centre at least once in the reporting period
- The needs analysis indicated that a total of 7021 of all under 5's registered with a Children's Centre attended a centre at least once. Only 1521 (21.5%) were from the most deprived areas, this means that those most in need are not accessing services
- This model did not deliver any financial savings

This option was not viable.

- (2) Option 2 – Provide all Children Centre activities from one Centre across the Borough; retain SEND hub and close remaining 7 Centres

- This option formed part of the savings consultation in October and many consultees told us it would be insufficient to meet the needs of the whole Borough geography, feedback also told us that consultees wanted to make sure that the service met the needs of more disadvantaged families
- Whilst this model would deliver financial savings, it did not provide sufficient access to services across the Borough, nor did it ensure that families in greatest need would receive support when they needed it
- This option did not provide the services that many consultees told us that they needed the Council to deliver

This option was not viable.

- (3) Option 3 - Proposed model– Bring Children Centre Service in-house with a dedicated Children's Centre team operating across the Borough in 5 Children Centres with 4 buildings changing from Children Centre to Early Years Status or Early Years Plus. The core purpose of Children's Centres is to improve outcomes for young children and their families and reduce inequalities between families in greatest need and their peers in child development, school readiness, parenting aspirations and skills as well as child and family health and life chances.

The London Borough of Bexley is seeking to ensure services reflect the changing Borough demography and associated needs, whilst addressing the core requirements of Children's Centres and financial constraints through the identification of new operating approaches for the Borough's Children Centre provision.

The location of the 5 remaining Children's Centres and the use of other venues will ensure equitable access to provision across the Borough for all families with Children under the age of 5.

PROPOSED DECISIONS

- (1) Note the outcome of the consultation which closed on 11th July 2021
Appendix 1 and 2
- (2) Agree option 3 as the model for the future delivery of Children Centre Services in Bexley
- (3) Agree option 3 as model for the alternative use of sites proposed for re-designation

REASONS

The revised proposed model responds to the outcomes of the consultation in the following ways:

- Provides enhanced targeted support to children and families in areas of greatest need
- Allows us to adapt more quickly to any future change in need across the Borough, by providing an in-house service via trained project workers that can flex our provision in relation to the needs of our community
- Expands our collaboration with established community venues (libraries, community centres, leisure centres) to provide local activities.
- Allows us to increase our partnership work with Health and continue with the statutory requirements of a Children's Centre provision
- Gives alignment with the Family Wellbeing Service to ensure a holistic approach to supporting families with timely co-ordinated support intervening early to prevent their problems from escalating in the future
- Provides an opportunity through renting out space in existing Children's Centre buildings to expand the local offer of childcare provision by local providers of universal support to families and their young children; this also allows increased income to offset saving requirements/investment in services

Signed: **Date:**

Councillor Teresa O'Neill OBE, Leader of the Council

LAST DATE FOR CALL-IN:

PUBLIC CABINET – 1ST SEPTEMBER 2021

RECONFIGURATION OF BEXLEY CHILDREN CENTRE SERVICE

1. Purpose of report

This report seeks to provide Cabinet with the outcome of the Children Centre Consultation completed on July 11th, 2021 and proposals for the future development of this service. This most recent consultation was undertaken following an initial MTFS consultation exercise held in July 2020 and in response to feedback from this a further and more detailed proposal was developed which represented a comprehensive opportunity to seek and listen to the views of a wide range of users and stakeholders. The consultation survey, views of stakeholders, partners and users are reflected in the model that is presented to Cabinet for agreement.

A summary of the consultation feedback received is attached to this report within **Appendices 1 and 2.**

The new model is reflective of the needs analysis and buildings analysis that were undertaken, **Appendix 3 and 5**, national best practice and guidance as well as detailed consultation. It also recognises the context that the Council must make a number of difficult decisions as a consequence of a significant reduction in its resources. The new model will result in:

- The retention of 5 children centres, West Street, Northumberland Heath, Normandy, Danson and North Cray Children's Centres
- The redesignation of the four sites that are not offering the full Children's Centre Offer, – 2 sites offering childcare, Greenmead and Hillsgrove Children's Centres, will be redesignated to Early Years status and will continue to offer nursery provision. The remaining 2 sites, St Augustines and North End Children's Centres, will continue to offer services to support children and families delivered by other agencies and be redesignated as Early Years Plus. Negotiations are underway with partners to re-locate services to support families in the community at these two sites
- An increase of Borough delivery adding alternative venues nearer to communities as requested in the first consultation period. This includes Libraries and the new Thamesmead Library due to be completed in February 2022, where we will be operating from 2 days a week. The Peabody Trust is very keen to work collaboratively with us to support families in the North of the Borough where need is greatest
- A dedicated in-house team of practitioners who will be able to work across the Borough, providing outreach and support for our hard-to-reach families
- A greater focus from pre-birth to 2 years of age (first 1001 days) which aligns with the Healthy Child Agenda and is also a key feature in the recent Leadsom review published by Government. This can be accessed online here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-best-start-for-life-a-vision-for-the-1001-critical-days>.
- More opportunities to work collaboratively with our partners in health, education, social care and voluntary and specialist services for the under-fives across the Borough

- A flexible model that can adapt and respond to changing needs across the Borough and future proof, as much as possible, this early help and prevention service

1. 1 The Andrea Leadsom Report: The best start for life: vision for the first 1001 critical days of life outlined three action areas to ensure families have access to the services they need:

1. Seamless support for families
2. A welcoming hub for families
3. The information families need when they need it

The new model will ensure better joined up services from pre-birth to 5 years old with a particular focus on children up to their third birthday. It will ensure that parents and carers receive the services that they need so that babies have the best possible start in life whoever they are, regardless of ability or circumstance.

1. 2 The updated Public Health Healthy Child programme states: *“Setting the foundations for health and wellbeing during pregnancy and in the early years is crucial to ensure we give every child the very best start in life as possible...”*

1.3 The Council and its partners are committed to under-fives having the best start in life and although our focus will be on the first 1001 days, we will continue to provide support and activities for 3-5-year-olds who are not accessing early years provision and their families. It is genuinely felt that the proposed model will support this aspiration in the context of the importance of early help and prevention in supporting our families as well as a climate of reducing resources. It will also ensure that vulnerable families are targeted and supported to take up services.

1.4 There are many definitions of ‘vulnerable’, and we have taken our definition from the report “No child left behind. A public health informed approach to improving outcomes for vulnerable children”. It reflects the vision, values and purpose of Children Centres.

[Addressing vulnerability in childhood - a public health informed approach \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/611116/Addressing_vulnerability_in_childhood_-_a_public_health_informed_approach.pdf)

In essence ‘vulnerable children’ are defined as any child at greater risk of experiencing physical or emotional harm and/or experiencing poor outcomes because of one or more factors in their lives”. This could be applicable therefore to any child and Centres are key in identifying those children and putting appropriate mechanisms in place to support them.

1.5 The Corporate Plan - The proposed model supports the following objectives of the Corporate Plan, Brilliant Bexley - Shaping our future together:

Priority 3: Part B Strong and resilient families: ‘Working early with families’

- Our schools, children’s centres and early years providers are engaged with and supporting our offers of early help
- There is a good range of preventative services offered in the community by the local authority and its partners to help families before they need a specialist or intensive service
- We help families at the earliest opportunity, especially if there are children living with violence, the mental ill health of a parent or carer, the risk of or actual school exclusion or drug and alcohol abuse by an adult or carer in the household

- We help families make connections with their local community and naturally connected networks so that they have help to keep their children safe and well

Priority 4: Living Well – ‘Children with special educational needs and/or disabilities’

- We will meet the needs of children and young people who have a special educational need or disability as locally as possible and at the earliest opportunity
- We will work collaboratively as a local system to coordinate and provide integrated professional advice and support to families, children, young people and carers

2. Objective of the proposed new model

- 2.1 Local Authorities (LAs) have a statutory duty to provide children’s centre provision as set out in the Childcare Act 2006. In addition, the Childcare Act 2006 places a statutory duty upon the local authority to secure early years provision free of charge.
- 2.2 The revised model will result in a reduction in the number of fixed Children Centres but will continue to provide access to free childcare places for eligible two-year olds and 3 – 5-year-olds. It will also make available rentable space for partners who are engaged in providing services to the under-fives in Bexley. The model moves Children’s Centres away from a fixed building to flexible and adaptive delivery in local areas of need. It is intended to ensure the most vulnerable receive a targeted service to meet their needs whilst enabling improved access to universal services. Services will be delivered subject to need to support working parents, in particular fathers, which will include weekends as required.
- 2.3 The model aims to shift the focus from specific sites and encourages parents and other users to look across their locality to access services. The model relies on the delivery of services from a range of venues to ensure services are easily accessed by parents and carers. These venues will include libraries, leisure centres, faith buildings and local community centres.
- 2.4 To achieve the savings required there will be an overall reduction in Children Centre buildings with universal services being provided across localities with increased focussed support to vulnerable families and a greater emphasis on outreach work.
- 2.5 Staff will be trained to offer intensive outreach support and to deliver appropriate activities to support children and families subject to need, rather than hiring external providers to deliver these.
- 2.6 It is expected that the new model will also address the budget parameters as outlined in section 9 of this report. Any income generated through leasing or sessional renting of space in our buildings will support the maintenance of buildings and be re-invested into the service.

3. The consultation process

- 3.1 Following the initial 84-day MTFS consultation The Cabinet Member for Children’s Services agreed to a further public consultation for our Children’s Centre model which started on May 10th and ended on 11th July 2021. The process was designed and planned to enable the Council to engage with as many users, stakeholders and partner agencies by providing them with a variety of opportunities to participate in the consultation exercise. A summary of those who participated in the consultation exercise and their feedback is attached to this report as **Appendices 1 & 2**.

- 3.2 The Local Authority consulted with a range of interested parties and stakeholders including the families of under- fives, users of children centres, health partners, which included midwives, health visitors, GP's and the three Trusts that provide services to Bexley and the CCG; Education services; Leisure services; voluntary organisations; faith groups; Elected Members; Early Years providers; current Children Centre staff and internal colleagues from Public Health; Leisure and Libraries.
- 3.3 Consultation was undertaken in a variety of ways. Officers met with a range of stakeholders – all were encouraged to complete the consultation questionnaires and their feedback has been captured either through a completed questionnaire or as written and or verbal feedback.
- 3.4 A total of 26 staff were consulted; 45 Councillors; 3 MP's and 43 consultation meetings/focus groups took place with all stakeholders including current providers. A total of 743 questionnaires were completed.
- 3.5 Stakeholder and User questionnaires have been collated and analysed and the views of stakeholders who attended face to face consultation meetings are captured in the consultation summary report which is attached to this report as **Appendices 1 & 2**.
- 3.6 It is clear from the feedback received and through the conversations and discussions that took place during the consultation period, that children centres are valued by users and partners. There is an overall agreement to the proposed model and it feels that we have responded to the initial consultation where families asked for local and accessible support and activities across the Borough, being concerned about access to having one Children's Centre as initially proposed.
- 3.7 The consultation asked participants to identify their postcode as we were keen to ensure we had an equitable number of responses. 460 people provided a post code; 211 did not provide a postcode; 48 were only identifiable by locality and 24, who had used the Danson Children Centre were out of Borough.
- 3.8 The highest responses came from the Crook Log Ward, which is opposite Danson Children's Centre, however there are no children in this ward who are identified as living in a 0-30% most deprived area; it is one of the most affluent wards in the Borough whereby half of all children registered in that ward have attended a children's centre at least once; primarily for Midwifery and Health Visitor appointments. These services will continue under the proposed model.
- 3.9 Due to the volume of responses to the consultation and a late submission of four alternative models for consideration, to analyse all of the information the Council added extra time to its decision-making process. In order to be able to fully consider the responses the decision on the future of Bexley's Children's Centres was moved to the Public Cabinet meeting on 1st September 2021 instead of the 26th of July as originally planned.

4. Key points raised during the consultation period

- 4.1 The consultation period allowed the Council to interact with over 840 participants who either provided their feedback verbally at meetings (18 meetings); through individual submissions (79) or in writing via questionnaires (743).
- 4.2 The analysis of the responses to the consultation are available for Cabinet to consider **Appendix 1** The following points are a summary of the responses to the consultation:

- 85.20% stated they had used a children centre on more than one occasion in the last 2 years, the most popular service being Stay and Play activities. Health Visiting and Midwifery Services were the next most popular service
- 60.93% agreed that the current model should be changed
- 67.33% agreed with the proposal to signpost to universal services already being delivered
- 70.56% agreed with the proposal to provide more targeted groups for expectant parents and children up to and including the age of 2
- 80.1 % agreed with the proposal to continue to support children aged 3-5 who had not taken up their free childcare place
- 63.49% agreed with the proposal to utilise more venues in the community to expand opportunities and provide services nearer to home but expressed a wish to consider the following for alternative models of deliver.
 - o Outdoor areas such as parks
 - o Designated spaces in schools
 - o GP surgeries or medical spaces such as clinics
- 63.49% of all respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with the proposal to have a dedicated Children's Centre Team, 10.69% did not have a view either way

4.3 When asked what services families would like to see in Children Centres the responses supported the new model of delivery. Outlined below are the services in order of importance:

- More groups for mothers and babies including postnatal support & parent support
- Communication groups – focus on speech and language
- SEND support groups
- Stay & Play age appropriate
- Family Learning – including access to courses to help gain employment such as teaching assistant
- Domestic Violence support

4.4 The consultation highlighted the following concerns relating to the proposed new model

4.4.1 *Potential insufficient capacity of 6 FTE Children's Practitioners being able to support families across the whole Borough.*

We are confident that the proposed 6 FTE Children's practitioners will be able to provide activities and support within the community. Through offering more targeted services and a pathway of groups and interventions for 0-2's and continuing to support 3-5's who are not taking up their entitlement; we believe we will have greater impact as most resource at present is not accessed widely by this cohort. We will draw on the universal provision offered by partners and re-align our focus on the younger age group in order that we can be equitable to families across the whole Borough and not just in one or two localities.

This is a new and direct resource, with funding being moved from buildings, their management and the provision of private sector services to support the creation of this new team. We see this proposed model as the start of a provision that will be more equitable across the Borough and there will be a continuous review of the service to ensure we have the right support for our families at the right time and place. In addition, we will be supported by a Partnership Board including members from our voluntary; statutory and community partners to monitor and advise on the service.

4.4.2 *Impact on private and voluntary, community sector providers due to potential increase in attendance at services*

Our in-depth analysis indicated that most (93%) of our 3 & 4-year-olds are taking up their free entitlements. As the Children's Centres will be providing more focussed sessions for the under 2's in the new model it is anticipated that there will be limited increase in demand, but this will be kept under review.

We are confident that there are enough universal community providers in Bexley to offer parents and families a choice of services to access. It has always been the role of Children Centres to signpost families to community providers, either initially or following a short period of support. It is important that we can support families in joining community activities.

4.4.3 *Impact of Private Providers post lockdown - providers have expressed their concerns that they will need to re-establish their businesses and re-engage with families who may be a little reluctant because of the pandemic.*

The Council values the support and variety of services private providers can make available to families in Bexley. It recognises that the private providers it previously funded to deliver activities in our Children Centres will have been affected by the pandemic. In order to support them with their recovery and continuation of their business in Bexley it is agreed that Children's Centre space will be provided free of charge for a period of 12 months. This will enable them to re-establish themselves and encourage families to return to their services.

5. Summary of Analysis of proposed alternatives

- 5.1 One provider submitted a formal proposal for consideration as part of the consultation process.
- 5.2 At the end of the 9 weeks consultation, Danson Youth Trust (DYT) submitted four alternative models for consideration. It was suggested that these models would be able to continue to be part of a new Children Centre Service under a Service Level Agreement (SLA).
- 5.3 Detailed analysis was undertaken on each of these proposals. A summary and response to each model is outlined below:

5.4 Hybrid Model

Under this model, DYT propose the following:

- DYT work under an SLA and manage half the Borough on half the Children's Centre's budget .
- Ward responsibilities can be determined as the London Borough of Bexley see fit whilst retaining the estate elements within the proposal.
- The Danson Children Centre and the Ward it is in will remain within the DYT allocation.
- The model proposes a 50/50 split and quotes a proposed budget of £0.146m. This is half the costs above once premises net costs are excluded.

Response:

For the London Borough of Bexley to maintain its 50% which incorporates the North of the Borough and half of Central where need is greatest, the minimum staffing required to support the model would be:

x1 Operational Lead

x1 Data Input Officer

x3 Children Centre Practitioners

Cost: £0.165m.

The London Borough of Bexley would still need the CACI software, training for its staff, and half for rental / activity costs, so at least £0.023m.

This Hybrid Model would incur additional costs of at least £0.042m for the London Borough Bexley to maintain its 50% split of the model. This figure is before considering the costs of premises and income which may arise.

This is not a viable option for the following reasons:

- It does not recognise the additional costs that would be incurred by the Council and the proportion of funding is not equitable given that the need is greater in the North and Central localities of the Borough
- It would negatively impact on the agility and flexibility of the proposed model as a Borough wide service

5.5 Partnership Model

Under this model, DYT propose:

- DYT work under an SLA and manage half the Borough on half the budget as a 50/50 split whilst holding management responsibilities
- reducing the staffing costs to the Service, saving the co-ordinating role less management adjustment costs to DYT
- DYT will hold half the service offer with service management responsibility
- Ward responsibilities can be determined as the London Borough of Bexley see fit whilst retaining the estate elements within the proposal
- The Danson Children Centre and the Ward it is in will remain within the DYT allocation
- 50/50 split proposed budget with agreed service management £0.156m (based on £0.146m plus management cost)
- Approximately 35% of the proposed operational lead cost. Saving London Borough of Bexley staffing costs and internal costs within model

Response:

The arguments that applied to the Hybrid Model also apply to the Partnership Model, in that the Council would have increased costs for running half the centres. For the London Borough of Bexley/Council to maintain its 50% which incorporates the North of the Borough and half of Central where need is greatest, the minimum staffing required to support the model would be:

x1 Operational Lead

x1 Data Input Officer

x3 Children Centre Practitioners

Cost: £0.165m.

The London Borough of Bexley would still need the CACI software, training for its staff, and half for rental / activity costs, so at least £0.023m

This Model would incur additional costs of at least £0.042m for London Borough of Bexley to maintain its 50% split under this Model. There would be no cost saving nor perceived operational benefits from the higher costs.

This is not a viable option for the following reasons:

- It does not recognise the additional costs that would be incurred by the Council and the proportion of funding is not equitable given that the need is greater in the North and Central localities of the Borough.
- It would negatively impact on the agility and flexibility of the proposed model as a Borough wide service.

5.6 Commissioned Model

Under this model:

- DYT propose to work within an SLA and manage the Borough wide service on London Borough of Bexley's proposed budget
- The enhanced budget on the current SLA would allow DYT to run the provision across the Borough following the new model needs analysis and most of the universal activity provision being protected to ensure a wider number of family's access support and developmental opportunities with a step-up / step-down approach. DYT can achieve this with their established partnerships, our flexibility and joint working with current and planned resources and specialisms
- DYT would hold Borough wide responsibilities to delivery for the London Borough of Bexley's new streamlined Service
- The Danson Children Centre and the Ward it is in will remain within the DYT allocation
- Bexley would retain the estate elements within their proposal and plans to change use or redesignate

Response:

This model does not recognise the financial implications for the Borough were they to lose the income generation from Danson Children's Centre which forms part of the Children's Centre portfolio. The Borough would still have to meet maintenance and operational costs for the remaining sites.

In addition, any commissioning model would need a thorough competitive exercise and evaluation would be needed for any commissioned service. There is no guarantee that DYT would be the awarded provider as a result of that exercise.

This is not a viable option for the following reasons:

- It does not recognise the financial implications for the Borough because of loss of income in relation to the Danson Children's Centre Building

5.7 Domestic Management Model **Under this model, DYT propose:**

- If the decision to move forward with the proposed model is agreed DYT would propose that the management of the Children's Centre building on the site be retained by the Youth Trust on the agreement that the rental income generated from current partner, Bromley Healthcare Trust remains unchanged. This rental value is known to be less than operational costs
- DYT is committed to supporting the Borough achieve its aims with minimal disruption to community access within universal provision and to the safety and integrity of the wider site
- This Model will ensure better running of the centre for families and practitioner's whilst saving substantial resourcing and operational costs to London Borough of Bexley

Response

DYT Children's Centre is a London Borough of Bexley asset and forms part of the proposed new model of delivery, under which it is one of the five Children's Centre sites from which services will be delivered.

Under the Domestic Management Model, DYT would maintain the management of the site and continue to generate income through subletting. The Council cannot guarantee the income generated from this site as providers could re-locate if they wish.

This is not a viable option for the following reasons:

- There is no financial advantage for the Council in this model, only the risk that income could be lost, and the possibility that sub-letting the building to use again could increase costs in the use of the site.

5.8 In summary, the staffing costs would increase the overall costs for the Council in either a partnership or hybrid model. These costs are outlined in section 9. The fourth option, of domestic management, has no financial or operational benefit to the Council, and could lay the Council at risks of increased costs should DYT not meet its income targets. This proposal would also remove the option of the site as a venue for delivery of our Children's Centre services.

In addition, the supporting documentation provided did not provide enough information to:

- Evidence how vulnerable families and those most in need are currently identified and targeted which means that the Service cannot be confident in the equitability of provision offered to children and families across the whole Borough

- Evidence to support that targeted and family support work could be carried out by DYT in a structured way. No evidence was provided to enable the Service to be confident that assessment of need would be carried out systematically by DYT

5.9 In addition if models 1 – 3 were to progress then the Council cannot consider the commissioned model for 1 provider as a public tendering exercise would need to be followed, this means that there is no guarantee that DYT would be awarded the contract.

6. Consultation with Overview and Scrutiny Members

6.1 The analysis of the consultation was shared at a meeting to brief Members of the Children's and Adults' Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the Children's Centre consultation and proposed model on 3rd August.

6.2 Councillors were pleased to be briefed on the key elements of the proposals – that five children's centres would remain in Bexley (supported by the provision of services at a range of community venues across the Borough); signposting to universal services, the re-establishment of a revitalised Children's Centre Partnership Board and the creation of a children's centres team consisting of 6 skilled practitioners. They noted that the proposed new model supports recently published evidence which suggested that early intervention and providing access to all expectant parents and children up to age 2 (first 1001 days of life) is where there will be greatest impact.

6.3 Members acknowledged how feedback received during consultation – that one children's centre in Bexley was not enough and that residents wanted services to be delivered near to them so that they are easy to access – had been incorporated into the proposed model.

6.4 Regarding implementation of the proposed model, there was support for offering private sector providers free access to children's centres' space for 12 months to support the re-establishment of their businesses post-Covid. Members agreed that good communication and signposting to universal services was fundamental to the successful delivery of the proposed model and further information on how this would be delivered was requested when available. Questions were asked about the referral routes into services, the geographical spread of services and use of community venues, particularly libraries, to provide services locally in response to need, service capacity and ongoing discussions with the Danson Youth Trust.

6.5 Should the proposals be agreed by the Cabinet, Members noted it was intended that they would be implemented from 1 November 2021, with a review in 12 months' time. Members agreed that this is something that Overview and Scrutiny should keep under review and that the appropriate OSC should be recommended to include this in its work programme for 2021/22.

7. Summary of Legal Implications

7.1 Section 3 of the Childcare Act 2006 ("the 2006 Act") provides that:

- (1) For the purpose of their general duty under section 1(1), an English local authority have the further duties imposed by subsections (2) and (3).
- (2) The authority must make arrangements to secure that early childhood services in their area are provided in an integrated manner which is calculated to–
 - (a) facilitate access to those services, and
 - (b) maximise the benefit of those services to parents, prospective parents and young children.

(3) The authority must take steps—

(a) to identify parents or prospective parents in the authority's area who would otherwise be unlikely to take advantage of early childhood services that may be of benefit to them and their young children, and

(b) to encourage those parents or prospective parents to take advantage of those services.

(4) An English local authority must take all reasonable steps to encourage and facilitate the involvement in the making and implementation of arrangements under this section of—

(a) parents and prospective parents in their area,

(b) early years providers in their area, including those in the private and voluntary sectors, and

(c) other persons engaged in activities which may improve the well-being of young children in their area.

(4A) In deciding what arrangements to make under this section, an English local authority must in particular have regard to—

(a) the quantity and quality of early childhood services that are provided, or that the authority expect to be provided, in their area, and

(b) where in that area those services are provided or are expected to be provided.

(5) In discharging their duties under this section, an English local authority must have regard to such information about the views of young children as is available to the local authority and appears to them to be relevant to the discharge of those duties.

(6) In discharging their duties under this section, an English local authority must have regard to any guidance given from time to time by the Secretary of State.

Section 5A of the 2006 Act provides that:

(1) Arrangements made by an English Local Authority under section 3(2) must, so far as is reasonably practicable, include arrangements for sufficient provision of children's centres to meet local need.

(2) "Local need" is the need of parents, prospective parents and young children in the authority's area."

7.2 In the event it is proposed to close a children's centre(s), or reduce provision, factors to consider and assess include: the need for children's centres in its area; what provision would be enough (sufficiency) to meet that need; and what number of children's centres it would be reasonably practicable for the Council to provide, taking into account such matters as affordability and considerations such as the availability of appropriate buildings, geographic location, and accessibility. Provided all three of these matters are considered, there is no obligation to consider them in any particular order.

7.3 In April 2013 the Government issued the "Sure Start Children's Centres statutory guidance" ("the Guidance") to which the Council is obliged to have regard when carrying out its duties relating to children's centres under the 2006 Act. In ensuring there are sufficient children centres, the Guidance details various things a local authority should do. These include:

- ensure that a network of children's centres is accessible to all families with young children in their area

- ensure that children's centres and their services are within reasonable reach of all families with young children in urban and rural areas, considering distance and availability of transport

- consider how best to ensure that the families who need services can be supported to access them

- target children's centres services at young children and families in the area who are at risk of poor outcomes through, for example, effective outreach services, based on the analysis of local need
- not close an existing children's centre site in any reorganisation of provision unless it can be demonstrated that, where it is proposed to close a children's centre site, 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
- Take into account the views of local families and communities in deciding what is sufficient children's centre provision.

- 7.4 Section 5D of the 2006 Act provides that the Council must secure that such consultation as they think appropriate is carried out prior to any significant change is made in the services provided through a relevant children's centre.
- 7.5 In consulting the Council should consult anyone who could be affected by the proposed changes, particularly to ensure disadvantaged families and minority groups participate in consultations. The consultation should explain how the Council will continue to meet the needs of families with children under 5 as part of any reorganisation of services. It should also be clear how respondents' views can be made known and adequate time should be allowed for those wishing to respond.
- 7.6 With respect to consultations, case law has set out the following principles:
- Consultation must be at a time when proposals are still at a formative stage
 - The proposer must give sufficient information for any proposal to permit intelligent consideration and response
 - Consultation must be for a sufficient time to allow respondents to properly respond
 - Consultation results must be considered by the final decision maker
- 7.7 The Guidance also makes clear that Councils should ensure that children's centres offer differentiated support to young children and their families according to their needs. To help fulfil their duty to reduce inequalities between young children in the area, the Council should consider the role that children's centres can play by, for example, providing inclusive universal services which welcome hard to reach families.

8. Comments of the Monitoring Officer

The comments of the Monitoring Officer are contained in the section above.

9. Financial Implications

- 9.1 The Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) includes agreed savings arising from the reconfiguration of Children's Centres of £0.369m in 2021-22 increasing to £0.492m in a full year. The proposed new model achieves a full year saving of £0.378m as shown in the table below:

	Proposed re-configuration with an in-house core team with targeted offer (£)
Cost of current Children's Centre provision	691,000
Costs of new model:	
Staffing	261,000
Software (CACI)	14,500
Rental, training and activities	16,000
Premises costs less income	22,000
Total costs of new model	313,500
Saving compared to current budget	377,500
Full year target saving	492,000
Full year shortfall compared to target saving	114,500

- 9.2 It should be noted that the staffing costs shown are subject to confirmation of gradings for the posts to be established under the new model.
- 9.3 In the current financial year an initial cost reduction was achieved from the deletion of 2.38 FTE posts which were part of the existing model of provision. This has resulted in a saving of £0.061m for the period April – October 2021. If the new model of provision is implemented as proposed from November 2021 there will be a five months' saving of £0.157m for the period November 2021 – March 2022. The overall saving achieved for the current financial year will therefore be £0.218m against a 2021-22 target of £0.369m, resulting in a shortfall of £0.151m. This shortfall can be mitigated this year through additional government grant income received by Children's Social Care.
- 9.4 In 2022-23 the full year implementation of the new model will result in a saving of £0.378m, a shortfall compared to target saving of £0.115m as shown in the table above. The review of the service has identified scope for future development of additional income-generation at Children's Centre sites through sessional lettings. A pricing strategy is under development to facilitate this. The additional income may assist in addressing the shortfall in saving. Any shortfall not covered by additional income will need to be addressed through an alternative savings proposal to be considered and agreed by Members.

- 9.5 The table below summarises the expected savings for the current and next financial years:

	2021-22 (£)	2022-23 (£)
Agreed saving included in MTFS	369,000	492,000
Saving achieved through staff reductions under existing model (April – October 2021)	(61,000)	n/a
Saving achieved through implementation of new model from November 2021	(157,000)	(377,500)
Additional income generation through sessional lettings	-	TBD
Total savings expected to be achieved	(218,000)	(377,500)
Shortfall compared to MTFS	151,000	114,500

- 9.6 Under the proposed model a number of sites return to direct Council management. There is therefore a potential risk of capital expenditure needing to be incurred to deal with any necessary works identified through stock condition surveys.

10. Comments of the Chief Finance Officer

The financial implications arising from the proposed option are explained in section 9 above.

11. Risks and Mitigation Measures

- 11.1 Insufficient income generation resulting from renting/leasing of buildings due to impact of Covid.

Initially it was anticipated that two of the re-designation sites would be suitable to provide additional free childcare places. The consultation showed that the two buildings identified were not viable for childcare providers to expand their provision. However, negotiations are underway with Health partners who because of the pandemic are seeking to re-locate their teams out in the community and the Children's Centre buildings are appropriate and purpose built to accommodate clinical services. In addition, GPs in the Borough are looking to utilise suitable space for sessional renting to accommodate some of their larger support groups and sessions.

- 11.2 Demand for services high following pandemic particularly for parents who had a baby during the pandemic with high levels of service provision needed around health and wellbeing and communication.

The new dedicated Children's Centre team are flexible and adaptable to be able to respond to emerging needs and deliver services to meet those needs. A focus will be on communication and health and wellbeing and will be reviewed quarterly.

- 11.3 How will we know the new service is working if there is no accountability?

Governance arrangements for the service will see the introduction of a 0-5 Partnership Board which will oversee and hold the service to account and will provide regular reports to the Director of Children's Services, Corporate Leadership and the Children and Adults Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Group as required. Quarterly monitoring reports against measured KPI's will be in place and it will provide a holistic approach to supporting families from the wider partnership. This will avoid duplication and ensure robust referral pathways are in place to support families in Bexley.

In addition, the re-launch of a Parents Forum will ensure that the voice of parents and children are reflected in the services that are delivered in Bexley.

Accountability will be provided by the Children and Adults Overview and Scrutiny committee and by a reviewing process after twelve months.

12. Summary of Other Implications

12.1 Equal Opportunities

Public Sector Equality Duty ("the PSED").

Section 149(1) of the Equality Act 2010 requires that, in exercising its functions public sector bodies to have 'due regard' to the need to -

- Eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Act;
- Foster good relations between people who share a relevant 'protected characteristic' and those who do not;
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a relevant 'protected characteristic' and those who do not

'Due regard' as required by the PSED means *'regard that is appropriate in all the circumstances'* given the *'context of the function that is being exercised at the time by the public authority.'*

The Equality Act does not impose a duty on public bodies to achieve equality or prevent public bodies from making decisions which may affect one group more than another. The law requires that the duty to pay 'due regard' be demonstrated in the decision-making process.

Assessing the potential impact on equality of proposed decision, changes to policies, procedures and practices is one of the keyways in which the Council can demonstrate that they have had 'due regard'. Assessing impact on equality should be tailored to, and be proportionate to, the decision(s) being made.

Part of the duty to have 'due regard' where there is disproportionate impact will be to take steps to mitigate the impact and the Council must demonstrate that this has been done, and/or justify the decision, on the basis that it is a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim.

A thorough and on-going consideration of the Council's obligations under the Public Sector Equality Duties (PSEP) has been given at each stage in the analysis of both the Children Centre offer and a review of the Children Centre buildings review process. Following the public consultation process additional information was sought about the impact of the original proposals on individuals with protected characteristics. A revised model has been proposed as a result of consideration of the consultation responses. An updated Equalities Impact Assessment has been undertaken with respect to the revised proposals in **Appendix 4**.

12.2 HR Implications

During the public consultation, staff and trade unions were also consulted on the proposed model. If the proposed model proceeds, then a new staffing structure will be

implemented subject to formal consultation with staff and trade unions on the staffing structure and the Council's usual HR procedures.

One Centre is currently being managed under a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with an external provider which will end on 31st October 2021. In addition, the commissioned contract for a second provider that delivers related services will also end on 31st October 2021.

Whilst initial discussions have taken place with those providers about the proposed model and possible staffing, further discussion would be necessary to determine whether the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations might apply and then result in the potential transfer of staff to the Council.

In that event, subject to which staff were transferred, any reorganisation of staffing would need to include consideration of both existing Council employees and transferred staff for roles in the new structure. If there were insufficient roles for all affected staff, then subject to consideration of redeployment opportunities, redundancy costs may be incurred. Those costs cannot be accurately quantified as they are dependent on whether or not staff transfer and then who may be selected for redundancy.

12.3 Community Safety

There are no specific community safety implications arising from this report.

12.4 Environmental Impact

There are no specific environmental impact implications arising from this report.

12.5 Human Rights

There are no specific Human Rights arising from this report. The proposed model will meet the needs of the communities we would wish to reach; and is in response to those communities asking for support that is local and accessible.

12.6 Health and Well-Being of the Borough

There are no specific Health and Well-being implications arising from this report. The proposed model will enhance the partnership relationships and provide a clear pathway to early help in our communities.

12.7 Data Privacy Implications

There are no specific data privacy implications arising from this report.

12.8 Asset Management Implications

The current children's centre buildings are a mixture of leased and Council owned buildings, the table below shows the existing ownership and occupation summary and the makeup of occupation under the new proposed model.

The proposed new model will enable the Local Authority to reduce overall costs by passing some of the buildings operating costs onto partner agencies and seeking additional rent by renting out additional space. Additionally, two sites are to be attempted to be surrendered back to their respective landlords; this is subject to the freeholders' agreement and cannot be guaranteed. However, if surrender can be

secured this is likely to give rise to initial costs but in the long term reduce running costs. The final financial position in terms of the property elements of the project will not be clear until the position regarding the surrenders and the extent of any subletting or hiring is known. Any subletting or hiring of space needs to be undertaken in consultation with the Council's Property team to ensure the Council's interest is protected.

Table: Existing ownership and Occupation summary

Property	Existing	New Model
West Street	Council owned and occupied with subletting to nursery and use by partner agencies.	Council owned and occupied as base for dedicated team with subletting or hiring of space to partner agencies
Northumberland Heath	Council owned and occupied with subletting to nursery and use by partner agencies.	Council owned and occupied as base for dedicated team with subletting or hiring of space to partner agencies
Normandy	Council owned and let to partner agency	Council owned and let to partner agency
Danson	Council owned but let to Danson Youth Trust who in turn sublet to partner agencies	Council own and occupied with subletting's or hiring of space to partner agencies.
North Cray	Council own building but rent out whole and retain small footprint for children's centre	Council to run and share use with health providers
Greenmead	Council hold a leasehold interest and currently sublet the whole premises to a nursery provider	Surrender back to landlord (early talks suggest they will keep existing tenant in occupation). Financial implications subject to finalisation of terms and obligations.
North End	Council hold a leasehold interest and occupy but sublet the ground floor to a nursery.	Council to retain its leasehold interest but seek to sublet whole to nursery and additional partner agencies
St Augustine's	Council lease and operate with partner services using space	Seek to surrender the Council's leasehold interest back to the school and replacing the Council's interest with a direct hiring arrangement between the school and partner agencies. This is subject to negotiation. Financial implications will be subject to finalisation of terms and obligations.
Hillsgrove	Council own and lease whole site directly to nursery provider	Council continues to own and lease whole site directly to nursey provider

13. Appendices

Appendix 1: Consultation Analysis
Appendix 2: Summary of Consultation Feedback
Appendix 3: Needs Analysis
Appendix 4: EIA
Appendix 5: Buildings Analysis

14. List of background documents

Document 1

The Best Start for Life: a vision for the first 1001 critical days of life

[The best start for life: a vision for the 1,001 critical days - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-best-start-for-life-a-vision-for-the-first-1001-critical-days-of-life)

Document 2

Healthy Child Programme – Pregnancy and the first 5 years of life

[HCP - Pregnancy and the First Five Years of Life \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/publications/healthy-child-programme-pregnancy-and-the-first-5-years-of-life)

Document 3

No Child Left Behind

<https://publichealthmatters.blog.gov.uk/2020/09/02/no-child-left-behind-a-public-health-informed-approach-to-improving-outcomes-for-vulnerable-children/>

Document 4

Cabinet Members Decision report – 26th April 2021

<https://democracy.bexley.gov.uk/ieDecisionDetails.aspx?ID=2977>

Document 5

Corporate Plan - #Brilliant Bexley – Shaping our Future Together

<https://www.bexley.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2020-09/BrilliantBexley-Shaping-our-future-together-2017-to-2025.pdf>

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