

Slough Borough Council

Report To:	Cabinet
Date:	24 th May 2023
Subject:	Remodelling of Children's Centres
Portfolio:	Children's Services, Lifelong Learning & Skills
Chief Officer:	Sue Butcher Chief Executive and Executive Director for Children's Services
Contact Officer:	Neil Hoskinson Associate Director for Education and Inclusion
Ward(s):	All
Key Decision:	YES
Exempt:	NO
Decision Subject to Call In:	YES
Appendices:	Appendix 1 - Consultation Summary Report Appendix 2 - Travel Time Modelling Appendix 3 - Childcare sufficiency assessment update Appendix 4 - Revised Equalities Impact Assessment Appendix 5 - Focus Group Schedule – private, voluntary and independent sector Appendix 6 - Focus Group Schedule – residents and service users

1. Summary and recommendations

- 1.1 This report seeks a decision from cabinet on the remodelling of children's centre services and ceasing directly provided childcare in specific children's centres where demand is low.
- 1.2 Consultation was recommended by cabinet at the December 2022 cabinet meeting. Public Consultation started early February 2023 and ended on 17th March 2023. We are now bringing the option suggested by the analysis of the outcome of the public consultation back to cabinet for a decision.
- 1.3 It is recommended that Cabinet agree to:

- (a) retain Chalvey Grove, Penn Road and Romsey Close as children's centre delivery sites with early years and Monksfield Way and Yew Tree Road for only Early Years provision. All other 5 current sites to close from September 2023.
- (b) Note that a report and strategy (following a business case and a feasibility study) will be brought back to Cabinet in October 2023 on a wider family hub model following engagement with the community and partner agencies in Slough.

1.4 Reasons:

- 1.4.1 The analysis of the online consultation, the face-to-face focus groups, service demand analysis for services, income maximisation analysis and the Slough area sufficiency report indicate the council should retain five sites for childcare and three sites for children centre based services at this time.
- 1.4.2 It is proposed that further work is undertaken on a wider strategy to ensure council and partner services are appropriately targeted and that the Council supports the PVI sector to meet the childcare sufficiency requirements.

Commissioner Review

Commissioners are content with the recommendations.

2. Report

2.1 Council priorities, strategic context, and the outcome of the public consultation

2.1.1 The decision recommended to the council is consistent with the following council priorities:

- A council that lives within its means, balances the budget, and delivers best value services for taxpayers and service users; and
- A borough for children and young people to thrive.

2.1.2 The recommended decision supports these priorities by seeking to make efficiencies from children's centres where demand is low for the services provided or there are suitable alternatives.

2.1.3 There is evidence to support from the public consultation and the evidence from a review of current service provision the current children centre services in Slough can be greatly improved by the following,

- shaping the market and in building in good commissioning practice to secure best value for public money.
- having a strategic commissioning approach to allow the private, the voluntary, and independent (PVI) sectors to provide for most childcare needs in the Borough.
- by consolidating services so that service provision is stronger and more sustainable in fewer centres.

2.2 Consultation feedback

2.2.1 The consultation engaged a wide range of stakeholder groups over a 6-week period using a range of different tools to gain evidence to support this report. The methods included an online survey, focus groups, and receiving feedback by email. The online

survey received 410 responses, with 91% of the respondents living in Slough. Focus groups and emails combined gathered feedback from headteachers, health professionals, residents who use the centres currently, Slough Borough Council staff, and Slough Children First staff. A detailed write-up of the feedback from the consultation is included in Appendix 1.

- 2.2.2 Respondents were asked to rank the three options for change, with option 1 receiving the highest level of support, being the option that retained the most physical sites. Many respondents mentioned that retaining 1 or 2 more centres than included in Option 1 would mitigate many of their concerns. This would bring the number of centres remaining open to 4 or 5. There were a range of views on which additional centres being kept open would make the biggest difference on improving outcomes for children and families. All centres were mentioned at least once by a respondent as a preferred option to keep open.
- 2.2.3 Overall, the centres are liked by families, staff, partner agency professionals, and other residents. This positive feeling came through in the responses, which expressed anxiety and sadness that some of the centres could close. When asked to rank which services respondents valued, childcare was ranked highest.
- 2.2.4 Many respondents said that more information on the future service offer might help to reduce their concerns.
- 2.2.5 There was a set of risks and opportunities related to Option 1 that were raised by respondents to the consultation. There were more risks than opportunities described. The main themes of the risks articulated by respondents included:
- Difficulties in finding suitable alternative childcare arrangements.
 - Increased barriers to access services through extra travel time or cost of travel.
 - Families where the adults and/or children have additional needs may not find suitable family services, early education services, or childcare that meet their specific needs.
 - The risk that additional needs would not be identified at an early stage, leading to delays in support and intervention.
 - Increased safeguarding risks as these remain “hidden” without opportunities for social interaction.
 - Risk of health services not being as accessible due to reduction in buildings.
- 2.2.6 Some opportunities were articulated by respondents, including:
- The remaining buildings could be kept open longer in the weekday evenings and on weekends to enable greater access.
 - Some of the services currently delivered in centres could be redesigned to be delivered from alternative buildings through a pop-up or outreach model.
 - Private and Voluntary Sector providers of family services, early education, and childcare might be able to expand and/or adapt provision.

2.3 Council response to consultation feedback

- 2.3.1 The Council has conducted travel modelling, the results of which are appended at Appendix 2. This has indicated that increasing the number of buildings available for childcare will have a positive impact on travel times to areas with higher prevalence of children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND). Continuing to provide direct provision particularly suitable for these children will allow support to be put in place at an early stage and before the child starts school.
- 2.3.2 The new model of delivery is intended to provide outreach services, including via other council and community buildings. Extending this to a wider age range of children and families will be a key consideration in formulating a family hub model of delivery.
- 2.3.3 The Council will consider options for utilising the buildings in the evenings and weekends, where this fits with a family hub model. This will be particularly relevant when providing services for families with older children. It is intended that a report be brought back to Cabinet for approval of a new strategy.
- 2.3.4 Whilst the PVI sector already provide childcare to assist the Council with its childcare sufficiency duty, the Council will consider its strategic commissioning approach, taking account of the Government's policy plans in terms of increasing the provision of free childcare.

2.4 Other information

- 2.4.1 A petition entitled 'Save Slough Children's Centres' was launched on the [Change.Org](#) website platform by a resident. The petition referenced the potential closure of children's centres but with a focus on any potential impact on Romsey Close and a focus on childcare provision. The petition by 21/04/2023 gained signatories of 969. The council is not seeking the closure of Romsey Close.
- 2.4.2 Slough Borough Council also updated the statutory assessment for childcare sufficiency. This review is key to understanding the change in decision from a 3+1 model to a 3+2 model as detailed in the recommended option section. The update to the Childcare Sufficiency Assessment can be reviewed at appendix 3a and 3b.

2.5 Table 1: Range of options to consider.

Option	Early Years & Childcare	Children's Centre Functions	Recommendation
1 – Retain the status quo (current children centre provision remains the same with no change)	All ten centres	All ten centres	This model is not recommended as it does not provide value for taxpayer's money. This model does not also allow for targeting of resource to those most in need and involves spending resources on maintaining buildings as opposed to focusing these on outreach and community

			provision. This option will maintain childcare in areas where there is a surplus or evidence that the Private Voluntary and Independent sector who could also meet the demand. Childcare Sufficiency Addendum.
2 – Retain 3 CC sites and 3 childcare sites	Chalvey Grove, Romsey Close, Yew Tree Road	Chalvey Grove, Romsey Close, Penn Road	This option is not recommended based on the revised sufficiency evidence and the analysis of the public consultation outcome.
3 – Retain 2 Children’s Centres to include childcare provision	Chalvey Grove, Romsey Close	Chalvey Grove, Penn Road	This option is not recommended. There is a high-risk Slough Borough Council would not be able to meet its sufficiency duty as more time is required to shape the market and to bring alternative provision onboard with commissioning.
4 – Retain 1 Children Centre and offer no direct provision of childcare	No	Chalvey Grove	This option is not recommended. There is a high-risk Slough Borough Council would not be able to meet its sufficiency duty as more time is required to shape the market and to bring alternative provision onboard with commissioning.
5 – Retain 3 Children’s Centres and 5 childcare sites	Chalvey Grove, Romsey Close, Yew Tree Road, Monksfield Way, Penn Road	Chalvey Grove, Romsey Close, Penn Road.	This option is recommended based upon the outcome of the public consultation and further data analysis on in the effect of people being the least of all options whilst providing both optimum operational efficiency and value for taxpayer’s money.

2.6 Recommended option - retain three Children’s Centres and five early years provisions.

2.6.1 The two centres not used as children’s centres can be utilised as delivery sites for some services. The consultation results and their analysis have highlighted the

need to bring another option to cabinet to consider, which is based on current and potential future demand as well as the analysis of the need for residents and service users within Slough to travel further than what perhaps they had before by walking, by public transport and by car, this analysis can be reviewed in Appendix 2 “Modelling on Travel Times”.

2.7 Table 2 – Recommended Model

Location	Function	Service Delivery	
		Early Years and Childcare	Children’s Centre
Chalvey Grove	Main Centre or Hub	Yes	Yes
Penn Road	Main Centre/Hub	Yes	Yes
Romsey Close	Main Centre/Hub	Yes	Yes
Monskfield Way	Outreach/Spoke	Yes	No/Outreach/Virtual
Yew Tree	Outreach/Spoke	Yes	No/Outreach/Virtual

- 2.7.1 This option is recommended based on the outcome of consultation and further data analysis on sufficiency, legal duty, in retaining council income and in ensuring the council can meet future needs.

Implications of the Recommendation

3. Financial implications

- 3.1 The 2022-23 budget included £456k of planned savings in relation to Children’s Centres. £179k of these savings were achieved on an on-going basis via a review of staffing requirements, as previously reported to Members in the quarterly budget monitoring reports. The balance of savings totalling £277k will be achieved by the remodelling of the centres, scheduled to begin in September 2023, which will release on-going savings over both 2023/24 and 2024/25. In 2023/24 savings released will total £165k, with a further £118k of savings being released in 2024/25. This means that full year effect savings, of £462k, will be delivered from 2024/25 onwards, which is £6k above the original savings target. In 2023/24 the shortfall against the budgeted savings target will be covered by the reserve set aside for potential phased delivery of savings.

Table 3.2 Savings to be achieved.

Saving Description	2022/23	2023-24	2024-25
	£'000	£'000	£'000
Review of Staffing Requirements	179	179	179
Retain three Children's Centres and five early years provisions.	0	165	283
Total Full Year Savings	179	344	462

- 3.3 The above reductions ignore the potential reduction in property operating costs such as business rates and utilities as these would still be incurred whether the buildings were in use for the purpose or not. The budget in respect of this expenditure is held by the Housing and Property directorate so that the ongoing use of the properties can be considered including the financial impact of any change of use.
- 3.4 There may be some additional savings that arise later, but there will not be immediate savings as premises costs would continue to be incurred until such time as an alternative use/occupant is identified. Full consideration of options for alternative use will need to take account of potential income from tenants, any restrictions on use through planning, capital investment required for any change of use etc. This does not form part of this decision and will be considered at the appropriate time.
- 3.5 Although savings will be made through this proposal, there are staffing implications that need to be considered included redundancy and pension strain costs which could be in the region of £300k dependent on the staffing changes arising from this proposal. The cost of funding redundancy and pension strain costs is met from a corporate redundancy reserve which is held for this purpose.
- 3.6 There are ongoing costs to maintain unused buildings which are referred to further in the property implications section.

4. Legal implications

- 4.1 The Childcare Act 2006 requires local authorities to improve the wellbeing of young children in relation to their physical, mental and emotional well-being, education, training and recreation, contribution made by them to society and social and economic well-being. Local authorities are also under a duty to reduce inequalities between young children in these areas and ensure that early childhood services are provided in an integrated manner to facilitate access and maximise the benefit to users of the services. Children's centres are key to meeting these duties and the Council must ensure it has sufficient centres, so far as reasonably practicable, to meet local need.
- 4.2 In relation to sufficiency, the statutory guidance states that local authorities should ensure a network of centres that are accessible to all families with young children in the area, take account of distance and availability of transport, work with health and employment services to ensure those families who need support can access it, target services at those most at risk of poor outcomes through effective outreach services based on analysis of local need, demonstrate that all children and families can be reached effectively, ensure opening times and availability of services meet the needs of families and not close an existing centre unless it can be demonstrated that the outcomes of children, particularly the most disadvantaged, would not be adversely affected. There is a duty to consult on any intended closure or significant change to services. The results of the consultation are contained in appendix 1 and summarised in this report. These results must be considered in reaching a decision on future provision.
- 4.3 The Childcare Act 2006 also requires local authorities to secure sufficient childcare, as far as is reasonably practicable, for working parents, or parents who are studying or training for employment, for children aged 0 – 14 (or up to 18 for disabled children). The strategic aim of early education and childcare provision is to work with parents, early years practitioners and partner agencies to support the development of all young children, including the most vulnerable, and to help them build the skills and resilience needed to become successful adults, with the capability and willingness to make a positive contribution to society.
- 4.4 The legislation allows local authorities to assist others to provide childcare including given financial assistance but specifies that local authorities should not directly provide childcare unless they are satisfied that no other person is willing to provide childcare for a particular child or group or it is otherwise appropriate to provide it. Local authorities providing childcare directly risk distorting the market, potentially preventing choice and options for small businesses to meet demand. Since 2006 local authorities' role in childcare/early years education has been to focus on market management and ensuring quality of provision.
- 4.5 When determining sufficiency, local authorities should take into account what is reasonably practicable, the state of the local childcare market including demand for specific types of providers, the state of the local labour market, the quality and capacity of childcare providers, encourage schools to offer childcare from 8am to 6pm and in school holidays, encourage existing providers to expand provision and new providers to enter the market if needed and encourage a sustainable business approach to planning by signposting providers to resources to support them.

- 4.6 The Children and Families Act 2014 sets out a statutory framework for supporting families of children with SEND. This includes a duty on local authorities to ensure that all providers delivering funded early education places meet the needs of children with SEND and should make sure that funding arrangements for early education reflect the need to provide suitable support for these children. This Act also requires local authorities to work in partnership with health providers to ensure integration of educational, health and social care provision where this would promote wellbeing and improve the quality of provision for children with SEND.

5. Risk management implications

Risks	Potential impact	Mitigating actions
1. Failure to maintain Children's Centre sufficiency	Breach of statutory duty. Inability of families, particularly the vulnerable to access early childhood services.	Needs assessment appended to December cabinet report. Consultation undertaken to assess impact. Work with partners so that core offer is maintained with emphasis placed on revised model coordinating offer and providing outreach and family support.
2. Failure to maintain early education and childcare sufficiency	Breach of statutory duty. Inability of families to access early education and childcare with residual impact on child (early education) and family (employment risk for example). Inability of vulnerable children including those with SEND to access early education.	Updated childcare sufficiency assessment. Increased directly provided childcare as result of consultation feedback. Continued work with PVI sector as part of strategic commissioning role.
3. Inability to make alternative use of assets, surplus to service requirements	Sites remain vacant and require ongoing maintenance.	Research potential alternative use options informed by scope and limitations of facilities. This work will be driven primarily by the Asset Disposals Programme Team to ensure that, where possible, surplus assets will be brought forward for disposal and any retained are effectively managed through the future Asset Management Plan.
4. Failure to manage transition effectively	Parents experience major difficult in finding alternative provision in a timely fashion.	Phase implementation in order to manage impact In line with the needs of parents in finding alternatives.

5. Clawback of capital grant afforded to construct centres	Financial impact on cost and savings projections.	Options for surplus buildings to continue to be used to support early years services either via use by PVI sector or schools.
6. Loss of preventative capacity which minimises children's social care demand	Increase in demand for statutory children's social care.	Work with targeted early help and Children's Social Care to manage transition as part of family hub strategy development.
7. Income	The centres need to drive income to support the structure	If the centre is unable to get the income there may be strain on budgets elsewhere.
8. Savings Targets	The recommended option is rejected.	Ensure the recommended option is supported by senior managers and continue engagement with members.

6 Environmental implications

6.1 No environmental implications identified.

7 Equality implications

7.1 A revised Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) has been drafted and attached as appendix 4 to this report. The proposed changes are likely to disproportionately impact females, as they are more likely to be the carer organising childcare or be the principal carer in a single parent family (64% of respondents to the survey were female), children with a disability and their families (16.9% of respondents indicated they had a child with a disability), working age adults and in particular those aged 25 to 39 as this age range are more likely to have young children and those who are pregnant or have had a baby in the last 12 months (11.8% of respondents had had a baby in the last 12 months). Mitigations identified are to work with a wider network of agencies and providers, including the PVI sector and to ensure that the new model is appropriately targeted to those most in need. Further work on a family hub strategy will consider these equality implications. In addition, the implementation plans will include clear communications and information on the changes and alternative service provision.

7.2 There are equalities implications associated with the proposed re-modelling of Slough Childrens Centres: these are likely to include both positive and negative impacts. Negative impacts include the potential reduction in access to and availability of services, and consequential support, particularly in the short term, whilst a transition to the new operating model is implemented. Full details of the profile of current service users, respondents to the consultation and specific equalities issues raised, is included in the Equality Impact Assessment (Appendix 4). However, in summary due to the nature of the services children's centres provide, women and children under

the age of 5 years are over-represented as users compared to the general Slough population. Service monitoring also suggests that children and families from the Asian and Asian British communities are over-represented as users, and children/families of White/White British and Black/Black British communities are under-represented. Both recommended options involve a reduction in current centres, and this will impact the current users of those centres. However, both recommended options seek to mitigate those negative impacts wherever possible, ensuring access to services is maintained and ultimately benefit these groups by enhancing the targeting of services to help reduce inequalities of outcome for children and offer better, more sustainable support to local families.

8 Procurement implications

8.1 There are no procurement implications in this report to consider.

9 Workforce implications

9.1 All presented options for consultation have workforce implications which include the potential need to consult with the staff on proposed changes to the service should they be recommended and agreed.

9.2 Staff will be actively engaged in the consultation process with any further workforce implications determined and addressed, subject to the outcomes of the consultation process and any resultant changes that may be recommended. Several staff may need to be redeployed or are at risk of redundancy where they cannot be matched into another role. This could be a maximum of 10 roles that are not in the new structure and where job roles cannot be matched.

9.3 There is a need for a 45-day consultation with staff arising from the whole council restructuring of directorates and departments. There may be the need to consult full council and we will also consult the employment and appeals committee at Slough with the restructure report. We may also have a need to go to council regarding pension strain where this meets a certain threshold.

10 Property implications

10.1 Nine of the ten children's centres are on school land and therefore have constraints that need to be considered if a change of use or lease is proposed.

- 9 of the 10 assets are on school land and therefore require Secretary of State approval for disposal including entering into lease arrangements. An application for disposal to the Secretary of State would require full details of proposed leasing arrangements with an expectation that income would be used to benefit the school whose land is affected by the disposal.
- An application requesting permission to lease the facility to an alternative provider of childcare services is likely to be more acceptable to the Secretary of State and in addition a change of use planning application would not be required.
- Vicarage Way Children's Centre is not on a school site and permission for disposal would not be required. The site could be sold generating a receipt for the Council.
- Orchard Avenue Children's Centre is sited on land held in Trust by the school and is not owned by SBC.
- Advice from Planners is that the centres currently fall under Use Class F1(a) which is for the provision of education. If the children's centres are to provide medical or

health services, then this would fall under use class E and would require change of use planning permission. Any change of use application of school land would need approval from the Secretary of State.

- One of the main issues with any alternative use of the Children's Centres will be access as most of these centres sit within school grounds or have narrow access.

10.2 These proposals will mean that at least 4 assets on school sites will become vacant later this year. As the next step and to avoid funding empty assets a project team will be set up to determine the best use of each asset. Options for the released assets fall into 3 main categories:

Sale: this is not possible without Secretary of State approval apart from Vicarage Way. The receipt is likely to be ringfenced for schools by the Secretary of State as part of any approval. The school's view will be sought by the DfE as part of any application process.

Lease: not possible without Secretary of State approval. If there is interest from the PVI sector, consideration should be given to the terms of such an arrangement to ensure the building costs are not an ongoing burden for the Council. Capital clawback risk is reduced if the building continues to be used for early years services.

Transfer: this would remove SBC's financial burden for maintenance of the asset if passed onto the school. No Secretary of State permission would be required. An agreement could be reached with the school to ensure the services required by the LA are still delivered and capital clawback by the DfE is not a risk.

11 Background Papers

None.