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BUDGET OPTION: CHILDREN'S CENTRES AND SURE START

1.0 OUTLINE OF PROPOSAL

1.1 Children's Centres and Sure Start has a combined budget of £8,246,000 and from this area total savings of £2,172,000 are proposed.

1.1 In terms of Children's Centres, this option proposes to:

- Reduce universal services in children's centres, retaining those covered by charges. Early support for some families could be missed, but universal services would remain available and affordable.
- The proposal to reduce the funding to Bookstart removes a part time post which was used to enhance the service. Children's Centres have a statutory responsibility to facilitate Bookstart. This duty will continue in the Children's Centre. The part time post was used to enhance the service organised by the Library Service. The Bookstart programme will continue to be organised by the Library Service.
- Stop providing bilingual support for children aged under 5 years, where English is an additional language. Children with English as an Additional Language would in future receive support commissioned by the Children's Centre to meet their individual needs. Support would still be available from the Council's Minority Ethnic Achievement Team.
- Relocate staff based at Bidston St James Children's Centre to Brassey Gardens Children's Centre. A proportion of the Children's Centre budget is currently spent on renting the top floor of Bidston St James Children's Centre. Moving the staff and stopping paying the rent for the first floor space in St James Centre building will make savings while allowing the service to continue from the Brassey Gardens site, which is nearby. Children's Centre facilities will continue to be delivered on the ground floor.
- Release of the Children's Centre Satellite bases at schools. The transfer of these facilities would result in a saving in operating costs. The Council will retain the option to continue to provide services through room rentals.
- Cease the current counselling service available at Children's Centres, and the counselling service for domestic violence provided at the Zero Centre. Early identification and prevention work with vulnerable families may be reduced however staff members have received training to provide some of this support.
- Outsource day care provision across a number of Children's Centres. The private and voluntary sectors have expressed an interest in taking over provision at these centres. This would result in a budget saving for the Council and a new enterprise for the voluntary sector. Day care

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provision at these locations will continue to be available. Close monitoring of the service will be put in place to ensure the quality and affordability of the service does not reduce.

1.2 The Sure Start service contributes to a range of different services and projects and helps families to find suitable services to meet their needs. In this area, this proposal would mean that:

- The options relating to Sure Start are to reduce the budget of the service through reconfiguring the Family Information Service, and stopping funding of the Play Council and Toy Library
- The reduction in Foundation Stage consultants and childcare development workers will be managed by changing the way that Early Years quality assurance and retained functions are delivered through Children's Centres and the two Early Excellence Centres.

2.0 RATIONALE FOR PROPOSAL

2.1 The Statutory Duties within the Childcare Act 2006 states that the local authority should:

- Make arrangements for integrated working; work with health and employment services (Section 3 & 4)
- Secure sufficient Children's Centres to meet local need (Section 5a)
- Consider whether early childhood services should be delivered through Children's Centres
- Ensure there are sufficient childcare places
- Provide pre registration training for childminders

2.2 Proposals for spending reductions are based around the following principles for change:

- Protecting front line delivery for children and families
- Refocusing provision into the areas of greatest need
- Allowing children's centres to generate income by charging for universal services in some areas of the borough
- Removing layers of management
- Protecting provision by transferring the risk and responsibility to other providers such as schools, the voluntary sector etc

2.3 DFE benchmarking data for 2012/13 indicates that this is an area where spend is above average compared to statistical neighbours - £106 per head, compared to an average of £89.

2.4 The percentage of children registered in the 30% most deprived wards is 84.98% which is higher than the national average. The percentage of children registered in the 70% most deprived wards is 74.4%.

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- 2.5 The percentage of pupils attaining at least 78 points in the Early Years Foundation Stage with at least 6 points in PSE and CLL is 61% the highest percentage ever achieved. Improvement since 2009 is in line with the other North West local authorities and better than 3 of our neighbouring authorities.
- 2.6 For attainment of children in receipt of free school meals Wirral is top of the North West table with the narrowest gap.
- 2.7 As a result of the health promoting activities within the children centres Wirral has the lowest obesity rates in the North West.
- 2.8 As a result of support for parents with safety in the home hospital emergency admission rates have decreased year on year for the last 3 years.

3.0 ACCESSIBILITY OF PROPOSAL

- 3.1 The option in relation to Children's Centres and Sure Start was published alongside a series of other options from the Chief Executive on November 9th 2012. These options were published following an extensive period of consultation during September and October 2012, which focussed on broad principles of policy to gather initial views on how options should be developed.
- 3.2 Residents, staff and stakeholders were provided with a range of information detailing the background, level of savings, potential impact and methods of mitigating any potential negative impact for this and all other options. This information included:

Questionnaire: Split into three sections, the questionnaire provided a one paragraph summary of each option and provided the opportunity for respondents to select one of three choices indicating their opinion on the option.

Summary Paper: Three summary papers (one per 'theme') were produced and were available online, at Council buildings and at consultation events. These papers provided a summary of each option, including the level of savings involved and some background information.

Option Paper: For each of the published options, a detailed option paper was available. This paper provided information regarding the background to the option, the potential impact if the option was implemented, proposed methods to mitigate that impact and also the potential savings associated with the option.

- 3.3 The Questionnaire was the primary research tool used in this consultation, and as such it was essential that the document was designed in a way to ensure robust, clear and actionable results. It was also vital to the success of the project to ensure that the questionnaire

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was produced in a fashion that was accessible, clear and neutral. To ensure that this was the case, Council officers took a number of steps to ensure the questionnaire was externally validated as an effective research and consultation tool.

- 3.4 A draft version of the questionnaire was analysed by an external agency through the Market Research Society. The final draft of the questionnaire was also presented to the members of the Children in Care Council and a group of people with learning disabilities at a Council Day Centre who made further suggestions as to the design and wording of the document.
- 3.5 Further work was also done to ensure accessibility including publishing an interactive Easy Read version, and developing three individual videos, which were used at consultation events, on the Council website and also played through the network of 30 LCD screens in One Stop Shops and Libraries. These videos were designed to more fully explain the context of the options and also provide guidance for how to complete the questionnaire document.

4.0 CONSULTATION PROCESS

- 4.1 An extensive programme of public consultation was completed in relation to all options which were published in November 2012. This programme included over 100 community events at locations such as libraries, supermarkets, cinemas, community centres and children's centres.
- 4.2 Extensive online promotion of the consultation was also completed, with emails being sent to over 13,000 residents, and the consultation also featured prominently on the Council's website which receives in excess of 1,000 hits per day.
- 4.3 Organisations from the Voluntary, Community and Faith sectors were also actively encouraged to take part in this consultation process.
- 4.4 Registered users of Children's Centres were informed of the consultation through email, as well as extensive promotion of the exercise within each centre. People using the services were assisted to complete the consultation documents, and had the implications associated with the option provided and explained to them through a variety of channels.
- 4.5 Further, extensive consultation was completed through bodies such as Wirral Children's Trust, School Governors Forum, and all Head Teachers across the borough.

5.0 CONSULTATION FEEDBACK

- 5.1 In terms of the public consultation process, the response to the questionnaire demonstrated a mixed view from Wirral residents, staff and other stakeholders as to the implementation of the options. The table below shows the response to the public consultation.

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Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
I support this under the circumstances	27.1%	1286
I accept this if it is absolutely necessary	29.4%	1397
I find this completely unacceptable	43.5%	2063

- 5.2 At the meetings with professional bodies described at 4.5, people were provided with detailed information regarding the proposals in this area, as well as identified potential impacts and mitigation. This information was also available to the general public and people using the services involved.
- 5.3 People were provided with the opportunity to highlight concerns, and ask questions of Council officers and to take part in the consultation process either through the meetings or by completing questionnaires.

6.0 POTENTIAL IMPACT IDENTIFIED

- 6.1 The potential impact of implementing this option was provided at the start of the process in the original options paper, and is provided below. Further potential impacts have been identified and discussed with people using services throughout the consultation process.
- 6.2 This will impact in a number of ways, including opportunities for children with complex special needs being less available and less support for child minders, breakfast clubs and after school clubs.
- 6.3 It will also mean a reduction in the quality of summer play schemes. Information about the services available for people to access will be provided through electronic kiosks within children centres and a redeveloped website.
- 6.4 Removing funding from the Play Council and Toy Library would not necessarily mean that the provision could not continue; the organisations would be supported to find alternative means of funding and / or income generation.
- 6.5 Further concerns were highlighted during the consultation that introducing charges and reducing universal services could potentially lead to a lack of engagement in services, particularly among the most in need.

7.0 PROPOSED MITIGATION

- 7.1 It is important that due regard is shown to the concerns highlighted throughout this consultation process from people using the services, their families, carers, and our own workforce. It is proposed that, should this option be considered and recommended by Cabinet and approved at

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Council that the following factors should be taken into account in the implementation of the option.

- 7.2 The Council has a requirement to undertake a childcare sufficiency audit to ensure there are enough places available for parents. There is currently a mixed economy where childcare in children's centres is provided by external providers and staff employed directly by the local authority. Schools and the private sector could take over the childcare offer currently provided the local authority, the extent and method of this will be developed in the coming months.
- 7.3 Ceasing to provide specialist services such as Bookstart, Bi-lingual support and domestic violence counselling may provide an opportunity for the private and voluntary sector to apply for funding to provide these services.
- 7.4 This might give schools that have satellites the option to take over the buildings with the proviso that outreach services from the children centres can book designated times to deliver services.
- 7.5 Concerns were raised during the consultation related to the potential reduced availability of children centre services to the most vulnerable and in need families. This will be mitigated through ensuring services are targeted at the most vulnerable wherever possible.

8.0 SUMMARY

- 8.1 The rationale for this proposal is outlined within this report, in that to modernise, effectively target and bring costs in line with the statistical average spend per head, a full review of universal services is necessary.
- 8.2 While raising concerns through the consultation at the potential for a reduced universal provision, residents and other stakeholders were primarily concerned with ensuring services for most vulnerable residents and family were maintained. This concern should be addressed by ensuring that services are targeted at those most in need.