

**What
Really
Matters?**

Budget Option
**Childrens'
Centres**

Savings

2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	TOTAL
£000s	£000s	£000s	£000s
500	1500	-	2000

Option summary

The Council spends over £6 million on providing Children's Centres and associated services. This budget option would enable the Council to save £2m over the next two years through restructuring and reducing services at a number of Children's Centres. We will maintain full service delivery at one main site in each of the borough's four Constituency areas and use an Outreach model to provide services from the remaining sites.

The Council has a statutory duty to ensure that there are sufficient Children's Centre services for its population of children under the age of five and their families. It is not proposed to close any Centres at this stage – this proposal will maintain services at four Children's Centres in the borough: Rock Ferry, Seacombe, Pensby and Brombrough. It will reduce the opening hours and services available from the other twelve sites.

The maintained nursery schools, Ganneys Meadow Early Years Centre and Leasowe Early Years Centre, would offer a reduced Children's Centre service as the funding available to them would be significantly reduced and negotiations will be needed with both Governing Bodies.

Potential impact

Children's Centres are a key part of the newly formed Targeted Prevention Services and provide early intervention services for children aged 0 – 19 year and their families with a focus on the early years. The newly formed Family Support Service team are funded through the Children's Centre budget and these changes will have a significant impact on the number of family support staff. A reduction in services may have a negative impact on the capacity available to identify emerging family problems and offer Early Help. This will result in more families needing intensive and specialist support.

Wirral Children's Centres have been developed as a part of the School Improvement Strategy and there is evidence to show that they have had a positive impact on children's school readiness. Early Years Foundation Stage data shows a significant and sustained improvement over the last 5 years, particularly in the areas of highest deprivation. The gap between the lowest and highest achieving children has narrowed and continues to do so. This work will be significantly less if staffing levels are reduced.

Children's Centres in Wirral are key to the Authority meeting its statutory duties to provide information, advice and guidance to parents (elements of the Family Information Service are delivered through the Centres to local families accessing two year old childcare funding). The budget for the Family Information Service was significantly reduced in 2013/14 and if staff capacity is reduced, there is significant risk to meeting this statutory obligation.

Children's Centres provide support to 120 private, voluntary and independent childcare settings as well as over 200 childminders in Wirral. The Sure Start Quality Assurance Team was significantly reduced in 2013/14 and Children's Centres have filled part of that role. Without this function, the Ofsted judgements of these providers will be at risk.

Reducing the opening hours of the smaller Centres will have a negative impact on partners, particularly health visitors and midwives who deliver a large number of services from the Centres both as single agencies and in partnership with Centre staff. These groups would be reduced or stop if Centres or staff are not available which will have a negative impact on joint performance indicators i.e. breastfeeding rates, obesity at reception age, attendance at A & E for accidental injuries.

Children's Centres operate under an Ofsted Framework and provide evidence of service delivery and the impact on the lives of the most vulnerable young children in their reach area. The changes to the delivery model will have a negative impact on the number of children that the Centres can support and therefore may impact on future Ofsted judgements.

Reducing the impact

The buildings most affected will be used for delivery of other services, e.g. Registry office services, sessions from private providers (Tumble Tots etc.) that would charge families, youth services.

A robust model of charging families for services, generating an income to support the Centres would be implemented and a further planned public consultation on the future of Wirral's Children's Centres will include an option to outsource the service to the private, voluntary or faith sector. Opportunities will be explored to engage partner agencies to deliver targeted support to vulnerable children and families, as part of this overall service.