

Consultation on early years and children's centres in Stockton-on-Tees



Introduction

We understand that good quality, accessible early years services are vital for families in Stockton-on-Tees. Currently, children's centres provide early childhood services for all families during pregnancy, birth and until a child is five years old. These services are delivered in partnership with a number of agencies and partners, including NHS providers, Adult Learning providers and Job Centre Plus and are delivered in local children's centres, community venues or at times, when required, within family homes.

In addition good quality early years education and childcare plays an important role in making sure young children become ready for school alongside enabling parents and carers to access work or training. This is delivered through a network of childcare settings including private nurseries, school nurseries and childminders.

The Council has a duty to provide a range of early years services to local families, and is committed to continue to:

- Give information and advice to families
- Provide health services in partnership with Stockton-on-Tees and Hartlepool NHS Foundation Trust
- Support children to develop by encouraging families to learn and play together. The aim is that children will be ready for school and have the skills and abilities to achieve well.
- Help children and their families to reach their full potential to increase their wellbeing and standing in the community
- Support parent and carers to meet their responsibilities and keep their children safe
- Help parents to develop their skills and access education and employment.
- Make sure there are sufficient early years education and childcare places for all families who need it, especially free provision for all 3 and 4 year olds and eligible 2 year olds.

Where early years education and childcare is concerned, the Government has also introduced a new entitlement for working parents from September 2017. That means many young children aged 3 and 4 years old will be able to have 30 hours free provision rather than the current 15 hours.

We need more early years education and childcare places to make sure that those families that qualify for the extra free hours can have them when they need them and as close to where they live as possible.

Our schools, childcare providers and childminders are active partners in making sure good quality early years services are available to families and are sometimes the main point of contact for working families.

Families are also at the heart of Stockton-on-Tees Early Help and Prevention Strategy, where the ambition is that young people are healthy, safe, aspire and achieve their full potential and families become more resilient and develop capabilities to prevent and resolve problems.

Stockton-on-Tees does not need a set amount of children's centres. However, we do need to make sure that we provide key services in the right place for all families with young children, and we also need to continue to offer guidance and additional support for those families who need it most.

We know that early years and children's centres are important for families in Stockton-on-Tees and we want to continue to work with partners to deliver a high quality service.

We also want to use the money we have available in an efficient way to ensure we continue to deliver great services to our residents, focusing on families rather than buildings or administration.

The Council has experienced further reductions in the amount of funding we get from government. By 2019/20 the overall annual reduction in funding to the Borough will be £73 million (a reduction of 61% in 10 years). As a result of that we need to consider how we can still deliver quality early years services that meet the needs of families but for less money, even if this means change.

Taking all of this into account, this gives us the opportunity to review our early years and children's centre model and we have developed the following proposals.

To help with final decisions, we would like to ask you about your views and what is important to you.

Why are we consulting?

As a parent or carer, being able to access the right support can make a real difference. This is important at all times, but is even more crucial in the early years, when good effective parenting can make a huge difference to the outcomes for children.

The support that families receive ranges from...

- Ante natal support from midwives
- Help with healthy child and child development from health visitors
- Children's centre activity around health and wellbeing and school readiness
- Childcare
- Additional services such as speech and language therapy.

There can be lots of agencies and people involved, across the Council, the local health sector, the private sector and the voluntary sector. In some cases, these services are, or can appear to be working in isolation, and although there is lots of good activity, and lots of good practice, it sometimes doesn't feel like a co-ordinated system, providing the right support in the right place. Neither does it always recognise the role that immediate family, friends and wider social networks play, and the skills that they have to offer when support is needed.

For too many parents and carers, their experiences of the system as a whole isn't as positive as it could be, which is something we want to address as it is parents and carers who give children the best start in life.

So...

We feel the time is right to bring together services for children in a different way. We think we can be more effective by working more closely together.

We want to make sure that all families can access the right level of support for them and that we can ensure that those families who need the most help can get that help.

We want to clearly set out what is on offer for all families – those that just want information and advice, those that might need some guidance and/or additional help, and those that need specialist help because they are finding family life difficult or because their child or someone in the family has additional needs.

We are confident that we can do this but it means we need be 'smarter' and more co-ordinated in the way we work. It means bringing services together, making sure everybody understands their role, what is available to help families and how to access it.

If we get this balance right we can provide the right level of help and support to meet individual family needs.

What are we consulting on?

1. Our overall 'vision' and approach, thinking about what we need to do
2. A way of working which is based on being able to direct services to those families most in need
3. A set of specific actions which will be needed to achieve this 'vision' and make any changes

Our overall plan and vision

Our overall plan is to develop an approach which:

1. empowers families, recognising their vital role, puts them at the centre and emphasise the role of services in supporting them;
2. focuses more on establishing networks of support in communities, rather than on expecting families to access services which are delivered from a small number of centres
3. develops the role of volunteers, acting as family mentors to support families
4. co-ordinates support and services, recognising the need to have good quality access points for information and advice. This will include co-location of services and the use of technology to speed things up, reducing the number of times families have to tell their story

5. emphasises the importance of early help, as part of a wider early help model. This includes making sure that there are 'universal', 'preventative' and 'targeted' offers in place for all families regardless of the level of support they need

What are we proposing?

To achieve this vision, we think we need to do four main things:

1. We need to develop **a clear model and picture** which is specific about what help is available and how to access it, as a set of shared commitments with families. This will be based on the following:
 - The services and support which is available to **all** families, those planning families or those with young children: such as ante natal/maternity services; the role of Health Visitors; access to services such as stay and play; childcare; information and advice and activities. These would be available to everyone and are often called 'universal' services.
 - The services and support we will make available to those who are at greater risk of not being able to give their children the best start in life because they might be more vulnerable, or isolated, or lack confidence to access services. We will all work together across partners and systems to identify where this might be the case. For these families we will offer additional support such as: further outreach visits; support through volunteering or family mentors, access to our Family Hubs, activities and parenting support. These services are called 'preventative' as they are designed to help families at the earliest opportunity to prevent them needing more specialist services.
 - The services and support for those families who need it the most will be reviewed in the form of assessments such as: those undertaken by Health Visitors and through Early Help services. For these families, we will provide team around the family type working, with access to more specialist services.
 - Where there are concerns over welfare and safeguarding, referrals will continue to be made for social care assessment through the Children's Hub as now.
2. We need a bigger focus on **integrating the services and support available** by closer working between agencies, including joint training; co-locating some services and sharing information and assessments.
3. We want to develop a **revised model for children's centres**, based on the establishment of a network of Family Hubs. To make sure we can deliver more of an outreach model, and to ensure that we are 'targeting' services for those families who are in most need. We think we need a new approach which is:
 - More focused on people than buildings – not requiring families to travel as far and providing more options to access basic services at home or online
 - Fewer actual centres, with a bigger focus on the development of 'Family Hubs' more 'targeted' on areas of need, and more focused on providing a wider range of support for families

- A smaller network of such Family Hubs, located in the areas of greatest need across the Borough. We think there is a strong case for 5 of these hubs, but want to explore the implications of this further in this consultation
 - Moving towards greater control by families and communities, both in the management of the Family Hubs, and potentially in running them in future
4. **A bigger focus on building family capacity, through the use of volunteers** as ‘coaches’ or ‘mentors’ for families where there is no requirement for more specialist support and intervention. Where families need ongoing information, advice, guidance and signposting, as well as looking at how we can support families in accessing activities to overcome isolation, and how we can support more help in the home around reading, talking, relationships and attachment.

A set of specific actions we are consulting on:

1. We will refocus and re-brand children’s centres as ‘Family Hubs’, offering a broader range of services for families, with a main focus where there are children aged 0-5, but offering services for children up to 19 (up to 25 if they have a Special Educational Need or Disability)
2. We will have fewer such Family Hubs – we think that these should be located in the areas of greatest need across the Borough. We think this will probably mean five centres.
3. We think we can designate a number of the existing centres as sites for additional childcare provision to help us make sure we are ready for the introduction of the free 30 hours entitlement.
4. We will invest more in peer mentoring / volunteer approaches, building on the A Fairer Start model. We think this might be best commissioned from a voluntary sector organisation, and it will form part of a wider early help approach.
5. We will look to bring services together to deliver one integrated offer for families – this includes health visiting and early year’s support. This doesn’t necessarily mean they will be provided by one agency, but parents should feel that services are working together.
6. This would build on the integrated workforce and shared skills approach developed in A Fairer Start model.
7. We will designate a larger number of early help access points e.g. community centres and libraries where we would potentially deliver support such as parenting programmes and information and advice.
8. By co-ordinating service delivery and focusing on ‘preventative’ actions, we will be able to use a more robust intelligence and knowledge base to identify families who might be at greater risk and supporting them. We think this will ultimately reduce the need for more specialist services.

Why do we think this will be better?

We think working differently will be better because:

1. We can better meet the needs of parents by providing more outreach support and tailoring this to each family's needs, rather than offering a one size fits all service from a specific building
2. We can support families to be confident and resilient when it comes to parenting

Frequently Asked Questions

Is this not just about you deciding to close children's centres?

Although we have a network of centres, parents have told us that they don't always feel comfortable going to them, and would sometimes prefer support to be more local, and in locations more convenient to them. We can't currently respond to this need because of the size of the network we operate.

By bringing together the support for families with children from pregnancy to the age of 19 (25 in the case of those with a Special Educational Need or a Disability) we can more effectively respond to what families need at the right time and in a way that fits with how much support is needed. Whether families need a bit of information or advice or whether they need a bit more support, by creating a more flexible workforce we can put services closer to families much more successfully.

Why a smaller number of centres then?

We are proposing to improve the way we provide services, and we would like you to tell us what you think.

We have had many conversations with parents, carers and families who were regularly telling us the same things;

- It's too complicated as a parent to know who to talk to
- None of the professionals say the same things
- I have to tell the same story to people every time I see them
- I'd rather get support in my home, on line or somewhere I already go with my child.

We are proposing to change the number of children's centre so that we can provide services where they are needed, and so we can target services where they are required most.

Will I have to pay for services?

At the moment there are no plans to charge for activities that are delivered through the Family Hubs. However, as now, there may be a small charge to attend some sessions, for example parent led 'Stay and Play'.

Will children's centres still look the same?

Family Hubs will continue to deliver the programmes that you are used to seeing. Over time we want to develop their role in supporting all families, including those with older children, so some things will change over time.

Some children's centre buildings might be used to support families by providing more childcare in your area.

We propose to provide a more flexible programme regardless of whether it is in a library, health centre, children's centre or church hall. We want the support you get to be of the same high quality, and be built around you and your family.

Will older children be able to access services through children's centres?

Yes. Part of our approach is to ensure that the new Family Hubs will extend their provision to families with children aged up to 19 (25 in the case of those with a Special Educational Need or Disability). This is part of the plan to make things easier for families who have children of different ages and will hopefully make it simpler for families to get the right support they need for their whole family.

However, this doesn't mean they will lose their focus on families with children aged 0-5, as this is so important, and we think these changes will happen over time.

If my nearest centre does not become a new Family Hub, how will I access services?

If you notice a proposed change to your local service, we are confident that you will have even more opportunities to talk to the right people, at the right time to get the advice and support you need. We want services to be more flexible and work around you.

If I am a parent who is interested in running a group, who should I talk to?

We want to encourage local parents and community groups to run activities for local families. Many of the Children's Centre buildings will be able to provide a local venue for these groups.

If you are interested in the idea of running a group now, call into your local children's centre and let them know. They will be glad to help you set something up.

Data Protection Statement

By completing this questionnaire you are giving Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council the authority to retain the enclosed information for research purposes and the information you give will be used to inform the Stockton-on-Tees Early Help, Partnership & Planning Department. Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council is the Data Controller for the purpose of the DATA Protection Act. If you want to know more about the information the Authority holds about you or the way the Authority will use this information, please contact Stockton Council, Church Road, Stockton-on-Tees, TS18 1LD.