

Subject:	Consultation on charging for some Children's Centre services		
Date of Meeting:	2 June 2014		
Report of:	Executive Director for Children's Services		
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Ward(s) affected:	All		

FOR GENERAL RELEASE**1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND POLICY CONTEXT**

- 1.1 Brighton and Hove City Council is facing a challenging reduction in funding from central Government over the next few years. The Council's budget for 2014/15 included a commitment to consult on a proposal for charging for some Children's Centre services. The aim is to use the income from charging to continue to provide services that would otherwise have to be reduced. The budget proposal for 2014/15 was to generate £20,000 income for charging based on introducing charging from September 2014. To ensure sufficient time for a detailed consultation the proposal, subject to the results of the consultation, is to introduce charging from January 2015.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 That the Committee agree to a consultation on charging for drop-in, open access Children's Centre services for parents.

3. CONTEXT/ BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 The core purpose of Children's Centres, as set out in the Government's Sure Start Children's Centre Statutory Guidance, is to improve outcomes for young children and their families and reduce inequalities between families in greatest need and their peers in:

- child development and school readiness;
- parenting aspirations and parenting skills; and
- child and family health and life chances.

The guidance states that a children's centre should make available universal and targeted early childhood services either by providing the services at the centre itself or by providing advice and assistance to parents (mothers and fathers) and prospective parents in accessing services provided elsewhere. Local authorities must ensure that children's centres provide some activities for young children on site.

- 3.2 In Brighton and Hove there is an integrated, citywide Children's Centre service with health visitors seconded into the Council. Midwives are based in the larger centres. All centres provide play and learning activities for children and parents, healthy child clinics, parenting advice and support groups, volunteering opportunities and information about training or getting back to work. Some of the activities are drop-in sessions and available to all local families and others by appointment or referral. Children's centres also provide home visiting for families who need additional support. A fuller description of services is set out in the leaflet "Your Sure Start Children's Centre Team".

Which services to charge for

- 3.3 Children's Centres already charge parents for childcare provided by Children's Centre nurseries. The consultation will consider charging for other Children's Centre activities. The Council has the power to charge for discretionary, non-core activities, ie. those services not required to fulfil the core purpose of children's centres.
- 3.4 The most frequently used groups in children's centres are stay and play groups (including Stay and Play, Toddler and You and Jump for Joy). Groups are run in both Children's Centre buildings and other locations including libraries. Before Children's Centres were established it was common practice for parents to pay a small contribution to attend parent and toddler groups. Some children's centres also run groups for childminders which are similar to stay and play groups. The proposal is to charge for these Stay and Play drop-in, open access groups.
- 3.5 There is no proposal to charge for services delivered by health staff or core Children's Centre activities including healthy child clinics, Baby and You groups which provide information for new parents, groups aimed at particular groups (eg. children with disabilities, bilingual families, children with speech and language difficulties), referral groups (eg. post natal depression), courses (eg. parenting programmes, family learning, adult education) or the crèches which support these courses. Charging for a wider range of Council funded services will be considered in the future.

How to charge

- 3.6 Handling cash is expensive and time consuming to administer. The proposal is to use the Parent Pay system which is used by schools across the city for parents to pay for school meals and trips. All Schools in the city will use Parent Pay from June. Parents join the system on line using a computer or a smart phone. Parents can pay on-line or with cash at Paypoint outlets across the city. Parents with school age children who pay for school meals will already have a Parent Pay account and can add their younger children. Parents of infant children who will receive free school meals from September will still be asked to register with Parent Pay to receive communications from schools. Parents would not be able to pay cash at Children's Centres. They would be able to attend a session and pay later. Attendance at sessions will be recorded using the CC attendance system and will then be matched to parents' Parent Pay accounts.

Who to charge?

- 3.7 The proposal is to not charge for the children of families receiving:
- Out of work, means tested benefits,
 - Working tax credit with a maximum income of £16,190 per family
 - Disability Living Allowance for a child.
- And
- Adopted and looked after children.
 - Children with a Common Assessment Framework (CAF) Action Plan, Child in Need (CIN) or Child Protection Plan (CP);
 - Children of parents aged under 20.
- 3.8 The first four criteria are consistent with the national eligibility criteria for free childcare places for two year olds. The Government's estimate is that 34% of two year olds will be eligible for places in the city from September. This is likely to mean that at least 34% of parents will still be able to attend sessions for free. Parents will be asked to show proof of benefits or tax credits to qualify for free sessions. The two last criteria are to ensure children with identified needs can access services and to encourage teenage parents to access services.

How much to charge?

- 3.9 The actual cost of drop-in groups varies according to the level of staffing and average number of children attending each group. As an example a 1.5 hour drop-in group staffed by one staff member and attended by 15 children would cost £3.60 per child including back office costs.
- 3.10 The proposal is to charge a standard amount for all groups of £3.00 per child per session (usually 1.5 hours). Charges for other parent and toddler groups across the city vary from £1 to £3.50. However these groups tend to charge all parents.
- 3.11 We do not have an accurate figure for the number of children attending activities who would qualify for free sessions. The proportion will be higher than the 34% who qualify for free two year childcare places. We have used an assumption of 50%. The estimate is that a charge of £3.00 for 50% of attendees would generate a total income of approximately £25,000. The total Parent Pay cost is estimated to be less than £2,000 based on parents paying for 5 sessions at one time. The net annual income is estimated to be around £23,000.

4. ANALYSIS & CONSIDERATION OF ANY ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 4.1 The alternative to charging for some Children's Centres would be to no longer provide some services or to reduce funding for another service. The proposals described above aim to ensure that parents on low income will be able to access services and to reduce the cost of administration.

5. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & CONSULTATION

- 5.1 The proposal is for the consultation to be publicised by email to Children's Centre users, Facebook and Twitter. A leaflet will be available in Children's Centres and distributed to parents and childminders who attend the groups which may be charged for. Responders will be encouraged to use the Council's consultation

portal but will be able to request a paper questionnaire. Consultation meetings will be held with Children's Centre Advisory Group members. Partnership organisations will also be consulted. They include Sussex Community Trust, Schools which host Children's Centres, the Library Service, and Voluntary organisations which provide services.

- 5.2 The consultation will run from June to early September and will report to the Children and Young People's Committee in October.

6. CONCLUSION

- 6.1 The consultation will propose charging for drop-in, open access activities at £3 a session using Parent Pay. Parents on low incomes and disabled, looked after and adopted children or those with CAF or CIN or CP plans will not be charged.

7. FINANCIAL & OTHER IMPLICATIONS:

Financial Implications:

- 7.1 The budget for Children's Centres for 2014/15 is £2,526,000. If the decision is taken to implement charging from January 2015 then the likely income for 2014/15 is £6,000. The remaining £14,000 for 2014/15 will be found from other savings including vacancies. The income for 2015/16 is projected to be £23,000.

Finance Officer Consulted: David Ellis

Date: 9 April 2014

Legal Implications:

- 7.2 The Department for Education has published statutory guidance for local authorities on their duties relating to children's centres under the Childcare Act 2006. The guidance states that Local Authorities must ensure there is consultation before making a significant change to the range and nature of services provided through a children's centre and / or how they are delivered, including significant changes to services provided through linked sites. Section 93 of the Local Government Act 2003 contains the power to levy charges for discretionary services provided by a local authority. This could include such discretionary services provided by the Authority in fulfilment of its duties under section 1 of the Childcare Act 2006 to improve the well-being of young children in the area. An LA can however only recover the costs of the service and not make a profit through charging.

Lawyer Consulted: Serena Kynaston

Date: 29 April 2014

Equalities Implications:

- 7.1 An Equalities Impact Assessment will be completed as part of the consultation and will consider the impact on protected groups including single parents.

Sustainability Implications:

- 7.3 Continuing to provide Children's Centre stay and play groups contributes to the One Planet principle of Health & Happiness: Encouraging active, sociable, meaningful lives to promote good health and well being.

7.2 Any Other Significant Implications: None.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

Documents in Members' Rooms:

- Your Sure Start Children's Centre Team Leaflet
- Sure Start Children's Centre Statutory Guidance

Crime & Disorder Implications:

- 1.1 None.

Risk and Opportunity Management Implications:

- 1.2 Risks have been considered in the development of the consultation proposals. The proposal to not charge parents on low incomes is to reduce the risk of the most vulnerable families no longer accessing services. The proposal to use a cash less system is to reduce the risk that the cost of administering charging could significantly reduce the income. There is a risk that charging will reduce the number of children attending sessions and therefore generate less income. There is also a risk that, despite being offered free sessions, low income parents may be deterred from attending. A full risk assessment will be completed as part of the final proposals.

Public Health Implications:

- 1.3 The proposal in the consultation aims to ensure that services will still be delivered for all parents. There is no proposal to charge for any health services.

Corporate / Citywide Implications:

- 1.4 The aim of the consultation is to contribute to the savings the Council has to make because of the reduction in Government funding.