

Record of decision taken under delegated powers by a council officer



Title:	Discontinuation of the Mobile Family Centre
Divisions Affected:	Children, Families, and Lifelong Learning Commissioning
Key Decision:	No
Decision taken under delegation by virtue of:	Part 3- Scheme of Delegation (Section 3- Scheme of Delegation to Officers)

Summary

The Waverley Family Centre and Mobile Family Centre (bus) is run by Barnardo's on behalf of Surrey County Council (SCC) to deliver targeted services. The purpose of the Mobile Family Centre is to engage with rural communities, although this was expanded to include any families that were isolated for any reason regardless of where they lived. It is funded by SCC through a £69,000 per annum grant to Waverley Family Centre which is managed by Barnardo's. This grant covers the costs of running the Mobile Family Centre including five hours a week for a Mobile Family Centre co-ordinator and a driver for the centre whose hours vary based on need. In addition to this, SCC is responsible for covering the costs of maintenance and repairs and pays £14,000 per annum for the lease of the vehicle. In total this amounts to £83,000 per annum cost plus any repairs that might be required. If the service continues running, by March 2024 the total cost would be £166,000 alongside any repair costs that might be required.

The grant funding criteria requires that Barnardo's make the Mobile Family Centre available to other family centres in Surrey for four days a week. Since November 2019 only Waverley Family Centre have used the Mobile Family Centre with other family centres being reluctant due to it not meeting their service delivery model.

The transformation of Children's Centres into targeted Family Centres in 2018 reduced the Mobile Family Centre offer from two buses to one. There was a public consultation on the transformation including the decommissioning of the Mobile Family Centre however the decision was taken to retain one Mobile Family Centre (bus) in response to the consultation. Usage of the remaining Mobile Family Centre has been in decline with the number of visits declining from thirteen a month in April 2018 to two by July 2019. Some of this was due to the change in services that Family Centres deliver compared to the Children's Centres that they replaced, as there was a move to delivering targeted level 3 interventions directly to families in the home and level 2 services in the community or virtually.

The Mobile Family Centre has not carried out any visits since the first national lockdown began in March 2020.

Barnardo's have recommended that the Mobile Family Centre service should be de-commissioned as they believe it no longer provides value for money, does not complement the Family Centre model, or meet the needs of local families.

A consultation was held between 21st February and 21st March 2022 to investigate views on discontinuing the services and the impact of this on families and children. There were four responders of which two indicated that the impact of discontinuing the service would be 'no impact', one indicated it would be 'somewhat negative, and one that it would be 'significantly negative'.

As a County Council we are focused on ensuring services for families enable them to thrive while also providing value for money. We are therefore proposing to discontinue the Mobile Family Centre from 1st July 2022, when the current grant agreement expires.

Decision made

Decision made:

It was AGREED that the Mobile Family Centre would be discontinued from 1st July 2022

Reasons for Decision:

The Mobile Family Centre isn't delivering a value for money service. It costs £83,000 per annum yet no visits have been conducted since March 2020 and before then usage had declined to two visits a month. Waverley Family Centre have provided a report stating that they feel the Mobile Family Centre doesn't meet the needs of rural communities and that Family Centres working with schools are able to support those communities more effectively. Waverley Family Centre have also noted that using the Mobile Family Centre uses up the time of their practitioners who take part in visits and that this is an inefficient use of their time.

The Mobile Family Centre has a financial cost for Surrey County Council and a resource cost for Waverley Family Centre, however family centre workers believe it is an ineffective way to meet the needs of rural communities and a service for which the engagement had been in decline before its suspension in March 2020.

The consultation received a small number of responses and didn't demonstrate that discontinuing the service would have a large impact on children or families.

Decision taken by:	Rachael Wardell, Executive Director for Children, Families, Lifelong Learning, and Culture in consultation with Clare Curran, Cabinet Member for Children and Families
Decision taken on:	19 th May 2022
To be implemented on:	1 st July 2022

Alternative options considered

Our Preferred option is to discontinue the Mobile Family Centre however three alternative routes have also been explored.

1. Do nothing/Continue grant funding the Mobile Family Centre

This is not a preferred option as the grant funding for the Mobile Family Centre is not providing value for money or representing a good use of the time and resources of Family Centre practitioners.

Family Centres across Surrey have stated that the Mobile Family Centre does not compliment their current delivery model and that they can meet the needs of families requiring targeted support without using the Mobile Family Centre. For example, through virtual provision, attending families' homes or hosting families within the Family Centre.

Waverley Family Centre have stated that when conducting visits via the bus, they must divide their staff between the Mobile Family Centre and the physical setting therefore reducing staffing from the core offer within the centre. This model is not the most effective way of delivering provision as there is a low level of residential engagement with the Mobile Family Centre when it does conduct visits.

There are also potential opportunities following the shift to online engagement that occurred after the first national lockdown. Family Centres have begun delivering sessions online and this allows for coverage of a wider area while also reducing the resourcing required in regard to staff time and travel costs. It has also been noted that some families prefer accessing an online offer.

2. Finding alternative uses for the Mobile Family Centre

This is not a preferred option as there is limited interest from other service areas in using the Mobile Family Centre.

During the first national lockdown the Mobile Family Centre was suspended, and efforts were made to find alternative usages for it as part of the Council's emergency response to Covid-19 such as using the bus to deliver food parcels or as a safe space for meeting with vulnerable residents. However, the bus was never utilised in this way and in February 2021 SCC Children's Services, Waverley Borough Council's Housing team, Home Start, Midwifery teams, and community health teams were all offered use of the bus however none of these services took up this offer.

Between February 2021 and July 2021 A2E (Access to Education) used the bus for visits to children outside of mainstream education and conducted sixty visits. However, since July they have stopped utilising the Mobile Family Centre although it has still been available to them.

The Mobile Family Centre vehicle is also nearing the end of its anticipated life cycle and so the costs of running it are anticipated to increase over time.

3. Continue promoting the service

This is not a preferred option as there is a risk that additional promotion would not address the underlying causes of low engagement and that it would carry additional costs for Waverley Family Centre resulting in poor value for money.

Waverley Family Centre sent flyers and marketing materials fortnightly through 2019 to all Family Centres in Surrey which included ideas for how the Mobile Family Centre could be utilised. In November 2019 it was agreed that the toy library based at Loseley Fields would be added to the Mobile Family Centre offer. Throughout this period usage of the bus declined and while the toy library did attract new families there was no long-term engagement with them.

Qualitative data provided from Barnardo's practitioners and from discussions with other family centres indicated that the underlying reason that engagement is declining is due to there being more flexible and accessible ways for rural communities to receive targeted support from family centres. The Mobile Family Centre visits also use up a lot of staff time and if poorly attended this can be a larger resource cost for family centres with minimal impact on families.

The addition of virtual services to the family centre offer is likely to have accelerated this trend as it has provided another highly flexible and accessible way for families to access services. It was concluded that promoting the service would have additional resource cost for Waverley Family Centre but that it would not address the underlying causes of low engagement and as such the service would continue to not offer value for money.

Summary of any financial implications

1. Savings of £83,000 per annum of which £69,000 comes from ceasing the grant to Barnardos and £14,000 from ending the lease agreement for the vehicle
2. Costs of repairs to the Mobile Family Centre are avoided if the service is decommissioned
3. A onetime cost of £1,000 to cover the redundancy cost of the Mobile Family Centre co-ordinator

Declarations of conflicts of interest

None

Consultation/Process Followed

1. The Family Centre Co-ordinator has engaged with all Family Centres in Surrey
2. Waverley Family Centre have been consulted
3. LeasePlan from whom the Mobile Family Centre vehicle is leased have been consulted
4. A public consultation was held between 21st February and 21st March 2022

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Background Documents

Exempt:

Surrey County Council - Agenda for Cabinet on Tuesday, 29 January 2019, 2.00 pm (surreycc.gov.uk) Equality Impact Assessment	
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