

**CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**  
**23 FEBRUARY 2010**

**CHILDREN CENTRES**

1. This report covers
  1. Update of the progress of children's centres.
  2. Annex A gives an update on the capital programme.
  3. Annex B gives a summary of the key points in the Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Act (ASCL Act) 2009 and main implications for Oxfordshire.

**Background**

2. Children's centres are 'one stop shops' for young children and their parents, and for childminders and other carers. They offer a friendly and safe place for parents and carers to play and have fun with their children and to get information, advice and support. They are a universal service, but particularly aim to reach vulnerable families who don't easily access services.
3. We have 45 children's centres in Oxfordshire and are now in the third and final phase of development. Phase 1 centres are in areas of the highest levels of deprivation. Funding is allocated on a formula basis taking account of the size and level of deprivation of the area served. 29 centres are well established; the remaining 16 are part of Phase 3 and still in development.

**Progress of Children's Centres Development, including an Update on Premises**

4. There are 45 children's centres in Oxfordshire. Sixteen of these are Phase 3 centres so are still in a relatively early stage of development. However all these are now designated as children's centres which means they are providing a minimum level of service and have plans in place for how they will move to full service delivery. Most Phase 3 centres are currently providing services from temporary premises.
5. The capital programme has presented many challenges. The government's advisers on this programme (Norfolk Property Services) have currently given Oxfordshire a red rating because our programme is due to be completed very close to the end March 2011 deadline. See Annex A for more information about progress on individual projects.
6. In a number of Phase 3 projects, which are mostly in rural areas, there has been significant local opposition to plans to develop new premises. Common factors to this oppositions include:
  - (a) Lack of understanding about what a children's centre is. We have provided information and arranged visits to established centres to help with this. A small minority are clearly opposed to the idea of and need for children's centres and are not open to persuasion.

- (b) Concerns about the impact of traffic that a children's centre may result in. Centres are required to do travel plans and where on school sites we are agreeing to stagger opening/closing times of activities at the centre so they do not overlap with busy times at the school.
7. Areas where there has been significant local opposition are indicated in the attached Annex A

### **Statutory Basis of Children's Centres**

8. The Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Act (ASCL Act) 2009 amends the Childcare Act 2006 by defining children's centres in law and places a duty on Local Authorities (LAs) to establish and support children's centres. The Act also places duties on Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) and Job Centre Plus (JCP) as statutory "relevant partners" to enable access to early years services through children's centres. Details of relevant sections of the ACT and implications for Oxfordshire are appended as Annex B

### **Summary**

9. Oxfordshire has been recognised by the Government Development Agency (Together for Children) as having made very good progress in its development of children's centres. Phase 1 and 2 Centres are now demonstrating their worth in terms of evidence of increasing take up of services, parental satisfaction and a 'narrowing of the gap' in attainment at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage. However the whole national programme is embryonic and will take several years to demonstrate long term improved outcomes for children, families and communities in terms of health, education and economic and social wellbeing.
10. National and International research evidence from places where similar investment has been made in early childhood programmes demonstrates that high quality early years services and support for parents provide protective factors against later vulnerabilities and significant cost benefits.
11. There are challenges around the phase 3 centres due to opposition in a small minority of Oxfordshire communities. The current economic and political uncertainties can also be undermining in terms of the confidence of staff, parents and communities about the future commitment to and sustainability of Children's Centres and services.

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| <b>Children's Centre</b>                                | <b>Development Description</b>   | <b>Current Status</b>   | <b>Anticipated Completion date</b>        |
|---|--|---|---|
| <b>NORTH</b>  |  |   |   |
| Ambrosden Children's Centre                             | Enhanced modular building solution on Five Acres Primary School site providing multi purpose room, small consultation room, office, kitchen, WC's and storage  | Feasibility completed. At planning stage                                  | February 2011                             |
| Heyford and Caversfield Children's Centre               | Mobile unit and minor works to existing community building in Heyford Park   | Van being purchased. Lease underway. Minor internal works to be completed | Summer 2010                               |
| Bloxham Children's Centre                               | Internal adaptations and small extension at Bloxham Primary School. Delivery by school as self help project  | On site. Work in progress.  | Summer 2010                               |
| N W Witney Children's Centre                            | Improvement/replacement of existing temporary building used by children's centre on West Witney Primary School site  | Condition of building on school site being investigated.                  | March 2011                                |
| Witney Children's Centre (phase 2)                      | High risk project. Alteration needed to existing building used by King's School and owned by Methodist Church  | Plans drawn up. Waiting for school to vacate and legal agreements.        | March 2011                                |
| The Willow Tree Children's Centre (Bampton and Burford) | New stand alone building on Bampton Primary School site providing multi-purpose room, small consultation room, office, kitchen, WC's and storage   | Planning approved. Tenders in and being considered.                       | November 2010                             |
| The Orchard Children's Centre (Eynsham and Woodstock)   | New stand alone building at Eynsham Primary School to provide multi-purpose room, small consultation room, office, kitchen, WC's, area co-ordinators office and storage for both Children's Centre and Extended schools programme. Early World (private provider) will be delivering | Planning approved. Tenders due in mid February                            | November 2010 (Children's centre element) |

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|   | childcare services in the building  |  |             |
| <b>SOUTH</b>                                    |   |  |             |
| The Rainbow Children's Centre (Henley)          | Extension to existing church facilities including separate access to provide multi-purpose room, small consultation room, kitchen and WC's  | On site. Work in progress                                  | Summer 2010 |
| The Rainbow Children's Centre (Sonning Common)  | High risk project. Sonning Common Primary School was initially the proposed site for the centre. Plans have changed due to ecological concerns. Internal works and refurbishment now planned at Chiltern Edge Secondary School to provide multi-purpose room, small consultation room, office, kitchen, WC's and storage  | Brief drawn up. Feasibility stage                          | March 2011  |
| The Red Kite Children's Centre (Thame)          | High risk project. John Hampden Primary School was the proposed site for the centre. Significant parental opposition led to change of mind from governors. Now planning to reburish old library site subject to building being surplus to other service needs (waiting for S&CS to declare old library is surplus to requirements). This will be smaller than standard phase 3 centre but will include all key elements, multi-purpose room, an office, a small consultation room, entrance and toilets, with a small outside area. | Brief drawn up. Feasibility stage                          | March 2011  |
| The Maple Tree Children's Centre (Great Milton) | High risk project<br>New stand alone building on Great Milton Primary School site providing multi-purpose room, small consultation room, office, kitchen, WC's and storage  | Planning stage. Concerns over significant local opposition | March 2011  |

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|  | as part of a 4 phase new school development  |   |                |
| Chalgrove and Watlington Children's Centre | Refurbishment and extension providing space for extended services, developing existing multi purpose room and kitchen and providing new office space, consultation room, entrance and changing room          | On site. Work in progress.                                      | November 2010  |
| Wallingford Children's Centre              | New build on existing OCC owned land to provide multi-purpose room, small consultation room, office, kitchen, WC's and storage. Combined building with Youth Service   | Planning permission granted and out to tender                   | March 2011     |
| North East Abingdon Children's Centre      | Infill to an existing building at Wootton Community Centre to provide multi-purpose room, small consultation room, office, kitchen, WC's and storage. Part of a larger £900k community project.              | On site. Work in progress.                                      | April/May 2010 |
| Southmoor Area Children's Centre           | High risk project<br>New building to provide multi-purpose room, small consultation room, office, kitchen, WC's and storage. Scheme combined with pre-school   | Submitted for planning (April)<br>Significant local opposition. | March 2011     |
| Wantage Children's Centre                  | Internal adaptations to Butler Centre (church property) to provide small consultation room by revamping toilet area  | Completed   |                |
| Ladygrove Children's Centre, (Didcot)      | Internal adaptations and small infilling at All Saints Primary School which will provide office space, consultation room, multi-purpose room and kitchenette, being carried out by school on self help basis | Working on detailed design                                      | November 2011  |
| Grove Children's Centre                    | No development planned in short/medium term. Base currently in church pending  | NFA   |                |

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|  | development of children's centre within major new development in Grove. |   |  |
| Slade & Headington Children's Centre (phase 2) | Rebuild of children's centre along with nursery and primary school.     | Submitted for planning. Framework contractor pricing work packages. | March 2011 (children's centre element) |

**(A) Arrangements for the provision of children's centres**Section 5A Childcare Act 2006

1. This section defines children's centres and gives a minimum of what should be provided.
  - (a) Children's centres intended to be the first, local port of call for parents/carers needing help or advise.
  - (b) Children's centres must directly provide activities for young children on site.
  - (c) Centres do not need to provide all early childhood services on site but need to actively support parents/carers in accessing services. Reliance on signposting eg through leaflets is not sufficient
  - (d) Managed by or on behalf of LA to ensure early childhood services delivered in an integrated way
2. LAs under a duty to secure sufficient children's centre provision for their area. Determining what is sufficient needs to be done with PCT, JCP and other Children's Trust partners and local communities.
3. LAs need to ensure centres are configured to meet needs of communities, especially the most deprived.

**Implications for Oxfordshire**

Oxfordshire is well on the way to meeting these duties and a highly regarded Local Authority by the national development agency monitoring the programme. Currently some centres may not be sufficiently proactive about supporting families to access additional services not provided on site

**(B) Duty on LAs, PCTs and JCP to consider providing services through a children's centre.**Section 5E, Childcare Act 2006

The Act places a duty on the LA, PCT and JCP to consider whether each of the early childhood services they provide (or commission others to provide on their behalf) should be provided through a children's centre. Guidance suggests that this exercise should be documented and reasons for decisions noted, in particular when the decision is not to deliver the service through the children's centre. There should be strong reasons not to provide services through children's centres. Decisions should be regularly reviewed and involve consultation with local communities. A key criterion should be whether providing the service through a children's centre is likely to improve access, especially for disadvantaged parents and improve outcomes for young children.

**Implications for Oxfordshire**

We have began work on drawing up Partnership Agreements with the PCT and will be doing the same with JCP to look at what service provision could be delivered through children's centres. .

This exercise could take a significant amount of time if backdated and done for each locality/children's centre area.

### **(C) Children's Centres: Consultation**

#### Section 5D, Childcare Act 2006

The Act stresses the importance of consultation before

1. Establishing a new children's centre
2. Before making any significant change to services at an existing children's centre
3. Before closing or substantially reducing services at a children's centre to the extent that it is no longer meets statutory definition of a children's centre

The term significant change is not defined but the example given indicates a centre would be expected to consult if they changed the location of the service, the day a service was delivered or if they reduced the service or no provided a service. The balance should be in favour of consultation before making changes to services that families rely on.

The guidance lists stakeholders who should be consulted including Children's Trust partners, advisory boards, elected members, other service providers including local voluntary organisations and parents/carers

The guidance says there should be a presumption against closure for children's centres. In drawing up a case for closing a centre, the LA needs to demonstrate how outcomes for children, particularly the most disadvantaged would be improved and better value for money secured by the centre closing rather than it remaining open.

#### **Implications for Oxfordshire**

There is an extensive programme of consultation in place for new centres

The message needs to be communicated to children's centres to ensure they are consulting appropriately before making significant changes to their programmes

There is some concern given the uncertain economic and political climate about how funding will come to the Local Authority after the current grant period comes to an end in March 2011,

### **(D) Children's Centres: Advisory Boards**

#### Section 5C, Childcare Act 2006

LAs have a statutory duty to make arrangements to secure that each of its children's centres are under the remit of an advisory board. Several centres can cluster together to share an advisory board but if so, parents still need to be engaged at a local children's centre level.

Advisory boards will not have a legal identity, will provide strategic oversight. They should have terms of reference with representation from key partners including PCT, JCP, local community, local service providers, 2-3 parents/carers. The board should reflect the local families and the local community. The chair should be independent and not the children's centre manager.

#### **Implications for Oxfordshire**

The guidance doesn't explain how the advisory board will sit alongside school governance arrangements. Children's centres managed by schools do not have advisory boards as Oxfordshire has made the assumption that schools are not expected to set up an additional layer of governance in the form of an advisory board but are encouraged to make sure their arrangements include the wide representation detailed in the guidance



**(E) Inspection**

Sections 98A-G Childcare Act 2006

The Act gives Ofsted a duty to inspect children's centres. Inspections will be outcome focused and will look for evidence of impact services are having on children's outcomes and the effectiveness of integrated services.

The LA has a duty to act in response to inspection findings. This will include ensuring a clear action plan is produced, distributed to key parties and displayed in the children's centre and other relevant places and that progress on the action plan is monitored to ensure the necessary improvement results.

**Implications for Oxfordshire**

Oxfordshire has been part of the Ofsted inspection pilot so we are already working on this. We will need to get systems in place to support centres and make sure LA duties are reflected in Service Level Agreements and contract with our partners managing children's centres. Our existing service specification will also need to be updated to reflect the Ofsted framework. This will be a focus for our work in the coming year.

**(F) Safeguarding**

Section 200, ASCL Act

The Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006 has been amended to add children's centres to the list of establishments subject to the new Vetting and Barring Scheme.

Anyone working in a centre on a regular basis where the work gives an opportunity to have contact with children (whether supervised or not) will have to register with the Independent Safeguarding Authority.

Where staff working in a children's centre are employed by another agency, the LA needs to ensure that written agreements clarify responsibilities for undertaking checks and storing records. Normally the 3<sup>rd</sup> party provider will check their own staff and keep records and confirm with the LA/centre manager/school governing body that this has been done.

All children's centres need to have a person at the centre designated to lead on safeguarding. The responsibilities of this role are outlined

**Implications for Oxfordshire**

Our safeguarding guidance to children's centres is being updated to take changes into account.

Guidance from Ofsted is expected be available at end of March over what information children's centres are expected to hold in relation to CRB clearance from staff working in the centre but employed by other agencies.

We are also waiting to get written assurances from key partner agencies that their staff are CRB checked; this is understood to be in progress with regards to the PCT. Currently JCP staff are not routinely checked by their agency, but this will change in future.

Clarity from the Government is needed on what constitutes working in a centre on a regular basis.

**(G) Having regard to the other services available in the local area**

Section 3(4A), Childcare Act 2006

The LA needs to give consideration to the local childcare market in deciding whether or not a children's centre should directly provide childcare on site or whether there is sufficient accessible childcare already in the area.

**Implications for Oxfordshire**

**Childcare**

The DCSF released draft Childcare Sufficiency and Assessment Guidance for consultation in December 2009 which will shape our next full Childcare Sufficiency Assessment Report and Action Plan for 2011. This updates and combines two earlier pieces of guidance for Childcare Sufficiency Assessments and Securing Sufficient Childcare.

There are relatively few changes, but a clearer focus on addressing the needs of specific groups including disabled children, children from black and minority ethnic groups, looked after children, families living in rural areas and Armed Forces families. Work with children's centres and other key partners will be crucial in meeting these challenges.

**Workforce and training**

The Children's Workforce Development Council are working to develop more appropriate qualifications for children's centre staff e.g. a Unit on Outreach Work which will be on the new Qualifications and Credit Framework and which we are planning to access when available.

Children's centres providing childcare are required to employ early years practitioners with Early Years Professional status. These are in place in some full offer centres (a requirement by 2010). There has been a reluctance by some qualified teachers to access the validation pathway. Centres have been visited by the training team to encourage this.

We are using Graduate Leader Fund to support Childminder Early Years Professionals (only one currently) to work with childminders to improve quality in several centres.

Some children's centre officers have completed Training for Trainers to enable them to offer whole-centre safeguarding training. We are also developing a training DVD for use by centre managers.