



2016 / 17 Budget Consultation

(b) Children's Centre

Our Children's Centre, which is currently funded by the County Council, provides invaluable support and opportunities for local families with young children. The Centre, which has sites in both Watlington and Chalgrove, provides a daily programme of activities, events and services which aim not only to stimulate children but also to educate their parents and to support healthy family relationships.

Health-related sessions cover issues such as healthy eating, first aid, stopping smoking, promoting breastfeeding and routine immunisations. Activities aimed at stimulating young children include music, storytelling, crafts and creative play, space to be active, and communication and language sessions. Parenting skills workshops and adult literacy support are also available. These are not simply playgroups or social spaces for mums to chat - they are structured, delivered sessions led by professionals.

The Centre provides a vital outreach service for vulnerable families but also a valuable network for dads, grandparents, nannies and other child-carers, and those who might otherwise feel isolated, including full-time parents.

Whatever we do, the County Council's cost-cutting measures will not allow this level of service provision to continue. £8 million of savings are to be made from the budget for 2016/17 for services for children aged 0-19, and of course those at the greatest risk of abuse or neglect must be prioritised. The consultation on this process of change has just begun, but the Council is proposing to withdraw funding for Children's Centres in favour of creating eight larger hubs in major urban areas, to support the most vulnerable. Given the increasing rarity of public transport services around the local area, getting to these hubs will be near impossible even for those for whom their services are intended.

To maintain the possibility of saving some of the services we currently enjoy, the Council has suggested that Watlington and Chalgrove Parish Councils contribute £3,000 each to keep the Centre buildings open. Reduced functions would include statutory health services, services for vulnerable families who would remain part of a supportive community rather than being segregated into a distant hub centre, and some Stay and Play sessions to educate and stimulate our young children.

Our options here are a) agreeing to support this potential, reduced Children's Centre service for the two parishes, or b) opting out. The cost if we do decide to support the continuation of the Children's Centre will be £3,000 per year, although it should be noted that this proposal is at present only a suggestion and not a firm commitment that the Children's Centre can be saved in any form.

This sum is exactly the same amount as has been provided by the Parish Council to the Youth Club in recent years, suggesting that we as a community are already committed to providing the best possible opportunities for our young people. We must now decide whether maintaining a local, accessible service to support the health and well-being of our youngest families is a priority for our spending.