



**Somerset Family Support Service &
Children's Centres public consultation
December 2017**

Somerset County Council are planning changes to the way that children and families get help and support by creating a new Family Support Service. If they go ahead, the changes would affect:

- **getset services** which include Sure Start **Children's Centres** services. This covers everything from Family Support Workers who help with a range of family situations from dealing with behaviour and family relationships, to support for employment and housing, parenting skills, Stay and Play sessions, childminder drop-ins, young parent groups, working with teenagers – all the support we give to families with children aged up to 19.
- **Health Visiting services** – deliver the Healthy Child Programme, led by Health Visitors who are registered specialist public health nurses, in conjunction with community nurses and support staff. They offer assessment, education and support for all families on aspects of parenting and issues affecting health e.g. child development, nutrition, mental health and common childhood illness.
- **School Nursing services** are delivered by specialist public health nurses, registered nurses and support staff. They support children aged 5-19, usually in the school setting. They run the National Child Measurement Programme, school immunisation programme, secondary school health and well-being clinics and offer health information and advice.
- **services and support will still be available**, but how and where they are accessed could change.

A series of open days, discussion groups and a questionnaire were used to ensure the public have the opportunity to comment and influence the development and delivery of the services that affect them.

Somerset Family Support Service & Children's Centres Consultation



executive summary

The public consultation reflects the views of over a thousand people through a questionnaire, open days, discussion forums, emails and a petition with various comment begun by a member of the public. **dialogue** undertook the open days, forums, analysis of data and produced this report and we would like to thank the many people who contributed so passionately about an issue that is of great importance to the people of Somerset. People we spoke to cared deeply, contributed positively and are looking for change. Officers supported the process and were keen that the consultation should be an honest reflection of people's views. We hope we meet these expectations.

broad support for integrated services

People like the idea of services being more efficient, of only having to register for a service once, and where it is right for their children for organisations to talk to one another. The public and the staff who contributed to the consultation generally see the integration of health visiting, school nursing and getset services positively.

children's centres are so much more than buildings

Many people highly value the services they have received from children's centre staff over the years, giving accounts of changes for their children, from social links through to survival and recovery in quite desperate circumstances with their support. The expectations on children's centres are wide and varied, from housing advice to child development support.

People described the importance of connection with a team and place which gives parents confidence to approach the Council if they are in need. Many people reported a culture of change and an erosion of services in recent years that has left buildings not fully utilised. While some could see a need for consolidation there is a lack of trust in the Council which leads many to think the loss of buildings will ultimately lead to the loss of the services almost entirely. People thought the flexibility and opportunity offered by having space in a building available will be lost.

In general, they did not support the de-designation of children's centres.

needing an alternative

There was criticism in the questionnaire and discussions that few alternative proposals have been made. The consultation in the main describes the reduction in buildings and amalgamation of some settings into early years provision. District councils, staff, parents and members of the public asked for more detail on what this would look like and how in practice the changes will reduce spending. There were ideas for alternatives, such as co-location with the One Team to provide a more holistic service with a shared venue.

local solutions for local services

Throughout the consultation it was clear that each area has its own culture, characteristics, population, geography and community that require decisions made at a very local rather than even a district

level. The particular difficulties in walking with a buggy from one side of Frome to another, the strong sense of community around Victoria Park, the sense of separation between Taunton and Wellington all bring unique challenges and opportunities, with a wide range of voices thinking about how these services might be delivered. There was also willingness from organisations, staff and parents to participate in these local decisions or discussions about venues to ensure they are sustainable, fit for purpose and joined up with other initiatives.

In general people wanted more services, particularly for younger children, and for those services to be accessible by foot (and buggy!) from where they lived, particularly for younger children. They had not understood, or did not believe, the consultation's aspiration of "coordinating the services available in community venues... where we would expect many families to access support rather than travelling to a centre". Many participants cited their experience of services to date, the impact of change, the reduction in budgets and distrust of the Council. As a result, many of the questionnaires highlighted problems such as the sparsity and expense of public transport and the impact of the loss of 'early help' services.

online information, not delivery

A high proportion of parents have internet access and they are keen to learn about services, groups and local events through a coordinated, well-maintained site. Some saw the opportunity for a forum with moderation from the health visiting team to ensure there is good advice readily available in Somerset, but people were not keen to have online consultations or similar. Some parents would like the 'red book' online.

services for everyone

Bringing up children is a hugely challenging while often rewarding task which people need support to achieve. Parents disagreed with the model of 'targeted services for vulnerable families', feeling we all need support and anyone can be vulnerable. Universal engagement, they argue, creates supportive social networks, reducing demand for targeted services while helping the Council identify and further support those who need it.

early pathways

Parents want a clear pathway of social opportunities for their children, with support from pre-birth through to school years. This can't be a 'one size fits all' approach – it needs to work in keeping with each local community. Venues should consider the time taken to walk to a group and have a choice of days and times. When parents feel isolated or need more help, they want people they know and trust to point them in the right direction. They would like to find out what's on from their midwives and health visitor, through well-maintained Facebook pages and written information at places they meet. Groups should be in consistent, warm, safe places with lots of toys and places for children to play and crawl.

Many would be willing to volunteer and support the groups to make them a welcoming, sustainable and positive (with tea or coffee!) and they would also be prepared to pay an affordable amount (around £1) towards each group. They recognise the need for particular groups to have additional support but see parenting itself as a challenging, important task that is best done with a network of support, which the council can help them develop.



methodology

Somerset County Council tendered for an organisation to take responsibility for six open days and ten discussion groups and to analyse the questionnaires returned. The emphasis was on independence to support attendees to fully communicate their views.

dialogue is a safeguarding children company who provide training, audits and consultancy for safeguarding children boards, councils, schools, health authorities and other organisations. The company has a strong value base focused on the rights and needs of children and young people.

John Woodhouse undertook all elements of the consultation. He has a track record in participation work, including as chair of the national body of Children's Rights Officers and Advocates, as well as senior management experience in children's services.

Somerset County Council devised the questionnaire, arranged the open days and discussion groups. These groups submitted their views through the questionnaire process or by speaking directly to dialogue or a member of staff from SCC. The council ran the online consultation, collated the online data and forwarded this unredacted information to **dialogue** to analyse.

The questionnaires were analysed and each main question is considered on the following pages, integrating feedback from open days and discussion groups. In Wellington a community petition was begun and submitted to the consultation with 677 signatures to 'Save Wellington Children's Centre'. 133 comments were received with the petition. In addition, there were 43 emails sent to the Family Support Service email address about the consultation. All responses have been read and incorporated into this report.

participants

Open days were held at the following venues in October and November:

- The Hub, Minehead
- Hillside Children's centre, Taunton
- Victoria Park Community Centre, Bridgwater
- Vicarage Street Methodist Church, Yeovil
- Glastonbury Hub

Following feedback from County Councillors and a local group about the location of the open days an additional open day was arranged:

- The Key Centre and the Library, Frome



The council also responded to a request by a County Councillor to attend an existing meeting where 110 parents and carers were attending to respond to questions about the consultation. **dialogue** was not involved in this session. Public Health and getset staff attended this event and encouraged completion of the online questionnaire and answered questions

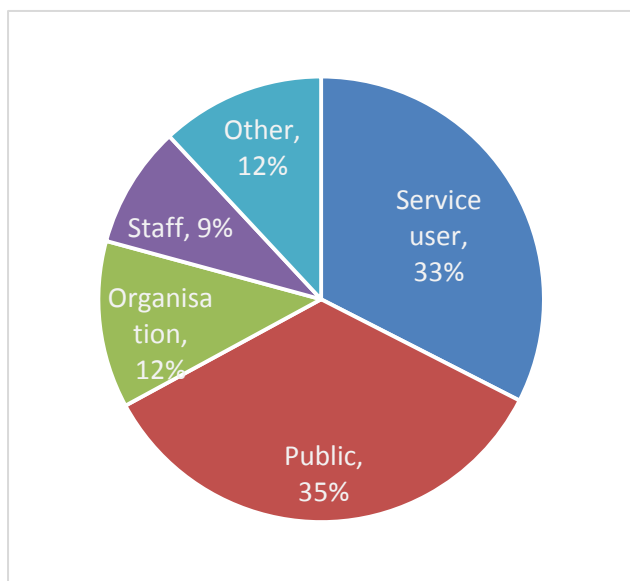
- Wellington Baptist Church

Discussion groups were arranged for existing groups who might have a particular interest in the consultation:

- Young Parents, Victoria Park Community Centre, Bridgwater
- Young Parents, Reckleford Children's Centre
- Chill and Chat, Reckleford Children's Centre
- Baby Oasis Breast Feeding group, Highbridge Children's Centre
- Café Muma (Breastfeeding group), Williton Children's Centre
- Hillside Bumps to Babe, Hillside Children's Centre
- Stay and Play, Watchet Children's Centre
- Young parents/Toddler group, Wellington Children's Centre
- Toddler PEEP, Chard Children's Centre
- Stay and Play, The Library Hub, Glastonbury
- Breast Feeding support group, The Key Children's Centre, Frome

Overall, 346 people contributed to the open days and discussion groups.

488 people completed the questionnaire. 59 of these were group or organisational responses.



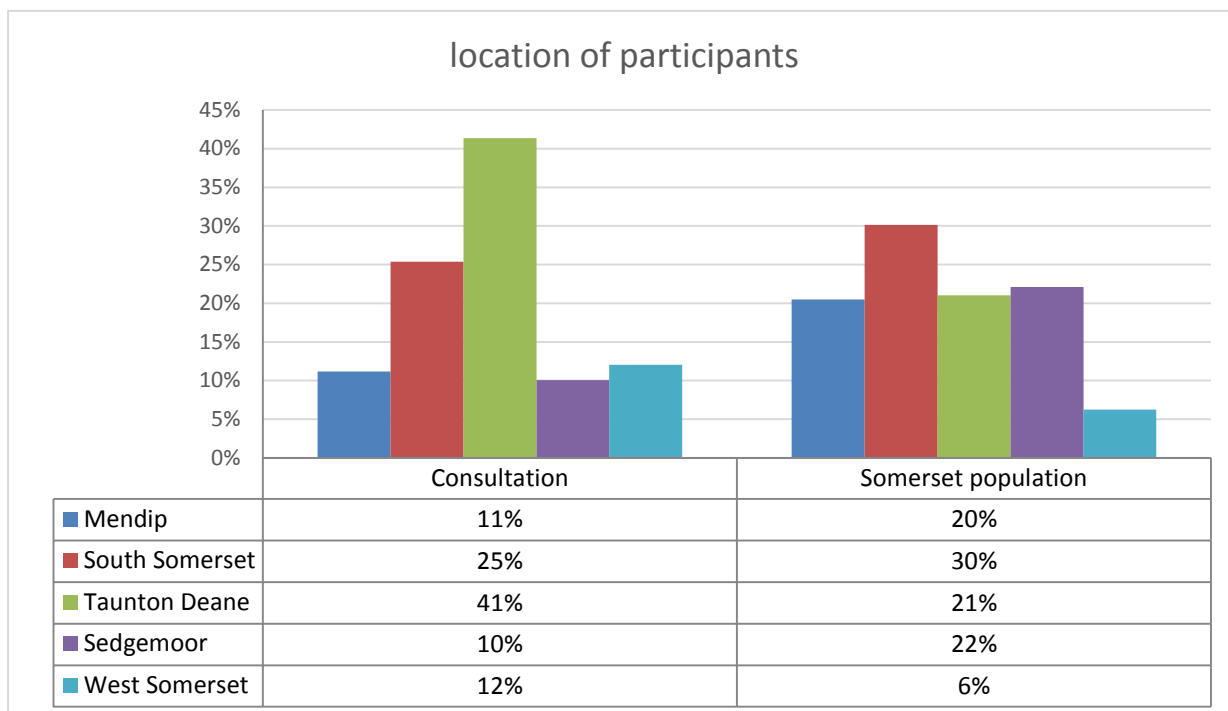
Question 1 asked about their role in respect of the consultation:

Two thirds of the respondents were members of the public, a third (158) being people who identified as someone who uses the family support service.

43 members of staff responded from across getset, health visiting and school nursing. Some of these responded as a group but would only be counted once.

This is a relatively limited response from staff which may reflect other consultation activity underway

Participants from each of the district areas responded. The graph below (on the left) shows where people stated they lived. On the right is a population breakdown from the Somerset 2011 census:



West Somerset and (most particularly) Taunton Deane were over-represented in responses to the questionnaire. There were particularly active campaigns to raise public interest in these areas.

Significantly, although unsurprisingly, more women (88%) responded than men and 70% of respondents were in the 25-49 age bracket. They may well see themselves as more affected by the issues in this consultation. Little disparity was found across age profiles. However, some of the fathers in the discussion groups felt their needs as a group were not being met with a lack of specific groups available to them. They also cited lower rates of access to cars, mobile phones and the internet. Where there are differences these are highlighted in the sections below.

Although the proportion of people with disabilities completing the questionnaire (14%) is lower than the general population, it is similar to the working age figure of 13% which reflects the age skew in the returns.

Half way through the consultation **dialogue** identified limited numbers of black, Asian or other ethnic groups had been enabled to complete the questionnaire and that some parents spoken to on open days collecting children from nurseries had been put off by the language barriers. Ethnic diversity is too statistically small to report on without becoming identifiable, but is well under the Somerset 5.36% figure.

Progress was made in encouraging participation of families whose first language is not English through an approach to Diversity Voice who circulated and translated 38 questionnaires (Polish (22), Romanian and Hungarian speaking parents) towards the end of the consultation period. It is

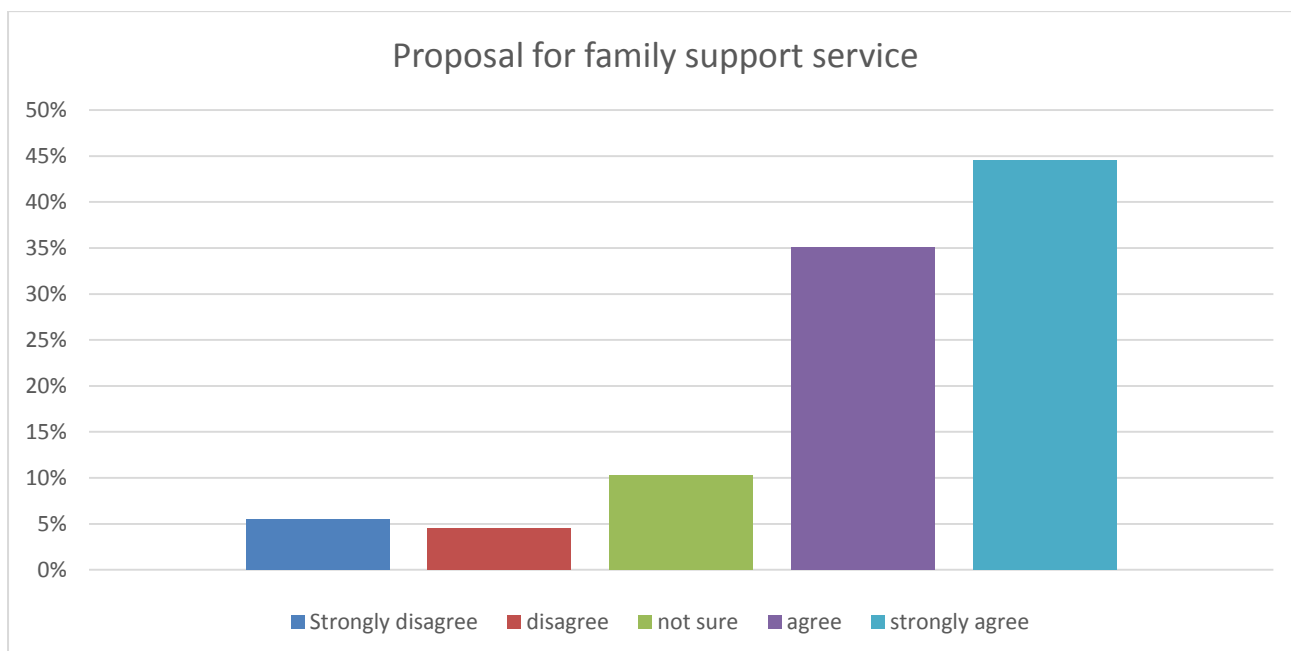
recognised that Somerset also has a large resident Portuguese community, who would identify as 'white'. In many cases this community has been resident in the UK for longer and so possibly have less language barriers. It is impossible to ascertain from the responses if we have received responses from people who do not have English as a first language.



Where participants had children, they noted how many children they had. There was much greater representation of infants, early years and primary age children. Young people's voice was under-represented in this survey. Small group consultations took place with particular groups, such as youth clubs and the children in care council, and submitted an 'organisation' response to the questionnaire.

the family support service

Question 2 asked “We propose developing a Family Support Service for children aged 0-19 years. This would include what we currently deliver in Children’s Centres, family support services, Health Visitors and School Nursing Services. We would look to develop greater links with other services that families need and build stronger links with communities.” **To what extent do you agree or disagree with this approach?**



There was strong support in favour of merging these services. 80% of 487 respondents answering this question agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

Those who agreed commented they felt this was already supposed to be in place through existing arrangements, but that any holistic approach would be helpful. They felt there were “gaps in services currently around the time and capacity to develop and maintain ... networks” and that “families need long term stable people they can rely on to give consistent support and advice...”.

Respondents saw an opportunity to work closer with their communities, and encouraged the Council to be more ambitious in developing links across services:

It can be very confusing for new mums with different services in different places and not sure who is responsible for what. Bringing it all together will make it easier for people to understand and engage with.

Member of public

We strongly agree with the approach to integrate services to develop better outcomes for families and build stronger links with the communities but are concerned that in only integrating the services identified above there will be missed opportunities. While we appreciate that the view may be that it is safer to take one step at a time the lack of a clear longer term plan as regards development of links with services provided by other agencies gives concern. Surely this is one step in delivering a longer term aspiration?

Mendip district council

167 attend [our nursery], 70+ on funded placements and 29 staff members. We know the families and are well-placed to support them there and then - especially if they are having a bad day.

Nursery owner

I saw a thing elsewhere in the country where they were using space at an older people's home for a toddler/early primary group one morning and they take their toys and interact with the older people so that they got the chance to interact with older people and the old people got time with the little ones and their toys. We could join up with the Hub (on Eastland Road, Yeovil) for example who work with 19-30 year olds with disabilities.

Staff member

There were suggestions that targeting could be further improved from use of wards with high levels of deprivation by linking with the Troubled Families database, the postcodes of Early Help Assessments already completed and utilising local knowledge and demand.

It was recognised integrating services requires a strong skills set in the professional group and merging services would not be without its challenges:

Multi agency working is the way forward and I feel this is best for the families to know that professionals work and communicate together. For this to work on a professional basis, professionals have to respect for each other and understand the limits of each others' services. All staff are accountable for their own decisions and there needs to be no hierarchy amongst professionals when working to safeguard children.

Staff member

There were a small number of comments about the data sharing implications of an integrated service. Some parents thought there would be benefits in information being shared with one service being visible to others (the example given being a health visitor's observation being shared with a GP). Another participant in a group supporting adults at

risk of domestic abuse could see the benefits but was clear sharing information should be an informed choice parents make.

My experience is having to share information with team after team after team, so for some people this will be good, but only if the individual wants to share - there should be the option only to share with one person, for example. the health visitor

Domestic abuse survivor

There was a sense from many participants, agreeing or disagreeing, that while the principle of better working links was sound this is not how it would develop in practice. Many people, agreeing and disagreeing, believed the existing children's centres could more effectively support such work or that there was a need for a central location where people knew they could go to access services. They want more of this, not less:

I would think that if they put the groups on people would go to them. If people knew about them they would go. The groups I go to are usually quite full. This is quite a rural area. All the friends I met here I still see.

parent

Many participants felt current services had declined in recent years, feeling that health visitors in particular were stretched and no longer providing a universal service, with a small number of parents commenting they had never seen a health visitor. Others were hugely positive:

I had twins and another under 2, so it was all a little bit ... hectic. The health visitors were brilliant, with twins they really look after you and they came to visit me in my own home...

HomeStart came and spent just a couple of hours a week in the house at "grinching time" which made such a difference - not having to ask family for help at a time when I was already asking family for a lot

parent

Some staff commented high demands, combined with blurring of roles and a lack of respect for health visitors' assessments, meant the skills base of some staff who deliver "face to face client care" is insufficient in relation to the complexity of working with a survivor of domestic abuse, and were concerned this could leave children at risk. Two participants highlighted current complex referral mechanisms and a lack of clarity on where to turn

which hindered people's access to services, especially people who struggle with engaging or communicating.

It was clear that people valued the services they had received, which in some cases had been nothing short of life changing, and are looking for some assurance that these services will continue and be improved:



I'm a success story of a children's centre. I started going when my daughter was six months old. I had postnatal depression and found it very difficult in Minehead to access services - I didn't get on with the services. Instead I accessed a permaculture course which is about systems thinking which helped me think about working my way in the world and paying back into the system.

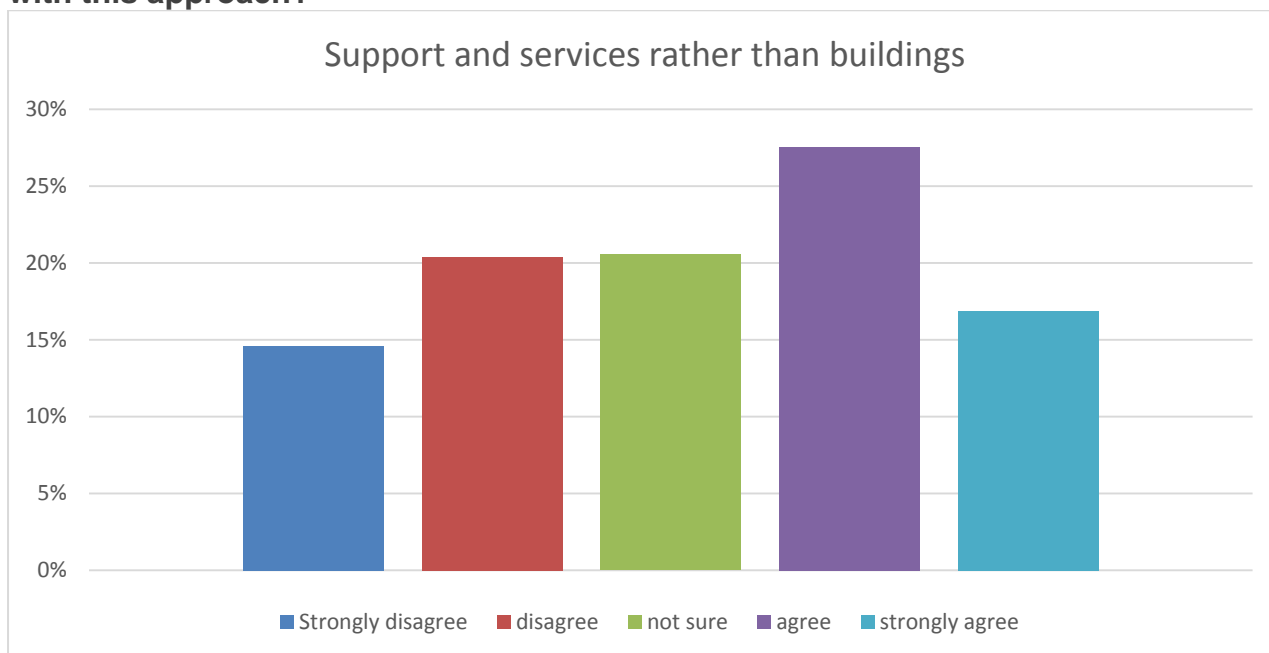
Moving [house] was the best move I ever made. [The getset manager] worked so hard at building up the children's centre and support services. She encouraged me to volunteer in schools which led to a Level 2 course. I then ended up as a Learning Support Assistant in a school. The children's centre gave me a funded Early Years place which enabled me to go to work at the school - now I'm level 3 qualified and have a permanent position.

Having all that support in place meant I have grown in confidence and been able to cope without medication and high levels of support with my second child.

parent

buildings or support and services

Question 3 asked “The Council has to make significant savings and wants to invest in support and services rather than buildings.” **To what extent do you agree or disagree with this approach?**



On the surface, participants' views were more split here – of the 486 responses to this question 44% agreed or strongly agreed while 35% disagreed or strongly disagreed (rising to 40% of service users). Men were less certain of this approach than women (30% not sure, women 20%) or disagreed (38%). Some participants complained this was “a bit of a leading question... nobody would disagree with making the best use of resources”, and the comments show similar reasons for both agreeing and disagreeing with the statement. There is a commonality around the importance of having somewhere consistent, local and fit for purpose. Many participants felt they needed more information on which to base their decision as the alternative to the current buildings was not described in the consultation.

Agree but people need somewhere to go, to congregate, to have groups, to interact with others who are perhaps in similar situations, even just that can be so powerful, knowing "you're not the only one" is so so important

service user

It's important that community venues are appropriate including providing a safe, welcoming, confidential space that is suitable for all ages.

A voluntary & community service organisation

We agree that investment in support and services is better than just buildings but would note that sometimes the buildings are important as a recognised place of safety/support for people in crisis, or feeling vulnerable, so would hope that thought will be given to ensuring that these 'lighthouses' are still obvious. Linking to our earlier comments we believe that, if other agencies and services were looked at as part of this review, there would be opportunities to use other organisations buildings to create this.

Health Visitor team

The perception of buildings as “focal points for services and the community generally” ran through the responses, linking to the opportunities suggested in question 2 about links with other services:

Buildings that can be used by various agencies and groups work well and share the costs of provision. Buildings that can provide an income from lettings etc to other groups in the community are to be encouraged. Do you have a marketing strategy for the buildings that you do intend to use? Will there be any income generated from de registering existing Centres and the use of these buildings by other groups?

Member of public

The importance of the groups in getting people out of their homes to a group setting was mentioned by many parents, particularly those with young children:

Having to go to something like weigh in forces you into a social situation - it's the first thing to get you out the house. Without that groups can be daunting. If they just came to your house you wouldn't get that.

parent

Coming to groups like this is an absolute lifeline if you're new to an area, particularly if you're suffering with anxiety or depression. Doesn't matter where it is as long as it happens local and if it's not too far, for example the community centre in Watchet.

parent

Participants at the open days and discussion groups felt there were opportunities for buildings to be really owned and used by the community. One commented that an evening group she had wanted to initiate about ‘positive birthing stories’ to support pregnant mothers had not been offered space due to staff availability in evenings. Three parents suggested renting out the children’s centres for children’s parties would really draw people in who could might learn about other services on offer as well as providing some income.

The Hollies has such an amazing room with a nice kitchen and so on - why don't you rent it out for parties and so on as village halls are a bit soul-less for children's parties and it's got all the facilities you need. That would also then ensure people are aware of the things on offer there.

parent

Victoria Park Community Centre already hosts many groups for children and managers were keen for children’s services to have more involvement in the strategic direction of the centre.

One of the biggest blocks to self initiated community support is finding appropriate venues at sustainable prices. Using rooms in children's centres have been vital for support groups setting themselves up. To move children's services out into local community buildings will be good for service users of that service, but make it more challenging for local support groups trying to run themselves, reducing community resilience and increasing the need for statutory services.

member of public

The importance of having consistent venues, communicating this effectively to the public and these venues being accessible and fit for purpose was stressed by many involved in the consultation. In some areas, for example Frome and Wellington, participants could not think of suitable alternative premises. In others the alternative was already well established (such as Victoria Park Community Centre).

Participants at the open days and groups spoke of a context of change, including changes of times, days and venues when groups were run. This led to fragmentation of the groups attending so attendance dropped. The low attendance then meant the group was discontinued.

Many people spoke of an erosion of services, particularly if they had previously used services with other children, stating there used to be many more groups:

There are a lot fewer things to do than there were three years ago

parent

My experience as a parent approaching the children's centre has been a big change over seven years from one child to the next. The offer of being able to go somewhere when I was having a 'bit of a day' has gone, replaced by targets and filling in forms. The range of services appropriate for me boiled down to one a week, on a day that I was working, so I couldn't access anything. When I wanted to go to a parenting course they were running - parenting young children - it was being run 5-7pm which was the worse time of day possible for a parent of young children. There's only five workers for the whole of south Somerset which really limits what they can offer

parent & volunteer



I feel that everything is dwindling. Everything keeps changing and the number of changes is stopping parents from coming. This group for example is moving to a Tuesday which will mean I will not be coming anymore and neither will two other families. It also clashes with another group that is running in the swimming pool. This group used to finish at 3:30 which made it easy to pickup children but the times changed so that I can't get the other children. It's not looking at a parent's perspective of the changes. It just goes ahead and changes and then they wonder why people aren't coming. They then record people aren't coming and the groups are lost. If they do move it to the community centre they need to bear in mind the people who will have to travel back to school or they are going to lose them

parent

There is limited trust in the Council's commitment to invest in support and services, and there was a high level of concern that the proposals will lead to reduction in buildings, support and services. Having a building was seen as a literally concrete reassurance of the Council's commitment to delivering services:

It feels like the start of a slippery slope. While they had the buildings they had somewhere they had to run the groups. If the groups dwindle a little bit then there isn't the pressure... There used to be something most days of the week. Nowadays there is not so much. The length of the group has shortened and there used to be a snack time which we don't have any more. Services are being reduced.

parent

Without a base the service will wither, it's staff disconnected from each other and from the community they serve. It's a terrible idea.

member of public

Other participants were less worried about the building, instead considering the practicalities of running services away from centres:

Buildings are not essential to run effective services but families and staff do have to have sufficient resources and accommodation to deliver services from. Surestart funding has provided such buildings and these should be used within reason for the purposes intended. Going back to using some drafty church hall to deliver groups etc shows the value SCC puts on users and staff.

previous staff member

This will only work if there is a budget for use of buildings when needed i.e group work, 1 to 1 work with clients and TAC meetings. Also storage for resources and equipment needed for activities and CY people and families.

service user

Some wondered about the costs and loss involved and whether this would achieve the savings promised:

The three family centres were purpose built within the last 10 years at enormous cost. Are they being re-purposed? Were they designed with change in mind?

member of public

I'm unsure how savings can be made by renting other premises, which may not have the resources (e.g. toys and craft materials) on site, so additional transportation and additional travelling for staff.

service user

The venues would need to be accessible and fit for purpose – there is more feedback on this in the section on where people would like to see services delivered, [below](#).

The importance of this decision was stressed by several participants. There were offers by parents to help in the selection of venues and a request that the staff involved in the delivery of the groups should also have a significant voice in the selection of the venues.

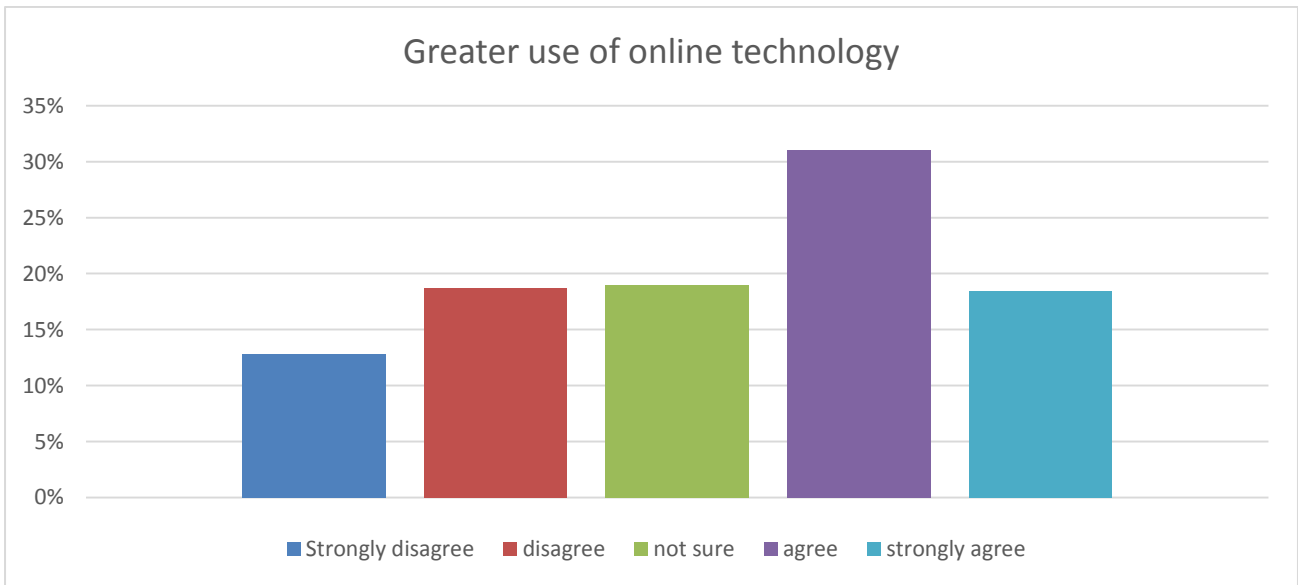


Although the way this is worded makes this sound a good idea (no one wants buildings for the sake of buildings), actually buildings offer a really important community space in which to provide the support and services. I understand that savings have to be made but I am concerned that these decisions to close buildings are easy to make but so difficult to reverse once it's happened. As far as I'm aware the evidence suggests that children's centres reduce child poverty and family issues. As family support has been reduced over the last few years there has been an increase in child poverty, numbers of looked after children and family breakdown - all of these social problems are hugely costly to the local authority. I think de-commissioning buildings will inevitably pave the way for easily reducing services and support in the future which will be a very costly mistake.

Service user

online services

Question 4 asked “We want to make more use of technology and create an easy to use online information service so that families receive the support that suits them best.” **To what extent do you agree or disagree with this approach?**



There was broad favour for this approach (50% agreeing or strongly agreeing, 19% unsure, 31% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing), although many participants made it clear this was not as a replacement for face to face services and access to online services must be a choice. Services users were slightly more in favour of this approach (53% in agreement)

There were many comments noting that not all families have access to the internet and people warned around limitations of broadband availability in rural areas.

People completing the questionnaire were asked about mobile phone and internet access: 94% had a mobile phone while 88% had internet access. These figures are far in excess of the Somerset average, but still leave an important minority without such access.

every time I'm asked [if I have internet access] I have to then explain that currently I don't have online access - my partner destroyed it

domestic abuse survivor

People advised online services should not replace face to face support, visits or groups but have their own advantages in disseminating information. Several of those unsure or who disagreed commented there was much information already available online. Participants had different comments about the effectiveness of current IT arrangements. Some were accessing helpful information already and wondered whether this was the point of Somerset Choices, others noted late and out-of-date information on websites and Facebook pages. One commented “The current Somerset county council website makes it hard to find the available services in each area”.

In my experience, there have been a number of attempts to collate information for families, e.g. Somerset Family Information Directory and Somerset Choices, which are neither properly maintained/updated or regularly used by individuals. My fear would be that resources are ploughed into another online resource that does reach or meet the needs of the majority of families in Somerset.

Service user

There were numerous comments about not putting too much money into a website, while ensuring there is sufficient resource to keep the site up to date. People want the advice on the site to be accurate and for the Family Support Service to further develop links with the local community and what is happening. The discussion groups were particularly positive about Facebook, and some noted that parents could subscribe and be alerted of new events in their area or that parents could share them with others. It was suggested other organisations' events could be added too.

The Wellington getset Facebook page is really good and linked in to what is happening elsewhere. These guys are brilliant at getting it all out there.

young parent

Many people commented the more vulnerable families are the ones who are less likely to be able to access online services due to finances or literacy, and two highlighted risks about traceability of online information when there are difficult domestic relationships. There were few comments in the questionnaire about the kind of services people would like to access on line. One commented that "some families need one to one support, so the online services must be able to identify them and help them access what they need".



Young people commented:

Promote the online service and make it easy to use for young people. Have the service in other places because people can't afford, or do not have access to the internet.

UKYPG

Young People stated that they would use the internet to find on line resources and that their staff should be well informed to signpost them

Somerset In Care Council

The young people are in favour of websites but pointed out that they don't all have access to the internet or digital equipment

Halcon Youth Club

In the discussion groups and open days we asked people for examples of what they would like. Although some parents thought there were too many apps around already, many parents were positive about online access:

Being awake at night is really lonely so you do pick up the iPad and go onto the internet. After you've googled how to get your baby to sleep (that should be in the search terms!) you then start looking for other things to do. It should be really easy to use and any group you like puts itself and the location into your calendar so you remember in the morning!

Parents at a breastfeeding group

One idea from parents was the option (and they were clear again this should be a choice) to have the Personal Child Health Record, the 'red book', online. While some found the tactile nature of the book and opportunity to complete all the sections an important part of their child's history, other parents would really appreciate having the book on an iPad or phone and for the new information to be added remotely. Some parents worried that they might lose the red book or couldn't find it at the time they needed it and were embarrassed. Online records are being currently being trialled nationally at www.eredbook.org.

Parents were not keen on accessing direct services over the internet, such as Skype or Facetime. Many commented they felt one of the most important things about the current service arrangements was they got you out of the house, off the internet and 'forced' you into social situations when there are many reasons to stay on your own. They described important implications for their emotional health and the social development of their children.

I agree it is great for extra support and it's very easy access for most people have access to the internet. But when I had post natal depression I used the internet as an excuse not to go out anywhere. It is very easy to hide behind your phone/tablet/computer rather than take that step out and communicate in a healthy manner.

Service user

Many parents felt the internet had a place in connecting them with these groups:

What about an app that has the timetable for the week, especially if you live on the boundary between two areas, so that it is always up to date and accessible. It could have a nursery rhyme of the week, a parenting tip of the week, maybe a discussion forum and so on.

parent

However, in common with others' views, some felt having the information did not of itself necessary address the issues:

Although most families have access to the internet, some don't but more importantly many families need prompting / hand-holding and will not seek out this support. Just having the information on the website will not mean your meeting the needs of vulnerable children and families.

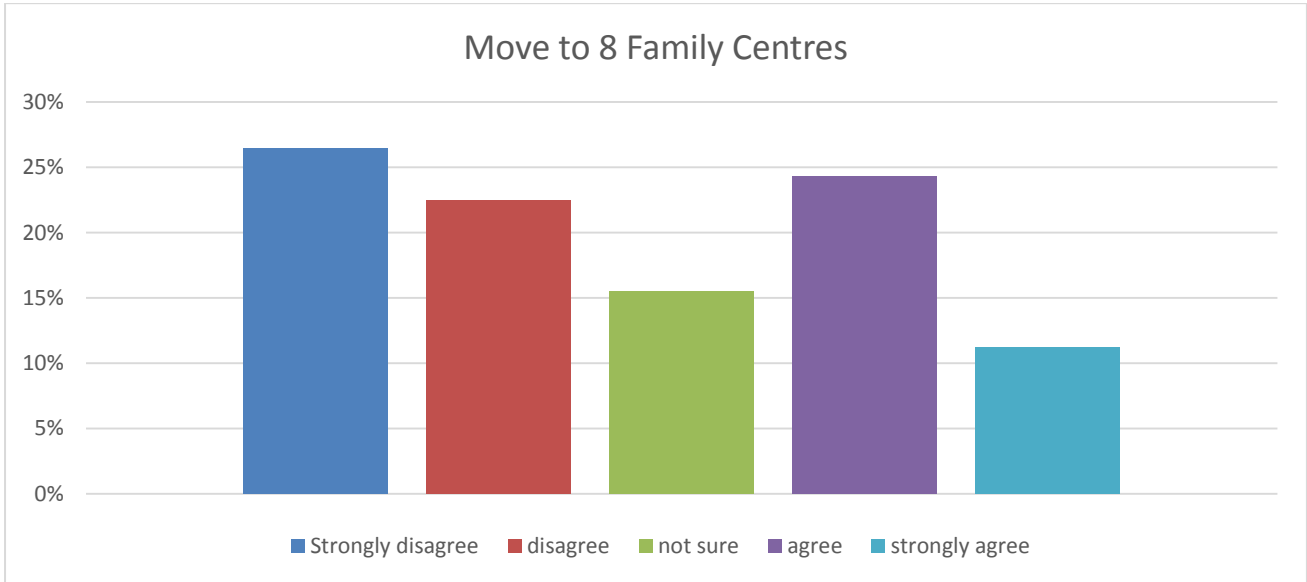
Taunton Deane and West Somerset Council

Using online technology brings the potential to make information more accessible, for example "technology that enables people who can't read rather than excludes them", and chances to ensure there is access to information for different ethnic and language groups about local events or organisations which could support them. There were differing views as to whether technology brought down barriers for literacy, or built them.



hub model

Question 5 asked “We would create 8 Family Centres in areas of greatest need. These centres would provide the same kind of support they do now and coordinate services in a wider network of places in local communities. This would include the use of libraries, people’s own homes, health centres, community halls and schools. The number of stand-alone Sure Start Children’s Centres would reduce by 16 but these would become part of the wider network delivering early childhood support for local families, for example nursery and school places.” **To what extent do you agree or disagree with this approach?**



Respondents were not positive about this plan, with 49% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing and 34% in agreement. Men were much less likely to agree or strongly agree (24%), with 35% strongly disagreeing.

Overall I feel like two centres per area would be better as West Somerset & South Somerset only have one yet are covering areas the same size as the others who have two each. The good relationships built with the midwives should be taken advantage of as this means support for families before birth if they need it. Also coming into the centre for midwifery appointments has broken down the barriers to accessing children's centre services as they are used to the staff already here.

getset staff member

Many parents talked about the importance of access, particularly by foot. The problems with the limited bus service in West Somerset and expense of public transport generally were highlighted, along with the hilly geography of places like Frome which makes it very challenging to walk with a buggy from one side of town to the other. There were cultural issues about where people feel they belong, concerns about accessing services in another community and concerns that towns such as Wiveliscombe, Wellington or villages would be further isolated.

The focus on areas of greatest deprivation was recognised as important, but many felt this missed wider needs across the community:

Areas of greatest need do need more support but whichever area there will always be a need. You will only create more areas of need by ignoring the needs across the county. All local areas are in need and families that are often in greater need are the families that are unable to get to these other locations due to lack of transport, direct buses not always available and families in need often have other children at school near the children's centre

service users

We are really worried about the implications. Support from services for vulnerable families is at rock bottom as it is, all we have in many cases is the ability to get our Parent & Family Support Advisor involved. We know in the info it says that it won't interfere with 'immediate access', but as we know, as soon as services become centralised thresholds increase and bureaucracy takes over. Also, I can see whoever manages the Parent & Family Support Advisors limiting their caseload to a level much lower than they hold at present, and although that is a good thing as we don't want to overload staff, we have at present the ability to be flexible when needed. Without this ability many of our families would be at crisis point.

Chair of Governors, Elmhurst Junior School

Some felt it would be difficult to maintain a parity of services where there was outreach rather than access to a specialised children's centre or hub:

It is vital that community spaces are suitable and well resourced. It would be awful for the families nearest to the Family Centres getting better resources than those who are not able to access the Family Centres and provision becomes more of a post code lottery.

A VCS organisation

Another suggested an opportunity to make services more inclusive:

I understand there are insufficient funds to maintain all Children's Centres but I believe there still needs to be a shared brand under which all services will sit. Any stigma attached to accessing existing Family Support Services could be removed and the service presented as truly universal.

service user

Staff had a similar perspective to the public (48% against, 29% for) and noted that the eight centres are not easy to reach for everyone and that the community venues would need to

be sourced. Staff parking needs addressed and transport provided for families not close to a centre – several staff perceived some challenges ahead with this. Some staff felt they had seen improvements:

Buildings that, at times are too small, not fit for purpose, very expensive and not cost effective have already seen more appropriate and productive use by early years providers and schools and we should recognise where this is more appropriate, more functional and more sustainable in the long term to retain these buildings and have them used appropriately.

getset staff member

In summary, the public either had not understood the Council was planning to maintain or improve the current reach of services, or did not believe this would happen in practice. People talked of the history of a loss of services, the impact of frequent changes and reducing budgets on groups, and/or felt there was an underlying agenda about a reduction in services.

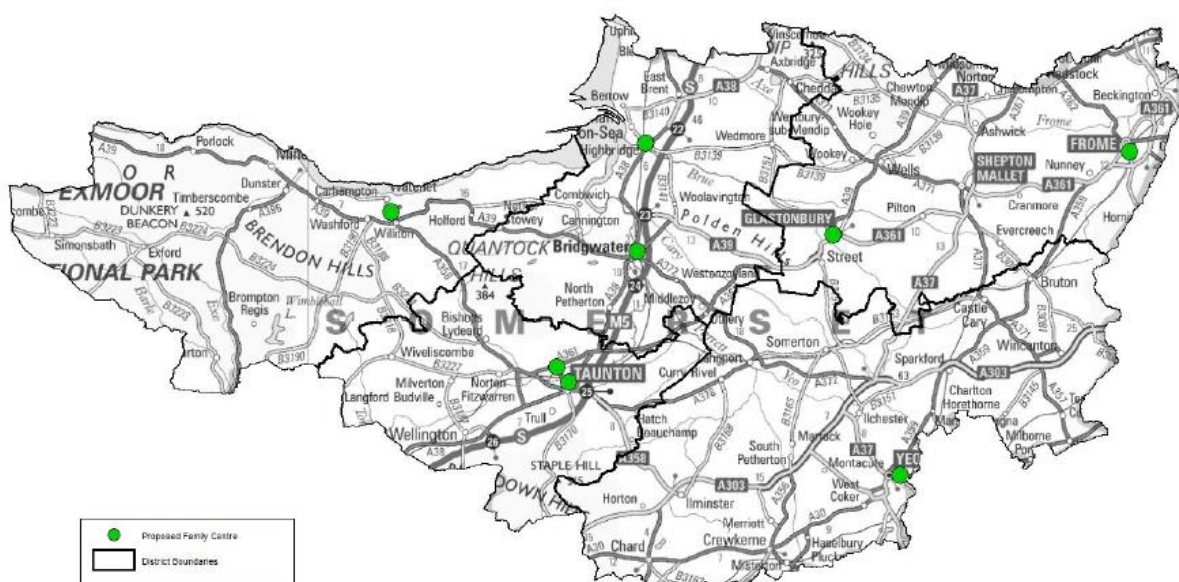
At the moment no one is sure what they're doing - they try things out, stretch too far, and then have to pull back.

parent

It was clear in our visits around the County that different solutions will need to be found for specific towns and villages – there were major variances within districts and sometimes within towns:

My concern is linked to the large locality of Somerset, and how just 8 centres will cover it all. The other venues would need to be visible, accessible and appealing to ensure services are accessed and people are not put off trying to get to them. Planning needs to ensure it carefully considers local context and need. Not all highest need is bunched together in one area (such as comparing the Halcon estate to West Somerset).

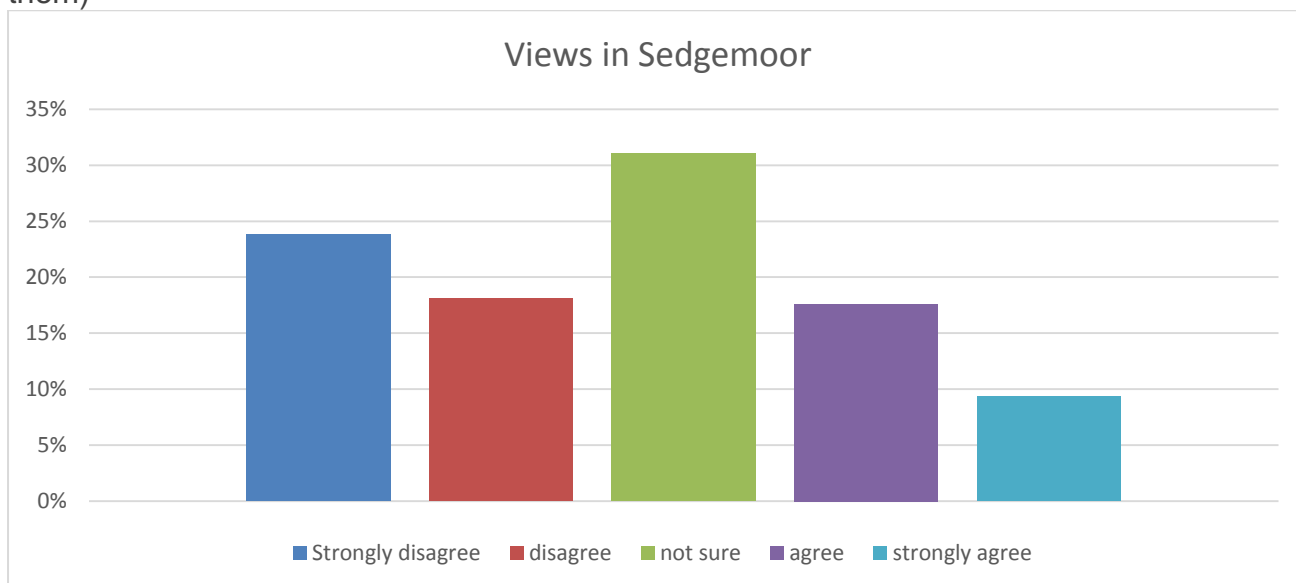
Member of staff & parent



This map shows the proposed Family Centre locations, overlaid on a map of Somerset, with district boundaries.

district proposals

Question 6 asked “To what degree do you support each of the district proposals? (Please provide an answer for the area/s that relate to you. You do not need to comment on all of them)



255 people responded about Sedgemoor – 42% disagreeing and 25% agreeing.

I don't feel the service now is adequate so not sure how cutting the spending on the buildings would improve the system. There is a chance it will be too big a service and delivery will suffer more.

Sedgemoor Council

All the existing centres provide important and essential functions in their local areas. Sedgemoor is my local area so I have more direct knowledge of the issues there. I am particularly concerned about the loss of both Hamp and Victoria Park Sure Start centres, as I know what valuable work they have been doing for local families. The success of this preventive work is evidence-based.

Town Councillor

I think this model works well and should be replicated in other areas. One large Centre covering a large area of deprivation and another Centre covering an area which also has a level of deprivation. This would ensure that families in the Highbridge area would not need to travel too far for support

Member of public

Another comment highlighted some community divisions between Hamp and Sydenham and felt Hamp residents would not access services there. Local provision and local experiences significantly affected people's judgements:

I would agree about buildings being underused. Langport is empty except rooms used for meetings occasionally. They occasionally ran groups when I first moved. However, the church opened a toddler group on a Wednesday morning and that was more effective at reaching out to people than the workers at the centre. People trusted them a bit more... . The group was more community centred - you didn't get that feel in the family centre.

parent

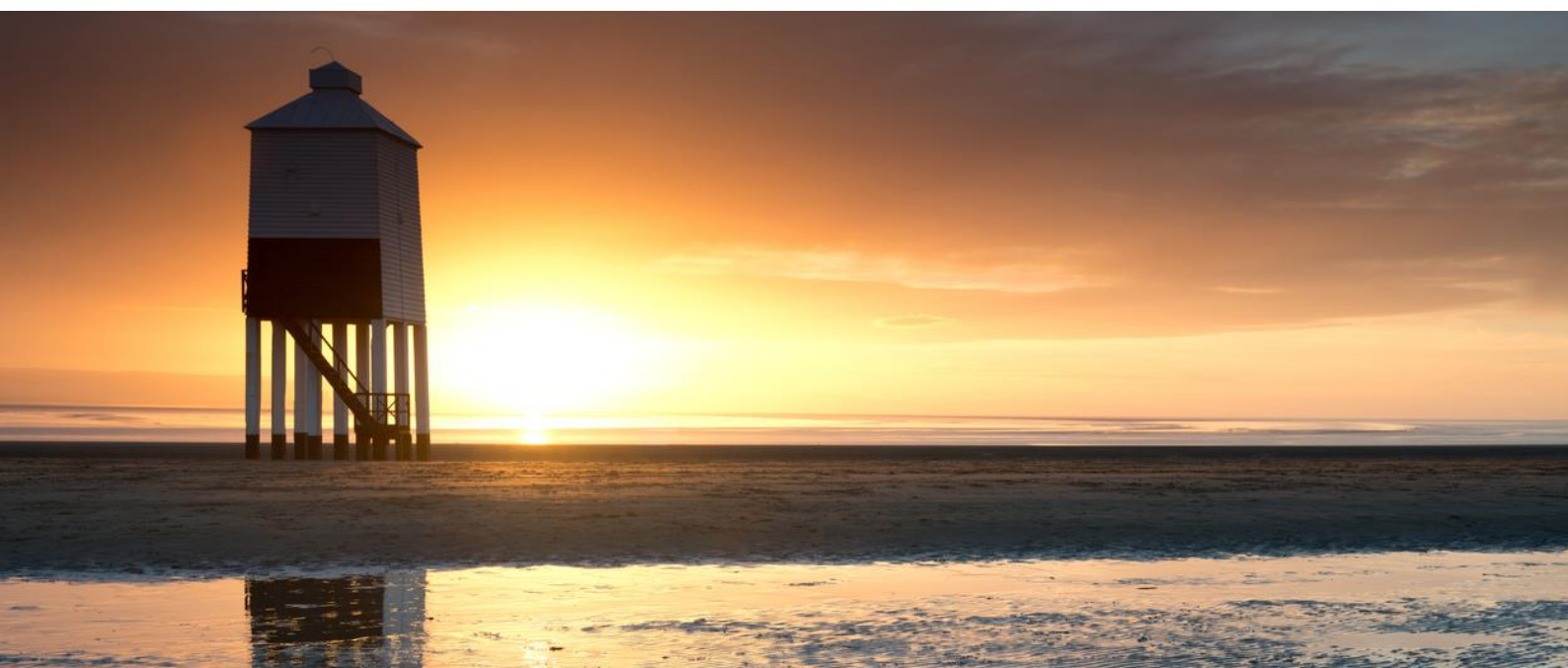
Concerns in Sedgemoor centred on travel arrangements, particularly the expense of public transport and the importance of having support locally. Some parents reported they did not know about services going on in their area, and others felt the range of provision at present is too small and these proposals would reduce it still further. Staff commented on the limited office space available even with the current hot-desking arrangements.

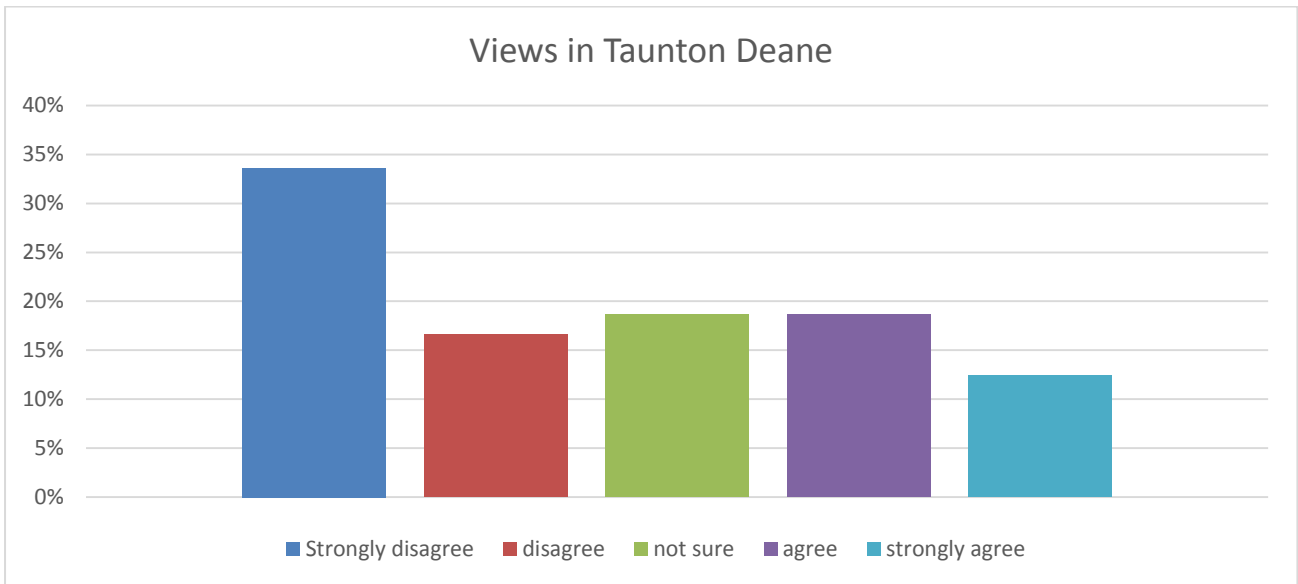
More detail was required: several participants did not think there were other appropriate buildings in their area or funds available to access these.

At the open day the chair of Victoria Park Community Centre argued strongly for the centre to be seen as more than a delivery point: “we want Children and Family services to be seen as an important offer to the Community”. He set out how the community centre provides services from birth right through life at present, is adjacent to the GP and pharmacy and the local Park with a wide range of opportunities on offer to draw people in. Rather than pulling back, he wanted to see services for children represented on the Board so that cohesive efforts could be made to improve the lives of people in the area.

The Children's Centre was a god send to me when I had my children. Without it I would not have survived and am sure I would have needed more acute help.

Member of public





307 people responded about Taunton Deane with 50% disagreeing and 25% agreeing. Service user feeling was even stronger, with 58% in disagreement.

I agree with Acorns and Hollies but I have concerns about the lack of any site at all in Wellington which is a sizeable town with lots of pockets of deprivation and need. Having a base in Wellington would give lots of advantages for Get Set, Health Visitors and other partners to support families.

Taunton Deane and West Somerset Council Officers

There was concern about Bishops Lydeard Children’s Centre:

The needs of individuals and families in communities such as Bishops Lydeard are just as real and serious as in more deprived areas. People still struggle with loneliness, post-natal depression and depression, financial problems, serious illness, family rifts etc etc. We, like other areas, have those single-parent families etc who rely upon our services for encouragement and support.

Seedlings Community Stay&Play Coordinator

There were a high proportion of responses from Wellington, with an additional 43 emails to the consultation and a petition of 677 signatures with numerous comments. These have been taken into account in this section.

I volunteered with the Children's Centre and the team is absolutely amazing. The work they do is so inspirational and they have had a positive affect on so many local children's lives. It is so important to have a centre focussed around families in the town. It will be such a loss if the planned changes take place, it must be stopped!

We need these people in our community. Wouldn't know who to turn to without them. Amazing people and a fantastic service. So many families would miss so much without them. Please help us save the Wellington centre

When I had my first child I used the centre regularly, it's a fantastic resource for the community that shouldn't be lost. I made life long friends due to this centre

Me and my son have been coming here since he was newborn. The support workers here are wonderful and great at their jobs. I have been helped through some pretty tough times thank you to this team. Children love coming to this centre. It's such a vital part of the community that is easily accessible to local parents and carers who a lot of them wouldn't be able to make their way to Taunton. I don't feel that there is possibly enough reasons to close something as important as a children's centre! I hope for mine, my son's, my future children and everyone else affected by this that we get to keep our centre.

Petition comments

People value the experiences they have had at the centre and the difference the staff have made in their lives. They see having a children's centre as part of being a community and essential to forging local links:

Although we are assured that the staff will still be working in the town, we are concerned that the local connections and partnership working will be lost. The argument put forward is that 'people support families not buildings'. We do not dissent from this view, but we believe that having a building, where staff can interact and discuss families' needs, greatly assists the process. The staff at the centre were graded 'Good with outstanding features' in their last Ofsted report and recently won an award for their partnership working.

Unfortunately, we have already started to see a reduction in the services in the town with the popular support group that worked on the allotment ceasing. This was devastating for the families and staff involved. This group had allowed parents to interact with their children in a relaxed environment and gave an excellent opportunity for staff to build positive relationships with vulnerable families. Our fear is that this will increase, if the centre were to close and staff no longer be based in Wellington, as the ability to interact with families will be lost.

email response

The theme of already stretched services in Taunton Deane and importance of community links in a small town like Wellington came strongly through the email correspondence:

The facility was/is truly a lifeline for the neediest families. It provided a safe place and a confidential service in times of crisis for so many vulnerable families. There is absolutely nowhere else for them to go when life is tough. The staff were highly professional and unquestionably provided families in Wellington with the support they needed, whether that was struggling with parenting, safeguarding issues or financial crisis. The Health Visiting service is under great strain at present as they try to maintain a service to the rapidly expanding population of Wellington. I feel that the closure of Wellington Children's Centre puts our community at great risk of a serious case arising in our midst.

Retired member of staff

Wellington is a town with two faces. The more easily seen face is one of leafy avenues, smart shops and fast-selling new houses. But there is another face of real deprivation and low expectations, running on generation to generation. This is especially true in North Wellington ward where the WCC [Wellington Children's Centre] is based.

email response

There was strong community momentum around this decision and some criticism that no open day was held in the town – one email correspondent pointed out “it is obvious that mothers who would not be able to travel there for services would not be able to travel there for a consultation either”. Senior officers attended a Q&A session at a school holiday event arranged by the Town Council and One Team partnership. This session provided an opportunity for members of the public to have their questions answered and to promote the online consultation questionnaire.

People connected with children, whether they are parents, family or just socially minded people, know that we need a place to which to go. When a need arises there is no time to go looking here, there and everywhere to find the person who will give just the help that is wanted. The Centre gives a focus to the service, without which it becomes something vague and intangible in people's minds. It also has a practical dimension.

email response

Comments on the questionnaires and petition also highlighted the distance to Taunton and the difficulty of public transport arrangements, and felt the proposal was that services would be withdrawn from Wellington.

Unlike Sedgemoor this model seems to be built around existing suitable buildings rather than the needs of the area. In Taunton we have two centres within a couple of miles of each other. I appreciate that there are some very deprived areas but the overall deprivation is no worse than in Sedgemoor... Wellington is a rapidly expanding Town with a highly deprived area & potential for more deprivation... in the North side of the town. I strongly feel the Sedgemoor model should be replicated here with one Centre in Taunton and one in Wellington.

Member of public

Young parents in a discussion group in Wellington had been part of a formal getset group. One parent talked about how relationships with staff had identified concerns for her and her child early. She returned to the group and at the end of the sessions the parents decided to continue and run their own group:

Will it isolate people more if there's no children's centre? Online can be isolating – last year I had post natal depression and used Facebook more than groups – in fact I used it as an excuse not to go to groups. getset came out and did home visits because she clicked on I wasn't coming to the groups and so she came out... M_____ has learned a lot of social skills. Here we've got everything we need – toys, crafts, room, a free venue. We would want this to continue. If we don't have the venue where would they keep the toys?

Young parent

We run a child minders' drop in once a month. We don't pay for the room and can have visitors from Somerset County Council and getset. It's a brilliant way for child minders to communicate in what can be a solitary job. The children's centre is somewhere I can come to for advice and for safeguarding issues. As a child minder you can sometimes be reluctant to go down an official route.

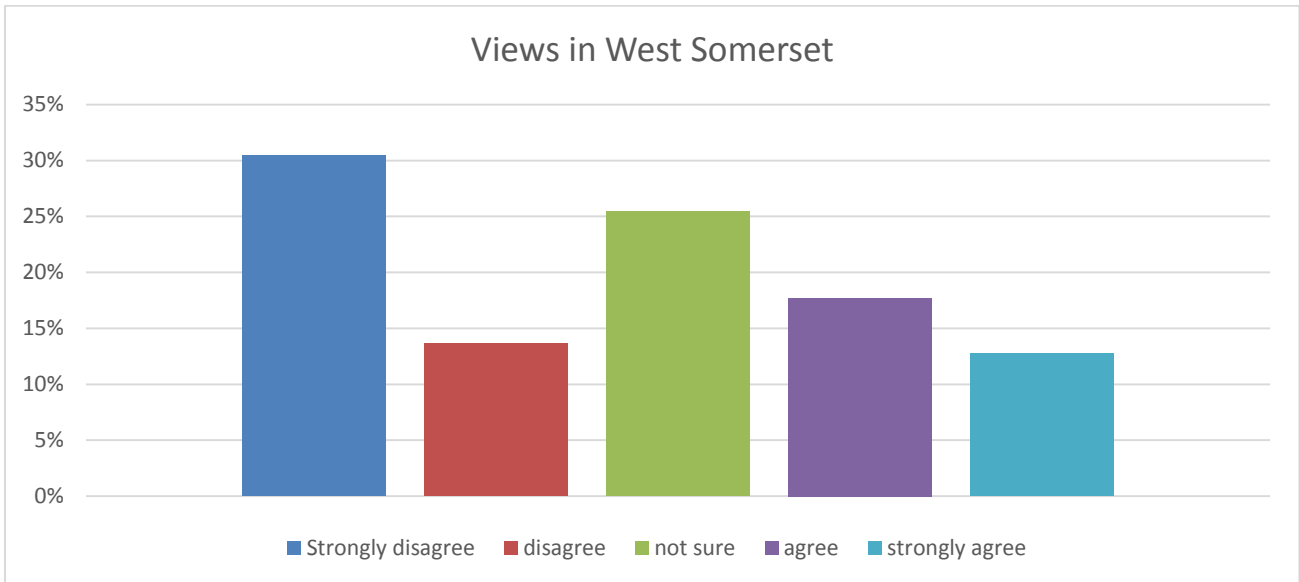
Childminder

Staff spoken to during the discussion group did not feel tied to the building, but rather to the links they have with the community and other professionals. They worried that moving their office base to Taunton would damage these:

It would make things more difficult if people can't have the children's centre. I suggest working with the Wellington One team. Create a local hub and people can drop in there. We've had four women in seven years turn up on the doorstep feeling domestic violence and they came to us because they knew us.

getset Staff





222 people commented on West Somerset, with 44% in disagreement with the proposals for the area and 31% in agreement.

Before considering the travel, travel cost, space issues and the plethora of other problems; the most obvious issue appears to be that the location suggested does not correspond to the location with the biggest immediate population. The idea is absurd.

Service user

As the local population rises, assets such as Children's Centres should be retained and used more effectively, including for intergenerational activities. This could address the huge and recognised problem of loneliness and social isolation in the district.

Member of public

Almost 50% of the area that we live in is rural and we cannot build centres in all villages and hamlets, therefore we need to scope and capacity to be more creative and innovative with our limited budgets to ensure we are meeting the needs of as many children, across the whole area, as we can.

getset staff member

With no wards in the 10% most deprived some participants felt West Somerset's profile did not recognise the problems in the area.

West Somerset is very rural and although I agree with the site at Williton (Williton N and Watchet S being the most deprived areas of W Somerset), West Somerset as a whole has relative high deprivation as evidenced by the worst social mobility in the country (and the West Somerset Opportunity Areas project). The model will need to ensure that support is available in hard to reach places.

Taunton Deane and West Somerset Council

One participant highlighted the work that had gone on to develop excellent inter-professional relationships, in line with the proposal to merge services, but worried the changes to building arrangements would affect this:

Alcombe Children's Centre is already a centre with good partnership working with the midwives who are based in there. Relationships have recently improved with the nursery and local health visitors and partnership working is the best it has been in a long time. If the health visitors move in as planned this would further improve relationships and create a well-integrated and consistent service for families. I feel that getset 'moving out' and only being there occasionally may harm these good relationships. There are already examples of where this positive partnership working has helped get support in place for some families.

getset Staff member

Problems getting to centres were highlighted as participants felt services would only really run from the proposed hub at Williton. There were comments that services such as the TAPs group were closed without consultation and that services had already been run down so there was little happening at Dulverton and Alcombe Children's Centres. They felt this was due to service decisions "in preparation for closure", not due to demand or need in the area.

There were a number of concerns about the selection of Williton as the hub with arguments for both Watchet (on the basis of highest levels of deprivation) and Minehead (due to level of need, distance/public transport arrangements and population size) be retained or to be designated as the Family Centre hub.

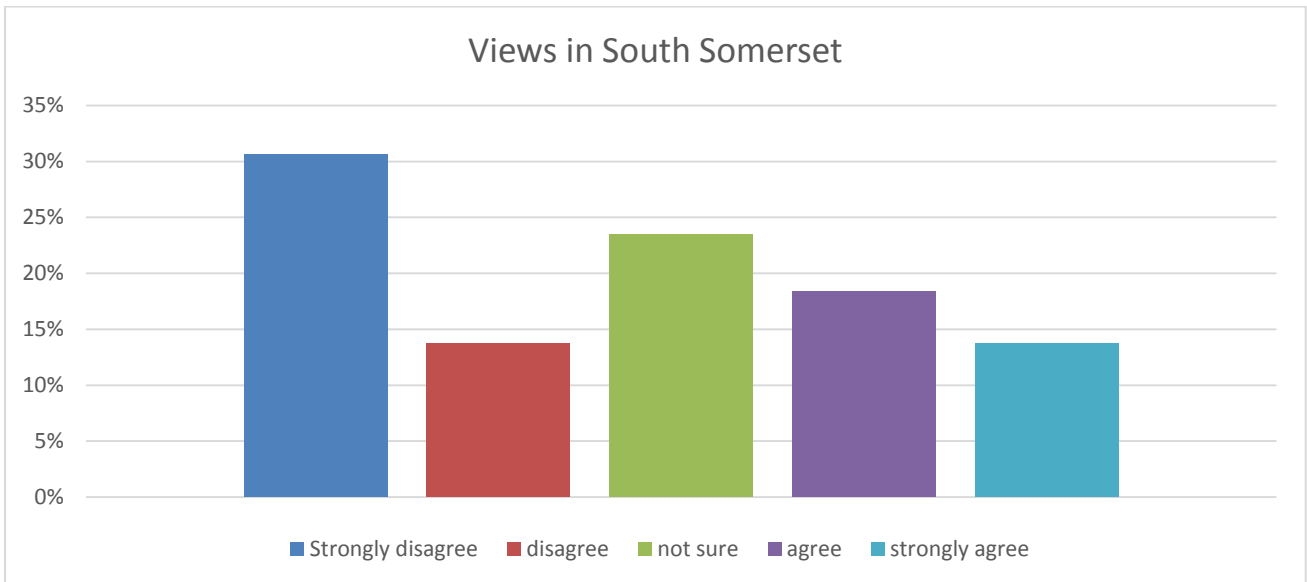
There are many impoverished families in Minehead. Poor access to adult learning, poor job prospects and poor health choices all contribute to make the place seem to be going the wrong direction. A lot of help is needed to change things around and children's services are vital for this change in behaviours and for better life chances.

Service user

Williton Children's Centre is simply not big enough to accommodate this without sacrificing some of the group and family rooms. The building is not fit for this purpose and therefore would go against exactly what is set out in the consultation document. Alcombe Children's Centre is big enough to accommodate many different services and is located near the local supermarkets where the majority of the residents in West Somerset do their food shopping therefore families would not necessarily have to make a separate journey to access our services as they would have to in Williton.

getset Staff member

People wanted further information on what the alternative proposals might look like, such as which buildings might be used. There were also comments asking about the future use of buildings which are proposed to be de-designated, such as the Alcombe Children's Centre.



45% of the 253 responses about South Somerset were critical of the proposals, 30% in favour. This rose to 50% of service users, with only 22% in favour. 35% of men responded as 'not sure'. Respondents were dissatisfied with the reduction in centres due to the size of this part of Somerset. Particular concern was raised about increasing poverty in Chard and parts of Yeovil:

Chard needs a designated support service in one central place. Yeovil is too far away with poor public transport. Chard is a deprived area with complex needs, English as a second language, etc

Member of public

The distance between Yeovil and the linked delivery points is huge – think about travel for staff and families. I already have families who are being encouraged to travel 10+ miles to attend groups.

Speech & Language Therapist

Although an issue across Somerset, more people in South Somerset than other areas expressed views that the current system does not sufficiently address the needs of the villages and rural areas – they want to see input in villages such as South Petherton, Martock and Merriott addressed in the new proposals:

South Somerset is an incredibly large area with a lot of deprivation. In addition it has very rural parts ... it is apparent that many vulnerable children and families are being deprived of even basic support services. ... the most vulnerable families will not access information online, they need face to face, consistent input from professionals and support workers. There is already an inequity of service provision county wide as most groups are offered in the town locations - sometimes a 45 minute bus drive away for some parents - this is a huge barrier to getting client engagement. Your proposals will only make this worse for clients and fundamentally the outcomes for children.

Health Visitor

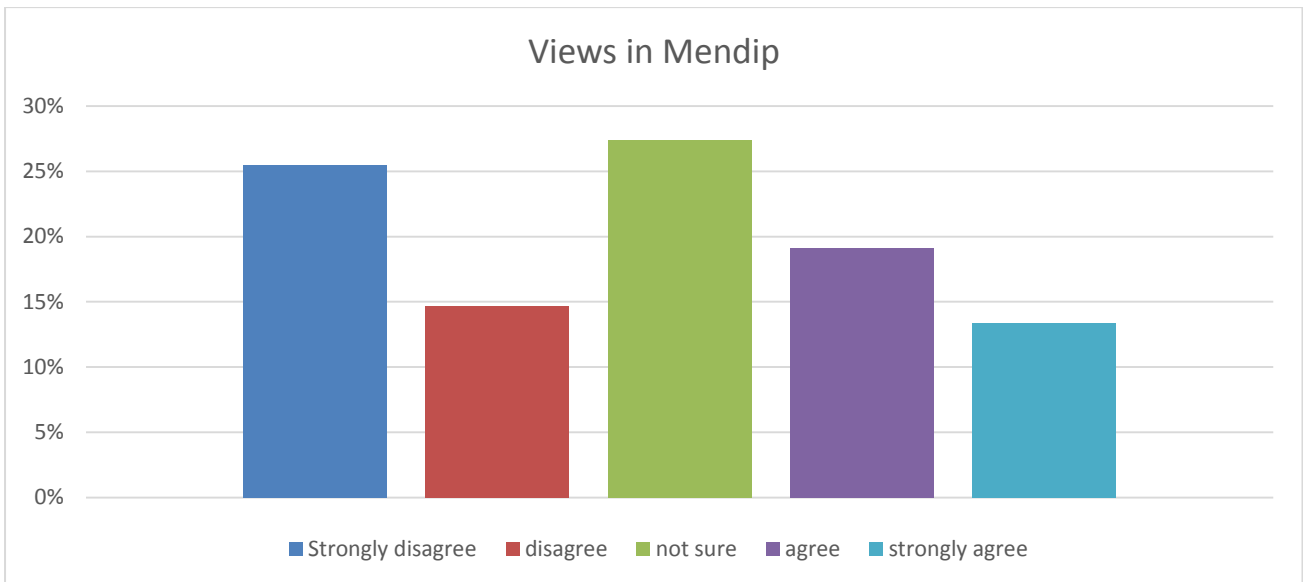
Many participants suggested the Children's Centre in Chard should be maintained, with one pointing out South Somerset has the largest number of children. In general, participants wanted more information and involvement in what the new services would look like in their area:

I would need more information about the local access points proposed in Ilminster before I could make a judgement on this proposal. To my knowledge, services currently available at the Children's Centre in Chard are not accessed by large numbers of families in Ilminster. Being a parent is stressful enough without having to transport children to attend a session of maybe just an hour or an even shorter appointment. It is important that any identified local community delivery points have the facilities to deliver all, or the majority of the support services, on an outreach basis, where this best suits the needs of individual service users.

Service user

We are very concerned about the significant reduction in Children's Centres in South Somerset which is the largest district in the County. We are particularly concerned about Chard and any reduction in access to services. Many families in Chard experience a wide range of complex issues while at the same time have limited access to services, being out on a limb with limited transport. We strongly request that when it comes to developing the new model of service delivery and the 'Linked Delivery Points' in each location you engage and consult fully with local services and organisations, as the potential arrangements are likely to be different in each location and will require detailed design to respond to specific local needs. SSSDC would like to be fully involved in the rolling out of your plans so that we can integrate, where possible, with our own services. There are opportunities, through our SSSDC Future Model through Transformation for better integration with Children's Services with SSSDC services such as Housing and Environmental Health. Strong local partnerships with other providers is essential. For example we work closely with the One Teams in Yeovil and Chard. We run a welfare advice surgery in the Forefront Centre, Chard, and work in close partnership to support vulnerable people with the Balsam Centre in Wincanton. We would be happy to help facilitate this in each locality as we have community development staff in each area with excellent local connections in each of the communities listed in your model. If possible we would like to work proactively with SCC and Mendip DC to ensure families are able to access support across the eastern side of Somerset. As a start we would suggest that the team at SCC are invited to attend our 4 Area Committees early in 2018 to engage with our members directly so that we can engage in constructive dialogue around the future provision of services in South Somerset.

South Somerset District Council



The geography of Mendip was highlighted during the consultation and an additional open day arranged in Frome to ensure people were able to participate. There were 207 responses about Mendip with 42% critical of the proposals and 31% in agreement. 47% of service users were critical and 28% in agreement.

There is currently a lack of services available within the Shepton Mallet area. A family centre would be more beneficial placed in Shepton than in Glastonbury.
Health Visitor

All children matter in all areas. We are Mendip. Having village outreach is important. So are children's centres in towns for an area with bigger populations. The proposals are vague with no information about impacts on the areas and the solutions to any problems.
Service user

This change has already happened. I think this will work as long as there are plenty of groups still running and as long as the teams are given enough space for groups to run and enjoyed by all parents and children
Service user

Some participants in other areas were critical of plans to maintain two main family centres in this area which they perceived as more affluent. Mendip respondents felt they should have a children's centre in their local town, citing Shepton Mallet, Street, Wells and areas of Frome.

At the open day service users talked about the difficulties of the Frome geography:

I think it's OK because they are keeping open [The Keys] children's centre and closing the [The Bridge]. If they'd done it the other way around I wouldn't have gone because it's too far and impossible with a buggy with the hills
Service user

Sure start centre at Christ Church/ The Mount in Frome is important hub but I am concerned that in the long run other neighbourhoods of poverty need and complexity (e.g. Vallis and Hayesdown) will be marginalised and less supported

Headteacher, Christ Cove Church First School

Many participants highlighted Shepton Mallet as an area of real need:

We appreciate the intention in Mendip is to retain centres where we have high deprivation: this has seen Frome and Glastonbury chosen. We are concerned about the impact on Shepton Mallet with a significant pocket of deprivation and would be looking for some clarity around the intended support for Shepton. Similarly in the case of the other two centres being de-designated, and the three linked delivery points, we would be looking for some assurance as regards what will happen with the services currently delivered from this buildings.

The District Council offers a variety of services from its main office in Shepton Mallet and has strong links with other partners in the community such as Mendip YMCA, Elim Connect and Mendip CAB. Along with our local partners we would be keen to begin conversations now about how more integrated support for families could be achieved. Along with our sister district, South Somerset, we already work collaboratively with partners to help support young people in the East of Somerset. Via the Positive Lives programme we work with all the Districts, the County Council and wider agencies to provide more integrated support for adults with complex needs. We believe that now is a good time to map out how support for families can be delivered jointly at a local level and ask that as part of this piece of work it commences.

Mendip District Council

Transport was regularly identified as a barrier to accessing services, and participants wondered about the impact on staff travel time if services were delivered locally.

The hub in Glastonbury was very busy and received plaudits from many parents on the open day, although several commented that there was only one day they were able to come as the other events all focused on particular needs.

I like Glastonbury Hub - I like that most of the toys are wooden and good quality. It's disappointing in the winter if it's raining as the place feels up really quickly and you can't get in. You've come all the way with your child and they're disappointed.

Parent



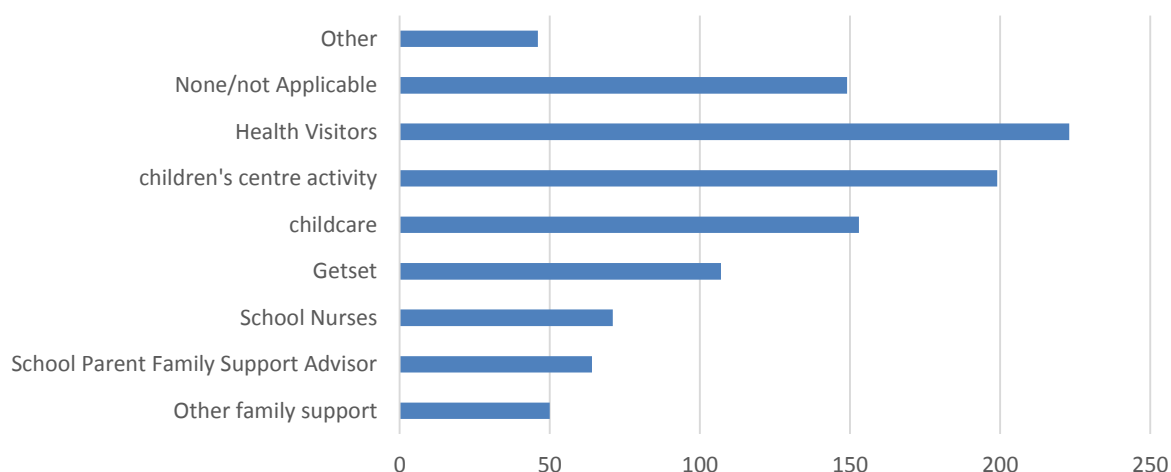
services used by respondents

Participants were asked about their current use of services and about the services they would like to see in the future. Health visiting and children's centre services were most commonly selected. In addition to the graph below some participants felt they had been offered no services, but many mentioned a range of services for children with disabilities (e.g. portage, autism support etc) and a wide range of other services from including social work support, independent child care, domestic abuse services, CAMHS appointments and more.

I told my step-daughter to go to the children's centre after she had her baby at the age of 20. The support and welcome was amazing. They even had a young parents group as most of her friends were at university, definitely not considering a baby. She became more confident and has strived to stay off benefits. Had she not had support, she'd of become lonely and quite probably lack in confidence to work, sort childcare and have a positive outlook. Her life changed dramatically, she got the support

Member of public

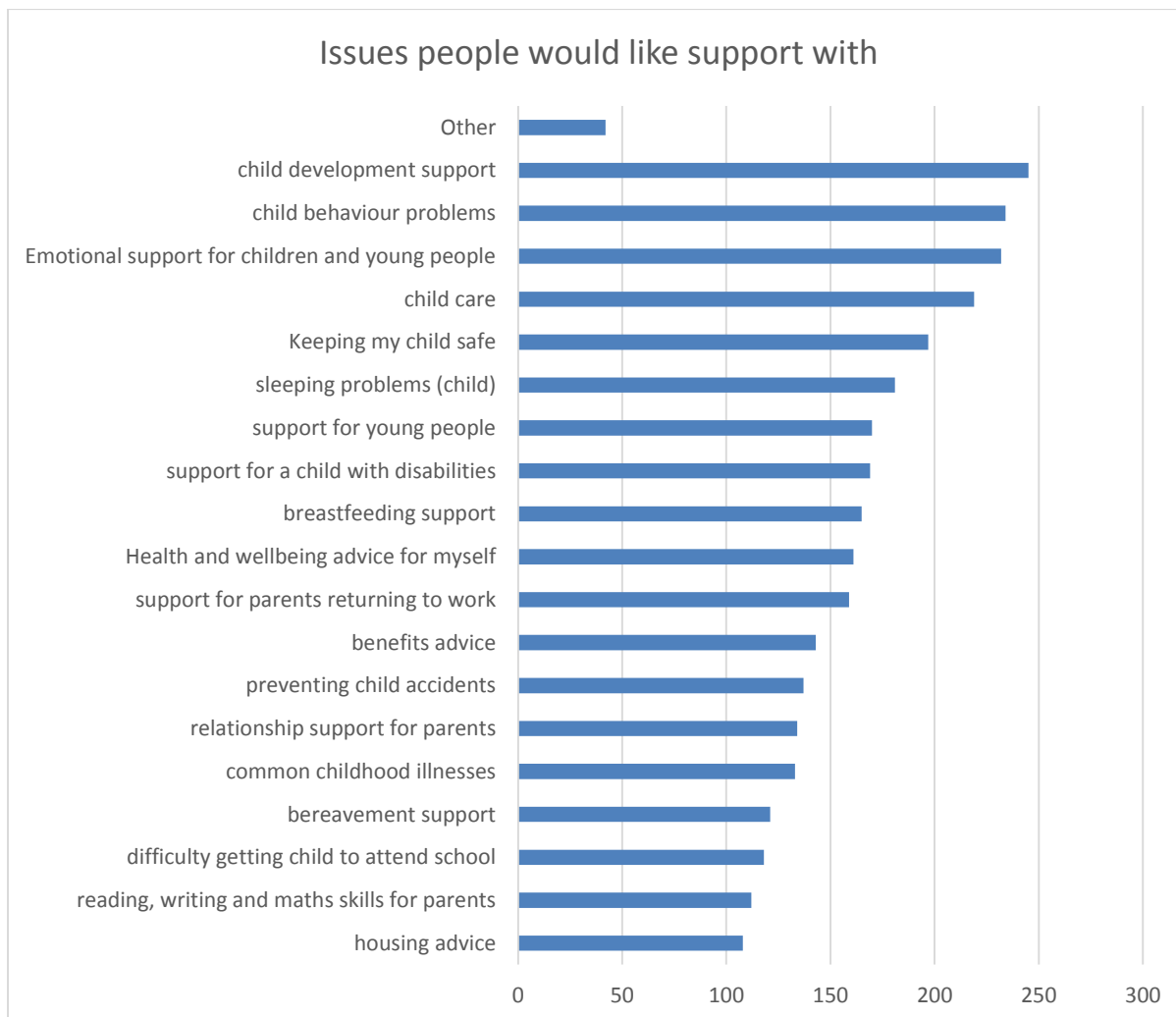
Services used by person completing questionnaire



This graph highlights the breadth of the advice given or expected of family support services. No area was left unselected even though most participants chose which to tick and which not to (there were some who selected all).

In an area which is by the sea and rivers it is so important that our children get used to water and learn to swim. We are already lacking in swimming pools in this areas and will really struggle ie these getset swim groups stop

Parent



Participants commented frequently on how important they had found the services they received, included throughout this report. There were some suggestions to invest more in parenting support delivered through schools:

I cannot talk highly enough of the support me & my children have received from PFSA services in Wells. He has proved to have been knowledgeable & skilled, my children have told me how well supported they feel in school by him.

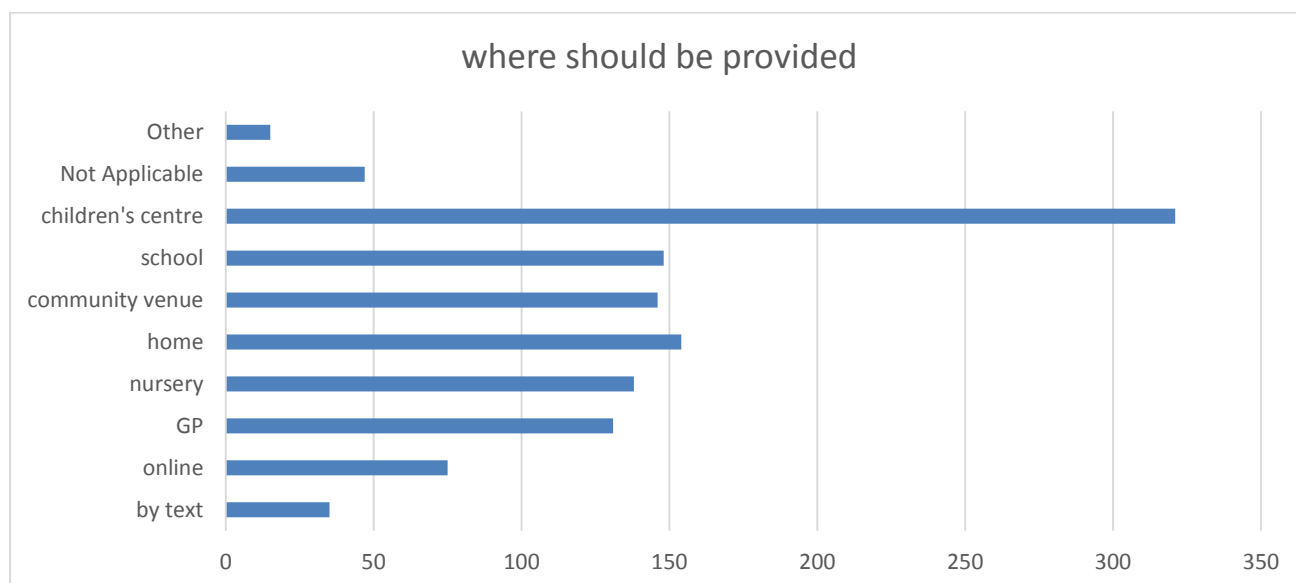
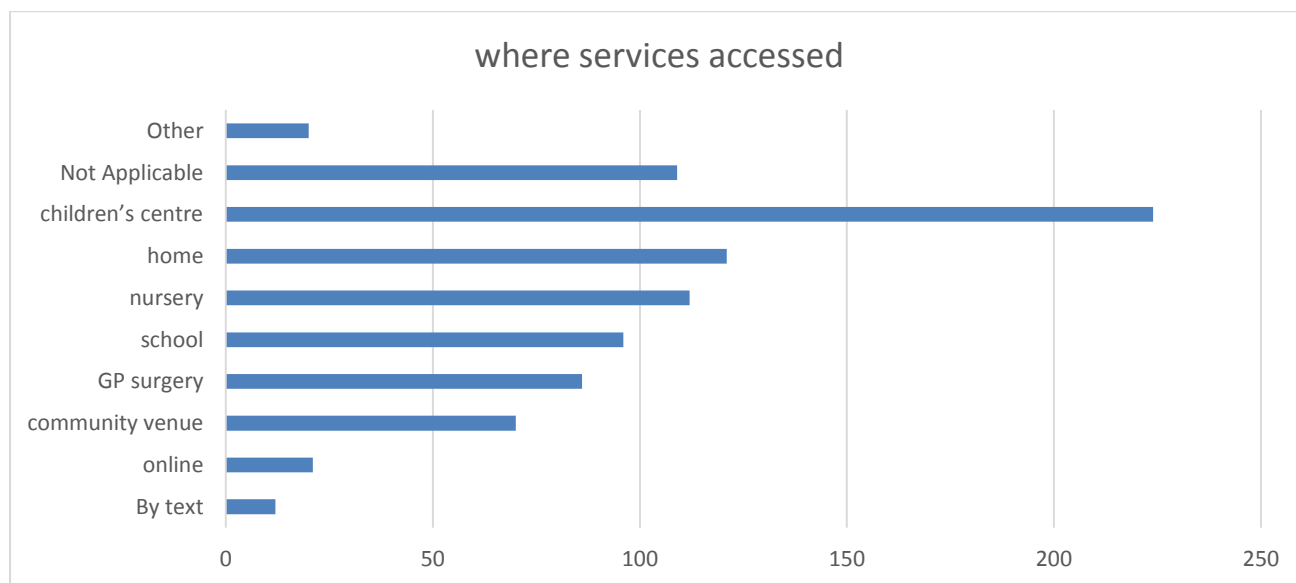
Parent

More opportunity to supporting children through school. Hearing tests, help with their teeth, eye tests etc. Monitor the pupils closely with their behaviour. Pick up on anxiety early and teaching groups about bullying. Make it accessible for children to approach a group where they feel safe to talk with an adult about their worries or problems that they are facing.

Parent

where services should be accessed

The questionnaire also covered where people current access services, and what they would like to see.



Participants overwhelmingly believed that services should continue to be delivered through children's centres. More felt use could be made of community centres. Of concern, given some of the current delivery arrangements, few wanted their services delivered through libraries.



There were various suggestions about characteristics of venues that were fit for purpose (or not). Participants asked for venues:

- to be within walking distance (taking into account hills!)
- to be in a consistent location, ideally with other groups
- to be accessible (centre of town or where the need is)
- to be accessible (wheelchairs, buggies)
- have parking
- to feel comfortable (“not cold, draughty halls”)
- to have space to store toys
- have space for buggies
- to be neutral (some participants wondered about the ethics of faith based venues for parents of a different faith or none)
- to have proper safeguarding arrangements
- to be close to their other children’s schools so they go out once
- to be funded properly
- to have tea and coffee
- not to be changed all the time so groups get to form and develop

There were also suggestions that staff capacity would need to be in place for booking arrangements (it takes some time to find a good venue or even to find a convenient meeting time available), and a protected budget for venue and travel costs for both staff and participants where needed.

Participants felt strongly that service users and the staff involved in delivering services should be involved in choosing the venues going forward. This ties closely with the findings about local solutions for local delivery.

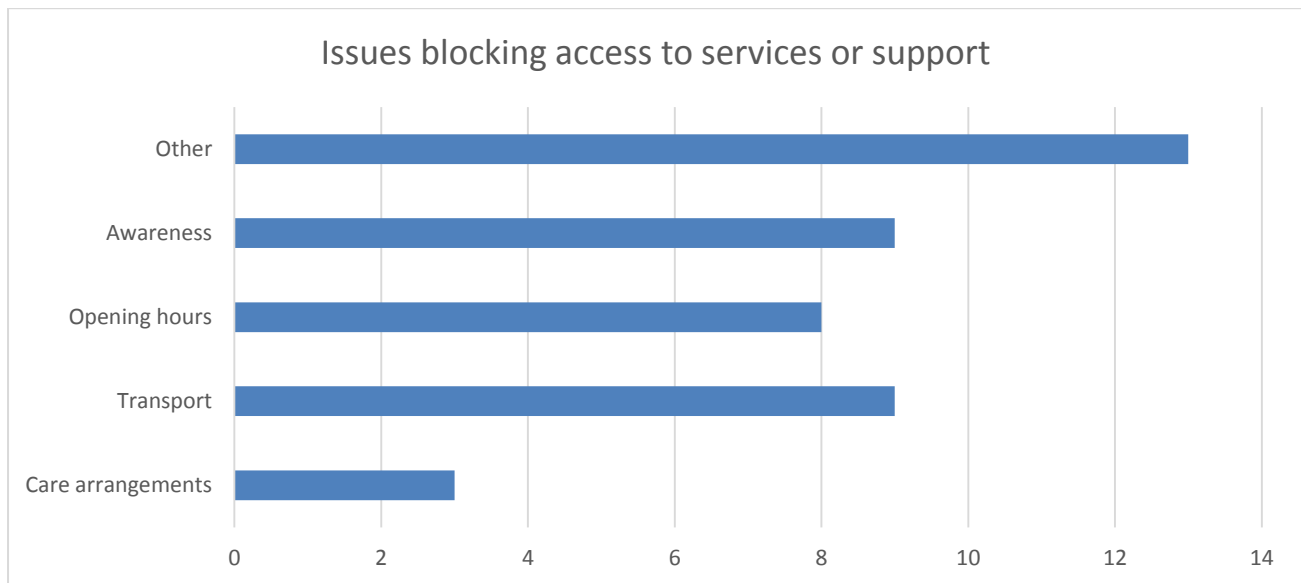
Some participants encouraged the Council to think outside the box running events with no building at all, with suggestions for a baby forest school or a trip to the beach in a minibus to encourage families to raise horizons and learn about things they can do with their children to make most use of the local cheap and free opportunities.



accessing services

Q11 asked about access to services. Of the 157 people who had accessed services who answered this question 85% had been able to access the services.

Participants were then asked what had stopped them accessing services:



13 people selected other as a category. This comprised:

- two families who did not meet the criteria for the service,
- four whose child's needs were complex and they felt no service had adequately provided for them,
- three who noted services had stopped at their local children's centre or that there was no local baby group,
- two not being aware of local services, and
- two who complained the quality of the service they had received was poor.
- No men cited care arrangements as a factor

There were no specific questions within the consultation about children with disabilities, nor any discussion groups focused on their experiences. In analysing the question data there were several parents responding who clearly did not feel they had been able to access the right

family support services. One worker involved young people with disabilities in the consultation:

I undertook this consultation at a youth club session with a small group of young people with SEN. It was a very difficult concept to understand but we had some fun doing the activity - they enjoyed acting out the emotions and behaviours they wanted to describe. What was apparent is that they do not have responsibility for seeking out or thinking about their needs; even talking to a trusted teacher was difficult to understand. This might be worth further exploration.

Mendip young people's group

It would be important in thinking about changes to explore this area further.

Participants were asked about how they access services. Of the 38 service users



who recorded the distance they travel to services 50% were within two miles (two participants note walking further than this) and 21% travelled more than 10 miles, particularly those living in rural locations.

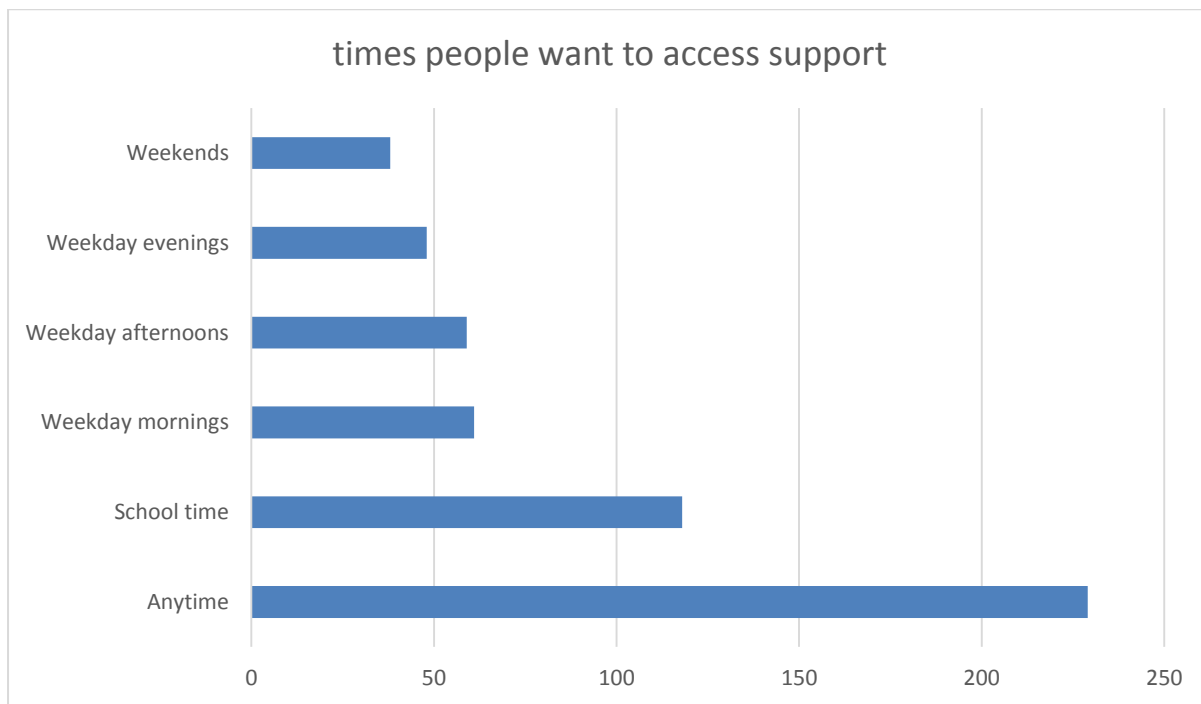
Accessibility was a feature in discussions in each of the District open days. While service users completing the questionnaire access to cars was higher than the Somerset average at 75% the car may be being used by a working partner as many participants worried the loss of children's centre buildings would mean services that were offered would be further away. They commented on the limitations of the public transport infrastructure and reliance on the ability to walk to sessions, particularly if a family did not own a car.

One meeting for a family held at Sydenham meant an hour and a half to walk there from Wilstock Village and then the same back again. The next meeting is going to be held at a school which is walkable but this required some begging! There should be identified spaces within walking distance of all areas of deprivation.

Health visitor

There was acknowledgement some services would have to be offered over a number of localities and ideas for improving access to services included emulating a local Sunday school with a minibus that travels around the villages in the morning collecting young people for a charge of 50p and then drops them back afterwards

when people want to access support



I love this [Glastonbury Hub drop in], it's invaluable to me. I'm separated from the mother of my child so actually finding places to go is really important. I travel half an hour from the edge of Exmoor. It's totally worthwhile as I find it a struggle in winter to find anywhere to take her. I know there's a group in Street and Shepton too. I'd like to see it open more often so I could drop in whenever. I've arranged the access to my daughter around the group. It would be amazing to have a session every day - we come to the library and she sees it through the locked doors and she's shouting I want to go in there

parent

In the questionnaires, open days and discussion groups service users and professionals commented that services

should be available at the time people need them, and that current arrangements were too restrictive.

Services shut at 5pm - if you're in a dark place that's when you may need help. You want to be able to speak to someone who can help you make a change, not just a helpline

Domestic abuse survivor

Some participants commented that thought needs to go into the timing of groups that are run, for example ensuring a parenting course for parents of young children is not at settling time. They also commented that many of the groups operate in term time only which is less relevant for parents of young children. They felt this left them at a loss during the school holidays and it was a break in routine that their young children did not understand.

other findings

moving towns/areas

As a newcomer to Wellington with two little ones, the children's centre has been invaluable with a warm welcome and introduction not only to the town but to the community

parent

The importance of the groups run by children's centres in creating social and support links between individual parents should not be under-estimated. In almost every setting people talked about being or having been new to a town or area and that going to the groups had enabled them to put down roots, gain real friends and become a part of the community.

Parenting can be an isolating task where people can feel a huge loss of identity – these groups were described as crucial in maintaining calm and positive parenting and getting help when required.

The [Glastonbury Hub]'s great - all the mums have made me so welcome and helped me out with clothes and stuff because I'm new to the area. The mums have taken me to a café for a coffee. There's an outdoor play area that you never get [at other drop in sessions]. Glastonbury is a very welcoming place and having a place like this supports that. Because it's in the library mums stay on and then read to their kids.

parent



new parents

This is even more so for those new to parenting. Many people talked about how challenging they have found it become a parent and several described their children's centre as a 'lifeline'.

[We need] ...specific advice and support for brand new parents in the first 12 weeks of becoming a parent. That time is tough and the right support can mean the difference between 1) preventing post natal depression or not and 2) whether a new mum perseveres with breastfeeding or changes to bottle feeding formula etc

Service user

Parents were not always routed smoothly towards these groups – those who were breastfeeding had typically been told about the breastfeeding group, but others said they did not know about services, or hadn't really understood they were for them. Many happened on the services by chance or word of mouth.



pathways

Following the new parent groups, parents again reported struggling with where to go next:

Somerset have really good groups from 0-1 but then there's a gap until they start school. Early walkers got booted out the group at age 10 months and there was nothing else apart from the church groups that you find. At Reckleford they had one session a week for toddlers, but that's it. It all falls off the radar after they start walking. I appreciate they have to have groups for young mums, single mums and so on, but if you don't fall into a category then you don't fall into any service.

parent

Many parents talked about not knowing what comes next, that there is not enough in the local area for young children unless there are specific needs. Their view was that being a parent is in itself a specific need, and that without the provision of support this can create demand for more intense services and/or make life difficult for parents or even children.

I would be happy to see a lot more activities/ clubs for younger children. I have a 7 year old boy who does a lot of clubs. He does swimming, taekwondo, cycling club and he is also taking part in recorder lessons too... Open up the village halls and do children's clubs. On a Monday painting, Tuesday counting, Wednesday socialising...

parent

barriers

A common complaint during the open days and discussion groups was the focus of groups meant they could not attend with siblings. The groups that are run should be adaptable to family situations.

We spoke to a small number of stay-at-home fathers during the consultation but there were common views about their experience. While welcomed in the predominantly female groups, they felt different and had a need to share their experiences with one another.

I've hinted for a father's only group as I'm a father in my forties with a three year old girl and there's not many people in my situation.

Parent

The little things matter and several parents described feeling unwelcome at children's centres because they had brought their buggy. Parents then struggled to unload what they needed, especially if they had more than one child.

Volunteering

In many places it was clear that parents feel ownership of the groups. At one discussion forum a Peer Supporter had run the group for six years and described her experience of changes in supervisor, lack of actual supervision and autonomy. The other parents were very positive about her and the session was very welcoming with tea, coffee and even homemade cake.

People are fine to volunteer to run a group. They give out questionnaires to people about getset to see if they want to volunteer their time. I said yes and it never got followed up. They could have volunteers coming out their ears

parent

There was some caution that joining up could be used as an excuse to reduce the overall service available to families and several comments about the risk of passing responsibilities to the voluntary and community sector without adequately supporting such services.

Community groups can't do everything - eg I am running a community allotment group who had referrals in relation to active drug users where we just do not have the skills to respond to need. There's so much scope for misinformation, e.g. in relation to breastfeeding

Member of public

the future

Parents, staff, organisations and the wider public were in general keen to hear more about the proposed changes before implementation. Some requested final, costed proposals with an analysis of the impact. Others are willing to be part of the ongoing change process, helping choose the venues, thinking about what is needed and joining up the approach with other services in Somerset.

This is an on-going conversation!

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