One Roof-All Things

This is a very precious place, a very special place with so much richness…this place is a lifeline for many of us.

Because they (children’s centre staff) had my back I could be there for my (special needs) child…they make us feel like normal parents.

This report is the result of interviews with 385 people, 1,820 respondents to an online and paper survey including 5,375 written comments.
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Introduction

Ealing has a national reputation for excellence in the provision of services for children in the borough aged 0-5 through our network of 27 children’s centres. While many local authorities have had to reduce the facilities they offer to families with very young children, with over 1000 children’s centres across the country closing since 2010, Ealing has remained committed to supporting the needs of the youngest in our community. This is consistent with the vision for the whole of the borough described in Future Ealing which is based on the determination of Ealing Council to continue to improve the lives of local people at a time of reduced funding.

All of Ealing’s children’s centres have been rated ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted. They offer much more than a place to play for the children who attend. Children’s centre services include antenatal checks with midwives, developmental assessments by health visitors, maternal mental health monitoring, baby clinics, parenting support, stay and play sessions as well as other group activities, adult classes, access to speech and language therapy and additional help for families whose children have special educational needs. The reality of life with babies and toddlers and the inherent difficulties of travel and transport means that having these resources available locally and under one roof, makes it more likely that services can be reached at a time of need to the benefit of parent and child.

Ealing is at the forefront of integrating NHS Central London Community Health Trust (CLCH) and local authority service provision for 0 to 19 year olds. Through this integrated care model, we respond to the NHS Long Term Plan in our children’s centres by:

- Ensuring women can benefit from continuity of care through and beyond their pregnancy;
- Providing extra support for expectant mothers at risk of premature birth;
- Expanding support for perinatal mental health conditions;
- Taking further action on childhood obesity;
- Increasing funding for children and young people’s mental health; and
- Bringing down waiting times for autism assessments

In the last year Ealing’s children’s centres have provided services and support for 39,814 children, parents and carers, including 1063 vulnerable children i.e. those with special educational needs/or a disability, and children who are looked after (in care) or require additional support. The January 2019 outcome letter from the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) inspection highlighted that ‘Most parents are positive about the support that they receive in the early years, particularly from children’s centres’.

The consultation has demonstrated that it is necessary to maintain and develop the services offered by Ealing children’s centres in response to local need. Ealing, along with other local authorities, is facing its toughest financial challenges in recent times. Ealing Council’s government grant has been reduced by £143.7m, equivalent to a reduction of 64% over the past 10 years. All of Ealing’s services have been scrutinised to ascertain the most effective way of achieving savings whilst continuing to deliver the amenities that the borough’s
residents rely on, especially those in greatest need. Children’s centres in Ealing are no exception.

Although government cuts force consideration to changes in all of Ealing’s services and resources, there is also a determination to minimise disruption and reduction of services offered by the children’s centres in the borough. A strategy has been proposed to rationalise services by re-organising some centres, by either consolidating what is available in some centres or closing some centres altogether. The details of this strategy will be presented to Ealing Cabinet on the 16th of July 2019. Making the changes that emanate from this proposed strategy could save £808,000 over the next three years to 2022 as part of the council’s wider savings plan.

In addition, the strategy proposal made provision for an extensive statutory consultation exercise with parents and carers who use Ealing’s children’s centres and with some of the staff and other service providers.

The objective of the consultation was to obtain an understanding of what the outcome of proposed rationalisation of services would mean for families with young children in Ealing should it become operational. That consultation process commenced on the 22nd of February and was completed on the 17th of May 2019.

The following report is the information obtained from the consultation, regarding the impact that the implementation of these changes would have on the lives of young children and families in Ealing.

The Place of Children’s Centres in Future Ealing

In 2017 Ealing Council’s cabinet agreed a fresh direction for the council with a renewed focus on ensuring that the lives of local residents continue to improve, despite reductions in funding. Known as Future Ealing, this initiative aims to transform the way the council pays for and delivers local services in order to secure future sustainability and make Ealing a better place to live. Future Ealing seeks to refocus on what really matters to local people through designating nine outcomes that the whole council is working together to achieve.

From the knowledge gained about the meaning and significance of Ealing’s children’s centres, in the course of this consultation, it is evident that the current network of children’s centres has a significant contribution to make in achieving several of these outcomes:

- A strong, diverse and fair community
- Keeping young people safe
- Helping young people to achieve their potential
- The right service at the right time

The consultation process highlighted how children’s centres assist in realising these Future Ealing outcomes. This is achieved through their ability to create a safe place in the community,
reduce isolation, provide a whole system approach, facilitate community cohesion and acceptance, encourage early identification of need and vulnerability, support access to mental health and wellbeing services and ensure there is ‘no wrong door’ to impede the ability of families in obtaining the resources they need. These themes will be discussed in greater length later in the report.

Methodology

The purpose of the consultation was to obtain the views of as many people as possible who used children’s centres, now or in the past, as well as those of some of the children’s centre staff. We also consulted a number of people who had a stake in providing the specialist services offered by some of the children’s centres, such as mental health monitoring, midwifery appointments, and health visiting services provided by the integrated Early Start 0-19 service; a service formed of our key NHS partners and Ealing Council children’s centres.

Methodologies employed to gather that information included:

- Face-to-face interviews which were conducted at all 27 children’s centres, with some centres being visited more than once - 385 people attended
- Two additional specific consultation sessions for 40 parents whose children had special educational needs
- Surveys were available for completion either online or in paper copy – 1,820 surveys were completed (including 5,375 written comments)
- Individual testimonials were encouraged to give participants the opportunity to tell their personal experience of the impact of children’s centres on them and their children
- There were three independently organised petitions initiated by local people to demonstrate the extent of the concern in their area about proposed changes to Ealing’s children’s centres provision.

Face-to-face interviews

Face-to-face interviews were conducted by an external consultant, an independent social worker with over 40 years experience working with children and families, and an interim member of staff with extensive knowledge of mental health services and who has previously worked in the area of public health for the NHS for 35 years. Both were new to Ealing children’s centres.

A programme of consultation meetings was developed and advertised at each of the 27 children’s centres with additional meetings arranged to meet demand. Interviews were conducted either individually or in groups, depending on the number of people who wanted
to take part. The consultants usually visited each centre together to conduct the interviews but because of the demand, on some occasions, they visited the centres separately with assistance provided by staff from the Ealing Early Years Service. Centres were included in planning the meetings to enable as many parents as possible to attend. The parents and carers who used each centre were aware of when the consultation was taking place and many made a special effort to be there, even if it wasn’t a day they usually attended. Each visit lasted between one to three hours depending on numbers and the schedule of each centre. Some of those who took part travelled long distances to ensure their views were included in the consultation.

In addition to visiting the children’s centres throughout Ealing, there was a separate consultation session at Perceval House with a selection of parents who attended an ongoing support group for parents of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Another session was held with parents who were involved in the Parents of Ealing Self-help Training Scheme (PESTS) at one of the children’s centres that specialises in providing help for children with special needs. These parents have either used the services of children’s centres in the past or have children who currently attend.

It was a priority to ensure that every individual who expressed an interest in putting their point of view across had an opportunity to do so. English was not the first language of a significant number of those who were interviewed, in these cases, it was arranged for their comments to be interpreted wherever possible.

Some of the interviews lasted only a few minutes, some took well over half an hour. Some individuals wanted to speak privately, others were happy to participate in group sessions or during activities with their children alongside. Notes were made of the key points arising from each interview.

For many of the parents and carers this was the first time they had ever expressed an opinion on anything to someone they perceived as ‘official’. Some were quite reticent about speaking for fear that they would ‘say something wrong’ or not ‘have the right words’ to get their views across accurately. Although this form of information gathering may seem routine to many, for a number of the parents and carers who participated in the consultation it was a daunting experience. Some who had promised to attend were not confident enough to make themselves available for interview on the day of the consultation.

The key questions that were included in each interview were:

- What children’s centre services do you value the most?
- Which services make the biggest difference to you and your family?
- How do you think things could be improved? Do you have any ideas/innovations to suggest?
- Do you think that some people (or groups) would be worse off than others with the proposed changes e.g. children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND),
families living in particular localities, fathers, pregnant women and new mothers or particular communities?

A total of 385 adults were interviewed. The majority of people spoken to were parents and carers, including many grandparents, plus a small number of childminders.

At some centres, interviews were also conducted with children and young people who had attended the children’s centres when they were younger. A small number of older children took part.

Contemporaneous notes were made of each interview at every consultation meeting and subsequently collated under the following themes; Safe place in the community, Reducing isolation, Whole system approach (no wrong door), Acceptance leading community cohesion, Early identification of need and vulnerability, Support for mental health and well-being. The full record of this information is available as an appendix.

Survey (online and paper copy)

Participants were encouraged to complete a survey either online or in written form. The survey questionnaire form is available as an appendix and consists of 29 questions about the respondent’s views on the proposed children’s centres strategy 2019-2022.

Many participants said that they found the phrasing of the questions asked in the survey confusing. They were unsure about how to answer without making a mistake concerning what they intended their reply to mean. One question, reportedly the most confusing, (Question 2) was modified midway through the consultation process by the authors of the survey but generally it was not a survey that respondents found easy to understand. The length was also described as ‘daunting’ by many participants.

Individual testimonials

Testimonials received from individuals who wanted to express a more detailed, personal view about what the services provided by their children’s centre meant to them. Some of the sentiments expressed in these testimonials include;

- I would agree you need to offer current services at the above 7 centres but not at the expense of others which may have to close
- I am scared and worried about how my family will be affected by the proposals
- The 7 children's centres are not accessible to the parents and children of North Greenford.
- I feel that to remove services from the other centres will have a very negative impact on the community and the development of the younger children within
our area. We use Islip Manor on more than a weekly basis and have done since my son was born, my son absolutely loves attending groups and he is developing above his age and I believe this is due to learning opportunities they have provided him with.

All the children’s centres are vital within the community, providing a network for mums, dads and carers of children. They offer vast educational opportunities to the children who attend and support all areas of their development. The support and network provided to parents and carers is crucial as they relieve feelings of isolation and improve their mental health and well being. Cut backs hence would be a false economy!

I use Acton Park, John Perryn and North Ealing children’s centres and believe that these have done great things for community cohesion and for parents in need. I believe that they should be given a chance to continue.

I strongly agree cos I’m currently using two of these children’s centres for my son who is on the spectrum and needs all the help he can get!!! However I strongly disagree with your proposals to close some of them!!! Have you not seen the number of kids with high needs in our borough?! These kids don’t get the appropriate support as it is!!! What's going to happen to them!!!

There may be good reason to keep these centres on full programmes - I object to Old Southall not being covered by them - 1 Southall based CC (Grove) is not enough for such a highly densely populated and deprived area. Families in Old Southall frequently struggle to travel further than their immediate surroundings and most have no idea where Grove Children’s Centre is or how to find it

I have the closest link to Perivale Children’s Centre. They helped and supported me in more ways than ever. They helped me identify my children’s needs as all three of my children have a confirmed diagnosis of autism. They helped me seek support and were there throughout the process. I still remain very close with the centre staff and support them whenever I can.

If you are going to close centres how do you intend to reach communities in local areas around the borough?? Rather than closing - new strategies need to come in to place with regards to how you reach out and encourage families to attend. Families NEED this type of service. It is essential for healthy families.

They are all safe so it’s good but we also need the other 11 which are proposed to close to run so the children all over that place get to go and learn and enjoy.

These are too far for me to travel with 2 young children. I do not drive and will struggle on a bus and will have to pay.
I go to Islip manor CC with my 6 months old daughter and we enjoy all the activities for the babies. It is nice to have the health visitor there. We are well looked after also I think to make any changes would be a big mistake. To me it is important to maintain the status quo in each centre because otherwise it would become overcrowded.

Petitions

Although not an official part of the consultation process, several local individuals chose to circulate petitions to register concern about the impact of the proposed changes to children’s centre provision in their area. Three petitions were circulated and had 902 signatures.

The Demographic Context of Ealing’s Children’s Centres

Income deprivation affecting children (IDACI)

According to IDACI 2015, 23% of the borough’s child population lived in income-deprived families. Analysis at ward level indicates that Ealing still has comparatively high levels of income deprivation affecting children as compared to wards in other local authorities, with 91% (or 21 out of 23) of wards placed in the most deprived five deciles in England, of which 13% fall in the 10% most deprived wards nationally. e.g. children’s centres located in South Acton and Cleveland Wards support families in areas where over 55% of all children are affected by income deprivation.

In 2018/19 there were nearly 16000 families who accessed children’s centre services. Children’s centre data indicates 46% of those families who accessed children’s centres who lived in Ealing were living in the top 30% most deprived areas of Ealing as identified by IDACI. This is illustrated in the chart below.
Increasing child poverty

After a steady decline, child poverty in Ealing is now increasing. In 2016 the Ealing average was 17.6% (England av.17.0%) In 2017, the Campaign to End Child Poverty projected a significant increase in child poverty averages to: Before housing costs 20.6%. After housing costs 31.4%.

The Network of Children’s Centres in Ealing

There is variation in children’s centres across the borough. A number of the centres are large purpose-built resources, some of them opened originally as part of the SureStart initiative 15 years ago. Some are smaller and less well-appointed. Others have developed within community centres, extended from nursery schools or play centres in parks. Two are integrated into primary schools and located on the same campus. Others are stand-alone buildings that were linked mainly to the local community rather than specifically to educational facilities. Some are located in the middle of residential areas that are themselves very different. The majority are in deprived areas with many dwellings of multiple occupation and whole families living in one room with no outside space. A smaller number are in mixed or affluent areas of predominantly owner occupation, though often disguising hidden need and temporary housing.

Some centres are on main roads with good service by public transport. Others are in neighbourhoods marooned by railway lines, busy roads and industrial estates that offered little or no access to buses or trains outside the area and where parents reported that even walking to the centre posed hazards to mothers with buggies and toddlers in tow.

Ethos Underpinning Ealing’s Children’s Centres

Inclusivity is one of the key characteristics that permeates the culture of children’s centres in Ealing. The sense of belonging and acceptance based on the commonality of being the parents of very young children was mentioned at virtually every consultation session. This was especially true for the parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities. Not only did they feel that their children were welcomed into the children’s centre community but also that they were helped to feel ‘normal’ and not defined by their child’s condition.

As parents with disabled children we have no other safety net, for ourselves or for our children, apart from the children’s centres

No matter where the centres were located or the range of services provided there were several themes that emerged repeatedly throughout the consultation that embodied the ethos that was the foundation in the operation of all 27 children’s centres in Ealing.
Themes emerging from the Consultation:

There were 1,820 surveys completed and returned. The key themes, in addition to those highlighted below, are:

- the consistent positive feedback on quality of services provided by Ealing’s children’s centres
- not to close the respondents’ local centre
- not to maintain or enhance some centres at the expense of others - keep all centres open
- the difficulties of access – travel and costs if local centres close
- the impact on remaining services – not enough capacity within remaining centres to meet increased need
- the range of services that different centres provide including those for older children and young people that build on the early years services at some centres

Acceptance

Leading to community cohesion through a strong, diverse and fair community

Many parents said that they did not feel judged by anyone when they were at the children’s centres. Some described coming to the children’s centre and feeling extreme apprehension because they perceived themselves as a ‘bad mother’ because: their child wouldn’t sleep, they were struggling with breast feeding, their child wasn’t speaking as much as other children or they were exhausted and didn’t think they could go on. It took some parents many failed attempts before they could even walk through the door, such was the depth of their low self-esteem. Other parents may have had successful, responsible careers before having children but were now living in a completely different world and facing isolation and uncertainty in adjusting to this new role.

What they all experienced was a sense of common cause with other parents who were going through the same things regardless of class, culture or language differences and the benefit of access to practical help and knowledgeable support from staff.

There is a sense of community. A sense of belonging. You can ask anything. Sometimes you don’t even need to ask they can see you are struggling.

Other parents give you encouragement and advice. I am quite isolated and lonely and I had a lot of problems breastfeeding. I got the help I needed without feeling judged.

I can honestly say that the only real joy in my life is this place.

This place is a lifeline for me...they are my family.
Here no one cares whether you are white or black or what religion you are or how poor or rich you are - you are a parent and they just want to help you.

Ealing children’s centres services are provided through partnerships who bring funded services to our local community. For example East London Advanced Technology Training (ELATT) responded to this consultation highlighting the role Ealing children’s centres play in meeting shared objectives;

Unlike colleges and other organisations in the area our funding allows us to provide childcare for the mums we support, without which these women are not able to study anywhere. Running the classes within children’s centres allows us to provide crèches for the children while their mums study.

The aim of our projects is to help women integrate in the community, learn English, move closer towards the job market, find jobs and volunteering opportunities. This is invaluable support for already marginalised groups and offering a crèche alongside enables us to be as inclusive as possible.

No ‘wrong door’

Through a whole system approach providing the right service at the right time

The range of skills and services that children’s centres offered were impressive. Many of the staff members have worked at their centre for a long time and have built up an invaluable range of knowledge about local services and who to contact for help with other needs. Also parents praised the expertise of staff in observing children whose behaviour and development indicated that they may need additional help with speech or referral for assessment of other conditions such as autism, hearing impairment or tongue-tie that had been missed in brief consultations with GPs or other health professionals.

My son had speech problems; I come from a bilingual family. I needed guidance and I got it. I have seen so much improvement in my son.

Children’s centre staff were described as having a ‘can do’ attitude. They were considered to be a trusted source of advice and support for problems common to many new parents such as breast feeding, weaning, sleeping routines and toilet training. But parents often came to them for help on other matters such as housing issues, benefits, immigration status, domestic abuse and fears for the safety of their children. Many saw the staff they had come to know and value at the children’s centre as a more trusted and approachable source of help than statutory services.

In addition to observational skills regarding children, staff members were described as being knowledgeable in identifying parental mental health problems such as post-natal depression and were able to put mothers in touch with services that could assist them at an early stage.
I was depressed since my baby of six months, and nothing gave me any joy. When I went to the GP he told me I was depressed but did not help me. Here they helped me. They gave me some respite from being exhausted with everything. Everything was getting on top of me. I was really at a very bad point of desperation, in fact, I did not think that anything could get any better ever. There were honestly times when I could have taken my life. I did try. If it was not for the staff here I think I would not be here. They saw my pain and helped me in every way they could. I was referred to a therapist. They welcomed me with open arms and so did the other parents. No one judged me, no one told me I was a bad mother. They were kind and supportive. I cannot explain to you what they did for me. There is honestly no where I could go to get this help. I want other parents to have this chance. They gave me my life back. I don’t have any family. This is my family without the centre I would be alone.

Parents said their need to learn about entitlements, benefits, assessments and sources of support usually comes at a time when they are sleep deprived and reeling from the upheaval of having a baby. Just getting out of the house was described as a major achievement and made all the more demanding if there were other children in the family who need attention.

The staff are so helpful they helped me gain funding for a nursery place. They gave me useful information when I needed it. I didn’t have a clue, staff helped me become a mum. I was entitled to things I didn’t know, it was so hard to give the children what they needed. The children in need funding really helped body, mind and soul. I can really see the difference in my children’s development.

Many parents said how much they valued having access to the services they needed all located at the children’s centre. If the service wasn’t there, the staff were usually able to tell them what to do, who to speak to and how to find their way through the system.

Having the health visitors on site is really useful- and helpful to the parents. There is nothing else like this here, where would they go?

New parents described how having a baby introduced them to a professional network and complex system of services they never knew existed. In addition to monitoring the health and development of the child through midwife and health visiting assessments there may be other procedures to manage that are completely unfamiliar such as housing, benefits and nationality status. If the child is also found to have special educational needs and/or a disability the system becomes even more complicated to navigate.

My son is autistic, I make sure I attend every session- I got the help I needed from the children’s centre but if I had not come here I would not have got the help I needed. The staff here have helped me with all the paperwork. There is no way I could have done it on my own. I have come today to just tell you the story of how amazing the staff here are.
Early Identification of need and vulnerability
Helping young people to achieve their potential

Having a baby was also a catalyst for other needs to come to the surface that may not have been so urgent in the past. The stress in families caused by adjusting to life with a new baby can cause a parent to seek help with domestic abuse that they may not have disclosed before. Incipient psychiatric problems or the emotional/hormonal changes caused by the birth itself and early stages of motherhood can make this a time of precarious mental health that benefits from early recognition and treatment. Parents with limited literacy or English may seek ways of addressing these matters once they have a child to consider.

Several members of staff described parents who confided in them about worries regarding domestic abuse, although the parents themselves were understandably guarded in sharing some of these experiences at the consultation session. However, one mother did say that she was fearful of her child’s father and the centre workers helped her to be re-housed so he could not find her.

Many of the centres offered clinical appointments with health professionals to monitor and address the needs of both child and parent in a place and at a time that meant there was usually good attendance at sessions. One of the perinatal mental health workers commented that the attendance rate for appointments at the children’s centre was usually at least 75% and often if the appointment couldn’t be kept prior notice was given. She said this was much better than the rate for this client group for appointments made in other community facilities.

Parents said they valued the willingness of children’s centre staff to ‘go the extra mile’ in being available when needed. This was particularly true for mothers who were experiencing difficulty in establishing breastfeeding who often needed help and needed it now from someone in whom they had confidence. Many said they would have given up breastfeeding if it hadn’t been for particular individuals on the children’s centre staff. One mother described herself as ‘nearly psychotic through lack of sleep’ because she was having trouble breastfeeding and her baby wouldn’t settle. In desperation she phoned the children’s centre and their breastfeeding specialist met her there even though the centre had already closed. The mother said she would never forget that day and the help she had.

Some parents who were adjusting to the care of a child with special educational needs commented on how much they valued being able to access the experienced advice and support of children’s centre staff when they needed it most.

*The children’s centre staff arranged a meeting on the day my child was diagnosed with autism to sort out provision for him. It would have taken months/years otherwise.*

*As we are located in a deprived area most of our clients come from low income homes making travel an issue for them as finances are tight.*
Many parents described how bringing their children to socialise with other children and take part in activities at the centre made them more ready to attend nursery and helped them to derive maximum benefit from their subsequent school experience.

*My eldest didn’t attend a children’s centre and isn’t doing as well in school now as his younger brothers who did go. He doesn’t have the same roots under his tree that they do.*

Parents reported that their children’s centre/s supported their children’s socialisation, stimulation and physical activity (especially for the many families who have no access to outside space at home). Parents’ responses highlighted how early integration with youngsters from different cultures and with children who had a range of developmental needs are experiences that only places such as children’s centres can provide.

*If we didn’t come here my children and me would not have the social aspect, the children have fun, and we both make friends. All my friends are from the children’s centre as I was new to the area with a 9-month-old, how else do you meet people?*

Parents appreciated the role of children’s centres in improving their own well-being and confidence in caring for their children.

*I didn’t know anything about being a mum, nor did my husband. I didn’t know who else I could talk to. I didn’t feel comfortable asking my mother-in-law or anyone at home but you can ask anything here and they will help you and they have health experts too.

*My child has communication problems and he couldn’t speak. They arranged speech and language therapy and taught me how to help my son and that in the end helped me too.*

Most of the parents mentioned that the staff take an active interest in how the child is getting on and become involved in sessions themselves rather than just letting the parents ‘get on with it’. They know the children by name and seem to have a personal interest in their welfare.

Parents and carers described sessions at the children’s centre as ‘the highlight of the day’ for their child as well as for themselves and said how much their child misses going to the centre when it is the weekend or not their day to attend or when the centre sometimes has to turn them away because they are at capacity.

A number of older children were interviewed who attended Play Service sessions based at children’s centres. Most of these children and young people had attended children’s centres when they were younger and still regard them as a place of safety and security that has played an important part in their experience of growing up.

*I have been coming here since I was a young child. My mum did the English course here... they are always welcoming and kind, it’s like a massive family with all the children and the parents, of all ages (10 year-old boy).*
A Safe Place in the Community

Keeping young people safe

Parents at virtually every children’s centre consultation session said that this was a place where they felt safe. Parents appreciated the high standards of safety within the centre itself, allowing their babies and toddlers to be in an open environment where they have a safe place to play. This was sometimes a facility that they did not have at home.

I feel safe here, my son is happy. I look after my son, I cannot afford day care. My wife works. We live in one room and in bed and breakfast.

This is the only place I feel safe with the baby. I can breastfeed comfortably. My husband encourages me to come. I don’t feel confident enough to go into public places.

I would not be allowed to go anywhere else, my in-laws wouldn’t let me. This place is a lifeline I could not manage without it.

Children’s centres that are located near or within parks have become a focal point for ensuring the security of those using the park when the children’s centre is open. A group of three mothers who have used their local park for several years described how they have felt increasingly uneasy about the number of older adolescents in the park whom they perceive as menacing and causing them to fear for the safety of themselves and their children. It is only when the children’s centre is open that they now feel able to use the park without worry because there is a place to go if there is trouble. They no longer use the park when the centre is closed.

Children and parents feel safe here (in the park) when the centre is open. I do not come here if it is not open, I do not feel safe.

A number of the older children who attended the children’s centres when they were younger said it is still a source of security, support and safety for them.

It is a really good thing coming here and I feel safe. If you need anything you can just come in and ask, they know me here from when I was a child so I feel comfortable here. You can also talk about anything you are worried about and it is okay. This is a special place like home, like a family.

I think I learned to behave in a decent way when I came here with my friends.

I was getting into trouble and bunking off school as a teenager, I was desperate to get away from my family and the bad influence they had on me. Coming to the children’s centre to volunteer was a life changing opportunity for me. It kept me away from other problems in my life. I now have child care qualifications and a job at the nursery here.
A young women who had come to the centre from the age of two, not speaking any English and with parents who were unable to support her, said that she found a ‘life support system’ in the children’s centre. They helped her learn English, helped with school work, with learning how to cook and sew and, in her words, taught her how to be ‘an independent and strong woman’. She is now doing a psychology degree. She said that so many children like her have become adults who can fit into society because of the children’s centres. For her, it was much more than a place for kids to play. She travelled two hours to come and take part in the consultation.

Ealing children’s centres work in partnerships with services that extend the age range of support to our local community, for example, youth work provided by Empowering Action and Social Esteem (EASE) responded to this consultation.

Our clubs also provide Gang Prevention Workshops, First Aid Workshops, Money Management Workshops and Mental Health Awareness Workshops just to name a few. Without these clubs our local teenagers would have nowhere that they can socialize with their friends in a safe environment which would leave them either isolated or with nothing to do but sit in the local parks. This often leads to them following the wrong crowds and getting themselves in trouble.

Reducing Isolation

Many of the people who participated in the consultation described the isolation they experienced in caring for infants and young children 24 hours a day. This was sometimes exacerbated by poverty, poor housing, language and cultural barriers, lack of family support and mental ill health. Even for parents who had more resources and social capital the journey of early parenthood frequently left them feeling alone and estranged from the life they had before. For parents of children with special needs this sense of isolation was often even more pronounced and required specialist resources from the children’s centre and the expert support from staff.

One mother of a child with learning disabilities described an incident at their first stay and play session, her child was playing with toys in the baby area that were meant for younger children. One of the other mothers suggested that the child play in another part of the room. The children’s centre worker observed this exchange and tactfully showed her and the child to the sensory room and took the other mother aside to explain the situation to her. The mother of the disabled child said:

Because they had my back I could be there for my child... they make us feel like normal parents.

I love this place. I am not from this country and it is very isolating being a mum. I have been coming since my baby was 19 weeks old. I could not afford to pay for anything. This has really reduced isolation for me. Giving me a reason to get dressed and out of the house.
My mum is very sick and she can’t really take us anywhere. She comes here only. She is in pain all of the time and used to be sad all the time until we came here. She doesn’t speak much English but has learned since she comes here, she can understand much more.

Another mother who has learning disabilities herself and has had several of her children removed from her care said that she never ‘spoke to strangers’ until coming to the children’s centre. She said it was:

The first time I felt ‘safe’ enough to open up and talk with other mums.

There was a strong sense of community and of parents looking out for each other. An example was cited during an interview with a member of staff of a very young, new mother living with her baby in temporary accommodation. The children’s centre workers were aware of her troubled background but of course did not divulge this information. The other parents that were in groups with her were aware that she was struggling and reached out to her to make her feel included and supported. This appeared to make a big difference to her confidence in herself as a mother and reduced her isolation. For this mother the children’s centre offered a much more acceptable way of receiving help, rather than through statutory services.

A number of male carers took part in the consultation, including a gay couple who had recently adopted two boys under the age of five. The men commented that they found the staff and other parents/carers at the children’s centres to be very welcoming and supportive. One of the adoptive fathers said he found the attitude of children’s centre staff to his family to be inclusive and very helpful in his adjustment to parenthood. This was a very different reception to the one he experienced at the private nursery that his children had attended previously.

The teachers are amazing here so helpful and kind. I am a full time dad and I love it here. It gets me out of the house, it is hard being a full time dad, because mostly it is mums but here I feel welcome. It is easy to park here. This has made such a difference to my life, my wife works so this is really important for my son and me. Coming here has really improved his behaviour.

If I didn’t come here I wouldn’t go anywhere.

Support for Mental Health and Wellbeing

A key feature of the consultations was the strength of feeling from the people who took part in the process. They spoke with urgency and a real sense of despair that the services they received at children’s centres may be lost or diminished. Many had never participated in an exercise like this before but overcame their reticence to be sure their voice was heard. Others made a special effort to attend the session at inconvenience to themselves in their determination to make their contribution.
If this centre closed it would be so bad for so many people - the children, young ones, older ones and families. How would someone like me get support? Where would I go?

It’s silly to close such a good place. I would be so lonely and stuck inside.

It is a lifeline for parents and grandparents. It is such a small place but filled with good things.

There was some dissatisfaction expressed by a few interviewees about aspects of how their children’s centre could be improved. A few mentioned that they thought the toys should be changed over more frequently. Comments were made about the centres being better publicised so more people knew about them, the programmes they offered and their times of opening. Others thought that better use could be made of the buildings by renting out space to other organisations to increase income. Some children’s centres are already doing this.

There was a mixed response to the suggestion that a small fee or donation be requested to attend sessions. Although many were willing to help financially if it meant not having to reduce the service, for others this would simply not be possible and would perhaps be divisive.

There was concern about the frequency with which some of the children’s centres had to turn people away because they were at capacity for a particular activity. Some children’s centres have resorted to a booking system so that parents now have to sign up for services that were once operated on a drop-in basis. Others wanted more opening times in the afternoon for children who napped in the morning (or vice versa). Most parents with older children valued having activities available for them after school and during the holidays, especially as some other services such as youth clubs have been reduced.

There were emotional stories about men and women who had nothing who found the children’s centres to be their source of survival in time of need. One woman especially wore a particular jumper to the consultation session because it had been given to her by the children’s centre when she needed it.

I came here in 2015. I had been moved here. I had no clothes and no food. The centre worker registered my child. She even helped me get food and clothing. Nothing is too much for them. They helped me with my immigration application. They found the right person to help me. They always asked me if everything is ok, if I needed any more help.

Without them I would not have survived. My family and I owe everything to the centre. The helped me to grow. I want others who, like me, need help to get the help they need from you. The jumper I’m wearing they gave me in 2015 when I had nothing. I will always treasure it.

They still help me, they still push me to learn and go on courses. To improve my English. Every time I come here they welcome me with open arms.
A single father told his experience of using the children’s centre

When my wife died the staff supported me. My daughter was only 10 days old. I could get no help from anywhere, I have no family and no friends. We were new to the area. I did not speak English. At that time, I did not speak English at all. It’s not just about me and getting the help that I got. It’s about all the other parents and grandparents that need the centre support. What about the next generation? I know my case was unusual, but you see so many parents asking for support.

If they can’t help me, they find someone that can. It is so hard when you don’t speak English. I would beg you on my knees not to close any centre down. When life almost defeats you, where are you to go? What do you do? When we are in trouble as parents and feeling low.

There really is no place to go especially if you don’t have any money. We as parents get angry and frustrated and the children suffer.

The staff here always pay attention, they always help you. They are like a gift. They give me ‘Seehara’ (to lean on for support) for me. They don’t judge. The only thing they do is care and support.

This place, the children’s centre, is a community. Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Hindi, everyone is welcome. They helped me to complete complicated forms. They helped me to find a better place to live and with clothes for the children and sometimes food.

Another mother described the influence of the children’s centre on improving her mental health:

Because so much has happened to me, I too am depressed. I am not mentally ill, I don’t think. I just think in the end I am human and can’t cope sometimes. I have been in a mental hospital because I was so stressed and couldn’t cope anymore. It was because I was exhausted, emotionally and physically. I had a breakdown. Since I have been coming here I am able to manage, and some light has finally come into my life. Light for my son and me. I don’t want to kill myself anymore. They have given me strength.

Phrases such as ‘this place is a lifeline for me’, ‘the people at the children’s centre are my family’, ‘where else would I go if I didn’t come here’ were used frequently during the course of the consultation. One consultation was held in a children’s centre that had closed down for nine months and had only been open again for about three weeks when the session took place. Families said they found it difficult to be without the services of the children’s centre, many had felt isolated and low in spirits and there had been a deterioration in the behaviour of their children. They said that it was taking time to re-build the trust and networks that had been established within the community, but there was a sense of relief that families who used the children’s centre had regained what they thought they had lost when the children’s centre closed.
In Summary

The 385 people interviewed were very concerned about the potential loss of any centres across the borough and the potential for other families not being able to access the support they and their families have received from Ealing’s children’s centres in the future.

Although the 1,820 people who responded to the online and paper survey were broadly in agreement 68% with the proposal to keep the main 7 children’s centres and enhance the 9 linked centres 69%; they were significantly in disagreement 68% with the proposal to do this at the expense of the remaining 11 children’s centres.

The 5,375 comments included within the survey added to the voice of the 385 people interviewed reinforcing the key reasons why the reorganisation, potential loss of services or closure of some of these 11 centres was of great concern. They valued the centres for the acceptance of all, as parents or carers first, the ‘no wrong door’ to access much needed help and support at the right time, through the early identification of need and vulnerability; helping children achieve their potential and feel safe, in safe places in the community, reducing isolation and supporting the mental health and wellbeing of parents and through this supporting their children’s development.

They were worried about not being able to access reorganised services due to distance including the cost and availability of transport; the capacity of the proposed 7 main and 9 linked centres to provide more services for the increased demand; and the loss of the range of local services and expertise.

It was difficult to select just one comment to summarise the strength of feeling among people who were consulted regarding the possible threat to the existing service provision offered by the network of children’s centres in Ealing. But the words of this parent spoke for many:

All parents deserve to have this chance. It would be devastating. It would be a tragedy. I would plead to anyone and everyone not to do this. Allow us women to have an outlet. Isolation kills you. This would be like a nail in the coffin. It doesn't matter what background you are this place is like a melting pot. It's a place that brings community cohesion. This centre has saved me, without it I don't know where I would be. I don't even know if I would be here at all.

Gretchen Precey
Independent Social Worker

13 June 2019
Key extracts from the online and paper survey ‘Have your say on the future of Ealing’s children’s centres 2019-22’

The full survey results (285 pages) can be provided for limited circulation on request.

**How often are Children’s Centres Used?**

According to the Children’s Centres Consultation, both from people interviewed and people who responded online there were variations in how the centres were perceived and used. Some of the parents/carers used a number of children’s centres each week, depending on how the time of the activity offered fit in with their child’s schedule and the range of programmes that were offered. Some of these parents/carers also had a mixed economy of children’s centre sessions and private provision that they paid for themselves. Other parents, for reasons of either practicality or familiarity or financial circumstances, only ever attended one children’s centre and identified very strongly with this place as a fixed point in their weekly routine and wouldn’t think of going anywhere else.

*It would be very difficult to go elsewhere as you get to know the staff and develop trust.*

*The centre is more than a community resource, they are a family.*

*This was the place I could find myself again.*

The Children’s Centres Consultation Online responses showed that 56% of respondents use the children’s centres on a weekly basis. The chart provides a breakdown of the use of children’s centres by online respondents.

![How often do you use Children's Centres](chart.png)
How are Children’s Centres Used?

Most centres offer a range of activities depending on staff expertise and local need. Some focus on the need of the baby or toddler who attends.

*The baby massage really helped me bond with my baby.*

*My son has learned to use a knife and fork here, he didn’t know before.*

Other activities aim to develop the potential and confidence of the parent which in turn strengthens their capacity to care for their child.

*I have attended ESOL classes here and now I have the courage to speak to people.*

*I like the cooking classes and healthy eating. I have lost some weight. I feel better about myself.*

The Children’s Centres Consultation showed that children’s centres currently provide a wide range of services. The consultation wanted to find out why services are important to users of children’s centres and how users would prioritise services delivered at children’s centres. Below are the results to these questions.

**14: To help us understand which services are most important to parents and carers, please select the top five services that you think should be prioritised for delivery at our children’s centres.**

![Children's centres services by respondents priorities](chart)

Report from Ealing Children’s Centre Consultation
15: Please tell us why you picked the above services as your top five choices.

This question was answered by 923 respondents. Below are some of the responses for this question.

*Everything listed above is important. But these 5 services are the ones that really helped me. Without the perinatal mental health services, I would not be alive today. The quality of the services here in Ealing is world-best, and the council should be proud of them instead of cutting them.*

*Very hard to pick but these services are what have helped me as a new mother. The support we’ve been receiving is absolutely invaluable – it is just so important to receive support, and not having to rely on poor advice from the internet etc.*

*The most important things that children’s centres provide are integration and social skills. All kids from various backgrounds come and play. People from lower income can enjoy toys. Parents get opportunity to meet other parents and share/learn about parenting.*

*We found the support of staff and other parents invaluable at the stay and play groups we used. The activities were brilliant for our children and prepared them for nursery. The speech and language support was great and reduced pressure on local NHS services, allowing us to access services close to home. Children’s centres are a vital stepping stone in allowing women to return to work.*

*These are essential services required by local people in their local environment, where families know if they need help and support they will receive a five star welcome by staff that are committed to offering support and services to any family in need.*

*Feeding and SLT support is critical to have in as many places as possible to be easily accessible to new parents not able to travel far. Weigh clinics etc are also important but I have been to some in health centres, churches etc so maybe not critical to be in a children’s centre. Stay and play is used a lot. SEND is already under-funded and we can’t afford to lose any more.*

*These services are important to me and my baby and I cannot afford to pay for these elsewhere. The help I have received is so very valuable, I wouldn’t be able to take care of myself and my baby without them.*

*These are the services I need and supports me raising my child.*

*They are the most important for overall development and hopefully giving children a better future.*
The chart below summarises the responses into 12 broad themes.