

# Report to Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee

17 June 2022

## Update on Early Help Asset Plan

### Report by Assistant Director of Property and Assets

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#### Summary

The decision around the future of the Early Help service was taken in July 2021 [CAB02 21/22](#). Amongst other matters the decision approved that 41 Children and Family Centres and Youth/Find It Out Centres were surplus to service requirements. These centres were vacated and handed back to the Property and Assets team between September and December 2021.

The Assets team have worked on the options appraisal for each of the affected assets to determine the most appropriate way forward and the Early Help Asset plan is now at the final stages of implementation.

This report updates the Scrutiny Committee on progress with delivery of the plan.

#### Focus for Scrutiny

The committee should consider the detail included in this report and make any comments to the Cabinet Member and Assistant Director of Property and Assets.

Key lines of enquiry include:-

- That plans are in place, or being developed, for each of the vacated buildings,
- That consideration has been given to how vacated premises could be used by the community in future, subject to any usage restrictions, financial considerations or other constraints,
- That the Property Team are sufficiently resourced to manage the level and complexity of the changes required to council building assets,
- That local members are consulted and informed of proposals in a timely manner.

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#### 1.0 Background and context

1.1 The Assets team have been working on the Early Help Asset plan since the consultation on the future of Early Help went live in March 2021. During the consultation a number of parties registered their interest in the properties and these parties have been kept up to date as implementation of the plan has progressed.

1.2 Once the formal decision to redesign the service and declare the affected assets surplus to requirements was taken in July 2021, the asset team carried out an appraisal of all the options for the properties affected by the decision. All legal and financial restrictions on the use of each property was firstly considered.

- 1.3 Due consideration was given to a range of options including social, community and environmental use. The priority was to establish if there were any alternative West Sussex County Council services which could use the property. Options were considered in the context of the objective to rationalise the estate in line with 'Our Council Plan 2021 to 2025' to *Make best use of resources* and the associated Key Performance Indicator 49, to reduce the square meterage of the Council's estate.

## **2 Update on Progress**

- 2.1 The Early Help Asset Plan is now in the final stages of delivery.
- 2.2 The options explored during the appraisal process included handing back leased property and disposing of freehold property. Income generating opportunities were also considered, including leasing out the properties. Generally, a solution for the whole of each property has been required as we no longer have the staffing resources in place to let out to casual hirers, part time users or run the properties on a community centre model.
- 2.3 During the consultation period, Public Health identified nine locations needed to continue to provide the Healthy Child Programme, commissioned from Sussex Community NHS Foundation Trust (SCFT). Seven centres were reserved for that purpose, with access for partial occupation to be negotiated at a further two.
- 2.4 Based on interest received during the consultation period, it was also considered if a Community Asset Transfer<sup>1</sup> lease was appropriate and viable.
- 2.5 The potential alternative use of each Children and Family Centre was largely constrained by the requirement to continue to use the properties in a way that complied with the Sure Start Grant used to construct or refurbish the buildings. This means that the centres must continue to be used predominantly for the delivery of services to Early Years age children (defined as under 5 years old). This requirement ruled out a large number of proposals from interested parties.
- 2.6 The total Sure Start Fund invested in the County Council assets, according to information from the Department for Education (DfE), is £18.4m. If a Local Authority proposes to change the use of the centres benefiting from the grant, the DfE can request a clawback of the grant. The DfE do accept applications from Local Authorities to defer the clawback of the Sure Start Grant where the Local Authority can demonstrate they intend to use the property for alternative uses which are still compliant with the grant terms. In some cases, where the grant was for minor refurbishment or equipment, the DfE can agree to waive the clawback completely. The Sure Start grant applies for 25 years from the date of the registration of the Children and Family Centre. In most cases the centres opened between 2008 and 2010, so we are about half-way through the period where the grant conditions still apply to the properties.
- 2.7 The team have been negotiating with the DfE to mitigate the risk of Sure Start clawback on each of the Children and Family Centres. Progress has been good and most of the grant has been deferred as we have been successful in reassuring the DfE that the intended use is for an alternative Sure Start compliant purpose. In a few cases the grant has been waived allowing us to

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<sup>1</sup> Community Asset Transfer is an established mechanism used to enable the community ownership and / or management of publicly owned land and buildings. More information is available on WSCC website. [Linked here](#)

hand-back leases and dispose of a small number of centres to produce a capital receipt to reinvest in council services. There is still risk that in possibly two cases the grant may need to be refunded to the Department for Education, where agreement cannot be reached on a future for the property that is compliant with the terms of the Sure Start funding.

- 2.8 Local Members were kept informed about the proposals for centres in their Division as the appraisal process progressed. Representations received were carefully considered and responded to. The outcome of the options appraisals were broadly supported and the context and constraints on the options available generally understood. Local Members have continued to be kept up to date as the plans have progressed and their input has been helpful and valued.
- 2.9 The Committee has previously raised concerns about the capacity of the Assets team to handle this work. Additional funding was provided to support the work of the Assets team; this included a project manager, and an estate surveyor. Recruitment was difficult, as the latter is a recognised hard to fill post. A project manager has been in post since November 2021. However, two part time estate surveyors have only been in post for some of this time.
- 2.10 A number of one-off and temporary property services costs have been incurred. Expenditure of £0.317m associated with project management, property clearance and holding was incurred in 2021/22, with further costs expected in 2022/23 as works continue on the disposal or re-assignment of affected buildings.
- 2.11 Additional support was provided by the Communities Team to help community groups and organisations displaced by the closures of the centres. They have helped sign post groups to alternative community locations and also helped support the process of selection of a preferred bidder for the three properties identified for Community Asset Transfer.
- 2.12 Completing the plan will take time as each property has its own individual circumstances, some of which are complex. In some cases, we need to wait for expiry of notice periods, finalise detailed lease hand-back and dilapidations negotiations, market opportunities and reach agreement on terms. In other cases, works will be required to properties to make them fit for the intended purpose. The team are anticipating some properties will remain vacant for some months whilst the plan is delivered.
- 2.13 The current position for each of the Assets is summarised below

<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Property</b> <i>CFC (Children and Family Centre)</i>
Disposal - producing a capital receipt to re-invest in council services - 3 properties	Footprints Crescent Road CFC Worthing (sold March 22) Little Footsteps CFC, Storrington (on market) Roffey CFC, Horsham (on market)

<p>Handback Lease to Freeholder or Superior Landlord - 5 properties</p>	<p>Sussex Downs CFC, Hurstpierpoint (Handed back Dec 21)</p> <p>Worthing Find It Out Centre (Handed back 21)</p> <p>Horsham Youth Centre, Hurst Road (Handed back April 22)</p> <p>Maybridge CFC Goring (Handed back -notice to expire Oct 22)</p> <p>Pulborough CFC (Handed back - notice to expire Sep 22)</p>
<p>Lease out to Third Party (subject to contract)</p> <p><i>In the case of former CFC's this is for Sure Start Compliant purposes only</i></p> <p>9 properties</p>	<p>Southwater CFC, Horsham (under offer)</p> <p>The Gattons CFC, Burgess Hill (under offer)</p> <p>Villages CFC, Yapton (under offer)</p> <p>Southbourne CFC (under offer)</p> <p>Selsey CFC, Chichester (on market)</p> <p>Thomas Bennett Youth Wing (temporary let)</p> <p>Billingshurst CFC (due diligence) (<i>with part to be made available for Healthy Child Programme delivery</i>)</p> <p>Southgate CFC, Crawley (due diligence)</p> <p>Petworth CFC (due diligence)</p>
<p>Identified for use or part use by Sussex Community NHS Foundation Trust for Healthy Child Programme delivery – in some cases subject to finalising agreements with superior landlords</p> <p>7 properties</p>	<p>Pound Hill CFC, Crawley (lease in place)</p> <p>Blackwells CFC, East Grinstead (tenancy in place)</p> <p>Felpham CFC, Bognor Regis (negotiations underway)</p> <p>Boundstone CFC at Nursery (subject to contract)</p> <p>Stepping Stones CFC, Southwick (subject to contract)</p> <p>Langley Green CFC, Crawley (subject to contract)</p> <p>Broadwater CFC at the Wave, Worthing (due diligence)</p>
<p>Returned to Former Use</p> <p>4 properties</p>	<p>Angmering CFC at the Library (part used by Midwifery Service)</p> <p>Findon Vale CFC at the Library</p> <p>East Grinstead CFC at the Library</p> <p>Crawley Find It Out Centre at Centenary House Crawley</p>
<p>Early Years / Nursery provision</p> <p>2 properties</p>	<p>Bognor CFC at the Nursery</p> <p>Horsham CFC at the Nursery</p>

<p>Identified for Community Asset Transfer</p> <p>3 properties</p>	<p>The Phoenix Centre, Bognor Regis</p> <p>The Bognor Find It Out Centre, Bognor Regis</p> <p>The Park Centre, Burgess Hill</p>
<p>Identified for alternative WSCC Service Use or Education Use</p> <p>8 properties</p>	<p>East Preston CFC</p> <p>Northgate CFC, Crawley</p> <p>Maidenbower CFC, Crawley</p> <p>Sidney West CFC offices, Burgess Hill (<i>with Hall subject to direct hiring arrangement for Healthy Child Programme delivery</i>)</p> <p>West Green Youth Centre, Crawley</p> <p>Langley Green Youth Centre, Crawley</p> <p>Adur Find It Out, Lancing</p> <p>Glyn Owen Centre, Worthing</p>

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**Background papers** - none