

Appendix 1 -Children’s Centres – Charging Consultation

The following report summarises findings from the consultation on the proposal to charge parents/carers for accessing some children’s centre activities. The survey was open from 9 June 2014 to 18 September 2014 and was hosted by the council’s Consultation Portal.

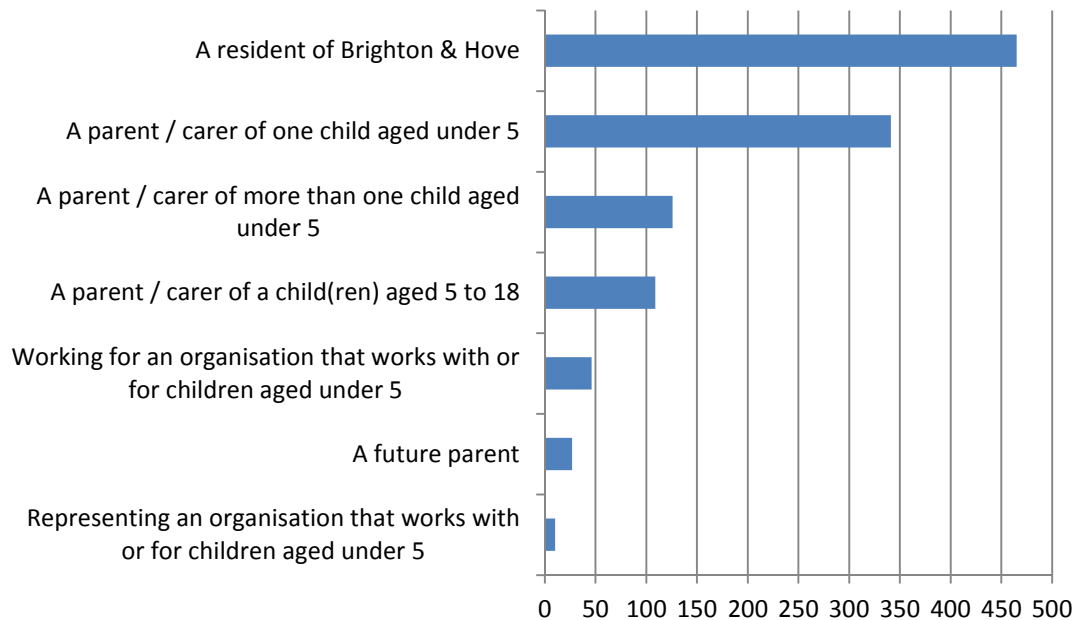
Parents were notified of the consultation by email, text, leaflets and discussion at children’s centres, and were able to respond either online or by completing a paper copy. Support was provided by centre staff to capture the views of parents who struggled to complete the questionnaire independently.

A total of 535 people responded to the consultation.

Who responded?

People were asked whether they were responding as a parent or an Early Years professional, and whether they were a resident of Brighton & Hove. The graph and table below shows the distribution of these categories. Respondents were able to categorise themselves as more than one option.

Number completing questionnaire



Category	Number completing questionnaire
A resident of Brighton & Hove	465
A parent / carer of one child aged under 5	341
A parent / carer of more than one child aged under 5	126
A parent / carer of a child(ren) aged 5 to 18	109
Working for an organisation that works with or for children aged under 5	46
A future parent	27
Representing an organisation that works with or for children aged under 5	10

465 out of 535 people declared that they were a resident of Brighton & Hove. It's not clear whether the remaining 70 people live outside of the area or chose not to declare this. Notification of the consultation was sent to all parents who had registered at a children's centre in the last 12 months, so it is possible that some of these families left the area and still chose to express their views.

Where did respondents live?

We asked people to provide their postcode so that it would be possible to map which children's centre catchment area respondents lived in.

Children's Centre Area	Respondents	Percentage
City View	43	10.12%
Conway Court	39	9.18%
Cornerstone	17	4.00%
Hangleton Park	39	9.18%
Hollingbury & Patcham	29	6.82%
Hollingdean	29	6.82%
Moulsecoomb	32	7.53%
Portslade	54	12.71%
Roundabout	27	6.35%
Tarner	39	9.18%
The Deans	34	8.00%
West Hove	21	4.94%
Out of Area	22	5.18%
Unknown	110	-
Total (excluding Unknown)	425	100%

The above table shows the distribution of responses across the city for those who provided a postcode. Response rates from each area are representative of the size of the under-5 population and the footfall for each centre.

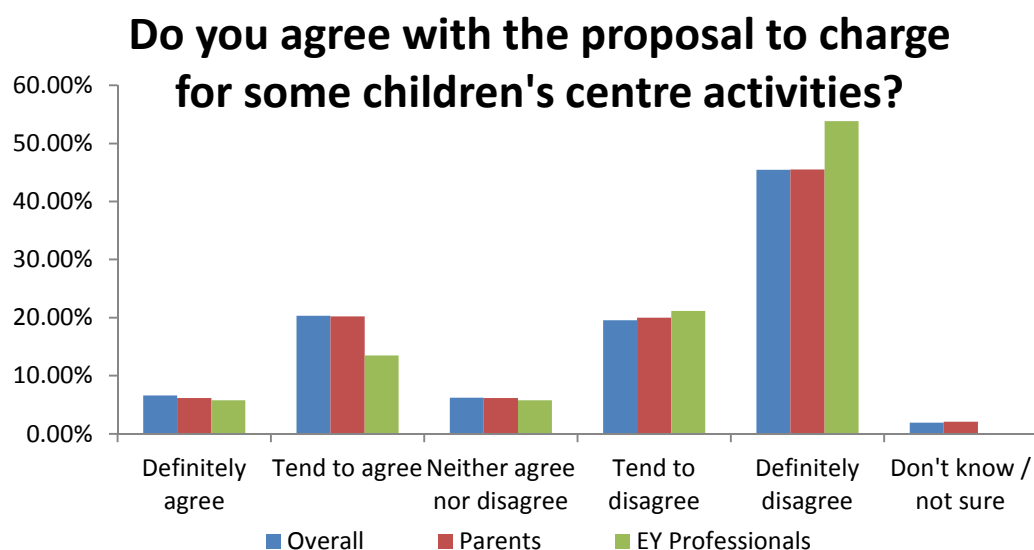
What did respondents think about the proposal to charge?

People were asked whether they agreed with the proposal to charge for some children’s centre activities given the context of budget constraints and a choice between paying for services or cutting services.

The table and graph below shows the overall response and the response of those who categorised themselves as parents or Early Years professionals.

	Overall	Parents	EY Professionals
Definitely agree	35 (6.6%)	30 (6.1%)	3 (5.8%)
Tend to agree	108 (20.3%)	99 (20.2%)	7 (13.5%)
Neither agree nor disagree	33 (6.2%)	30 (6.1%)	3 (5.8%)
Tend to disagree	104 (19.6%)	98 (20.0%)	11 (21.2%)
Definitely disagree	242 (45.5%)	223 (45.5%)	28 (53.9%)
Don't know / not sure	10 (1.9%)	10 (2.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Total	532	490	52

NB – The total number of Parents and EY Professionals responses do not equal the Overall responses because respondents could categorise themselves in more than one way, or not at all.



EY professionals tended to feel more strongly that charging for some children’s centre activities was a bad idea. Overall 26.9% of respondents agreed with the proposal, while 65.0% disagreed. The remaining 8.1% were unsure.

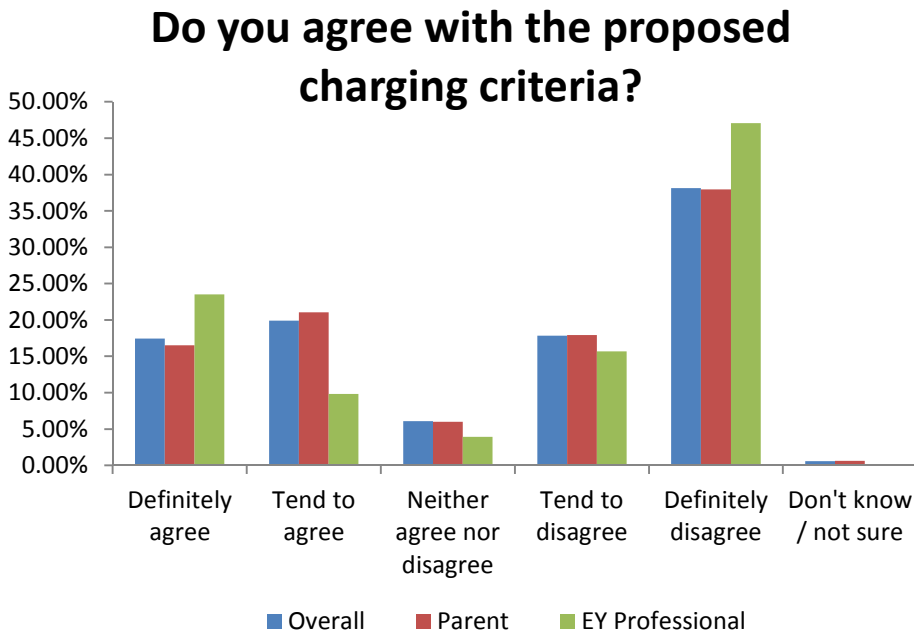
What did respondents think about the charging criteria?

Under proposals to charge for some children’s centre activities, not all families would have to pay. Those receiving out of work means tested benefits or Working Tax Credit with a maximum household income of £16,190, and children who are adopted, looked after by the local authority or disabled would still be able access all services for free. Respondents were asked whether they agreed with these charging criteria.

The table and graph below shows the overall response and the response of those who categorised themselves as parents or Early Years professionals.

	Overall	Parent	EY Professional
Definitely agree	92 (17.5%)	80 (16.49%)	12 (23.5%)
Tend to agree	105 (19.9%)	102 (19.92%)	5 (9.8%)
Neither agree nor disagree	32 (6.1%)	29 (6.07%)	2 (3.9%)
Tend to disagree	94 (17.8%)	87 (17.8%)	8 (15.69%)
Definitely disagree	201 (38.14%)	184 (38.1%)	24 (47.1%)
Don't know / not sure	3 (0.6%)	3 (0.6%)	0 (0.0%)
Total	527	485	51

NB – The total number of Parents and EY Professionals responses do not equal the Overall responses because respondents could categorise themselves in more than one way, or not at all.



EY Professionals have stronger opinions about the proposed charging criteria, but in general responses are comparable. Overall 37.38% agree with the proposed charging criteria, 55.98% disagree and 6.64% aren't sure.

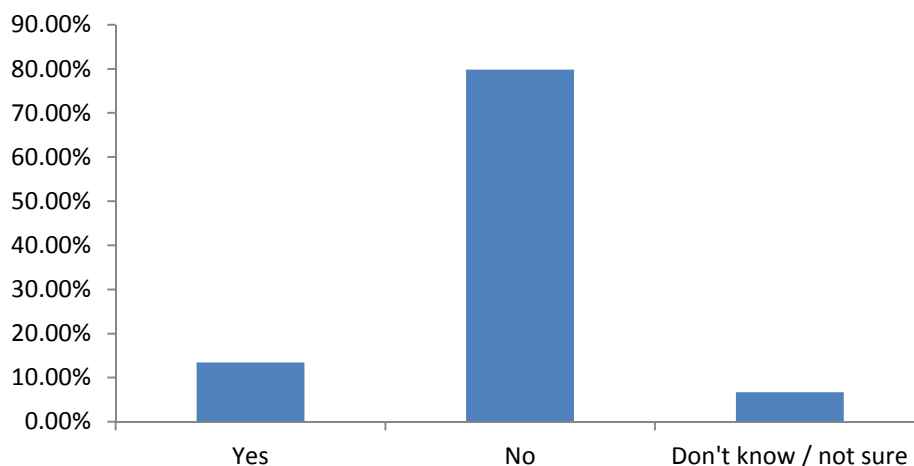
Who would qualify for free access?

The table and graph below show whether respondents think they would qualify for free access base on the proposed charging criteria.

Yes	No	Don't know / not sure	Total
66	392	33	491
13.44%	79.84%	6.72%	100.00%

In addition to those who were unsure about whether or not they would be charged, 44 respondents did not answer this question.

Would you qualify for free sessions?



It is clear from the above graph that far fewer respondents who responded to the questionnaire believe they would be eligible for free sessions compared to the estimation based on data from the Department of Work and Pensions.

A possible reason for the discrepancy is respondents' misunderstanding of the charging criteria. Presuming that everyone who was unsure or did not answer this question was eligible, 28.3% of respondents would be entitled to free sessions, which is closer to the estimate. It is also possible that some respondents who thought they would not be eligible are in fact entitled to free access. Alternatively, those who responded to the survey may not have been representative of the population and those who thought they would continue to receive free services did not respond.

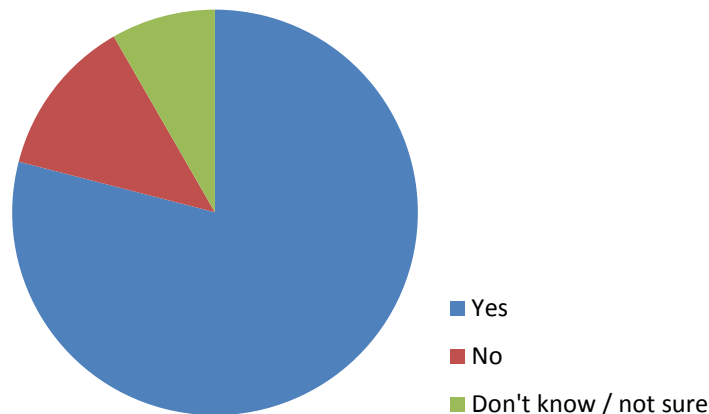
What did respondents think about exemption for children aged under one?

People were asked whether there should be an exemption on charging any child under the age of one as this is a key time for centres to engage with new parents. The table and graph below show what respondents thought of this proposed exemption.

Yes	No	Don't know / not sure	Total
418	67	44	529
79.02%	12.67%	8.32%	100.00%

In addition to those who were unsure about whether or not children aged under one should be entitled to free services, 16 did not answer this question.

Should children under the age of one receive free services?



There is a strong feeling that children under the age of one should not be charged for accessing children's centre services. There was no significant difference in opinion between parents and EY professionals on this question.

Children under the age of one represent approximately 20% of the total under-5 population. Presuming that 30% are already eligible to access children's centre services for free, exemption for all children under the age of one would increase the total number of families who can access centres for free to 44%. This would have a significant impact on any income generated, compounded by the fact that younger children access centres more regularly than older children (See [2014/15 Q1 Attendance Summary](#)).

How much should be charged?

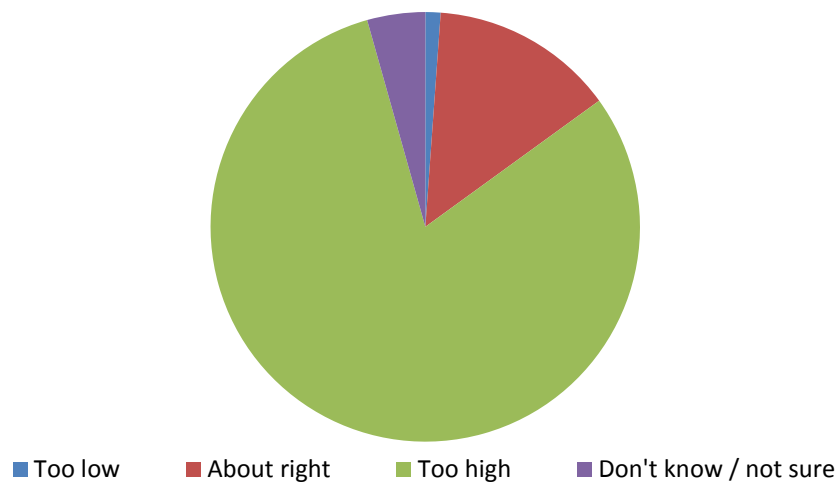
In order for charging to be financially viable, a flat rate of £3 per child, per session was proposed. This would generate enough income to cover the staffing and premises costs associated with universal drop-in groups.

People were asked whether they thought that this was a reasonable amount to charge. The table and graph below summarise their response.

Too low	About right	Too high	Don't know / not sure	Total
6	73	424	23	526
1.14%	13.88%	80.61%	4.37%	100.00%

In addition to the 23 respondents who were unsure about whether £3 was a reasonable charge, 19 did not answer this question.

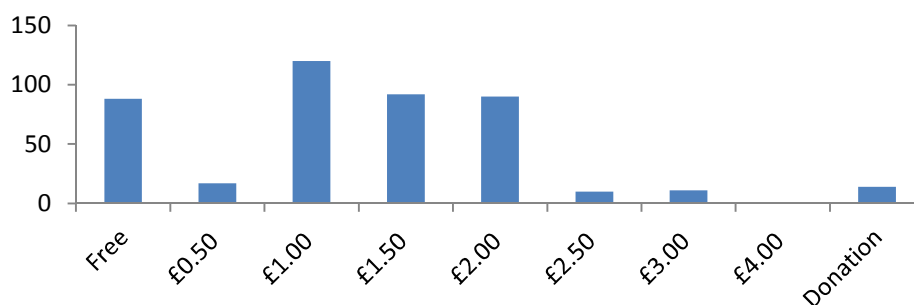
Is £3 a reasonable charge per child?



Bearing in mind that 65% of respondents do not think there should be any charge for accessing children's centre services, the above graph still represents a strong feeling that £3 is too much to charge.

People were also asked what they thought a reasonable charge per child per session would be.

What would be a reasonable charge?



Should families with more than one child be charged more than once?

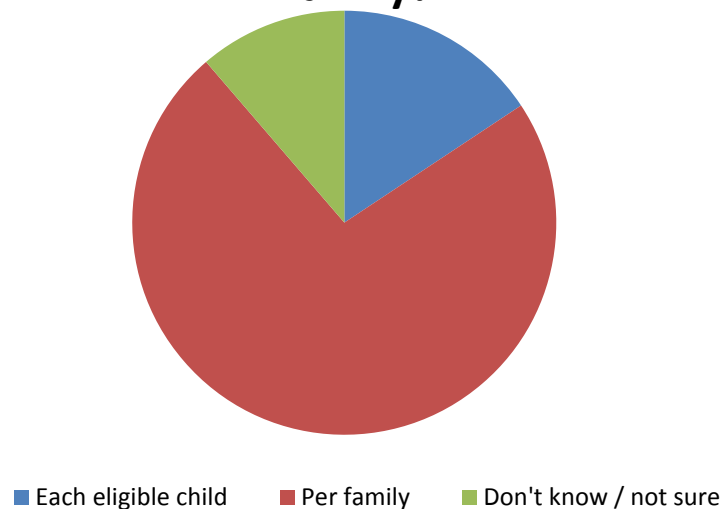
The income projections underpinning this consultation are based on charging every child regardless of how many are in a single family.

The table and graph below show whether respondents think this is a reasonable approach.

Each eligible child	Per family	Don't know / not sure	Total
79	368	57	504
15.67%	73.02%	11.31%	100.00%

In addition to the 57 respondents who were unsure whether it was fairer to charge per child or per family, 31 did not answer this question.

Should the charge be per child or per family?



Almost three quarters of respondents felt that any charge for accessing children's centre services should be per family rather than per child.

The recent [parent questionnaire](#) shows that the average number of children per family, under the age of 5, regularly accessing children's centres is 1.5. This represents a potential 33% decrease in income should a charging model be based on family rather than individual.

It should be noted that families receiving additional support from their health visitor, who would therefore be exempt from charges anyway, tend to have larger families. This would counterbalance the reduction in income to a certain extent, but moving to a family-based charging model would inevitably impact any income generation.

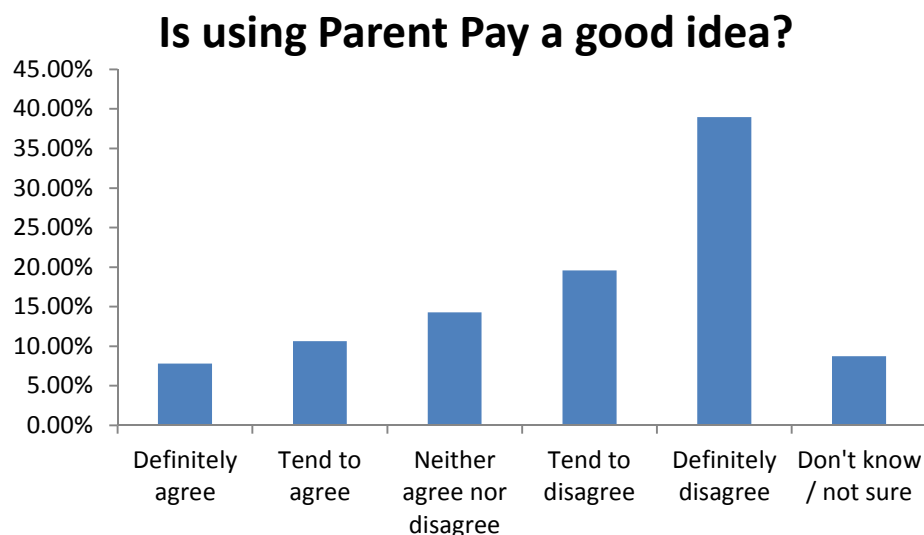
How should payment be handled?

The proposal was to use Parent Pay (an online system used by schools to handle lunch payment and other sundries) to manage cash flow in children’s centres. This would reduce any on-costs associated with handling cash and secure collections across the city.

People were asked whether they thought using Parent Pay to manage charges for accessing children’s centre services was a good idea. The table and graph below is a summary of responses.

Definitely agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Definitely disagree	Don't know / not sure	Total
41	56	75	103	205	46	526
7.79%	10.65%	14.26%	19.58%	38.97%	8.75%	100.00%

In addition to the 46 respondents who were unsure whether using Parent Pay was a good idea, 9 did not answer this question.



58.6% of respondents disagreed with the proposal to use an online system to manage payments to children’s centres. 18.4% agreed that it was a good idea, and 14.3% were undecided.

The impact of accepting cash on site would mean an increase in admin time required to manage the process of charging. Cash collection and deposit also comes at a cost. Both factors would decrease any income generated from charging for children’s centre services.

Accepting payment on site would also make it more difficult to handle free entitlement discretely. This was a concern raised repeatedly in the comments respondents made (see separate report [[insert hyperlink](#)] for a summary of all comments).

Comment Themes

Below is a summary of themes that came out of the additional comments respondents made as part of the consultation. A full record of all comments can be found in a separate report [*insert hyperlink*]

Charging is a bad idea because:

- It will put families off attending
- It will stigmatise families who can access for free
- £3 is too much
- Parent Pay looks confusing
- Voluntary groups do it cheaper

Alternative income:

- Hire out children's centres to community groups
- Ask for donations
- Host fundraisers (such as bake sales and bring-and-buy events)
- Get parents to run groups to save on staff costs

General comments:

- Just because a family doesn't meet the exemption criteria, doesn't mean they have disposable income.
- One of the strengths of centres is their inclusivity. It would be a shame to undermine this by introducing means-tested charging
- Why should people who already pay council tax be charged an additional amount while those who don't pay council tax get it for free?