healthwetch

Halton Family Hubs



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About us

Healthwatch Halton is the borough's independent health and social care champion. We are here to listen to the experiences of local people using local health and care services.

About Halton's Family Hubs

Family hubs support children and young people from birth until they reach the age of 19 (or up to 25 for young people with special educational needs and disabilities). They bring council, health and community services together so that families can access the right support at the right time.

The hubs will provide a mix of physical and virtual spaces, as well as outreach, where families can easily access non-judgmental support for the challenges they may be facing.

Currently, (May 2024) Halton has 4 Family Hub established in Widnes and Runcorn. Up until March 2025, Halton will be establishing further family hubs by utilising some existing Children's Centres and other Local Authority assets to enhance and transform the early help offer by joining up and improving access to services, the connections between families and professionals and putting relationships at the heart of family help.

Services that are planned to be delivered from family hubs include:

- midwifery appointments, health checks, weaning and nutrition advice, early years play education and sensory development.
- intensive support to reduce family problems that result in family breakdown, working with the child and family to make positive changes.
- family help and support for children with disabilities or additional needs.
- practical support around finance and housing.
- youth support services, including youth justice.
- mental health support for children, young people, families and new parents.

Summary

Healthwatch Halton were approached by Halton's Family Hubs to carry out engagement with people using Halton Family Hubs and Children's Centres, to gather their experiences, and also to speak with people who haven't used the service to find out some of the reasons why.

With the support of Halton Family Hubs a survey was developed to gather not only the views of people who use the Hubs, but also of those who hadn't.

The survey went live on 17 January 2024 and closed at the end of March 2024.

Two drop-in sessions were held in February 2024, one at Brookvale Family Hub and a second at Kingsway Family Hub. An outreach session was also held in March at the Riverview Traveller site in Widnes to gather the views of the Traveller community in Halton.

In total 148 people took part in this project, 131 took part in the survey and 17 people took part in two additional focus group sessions in the community held in March 2024.

Due to the number of responses received the report cannot be considered to be fully representative of all people using Family Hubs. It is presented to provide a snapshot of the experiences of those who took part and to highlight themes and issues areas for consideration by the service provider.

What we found

- 65% of people who have used family hubs felt they had an increased amount of confidence in themselves as parents.
- 94% of people who have used family hubs felt the staff were supportive of them.
- 82% of people who have used family hubs saw them as valuable for their family.
- 44% of people who have used family hubs felt the hubs were known about by other local families.
- 85% of people believed family hubs would benefit their family by offering a wider range of services.
- 85% of people who have used family hubs would recommend them to friends and family.
- 47% of people who took part in our survey hadn't used a Family Hub
- The hubs were seen by many as only providing support for families with very young children.

Survey Demographics

131 people took part in the survey. 87% were female, 12% male and 1% preferred not to say. Across the two focus groups we engaged with 17 people. Demographic data was not collected from the focus groups.

Ethnicity	Percentage
Asian/Asian British: Chinese	1%
Asian/Asian British: Indian	1%
Black/Black British: African	1%
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups: Black African and White	1%
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups: Any other Mixed/Multiple ethnic group background	1%
White: British/English/Northern Irish/Scottish/Welsh	80%
White: Irish	1%
White: Gypsy, Traveller or Irish Traveller	5%
White: Any other White background	4%
Prefer not to say	7%

Age Groups







30 - 39











How many children do you have?



Survey Findings

As part of the survey there were five open text questions. One of these questions asked about positive things people had experienced due to support from the Hubs / children's centres, with another question looking for one thing that could have helped improve experiences. The feedback from the five questions provided a number of responses for each one with similar themes appearing in the answers across the five questions. Therefore, the comments have been drawn together and thematically analysed providing overall themes from the feedback. This has been done because if each question is taken in isolation, it is difficult to draw themes from the feedback and the meaning is lost from those answer. Taken as a whole it is possible to identify themes that are returned to repeatedly.

Increased confidence

People responding to the survey identified an increased amount of confidence in themselves as parents as one of the positive outcomes from using the Family Hub services.

One comment was from a Mum who said that 'the groups have really helped with my confidence and anxiety which is great because I have worked really hard to ensure that my daughter doesn't miss out on opportunities/activities because of my anxiety... attending the groups and meeting lots of new people helped build my confidence and reduce my anxiety. I now wouldn't hesitate to try a new group or class with her.'



Another parent that used the Hubs said that 'the health visitors are amazing... it really helped with my confidence, especially in the first few weeks, the advice was there.' Whilst another said 'honestly, it has improved my mental health and given me confidence in being a Mum.'

A parent attending Warrington Road Children's Centre told us, 'Using the family hub has really helped me grow in confidence by meeting with other mums.'

Parents taking part in the parenting classes also reported increased confidence and that it had had an impact on their family relationships. One parent commented that 'it's like a switch has been flicked with her behaviour and that's because of how I've been and the things that I have done... Been consistent with the kids and self-aware about my actions and how they affect things.'

Another mum told us, 'Attending the groups provided by the children's centres has been fantastic. I was very anxious attending the first group and it took me a

couple of weeks to build up to it. But once I attended, I was made to feel so comfortable and at ease and I now attend groups every week...'

Social Interaction

Social interaction was seen as important both for parents and for their children. One parent commented how 'I find it a great place to bring my young son and meet other mums and children. This morning when I told my son we were going to see the other babies at the centre, he was so excited he got his backpack ready at 7.00am!'

Another parent said that the 'socialising, I feel has brought on my little one.'

Whilst another commented that the 'groups have been fantastic for my little girl who has learned loads and is very social and loves being around the other kids.'

The same parent goes on to say, 'I have made a great group of friends with other mums. I believe that this has completely changed how my maternity leave could have been.'

Child development

The positive impact on the development of their children was commented on by some parents. They spoke about the Hubs providing 'enrichment for children' and 'socialising' was again referred to as being a positive part of their child's development.

One parent spoke about how they had been 'worried about growth' and that they had 'had advice for that' through the Hub and 'now he is developing well.' Another parent said, 'I was worried about my child's development and they arranged for the one year review to take place earlier, which really eased my mind.'



SEND children

Whilst it was commented that the Hubs provided a 'space for [the] disabled children's service to meet' there were comments from parents of children with SEND that the Hubs did not always meet their needs.

One parent who used the Kingsway Hub commented that whilst 'accessing the sensory room' was positive they had found it difficult to access because it was 'unavailable' as it was 'always broken.' Another parent commented on Halton Lodge children's centre saying that 'Having to phone to book the sensory room is not very digital.'

Another parent said that they felt that their four-year-old child with Autism 'sticks out in play days' and they felt that a 'getting ready for school group would be better for us.'

The age ranges at some of the groups was also seen as a problem for one parent of a child with additional needs who said, 'some children are adult size and could possibly unintentionally hurt my child as he's only small and nonverbal so couldn't tell anyone.'

Provision for older children and young people

None of the parents responding to the survey spoke about services that were accessed by older children and young people. There was little awareness that there were services provided with comments made that, 'for us with children now starting high school there is less provision' and one parent saying that they were 'not sure what they offer now, my child is almost 11.' Another said that 'as far as I knew they only catered for 0 to 5's.'

Another person said that 'because the posters (for the Hubs) are all young children I assumed it was just for under 5's.'



We also received comments from some parents with children aged between seven and 'My child is four, but autistic. Feel like she sticks out in play days feel like a group getting ready for school would be better for us.'

Communication about the Hubs

Feedback suggested that information about the Hub offer was not always reaching people and that as a result many of those who could benefit were unaware of them.

One person commented that 'I was shocked at half term at the number of parents that didn't know about the free activities and free packed lunches at Kingsway Library. I think a lot of people assume these are just for families that receive support/need help.'

However, there were no comments that suggested people thought that activities and services were for families who needed additional help, with people more likely to say, 'I've never heard of the family hubs.' It was commented that 'people need to know that they are there to be used.'

Some of those who were using the hubs explained how they found out about services. One person said that they 'found out about the Hubs from the midwife.' They went on to say that they found out about the activities that were happening from social media and that 'having the Facebook means everyone knows what's going on.'

Others who use the Hubs spoke about how they, 'often tell my friends and family about the services and encourage them to come along'; whilst another said that 'it's a useful place for me, so I would tell friends and family about it too.'

Location of services

We received a small number of comments about locations and lack of public transport access, or parking issues, but overall the Hubs were deemed as local and accessible for the majority of people.

One person who used Windmill Hill Children's Centre spoke about the need for services in Murdishaw on more than one occasion. They said that 'families in Murdishaw do not have an easily accessible Children's Centre, making it impossible for a lot of young families to be able to benefit from the services being offered.' Another person using Upton Children's Centre commented that having 'more services available somewhere closer to where I live would be really good.'

There was some comment about the lack of parking at the Kingsway Hub with one person saying that 'it put me off visiting for a while.' Others commented that some locations were difficult to reach with one person who used Halton Lodge Children's Centre saying that 'if I didn't have the use of a car I would need to get two buses which isn't ideal' and another said that they got dropped off but 'it is a 40 minute walk if I can't get dropped off. I wouldn't know how to get a bus here.'

Staff

There were many very positive comments about the staff at the centres with people highlighting the support that they give.

One person said that 'the staff who run the groups are really good and helpful' and another that they staff are 'fantastic and supportive.' It was also commented that 'the staff that work at the children's centres are amazing with the children and a great support to parents.'



Centre atmosphere

People who had used the Hubs or Children's Centres commented on the welcoming environment at them with comments such as 'such a friendly atmosphere'. One person talking about Brookvale Hub said, 'it has offered us a nice, calm, non-judgemental environment to attend.' One person using the Kingsway Hub commented, 'Staff who run Widnes groups are really good and helpful.'

Specialist support

Some people spoke about accessing specialist help and support through the Hubs and children's centres. One parent said that they had 'a referral to a dietician for my baby. He was having milk that didn't agree with him at first and they helped sort that out.'



Another told how their child had had an assessment at 18 months old due to 'speech

delay' and they received support that 'led on to my child getting diagnosed with autism... my child is now four and with early intervention is thriving.'

Another parent spoke about getting 'speech and language tips for my son to ensure he gets the best start in life.'

Service times

There were a small number of comments about the need for wider opening times. It was commented that 'weighing clinics needed to be earlier and later in the day for working parents.' Another suggested that having appointments at the 'weekends' would be an improvement they would like to see.

It was also commented that 'a range of pre-walker baby classes in the afternoon' would be helpful as 'getting up and out for classes in the morning is hard with a new baby.'

Focus Groups

In addition to the survey, we undertook two in-person focus groups with the aim of hearing from people who may not have used Family Hubs or the Children's Centres. One of the focus group sessions was with a parent and toddler group that is provided through a church in Widnes and the other was a parent support group for families with SEN children, also in Widnes.

The toddler group is provided on a Monday morning in term time and is open access, with no need to book a place. There is a charge of £2 per family group and includes drinks and snacks for the children as well as their accompanying adults. The group is well attended with around 40 adults in attendance including grandparents as well as parent and carers. People were able to choose to speak to us about the family hubs and seven people chose to take part.

The second group meets weekly in a community centre. Again, it meets during term time. Parents come together to discuss issues that they are facing and is a solution-based group where they share experiences and knowledge. There were 10 parents who took part in the group.

The feedback from the groups has been analysed using thematic analysis and the key themes have been identified. We have also identified where there are specific themes that relate to a particular group.

Lack of knowledge about the Family Hubs was a common theme across both of the groups.

It was commented by one person who was also a worker at the group we attended, as well as parent, that 'I work with different kids' groups, but I know nothing about the Hubs. I also have four kids of my own and I didn't know that they had stuff going on for all ages.'

Another person said that they 'knew nothing' about them and another that 'I don't know about them, if I knew about them, I would use them.'

It was generally the case across most people we spoke to that they did not know about the Hubs and what they do. Those people that did know about them felt that the services were not aimed at their families. One person said, "I've got older children, so it's probably not for me.'

Another said that they knew about the Hubs because they had had a talk at the High School and what they took away was that the Hubs 'put on baby showers'. As a parent with older children with SEN they felt that their needs would not be met by the hubs.

For those that had had some contact with the Family Hubs the feedback was mixed. One person said that she used the Hub regularly, attending the 'Musical Mayhem and baby stay and play'. She said that they got structured play, and it is 'more guided.' She also saw a benefit in parents being able to 'have adult company' when they go to the hubs and that it reduced social isolation.

Another said that they had attended an 'Open Day' when one of the hubs had opened but was unsure what the hubs could offer her family.

Another person said that they had attended one of the toddler groups held at a Children's Centre. Their feedback was negative with them saying that 'there wasn't a lot of equipment' and it was not well supported [by staff]. The children were having to 'fight' for stuff. 'We didn't go back because it wasn't a good environment.'

Nobody else from the groups was able to say that they had accessed any Hub services and were unaware of what was on offer.

They were asked what the Hubs needed to do to encourage them to attend and overwhelmingly they said that the Hubs needed to communicate with them so that they knew what was on offer. It was commented that there needs to be 'communication about the service, people don't know what there is.'

It was suggested that there 'needs to be a signposting booklet about the different services' and that they should have a 'single website for everything' as well as 'advertising in doctors and things, more localised information.' People from the SEN parents group felt that they were 'reliant on other SEN parents letting you know about things.' Engaging with the groups such as the SEN community network and the toddler's group were suggested as ways of making more known about the Hubs.

It was commented at the church run group that they would be pleased to have the Family Hubs information available or visits from Hub staff as they had many families that they thought could benefit from more support.

People from the SEN group also discussed their experiences of accessing family support, with one person saying that they had asked for a family support worker when they were struggling to cope. They had found the 'process overwhelming' and that they 'only had two sessions as they were not considered a high-risk family.' Others said that they had self-referred for family support 'through CAMHS' and that they had had no issues, but at the time their child was not attending school, and this may have made the difference.

People spoke about the things that they would like the Family Hubs to offer.

Some of the things that they suggested are already proposed or on offer at the Family Hubs, such as housing advice and benefits advice and support with form filling. However, as people did not have specific knowledge of the Hubs, they were not aware of what was already on offer.

Suggestions from both groups were similar despite the different ages and needs of the groups.

Having activities during the school holidays was discussed by people as it was commented that 'lots of activities in the wider community are term-time only'

and that 'for the 6 weeks holiday- it's a really long time, especially if you can't afford to go away.'

Having mixed age group activities was also mentioned by both groups and that they would like to see activities 'catering for mixed age groups - sibling groups especially during the school holidays.' The SEN parents group were also keen to have activities that were 'suitable for both sets of children' in their families who had some children with SEN and other children who did not. One parent commented that they would like 'help with having all three children together. Engaging together as a family without it turning into violence. The younger children are copying the behaviour of their brother. I would like them to be able to play together.'

There were requests for more information on what was on offer for older age groups as people were not aware that the service provision was beyond 0 to 5 years. People were keen for there to be activities for older children and teenagers. One person commented that their child was 'either too old or too young for the Hub services. She's six and they are all 7 to 8 years old or under 5.'

Others suggested that there needed to be 'stuff for older kids - primary school and above. It needs to be things that they are interested in.'

SEN parents also suggested that there needed to be specific provision for SEN children as they thought activities were often labelled as being 'suitable for SEN children' rather than SEN specific. They also suggested that there needed to be support in place for children and young people who have just had a diagnosis saying that they 'need help with coping with diagnosis' and that this needed to be tailored for 'different age groups and genders.'

The SEN parents also asked that there be more professional support and advice available to them, opening up the Nurture programme to all parents, as well as providing 'developmental information - knowing what is normal and what is not. I only have one child and I didn't realise that some of the things she does are not normal.' Another asked that they have 'an opportunity to speak to professionals for support and reassurance that you are doing the right things.'

However, the key message from the focus groups, that they wanted more than anything, was that they were kept informed about what was on offer at the Family Hubs and that the Family Hubs came to their groups to speak to them about what they could offer and what they need from the services.

Survey results

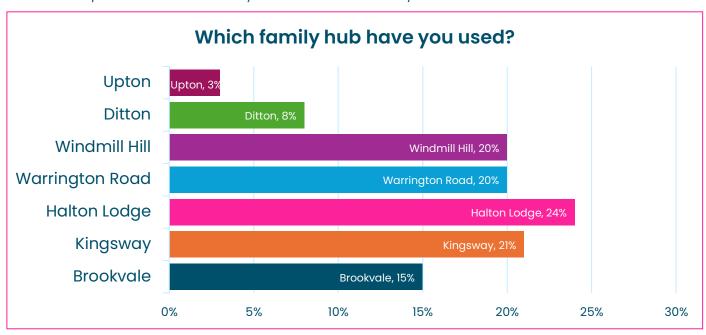
The initial survey question provided a list of twenty-one services and asked if respondents had ever used any of these services in Halton.

The ten most commonly used services were:

- 1. Children's Centre Activities for 0-5 years
- 2. Health Visitor
- 3. Midwifery / Maternity Services
- 4. Speech, language and communication
- 5. Infant Feeding Support
- 6. SEND Support
- 7. Birth registrations
- 8. Mental Health services
- 9. Nutrition and weight management
- 10. Housing support or advice

Participants were then asked if they had ever used a family hub.

53% of respondents said they had used a family hub.



Just over a third of people, 36%, said they were aware that family hubs offered services from 0 to 25 years of age, with 64% not being aware.

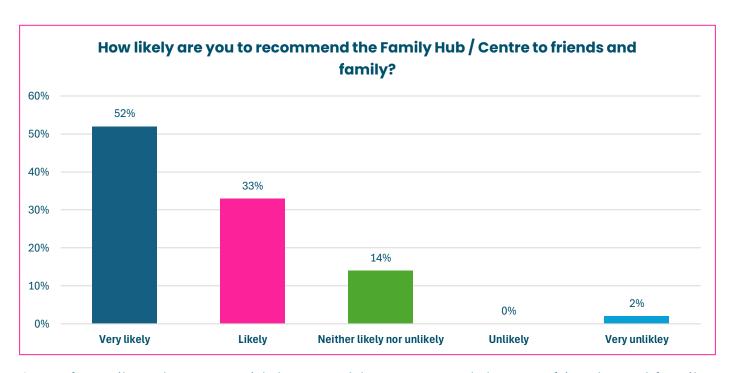
One person commented, 'I assumed it was up to five, the same as the Children's Centres. Not seen the change in the service yet.'

Now thinking about a specific family hub you have used, how much do you agree with the following statements?

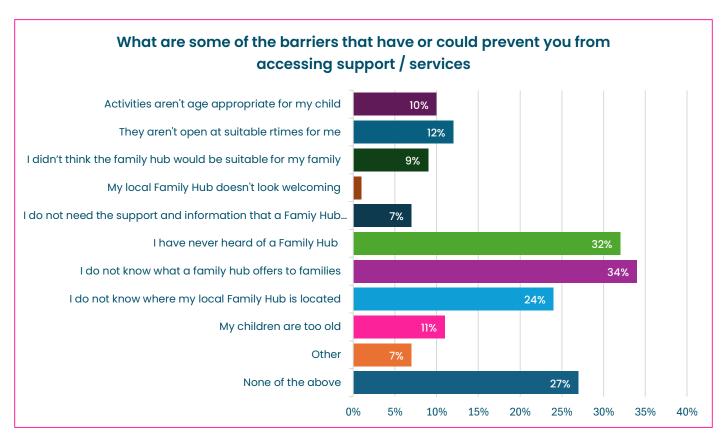
The place where I access services / support from						
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	N/A
Is easy to get to	39.7%	47.1%	8.8%	1.5%	2.9%	-
Is easy to get around	37.9%	48.5%	13.6%	-	-	-
Is welcoming	41.2%	50.0%	8.8%	-	-	-
Has supportive staff	50.0%	44.1%	5.9%	-	-	-
Gives useful help to local families	35.3%	50.0%	10.3%	2.9%	-	1.5%
Gives me the information I need, when I need it	36.8%	36.8%	22.1%	2.9%	-	1.5%
Is valuable for my family	38.8%	43.3%	11.9%	4.5%	-	1.5%
Is known about by local families	20.6%	23.5%	35.3%	19.1%	-	1.5%
Refers families to the right help	30.9%	17.6%	39.7%	4.4%	-	7.4%
Uses technology that makes my visit easier	14.9%	16.4%	35.8%	10.4%	1.5%	20.9%
Has helped my confidence	26.5%	38.2%	22.1%	8.8%	-	4.4%

How much do you agree with the following statements?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	N/A
I believe Family Hubs will benefit my family by offering a wider range of services than was previously available.	41%	44%	10%	1%	_	3%



85% of Family Hub users said they would recommend them to friends and family.



The main barrier people accessing Family Hubs is a lack of awareness of the hubs, with one in three people not knowing what family hubs offer to families. One in four people said they didn't know where their local hub was located.

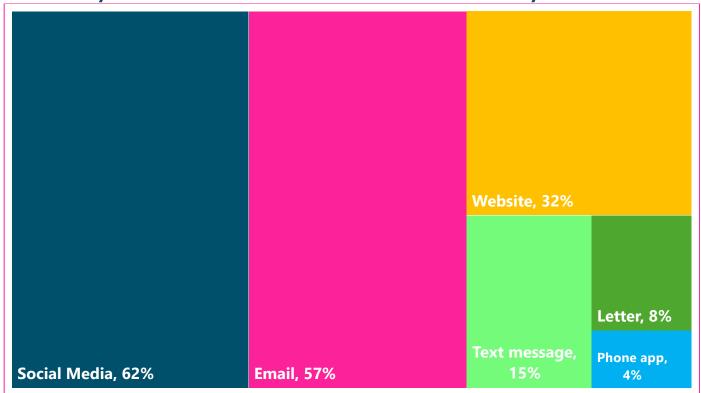
People who hadn't used a Family Hub were given a list of twenty-one services that are available through Family Hubs and asked which ones they would be likely to use.

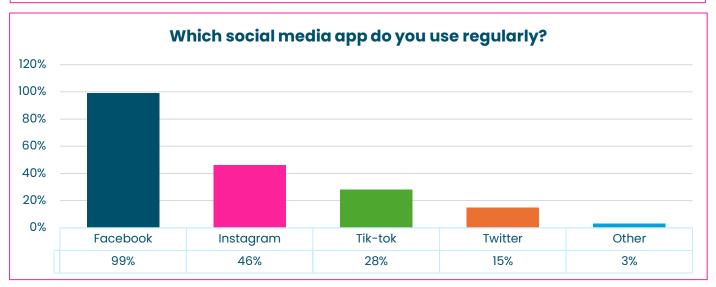
The ten most selected services were:

- 1. Activities for 0 to 5
- 2. SEND Support
- 3. Health Visitor
- 4. Families Information Service
- 5. Speech Language and communication
- 6. Mental Health services
- 7. Nutrition and weight management
- 8. Oral Health improvement
- 9. Infant feeding
- 10. Parenting programme intervention



How would you like to hear about activities and events the Family Hub has to offer?

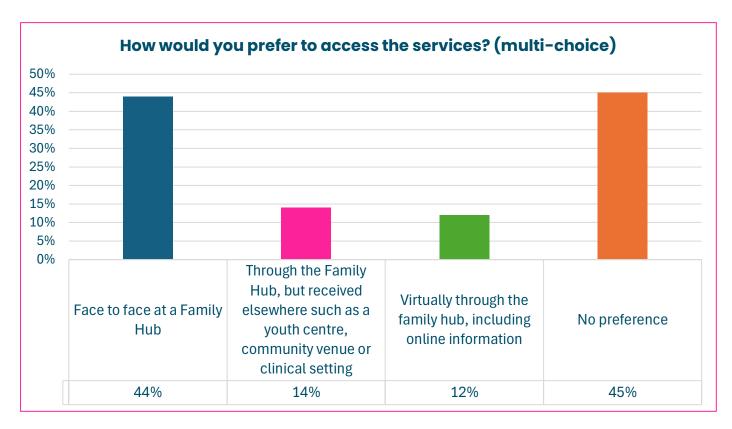






Just over 60% of respondents wanted to hear about activities at the Family Hub via Social Media. Facebook was far and away the most popular social media app to be used with 99% of respondents saying they used it regularly.

More than half of respondents said they would be happy to receive information via email/ebulletins. Almost one in three people said they would use the Family Hub website for information.



Forty-five percent of people said they had no preference on how they would access services. Forty-four percent wanted to access services face to face at a Family Hub. Fourteen percent were also happy to access Hub services at other venues, while twelve percent were also willing to access services virtually through the hubs.



In an ideal world what other services / activities would you like to see in the family hub to make you more likely to use them?'

The 62 people who'd stated they hadn't previously used a Family Hub were asked what services / activities would make them more likely to use the hubs.

Some people said the Family Hubs already offered all the services / activities they would need with one saying, 'There are loads of things available, so I think that they have got it covered.'

A number of people had been completely unaware of Family Hubs and the services they offer, with one person saying, 'I'd not heard about family hubs before today. They sound a really good idea. I don't know what else could be provided.'

Activities

There were a lot of comments asking for more activities across age ranges. One parent told us, 'I'd like to see some activities for children over five years old. Your list of services didn't seem to show anything available for families with older children.' Another commented that there needed to be 'More free activities for children over 5 years of age', this was echoed by others in comments, asking for 'activities for older children.'

Other suggestions asked for activities to take account of working parents, with one person saying, 'I'd like to see services that full time working mums can access. My kids and I always miss out as there is nothing for us because I have to work.'

Another person asked for 'some activities for dad's to get involved in.' There was a suggestion for a 'Dad's group and community cafés' by another. Yet another person asked for 'Activities at the weekend for people who are working to be able to access.'

Another commented that they would like, 'More evening session to support people who work full time.'

One person said, 'Maybe some active groups in the summertime especially. A Forest school group would be brilliant, too.'

SEN specific support and activities

There were suggestions for more activities for SEN children and young people, with one person saying there needed to be, 'More activities for teenagers with SEN during school holidays that are age appropriate. Not all children with SEN want to go to playbarns in their teenage years etc.'

Parents also suggested more support offerings were needed, with one parent saying, 'Maybe twice-yearly information for those on the SEN journey from advice if you think your child may have SEN needs, to the pathway, to what happens next and the services/support you can receive.'

Another parent suggested there should be 'More around SEND support/advice. Even if it was just someone to talk to. Parent to parent. It's hard as well if you have some SEND and some not. Somewhere people don't judge. 'Oh, there's the naughty kid again'.



Other suggestions for additional services / activities included:

- 'Cooking'
- 'More children's activities'
- 'I'd like to see more State run nurseries'
- 'Maybe something around mental health support'
- 'Autism support, Mental health support Sensory integration support, all from up to date and fully qualified professionals.'
- 'Children's education support, such as information on tutoring.'
- 'Bereavement councillors.'
- 'More activity clubs to support age 19 upwards.'

Conclusions

One principle of a Family Hub is 'Superb provision for children's early years (0-5) so their families get whatever help they need to give them the best start in life and ensure they are school-ready."

In many ways the Hubs are already meeting this aim, but there is room for improvement if the Hubs are to 'ensure families with children and young people aged 0-19 receive early help to overcome a range of difficulties and build stronger relationships. If the aim is to provide services across the 0 to 19 age range there needs to be consideration as to how the Hubs are promoted across the borough, as currently many people see the Hubs as only providing services and activities for parents with very young children.

• It is clear that Halton Family Hubs provide a range of services and support that is generally appreciated and well valued by those who currently use the hubs.

¹ https://familyhubsnetwork.com/introducing-family-hubs/

- The current services and activities appear to be very much focussed on supporting parents with children in the 0 to 5 age group.
- There were requests from parents with children aged between 3 and 5 to see more activities focussed on this age group, as many felt there was a gap in this area.
- Feedback from people who haven't yet used the hubs suggested a lack of awareness of the hubs and in particular the activities and services that are available and who they are targeted at.
- Feedback from the focus group session with the parent and toddler group also pointed to a lack of awareness of the hubs, yet this group met weekly in a venue located less than 50 metres away from a Hub.
- As previously highlighted, the key message from all the potential users of the Hubs, was to be kept informed about what is on offer at the hubs.

Recommendations

- 1. Consider offering a wider range of age-appropriate activities at the Hubs aimed at older children and young people.
- 2. Work in partnership with SEN parents to offer more SEN specific support and activities.
- 3. Work in partnership with young people's groups and organisations to ensure the Family Hubs provide activities that meet their needs.
- **4. Engagement**. There were requests from the focus groups we spoke with for closer links with the Family Hubs. Consider a role for an engagement / link worker to build and develop links across the borough with these and other community groups and organisations supporting families in Halton.
- 5. Use a wider range of age-appropriate images when producing communication materials, i.e. Leaflets, posters, timetables. The current range of images were seen to be very baby and toddler centric.
- 6. Consider offering low-level mental health and wellbeing support services for young people through the Family Hubs.
- 7. Communicate and inform. Continue to make good use of social media to promote the Family Hubs and look to develop and maintain a standalone website for the Family Hubs to provide information on all services and activities available through the hub.

Acknowledgements

We'd like to thank everyone who took time to give us their views and experiences. We'd particularly like to thank the Transform Tots playgroup and the Advanced Solutions SEN parents group for welcoming us along to their sessions.

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