

Children's Centre Census 2015



A national overview of Children's Centres in 2015

"The Children's Centre really helped me out when I first had my baby, helping to build my confidence being a single mother. If it wasn't for (them)...I don't think I would be here to tell the story"

"I used to suffer depression and was sent to the Children's Centre when pregnant...since having my baby I've not gone back on my medication. I ask for help from the Children's Centre if I need it rather than dealing with it alone"

"At any crisis points we've hit we've been able to come to the Centre and get excellent support... nothing is too much trouble...I genuinely couldn't have got through parenting without the support we have received"

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Children's Centres in 2015 and beyond

Children's Centres play a central role in the lives of families and communities...



Over 1 million children and families are frequently using Children's Centres

83% of Centre managers say their Centres deliver family support in the home

79% of parents who use Children's Centres say life would be harder without them

64% of Centre managers have seen their budget cut this year



But there are current & future challenges for Children's Centres...

Which has meant Centre managers will...



57% have to cut services for children and families



34% be unable to retain staff



28% reduce the number of locations they deliver



20% reduce opening hours

Mental Health

68% of managers say further improvement could be made by having more mental health professionals working through Children's Centres

Jobcentre Plus

69% of managers are engaging with Jobcentre Plus and this relationship can be built upon

Social Care

A new Social Care Family Worker, working through Children's Centres, would help relieve pressure

What's next? Children's Centres hold huge potential

We can make Children's Centres even stronger by turning them into Hubs and building on existing infrastructure



What do parents say?

Alongside the main Children's Centre Census, this year 4Children also conducted a parent survey. In total we received nearly 600 responses from parents across the country who use Children's Centres, who told us that:

- Children's Centres are a regular feature in the lives of many of those who use them
 - » 55.2% of parents said they used their local Children's Centre at least once a week
- Going to a Children's Centre has a positive impact on the vast majority of children
 - » 90.5% of parents said that attending a Children's Centre has had a positive impact on their child
 - » 64.1% describe this as "very positive"
- Children's Centres also have a positive impact for most of the parents who use them
 - » 82.8% of parents said that attending a Children's Centre had a positive impact on their confidence and skills as a parent
 - » 51.6% describe this as "very positive"
- If their Children's Centre were to close, this would make life harder for most of the parents who use them
 - » 79.4% of parents said that if they were unable to use their local Children's Centre this would make life harder for them and their family
 - » 34.4% of parents said it would make a "big difference" and life would become "a lot more difficult"
- When asked about the one thing that their Children's Centre offers that they don't get elsewhere, the top three areas parents highlighted were:
 - » The chance for them and their children to meet new people
 - » Staff who are friendly and welcoming
 - » Being able to get different kinds of support in one place

When talking about their Children's Centre, parents said that

"It's a place where my children can experience brilliant activities and it doesn't cost the earth"

"The Centre is ready to be there when I or my child need support. It's like an insurance policy – I hope not to need it but have peace of mind knowing it's a place to turn"

"I need the sessions and would be lost without them. It is the highlight of my daughter's week and like me she has made lots of friends"

"It is the centre of our community"

Chief Executive's Foreword



4Children's annual Children's Centre Census gives us the only insight into what is happening in Children's Centres up and down the country – and this is the first to be published since I became 4Children's new Chief Executive in March 2015.

Since starting, I've witnessed first-hand the exceptional work that many Children's Centres do to support children and parents across the country, and the difference they can make to families' lives. Children's Centres, as the findings of this year's Census show, play a vital role in early intervention – reaching those whose needs might otherwise escalate into more serious problems, and delivering crucial preventative support. At the other end of the scale, they are also increasingly dealing with more urgent and acute forms of need that statutory services are too stretched to meet. Without Children's Centres, many families would find the support they rely on pulled from underneath them, and a substantial gap would open up.

However, as everyone involved in this area knows, times are very challenging for Children's Centres. Our results show that many Centre managers have faced annual budget reductions this year, continuing a trend that has been ongoing for some time, and that financial pressures are beginning to have a real impact on the support available through Children's Centres and their capacity to reach families. We are seeing an increasing shift in the balance away from universal services open to everyone, and towards a more targeted offer. While Children's Centres' support for the most vulnerable is unquestionably a key aspect of their work, the shift away from universal provision is of concern. Not only do universal services reduce stigma and help get those who need support through the door in the first place, research also indicates that children from disadvantaged backgrounds learn and develop best when in settings with a strong social mix – and we'll lose that important element if Children's Centres adopt an overwhelmingly targeted approach.

Against such a tough backdrop, we need to think constructively about how we build on the existing infrastructure and expertise in place to deliver the best possible offer for children and families. 4Children believes that Children's Centres should act as Hubs for local services, bringing them together and breaking down silos. Capitalising on Children's Centres' existing strong relationships with a wide array of statutory and non-statutory services, a Hubs model will not only help services to be delivered more efficiently, but also more effectively. With a range of professionals on hand,

services can respond to the needs of a family, problems can be identified earlier and can be tackled in the round. This approach would ensure a core support offer from conception into the early years of a child's life, but would recognise that children and families' needs do not stop there and that support is needed at different ages and stages.

Children's Centres have become a central part of the lives of many families since being established over fifteen years ago. Now is the time to look ahead to the next fifteen years and ensure we provide the best possible support for children and families and that Children's Centres continue to adapt to the changing needs of modern family life.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Imelda Redmond". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Imelda Redmond CBE
Chief Executive, 4Children

Executive Summary

This is the fourth year in which 4Children has published the findings of its annual Children's Centre Census, which provides an overview of the major trends and developments taking place in Children's Centres across the country. This year the Census received responses from nearly 400 Centre managers, who we estimate are collectively responsible for approximately 1,000 Children's Centre sites nationwide.

The central role of Children's Centres in the lives of families and communities

- Over 1 million children and families are regularly using Children's Centres, with a majority of Centre managers saying that numbers have gone up in the past 12 months
- Parents tell us that Children's Centres make an important difference to their lives – 79.4% of parents say that being unable to use their local Children's Centre would make life harder for them and their families, and 34.4% said it would make a "big difference" and that life would become "a lot more difficult"
- Parent and health services represent a fundamental aspect of Children's Centres' service offer, highlighting the crucial role they have in supporting the health and development of young children and their place in delivering early intervention
- Children's Centres are playing an important part in the provision of childcare, particularly for 0-2 and 3-4 year olds
- Children's Centres have developed strong relationships with a wide range of statutory and non-statutory organisations in their local areas and have embedded themselves in communities

Current and future challenges for Children's Centres

- Two thirds of Centre managers have seen their annual budget cut in this financial year, with only 4% saying their budget has increased, reflecting a long-term trend of budget decreases
- Budget cuts are having a tangible impact – 57.5% of managers who have experienced a budget reduction say they will have to cut back services as a result and 32% say they will be unable to reach as many families as before

- Over three quarters of Centre managers say that the services they offer have become more targeted in the last year
- There is considerable uncertainty about the future – 24.5% of managers know changes will be made to the way their Children's Centres are run, but do not know what this will involve, and the threat of closure remains very real for many

The future of Children's Centres and opportunities to maximise their potential

- Children's Centres are playing a crucial role in supporting children and families but their full potential is yet to be realised
- Parents particularly value the personal relationships they build with staff and other parents through using Children's Centres, and the fact they can access different kinds of support in one place, which are not easily replicated by other services
- Children's Centres now have a key role in providing mental health and employment support, and many are also involved in delivering the Troubled Families programme
- A quarter of Centre managers say that, in the last year, at least 50% of the parents they have provided employment support to have moved "significantly closer to employment" – similar numbers said that at least 25% of those they worked with successfully moved into work
- Children's Centres are also increasingly dealing with acute need due to the thresholds for children's social care being higher than presenting need. Creating a new class of social care professional, the Social Care Family Worker who would work out of Children's Centres, would help to address this
- Improving data sharing and increasing the provision of birth registration through Children's Centres would help further enhance the support that Children's Centres can offer
- The support Children's Centres provide in all these areas could be further enhanced if they became Children and Family Hubs, enabling them to further bring services and professionals together around a child and family to identify problems at an earlier stage and ensure a joined up response

Recommendations

1

The Government should prioritise children and families over the forthcoming Parliament and develop a comprehensive strategy to support their development

2

Central and local government should maximise the existing infrastructure of Children's Centres, recognising their value and potential to deliver a range of services at a time when resources are stretched

3

Children's Centres' partnerships and joint-working should be built on to develop them into Hubs for local services and family support

4

There should be an automatic assumption of data-sharing between Children's Centres and other agencies working with children – such as schools, health, social services

5

There should be a clear commitment to maintain a universal offer alongside targeted services within Children's Centres

6

The provision of birth registration services in Children's Centres should be increased

Section 1: The central role of Children's Centres in the lives of families and communities

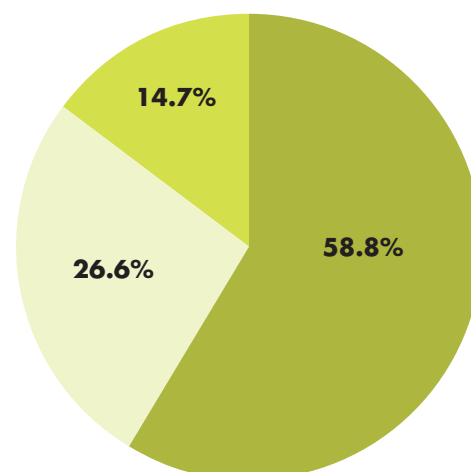
- ➔ **Over 1 million children and families are regularly using Children's Centres, and parents tell us that Children's Centres make an important difference to their lives**
- ➔ **Children's Centres are in a prime position to realise the benefits of early intervention**
- ➔ **Children's Centres have developed crucial relationships with a range of other agencies and organisations**

The Sure Start programme was first established in 1999 as a geographically targeted initiative providing support to children and families in the most deprived areas in England. Since then, the programme has expanded significantly, with Sure Start Children's Centres being rolled-out nationally between 2004 and 2010, extending coverage across the country. This ensured that Children's Centres would be able to reach those who, despite not necessarily living in the most disadvantaged areas, might still be in need of help.

The number of children and families that Children's Centres work with has grown substantially since the earliest days of the programme, and we believe that somewhere **between 1.0 million and 1.1 million children and families are now using Children's Centres on a frequent basis.**¹

The majority of Centre managers that we surveyed for this year's Census also indicated that the number of families using their Children's Centre had increased in the last 12 months (Figure 1). There are prospectively a number of factors driving this, including not only rising need and improvements in engaging families, but also the impact of reduced service provision and closures in some areas – this could potentially mean that those Centre managers who have been able to maintain service levels are now supporting additional families who are no longer able to use their original Children's Centre.

Figure 1: Has there been a change in the number of families using your Centre(s) in the last 12 months?²



It has increased – 58.8%
It has stayed the same – 26.6%
It has decreased – 14.7%

What do parents say?

Alongside the main Census, we also ran a parallel parent survey³ to provide a parents' perspective on the importance of Children's Centres, which revealed that:

- Children's Centres are often a regular feature in the lives of those who use them, with 55.2% of parents who use Children's Centres visiting their local Children's Centre at least once a week

- 90.5% of parents felt that attending a Children's Centre had a positive impact on their child – 64.1% described this as "very positive"
- 82.8% felt that attending a Children's Centre had a positive impact on their own confidence and skills as a parent – 51.6% described this as "very positive"
- 79.4% said that being unable to use their Children's Centre would make their life more difficult – 34.4% said that it would make a "big difference" and life would become "a lot more difficult"

Reaching families in the greatest need

The Census also reveals that Children's Centres are performing strongly in the work they undertake to reach children and families with especially difficult and complex needs.

When Children's Centres are inspected by Ofsted, the rating they receive is partly based on the number of children and families from certain "target groups" that they work with, who include the most vulnerable users.

We asked Centre managers about which particular "target group" families they currently work with.⁴ The results show that:

- 96.0% work with children from low income backgrounds
- 93.6% work with "children in need" or on child protection plans
- 87.9% work with lone parents, teenage mothers or pregnant teenagers
- 83.3% work with children living with domestic abuse
- 78.8% work with children living with adult mental health issues
- 75.3% work with fathers
- 66.9% work with families in the Troubled Families programme
- 62.6% work with children living with substance abuse

What services do Children's Centres currently provide?

Turning to look at the types of support currently available through Children's Centres, respondents to the Census were asked about the kinds of services they offer.⁵ The results indicate that the services provided include:

Parent and health services

- Stay and Play – 95.0%
- Parenting advice – 91.6%
- Breast-feeding support – 85.2%
- Baby massage – 82.1%
- Health check-ups with Health Visitors – 79.8%
- Support around transitions to pre-school and school – 78.7%
- Father's groups – 45.1%
- Relationship support – 32.2%
- Birth registration – 15.7%

Outreach services

- Family support delivered in the home – 83.5%
- Sessions delivered through outreach venues – 76.8%

Support for those with additional or complex needs

- Child protection – 77.6%
- Support for those experiencing domestic violence – 76.8%
- Support for children with Special Educational Needs – 70.3%
- Support for those experiencing substance misuse problems – 32.5%

As this year's findings clearly show, outreach services are now an important part of Children's Centres work with nearly 85% of Centre managers delivering support in the home and three quarters running services through outreach venues. Furthermore, parent and health services represent a fundamental part of Children's Centres' service offer. In many ways this is unsurprising, as this has always been a core part of the work that Children's Centres do, but the results serve to highlight the vital role they play in supporting the health and development of young children.

This is particularly important given that policy makers now place a very significant focus on the period between conception and age two. It is now widely recognised that delivering positive interventions at this crucial stage is key to giving children the best start in life and ultimately improving life chances, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, in a seminal review undertaken in 2010, Graham Allen MP highlighted the importance of this period, referring to research which demonstrated that a child's development score at 22 months can serve as an accurate predictor of educational outcomes when they are 26.⁶

This is why many of the core parent and health services provided by Children's Centres, such as Stay and Play sessions, parenting advice and health check-ups, are so important. By promoting strong attachment between parent and child and supporting healthy development, the fundamental basis of positive later life outcomes is established, which can help to tackle the potential impacts of social and economic disadvantage before they become entrenched.

There is also a strong fiscal case for this approach, and using Children's Centres to deliver early intervention. Where potential problems are not identified and addressed at a sufficiently early stage, there is a risk that families' needs can escalate substantially until far more costly and resource intensive support is required later on. The Early Intervention Foundation has recently estimated that the financial costs of this kind of "late intervention" runs to nearly £17 billion a year, emphasising the importance of tackling problems early.⁷

Given the nature of their service offer and the extent of their reach, Children's Centres are now in a prime position to realise the social and financial benefits of early intervention. Indeed, as will be discussed in more detail in Section 3, this is further reinforced by the fact that Children's Centres also have a significant role in delivering mental health and employment support, thereby helping to prevent the long-term consequences of mental illness and unemployment.

Childcare in Children's Centres

Children's Centres are also playing a significant role in the delivery of childcare, with the results of this year's Census revealing that 44.9% of Centre managers currently provide childcare places.⁸

Of those Centre managers who offer childcare places:

- 85.3% offer places for 0-2 year olds⁹
- 79.0% offer places for 3-4 year olds¹⁰

This indicates that substantial numbers of Children's Centres are involved in childcare provision, particularly for 0-2 and 3-4 year olds.

Partnerships and co-location

The role that Children's Centres are playing in their local communities is further demonstrated by the strength of the relationships they have developed with both statutory and non-statutory partners in their areas. Centre managers who took the Census survey were asked which other agencies and providers they were engaging with¹¹ – they reported that they currently work with the likes of:

Health and education

- Health Visitors – 99.2%
- Schools – 96.0%
- Midwives – 93.8%
- Family Nurse Partnerships (FNP) – 69.0%
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) – 64.8%

Non-statutory organisations

- Private childcare providers – 78.4%
- Charities and community groups – 72.2%

Agencies/programmes supporting those with specific needs

- Children's social care services – 95.5%
- Jobcentre Plus – 68.8%
- Troubled Families – 63.4%

Support and advice services

- Housing/social housing providers – 77.3%
- Citizens Advice – 52.8%

Children's Centres therefore appear to be embedded in a broad network of local partnerships.


Indeed, the Census shows that levels of co-location (where workers from another agency are based at a Children's Centre) are strong in certain areas and emerging in others. Respondents to the survey were asked about whether certain professionals worked from their Children's Centres,¹² with the results showing that:

- 70.1% say that Health Visitors work from their Centres
- 37.1% say that staff from children's social care services work from their Centres
- 20.7% say that Jobcentre Plus advisors work from their Centres
- 18.4% say that staff from their local Troubled Families team work from their Centres
- 14.4% say that staff from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services work from their Centres
- 5.8% say that staff from adult mental health services work from their Centres


In addition, the results of the Census suggest that as well as delivering services directly, Children's Centres have also started to play a broader role in their local areas. In many cases they have become community assets which other providers rely on for support. One way in which Children's Centres achieve this is by allowing external organisations and groups to utilise their buildings when

they are not in use. This is a widespread practice, and 82.5% of respondents say that they either currently host other organisations in this way, or would be able to if asked.¹³


The range of groups who are sharing Children's Centres' space is diverse, and encompasses the likes of church and community groups, local residents' associations, youth services, adoption and fostering services and even libraries and Post Offices in some instances. In many cases therefore, Children's Centres' significance lies not only in the value of the support they provide themselves, but also in the role they can play in strengthening the capacity of other providers in their area.



"At any crisis points we've hit we've been able to come to the Centre and get excellent support ... nothing is too much trouble ... I genuinely couldn't have got through parenting without the support we have received"



"The Children's Centre really helped me out when I first had my baby ... If it wasn't for the support worker coming to my house I don't think I would be here to tell the story"



"Can't praise them enough – they've been a lifeline to me"

Summary

Over 1 million children and families are regularly using Children's Centres.

Parents tell us that Children's Centres are often a regular feature of their lives, have a positive impact on them and their children, and that life would be more challenging without them.

Parent and health services represent a fundamental part of Children's Centres' offer, highlighting the key role they play in supporting the development of young children and their capacity to deliver early intervention

Children's Centres also play an important role in providing childcare, particularly for 0-2 and 3-4 year olds and are an important part of a sustainable childcare offer.

Children's Centres have strong partnerships with a range of statutory and non-statutory agencies, and work closely with them to bring together and integrate support.

As well as delivering services directly, Children's Centres have become community assets, and are playing a broader role in strengthening the capacity of other organisations – this includes allowing external providers to make use of their buildings and space.

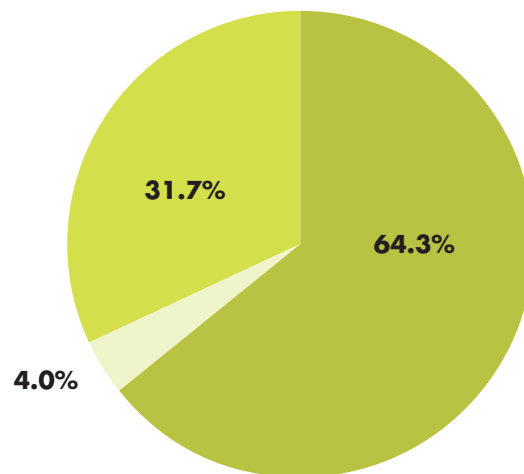
Section 2: Current and future challenges for Children's Centres

- **Children's Centre budgets are under substantial pressure and have been for a number of years – this will have an impact on services, staffing and reach**
- **There has been a shift away from universal services towards more targeted services**
- **There is considerable uncertainty about the future for many Children's Centres**

In recent years, changes to the way in which Children's Centres are funded has made them much more vulnerable to spending cuts. In 2010 it was announced that the ring fence around Children's Centres' funding would be removed, and in 2013 the Early Intervention Grant (which much of the spending subsequently came from) was abolished. The money was instead directed into Local Authorities' general funds, meaning it could potentially be spent elsewhere. As a result, the severe financial pressure which Local Authorities have been under over the past few years has had a very significant impact on Children's Centre budgets, which continues today. Two thirds of Centre managers surveyed for the Census reported that their annual budget had gone down this year – if data from the Census were scaled up to the national level, this would equate to approximately 2,300 Children's Centre sites across the country experiencing a budget reduction.¹⁴ Just 4.0% of Centre managers said that their annual budget had increased (Figure 2).

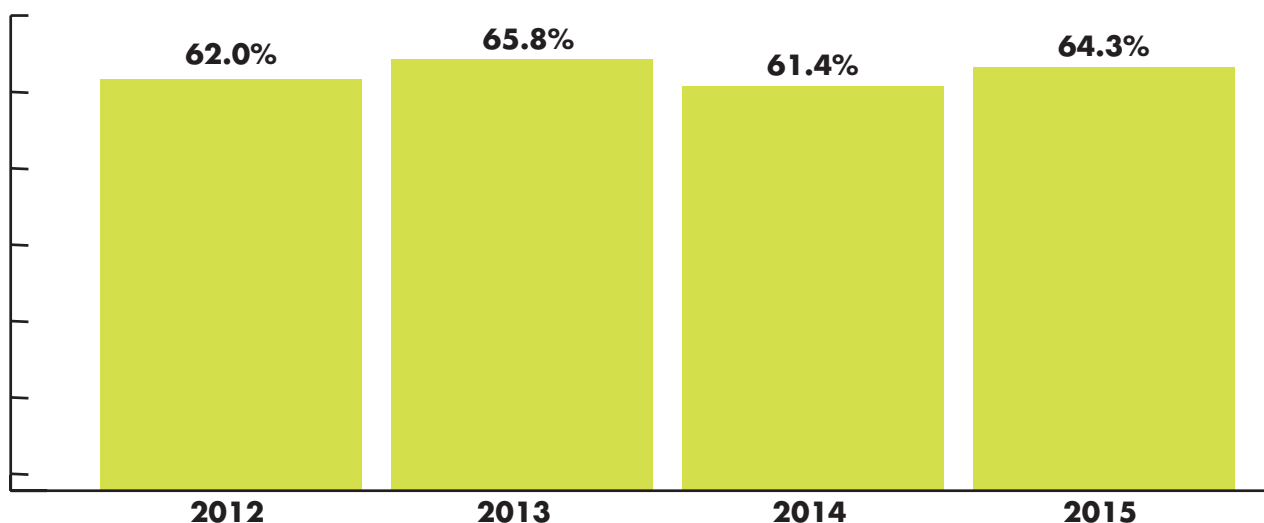
This is part of a long-term trend of budget decreases (Figure 3), suggesting that many Centre managers will have been dealing with successive annual budget cuts for a number of years.

Figure 2: How does your budget for 2015-16 compare with your budget for 2014-15?¹⁵



Decreased budget – 64.3%
Increased budget – 4.0%
Unchanged budget – 31.7%

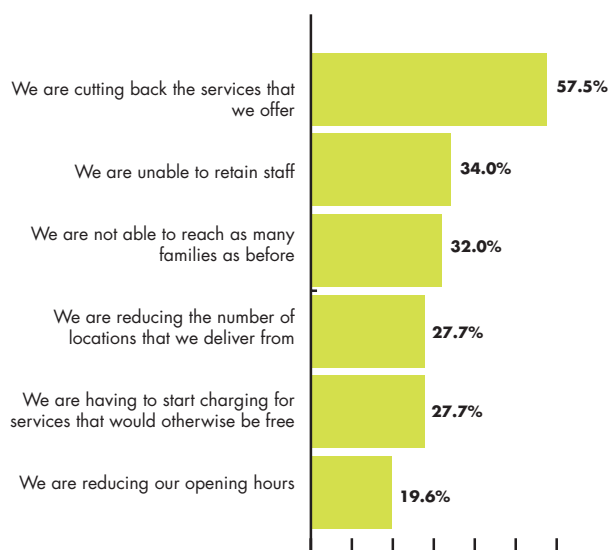
Figure 3: Proportion of firm respondents reporting a decreased budget compared to previous financial year, 2012-2015¹⁶



The impact of budget reductions

Where respondents indicated that their budgets had decreased, the Census asked the important question of what impact this will have and how families will be affected. Well over half of those Centre managers who had experienced a budget reduction said that they would have to cut back the services they offered as a result, which we estimate would equate to approximately 1,270 Children's Centre sites nationwide, clearly demonstrating that financial pressures will have immediate consequences for the level of support available for families (Figure 4).

Figure 4: In what areas is having a decreased budget going to have the biggest impact?¹⁷



Strikingly, a third of those dealing with a budget cut also reported that they would be unable to reach the same number of families as before, which we estimate would equate to at least 650 Children's Centre sites nationwide. Furthermore, a quarter said that they would have to reduce the number of locations that they deliver from – we estimate that this would equate to at least 600 Children's Centre sites nationwide that are looking to reduce their delivery locations. This suggests that some of the strengths of Children's Centres identified in the previous section could be under threat. The important role that Children's Centres have to play in delivering effective early intervention has already been highlighted, but there is risk that this could be significantly undermined if budget reductions were to continue at the same rate.

Moreover, nearly a fifth of Centre managers indicate that they will have to reduce their opening hours, which we estimate would equate to approximately 540 Children's Centre sites nationwide, and over a quarter will prospectively have to start charging for services that have previously been free, which we estimate would equate to at least 600 Children's Centre sites nationwide. This reinforces the concern that Children's Centres' support may become more inaccessible to those who need it.

The pressure that budget cuts are putting on the Children's Centre workforce is also an area of concern highlighted through the Census, with a third of managers facing a budget reduction saying they will be unable to retain staff, which we estimate would equate to approximately 720 Children's Centre sites nationwide. Over recent years many Children's Centres have responded to budget cuts by streamlining staffing structures to ensure resources are focused on the front-line. These findings could indicate significant strain on Children's Centres and their ability to deliver front-line services. Continuity is especially important in an environment where trusting relationships can be critical to the provision of effective support. Where financial constraints mean the loss of experienced staff who have carefully built up such relationships over time, the impact is likely to be most keenly felt by families themselves.

Services that are being cut back in Children's Centres

To provide more of an insight into what cuts to Children's Centre services will mean for families, the Census asked respondents to identify which particular types of service they planned to reduce over the coming year.¹⁸ This revealed that:

- 19.6% of managers will cut back Stay and Play sessions
- 15.1% of managers will cut back Messy Play sessions
- 13.7% of managers will cut back baby massage sessions
- 13.5% of managers will cut back music and movement groups
- 10.1% of managers will cut back their provision of fathers' groups

Where services are being reduced, it is often core parent and child sessions that are most at risk. While these sorts of groups are sometimes dismissed as soft, dispensable services, the reality is quite different. For example, Stay and Play sessions play a crucial role in supporting parents to engage proactively with their children's learning and development, and in helping to establish a positive home learning environment. Research clearly indicates that both parental engagement and the home learning environment have a significant impact on improving outcomes and closing attainment gaps,¹⁹ and any reduction in services which support these is therefore concerning.

Furthermore, services such as baby massage are an effective way for parents to bond with very young babies and as such forge strong early attachment which is so necessary for strong personal, social and emotional development.

The fact that 10% of Centre managers also plan to cut back fathers' groups is also worrying. There is a recognised desire to increase engagement with fathers across all services. Children's Centres have a good record of reaching dads (over three quarters of managers say they work with fathers, as data from Section 1 on "target groups" shows), but this is potentially at risk where services are being cut back.

The balance between universal and targeted services

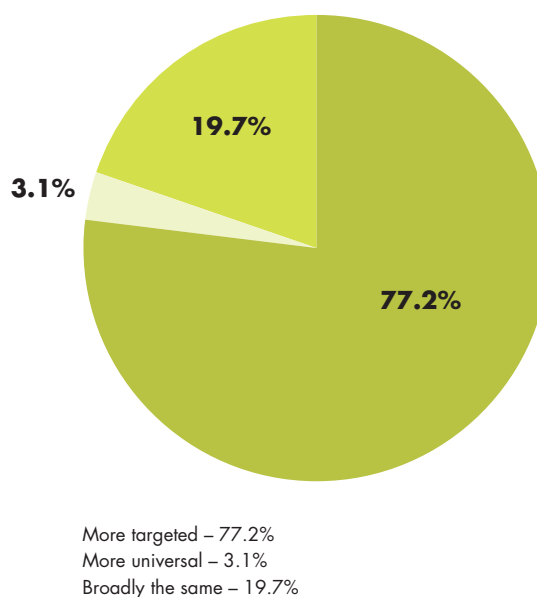
Another way we have seen a change in services in response to challenging financial circumstances is by a shift in the balance towards more targeted services (focused on the most vulnerable users) and away from universal services (open to everyone). Over the last 12 months, three quarters of Centre managers report that their services have become more targeted, which we estimate would equate to approximately 2,650 Children's Centre sites nationwide, while just 3.1% say that their provision has become more universal (Figure 5) which we estimate would equate to approximately 70 sites nationwide.

Without doubt, targeted services are an extremely important aspect of Children's Centres' work, ensuring support is given to those identified as either more at risk of problems developing or already experiencing difficulties.

However, while greater targeting is an understandable response in the face of severe budget constraints, it should also be recognised that the loss of universal

provision can have consequences, including for the most disadvantaged families. In particular, research shows that one of the key factors in supporting the development of young children from disadvantaged backgrounds is giving them the opportunity to learn and engage with a broad social mix of other children,²¹ which is lost if services become solely targeted. Furthermore, universal services are known to be an essential way to engage families in the first place, due to their non-stigmatising nature. This enables identification of families in need of further support who would not otherwise have accessed targeted services. Therefore, while Children's Centres' targeted work is unquestionably crucial, it is equally important that this is delivered alongside a base of universal provision.

Figure 5: How has the balance between universal and targeted services changed at your Centre(s) over the past year?²⁰



Changes to the way Children’s Centres are organised and closures

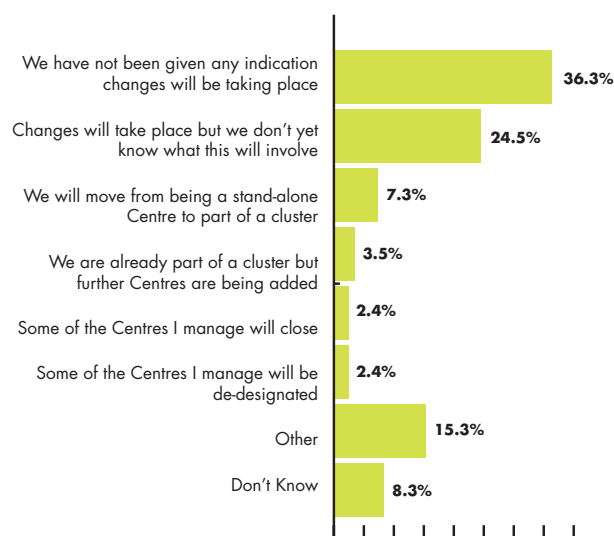
As well as looking at the challenges that Children’s Centres are facing right now, it is also important to understand how this is likely to develop in the future, and the sorts of changes that will be taking place to the way that Children’s Centres are organised and managed. When faced with the need to make savings, Local Authorities have taken a range of different approaches. These include making changes to organisational structures, such as moving an individual Children’s Centre run on a “stand-alone” basis into a cluster of several Children’s Centres to reduce management costs, or in some cases closing Children’s Centres altogether (an alternative option of “de-designation”, which involves reducing services to such an extent that a building no longer qualifies as a Children’s Centre, is sometimes also pursued).

Centre managers who participated in the Census were asked whether they had received any indication that changes would be taking place to the way their Children’s Centres were organised (Figure 6). Just over a third said that to their knowledge no changes were currently planned, which we estimate would equate to approximately 1,315 Children’s Centre sites nationwide. However, one particularly striking aspect of these results is that a quarter of respondents suggested that they were aware that changes would be taking place, but were yet to be informed about what this would involve, which we estimate would equate to approximately 750 Children’s Centre sites nationwide.

This starkly illustrates that many of the managers and staff in Children’s Centres are operating under conditions of significant uncertainty. With only a limited idea of how their Children’s Centres will be structured over the next few years and the capacity that will be available, it becomes very difficult to plan meaningfully for the future. Attracting and retaining good staff is also much more challenging in such circumstances. Ultimately, a degree of stability and security is crucial for Centre managers to be able to ensure that effective support is available on an ongoing basis to families who rely on it.

Another notable aspect of these results is the number of respondents who anticipate that their Children’s Centres will be closed or de-designated, with around 5% reporting that they are in this situation.

Figure 6: Have you received any indication that changes will take place to the way your Centre(s) are organised in future?²²



If the number of closures and de-designations suggested by the Census data were to be scaled up nationally, it would indicate that approximately 130 Children’s Centre sites are currently at risk across the country.²³

However, we believe that this figure is unlikely to reflect the full extent of the closures and de-designations taking place nationally. In particular, the fact that decisions are taken at a local level means that there is a strong geographic element to these trends which will not necessarily be captured by scaling up data from the Census sample up to the national level.

What can be said for certain is that, with further Local Authority decisions on Children’s Centres still pending at the time of writing, the prospect of further closures remains very real, emphasising how difficult the current climate is.

“If only they had funding to do more, it’s such a shame that these vital services are being cut. I’m not sure there is any service out there that can help parents straight away despite what other professionals state”

Summary

Most Centre managers have seen their annual budget decrease this year – many will have been experiencing year-on-year budget reductions for a number of years.

Where budget cuts are taking place, this will lead to a reduction in services, staffing and the number of families supported.

Where services are being cut back, core parent and child services are often most at risk. These can play a crucial role in the development of strong attachment and ensuring parental engagement with a child's learning.

In general, the balance of services has shifted more towards targeted services and away from universal services, which can play a key role in supporting the development of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Large numbers of Children's Centres are operating under conditions of significant uncertainty, making it very challenging to plan for the future. The threat of closure and de-designation remains an ever present concern.

Section 3: The future of Children's Centres and opportunities to maximise their potential

- ➔ **Children's Centres are playing a crucial role in supporting children and families but their full potential is yet to be realised**
- ➔ **Children's Centres have a key role to play in mental health, employment support, the Troubled Families programme and in addressing acute need – better integrating support through Children and Family Hubs would break down silos and be more cost-effective**
- ➔ **More can still be done to increase the impact of Children's Centres through better data sharing and the introduction of birth registration services nationwide**

The current climate is clearly a challenging one for Children's Centres. However, while they face a number of difficulties, it is important that we do not lose sight of both the impact they are currently having and their considerable potential. As we discuss the future shape of Children's Centres our focus should be on how we deliver the best possible support for children and families in the years ahead and the role Children's Centres play in this. 4Children believes that the key to achieving this is to develop Children's Centres into Hubs for local services and family support.²⁴

Children's Centres are already leading the way in joining up services around children and families' needs and providing support from conception through the earliest years of a child's life. By taking advantage of Children's Centres' existing infrastructure and relationships, they are the ideal vehicle to develop further partnerships and integrate wider services around the needs of children and families. Not only will this approach be more effective – breaking down silos and avoiding duplication – but crucially is cost effective, making the best use of existing resources.

This Section examines the good work that Children's Centres are currently doing in several of these vital areas, including the provision of mental health and employment services, supporting the Troubled Families programme and addressing more acute need, and explores the potential benefits of implementing the Hub model and expanding Children's Centres' role in delivery.

Initially however, it is important to recognise the unique advantages of providing services through Children's Centres, and the value they add to delivery.

The parent survey conducted in parallel to the main Children's Centre Census offered the opportunity to examine this, with parents being asked about the one thing their Children's Centre offered that they did not get anywhere else.²⁵ The top three responses given by parents who responded to the survey were:

- The chance for them and their children to meet new people
- Staff who are friendly and welcoming
- Being able to get different kinds of support in one place

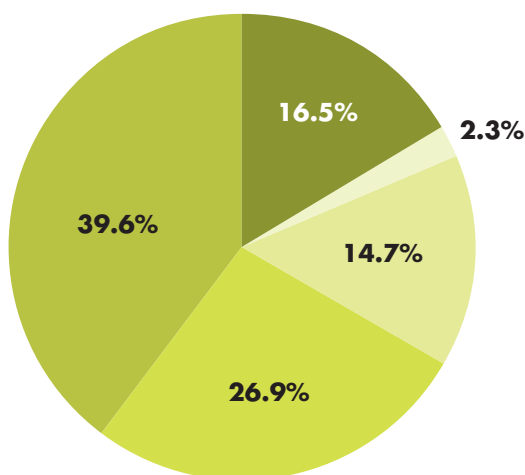
Clearly, parents place significant value on the personal relationships they build with staff and other parents as a result of using Children's Centres, and the fact they can access different kinds of support in a single location. These are not easily replicated by other services, and represent some of the key benefits of delivering support specifically through Children's Centres.

Mental health support in Children's Centres

One of the key areas in which Children's Centres are playing a prominent role is in the provision of mental health support. A third (33.8%) of Centre managers who participated in the Census told us that they currently offer mental health support to children and young people²⁶ – if data from the Census were scaled up to the national level, this would equate to approximately 1,130 Children's Centre sites offering mental health support to children and young people. Meanwhile, six in ten (60.4%) of Centre managers are providing mental health support to adults,²⁷ which we estimate would equate to at least 2,040 Children's Centre sites nationwide.

Moreover, maternal mental health is a particularly important strand of this work, with just under half of Census respondents (43.9%) indicating that they provide some form of mental health support to mothers either before or after birth, which we estimate would equate to at least 1,480 Children's Centre sites nationwide. A quarter of Centre managers say they are offering continuous support across both the pre and post-natal periods (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Do you provide mental health support for adults?²⁸



Yes – 16.5%
 Yes, including prenatal – 2.3%
 Yes, including postnatal – 14.7%
 Yes, including both prenatal and postnatal – 26.9%
 No – 39.6%

It is now widely understood that there is a significant link between mental health and outcomes, and that support can often be required at key moments in an individual's life, such as during youth and adolescence and at periods of major life change (including the birth of a

child, unemployment or the breakdown of a relationship). Indeed, the eventual costs of not intervening when someone is in need of support can be substantial – for example, the Maternal Mental Health Alliance have estimated that the annual cost of perinatal mental health problems is somewhere in the region of £8.1 billion, highlighting the need for a strong system of preventative support.²⁹ Children's Centres not only play a major part in delivering this, as these results clearly demonstrate, but also provide a safe and trusted environment to increase this support in a location already accessed by many parents, where referral to other services can take place quickly and easily.

However, equally significant, as has been emphasised, is the potential role that Children's Centres can play in building an even stronger support framework in the future through the Hub model. This approach, which brings together a range of professionals and services within Children's Centres, prospectively enables earlier identification of mental health problems and a more effective and co-ordinated preventative response. Centre managers themselves recognise the value of this – when asked about the factors that would improve the mental health support they offer:³⁰

- 80.5% wanted help to support those with low-level mental health issues at an earlier stage
- 67.9% wanted help to identify those with mental health problems at an earlier stage
- 67.6% wanted more mental health professionals working through their Children's Centres

Children's Centres already have partnerships in place with many key stakeholders such as Health Visitors, midwives and Adolescent Mental Health Services, providing a strong base for developing them into Hubs for enhanced mental health support.

"I used to suffer depression and was sent to the Children's Centre when pregnant ... I improved and since having my baby I've not gone back on my medication. I ask for help from the Children's Centre if I need it rather than dealing with it alone"

Employment and skills support in Children's Centres

The provision of employment and skills support is another area in which Children's Centres are now playing an important role.

Nearly all respondents to the Census (97.7%) said they offered some form of support to parents to help them improve their skills and employment prospects,³¹ which we estimate would equate to approximately 3,315 Children's Centre sites nationwide.

Moreover, this support appears to have a tangible impact on outcomes:

- A quarter (24.6%) of Centre managers surveyed said that at least 50% of the parents they had supported in the last year had moved "significantly closer to employment" as a result³²
- A similar number (24.0%) said that at least 25% of the parents they had supported in the last year had moved into employment³³

Given that parents in receipt of this kind of support can sometimes have quite a distance to travel on their journey to employment, these figures represent a notable achievement, and it is important to recognise the significant contribution that Children's Centres are making in this respect.

Looking ahead, and as already recognised by the announcement in last year's Autumn Statement that the Government intended to fund pilots around the provision of basic skills training and employment support through Children's Centres, there is a strong case for further developing Children's Centres' role in this area.³⁴ There is already an excellent base from which to expand their provision, and build on existing links with the likes of Jobcentre Plus and education providers.

Children's Centres and the Troubled Families programme

The Troubled Families programme is the Government's flagship initiative for supporting families with complex needs, and aims to improve outcomes in key areas such as unemployment and school truancy.

The Census indicates that in many cases Children's Centres are already playing an active role in supporting the Troubled Families programme, with the results showing that:

- Just over half of the Centre managers surveyed (53.2%) said that they were directly involved in delivering the Troubled Families programme³⁵
- Around two thirds (63.4%) reported that they work in partnership with their local Troubled Families team³⁶
- A fifth (18.4%) have Troubled Families staff working through their Children's Centres³⁷

Given the strength of their outreach work and reach, Children's Centres are excellently positioned to contribute in this policy area. Their involvement in the programme shows how Children's Centres are playing a crucial role in delivering priority programmes, and that without them the successful delivery of these services would be more difficult.

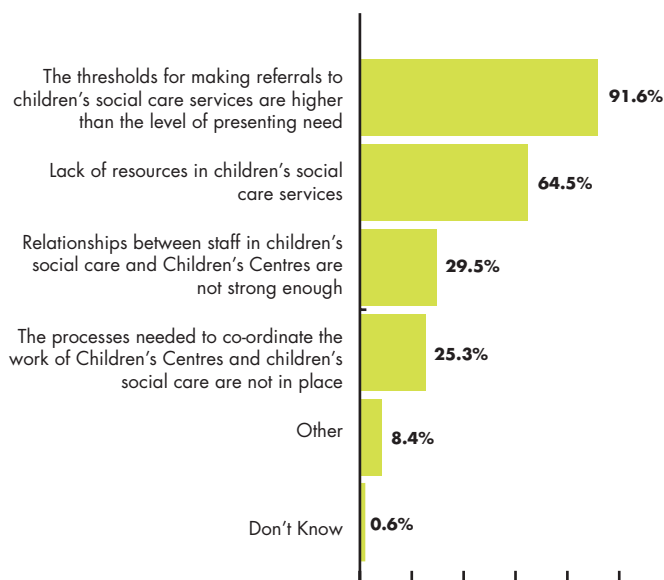
For the Troubled Families programme, it is also clear that there is further potential for more collaboration to integrate these services at a local level.

Children's Centres' role in addressing acute need

In addition to the work that Children's Centres do in the provision of early intervention, one other trend which is raised anecdotally through Children's Centres is their increasing role in addressing more urgent forms of need and in meeting demand at the acute end, as well as providing more preventative support.

When asked what they thought led to this – and in certain instances prevented children's social care being able to adequately support them – the main factor identified by 90% of Centre managers is that thresholds for making referrals are higher than the level of presenting need, followed by a lack of resources within children's social care services, as identified by 64.5% of Centre managers (Figure 8).

Figure 8: What are the main factors which, in your view, prevent children's social care services from adequately supporting you in all cases?³⁸



Without Children's Centres picking up residual acute need, the pressure that children's social care services are already under would likely escalate further. But as we look to the future, we should consider how Children's Centres can be best utilised to build a stronger and more robust system for meeting this urgent level of need. To this end, as well as integrating services more effectively by developing Children's Centres into Hubs, 4Children has proposed the creation of a new class of social care professional – the Social Care Family Worker – who would operate through Children's Centres to support those with lower-level needs, thereby helping to relieve the pressure on front-line Social Workers.³⁹

Data Sharing and Birth Registration

The difficulties that Children's Centres encounter in accessing data from other statutory agencies is often cited as one of the key barriers standing in the way of greater collaborative working, and is an issue which will need to be overcome in the long-term if better service integration is to be achieved. The Census examined current levels of data sharing, and found that while this is well developed in some areas (particularly with children's social care), in others (such as with health and schools) there is still more to be done.⁴⁰

- 77.6% of managers say they receive data about children on child protection plans or who are classed as "children in need"
- 59.2% receive data on live births in their area from their local health service
- 48.0% receive data from primary schools to enable them to track children's progress
- 34.5% receive data about hospital admissions for under-5s

Data on live births enables Children's Centres to identify families in their area who have recently had a child and may be in need of support, while tracking data on the progress of children at primary school allows Children's Centres to monitor how effectively they are preparing children for school and what interventions are particularly successful. Ideally all Children's Centres should receive this information, but in reality this is far from the case. Census respondents were asked to identify what factors would improve the situation, and highlighted a need for clearer and more explicit guidance about what data can be shared and when, as well as better processes. These are developments that central and local government can help to enable, and should be a priority for the future.

The other key development which would help enhance the support that Children's Centres provide is the introduction of birth registration services on a national basis. Data from the Census indicates that 15.7% of Centre managers currently offer birth registration through their Children's Centres,⁴¹ but with evidence suggesting that this can play an important role in introducing new families to Children's Centres' services and improving engagement,⁴² widening the practice across the country would enable them to extend their reach yet further and support even more families.

Summary

Children's Centres are playing a crucial role in supporting families but their full potential is yet to be realised.

Children's Centres play a prominent role in providing mental health support, including to new mothers.

Children's Centres are providing employment and skills support, helping to move parents closer to employment and into work.

Children's Centres are already playing an active role in supporting the Troubled Families programme, but there is potential for them to offer more.

In addition to their preventative work, Children's Centres are also addressing acute need – the creation of a Social Care Family Worker operating through Children's Centres would help to relieve some of the pressure.

Improving data sharing and introducing birth registration on a nationwide basis would help enhance Children's Centres work even further.

Conclusion

This year's Census has shown that Children's Centres are playing a central role in the lives of families and communities across the country, and providing support which many children and parents have come to rely on. It also demonstrates the scale of the ongoing financial challenge and uncertainty that Centre managers are dealing with, and the tangible impact this is likely to have.

Equally though, the findings also point towards what Children's Centres are capable of offering us in the future, which is particularly significant at a time when Government resources are under such pressure. The Census illustrates that Children's Centres are not just playing an important role in providing mental health and employment support, as well as contributing to the Troubled Families programme

and addressing more acute need, but that they can prospectively do even more if their potential is harnessed. This approach would better integrate services, break down silos and be more cost-effective.

The basis for this is already in place, given the strength of Children's Centres' existing infrastructure and partnerships – the key question is how we build on this to provide the best possible support for children and families in the future. As has been suggested throughout this report, 4Children sees the Hub model as a key part of the solution, and believes it will not only enable Children's Centres to deliver support more efficiently but also more effectively. With this in mind, 4Children makes the following six recommendations:

1

The Government should prioritise children and families over the forthcoming Parliament and develop a comprehensive strategy to support their development

2

Central and local government should maximise the existing infrastructure of Children's Centres, recognising their value and potential to deliver a range of services at a time when resources are stretched

3

Children's Centres' partnerships and joint-working should be built on to develop them into Hubs for local services and family support

4

There should be an automatic assumption of data-sharing between Children's Centres and other agencies working with children – such as schools, health, social services

5

There should be a clear commitment to maintain a universal offer alongside targeted services within Children's Centres

6

The provision of birth registration services in Children's Centres should be increased

Appendix A: Children and Family Hubs

4Children believes that developing Children's Centres into Children and Family Hubs represents the most effective way of delivering the best possible support for children and families over the coming years – building on existing infrastructure and partnerships. This Appendix provides an overview of the Children and Family Hub model and sets out the potential benefits of introducing it.

The Children and Family Hub model

Children and Family Hubs would bring together a wide range of services in a single place to provide a holistic offer for children and families.

This would include health support (including Health Visiting and midwifery); parenting services; relationship support; employment support; childcare and early years provision; and support for those with complex needs (working closely with local Troubled Families teams and children's social care services, and having new Social Care Family Workers operating through Hubs to deal with lower-level cases). Support would be available for children from 0-19 and their families. Hubs would deliver, co-ordinate and signpost for all services children and families need.

Crucially, Hubs would undertake work on both a universal and targeted basis, ensuring that the benefits of universal provision (in terms of encouraging engagement amongst those families who might not access targeted provision and supporting the development of disadvantaged children through early intervention) are not lost.

The benefits of Children and Family Hubs

- The Hub model ensures greater integration of services for children and families – breaking down silos and facilitating better joint working between agencies ultimately leading to better services for children and families
- Hubs build on the infrastructure and relationships already in place across the Children's Centre network, capitalising on their existing resources and strengths at a time of significant pressure

Appendix B: Case Studies

As part of this year's Census, we asked respondents to provide us with case studies of good practice – this page includes examples of Children's Centres' work in several key areas:

Outreach

"We examined data about disadvantaged two-year olds in our area who were entitled to a free childcare place but were not taking it up, and found a high number in a ward 6 miles from our Children's Centre. We therefore decided to offer an early years session through a new nursery setting, to encourage these families to attend.

We found that the reason free places were not being taken up was largely because of poor transport links and availability of funding. We now have a regular attendance at this group, and data shows that there has been an increase in two-year old funding within the reach area. Families tell us they enjoy the session and want to volunteer in the future, and for it to become a parent-led group." **(Cluster Manager, East Midlands)**

Mental Health Support

"Last year our Children's Centre saw a significant number of mothers experiencing low mental health and post natal depression. Following discussions with the local health service as well as social care and local childcare providers, it was decided to deliver a post natal depression support group from the Children's Centre. Women attending this group have reported improved health, a reduction in isolation and an increase in confidence, which is evidenced in the group evaluations.

We see this group as a starting point for improving the mental health of the women we work with and over the past 12 months have offered places on our "Strong Women" programme. This 6 week programme builds self-esteem, resilience and aspirations and leads onto the "Stronger Women" group. The group is supported by local industries who not only contribute the use of space and facilities but also encourage their female employees to attend sessions to talk about their roles, work place offers and how to access further training." **(Cluster Manager, North West)**

Troubled Families

"As part of the Troubled Families programme, a parent was referred to us by social services and her Health Visitor for parenting support. She attended all the sessions, and while at first she was not very keen on the training (she later said 'when I first came here I wanted to run home'), after completing the course she had progressed well and implemented the strategies she was taught. Following the sessions she said 'I didn't know that the training would be so relaxed and all the strategies have worked to improve my parenting'." **(Centre Manager, North East)**

Volunteer Progression

"A parent started to access services at our Children's Centre in January 2013, predominantly for parenting support. That April, she became a volunteer at the Children's Centre. She started by supporting Children's Centre staff and 0-19 team by being a face for the Children's Centre during baby clinics. In June 2013 she began supporting us with administrative work within the Children's Centre. At this point, she volunteered for an average of 3 days a week. She became involved in producing ante-natal packs for our Children's Centre which we still use today, and are given to all ante-natal parents in our reach area.

Alongside all of this, she worked closely with our local authority's Planning Office to create a document detailing all current and prospective housing developments in our reach area, including the numbers of social housing units on each development. The developers now all include information about our Children's Centre in their New Home Packs. This parent's support for the Children's Centre was recognised when she successfully applied to cover the maternity leave of our Children's Centre Administrator, and she is now employed with us 5 days a week." **(Centre Manager, East of England)**

Appendix C: Methodological Note

Children's Centre Census Methodology

This report is a summary of key findings from responses to the Children's Centre Census 2015 survey, which ran for just over 8 weeks from Friday 22nd May to Monday 20th July. It was conducted online and promoted to Centre managers through a series of emails, using a contact list made available by the Department for Education on the Directgov website. In total, the survey received 388 responses from Centre managers working in 124 local authorities across England. Based on data provided by respondents, we estimate that those who took part in the survey were collectively responsible for between 930 and 1,040 Children's Centre sites (this represents approximately one third of all sites nationally, based on data published by the Department of Education on Tuesday 30th June, which indicated that there were a total of 3,382 "main" and "additional" sites operating on that date).

Parent Survey Methodology

Alongside the main Children's Centre Census, we also ran a parallel parent survey which was open for just over 10 weeks from Friday 22nd May to Tuesday 4th August. This was also conducted online, and was promoted to parents who use a Children's Centre across several social media platforms. In total, the survey received 576 responses from parents across all 9 English regions.

Number of children and families using Children's Centres

Based on data provided by Census respondents, we estimate that between 1.0 million and 1.1 million children and families are currently using Children's Centres on a frequent basis. This estimate has been calculated by scaling data captured from the survey sample up to the national level. Responses to the Census suggest that managers who participated in the survey are collectively supporting approximately 310,000 children and families on a frequent basis. As noted above, we estimate that these managers are responsible for between 930 and 1,040 Children's Centre sites. Taking a national base of 3,382 Children's Centre sites, and assuming that usage trends within the Census are consistent nationwide, multiplying the number of children and families using sample Children's Centres up to a national level suggests that the overall number lies somewhere between 1.0 million and 1.1 million (2 sig fig).

National estimates of the number of Children's Centres affected by issues such as budget reductions and uncertainty, and that deliver mental health, employment support etc.

On a number of occasions in Sections 2 and 3, we have used data from the Census to make a projection of the number of Children's Centre sites potentially affected by issues such as budget reductions and uncertainty, and that are delivering certain types of support. In doing so, we begin by using data from the Census survey to estimate the overall number of Children's Centre sites represented by respondents to a particular question (e.g. How does your budget for 2015-16 compare to your budget for 2014-15?). We then estimate the number of Children's Centre sites represented by respondents selecting a particular answer (e.g. We have a decreased budget), and calculate the proportion of the overall number of sites providing a response that this represents. This proportion is then applied nationally, utilising the base of 3,382 Children's Centre sites suggested by the Department for Education's official figures, to provide an estimate of the total number of sites affected across the country.

Number of closures and de-designations

Estimates for the number of closures and de-designations nationally have also been based on scaling up trends from the Census sample to a national level. Data provided by survey respondents suggests that 36 to 37 sites are currently at risk of closure and de-designation within the sample. Multiplying these figures up nationally suggests that between 127 and 138 sites are at risk overall. However, due to certain limitations in this approach, we believe that this is unlikely to reflect the true extent of the closures and de-designations taking place, as indicated in the main text. In particular, as decisions on these issues are taken by Local Authorities, there is a very strong geographic element to patterns of closures and de-designations. The assumption that trends from a limited sample can be taken as nationally representative is therefore less robust in this context. For example, close inspection of the data shows that in a number of areas where closures and de-designations are known to be happening, no survey respondents have indicated that they are affected, suggesting that those directly impacted have not submitted a response and that survey data does not show the full picture of what is taking place.

**For further information please contact
public.affairs@4Children.org.uk**

Endnotes

1. The Methodological Note in Appendix C provides further information on how this estimate was calculated
2. N = 388
3. N = 576
4. N = 372
5. N = 357
6. Graham Allen MP (2011) Early Intervention: The Next Steps, p. 24
7. Early Intervention Foundation (2015) Spending on Late Intervention: How we can do better for less, p. 4
8. N = 334
9. N = 150
10. N = 148
11. N = 352
12. N = 348
13. N = 348
14. The Methodological note in Appendix C provides further information on how national estimates for the number of Children's Centre sites affected by budget cuts, and other indicators, have been calculated
15. N = 372
16. N = 372 (2015); 337 (2014); 483 (2013); 516 (2012) – Note that in 2014 this question was asked in a different format so data has been recalculated on a comparable basis
17. N = 235
18. N = 357
19. Kathy Silva et al (2004) The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Final Report, p. iv-v
20. N = 355
21. Kathy Silva et al (2004) The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Final Report, p. iv
22. N = 372
23. The Methodological Note in Appendix C provides further information on how this estimate was calculated
24. Further detail about the 4Children's proposals for Children and Family Hubs are in Appendix A. For previous work on this topic see: 4Children (2014) Children and Family Hubs: 4Children's integrated model for effective children and family support
25. N = 576
26. N = 346
27. N = 346
28. N = 346
29. Annette Bauer et al (2015) The costs of perinatal health problems, p. 4
30. N = 343
31. N = 342
32. N = 333
33. N = 333
34. HM Treasury (2014) Autumn Statement 2014, p. 89
35. N = 340
36. N = 352
37. N = 348
38. N = 166
39. For further details on 4Children's proposals for Social Care Family Workers see: 4Children (2014) Children and Family Hubs: 4Children's integrated model for effective children and family support
40. N = 348
41. N = 357
42. All Party Parliamentary Group on Sure Start Children's Centres (2013) Best Practice for a Sure Start: The Way Forward for Children's Centres, p. 26-33

Ten statistics you need to know from the Children's Centre Census



Over 1 million children and families are using Children's Centres



79% of parents who use Children's Centres say life would be harder without them

83% of Centre managers say their Centres deliver family support in the home



98% of Centre managers say their Centres provide employment support



77% of Centre managers say services have become more targeted in the last year



64% of Centre managers have seen their budget cut this year and of these...



24% of Centre managers know change is coming but don't know what this will involve



57% will have to cut services for children and families



34% will be unable to retain staff



20% will reduce opening hours