
All Party Parliamentary Group on Sure Start Children's Centres

2015 Pre-Election Report



All Party Parliamentary Group on Sure Start Children's Centres

2015 Pre-Election Report



Introduction

In the years since they were first established a decade and a half ago, Children's Centres have become fundamental to the way we support children and families. They represent a crucial element of the early years landscape, and as the former Education and Childcare Minister Elizabeth Truss MP told us in January 2014, are now "a key part of what it means to be a parent and a child in this country".

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Sure Start Children's Centres was formed in 2010, with three core aims: to champion the good work of Children's Centres; to identify and share good practice; and to consider and inform policy development on key issues. The Group provides an important forum for its members, who represent all the major parties and both Houses of Parliament, to engage directly with both front-line practitioners and senior policy makers.

In July 2013, the Group published a major report, "Best Practice for a Sure Start: The Way Forward for Children's Centres". This was the culmination of a year-long inquiry into best practice across the Children's Centre network, and highlighted the importance of delivering a "holistic" service for babies, children and parents through Centres. Since then, the Group has held a series of meetings during the 2013/14 and 2014/15 parliamentary sessions to examine key issues for the Children's Centre network, such as the delivery of integrated health services, quality improvement and early education.¹ As we approach the 2015 General Election, this report sets out five recommendations which the Group believes any incoming Government must take forward to ensure the continued success of Children's Centres, based on its views of the discussions which have taken place over the past two years.

Centres now work with over a million families on a regular basis (including approximately two-thirds of the most disadvantaged families),² giving them an

almost unrivalled ability to reach children during the crucial early years of their lives. Children's Centres should continue to play a crucial role in supporting children and families over the course of the next parliament, making the future of the network an important priority for politicians of all parties.

The Group is keenly aware that this year's General Election comes at a crucial period for the Children's Centres, as they seek to balance exceptionally high levels of demand with considerable pressure on resources. In this context, it will be crucial for any Government which comes to power in May 2015 to continue to build on Children's Centres' many achievements, and stand decisively behind the network and its staff by taking forward the following recommendations as soon as the new parliament begins:

- 1. Position Children's Centres at the heart of local service provision**
- 2. Give clear direction that sharing information with Children's Centres should be standard practice**
- 3. Support Children's Centres to provide birth registration services to local families, including through the establishment of a national pilot**
- 4. Develop an integrated inspection framework**
- 5. Promote the continued development and retention of a high quality workforce**

¹ A summary of the meetings held by the Group in 2013/14 and 2014/15 is available in Appendix A

² 4Children (2014) *Sure Start Children's Centre Census 2014*, p. 16

I: Position Children's Centres at the heart of local service provision

One of the greatest strengths of Children's Centres has always been their capacity to join-up a wide range of services around a child to provide a genuinely "holistic" model of support, and the importance of this was emphasised in this Group's "Best Practice for a Sure Start" report in 2013. Any new Government should seek to make full use of the infrastructure now in place across the Centre network to deliver this model of support, building services around children and families by positioning Children's Centres at the heart of local provision.

When the Sure Start programme first began in 1999, it represented an ambitious vision for developing a new kind of public service which placed parents and children at the heart of a joined-up model of support. Children's Centres have come a long way since then, and today play a central role in the lives of an estimated 1.05 million families across the country.³ As we move into a new parliament, the Group believes it will be crucial to build on what Centres have achieved to date to deliver the best possible offer for families.

Any incoming Government should seek to take full advantage of the infrastructure currently in place across the network to build local services around children and families – its ultimate aim should be to position Children's Centres at the heart of service provision in their communities, to enable them to provide the sort of "holistic" offer we know to be valued and effective. This approach to service delivery will yield a number of important benefits, including breaking the culture of "silo" working at a local level, improving collaborative work between services and providing enhanced support to children and families, whilst minimising Children's Centre closures.

Data from 4Children's "Sure Start Children's Centre Census 2014" indicate a very strong base already exists to work from, and that Centres now have extensive relationships in place with other service providers. Figures show that virtually all Centres

work frequently with their local health service, while 97% are regularly working with social care and 91% with midwives.⁴

Building on this, the concept of developing Children's Centres into local service hubs is one that is now being widely discussed. The Centre for Social Justice has argued that Children's Centres should become "Family Hubs", which they describe as "local 'nerve centres' which enable parents to access all family-related support including universal support and specialist help to meet their most pressing needs".⁵ 4Children has also proposed a new model of "Children and Family Hubs", which would extend Centres' support across the whole 0-19 age range and draw together a wide range of services and professionals in a single co-located space.⁶

The Group therefore calls on any new Government to take full advantage of the existing Centre infrastructure in order to deliver "holistic" support for children and families, by exploring opportunities to develop Children's Centres into service hubs and setting out a clear policy direction which places Centres at the heart of local provision.

⁴ 4Children (2014) *Sure Start Children's Centre Census 2014*, p. 33

⁵ Centre for Social Justice (2014) *Fully Committed? How a Government could reverse family breakdown*, p. 47-58

⁶ 4Children (2014) *Children and Family Hubs: 4Children's integrated model for effective children and family support*

³ 4Children (2014) *Sure Start Children's Centre Census 2014*, p. 16

2: Give clear direction that sharing information with Children's Centres should be standard practice

The difficulties that Children's Centres face in accessing key data from statutory agencies, such as their local health service, are widely recognised across the sector. This represents one of the central challenges that Centres encounter in their efforts to deliver a joined-up, proactive service for families, and is an issue that needs to be tackled decisively through the provision of clear and unambiguous direction that data sharing with Children's Centres should be the norm.

Of particular note are the problems that Children's Centres have in accessing live birth data, information on live births in a locality which is used by Children's Centres to identify new-born children within their reach areas. As highlighted in The Children's Society's recent report, "*The right start: how to support early intervention through initial contact with families*", having access to live birth data could make an enormous contribution to Centres' outreach work by enabling them to get in touch with new parents at the earliest possible opportunity. Currently, The Children's Society estimate that almost half of local authorities are not sharing live birth data on a regular basis, which represents a significant impediment to Centres' ability to reach new families who may be in need of their support.⁷

It is important to recognise that there are no statutory obstacles to sharing this kind of data. In the final report of a "*Task and Finish*" Group set up by the current Government to address the issues around information sharing in the foundation years, it was clearly stated that:

"Current legislation and guidance all make clear that information can be shared if there are agreed local processes designed to meet specific legal requirements about confidentiality, consent and security of information ... The barriers are therefore less about actuality and more about the clarity of existing guidance, whether different groups of professionals

have actually seen it, and about professionals' attitudes and beliefs."⁸

In order to tackle these issues, The Children's Society have called on the Department for Education to review and strengthen the existing statutory guidance on sharing live birth data, and also consider whether there is a need for this to be placed in statute due to the mixed national picture of information sharing.

The Group wholeheartedly supports these proposals, and believes there is a need for any incoming Government to provide clear and unambiguous central direction that information sharing with Children's Centres should be the norm, to overcome challenges which have persisted for too long and continue to represent a barrier to good practice.

⁷ The Children's Society (2014) *The right start: how to support early intervention through initial contact with families*, p. 8

⁸ Information Sharing in the Foundation Years "Task and Finish" Group (2013) *Final Report*, p. 4-5

3: Support Children’s Centres to provide birth registration services to local families, including through the establishment of a national pilot

The widespread delivery of birth registration services through Children’s Centres has been a long-standing call of this Group. Where birth registration is provided through Centres it has been shown to enhance levels of parental engagement, and could deliver mutual benefits for both Centres themselves and the registration service. The Government should proactively support such initiatives, and set up a formal national pilot for registering births in Centres.

As part of the Group’s “Best Practice for a Sure Start” inquiry, which reported in July 2013, evidence was submitted by the Department for Education to highlight the positive impact that the provision of birth registration services can have. This pointed to the success enjoyed by Children’s Centres offering birth registration in Manchester, Bury and York, which were achieving notably high levels of parental engagement. Benchill Children’s Centre in Manchester, for example, which has a strong reputation for working with “hard-to-reach” families, achieved a parental engagement rate of 87.5% in 2012-13 as a result of its registration work, while Ramsbottom Children’s Centre in Bury had an engagement rate of 88% in the same year.⁹

In addition, the Department’s evidence also identified a number of key benefits that providing birth registration through Centres can deliver for the registration service itself, including: a setting that adds value to the birth registration process; extra registry capacity in populous areas; the convenience of the service being in the community; and a reduction in “no shows” and missed appointments.¹⁰

Delivering birth registration services more widely across the network would play an important role in enabling Children’s Centres’ to extend their reach and help more families. Data from The Children’s Society indicate that around 85% of local authorities do not currently register births through Centres, but that many have expressed an interest in doing so,

suggesting there is significant scope for extending this practice.¹¹

The Group recognises that both Children’s Centres and local registration services themselves will require support to realise this ambition, and believes that the Government should be proactive in providing this. Its first step should be to set up a formal national pilot, to establish the effectiveness of registering births through Centres and identify how to overcome any logistical obstacles that may exist on the ground.

⁹ 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. 27

¹⁰ 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. 29-32

¹¹ The Children’s Society (2014) *The right start: how to support early intervention through initial contact with families*, p. 13

4: Develop an integrated inspection framework

Significant progress is currently being made towards establishing a more integrated outcomes framework for the early years, which draws together educational attainment and health outcomes. At present, this is not reflected in the current inspection regime, which some evidence suggests may act as a barrier to integration and in certain cases penalise Children's Centres for good practice. The Group therefore believes there is a clear need for an integrated inspections framework to be developed.

The joint work undertaken by the Department for Education and the Department of Health to create a single "integrated review", which brings together the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile check at age 2 with the Healthy Child Programme review at 2 to 2 1/2, represents an important milestone in efforts to develop an integrated system of support around children in the early years. Not only does it enable us to build a much more rounded picture of a child's development which encompasses both educational and health outcomes, it is also a way of bringing together practitioners across different areas and facilitating joined-up working.

These very positive developments are not currently reflected in the current structure of the inspections framework, however, which may even be acting as a disincentive to integrated working. In their recent report "*Getting It Right for Families*", the Early Intervention Foundation has argued that:

"[T]he inspection framework is a potential barrier to developing integrated services. There is no single inspection regime for integrated early years, and there are separate Ofsted inspections for childcare and Children's Centres and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) inspections for health services.

"Currently Children's Centres are inspected individually or in small groups and receive a single judgement. Good integration is not always recognised by inspectors and some areas feel that they are penalised for innovative practice such as delivering services for older children through

Children's Centres, or integrating with health visiting and maternity services."¹²

The Group believes that the inspection regime for Children's Centres should support the drive towards greater integration and more innovative practice, and that any incoming Government should seek to develop an integrated inspections framework to facilitate this. The Group recognises that the landscape around early years inspections is prospectively shifting, with Ofsted potentially moving towards assessing provision across a local authority as a whole rather than on the basis of individual sites (Ofsted is also planning to introduce a Common Inspection Framework from September 2015, although at present Children's Centres would not be affected by this). Such changes could help open space for a more integrated regime, but nonetheless the Group believes that a determined drive is required from within central Government to ensure an integrated inspection framework is realised.

¹² Early Intervention Foundation (2014) *Getting It Right for Families: A Review of Integrated Systems and Promising Practice in the Early Years*, p. 51

5: Promote the continued development and retention of a high quality workforce

The publication of the Nutbrown Review in June 2012 highlighted the importance of developing a well qualified early years workforce, and the significant difference that this can make for children's outcomes. The development and retention of high quality staff represents a key issue for Children's Centres, particularly at a time of significant resource constraint. Any new Government should proactively support this, including by ensuring that existing qualifications and training opportunities effectively support early years professionals' development.

Good staff represent Children's Centres' greatest resource. The Nutbrown Review made clear that "high quality early education and care has the potential to make an important and positive impact on the learning, development and wellbeing of babies and young children", and that having a well qualified and professionalised workforce was fundamental to achieving this.¹³

At a time of financial pressure, however, retaining high quality staff represents a major concern across the Centre network. 4Children's "Sure Start Children's Centre Census 2014" indicates that around 54% of Centres believe that "maintaining staffing levels" will be one of their biggest challenges this year – no other issue was cited by this many Centres.¹⁴

The Group therefore believes that it will be vital for any incoming Government to recognise and proactively support the continued development and retention of a high quality workforce, both within Children's Centres and across the early years sector more widely. There are several dimensions to this.

For one, ensuring that the existing suite of qualifications adequately prepares those working in early years settings to provide high levels of education and care is clearly essential. In addition, providing staff with opportunities for continuing development is vital to allowing practitioners to grow

as professionals and enhance the quality of the education and care they provide. The importance of in-service training opportunities for staff in early years settings, and the positive impact this can have on children's outcomes, has been highlighted in representations to the Group's meetings. Moreover, the value of reflective practice to staff development, allowing practitioners time and space to occasionally step back and reflect more deeply on the work they do with children, is something the Group is keen to recognise.

The Group calls on any incoming Government to support the development and retention of high quality staff in Children's Centres, by continuing to build on the findings of the Nutbrown Review and, more broadly, by ensuring that Centres are appealing places for early years practitioners to work and develop a career.

¹³ Professor Cathy Nutbrown (2012) *Foundations for Quality: The independent review of early education and childcare qualifications – Final Report*, p. 2

¹⁴ 4Children (2014) *Sure Start Children's Centre Census 2014*, p. 39

Summary of Recommendations

In summary, the Group calls on any Government which comes to power after the 2015 General Election to:

- 1. Position Children's Centres at the heart of local service provision**, in order to ensure we take full advantage of the infrastructure that is currently in place across the Children's Centre network to build services around children and families, and deliver a genuinely "holistic" model of support. As part of this, opportunities to develop Children's Centres into local service hubs should be explored.
- 2. Give clear direction that information sharing with Children's Centres should be standard practice** to overcome the difficulties that Centres continue to encounter in accessing key data from statutory agencies. In particular, all Children's Centres should have regular access to live birth data to support their outreach work. The Department for Education should review and strengthen the relevant guidance, as well as considering whether there is a need for such provisions to be formally placed in statute, in order to facilitate this.
- 3. Support Children's Centres to provide birth registration services to local families, including through the establishment of a national pilot**, as this is something which has been shown to enhance parental engagement rates and can deliver mutual benefits for both Centres and the registration service.
- 4. Develop an integrated inspection framework** to mirror outcomes frameworks such as the "integrated review". Currently the fact that Children's Centres are inspected by Ofsted while local health services are inspected by the Care Quality Commission can be an obstacle to integration and good practice, and any new Government must take action to deal with this.
- 5. Promote the continued development and retention of a high quality workforce**, by continuing to build on the findings of the

Nutbrown Review and making Centres appealing places for practitioners to build careers. Ensuring that qualifications provide adequate preparation for those moving into work in early years settings, and that opportunities are available for existing staff to undertake in-service training and engage in reflective practice, will be particularly important to achieving this.

Appendix A: Summary of meetings of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Sure Start Children's Centres during the 2013/14 and 2014/15 sessions

Over the course of the last two years, the Group has held a series of meetings to examine various key issues for the Children's Centre network, as outlined below:

2013/14

November 2013: The first meeting of the 2013/14 session was a follow-up session to the Group's "Best Practice for a Sure Start" report, with representations from:

- Mark Rimmer, Chair, Local Registration Services Association
- Sabrina Fuller, Head of Health Improvement, NHS England
- Dr Angela Donkin, Senior Adviser, UCL Institute of Health Equity

January 2014: The second meeting of the 2013/14 session focused on the issues surrounding childcare in Children's Centres, with representations from:

- Elizabeth Truss MP, Minister for Education and Childcare (2012-2014)
- Simon Dennison, Children's Centre Team Manager, Southampton City Council
- Harriet Price, Head Teacher, Homerton Children's Centre and Nursery School

March 2014: The final meeting of the 2013/14 session, held jointly with the APPG on Strengthening Couple Relationships and the APPG on Conception to Age 2 – The First 1001 Days, focused on supporting couple relationships and the role that Children's Centres can play, with representations from:

- Anne Longfield OBE, Chief Executive, 4Children
- Honor Rhodes OBE, Director of Strategic Development, Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships
- Bev Miller, Centre Director (Derby and Southern Derbyshire), Relate
- Dr Samantha Callan, Associate Director for Families and Mental Health, Centre for Social Justice
- Jeszemma Garratt, National Practice Development Manager, Fatherhood Institute

2014/15

November 2014: The first meeting of the 2014/15 session focused on the theme of "Integrated Health Delivery through Children's Centres", with representations from:

- Professor Vivienne Bennett, Director of Nursing and Midwifery, Department of Health and Public Health England
- Donna Molloy, Director of Implementation, Early Intervention Foundation
- Helen Berresford, Head of Public Affairs, 4Children
- Lucy Capron, Senior Local Public Affairs Officer, The Children's Society

December 2014: The second meeting of the 2014/15 session focused on the theme of "Early Education and Intervention", with representations from:

- Dr Julian Grenier, Head Teacher, Sheringham Nursery School and Children's Centre
- Allison Jones, Early Years Manager, London Borough of Merton
- Anne Longfield OBE, Chief Executive, 4Children
- Professor Edward Melhuish, Director of the Institute for the Study of Children, Family and Social Issues at Birkbeck and Research Professor at the University of Oxford

February 2015: The final meeting of the 2014/15 session meeting focused on the theme of "Improving Quality and Accountability in Children's Centres", with representations from:

- Councillor David Simmonds, Chairman, LGA Children and Young People Board
- John Alwyne-Mosley, Early Years Advisor, 4Children
- Charlotte Pomery, Assistant Director of Commissioning, London Borough of Haringey
- Renata Bailey, Children's Centre and Early Years Co-ordinator, London Borough of Haringey
- Michele Barrett, Head Teacher, Vanessa Nursery School and Children's Centre



Designed and published by 4Children on behalf of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Sure Start
Children's Centres, March 2015
Cover photo © Gary Manhine