



'Developing the future purpose for children's centres': Findings from the National Children's Bureau survey of practitioners and parents

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Introduction

On 28 November 2013, the National Children's Bureau published a series of essays in '[Partnerships for a Better Start: Perspectives on the role of children's centres](#)' to consider the future direction and purpose for children's centres.

The publication of the essay series coincided with the launch of a survey directed at practitioners and parents to find out what they value most about children's centres and to establish where, in their opinion, resources should be prioritised in the future. The survey ran from 28 November 2013 until 24 January 2014.

Background

Children's centres have evolved over the past 15 years. They began life in 1997 as Early Excellence Centres – nursery schools that integrated early education, childcare and multi-agency services. Early Excellence Centres formed a key component of the government's strategy to support families, by reducing social exclusion, improving health and addressing child poverty. In 1999, Sure Start Local Programmes were launched. These had similar aims to Early Excellence Centres but included a responsibility to meet the needs of every child within their area, achieved by increasing access to outreach services and family support. In 2004, Sure Start Local Programmes were transformed into Sure Start Children's Centres, with legal status gained in 2006 through the Childcare Act.

By 2010, there were 3,631 children's centres, fulfilling the vision of a children's centre in every local community. However, by April 2013 the number of children's centres had fallen to 3,116 mainly due to local authority funding cuts, closures and mergers of children's centres.

The coalition government came to power in 2010, promising continued funding and prioritisation for children's centres. A new core purpose and vision for children's centres was formulated (see below), with greater focus placed on supporting individual families facing difficulties, and moving from a service open to all in the locality to a more targeted approach.

The government believes that children's centres should have a clear core purpose, focused on improving outcomes for young children and their families, with a particular focus on the most disadvantaged families, in order to reduce inequalities in:

- child development and school readiness;

Supported by improved:

- parenting aspirations, self esteem and parenting skills;

- child and family health and life chances.

Summary of key findings:

- Over ninety percent of respondents agreed with the statement that '*our local children's centre is important to our community*'.
- The majority of respondents (87%) want funding for children's centres to be prioritised.
- Nearly 80% of respondents believe in the principle of progressive universalism: providing a universal point of access to children's centres with specialist support offered to vulnerable families.
- According to respondents, the highest priorities for children's centres should be: family and outreach support (49%); early education and language development (20%); and play opportunities (15%). While parents more frequently prioritised opportunities to play, practitioners emphasised the importance of early education and language development; both groups recognised the importance of family and outreach support.
- Almost 80% percent of respondents believe that their '*local children's centre should be for all children and families, but should work hard to bring in disadvantaged families*'.
- Over 80% of respondents want children's centres to work with all children under the age of five.
- Respondents recommended several ways in which health services could improve how they work with children's centres: better data sharing between agencies; co-locating health services within children's centres; improved integrated working between professionals; and placing greater focus on preventative support.
- Respondents proposed that the future of children's centres could be guaranteed by: securing long-term and stable funding streams; raising awareness of the positive outcomes of children's centre services; engaging businesses and the wider public to make children's centres community 'hubs'; and clarifying the core purpose of children's centres.
- According to respondents, the identification of vulnerable families could be improved by: enhanced data sharing between agencies; better communication and integrated working between professionals; and closer engagement with the local community to identify families most in need.

Part One: Engagement with children's centres

i) Survey respondent demographics

There were 215 responses to the survey. The largest respondent group were early years professionals (161), followed by parents (46). Eight others respondents included parliamentarians, students, volunteers and grandparents.

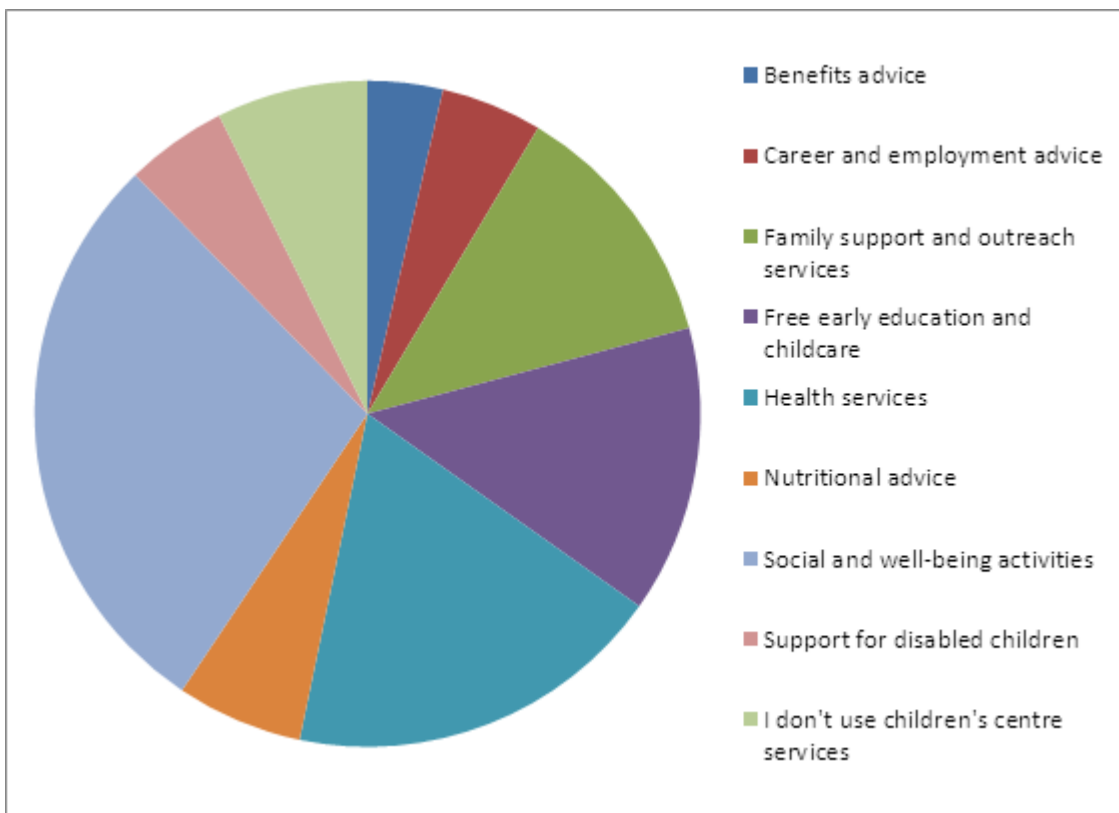
ii) Children's centre attendance

The majority of respondents (86%) had been to their local children's centre. When the data was analysed according to user group, it was determined that 94% of parents had visited their local children's centre, as had 83% of practitioners.

Half of respondents currently use their local children's centre, of which 53% were parents and 47% were practitioners.

iii) Usage of children's centre services

Parents were asked to identify the children's centre services with which they engaged.



Social and well-being activities were the most popular answer (49%), followed by family support and outreach services (38%); health services (32%); free early education and childcare (21%); nutritional advice (11%); careers and employment advice (9%); childcare and support for disabled children (9%); and benefits advice (6%). 13% do not use any children's centre services.

Other activities cited by respondents included: breastfeeding support; parenting classes; post-natal depression support; mental health counselling; and stay and play.

Part Two: Use and experience of children's centres

i) Value of local children's centres

The survey sought to ascertain the degree to which parents and practitioners valued their local children's centre.

93% of all respondents agreed with the statement '*Our local children's centre is important to our community*', while all parents stated that their local children's centre was important to their community. The small proportion who disagreed with this statement were practitioners or 'others'.

ii) Personal experience of local children's centres

Survey respondents were asked whether they had a good experience of using their local children's centres. Most parents responded to this question, whilst over a half of practitioners chose not to. Responses could be summarised into four main categories.

a) Services

Many parents stated the critically important role that children's centre services had played in supporting their family during times of challenge or crisis.

"They have empowered me and helped me with employment and parenting skills that has helped me become a better parent."

"The children's centre saved our family. I went there after being diagnosed with post-natal depression."

Parents were inspired by the range of services that were available and how the centre provided a 'one stop shop'. Services which were praised included: breastfeeding support; baby sign language; paediatric first aid; music classes; toy library; stay and play; health visiting; parenting classes; and information support.

Parents spoke about how their children's centre was vital in supporting them to meet other new parents and to bond with a peer group. Practitioners explained that the children's centre enabled them to direct parents to other local services.

Gaps in service provision noted included on-site childcare provision and access to speech and language therapy.

b) Staff

Parents noted the supportive nature of staff working in the children's centres.

"I found it a welcoming place with staff who cared."

"Friendly helpful staff, relaxed atmosphere, lots of support on offer, non-judgemental."

c) Experience of children's centre practitioners

Practitioners often spoke about the service they offered within their children's centre and engagement with parents and the local community:

"I refer families who are in need who I come into contact with in my role as nursery practitioner. They have helped several including ones coming to terms with SEN diagnosis, family break up and PND."

"As a partner agency we have worked to achieve a model of best practice in partnership working to reach some of North Devon's hardest to reach families bringing new ways of engaging with partners and the community."

d) Impact of funding cuts

Both parents and practitioners raised the impact of funding cuts on access to children's centre services.

"The children's centre was moved into the basement of the school. This is a much smaller space, darker space and inaccessible with a buggy and people regularly get turned away."

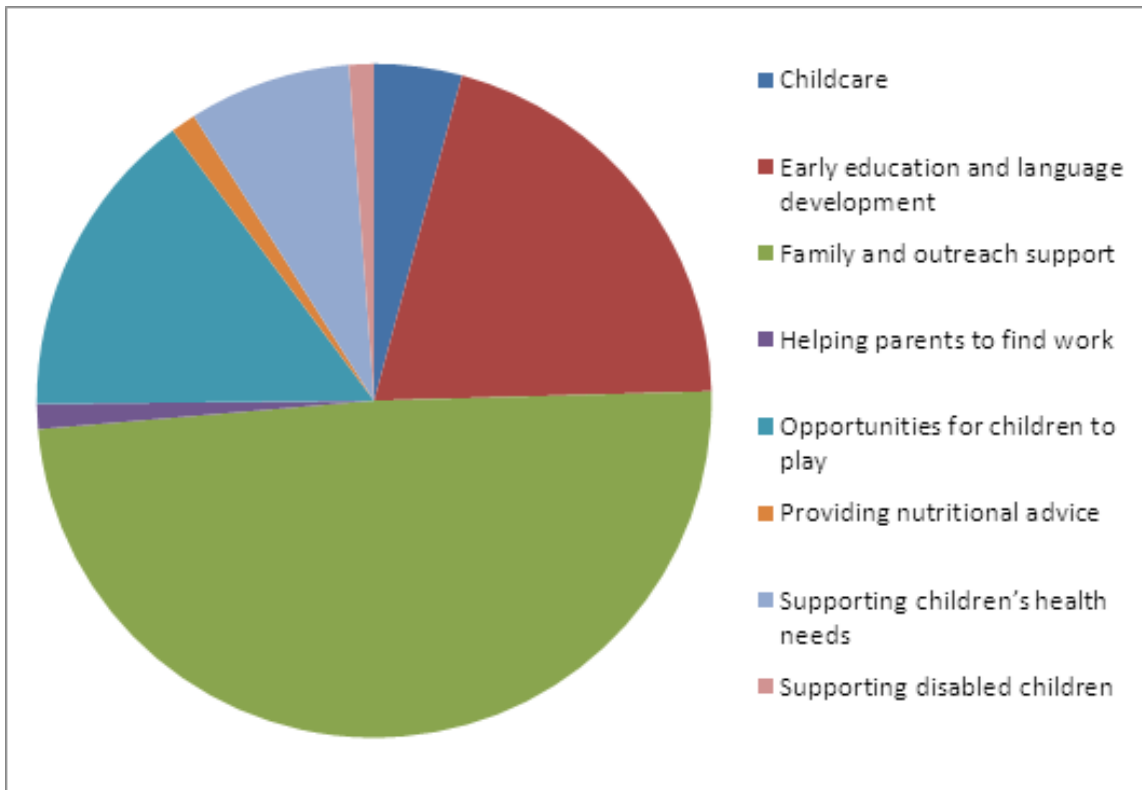
"I did used to have a very positive partnership with the children's centre in Sure Start days. Since the takeovers, relationships have been hard to keep due to staff changes."

"I work in the same building and value the integrated services. Unfortunately our Sure Start has been totally dismantled by local government cuts and although our site is supposed to be a hub, the service offered is nothing like before and that is really sad and the clients have seen the demise of a thriving centre."

Part Three: Future priorities for children's centres

i) Priority focus areas for children's centres

Respondents were asked to identify what they thought should be the priority focus areas for children's centres.



The most frequent answer was family and outreach support (49%), followed by early education and language development (20%); play opportunities (15%); supporting children's health needs (8%); childcare (4%); helping parents to find work (1%); supporting disabled children (1%); and providing nutritional advice (1%).

Additional comments cited the importance of: focusing services on pregnancy and the first two years of life; engaging the most vulnerable children and

families; signposting and introductions to services; breastfeeding support; and workshops for parents.

Both parents and practitioners highlighted the importance of family and outreach support. However, while parents also prioritised opportunities to play, practitioner respondents thought early education and language development were important.

ii) Targeting of services on disadvantaged families

Respondents were asked to state their views on the degree to which children's centres should target their work at disadvantaged families or work for all families.

The majority (80%) said that children's centres should be accessible to all, but should work hard to bring in disadvantaged families. 19% said that children's centres should be for all families, while 1% said that children's centres should only be for disadvantaged families.

The very small number who stated that children's centres should only be for disadvantaged families were practitioners; however in general there was no real differentiation between the responses of the user groups.

iii) Age-related service provision

Respondents were asked to identify which age group they believe children's centres should focus their services on. The majority (83%) stated that children's centres should continue to focus on all children under the age of five. Some (15%) said that children's centres needed to focus down on children under the age of two, while a very small proportion (2%) said that children aged 2-4 years should be prioritised. Practitioners were marginally more likely to recommend a focus on children under the age of two.

iv) Identification of families

The Ofsted inspection framework¹ for children's centres focuses squarely on the identification of families most in need of access to services. Respondents were asked to recommend how children's centres could identify the families who would most benefit from their services. Responses could be grouped into four main categories.

a) The using and sharing of data and information

Respondents emphasised the need to share data and information effectively

¹ Ofsted (2013) *Framework for children's centre inspections*. Available at: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/framework-for-childrens-centre-inspection-april-2013>

between agencies in order to identify vulnerable families. Mechanisms for doing so included:

- identifying high population clusters of obesity
- maximising the data available from all agencies and integrating practices for sharing information
- identifying families accessing Universal Credit/benefits, free early education places for two year olds, JobCentre Plus referrals, and free school meals
- sharing data from birth registration and maternity screening
- sharing data from social services on young parents, child protection and looked after children
- carrying out a needs assessment of the local area
- ensuring that data sharing from health and GP services matches the children's centre area

b) Integrated working and improved communication

Respondents stated that improving integrated working and referrals between children's agencies, alongside greater publicity of services on offer at children's centres, would help to increase take up from vulnerable families. Many spoke of the importance of building trusting relationships between parents and practitioners. Several felt that health visitors should be the lead health practitioner within the children's centre environment.

"Good communication with midwives, health visitors and GPs; free non-intimidating drop-in sessions at sensible times for parents; publicise in primary schools to reach parents with younger children; use local radio – interviews, comment pieces, responses to news items."

"Ensuring that all local services that work with young families know what the children's centre offers and how to refer them. Recognise that it is not only those families identified as being 'at risk' or 'hard to reach' are in need of support."

"Involve health! It starts from birth. It's the midwives and health visitors who see the families first. If their services are run out of the children's centre then the parents are already on-site and able to see what goes on."

c) Working with parents and families

Respondents cited the importance of children's centre staff working closely with parents and being active in the local community in order to develop a more detailed understanding of the challenges facing vulnerable families.

"Get to know their local area on the ground, to be able to identify areas which have most families living in them that are most in need of information and support."

"Really listen to local people in that area, especially those who are often isolated or do not have their say. Work in partnership with other community providers to ensure families are reached in everyday situations. Do not just offer what the majority wants or needs as this will marginalize the isolated families even more."

"Tap into parents' aspirations for their children and help them to identify and overcome barriers that are preventing their children reaching their potential."

d) Universal services

Many respondents noted the importance of retaining a universal model of service provision, but in addition providing more targeted support to the families who need it most.

"It is important that every child in the community is able to access services. All children are equal."

"All families can benefit from children's centres, however not all services will be needed for all families. A short questionnaire on enrollment could help centres direct families to the correct services."

Part Four: Securing the future of children's centres

i) Recommendations

Respondents were asked to outline ways in which the future of children's centres could be secured. Their responses could be grouped into a number of categories.

a) Funding

The survey sought to ascertain the degree to which parents and practitioners think spending on children's centres should be prioritised. Up until two years ago, children's centres were funded through a dedicated Early Intervention Grant.

However, local authorities now have greater freedom in deciding how they allocate funding to services, and funding restraints have led to children's centres often receiving less funding and resources than they previously did.² The majority of survey respondents (87%) agreed with the statement '*children's centres are very important and our local area should spend money on children's centres as a priority*'. However, 12% said children's centres should not be a higher priority than other local services and 1% said that children's centres should be *less* of a funding priority than other services. There was no discernible difference in responses between user groups.

Funding was cited as critical for securing the future of children's centres. Options put forward included:

- lottery funding
- protected local authority budgets and greater prioritisation of children's centre funding
- lobbying government to ensure sufficient funding to keep centres open
- providing stable contracts and good salaries for children's centre staff
- raising taxation to pay for children's centres
- income generation by children's centres for specific services
- base businesses within children's centres to pay towards the upkeep of centres

b) Communicating the value of children's centres

Respondents stated that it is essential for the benefits of children's centres to be communicated to a wider audience to help secure their future. Suggestions about how this could happen included:

"Share anonymous testimonials in local and national papers."

"By the Government spending time at the children's centre and understanding the importance of them in the community."

"Ensure the local communities understand and help develop the children's centres."

² 4Children (2013) *Children's Centre Census 2013* Available at: http://www.4children.org.uk/Files/8dd559e9-acc8-4030-a787-a28800f72e3d/Children_Centre_Census_2013_FINAL_AM.pdf

"Make them an essential place for the local community like the doctors surgery."

"More events and activities for children to get parents to want to come."

"Understand and raise awareness about their importance in the development of children and their ability to thrive at school once they get to school age and the value of the centres in early intervention, preventative and early identification roles."

c) Clarifying the role of children's centres

A small number of respondents stated that it was key to clarify the role and purpose of children's centres.

"Clear purpose needs to be defined and agreed by politicians, local authorities and Children's Centre leaders and properly funded so it is possible to deliver to the remit and targets set."

"Refocus the aim of children's centres in offering outreach/in the home support for families."

"Give it [children's centres] a defined role and collect data on results."

In addition, a few respondents recommended that children's centre services be re-focused on supporting the most vulnerable families.

iii) Integrating health services

Until recently, Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) were responsible for delivering health services for their local area. However, following the implementation of the Health and Social Care Act 2012, PCTs have been abolished, with new clinical commissioning groups responsible for the majority of local healthcare, and local authorities overseeing public health services. Accountability for public health services for 0-5 year olds (including health visiting) will only be transferred from NHS England to local authorities in April 2015. All of these bodies involved in the planning of health services have legal duties on reducing health inequalities. These significant changes to the delivery and organisation of health services pose a challenge to continued partnership working between health and children's services, but also provide an opportunity to strengthen such relationships.

It was therefore deemed pertinent to ask respondents to give their opinion on how health services should work with children's centres in the future. Responses could be grouped into five categories.

a) Co-locating health services within children's centres

Suggestions were made as to how locating health services within children's centres would improve access to midwifery, health visiting and general practice, and also enable centres to offer specialist interventions to support more vulnerable families.

"Services should be integrated with clinics run from children's centres, where premises are suitable, and there should be close neighbourhood partnerships between children's centres, health visiting and midwifery and local health improvement teams."

b) Integrated working between professionals

Respondents also noted the value of improving integrated working with other professionals and children's services.

"By being based at children's centres, running health visitor clinics, immunisations, development checks, there would be a far better holistic approach to families if the health team worked alongside family support and early years."

"Health teams and children's centre workers should undertake joint working on universal and targeted services such as ante-natal, post-natal, child health clinics, workshops on healthy eating, oral health, weaning etc."

c) Preventative support

Respondents stated the importance of health professionals in early intervention and preventative care.

"Health services should work closer with the children's centre to diagnose children who are not following the expected pattern of development. They should also help parents with problems such as post-natal depression."

"Early detection by health services and support offered by children's centre to improve health outcomes for families."

d) Data-sharing

Respondents cited the importance of sharing data and information between different agencies working with young children and their families.

"Share information on who are the most in need families and work in partnership."

"Health visitors have access to important information on families with children aged 0-5 and this information should be shared so that children's centres can shape their services to meet any needs of these families and the wider community."

e) New innovations

Respondents made a number of additional recommendations on improving health services/interventions in children's centres.

"Help families to find simple, cheap ways to improve nutrition and increase exercise; provide opportunities for parents to quit smoking; provide information and discussions about vaccinations and the spread of diseases."

"Notify centres of expectant mums to ensure that they are aware of the services before their child is born and it is the natural place for them to seek support and social activities from birth."

Conclusion

It is clear from the survey findings that parents and practitioners greatly value children's centres and the services and support they provide to all families, particularly those that are most vulnerable. The findings from this survey together send a clear message to government and to all the main political parties as they develop their manifestos for the 2015 General Election.

- *Children's centres are valued by their communities, and provide an effective mechanism for delivering joined up early years services for 0-5 year olds*
- *Children's centre services should be for all, but with a focus on reaching out to and supporting disadvantaged families*
- *Government and the main political parties should commit to protecting funding for children's centres and the delivery of integrated or co-located services for young children and their families in the community*
- *Any future government should work with parents, practitioners and child development experts to agree a clear purpose for children's centres, specifying the outcomes children's centres should achieve for young children and their families*

At the same time, current policy and practice changes provide opportunities for local authorities, children's centres and local health leaders to take forward some of the recommendations made by the respondents to our survey.

1) The government has been working with five local authorities to trial a new developmental assessment at age 2-2.5 years, provisionally called **the integrated review**, to bring together the current health visitor check with the Early Years Foundation Stage progress check. It is anticipated that it will be up to individual local authorities to develop models of best practice which best meet the needs of children and families in their local area. Children's centres are likely to play a key role in providing a location for assessment, which should also lead to improved data sharing and integrated working between health and early education colleagues.

2) The transfer of responsibility for public health services for 0-5 year-olds to local authorities from April 2015 provides the potential for greater collaborative working between children's centres and public health services and innovations in service delivery.

3) Registration of births in children's centres has been piloted in a number of areas and would enable centres to engage with vulnerable families at the earliest opportunity and to inform them about the services on offer. In addition, the sharing of live birth data would enable children's centres to better understand the demographics of the families living in the local area and to target resources where most needed.