

The success of the children's centre programme – as a tool for combating poverty and improving outcomes for all children – will rest, substantially, on the capacity of centres to engage and involve families who may not know of, or are currently reluctant to make use of, childcare and other related services.

This short study was carried out to look at the effectiveness of children's centres in reaching the most highly disadvantaged families, the ways in which they meet the needs of those families and the outcomes achieved.

Children's centres

ensuring that families most in need benefit

Summary

Children's centres: ensuring that

About the study

The study, undertaken by Capacity, revolved around four "exemplar" children's centre case studies, examining their work within the context of current government policies, best practice and a wide range of research perspectives. The purpose was to try to identify what "works", to examine the evidence base; and in particular, to examine the role of centre managers in creating a framework and methodology for engaging disadvantaged families.

All Sure Start children's centres listed on the Sure Start website were contacted by e-mail and invited to participate. A brief pro-forma for those which wished to offer themselves as case studies enabled them to provide preliminary information about why they might be considered "exemplar" centres, their strategies for "reach" and any innovative features of their work. An expert group advised on the final selection, which, following careful consideration, was:

Carlisle South Sure Start
Broad Green, Croydon
The Maden Centre, Rossendale
HOPE Bromyard

The research took the form of interviews with managers and staff, reviews of completed evaluations, policy and other documents and material relating to outcomes. Focus groups and other interviews with parents provided further evidence.

Findings

The centres within the study were found to be highly effective in delivering multi-agency services to and for children and families. Each has been successful in reaching a number of families who would be considered "difficult to include", giving thought to and overcoming the practical and other barriers which might prevent those families using the various services on offer.

In the course of the research, however, the following key issues and findings emerged.

Resources – will they deliver?

It is possible that more resources than are currently allocated for the children's centre programme are needed to ensure that it can meet its objectives. In acknowledgement of this, the Department for Children, Schools and Families has recently announced a cash injection of more than £4billion to children's centres, early years education and childcare, which will include additional funds for out-reach workers. However, where, despite this, high-achieving Sure Start children's centres are faced with tapering levels of funding, the pressures to attract and retain a more middle-class clientele, who can afford to pay for services, will almost certainly increase. Where this occurs the Department for Children, Schools and Families should take steps to evaluate and monitor the capacity of those children's centres to reach those families most in need.

Reach strategies

The reach strategies adopted by successful centres have been implemented in a particularly thorough way. Some of the community consultations, for example, have been extensive and highly structured, utilising focus groups, outreach and public information campaigns, as opposed to more limited consultations and surveys. Centres know their communities well, staff are knowledgeable about the effects of poverty and understand that the lives of poor families can become chaotic for reasons beyond their control. By making the effort to find out and then deliver what families want, they have secured the trust of their communities.

Achieving high visibility for the work and value of children's centres, particularly among those who are most remote from services, requires motivation, painstaking research, rigorous planning, effective communication and a range of professional skills and expertise. Children's centres which have not yet formulated their strategies may not have ready access to this range of skills and expertise. As a starting point, the Together for Children Toolkit for Reaching Priority and Excluded Families offers a highly valuable planning resource. The Department for Children, Schools and Families, however, should take responsibility for the identification and dissemination of best practice in the design and implementation of strategies for reaching those most excluded.

families most in need benefit

A new approach to monitoring and evaluation

If children's centres are to achieve their objectives, they need to capture detailed information about their users, both at the point of first contact and at subsequent intervals. Only by this can they demonstrate both that they are engaging the most "difficult to include" and offering them services of value.

To assist with this process, it would be helpful for the government's main monitoring tool – the Children's Centre Performance Management Self-evaluation Pro-forma to be brought into closer alignment with the factors which are associated with severe deprivation. The development of a model registration form would help to ensure that children's centres have sufficient baseline information on which to plan and evaluate their performance.



Planning around the needs of users

In all four centres, best practice involved highly differentiated and personalised planning for individual parents, built around their specific circumstances and needs, whether in relation to support for particular family difficulties, or involvement in centre activities, learning or volunteering opportunities. The concept of progression was very evident, each parent moving through a continuum of involvement at the pace which was most appropriate. The capacity to plan and provide for progression for parents is sufficiently important to be part of the training of the children's centre workforce.

Care needs to be taken, to ensure that in trying to help families, children's centres do not fall into the trap of unintentionally limiting opportunities on the basis of narrow judgements about what is best for them. The values and ideas of those leading children's centres shape the model of what a children's centre is within their localities. The model of early education and family support within a broader framework of building individual and social capital appears to be particularly successful and merits further evaluation.

Children's centres need to be better able to assess the outcomes that are achieved for users, both generally and for particular target groups and to be able to relate these, as far as is reasonably possible, to particular interventions or inputs. Better tools are needed for them to do so than are currently available. Local authorities and their partners are responsible for monitoring performance in this area, but the Department for Children, Schools and Families should commission and disseminate an appropriate framework, taking into account the current Performance Management Self-evaluation Methodology. Best practice would be served by the development and inclusion of a soft outcome framework.



The impact of leadership

In all four centres, the expertise and depth of experience of those leading the work was very considerable and this was a critical factor in their extensive achievements. It would be difficult for any qualification to provide benefits comparable to this level of experience. In the wider roll-out of children's centres, effective use of high-achieving centres could be made by utilising them in a consultancy role to others at an earlier stage of development.

On the evidence of the studies, a critical requirement for reaching the most disadvantaged families is an understanding of poverty and disadvantage. Training to provide skills and knowledge in this area should be part of the updated strategy for the children's workforce.



The centres in the study are unusually pro-active in encouraging and providing access for parents to skills-related and other learning. The Department for Children, Schools and Families should raise the profile of this objective, with Together for Children, collating and disseminating good practice of the kind described here and providing any further support and guidance which may be necessary for centres to make these opportunities more widely available.

Sure Start was conceived with the aim of helping to reduce poverty. If it is to achieve its aim, support for parents to gain employment or to move into better paid work must have a higher priority and children's centres will need to ensure that they have effective links, not only with Jobcentre Plus but with employers and training providers.

Support for employment should be closely integrated with the core children's centre offer and those leading centres should be pro-actively engaged in ensuring that this is a priority for delivery and that parents are given sufficient personal support when moving through programmes of vocational or other training. Innovative strategies like the trainee scheme in Carlisle South and Maden Centre's Achieving Together Workshops should be widely disseminated.

Children's centres are also employers and consideration should be given in employment policies to the scope for training and employing parents. Benefits disregards should be considered as a means of providing transitional employment opportunities for parents on supplemented benefits. Linking with appropriate business partners, centres could also provide support for co-ops and self-employment.

Children's centres will be more effective where their local communities are persuaded to accept and back the need for change. Co-production, which involves the beneficiaries of public services as active agents is a model which is worthy of exploration. Further research is needed to test the effectiveness, in the medium and longer term, of using parents as children's centre delivery partners.

Conclusion

In what was a limited qualitative analysis of a small number of children's centres, the study found that they were capable of reaching highly disadvantaged families and had well developed strategies for meeting the expressed needs of those families.

The study raised a number of more general questions about the children's centre initiative and its capacity to deliver on its policy objectives, in particular, its promise to reduce poverty and improve outcomes for children.

But in the longer run, the success of the initiative will depend most on the people on the ground, working with families. In the best of the centres visited here, those leading the delivery were explicit in their aims to tackle poverty and had engaged their communities in a process of regeneration which had the capacity to transform the economic and social landscape, as well as to change the lives of individuals.

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