Sure Start
Children’s Centres
Census 2012

Developments, trends and analysis of Sure Start Children’s Centres over the last year and the implications for the future

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More than might have been hoped in 2001, when government began its move to roll out a nationwide programme of Sure Start centres, children’s centres have become pivotal to supporting families across the country and central to children’s lives. Their expansion in recent years, to become a focal point of children’s services – for health, as well as early education and childcare - is a significant and welcome development.

With the significant cuts within local authority budgets, and the removal of the dedicated Sure Start grant, the past few years could have posed a devastating threat to the nationwide network of centres. However, there are signs that children’s centres are emerging from this period of challenge more robust than ever in many areas – commanding support from all political parties.

The network has not emerged unaltered however, and its future is not yet settled in terms of reform. The shift from universal to targeted services, the introduction of payment by results, and the ongoing reform of centre organisation mean the next few years are likely to see more changes to the services on offer, rather than less.

It is in this environment that 4Children carried out this 2012 census of children’s centres and the research work that accompanies it, to measure trends, the scale of changes in children’s centres, the impact on the services and the workforce and to highlight best practice and best ways of working across the country.

We have found a picture of resilience and creativity from children’s centres who are increasing their engagement with professionals and communities and in a significant number of cases increasing their support to families despite reduced funding. The commitment from most local authorities has been marked, with many making the decision to prioritise their funding above other services. Their centrality to early intervention and prevention – especially for those in greatest need – is increasingly recognised with the potential for centres to play a key role in the reconfigured architecture of local services, working with communities to provide the help they need at the earliest opportunity.

Overwhelming support from parents is at the heart of this success, and is what will continue to see the centres through the next few critical years as the centres mature. The potential for children’s centres remains enormous. The priority remains to maximise that potential in every locality.

Anne Longfield OBE
Chief Executive, 4Children

About 4Children

4Children is the national charity all about children and families. We have spearheaded a joined-up, integrated approach to children’s services and work with a wide range of partners around the country to ensure children and families have access to the services and support they need in their communities. We run Sure Start Children’s Centres as well as family and youth services across Britain.

In 2001 our Millennium Childcare Commission called for a children’s centre in every community to give children the best start and to support parents to flourish. Our commitment has continued over the decade working with government to assist local authorities to set up children's centres until 2011 and supporting their development through good practice sharing and advocacy. In summer 2012 we are delighted to be launching a new online resource – the Children’s Centre Hub and also a ground breaking outcomes framework for children’s centres from Professor Marmot’s team at the UCL Institute of Health Equity – An Equal Start.

As the Government’s strategic partner for early years and childcare we have a crucial role in co-producing policy with the Department for Education and representing the sector’s views and experiences. Our national campaigns, like Give Me Strength, challenge policy and practice and put the needs of children and families on the political and policy agenda.
There has been much discussion about the tangible results produced by Sure Start centres, and measuring outcomes has often proved difficult in the short term, due to their long term and preventative impact. However, the most recent evaluations have conclusively demonstrated improvements to parenting styles and child development for those who access Sure Start, with an increased likelihood of parents engaging with other vital services through centres. Centres also play a key role in narrowing the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers with results from the Foundation Stage Profile showing this gap closing by 3% in the last three years.

Further, their importance to early intervention has been highlighted across the Munro, Field and Allen reviews which all detailed the positive work of children’s centres and recommended that they remain central to future initiatives and family support frameworks. Though evidence is still emerging as to the long-term impact of Sure Start centres on families, it is clear that they are already meeting a number of their key objectives. The effectiveness of recent moves to return Sure Start closer to its original purpose of supporting the most disadvantaged families through greater targeting of services has yet to show in evidence but is expected to deliver significant outcomes for both children and families.

On coming to office the Coalition Government stated its commitment to “retaining a network of Sure Start Children’s Centres – providing a range of universal and targeted services to meet local need, which are open to all families but focused on those in greatest need”. Austerity budgeting during 2010 and 2011 led to rising public concern about the possibility of widespread closures. However, as a result of significant public pressure from parents, alongside organised campaigns like 4Children’s “Shout out for Sure Start”, local authorities have ensured that Sure Start closures have remained largely limited to date.

What is less clear, is whether the centres’ impressive fortitude in the face of budget cuts is sustainable in the long run. We are in an era of localism and centres will need to continue to deliver real results to their community if they are to retain confidence and investment. Research shows that centres are being asked, and in many cases succeeding, to deliver more for less. However, there will be limits to what can be done and significant ongoing investment will be needed if centres are to offer children and parents the support they need.

Key Sure Start figures

- In 2011, there were 3.5 million children under five in England and Wales – the age of children using most Sure Start children’s centres.
- There are currently 3,350 Sure Start Children’s Centres a reduction of 281 since April 2010. In 2012-13, £2.365bn was allocated to local authorities in England through the Early Intervention Grant. This is the pot from which Sure Start Children’s Centres are funded.
- The difference between the achievements and school-readiness of children in deprived and non deprived areas is now 12%, a reduction of 3% in the last three years.
- Research has estimated that £4.60 will be generated in social value for every £1 invested in an effective Children’s Centre.

1 The Impact of Sure Start Local Programmes on Three Year Olds and Their Families, Department for Education, 2008
3 Field, F., Review on Poverty and Life Chances, 2010
4 Allen, G., Early Intervention, the Next Steps, 2011
5 On coming to office the Coalition Government stated its commitment to “retaining a network of Sure Start Children’s Centres – providing a range of universal and targeted services to meet local need, which are open to all families but focused on those in greatest need”.
6 Austerity budgeting during 2010 and 2011 led to rising public concern about the possibility of widespread closures. However, as a result of significant public pressure from parents, alongside organised campaigns like 4Children’s “Shout out for Sure Start”, local authorities have ensured that Sure Start closures have remained largely limited to date.
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8 Research shows that centres are being asked, and in many cases succeeding, to deliver more for less. However, there will be limits to what can be done and significant ongoing investment will be needed if centres are to offer children and parents the support they need.
Sure Start Children’s Centres remain a hot topic for parents of young children and policy makers alike. Universally welcomed by parents for the advice, practical help and specialist support they can offer them and their children; they also continue to generate huge interest, scrutiny and discussion among public policy makers and administrators.

Yet despite their popularity, the nature and effectiveness of centres have historically been a point of debate. Children’s centres require significant investment and the gains achieved can be long term and often difficult to identify. With local authorities looking for significant levels of budget reductions, children’s centres have had the potential to be easy targets for savings, with many observers fearing that numbers would drop significantly over this period.

Our 2012 Children’s Centre Census shows that this has not been the case to date and that whilst the focus and the delivery model of many children’s centres has changed, children’s centres have remained resilient with evidence that local authorities have so far prioritised them for investment above other services in many areas.

An intention to refocus support on the most in need has come as part of a package of significant reforms to Sure Start centres, which has seen the ‘core offer’ replaced with a ‘core purpose’, the first trials of ‘payment by results’ measures and a removal of the requirement to provide access to childcare in the most disadvantaged areas. These changes have been introduced alongside a removal of the ring-fence for Sure Start funding, which when combined with the difficult economic climate have continued to make the funding of many centres less certain.

Nonetheless, this Census provides a picture of a service which is increasing in maturity as its moves from niche to mainstream in the majority of areas. Increasingly central to the delivery of health visiting reforms, poverty reduction, employment support, relationship support, parenting and family support, children’s centres are taking their place as important pillars in the welcome reconfiguration of local services towards early intervention and prevention.

This confidence is reflected in the range of innovative responses to changing demands in many areas. While services are being reduced in some areas, just as many centres are increasing services as are cutting them. While childcare and qualified teaching staff are being reduced, numbers of outreach and family support workers are growing. While funding for some universal services is reducing, engagement with parents and communities is increasing. And whilst we have found that charging has arrived in some centres, this is largely restricted to peripheral services, which do not affect the core purpose of the centre.

Children’s centres are holding their own and reflecting their value and potential by their determination and commitment to continue to offer parents and children the innovative support they have begun to rely on. For some staff, this is clearly an unsettling and uncertain time of change. But children’s centres remain at the leading edge of children’s services responding positively to change, despite challenging budget settlements.

The priority now must be to maintain and build on these gains to maximise the potential of every children’s centre in the country. If children’s centres are to play their full part in delivering early help and intervention, local authorities and wider professionals will need to nurture and extend their centres’ role. This means the development of centres as community hubs with more services and specialist support – designed by and delivered with parents and the community. Extending the age range of support for children into school age and the wider family is the next challenge for many with the potential to provide seamless whole family support over a significant period of time.

In the year ahead children’s centres must remain focused on delivering upbeat services for their children and families.
Recommendations

1. Sure Start centres must become central to early intervention and prevention

Local authorities and Health and Wellbeing Boards must place Sure Start children’s centres at the heart of their system change to deliver a joined up preventative approach to early intervention, with clear links to health, employment and vulnerable families. Ongoing investment is essential but the case on long-term benefits and social savings can now be made.

2. Sure Start must remain a national priority for Government with monitoring and funding arrangements that reflect this

Sure Start is a national priority and the Government should recognise this by gathering robust data on local trends, developments and funding in children’s centres and by placing a ring-fence around funding for Sure Start children’s centres to ensure they receive the support they need to deliver for families.

3. Government should lead the way in developing social investment models for children’s centres

Local authorities are demonstrating a clear commitment to children’s centres in most areas but budgets are being reduced and services limited. Government should work with social investors to develop new models of social investment for children’s centres to deliver effective and evidenced outcomes.

4. Centres should be developed to deliver a full spectrum of support from accessible universal services to targeted and specialist help

Centres have the potential to deliver a wide range of support for children and parents with varying levels of need. This approach is both cost effective and offers the potential to provide early and consistent help.

5. Centres must resist charging for services, wherever possible

Sure Start centres should charge for access to their services only as a last resort, and then on an income contingent basis wherever possible - in order to ensure that the most deprived families are not denied access to their services.
There must be more investment in developing the Sure Start workforce

The Department for Education and local authorities must ensure that centres are provided with sufficient funding to support the development of their workforce to meet the new challenges of children’s centre priorities. The more targeted, results-led approach requires good leadership, strategic grip and management to be successful. These are crucial areas for further development in the workforce.

Best practice guidance for parent and community volunteers must be developed

A best practice forum should be developed by the Department for Education to share volunteering and parental involvement best practice – in order to allow centres to successfully manage their volunteers, and help ensure parents are engaged at the very heart of Sure Start delivery.

Diversity in the delivery of children’s centres should be encouraged

More local authorities should go further in opening up their commissioning to the voluntary sector and social enterprises to increase the range of Sure Start children’s centre providers and the range of specialist and community based approaches. Local authorities should take positive steps to level the playing field and invite voluntary sector organisations to tender to run more services.

Centres must support parents to take up employment

Children’s centres must work with Job Centre Plus to provide effective advice and support to parents to find and take up employment. Children’s centres must maintain childcare provision in centres where possible – this may include working with local childcare providers to ensure that places are available. It will also be important to ensure the capacity demands of the two year old offer can be met by 2014.

The payment by results trial results must be robustly tested against its ability to improve measurable outcomes

To improve outcomes and be effectively implemented by a range of providers including the voluntary sector before it is rolled out as a national scheme. Effective payments schemes for centres must be tested as part of this process, engaging with providers to inform and shape the new system. Children’s Centre staff must be involved in these developments and supported to fully play their part.
Children’s centres budgets, what has the impact been?

Children’s centres are emerging from a period of significant uncertainty, much of which has focused on funding. The Government’s decision to roll the funding for Sure Start into the Early Intervention Grant and to remove the ring fence came at a time when many children’s services faced reductions in their budget of between 14% and 15%.25 What have the results been of these funding changes? And how are centres coping now?

Children’s centres are a statutory service. The Childcare Act 2006 imposed duties on local authorities, so far as is reasonably practicable, to make arrangements for sufficient provision of children’s centres to meet local need. The statutory basis of the service offers some protection at a time of budget reduction. Local authorities are required to consult with the local community over any major change of service requiring a demonstration of low levels of need before closure. However, reduced local budgets are a fact of life in every aspect of local service provision and it is clear that children’s centres have not been immune to this.

In order to investigate the effects funding reductions may be having on children’s centres around the country, we asked how centres were coping financially. Positively, the Census revealed that the majority describe themselves as ‘coping’ financially, whilst just over 10% are ‘struggling’ – a significant reduction from our research last year which painted a much more concerning picture with 7% of centres expecting to close due to funding concerns. This year less than 1% said that they may close.

That so many centres are ‘coping’ with significant budget reductions suggest that centres have responded flexibly and innovatively to cuts. Further, a response to a parliamentary question from the Department for Education indicates that there has been a net reduction of 281 centres – but the majority of these have been through mergers with only 16 outright closures10.

However, the 10% of centres that indicated they are currently struggling act as a reminder that funding for centres is still very vulnerable in some areas. That 10% represents over 350 centres, which play key roles in 350 communities. If only half of those struggling centres closed over the year ahead it would be a significant blow for families across the country. Similarly, if the quality of provision deteriorated, that too would have a direct impact on local children and parents.

“This past year has been very challenging and with budget cuts and change of provider it has taken its toll on staff and service provision. We have had to shift focus from universal to targeted services which are of a higher level need but with less staffing.”

Centre Manager, East Midlands

Figure 1: Current financial sustainability of centres11

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11 n = 534 base
We also asked centres how their financial sustainability had changed over the last year and what their budgets were for the year ahead. Just under half of centres said that their financial sustainability has worsened in the past 12 months with 62% of centres saying they had a decreased budget.

“With funding being reduced in the centre it will be hard to maintain the same level of service we have done in the past year. Childcare is a big worry.”

Centre Manager

The picture for the year ahead continues to be challenging. While service provision across centres does not appear to have substantially reduced over the past year. Efficiency savings that do not affect service provision can only go so far. If the same or higher proportion of centres report decreased budgets this time next year, then there may be little option but to reduce service provision.

“Although we have had funding cuts we are committed to offering the best service we can to the families and will strive to find ‘creative’ ways to expand services.”

Centre Staff Member, North East England

However the Census does reveal that a significant number of centres have seen their budget remain the same from the previous year. This would suggest that a number of local authorities are protecting the budgets of their centres in the face of cuts from central government. We welcome these moves from local authorities who are committed to the protection of their Sure Start centres, and we hope that other authorities will replicate their example wherever possible. As many centre managers have suggested, the Government’s commitment to early intervention could be undermined by cuts to vital early years services – and risk costing the public pursesubstantially more in the future.
How are changing priorities and reduced funding affecting the range of services of children’s centres?

In 2012, the Government replaced the Sure Start ‘core offer’, which set out a number of services which centres were required to provide, with a ‘core purpose’ to improve outcomes for young children and their parents focusing particularly on families in greatest need. The new emphasis is on outcomes, relying on the judgement of individual centres to bring together a portfolio of services in response to local need.

This change of emphasis and focus on those children and parents most in need, combined with a reduction in budgets, have led most local authorities to review their children centre delivery over the last year. The results are beginning to show through in the nature and extent of services being delivered by local centres.

The Children’s Centres Census asked centres how their general service provision has changed over the last year. It is a credit to the dynamism and commitment of children’s centres that we have found that the majority of centres are currently providing either more services than they did last year, or broadly the same number. 42% of centres are providing more services than last year and over 50% believe that this time next year they will be providing broadly the same number that they currently offer. This is despite budget reductions in Children’s Services of between 14 – 15% in some areas.14

Figure 4: Change of centre provision in the last year15


15 n = 181 base
We also asked centres where they anticipated service levels to be in a year’s time. Half of all centres said that they would be providing broadly the same number of services as currently offered, 25% said that they would be providing fewer services and 24% would be providing more services.

From those centres that were planning to expand their services over the next year, 21% said that they would be increasing service provision only, whilst 12% said that they would be increasing both staff numbers and service provision.
The Census shows that where expansion is taking place it is in the areas of parenting advice and early intervention – closely following government priorities. There was also a significant increase in healthy eating classes, despite no additional funding being made available in this area. Services such as baby massage show lower, but still significant, levels of growth.

We also asked centres whether they planned to increase the frequency of services. The results showed that again, parenting and early intervention services come out on top with significant increases, closely followed by healthy eating classes.

Figure 6: Services Centres intend to expand over the coming year?18

Figure 7: Which services are you intending to expand the frequency of over the coming year?19

18 n = 173 base
19 n = 168 base
Whilst a positive number of centres are planning to maintain or expand their services over the coming year, a significant number are planning to reduce their services. 19% of centres said that they are planning to make cuts in service provision over the coming year, whilst 26% believed that both staff numbers and service provision would be reduced.

Among those centres which are reducing services, most appear to be making cuts to services which are not specifically targeted at the most disadvantaged. Stay and Play sessions were, by a significant margin, the most likely to be cut, followed by baby massage classes.

Figure 8: Where centres are planning to make efficiencies over the coming year

Figure 9: Services centres are planning on reducing over the coming year

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20 n = 532 base
21 n = 262 base
These results were repeated in respect of reductions in the frequency of services – Stay and Play sessions, healthy eating classes and baby massage are all facing significant reductions in service provision.

Figure 10: Sessions that centres intend to review the frequency of over the coming year

n = 240 base
Are clusters the way forward?

Many local authorities are redesigning their centres into ‘clusters’ to co-ordinate support, reduce back office costs and share specialisms.

The redesign of children’s centres into clusters in many areas, comes as part of a wider move to redesign services and systems to make them more streamlined and cost effective. The drive for efficiency poses a significant challenge for children’s services and children’s centres are no exception. Local authorities are responding in different ways but one prominent model of change is the move to a cluster approach. By sharing managers, staff and back office functions over a range of sites costs are reduced. Moreover, this approach also allows specialist services and staff to be shared between sites. Ofsted have recently announced that they intend to alter their inspection process for ‘clustered’ centres in further recognition of the approach.

As part of their enquiry in Sure Start delivery the All Party Parliamentary Group on Sure Start has heard from a number of local authorities over the last year who have adopted the ‘cluster’ model with largely positive results to date.

However, there should also be some caution. There have been scattered reports from parents groups, that cluster models can leave centres without services that parents need close by. Some parents talk of ‘empty shells’ which are shedding key services and remaining closed for parts of the day.

Whilst some centres are clearly reducing their level of service in some areas, the Census does not provide evidence of the wholesale ‘hollowing’ of buildings that some had feared. However if centres are being under-used it must be unacceptable. Children’s Centre’s are a precious resource for children and parents that have the potential to be open 7 days a week, from dawn to dusk. Under-using this resource limits help to children and parents and falls short of the support that could be provided.

“We have moved to a cluster model for staffing. Our groups have not changed so far but our focus of development has changed to the most vulnerable groups and how we can measure the impact of our work.”

Centre Manager, London
Targeting vs. universal

How are services responding and what does this mean for parents?

Sure Start centres have long been intended to support the most vulnerable parents in order to provide extra support, and improve outcomes over time. Indeed, Sure Start Local Programmes and the Phase One children’s centres focused on the 20% most deprived areas in the country, and Phase Two expanded the programme to cover all of the country’s 30% most deprived communities.

There are many centres which have achieved real successes in engaging vulnerable and disadvantaged families. However the increasing focus on targeted support, set out in centres’ new ‘core purpose’ is codified and backed up in the Ofsted inspection framework is requiring centres to go much further. 85% of disadvantaged parents must be regularly using the Children’s Centre for it to be viewed as outstanding by Ofsted. This is a considerable change which is very challenging for many.

Increasingly, local authorities are seeking to provide a wide range of more targeted support through children’s centres. With reduced local budgets, local authorities need to find ways to make their money go further – streamlining services to provide a cost effective spectrum of services from universal to targeted support. For an increasing number, the model of children’s centres is being developed to meet this need, providing an integrated partnership hub which is a gateway to wider specialist services for those in greater need.

However, ensuring that the universal gateway is maintained is important not only as an entry point for disadvantaged children and parents but also in offering support for the wider community. The Census shows that the universal services are the ones most likely to be reduced as budgets are diverted to targeted. This is an area which will need continued monitoring. Some centres are increasing their use of community and parental volunteers to support the universal services and this can bring very positive benefits. Nonetheless, this will need careful planning and management to ensure that high quality services continue to be delivered.

The health visiting approach of universal access leading to additional support (universal plus) provides a useful model of delivery which Children’s Centres can learn from. Equally, it is important to recognise the role of centres in providing specialist support to tackle problems that are not bound by socio-economic background. Issues include domestic violence, postnatal depression, alcohol and drug abuse, families in need of parenting support, and many others who may not always be targeted. The universal gateway provides the reach needed to ensure that all parents have access to support when needed whilst ensuring more help is on hand for those who need it.

It’s clear that managing the move to a more targeted approach is a change for many children’s centre providers that, when accompanied by shrinking budgets and expected increases in demand in the years to come, poses a significant challenge. The Children’s Centre Census found that 75% of managers felt that this new approach presented some of the greatest challenges for the year ahead.

It is clear that centres will require an extension of skills and leadership to manage this change, backed up by strong processes for identification of need and management of a more targeted response. Sharing best practice will be essential.
Children’s centres are increasingly being recognised as integral to a new joined up approach to children’s services, acting as a hub for professionals and services supporting children and parents. This approach has been widely praised and encouraged but is still underdeveloped in some areas.

Since their inception, a key element of Sure Start Centres has been the drive to bring services together to best meet children’s and parents’ needs. The positive impact of this joint working is significant. Research has found that centres which combine health and family services are viewed positively, and have the greatest impact on children’s outcomes.

It is clear that the level of integration around Sure Start Centres still varies. However, centres are increasingly being seen as central to a range of local strategies to improve outcomes for children and families:

- Children’s centres are increasingly central to an early intervention and preventative approach to improve school readiness and offer early support to overcome inequalities.
- Centres are core to the delivery of The Healthy Child Programme and a key focus for the health visitor’s implementation programme.
- Centres are increasingly being seen as central building blocks in local strategic health plans for new Health and Wellbeing boards.
- Centres are increasingly being recognised for their potential in supporting relationships with programmes by Relate, Centre for Separated Families and 4Children now focusing on children’s centres.
- Work to support Fathers through centres is being mainstreamed with specialist support in some areas from organisations such as the Fatherhood Institute.
- Parenting Support is core to the work of children’s centres with the potential for many to become the base for universal parenting trials in trial areas of the country.
- 88% of centres offer support for families experiencing domestic violence
- Centres will be a focus for many working with vulnerable families in the troubled families programme
- Some centres provide birth registration
- Centres are at the heart of many local authority anti-poverty strategies.

Whilst the potential for integrated working to support children and parents is clearly high, there are of course challenges. Partnerships require professionals to find new ways of working across professional boundaries with a new joined up focus on the needs of the child and parents. The new troubled families programme is being seen as a potential catalyst to joined up solutions in many areas, with an increasing number of authorities working towards whole scale system change to intervene early and prevent costly problems developing. New early years demonstration sites, supported by the Children’s Improvement Board, will offer an opportunity to learn more about how these ambitions can be moved from policy in to practice. Work from the forthcoming Early Intervention Foundation will also develop new approaches to early support.

However some areas of joint working around children’s centres remain underdeveloped. A 2008 report from Jobcentre Plus found that despite being involved with the programme for over 5 years, only a small amount of centres offer employment advisor outreach programmes. We have found little evidence that this has changed in this census.

There is also a clear gap between the potential and the practice. 4Children’s report into family violence – The Enemy Within found that while domestic violence services exist in 88% of children’s centres, only 1% of people who had experienced family violence had sought support from their local centre.23 This reflected similar findings in 4Children’s report into post natal depression – Suffering in Silence which found that only 12% of mothers experiencing post natal depression received support from their centre.24 Raising awareness of the range of services and support on offer at the children’s centre must be a priority.

Children’s centres have the potential to offer a powerful mechanism for integrated working across a wide range of professions and services. Local authorities and Health and Wellbeing Boards must lead this change of approach to reconfigure services to offer early help that is joined up around the needs of the child and the family.

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Children’s centres: Is charging on the rise?

With budgets tightening many centres are now considering charging. Will the increase in charging we can see across the country make centres more efficient, or will they drive away families with fewer resources, making outreach work more difficult?

In these complex times, many centres are having an ongoing debate around the introduction of charging for their services to help balance their budgets. The census asked centres what conclusions they had reached. The findings show that most centres have not yet turned to charging for the services they provide with over 60% of centres not charging for any of the services they offer.

Despite this general picture, there appears to be a small but growing trend of centres which are viewing charging as a means to make up funding shortfalls. A fifth of centres said they have started to charge for new services in the past year and another fifth have begun charging for services which were previously free. Amongst those services most likely to be charged for are sessions which fell outside the previous ‘core offer’.

Stay and Play services are charged for in more than half of those children’s centres who charge. While the costs of these sessions tends to be small, this increase in charging highlights a trend which needs close monitoring. For many parents, Stay and Play sessions are their ‘way in’ to centres. If parents are dissuaded from attending due to session costs, that could have significant knock-on effects on outreach services.

Further, services such as fathers’ groups, which offer dads the chance to become more engaged with their children at an early age, and healthy eating classes, which support parents and children to understand the importance of nutrition, are also more likely to be charged for.
It is important that any move towards charging is taken with the utmost caution and a clear understanding of the likely impact on take up. Engaging fathers is a core priority for many centres which risk being undermined if charging is introduced. Wider universal services such as Stay and Play will often be the entry point to the centre and the lifeline for vulnerable families, and those in need of additional support. Charging for these services could lead to a reduction on reach and impact.

Figure 12: Services being charged for in the past year

26 n = 191 base
Who is delivering Sure Start Centres?

Government, Members of Parliament and the voluntary sector have long been vocal supporters of more voluntary organisations and social enterprises delivering children’s centres. Although steps have been taken to encourage this and remove barriers to voluntary sector participation, are we seeing a significant change in practice?

The Government has signalled its intention to increase community involvement in the delivery of public services, and to exploring and encouraging models of increased independence and diversification for children’s centres. This includes encouraging more mutuals and social enterprises as well as voluntary and private sector providers.27

Department for Education funded work is underway with voluntary organisations and local authorities to begin to identify and overcome the barriers that can prevent voluntary and community sector organisations running children’s centres.

It is intended that this approach will provide more say over services to those who use them and allow more specialist organisations to bring their unique approaches to service delivery.

There has been a notable increase in the number of local authorities seeking to commission their children’s centres over the last year with approximately 10% of local authorities putting the operation of centres out for tender over the last 12 months. More local authorities are planning to commission their services over the year ahead.

However, it is clear that the overall level of change in management over the last year has been limited. 90% of centres from our census said that they had not changed management in the last year with only 4% of centres transferring from a local authority to a voluntary sector provider.

Further, only 20% of centres are currently run by the voluntary sector – with the majority (76%) still being run by local authorities – sometimes in conjunction with schools. 1% of centres are being run by health sector providers and 2% of centres are being run by private sector organisations.

Figure 13: Management of centre by sector provider28

![Management of centre by sector provider](image)

Figure 14: Changes to the management of centres in the last year?29

![Changes to the management of centres in the last year](image)

27 The Cabinet Office, Open Public Services White Paper, 2011

28 n = 549 base

29 n = 552 base
Is the workforce changing to meet the changing needs of children’s centres?

Children’s centres are increasingly being called upon to provide access to a full spectrum of support from universal services to highly targeted support for those in greatest need. High levels of collaboration across professionals and the community are essential, requiring strong leadership, entrepreneurial and negotiation skills.

Highly skilled and experienced staff are central to the success of children’s centres – to the quality of service delivery, the success of frontline services, and their ability to reach the most deprived communities. New demands for a more targeted approach bring new challenges to the leadership of centres requiring in depth understanding of the needs of the most vulnerable parents and high levels of engagement with social services and the wider range of services who can help. A new emphasis on integration and parental engagement requires strong community development and entrepreneurial approach, whilst the ongoing restrictions on budgets requires creativity and negotiation skills. At the same time, in the more for less environment, staff costs are the most likely area to look for cost reductions.

As such, we were keen to explore any changes to the staffing profile taking place in centres around the country, and to examine how these changes meet the changing needs of Centres.

“There are still many unknowns ahead including balance between targeted services and universal services.”

Centre Staff Member, South East

Staff numbers are certainly falling overall in many centres. The results from the Census indicate that the number of staff employed by the children’s centres is declining, and will decline further over the next year. Of those centres that were planning to make efficiencies over the coming year 14% will reduce staffing levels.

We asked centres if their staffing levels have changed over the last 12 months and found that the majority of centres have experienced staff reductions. Further, the most likely staff to face redundancy, or to not be replaced, are childcare workers and qualified teachers, which sit alongside a reduction in centres delivering childcare.

Early years qualified teachers remain essential to providing the highest quality early learning experience for children. Reducing their numbers may put at risk the chances of children becoming ‘school ready’.

However, there were signs of growth in some centres. Despite the reduction in funds, a small number of centres are planning to increase their staffing levels. 14% of centres are intending to increase their staffing to match their new priorities – with outreach workers and family support staff the most likely to be taken on in the year ahead.

Whilst many centres are now responding to the challenging budgetary climate to think creatively about the best way to maintain resources, often sharing staff across and working in clusters, the reduced numbers of staff revealed by our research could impact on levels of support and so reducing the potential on improving outcomes for children and families.

The recent publication of the Nutbrown Review, *Foundations for Quality*[^30] made some significant recommendations in regard to their future of the early education workforce which will have an impact on those centres providing childcare. The report emphasised the importance of highly qualified staff in the delivery of childcare and early education. It recommended a significant increase of the status and qualification levels of those working in the sector over a period of ten years.

Enhanced support for children’s centre managers and leaders to develop their leadership, management and entrepreneurial skills will be essential if centres are to maximise their potential with a new emphasis on meeting the needs of most vulnerable families.

In light of these moves, centres must take utmost care to ensure they retain and build an appropriate skill mix within the staff team. This means extending the range of skills and experiences within the team and providing the strong, credible and creative leadership needed to offer the most vulnerable families the support they need.

Enhanced support for children’s centre managers to develop their leadership and entrepreneurial skills will be essential if centres are to maximise their potential with a new emphasis on meeting the needs of the most vulnerable families.

It is important to ensure that reduced staffing levels and skills do not reduce outcomes for children and parents.

Figure 15: Top five staff that centres intend to reduce over the next year\(^{31}\)
Is childcare still a key aspect of children’s centres?

Childcare supports parents to take up and stay in employment and has long been associated with Sure Start Children’s Centres. With changing requirements on Centres to provide childcare has there been a shift in service levels and is supply keeping up with demand?

In 2011 the Government removed the requirement for children’s centres in the most disadvantaged areas to provide access to childcare if there wasn’t identifiable need. The Census explores the impact of this, along with falling household budgets on the availability and sustainability of childcare in and around centres.

Supporting parents out of poverty is a key role for children’s centres. The importance of childcare in supporting parents to take up work and the training to achieve this was recognised in the original core offer for children’s centres in areas of 30% most disadvantage which required centres to offer integrated early education and childcare places for a minimum of 5 days a week, 10 hours a day, 48 weeks a year. In 2011 this requirement was removed in response to ongoing concerns from local authorities about the sustainability and viability of providing childcare. The removal of this requirement, coupled with falling family budgets to pay for childcare, is likely to have an impact on the number of childcare programmes provided directly by children’s centres. This 2012 Census offers the first opportunity to judge how far reaching the changes in this area are likely to be.

Figure 16: Centres offering full time childcare places

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>We offer no childcare</th>
<th>0-20</th>
<th>21-50</th>
<th>50-100</th>
<th>More than 100</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 17: Phase One Centres providing full time childcare

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>We offer no childcare</th>
<th>0-20</th>
<th>21-50</th>
<th>50-100</th>
<th>More than 100</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

33 n = 195 (2012) n = 120 (2011) base
The Census indicates that almost 2,000 centres across the country offer no childcare at all. This does not necessarily mean that childcare is not available in the locality of the children’s centre. Indeed, centres in less disadvantaged areas have always been required to provide information and access to childcare rather than provide it themselves. However, we also know that childcare is less likely to be available in the most disadvantaged communities. If children’s centres are taking decisions to reduce their childcare provision this may leave some disadvantaged communities with a childcare shortage.

However, there does not appear to have been any major reduction in the number of children’s centres in the most disadvantaged areas offering childcare over the last year. The Census has found evidence of some realignment and downsizing in scale with a reduction of those offering 50 – 100 childcare places and an increase of those providing 21 – 50 places.

But at the same time, of those centres which do offer childcare, over half reported that they were oversubscribed. This clearly shows a demand from parents that has yet to be met. With parents and local authorities reporting a shortage of childcare places it would be unwise to ignore the potential capacity for childcare in children’s centres around the country, many of which already contain the in-house expertise required for high quality provision.

Notably, in centres which are planning to expand their functions in the year ahead, few rank childcare provision as a leading priority, with most favouring expanding services in areas such as outreach or family support workers. At the same time, in those centres which are shedding staff, those providing childcare are some of the most likely to be let go.

This reduction in childcare staffing is matched by a reduction in the number of full-time childcare places available from children’s centres on a nationwide basis compared to last year.

Some children’s centres are clearly reducing the levels of childcare provided for a range of reasons. This reduces availability for parents and reduces specialist staff in this area. Sure Start centres should further embrace their community leadership role to identify unmet demand for childcare and work with community providers to maintain and develop childcare places to meet demand in and around the centre.

Local authorities should also consider how children’s centres can help support the expansion of places for disadvantaged 2 year olds – working with community providers to extend and enhance existing provision.
Are parents and communities getting involved in their children’s centres?

The enhanced drive for localism and community engagement places a strong emphasis on the involvement of parents and communities in the running of their children’s centre. How far is this approach becoming the norm in children’s centres and what is the impact?

There is a long history of parental involvement in early years services. Many of the first after school clubs and playgroups were set up by groups of parents responding to the lack of services in their area, and parental involvement has also remained a central feature of Sure Start centres.

Parental engagement is beneficial to parents and children alike. Parents are able to spend more time with children in a positive learning environment and complement the learning experience at home, as well as developing their skills and allowing them to engage further in local communities. For centres, parental involvement increases the understanding of local need and provides the foundation for a partnership to improve the quality and personalisation of their services whilst opening the opportunity to extend the range of services on offer.

“The move towards using volunteers to replace paid, qualified and experienced staff would be a dangerous one. Volunteers are a valuable resource but need careful and thoughtful management and support.”

Centre Manager, North East

The reformed Early Years Foundation Stage framework places a significant emphasis on parents’ involvement in their child’s learning and development. The framework recommends regular meetings between parents and early educators and a 24-36 month progress check to ensure that parents have the information they need about their child’s development.

Many parents have traditionally volunteered to help deliver sessions such as Stay and Play. In tough economic times this is a trend which has increased to a range of wider services. Engaging parents in the delivery of services will be essential to support and maintain universal access and will play a crucial role in getting vulnerable parents to engage with centres.

Mothers or female carers of children are shown to be the most likely to volunteer, followed closely by those on work experience placements and other members of the community. Fathers are significantly less likely to volunteer although it is notable that a third of centres do now have volunteer dads.

“Volunteers have had a huge impact in the Centre over the last 6 months. They support the more vulnerable parents enabling them to access the sessions”

Centre Staff, London

Figure 20: Centres use of volunteers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mothers/female carers of child</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work experience placements</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other people from local community</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fathers/male carers of child</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other relatives of child, e.g. grandparents</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business placements</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We do not have any volunteers</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 511 base
Importantly both the number of volunteers used and the hours they volunteer have increased over the past year. 74% of volunteers currently provide up to 10 hours a week at the centres they volunteer in, again a number that has increased in the last year. Many centres report parents taking the lead in establishing and running self help groups at their children’s centre. This enables centres to increase their support without drawing heavily on paid staff.

While current levels of volunteers and paid staff appear to be functioning well there will be limits to the expansions of services which will be able to be supported by more volunteers alone, the available pool of volunteers may be reaching capacity. Furthermore, support and training for volunteer group leaders will be essential if groups are to be effective and confidently run. Volunteers are a very positive resource for a centre but will need support to get established.

Engaging parents in the governance of centres is now a statutory requirement that is also assessed by Ofsted. Ensuring a representative and effective management group that involves parents is key to delivering a community based approach which is capable of responding to local need.

Figure 21: Change in volunteer numbers in the past year

Figure 22: Change in the number of hours volunteers are providing in the past year

37 n = 473 base
38 n = 471 base
Payment by results - improving effectiveness or adding more burdens?

The Government is trialing a payment by results scheme for children centres aiming to improve child development and reduce inequalities. Whilst report backs from trials shows positive engagement and learning there can be little doubt that this is a complex area. What can we tell so far about its likely success and will payment by result achieve its aim or add another burden to centres?

The introduction of payment by results for children’s centres is complex. Intending to incentivise and drive improvements and delivery, it is surrounded by challenges - from the measurement of impact to the apportioning of rewards. The Department for Education announced measures for payment by results trials earlier this year but questions remain for many about how success will be demonstrated, how long term preventative gains will be calculated and how funding will be split between revenue and ‘payments’. There can be little surprise that such a high profile reform that is at such an embryonic stage is causing some concern. Tellingly, 62% of centres in our survey reported a concern as to how payment by results could be introduced in the future.

There has been significant progress in recent months in identifying the measures by which children’s centres outcomes should be evaluated. A report by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) in conjunction with the National Children’s Bureau (NCB) found that national measures such as: the take up of the national entitlement for 3 and 4 year olds, and the results of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile produced strong, empirical guidance against which children’s centres could be measured. The NFER and NCB report also highlighted a range of measurements which are difficult to measure, problematic to attribute, and not clearly linked to the core purpose of children’s centres. The newly launched Equal Start Outcomes Framework for Children centres developed by Professor Marmot’s UCL Institute of Health Equity with 4Children provides a valuable tool for future developments.

The payment by results trials have highlighted that the range of measurements maybe problematic to attribute and not always clearly linked to the core purpose of children centres. Sitting alongside national measures are local measures to be decided by local authorities with individual children’s centres. Whilst there may be some concerns about the potential introduction of payment by results by working closely with children’s centres local authorities will be able to tally many of these concerns.

This area of activity is likely to develop significantly over the coming year as the trials extends to a further 23 local authorities. The messages from the sector are clear –

- The scheme must be fit for purpose for voluntary sector children’s centres as well as local authority run centres
- The ‘payment’ element must start very small if a payment is to be held back to be paid on results to enable centres to continue to operate effectively
- The reward must be passed on to centres rather than sitting within the authority
- The measurements of success must be clear with training and support for staff to achieve.

Research methodology

Between Wednesday 14 March and Friday 20 April 2012 4Children undertook an online survey with Children centre staff working in centres across England. Surveys were sent to all children’s centres listed on the Direct Gov website Sure Start Children’s centre database as of March 2012. Responses were received from 578 centres in 133 local authorities representing a response rate of 16% nationally. A review of existing literature relating to current trends in Sure Start Children’s Centres was undertaken to supplement the primary research.

Efforts were taken to gain a representative sample from centres launched in different phases and which were managed by different providers. As our survey was self selecting our sample slightly under represents phase three centres and private centre operators comparable to national estimates. National estimates provided in our census were calculated with recent data collected from the Department for Education regarding the number of centres nationally.

We also provide comparisons to previous research undertaken by 4Children regarding children’s centres in 2011. Between Monday 21 March and Friday 1 April 2011 4Children surveyed children’s centres listed on the Family Information Service website as of November 2010. 402 responses were collected representing more than 10% of centres nationally.

Please contact 4Children for future detail on research methodology.
References


