Evaluation of the Community Childcare and Early Learning Hubs

Final Report

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Introduction

In 2013, 4Children commissioned OPM to evaluate its pilot Community Childcare and Early Learning Hubs programme. Funded by the Department for Education, 4Children's 'Childcare and Early Learning Hubs' programme aims to bring together high quality day care providers, schools, children's centres and childminders into Community Hubs (hereafter referred to as 'hubs'), to develop a financially sustainable model for more flexible and responsive childcare and early education in a local area. Specifically, the hubs were intended to: improve the **quality** of provision; support the provision of new childcare places focussing on **funded two year olds** where this is seen as a gap; and support parents with their working patterns by offering **blended childcare** and early education.

The evaluation

Our evaluation is intended to assess the **impact** of the hubs and identify important **learning** that can support the spread of hub working to other areas.

In brief, our research comprised:

– a review of background documentation on each hub and scoping visits to all hubs

– analysis of monitoring data collected by 4Children

– a baseline and follow on survey of parents/carers.

– a baseline and follow on survey of providers.

– case study fieldwork in seven hubs. The fieldwork involved interviews with the hub lead, providers, and where possible, parents.

– two video case studies: one on blended childcare and the other on providers' experiences of being part of a hub.

Impact of the hubs

Aim 1: Improving the quality of childcare

– 82% of providers in our baseline survey felt that local practitioners' recognition of the importance of CPD was 'excellent' or 'good'. This rose to 100% in the follow on survey.

– 93% of providers felt that the hub has been 'very' or 'fairly' successful in *'providing opportunities to share practice and learning amongst practitioners to improve quality'*

and the same proportion rated the hub as 'very' or 'fairly' successful in *'increasing practitioners' recognition of the importance of quality'*

– 67% of providers reported that their hub's activities have led to improvements in the quality of local provision.

Our case study research provides a more detailed insight into the activities hubs have undertaken to improve quality and the impact that this has had:

– **Creating a collaborative environment:** The hubs have provided a forum for increased interaction between providers which in many cases has resulted in closer relationships between practitioners.

– **Improved consistency between providers:** The sharing of ideas, experiences, and best practice between hub members is a key feature of all the hubs.

– **Improving readiness for school:** Hubs have also undertaken work to improve children's readiness for school.

Aim 2: Increasing opportunities for more flexible or blended childcare

– Our surveys found relatively little awareness of, or demand for, blended childcare amongst parents.

– Parents who did know about or had used blended childcare were more likely to rate it as 'easy to organise' at the end of the programme than at the beginning.

– Likewise providers rating blended childcare opportunities as 'excellent' or 'good' increased during the lifetime of the programme

– Whilst these positive improvements are encouraging, they also indicate a continued need to create more opportunities for flexible childcare and increase parents' awareness of what is available to them.

– Challenges facing the hubs in offering a more satisfactory blended offer included: Childminders being reluctant to pick up children from nursery in the evening; direct competition between settings means that they are reluctant to 'share' children; and insufficient supply of childcare places in the market to facilitate more flexible working.

Aim 3: Increasing places for funded 2 year olds

– Our follow up survey found an increase in the proportion of providers who rated the availability of childcare places for funded 2 year olds as either 'excellent' or 'good'.

– Whilst this data indicates improvement in availability, there is still more work to be done to increase providers' awareness of local need, and to meet this need in practice.

– Over half the providers indicated that they 'don't know' whether there is a need to increase provision for funded 2 year olds locally.

− The proportion (27%) of providers intending to offer or increase funded places for 2 year olds did not change across the programme.

Learning from the hubs

Common challenges

Limited capacity and competing priorities: The majority of hub leads talked of the challenge of contributing to hub activities in addition to their core role.

Finding time to meet: Hub members work in different ways across different times of the day, and this can create a challenge in bringing the group together for meetings.

Communicating /awareness raising with parents: Most hubs have struggled to engage parents with the idea of a 'hub': in and of itself it does not have much meaning for parents.

Engaging with a broader hub network: Most hubs are characterised by an active, core group of members but there is the ongoing challenge of engaging with the wider network of providers.

Mismatch between supply and demand for childcare: Across several of the hubs, the demand from parents does not match the supply of childcare.

Important learning

Create a strong foundation

Build on what you already have: The majority of hubs based themselves around existing local networks or partnerships. This may only be a small core group of providers but the existing relationships mean the hub can start taking action quickly and demonstrate early successes to potential new members.

Create a unique identity and focus: Hub activities need to be tailored to the needs and wishes of local providers – undertaking an early needs assessment, or canvassing views more informally, will help set the direction of the hub.

Clearly communicate the benefits

Communicate 'what's in it for you': Set out a clear narrative about 'what's in it for you' to attract providers to the hub. If providers feel that they are getting something in return for their time, e.g. free training or publicity, they will be more inclined to join.

Create quick wins to demonstrate value: Start with a project or activity that brings the partners together and creates value. This encourages existing partners to stay involved while creating reasons for others to join.

Use existing communication channels: Identify and work with the 'key' childminders locally to help engage

Drive parent demand through targeted communications: Create marketing and publicity materials which clearly explain new childcare options to parents.

Create relationships to maintain sustainability

Maintain frequent contact between partners: Interaction between hub members should be encouraged between and outside of core hub meetings. Sharing contact details and encouraging ongoing conversations and mutual support ensures the hub relationships add value beyond the formal meetings.

Structure activities to take place between meetings: Giving hub members activities to complete between meetings can be a good way of maintaining momentum.

Formalise organisational roles and responsibilities: To maintain continuity when key individuals leave the hub, organisational responsibilities and commitment to the hub should be agreed.

Foster a sense of collaboration and equality

Involve partners in setting hub focus: All partners should be included in setting the priorities and work areas for the hub.

Value the input of partners equally: Allow partners to provide input irrespective of their setting or size - one partner should not be allowed to dominate or lead the activities.

Provide training in a joint setting: Enabling partners to take part in training at the same time ensures that they all feel equally valued. It also enables the creation of shared knowledge and expectations for good practice.

Manage resources creatively

Ensure the hub lead has enough time: The role of hub lead is key to success. A hub lead should be given the time to drive forward the hub's activities and maintain momentum.

Create a culture of shared responsibility: The hub lead should be supported to oversee and drive forward the hub by other hub members who are willing to sign up to tasks and take on responsibilities.

Don't duplicate work: Where existing networks or partnerships are being integrated, ensure that there is a clear reallocation of responsibilities and activities.

Draw on existing networks for support: Existing networks and partnerships in the area should be utilised to both promote the hub's services to parents and to recruit new members.

Work with the local authority but retain leadership: The local authority may be able to provide access to a range of resources, networks and expertise. This support should be welcomed to strengthen the hub and ensure the hub is aligned with local priorities and projects. The hub lead should, however, remain within the hub members.

Conclusion

As in any innovative programme of this nature, there will be some hubs or sites that make better progress than others, due to a range of factors including: pre-existing relationships between providers; the leadership style and qualities of the hub lead; the mix of providers in the locality; and contextual factors.

The greatest impact of the programme can be seen in the area of quality improvement.

The impact of the programme on increasing the availability of blended childcare has been positive, but less pronounced.

The programme has had some success in increasing funded 2 year old places, which is concentrated in a small number of hubs.

The programme has generated a significant amount of learning about the challenges of setting up and running a hub, and the potential impacts that hubs can have. Our evaluation evidence points to the following factors as being critical to the success of setting up and implementing a hub:

– A common vision and a clear set of values and aims, agreed upon by all hub members.

– A strong hub lead with the ability to encourage, persuade and lead others.

– Financial support, at least initially, to free up the hub lead to dedicate time to forming the partnership and fund training.

– A personalised approach - meeting individually with providers, especially in the early days, to promote the hub and recruit members.

– Flexibility to work around the time constraints of providers, and cascade information to people unable to attend meetings.

– Key performance indicators to keep the project on track and encourage regular reflection of what's working well and what needs to be improved.

– Open channels of communication, including a willingness to listen to others and accept constructive criticism.

Introduction

In 2013, 4Children commissioned OPM to evaluate its pilot Community Childcare and Early Learning Hubs programme. Funded by the Department for Education, 4Children's 'Childcare and Early Learning Hubs' programme aims to bring together high quality day care providers, schools, children's centres and childminders into Community Hubs (hereafter referred to as 'hubs'), to develop a financially sustainable model for more flexible and responsive childcare and early education in a local area. Specifically, the hubs were intended to:

– improve the **quality** of provision;

– support the provision of new childcare places focussing on **funded two year olds** where this is seen as a gap; and

– support parents with their working patterns by offering **blended childcare** and early education.

4Children provided ongoing advice and support to the hubs, as well as providing two days' of tailored CPD support two days' of training and support to help them understand and respond to the government's Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) reforms which came into force in September 2014[1]. Further to this Contact a Family have provided ongoing support throughout the project as a partner organisation. 4Children have also created a toolkit to support existing hubs as well as those wishing to become a hub or work in a more collaborative way with local providers, which can be found here:
http://www.foundationyears.org.uk/hubs/

The evaluation

Our evaluation is intended to assess the **impact** of the hubs and identify important **learning** that can support the spread of hub working to other areas.

In brief, our research comprised:

– a review of background documentation on each hub and scoping visits to all hubs to interview the Hub Lead in November/December 2013.

– analysis of monitoring data collected by 4Children from all nine hubs in the first quarter of 2014.

– a baseline and follow on survey of parents/carers. The baseline survey was conducted between December 2013 and February 2014 and involved six hubs (Merton, Homerton, Strensall, Stroud, Wooler and Parbold Douglas). The follow

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[1] The reforms require local authorities to produce a 'local offer' setting out the support available for children and young people with a SEN or disability. In addition, statements of special educational needs and learning disability assessments are being replaced with a single Education, Heath and Care Plan.

on survey was conducted between November 2014 and February 2015 and involved five of the original six hubs[2] .a baseline and follow on survey of providers. The surveys were conducted at the same time as the parent surveys and with the same hubs. (For full analysis please see: http://www.foundationyears.org.uk/hubs/)

– case study fieldwork in seven hubs[3] between June 2014 and January 2015. The fieldwork involved interviews with the hub lead, providers, and where possible, parents. We produced seven written case studies from this fieldwork. (For full case studies please see: http://www.foundationyears.org.uk/hubs/)

– an interview with Parbold Douglas Hub Lead, following the hub's decision to exit the programme after the first year.

– two video case studies: one on blended childcare which involved interviews with the hub lead, providers and parents at the DragonFishers hub, and the other on providers' experiences of being part of a hub which involved interviews with providers at the Homerton hub. (Please see http://www.foundationyears.org.uk/hubs/)

Research challenges / limitations

The main challenge we faced in the research was getting a good response to the surveys. This was largely the result of us not having direct access to potential respondents – we were reliant on hub leads circulating the surveys to their providers and local parents, and issuing reminders on our behalf. Hubs received a series of email reminders and phone calls to encourage responses to the surveys, by both 4Children and ourselves. Whilst response rates in the baseline survey were good, the follow on surveys were less so. At the time the follow on survey was being conducted, some of the hubs were experiencing local challenges such as staff turnover or financial uncertainty, and were less able to support this element of the research. The final response rates were as follows[4]:

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[2] Parbold Douglas exited the programme at the end of the first year. The reasons for which are set out in the Interim Evaluation Report published in May 2014.

[3] Bluecoat Children's Centre in Torrington did not participate in the case study research.

[4] In order to make the baseline and follow up survey results comparable, we removed the Parbold Douglas data from our baseline survey.

		TOTAL
Parents/carers	**Baseline**	**90**
	Follow-up	**31**
Providers	**Baseline**	**45**
	Follow-up	**15**

The low number of responses in the follow on survey, particularly from providers, limits the extent to which we have been able to draw definitive conclusions from this data.

This report

This report sets out our findings from across the evaluation, and builds on the interim report produced in April 2014. It focusses on the impact and learning from the programme as a whole, rather than from individual hubs. A separate Annex accompanying this report provides more detailed information about the hubs, including the seven case studies and our detailed survey analysis, please see: http://www.foundationyears.org.uk/hubs/

The remainder of this report is set out under the following headings:

–   Overview of the hubs

–   Impact of the hubs

–   Learning from the hubs

–   Conclusions.

Overview of the hubs

The Hubs

The hubs were identified through proactive efforts by 4Children or otherwise volunteered after hearing about the programme. The hubs represent a geographical spread across England and are being led by different 'types' of providers (children's centres, nursery school, primary school etc.). Three of the hubs were already working in partnership with other childcare providers before joining the programme. These hubs are led by:

– Sheringham Children's Centre in Newham;

– Bluecoat Children's Centre in Torrington; and

– The DragonFisher partnership, York City Council.

The other six hubs were much less established. These are led by:

– Haslemere Primary School in Merton

– Homerton Children's Centre in Cambridge

– Severn View Primary Academy in Stroud

– Robert Wilkinson School in Strensall, Yorkshire

– Wooler Children's Centre in Northumberland

– Parbold Douglas Church of England Academy in Wigan[5].

Hub membership

The hubs have attracted a mix of providers, including children's centres, primary schools, childminders, and nurseries, with numbers ranging from 4 in York DragonFisher to over 30 connected to the Sheringham hub. Staff in the hubs used a range of strategies to raise awareness of their work and recruit providers, including:

– press releases in local newspapers;

– emails to local providers to introduce them to the hub and invite them to join;

– face-to-face meetings with local providers;

– online publicity and social media strategies, such as a Facebook page to attract childminders; and

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[5] As noted already, this hub's participation in the programme was limited to the first year.

–   existing relationships or networks with local providers to 'spread the word'.

Implementing the hubs

All hubs have organised regular face-to-face meetings with providers, and the content of the meetings has been tailored to the wishes and needs of hub members. Across hubs, topics have included, amongst other things, safeguarding, supporting children with SEND, early years' communication and language development, measuring and improving quality, increasing provision for funded 2 year olds, and demand and supply of flexible childcare options. These meetings are an opportunity to highlight local childcare issues and needs; share knowledge and practice; and increase networking between different local providers.

Hubs have also undertaken a mix of other activities, including:

–   formal training on a range of topics of relevance to the local setting.

–   hub members visiting each other's settings.

–   developing communication materials, and in some cases a website, aimed at improving childcare information for parents.

–   establishing a common system for measuring and tracking children's progress over time and between different providers.

–   cross moderation of children's learning outcomes.

–   joint events, such as a sports day or carol singing.

The impact of these activities is set out in the following chapter.

Impact of the hubs

This chapter sets out our findings on the impact of the programme, drawing on our case study research and survey data. We begin by reporting our findings on the three main programme aims, and finish with our findings on the impact of the programme in improving childcare information for parents.

Aim 1: Improving the quality of childcare

Findings from the baseline and follow on surveys illustrate the high importance that parents place on continuous quality improvement within childcare settings, with 80% of parents in both surveys identifying it as 'very important'.

Providers similarly view it as important, and our survey found some encouraging evidence of improvements in practitioners' perception of the importance of CPD as well as their understanding and practice around quality improvement:

– 82% of providers in our baseline survey felt that local practitioners' recognition of the importance of CPD was 'excellent' or 'good'. This rose to 100% in the follow on survey.

– 61% of providers in our baseline survey felt that local practitioners worked together 'very' or 'fairly' effectively together to share practice and learning. This figure rose to 93% in the follow on survey.

– 93% of providers felt that the hub has been 'very' or 'fairly' successful in *'providing opportunities to share practice and learning amongst practitioners to improve quality'* and the same proportion rated the hub as 'very' or 'fairly' successful in *'increasing practitioners' recognition of the importance of quality'*.

– Two thirds (67%) of providers in the follow on survey reported that their hub's activities have led to improvements in the quality of local provision. When asked to give examples of how quality had improved, providers most commonly referred to having shared policies with other providers. Other examples reflected better communication and information sharing across providers, and improved or new activities/services for children and parents.

We found little change across the two surveys in terms of the methods providers use to monitor their own quality. We did however find an increase in the proportion of providers using a quality improvement plan (24% in the baseline survey, 33% in the follow on), or some other kind of action plan (56% in the baseline survey, 80% in the follow on survey). Other methods being used include self-evaluation, Ofsted feedback, staff meetings, and parental surveys.

Our case study research provides a more detailed insight into the activities hubs have undertaken to improve quality and the impact that this has had. Our findings are set out under the following three themes:

– Creating a collaborative environment

– Improving consistency of policy and practice

– Improving children's readiness for school.

Creating a collaborative environment

The hubs have provided a forum for increased interaction between providers which in many cases has resulted in closer relationships between practitioners. One interviewee described their hub as *'creating a more supportive and equal early years environment'* and across the hubs we found communities of practitioners who are willing to offer mutual support and advice.

"I feel more confident about calling [name of person] if I have an issue or want to discuss something. Now we have open doors to each other's settings, which is great." (Local provider – Wooler)

Whilst the collaborative environment brings many positive benefits in terms of knowledge and practice sharing, several stakeholders also suggested that it creates an element of healthy competition between providers, which contributes to raising standards and quality.

Improved relationships between formal childcare settings and childminders are proving to be particularly beneficial. In many hub areas, childminders were not part of any previous early years networks.   Increased interaction with childminders has enabled pre-school staff to have a better understanding of the challenges faced by childminders, and likewise childminders have a better understanding of how to support children transitioning to other settings. In some hubs, new relationships developed between childminders are enabling them to provide ad-hoc support to each other when needed.

Improved consistency between providers

Sharing ideas

The sharing of ideas, experiences, and best practice between hub members is a key feature of all the hubs. In some hubs, members have visited each other's settings and shared resources that have worked well in their own setting. Examples include reward stars to motivate parents and children in home learning (Homerton) and using tablet computers for observations (Stroud). Hub members agreed that this peer to peer sharing was an effective way to improve their own practice.

Formalising consistency

In addition to informal knowledge and practice sharing, some hubs have developed common policies and practices, for example, the Wooler hub members have developed a joint policy on Promoting Positive Behaviour. Other hubs including Strensall, Stroud, Haslemere and

DragonFishers have formalised a process of cross-moderation of children's progress and learning outcomes. This process is used to compare how children are assessed against core capabilities, ensuring that each partner is using a consistent approach.

"Networked learning means that we have improved through the quality improvement groups we have set up, and settings and childminders have felt positive about learning together. We have moved away from the model of disseminating good practice and into the model of peer-learning and creating knowledge networks." (Hub Lead - Sheringham)

The cross-moderation of learning outcomes gives primary schools more confidence in the assessments being carried out on the children joining their school. This allows them to more effectively plan the support needs for new classes, while also being able to discuss the needs of specific children with other hub partners. It also facilitates a smoother transition for pupils.

"A big thing for us, as a reception and F2 provider, is knowing that the children and the judgements [providers] come up with are accurate. As a teacher I have to baseline the children and set targets…if the information they are sending us is not accurate it gives us a problem." (Hub Lead – Robert Wilkinson Primary)

The success of formalised moderation is particularly clear in the Haslemere Hub, as illustrated in the following vignette.

The Haslemere Hub targeted 'readiness for school' skills, carrying out assessments and implementing a consistent approach across all providers to reach agreed standards on core skills. Providers received some relevant training and were able to access the children's centre's resources as needed.   Before this exercise, many children were entering primary school with significantly below average levels of communication, language and social skills, as measured by the Early Years Foundation Stage Profiles. Many are now reaching average levels. Developing a clear transition of development records ensures that the children staying within the Haslemere system remain on track and can progress when ready.

"Overall I believe the pre-school to be the main factor why my daughter is so confident and has got off to a great start at the bigger nursery at Haslemere" (Parent - Haslemere Hub)

Improving readiness for school

Other hubs have also undertaken work to improve children's readiness for school. Hubs have commonly organised external speakers and/or training on specialist topics including: communication, language and social skills, the needs of SEND pupils, and the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework.

Providers' attendance at training often comes down to it being offered for free or at a very low cost, ensuring all providers irrespective of their size or resources can attend. Hubs have used some of their funding to pay for external trainers, or have utilised existing resources within the schools or Children's Centres. The logistical needs of the providers are also a key consideration, for example ensuring provision of crèche facilities enables childminders to attend more flexibly.

The provision of group training sessions has contributed to the promotion of more consistent practices across providers. By attending the same training events, the providers have a shared understanding of what support is required to help children become more ready for school and can work towards this. Even in hubs where providers were already rated as outstanding, such as Strensall, consistency across providers was reported to improve.

Aim 2: Increasing opportunities for more flexible or blended childcare

Our baseline and follow on surveys of parents found relatively little awareness of, or demand for, blended childcare, and this is not surprising as it is a new concept for many. However, parents who did know about or had used blended childcare were more likely to rate it as 'easy to organise' at the end of the programme than at the beginning (37% described in as 'very' or 'fairly' easy to organise in the baseline survey, rising to 51% in the follow on survey). There was a similar pattern amongst providers, with 49% of providers rating blended childcare opportunities as 'excellent' or 'good' in the baseline survey, and 60% doing so in the follow up survey. Whilst these positive improvements are encouraging, they also indicate a continued need to create more opportunities for flexible childcare and increase parents' awareness of what is available to them.

Providers who felt that blended childcare in their area was 'satisfactory' or 'poor' were asked to comment further on this, and their responses reflected come of the challenges facing the hubs, including:

–   Childminders being reluctant to pick up children from nursery in the evening

–   Direct competition between settings means that they are reluctant to 'share' children

–   Insufficient supply of childcare places in the market to facilitate more flexible working.

Despite these challenges, we found evidence of more providers working with others in a flexible way. In our baseline survey, 60% of providers currently worked with other providers to offer blended childcare; this rose to 73% in the follow on survey.

Our case study research found that increasing blended childcare opportunities was more of a focus for some hubs than others. Several hubs found that the demand for this kind of care was limited, and one hub reported that the rural geography of the area did not facilitate providers working in this way.

The DragonFishers Hub is probably the best illustration of how blended childcare is working in practice. This arrangement was already established before they became a hub, however participating in the hub programme has helped to cement relationships, drive up quality across the partnership, and focus on collective objectives, such as increasing parents' awareness and take up of the blended childcare offer. The close geographical proximity of the providers was identified by local stakeholders as a key enabler of blended childcare in practice.

The DragonFishers Hub is a partnership of two primary schools, a nursery, and 'FunFishers' a breakfast, day and afterschool provider attached to one of the primary schools. The parents of children attending either primary school can drop off and/or collect their children at FunFishers. The children are transferred between the different settings by FunFishers staff throughout the day.

For some parents, this arrangement has enabled them to resume full-time working hours. The close relationship between the providers is important to parents - knowing that their child or children are familiar with the settings, their staff, and the other children gives them the peace of mind to leave them in their joint care throughout the day:

"It has made a big difference to us. Previously my wife only worked part-time and having the facility here has allowed us to both continue in full-time jobs" (Parent using DragonFishers)

The Sheringham Hub has also had success in widening opportunities for blended childcare, which is offered alongside a range of other options, including child-minding and an after school club for primary school pupils.

"It is working. Parents are seeing that they can have a piece of this and a piece of that, and it all joins together." (Hub Lead - Sheringham)

Other hubs has focused on creating a single point of information and contact for parents to increase their awareness of the childcare options locally. For example, the Haslemere and Strensall hubs reported low awareness amongst parents of the childcare options available to them, including blended childcare. By aggregating all of the information about local childcare providers and available places into one place, they hope to make it easier for parents to find out what is available locally.

Aim 3: Increasing places for funded 2 year olds

Our surveys found an increase in the proportion of providers who rated the availability of childcare places for funded 2 year olds as either 'excellent' or 'good', rising from 44% in the baseline survey to 67% in the follow on survey. Whilst this data indicates improvement in availability, there is still more work to be done to increase providers' awareness of local need, and to meet this need in practice. Over half the providers in both the baseline and follow on surveys indicated that they 'don't know' whether there is a need to increase provision for funded 2 year olds locally. The proportion of providers intending to offer or increase funded places for 2 year olds did not change across the programme: 27% in both the baseline and follow on survey.

Our case study fieldwork revealed that the Homerton and Stroud hubs have had some success in increasing the provision of funded and non-funded places for 2 year olds. At the same time, it also revealed the challenges they've faced in doing so.

In Homerton, the children's centre worked with the local authority to encourage and support local community halls and schools to provide more places. Through the use of a roadshow to raise awareness and by providing support, the hub has enabled one school to take on more 2 year olds. Given the effort invested in these activities by the hub, this level of uptake was disappointing for those involved.

The Stroud hub took a different approach to create more places. They relocated the nursery within the children's centre to create more dedicated space for 2 year old provision, as well as for 3 and 4 year olds. The children's centre now uses a team of flexible staff to enable it to make best use of the newly created spaces whilst not committing to long term increased staff costs.

Other hubs have struggled to increase provision. In the case of Strensall, providers reported little demand from parents, however in Haslemere some providers were unwilling to increase supply, primarily because parents of these children often wanted part time care. As it is often easier and more financially sustainable to provide full time care, providers were resistant to offering more 2 year old places.

Other impacts

Improved information on childcare provision

The sources used by parents to find out about childcare options remained largely similar between the two surveys. By far the most common method is word of mouth (59% in the baseline, 61% in the follow-up), followed by schools (16% in the baseline and 26% in the

follow up). By the end of the programme however, 16% of parents reported finding out about childcare options through their local hub.

Two thirds of providers in our follow up survey felt that their hub had improved the information available to parents about childcare opportunities locally. This is borne out in the following findings:

– In the baseline survey, 51% of parents found it 'very' or 'fairly' easy to find up-to-date information about childcare places locally. This proportion rose to 71% in the follow on survey.

– 56% of providers in the baseline survey reported that it 'very' or 'fairly' easy for parents to find up-to-date information on childcare places. This rose to 74% by the end of the programme.

– Just over half (51%) of providers in the baseline survey felt that local childcare information was 'excellent' or 'good', and by the end of the programme this proportion had risen to 80%.

Our case study research provided insights into how hubs were improving the availability of childcare information for parents. As noted earlier, several hubs (including Haslemere, Strensall and Wooler) have been successful in creating a 'one stop shop' for childcare information, with websites and/or other communication materials alerting parents to what is on offer locally. Sheringham took this one step further: in addition to a new website they have revamped the reception area at the Children's Centre to provide a physical central information point about childcare in the area. The hub lead told us:

"The hub has really made us focus on publicity and parent outreach and engagement" (Hub Lead - Sheringham)

Learning from the hubs

This chapter sets out the common challenges faced by those involved in establishing and implementing the hubs, and the learning to emerge from their experiences.

Common challenges

Limited capacity and competing priorities

The majority of hub leads talked of the challenge of contributing to hub activities in addition to their core role. Individuals are taking on the responsibilities because they see the value in participation, but often they do not have protected time for participation. Where core meetings took place during school hours, hub leads were frequently given time, or teaching cover, to attend. Activities outside of school time were often completed in participants' own time.

The organisations interested in taking part in the hub are commonly those with an innovative or forward-looking approach. This means that the lead provider will likely be taking part in a range of other initiatives, all of which create competition for time and resources. Where a new project becomes the primary priority, there is the risk that hub work takes a back seat.

In a minority of hubs, capacity challenges lead to slow progress on key activities or a lack of momentum between some meetings. These problems are exacerbated where there is turnover of key staff.

Finding time to meet

Hub members work in different ways across different times of the day, and this can create a challenge in bringing the group together for meetings. Childminders are often unable to access cover to attend a meeting during school hours, while teachers are required to give up their own time to meet in the evening.

Hubs have tried various methods to get around this problem, including rotating meetings between different settings to reduce travel time; having each hub meeting at two different times to accommodate different working patterns; and providing crèche facilities so childminders can attend. There is no 'one size fits all' solution, and hubs have had to use a bit of trial and error to find what works best for their members.

Communicating /awareness raising with parents

Most hubs have struggled to engage parents with the idea of a 'hub': in and of itself it does not have much meaning for parents. The most successful solutions have been where the hub lead organisation, or other active hub member, has acted as a single point of contact and information for the parents.   Where up-to-date information about the availability of childcare places is coordinated and available in once place, parents are given a reason to make contact.

Most hubs have developed a website to engage with parents, but this is an area in which many hub members do not have skills or experience, making it a difficult and time-consuming task. Website development has been successful with external support, but there is still the challenge of raising parents' awareness of the site and encouraging their consistent use of it.

Engaging with a broader hub network

Most hubs are characterised by an active core group of members, however there is the ongoing challenge of engaging with the wider network of providers. This wider network is often made up of independent childminders, who can broaden the childcare options available to parents, but do not necessarily participate in any of the hub activities, or participate only sporadically. Some hubs have found that childminders do not typically see the benefits of ongoing participation in the hub, and so dedicated communications is needed to re-engage them when this is found to be the case.

Mismatch between supply and demand for childcare

Across several of the hubs, the demand from parents does not match the supply of childcare. In both affluent and more socially deprived areas, parents are often working part-time, which means they have specific demands for childcare. These needs are often met by extended family networks who can respond at short notice for short periods of time. In contrast, childminders would prefer to offer a consistent pattern of care to each child, enabling them to better plan and manage their work. This makes provision of ad-hoc care difficult to find.

Important learning

The key learning from the hub's experiences is presented in this section under five central themes:

– Create a strong foundation

– Clearly communicate the benefits

– Create relationships to maintain sustainability

– Foster a sense of collaboration and equality

– Manage resources creatively.

Create a strong foundation

Build on what you already have

The majority of hubs based themselves around existing local networks or partnerships. This may only be a small core group of providers but the existing relationships mean the hub can start taking action quickly and demonstrate early successes to potential new members. Where hubs are starting from scratch, or providers have experienced of failed partnerships/networks in the past, it can take much longer to establish the hub.

Create a unique identity and focus

Hub activities need to be tailored to the needs and wishes of local providers – undertaking an early needs assessment, or canvassing views more informally, will help set the direction of the hub. This should be complemented with a clear set of objectives and responsibilities. This is particularly important where existing networks are being reshaped into a hub – all partners need to be clear about who is responsible for what in the new structure.

Clearly communicate the benefits

Communicate 'what's in it for you'

Set out a clear narrative about 'what's in it for you' to attract providers to the hub. If providers feel that they are getting something in return for their time, e.g. free training or publicity, they will be more inclined to join.

Create quick wins to demonstrate value

Start with a project or activity that brings the partners together and creates value. This encourages existing partners to stay involved while creating reasons for others to join.

Use existing communication channels

Identify and work with the 'key' childminders locally to help engage others. In an area where there are a lot of childminders there are often those who are regarded as 'leaders' who can encourage others to get involved. Meeting face-to-face and one-to-one with providers in the early days is often more effective than mailshots, emails or group meetings.

Drive parent demand through targeted communications

Create marketing and publicity materials which clearly explain new childcare options to parents. Blended childcare is likely to be a new concept parents, so hubs have a role to play in raising their awareness of what it looks like in practice, and doing so can help create demand for more flexible options.

Create relationships to maintain sustainability

Maintain frequent contact between partners

Interaction between hub members should be encouraged between and outside of core hub meetings. Sharing contact details and encouraging ongoing conversations and mutual support ensures the hub relationships add value beyond the formal meetings. Emails between partners and from the hub lead are a quick and effective way to share information with those who are already engaged.

Structure activities to take place between meetings

Giving hub members activities to complete between meetings can be a good way of maintaining momentum. This might include: testing a new approach / material in their setting; contributing to the development of a common policy; or fact finding to inform the next meeting.

Formalise organisational roles and responsibilities

To maintain continuity when key individuals leave the hub, organisational responsibilities and commitment to the hub should be agreed. Where possible, hub members should keep key colleagues updated to enable them to step into the role if needed.

Foster a sense of collaboration and equality

Involve partners in setting hub focus

All partners should be included in setting the priorities and work areas for the hub. Ask partners to highlight key issues early in the process and integrate them into the workplan. This ensures partners feel involved and take value from participation.

Value the input of partners equally

Allow partners to provide input irrespective of their setting or size - one partner should not be allowed to dominate or lead the activities. Cross-moderation of professional judgements is an effective way to bring all partners together on a shared topic. Careful mediation of this process can allow hub members to experience the value of their peers' perspectives.

Provide training in a joint setting

Enabling partners to take part in training at the same time ensures that they all feel equally valued. It also enables the creation of shared knowledge and expectations for good practice.

Manage resources creatively

Ensure the hub lead has enough time

The role of hub lead is key to success. A hub lead should be given the time to drive forward the hub's activities and maintain momentum. The lead should be able to block out dedicated time to work on the hub, not just for meetings. A dedicated lead may be willing to use their own time for hub activities, but this should not be relied upon as a sustainable solution.

Create a culture of shared responsibility

The hub lead should be supported to oversee and drive forward the hub by other hub members who are willing to sign up to tasks and take on responsibilities. The hub lead should not be left to 'do everything' and 'have all the answers'.

Don't duplicate work

Where existing networks or partnerships are being integrated, ensure that there is a clear reallocation of responsibilities and activities.

Draw on existing networks for support

Existing networks and partnerships in the area should be utilised to both promote the hub's services to parents and to recruit new members. Providers will often be members of specialist networks which will not be in competition with the hub, for example local childminder networks.

Work with the local authority but retain leadership

The local authority may be able to provide access to a range of resources, networks and expertise. This support should be welcomed to strengthen the hub and ensure the hub is aligned with local priorities and projects. The hub lead should, however, remain within the hub members.

Conclusions

The programme has successfully tested out a new approach to increasing the availability, flexibility and quality of childcare in nine diverse areas in England, and is currently expanding the number of hubs across the country, using the learning it has gained over the last 18 months or so. The concept of hub working amongst early years providers is gaining momentum nationally; towards the end of 2014 the Government released up to £5M of funding for Teaching Schools wishing to work with local early years providers to drive up the quality of early years provision. This provides an impetus for hubs to continue working in this way, as well as an opportunity to link with a local Teaching School to expand their work, should this be applicable.

As in any innovative programme of this nature, there will be some hubs or sites that make better progress than others, due to a range of factors including: pre-existing relationships between providers; the leadership style and qualities of the hub lead; the mix of providers in the locality; and contextual factors such as staff turnover, the introduction of competing initiatives, or financial insecurity. The purpose of this evaluation was not to compare and contrast individual hubs, but to capture the impact and learning across the programme as a whole.

The greatest impact of the programme can be seen in the area of quality improvement. This has been the core focus for most hubs, which by design or default, also responds the high importance that parents place on continuous professional development amongst childcare professionals.   Across hubs, we found evidence of local providers undertaking joint training; sharing their experiences, practice and materials within and outside of hub meetings; and developing common policies and practices. This has led to some positive impacts including: providers taking quality improvement more seriously and using action plans to monitor their own quality; greater consistency across providers in areas such as behaviour and children with SEN and disabilities; and cross moderation of children's progress and outcomes to support smoother transitions across settings.

The impact of the programme on increasing the availability of blended childcare has been positive, but less pronounced. This has been a more challenging area to work on for some hubs, due to their rural geography, a lack of demand for parents for this kind of childcare, and/or some providers being less willing than others to work in a more flexible way. Where hubs have facilitated more or better blended childcare in practice, it has been received very positively by parents who are able to work more flexible or longer hours. There is an ongoing need for hubs to raise parental awareness of the concept of blended childcare and what it looks like in practice, so they can begin to create demand from parents, whilst at the same time working with providers to create more supply.

The programme has had some success in increasing funded 2 year old places, which is concentrated in a small number of hubs. Some hubs reported a lack of local need, whereas others experienced resistance amongst some providers to offer part-time care. The findings from our surveys suggest that more needs to be done by some hubs to fully understand the

local situation in terms of need/demand and current supply, and to convey this knowledge to their members.

The programme has generated a significant amount of learning about the challenges of setting up and running a hub, and the potential impacts that hubs can have. Our evaluation evidence points to the following factors as being critical to the success of setting up and implementing a hub:

– A common vision and a clear set of values and aims, agreed upon by all hub members.

– A strong hub lead with the ability to encourage, persuade and lead others.

– Financial support, at least initially, to free up the hub lead to dedicate time to forming the partnership and fund training.

– A personalised approach - meeting individually with providers, especially in the early days, to promote the hub and recruit members.

– Flexibility to work around the time constraints of providers, and cascade information to people unable to attend meetings.

– Key performance indicators to keep the project on track and encourage regular reflection of what's working well and what needs to be improved.

– Open channels of communication, including a willingness to listen to others and accept constructive criticism.

Finally, we found an appetite amongst some hubs to network and share their learning with established and newer hubs. We recommend that 4Children explore how it might continue to support ongoing hub-to-hub learning, should this be possible within existing resources.