

# Registration of births at children's centres

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Children's centres are well positioned to provide a welcoming environment for many families in need of extra support. The opportunity to register births in children's centres is potentially a very effective means of alerting parents to the support services available and the benefits of accessing these services through children's centres.

Local authorities can already make children's centres one of the places where parents can register the birth of their child. Manchester City, Bury and York are three local areas where this practice currently happens.

- Manchester City have been registering births through children's centres since 2001. Currently 7 (Benchill, Gorton North, Longsight, Clayton, Harpurhay, Cheetham and Moss Side) out of 39 centres provide this service.
- Bury have been registering births at children's centres since 2008. Currently 4 (Besses, Coronation Road, Ramsbottom and Sedgley) of Bury's 14 children centres allow parents to register births. At 3 centres, the registration service is offered on a fortnightly basis for half a day. In Sedgley children's centre, it is offered weekly.
- In York births were registered at 3 Children's Centre's (Hob Moor, Knavesmire and The Avenues) until recently (March 2013). The service is currently offered at 2 of York's 9 centres (with registrations taking place at Hob Moor twice a week).

## Six benefits of registering births at children's centres from the perspective of Sure Start

### 1. Improved reach

Children's centre's services should be easily accessible to their local communities.

The targets set for the number of children to be reached by children's centres relate to the number of children under five years old living within the children's centre area, i.e. those who potentially can access the health, family support and outreach services provided. Data from children centre teams in Manchester, York and Bury all suggested that the centres that offer birth registration generally have better 'reach' than other similar sized local children's centres that do not offer birth registration as a service.

- In general, the 7 children's centres in Manchester that have registration facilities are amongst the busiest Sure Start Centres in Manchester city, based on the reach figures of the centres. In 2012/13, 5 of the 7 registration centres were in the top 7 busiest children's centres with Cheetham and Moss Side performing around the middle.
- Data from York clearly shows the difference in reach and engagement levels between the 3 children's centres who offer registration services compared to the other 6 children's centres which don't. For example, Table 1 shows registration data is considerably lower for Clifton children's centre, yet there is a direct comparison with centre size and services offered (apart from birth registration) to Hob Moor. There is a registrar's office close to Clifton children's centre and so birth registration is not offered from this site.

*“Conducting registrations locally helps us make sure we are engaging with as many families as possible... particularly those that are deemed ‘hard to reach’... because everyone has to legally register their baby.”*  
Children centre staff, York

## Percentage of registered children aged 0-4 years as proportion of total 0-4s by children's centre in York March 2013

York children's centre	Carr	Clifton	Haxby Rd	Hob Moor	Knavesmire	New Earswick	St Lawrences	The avenues	Westfield
% registered (average York 59%)	64%	49%	62%	72%	64%	46%	53%	59%	67%

## 2. Parental re-engagement with children's centres services

Birth registration has been offered from Benchill children's centre in Wythenshawe, Manchester since 2001. The birth registration service is felt to be the main reason why the centre excels in engaging 'hard to reach' families', and is cited as one of the key factors in the centres 2012/13 re-engagement rate with families of 87.5% (122 families re-engaging with the services offered from the centre out of 128 who registered their births there).

Benchill has developed a Targeted outreach Engagement programme designed to work with the families who register births at the children's centre. The outreach programme gathers information at the child registration events and enables the outreach teams to make decisions about prioritising follow up from the centre around issues such as English not as a first language, SEN/disability, young parents, literacy and child protection concerns.

The early identification and targeting of young parents over the last few years has proved particularly successful: 100% of young parents who registered their baby at Benchill have re-engaged with the service.

*"Our early engagement with families through birth registration helps with the early identification of individual family needs."*

Outreach team, Manchester

At Ramsbottom in Bury, 88% (56 out of 63) of families who registered births at the children's centre continued to engage in 2012/13 and 86% (31 out of 36 families) in 2011/2012.

Besses children's centre in Bury also demonstrates high engagement rates with families post registration onsite. Table 2 shows the engagement rates for families of children of each specific age band (i.e. the children who are 4-5 would have been registered in 2008) since the birth registration service began.

### Besses children centre, Bury - Engagement since registration started in 2008

Child age	% engagement
0-1	70% of the sample attended sessions beyond their registrar appointment 70% attend multiple sessions per month
1-2	90% of the sample attended sessions beyond their registrar appointment 50% attend multiple sessions per month 10% attended less than 15 sessions before their attendance stopped 30% attended less than 5 sessions before their attendance stopped
2-3	80% of the sample attended sessions beyond their registrar appointment 50% attend multiple sessions per month 10% attended less than 10 sessions before their attendance stopped 20% attended less than 5 sessions before their attendance stopped
3-4	70% of the sample attended sessions beyond their registrar appointment 50% attend multiple sessions per month 20% attended less than 5 sessions before their attendance stopped
4-5	20% of the sample attended limited sessions beyond their registrar appointment

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### 3. Reducing stigma

It was felt that the universal nature of the birth registration service has helped to dispel misconceptions about the work of the children's centres. Staff in Bury and Benchill (Manchester) felt birth registration has helped to reduce the perceived stigmatisation of Sure Start services being only for 'problem families'.

*"Everyone has responsibility to make it [children's centre] a welcoming place. We almost overcompensate for the fixed views of dads who may not feel welcome... to try and get dads to remain interested."*

Outreach team, Manchester

Some of the centres in Bury and Manchester have fostered strong links with antenatal midwifery services. These relationships and contacts can be powerful when used to try and dispel myths about children's centres and promote the support they can offer, as well as signposting the opportunity to register upcoming births at the centre.

In Bury all families coming to register the birth at the Ramsbottom centre are already known through access of the local antenatal services. The registration service is offered in a room in the library, (i.e. the children's centre's administrative base), outside of which there is a children's centre notice board providing information about services on offer and a 'What's on Guide' that parents can take away. All the centres in Bury report that the provision of antenatal services linked to children's centres has meant that a large number of families who access these in the centre go onto use the registrar service. Key to this is active promotion of the registry offer at the local centre by midwifery teams.

### 4. Acceptability to parents

Due to the strategic way in which local children centres were selected for birth registration in each area, new parent/s usually find the children's centre more accessible than other alternatives on offer, such as the central Register Office. Children's centres can offer proximate parking, are accessible for buggies and small children and there may even be someone to 'meet and greet' and 'offer help to a new family with a car seat'.

*"Over the years different centres have fought hard for a registrar's weekly visit so I guess they must feel that there is a benefit and feedback from customers, which we have gathered over the years, has always been excellent."*

Registrar, Manchester City

The act of registering a birth is often the first family outing (or even contact) parents may have with wider society and the community at large post the birth of their child. It is really important that this contact is a positive experience, and this is exactly what the children's centres that register births aim to deliver.

In Bury, Besses, Sedgley and Coronation Road centres offer 6 appointments per session, while Ramsbottom offers 5. An appointment lasts for 20 minutes each and is booked through the centres administrator, who has a list of specific information that they need to obtain from the family. This information is then provided to the registrar the day before the session to allow for preparation for the appointments.

In Manchester, Benchill currently offers 16 places at each registrar session and there is currently a 3 week waiting list to register births at this children's centre setting. The fact that parents are willing to join a waiting list to register is a proxy indicator that they find the option to register births at their local children's centres acceptable and are keen to support and utilise the local service.

### 5. Involving fathers

There is a sense that providing the option to register births at children centres increases the likelihood that fathers also attend the appointment and get their names on the birth certificate. This could be due to the proximity of the location, allowing for easier attendance as well as the centre being a less formal environment, based in the community of residence. This is particularly important where the parents are not married. In such cases, if the father doesn't attend the registration with the mother, the father's details cannot be easily entered and will continue to remain blank on the birth entry unless the birth is subsequently re-registered.

*"I certainly think that registering out in the community encourages families to register and probably increases the number of fathers that attend, where parents are not married."*

Registrar Manchester City

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Building on the birth registration offer, centres like Benchill are ushering in a cultural shift towards challenging the idea that ‘the mother is always the main carer’.

*“We talk to dads and advocate that dads come and get their names on the certificates, give them an idea of the time it takes and a copy of the family photo. We emphasise and demonstrate that the centre is not just a mother’s area.”*

Children’s centre staff

Benchill provide the offer of a free ‘family photograph’ taken after the registry appointment at the centre. This is a part of reinforcing the idea of celebrating births and parenthood and also building family links to the children’s centre to foster future engagement.

*“We keep all the photos in an album – one month on a wall – celebration!”*

Outreach team

## **6. Raising awareness to services for 0-2’s**

A birth registration, because it is compulsory, is a unique opportunity to engage with a new family, and often they are a receptive audience. At the birth registration it is essential that children’s centres are able to showcase a range of relevant services and support on offer to new parents and young families.

*“In terms of early years the greatest added value is likely to come from contact with a sure start centre, especially for those harder to reach families.”*

At Besses, Coronation Road and Sedgley in Bury, it is part of the practice that families attending for their appointment are registered with the centre, if they aren’t already, or their registration updated. A member of staff will spend some time talking to the family about what is on offer at the centre and particular groups the family may be interested in. At Coronation Road there is particular promotion of the baby weighing clinic, at Besses ‘Baby Bistro’ and ‘Tummy Time’. The families are also given a copy of the ‘What’s on’ at the children’s centre guide to take away with them and any other relevant literature. In York they are developing the Parenting Track as part of a Universal offer for all families. Each children’s centre will dedicate one day per week to delivering the Parenting Track (ideally the day the 2 year old healthy child review is held).

## **Six benefits of registering births at children’s centres from the perspective of the registration service**

### **1. A setting that adds value to the birth registration process**

Local authorities need flexibility in determining where to locate registration facilities to meet local need, for example, if a large maternity hospital opens in a local authority the parents may prefer that a registrar attends at the hospital. The registration service is clear that parents should not be placed under any additional burden in carrying out their statutory duty to register births, so settings are chosen carefully and provision constantly reviewed in order to ensure that the location and facilities continue to be appropriate.

The registration services in Manchester, Bury and York were all highly positive about using children’s centres as settings to register births. It was acknowledged that, whilst there are a variety of delivery points for birth registrations (e.g. register office, customer contact centres, hospitals even supermarkets), none of these other alternative settings necessarily added value to the registration process.

*“A good idea and we went out and did it. Before sure start the local hospitals were approached but they were not really interested. Linking with the children’s centres was the logical next step and [we are] keen that the process continues.”*

Registrar, Bury

The use of children centres clearly added value to the transaction and allowed each centre access to the new parent/s in order to promote services or allied services, either waiting to register, or directly afterwards.

*“In Manchester we have also led the way in using the registration to hand out Bookstart packs, encouraging reading at the earliest point.”*

Registrar, Manchester City

Perceived risks to current birth registration service provision in children’s centres were linked to the withdrawal of funding for Sure Start. Without adequate resources to support the appointment booking system, children centre’s were in danger of becoming just ‘another venue’ to registration services and lose some of the special ‘added value’ elements of their unique offer.

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*“Sometimes the simple cutting of hours for a member of Sure Start staff (receptionist for e.g.) can have a major effect on the ability to deliver the service. Originally we received funding to cover our expenses e.g. IT, travel but with huge budget cuts effecting early years we have been forced to absorb these costs, adding to the significant budget pressures already being experienced by this service.”*

Registrar, Manchester City

*“Of course another risk would be the cutting of registration staff...I cannot spread the service in the way we currently do, without the staff hours to provide it.”*

Registrar, Bury

If the convenience to register “elsewhere” becomes more practically and financially viable there is also potential for revisions to the portfolio of settings used to register births.

*“We had an office in the ASDA store in York a few years ago. It was free...but for a number of reasons we could not continue to register births there, but at its peak, half of all registrations were taking place there! We would do it again if it were viable.”*

Registrar, York

## **2. Extra registry capacity in populous areas**

Lambeth birth registration service is one of the busiest in the country, currently registering over 12,000 births each year. The exceptional level of demand is due to the location in the borough of both Kings College and St Thomas' Hospitals. Most birth registrations currently take place at Lambeth's Town Hall in Brixton. Recently it has proved increasingly difficult to keep up with demand and so the local authority is exploring other settings and service models for birth registrations.

*“Our predicament and current opportunity led us to look very closely at the needs of our customers. We want to increase access options whilst crucially adding value for our service users as we look at how we can work with other services when we register births.”*

Head of Active Communities

Following feedback from parents and consultation across local services, Lambeth will pilot taking their statutory births

registration service into local community settings at 5 of their 26 local Children's Centres starting this summer. The children's centres have been carefully chosen due to their location in the borough, their strong links with local communities and estates, links with health and midwifery services and the availability of confidential space/rooms.

## **3. Proportionate and integrated service**

The centres where birth registration is possible have been carefully chosen based on population demographics and the spread of other registry settings and options.

*“Obviously one of the key issues is resources - everyone is struggling for staff. So if we are sending a register out to a venue we need to know that they will be fully employed and all appointments filled.”*

Registrar, Bury

The key to getting the service right is down to strong relationships between the registration service and the children centres involved and a clear commitment to an on-going review, the evaluation of usage and, importantly, parental and staff feedback.

*“There have been centres which have been trialled but proved to be unpopular, either because they were too close to the city centre or another centre with more facilities. Over the years I think we have achieved reasonable coverage around the city bearing in mind the limited resources we have.”*

Registrar, Manchester City

In Bury, having the children's centres as community registration settings helped with contingency planning, as the children centres provide alternative settings if there was a problem with using the Town Hall for a period of time.

A good example of how the service is integrated and how the children centre can provide added value to the registration service is the process in Manchester and Bury settings, where children's centre staff set-up the appointments on behalf of the registrars. When parents local to the children centre ring the local registration service, they are given the option to register at the children's centre if they wish and contact details to make the appointment there.

*“I would also advise that the centres book their own appointments as this makes it more of a service that they are then offering.”*

Registrar Manchester City

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Registrars need to know how many appointments they have booked at any one session at the children's centres in order to bring the appropriate quantity of materials. The issue of security, whilst still a concern, is managed by good information sharing between children's centres and registration staff about the number of appointments booked. The policy is to collect and return certificates and registers from/to the register office on a daily basis, so nothing of potential value to fraudsters is left at the children centres overnight.

The environment of some children's centres may not be appropriate for registrars to be based on site and feedback from registrars was consistent that birth registration wouldn't work for every children's centre in a local area. Local authorities may provide special facilities for bereaved parents who are registering the death of their new-born baby at the same time as the birth, such as separate waiting areas which might not be available at all children's centres.

#### **4. Convenience of the service being in the community**

The convenience for service users was highlighted as a real positive outcome of children centre birth registration in all three areas. This 'convenience' enhances the reputation of local authorities providing the service.

There is also a duty placed on Registrars to ensure that births are registered promptly and within the statutory time frame of 42 days. It could be argued that by providing the opportunity to register at children's centres, the service is reaching out to/making it easier for families, who because of their circumstances, may be less likely to register within the 42 days. These may also be the very same families that the early years' team are most eager to make early contact with also.

The different perspective provided by the embedding of the service in Sure Start was the key point for some registrars. It was pointed out that children's centres were not necessarily the most efficient way to deliver a birth registration service (as registrars need to travel to children's centre settings) but they certainly seemed to be the most convenient for the local population.

There were added benefits such as the service being seen almost as a drop-in where parents could seek advice on other aspects of registry business such as name changes or marriages as an aside to the actual registration of birth. In Manchester, the decision was taken to rotate registrars so that they still felt a part of the core service based in the Town Hall, but had the opportunity to work out in the community also.

*"We also have the luxury of being able to rotate the staff who work off site to prevent them becoming alienated from the rest of the service."*

Registrar, Manchester City

As Lambeth develop their new registration service, central to this is the notion that if families are introduced to a wide range of services through a birth registration 'community portal' they can be more effectively put in touch with local services, particularly at times of need. It is hoped that the resultant take up of support services and vision for future work in Lambeth will build stronger 'early trusting relationships' and ultimately offer more support and the space for family members to get involved in local community life.

*"We understand that linking up birth registration and children's centres can be influential and beneficial to children and their families. This is also intended to help Lambeth colleagues to identify how the services they need to prioritise or target can best assist those in need of help and essentially do this before reaching crisis point. We want to encourage families to seek timely help from their local Children's Centre. We want to reach those that are particularly vulnerable and more at risk - children and parents."*

Head of Active Communities

#### **5. Repositioning of the registrar service**

Registrars in Manchester and Bury felt that by re-articulating the service through some children's centres the perception of the registration service has been changed in the eyes of the council and the population it serves.

*"Registration was seen as an old-fashioned service, in Bury this has been changed for the better by the positive perceptions of being linked with SSCCs."*

Registrar, Bury

*"Historically the Registration Service was somewhat separate from the rest of the council, steeped in hundreds of years of registration law and practice, many didn't even know it was a local authority function. But working with the Sure Start team has brought the service to the centre of council policy and its values, in supporting early years delivery at the heart of communities."*

Registrar, Manchester

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Lambeth can also see the potential for registering births at children's centres from both an 'outcomes for communities' perspective and a commissioning approach as part of repositioning the service.

*“In Lambeth our focus is to improve the outcomes for our communities as we step up our work and develop new ways to develop and deliver future services within our cooperative model whilst managing within reduced budgets.”*

Head of Active Communities

## **6. Reduction in 'no shows' and missed appointments**

In general there was the feeling that there was a reduction in missed appointments by offering the registration sessions through local community settings. There was also the option to be more flexible in "squeezing in" a registration session at the end of the day if it was felt to be appropriate for that family.

*“Because we only attend once a week and you may have to wait a couple of weeks for an appointment families are more likely to attend compared to register office appointments and associated high levels of 'no shows' - this may also be linked to increased difficulties in travelling to the city centre, especially with all the uncertainties that a new baby brings.”*

Registrar, Manchester