



Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (ECCE) Strand 1: First Survey of Children's Centre Leaders in the Most Deprived Areas

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Introduction

This report is the first output from the Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (ECCE), a six year study commissioned by the Department for Education and undertaken by NatCen Social Research, the University of Oxford and Frontier Economics. The aim of ECCE is to provide an in-depth understanding of children's centre services, including their effectiveness in relation to different management and delivery approaches and the cost of delivering different types of services.

The aim of Strand 1 is to profile children's centres in the most disadvantaged areas, providing estimates on different aspects of provision with which to select centres for subsequent stages of the evaluation and to explore different models of provision. The findings below relate to 500 children's centres that are representative of all phase 1 and 2 centres (i.e. those in the 30% most deprived areas).

Background

Children's centres are intended to be one of the main vehicles for ensuring that integrated and good quality family services are located in accessible places and are welcoming to all. They aim to support young children and their families, particularly the most disadvantaged, to reduce inequalities in child development and school readiness. The mechanism for achieving this is through supporting children's personal, social and emotional development, improving parenting aspirations and skills, providing access to good early education, and addressing family health and life chances.

Methodology

The survey was conducted with a mixed mode approach using a web survey and telephone interviewing techniques. The fieldwork took place between July and September 2011.

Key findings

Governance and management

- Fifty-eight per cent of leaders reported that they managed one centre; the remainder managed two or more centres and a minority (7%) managed more than four.
- The local authority was the lead organisation for the majority of children's centres. Eighty-one per cent of centres were led by the local authority, schools or both.

- Most centres (95%) had an advisory board which, in the majority of cases, met once a term or once a quarter. The advisory boards represented a wide range of organisations.

Location

- Most centres (97%) had a main site. One third of these centres had a single central location; the remainder either had satellite sites that were part of the children's centre or made regular use of other venues.
- A wide range of services were located in or close to the children's centres, supporting the idea of children's centres as being located in accessible places. The most frequently cited services were schools (90%), centre-based childcare and early learning (89%), a park or playground (88%) and health centre (88%).

History

- Half of the children's centres had developed from Sure Start Local Programmes. Centres also frequently developed from community centres, Neighbourhood Nurseries and local authority maintained nursery schools. For 27 per cent of children's centres, the centre was completely new.

Staff

- Over half of all the staff delivering services were employed by the children's centre (29% full-time and 25% part-time). Staff employed by other organisations comprised 28 per cent and volunteers made up 18 per cent of staff.
- The average annual salary of staff was £15,001 - £20,000. The salaries were fairly normally distributed with a slight skew to the higher end. Three per cent of staff were paid over £40,000.
- Half of the staff (50%) were qualified to NVQ level 3 or equivalent, based on qualifications that were relevant to their post. Thirty-one per cent were qualified at a higher level and 11 per cent were qualified at a lower level. A minority (7%) had no qualifications relevant to their post.
- Sixty-three per cent of leaders had achieved the National Professional Qualification for Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL) and a further 10 per cent were working towards it. Other achieved professional qualifications included Qualified Teacher Status (27%), Social Work (15%) and the Early Years Foundation Degree (15%).
- Professional qualifications most frequently held by staff other than the leader were Qualified Teacher Status (at least one staff member in 77% of centres), Early Years Foundation Degree (in 57% of centres), Early Years Professional Status (in 49% of centres) and Social Work (in 30% of centres).

Service provision

- Across different service types, children's centres were more likely to provide services directly than help users gain access through sign-posting and referral.
- Forty-six different types of services and programmes were offered by the centres.
- The most frequently cited service was 'Stay and Play'. Other services mentioned by over 80 per cent of the leaders were home based services (99%), parent and family support classes or groups (93%), breast feeding support (91%), adult learning programmes (87%), parent forum (86%), evidence based parenting programmes (84%), health visitor clinic (82%) and early learning and childcare (82%).

- Among the centres providing early learning and childcare, the majority provided 'full-time' sessions (78%). Thirty-seven per cent offered part day sessions of less than four hours and 29 per cent offered longer part day sessions of four hours or more. A minority (9%) offered sessions outside of normal working hours.
- Children's centres services were more often open to all rather than requiring referral. Services more likely to require referral were those offering specialist support, targeted at specific groups, and evidence based programmes.
- Services with the highest number of users were early learning and childcare services, and 'stay and play' programmes (average of 98 users in both cases). The services with the lowest numbers of users were employment and benefits advice, advice and information services and adult education.
- Forty-seven per cent of centres offered at least one evidence-based programme from those shortlisted (ranked on quality and volume of supporting evidence) in the Graham Allen report on early intervention. The most common programmes were 'Incredible Years', 'Triple P' and 'Family Nurse Partnership'. A further 41 per cent mentioned other kinds of programmes and 12 per cent of centres did not offer any evidence-based programmes.
- The user groups regarded as a high priority by most centre leaders were workless households (96%), children between the ages of one and five (95%), new-borns and babies under 12 months (94%), children with special educational needs and lone parents (93%), teenage and young parents and expectant parents (92%) and fathers (90%).

Publicity

- Word of mouth was the most popular method for raising awareness and considered effective by nearly all leaders. Other well-regarded methods were through the health visitor, fun fairs or events, referrals or signposting from partner agencies, the children's centres outreach practitioner and local community groups and networks.

Users

- The average number of users of services in the previous three months was 337 with some centres reporting up to 4,000.
- Approximately one fifth (21%) of the service users spoke English as an additional language, and just over a quarter (27%) were from an ethnic minority background.
- Twenty-eight per cent of the children's centre users in the last month used only the childcare and early years services.

Feedback and evaluation

- All leaders referred to obtaining feedback from parents to monitor progress and performance. Most centres also used a range of other methods for self-evaluation.
- Outcomes for disadvantaged families were most often monitored through assessing service usage and carrying out informal observational assessments.

Finance

- Children's centres received resources from a variety of organisations with the local authority being the main provider (99% of centres). Centres were also supported by the NHS (35%), child development services (29%) and local charities and third sector organisations (each 24%).

- The local authority provided funding in all cases, but also provided staff, venues and materials to over half of the children's centres. Most of the other organisations mentioned mainly provided staff.
- In terms of annual revenue, the local authority provided an average amount of close to £300K in 2010-11 and up to £3m for some children's centres. Charging fees brought in an average revenue of close to £50k and partner agencies provided on average approximately £17k.
- The local authority was the sole funder for 37 per cent of centres. In most other cases, local authority funding was combined with funding from partner agencies and/or fees.
- The largest area of expenditure was employment costs. In 2010-11, children's centres spent on average close to £300K on employment costs and a little under £100K on goods, materials and services.

Cuts

- The majority (60%) of leaders reported that no cuts had been made in 2010-11. Forty per cent reported that cuts had been made, reflecting the economic climate and budget reductions affecting local authority services more widely. No data was collected on the amount by which centre budgets had been reduced.

Types of provision

- Using cluster analysis, four typologies of children's centres were suggested that strongly differed by site arrangements and the number of centres that a leader managed. This analysis will be extended further as more data are gathered through subsequent stages of the evaluation.

Additional Information

The full report can be accessed at <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/>
Further information about this research can be obtained from
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This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.