



Department
for Education

Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (ECCE)

**The extent to which centres 'reach'
eligible families, their neighbourhood
characteristics and levels of use**

Research Brief

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Contents

Background	3
Stage 1: 'Reach Areas' and Children's Centres	3
Stage 2: The Nature of the Areas Served by the Centres	4
Stage 3: Measuring Children's Centre Reach	5

Background

This report forms part of the national Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (ECCE). The evaluation focuses on national samples of children's centres, which particularly focused on the 30% most disadvantaged areas in England. It includes studies of the management, organisation and programmes offered in the centres; a longitudinal study of families and children who used these children's centres and their outcomes; and a cost-benefit analysis of the programme.

A key objective of the Sure Start Children's Centre programme was that centres should serve areas, families and children with high social needs. This report addresses three main questions in relation to this:

1. How were the local areas, served or 'reached' by each centre, defined?
2. What were the principal characteristics of these areas and how were they changing over time?
3. How well were centres serving these areas in terms of take-up or 'reach' and levels of use?

This study draws on three sets of data, which in combination address these three main questions:-

1. A survey of local authorities that contained one or more of the 128 centres from the national sample (Stage 1)
2. An analysis of a wide range of relevant national neighbourhood data for each centre (Stage 2)
3. A follow-up survey of the local authorities that processed children's centre data centrally, to estimate take-up and usage (Stage 3)

The purpose of this study was to measure the extent to which centres reach local families. This new information will be fed in to the broader evaluation of the impact that centres have on the outcomes of children and parents. This study will be of interest in its own right to those researching children's centres and those making decisions about them.

Stage 1: 'Reach Areas' and Children's Centres

- **Almost all local authorities surveyed had a defined 'reach area' for each of their centres** mainly using LLSOA (Lower Level Super Output Areas with populations around 1,500) or electoral ward boundaries. However a few local authorities were moving to a 'locality' model where a group of centres served a larger area rather than a standalone model of a single centre and its neighbourhood.
- Almost all local authorities had a data collection system to record and centrally analyse data collected at the centre level, covering individual users and families. **However, apart from ethnicity and lone parenthood, background data on users was not always fully filled in. This has implications for assessing how well centres target 'high need' groups.**

- Drawing on the local authority specifications of 'reach areas', reach areas were mapped for 117 out of 128 centres in the national sample.
- **A sample of user postcodes demonstrated that the large majority of registered users at each centre came from its reach area (average 82%).** This is important because Ofsted now uses local 'access' by families as one of the three key judgements on a centre's overall effectiveness.

Stage 2: The Nature of the Areas Served by the Centres

- **Analysis of the neighbourhood data for the reach areas supports previous findings that local authorities are indeed targeting children's centres towards more deprived local areas.** Of the 117 defined reach areas, more than half (52%) of all LLSOAs lie within the most deprived 30% on the national IDACI (deprivation) measure, and less than one-tenth lie within the *least* deprived 30%.
- However, levels of deprivation vary widely between different reach areas. For one large metropolitan centre area, nearly two-thirds of all children aged 0-4 were living in areas classified amongst the most deprived 30% on IDACI. At the other end of the scale, in one rural centre area, less than one-tenth of children were living in areas classified amongst the most deprived 30%.
- **Analysis of socio-economic indicators of poverty and low income, unemployment, education, health, housing, crime and transport shows an overall picture where the children's centre reach areas are on average more deprived than both the national average and the local authorities in which they are located.** However the overall picture conceals significant variation across the reach areas. Although the majority are highly deprived, individual areas vary widely across all the indicators explored. For example, the proportion of young children living in poverty varies from 12.7% to 51.2% across the 117 reach areas.
- The reach areas have seen a marked fall in child poverty levels in recent years, with the proportion of children in poverty falling from 30.6% in 2006 to 27.3% in 2011, the most recent year for which data is available. This improvement was also seen nationally. However children's centre areas on average showed a larger improvement than the corresponding local authorities and England as a whole over the same period (3.3 percentage points fall, compared with a 1.1 percentage point fall across England). Comparisons between child poverty levels and changes over time show that those areas starting off with the highest levels of child poverty, were also those areas that showed the biggest reductions in child poverty levels. There is also a sense that reach areas were being 'pulled up' by improvements in the local area; reach areas with large reductions in child poverty are located in local authorities which also saw large reductions in child poverty.
- Comparison of deprivation levels based on IDACI 2004 and 2010, shows that there is a good deal of movement in terms of deprivation levels for reach neighbourhoods. More than half (56%) of all LLSOAs in the reach areas moved to a different deprivation 'decile' (10% band) between 2004 and 2010. Of these, 198 (15% of all areas) moved by more than one

decile. In other words, deprivation levels should not be viewed as static and fixed for all time - some children's centre areas show marked improvement over time relative to other areas, while others are slipping back.

- Data on children achieving a 'good' level of development at the Early Years Foundation Stage showed, as with the child poverty measures, a general improvement in the reach areas, with a steady year on year increase between 2008/09 and 2011/12. Again, there is wide variation within the individual reach areas, with the greatest improvement seen in the areas with the worst starting position. The most improved reach area saw a 29% increase in the proportion of children achieving a good level of development at Early Years Foundation Stage between 2008/09 and 2011/12, and indeed the majority of reach areas saw improvements. At the other end of the scale, seven reach areas saw a *fall* in the level of children reaching the target EYFS, with one reach area seeing a 14% fall.

Stage 3: Measuring Children's Centre Reach

- Data for this stage is provided from different local authority systems based on information on users and their families recorded at centre level. There is therefore likely to be variability in quality and completeness, with some authorities unable to provide some of the data requested., either because their systems did not record this information or it was not analysed. Also data was, in almost all cases, entered at centre level as part of the record on users, their families and the programme. There is therefore likely to be variability in how well such data was collected or recorded at source. The 2011 census was used to provide benchmarks for each local reach area against which registration and use could be assessed.
- **Centres typically had very large registration and user numbers. The average size of the user group in a year was 770 children aged 0-4, ranging from 250 to well over 1,000 users.** One centre had a registration base of over 2,000 children aged 0-4.
- Initial registration by families turned out to be a more variable process than had been expected. Most registered at their local centre but in other cases registration at *any* centre was automatically linked back to the reach area of their local centre (even though the family might not be a user of the local centre). In some areas there were possibly some multiple registrations as families used more than one centre.
- In a few cases registration was closely linked to the health visitor programme of contacts around the birth period. These areas tended to have registrations that were close to or above 100%, judged against the population aged 0-4 in the 2011 census.
- **In almost all areas the proportion of registrations in a single year, judged against the average 2011 census population aged 0-4 in a year was very high (median 93%), though in a few centres it was much lower (around 60-65%).** This could be affected by local authority boundaries if users registered and used centres in a neighbouring authority.
- **The high registration levels (over 90% on average) mean that most eligible families have the option to engage with services and the data indicates that the majority of families do choose to take-up services with over half (55%) of the 0-4 age group in**

the reach area using centres over one year; for the core of centres this figure ranged from 42% to 66%.

- Attempts to gather data on specific groups of users largely failed as many local authorities did not collect or analyse this data or considered it to be unreliable. The exception was data on ethnic group, though this was affected by the large number of families for which this data was 'not given' –15% overall.
- Comparing the main ethnic groups from the 2011 census for children aged 0-4 living in each reach area against the numbers of users aged 0-4 suggests that **overall the proportions in the main ethnic groups using the centres closely matched the expected levels; that is, no major ethnic group appeared to be significantly under-represented.**
- **The age distribution of users demonstrated that the largest age group of users was under one year (27% of all users)** tailing off to the 4+ age group (11%) when other early years facilities take over.
- Data on the levels of use ('usage') was provided for 60 centres. This is use recorded by centres and may well undercount the true figure. **Results consistently showed that more than half (60%) of the users made relatively light use over the year (five or less contacts) and on average around 13% had 20 or more contacts.** The heavy users (20+ contacts) were typically concentrated among something under 17% of all users, with a few centres recording around one third of their users making 20+ uses over the year. These patterns varied by centres and may reflect the type of service offered. For example centres offering childcare will have more heavy users.



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