

Early Childhood Forum's response to the Children, Schools and Families Select Committee's Inquiry on children's centres

The Early Childhood Forum (ECF) is a voluntary organisation hosted by the National Children's Bureau (NCB). It is a coalition of 59 professional associations, voluntary organisations and interest groups united in their concern about the well-being, learning and development of young children from birth to eight and their families. Its vision is to bring together partners in the early childhood sector to promote inclusion and challenge inequalities, and to champion quality experiences for all young children from birth to eight and their families.

Inquiry theme 1 - How models of Children's Centres have developed as the programme spreads from the most deprived neighbourhoods

1. Children's Centres in the first phase are making a difference for many families but it will take some time before the work they are doing is fully embedded and meets the needs of all families. We are concerned that the core Children's Centre offer may be diluted as the programme is rolled out in subsequent phases to all neighbourhoods. The Children's Centre programme should provide universal support as well as being responsive to the most disadvantaged in the area. However this is not easy to achieve without a strong programme of outreach work which is not yet fully in place in many areas. The ability to provide the high levels of support needed for the most disadvantaged and reaching them in the first place does depend on the available resources. Research shows that these families can benefit hugely from a continuum of support, including early intervention, family and Children's Centre services, which will ensure their children get the best start in life.

2. Children's Centres were established primarily to benefit children and to provide them with the best possible start in life. Effective early education has been proven to do this. ECF believes that high quality early education and childcare should be at the heart of developing Children's Centres committed to improving the life chances and opportunities for children experiencing disadvantage. They also provide support to families, including 'back-to-work' support for mothers. Factors such as unemployment and poverty are more prevalent in families with a disabled child and there is evidence of difficulties for these families in accessing services. Other research has shown that the combination of disadvantaged circumstances and difficulties in securing access to appropriate services, which are apparent for the majority of families with a disabled child, are particularly acute for families from minority ethnic groups.

3. The disproportionate disadvantage experienced by many black and other minority ethnic families and families with disabled children, indicates the need for a strategic approach that is embedded within local authorities' strategic equality plans to ensure that services understand and meet families' needs. Existing evidence suggests that this is not happening. The reports from The National Evaluation of Sure Start reveal very limited information about the

effectiveness of Sure Start on black and other minority ethnic families and families with disabled children, in spite of the considerable impact such an investment could create. In 2006, a report analysing findings from local evaluation reports noted that 'detailed evaluation work on efforts to include Black and Minority Ethnic families, group (sic), or individuals in Sure Start was scarce'. ECF wishes to see this issue to be addressed by all Children's Centres as a priority.

4. We are only just starting to see the effects and impact on groups that do not tend to access services in the least affluent areas of our communities. It takes time and effort to change the way people think about authority figures, and Children's Centres have needed to work closely and engage with their communities for local people to see the benefits. Impact may only be measurable in the medium and longer term but with healthcare moving strongly into these centres, they are beginning to be trusted by families and there are signs that they really support improvement to family well-being.

Inquiry theme 2 - The range and effectiveness of services provided by Children's Centres

5. While ECF applauds the mainstreaming of specialist and targeted services through Children's Centres, we have concerns about the capacity of some centres to cover the full range of services in depth. For instance, there is an overload on some Children's Centres now that they have responsibility for the roll out of Early Support, particularly when drawing on already stretched PCT provision. There needs to be greater support for Centres in terms of training and providing expertise to help them meet the requirements of families with disabled children. This could be provided by establishing firm partnership arrangements with inclusion services that are typically delivering home based programmes, such as Portage and local authority sensory support services.

6. Parents should be able to expect the same high quality early education and care provision wherever they live and whatever institution their child attends. In order to ensure equality of opportunity wherever publicly funded 'early education' is offered, children should be taught by a qualified teacher.

7. Children's Centre services should include fathers as well as mothers, and in particular should consider how to welcome disabled parents. We would suggest that Children's Centres collect data on their engagement with fathers and disabled parents and modify their services, systems or practice if there is a low engagement. Some simple techniques such as proactively collecting data on fathers and father figures, addressing letters to both fathers and mothers, setting up home visits to meet both parents, ensuring that mainstream services are genuinely being offered to both parents and offering services of interest to fathers can hugely increase involvement and engagement. Staff need training and support if they are not unconsciously to exclude fathers and miss opportunities to engage with them.

8. 'Sure Start and Black and Minority Ethnic Populations' is one of the few reports that acknowledges the impact of racism. The report 'All our Children Belong', exploring the experiences of black and minority ethnic parents of

disabled children, acknowledges the doubled discrimination of racism and disability. Those who provide equality-focussed training to Children Centres know that a minority of staff still hold negative attitudes and assumptions that impact on their relationships with black and other minority ethnic children, disabled children and families. Children's Centres can only fully realise their potential when racism and disablism is acknowledged, challenged and ended.

9. More needs be done to improve outdoor areas of children's centres and promote the value of outdoor play and learning for children and families, for health and well-being, as well as provision of the Early Years Foundation Stage. Sure Start Children's Centres should endeavour to embed the provision of free play opportunities by providing stimulating play facilities on their sites and explore opportunities to make these available outside of hours. By making links with local parks and play services they can help meet part of the Government's commitment to ending child poverty and help families live in safe, cohesive and prosperous communities where children can thrive, with safe places to play, opportunities to develop, and access to high-quality services. In addition, staff working in Children's Centres should have an understanding of play and playwork. This should be part of the common core of knowledge and skills that every adult needs when working with children.

10. More attention also should be given to the environment in which services are provided, including making best use of community spaces indoors and outdoors. Families living in temporary or cramped accommodation and poor housing need help both to improve their own living conditions and to be able to spend time in buildings and outdoor spaces conducive to mental and physical good health, social interaction and learning.

11. We are concerned about accommodation for children's centre services in many cases – particularly in phases 2 and 3 where graduated models are housed in converted classrooms and annexes. A post occupancy evaluation of children's centres undertaken by CABE in October 2008 was condemning of the outdoor areas of many of the new children's centres.

Inquiry theme 3 - Funding, sustainability and value for money

12. Evidence from 'Backing the future' report explains why investing in targeted and universal services makes financial sense in the long-term by improving outcomes for young children and their families. We feel very strongly that high levels of funding in early years, including Children's Centres, must continue as the quality of life that young children experience has a massive impact on their later childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Spending in the early years can save a great deal of money later on e.g. in terms of costs of youth justice or substance misuse support which would not be needed so widely.

13. Some original Sure Start projects may have lacked appropriate structures to record their impact on children and families.

14. The Early Years Single Funding Formula (EYSFF) must reflect the cost to children's centres of the full range of relevant factors, for example the levels of deprivation, the need for SEN support, staff development and differential premises costs. There should be a comprehensive audit of the costs experienced by Children's Centres and regular monitoring of costs in the future.

Inquiry theme 4 - Staffing, governance, management and strategic planning

15. There are difficulties regarding delegation and supervision in some areas where staff are employed by the local authority but work with health visitors. It becomes quite complex with different organisations having different protocols, governance, IT systems and lines of accountability. In some places partnership working works well but in other areas there are huge challenges and different perceptions.

16. Some Children's Centres are employing staff with a low level of skill, experience or qualification. They are often overwhelmed and have insufficient experience to work with the most complex families and deal with the poverty, child protection, substance misuse, domestic abuse, disability issues and unmet health needs. What happens in practice is that the most needy and deprived families often have the most inexperienced staff working with them. Almost no staff, from the most inexperienced to the most well qualified, have real skills and self-confidence in engaging with fathers. Failure to do so in high need families in particular can put children at risk.

17. The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) research, which is quoted extensively by Government, makes clear that the involvement of qualified teachers in both the delivery of provision and its management are crucial factors in both quality of experience and outcomes. The original guidance for children's centres included the following advice: "*the minimum requirement is the employment of an early years teacher on a half-time basis. However, we would also expect that this would be a minimum which most centres would exceed and that centres offering this minimum would build up to a full-time teacher within 12-18 months of delegation.*"

18. Home visiting is very different from working with families in a centre. There are concerns over lone working and how to work with mothers and fathers in this context. The training that is needed to do home visiting and community work is very different from working on a site somewhere. Many staff do outreach work having not had sufficient education or training on this.

19. It is essential that a career in early years is seen as an attractive option for black, disabled and male practitioners, not only for ethical reasons, but for sustainability and efficacy. Children flourish in an environment with well-qualified and well-trained staff who have the confidence to engage with families and children from a wide range of backgrounds. The National Evaluation Report on 'Sure Start and Black and Minority Ethnic Populations' notes that within their study there are very few minority ethnic staff in senior

positions in Sure Start Local Projects. Equally stated in 'All our Children Belong', it is very powerful for a child or a young person from minority or stereotyped groups to see themselves reflected in a position of authority. This was acknowledged by the Government by investing in the REACH programme which promotes black male role models. The process of enabling children to encounter positive role models from all backgrounds must start in the early years. Over fifty years of research shows that children notice difference from an early age, including difference in ethnic background, and start to make judgements about what is good and bad.

20. We are supportive of CWDC in exploring the role of men in the workforce and encouraging men to become early years workers by identifying the barriers and seeking to overcome them. Currently there are only 2 males under the age of 25 working in state-maintained nurseries. It is powerful (in a negative way) for girls and boys to see only women providing care to children and it is therefore hugely important that boys and girls have experience of effective male carers in Children's Centres and other early years services. The issues of low male participation as professionals and low male participation as clients are linked. With the right support, fathers can become fathers who are workers. ECF would like to see greater emphasis on recruiting disabled early years workers and having disabled role models. ECF would actively encourage diversity and disability equality training for all staff.

Inquiry theme 5 - How well Children's Centres work with other partners and services, especially schools and health services

21. The Sure Start evaluation identified that many of the most successful children's centres were where health services were co-located. There has been some good practice in developing the health visitor role, particularly regarding outreach. However this has stretched the capacity of PCTs in some areas. Moreover, many health staff have concerns that the public health agenda is getting lost. One of the biggest stumbling blocks seems to be the lack of space in many children's centres for health visitors to be based there due to poor planning and facilities. Health visitors who have been trained in disability equality have a key role in supporting parents of disabled children to think positively about their children's inclusion in Children's Centres.

22. ECF would like to see much stronger messages about the importance of play and green space and access to nature in the lives of young children and their families. There is interesting work in other parts of the world about environmental justice and links to deprivation. There is increasing evidence from a range of research programmes about outdoor play and access to green space and the positive impact this has on both physical and mental health.

23. We would like to see inclusion of proactive programmes supporting family work outdoors.

Inquiry theme 6 - Whether services are being accessed by those most in need and how effective they are for the most vulnerable

24. We need to ensure that Children's Centres are truly inclusive in their reach and practice. In the experience of members working in Children's Centres, disabled children are often invisible in all mainstream activities and are relegated to a single support group for them and their families. Disabled fathers, children of prisoners, fathers of disabled children and fathers whose partners are disabled are also particularly invisible to services, as are in some cases mothers. All services need to be developed to be accessible and inclusive to all the groups of children and families especially those who at present are excluded and invisible. This can include not only disabled children, children of prisoners and their families, but also mothers and fathers who are very young, unemployed, or have been in the criminal justice system; gypsy Roma and traveller children and their families, those who speak English as an additional language; black and minority ethnic children and families, and all fathers to a greater or lesser extent.

25. The lack of hard data and evaluation relating to specific ethnic groups, disabled children and fathers makes it impossible to evaluate how accessible the services are for these children and families. There is limited knowledge of the accessibility of services for fathers and black families in predominantly white or rural areas. We recommend that any local authority funding of Children's Centres is subject to their adoption of the CWDC auditing tool and the collection of appropriate data as well as appropriate tools to measure involvement by gender. Children's Centres must be encouraged to address recruitment, retention and career development practices that disadvantage black and disabled practitioners or that disadvantage or advantage males (by for example moving them from front-line services to management positions). Gender, age, disability and racial/cultural diversity in staff at all levels flags up important messages about access to local people. Everybody working with children must have an understanding of how gender stereotypes operate to disadvantage both sexes; how stereotypes related to Single Equality Strategies can inform beliefs, attitudes and behaviour; what racism is and how racism and fear of racism impact on people's choices and behaviour; what disability is, and how disability and fear of disability impact on people's choices and behaviour. There is also some evidence of a lack of awareness on the part of practitioners and parents (particularly fathers) of the existence of local Children's Centres and services.

ECF members

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Action for Children

Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP)

Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL)

British Association of Community Child Health (BACCH)

British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF)
Campaign for Advancement of State Education (CASE)
Children in Scotland (CiS)
Children's Society
Children in Wales (CiW)
Council for Awards in Children's Care and Education (CACHE)
Council for Disabled Children (CDC)
Community Practitioners and Health Visitors Association (CPHVA)
Daycare Trust (DCT)
Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network
Early Education
Early Years (formally NIPPA)
Early Years Equality (EYE)
Fatherhood Institute (formally Fathers Direct) (co-opted member)
Full Time Mothers
Forum for Maintained Nursery Schools
High/Scope UK
ICAN
Learning Through Landscapes (LTL)
Local Authority Early Years Network (LAEYN)
Mencap
Montessori Education UK
National Academy for Parenting Practitioners (NAPP)
National Association of Education Inspectors, Advisors & Consultants (ASPECT)
National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT)
National Association for Primary Education (NAPE)
National Association of Nurseries in Colleges & Universities (NANCU)
National Autistic Society (NAS)
National Children's Bureau (NCB)
National Campaign for Nursery Education (NCNE)
National Childminding Association (NCMA)
National Council for Parent Teacher Associations (NCPTA)
National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA)

National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS)
National Literacy Trust (NLT)
National Network Of Family Information Services (NAFIS)
National Portage Association (NPA)
National Union Teachers (NUT)
Parenting UK
Parents for Inclusion
Play England (formally Children's Play Council)
Preschool Learning Alliance (PLA)
REU (formerly Race Equality Unit)
Refugee Council
Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)
Save the Children (SCF)
Scope
Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship (SWSF)
Training, Advancement & Co-operation in Teaching Young Children
(TACTYC)
UNISON
Voice - Union for Education Professionals (formally PAT / PANN)
What About the Children (WATCH)
World Organisation for Early Childhood Education (OMEP)
Young Minds