



## **Inquiry Session: Achieving Outcomes: Maximizing Impact**

Produced by the All Party Parliamentary Group for Sure Start

**Achieving Outcomes: Maximising Impact**  
Sure Start APPG: Inquiry Session, 26<sup>th</sup> March 2013

**Background**

The All Party Parliamentary Group for Sure Start was founded in June 2010 in order to enable Parliamentarians to build the understanding and promote the development of Sure Start centres, and to share best practice across the country.

Over the past year, the Group has invited representatives from local authorities, voluntary sector providers, health professionals, parents groups and early years experts and others to provide evidence to inquiry sessions designed to shape and influence the policy and delivery of Sure Start Children's Centres.

The Sure Start APPG is currently undertaking an inquiry into 'best practice' delivery of children's centres by collecting evidence from experts across local authorities, central government, and the voluntary sector, and hearing directly from children's centre managers working at the 'coal face'. The Group will publish a final report with key recommendations in summer 2013, and will produce an interim report after each session.

In March 2013 the Group met to have the fourth inquiry session of the year.

The speakers for the session were:

- Sue Egersdorff, Children's Centre Leaders Reference Group
- Susan Gregory HMI, Director of Early Childhood at Ofsted
- Ann Gross, Director of Early Years and Special Needs Group at DfE

Key themes and findings from the session are set out in this report.

## **Delivering Sector Led Improvement**

Sue Egersdorff from the Children's Centre Leaders Reference Group (CCLRG) opened the session setting out the work that the Group had been doing to promote sector-led improvement. Working with 13 local authorities they had been encouraging a systematic approach to improving children's centre provision during this time of unprecedented change. This process had illuminated the following issues:

1. Recognition that everyone has a view about Sure Start Children's Centres – sometimes based on evidence and sometimes not
2. Children's centre leaders are a young profession; with a need for a strong focus on improvement and continued professional development
3. Children's centre improvement is necessary and possible and key to achieving this will be leadership
4. New flexibilities are available as a result of the move from the Core Offer to the Core Purpose – centres need to make the most of this. This also creates unprecedented change and there is increasingly a huge variance in how centres are run and what they do at a local level
5. Early intervention is still a real challenge because of the in-built, systemic bias in favour of 'saving' those already in trouble.
6. Children's centres still need to improve their communications. They need to move beyond telling families what they offer and get better at having difficult conversations with families especially around conflict resolution and improving parenting.

The CCLRG has identified the following key challenges facing Sure Start Children's Centres in the months ahead:

1. The government is proposing a 0-18 school-led education system – what does this mean for provision for under 5s?
2. How can the foundation years become respected as a phase of education with specialism within it?
3. How can we improve vertical integration between children's centres and the schools system?
4. The sector needs a cross-Party agreement on a long term view of early childhood and the services and supports that should be available to children during this stage
5. Need to establish how the sector can work most effectively with the new health infrastructure
6. Need to recognise and take action on differential take up of 3 and 4 year old offer to ensure all children are able to access early education
7. Need to challenge perceptions of children's centres and celebrate success – we don't criticise schools which are popular and oversubscribed, but parental support for centres is often seen as a negative

## **What Makes ‘Good’ and ‘Outstanding’ Children’s Centre Delivery**

Susan Gregory HMI, Director of Early Childhood at Ofsted presented evidence to the inquiry session based on Ofsted’s experience of inspecting children’s centres and set out how the new inspection framework would operate. She reiterated Ofsted’s recognition of the important role that children’s centres have.

Ofsted’s experience is that the best children’s centre provision is in deprived areas. These centres effectively target the hardest to reach families and have good relationships with families locally. However, the Chief Inspector’s 2012 Annual Report showed that at their most recent inspection 30% of centres were currently performing below ‘good’ and this was something that needed to improve. Excellent leadership was crucial to successful children’s centre delivery.

Susan Gregory went on to set out the common factors which underpin the best children’s centre provision. The best centres ensure:

- the effective removal of barriers to access
- that they identify the their most vulnerable target families and their needs
- they focus on development of parenting skills
- they work in partnership with other agencies
- they are characterised by high quality leadership, governance, team work and excellent staff
- they set themselves challenging targets with clear benchmarks
- that local authorities actively contribute to improvement and development
- they successfully draw on the views of children and families
- they make good use of data, and don’t rely on anecdotal evidence
- they know how much progress children are making and can show families where parents are better able to engage in parenting as a result of their intervention
- they have a good understanding of local childcare provision<sup>1</sup>
- they continue to track children and family outcomes when they leave – eg start school

## **Government Priorities for Children’s Centre Delivery**

Finally Ann Gross, Director of Early Years and Special Needs Group at the DfE set out the government’s priorities for the future development of Sure Start delivery. She highlighted that government had set out three key priorities:

1. Improving outcomes for disadvantaged children
  - a. Raising the aspirations and skills of parents

---

<sup>1</sup> Children’s centres can play a key role in the childminding agencies, building on the work that some already do running childminder networks. The evidence is clear that childminder provision is better when they are involved in networks which promote and support professional development and share pedagogy.

- b. Improving school readiness
  - c. Supporting children's development
2. Using evidence based interventions
  - a. 0-2 period of particular significance
3. Integrating services – especially with health
  - a. Each children's centre should now have a named health visitor and should be working closely with the Family Nurse Partnership programme
  - b. The new integrated review at 2 years would be a key opportunity to work together
  - c. Link up with the troubled families programme is also a top priority

The new statutory guidance for local authorities on Sure Start Children's Centres would be published in the coming weeks and would reiterate among other things; the importance of children's centres and the duties on other local partners including health to consider locating services within centres. [Following the inquiry session the Statutory Guidance was published and is available at

<http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/earlylearningandchildcare/deliver/surestart/g00224078/sure-start-statutory-guidance>

Warwickshire County Council was highlighted as one area with good partnership between children's centres and health, with 50% of their health visitors based in centres.

### **Sharing Best Practice**

Speakers and attendees at the inquiry session were in agreement that still more action was needed to support children's centres to share good practise.

Susan Gregory highlighted that the Ofsted good practice website was developing all the time. <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/goodpractice>. She urged that the best children's centres, nurseries, and infant schools should provide hubs of good practice for weaker early years providers in their areas.

Anne Longfield of 4Children highlighted the Children's Centre Hub on the Foundation Years website which aimed to identify and share what works.

Susan Gregory also stated that Ofsted was considering whether the importance of support and the sharing of good practice' should be reflected in the inspection judgements.

Sue Egersdorf reminded attendees that children's centres do not have a large leadership team and this made taking time out of the centre to attend events and meet with other colleagues from around the country a practical challenge. Resources will need to be provided to allow this to happen.

Participants in the session also considered the proposal that 'outstanding' centres should formally mentor those doing less well.

Ann Gross also highlighted the new Early Intervention Foundation as a powerful new tool for sharing best practise and promoting evidence based early intervention.

[www.earlyinterventionfoundation.org.uk](http://www.earlyinterventionfoundation.org.uk)

## **Recommendations:**

As a result of the evidence gathered at the Achieving Outcomes: Maximising Impact session of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Sure Start following recommendations are being made:

- Leadership is key – providers and Local Authorities must allocate resources to help Children’s centre leaders develop their leadership skills and engage in professional development and networking activities.
- Guidance – with clear best practice to back it up – should be developed that encourages Children’s Centre leaders to be confident in not only supporting and encouraging parents, but also challenging parents on important issues, such as parenting and providing their children with safe environments
- A easy-to-access online forum should be created specifically for Children’s centre leaders to support each other and learn from best practice
- Health commissioners – including NHS England – must fulfil their statutory duty to consider providing services in Children’s centres. This will mean that more Centres will be able to offer a full range of perinatal and early days services
- Consideration should be given to whether a commitment to sharing good practise should form part of the Ofsted inspection framework. This could mean for example that Centres could only achieve ‘outstanding’ if they can evidence the use and sharing of best practise.