



**Joint Session: Sure Start Centres and Child Protection,
January 30th 2013**

Produced by the All Party Parliamentary Group for Sure Start

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Child Protection APPG and Sure Start APPG: Inquiry Session, 30th January 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 to provide evidence to inquiry sessions designed to shape and influence the policy and delivery of Sure Start Children's Centres.

In light of the substantial overlap between child protection issues and best practice in Sure Start centres, a joint session with the Child Protection APPG was arranged in order to explore issues which were pertinent to both Groups. This report is a joint publication between the Sure Start and Child Protection All Party Parliamentary Groups.

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 September 2013, and will produce an interim report after each session with recommendations for central and local government, and children's centres.

Sure Start Centres and Child Protection

In January 2013, the Chairman of the Child Protection APPG, and a number of the Group's members attended a joint session with the Sure Start APPG to examine child protection and early intervention issues.

The Groups heard from Lisa Harker from the NSPCC, who highlighted early findings from the forthcoming NSPCC report into local service provision from pregnancy to two, and the role children centres play in providing crucial support to parents at the earliest possible time. The Group also heard from Louise Casey from the Troubled Families Unit in the Department of Communities and Local Government – setting out the progress of the Troubled Families programme, and the best way to develop partnership working with Children's Centres to prevent child abuse.

Key themes and findings from the session are set out below.

Early Intervention – Services for 0-2

Lisa Harker, of the NSPCC, opened the session by detailing a report, due to be published later this year, which outlined the results of research undertaken by the NSPCC into services provided for families with children aged 0-2. The research was undertaken in a London Borough and a rural county, though both local authorities have asked to remain anonymous.

The report set out two reasons why services aimed at those aged 0-2 are so important:

- Babies are at significantly greater risk of harm than other children: infants aged under one year are more at risk of being killed at the hands of another person than any other age group in England and Wales, over a third of all serious case reviews are in relation to babies under one year of age, and 4,630 children aged under one year and 738 unborn children were the subject of a child protection plan in England on 31 March 2011;¹ and
- Intervention at the earliest stage is both more effective at preventing harm, and more efficient in terms of cost².

The data supporting the report established that babies are more at risk of abuse and neglect if their parents experience one or more of three key risk factors: drug abuse (19,500 babies under one year old are living with a parent who has used Class A drugs in the last year); domestic violence (39,000 babies under one year live in households affected by domestic abuse in the last year); or mental ill-health (144,000 babies under one year live with a parent who has a common mental health problem)³. Consequently, in order for children's centres to prevent abuse and neglect, and deliver effective interventions, engaging with these parents is vital.

However, significant disparities exist in the coverage and reach of the services currently offered by children's centres in their efforts to reach out to the most vulnerable families. Successful engagement with groups such as teenage parents ranges from 6% to 68%, while parents in a number of locations described feeling unwelcome at their local centres, or unaware of the services they provide – meaning those most in need were often those least able to access services.

The report highlights three steps that children's centres must take if they are to reach out to the children and families who need them the most, and improve the reach and success of child protection interventions:

- Centres must understand who the vulnerable families are in their catchment area, and develop a comprehensive map of their needs;

¹ http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/resourcesforprofessionals/children_under_one_statistics_wda79305.html
accessed on 08.02.2013

² Allen, G, 2011, Early Intervention: The Next Steps

³ http://www.nspcc.org.uk/inform/resourcesforprofessionals/underones/all_babies_count_wda85568.html
accessed on 08.02.2013

- Barriers to information sharing must be broken down – professionals from across social, family and children’s services must be encouraged to share relevant information, and coordinate policy and service responses; and
- All parents must be made to feel welcome at children’s centres – particularly the most vulnerable.

Centres should work with their partners in health, education and criminal justice to construct a map of the needs of parents within their catchment areas, and where possible – beyond. When a family is experiencing domestic violence or drug abuse a professional somewhere will know about it – whether it is a midwife, a police officer, a social worker, or a worker in a children’s centre, and that that information needs to be collated and shared to ensure services can have the biggest positive impact on the lives of children and families.

Given the importance of the first two years of a child’s life, as set out in Graham Allen’s recent report,⁴ the importance of children’s centre staff having a working knowledge of the implications of early attachment, and how to support children is vital. Though it is unlikely that all centres will be able to recruit a member of staff trained in these issues, it is important that all centres know where to access staff with early attachment expertise. Expansion of the regulatory framework beyond ‘school readiness’ to include emotional and attachment needs and children’s mental health, would help ensure that the right interventions are made at the right time.

Further, children’s centres must be welcoming – once parents have been identified via outreach services, they must be encouraged to come into children’s centres to access a fuller range of services, and build stronger links with their local community. In order for this to be successful, centres must be friendly and stigma-free, and encourage healthy relationships to develop between parents.

During the discussions the following areas of good practise were highlighted:

- Outreach to local Gypsy and Irish Traveller sites has proven very successful across a number of local authorities – including addressing the relatively high risk of abuse and neglect;
- A number of centres, including some attached to integrated schools, are running ante-natal classes in order to build strong relationships with parents before children are born;
- A children’s centres leader identified her position on the MARAC panel in her local authority as a key to supporting information sharing, and being well placed to access at-risk parents early on; and
- The provision of a ‘one stop shop’ information resource has helped to support parents to access all the information they need in one place – and to ensure that parents accessing support in one place were able to access any additional support they needed.

⁴ Allen, G and Duncan Smith, I, 2009, Early Intervention: Good Parents, Great Kids, Better Citizens

Lisa also struck a note of caution – warning that the vision of children’s centres as places that improve life chances is at risk in the face of cuts to local authority budgets – particularly the removal of the Early Intervention Grant.

Troubled Families and Children's Centres

Louise Casey spoke to the joint session about the work being undertaken by the Troubled Families programme within the Department for Communities and Local Government, and the importance of early intervention to minimise the cost to the state, and deliver the best results for children and families.

The Troubled Families programme aims to address the problems affecting 120,000 of the most deprived families – which include truancy, domestic violence, mental ill-health, drug and alcohol abuse and unemployment. Spending on these families is currently high – with some local authorities spending up to £100,000 per family per year⁵, while Family Intervention Projects cost on average £10,000 per family per year. In order to address this imbalance, central government and local authorities have provided an additional £448m between now and the next general election, to transform the provision of services to these families, and reduce costs at both the local and national level.

Part of these savings will be achieved via intervening more effectively – but the majority of the savings are expected to come about as a result of breaking the intergenerational cycle of deprivation by giving families the support they need to avoid replicating the destructive patterns of their past. The savings this will realise will also be vital to local authorities' efforts to meet their statutory requirements in the face of cuts to their funding.

Louise was clear that this programme needed to touch the lives of these families in a way that previous attempts, from the Single Regeneration Budget, through New Deal for Communities, to the current Pupil Premium, had not. She highlighted the work of the Family Intervention Projects (FIPs), which formed the model for the work currently delivered by the Troubled Families unit. They were targeted at anti-social families and succeeded in reducing anti-social behaviour by 59%, but also had other unintended positive results, such as reducing domestic violence – due to the systematic way in which they approached deprivation.

Learning from the success of FIPs and the work undertaken by the Troubled Families programme to date, Louise identified the following factors as key to successful interventions:

- Professionals being equipped to authoritatively challenge families to change their behaviour, and provide support to them to make that change;
- Ongoing provision of practical, jargon-free, hands-on advice to help families to make the necessary changes;
- Ongoing support based on transforming lives, rather than lifting families slightly above the 'crisis waterline' and waiting for them to fall back under again;
- Addressing causes as well as effects – helping families build, or rebuild, a healthy understanding of love and respect, rather than just seeking to address problems caused by their absence; and
- Focussing on moving families from dependence to independence.

⁵ Department of Communities and Local Government, 2013, The Cost of Troubled Families, p15

However, she also identified issues that were preventing the Troubled Families Programme from making the progress it needed to. For example, some local authorities had identified none, or very few, troubled families in their area – and consequently could not appropriately target the available support. It was recommended that local authorities get a better grasp of the available data to identify the families who would benefit most from the programme.

Louise also highlighted the lack of contact many families in some areas had with early intervention provision – in one estate of 3000 children, only one regularly visited the dentist, while 300 had received A&E treatment as a result of poor dental hygiene. She stressed that local authorities and children's centres needed to transform the way in which these families accessed services – and they needed to do it quickly, while the public mood of support was still behind the programme.

Lisa Harker agreed that the biggest advantage of the Troubled Families programme is its potential for systematic change. It is an intensive starting point, which should eventually be rolled out universally. Being clear about its ambition, aiming for system change and learning from best practice will help achieve for the neediest families.

Recommendations:

As a result of the evidence gathered at the joint session between the All Party Parliamentary Group for Sure Start and for All Party Parliamentary Group for Child Protection, the Groups have made the following recommendations:

To Local Authorities:

- Local authorities should work with children's centres to construct a map of vulnerable families divided by catchment area, to support centres in their outreach work.
- Local authorities should work with the new clinical commissioning groups, Jobcentre Plus and other agencies to break down information sharing barriers between professionals to allow services to target support at the most vulnerable families.

To Children's Centres:

- Centres should work closely with health colleagues to encourage the delivery of ante-natal classes to parents via centres, in order to ensure they are in touch with services prior to children being born.
- Centre managers should engage with other local professionals to improve the 'reach' of their centres, for example by taking up a seat on a MARAC board, attending governor's meetings at local schools, or arranging drop-in sessions with local health professionals.
- Access all 'new' families through improved outreach.
- Centres should develop 'one stop shops' of information about local services for parents, and work to direct parents to additional support where they need it.
- Centres should build links with local Troubled Families and Family Intervention projects, and use those services to drive outreach to vulnerable families.