



APPG on Sure Start Children's Centres joint meeting with the APPG on Childcare



Houses of Parliament, Committee Room 11, 16:00-17:00, 8
December 2010

Attendees

Baroness Benjamin, Annette Brooke MP (chair), Duncan Hames MP, Sharon Hodgson MP (vice chair), Baroness Howe of Idlicote, Earl of Listowel, Tim Loughton MP, Dan Rogerson MP, Baroness Walmsley, Rob Wilson MP

Also in attendance

Marion Breslin (Carlton Hill Nursery), Sally Burlington (Department for Education), Janet Grauberg (Department for Education), Louise Harrington (NLH Partnership), Judith Howells (Grandparents' Association), Paula Jones (Lisson Green Community Nursery), Neil Leitch (PSLA), Nigel Lloyd (NLH Partnership), Claire McCarthy (4Children), Karen MacKay (Busy Bees Childcare), June O'Sullivan (LEYF), Victoria Parker (NDNA), Kate Peach (Early Years Childcare), Lisa Penney (Bounty Parenting Club), Heather Ransom (NCB), Andrew Sharp (NCT), Ryan Shorthouse (Social Market Foundation), Nina Smith (Carlton Hill Nursery), Chris Stanley (House of Commons), Eleanor Thompson (4Children), Chris Waterman (Investors in Families), Lucy Williams (NCB), Emma Westcott (General Teaching Council)

1) Welcome from Annette Brooke MP (Chair). Apologies on behalf of the Minister for Children and Families Sarah Teather MP and confirmation that the Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families Tim Loughton MP would be replacing her.

New agenda as follows

- Talk through 4Children and Daycare Trust's recent research - Anne Longfield
- Speech and Q&A from Tim Loughton MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families
- Any other business

2) 4Children and Daycare Trust's survey results

Anne Longfield (AL) set out the background and results of the 4Children and Daycare Trust Children's Centre managers survey.

Discussion:

AL was thanked for the survey which members said had produced useful information and provoked debate into the subject. She was asked whether the survey investigated what effect the increased budget to provide free daycare for disadvantaged 2-year-olds would have on closures and if she had any information on the advice central government is giving to local government about where to cut. She replied that this was a short survey with a quick turnaround and that unfortunately neither of those areas was investigated. She added that a summary of the report would be circulated after the meeting. Baroness Walmsley asked how many Centres would be expected to close in a normal year and how 250 (the number the survey found were expecting to close due to budget cuts) would compare to a normal year. AL replied that while natural closures due to population migration may be a possibility, these numbers are much higher than would ever be expected to be seen as a result of demographic shifts.

3) Speech and Q&A from Tim Loughton MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families

The settlement in the spending review was a good outcome and indicates how important the early years are. It is up to Local Authorities to make the decisions on how best to fund their services and good Local Authorities are looking at how to recluster and save public money. Central government has been examining the evidence into early intervention and is very keen that Local Authorities keep the network of Sure Start Children's Centres open. One of the great things about Children's Centres is their non-stigmatising nature and the fact they are ideally placed to point families to important services. However government needs to give local authorities the freedom to change Sure Start Children's Centres to meet local need.

The government has formed a steering group to help determine policy on the early years and has identified 5 factors to ensure Sure Start Children's Centres can reduce disparity of opportunity:

- Flexibility: Under the new policy, Local Authorities are able to respond to what local people want. By keeping the cash settlement and removing the ring fence, the government has given Local Authorities the right to react. However, the government does feel that a network of Sure Start Children's Centres is essential. It makes sense to remove the daycare requirement, although Children's Centres do still have a role to play in offering high quality early education.
- Targeting the neediest families: Graham Allen MP shares the government's view that early intervention is essential and Frank Field MP has set out why Sure Start is essential. Good, evidence-based early intervention programmes are the best way to level opportunities.
- Bringing services together: Children's Centres are ideally placed to offer innovative services and join together with others to provide those services. However, they need to be creative, for example Oxfordshire Sure Start Children's Centres have teamed with local libraries to help offer books to families to work to improve literacy rates.
- Increased diversity: Local Authority staff and the voluntary sector will soon be able to pitch to run and improve Sure Start services.
- Accountability: The government is introducing such incentives as payment by results to ensure that there is accountability for the services being delivered in Sure Start Children's Centres

The government is determined to make the system work and are determined to underline their support for a well-run network of Children's Centres. They have removed ringfencing because that is what Local Authorities have asked for. Now it is important that government relies on Local Authorities to make the decisions that are best for their communities as they are the ones that are accountable to those communities.

Questions: Sharon Hodgson (SH) MP raised a response that David Cameron had given to a challenge from the leader of the Opposition regarding Sure Start and libraries cuts at Prime Ministers' Questions earlier that day. She said that by implying that the whole of the Early Intervention Grant was for Sure Start, Mr Cameron had misled the house and the nation. She asked what the government planned to do once some Centres had closed.

TL replied that while central government had put a new emphasis on early intervention it will be up to Local Authorities to make the final decisions. He said that by the end of the roll-out to 3500 Children's Centres the money in local budgets was wearing thin anyway and while some Children's Centres are full of life and thriving, there are others which are hardly being used. Providing a Sure Start network can be done more efficiently, he said, and it is not fair to impose a central template on

local services. In addition, much of the funding which was needed in the past was to pay for the initial roll out – the need for this has been reduced.

SH asked whether or not Sure Start Children's Centres are going to close. TL replied that no Sure Starts have yet been identified for closure, adding that it will be up to Local Authorities to justify why they have closed Centres if they choose to do so.

Baroness Howe said she was encouraged by this approach as she believed it will add value to the early years. However she was concerned about those Local Authorities who are not interested in Sure Start. Earl Listowel asked whether Central government could be doing more to advise Local Authorities on how to restructure to avoid cutting frontline services. And Chris Waterman (Investors in Families) challenged TL on Local Government making the “least awful decisions”.

TL said there were going to be some really challenging decisions but that the DfE had not done too badly in the Comprehensive Spending Review. He said there are two sides to localism – if you believe that Local Authorities have the right to make the decisions about what happens in their areas then you have to leave it to them. Central government wants to make sure that Sure Start is reaching the families who most need it which is why they are discussing payment by results. The government needs to get better at disseminating best practice and is open for doing so.

(At this point, TL had to leave. The following questions were proposed by the group to be submitted to the Department for Education)

- If local authorities are able to choose to keep their Sure Start Children's Centres open, how can the government promise to maintain the national network?
- In reference to payment by results: what sort of tools are government planning to use to measure outcomes? Measuring impacts can be difficult. Will Ofsted results be taken into account?
- These cuts will impact on Children's Centres' abilities to reach the most vulnerable. How is the sector expected to maintain their current impact with less money?
- What do you perceive to be the future for outreach?
- At the Grandparents' Association we have seen successful groups have to close down because of regulations. How will the bidding process to allow voluntary groups and charities to run Sure Start Children's Centres work in practice?
- Regarding charging for services, has the cost of collecting and processing this money as well as the effect on demand been assessed?
- The government is asking Children's Centres to use evidence-based programmes but some of these – for example 'Triple P' – can be extremely expensive. How are centres going to pay for these programmes without increased budgets?
- Playwork is currently in a state of limbo. Some of the outreach playrangers doing excellent work in the most deprived areas do not know what is going to happen to their jobs and the government has gone very quiet on the issue. Please could we have some clarification of the government's position on play and playwork?

Meeting closed. Annette Brooke MP thanked members for attending. Date of next meeting to be confirmed.