

# Department for Education

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**6 April 2011**

Dear Eleanor,

I am writing in response to questions raised at the All Party Parliamentary Group on Sure Start on 9 February, as promised in the Minister of State for Children and Families' letter of 25 February to Annette Brooke MP. I apologise for the delay.

I set out responses to the group's specific questions below. Your members may also be interested to know that the Government will be publishing an early years policy statement later this year, which is being developed with experts in the early years sector working alongside local authorities. Further information can be found on the DfE website at:

<http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/earlylearningandchildcare/developing>

## **Specific questions**

*1) If local authorities are able to choose to close their Sure Start Children's Centres, how can the Government promise to maintain the national network?*

As the Minister explained in her earlier letter, local authorities have duties under the Childcare Act 2006 to consult before opening, closing or significantly changing children's centres and, as far as is reasonably practicable, to secure sufficient children's centre provision to meet local need. It is vital that any changes are based on proper consultation with local parents and communities. Statutory guidance accompanies these duties and can be found at:

<http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/earlylearningandchildcare/surestart/a0074514/sure-start-childrens-centres-statutory-guidance> .

Many local authorities are reviewing their children's centre provision, and

consultations are ongoing in a number of areas. They are looking at methods of clustering centres to merge back-office functions; considering the evidence which shows what is effective and using it to inform their decisions; and are thinking about how to make best use of children's centres to support early intervention and reach the most vulnerable families more effectively. It is vital that any changes are based on proper consultation with local parents and communities.

*2) In reference to payment by results: what sort of tools are the Government planning to use to measure outcomes? As a former NESS researcher I can say that measuring impacts can be difficult. Will Ofsted results be taken into account?*

We agree that measuring and rewarding outcomes appropriately can be difficult. That is why Ministers have decided to work with local areas and experts to trial approaches to payment by results for Sure Start Children's Centres over the next two years.

We intend to begin trials with a small number of local authorities later in 2011. The aim of the trials will be to develop payment by results frameworks which can improve incentives for local authorities and children's centres, and local partners, to reach families in greatest need more effectively, and improve their outcomes.

As part of the trials we will be asking participating local authorities to develop and test a basket of measures that might be used for national roll-out of payment by results for children's centres. The measures will focus on the key role of children's centres in improving outcomes and narrowing gaps, particularly to reach the most vulnerable families. We want to explore measures which capture outcomes in the following areas:

- Parenting aspiration, self esteem and skills
- Health and wellbeing (including economic wellbeing)
- Child development and school readiness

The trials will be able to consider whether it is appropriate for Ofsted results to be taken into account, and how this could work.

The Government will shortly invite local authorities to express an interest in being part of a trial.

*3) 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?*

By removing the ring-fence for Sure Start, the Government has simplified the funding process and given local authorities greater flexibility to decide how best to ensure vital services reach vulnerable families through children's centres. It has ensured through the Spending Review that there is enough money in the Early Intervention Grant to retain a network of children's centres.

The Government has made it clear that it is for local authorities, working with local communities, to determine the most effective use of the Early Intervention Grant. Those decisions should be informed by consultation with local parents and providers.

*4) What do you perceive to be the future for outreach?*

Children's centre outreach services have a very important role to play in reaching vulnerable families, alongside health visitors, social workers and other early years professionals. While it is for local areas to decide how best to develop their services to reach the most vulnerable families effectively, the Department for Education is working with early years experts and stakeholders, including the Children's Centre Leader Reference Group, to explore what forms of outreach are most effective for different families.

The Government has also committed to an extra 4,200 (full time equivalent) health visitors by 2015. On 8 February, the Department of Health launched a Health Visitor Implementation Plan 2011-15. The plan sets out the full range of services that families will be able to expect from health visitors and their teams, depending on their needs. It will create a bigger, rejuvenated workforce with an extra 4,200 health visitors by 2015 and an improvement in the quality of the health visiting service for children and families.

*5) 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?*

The Government is committed to encouraging greater diversity of provision of children's centre services. Voluntary sector organisations already provide a wide range of services and children's centres themselves. Some of these organisations are already working with local authorities in a number of areas to consider how they can help reduce costs whilst still delivering high quality services.

The Localism Bill, which is currently before Parliament, will give voluntary and community groups the right to challenge local authorities where they believe they could offer a better alternative to public service delivery. It completed Committee stage on 10<sup>th</sup> March and will proceed to Report stage in due course. Subject to the will of Parliament, this right will apply to children's centre services. Voluntary and community bodies will have the right to express an interest in delivering all or part of a service, for example a whole children's centre or services within a centre. Where the local authority accepts an expression of interest they will be required to conduct a procurement exercise in line with the normal legal requirements for advertising, tendering and awarding contracts. Other organisations, including private companies, will be able to bid in the procurement exercise.

The Department has also consulted on changes to the data local authorities are required to report on their expenditure on children's services (under section 251 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009). Local authority expenditure on Sure Start Children's Centres will be published from 2011-12. This data will set out expenditure by voluntary and community sector providers of children's centre services, where they are commissioned by the local authority.

*6) Regarding charging for services, has the cost of collecting and processing this money as well as the effect on demand been assessed?*

It is up to local authorities and children's centres and local authorities to devise their own charging systems. Most children's centres have well developed systems in place for collecting and processing fees for their childcare services. Many centres already charge for other services and have developed ways of ensuring that their systems do not "stigmatise" or discourage the most vulnerable families from using services.

*7) 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?*

It is for local authorities and children's centre leaders to commission services which most effectively meet the needs of local families – particularly the most vulnerable. The Government wants to ensure greater use of programmes and approaches which have been proven to be effective, and to provide best value for money. Where programmes are expensive, it is of course important to ensure that they are effective and that the benefits to the families who use them are justified by the costs. Many centres and local authorities already use evidence based programmes including Triple P, and regularly evaluate the effectiveness (and cost-effectiveness) of their services in meeting the needs of their families.

The Department for Education is working with experts and stakeholders to develop approaches to make best use of evidence based programmes, drawing on Graham Allen MP's report on Early Intervention. This work will inform the early years policy statement to be published later this year.

*8) 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. And we are concerned about the investment that went into developing staffed adventure playgrounds. Please could we have some clarification of the government's position on play and playwork?*

The Government acknowledges how important it is that children and families have safe, free local places to play, and also recognises the benefits these places can bring to the wider community. The DfE Play programme delivered over 2,000 new or refurbished play sites across the country since April 2008. The programme also produced sector-endorsed good practice guidance, training for 4,000 playworkers, and support for local authorities and community groups to improve local play provision. This work has been enhanced by a wide range of play sector activity not funded by the Department, and a significant amount of match-funding raised by local areas. This is a solid foundation for the play sector, local authorities and their communities to sustain and build on.

It was always the intention that the Play capital programme would finish at the end of March 2011, and that local authorities would assume responsibility for taking forward play provision locally. As the Government decentralises and gives powers back to local areas, full responsibility for play will be returned to local authorities and their communities. Children, parents, play professionals and local communities know best what is most needed in their local areas.

*9) Closing vital forms of support such as Children's Centres will lead to more families reaching crisis point which will result in more cost to the state. How will government account for this?*

Ministers have made it very clear that Sure Start Children's Centres are a priority for the Government. They have a key role to play in supporting children and families – particularly those who are most vulnerable and disadvantaged. Despite the pressure to reduce public expenditure the Government has provided sufficient money in the Early Intervention Grant (EIG) to retain a network of Sure Start Children's Centres. Statutory duties for local authorities to provide sufficient children's centre provision, and to consult before making significant changes, remain in place.

In December the Prime Minister announced a new national campaign to support and help turn around the lives of all families with multiple problems by the end of Parliament and thereby reducing costs to public services. The campaign will be underpinned by a range of measures. These include Community Budgets which will allow areas to pool funding to assign key workers and provide intensive support to the most vulnerable families. Funding will be available for local areas to develop and disseminate new ways of supporting families through local exemplar projects and regional dissemination hubs. Local authorities will also be able to obtain advances on future years EIG funding to help meet the cost of redesigning services to deliver better outcomes and make savings in future years.

In addition, the Government has commissioned Graham Allen MP to look at innovative funding mechanisms for early intervention, which can save substantial public sector costs over time. His second report covering these issues is due in May.

I hope the members of the Group find this response helpful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. J. Byr', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

**Sally Burlington**