

Sure Start All Party Parliamentary Group
February 29th, 3-5pm, Committee Room 12

Attendees: Annette Brooke MP (Chair)
Sharon Hodgson MP (Vice-chair)
Andrea Leadsome MP (Vice-chair)
Sarah Teather MP (Minister for Children and Families)
Anne Longfield (Chief Executive, 4Children)
Rashid Iqbal (Deputy Director, The Children's Society)
Maureen Nuttall (Strategic Development Manager, Action for Children)

Sharing good practice: national voluntary sector providers – models of delivery

Giving evidence: Anne Longfield (4Children), Rashid Iqbal (The Children's Society), and Maureen Nuttall (Action for Children).

Q – (Annette Brooke) Please give a brief introduction to your work

- (Anne Longfield) We focus on building strong community partnerships with schools and the health sector, and on strong universal and targeted support for troubled families and the employment sector;
- (Rashid Iqbal) We focused on our charitable mission, and the aim of delivering most help to those who were most in need;
- (Maureen Nuttall) We specialize in community based outreach programmes, and in prioritising safeguarding.

Q – (Sharon Hodgson) How have you dealt with recent cuts to your funding?

- (Anne Longfield) Community engagement can help manage the reduction in funding while maintaining core services – and can also function as a method of outreach
- (Maureen Nuttall) AfC have started to reduce the number of sessions they run, and have focused on delivering the 'must haves' rather than all the 'nice to haves'. We have also considered charging for some 'nice to have' services
- (Rashid Iqbal) We have managed our resources in partnerships to spread the cuts as thinly as possible, and find different sources of funding. We have also introduced more targeted delivery of some services, and considered rationalizing our estates.

Q – (Andrea Leadsome) Is the government's involvement in specifying best practice a help or a hindrance? Is it helpful that Children's Centres are a statutory requirement? Is it preferable to have lots of Children's Centres that are easily accessible, or to have one central super-centre? Would a Children's Centre be a good place to access benefit payments?

- (Rashid Iqbal) Children's Centres are an excellent place to combine access to services, including benefits. The Children's Society would prefer a model of smaller, accessible children's centres, to one which requires parents to travel long distances to access. Best practice differs significantly by region, so one model of best practice would not work, however – a number of models that could be adapted for each circumstance would be very helpful.

- (Maureen Nuttall) Agree that Children's Centres can deliver services and reduce stigma – though the involvement of health services is the best way to create that environment. The current number of centres is based on capacity issues – i.e. 800 children per centre, and though those ratios are not stable there is a solid motive behind the distribution. AfC support the 'core offer' provided by government, as it goes some way to ensuring that a common theme is on offer from all locations – outcome focused measurements are also very important though, and can be a way of truly measuring the impact centres have.
- (Anne Longfield) It is important that people are relatively clear about what they will receive when they go to a children's centre, so some framework for delivery is appropriate. 4Children would locate all services within Children's Centres if it could, they form the beating heart of the community. Higher numbers of centres are definitely for the best, as they allow more community engagement. Similarly, statutory backing is also very helpful, as it ensures that Children's Centres are seen as a priority, and helps protect against cuts. 4Children also embraces the positive approach of measuring outcomes, not outputs, and is working with UCL to develop a framework for the sector.

Q (Graham Stuart MP) Has the government got the key incentives aligned to ensure that services do increasingly co-locate in children's centres? Is there anything that could be changed to help that happen?

- (Anne Longfield) Improvements are already happening – the two year old written progress report, the increased number of health visitors, the updated EYFS etc. Where we are facing a challenge, as always, is in aligning professional groups so that we can bring all the skills we need together, to really deliver. The troubled families programme could be a great way to bring all those skills together.
- (Maureen Nuttall) Joined-up approaches need to be further rolled out, to ensure that best practice can happen as widely as possible. There is some concern that 24-36 months will be too late for a report, shouldn't parents receive one pre-birth and in the early months?
- (Rashid Iqbal) Shared outcomes often mean it is difficult to judge where value is added, which can cause some problems in getting professionals to work together – and have all their inputs recognised. One thing that would definitely improve the partnership working would be the co-location of nurseries and children's centres. This co-location is proving difficult in some areas, particularly when childcare services are profit driven.

Q (Graham Stuart MP) How do you feel about Payment by Results?

- (Rashid Iqbal) We have mixed feelings, there are collaborative opportunities available, and it has helped bring together service development in some areas, though there is a risk that a poorly constituted system could create perverse incentives.
- (Maureen Nuttall) Some service level agreements are already perversely driven by Payment by Results, but many are emerging well. Outcomes frameworks are very helpful, but the differences must be real differences, rather than manipulated figures for financial gain.

Q (Sharon Hodgson MP) Does Payment by Results threaten to punish deprived areas for being deprived?

- (Anne Longfield) It depends on the amount of money that is paid via the Payment by Results system – an amount around 5% would be effective at driving performance increases, whereas an amount closer to 90% would mean it was unsustainable for the voluntary sector to actually run children’s centres.
- (Maureen Nuttall) We are working closely with the Children’s Society to implement the early language development programme. There is a lot of trouble getting appropriate funding for this project, particularly in deprived areas.

Q (Chris, Early Childhood Forum) Is school readiness an appropriate measure? Is this really what children’s services should be delivering?

- (Andrea Leadsome MP) I have spoken with the Minister many times about this, and have told her that early development is not a staging post for getting ready for school.
- (Anne Longfield) There has been a big debate in the co-production group around the use of ‘school readiness’, many of us think that it should also include ‘life readiness’.
- (Sue Robb) The Tickell Review set out the various issues around the ‘school readiness’ point, and the sector has been unified in pressing the Department for Education to include a fuller definition in the new EYFS framework.

Q (Sharon Hodgson) We are aware of local authorities who are keeping centres open, but stripping all the services out of them, in order to avoid headlines. Should there be sanctions used against this practice?

- (Head of Children’s Services, Surrey) Central government should hold local authorities to account if they fail to deliver their statutory duties. They also need to facilitate greater influence for children’s services in the commissioning of health services at the local level.
- (Annette Brooke MP) We do already know that it is very difficult to consolidate the services of Health Visitors and Midwives, due to their different employers. This may well get worse as things progress.

Q (Annette Brooke MP) Any final comments from the panel?

- (Anne Longfield) Sanctions against local authorities who fail to meet sufficiency requirements are very important. I hope the Minister will deliver a clear answer on sanctions.
- (Maureen Nuttall) Centres need to have a strong and consistent lead from Ofsted on what they should deliver – this has not been the case for the past year. There is also a lot of focus from government on children’s centres leaders delivering change in local areas, but often leaders do not have the necessary influence.
- (Annette Brooke MP) Yes, I agree on the Ofsted point, we will write to the Minister from the APPG setting out your concerns.
- (Rashid Iqbal) The receding tide of government funding is not necessarily allowing children’s centres to contract gracefully – if cuts continue at the current rate, it may well be that some of the services crash and burn. The Minister should carefully

consider what prescriptions she makes on local authorities and children's centres, and decide whether they should be extended further to ensure the delivery of important services.

Ministerial response to the Interim APPG Report on Sure Start

Sarah Teather MP, Minister for Children and Families

Q (Annette Brooke MP) Many thanks to the Minister for joining us. I would be grateful if she could provide a response to the report.

- (Sarah Teather MP) Thank you – I have not had time to fully consider the report, so I will respond to some of it now, and write to the APPG about the remainder at a later date. I would like to set out that:
 - The government is committed to the delivery of Sure Start centres, and is also very much on board with the co-location of services, and the provision of a universal front-door. This better integration also applies to increased data sharing, and targeted service delivery.
 - We want to see a much greater amount of voluntary sector involvement in the delivery of children's centres, as well as significantly more parental involvement in the delivery of services.
 - We are committed to localism and local decision making, though I am pleased to see the development of the 'hub and spoke' delivery model, which may be an example of best practice emerging from the current reforms.
 - We have recently published an SEN Green Paper, with collaboration from the sector – and are now focusing on improving the performance of all children, and narrowing the gap between the highest performers and those who need additional help.
 - We know that early intervention makes sense from a finance perspective, and hope that local authorities will seize the opportunity to implement it – and to follow the evidence based practices that are available;
 - We recognise that flexibility is vital in children's centre provision, and that local authorities must pay attention to local circumstances when delivering their services;
 - We think that payment by results has the potential to focus Local authorities on what really matters, and works in their area, but we recognise that it can be difficult to get the measures right, which is why we have only implemented a pilot programme at this stage;
 - We welcome the role of the APPG in sharing best practice with the sector.

Q (Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea) Baby massages close the gaps in development very well – can this be rolled out further?

Q (Head of Children's Services, Surrey) Influencing people to breast feed is most effective at 2 days old – how can the government take advantage of that information?

- (Sarah Teather MP) Localism should deliver more baby massage if that is what people want and it supports outcomes – the government fully supports variations in practice by area, if that is based on local decision making. We have the highest number of health visitors ever – who can play a key role in increasing breast feeding,

but data sharing remains a problem between different agencies. Working together to improve data-sharing and ensuring that centres record data in the same way is also key to properly measuring outcomes.

Q (Andrea Leadsome MP) Why not have secure bonding between parents as children as an objective for health workers?

- (Sarah Teather MP) I'd be happy with that, if we could decide on how 'secure bonding' was measured. In the absence of that certainty, we have gone for longer term measures.

Q (Sharon Hodgson MP) We need leadership and co-location of services, will the government incentivize people to do that?

Q (Annette Brooke MP) Government policy has diminished the link between nurseries and children's centres, will you address that?

- (Sarah Teather MP) It is difficult when structures already exist, certainly if they did not, we would have designed them differently. I am also concerned that we would be placing an expensive diktat on local authorities if we demanded they co-locate now.
- (Sarah Teather MP) We have watered down the link between nurseries and children's centres as a cost-saving device, to ensure that settings do not end up providing unnecessary childcare places, which are not taken up by target groups, or which remain empty.

Q (Sharon Hodgson MP) What is the difference between the outcomes and the outputs?

- (Sarah Teather MP) Outputs are just a proxy for results, for instance, the number of children who go to children's centres, whereas outcomes actually measure school readiness, and provide much more useful data.

Q (Chair of Governors, Guildford Children's Centre) Please consider the impact of counting places to the financial stability of setting.

- (Sarah Teather MP) We are considering consultation responses on this issue, local authorities can also re-consider how they assign their Direct Schools Grant, you may wish to take it up with them.

CLOSE