



Planning early childhood services in 2020

Learning from practice and research on children's centres and family hubs

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About EIF

The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) is an independent charity established in 2013 to champion and support the use of effective early intervention to improve the lives of children and young people at risk of experiencing poor outcomes.

Effective early intervention works to prevent problems occurring, or to tackle them head-on when they do, before problems get worse. It also helps to foster a whole set of personal strengths and skills that prepare a child for adult life.

EIF is a research charity, focused on promoting and enabling an evidence-based approach to early intervention. Our work focuses on the developmental issues that can arise during a child's life, from birth to the age of 18, including their physical, cognitive, behavioural and social and emotional development. As a result, our work covers a wide range of policy and service areas, including health, education, families and policing.

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Foreword

The science on early childhood is compelling. It is one of the most significant periods of human growth, critical in determining physical, social and emotional, behavioural and cognitive development in ways that can have a lifelong effect on health and wellbeing. We have a good understanding of the risk factors that can threaten children's development, and this helps us to identify children who are vulnerable and may need extra support. We know that intervening early can reduce risk factors and increase protective factors in a child's life.

Sure Start and children's centres have been an important part of early intervention policy and services for the past two decades. Coherent support for families during pregnancy and the early years of life that works over the long term to reduce child poverty and inequality and boost social mobility is as relevant now as it was 20 years ago. However, the context has changed dramatically. This changed context is driving local authorities and their partners to think again about what works and what they can afford.

As local authorities and their partners work out how best to maintain early childhood services in the face of current pressures, there is a demand for evidence to inform their decision-making. There are, however, some gaps in our understanding about what kind of early interventions are likely to be the most effective. This is particularly true of complex and evolving local systems, such as place-based children's centres and family hubs, which are made up of many services, interventions and interactions, and which are difficult to describe and evaluate.

Children's centres have evolved considerably since the early days of Sure Start local programmes, with increasing diversification of approaches. There has long been strong interest in the question of which children's centre models 'work best' in different contexts. Every local authority is required by statute to make evidence-based choices about the most effective way to deliver local place-based early childhood services. The substantial variation in how children's centres and hubs have been organised and delivered locally has made it challenging to evaluate their impact, and so questions about the relative effectiveness of different models are not easy to answer from the available evidence.

As one of the UK's What Works centres, EIF's mission is to ensure that effective early intervention is available and is used to improve the lives of children and young people at risk of poor outcomes. We consider early intervention to be effective when it shows evidence of improving outcomes for children and young people. Children and families who receive interventions shown through rigorous testing to have improved outcomes are more likely to benefit, and to a greater degree, than those who receive other services.

Developing robust evidence of impact across all the activities within local systems of support for families is a huge challenge. Many aspects of local service design such as how agencies work together, share information, or develop practitioner skills are less amenable to traditional approaches to impact evaluation than specific interventions and manualised programmes. In addition, of course, there are many elements of local services which are principally aimed at providing better, more accessible public services. Such elements might be necessary in order for great services to be delivered, but they are not in and of themselves designed to improve outcomes for children and families. Whilst it is not necessary to test the impact of all elements of service delivery, where particular ways of working are being seen as a way of improving outcomes then we have a duty to vulnerable families and the taxpayer to devise methods for testing.

This study seeks to better understand the current practical experience of delivering children's centres and similar approaches, and to explore how this relates to what we know from research. This allows us to draw conclusions about what this means for the support needed to plan effective place-based early childhood services in the future.

The information in this report is based on insight, learning and evaluation from a wide range of practice and research experts in children's centres and hubs, and we are grateful to those who have generated this knowledge, particularly the local innovators who are at the front line of testing and learning, and who shared their experiences with us. We designed a review process that started with these local practice experts, so that we have been able to illustrate how local areas across England are delivering children's centres and hubs from the perspective of 14 very different places.

For many readers, this will not be the report that they need on children's centres. It is not a review of the statutory guidance or an evaluation of children's centres' effectiveness, and nationally, the future of children's centres have been much debated territory. Confirming the national vision for children's centres and family hubs as part of early childhood services is important, as is being clear about sufficient funding as a necessary condition for change. What happens next is key. It is difficult to think of a more effective way in which the government might realise its vision to 'level up' Britain and ensure equality of opportunity than through ensuring access to high-quality local family services which start in maternity and run throughout childhood.

There is an urgency about supporting local leaders and commissioners to respond to the uncertainty and pressures of the current situation. Much of the work with local areas in this review was completed in 2019. The challenges that they described have been exacerbated by Covid-19, and there are now almost daily reports of service closures, retrenchment and black holes in local authority finances. It is difficult not to feel that some of the questions that we explored about how best to organise local early years services seem to relate to another time. However, the way that local areas have innovated over the past six months through periods of lockdown and social distancing shows, now more than ever, just how important local service planning is.

This report draws on the messages from practice and research to draw conclusions about the practical guidance and resources that are needed to support local area planning and decision-making. There is unlikely to be any to be one model of place-based early childhood services or single 'effective' approach which is the best bet in every place. It is important for areas to work through what arrangements are needed in their local context guided by principles about how best to deliver community based services built on the evidence of what works to improve outcomes for children and families. We will be continuing to develop planning support resources with local and national partners, including working with the Local Government Association. You can find out more in our new online hub, at EarlyChildhoodServices.EIF.org.uk.

This work is part of the onward discussion about how best to support local planning of children's centres and hubs as part of local family services, not a set of answers or the final word. We look forward to exploring this further with local areas and others who are passionate about how they get it right for babies, young children and their families.

Donna Molloy
Director of Policy & Practice, EIF

Summary

Sure Start and children's centres have been an important, ambitious and evolving part of maternity and early years national policy and local services for the past two decades.

Since the introduction of revised statutory guidance for children's centres in 2013 there has been an increasing diversity of local delivery approaches as local authorities respond to changes in population need and public funding. This includes adapted approaches to delivering local place-based whole family services, such as family and integrated hubs.

The past decade has seen a significant decline in spending on children's centres, with a 60% real-terms fall in Sure Start funding from 2011/12 to 2016/17, and an estimated 15–20% decline in use of children's centres by both children and parents. It has been suggested in recent research by Action for Children that the number of children using children's centres in the most deprived local authorities is falling faster than elsewhere, although there is no official national data on use or reach of children's centres and hubs.

Local areas are making decisions around the use of children's centres and hubs in the context of continuing poor child health outcomes, increasing health inequalities, rising child poverty, growth in the number of children in the care system, and limited progress on closing the gap on educational attainment, including in the early years. These challenges are expected to be significantly amplified by the impact of Covid-19, with the consequences falling hardest on the families who were vulnerable and disadvantaged before the pandemic.

Aims of this review

The aim of this review is to understand contemporary local practice and to explore how far this and existing research can guide future development.

The learning from this review is intended to guide a series of practical planning resources for local leaders and commissioners who are responsible for early childhood services.¹

This work was conducted on behalf of the Department for Education to support local authorities in their strategic decision-making about the use of children's centres in early intervention.

It is important to note that this work is not a review of statutory guidance for children's centres, nor is it an evaluation of the effectiveness of children's centres. It is a review to understand rather than prove, and it uses the experience of local experts in delivering children's centres and hubs to do so.

Methodology

This review combines contemporary practice learning from qualitative interviews and focus groups with stakeholders in 14 local areas across England on their local arrangements for delivering early childhood services through local centres or hubs, and a rapid review of the evidence relating to how children's centres are designed and delivered.

¹ These resources are available through a new online hub at <https://EarlyChildhoodServices.EIF.org.uk>

Main findings

1

The lack of recent national monitoring and evaluation of approaches to children's centres and hubs means that there is little robust evidence on how they are currently being delivered and how effective they are.

There has been no national evaluation of children's centre approaches since the final Evaluating Children's Centres in England impact report in 2016, which limits the contemporary evidence on children's centres and hubs.

In addition, Ofsted inspections of children's centres were suspended in September 2015, and there has been no independent inspection since that point to see how local authorities are meeting their statutory duties.

The lack of national data and research means that much of the knowledge about innovation and effectiveness in children's centres and hubs is held at the local level.

2

Children's centres and hubs across England in 2020 are context-specific and diverse, and lack a consistent way of specifying and evaluating different approaches.

The current national specification of children's centres expects local commissioners to judge what interventions and services are needed and for whom, rather than prescribing interventions at a national level, in the way that previous statutory guidance did.

As a consequence of the more permissive national guidance, local areas have set out a variety of locally defined approaches which respond to the local context, resources and priorities. However, this means there is a lack of a common language across areas to clearly specify and distinguish the approaches that they are taking, and no consistent metrics or evaluation designs with which to judge effectiveness.

3

Local areas are increasingly connecting early childhood services with whole family services and focusing on targeted support. But they continue to make the case for sufficiently resourced, open-access centres in order to reach and support vulnerable families.

Children's centres are required to be universal in ambition but with a priority focus on reducing inequalities. The local areas in this study made the case strongly for the importance of retaining sufficiently resourced open-access services in order to reach and support vulnerable families, and questioned the benefit of retaining only a vestigial universal offer.

Over the last decade, children's centres have increasingly been used to reach a broader age group of children, not just those in the early years. Local areas have been experimenting with extended age support due to the potential efficiency benefits which come with pooling and aligning resources. There is, as yet, no evidence on the impact of extending the age range for children's centre services, or the effectiveness of a family hub approach. However, there is a logical case for more holistic and joined-up approaches to delivering area-based family services, which responds to concerns about a lack of service integration and artificial service boundaries, and builds on central family-focused policy initiatives such as Think Family, the Troubled Families programme, and the Reducing Parental Conflict programme.

4

The lack of evidence for contemporary approaches makes it difficult to be conclusive about what works in delivering children's centres and hubs. Nevertheless, local areas are responding to the current context by:

- moving to virtual and digital ways to engage families
- taking a more coordinated and strategic approach to the inclusion of families who are less likely to use early childhood services, and to address gaps in knowledge about population groups
- reducing building management costs and using dispersed delivery approaches, which give access to other physical spaces which can be better suited to specific child or family activities
- developing multi-agency support pathways for families, and establishing clear protocols for data sharing
- retaining a focus on early years skills development and relational practice as part of a wider strategic approach to leadership and workforce planning.

This study describes a trend of parents increasingly being consumers rather than co-creators of children's centres and hubs, although local areas are increasingly experimenting with less traditional, more digital ways of engaging families. Co-design with parents and communities seems to be most embedded where it is an explicit part of the local strategy and is built on the practical involvement of parents. There is limited evidence on what difference community and parental involvement makes to children's centres, but there was a consensus across the local areas in this study about the importance of approaches which value relationships and community cohesion.

We collected only limited messages from practice about how children's centres and hubs are tackling inequalities, but there is lack of research evidence on how to effectively meet the needs of fathers and families from minority ethnic groups, which is a significant gap, given the importance to children's centres and hubs of responding to the needs of diverse families. Local areas stressed giving weight to the views of non-service users; taking a strategic approach to inclusion; tailoring service delivery so that it responds to the needs of different groups; and building a workforce that different types of families and families from ethnic minority groups will recognise and trust.

A focus on centres as physical, local venues for delivering early childhood services has shifted as early intervention resources have reduced over the past decade. Many of the new local approaches appear to offer efficiencies and flexibility. However, it remains unclear how a reduction in open access sites impacts on the ability to build trusted relationships with vulnerable parents.

The existing evidence on the effectiveness of multi-agency service integration in improving outcomes for vulnerable children is limited, and much of the language used to describe service integration is imprecise, which makes evaluation difficult. There is, however, a strong practice consensus that greater integration can benefit families. There is also general agreement about what facilitates integration, including a shared recognition of the need for change, strong leadership and management, a focus on building relationships and trust, clearly defined roles and responsibilities, good systems for communication and information sharing, and support and training for staff.

Local practice emphasises that children's centre and hub leaders need to be as proficient in managing strategic change as they are in managing people, even if in some areas children's centre managers are less likely to be strategic leaders than others. Local capacity to carry out workforce planning appears to be limited, and so in many areas tends to focus on individual training programmes for skills development, with a lack of overall strategic oversight.

5

Progress in growing the effective use of evidence-based interventions as part of early childhood services appears to be at risk, due to funding pressures and a lack of robust local evaluation.

Using evidence-based interventions increases the likelihood of improving outcomes for children and families, and there appears to now be more widespread use of evidence-based interventions as part of contemporary early childhood services.

However, local areas are often not able to prioritise evidence-based interventions as part of their local offer, and where they do there continues to be a challenge in how to implement these with fidelity, which requires making only careful adaptations that are consistent with the evidence.

This is compounded by variable use of valid and reliable measurement tools to understand effectiveness, and a lack of funding and confidence in evaluation generally.

There is a need to go further in making evidence-based interventions the foundation of local approaches, alongside a consistent and robust approach to generating local evidence of intervention effectiveness.

Conclusions

Overall, there is a lack of robust national data on the characteristics and effectiveness of contemporary children's centres and hubs, including on the services that they provide, how they are organised, and how families use them. The loosening of statutory requirements for children's centres has led to an increasing diversity of local approaches and experimentation, but without a common language to describe these different approaches or a consistent set of metrics for assessing their impact. This is challenging in a context where every local authority is required by statute to make locally bespoke and evidence-based choices about the most effective way to deliver early childhood services.

While the national knowledge base about children's centres and hubs has not kept pace with local practice, the local capacity for system planning and review is under real pressure from a combination of increased service demand, reduced resources, and now additional challenges due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Against this backdrop, practical support for the local planning of early childhood services, including children's centres and hubs, is even more urgently required than when this work was first commissioned. We have identified four key ways in which this can be done.

1. Specifying the local approach

A key message from this review is the importance of being clear about what a local area is seeking to achieve through its early childhood services and then designing them in a way that is likely to achieve this purpose. There is no single 'right' model of place-based early childhood services that works in every context, but there are some fundamental questions

that are relevant to every local area, such as what are the intended child outcomes, who is the intervention for and what will it do.

These questions form the basis of a theory of change. Articulating the local approach through a theory of change would allow local stakeholders to make explicit and considered choices about key service design issues; use the local assessment of community needs and contextual issues to create a bespoke approach to early childhood services, while retaining a focus on what developmental science tells us about the things children need to thrive; and reinforce the use of evidence and evaluation as part of creating a local strategy for early childhood services.

2. Using and generating evidence

The challenge of using and generating evidence is a theme that runs through this review. The dearth of research evidence relating to contemporary early childhood service models, at a time when many areas are redesigning local services, is problematic, particularly as the consequences of Covid-19 force local authorities and their partners to review priorities and investment. This is compounded by the lack of capacity and confidence at a local level for assessing the impact of local services and building a local evidence base.

This could be addressed by a renewed effort to generate evidence outputs that are designed to meet current practice needs across maternity and early years services; providing planning tools and advice which help local areas to use evidence; supporting the use of common metrics for assessing local system development, which would enable benchmarking and create a 2020 baseline against which to assess progress in the wake of Covid-19.

Local areas also commonly identify shared outcomes and outcome frameworks as a priority for improvement. Practical steps here could include the development and consistent use of common metrics which support local measurement; extending the use of standardised, valid and reliable measurement tools across local early childhood services; and improving the quality of needs assessments that review the experiences of families during pregnancy and in the early years.

3. Sharing learning

One of the clear messages from this work is that much of the knowledge about innovation in children's centres and hubs is held at the local level. Approaches which enable the sharing of local practice and experimentation are likely to be vital to local areas as national policy and research catches up. We also know from the local areas involved in this review, and from the success of the LGA's early years peer challenge programme over recent years, that there is a strong appetite for peer-to-peer learning opportunities.

This could be supported by strengthening local arrangements for maternity and early years stakeholder engagement in joint planning across early childhood services; sharing examples between areas of the experimentation and learning taking place; strengthening the planning and evaluation support that is built around peer challenges; and coordinating and curating information on evidence and practice learning.

4. Creating the conditions for local change

Local areas have shown incredible resilience in the face of a public health emergency and lockdown, although they will be living with the consequences of Covid-19 for the foreseeable future. This emphasises the importance of effective local planning and implementation in the 'new normal' context, particularly for non-statutory early childhood services, which are at risk due to further pressures on the local public purse.

Notwithstanding the question of adequate funding, which is outside of the scope of this review, support to local areas which increases the likelihood of effective implementation of change could include readiness for change assessments; structured support and challenge for local change programmes; and tracking progress over time using early intervention system assessment tools, such as EIF's maturity matrices.

Next steps

This review is part of EIF's wider body of work on maternity and early years, connecting what works evidence reviews, evidence translation and implementation support.

EIF will continue to work alongside strategic partners in national and local government as well as with the Local Government Association (LGA) to support the effective planning of early childhood services and generation of the evidence needed to support improvement.

Details of the practical tools and evidence resources published alongside this report are available through an online hub:

EarlyChildhoodServices.EIF.org.uk