

Scrutiny Committee Report on Children's Centres

This committee commends the depth and breadth of work being undertaken in centres across Dudley. We note the various reports and evidence produced nationally (referred to later), local evidence gathered and provided to the scrutiny committee, OFSTED reports and comments from parents that leads us to conclude that the services provided by Children's Services are of high quality and valued by users. While it remains too early to draw firm conclusions about the success of early intervention through Children's Centres (it may take a generation before that evidence is fully available), we maintain the belief that Children's Centres are an integral component of early intervention strategies and that any reduction in their provision increases current and future risks to our young people.

Members of the committee have undertaken visits to centres across the borough and have been impressed by the commitment and dedication of the staff and volunteers and the enthusiasm demonstrated by parents who have benefitted from their attendance at the Children's Centre. The opportunities for volunteering and training are particularly valued.

The recent OFSTED report for Woodside Children's Centre, undertaken in January 2013 after the service was brought back to the control and leadership of the Local Authority, produced an outstanding judgement. This is the standard we should aspire to and some of their conclusions are set out below

- *Outcomes for families are significantly improved as a result of their engagement with the centre. Data shows a staggering increase in children's achievement, over the last two years, in their learning and development in the Early Years Foundation Stage. Also, the centre has contributed significantly to the improved health of families as a result of well-planned health promotion activities and the provision of high-quality health services on-site.*
- *The excellent range of services and learning activities are making a huge difference to the lives of families, and especially those families made vulnerable by their circumstances.*
- *100% of all mothers in the reach area, who are actively engaging with the centre, initiate breastfeeding. At 6 weeks, 61% of mothers continue to breastfeed their babies. At 93% the engagement of families in health services provided at the centre is excellent. The percentage of women smoking at the time of giving birth has halved in the last year and is now at 12.9%. The proportion of children who are considered obese at the end of reception is considerably lower than the national average.*
- *Children make huge leaps in their learning and development as a result of the excellent childcare provision available to them. The most recent Early Years Foundation Stage profile data for the area shows an extremely positive and improved picture of children's achievement. There has been a dramatic increase in the percentage of children achieving the expected levels at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage. For instance, in 2010 32.6% of children achieved the expected 78+ points across the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile; in 2012, this figure leapt to 93.8%.*

These comments and outcomes should be the benchmark for early intervention services such as Children's Centres. Any proposed changes to the structure as a result of budgetary constraints, subject to consultation, should outline how it will seek to achieve this benchmark consistently across the whole borough.

If we get it right in the early years then we don't have to spend huge amounts of money in later years to catch up on education, not to mention all the other consequences of a poor start in life. In the report to the Scrutiny Committee provided by the Director of Children's Services (page 84), it is stated that;

"The cost benefit of children's centre provision is significant. It can be demonstrated that Children's Centre support has reunited families and enabled them to remain together."

To put this into context, an example of an intervention by a Children's Centre put the cost at £2,126 per annum. Alternative current and future costs 'may' have included £39,000 per annum which represents the average cost of an external foster placement or £15,00 for an internal foster placement. In addition to the potential for immediate increased financial costs there are the future financial and social costs – the Creating Chances Trustⁱ states that;

- 30% of rough sleepers are ex-care children
- 30% of the prison population are ex-care children
- 65% of 16 year olds achieve 5 A* to C at GCSE but for a child in care the figure is closer to 15%
- 42% of prostitutes are ex care children
- A care leaver has a greater chance at 18 of being in prison than attending a university.
- Literacy levels for ex children in care are very low but suicide rates are high.

Successful early intervention for a child in need does not only save us money but also significantly improves the life chances of children we are responsible for.

The Statutory Duty

There are a wide range of statutory duties imposed on a Local Authority, some directly related to the provision of Children's Centres others indirectly related.

The Children Act 1989

Imposes a general duty on local authorities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need in their area and so far as is consistent with that duty to promote the upbringing of children by their families by providing a range and level of services appropriate to those children's needs.

Children who are defined as in need under the Children Act 1989 are those whose vulnerability is such that they are unlikely to reach or maintain a satisfactory level of health and development, or their health and development will be significantly impaired without the provision of services.

Children's Centres provide a focus for much of this work across the borough, any reduction in their current provision will increase the risk of us not meeting this statutory requirement.

Children Act 2004 Section 10 (1)

Duty to co-operate' – to make arrangements to promote co-operation between the local authority; each of the authority's relevant partners, and such other persons or bodies the authority consider appropriate to improve outcomes for children. Those outcomes are defined as the five Every Child Matters outcomes: be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being.

To promote and encourage better co-operation and partnership working among the various agencies which provide or commission services for children (and families) at every organisational level from strategic planning to front line multi agency team work.

The outstanding Ofsted report for Woodside Children's Centre commended their partnership working between different agencies with particular praise for the work conducted with Health Visitors. Both the manager of Woodside Children's Centre and the school it is attached to spoke of the benefits of their close collaboration for the benefit of children – again, the “staggering increase” in children's achievements must be due to the benefits of such partnership working.

Committee members have expressed a wish to see even more emphasis placed on joint agency working in all Children's Centres and we believe there is further opportunity for partner agencies to work closer to deliver and fund early intervention services in Dudley. This includes looking at opportunities with voluntary and community groups to enhance early intervention services.

Children Act 2004 Section 10 (3)

Duty to have regard to the importance of parents and carers in improving children's wellbeing.

To highlight the importance of families to children's well-being in the Children Act 2004.

Visits to Children's Centres by committee members highlighted the range of services that are offered which provide valuable life and parenting skills to service users. Centres provide opportunities and encouragement for parents to take part in activities which have real benefit to them away from the centres.

Childcare Act 2006 Section 1

General duty to improve the well-being of children under five and reduce inequalities.

Places a duty on local authorities to improve the outcomes of all children under 5 and close the gaps between groups with the poorest outcomes and the rest by ensuring early years' services are accessible to all families.

The development of Children's Centres as an integral part of the early intervention strategy has done much to uphold this statutory duty. Diminution of the current provision increases the risk of the local authority breaching this duty.

Childcare Act 2006 Section 3

Specific duties in relation to early years services. Includes duties to: make arrangements to ensure integrated provision of early years services; take steps to identify parents not using services and to encourage them to do so; take reasonable steps to encourage the involvement of various interested parties in the making and implementation of arrangements made under this section of the Act; have regard to such information about the views of young children as is available; and have regard to statutory guidance.

Section 3 encourages local authorities to work with health services and employment services when arranging early years services. It also encourages them to take into account the views of interested parties, and to promote early years services to those parents least likely to use them.

Committee members have expressed support for current partnership arrangements with other local agencies but have also stated that they would like to see this improved further to include delivery of more services from Children's Centres and additional funding from partners to develop the current service.

Child Poverty Act 2010

Duties of local authorities and other bodies in England: requires local cooperation arrangements to be made to reduce and mitigate the effects of child poverty in local areas; and the arrangements to include arrangements to prepare and publish local child poverty needs assessments, and to prepare joint child poverty strategies for local areas.

Tackling child poverty requires action at national and local levels, and the Child Poverty Act therefore compels both tiers of government to act (the Act requires the Government to publish a UK child poverty strategy). Part 2 of the Child Poverty Act aims to ensure that all local authorities take steps to enable more effective cooperation at local level, grounded in strong knowledge and understanding of child poverty in local areas and leading to clear strategies and plans through which cooperation and partnership working can have a demonstrable impact on child poverty in local areas.

Following on from recommendations regarding developing partnership arrangements in the delivery of early intervention through Children's Centres – the Child Poverty Act reinforces the statutory duties on local authorities to “enable more effective cooperation”. Any change to the provision of Children's Centres may impinge on the local authority's ability to act proactively in regard to achieving effective cooperation. The committee is also interested to know what plan other agencies have developed to mitigate any reduction in the provision for early intervention by the local authority.

Evidence based practice in Children's Centres and elsewhere

An Evaluation of Children's Centres in England, published by the Department of Education in July 2013^{ii iii} found that well evidenced programmes reached a relatively small number of participants. Any review of early intervention provision in Dudley should take into account the evidence when determining which services should be provided to ensure that we are delivering the very best evidence based services across a range of agencies. Children's Centres could be the focal point for delivery and this should lead to on-going discussions regarding funding to ensure that the financial burden is fairly and appropriately shared. In particular, emphasis should be placed on using Children's Centres as a catalyst for the greater integration of health professionals.

The Marmot Review on Health Inequalities (2010)^{iv} recognised that disadvantage starts before birth and continues throughout life and recommended "giving every child the best start in life." In a report by the Local Government Association^v it is suggested that recent reforms provide an opportunity for local authorities to jointly commission, join up and integrate services particularly for early years. Children's Centres should be at the heart of that approach and no partner agency should be operating independently when it comes to early intervention. At a time when budgetary pressures are so acute it is all the more important that evidence based services are at the very top of the agenda to ensure that every child is given the best start in life. No major changes to the provision of early years services should be undertaken without the full and active involvement of other partners to ensure that this generation of children and those that follow receive on the best that Dudley has to offer. To be the best relies on delivering a range of evidence based services in a multi-agency model with close co-operation, communication and strategic planning. The committee is not convinced that Dudley has reached that stage despite some examples of good practice.

Conclusion

Staff, volunteers and families should be proud of the excellent work that goes on in our Children's Centres. They are embedded in our community and offer the potential to deliver immediate and on-going benefits to our children and their families. A successful early intervention strategy is paramount to dealing with inequalities and ensuring that children can have the best start in life.

The testimony of parents given to members of the committee during visits to Children's Centres and at a formal committee meeting demonstrates the life changing nature of successful early intervention. In austere times, local authorities and their partner agencies cannot afford to act in isolation and where change is necessary or desired, the best possible outcome should be the aspiration and the outcome.

Recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee

This committee notes the value of Children's Centres in Dudley and would like to express our thanks to the staff, volunteers and families who have contributed to their success. The evidence gathered by Children's Centres across the borough alongside the outcome of Ofsted inspections demonstrates the effectiveness of early intervention in securing positive outcomes for children and their families.

Funding pressures put at risk this ongoing effectiveness and the recent proposals to close some Children's Centres gives rise to concern that this effectiveness will be impaired. The plans for a "hub and spoke" approach will deliver significant savings and the committee is broadly in support of this on the basis that it will be used to raise standards by providing a consistent approach based on need

and we look forward to seeing further information on this as plans are developed further during the consultation.

Committee members recognise that savings need to be made in the current financial climate but also note that leading up to 2015 there will be significant opportunities for local partners - the local authority, health, voluntary groups and others - to offer greater integration in the delivery of services, including early intervention. The committee calls on local partners to use the consultation period as an opportunity to consider how the changes proposed for Children's Centres may impact on future plans and develop alternative models that are consistent with those future opportunities.

The Children's Services Scrutiny Committee therefore recommends the following;

1. Local partners, during the consultation period, work together to develop alternative proposals that support the future development of integrated services in relation to early intervention. This should include proposals for 5 hubs rather than the 4 currently proposed.
2. Local partners should explore opportunities for Children's Centres to become community hubs for health, social care and other services such as Credit Unions, Citizen's Advice surgeries and be the meeting place of choice for community groups.
3. Anecdotal evidence gathered during visits to Children's Centres by committee members highlighted the importance of health workers introducing families to Children's Centres. The committee believes that there are untapped opportunities to improve the reach of Children's Centres particularly in relation to health workers signposting prospective families to Children's Centre services and work should be done to build on this over the next 12 months.
4. Services provided from Children's Centres should continue to give regard to evidence based practice.

ⁱ www.creatingchances.org.uk

ⁱⁱ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/224045/DFE-RB297.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/early-intervention-next-steps.pdf>

^{iv} <http://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/projects/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review>

^v http://www.local.gov.uk/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=2a49df73-c17e-426c-8b38-f3634f82e58a&groupId=10180