Evaluation of Children's Centres in England – DfE research

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Author Kathy Baker
LGIU/CSN Associate

Summary
As part of the Evaluation of children's centres in England (ECCE), the DfE has published (July 2016) two commissioned research reports: Research brief: evaluation of childcare centres in England (ECCE)- strands 1-5 and Children's centres in England: value for money. The reports provide an overview of the project with relevant past reports referenced across the five strands of research activity as well as a detailed briefing on the final value for money theme.

This briefing will be of interest to local authority members and officers with responsibility for early years and early intervention.

Overview
Children's Centres began life in 1997 as Early Excellence Centres (EECs) which nursery provision which integrated early education, childcare and multi-agency services and formed a key strand of support for families, improving health and addressing social exclusion and child poverty. In 1999, Sure Start Local programmes were launched with similar aims to EECs but with responsibility to meet the needs of children within their reach area. This was to be achieved through increased access to outreach services and family support. Sure Start Local Programmes became Sure Start Children's Centres in 2004, created to offer children under five and their families, access to integrated early childhood services when and where they were needed. Children's Centres were given legal status by the Childcare Act 2006 and their definition covered early years provision; social services relating to young children, parents or prospective parents; provision of support in accessing employment and training for parents; and information and assistance to parents about childcare and other relevant services. Children's Centres were given the responsibility of serving 30% of the most deprived communities.

By 2010, in response to a vision of a Children's Centre for every community, there were 3,631 centres open. Children's Centres were at the heart of most communities, providing a range of onsite and outreach services to support young children and their families pre-birth to age 5. However, under the Coalition Government their number dropped to 3,116 by April 2013 and now they were required to tighten their focus on school readiness for disadvantaged families and have clearer outcomes, with parents and communities seen as having a greater role in the running of centres. By the 2014-15 financial year, budget savings under the Coalition had resulted in local authorities reducing their funding of Children's Centres by nearly a third over five years. With these constraints, many centres were no longer able to operate at full strength, leading to a scaling down of services and in some cases, restructuring.

The Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (ECCE) is a six-year study commissioned by the DfE and undertaken by NatCen Social Research, the University of Oxford and Frontier Economics.
The aim of ECCE is, as the report underlines, ‘to provide an in-depth understanding of Children’s Centre services, including their effectiveness in relation to different management and delivery approaches and their cost’.

Briefing in full

Research brief

The ECCE evaluation studied Children’s Centres located in 30% of the most deprived areas of England. The project involved what the research brief report describes as a ‘nesting design’. This started with a national survey of Children’s Centres from which a sample of over 120 Children’s Centres were selected to participate in the other elements of the study, including providing a sample of families for the longitudinal survey. The key elements are organised as five strands:

1. Survey of Children's Centres leaders
2. Longitudinal survey of families using Children's Centres
3. Investigation of Children's Centres service delivery and reach
4. Impact analysis of the effects of Children's Centres on child, mother and family outcomes
5. Value for money (cost benefit and cost effectiveness) analysis.

The whole collection of the ECCE research reports are available at Evaluation of children's centres in England (ECCE). The five strands are as follows (a more detailed report on the Fifth Strand – value for money – was published on at the same time as the main evaluation report.

Strand 1: Survey of Children’s Centre Leaders

The aim of Strand 1 was to profile Children’s Centres in the most disadvantaged areas in relation to management, staff, services, users and finance. The profile covered over 500 Children's Centres, representative of all Phase 1 and 2 centres in the most disadvantaged areas. Leaders were interviewed in 2011 and 2013 on the key aspects of service provision. The data were used to understand models of provision and to select centres for subsequent stages of the evaluation.

The first leaders survey (findings in Tanner et al, 2012) was conducted using a web survey and telephone interviewing between July and September 2011. The report provides findings from the survey and gives a ‘snapshot’ of service provision at that time. A group of 128 Children's Centres were selected from the 509 responses to take part in subsequent stages of the evaluation including the longitudinal survey of parents and children, detailed data collection from Children’s Centres and the costs of services.

A follow-up survey of centre leaders was conducted by telephone between October and November 2013. The aim was to describe how Children’s Centre services had changed between 2011 and 2013. The report (Poole et al - NatCen Social Research, 2015) explores change and continuity since the baseline survey in 2011 in relation to key aspects of provision:

- management and governance;
- staff numbers;
- salary and qualifications;
- types of services including evidence based programmes;
- families and children using centres;
- income, expenditure and the impact of funding changes.
Strand 2: Longitudinal Survey of Families using Children's Centres

The Strand 2 longitudinal survey of families using Children's Centres followed families who were registered with centres from when their child was 9 to 18 months old until they were 3 to 3.5 years. A total of 10,187 parents were selected from 128 centres and invited to take part in the survey, and this resulted in 5,717 interviews carried out between January and April 2012. It collected data on:

- families' use of Children's Centres;
- other service use including childcare and early education;
- parent physical and mental health;
- family functioning;
- child health;
- child cognitive and social-emotional development;
- socio-demographic characteristics.

The baseline survey of families using Children's Centres in the most disadvantaged areas resulted in a findings report which was the third ECCE output (Maisey, 2013). The key aims of the longitudinal survey of parents were to:

- Provide estimates of the level of take-up of various children and family services among families with different socio-economic characteristics.
- Monitor changes in patterns of use over time.
- Collect data on different aspects of child development and family functioning in order to enable an analysis of impact on child outcomes from using different types of service.

A further report published in 2015 presents findings from across three waves of the longitudinal survey registered with Children's Centres (Maisey et al, 2015). The longitudinal survey of families collected data when the selected child was aged 9 to 18 months, at age 2 (by telephone in 2013) and at about 3 (face to face in 2014). The final wave included interviews with parents and the collection of child outcome data resulting in interviews with 2,602 families.

The report provided insight on Children's Centres from the perspective of families and the longitudinal survey provides a baseline assessment of families alongside early outcome measures from which to assess impact. This allowed an exploration of how families' use of Children's Centres changed over time. The data presents a picture of the families; the extent to which they use different services; and how they fared in relation to the outcome measures selected for the study. The report showed how these statistics had changed over the three-year study and how they vary significantly by families' socio-economic circumstances.

Strand 3: Investigation of Children's Centre Service Delivery and Reach

Strand 3, the investigation of Children's Centres' service delivery, multi-agency working, parenting and reach, involved visits to 121 of the 128 Children's Centres sampled for Strand 2. The first two waves of fieldwork were carried out in 2012 and 2013 to assess:

- the range of activities and services that centres deliver;
- leadership;
- evidence-based practice;
- parenting support services;
- partnership working.
Strand 3 also involved a profiling exercise in 117 Children's Centre areas to assess their reach: information was compared about the centres and the families that use them to existing data on the demographic composition of the centres' catchment areas.

The delivery of family services by Children's Centres report was the fourth output of the ECCE project (Goff et al, 2013) and it focuses on service delivery; multi-agency working and integration; leadership and management; evidence-based practice; and reach and structure of Children's Centres.

The second report within this strand aimed to provide new and up-to-date information on the areas served by the Children's Centres and how well these were covered (Smith et al, 2014). The report focuses on the extent to which centres 'reach' eligible families, their neighbourhood characteristics and levels of use. The analysis goes beyond the centres and their users to focus in more detail on the local neighbourhoods and the 'reach areas' they serve.

The ECCE's sixth output was the report on parenting services in Children's Centres (Evangelou et al, 2014). Fieldwork carried out in 117 centres across England in 2013, involved a mixed methods approach including staff self-report questionnaires and face to face interviews with both staff and parents. The study aimed to collect information on:

- provision for parenting and services for parents across the sample;
- staff perceptions on family needs;
- the range of parenting programmes delivered by a particular Children's Centre and any associated centres within their cluster;
- how Children's Centres manage their services;
- staff perceptions of the benefits for parents and children;
- parental views of Children's Centre services.

The final report within this strand of activity was on organisation, services and reach of Children's Centres (Sylva et al, 2015). This study synthesises the findings from the earlier Strand 3 reports, as well as reporting changes between 2012 and 2013.

**Strand 4: Impact Analysis studying the effects on Children's Centres on Child and Family Outcomes**

Strand 4 studied variations in the take-up and patterns of use of Children's Centres and their services amongst a sample of users to assess their effectiveness in relation to family and child outcomes. The analysis drew on quantitative data about Children's Centres and their characteristics (Strands 1 and 3), the use of Children's Centre services by children and families, and family and child outcome data (Strand 2).

The changes in resourcing and characteristics of Children's Centres was the tenth output of the ECCE project (Sammons et al, 2015). This report is built on an analysis of a sample of 117 centres and presents findings that summarises some of the changes to funding, resources and services that were captured via questionnaires completed by centre staff during the period 2012-13. Specifically, this study investigates associations to show whether certain centres were more likely to have experienced change than others, and what characteristics were shared by centres that were expanding rather than reducing services. The focus of the report was chosen to follow up the main impact report described below.
The main impact report (Sammons et al, 2015) studies the ‘effects’ of Children’s Centres in improving 13 measured outcomes for a sample of users. These outcomes (family, mother and child) were chosen to reflect the aims of Children’s Centres which were intended to support parents and families, and in the longer-term provide young children with a better start to school. Thirteen outcomes were measured through the longitudinal survey (Strand 2) that recruited a sample of user families registered at a named centre with a child aged 9-18 months (mean age 14 months) and followed up to age 3 plus (mean age 38 months).

**Strand 5: The value for money of children’s centre services**

This newly published report (Gaheer et al, 2016) presents the last output of the evaluation and drew on cost data collected from 24 centres and from an analysis of the associations between centre use and improved child and family outcomes. It also uses existing evidence on the links between child and family outcomes when a child is aged three and later life outcomes and on the monetary value of outcomes. As the original intention of this Strand - to estimate the overall value for money of centres - proved infeasible, value for money has instead been assessed for individual types of services delivered within centres.

**Main Findings**

- **Cost of delivery:** The average total weekly delivery cost for the 24 centres reviewed was just under £10,000 (based on 2014 prices). The total included both the costs paid by the centres and costs implicitly paid by other government and private organisations or individuals through the provision of venue space and staffing. On average, just under 60% of costs were attributable to the delivery of specific services while the remaining costs could be attributed to the general running of the centre. Staff costs formed the majority of the costs. Costs per user hour is the value of resources used to deliver one hour of a service to each child or family, including the use of resources specifically for the service and a share of the running costs. Across all services, the average cost per user hour was £30. Services using more specialised staff and operating on a one to one basis tended to have a higher hourly cost, just as the use of less skilled staff for a service offered in groups had lower average costs.

- **Associations between service use and outcomes:** The association between the use of different types of Children’s Centre services and improved family outcomes were estimated using data from the longitudinal survey of families. Regression models were estimated for a broad range of child and family outcomes comparing outcomes between families who used services at the centres and families who do not use similar services at any organisation. The models included a wide array of control variables to make allowances for other factors that might be driving any differences in outcomes. In order to obtain some insight into value for money, the associations with better outcomes for individual services were taken forward into the value for money estimation and those with poorer outcomes discarded. The value for money is therefore based on hypothetical scenarios of what the value for money would be if there were impacts of the magnitude of the positive association for each service type.

- **Monetary value of benefits:** As the ECCE study only followed children until the age of three, the potential longer term benefits of Children’s Centre services were estimated using existing evidence on the links between child and family outcomes at age three and later outcomes for the child. These links included the use of baby health services and lower probabilities of truancy, school exclusion, SEN, mental health problems and adult crime; the use of baby health services and higher educational attainment, the probability of being at work and hourly wages; the use of child play, parent support and specialist parent/family support services and...
lower probabilities of having SEN or depression; and the use of child play, parent support and specialist parent/family support services and higher educational attainment. Monetary valuations of the potential benefits were estimated for the four types of services associated with improved outcomes. The value of benefits findings in the report highlight that most of the value of the benefits of the services is dependent upon the links to improved labour market outcomes. Without the associated increase in earnings the researchers conclude that the services would offer little financial return. They also highlight that the findings also suggest that most of the benefit accrues to the individual rather than to the Government or society more broadly.

- **Value for money estimates**: Cost effectiveness compares the cost of achieving a change in a particular outcome through different interventions. The report findings present the cost effectiveness of the different types of services in raising the early home learning environment (HLE) score: specialist family/parent support services and parent support services after the child is one offer the greatest potential increase for each pound spent, while baby health and child play services have far lower cost effectiveness. The report shows that most services have a positive net benefit with the average benefit per user exceeding the cost. The report reveals that the parent services had a higher benefit to cost ratio than the more child based ones, with a ratio of over six for parent services used between the target child being aged one and three years. These highest returns are driven more by a lower cost per user than a higher benefit per user. Also presented as part of the findings is the value for money for the Government, comparing the costs paid by the Government to deliver the services with the value of the benefits accrued to the state. Unsurprisingly, given the state's minority share in the value of the benefits, most service groups have negative net benefits and benefit to cost ratio is very low.

**Conclusions**

The main contribution of the analysis in this report is regarded by the authors as not being about producing precise estimates of the value for money. Instead its contribution is to identify some key findings about how Children's Centres may offer a monetary return on their costs as set out below:

1. Under plausible hypothetical scenarios of impact, the best estimate is that some Children's Centre services provide positive value for money with the monetary valuation of improved outcomes exceeding the costs of delivery.
2. Most of the value of the benefits is derived from improved later market outcomes for children in the families using services. Without the associated increase in earnings, the services would offer very little financial return.
3. The majority of the benefits accrue to individuals through higher net earnings rather than to the Government. The best estimates suggest that only few services provide positive value for money for the Government and the returns are considerably smaller than those for total benefits.
4. Parent support and specialist family/parent support services offer better value for money than the more child-based services. This is driven more by a lower cost per user than a higher benefit per user.
5. There is limited evidence that the impact on the early home learning environment (HLE) at age three has a higher value of benefits than comparable impacts (driven by the same service) on child social development at age three.
Comment

What the detailed and thorough ECCE evaluation study reveals is not necessarily definitive judgements about the impact of Children’s Centre interventions on the lives of young children and their families but more a snapshot of the challenging and ambitious enterprise being carried out by these centres over time. The focus of the last strand of activity on value for money issues is very welcome in a sector increasingly dominated by short-term strategy which has not been subject to this kind of evaluation. The current 15 hours, and proposed 30 hours, of free childcare provision is a case in point.

The 2015 Ofsted annual report on early years and childcare highlights the overall success story of the pre-school sector with 85% of early years providers judged as good or outstanding and this picture includes the contribution of Children’s Centres. However, as part of the mixed economy in early education and childcare, Children’s Centres were not encouraged to develop their role by the Coalition Government, and Children’s Centres now have a reduced role because of reductions in local authority funding. Ofsted continues to be very vocal about the continued problem of school readiness and what is described as the ‘yawning gap’ between the most and least disadvantaged young children which threatens further improvement in the sector and beyond. This kind of gap needs more concerted policy intervention than the addition free hours of provision, however welcome for working families on low wages.

The new Secretary of State should carry out a cross-departmental review concerning the future role that Children’s Centres could play within the early years sector and their relationships with their localities and local authorities. The vision of them having a universal role and being at the heart of every community has gone. But there should be a debate about what the current problems are that the centres should be trying to address. Commentators writing in a National Children’s Bureau publication in 2014 looked at the possibilities of the centres either being responsible for small groups of families with the most serious problems versus them having a lighter touch role with a bigger group of disadvantaged families which prevented them becoming part of the smaller group. Other proposals as the way forward for the Children’s Centre role included: the prioritisation of the language development of very young children; and employment paths for their parents. It is hoped that the ECCE evaluation and other relevant research could also play into any debate about the future of this part of the early years sector.

External Links

Research brief: evaluation of childcare centres in England (ECCE)- strands 1-5

The value for money of children’s centre services (ECCE) Strand 5


Related Briefing

Foundation Years: Sure Start Children’s Centres: Commons Education Committee (January 2014)

Ofsted 2015 Early Years Annual report (July 2015)

Early Years Education and Childcare Costs : DfE economic assessment (May 2016)

For further information visit www.lgiu.org.uk or email john.fowler@lgiu.org.uk