

The role of Action for Children Children's Centres in the local service system for children and their families King's College London - Interim Report

Action for Children briefing November 2010

1. Introduction

Action for Children commissioned King's College London to investigate the impact that our Sure Start Children's Centres (SSCC) have on outcomes for vulnerable children, looking at:

- How good are we at co-ordinating different agencies within our SSCC and how does this improve outcomes for vulnerable children?
- What do our outreach services achieve for children (outcomes) and to comment on evidence behind the skills sets which are required to deliver outcomes for children?
- What do our family support services achieve for children (outcomes)?
- How good are we at achieving health outcomes (and how do our outreach and family support services support health staff in SSCC to achieve improved outcomes)?

The research project will take place between September 2010 and May 2011.

2. Interim key themes

Interim key themes identified are very promising:

- The Action for Children agency **partnership style**, working with other local agencies, maximizes service responsiveness for families, and can help protect local family support capacity, by engaging with small/medium size agencies.
- Action for Children's ability to assemble a skill mix, (including but not necessarily dependent on *formal* secondment) can ensure **cohesive and responsive service design and delivery**.
- Initial finding indicate that Action for Children is able to demonstrate how family support provision contributes to helping achieve **health outcomes** for children and families.
- Centre-based work with **adults who are parents** means that individuals can be supported in developing their capacity as *parents*; as well as *adults*, including facilitating their engagement with and entry in to the labour market.
- Helping develop the confidence of adults to undertake **good quality parenting is a key building block in the building of community capacity**.

as long as it takes

- Children’s centres have evolved a sophisticated range of mechanisms to **maximize “reach” in even the most challenging circumstances.**
- Children’s centres contribution to enhancing the economic capital of the family but also the release of **social and psychological ‘capital’** – e.g. through access to employment and training opportunities.
- Action for Children’s integrated approach to **safeguarding children** - demonstrated through a robust commitment to undertaking, along with colleagues, responsibility for safeguarding children.

3. Initial findings

The Interim Report concludes that: *“it is possible to identify an overlap/fit between services that meet the needs of children and their families and services whose identity and mode of delivery can potentially be seen to reflect ‘value for money’.”*

Outcomes data will be collected in the second phase of the research, but data already collated shows that out of 202 closed cases:

- 156 children reported improved outcomes
- 85 maintained at initial level
- only 5 showed a deterioration

The areas of most improvement related to:

- parents capacity to support their child’s health;
- parents ability to cope with difficulties; and
- improvement to the child’s learning environment.

This includes reaching the most vulnerable families, our co-ordination role in local communities undertaken in a way that does not necessitate bureaucratic mechanisms, and our capacity building in the local community. The report also highlights inter-agency work with health and an integrated approach to safeguarding.

4. Background and next steps

This briefing paper highlights key issues in terms of outcomes and themes identified so far in the initial research findings. Action for Children commissioned the study in the context of what is a particularly challenging policy period. The allocation of public spending has been, and will continue to be, under rigorous scrutiny within the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR). The study has been designed to take account of this policy imperative and the interim report coincides with the publication of some early aspects of the Government’s intended approach to the delivery of services for vulnerable and children and their families.

The final report by King’s College London will be published in May 2011. It will build on the key themes that have emerged in initial findings and seek to demonstrate the impact that our children’s centres have on vulnerable children.