

September 2008



Action for Children briefing

Action for Children Children's Centres – helping children and families in most need

Summary

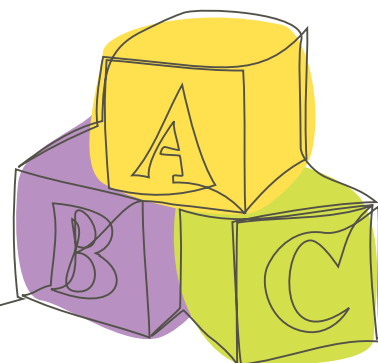
Children's Centres have the potential to give children the best start in life. Already, many Children's Centres are making a difference to the lives of children and families across England.

- ▶ As a provider of Children's Centres, Action for Children believes it has a responsibility to highlight how we help to meet the needs of the most marginalised and disadvantaged by, for example, co-locating Children's Centres at primary schools or tailoring services to meet the needs of minority ethnic parents.
- ▶ When delivering Children's Centres, Action for Children prioritises the need to offer an inclusive, engaging, integrated and effective service to meet the differing needs of children and families. This approach often involves working with other local voluntary organisations or community groups and volunteers.
- ▶ Children's Centres need to be an integral part of the local community and to develop innovative and tailored ways to engage with and respond to the most disadvantaged families in the areas. Failure to do so will only result in letting down the children who will benefit the most from this initiative.

Background

Children's Centres are transforming the landscape of early years provision across England. Well over one million children and their families can access holistic, integrated services at these centres – the provision of early education, health, Job Centre Plus, childcare and family support services under one roof helps ensure children have the best possible start in life.

No one disputes the importance of investing in early years provision or its link to outcomes later on in life. The first years of a child's life are crucial in building the foundations for the future – it is vital that every child, regardless of their background or circumstances, has the chance to thrive. As one of the main providers of Children's Centres, at Action for Children we continuously assess our practice to ensure we provide a flexible, responsive service to those children and families in most need.



Action for Children

Action for Children is one of the UK's leading children's charities. We run nearly 500 services and work with over 178,000 children, young people and their families across the UK. We are a leading provider of Children's Centres in England, as well as intensive family support for families in crisis.

Action for Children meets the needs of the children and young people in most need of support, helping them to achieve their full potential. Through our work and through speaking out, we seek to break the cycle of deprivation. We challenge injustice and empower children to overcome the obstacles in their lives that hold them back. We tailor our work to local circumstances, in partnership with children and young people, families, communities and local organisations.

The policy agenda

Children's Centres are a vital part of the government's 10-year childcare strategy to give families access to affordable, flexible, high-quality childcare. The government is on track to meet its commitment to have 3,500 Children's Centres by 2010 – these centres will be in all communities and will engage with all families, particularly those with young children who are hard to reach. By the end of 2008, all of the most disadvantaged areas of England will be served by a Sure Start Children's Centre.

The Children and Young People Review conducted by the Treasury highlighted how crucial the years between birth and age three are to children's development. It commented that: 'studies show that the foundations of adult health are laid in early childhood and before birth. Slow growth and poor emotional support raise the lifetime risk of poor physical health and reduce physical, cognitive and emotional functioning in adulthood.'¹ This underlines the important role and responsibility of Children's Centres to improve life outcomes for children.

While Children's Centres are making a difference, analysis found that some of the most vulnerable and excluded were missing out. Research from the national evaluation of the Sure Start programme in 2005 showed that the most vulnerable did not benefit.² In 2007, the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee reported that 'most Children's Centres are not doing enough to reach the most disadvantaged families'.³ A National Audit Office Report questioned the effectiveness of Children's Centres to reach various groups such as lone and teenage

parents, disabled children's parents, and parents from some ethnic minorities in areas with small minority populations.⁴

However, by 2008, the national evaluation report revealed beneficial effects for almost all children and families living in Sure Start areas, reflecting greater experience in reaching out to the most vulnerable households.⁵

Action for Children have made targeting the most vulnerable children a priority in our Children's Centres. We are, therefore, pleased with the requirement for Children's Centres to reach out to the most vulnerable groups in the communities they serve. Failure to act on these findings will severely limit the ability of Children's Centres to meet the needs of all children, and will let down those they aim to help the most. Action for Children believes reaching out to the most vulnerable must be a priority for all Children's Centre providers.

¹ *Aiming High for children: supporting families*, HM Treasury, 2007

² *Early Impacts of Sure Start Local Programmes on Children and Families*, National Evaluation Report 13, University of London, 2005

³ *Conclusions and Recommendations*, pg 5 *Sure Start Children's Centres: Thirty-eighth Report of Session 2006-07*, HC 261, July 2007

⁴ See NAO (2006) *Sure Start Children's Centres, Report by the Controller and Auditor General*, London: The Stationery Office

⁵ *The Impact of Sure Start Local Programmes on Three Year Olds and Their Families*, National Evaluation of Sure Start Research Team at Birkbeck, University of London, March 2008

In addition, it is pleasing to see that the Treasury review highlighted the importance of children's services delivering proactive support, offering a seamless provision of services when children and their families require them. It also stressed the need for the greater personalisation of children's services to meet the individual needs of children and their families, and for the empowering of parents (both mothers and fathers) in the design and delivery of the services provided by Children's Centres. From our experience, this kind of approach, with an emphasis on prevention, can only benefit those children and families in most need.

Children's Centres should be the one-stop-shop for children and families. Increasingly, Action for Children is co-locating specialist support such as intensive family support alongside mainstream services. We believe no Children's Centre should be totally prescriptive in its approach – services should be tailored to meet the needs of local families and developed in partnership with parents and the local community.

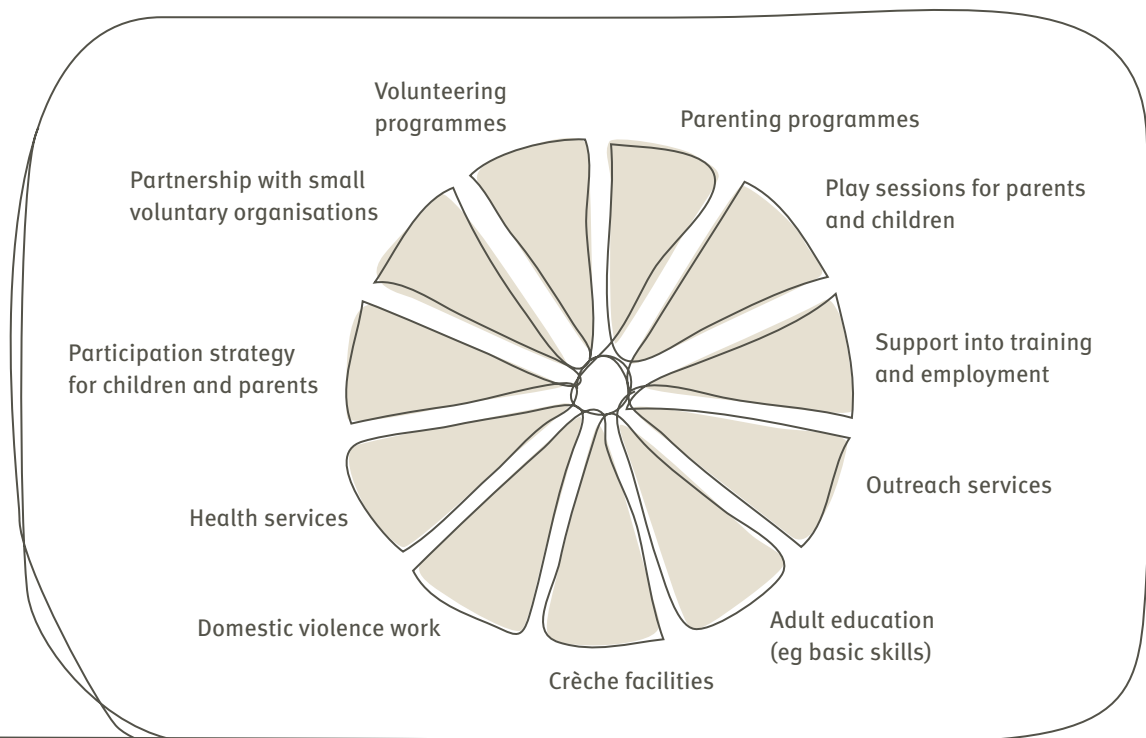
Action for Children Children's Centres

Action for Children is one of the main providers of Sure Start Children's Centres, in partnership with local authorities. Each Action for Children Children's Centre is unique, as it responds to local need. For example, we successfully deliver Children's Centres in rural, urban and inner city communities, working with families from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Our Children's Centres are specifically designed to meet the needs of those children considered the hardest to reach.

We believe that Children's Centres are a key part of community-based networks to support children and families with a wide range of needs, including those who need intensive support at particular times in their lives. In this way, Action for Children Children's Centres are a vehicle for achieving progressive universalism. Our experience of partnership working, combined with our extensive expertise, knowledge and capacity, enables us to offer a flexible approach, meeting the changing needs of children and families in local communities. (See below for the kind of services offered at a typical Action for Children Children's Centre.)

A typical Action for Children Children's Centre

Service profile of a typical Action for Children Children's Centre. This is based on the services that are present in 80 percent or more of Action for Children Children's Centres

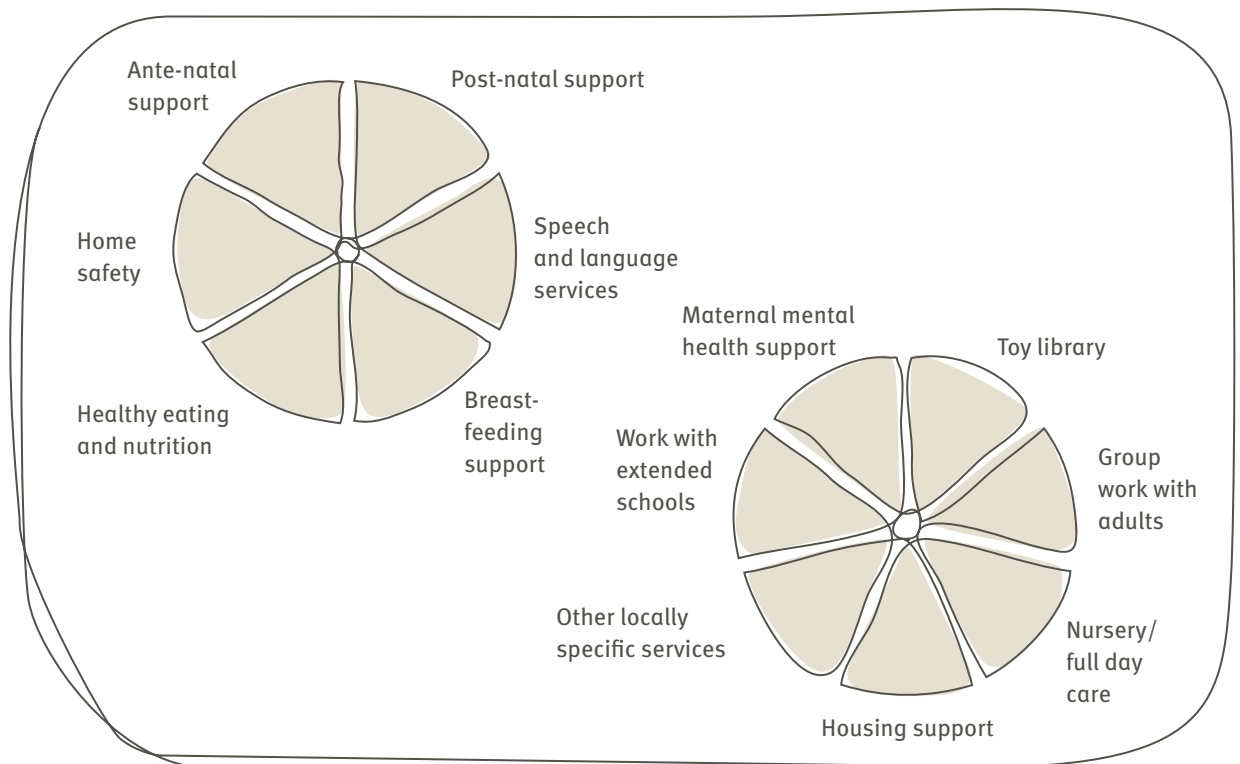


In addition to the Action for Children ‘core offer’ provided in our Children’s Centres, we also provide other services that respond to and are tailored to meet local need. Examples are given below.

Other services provided at Action for Children Children’s Centres

Right: Typical Children’s Centre health services

Far right: Menu of common extra services in Action for Children Children’s Centres



Effective approach

It is essential that the work of Children’s Centres is constantly assessed to ensure that services are responsive to the changing needs of children and parents. At Action for Children, we see it as a priority that services are performing, and monitor this through self-assessment and internal evaluation, as well as external reviews and research. There is a responsibility on service providers to show the difference they are making to local families.

Every Child Matters outcomes

The key driver of Children’s Centres is an integrated approach to achieving the five outcomes of the Every Child Matters agenda: be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution, and achieve economic wellbeing.

Action for Children has developed an outcome-focused service planning framework for our Children’s Centres services as well as a series of common indicators organised around Every Child Matters outcomes. This ensures that the services we provide are focused and measurable.

Emotional wellbeing

One of the hidden successes of Children’s Centres has been the way in which parental involvement and delivering child-centred services has improved the emotional wellbeing of both parents and children. The whole-family approach improves parent–child relationships and the tailored approach to meeting the needs of individual children builds their confidence and self-esteem. For the parent, the various ways of being involved (from volunteering opportunities or learning basic skills to being part of the governance of the Children’s Centres) also builds their confidence and enables them to further develop their skills, experience and employment opportunities, benefiting the child, parent and family.

Meeting the needs of hard-to-reach families

In line with our organisational values, we have made it a priority to tailor our services to meet the needs of the families and children who are often the hardest to reach. Action for Children's approach to Children's Centres can be summarised as:

Inclusive

It is essential that Children's Centres provide tailored approaches to reach out to the most vulnerable or marginalised families, including those who are considered invisible, who do not proactively seek services or who may be vulnerable for other reasons, such as having learning difficulties or mental health problems. Engaging with under-represented groups, such as minority ethnic groups, travellers and asylum seekers, must also be a key component of Children's Centre work.

Below is an example of how our Children's Centres are meeting the needs of minority ethnic children and their parents.

Research by De Montfort University also supports the approach taken by Action for Children to reach to those in most need. For example, when examining the impact of Action for Children Sure Start services in Dudley, the researchers concluded that: 'Family support workers frequently form a "bridge" for isolated families to wider services. They extend the social capital available to the family. This is particularly important for those parents who lack confidence or social networks and cannot easily access help for themselves.'⁶ Action for Children strongly believes that this kind of provision and emphasis should be the norm in all Children's Centres.

Action for Children's Kates Hill and Sledmere Children's Centre – reaching out to minority ethnic parents and children

Action for Children's Kates Hill and Sledmere Children's Centre, which is located in a very ethnically diverse community, found that a significant number of children spoke little or no English when they started school. This meant that starting school was a very traumatic time for the children. In addition, the Centre knew that many of their parents were also struggling with English as a second language. Many of the families were very isolated and were having difficulty accessing even basic services, such as the local doctor, or finding out what services were available to them.

To address this, the Action for Children team launched the Early Start English for Speakers of Other Languages Programme at the Centre, helping both the children and their parents learn English and boost their confidence in social situations. Sixteen parents and their children attended the first course, all of whom came to us by word of mouth. Using local networks, the Centre also asked for help to identify families who would benefit the most from the course.

Over the 10-week course, the confidence of the parents grew and this was crucial for their children's development. Many of the parents are going on to full ESOL courses, while others are staying on with their children for 'play and stay' sessions at the centre. By combining English with a focus on their children, this course enabled the team to reach families they had never been able to reach before.

▶ Engaging

Involving children, families and volunteers in the delivery of services is key to providing services that respond to the needs of local parents and their children. Increasing community participation through volunteering and service user participation also gives a more personalised service.

Parental involvement

Action for Children has a strong tradition of empowering those who use our services. Encouraging parental involvement in the running and governance of our Children's Centres often brings benefits to both the parent and the Centre (for example, involving

fathers in service design has enabled us to develop more accessible and appropriate services) and buddying schemes are an effective way of engaging with hard-to-reach families.

Buddy scheme – Action for Children Sure Start Aspley Bells Lane

Action for Children Sure Start Aspley Bells Lane has developed a holistic approach to volunteering that includes training, support and links to the local college network. The buddy scheme is a small, low-cost initiative that uses volunteers from the local community to help get Action for Children Children's Centre services to children in otherwise hard-to-reach families. Buddies trained through the scheme achieve national accreditation with the Open College network. The scheme includes a training pack, mentoring support, crèche provision and other childcare costs for participants.

▶ Integrated

Bringing together local services, professionals and volunteers to enrich the service offer is one of the most important elements of Children's Centres. Working with schools, as part of the extended schools programme, as well as a range of organisations and bodies in health and housing is necessary if we are to meet the complex and multiple needs of children and their families.



Linking Children's Centres with schools can yield significant benefits, by ensuring a smoother transition to school life for children. Following is an example of Action for Children working with schools to provide an integrated service of childcare and education which is responsive to local needs.

Working with schools

Action for Children runs Valley Park Children's Centre, which is co-located with the local primary school. This partnership has resulted in a more integrated and seamless delivery of service and support to children and families, from the early years through the important transition to school, something that can be difficult for both parents and the child.

Parent representatives from the Children's Centre are on the school's governing body and are also members of sub-groups, regularly attending and participating in strategic and governors' meetings.

The Children's Centre also links with the school to provide wrap-around care and has regular joint activities and planning meetings with school staff. Action for Children provides the core offer, which involves adult learning courses, parenting courses and health services. An important part of working together means that Children's Centre staff attend school staff meetings and vice versa. There is also regular informal contact and liaison regarding work with children and families.

Innovative partnerships

Working with other local organisations can also enhance the services and responsiveness of Children's Centres, for example, with the local Co-operative or, in some cases, corporate organisations. Following is an example of how Action for Children has engaged in partnerships to respond to the needs of local children and their parents.

Action for Children Sure Start Central Link – intergenerational learning

The Walled Garden project is an Action for Children partnership with Age Concern aimed at intergenerational learning and creative use of outdoor space. Age Concern occupy an historic house with extensive grounds, provided by the Pilkington Family Trust. Action for Children Sure Start Central Link and Age Concern have worked together to begin restoring the kitchen garden to create an accessible outdoor space used for play, learning about the environment, local history, and sharing skills and experience.

Working with health professionals

Ensuring that health professionals are closely involved in the services offered by Children's Centres is also important to giving children the best start in life. Health professionals are the first point of contact with parents even before the birth of their child. This offers a prime opportunity for engagement and relationship building between the parent and Children's

Centre. Services such as post-natal or breast-feeding support, or information about healthy eating and nutrition, can make a real difference to parents and families. Below is an example of joint working between Action for Children Sure Start in Exeter and the local Primary Care Trust.

Action for Children Sure Start Exeter – working with health professionals

Action for Children Sure Start Exeter has pioneered an innovative parent–infant mental health service, which involves a parent–infant mental health specialist (psychologist), using the CARE-Index training for staff. This service aims to meet the needs of parents arising from CARE-Index assessment and parents with post-natal depression. Action for Children Sure Start Exeter is also piloting a parent–infant mental health model for Exeter Primary Care Trust, which will roll out across Exeter and through the Children's trust to the rest of Devon. This is a whole-programme promotion of preventative parent–infant mental health in partnership with statutory agencies (health visitors, midwives, adult services and Sure Start Children's Centre staff) and includes universal attachment surveillance through health visiting.

As already highlighted, health services provide an important component of Children's Centres. Working closely with health professionals such as midwives can act as an important link to hard-to-reach families and introduce them to the services provided by Children's Centres.

Conclusions

Children's Centres are making a real difference to the lives of many children and families. To build on this success, however, Children's Centres research findings present a challenge for us all, particularly focusing on how well they meet the needs of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children in society. Action for Children is committed to working in partnership

with local authorities, other providers and with parents and children from the most excluded backgrounds, to meet their particular needs through our Children's Centre work. It is essential that all providers of Children's Centres do much more to reach out to those groups currently excluded from these services to avoid letting down those who are most in need.

For more information about our Growing Strong campaign, please contact the Action for Children Public Affairs team on **020 7704 7132** or at publicaffairs@actionforchildren.org.uk

as long as it takes