

July 2011

# Action for Children briefing

## Children's centres in 2011: improving outcomes for the children who use Action for Children children's centres

### Introduction

Action for Children commissioned a research team at King's College London to evaluate the impact its children's centres have on outcomes for children. The study took place during 2010–11 and addressed key topics including health, inter-agency collaboration, access to services and the role of outreach. Quantitative and qualitative methods captured data from a sample of Action for Children children's centres across England.

### Context

The study period coincided with robust public and political debate around the allocation of public spending, alongside an extensive review of services and outcomes for children and young people, through five parallel reviews.<sup>1</sup>

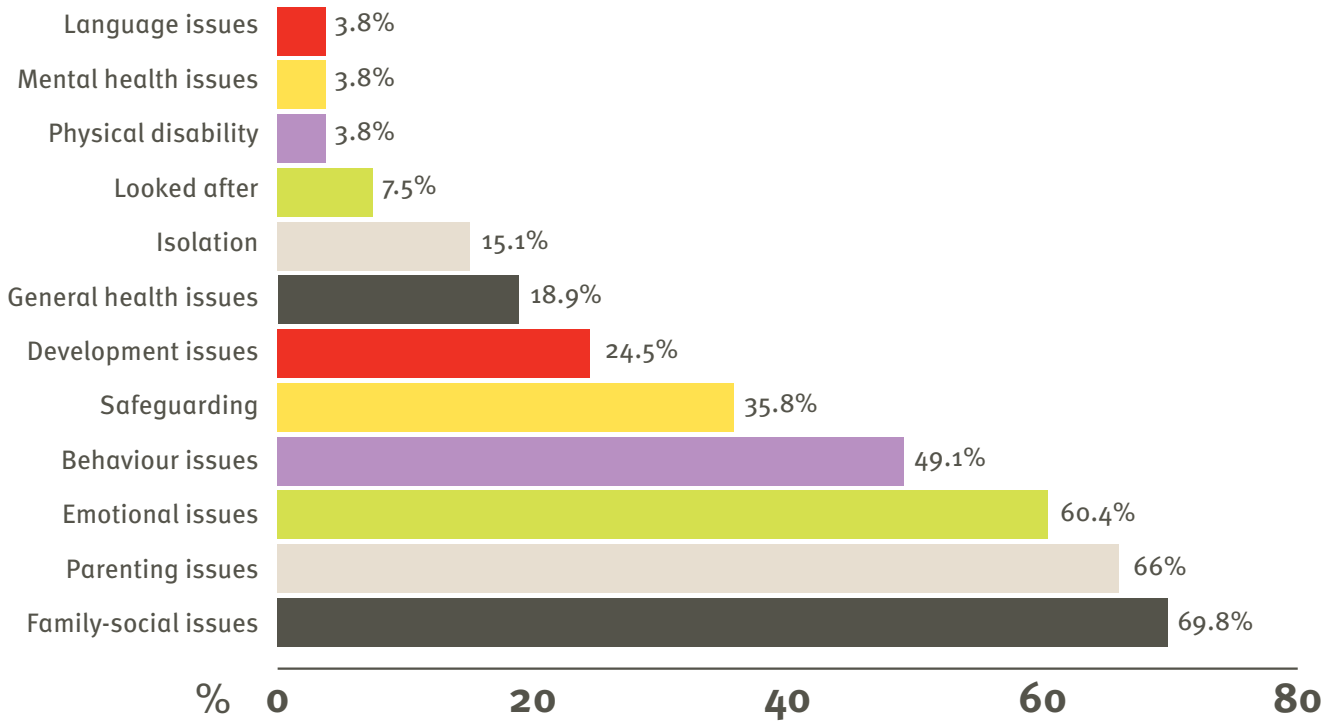
Evaluations already commissioned by the Government and other bodies have consistently shown that children's centres can 'host' a set of services delivered by a complex mix of other agencies, including health, social work, early years and employment-related services. Evaluations of Sure Start local programmes/children's centres which have been completed, at both national and local levels, have pointed to the advantages for children and families of delivering targeted services in a framework of universal services. This also maximises the effective management of resources.

### Project objectives

The project objectives were:

- ▶ Which models of joint working operate in children's centres?
- ▶ To what extent do children's centres succeed in co-ordinating different agencies in their areas?
- ▶ Do, and if so in what way, children's centres improve outcomes for vulnerable children?
- ▶ What outcomes do children's centre outreach services achieve for children and what is the state of the evidence behind the skills' sets which are required to deliver positive outcomes for children?
- ▶ What outcomes do family support services achieve for children?
- ▶ How good are children's centres at achieving health outcomes (and how do their outreach and family support services support health staff in children's centres to achieve improved outcomes)?
- ▶ What are the implications of the available data for the nature of future service developments in Action for Children policy and practice?

## Child's needs



## Findings

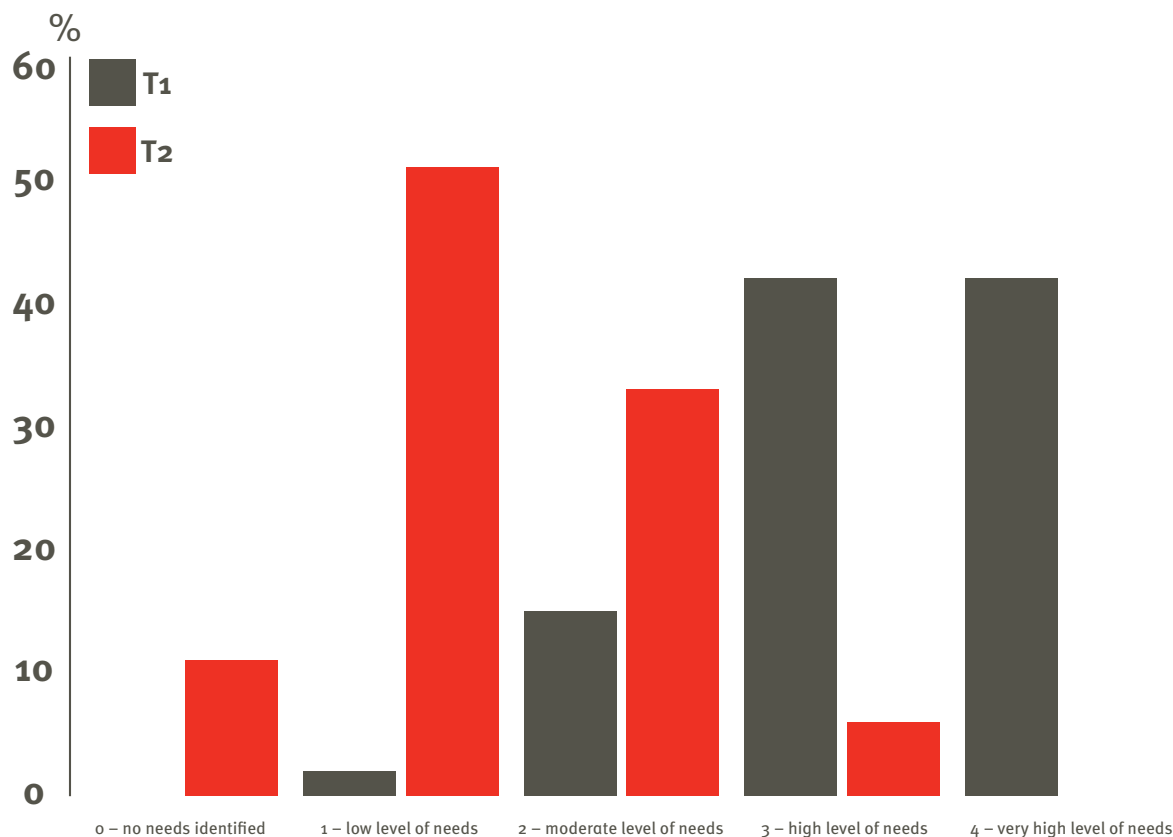
### What needs did the children bring to the children's centres?

The vast majority of children had family or social problems including experience of domestic violence and parents with mental health problems and alcohol misuse. Parenting issues were identified as a clear challenge faced by one or both of the parents. These were usually a result of social, economic and mental problems and were considered to have direct implications on the child concerned. The graph above shows a wide range of needs with many overlaps, meaning most of the children had multiple needs.

### Focusing on outcomes

The research highlighted that it is essential to acknowledge the complexity of measuring outcomes in the relatively short period of the study. The graph on the opposite page shows overview of outcomes at point of referral (T1) and point of data collection (T2, ie either case closure – four-fifths, or open at file analysis – one-fifth). In respect of a high proportion of the families, the maintenance of 'status quo' is itself a positive outcome. In terms of health outcomes, it is only realistic to expect very obvious measurable outcomes over a much longer period. This research reality underlines the validity of the concept of 'as long as it takes': Action for Children's endline which expresses its commitment to always being there for children.

The data provided an overall picture of 'children doing better' in open cases after the beginning, and in closed cases by the end of their contact with the children's centre staff and the services on offer.



## Key messages

Key messages of the evaluation included:

**Maximising reach:** Action for Children children’s centres have evolved a sophisticated range of mechanisms to maximise ‘reach’ in even the most challenging circumstances. The Action for Children agency partnership style, working with other local agencies, and crucially health, maximises service responsiveness for families and can help protect local family support capacity by engaging with small/medium-sized agencies.

**Partnerships with health services and NHS professionals:** The study has identified the potential role for children’s centres to offer commissioners of health and children’s services a joined-up service that achieves positive outcomes for children and adds value to their investment in respective services. Children’s centres offer centre-based opportunities for local health professionals to engage with parents in a family-focused setting; they seem to have had particular success in meeting health-related need through the engagement of

community-based midwives and health visitors and the potential to consolidate links with GPs.

**Maximising investment at the same time as building community capacity:** Children’s centres offer a wide range of ‘volunteer opportunities’ for members of the local community. These are beneficial to users of their services and are also helpful in enabling parents and members of local communities to share in support for families. While some volunteers may use this as a stepping-stone into employment, others may find it useful in developing social and community capital.

**Access and acceptability for all parents:** Children’s centres have been sensitive to the wariness of parents and have made efforts to reduce the risk of stigma. A key part of the children’s centres’ work has been that while they have stressed accessibility, they have also engaged in outreach. It is this that may reverse disengagement and strengthen the link to parents who are most isolated and vulnerable and least able to meet the health needs of their children. They also work with many children with disabilities and long-term health conditions.

**Meeting some needs for most children to ensure that the needs of vulnerable children are identified and met:** Action for Children children's centres can deliver a range of preventative services which make a major contribution to a range of outcomes for children – including health outcomes, behavioural outcomes and developmental outcomes – all of which contribute short-term and lifelong benefits, including the enhancement of school readiness. This breadth of early intervention applies as importantly to children whose various special needs have already been identified, as to families who struggle with the challenges posed by the task of parenting, and who may need short periods of support in order to weather crisis or change. A number of the children the children's centres work with have raised child protection concerns, although levels of risk vary. In a small but significant number of cases, the children's centres are part of a web of support for very vulnerable children.

## Conclusion

Action for Children children's centres have the potential to act as a gateway, and in some cases one-stop shop, for the early intervention which we know from the international and national evidence base, can improve outcomes, especially health outcomes, for children both during their childhood and in later life.

The research findings highlight the value of the policy and practice approaches found in the children's centres and would suggest the Action for Children service style constitutes a very timely and effective way of delivering services in a period of particular resource challenge. For families, the children's centres constitute a non-stigmatising and popular route into services; for service agencies and professionals they provide a crucial resource to help them co-ordinate their work to the benefit of children, at the same time as reducing inefficiency and lack of co-ordination.

The King's College London executive summary and full final report are available here: <http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/policy-research/research>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.education.gov.uk/munroreview/> (assessed 31/05/11)  
<http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/g/graham%20allens%20review%20of%20early%20intervention.pdf>  
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