

# Closed Doors – briefing

*Children's centre usage between 2014/15 and 2017/18*



## About

From before they are born until their twenties, Action for Children helps disadvantaged children across the UK. We improve the lives of over 300,000 children, young people, parents and carers every year by doing what's right, doing what's needed, and doing what works for children.

We run over 100 children's centres in England and work with parliamentarians to give every child the ability to reach their potential.

## Recommendations

From relationships to educational outcomes, the earliest years will influence the rest of a child's life. To make sure all children get the best start in life, government must:

- set a clear direction for children's centres, introducing an outcomes framework to help clarify requirements and direct resources more effectively;
- address current funding challenges and use the next Spending Review to allocate additional funding to local authorities for children's services;
- work with local authorities to maintain up-to-date records on children's centre usage, ensuring sufficient local provision to meet need.

## Background

It has been more than 20 years since a network of children's centres was established across England, bringing together programmes and local early years services. This reflects the shared ambition across government to improve outcomes for pre-school children.

Despite successive governments raising levels of development, children from poorer backgrounds remain behind their peers. Only **57% of these children** are ready for school at age five, compared to **74% of their better-off peers**. The gap between low-income children and their peers closed by only two percentage points between 2013/14 and 2017/18. Many of these children will find it difficult to catch up, which has the potential to influence their entire future.

## The changing face of children's centres

Children's centres provide support to families to overcome challenges and help to provide a safe, warm and loving environment for children. They are ideally placed to increase the proportion of children deemed to be school-ready by age five.

However, this landscape is changing. The funding available for local authority children's services has fallen, with local authorities having **£3 billion less** to deliver services in 2017/18 than in 2010/11. This has left councils with little choice but to cut spending on non-statutory services such as children's centres, with research indicating over 1,000 have closed their doors in the past decade.

Many of those centres that have remained open have reduced the level of service on offer despite no fall in demand. Our research also shows that many of these services are increasingly targeted at families with complex needs. Worryingly, we know over 1,000 children's centres have **not received an Ofsted inspection in over five years**, leaving uncertainty around the quality of these services.

## Children's centre usage

Local authority spending on children's centres **fell by £327m between 2014/15 and 2017/18**. Our research shows that, during the same period, the number of children using children's centres **decreased by 400,000** to 1.8m – a fall of around 18%.

This fall comes despite there being no reduction in demand for support, with the number of children aged under five deemed to be in need remaining roughly constant and the number subject to a child protection plan falling only slightly. Providing early support for families through services offered by children's centres is a highly effective way to prevent families reaching crisis point.

Data from our own children's centres shows that **nearly two-thirds** (62%) report working with families with more complex needs. The same proportion also told us that the time spent working with each child has increased, likely a result of the increasingly targeted nature of services. Our findings also show that, with centres becoming more targeted, the proportion of children aged under five who have used a children's centre **fell from 50% in 2014/15 to 41% in 2017/18**.

Unlike children's centres, early education has been the subject of significant level of policy focus and investment. The number of children under five accessing funded early education has therefore risen by 7%. But, despite being a valuable area of investment, a Department for Education survey found more than half of parents reporting that their early education provider doesn't offer advice about different activities to do at home. This is an area where children's centres have an important role to play, remaining popular among parents and offering ideas about learning and play activities.

## Age five outcomes

Local authorities have a duty to improve outcomes for all children by the time they are aged five, and to reduce inequalities. The support offered by children's centres plays a central role in improving outcomes for children in their early years.

However, there has been a persistent gap in the proportion of children achieving a "Good Level of Development" based on their family income. In 2017/18, the gap between children eligible for free school meals and their peers was 17% – **a fall of just two percentage points since 2013/14**. Recent data suggests this gap is now increasing.

We found that, in those local authorities where the number of children using centres in the last four years has increased, the gap between low-income children and their peers has **closed by an average of 0.5 percentage points**. Meanwhile, those local authorities experiencing a drop in children's centre usage have seen the gap grow by an average of 0.3 percentage points.

Our findings also show that the number of children using children's centres has **fallen fastest in more deprived areas**. The most deprived local authorities in England witnessed a 22% decline in usage compared to a fall of only 12% in the least deprived local authorities. Worryingly, more deprived areas typically record poorer outcomes for children at age five, which suggests that there is a greater need for the services provided by children's centres.

## Monitoring children's centre usage

The Childcare Act 2006 requires local authorities to offer sufficient children's centre provision to meet the needs of families. It is unclear how local authorities monitor this duty, nor does the Department for Education scrutinise performance.

Without a clear picture of children's centre usage, it is difficult to tell whether provision meets the needs of families. Two in three councillors have reported that a lack of clear direction and funding is driving children's centres closures.

The Department's decision to suspend Ofsted inspections of children's centres has removed a route of demonstrating the high quality services on offer. Developing an outcomes framework would help to clarify requirements and direct resources more effectively. This in turn would help children to consistently reach important milestones, and ensure the most disadvantaged children are reached.

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