

BEYOND THE BUILDING:

THE EVOLUTION OF CHILDREN'S CENTRES

Children's centres briefing series



BACKGROUND

The last few years have been challenging for children's centres. As a result, they are changing the way they operate to extend 'beyond the building'. This paper looks at how they can continue to evolve and focus their efforts to become the core mechanism for delivering improved life chances for children in the early years.

Tightening budgets have forced local authorities to make difficult decisions about prioritising resources. At the same time, there has been renewed impetus from central Government for a focus on working with the most disadvantaged families.

Increases in targeted work in children's centres is putting their ability to meet and engage with a broad range of families, and identify problems early, at risk. More activities and programmes which are open to all local families can be retained by linking children's centres with services accessed by the vast majority of children, like health visitors and childcare.

This will ensure that precious resources are aligned in the crucial foundation years, when the right support can have a major impact on children's future life chances, from the moment they start school to the day they take their GCSEs.

To get this right, a shared goal is needed so that all local authorities are striving to improve children's life chances from the earliest years onwards. National Government should introduce an outcomes framework for children's centres to provide the accountability required.

Local authorities must harness opportunities presented by the new and diverse ways they're delivering children's centre activities across the community, rather than from a single site. Strong leadership to bring services together is needed to prevent service fragmentation and to ensure families are given opportunities to have their say, so that services work for them.

This briefing looks at:

1. The current picture for children's centres
2. The importance of retaining open access services within children's centres
3. Flexible approaches to delivering services going 'beyond the building'
4. Embracing opportunities by introducing an outcomes framework, building stronger leadership and parental voice



What are the challenges facing children's centres?	How could these challenges be overcome?	What impact would these changes have?
<p>Reduced resources and revised statutory guidance has led to centres doing more targeted work.</p> <p>It is increasingly hard for centres to provide activities that all families can access.</p> <p>There is a risk that centres could become more stigmatising and less effective as a mechanism whereby children and families receive help early before problems escalate.</p>	<p>Local authorities should retain a minimum level of open access provision in children's centres by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Prioritising open access services, such as Stay and Play and drop-in health clinics, in the foundation years, particularly from birth to two-and-a-half ■ Linking children's centres with access to the free childcare entitlement for two-to-four-year-olds and with health visitors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Children's centres are accessed by a wide range of children and parents in the early years, and not seen as stigmatising – a barrier for families' getting support when they need it ■ Better identification of those children who require targeted support and prevention of problems that will cost more later on in their lives ■ Families with younger children have higher engagement with a range of services supporting healthy development and school readiness ■ Resources in the early years are aligned and centres are an effective mechanism for bringing services that most children and parents need together
<p>Funding reductions are prompting local reviews of children's centres to consider how to maximise resources, with an increasing move to multiple sites to deliver programmes and classes.</p> <p>As services diversify, there is a lack of accountability about what children's centres should be aiming for, potentially putting vital work in the early years at risk and fragmenting delivery.</p>	<p>National Government should introduce an outcomes framework for children's centres, focused on children reaching a good level of development by age five and improving children's life chances.</p> <p>Local authorities should embrace the use of multiple sites, taking classes and programmes to locations across the community that work well for children and parents.</p> <p>A flexible approach should be underpinned by strong leadership across a local area, and on-going consultation with parents.</p>	<p>An outcomes framework would:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Drive local services and programmes towards a single goal, delivering better outcomes for children by age five, impacting upon school readiness, healthy development and future education and employment prospects ■ Provide accountability at a local level ■ Allow local authorities to retain local freedoms to organise centres in the best way for their community, prevent service fragmentation and strengthen support available for very young children and their parents

BEYOND THE BUILDING BRIEFING SERIES

The difference children's centres make to children and parents can be significant. Few other local services in the last decade have proven to be as popular or sought to address such an important goal – to give children the best start in life.

The programmes and support children's centres offer do make a difference. Research has found improvements in parenting and the home environment amongst parents taking part in programmes.¹ These, in turn, benefit children. There is strong evidence that the right support at this early stage has a positive impact across a child's lifetime.²

One of the strengths of centres has been to bring services and programmes together for families and young children to have access to integrated, easily accessible health, early years and family support. There is a lack of alternative provision that offers this range and combination of support to families on a daily basis.

In a difficult funding climate, children's centres are facing the same challenges as other local services. Budgets across England have been reduced annually over the past few years.³ At the same time, national policy is directing centres toward more targeted work and away from universal programmes.

As a major voluntary sector provider of children's centres we understand the challenges children's centres are facing, as well as the ways in which they are changing. We know that the way in which support is being delivered is going beyond buildings in single locations, and there is potential for children's centres to evolve to better meet children and parent's needs.

We believe that children's centres should and can retain a vital role in supporting children and families in communities across England. To achieve this, we need to go beyond the debate about centre closures and funding issues, and consider how centres can innovate and develop to meet current and future challenges.

METHODOLOGY

Our series is based on a survey of 450 children's centre staff working across England completed earlier this year. We also interviewed a number of staff working in our children's centres to develop our recommendations.

1. THE CURRENT PICTURE FOR CHILDREN'S CENTRES

In recent years, children's centres' budgets have come under increasing pressure. Along with a drive to work with higher need families, there has been a change in the way centres are organised locally and how they are working with families.

BUDGET PRESSURES

Local authority spending on children's centres has fallen by 35 per cent from £1.2 billion in 2010 to £740 million in 2015,⁴ reflecting a much wider trend in decreasing spend on early intervention services. In the last five years the early intervention funding for local authorities from central government has fallen by 48 per cent.⁵

"Funding is due to reduce by 15 per cent [in my local authority] next year and this will only continue on a downward trend."

Children's centre staff
(Action for Children Children's Centre Survey 2015)

STAFF CONCERNS

Staff are committed to helping families in difficult times,⁶ but have concerns about the long-term future of children's centres. Our survey found:

48% OF CHILDREN'S CENTRE STAFF BELIEVE THAT CHILDREN'S CENTRES WILL NOT BE IN A BETTER POSITION TO HELP CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN FIVE YEARS TIME.⁷

Staff highlighted that the biggest reason for these concerns were ongoing budget reductions. Others mentioned a belief that children's centres would be consumed by other local services, losing their ability to reach out and support a broad range of local families.

"I do not think children's centres are valued enough by Government."

Children's centre staff
(Action for Children Children's Centre Survey 2015)

CENTRE CLOSURES

In some cases, local authorities have taken the decision to close children's centres. Over the first six months of 2015, 99 children's centres closed, an increase from 83 closures in 2014 and 32 closures in 2013.⁸

"Due to funding cuts there will be less centres but more children to work with."

Children's centre staff
(Action for Children Children's Centre Survey 2015)

Local authorities that have closed centres often point to new approaches to delivering services to maximise resources. For example, closing a centre but increasing use of outreach work or using other local facilities to deliver different programmes.⁹

As centres and programmes are reorganised, the number of closures alone do not give a clear picture about the level of support still available to local families. This makes it difficult to gauge what impact closures are having on children's outcomes.

SERVICE LEVEL AND OPEN ACCESS

Although the number of different services on offer from children's centres has remained broadly stable in the last few years, the frequency of these services has been found to be 'thinning out'.¹⁰ This may take the form of a class only being offered once a week, where before it was offered on multiple occasions.¹¹

Centres are also increasingly scaling back open access services available to all families in the local community, such as Stay and Play for older children and activities for parents such as coffee shops, in favour of those programmes working with higher need, disadvantaged families.¹²

In 2013 revised guidance from the Department for Education directed children's centres towards increasing their work with more disadvantaged families, as well as recommending centres retain services accessible by any family.¹³

Achieving this is a balancing act for local authorities as they face difficult decisions about which forms of service should take priority: targeted work to support higher needs families or non-stigmatised open access services for all families to use.

"Resources are being stretched so far that it may not be possible to identify and reach those families who are in need but don't freely present themselves as vulnerable. Services are being targeted at 'the most vulnerable' but these are being categorised or identified by authorities in a very basic ways. Some problems are hidden and it takes skilled workers time to identify them and I'm not sure that there will be the resources to do that in five years' time."

Children's centre staff
(Action for Children Children's Centre Survey 2015)



2. RETAINING OPEN ACCESS SERVICES

There is a strong case for why children's centres should retain open access services as part of a pathway to delivering effective targeted work. With a lack of alternative provision in communities, the role these services play in identifying problems where children and parents may need additional support must not be lost.

EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF NEED THROUGH OPEN ACCESS SERVICES

Targeted services can only be delivered once a particular need has been identified. This is practically impossible without some form of service that brings families from across the community into contact with professionals. They then get to know them and make informed decisions about any problems children or parents may be facing.

Open access services, such as Stay and Play where any parent can bring their child along to play with toys and other children, not only bring a broad range of families into children's centres but also offer benefits, such as interacting with children from different social backgrounds which can enhance children's development.¹⁴ These types of activities de-stigmatise children's centres and act against driving away parents and children who stand to benefit from the support available.

KEY ROLE IN THE COMMUNITY

There are few alternative services in local communities that can account for the loss of open access services within children's centres. Our survey found:

57% OF CHILDREN'S CENTRES STAFF BELIEVE THAT THERE IS A LACK OF LOCAL SERVICES WHICH IDENTIFY AND PROVIDE HELP FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AT THE EARLIEST POINT.¹⁵

Even with funding likely to limit how far centres are able to deliver open access services, this part of their offer to families must not be entirely lost.

INTEGRATION AND LINKING EXISTING EARLY YEARS SERVICES TO CHILDREN'S CENTRES

One way to retain the wider benefits of open access services is by linking existing local services that enjoy high engagement with a broad range of families, through children's centres. This approach would make the most of existing resources, ensure children access a range of support geared towards their healthy development and enable families to move between services as their level of need changes.

Some services are in a strong position to do this – in many cases, they are already integrated with children's centres as well as focused on the early years, when interventions can make a big difference to children's long-term outcomes.

KEY SERVICES THAT CAN BE LINKED TO CHILDREN'S CENTRES INCLUDE:

1. HEALTH VISITORS

Antenatal support and health visitors provide a level of open access service that all local families will engage with. *Beyond the building: Focusing on the foundation years* showed how routing antenatal support through centres and basing health visitors there would extend the reach, engagement and capacity of children's centres.¹⁶

2. FREE EARLY EDUCATION ENTITLEMENT

A further opportunity is presented by linking the free childcare entitlement for young children to children's centres.

Health visitors typically work with children up to age two-and-a-half, but childcare is accessed beyond this age. Some children aged two, and all three-and four-year-olds in England, are entitled to take up to 15 hours a week free early education paid for by Government (sometimes referred to as FEE or free childcare). The offer has led to very high take up rates amongst three-and four-year-olds,¹⁷ with the extension to disadvantaged two year olds bringing more children into settings in their local communities.

Free early education can be delivered by a number of local providers, offering choice to parents, including childminders, day nurseries, independent and local authority nursery schools and some children's centres.¹⁸

Childcare providers are not best placed to address the full range of problems children or their parents may be facing. However, they are well placed to identify low level problems early, because they have regular contact with children.

Rather than childcare being provided in isolation, it can be part of a pathway to a range of support by being offered directly within a children's centre setting or by supporting parents to find and take up the free entitlement delivered by other providers. Benefits would include:

- **Families access a range of support through children's centres:**
The number of families using children's centres often falls after a child turns three as they take up formal childcare placements.¹⁹ Language, behavioural and social problems can emerge at any point in the preschool years and without the right support, can easily escalate. A clear pathway from childcare to local children's centres prevents this from happening by enabling timely referrals to extra support, as well as making parents aware of other activities they may like to take part in.
- **Maximising current funding:**
The Government has made a significant investment in childcare for two-three and four-year-olds. It should be the priority to maximise the value of this funding, using it to support the work of a range of local services, including children's centres, to identify families who may benefit from additional support.
- **Supporting school readiness:**
Positive outcomes at age five are closely associated with future educational attainment and earnings.²⁰ High quality childcare can play a role in making sure children are school ready. But the role children's centres play in supporting good parenting and children's physical health is also important. Clearer referral pathways between childcare and the support offered by children's centres would create a holistic approach across communities to address any barriers to a child being ready to start school.

Given the importance of children's earliest years to their future life chances, it is right to maximise resources and prevent costly problems from arising.

Routing two of the main services and programmes used by children in the early years – free early education and health visitors – through children's centres would further integrate complementary forms of support and direct resources towards a single aim: delivering better outcomes for children at age five.



3. FLEXIBLE APPROACHES TO DELIVERING SERVICES 'BEYOND THE BUILDING'

Children's centres are evolving. They are moving towards multiple site models and delivering programmes from a range of local venues such as libraries, schools, leisure and community centres. This can be embraced to effectively link health visitors and the free early education entitlement to children's centres, and prevent services from fragmenting.

AN INCREASE IN CLUSTERING AND MULTIPLE SITE DELIVERY

The last few years have seen the traditional, 'single site' children's centre increasingly replaced by clustering and hub and spoke arrangements. This reflects the current flexibility within government guidance on children's centres that does not require all services or programme to be delivered in one physical location.²¹



How are children's centres organised in local communities?

The Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (ECCE) used responses from children's centre managers to create three broad organisational models for children's centres.

Single site or stand-alone centres:

This model is characterised by a single standalone centre with a manager or lead, which may or may not have associated satellite sites.

Clustering: This model is characterised by the joint management of multiple centres, resulting in the potential sharing of policies, information, and training; multiple centres are responsible to a common line management (i.e. a lead agency).

Hub and spoke: In this variant of the cluster model, the 'hub' may be either a single centre or a basic cluster. In the absence of a physical centre or cluster, a strategic lead may also be considered as the hub. The remaining basic clusters or satellite sites are often considered as spokes.

The latest available research shows that between 2011 and 2013 there was a 38 per cent decrease in the number of traditional standalone centres and a 60 per cent increase in clustering of centres and sites.²² Many children's centre staff who have not already seen a reorganisation of local centres expect to see one soon.²³

There has also been the emergence of ‘virtual children’s centre’ – where outreach work within the community is prioritised without the presence of an administrative children’s centre ‘base’ (where core services would be carried out). Instead, the children’s centres address might be at a school with services coordinated by the centre throughout the local community.²⁴

A number of different terms are used for describing the area from which a centre serves families, including: cluster area, reach area, locality, footprint, project, quadrant, catchment area, geographical area and community. Whilst some clustered centres were clearly within walking distance of each other and could easily divide out services across different sites, a few centres had been set up to serve a larger, often more rural area.²⁵

Maximising resources is a driving factor for this reorganisation with the aim of making service delivery more efficient. The increase in clustering and hub and spoke models has led to greater sharing of resources and management, physical spaces and even services.²⁶

OPPORTUNITIES FROM USING MULTIPLE SITES

Children’s centres staff recognise that a move toward clustering and multiple site delivery offers a number of opportunities, including:

- **Generating savings from management costs:** Savings can be made at a management level, with locality or cluster managers providing leadership across an area. This can limit the need to find savings from frontline services.²⁷
- **Reducing duplication of services:** Formal clustering arrangements can support centres to better share information about which families they are working with. This breaks down potential silos between standalone centres where families may access a range of services independently and prevents duplication of efforts from a number of centres.²⁸

- **Delivering programmes to a high level:** The sharing of a ‘parenting services’ team across a group of centres might allow a specific team of individuals to be trained to deliver evidence-based programmes with fidelity, and to receive relevant support and supervision (thus reducing the cost of training and support for each centre) and increasing their likelihood of higher quality delivery.²⁹

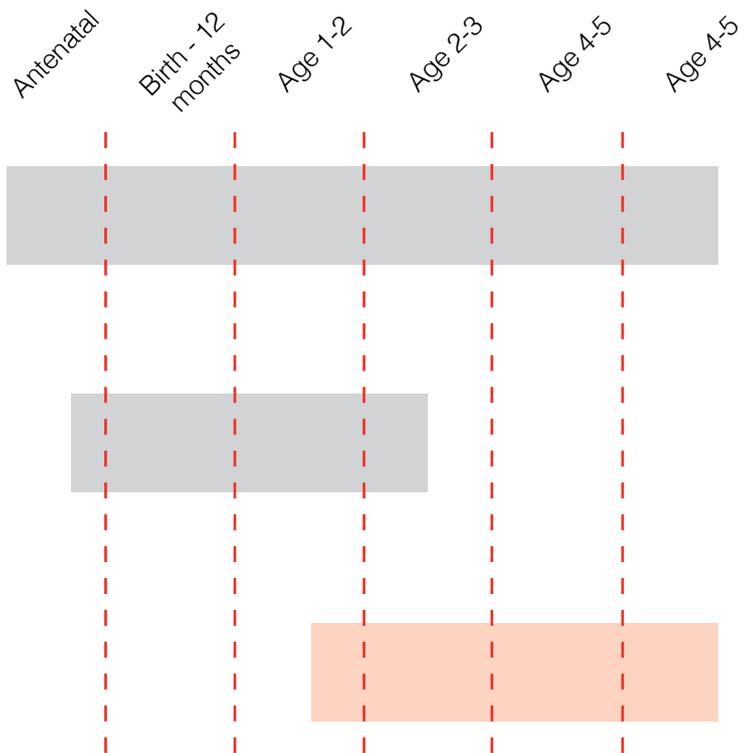
SERVICES AND PROGRAMMES ACROSS MULTIPLE SITES

Action for Children has been part of a pioneering approach within Worcestershire delivering children’s centres as part of an Early Help Strategy.³⁰ The services are organised into clusters within districts to maximise resources. In addition to the core offer from the children’s centres, other venues – such as a local outdoor activity centre and the Youth Support Service – are used to run services as well as providing essential outreach in family homes. This enables staff to reach out and provide essential early help to those who need it most in locations that work for them.

BEYOND THE BUILDING: EMBRACING A NEW APPROACH

OVERALL AIM

All children reach a good level of development by age five and are ready to succeed at school



Child development, parenting programmes and family support

Open access services such as baby days and Stay and Play and targeted interventions such as Incredible Years can be delivered throughout the early years.

Health visitors

Offering a minimum universal service to all local families, health visitors can act as another route for identifying problems early. By being based in children's centres they can quickly and easily refer families for further support.

Free 2, 3 and 4 year old childcare entitlement

With children able to take a free childcare place from age 2 onwards the free entitlement can act as a local service able to support early identifications of problems with the families that they are engaging with.

- Children's centre based or from other venues in the community (i.e. leisure centres, schools)
- Children's centre based or from providers across a local community linked to children's centres



Our experience indicates that new flexible approaches to delivery have potential for bolstering the reach of children's centres, with children and families accessing their activities and programmes in different locations. However, there are also inherent risks from delivering services across a greater number of venues. Retaining good joint working and communication and really embedding an integrated approach will require local authorities to engage in early planning and put some building blocks in place. We believe that there are a number of key factors for local authorities to consider.

4. EMBRACING OPPORTUNITIES BY INTRODUCING AN OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK, BUILDING STRONGER LEADERSHIP AND PARENTAL VOICE

To make the most of the opportunities presented by a move towards more flexible models, the following building blocks will be needed:

1. A SHARED GOAL: DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES AT AGE FIVE

The first five years of a child's life are a crucial developmental period and present a window of opportunity for improving children's long-term outcomes and life chances. Focusing on a set of desired outcomes will require children's centres to demonstrate how they are working effectively to achieve this and give them a unifying purpose, regardless of how or where activities and programmes are delivered.

WHAT OUTCOMES SHOULD BE MEASURED?

It is important that we aim for all children to reach a good level of development by age five, so they are able to go on to succeed at school. Development in cognitive ability in the early years is highly predictive of subsequent achievement, both in educational success at school and income in later life.³¹ However, by age five there are already wide variations in children's abilities which widen through childhood.³²

Being ready to start school is measured by children reaching a good level of development across the following areas;

- personal, social and emotional development
- physical development
- communication and language
- mathematics and literacy

School readiness is already an important focus for children's centres and other early years services. Our briefings have demonstrated that these are priority areas for children's centre staff; 89 per cent of staff said that language and cognitive development was a high priority and 87 per cent said emotional development was a high priority.³³

In a challenging budgetary climate, placing these outcomes on a statutory footing would make sure all local authorities are striving to improve children's life chances from the earliest years. It will provide a clear focus and act against any fragmentation of local services or silo working that could result in a lack of clarity from disparate priorities.

2. LEADERSHIP AND OVERSIGHT ACROSS A LOCAL AREA

Delivering services and programmes across a collection of locations means that oversight and strategic planning become even more important so that children's needs are met.

At a local authority level, available resources need to be deployed strategically across an area, for example through pooled budgets. Early planning on any changes to the delivery of classes and programmes should take into account the needs of the local population and how outcomes will be met by delivering activities and programmes in different venues. How far information sharing protocols are in place, for example on birth data, will also be crucial.

The move to multiple site delivery across local areas (also referred to as localities or clusters) and partnership with other agencies requires strong management to ensure the delivery of effective and efficient services. This role can be taken on by children's centre leaders. They are ideally placed to provide oversight across a local area, allocate resources and coordinate early help. This would enable services to be more responsive to the changing needs of children and parents in their communities.

The role of leading children's centres, increasingly across multiple sites, is demanding and challenging.³⁴ Currently there are variations in the quality of leadership between children's centres in different local authorities and across different organisational models.³⁵ Staff who undertake these roles often have a diverse range of backgrounds, qualifications and professional experience.³⁶

The Department for Education has indicated that it will be reviewing progression routes within the early years' sector.³⁷ Any review should consider how professional development can include leadership and management skills so staff are best equipped to deal with the changing approaches to service delivery within children's centres.

3. CONSULTATION WITH PARENTS

Reorganisation of local services can bring uncertainty for parents. Any decision to relocate a service or to increase or reduce a particular programme, cannot be taken without consideration of what local families want from their local services.

Parental involvement is already an important feature of children's centres management, especially through local children's centre boards and consultation events. A flexible approach to where services are located will only be successful if this is explicitly informed by parents themselves.

Research shows that 'being done to' is less effective than 'working with' when delivering support that makes a positive difference.³⁸ By bringing parents more explicitly into the co-design of local services we can enhance both their voice and choice, making them advocates for services and through children's centres becoming a more responsive local service, increase their impact and engagement.³⁹

CONCLUSION

Reduced funding and new guidance has led to a shift in how centres are modelled and working. There has been an increase in the use of clustering and multiple sites for delivering programmes and services, as well as targeted work to meet the more acute needs of some disadvantaged families.

The increase in targeted work has come at the expense of open access services. This will make it more difficult for all families to engage with the activities on offer and potentially make centres more stigmatised. This will reduce opportunities for identifying problems early, and prevent some children and parents who need support the most from accessing it.

To prevent this crucial part of children's centres' work from being lost, a minimum level of open access services must be retained, especially in the antenatal period and in the earliest years. To maximise the benefit of these services in identifying problems, centres should be the permanent base for health visitors and be formally linked to providers delivering the free early education entitlement – universal services that are ideally placed to support the work of children's centres in reaching out and engaging families in a broad range of available support, including housing and benefits advice.

Local accountability is needed to prevent fragmentation of services and a loss of capacity within local communities.

An outcomes framework for children's centres, focused on child development at age five, would provide a clear aim for activities across a local community and within children's centres. It would direct resources toward the crucial foundation years so that services are all working to make a positive difference in improving a child's life chances.

Leadership will be needed both at a local authority and centre level, assessing the needs of the community and pooling resources effectively. Where and when services are delivered should be shaped by parents and informed through ongoing consultation with early years staff.



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Looking at our website: actionforchildren.org.uk/beyondthebuilding

ABOUT ACTION FOR CHILDREN

Action for Children works with over 300,000 children, young people, parents and carers through 650 services across the UK. We are committed to helping the most vulnerable and neglected children and young people break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can reach their full potential. Over the past six years we have developed our evidence base on child neglect, campaigned for change and drawn upon the knowledge and experience we have gained over 145 years of working with children to support practitioners and develop innovative services.

Action for Children

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Action for Children supports and protects the young and vulnerable as they grow up. We make their lives better: now, tomorrow and every day.

actionforchildren.org.uk



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[actionforchildrenUK](https://www.youtube.com/actionforchildrenUK)

Registered charity nos. 1097940/SC038092/company no. 4764232

Produced by Action for Children 07/2015. 15/16 0287

Images: Children (and families) shown have all been helped by Action for Children.

Names have been changed (or models used) when we need to protect identity.