

BEYOND THE BUILDING: DATA SHARING

Children's centres briefing series



BACKGROUND

Children's centres provide crucial support to children and parents across England delivering early childhood services, including antenatal support, drop in sessions, targeted parenting programmes and childcare. They are a flexible resource, allowing for tailored support to meet the different needs of local families.

Children's centres require accurate information on new births in their area in order to reach out to new parents who may not have visited the children's centre before or during the antenatal period. Making this contact soon after the birth is important because it is an opportunity to begin working with new parents who are open to advice and keen to learn about their child's development. Providing support at an early stage also makes a significant difference to children, by addressing problems before they escalate.

Delivering effective early intervention is reliant on quick and accurate identification of problems as they emerge. This is only possible through sound professional judgement, underpinned by a good understanding of the needs and circumstances of each child and their family.

This briefing explores the current challenges experienced by children's centres around data sharing and proposes practical solutions to address them, in order to improve support for children and families. It examines two aspects of data sharing:

1. Birth data
2. Ongoing information sharing in the pre-school years.

These are both important to children's centres in engaging early with parents and children and providing effective early help from birth through to school.



What are the challenges facing children’s centres?	How could these challenges be overcome?	What impact would these changes have?
Birth data		
<p>Nearly a third of children’s centres are not receiving birth data in a timely or efficient way.</p> <p>Current approaches are patchy across local areas and are not always cost effective or reliable. A national solution is needed so that all children’s centres across England receive data on new birth registrations in a timely fashion.</p> <p>Without the outreach that can be done when children’s centres have access to birth data, children and parents may miss out on support at a crucial developmental stage, the benefits of which stretch into children’s futures.</p>	<p>Local authorities should operate the Tell Us Once scheme as the default option for registering births. Currently only 40 per cent use the scheme for birth registrations, although almost all local authorities use it for death registrations. Parents like using the scheme, as it means they only have to give information to one agency.</p> <p>Children’s centres should be listed as a partner agency on the Tell Us Once system so all centres receive birth registration data directly. The Tell Us Once birth scheme currently shares information collected at birth registration with a number of partner agencies, but children’s centres are not always included.</p>	<p>Using the Tell Us Once scheme for birth registrations, and directing birth registration data to children’s centres, would:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be simple to achieve • Make the most of an existing scheme • Be cost effective • Complement local arrangements • Act as a ‘safety net’ where there are gaps or barriers to good information sharing • Prevent possible costly problems in the future
Information sharing in the pre-school years		
<p>Children’s centres and services, such as schools and health, use different recording and case file systems.</p> <p>This prevents easy sharing of information about children and families, and makes it harder for professionals to identify where additional support may be needed.</p>	<p>All local authorities should use a unique identifier number for each child in their area so that records and information can be shared between different professionals.</p> <p>The NHS number, generated for all children after birth, provides an existing reference number that can act as this unique identifier. The Unique Pupil Number, generated for each child when they begin school, offers another option.</p>	<p>Using NHS numbers and Unique Pupil Numbers to create a comprehensive record of service contact with children will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enable professionals working across a range of services to share information • Create a central point of reference for all agencies and professionals • Bring different records together that already exist • Develop an ongoing record of children’s interaction with services, and a mechanism to monitor a child’s progress from birth through to school • Help professionals identify children and parents who need extra support, preventing more serious and costly problems in the future

BEYOND THE BUILDING BRIEFING SERIES

The difference children's centres make to children and parents can be significant. Few other local services 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. There is evidence that people have improved both their parenting and their home environment as a result of these 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. Support services are increasingly being delivered across an area, rather than from a single building. There is potential for children's centres to evolve further to better meet children's and parents' 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. We also interviewed a number of staff working in our children's centres to develop our recommendations.

DATA SHARING IN CHILDREN'S CENTRES

There are many features that underpin effective work within children's centres. One of the most important is accurate data on children and families in the local community. This data enables children's centres to reach out to children and parents, including the most vulnerable. They are then able to offer advice on breastfeeding, parenting courses or more intensive family support, depending on the needs of the individual family.

1. BIRTH DATA

The support children's centres offer new parents can be invaluable as they adjust to the changes in their lives after having a child. However, it will only make a difference to families if they know that it is available and are supported to access it. This is why the information collected when a new birth is registered with the local authority is so important to children's centres. It gives them the information that they need to contact new parents, and encourage them to visit with their children.

Without birth data, it is much more challenging for centres to engage with new parents in their local community. They may not be able to make contact with new parents at all or involve them in the activities that they run, such as health visitor drop in clinics. Crucially, centres potentially miss the ideal opportunity to invite parents into a centre just after the birth of their child when they are most open to advice.⁴

Children's centre staff view relationships developed during the antenatal period and the first few months after childbirth as crucial, both in the short and long-term. They are able to offer immediate support if there are any apparent concerns or problems, and help parents give their children the best start in life.

There are a number of ways for families to make contact with a centre in the weeks and months before and after a baby is born. Some children's centres have good relationships with parents established through the antenatal services that they deliver. Other parents may be referred to centres informally by friends or health visitors, whilst some will be referred formally through statutory services.

But we can't rely on informal routes to make sure centres are coming into contact with families. There will be some parents who don't attend antenatal classes at centres, are not referred by friends or who do not proactively seek out their local centre. In these cases, information that children's centres receive on births in their area is really important.

A PERENNIAL PROBLEM

Ineffective sharing of birth data is a long-standing issue and research has repeatedly highlighted that it is a problem for children's centres.⁵ Our survey found that this problem has not been resolved.

28% OF CHILDREN'S CENTRES DO NOT HAVE ANY FORMAL DATA SHARING ARRANGEMENTS WITH PARTNER AGENCIES⁶

A further eight per cent said that they were unaware of any arrangements that may be in place. The lack of formal data sharing arrangements leaves children's centres at risk of not receiving birth data consistently preventing effective outreach to, and engagement with, families. Previous Action for Children research found that resource intensive systems and misunderstanding of data protection rules play a big role in creating barriers to effective information sharing.⁷

AN INCONSISTENT RESPONSE

The current approaches to sharing information are patchy. There are centres that have formal arrangements with other local agencies. In our experience, this can work effectively but it is not replicated everywhere. Even with formal arrangements, staff told us that there can be significant delays in receiving birth data.⁸

Other children's centres only have informal arrangements, which can result in an inconsistent approach from one month to the next, and leads to delays in information being shared.⁹ In these cases, children's centres are potentially missing a crucial window to engage with new parents.

HOW IS THIS CHALLENGE BEING ADDRESSED?

A number of solutions have been put forward in the last few years, including creating a legal requirement to share birth data.¹⁰ Yet, the Government has remained reluctant to address this problem through legislation. Instead, it has opted to leave it to local authorities to decide how to enable information sharing and has encouraged them to share best practice.¹¹ Ministers have pointed to Statutory Guidance on Sure Start Children's Centres as already creating a clear requirement to ensure this information is shared.¹²

DATA SHARING IN CHILDREN'S CENTRES

Action for Children children's centres in Northampton work closely with other centres in the local authority to share information. The establishment of a joint Management Information System Group has led to clear terms of reference and progress to streamline data recording. With a confidential system for sharing concerns the system allows all services to feed in to a record that will help staff identify who needs support. The group is now exploring where further data can be added to improve the centres' ability to identify and reach out to families.

WHAT DOES SURE START STATUTORY GUIDANCE SAY ABOUT DATA SHARING?

Health services and local authorities should share information (such as live birth data and data on families with children under five who have recently moved into the area) effectively with children's centres on a regular basis. Local authorities and commissioners of health services should consider developing local partnership agreements or information sharing protocols to enable effective sharing of bulk data (such as live birth data), whilst ensuring compliance with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 1998, and other relevant legal provisions. Local authorities might wish to use records of all new births as a vehicle for health visitors to work with the families that might benefit most from using the services offered by children's centres.¹³

BIRTH REGISTRATIONS

Some children's centres offer a birth registration service to parents, with local registrars working out of children's centres at set times. This achieves the overall goal of getting parents into centres and centre staff establishing contact with a new family.¹⁴

Birth registration within children's centres does have potential to maximise resources. As some local authorities contemplate closing registry offices as part of cutbacks and moving this function elsewhere,¹⁵ children's centres could become one of a 'portfolio' of locations used by local registrars.¹⁶

However, in some areas, birth registration at children's centres has been withdrawn due to uptake or costs.¹⁷ It won't be the right fit for every local authority. In addition, parents may not necessarily access a single children's centre to take part in their activities and programmes. Increasingly, children's centres deliver their services across a number of locations in a local area.

We are aware of a number of other approaches, including linking up with other sites for birth registrations. For example, in one local authority birth registrations are held in a library and staff from the local children's centres attend to encourage parents to register with their local centre at the same time. In other areas, health visitors are helping to increase engagement and registration at children's centres, by sharing information with the local children's centres following the eight week visit.

HOW CAN WE HELP CHILDREN'S CENTRES GET THE INFORMATION THEY NEED?

There is a shared view that there is not a simple solution.¹⁸ A number of approaches can draw parents and children into children's centres to benefit from support. However, it is important that birth data is shared with children's centres consistently and systematically, regardless of where birth registrations take place. This way, centres will have the option to reach out to new parents if they are unable to make contact with them through other means.

We believe that a systematic, national system for providing birth data to all children's centres is required. This would complement other local arrangements, such as birth registrations in children's centres, and informal data sharing arrangements. A systematic approach would act as a 'safety net', effectively catching parents across a local authority who may not otherwise come into contact with children's centres.

MAKING THE MOST OF EXISTING RESOURCES – THE TELL US ONCE SCHEME

Rather than introducing a new system, we should consider how to make better use of current processes for local authorities. Sharing good practice and building on existing systems will be more cost effective and simpler than generating an entirely new approach.

In 2011, the Tell Us Once scheme was launched by the Government to enable death or birth registrations to be shared with a number of partner agencies. The scheme allows agencies to update their records without requesting the same information on multiple occasions, improving accuracy of records. The birth scheme is open to all parents and involves a single electronic form filled in by a registrar with the parent. It only takes a few minutes to complete and once done, a birth is fully registered.

Although almost all local authorities (92 per cent) operate Tell Us Once for registering a death, only 40 per cent operate the scheme for births.¹⁹ Using this scheme to improve children's centres' access to data on births has been suggested previously.²⁰ However, rollout of the birth scheme slowed after it launched, and the potential for linking with children's centres and other local services has not been fully realised.²¹ In some local authorities running the birth scheme, Family Information Services receive the information from Tell Us Once and pass this to children's centres. However, this is inconsistent and there is no requirement for Family Information Services to pass the information on. Our survey found that:

14% OF CENTRES SAID THEY RECEIVED INFORMATION FROM THEIR LOCAL 'TELL US ONCE' SCHEME ²²

Increased use of the scheme could work well for both centres and parents. Evaluations show that parents like not having to report the same information to a number of different agencies, and parents have suggested children's centres be included on the list of agencies that receive birth data.²³ The Department for Work and Pensions has been working with registrars and local authorities to develop the system further, to improve usability and streamline the process. This development is likely to improve customer service and positive feedback from registrars further.

IMPROVING OUTREACH

Discussions about sharing birth data can dwell on the technicalities of transferring data, but it is important not to lose sight of the overall goal – early engagement with new parents.

Inclusion in the Tell Us Once scheme would give children's centres a consistent and direct route to information about births in their area. They can identify families they haven't been in touch with previously and invite them to visit the centre. This could be through a letter, a visit from a health visitor co-located in a centre or through dedicated outreach workers.

This outreach work is something children's centres are already expanding in line with the revised core purpose for children's centres.²⁴ Outreach is important because not all parents will have the confidence or feel comfortable seeking out and visiting their local children's centre. There are parents who need some extra help to feel ready to visit a centre and use the services on offer.

Our children's centres have shown that along with staff contacting new parents, peer-to-peer outreach is a valuable tool for centres. This all helps support families to access services in a way that is comfortable for them.

ACTION FOR CHILDREN PARENT CHAMPION PROGRAMME

Our Parent Champion Programme is made up of volunteers who act as advocates and peer advisers to other parents in their community. They all have positive experience of childcare or supporting their child's early learning. The programme encourages parents to participate in early learning activity, helps them find formal childcare places, and even helps them become parent representatives on their children's centre advisory board.²⁵

2. DATA SHARING IN THE EARLY YEARS

Good data sharing enables children's centres to reach out and engage with families. This ensures support follows children as they grow, and prepares them for school. Children's centres already record a range of data on children and parents for commissioning purposes, to meet inspection criteria or to demonstrate impact. Unfortunately, the way in which data is recorded and processed often varies from one children's centre to another. In many cases the data and records held by centres are not easily matched with data held by other local services.

Disparate systems create barriers to effective early intervention by limiting good information sharing and preventing a full picture of changing needs. It can lead to duplication of efforts by different agencies or too many professionals involved, without an effective means to work together to improve children's outcomes and meet families' needs.

Sharing information can be done in person through meetings or informal conversations. However, as the delivery of early years services becomes more flexible across a range of sites and venues, a systematic way of accessing and sharing information about individual children will support professionals to work together and provide effective early help.

BENEFITS TO LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND DELIVERING EARLY HELP

There are benefits to local authorities of bringing together different records. These include:

- More effective planning and commissioning of services through a better understanding of need and usage
- Providing the intelligence needed to step in and protect children from harm or neglect.

- Better data on the number and characteristics of families using early year's provision.²⁶

LINKING EARLY YEARS SUPPORT WITH SCHOOLS

There are also benefits for professionals who work with children as they get older.

Currently schools and children's centres are not consistently sharing information. Our survey found that:

36% OF CENTRES SAID THEY DO NOT HAVE ANY ARRANGEMENTS TO SHARE INFORMATION WITH LOCAL SCHOOLS ²⁷

Local schools would benefit from having greater information about children's foundation years to understand the needs of their new pupils. It would allow them to identify children who may benefit from additional support from day one. Without this, children in primary school may miss out on targeted support to prevent them from falling behind their peers.



USING A UNIQUE IDENTIFIER TO SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN AS THEY GROW

To provide joined up support for children in the early years through schools, we need information to be matched from one system to another, and for it to be brought together for professionals to use. Using a universal identifier – a number that follows every child – would enable children’s centres, early years services and schools to reference and match individual files and draw records together. Information could be matched across a local community and provide a valuable resource for professionals at all levels to inform, support and challenge decisions about whether a family requires early help and what form this should take.

There are two unique identifier numbers currently in use for children.

THE NHS NUMBER

Currently generated for all children shortly after they are born. It is used to allow healthcare providers to match records to create a complete record, linking every episode of care across health and social care organisations. The use of the NHS number enables patient information to be shared safely within and across organisational boundaries, including transferring patient files between GPs.²⁸

THE UNIQUE PUPIL NUMBER (UPN)

Identifies each pupil attending school in England. It is generated by local authorities and allocated when a pupil joins a nursery, primary school or academy. It remains with a pupil throughout their school career, regardless of any change in school. UPNs facilitate the transfer of attainment data between schools, local authorities and central government.

Options to make better use of unique identifiers in the early years include:

- A number of local authorities are already looking at how NHS numbers could be used to provide a link between health and school data. One number would follow a child across health and education. This would mean making the NHS number a universal identifier for schools.
- The NHS number could be linked to the Unique Pupil Number. Both numbers would remain in use and they would be linked. Other systems used in early years services could share information using the NHS number and then link to the UPN when the child reaches school age. Linking NHS data and records held by early years services would enable better tracking of each child’s development and progress from the earliest years throughout school.

Whichever unique identifier number is used by local authorities, it is crucial that they are linked, to provide seamless recording from birth onwards and a constant route to sharing information.

Action for Children is working with local authorities currently exploring the use of the UPN for younger children by generating them before starting school. In these local authorities, potential barriers around data sharing law has been considered and overcome. The Early Intervention Foundation has identified a number of local authorities already pushing forward with using NHS numbers.²⁹ This creates a template for other local authorities to follow when looking to bring together records.

Greater use of unique identifiers was also proposed by the Task and Finish Group created in 2013 by the Department for Education.³⁰ The Government's response said they had "considered the arguments for linking health, social care and schools data and are undertaking further work to consider all pragmatic solutions."³¹ But progress on this has been slow.

The benefits of using unique identifier numbers have not been realised effectively by early years services. As children's centres increasingly deliver programmes away from one building, there will be fewer opportunities for staff to share information informally with others working out of the same building.³² Robust mechanisms for monitoring children's needs will be required, and greater use of unique identifiers would provide a sound approach. We believe that using either the NHS number or UPN as a universal identifier would be a positive step towards fully integrating health and early years records.

We asked early years professionals what they wanted to see as part of the future of children's centres. They told us:

"A service for families with children under 5 where all agencies share information effectively to identify and support families at the earliest point. Once information sharing barriers are removed, children's centres will be able to support families sooner, and often support families to resolve issues that would ordinarily not be identified until a child reached school age."

Action for Children Children's Centre Survey 2015



CONCLUSION

Children's centres are a valuable local service for children and parents and provide support which makes a positive difference to them and their families. Yet, support will only make a difference to children's outcomes if families know about what is on offer and are supported to access children's centres.

Birth data is critical for centres to reach out to parents and children. Our survey and interviews with children centre staff show that sharing birth data is still not happening consistently or effectively.

A more systematic and consistent approach is needed so that this crucial information is shared with children's centres, providing means to make contact with all families in their local community. We believe that using the Tell Us Once scheme would be an effective option. It would complement other ways that children's centres are contacting families, but ensure that the data is consistently shared. Local authorities would need to adopt the birth registration part of the scheme so that children's centres receive birth information directly.

Making the most of existing data systems also has huge potential to improve early help for children across a number of agencies, from birth into the school years. We know that addressing problems when they first emerge leads to better outcomes for children and families.

There is already significant information recorded by different professionals working with parents and young children, yet this is not always shared effectively. We believe that the next step is bringing this information together using a universal identifier. This could be the current NHS number or a Unique Pupil Number generated before children start school. Linking these two numbers together would allow professionals to record and share information. It would continually inform decisions about which children require additional support.

These solutions are cost effective, easy to achieve and make the most of existing systems which have already proved successful. They would maximise the effectiveness of children's centres. The long-standing problem with birth data sharing for children's centres would be tackled. Most importantly, children's centres will be able to reach and support more children and parents in the early years. Support at this age has positive impact for a lifetime, making children more likely to thrive as adults.

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Looking at our website:

www.actionforchildren.org.uk/beyondthebuilding

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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.

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