

# CLOSED DOORS



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

HOW

**ACTION FOR CHILDREN**

WORKS

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# Executive summary

**It is vital that every child gets the best start in life. A child's early years are critical to their development, and lay the foundations for their future.**

Children's centres support parents to overcome challenges and help them to provide a safe, warm and loving environment for their children. They support parents to develop positive routines, address behaviour, and encourage the development of a child's language and communication skills.

Local children's centres are popular among parents, who use them to pick up ideas about learning and play activities.<sup>1</sup> At a time when the government is seeking to improve the home learning environment (HLE), children's centres are ideally placed to increase the proportion of children starting primary school with the communication and reading skills they need to thrive.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the importance of children's centres to many families, their existence is under threat. Years of funding cuts have left councils with little choice but to reduce children's centre

budgets. As resources become increasingly stretched, a number of centres have closed. Many of those that remain have been forced to reduce the level of service on offer.

More than 1,000 children's centres are overdue Ofsted inspections<sup>3</sup> and funding has been cut by 62 per cent since 2010.<sup>4</sup> Councillors across England are also concerned about the lack of direction from ministers.<sup>5</sup> 'Closed Doors' reveals the impact that cuts and uncertainty are having on the most important aspect of a children's centre: the capacity to help children and families.



## Based on responses from all 152 local authorities in England, our analysis found:<sup>6</sup>

- **Between 2014/15 and 2017/18, we estimate that the number of children using children's centres fell by almost a fifth (18 per cent) – from 2.2 million to 1.8 million.** Our analysis also estimates that the number of children receiving support from a children's centre has fallen annually, as budget cuts and centre closures continue.
- **The majority of children using children's centres are in their pre-school years.** We estimate that, in 2017/18, 1.7 million children aged five and under used children's centres compared to just 166,000 aged six and over. Despite the potential role centres play in supporting school-aged children, there is a need for greater resources to enable local authorities to work consistently with older children.
- **The proportion of children aged under five who have used a children's centre fell from 50 per cent to 41 per cent between 2014/15 and 2017/18.** Once a universal service for all children, children's centre use across the population has fallen by nine percentage points in the last few years. As centres become more targeted and work with those children with the greatest need, they are gradually reaching a smaller percentage of the total population.
- **Average children's centre spending per child has fallen from £532 in 2014/15 to £412 in 2017/18.** Spend per child provides a valuable indication of the level of resource available across a local authority. At a national level, the drop in per capita spending is a clear indication of how stretched budgets have become.
- **The number of children using children's centres in the most deprived local authorities has fallen faster than in the least deprived.** The most deprived local authorities have seen a 22 per cent fall compared to 12 per cent amongst the least deprived. Deprived areas have traditionally recorded poorer outcomes for children at age five, suggesting a greater need for services provided by centres. This makes the fall in the number of children using centres deeply worrying.

With funding reductions and centres closing, the number of children using centres could have been expected to fall in recent years. However, there hasn't been a decrease in demand for the support centres offer. Since 2014/15, more than 800,000 children have started school below the expected developmental milestones – including 168,000 from low income families.<sup>7</sup>

The gap between those children who have achieved key developmental milestones and those who haven't is a telling indicator. Children's centre statutory guidance makes clear that local authorities should view centres as a means to reduce early years inequalities.

**Through our analysis, we found that the average developmental gap between children from low income backgrounds and their peers has fallen in areas where the number of children using centres has increased.**

Our findings provide a national estimate of children's centres use, highlighting just how many families rely on the support they offer. Comparable in reach to health visitor and government funded early education, the findings raise serious questions about the government's approach to the challenges faced by children's centres.

## Action for Children recommends:

### 1. The government must show leadership and set a clear direction for children's centres.

Children centres provide an ideal mechanism to help the government achieve its ambition to improve early years outcomes. The current situation is creating a drift in policy and risks the long-term future of centres. The introduction of a children's centre outcomes framework would demonstrate ministerial commitment and align centres with current government priorities.

### 2. The government must use the forthcoming Spending Review to allocate additional funding to local authorities.

It is clear that the decline in children's centre use is being driven by the current funding crisis facing local authorities. In spite of reductions in capacity, children's

centres remain a highly valued and effective source of support for children and families. However, without additional funding, the current trend of cuts to spending are likely to continue, limiting the level of support on offer to local families.

### 3. The government should require local authorities to submit records on children's centre use.

Each year, local authorities report on the number of children receiving government funded early education, yet no comparable process exists for children's centres. Currently, one in four local authorities are unable to provide full data on children's centre use in the early years. Asking local authorities to submit this data would be a valuable way to make sure councils deliver sufficient children's centre provision to meet local need.



# Introduction

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

In the following two decades, children's centres have undergone significant change. Reforms to national guidance from different governments, as well as funding reductions, have seen an evolution in how centres operate and who they help. There has also been a fall in the number of centres across England, and those remaining now focus on families with more complex needs.<sup>8</sup> However, despite these reforms, children's centres remain an area of significant public spending.

In the last four years, local authorities collectively spent almost £3 billion on children's centres<sup>9</sup> – including staff and services for children and parents. Yet there have been few attempts to capture the number of children and parents that centres support every year at a national level, or how this has changed.<sup>10</sup>

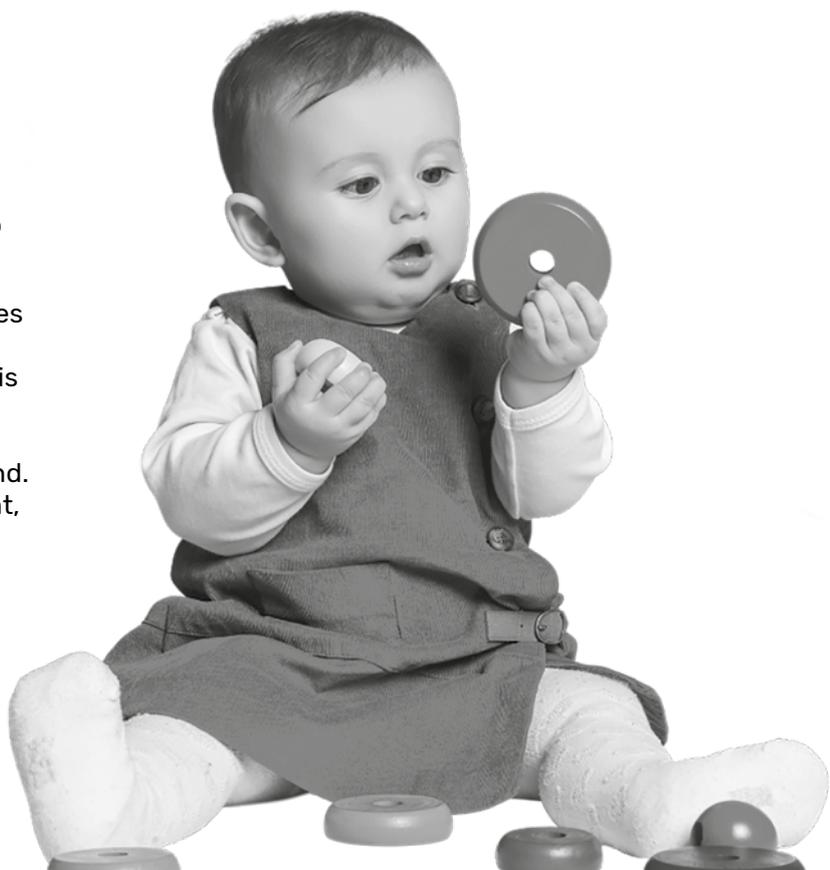
In 2013, the charity 4Children published its annual children's centre census, which estimated that children's centres were supporting 'as many as one million' families across the country.<sup>11</sup> This figure was used in 2014 by the Department for Education (DfE) to demonstrate the success of children's centres in reaching local families.<sup>12</sup> While this estimate provided a helpful indication of use, it did not estimate the number of children receiving help and how this compared to previous years.

Since the last estimate of use, children's centres have seen ongoing reductions in funding, further closures and extensive remodelling. This changing landscape is likely to have played a significant role in how many children are using centres and the level of capacity across England. Without a clear sense of reach and engagement, it is all too easy for policymakers to undervalue the important role centres play in the lives of young children and their families.

To address this evidence gap, Action for Children sent Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to local authorities in England, asking about children's centre use between 2014/15 and 2017/18.

All 152 upper tier local authorities responded to our request, with 80 per cent supplying complete figures for each of the last four years. Based on the responses received, we have produced an estimate of the number of children and parents using children's centres in the last four years. Our analysis suggests that previous research underestimated the number of children and families using centres.

In addition to information on centre use, we have reviewed publicly available data on early education and made a separate FOI request to Public Health England to build a broader picture of local service use across the early years.



# A recent history of children's centres

## What is a children's centre?

Children's centres are a single place, or group of places, where early years services are provided for young children and their families. Children's centres aim to improve outcomes and reduce inequalities through access to health services, parenting support and outreach services.<sup>13</sup>

Children's centres support families facing a wide range of challenges, including parental relationships, issues with child behaviour and budgeting.<sup>14</sup> Action for Children's e-Aspire system records the needs, interventions and outcomes across our children's centres. This provides a valuable insight into the types of need and the support on offer from our centres.

The type of support a centre offers varies, depending on the needs of each family. This support may include home visits to help parents stick to a plan and routine, or sessions offered at the centre as part of a parenting programme. These programmes have been shown to make a difference to children's outcomes. The National Evaluation of Children's Centres found that increased use by individual families led to better outcomes, from maternal health to child behaviour.<sup>15</sup>

There is some debate about the total number of children's centres across England. While the current DfE database, Getting Information About Schools, shows 536 have closed since 2010,<sup>16</sup> the Sutton Trust estimates that more than 1,000 have closed since 2009.

## What are the most common challenges faced by children and parents who use children's centres?

### CHILDREN



Stimulating play  
**19%**



Behaviour  
**18%**



Speech and language  
**13%**



Communication  
**13%**

### PARENTS



Guidance and boundaries  
**23%**



Interaction  
**18%**



Routines  
**18%**



Financial management  
**11%**

## Policy context

Children's centres can trace their history back to the announcement of the Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLP) in 1998. The SSLP were designed to support low income families and young children in the poorest areas of England.

The launch of Every Child Matters, published in 2004, saw a move from SSLP to a network of children's centres. This was part of a drive to close the achievement gap among children from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as to provide universal services for all families in a local area.

The government committed to establishing 3,500 children's centres by 2010: some in dedicated new buildings, others on existing sites, including primary schools. By April of that year, 3,645 designated children's centres had been created across England.<sup>17</sup>

In 2012, the coalition government introduced revised statutory guidance for children's centres. While retaining universal services for all families, centres began to place a greater focus on those children in greatest need.

Following calls for clearer delivery outcomes, and revisions to the inspection framework, the government announced a consultation on the future of children's centres in autumn 2015.

This consultation has, however, been beset by delays. Initially a standalone consultation, the last government rolled it into a wider proposal for a Life Chances strategy. This strategy was not taken forward following Britain's vote on membership of the European Union.<sup>18</sup>

Following the general election in 2017, DfE initially confirmed that they still planned to launch the children's centre consultation. But, by summer 2018, the Department indicated it was now unlikely to go ahead.<sup>19</sup>

With DfE appearing to have shelved the consultation, both the Education Select Committee and the Science and Technology Committee launched inquiries into the early years. The Science and Technology Committee called on the government to clarify its position on Sure Start centres and to specify if – and when – it intends to hold a consultation. The sense of drift was evident in the Committee's insistence that, if a consultation was to go ahead, it should take place within months to prevent further delays.<sup>20</sup>

In responding to the Science and Technology Committee, the government highlighted the need to better understand:

- How local authorities use children's centres to improve early years outcomes.
- The work of the Early Years Social Mobility Peer Review Programme launched by the Department in 2018.

The Programme focuses on early years language, and covers the quality of local early years services, provision and access to targeted support.<sup>21</sup> Ministers have indicated the review will collect evidence on changes to children's centre provision, and improve their understanding of how they are working.<sup>22</sup> This approach will inform the Department's strategy to raise outcomes for children, including a consideration of whether a future consultation on the role of children's centres is warranted.<sup>23</sup>

The Education Select Committee drew similar conclusions from its inquiry. MPs recommended that DfE should resurrect its review of children's centres and develop a wider, more comprehensive strategy for the provision of high quality and effective early years services.<sup>24</sup> The government's response went further than referencing the Early Years Social Mobility Peer Review Programme alone. The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) have been commissioned to lead a review to identify tools and support for local areas. It is hoped this will help local authorities make informed decisions about different early years delivery models and integrated services, including children's centres and family hubs.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to the Early Years Social Mobility Peer Review Programme and EIF review, the government has taken steps to review how early years services are operating in the first 1,001 days. The Prime Minister asked Andrea Leadsom MP to chair a cross-government ministerial group to make recommendations on how to improve the coordination and cost-effectiveness of early years family support, and to reduce the gaps in provision.<sup>26</sup>

These are all positive steps that seek improvements to service design and practise at local level. However, none of these activities examine the broader, structural challenges children's centres face, such as funding and whether current guidance is adequate.

# Our findings

## The number of children using centres across England

In 2014, the National Evaluation of Children's Centres found many of the 73 local authorities contacted used a uniform system to collect and analyse children's centre data. Nearly two-thirds (63 per cent) used the Capita eStart programme, while the remaining 34 per cent used alternatives, including custom-built systems and other commercial products.<sup>27</sup> Typically, these systems required each centre to enter information about registrations and users, and keep updated records at individual family and child level.<sup>28</sup>

From our request, 139 local authorities (91 per cent) in England said they operated a database in 2017/18. Of these, 121 were able to provide full data on children's centre use between 2014/15 and 2017/18. Across these 121 local authorities, there has been a 13 per cent fall in the number of children using centres in the last four years.

Not all of the local authorities were able to provide data. The figures from our request are, therefore, an underestimate of the total number of children and parents using children's centres across England.

From the responses received, it is possible to produce an estimate of likely use among local authorities who were unable to submit data. To do this, we grouped together local authorities with similar characteristics and used the average use numbers to act as an estimate.

Our approach provides a conservative estimate of total use.<sup>30</sup> Through this method, we estimate that, between 2014/15 and 2017/18, the number of children using children's centres fell by almost 400,000 – from 2.2 million to 1.8 million. This is a fall of almost a fifth (18 per cent) in just four years.

**Table 1: Number of children using children's centres across England from FOI responses**

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Number of children using children's centres from FOI responses <sup>29</sup>	1,568,760	1,563,226	1,515,068	1,359,043

**Table 2: Estimated number of children using children's centres across England**

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Estimated total number of children using children's centres	2,242,000	2,200,000	2,063,000	1,843,000

## Understanding reductions in children's centre use

### Service provision and funding

To understand the reduction in use, it is important to look at the change in services offered by children's centres, both in terms of focus and capacity.

Research by the Sutton Trust found that universal services – which are offered by most centres and open to any family – have been reduced or restricted to fewer centres or fewer sessions.<sup>31</sup> In almost one-fifth of local authorities, few or no centres were open full-time, while over half reported a reduction in the number of services provided by centres.<sup>32</sup>

These changes inevitably result in fewer children receiving support. An increase in targeted work at the expense of open access services effectively creates a threshold. As centres lose open access services, the number of children using these services declines, as a number fail to reach the effective thresholds to access the services on offer.

In explaining these changes, the Sutton Trust's report found financial pressures were the 'principal driver' for local authorities.<sup>33</sup> This is indicative of the wider funding crisis facing children's services. In 2017/18, local authorities faced a £1.4 billion funding gap – the difference between what they are spending and the available funding for children's services.<sup>34</sup> The Local Government Association (LGA) estimates this gap will reach £3.1 billion by 2025.<sup>35</sup>

### Levels of need among children and parents

While a fall in use may reflect changing levels of need among children and parents, there is little evidence to suggest this is the case. Such a pattern of decreasing need would be reflected by centres working with fewer families, presenting with less complex challenges. However, a survey of Action for Children's centres found the opposite to be true. Two-thirds (62 per cent) reported working with families who have more complex needs.<sup>36</sup> The same proportion also reported that the time spent working with each child had increased.<sup>37</sup> The more complex problems families face often require more intensive support. Together, this suggests that – far from seeing a decrease in need – children's centres are increasingly working with families that have more challenging problems.

There is also a continuing demand for the type of support children's centres provide. In the last four years, the number of children aged under five who are deemed to be in need due to abuse and neglect hasn't changed.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, the number who are subject to a child protection plan has only fallen by two per cent.<sup>39</sup>

In both cases, providing early support for families – through the type of parenting programmes children's centres are perfectly placed to deliver – is the most effective way to prevent problems reaching a point where social services need to intervene.

Looking more broadly at early years outcomes, the gap between children in low income families and their peers has only closed by 1.7pp since 2014/15 – from 19 per cent to 17.3 per cent.<sup>40</sup> This is despite an increase in the number of children who are considered school ready. In this time, more than 800,000 children have started school below the expected developmental milestones – including 168,000 children from low income families.<sup>41</sup>



## Children's centre use compared to other early years services

The importance of early years development to a child's future outcomes are widely recognised. As a result, successive governments have prioritised interventions and services that work with families in the pre-school years.

Along with children's centres, early education provided through nurseries and childminders – as well as the health visiting service – play a big role in a child's early development. From our analysis, existing official figures on early education and a FOI request to Public Health England, it is possible to estimate use across each of these three services.

The estimates show that – even with a reduction in recent years – children's centre use is comparable to both early education and health visiting.

There has been a seven per cent increase in the number of children aged under five receiving funded early education. The number of children receiving help from health visitors has also

fallen in recent years, dropping by one per cent between 2016/17 and 2017/18.

Like children's centres, public health funding has seen significant cuts in the last few years, with spending on under fives falling five per cent in real terms – from £819 million in 2016/17 to £777 million in 2017/18.<sup>45</sup> These reductions have stretched resources, with the workforce falling by 24 per cent from 10,309 in October 2015 to 7,768 in August 2018.<sup>46</sup>

Unlike children's centres and health visiting, early education has been subject to a significant level of policy focus and investment from central government in recent years. High quality early education can make a positive difference to a child's outcomes. This makes it a valuable area of investment and, by the end of the current decade, the government will be spending £6 billion on early education provision – with £3.5 billion of this allocated to the free entitlement.<sup>47</sup>

In comparison, children's centres have been largely overlooked by ministers. Based on current trends, it is estimated that spending on centres will fall to less than £300 million by 2019/20. In addition, the children's centre consultation has been repeatedly delayed.<sup>48</sup>

**Table 3: Children's use of early years provision**

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Number of children aged under five using children's centres <sup>42</sup>	2,034,000	2,010,000	1,871,000	1,677,000
	2014	2015	2016	2017
Number of children aged under five receiving funded early education <sup>43</sup>	1,387,000	1,479,000	1,506,000	1,481,000
	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Number of children using the health visitor service <sup>44</sup>	-	-	1,670,000	1,657,000

This discrepancy in government focus not only raises a question mark over the long-term future of a local service many families rely on, it also suggests a missed opportunity for the government to deliver on an ambition to improve the home learning environment (HLE). This is an outcome that children's centres are proven to deliver.<sup>49</sup>

### **QUICK EXPLAINER:** **The home learning environment (HLE)**

The **HLE** covers a number of activities that parents do at home that have a positive influence on child development. Research has identified parent-child activities that correlate to better developmental and educational outcomes.<sup>50</sup> These are:

- Reading to children.
- Playing with letters and numbers.
- Teaching children nursery rhymes and songs.
- Painting and drawing.
- Taking children to the library.
- Taking children on visits.
- Arranging for children to play with their friends at home.

The HLE has been identified as a DfE priority through the publication of the Social Mobility Action Plan. Last year, the Department published a new approach designed to support changes in parenting behaviour and improve the HLE.

The new approach includes an ambitious aim to halve the proportion of children who do not reach the expected levels in language, communication and literacy by 2028.<sup>51</sup> Making the most of existing networks and services would help to achieve this aim.

More than half of parents reported that their early education provider does not offer advice about activities to do at home.<sup>52</sup> Given the limited time parents are likely to spend with early education

staff, it is not always feasible to expect staff to discuss different approaches and ideas.

This is an area where children's centres have an important role to play. They remain popular among parents and can offer ideas about learning and play activities. Only schools, and informal sources such as social media and friends, are more popular.<sup>53</sup>

Increasing the involvement of children's centres in DfE's plans would make the most of an existing resource that has a track record of helping to improve the HLE.

### **Children's centre use by age**

Children's centres have traditionally focused on supporting families with early years children. However, in the last few years, there has been a growing debate about centres expanding their remit to work with school age children.

This debate has emerged as local authorities seek to align children's centres more closely with community-wide approaches to early help. Dedicated services for school age children have also faced many of the same challenges as provision for under fives.

Between 2014/15 and 2017/18, funding for youth services has fallen by £229 million – a decrease of 39 per cent.<sup>54</sup> Since 2012, an estimated 760 youth centres have closed.<sup>55</sup> These cuts have led to calls for children's centres to fill the gap and to adopt a 0-11, 0-19 or even 0-25 service age range. This approach has been promoted by a number of Conservative Party MPs<sup>56</sup> and the Office of the Children's Commissioner.<sup>57</sup>

Research from the Sutton Trust found that only 12 per cent of local authorities felt a reduction in early years provision was caused by their decision to increase service provision for school age children.<sup>58</sup> Our analysis suggests this is broadly reflective of current use.

Responses from the 115 local authorities who provided complete data and a breakdown by age shows 1,138,707 children aged five and under used centres – compared to just 155,764 children aged six and over in 2017/18. Based on these responses, 88 per cent of children using centres in 2017/18 were aged five and under. This age split has remained the same over the last four years.

**Table 4: Number of children using children's centres by age group<sup>59</sup>**

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Children aged five and under	1,323,893	1,301,462	1,258,005	1,138,707
Children aged six and over	185,512	176,321	177,644	155,764

Adopting our approach to estimate the number of children using centres, we can break down the figures by school aged children and those aged under five.

**Table 5: Estimated number of children using children's centres by age group<sup>60</sup>**

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Children aged five and under	2,034,028	2,009,846	1,871,255	1,677,208
Children aged six and over	208,399	189,729	191,640	166,108

In a difficult funding climate, it is understandable that local authorities look to find new ways to support young people through existing children's centre networks. Research from the Sutton Trust found that 30 per cent of local authorities were considering an increased age range as part of future reforms.<sup>61</sup>

There are clear positives to this approach. Without informal age restrictions, families are less likely to miss out on help once their children reach school age. With fewer local services dedicated to young people, offering programmes and classes from existing community buildings helps make use of available resources.

An important consideration of this approach is to make sure that support for one age group does not come at the cost of support for another. Shifting resources from early years services to those for school age children will not help communities.

Our analysis shows that, overall, children's centres work with an ever-decreasing proportion of the total population.

**Table 6: Estimated number of children using children's centres as a percentage of the total population<sup>62</sup>**

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Children aged five and under	49.6%	48.8%	45.3%	40.8%
Children aged six and over	2.6%	2.3%	2.3%	2.0%

As new proposals are developed to make the most of the current network, children's centres continue to face obstacles that prevent them from reaching the number of families they have done previously. Adopting new approaches will only be successful if proposals also address current challenges, primarily funding, that drive local authority decision-making and limit children's centre services and reach across local communities.

## Number of parents using children's centres

Previous estimates of use have focused on the number of families visiting centres. As part of our request, we received information from 112 local authorities about the number of parents – in addition to children – who used children's centres in the last four years.

While it is not possible to produce a national estimate for parental use due to the difference

in family sizes, the responses do provide an indication of how many parents have received support from children's centres – and how this has changed – in the last four years.

Unsurprisingly, the responses show a similar pattern to use among children. In the last four years, the number of parents using centres has fallen by 17 per cent. This means that fewer parents are receiving the kind of help that makes a vast amount of difference.

**Table 7: Number of parents using children's centres<sup>63</sup>**

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Number of parents using children's centres	1,424,287	1,379,853	1,332,675	1,183,366

## Case study: Helen

Helen was 42 when she had her son. She had two older daughters with a 17-year age gap between them.

"I didn't expect to become a mum at 42. I felt totally isolated as an older mum, as all my friends were at a different life stage to me – they were in work and some had grandkids. I also think, because I was older, people assumed I was comfortable and knew what I was doing. But my daughters were grown up, so it was all new to me again. I found a children's centre and decided to start going to sessions regularly. I met other mums and it felt much more manageable. I had support from people who were in a similar position.

"When my son was 18 months, his speech was not hitting the markers you expect. The children's centre helped me to arrange a hearing test, as well as speech and language support. The test came back fine but a staff worker still felt something wasn't right. At first, I was resistant, because you don't ever want to admit something might not be OK. But she convinced me something wasn't right. She suggested we get an early years special needs [specialist] to come and observe him."

At four, Helen's son, Sam, was diagnosed with autism.

"Because it was picked up early at the centre, Sam has everything he needs to start school. He has an education care plan and diagnosis, which

is highly unusual. Most children do not have their condition picked up until they start school, and it is then usually three years before they are officially diagnosed and can get the support they need.

"If Amanda, my support worker at the centre, hadn't persisted and supported me like she did, they would have only picked it up two years down the road. Instead he has started school with full support in place."

Helen is sure things would have been different if it wasn't for the children's centre.

"We are so lucky – it's down to the centre. The main thing is they persisted with it, because as a parent, you don't see it, you don't want to see it."

"Amanda kept persisting with gentle persuasion, and came with me to meetings and to the diagnosis. She really went above and beyond.

"People ask me how I managed to get support in place so early. I explain that, without the support I have, I would not be where I am. If it hadn't been for Amanda's professionalism and the caring way it was approached, things would not be as they are today. I receive ongoing support with special needs and parents' groups."



# A deeper look at changes in children's use of children's centres

In addition to estimating total use, the breadth of complete responses to our FOI request provides an insight into how changes in use are taking place alongside changes in provision, levels of deprivation and spending on children's centres.

## Children's centre use by levels of deprivation

Following our request, we received full responses from 24 of the 30 most deprived local authorities in England. Among these 24 local authorities, there has been a 22 per cent fall in the number of children using children's centres – from 324,327 to 253,370.

Of these local authorities, 15 have seen a fall in the number of children using centres. Eleven have seen a fall of more than 25 per cent between 2014/15 and 2017/18.

In comparison, we received responses from 27 of the 30 least deprived local authorities in England. Of these 27, there has been a fall of 12 per cent in the number of children using children's centres – from 334,494 to 292,870.

Of those local authorities that supplied data, there is a worrying indication that the number of children using centres has decreased more significantly in the most deprived communities.

Children's centres were originally targeted by government to support children in the most deprived areas in England.<sup>64</sup> This reflects a necessity to prevent children from deprived areas experiencing poorer outcomes to their peers. The differences in outcomes are apparent from birth, with parents in deprived areas having higher levels of smoking during pregnancy and lower rates of breastfeeding.<sup>65</sup>

These differences continue throughout the early years, with children aged two-and-a-half already falling behind on measures of development.<sup>66</sup> By the time they start school, children in deprived

areas are more likely to be overweight and have failed to reach the benchmark for being school ready.<sup>67</sup>

In recent years, there is little evidence of marked improvements for children in deprived areas. Facing an increased risk of poor outcomes, the falling numbers of children receiving help from centres is deeply concerning.

## Average use per children's centre

As part of the National Evaluation of Children's Centres (ECCE), the reach of children's centres was mapped across a number of local authorities.<sup>68</sup> The findings showed significant variations across local authorities, ranging from 250 to over 1,000 children. The study found an average of 770 children per centre.<sup>69</sup>

Of the 115 local authorities who provided data on under fives, we found centres worked with an average of 470 children.<sup>70</sup> As with the ECCE, we found large variations, ranging from 1,745 per centre in one local authority, to just 82 in another. While this may appear low, it is important to consider that some centres are now operating a reduced service on a part-time basis. Centres may only be open one day a week, and offer only very specific services. As with trends in overall use, this change in service provision is likely to lead to far fewer children using centres.

## Children's centre use and age five outcomes

Children's centre statutory guidance for local authorities outlines how children's centre provision plays a central role in discharging their duties with regards to improving outcomes for children by age five.<sup>71</sup> These outcomes are often measured through the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP).

Looking at responses from the 115 local authorities who were able to provide figures for under fives using centres in the last four years, we can map changes in use against EYFSP results. The EYFSP contains a number of different measures, including the number of children reaching a good level of development (GLD).<sup>72</sup> Achieving a GLD is used to give a broad measure of whether a child is 'school ready'.<sup>73</sup>

### QUICK EXPLAINER:

#### Good level of development (GLD)

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) includes seven areas of a child's learning and development. There are three prime areas, focusing on the earliest experiences, that are foundations for learning: personal, social and emotional development; communication and language; and physical development. There are four specific areas where the prime skills are applied: literacy; mathematics; expressive arts and design; and understanding of the world. Children achieving a good level of development are those achieving at least the expected level within the following areas of learning: communication and language; physical development; personal, social and emotional development; literacy; and mathematics.<sup>74</sup>

There has been a persistent gap in the percentage of children achieving a GLD based on family income. In 2017/18, the gap between children eligible for free school meals and their peers was 17 per cent. This is a fall of only two percentage points from 19 per cent in 2013/14. While there has been some progress in closing this gap, the most recent data suggests that the gap is actually now increasing year-on-year.<sup>75</sup>

The EYFSP is completed while a child is in reception year, and our figures reflect the entire under five population. This means that we can't ascribe direct causation between the use of children's centres and achieving a GLD. However, we can map use against GLD results for each local authority to see if there is a broad correlation.

In 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, on average, by 0.5pp. While a small amount, this should be viewed in the wider context of slow progress nationally. In comparison, those local authorities that have seen a fall in use have, on average, seen the gap increase by 0.3pp. This suggests that the closure of children's centres could help explain why progress in closing the GLD gap is improving in some areas and deteriorating in others. If correct, this would be significant to policymakers. However, there are some important limitations and caveats to our analysis.

Among individual local authorities, there was significant variation between use and outcomes at age five. There are a number of factors that contribute to each child's individual EYFSP assessment. Attending a high quality early education setting has been proven to have a positive impact on child development.<sup>76</sup> Without accounting for other factors, it is difficult to determine the specific value of children's centres in achieving a GLD.

As such, this is an area that would benefit from further research. Our FOI request indicates that a large number of local authorities record children's centre use. This may include identifiable information that would enable a comparison between a child's centre use and their EYFSP results. Combining these records may give us a better understanding of the link between children's centre use and age five outcomes.

## Children's centre spending per child

Central government funding for children's services has fallen significantly since 2010.<sup>77</sup> This has led to many local authorities reducing spending on children's centres. Amongst the 121 local authorities who supplied data on usage there has been a 33 per cent (£274 million) fall in spending between 2014/15 and 2017/18.<sup>78</sup> This fall in spending has led to a 23 per cent reduction in spending per child.

**Table 8: Local authority spend per child using children's centres**

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Total spending on children's centres <sup>79</sup>	£834,808,000	£717,654,000	£608,240,000	£560,406,000
Number of children using children's centres <sup>80</sup>	1,568,760	1,563,226	1,515,068	1,359,043
Spend per child <sup>81</sup>	£532	£459	£402	£412

In addition to indicating how funding has changed over time, the fall in spend can also act as a helpful proxy for adequate resourcing. Providing high quality support for children requires trained staff and materials for classes and programmes – such as guides and toys for interactive sessions.

Overall reductions in funding indicate a strain on resources. This raises questions around the remaining children's centres and how equipped they are to provide the best level of support.

The situation is difficult to assess, as the level and complexity of needs among children who use these centres aren't constant. A recent survey of Action for Children's centres found that nearly two-thirds (62 per cent) reported supporting families with more complex needs.<sup>82</sup> This is the same proportion of children's centres that also reported spending an increased amount of time with each child in the centre.<sup>83</sup>



## Monitoring children's centre use

Under the Childcare Act 2006, local authorities are required to offer sufficient children's centre provision to meet the needs of parents, prospective parents and young children in their area.<sup>84</sup> It is unclear how local authorities monitor progress against this duty. The DfE does not monitor local authorities' performance in relation to this part of the Act.<sup>85</sup>

There are questions about how the 13 local authorities that don't collect usage data – and the 37 that could not provide an under five breakdown – are able to assess whether they are adequately discharging this duty. Without a clear picture of how many, or which, children are using centres and the services on offer, it is difficult to tell whether current provision meets the needs of local parents and young children.

These questions are part of a much larger issue about the range and scale of challenges hanging over children's centres. From falling funding to a lack of accountability, centres face an uncertain future.

This is borne from a lack of prioritisation by central government, evident in the delay and postponement of the children's centre consultation. At a local level, 65 per cent of councillors have said that a lack of clear direction and funding is causing children's centres to be scaled back.<sup>86</sup>

At the same time, minister's decision to suspend the Ofsted inspection of children's centres has removed a route to demonstrating the high quality services on offer. Almost nine in ten parents (86 per cent) think that Ofsted inspections of local family support services are important, to make sure that services are safe and high quality.<sup>87</sup>

While the Early Years Social Mobility Peer Review Programme may touch on some of these challenges, it does not have the remit to truly explore children's centre provision in detail. This is likely to lead to few recommendations that fully address the range of challenges centres face.

The government needs to provide leadership to ensure children's centres receive the same prioritisation as other early years services. The introduction of a national outcomes framework for children's centres is one way the government could deliver this.

Developing a framework would help to clarify requirements and direct resources more effectively. This would help children to consistently reach important developmental milestones and ensure the most disadvantaged children are reached.

Such a framework would also affirm the government's long-term commitment to children's centres as a key service that reduces the development gap and improves early years outcomes.<sup>88</sup>



# Conclusion

In their short history, children's centres have become a vital local resources for many families. In 2017/18 alone, an estimated 1.8 million children benefitted from support and services provided by these centres.

Despite this, the reach of these centres – and consequentially the scale to which they are able to support local families – has been reduced substantially.

The size of funding cuts to children's centres has been well documented, with spending falling by more than £300 million in the last four years. This has not only resulted in centre closures and a reduction in services, it has also reduced the budget available to support those children and families who continue to rely on them.

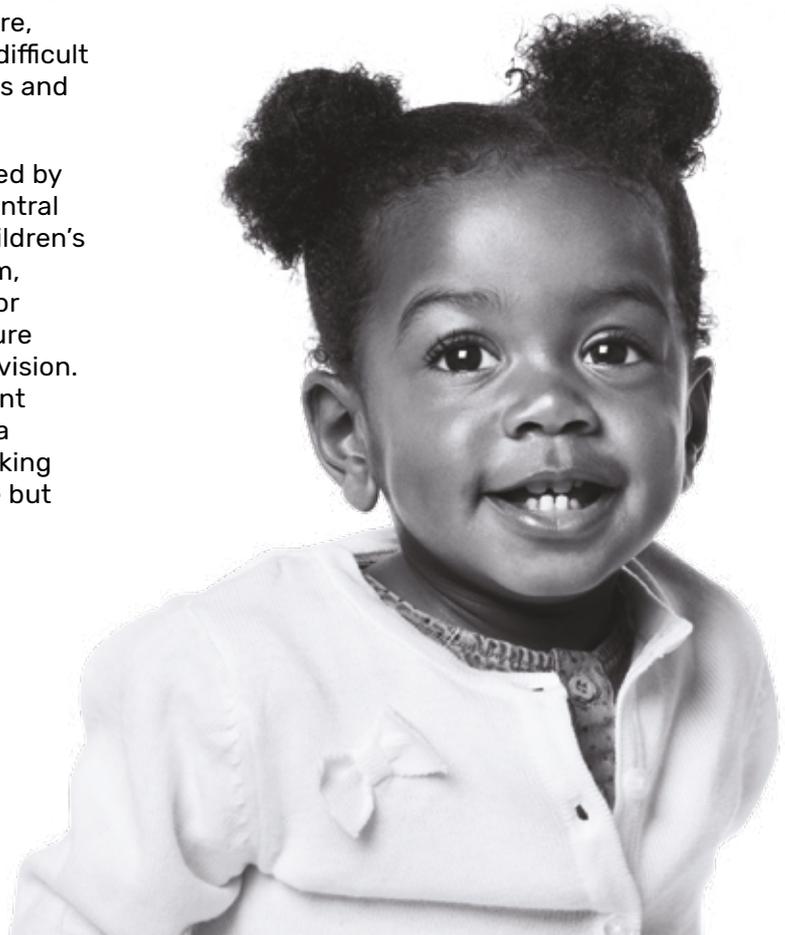
This financial pressure is reflected across local authority services, and is set to continue. By 2025, the LGA estimates that local authorities will face a £3.1 billion funding gap for children's services. This includes funding for children's centres.

At the same time, the complexity and range of needs that children's centres respond to is increasing – as is the time needed to work with each family. Fewer resources are, therefore, likely to result in centres having to make difficult decisions about how to ration the services and approaches used to help families.

These funding challenges are compounded by a lack of leadership and direction from central government. The uncertainty over the children's centre consultation has created a vacuum, with no clear outcomes to drive a focus for centres, and no accountability to make sure local authorities continue to invest in provision. This is in stark contrast to ministers' recent prioritisation of early education. There is a clear contradiction between ministers talking about giving children the best start in life but overlooking children's centres.

With nearly one in ten local authorities failing to monitor children's centre use, it is unclear whether local needs are being suitably met. This raises further questions about how local authorities are assessing whether they are discharging their duties and providing sufficient children's centre provision. With central government not monitoring local authority compliance with these duties, a grey area has been created, which requires greater oversight.

Addressing these challenges requires a detailed review of early years policy, which is only feasible through a dedicated process led by the Department for Education. The terms of reference for the Early Years Social Mobility Peer Review Programme make little mention of children's centres, which means it is unlikely the scale of the challenge facing centres – or the extensive changes – will be captured. The EIF review will support better local decision making but will not seek to understand the role current challenges, such as funding and a lack of clear outcomes, are impact on service provision. Without clearer leadership from government these systemic problems will remain unresolved.



# Recommendations

- 1. The government must show leadership and set a clear direction for children's centres.** Children centres provide an ideal mechanism to help the government achieve its ambition to improve early years outcomes. The current lack of leadership is creating a drift in policy and risks the long-term future of centres in this country. The introduction of a children's centre outcomes framework would demonstrate ministerial commitment and align centres with current government priorities.
- 2. The government must use the forthcoming Spending Review to allocate additional funding to local authorities.** It is clear that the decline in children's centre use is being driven by the current funding crisis facing local authorities. In spite of reductions in capacity, children's centres remain a highly valued and effective source of support for children and families. However, without additional funding, the current trend of cuts to spending are likely to continue, limiting the level of support on offer to local families.
- 3. The government should require local authorities to submit records on children's centre use.** Each year, local authorities report on the number of children receiving government funded early education, yet no comparable process exists for children's centres. Currently, only one in four local authorities is able to provide full data on children's centre use in the early years. Asking local authorities to submit this data would be a valuable way to make sure councils deliver sufficient children's centre provision to meet local need.



# Methodology

## Freedom of Information requests

In August 2018, Action for Children sent Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to all 152 upper tier local authorities in England. We asked the following questions:

1. Does your council, either in house or through a commissioned partner, operate a management system recording the total number of children and parents using children's centres within your local authority boundaries?
2. How many children used children's centres in your local authority in each of the following financial years:
  - a. 2014/15
  - b. 2015/16
  - c. 2016/17
  - d. 2017/18

By 'use' we mean received any specified service or participated in at least one class or session delivered by the children's centre on site or at an alternative site operated by the children's centre.

The total for each financial year should only count a child once even if they used children's centres on multiple occasions within a single financial year.

By child we mean any person aged 18 and under.

3. How many of these children in each year were aged five or under?
4. How many parents/carers used children's centres in your local authority in each of the following financial years:
  - a. 2014/15
  - b. 2015/16
  - c. 2016/17
  - d. 2017/18

By 'use' we mean received any specified service, received information or participated in at least one class or session delivered

by the children's centre on site or at an alternative site operated by the children's centre.

The total for each financial year should only count a parent/carer once even if they used children's centres on multiple occasions within a single financial year.

We received 152 responses to our request. This is a 100 per cent response rate. Due to changes regarding systems used to record children's centre use, some local authorities were unable to provide data for all years.

## Estimating the total use of children's centres

Thirteen local authorities did not collect any data on children's centre use. A further 18 were unable to provide full data for each year. Without data from these local authorities our findings represent an underestimate of children's centre use in England. To account for this, we decided to estimate centre use by local authority in both the missing years and among local authorities without recording systems. To achieve this, we took a two-step approach.

### 1. Estimating use in missing years

We used a line of best fit drawn from supplied data to produce estimates for the missing years.

### 2. Estimating use in local authorities that do not record data

We matched all the local authorities without data to their statistical neighbours. Each local authority in England has 10 statistical neighbours based on a number of shared characteristics. Statistical neighbours are used to benchmark performance across a number of different areas related to children's services. Some of the local authorities had statistical neighbours that also hadn't provided information. However, no local authority had more than two statistical neighbours who were missing data.

To estimate use in these local authorities we calculated the average reach of centres – defined as the percentage of children in the local authority population who had used a children’s centre – across each of the statistical neighbours. We then applied this percentage to the population of a local authority that didn’t supply data. For example, if local authority A didn’t provide data, and the average reach across their statistical neighbours was 38 per cent, we would calculate what 38 per cent of children aged under five equated to. This figure acted as our estimate for use in local authority A. Given the nature of this approach, the figures created are likely to be a conservative estimate.

Some local authorities’ children’s centres support children aged six and over, as well as children in the early years. To provide a more accurate estimate, we reviewed service

provision for each local authority that did not collect data to determine whether they offered services to school age children.

For local authorities that did not provide services for school age children, we only produced estimated use figures for under-fives. For local authorities that do provide services for school aged children, we estimated use among under-fives and, separately, among school aged children using the same approach. We combined these two figures to produce a single number for the local authority in question.

Our approach increased the estimated change in use across the last four years. However, trends in our estimates are closely reflected in the data returned by the 121 local authorities who fully responded to our information request.

**Table 10: Use figures from complete responses to our information requests**

	Children under five using centres (based on 115 local authorities who provided information)	Children under 18 using centres (based on 121 local authorities who provided information)
<b>2014/15</b>	<b>1,323,893</b>	<b>1,568,760</b>
<b>2015/16</b>	<b>1,301,462</b>	<b>1,563,226</b>
<b>2016/17</b>	<b>1,258,005</b>	<b>1,515,068</b>
<b>2017/18</b>	<b>1,138,707</b>	<b>1,359,043</b>
<b>Change from 2014/15 to 2017/18</b>	<b>-14%</b>	<b>-13%</b>

The difference between our estimated change figure and reported use can be explained, in part, by the size and nature of local authorities’ missing data. A group of local authorities with large child populations will noticeably increase the total estimate for each year. The largest

year-on-year change in our estimated figures is between 2016/17 and 2017/18. This is mirrored by the data we received from local authorities, which also saw the largest year-on-year change between 2016/17 and 2017/18.

## Number of parents using children's centres

We received complete data on the number of parents using children's centres from 112 local authorities in England.

## Estimating use as a proportion of the population

To estimate the use of centres we used mid-year population estimates from the Office of National Statistics (ONS). To obtain the parental population with a child aged 18 or under, we commissioned the ONS to produce bespoke analysis based on mid-year population estimates. They supplied figures for 2014 to 2016. Figures for 2017 were unavailable at the time of commissioning.

## Comparison of use with other early years services

We used a Department for Education release on education provision for children under five years of age. Further details on early education statistics are available here:

**<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/education-provision-children-under-5-years-of-age-january-2018>**.

Note: the figures for early education are presented for calendar years. Data for children's centre use is presented across financial years.

In November 2018, Action for Children submitted a FOI request to Public Health England. The request sought to establish how many children received at least one visit from a health visitor – recorded through Health Visitor Delivery Metrics. Public Health England provided approximate figures for 2016/17 and 2017/18, which are presented in this report. These figures are approximates produced, as accurately as possible, by Public Health England. However, there may be overlaps given the number of children receiving new birth visits and six to eight-week reviews.

## Spending figures

Estimates of local authority spend per child in children's centres is based on Section 251 data outturns from local authorities between 2014/15 and 2017/18. The spending figures are presented in real terms using inflation figures from the Office of Budget Responsibility's October 2018 fiscal outlook. All figures are presented in 2017/18 prices.



## Endnotes

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39. In 2014/15 there were 20,390 children aged under five subject to a child protection plan. In 2017/18 there were 19,900 children aged under five subject to a child protection plan. For more information please see: Department for Education (2014) *Characteristics of children in need: 2013 to 2014*. [exls] available at: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/367878/SFR43\\_2014\\_Tables.xlsx](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/367878/SFR43_2014_Tables.xlsx). Accessed 4 January 2019. Department for Education (2018) *Characteristics of children in need: 2017 to 2018*. [exls] available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/762539/Characteristics\\_of\\_children\\_in\\_need\\_2017-2018\\_Main\\_tables.xlsx](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/762539/Characteristics_of_children_in_need_2017-2018_Main_tables.xlsx). Accessed 4 January 2019.
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41. Action for Children analysis of published figures by the Department for Education. Individual pupil numbers based on the relevant published percentages and the relevant pupil numbers included in the release. This acts as an estimate – not an official count which can be obtained through the NPD. Figures have been rounded. Further information is available from: Department for Education (2018) *Early years foundation stage profile results in England, 2018*. [pdf] available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/748814/EYFSP\\_2018\\_Main\\_Text.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/748814/EYFSP_2018_Main_Text.pdf). Accessed 20 November 2018.
42. This figure relates to the estimated number of children using centres. This figure has been rounded to the nearest thousand. For the total figure of estimated usage please see table 5.
43. Figures taken from Department for Education early years statistics. These figures refer to the number of two, three and four-year-olds receiving funded early education placements in each calendar year across all types of providers. Figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred million.
44. Freedom of information request submitted by Action for Children to Public Health England (PHE). The figures are approximate figures based on the best estimates available to PHE from Health Visiting Delivery Metrics. Please see the methodology for further information.
45. Action for Children analysis of local authority revenue expenditure and financing 2016/17 and 2017/18. Real terms figures based on latest RPI figures from the OBR.
46. NHS Workforce Statistics - August 2018
47. Pre-school Education: Disadvantaged: Written question – 211361 [online] available at: <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/ Commons/2019-01-22/211361/> Accessed 20th February 2019.

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78. Local authority expenditure data for 2017/18 is not currently available. It will be released as part of local authority spending returns in December 2019. This is based on Action for Children analysis of Section 251 Outturn data. Figures presented in real terms. In 2014/15 local authorities spent £906 million on children's centres. In 2017/18 local authorities spent £579 million on children's centres. This is a fall of £327 million. Figures have been rounded.
79. This is based on Action for Children analysis of Section 251 outturn data. Figures presented in 2017/18 prices. Figures have been rounded to the nearest thousand. The total spending on children's centres relates to spending by local authorities that provided data on children's centre usage.
80. Please note this figure related to only local authorities who were able to provide the full data on children's centre usage between 2014/15 and 2017/18. This figure is separate to the estimated usage figures we use elsewhere in this briefing.

81. Figures have been rounded to the nearest pound.
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