‘There’s been times when [I] have had no one to turn to, and I’ve come to [the] children’s centre and they have always been there for me ... I don’t know what I would have done without the children’s centre [sic]...’

Mother

Supporting the UK’s most vulnerable families

Why children’s centres are the best way to reach those who need it most
As the leading voluntary sector provider of children’s centres in England and family support services in the UK, we know from experience that children’s centres are one of the most effective ways to reach the most vulnerable children and young people. Recently, we carried out surveys across our children’s centres with parents and partner agencies to find out what they thought. Using the findings of these surveys, we show you why Action for Children children’s centres are valued by the children, young people and families we work with, in local communities throughout the UK.

1 All our children’s centres across England were invited to take part in three surveys, which took place in August and September 2010. Survey methodology for parents/carers was via paper-based surveys and for partner agencies was via an online survey. Total numbers of respondents for each survey were as follows: 1049 parents/carers who access services at our children’s centres; 162 parents/carers who access outreach services; 98 respondents from partner agencies working with our children’s centres. Unless otherwise stated in a footnote, percentages are based on the full sample size of the respective survey. Please be aware that base sizes will vary in results discussed throughout this report, and particular caution should be taken when interpreting findings from small base sizes as margin of error will be greater in these cases. Some questions were filtered – for instance to fathers or to those accessing a particular type of service – these base sizes are therefore smaller.

To protect identity of service users all names appearing in quotations have been changed, and where a specific name of a children’s centre or area has been mentioned this has been removed. Where anonymity could be compromised, we have not specified the region.

1 Base size excludes non-responses = 372
2 Base size excludes non-responses = 754
Outreach services
90% of parents receiving outreach services said they are now more confident that they can be a good parent/carer to their child because of the support they have received.

Reaching fathers/male carers
81% of fathers/male carers agreed their relationship with their child has improved because of the services and support they receive at their children’s centre.

Children with special needs
84% of parents with a child who has special needs felt their child is more confident and gets on better with people around them, and 85% felt their child is happier since using information, advice and services at our centres.

Responding to funding cuts
68% of partner agency respondents said they felt we are flexible and can work with them in getting the best value for money.

Integrated working
88% of partner agency respondents rated us as good or very good at integrated working.

Outreach services
Base size excludes non-responses = 130

Reaching fathers/male carers
Base size excludes non-responses = 48

Children with special needs
Base size = 33

Responding to funding cuts
Base size excludes non-responses = 93

Integrated working
Base size excludes non-responses = 79
We're a national charity, with a focus on making a difference locally. We work in local communities with around 200,000 children, young people and their families through nearly 480 services across the UK. Of the services we deliver, 130 are children’s centres, reaching around 90,000 children nationwide.

Tailoring services to each community is important, because whether a community is urban, inner-city or rural, we understand it will have its own causes of vulnerability and deprivation. This means a personalised approach if we are to reach the most vulnerable, as different communities require different types of support. So we make sure our children’s centres are targeted locally, not only to tackle existing problems, but to make sure services are delivered at the right time, to prevent families from becoming vulnerable.

Feedback on our approach to working with local communities from our partner agencies is positive. Some of the comments we received show that we have a good understanding of community needs, and know how to deliver services to meet these needs:

- ‘The centre is welcoming, professional and dynamic. The staff work proactively with the community and always put the customer first and adapt their services to meet their needs. The centre works at all levels within the community and contributes [to] the development and wellbeing [sic].’
  Partner agency

- ‘They care about their communities and are knowledgeable and supportive.’
  Partner agency

Understanding each local community
Improving the health of vulnerable families

Not all families are aware of the health issues we might take for granted, or know how to lead the healthy lifestyles we might think are obvious. This can leave them vulnerable to increased future ill health and issues like obesity and infections. For many families, children’s centres can be a vital source of not only check-ups to spot problems early, but also to educate and empower parents so as to minimise or even prevent health problems occurring.

Some parents may struggle to read information leaflets about health services, or not know who best to turn to for health advice and support. For parents in these situations, accessing health services can be a daunting task. Children’s centres can help to change this, providing families with the information they need, in ways they can understand. As a result, parents are now accessing health services more.

71% of parents using health services at our children’s centres said that they use health services more often than before they came to the children’s centre

93% of parents who responded feel more confident that they are doing what is best for their children’s health and wellbeing as a result of using health or healthy lifestyle services at our centres

Parents also gain from using the health or healthy lifestyle services at their centre: 87% now feel more confident they’re looking after their own health and wellbeing

93% of parents using health services said they find it easy to use health services at the centre

‘Being able to attend the children’s centres has offered valuable opportunities for helping understand the health and development of my children, both in a formal way (courses) and informal (social) level. I have been fortunate in being able to attend a few courses, and found [the sessions on talking to your baby] really useful for speech development. We also used to enjoy the singing groups. With my 2nd baby I found it very helpful to be able to get her weighted by [a] H.V. [health visitor] at a children’s centre. I wasn’t aware of this facility with my 1st baby. It offered a much more relaxed environment than attending GP’s surgery [sic].’

‘[My son is] eating more healthily, eg raisins instead of a chocolate bar. Sure Start gave me a lot of information about replacing things in lunchboxes [sic].’

Mother
Taking the pressure off the NHS

It’s widely known that resources in the NHS are already scarce. Our survey results showed that many parents are taking their children to A&E and/or their GP for issues like coughs, sore throats and runny noses, rashes and allergies, stomach upsets, fevers and cuts or bleeding.

This is placing a huge amount of unnecessary pressure on the NHS, as issues such as these could be dealt with elsewhere. The results indicate 37 per cent of respondents have used A&E in the last year for their child. Fourteen per cent of respondents have visited their GP more than six times in the past year for their child/children. The graph below shows the reasons respondents visited A&E and/or their GP, and the percentage that visited for each particular reason:

We believe children’s centres could play a crucial role in relieving the NHS of this extra pressure, leaving them to focus their limited and costly resources on more serious issues. This could be done in several ways:

- Children’s centres already work to raise awareness among parents about the different services appropriate for different health problems.
- They also offer services to advise parents how they can reduce the chance of minor injuries happening in the first place.
- Through the Healthy Child Programme and the NHS Baby LifeCheck, children’s centres could offer more services for diagnosis and spotting problems early. It would mean parents could be directed to the appropriate treatment, thereby relieving the NHS of this task.
- Comments from parents included that they feel more comfortable in the children’s centre environment, so it makes sense to deliver more of these services there. This would also have the added benefit of increasing the opportunities to bridge these families into other services they might need.

Respondents’ reasons for A&E and/or GP visits in the past year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents who visited for this reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cough/sore throat/runny nose</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rash/allergy</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fever</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stomach upset</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuts/bleeding</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Base size = 906. Respondents prompted with these particular reasons and asked to say yes or no for each.*
Of the parents we asked, 69 per cent of respondents said they would be willing to use their local children’s centre instead of A&E or their GP for issues like coughs, sore throats and runny noses, rashes and allergies, stomach upsets, fevers and cuts or bleeding. Their reasons for this response are as follows:

- 38% said that this was because it would be easier/more convenient
- 15% said it was because the atmosphere and environment is friendlier, more comfortable for children and less stressful
- 11% felt that it was because they thought they could be seen quicker
- 8% felt they would find it easier to speak to the staff at the children’s centre

‘Doctors are always so busy and you can’t always be seen when you need to. The children’s centre staff are also so friendly I wouldn’t have a problem discussing issues with them.’

Mother

‘More convenient, easy to get to and less waiting.’

Mother

‘The children’s centre and all its services are a godsend, the access to health visitors and a GP would be such a good service as we wouldn’t have to travel with a poorly child and more often than not it’s just a quick check and reassurance that the parent needs, which stops the GP’s surgery being clogged up with worried mums.’

Mother

17 Base size excludes non-responses = 754
18 Base size = 193
Using outreach to engage the most vulnerable

Many of the most vulnerable families are also some of the hardest to reach, often not accessing services voluntarily. This can leave them unable to break out of the cycles of deprivation. Outreach is where we visit these families in their own home, bringing services to them that they would otherwise not be accessing. Successful outreach can engage these families, encouraging them to access services delivered at their local children’s centre, where they can then be signposted to a broader range of services.

Barriers preventing families from visiting children’s centres can include being scared to ask for help, or not being able to speak or write English, for example. Our survey found that before benefiting from outreach, 80 per cent²⁰ of respondents who were now receiving outreach services were not previously getting support from anywhere else, and 46 per cent²⁰ were not accessing services because they did not know they were there. These figures help show the importance of children’s centres in engaging hard-to-reach families, and suggest our approaches to doing so are successful.

A comment from one of our partners demonstrates why our outreach work is a success:

‘The professional relationship works well. Case discussions are well received and have the grounding in exploring the best outcome for children and families. Families are treated fairly and with open and honest respect no matter what their circumstances. This stems from the accepted philosophy from the manager down to all staff ... Children’s centres have reached out to the families most in need who would not for many reasons contact a statutory agency such as children’s social care.’ Partner agency

But perhaps the most important indicator that we’re succeeding with outreach is the response from the families that benefit from it:

- 98%²¹ of respondents receiving outreach services felt they trusted Action for Children to give them the support they need
- 93%²² said the services were flexible and they could get them when they needed them
- 97%²³ said their relationship with their family support worker was good or very good
- 94%²⁴ said the range of activities and services available to them was good or very good

Outcomes from outreach work are promising, with 90 per cent²⁵ of respondents saying they are now more confident that they can be a good parent/carer to their child because of the support they have received. Eighty-three per cent²⁶ feel their child is now happier and healthier as a result too.

As a result of accessing our outreach services, 73 per cent²⁷ of respondents are now also attending services delivered in centres. As well as encouraging families to visit centres, outreach services also work to bridge families into other services appropriate for their needs. This indicates outreach really does help to make sure otherwise excluded families have access to the right services.

‘I found the service very helpful, as support was always available for when I needed it. The service supported me with my financial difficulties and also secured a nursery place for my 2 year old child with Downs Syndrome [sic].’

Mother

²⁰ Base size = 162
²¹ Base size = 130
²² Base size excludes non-responses = 135
²³ Base size excludes non-responses = 120
²⁴ Base size excludes non-responses = 129
²⁵ Base size excludes non-responses = 130
²⁶ Base size excludes non-responses = 139
²⁷ 73% is the combined percentage of those who said they now attend services in the centres about once a week, once a month or a few times a year. 48% are now attending once a week. Base size excludes non-responses = 114.
‘I had post natal depression and didn’t want to go out anywhere ... She [family support worker] is wonderful and has given me the support and confidence I needed to get out of the house with my daughter. Before we never went out, now we attend two or three groups a week. My children’s centre is a relaxed, friendly place with great groups on offer. It’s helped me, along with my support worker, lead a more positive and pro-active life [sic].’

I had post natal depression and didn’t want to go out anywhere ... She [family support worker] is wonderful and has given me the support and confidence I needed to get out of the house with my daughter. Before we never went out, now we attend two or three groups a week. My children’s centre is a relaxed, friendly place with great groups on offer. It’s helped me, along with my support worker, lead a more positive and pro-active life [sic].’

‘[My] children learnt to play and interact with other children and adults. Our worker helped us with lots of things including help during my pregnancy, health issues and child benefit. My husband and my children are very grateful, my children’s life [has] improved, [so have] our finances and generally we are living [at a] much better standard thanks to Sure Start [sic].’

Mother
Reaching fathers/male carers

Industry research has shown that fathers/male carers are less likely to access services for their children, even though they can benefit from them just as much as mothers/female carers, and are often just as in need of support. Evidence also shows that fathers being involved in their children’s lives improves the child’s wellbeing and strengthens their resilience.

Children’s centres can help to do this. They work to engage fathers with services, which can strengthen their relationships with their children. They can also help build confidence, skills and knowledge, as well as offering advice on getting back into work, such as training, advice and links to Jobcentre plus. Volunteer opportunities in the centre can also provide valuable work experience.

Our survey findings revealed that 65 per cent of father/male carer respondents were not using children’s centres or similar services before attending Action for Children centres – a sign that our efforts to engage fathers are effective. Some of the reasons given for this included not feeling comfortable being a man in the centre before, or not being comfortable with the all-female atmosphere. Other father/male carer respondents said they didn’t know about the services or had not received any information on them. Of the respondents who were not previously accessing services, some of the reasons given as to why they now enjoy attending centres are encouraging:

- ‘Friendly staff, made to feel very welcome.’
- ‘Male support groups offered.’
- ‘It gives me space and I get to meet new people.’
- ‘Location. Good to see other males in and around [the] setting.’
- ‘Opening times/hours of work.’

We understand it’s important our children’s centres’ opening times are convenient, particularly in the case of fathers and male carers. To account for this, we have encouraged, where possible, all centres to offer later opening times, or sessions on Saturdays, which fathers and other community groups may find more convenient to attend. This ensures they have the opportunity to visit centres if they wish to, and are not restricted by things like working during the day, for example.

Children’s centres are effective for fathers/male carers

Results from our surveys indicate that the longer-term outcomes of accessing children’s centres are promising:

- 96% of father/male carer respondents said they feel supported to help their child get the best start in life because of services they have used at the centre
- 90% of father/male carer respondents felt more confident that they could be a good father because of their experience at the centre
- 88% of father/male carer respondents feel they can be a better role model to their child because of the services they used at the children’s centre
- 81% of father/male carer respondents feel their relationship with their child has improved after using services at the children’s centre

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28 Base size = 62
29 Base size excludes non-responses = 51
30 Base size excludes non-responses = 52
31 Base size excludes non-responses = 52
32 Base size excludes non-responses = 48
33 Statement based on statistics quoted on page 10
Our survey results indicate we’re good at engaging fathers and male carers.

‘Using [the] Dad’s group on a Saturday has helped me with both my boys understanding their needs, and being able to meet other dads, and talking about behaviour and food needs with specialist people has been very beneficial [sic].’

_Father_

‘If I didn’t have the help that I have received from Sure Start, I would not be in such a good position in life. I owe them a great deal and think they are doing an amazing job. Well done.’

_Father_
Reaching children with special needs

Ensuring children with special needs can access support at children’s centres is an essential part of the service our centres provide. It ensures they can get the best possible start in life, giving them the opportunity to reach their full potential. It means adapting existing services to make sure they are accessible and appropriate for their needs, as well as delivering more specialist services in convenient locations.

Evidence suggests we’re already providing good facilities, as 90 per cent\(^34\) of respondents among parents of children with special needs felt that all of the services at the centre were easy for their child to use. What’s more, 68 per cent\(^35\) of respondents felt they get specialist disability services and support at the centre that they cannot get elsewhere. With these service users relying on children’s centres for the specialist support they need, it’s essential we’re able to continue providing these services for the children with special needs that we work with.

Parents of children with special needs receive support from children’s centres themselves too. This can include practical support, advice directing them to other useful services, help with benefits and allowances, or simply the chance to meet other parents. Our survey results show that 92 per cent\(^36\) of parents feel supported by the centre’s services as a parent of a child with special needs, and 95 per cent\(^37\) feel they are more confident in meeting their child’s needs as a result of their experience at the centre.

Our survey indicates that the specialist disability information, advice and services at our children’s centres is invaluable: 84 per cent\(^38\) of respondents feel their child is more confident and gets on better with people around them. Eighty-five per cent\(^39\) feel their child is happier as a result of using the centres, and 77 per cent\(^40\) said their child now has more friends.

‘They have helped Joshua and me with information to do with some of his conditions, like his fits. I learnt baby CPR there which I have had to use on Joshua, although I had been shown briefly before, I did not take it in and didn’t feel confident doing it until I did it at the children’s centre. Thank you it saved my son [sic].’

Mother

‘The centre is always professional and very welcoming of families and children with additional and special needs.’

Education (partner agency)

‘My child David is autistic, since finding out the nursery nurses at playgroup have been very helpful to David, using Makaton when talking to him. This has made David feel more confident in the playgroup environment [sic].’

Parent

\(^{34}\) Base size excludes non-responses = 40
\(^{35}\) Base size = 37
\(^{36}\) Base size = 39
\(^{37}\) Base size = 32
\(^{38}\) Base size = 33
\(^{39}\) Base size = 31
\(^{40}\) Base size = 39
Multi-agency working

A multi-agency approach involves working collaboratively with partners and sharing information, to ensure families' specific needs are identified, and that they are referred and signposted to the right services. Successful multi-agency working can improve the impact of support provided to vulnerable families. We recognise the benefits of multi-agency working, as we know it can help ensure families don’t fall through the gap. It can also mean that scarce resources go further, because duplication is avoided. We wanted to find out what our partner agencies thought were the various obstacles and challenges multi-agency working can present. This is what they told us:

- resources/staff limitations due to the workloads involved
- communication problems between agencies (this is often affected by lack of time but also by the friendliness and collaborative nature of other agencies)
- difficulties with sharing information
- lack of understanding of each other’s agendas
- lack of leadership in multi-agency teams

Fortunately, the results of our survey suggest our awareness of these issues means we're well placed to avoid them. When asked about their experiences of working with Action for Children, our partners’ responses were positive:

- 88%41 of respondents rated us as good or very good at integrated working
- 78%42 of respondents said we were good or very good at communication with partner agencies
- 91%43 of partner groups rated their overall experience with Action for Children as good or very good

Taking the lead

We believe one of the best ways to overcome many of the problems encountered in multi-agency working is for one partner to take the lead in pulling together the various agencies that make up the advisory board, and who, together, agree the policies, governance and accountability for the provision of services offered. This can mean less duplication, the right agency meeting the identified needs and fewer conflicts when it comes to making decisions about future funding and service development. Seventy-one per cent44 of respondents rated us as good or very good at taking the lead in integrated working, and when asked to give a reason for their positive rating of their overall experience of working with Action for Children, one partner said:

‘Excellent inter agency-working; Action for Children works hard to be inclusive and lead the way regarding many aspects of this area.’ Partner agency

‘I have been actively involved with Action for Children for 10 years and have found them easy to work with, eager to discuss innovations and very supportive of new initiatives.’ Health (partner agency)

‘Always willing to listen to issues raised and act upon them [Action for Children] go out of their way to assist in delivering our services [sic].’

Health (partner agency)

‘Proactive in involving voluntary and statutory agencies. Leaders in putting families first.’

Education (partner agency)

‘Action for Children has been supportive, welcoming and willing to offer support where possible. All our staff feel comfortable and supported when working alongside Action for Children.’

Partner agency
Building good partnerships
An essential element of a successful partnership between agencies is the respect and understanding of the contribution to positive outcomes each agency brings in terms of expertise, service delivery and outcomes for children and families. The ability to create partnerships where trust combined with flexibility and the desire to innovate are at the heart of service planning is how we like to work. We realise that if the children and young people we support are to benefit from our partnerships as much as possible, it’s important our partner agencies respect and believe in the work we do, as well as our ability to deliver it.

So the following survey findings are particularly encouraging:
- 91% of our partners believe that we are very good or good at working together with other partners to deliver positive outcomes for children and families
- 69% of partners see us as leading practitioners in early intervention and prevention
- 73% agree we are experts in children’s centre delivery
- 68% say they look to us for advice and information about meeting the needs of children and families

‘Staff are all always very open, friendly and welcoming. Work is carried out to a good level and they are always more than accommodating. Staff build excellent rapports with the families using the centres and are all passionate about the work they do. It is a pleasure to work in partnership with them.’

Partner agency

‘Flexibility and innovation are key to proactively working with the community and the [children’s centre we work with] demonstrates this to the highest level. In the many years that I have worked with the centre I have been constantly impressed by the range of services and support on offer. Overall the wellbeing of children has improved and families have the opportunity to engage with services in many different ways. The staff are professional, caring and committed to the work they do.’

Partner agency
Helping to protect the most vulnerable from the effect of funding cuts

Some of the most vulnerable families we work with are likely to be some of the worst affected by the cuts to government funding. Resources are going to be more in demand, and we know we must find ways to make sure the most vulnerable families are known and responded to quickly. We must also make sure they receive services when they need them, at the earliest point possible.

We asked our partners how they thought children’s centre providers needed to respond to funding cuts and how partners thought children’s centres could help them in dealing with the cuts.

Feedback included the following:

- **Children’s centre providers must work more closely together with their partners**
  
  ‘Work together. Share resources and skills. Promote each other’s work and continue exploring the potential to work more closely.’ **Partner agency**
  
  ‘Flexible use of buildings, eg venue for evening and weekend meeting and training events, places to hot desk, places to meet clients.’ **Education (partner agency)**
  
  ‘Talk to all partners concerned in integrated service provision and seek to plan together – every agency, voluntary and public sector, is in the same position now and we all need to be open and honest about what can be achieved. Keep skills levels high and promote what you do best.’ **Health (partner agency)**

- **They must involve the community**
  
  ‘Work collaboratively with other community organisations. Look for ways of delivering services via pre-school provision and schools as well as via health centres and community buildings.’ **Education (partner agency)**
  
  ‘They need to get more mothers/fathers involved with running groups. They need to increase and support volunteers. They need to look at what gives value for money. To look for alternate sources of funding for running groups etc. To consider small charges for some activities. To identify areas of crossover.’ **Health (partner agency)**
  
  ‘Involve as much of the community as possible in the running of the place. Act as co-ordinators of services and trainers.’ **Partner agency**
  
  ‘Recruit more volunteers.’ **Partner agency**

**Being innovative and flexible in response to the cuts**

When asked if they thought Action for Children could help partners to get through this difficult time, 68 per cent⁴⁹ of respondents said they felt we are flexible and can work with them in getting the best value for money. Just over half of respondents⁵⁰ felt they could depend on us for coming up with innovative solutions and responding quickly to the changing environment.⁵¹

While it’s clear we are all entering a difficult and uncertain future, and an especially hard time for the families we support, Action for Children is in many ways well prepared to meet the challenge. We’re aware of the need to plan ahead for different scenarios and reduced levels of funding. We know we will need to continue to listen and involve service users in discussions early to benefit from their ideas and input, and continue to consult with them to ensure these ideas are considered. And we’ll identify priority areas for maintaining services.

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⁴⁹ Base size = 79
⁵⁰ 51%. Base size = 79
⁵¹ 56%. Base size = 79
In a period of financial uncertainty for everyone, the feedback from these surveys shows why children’s centres are crucial for reaching the most vulnerable children and families. By being even more flexible and innovative in the services we deliver, the way we deliver them, and the relationships we form with the community and with partners, we will continue to make sure our children’s centres can support the UK’s most vulnerable children, young people and families, for as long as it takes to make a difference in their lives.

To find out more about how we can work with you to reach the UK’s most vulnerable children, families and communities through children’s centres, please contact us on 0300 123 2112 or email ask.us@actionforchildren.org.uk