

Children's Centre Leader



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POLICY

Sector-In-Waiting - For What?

James Hemsall asks whether with a continued 'radio-silence' from ministers it is now time for local children's centre services to focus attention on local direction rather than wait for a national steer.

We have, for many months and years, waited for a strong and revitalised national policy direction for children's centres and linked services. In the meantime, various milestones have come and gone. And in stark contrast to the frantic days of creating our children's centre infrastructure, and establishing new ways of working, we could now be excused for feeling like we are 'always the bridesmaid and never the bride'. All the distractions of general elections, cabinet reshuffles and the EU referendum mean we never seem to reach the top of pile above competing

priorities. What seems apparent is this may now be a futile pursuit. It may be time to 'keep calm and carry on', but that is easier said than done.

Ministerial statements have recently fallen short of committing to any meaningful updates on the previously promised children's centre consultation, and instead assert children's centres are a matter for "councils to decide the best solutions in their area" (Robert Goodwill MP, November 2017). But what happens in reality, is many local areas rely on national messaging to

Welcome

Welcome to the December 2017 issue of Children's Centre Leader.

Find out on p3 about the Family and Childcare Trust's latest research with parents in the driving seat.

We celebrate North Yorkshire's achievements with the funded places for 2-year-olds (p6) as well as the Barrow-in-Furness programme for secondary school transition on p8.

And finally, there are some tips for children with communication needs on p10. As always, let us know what you think by emailing: cclr@hemsalls.com

James Hemsall,
Editor, Children's
Centre Leader



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drive local decision making. Recently, the Social Mobility Commission’s annual report ‘Social Mobility in Great Britain: Fifth State of the Nation Report’ called on government to increase its proportion of spending in those local areas where it is needed most. Whilst also calling on local authorities to develop a strategy for improving disadvantaged children’s outcomes. But this light touch national approach, and reliance on local choice is fraught with risks. The collateral damage we are experiencing is manifested in a

stymied inspection framework, an uncertainty around the aim and purpose of our work, a losing battle against competing financial demands on local councils, and an erosion of our ability to resource and deliver the work we ambitiously seek to deliver. We are trapped into the position of delivering more for less, ultimately delivering less to no fault of our own, and then being called to account and blamed for our diminishing services. That said, there is a real need to focus on what we can and should be doing for greatest effect: parental employment, pre-school learning and childcare, and identifying physical and mental health and safeguarding early and coordinating interventions to prevent greater needs and financial drains later. And one essential method to make this happen is to forge meaningful partnerships with others, such as JobCentre Plus and health as two examples. These are the strategic and operational priorities local authorities need to be grappling with and investing focus on at the highest levels.

In this issue of Children’s Centre Leader, we feature partnership working and cross-disciplinary teams tackling resilience, transition and prevention, giving a voice to those that need to be heard the most - the children and parents we work with every day.

Those of us charged with delivery and managing and motivating teams through the necessary change understand, as much as other key sectors, the context of austerity and the reality of difficult local funding decisions. This has driven our patience and willingness to make difficult decisions and allocate changing resources within new parameters. But our patience could be rewarded with continued local decision-making compromising our futures, and a lack of a national pathway that could and should inspire, motivate, and energise us to reach out to the families and children that need our services the most, before it is too late.



James Hemsall, OBE, has worked in the sector for over 25 years. He is a former playworker, children’s centre manager, further education lecturer, development worker and projects manager for a national childcare charity. His career has been spent supporting organisations to develop quality and sustainable childcare. James was the National Support Director of the Department for Education (DfE) Achieving Two Year Olds contract, supporting the roll-out of the free entitlement for least-advantaged two year olds. He is currently the National Programme Director for the DfE Childcare Works programme, supporting the implementation of 30 hours childcare as well as a volunteer counsellor/psychotherapist.

Future of Family Services

Gordon Cameron, from Family and Childcare Trust, shares research that put parents in the driving seat to find out what they really think about children's centres and local family support services.

In recent years, the Government's approach to supporting children and families in the early years has undergone significant change. While there has been considerable extra investment in free early education and childcare, broader early years services have come under significant pressure as local authorities have struggled to manage funding reductions.

Given the ongoing transformation of early years services, and the potential they offer in supporting families, we wanted to understand from parents what they thought of and how they used children's centres and other family services. We also wanted to learn how these could be improved to both reach more people and better serve the families that access them.

The research was led by four groups of parents. Three of these groups included volunteers from Family and Childcare Trust's Parent Champions programmes in Leeds, Lincolnshire and Brent. The fourth group was run by the Young Dads Collective (YDC), who conducted research in Hackney and Westminster.

The parent researchers selected a range of different questions and research methods to gather the views of local parents. Between them, the parents conducted four different survey questionnaires completed by a total of 465 parents. They also conducted four focus groups and one citizen's jury. Although the groups worked separately, and asked different sets of questions, there were several key themes that emerged from their individual findings.

Stay and Play

All of the groups found that 'stay and play' services were highly valued by parents. In Brent for instance, 80 per cent of survey respondents reported they had used stay and play activities. In Lincolnshire, the few parents who had not been able to access stay and play regarded these services as a priority.

Where they work well, these are places where children can play with their peers in a safe, fun and stimulating environment. They also give parents an opportunity to socialise with other parents, and learn new activities to support their children's

development. During one focus group, a parent said the service "creates interaction with other children and adults", and another said it was "good for confidence and social skills."

Variety of Services

Though parents expressed a strong interest in stay and play activities, there was also a clear demand for a broader range of services. Certain services, though not a priority for the majority of parents, were highly valued by those that needed them. These included support for children with additional needs, family support services and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) classes.

Some of the groups highlighted the advantage of integrating a broad range of services within a family friendly environment. At the citizen's jury, participants discussed the role centres can play in identifying families with specialist needs, who may be attending universal activities such as stay

(continued on page 4)

(continued from page 3)

and play, and offering, or signposting them towards, more targeted support.

Community

Becoming a parent can sometimes be an isolating experience. Across the research groups, early years services were found to serve an important social function for families, giving them an opportunity to “leave the house” and meet other parents. For example, one parent in Brent discussed a sewing class she attended at a children’s centre: “you can get to know other people, your baby can play... I was spending so much time with her just changing her nappies, just feeding... it was just perfect, it was something different”. Another parent described their local children’s centre as a “second home”.

As well as countering isolation, services allowed parents to build networks which they could use to share experiences and ideas about parenting, gain confidence and social skills and find out other local services available for families.

However, a number of the groups raised the issue that family services did not always serve some groups as well as they could. This is reflected by the fact that the vast majority of surveys, which were mostly collected at children’s centres,

came from mothers rather than fathers. The absence of fathers from children’s centres was explored in particular by the YDC group. Panellists at the citizen’s jury proposed community-based solutions to these issues, like family fun days and services that focused on engaging fathers.

Communication

Parents had varied experiences of finding out about local family services. Most respondents found it easy to access services, which might be expected as many of the researchers distributed

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surveys through children’s centres. Despite this, parents highlighted a number of issues with the way services were communicated. Both the Leeds and the Brent groups found that the most commonly cited barrier preventing parents from using a service was that they did not know it was available.

Focus group discussions suggested that services may be more difficult to access for parents who have recently moved to the area,

or for those that do not have access to the internet. As one parent said, “if you’re not a mum that goes online and searches you are left alone”.

Findings suggested that good communication involves accurate, clear and up-to-date information, delivered through a range of channels. This includes the use of printed material (such as posters and leaflets) and other services such as schools, libraries and doctors. Websites and social media were highlighted as particularly powerful tools to communicate local family services.

Availability and demand

All of the research groups highlighted that some parents were struggling to access the services they wanted or needed. Responses indicated a number of barriers:

- » no local availability
- » open at unsuitable times
- » insufficient places to meet demand
- » unaffordable
- » not child friendly or childcare was not available
- » quality of provision was too poor.

Often, parents experienced these issues in combination. For instance, during one focus group, parents reported that although there were a number of playgroups in their area, they were generally poor quality. The high quality sessions that were available were only open at certain



Parent researchers speaking at the parliamentary launch of the research.

times. Some parents were not able to access these because the timings were not suitable for them, while others had experienced waiting lists of two months.

What next?

Taking the findings as a whole, this research has shown that family support services are highly valued by parents and communities. Where they work well, they can fulfil a range of different functions, promoting wellbeing and learning for

the whole family. However, the research also highlights a number of improvements that need to be made to ensure that local provision is meeting demand and providing a quality service.

To address these issues, the Family and Childcare Trust is calling on the Government to develop a comprehensive national strategy for family services in the early years that supports parents and their children to thrive. This should take into account the broad range of ways in

which families access support, including children's centres. Critically, the development of the strategy must recognise and draw on the expertise of parents, to make sure that services genuinely meet the needs of families.

To download and read the research report: *The Future of Family Services*, click here: <https://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/future-family-services>



Gordon Cameron is a Policy and Research Officer at the Family and Childcare Trust. He has previously worked as a researcher for the Strategic Society Centre, a public policy research centre. He has a first in Sociology and an MSc with distinction in Science, Technology and Society from UCL.

Rurality, Children's Centres and Funded Early Education Places

North Yorkshire early years service surpassed their targets to achieve 100% of funded places available for eligible 2 year olds. Tracy Hopkins and Alana Miles share how they did this in such a rural area.

Within North Yorkshire, we have a clear vision for children and families as part of the Children and Young People's Service. We want North Yorkshire to be a place of opportunity where all children and young people are happy, healthy and achieving, based on the following outcomes:

- » A happy family life – strong families and vibrant communities (happy)
- » A healthy start to life – safe and healthy lifestyles (healthy)
- » Education as our greatest liberator – high aspirations, opportunities and achievements (achieving).

Our children's centres sit within the Prevention Service. This service seeks to build and strengthen resilience in children, young people and families and is underpinned by acknowledgement of the value that offering support at an early stage prevents longer term, more costly and damaging problems occurring later. Parents have primary responsibility for, and are the main influence on, their children. Our role is therefore to work alongside parents in order to strengthen parenting capacity, whilst remaining clear about our

duty to safeguard vulnerable children and young people. The Prevention Service has embedded whole family working into assessments, plans and outcomes. [Evidence supports that children and young people's needs](#) are best met when addressed in the context of the whole family, which means that our service works in an integrated and holistic way. The quality of the interventions we offer is critical to our success. Our aim is to make sure that, as far as possible, the support and interventions offered are evidence-informed and appropriately targeted so that achievable, positive outcomes, are realised for the whole family.

North Yorkshire is the largest county in the country, with 40% located within one of our two national parks – the Dales and Moors, so also very rural. We have seven district council areas: Harrogate; Hambleton; Craven; Scarborough; Selby and Richmondshire.

The Ripon and Rural Children's Centre Team sits within the Harrogate district and operates two sites; one in the centre of Ripon and one in the centre of Pateley Bridge. However, we also operate from a number of hubs across

the district, offering a wide range of services from drop-ins such as Baby & Me and Little Explorers sessions aimed at the developing child, to referral-based programmes such as 'Incredible Years' and 'Strengthening Families Strengthening Communities' parenting programmes and our regular speech and language drop-in session delivered by speech and language therapists.

A key part of our role is to ensure that parents and carers are given timely support and advice to care for their children and as part of this role, we engage families to ensure that every eligible child has the opportunity to access a funded 2-year-old place at the early years provider of their choice. Our county target for this is 85% of those potentially eligible and so far we have achieved 100%.

Rurality presents a challenge in ensuring both the sufficiency of childcare places across the county, and the availability of places to meet parental demand.

The Ripon and Rural Children's Centre reach area includes many out-lying, sparsely populated villages and hamlets. Across this



'reach area' there is a wide variety of funded childcare providers: 28 childminders; 12 day nursery businesses; 11 community pre-schools; 5 independent school nurseries; 21 maintained nursery classes and 2 governor-run early years providers in primary schools offering funded places. In order to meet statutory sufficiency duty, these must be financially viable to run and when numbers of children in each annual cohort fluctuates and potentially falls. Especially,

within isolated villages, there is a real challenge to ensure families can continue to find appropriate childcare.

The children's centre has played a key role partly promoting the funded early education places for both eligible 2-year-olds and the extended entitlement, as well as ensuring that families know how and where they can access their funded places.

Following the early roll-out of the extended entitlement for 3 and 4-year-old funding in

the summer term 2017, 66% of providers have indicated that they will be offering the hours across the area in the autumn term, which may well rise with rural childminders supporting families in the most rural areas. Children's centre staff also alert the central early years strategic team to any shortfalls in provision, so that specific areas for places development are known and responses made in order to continue to meet sufficiency duties.



Tracy Hopkins is team leader for 0-19 services for Ripon and Rural Harrogate. Her role involves identifying gaps within the service reach area, working with schools settings, health services and partner agencies to deliver targeted activities, courses and events to meet local need. She has 20 years of practical experience in early years, care and education including being a parent support advisor in children's centres.



Alana Miles is early years policy and development officer and oversees the childcare sufficiency across North Yorkshire. She is also lead for the extended entitlement initiative, and a training and learning officer for the county council. She has worked in the early years sector for twenty three years and has just completed a PGCE.

Transitioning to Secondary School

Jill Kassell from Greengate Children's Centre, Barrow-in-Furness developed a scheme in partnership with the local primary school to help Year 6 children transition to their new secondary school. She reviews the success of the 2017 group.

I have worked in Greengate Children's Centre, Barrow-in-Furness for four years and have been part of this project for two.

Barrow has some of the most deprived wards in the country and levels of poverty which cause difficulties and can lead to families struggling. At Action for Children, we aim to help them at any stage of life to be as happy, healthy and resilient as they can be. A large part of what we do focuses on building resilience, self-esteem and helping deal with mental health issues in a variety of ways, from parents having the confidence to build good relationships with their children, to giving young people the skills and tools to deal with challenges and change.

I was working in partnership with a local primary school in summer term 2016 when we identified a number of children who would benefit from continued support over the summer break, adding to the preparation they already had in school as part of their transition package.

Children were identified mainly by schools, but also

through a school nurse. I met with local services in the spring term and discussed the service with them, and encouraged them to identify children who they felt would need additional emotional support with the transition to secondary school.

Our concerns were that their worries and fears about moving to secondary education may increase over the summer break leading to higher levels of anxiety in September. I planned the original group sessions with one of my colleagues drawing on our knowledge from other evidence-based programmes, such as the resilience framework for children and young people which can be found on: www.boingboing.org.uk.

We were expecting the children to attend over their summer breaks, so we kept sessions upbeat and fun. We covered topics weekly, using arts and craft, small group activities and games.

This year, we were able to refine the programme from last year, developing some of the activities to include mindfulness techniques,

and had the added bonus of a trip to the Trampoline Park as a reward for getting on and staying involved with the programme.

The sessions promoted listening and communication as well as boundaries and consequences.

We delivered six sessions over the summer, which meant that the children checked in at the children's centre weekly over the summer holidays. We also delivered an additional celebration session at the end of the summer holidays, when the children had started at their new secondary schools.

Our outcomes for the service were:

Feeling good about myself and my achievements

- » I can tell you some of the good things about me that others like and value.
- » I can outline some of my strengths.
- » I know when and how I learn best.
- » I can reflect on what I have achieved.
- » I can tell you what I am proud of.

Coping with change

- » I have some strategies for managing the feelings that I might experience when I change schools.
- » I can describe how starting in a new school feels and why.
- » I can share one of my worries about going to secondary school.
- » I understand why I behave the way I do sometimes when I feel uncomfortable.
- » I try to understand other peoples' behaviour by thinking about what they might be feeling or thinking.

Making a good start

- » I understand the importance of first impressions.

Celebration

- » I can reflect on what I have achieved.
- » I can tell you what I am proud of.

We are finding that we have an increasing number of referrals from our teaching colleagues for support with children's emotional development and the management of their feelings and behaviour. One of the things I love about working in the children's centre is the ability to respond to that very local identified need with an imaginative yet evidence-based solution. The transition groups have been so positive for all involved.

On the most recent transition course, eight young people

completed the programme from a number of different primary schools in the area.

We contacted all the parents and carers a few weeks into the new term and they all commented that the transition had gone well and that their children were actually enjoying being in secondary school. One parent reported her son was still getting lost sometimes but he knew what to do when that happened so he didn't think it was a problem.

Feedback from the young people included:

"Transition has really helped me fit in a lot."

"The group we did made me believe I could do anything."

"This group has helped me be more confident in myself."

"Secondary school is amazing."

In Barrow-in-Furness, **Action for Children** supports families with a wide range of services run from their children's centres. From supporting parents even before their children are born with courses on topics such as positive parenting and breastfeeding, through to working with parents who want to learn new skills, to helping children and young people at each stage of development and life.

Supporting children to communicate

Mandy Grist from I-Can shares tips on how to help prepare children for the next steps.

For many, starting a new school or setting is a time of mixed emotions. Parents often feel excitement at this new phase of their child's journey, but it can often also be accompanied by anxiety that they're out there on their own, reliant on their own communication skills to get them through the day. Many parents will find themselves asking questions: Will they make friends?, Will people be able to understand what they're saying?, Will they be able to ask for things like a snack or going to the toilet? and How will they be able to tell me what they've done all day?. This is even more the case for parents of children who struggle with communication skills, including the 1.4 million children (10%) in the UK who have long-term, persistent speech, language or communication need (or language disorder).

When supporting children to move on, it can help to provide a bridge between the

classroom and home. There are a range of strategies that can be helpful in preparing both parents and children with transitions and can help ensure that any child, including those who struggle with communication, can make the transition successfully. You might like to:

- » Help them learn about their new school or setting by showing them pictures. This will help them know what to expect. A strategy like visual timelines can be useful to help support any child who is anxious about starting something new. It helps to explain the sequence of new events, like the different morning routine or the structure of the school day, by using simple flow charts made up of pictures, photos and numbered boxes on a sheet. Children will be able to see what to expect.
- » Make sure children know how to ask for help. Teach them some useful phrases such as: 'I don't understand', 'Can you say that again?', 'I've got a problem' or even 'I need

help', so that if they are stuck they know how to get some support.

- » When children start school they are likely to come across some new words they haven't encountered before, such as register, assembly, bell or even playground might be new. See if you can come up with a list of school-based words and talk to children about what they mean.
- » Have fun practising some nursery rhymes and songs. If children know some popular songs they will be able to join in more easily at school, and it will help them to practise the important skills of rhyming; so crucial for learning to read.

If you're worried about how a child is getting on in your setting, or you're worried about their communication skills, why not suggest to their parents to contact one of I CAN's speech and language therapists? The I CAN Help service offers [free advice and information via phone or email](#), for parents and carers.



Mandy Grist is a Speech and Language Advisor at I CAN, children's communication charity. She has been a speech and language therapist for the past 21 years and as part of her current role keeps abreast of the many developments in policy and legislation in the fields of speech and language therapy and education. She also provides advice and information to others, both within and externally to I CAN. Mandy has specific knowledge and keen interest in collaborative practice for professionals working with children and young people with SLCN, including children and young people with SLCN in educational settings.

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