

Social workers and centre based services: promoting effective help for families

The Labour Party can be justifiably proud of its longstanding and inspiring relationship with centre based services for children and families in the community, including family centres as well as the Sure Start children's centres which were introduced by the Labour government from 2000 onwards. (Indeed the party's origins, closely associated with the settlement movement in the east end of London, were an early expression of Labour understanding of the complex relationship between community, family and child wellbeing). And it's more recent most popular achievements, such as the Sure Start initiative, reflect both the party's commitment to social justice and mobility, as well as to the importance of community and family support for the maximising of positive child outcomes. The number of children's centres to have closed so far as a result of recent government cuts to local authority funding, is now estimated to have reached 800. It is impossible to be more precise as, shockingly, there is no national mechanism for counting these closures. The ongoing local campaigns against closures in a range of demographically diverse areas serve to highlight robust cross-socio-economic popular support for the centres.

These democratic preferences are supported by an extensive longstanding, and uncontested evidence base around the outcomes of centre based services for children and families. Alongside a high quality universal service for all families, centres can provide services for early intervention in emerging child and family problems, and ongoing support to prevent family stress leading to child protection issues and possible reception into care. They are a vital foundation stone in any comprehensive child care system, and their ability to provide early help across a multi-disciplinary front has been shown to deliver value for money.

What does research indicate about outcomes?

- High quality education and day care services enhance child development
- Parenting programmes, especially those that are group based, help parents develop effective techniques/improve child behaviour
- Befriending & support by trained visitors can improve maternal well-being
- Intervening early before problems become entrenched reduces later harm
- Targeted support within a framework of universal services maximises access, including at an early stage of problems emerging. Centres can overcome well known barriers such as lack of information; physical & financial obstacles fear of stigma.
- Having a clear rationale for how the service will help maximises effective inter-agency collaboration and outcomes is important,

Distinctive characteristics demonstrated by centre based services.

- Building on strengths as well as tackling weaknesses
- An integrated whole-family approach that looks at the range of services a family might need-not just the problem
- Encompassing child protection, family based & community work
- Varied & flexible service- willingness to experiment- realistic packages of services on group & individual basis
- Evidence of clear decision making, review & evaluation
- Holistic approach – greater emphasis on preventive work
- They provide opportunities for positive complementary working, in particular a key role for social workers, health visitors, speech and language therapists, welfare rights and employment advisers.

Social workers and Children's Centres

- Despite the budget cuts that have resulted in significant closures, children's centres still provide high quality family support in many areas of the country.
- They are able to act as a welcoming "hub" for the delivery of multi-agency service. By providing both 'early years' and 'early help' services they contribute to improvement in a wide range of outcomes such as increase in breast feeding, improved parenting, school readiness, access to employment.
- They promote access to and reduce stigma for families needing a range of more specialist services to help them with complex problems
- Social workers as familiar figures in family centre teams can facilitate the early identification of families in need of support and in particular in relation to child protection.
- Multi-disciplinary family centre teams provide a bridge between children's social care and universal services, and have a vital role to play in ensuring the delivery of high quality child protection and safeguarding services from a setting that minimises stigma

Implications for Labour party policy on social work

- The necessity of adequate funding for both early years and early help services in order to promote both children's wellbeing and ensure effective child protection
- Policy must ensure that social workers are networked into early help as well as child protection services
- Education for social work must ensure that that social workers understand and are equipped to support families as well as protect children
- This therefore supports a generic model of social work education maximising the capacity of practitioners to work across both adult focused and child focused agencies

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All of the reports from the five modules of National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) are available on the NESS website , from 2001-2015:
www.ness.bbk.ac.uk