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Sure Start Children's Centres: Building Brighter Futures

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department for
children, schools and families

Introduction

In many parts of England, Sure Start Children's Centres are already established as the focal point for early years services for young children and families. This booklet is aimed primarily at the wide range of organisations that are currently working in or with Sure Start Children's Centres, or have the potential to do so in future. It aims to summarise what centres do, how they do it, and why they are so important in the drive to end child poverty, improve life chances for all children and families, close the achievement gap between the most disadvantaged children and the rest, and support parents.

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Context

The Government's vision set out most recently in the Children's Plan published in December 2007, is that every child and young person should have the opportunity to fulfil their potential. To make this a reality, local partners are working together in new ways to deliver services tailored to individual needs and offering ever greater choice and flexibility. Sure Start Children's Centres are at the forefront of this work as they transform services for very young children and their families. Working with parents from before a child's birth, Sure Start Children's Centres provide services for families including health and family support services, integrated early learning and full-day or sessional care for children from 0–5 years, and advice and information for parents on a range of issues from effective parenting

to training and employment opportunities. Better, more accessible services for all – but with more resources targeted at those who need it most. By 2010 every community will be served by a Sure Start Children's Centre, offering permanent universal provision across the country to ensure that every child gets the best start in life.

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Sure Start Children's Centres, along with extended schools, are at the heart of the Every Child Matters (ECM) programme for improving the five ECM outcomes for children and families:

- Being healthy
- Staying safe
- Enjoying and achieving
- Making a positive contribution
- Achieving economic well-being.

The Childcare Act 2006 requires local authorities and their NHS and Jobcentre Plus partners to work together to improve the five ECM outcomes for all children up to five and reduce inequalities between the most disadvantaged and the rest by ensuring that early childhood services:

- Are integrated to maximise access and benefits to families
- Reach out to identify and support excluded families

Local Authorities and their partners must:

- Involve parents and providers from the private, voluntary and independent sectors in both designing and delivering the services
- Take the views of young children into account.

This Outcomes Duty underpins the delivery of a Sure Start Children's Centre for every community, and provides a legal framework which reinforces the key characteristics of the Sure Start approach.

What is a Sure Start Children's Centre?

The aim of Sure Start Children's Centres is to improve outcomes for all children but with a particular focus on reducing the inequalities between the most disadvantaged and the rest. They achieve this through:

- Prevention of the factors that limit children's life chances
- Early support, wherever possible before the problems arise
- Ongoing support for those with longer term needs.

In the most disadvantaged areas centres will provide integrated childcare and early education, information and advice, and a range of family and parenting support, outreach, health and employment services. Elsewhere the range of support they provide will vary according to local need. But wherever they are based, children's centres should act as a service hub within the community, linking parents and providers of services. They will work closely with neighbouring schools, linking with the expanding range of extended services on offer.

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Who runs Sure Start Children's Centres?

Sure Start Children's Centres can only meet their aims through strong partnership working. Local authorities have overall responsibility for children's centres, working with Children's Trust partners. They work with a wide range of partners to plan and deliver appropriate services, including the NHS, Jobcentre Plus, schools, and private, voluntary and independent sector providers. The management of individual centres can be undertaken by any of these organisations though the key feature is that services are joined up for parents, with a clear Sure Start identity.

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Getting the Services Right

Good partnership working creates an experience for families that feels seamless, with tailored support based around their needs. Children's centres adopt different approaches to ensure that every part of the community, regardless of ethnicity or faith feels that they can really help them. Families with disabled children should be included in all services provided by children's centres.

Consultation with local communities is an essential ongoing activity to ensure that

services reflect the needs of all fathers and mothers, and are improving continuously. Centres should involve parents actively in the design and delivery of services as an effective way to:

- Build stronger partnerships with the local community
- Develop their confidence and skills
- Increase the community's capacity to improve local outcomes and quality of life.

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Sure Start Weston-super-Mare commissioned research to identify the factors that families value in high quality services. Parents took part in a discussion group to identify the characteristics of good quality, accessible services. A further group of parents were then recruited as 'mystery shoppers' to report on their experiences in contacting and using a range of local services. The factors that parents identified fell into five broad areas:

- Staff manner
- Ease of access
- Standard of facilities
- Privacy and confidentiality
- Signposting and information.

The findings were converted to a detailed checklist as a useful way for services to benchmark their facilities and services.

Sure Start Children's Centre Services

Integrated early education and childcare (early years provision)

There is strong evidence that good quality pre-school experience improves children's intellectual, emotional and social development

– particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Flexible good quality early learning and care is also a key factor in helping fathers and mothers take up work – and therefore in better outcomes for children and families.

High quality pre-school experience – the positive payback

Findings from the EPPE* research project show that:

- High quality pre-school experience enhances all-round development in children
- Disadvantaged children gain particular benefit from a high quality pre-school experience
- Integrated centres that combine early years provision, health and family support do best in promoting better outcomes.

** The Effective Provision of Pre-School and Primary Education project is the first major European longitudinal study of a national sample of young children's development (intellectual and social/behavioural) between the ages of three and seven years.*

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All Sure Start Children's Centres have a vital role in ensuring that children reap these benefits – either by offering early years provision,

delivering the Early Years Foundation Stage (from September 2008), or by signposting to existing local providers. Centres should promote these benefits to parents and carers to maximise the take-up of early years provision, including the free entitlement for three and four year olds. They should also support local childminders, providing access to resources and training.

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All centres offering early years provision have a minimum of a half time qualified teacher involved in its planning and delivery – and this will increase to full-time within 18 months of the children's centre being open. The service should be available at times suitable for working parents, for a minimum of 10 hours a day, 5 days a week, 48 weeks a year.

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"It is really clear in our reception class which children have been involved with Sure Start. They are generally happier children – and happy children make the best learners".

Julie Holmes, Headteacher
at Rose Street Primary,
Sheerness, Kent.

Support for Parents: Mothers and Fathers

Parents are the single most important influence on children's development. Supporting both mothers and fathers in bringing up their children can therefore make a significant difference to children's life chances. The Government published Every Parent Matters in March 2007, setting out how best to support and engage them. Sure Start Children's Centres are a vital part of this strategy, and integral

to local authority plans for delivering parenting support services as part of their Children and Young People's Plan.

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Shropshire County Council's Oswestry Area Children's Centre currently runs the Incredible Years Parenting Programme, an evidence-based course built on principles that describe how behaviours are learned, and how they can be changed. To date approximately 250 parents have been supported in putting together key principles (known as "tools") for managing both their child's and their own behaviour. Over 12 weeks parents build up their "tool box" of practical techniques to deal with the challenges they face.

The centre has worked hard to make the programme fully accessible in the rural area it serves. The group is run in both town and village locations on a rotational basis, with crèche provision available.

Sure Start Children's Centres should provide access to:

- Advice and guidance on how parents can support their children's learning and development, including family literacy sessions
- A wide range of information and advice on parenting, children's well being, and on local childcare options
- Access to specialist, targeted services for families with more complex needs (e.g. support for parents/carers of disabled children)
- Structured, evidence-based parenting programmes.

Every centre's strategy for working with parents should include specific efforts to reach out more and involve:

- Fathers
- Teenage Parents
- Children and Families from minority ethnic groups
- And those with disabled children.

"It's just a good place, before I had Lucas I didn't know many mums in this area and I didn't know what facilities were available."

Mother, Islington

"The parents get to interact and talk to each other, because sometimes you can feel trapped having a child and it's nice. A bit of company for the parents as well as the kids with the other little ones."

Father, Islington

"My children have got so much out of Sure Start; my daughter sailed into nursery and is now enjoying full time school. It is now my son's turn to enjoy the benefits of such a good start."

Mother, Worksop

Child and Family Health Services

The National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services (NSF) published in September 2004 sets out a ten-year programme for sustained improvement in children's health and well-being. It also forms an integral part of the Every Child Matters programme. The knowledge and skills that health professionals have in early intervention and prevention and their acceptability and credibility with parents, gives them a central role in Sure Start Children's Centres.

The range of health services that are delivered from a children's centre will vary depending on local needs and the existing configuration of services.

Children's centres can be an ideal place for delivery of the Child Health Promotion Programme (CHPP), improving access and connecting families with the services of the centre. The CHPP offers a programme of screening and surveillance, immunisations, health reviews, health promotion and parenting support, led by the health visitor.

Where centres serve communities with less intensive needs, they will have a role in helping families with additional needs to access health services. Effective joint working with midwives and other health professionals will provide a means of delivering integrated, multi-agency services for families at greatest risk of social exclusion.

The 'Bosom Buddies' scheme started out as a local breast-feeding support group, but now works in a number of Gateshead children's centres. Around 60 women have had professional training to enable them to help new breast-feeding mums at informal drop-in groups that are promoted and supported by health visitors and midwives. Between January and March 2006 over half of mothers giving birth at Queen Elizabeth Hospital had initiated breast feeding within 48 hours or by the time of discharge - the highest level since collection of this data started.

At Willington children's centre in County Durham, where the manager Lyn Reed, is a health visitor by background, the children's centre provides fully integrated services to local children and their families and has excellent links with local GPs. The team includes midwives, health visitors, a Family Nurse piloting the Family Nurse Partnership programme, nursery nurses and a range of early years and family support staff. The centre is busy with local families taking up a wide range of services and activities that are on offer. This means that the health visitors can focus on primary assessment and use the rest of the team to provide a package of support to families who need it.

Helping Parents into Work

Employment helps to lift families out of poverty – and also has a positive effect on children's mental health, behaviour and educational performance and parental confidence and self esteem. It is vital that Sure Start Children's Centres contribute fully to enhancing employability and contributing to the Every Child Matters outcome of achieving economic well-being.

Sure Start Children's Centres and Jobcentre Plus work together to encourage and support parents who wish to consider training and employment. The exact nature of these links will be agreed locally, but could include delivery of

services at centres (such as lone parent adviser surgeries or in-work benefit advice), or 'warm phones' with a direct link to the local Jobcentre Plus or Jobseeker Direct service. All Sure Start Children's Centres should help with access to good quality childcare – this is a key factor in giving parents confidence and helping them take up work, and therefore in achieving better outcomes for children and families.

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The New Horizons Jobshop has been set up in the Rainbow Children's Centre, Hull. The project aims to help anyone, including parents who are thinking of returning to or starting work, or are looking to improve their work related qualifications. The service includes advice on applying for jobs, one-to-one interview skills practice, support in finding suitable childcare, as well as job matching through the close links with Jobcentre Plus and local employers.

The job advisor works closely with the multi-disciplinary team and other co-ordinators to promote services. Further effectiveness has been achieved through implementing a shared monitoring system.

The personal, face-to-face service has motivated and encouraged parents to overcome barriers that they face in both finding suitable employment but also accessing associated in-work benefits.

The project's success has resulted in 33 people securing employment of more than 16 hours per week and 1,146 hours worth of training accessed by Jobshop clients in the last six months of 2006.

Children's centres should also work with local partners to address the barriers to work experienced by low-income groups, including lone parents, minority ethnic families and disabled parents. Employment strategies to target the needs of these groups should include outreach work to encourage engagement with support services, basic skills training, and confidence building.

"I didn't really know what I wanted to do when I had the children. Coming to Sure Start Sheerness has inspired me to go to college and become a midwife. I wouldn't have had the courage to do that without their support."

Candice Brown, young mum with two daughters.

Outreach and Home Visiting

Some families need more convincing and encouragement than others to use Sure Start services. Reaching out into the community is essential if Sure Start Children's Centres are to support the most disadvantaged families. A structured programme of outreach enables centres to:

- Inform families about support available to help them
- Make services easier to reach and use
- Provide a gateway to persuade families to access services

- Deliver services through home visits particularly relating to child health and communication and social and emotional development
- Target resources at the families who need the most support and so improve outcomes for the most disadvantaged children.

Outreach and home visiting can involve staff from the whole spectrum of Sure Start services, including health professionals, family support workers and a range of specialists to target specific issues.

Kensington and Chelsea provide a universal home visiting service in the north of the borough to all babies at eighteen months and at age two. The service offers families an introduction to Sure Start, and acts as a bridge between the most disadvantaged families and vital health and social care services. Visits are undertaken by a multi-disciplinary team comprised of health visitors, nursery nurses, a social worker and an Arabic family support worker. Packages of support are provided for families with additional needs, and staff have been trained to deliver a ten week parenting programme. External evaluation identified that:

- Parents/carers reported improved self esteem, independence and parenting skills
- Successful preventative work was carried out with children at risk of statutory intervention
- The approach was highly effective for working with Arabic speaking communities.

The approach has been so successful that the local authority is rolling it out across the whole borough.

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Find out more

By 2010 there will be 3,500 Sure Start Children's Centres operating in England. Every organisation offering services to families with young children should be working with Sure Start by this stage, as centres become the first port of call for parents for advice and support.

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Further information on the role of Sure Start Children's Centres and related services can be found through the following organisations and resources:

Information on Sure Start including resources, guidance and events can be found at www.surestart.gov.uk

Together for Children is working in partnership with the Department for Children, Schools and Families to support local authorities in delivering 3,500 Sure Start Children's Centres across England by 2010. www.childrens-centres.org

Guidance on governance of children's centres and extended schools is available at www.teachernet.gov.uk/publications

Information on delivering children's centre services can be found in the Children's Centre Practice Guidance at <http://www.surestart.gov.uk/improvingquality/guidance/practiceguidance/>

Information on performance management can be found in the Children's Centres Planning and Performance Guidance, available at <http://www.surestart.gov.uk/improvingquality/guidance/practiceguidance/>

The guidance, *Raising Standards – Improving Outcomes*, published jointly by the Department for Children, Schools and Families, the Department of Health and the Department for Work and Pensions, sets out what local authorities, Primary Care Trusts, Strategic Health Authorities and Jobcentre Plus must do to fulfill the duties in sections 1–4 (the Outcomes Duty) of the Childcare Act 2006 and help to deliver the authority's statutory early years targets.

This can be found at <http://www.surestart.gov.uk/improvingquality/guidance/raisingstandards/>

The Department of Health has produced guidance on involving health in the delivery of children's centres and examples of good practice. This can be found at http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_076333

Early Support is the Government's recommended approach to co-ordinating services for disabled children across England. All local authorities are expected to use Early Support principles and practice in order to move to more consistent levels of service across the country, ensuring that wherever a family lives, they receive the same, high standard of support. See www.earlysupport.org.uk

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