



House of Commons
Education Committee

**Foundation Years: Sure Start
children's centres: Government
Response to the Committee's
Fifth Report of Session 2013–14**

Fifth Special Report of Session 2013-14

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The Education Committee

The Education Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Department for Education and its associated public bodies.

Membership at time Report agreed:

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Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Dr Lynn Gardner (Clerk), Katy Stout (Second Clerk), Martin Smith (Committee Specialist), Claudia Sumner (Committee Specialist), Ameet Chudasama (Senior Committee Assistant), and Caroline McElwee (Committee Assistant).

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Fifth Special Report

On 17 December 2013 we published our Fifth Report of Session 2013-14, *Foundation Years: Sure Start children's centres*.¹ The Government response was received on 25 February 2014 and is published as an Appendix to this Special Report.

Government response

Government response to the Education Select Committee's report on Foundation Years: Sure Start children's centres

May I begin by taking this opportunity to thank the Committee for their thorough work in gathering evidence from a wide range of individuals and organisations. The Committee's thoughtful questions and discussion have made for a comprehensive and thought-provoking report. I very much welcome the report and have studied the recommendations carefully.

We want to see all children do well, and children's centres have a vital role in making sure families access the right services to support children's development and early learning. Children's centres offer a single doorway that provides targeted support to the most vulnerable families, alongside offering universal services for all families.

This rich mix of parents and services is an important part of what makes children's centres successful and popular with parents. Where services are joined up or co-located this can help to engage a family in the first place but also keep them coming back through the door. They provide a valuable place for parents to meet, as well as helping them to access the range of services they may need from midwifery, birth registration and beyond. Children's centres also help to bridge the gap between early years and schools—as just over a third of centres are co-located with schools.

As I made clear when I gave my evidence to the Committee in October, we have developed a clear core purpose for children's centres which focuses on improving outcomes for young children and their families, and reducing inequalities.

The core purpose helps provide flexibility for local authorities to design and develop the services that are right for their own communities. On top of this, local councils have been given the freedom to target their resources so that they best support the needs of local communities. Funding for early intervention in the round has increased from £2.2 billion in 201–12 to £2.5 billion in 2014–15, and councils are in charge of how this money is spent.

¹ Education Committee, Fifth Report of Session 2013-14, *Foundation Years: Sure Start children's centres*, HC 364-I (Incorporating HC 852-i and ii, Session 2012-13)

Many local authorities are examining their current children's centre provision to make sure that services are being delivered efficiently and effectively and that they are meeting the needs of the community. In doing so, they are identifying new ways of retaining a network that is accessible to all, while having a particular focus on making a real difference to those most in need. For example, Dorking Children Centre was set up as a hub and spoke model and delivers services from the 'hub' main centre through spokes across the locality overseen by a specific member of the senior management team. Services differ in the "spokes" according to local need.

As 4Children's own survey, published on 29 October, showed us, over a million families are now using children's centres and accessing the valuable services they provide. That survey also, quite rightly, highlighted the importance of joint working especially between health and education professionals. Children's centres need to act as a gateway for families so they can receive support, whether that is in parenting, for health services, support with child development or early learning. This joined up thinking is developing locally, and we have seen some excellent examples of birth registration now taking place at children's centres and health visitors being based at children's centres.

As the children's centre network matures, we are keen to explore how we can have an accountability framework that looks at the overall impact those networks are having in local areas. We will continue to work closely with Ofsted and consider how we might move from the current focus on individual centres to improving outcomes for children right across the country.

Response to recommendations

We have responded to each numbered recommendation below.

What is a Sure Start centre?

- 1 To assist its policy-making, the government needs to have a clearer picture of the pattern adopted by local authorities in fulfilling their statutory obligations with regard to Sure Start children's centres. We recommend that the DfE collect data from local authorities on the pattern of centres commissioned based on the model we set out above. (Paragraph 17)**

The government agrees that it is important that local authorities are clear on how their local network of children's centres is configured so that it fulfils their statutory obligations under the Childcare Act 2006. This will include being clear on the governance arrangements for main centres and associated sites, particularly where management functions have been merged.

The department is currently overhauling the way in which data on main centres and further sites is collected, to ensure that parents have access to up-to-date information on where to access services locally, and to ensure that data is available by local authority on the number of main centres and further sites open locally. This is important is ensuring that local authorities can be held to account by their local electorate for the delivery of their statutory duties.

The core purpose

- 2 **We are not convinced by the Minister's defence of the wording of the core purpose, which we judge to be too vague and too broad, whichever version is used. It is not possible for a small children's centre, which acts principally as a signpost to other services to fulfil such a wide-ranging and all-encompassing purpose. For other centres, the core purpose is too all-encompassing to be of any use as a guiding principle of their aims and priorities. In neither case is it possible for a children's centre to achieve such expectations alone. It is right that councils should have the freedom to organise their services to achieve the best outcomes for children but we are not convinced that setting a universal core purpose for all children's centres assists them to do this. We recommend that the core purpose be reviewed and reshaped to focus on achievable outcomes for children's centres to deliver for children and families, and to recognise the differences between the three types of centre. (Paragraph 20)**

The government agrees with the Committee that it is important that local authorities should have the freedom to organise their services in the way that best meets the needs of local families. Those needs will inevitably vary from area to area. The core purpose document was published in April 2013 following a period of extensive consultation with local authorities, children's centre managers and other interested parties. It was always intended to offer a high level and aspirational statement of intent, which gives local authorities and individual centres the flexibility to configure services in accordance with local circumstances.

While the government understands the Committee's concerns, the government believes that focus should now be on developing services within the broad framework the core purpose document provides, and seeking to maximise the impact of the roughly £1.3 billion investment that local authorities are making in children's centres. While it will obviously continue to monitor local application of the core purpose document, the government does not agree that there is a need for a formal review so soon after its adoption.

Universal or targeted services

- 3 **Funding pressures inevitably mean that greater targeting of services must occur but it is important that all families are able to access services through children's centres and universal services play a significant role in removing the stigma from**

attending centres and in encouraging families to engage with centres in the first place. The Government must make clear in its statutory guidance that local authorities should have regard to the relationship between universal services and the effectiveness of targeted prevention services when planning local provision. (Paragraph 24)

The government agrees that children's centres should offer a universal front door, and will continue to offer something for everyone. At the same time, it is also right that limited resources should be targeted on the families where they can have the biggest impact. Getting the balance right between universal and targeted services must be a matter for local planning and decision. The statutory guidance clearly indicates that local authorities should offer a network of services available to everyone but especially those most vulnerable families.

Priority services: children or parents

- 4 Clarity is needed on who children's centres are for and the balance between the needs of parents and those of the children themselves. The core purpose gives scope for a focus on parenting skills but is vague about parental "aspirations" and what this means for child development. It is also not clear how far centres are meant to offer training for parents in employment skills. We recommend that the Government address these issues in its review of the core purpose. (Paragraph 28)**

The core purpose is clear that children's centres are there to support both children and their parents, especially those in greatest need. As the Committee's report notes, parenting classes are one of the services most commonly provided by children's centres, and the core purpose document reflects the fact that this will continue to be an important role for many centres moving forwards. Improving parenting aspirations was an important theme in the consultation and is intended to capture the desire expressed by many professionals that we should encourage parents to have greater aspirations for their children and for their own contribution as parents. It is intended to be a flexible term which centres are able to interpret in ways that best meet the needs of parents in their area.

The government understands why the Committee raises the question of whether centres are meant to offer training for parents in employment skills. However, that would seem to imply a more prescriptive view of the role of centres than the government intends. Where there is an identified need locally for training of this sort, and where centres have forged good links locally with Job Centre Plus and local training providers, the centre will often provide a convenient setting, possibly with crèche facilities, which will enable training to take place. There are good examples where that has happened. However, this will depend entirely on local needs and the extent of collaboration at a local level.

- 5 Centres are required in legislation to provide activities for young children and it is not acceptable for any centre to operate without direct contact or engagement with children: local authorities should ensure that the statutory requirement is met and Ofsted should draw attention to any centres in breach of the requirement in its inspection reports. (Paragraph 30)**

The core purpose makes clear that children's centres must provide activities for young children. We agree local authorities must meet their statutory duties, and Ofsted inspection reports should always draw attention to any breach of legislative requirements.

Childcare and early education

- 6 We consider that it is not necessary or practical for all centres to run their own education with care but it is essential that all centres build close links with high quality early education/childcare providers. For the majority of centres that do not have childcare or education on site, there are questions about how well they can fulfil the expectations in the core purpose that they deliver improved outcomes for young children and reduce inequalities in child development. The Government must set out clearly how these expectations apply in such cases. (Paragraph 35)**

The government agrees with the Committee that it is not practical for all centres to provide education and childcare provision. However, it would be wrong to view early education and childcare services as the only way in which centres can contribute to improved outcomes for young children and reduced inequalities in child development. Most if not all the services that centres offer will contribute directly or indirectly to these outcomes. The core purpose document sets out the universal and targeted services that centres can offer to help deliver these outcomes and so ensure that local authorities are meeting their legislative and statutory responsibilities. It is for local authorities to interpret these requirements in relation to the needs of families in their area and to tailor services accordingly.

- 7 Research shows that contact with qualified teachers enhances outcomes for children. All centres require input from a qualified teacher to help shape their offer to and their work in direct contact with, children. The Government was wrong to remove the requirement for a link with a qualified teacher and we recommend that the decision be reversed. (Paragraph 36)**

The government agrees that high quality early education staff can have the biggest impact on children's outcomes. We have announced a series of reforms to increase the supply of people with the relevant specialist skills in the early years workforce, and already there has been a 25% increase in the number of students training to become Early Years Teachers.

Where children's centres are continuing to offer early education and childcare, then local authorities have a responsibility to ensure that it remains high quality and an example to other providers locally. Indeed in some areas, children's centres are at the heart of local efforts to improve the quality of early education provision. In Bristol, for example, there is an Early Years improvement network involving a children's centre, school nurseries and a PVI provider, working together to improve children's outcomes across their area.

However, it may not always be practical for children's centres to offer full daycare provision. National Audit Office evidence suggested that in some areas, where demand for full day care was low, money intended for other children's centre services was subsidising it. By removing the requirement to provide full day care where there is no demand the government freed local authorities and children's centres to use their resources more flexibly and to intervene more effectively.

Working with partners

- 8 We welcome the new integrated 2½-year-old health check as a demonstration of closer partnership-working with shared objectives. Joint training for the integrated check might overcome some of the barriers between the professions. We recommend that the Government incorporate joint training between the different agencies involved into the implementation of this policy. (Paragraphs 45)**

The government agrees it is essential that joint working between different agencies occurs, as we believe it may overcome some of the barriers between the professions. We will continue to work closely with Department of Health colleagues to see how this can be incorporated into the implementation of the 2 - 2½ year old integrated review. We expect to see a draft report from the implementation study on the Integrated Review later in the spring.

Working with childminders and other education providers

- 9 The Government's proposals for a new baseline assessment of children upon entering reception may lead to improvements in primary school accountability, but a better procedure is needed for passing on richer information on individual children from children's centres to schools and nurseries. Clearer guidance is also needed on how schools should use this information. This applies equally to assessments of individual children passed on from childminders to children's centres and schools. We recommend that the Government examine how this can be done. (Paragraph 51)**

There are many good examples around the country where information sharing between children's centres and schools is working effectively. This is particularly the case where children's centres are operating on the same site as schools and/or under

shared leadership and management arrangements. For example, at the Old Church Nursery School and Pre-school in Tower Hamlets the Headteacher works closely with the children's centre on site. The school and children's centre share information and jointly manage case reviews on children at the centre and the school. They also jointly provide healthy eating programmes and training for parents.

Outcomes and accountability

Measuring Outcomes

- 10 We agree that local authorities should be held to account for outcomes for their children across the piece but there is still a strong case for being able to measure the performance of and contribution made by individual centres. We recommend that the Government develop a new national outcomes framework, in consultation with the sector. This would increase the accountability of centres to parents, local authorities and the Government. Any framework must be usable by staff and include meaningful, achievable outcomes and be capable of adaptation to the different kinds of centre. (Paragraph 55)**

The government agrees that it is important that local authorities should be accountable to their local electorate for the delivery of their statutory duties in relation to children's centres and for children's outcomes as a whole. We are currently exploring with Ofsted how best to achieve this.

The government understands the rationale for a national outcomes framework for individual centres. However, as other evidence to the committee suggested, it might be difficult to reconcile such a framework to the mixed and flexible offer made by children's centres. If children's centre managers would find a national outcomes framework a useful local tool, then local authorities and third sector organisations should be encouraged to develop such a tool. However, the government would not want to prescribe its use.

Inspection

- 11 It is important to distinguish between early education and children's centres in terms of inspections. Ofsted needs to act on the research which questions its expertise in inspecting provision for the under-threes and address other concerns about its inspections. It also needs to demonstrate that its framework is adaptable enough to allow a meaningful assessment of a centre offering a few, targeted services as well as of a centre offering a wider range as identified in our three-part structure at the beginning of this report. Ofsted must also make clear to centres that a good or outstanding rating does not mean that they have no need for further improvement. (Paragraph 60)**

The government has noted this recommendation. While we are working with Ofsted to improve and strengthen the inspection regime so it looks at the overall impact of a local network of children's centres as part of the broader effort to raise children's outcomes, this is a recommendation to which HM Chief Inspector should respond.

- 12 Ofsted does not have the resources to assist improvement in all 3,000 individual centres. We recommend that the Government clarify who is to fill this gap if local authorities are no longer able or empowered to help with improvement. The Government should recognise the role in sector improvement of Early Years Teaching Centres where nursery schools that are also children's centres assist leaders and staff in other centres, and the Early Years Teaching Schools, where nursery schools help other schools. (Paragraph 61)**

Local authorities continue to have statutory responsibilities to ensure that there is an adequate network of children's centres and for the delivery of good outcomes for children in their area. As indicated above, we see the role of Ofsted moving forwards to be inspecting whether or not local authorities are delivering on those duties. If they are not, the responsibility rests squarely with the local authority, and it will want to take steps to address any weaknesses identified by Ofsted in its children's centre provision.

How a local authority does that is a matter for local decision, but the government has taken a number of steps to ensure that support is available, not least through the development of the Early Intervention Foundation. The government is keen to explore what more it could do in collaboration with the Local Government Association and other partners to support improvements in children's centre practice.

Evidence-based interventions

- 13 The use of evidence-based programmes in children's centres is developing but more training needs to be given to help staff understand and implement the programmes correctly. Centre leaders need to ensure that they are aware of best practice both in choosing programmes and putting them into effect. The EIF should issue guidance on how programmes can be used and implemented in the context of children's centres. Such programmes should include examples of local practice as previously validated and shared by the C4EO. Centres which have developed their own evidence-based programmes should also be encouraged to have them validated through the EIF. (Paragraph 68)**

The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) is building a robust overview of the evidence on early intervention covering the programmes, practice and systems relevant to families with children of different age groups. As the Foundation reviews the evidence, they will summarise it in forms accessible to children's centres, and other local services, through an EI Guidebook on their website. This will provide

information in terms of what works and what does not for key population groups, in relation to key outcomes.

As part of this a systematic what works review is currently being undertaken on 'What works for 0-5s on programmes and interventions'. This will cover the most effective programmes/practice that staff in early years services can use to make a difference to children and families, and is due for publication early in 2014.

In addition, the EIF will also be seeking wider examples of programmes being delivered in early years and other settings in order to provide advice on how far they reflect evidence about what works best for improving children's outcomes.

- 14 Local authorities need to be clearer about the outcomes they expect from programmes and how these can be monitored. Authorities also need to be clear about their role in commissioning programmes and their accountability for commissioning services. We recommend that this is set out by the Government in its statutory guidance. (Paragraph 69)**

We agree local authorities have to be clear to centres on what is expected of them to deliver good outcomes for children within their local communities and this should inform their approach to commissioning. However, this is not something that local authorities need to be told to do by central government. The approach that local authorities take to commissioning and organising their centre provision will vary depending on local circumstances, and local authorities are best placed to judge how to undertake their local commissioning role.

Decision-making and governance

- 15 As we have argued elsewhere in relation to schools, good governance is vital both in terms of the right structures and the effective performance of those involved. The governance of children's centres must become stronger and more formal like an effective school governing body and linked to their statutory duty. Parents need to be more involved in children's centres but within a clear framework to ensure that one group does not dominate. We recommend that the DfE take the necessary statutory steps to bring this about. (Paragraph 75)**

The government agrees that parents have an important role to play in the governance of children's centres. Statutory guidance already makes it clear that families should be at the heart of decision making and that this may involve a role for parents in governance. No 'one size fits all' system of government is likely to work for all areas. Different models of parental involvement have worked well in different areas. For example, volunteering to run activities, being a member of a children's centre advisory board or parents' forum. The department has also funded a project that was run by our strategic partner (4Children) to support ten groups of

parents and community members to help them bid to run their own local children's centre.

The government would prefer to allow these models of parental involvement to develop organically in accordance with local circumstances rather than legislate to make a particular form of governance a national requirement.

- 16 Local authorities should improve the quality of data given to advisory boards and put more effort into encouraging all sections of the community to contribute to boards. We look forward to learning the outcome of the DfE's further consideration of the need for closer monitoring of the adherence of local authorities to the statutory guidance on these issues. (Paragraph 76)**

Local authorities have a legal duty to ensure that each of their children's centres has an advisory board. While we do not prescribe what the make-up should be, we agree that it is important that the membership of advisory boards is drawn from right across the community and should reflect the community the board serves. We rely on Ofsted to consider the make-up of advisory boards as part of the inspection process.

Research into effectiveness

- 17 We recommend that the Government continue to fund the on going research into children's centres and commission more work into what makes children's centres of the three distinct types effective in improving outcomes for children. In particular, research is needed into what kind of engagement with parents in their children's learning in the family home makes the difference in narrowing the gap between the most disadvantaged children and their better-off peers. (Paragraph 78)**

The government agrees with the importance of taking an evidence-based approach to the development of children's centres and of services to support children's outcomes.

The government has set up the Early Intervention Foundation to provide advice and support to local commissioners on evidence-based policy and practice, and build research evidence on what works in terms of intervening early. They will conduct a rigorous review of the existing evidence on early intervention and develop standards of evidence to judge how effective intervention has been.

Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (ECCE) began in 2012 and will be completed in 2017. It will produce strand and impact reports when children are aged three, five, with a potential for it to also offer a follow up report at age seven. The study evaluates the range of children's centres looking at services being provided,

costs usage, impact and how outcomes vary by user. A high proportion of children's centres now use outcome data to monitor their own impact.

Reaching children and families in need

Disadvantaged groups

- 18 Local authorities are obliged under the Children Act 1989 to identify the number of children in need in their area and also to support their families. This provides a framework for identifying those in need but we recommend that there be a new duty on local authorities to put these children and families in contact with services, including children's centres. Local authorities and health professionals should seek out the most vulnerable children and also do more through their websites and other services to raise awareness of children's centres. (Paragraph 83)**

The Childcare Act 2006 already places duties on local authorities to improve the well-being of young children in their area and reduce inequalities between them, and to provide information to parents about services - and families in need of support are making use of their children's centre provision. The government assists local authorities in these duties by providing information as appropriate. For example, to support the programme of early learning for two-year-olds the government is providing local authorities with regular information on eligible families. This is intended to help make sure that parents are made aware of their entitlement and supported to take up a place. It provides an opportunity for local authorities to share information with parents about other services available locally.

- 19 We recommend that the DfE restore the national collection of data on the reach of individual centres in order that both good and poor practice can be identified and monitored, including the effectiveness of centre services and the impact on children in the community. Ofsted could use this data to assist them in their role of requiring local authorities and centres to account for those who do not attend. (Paragraph 84)**

The government agrees this is helpful information, and to support the current inspection framework introduced in April 2013, local authorities are already asked to provide Ofsted with information about the number of under-5s within the reach of a children's centre.

Data-sharing

- 20 We welcome the Gross report on information-sharing in the foundation years. Data-sharing is vital: the DfE must strengthen its guidance on health services and local authorities sharing data with children's centres. We recommend that**

the DfE and the Department of Health audit where this is not happening and ensure that the appropriate protocols are put in place. The Government should report back on its findings. (Paragraph 97)

The government agrees with the Committee about the importance of professionals working together to identify families who are in need of support and to offer them that support. As the Committee will be aware, the DfE's statutory guidance for children's centres is clear that health services and local authorities should share information, such as live birth data, with children's centres on a regular basis.

The Committee is quite right that more could be done to encourage even greater data sharing between professionals. We agree with Jean Gross' analysis, that some of the biggest barriers to information sharing are linked to professional practice and culture. There is a need to break down these barriers, if we are to ensure that information is shared effectively in all areas. We are tackling this by promoting the sharing of information and good practice. The government is also exploring with the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, and the DfE's strategic partner, 4Children, how best to take forward work on an e-learning package on information sharing that would be appropriate for and accessible to health and early years professionals.

Child protection and children in need

- 21 Local authorities need to ensure better co-ordination between children's services and children's centres. Information on children and families known to social services should be passed on where possible. In particular, children's centres should be directly linked to Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC) to ensure that they are kept informed about domestic violence. The principle behind the named social worker requirement is that there should be clear responsibility for building relations with children's centres so that action can be taken quickly where necessary. Local authorities should ensure that this is done even where the named social worker model is not adopted. The DfE should revise its statutory guidance to reflect this. (Paragraph 100)**

We know there are a number of initiatives where local partners are already working in innovative ways to share information about a child and its family. The Multi Agency Risk Assessment (MARAC) provides a forum for sharing information from other representatives such as children's services.

Working Together to Safeguard Children 2013 is clear that the timely exchange and sharing of information between professionals is critical if children are to be safeguarded. It is a requirement that all organisations should have arrangements in place, which set out clearly the processes and the principles for sharing information between each other, with other professionals and with the Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB).

The LSCB should play a strong role in developing mechanisms for supporting information sharing between and within organisations and addressing any barriers. This should include ensuring that relevant guidance is understood and supports information sharing; that multi-agency training covers information sharing; and that a culture of information sharing is developed. It is for local areas to decide how they develop their information sharing mechanisms and how they train their workforce on appropriate information sharing arrangements. The presumption should be that information is shared wherever possible in the interests of safeguarding children.

Registration of births

- 22 Registration of births at children's centres is a powerful engagement tool but we are unconvinced that it is necessarily a practical solution for all local authorities to implement. It is also not cost-free. We recommend that local authorities should be permitted to adopt the practice but not obliged to do so. An approach of presumed consent, where the local authority will pass on information to children's centres unless specifically told not to, could achieve similar results at lower cost. (Paragraph 103)**

We agree with the recommendation put forward by the committee and have recently met the Local Government Association to explore what more could be done with other partners to support improvements in children's centre practice. We agree it would not be appropriate to make birth registration compulsory in all children's centres. It is for local authorities to determine where to locate registration facilities and they need flexibility in determining where to locate services to best meet the needs of the community they serve.

Local authorities can already make children's centres one of the places where parents can register the birth of their child. We know that some local authorities, such as Manchester, are already doing so and we welcome that.

Use of data by centres

- 23 Children's centre staff need appropriate training in collecting and interpreting data and centre leaders need to be taught how to use the data to drive interventions. It should be the responsibility of local authorities to ensure that the required standards are met by centres. Joint training in data-handling with staff from other agencies would break down barriers and ensure greater understanding of what data is available and how it can be used to target those in need of services. We recommend that the DfE include this in its statutory guidance on children's centres. (Paragraph 106)**

We agree with the committee on the importance of data collection by children's centres and that this should be used to inform improvements in service delivery.

The government is exploring with the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health and our strategic partner, 4Children, how best to take forward work on an e-learning package on information sharing that would be appropriate for and accessible to health and early years professionals.

In addition, the Department of Health will liaise with NHS England and partners, including the Health and Social Care Information Centre, to explore the practical issues involved in providing regular and timely updates of bulk live birth data to local authorities.

Local and central Government: funding, commissioning and strategic planning

Funding

- 24 We believe that it was right to remove the ring-fencing from funding for children's centres because of the different ways in which the centres are used by local authorities and the different services provided by them. In principle, we would welcome the end of ring-fencing for early intervention as a whole to give freedom to local authorities to respond flexibly to needs in their area—if the accountability framework were effective enough to ensure that funding decisions led to improved outcomes for children. Given the current accountability framework, we do not believe that the ring-fence around early intervention spending should now be removed. There should, however, be more transparency on Early Intervention Grant spending by local authorities so that it is clear how much has been spent on different services. We recommend that the Government ensure that this is done. (Paragraph 111)**

Whilst we do not monitor how individual non-ring fenced grants are spent, the government continues to collect details of local authorities' spending, irrespective of the funding source, on Looked After Children, safeguarding, youth justice and family support services via local authorities' section 251 returns. We will certainly explore the potential for incorporating this data alongside other relevant data sets in the department's existing early years and children's services benchmarking tables.

Commissioning

- 25 We believe that multi-agency commissioning makes for the best use of resources and the most informed service delivery. We recognise the difficulties caused by short-term funding decisions and recommend that the Government examine how a longer term view of children's centre funding can be taken within current spending decision cycles. (Paragraph 115)**

From 2013/14, funding was transferred to DCLG and formed part of the new Business Rate Retention grant. This means that children's centres funding is now a local issue for local authorities.

Local authority accountability

- 26 The accountability framework must ensure that the lead member and Director of Children's Services remain focussed on early years. Questions raised by Ofsted about children's centres in an authority should trigger the same reaction as questions about schools or other children's services. We recommend that the Government consult on a new accountability framework for local authorities' children's services that puts as much weight on early years and children's centres as on schools and children's social care. (Paragraph 126)**

We agree the accountability framework must remain focused on early years. The Centre for Excellence and Outcomes (C4EO) has been developing work in this area by looking at how the services provided at children's centres help to improve the lives of the children and families who use it. We are also working with Ofsted to improve and strengthen the inspection regime so it looks at the overall impact of a local network of children's centres as part of a local authority's broader effort to raise children's outcomes,

Government policy

Two year old offer

- 27 We welcome the two year old offer but have concerns about the funding, the quality of providers, the availability of places in effective settings and about the impact on places for other age groups. We recommend that local authorities monitor and report back to Government on the number of places available in good or outstanding settings in 2013/14 in order that action can be taken before September 2014 if necessary. (Paragraph 130)**

The government has provided local authorities with £525 million in 2013–14, rising to £755 million in 2014–15 for early learning for two-year-olds. This equates to an average hourly rate of £5.09, which compares favourably to the £4.26 average hourly rate charged by nurseries in England in the Daycare Trust's (now Family and Childcare Trust) 2013 childcare costs survey. Although these amounts are not ring-fenced within the Dedicated Schools Grant, the department encourages local authorities to pass as much funding as possible to providers.

It is important that early learning places are of the highest quality, as these are known to have lasting benefits for a child's development. As outlined above local authorities should only fund two year old children in providers that have been

judged 'satisfactory/requires improvement' where there is not sufficient 'good' or 'outstanding' provision. Our ultimate aim is that all early learning places are delivered by 'good' and 'outstanding' providers, and wider reforms and improvements in the early years sector will help to make that a reality.

Estimates provided in October 2013 from 114 local authorities suggested that around 90% of settings delivering two-year-old funded places so far are rated 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted. Data on the quality of settings will be routinely collected on an annual basis. The first statistical data will be available in summer 2014.

- 28 There is a clear disparity in how funding is being used by local authorities. The Government should monitor funding and the impact on positive outcomes for children. We recommend that there should be flexibility in the use of the funding by local authorities to offer direct support or parent intervention where families are not just poor but also vulnerable. (Paragraph 131)**

We agree that local authorities are best placed to decide how to spend their resources and we would expect them to consider how best to allocate funding that would affect the outcomes for children and families within their communities, while delivering on their statutory duties.

Each year the department collects and publishes data on planned expenditure of local authorities via the section 251 returns, which outlines planned expenditure on schools and a range of services for children and young people. Information on the rates paid to providers for two year old places will be published shortly in the department's early years benchmarking tables. This will provide a powerful tool to help parents and providers to hold their local authority to account for local spending decisions. The government agrees that it is important that the two year old entitlement is integrated with a wider range of services for young children and their families. Children's centres have an important role to play both in offering places directly and in identifying and supporting hard to reach families so that they are able to take advantage of their entitlement.

Central Government policy on early years

- 29 There has been, and continues to be, too much short-term and disparate government policy in the area of early years. Too much reorganisation of services impedes professional relationships and communication. The change in funding for early intervention from DfE to DCLG emphasises the role of local authorities in tailoring services to meet local needs but breaks the direct link between the Department for Education and children's centres. Changes in funding streams also lead to short-term contracts and distract centres from their crucial work with disadvantaged children and families. We recommend that the Government set out coherent, long-term thinking on early years and**

the place of children's centres within that, including funding, responsibility across Whitehall and accountability. (Paragraph 136)

The government set out its future strategy on early years policy in two sister documents published last year: More great childcare, and More affordable childcare. These documents set out a vision for the sector, and a clear set of reforms aimed at improving the quality, availability and affordability of early education, and so increasing choice for parents. Both documents set children's centres squarely at the centre of this vision. The core purpose document, also published in 2013, went into more detail about the particular role and responsibilities of children's centres.

30 We are particularly concerned about Government policy towards maintained nursery schools. They offer capacity and a recognised level of expertise, which needs to sit at the centre of the Government's proposals on Early Years Teaching Schools. We recommend that the Department for Education set out a strategy for ensuring the survival of those that remain and for encouraging the further development of the network of nursery schools with children's centres throughout the country. (Paragraph 137)

Maintained nursery schools are part of the wide range of school-run early years provision that is available to meet the needs of parents and children, and many offer a fantastic quality of early education that is to be celebrated.

We are keen to ensure that nurseries more broadly can spread best practice, share their expertise, and extend their reach, through working in partnership with a range of organisations, including other schools, PVI providers, children's centres and so on. There are a growing number of nurseries engaged in local Teaching School alliances and the government is collecting and sharing best practice in this area.

We are also encouraging school nurseries to consider how best their offer can be made as flexible as possible to meet the needs of parents, whilst maintaining high quality standards. There are some great examples of schools that do this, including the St Bede Academy in Bolton. They offer nursery places from 0–5, 7.30am–6pm for 52 weeks of the year, that enable parents to take up their 15 hours of funded early learning entitlement in a flexible way. But too few schools currently offer flexible 8–6 provision which meets the needs of working parents, whilst still delivering the high quality education that many are known for.

Workforce and Leadership

The workforce

- 31 **The Government is right to want to increase qualifications of the workforce but difficulties remain with status and pay. The message that Early Years Teachers are not equal to teachers in schools is strong and unjust. It is not enough for the Minister to articulate a vision of equality with other teachers—she has to set out a course of action with milestones on the way to a position where equal pay attracts equal quality. We recommend that the Department for Education set out such a strategy. We also recommend that an evaluation of the impact of the introduction of Teach First to the early years sector be carried out before the programme is expanded beyond the current pilot. (Paragraph 144)**

We welcome the Committee's endorsement of our aim to improve the status and qualifications of the early education and childcare workforce. This is a priority for the government and we set out our plans in *More Great Childcare* in 2013.

The new Early Years Teachers programme, builds on the achievements of the Early Years Professional Status programme. Interest in the new programme is high and 25% more trainees have been recruited to the first intake of Early Years Teacher trainees in September 2013 compared to the intake onto the predecessor programme in September 2012.

To be awarded Early Years Teacher Status, trainees must meet robust standards designed specifically for high quality work with the birth to five age range. The entry requirements to Early Years teacher training have been strengthened and are the same as those for entry to primary teacher training. In addition the bursary levels are set at the same level as those for primary teacher training to encourage equally high caliber trainees to enter the profession.

The pay and conditions for those working in early education and childcare settings outside maintained schools are determined by employers at a local level. The majority of early years' settings are private, voluntary or independently (PVI) owned and run. We would expect employers to want to pay Early Years Professionals and Early Years Teachers in accordance with their status.

The Teach First in the early years programme leads to the award of QTS and is an extension of the primary programme. We agree with the committee on the importance of evaluation. Evaluation is an integral part of the Teach First in early years programme. An independent evaluation will be completed at the end of the first year and regular review of progress is being undertaken to inform future development.

Training and development

- 32 CPD is vital and should be encouraged by all centres. We recommend that the Ofsted inspection framework include checking that each centre has a training plan and that the plan is being implemented. We support the development of Early Years Teaching Centres as an effective way of passing on best practice and promoting workforce development. Nursery schools with children's centres should be at the centre of these hubs. The NCTL should take on a role in developing this and should also set out a career structure for children centre staff, including how the new qualifications and other CPD match to this pathway. The NCTL should also continue their work on systems leadership in early childhood education and their work on leadership standards in the early years. (Paragraph 149)**

Under the current arrangements, CPD is covered in the inspection framework within the judgement on the effectiveness of leadership, governance and management of children's centres. Ofsted inspectors routinely ask to see training plans as part of their evaluation of CPD.

NCTL's purpose is to support the development of a self-improving, school-led education system. To deliver this, NCTL is working with schools and providers to develop a 2–18 system in which teacher and leadership training, continuous professional development and school-to-school support are delivered locally by partnerships led by the best schools, early years providers and leaders working together. Teaching schools are central to the delivery of the government's vision. Teaching schools are amongst the best schools in the country. They are outstanding in their own performance and have a track record of working with others to raise standards for children beyond their own school.

NCTL are considering how to encourage further early years engagement in a 0-18 self-improving education system, to enable quality improvement and leadership standards to be driven locally by the best leaders.

Leadership

- 33 The NPQICL needs to be overhauled to reflect current practice in children's centres and then offered widely to new leaders. The course should retain the much valued elements of professional exchanges and time for reflection. It is vital that practitioners are involved in reviewing and designing the qualification. (Paragraph 154)**

NCTL are considering options for the NPQICL programme, which was developed by the former National College for School Leadership in 2005. Future options for leadership development will be considered within the context of the government's vision for a system where improvement and continuous professional development

are led by frontline experts and where the role of central government is to support this, rather than to design, develop and deliver it.

34 The NCTL should take on the role of promoting locality leadership to spread best practice and encourage innovation, as it does in schools. (Paragraph 155)

NCTL's aim is to support the development of a 0–18 self-improving education system that is led by the best schools, early years providers and leaders working together to spread best practice and encourage innovation. As part of this, we will encourage opportunities to share expertise, resources and knowledge across early years provision and schools. As outlined elsewhere, school nurseries are increasingly involved in the teaching schools programme, which is central to this school-led approach. Through the teaching schools research and development network, interested teaching schools have been invited to build on their existing alliances and explore models to increase early years engagement. Development plans are underway and a final evaluation report is due by the end of 2014.