



Department
for Education

Research brief: evaluation of children's centres in England - strands 1 to 5

**Evaluation of Children's Centres in
England (ECCE)**

Research brief

July 2016

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Finally, we much appreciate the contribution of all staff and families who were generous with their time during the visits and interviews. This research would not have been possible without the co-operation of the children's centre staff participating within all strands of the Children's Centre evaluation; particularly those taking part in the NatCen Children's Centre survey for Strand 1, and those who were willing to allow our Strand 3 and Strand 5 fieldworkers to visit their centre. We are also very grateful to the many families who agreed to be part of the NatCen survey in Strand 2 of the evaluation.

Introduction

Children's Centres

Following on from the Sure Start initiative of 1998, Children's Centres were launched in 2002 with the aim of giving disadvantaged children the "best possible start in life." The centres provide integrated multi-agency services at a single point of access for families with young children including childcare and early education programmes, health services, parenting classes and specialised family support services.

Children's Centres are intended to be one of the main vehicles for ensuring that integrated and good quality family services are located in accessible places and are welcoming to all. They aim to support young children and their families, particularly the most disadvantaged, to reduce inequalities in child development and school readiness. The mechanism for achieving this is through supporting children's personal, social and emotional development, improving parenting aspirations and skills, providing access to good early education, and addressing family health and life chances.

Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (ECCE)

The Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (ECCE) was commissioned by the Department for Education and undertaken by NatCen Social Research, the University of Oxford and Frontier Economics. The aim of ECCE is to provide an in-depth understanding of Children's Centre services, including their effectiveness in relation to different management and delivery approaches and their cost. The evaluation studies centres located in the 30 per cent most deprived areas and comprised a multi-component evaluation using a nested design, starting with a national survey of Children Centres from which a sample of over 120 Children's Centres was selected to participate in the other elements of the study including providing a sample of families for the longitudinal survey. The key elements are organised as five strands:

Strand 1: Survey of Children's Centre leaders:

Strand 1 surveyed children's centre leaders. Leaders from a sample of Children's Centres were interviewed in 2011 and 2013 on key aspects of service provision, including management, staffing, services, users, and finance (Tanner, et al., 2012; Poole et al., 2015);

Strand 2: Longitudinal survey of families using Children's Centres:

Strand 2 involved a longitudinal survey (over three waves) with families registered at 128 of the Children's Centres taking part in the Strand 1 survey. Information was collected about families' service use, demographics, family functioning, parent and child health, and wellbeing, as well as their child's development (Maisey et al., 2013; 2015);

Strand 3: Investigation of Children’s Centre service delivery and reach:

Strand 3 involved visits to 121 of the 128 Children’s Centres sampled for Strand 2. Two waves of fieldwork were carried out in 2012 and 2013, to assess the range of activities and services that centres delivered, partnership working methods, leadership and management, and evidence-based practice (Goff, et al., 2013; Sylva et al., 2015), parenting support (Evangelou, et al., 2014) and centre reach (Smith, et al., 2014);

Strand 4: Impact analysis of the effects of Children’s Centres on child, mother and family outcomes:

Strand 4 studied naturally occurring variation in the take-up and patterns of use of Children’s Centres and their services amongst a sample of users to assess their effectiveness in relation to family and child outcomes. The analysis drew on quantitative data about Children’s Centres and their characteristics (Strands 1 and 3), the use of Children’s Centre services by children and families, and family and child outcome data (Strand 2) (Sammons et al., 2015);

Strand 5: Value for money analysis:

Strand 5 assessed the potential value for money of Children’s Centre services. It drew on cost data collected from 24 centres (Briggs et al., 2012) and from an analysis of the associations between centre use and child and family outcomes. It also used existing evidence on the links between child and family outcomes when a child is aged three and later life outcomes and on the monetary value of outcomes (Gaheer and Paull, 2016).

Twelve reports have been published as part of the evaluation.¹

¹ These are available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/evaluation-of-childrens-centres-in-england-ecce>

1. Strand 1: Survey of Children's Centre Leaders

The aim of Strand 1 was to profile Children's Centres in the most disadvantaged areas in relation to management, staff, services, users and finance. The profile covered over 500 Children's Centres, representative of all Phase 1 and 2 centres in the most disadvantaged areas. As well as describing different aspects of Children's Centres, the data were used to explore models of provision and to select centres for subsequent stages of the evaluation.

1.1 First survey of Children's Centre leaders in the most deprived areas

July 2012

E. Tanner, M. Agur, D. Hussey – NatCen Social Research

J. Hall with P. Sammons, K. Sylva, T. Smith, M. Evangelou, A. Flint – University of Oxford

Aim and scope

This report was the first output from the Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (ECCE). The aim of the survey was to profile Children's Centres in the most disadvantaged areas², covering all key aspects of provision including management, staff, services, users and finance.

The survey was conducted with a mixed mode approach using a web survey and telephone interviewing techniques. The fieldwork took place between July and September 2011.

Report

The report presents findings from the survey which provided a 'snapshot' of service provision by surveying leaders of Children's Centres in disadvantaged areas to profile the characteristics of provision across key areas including management, staff, services, users and finance. A group of 128 Children's Centres was selected from the 509 respondents to take part in subsequent stages of the evaluation – the longitudinal survey of parents and children, detailed data collection from Children's Centres and the costs of services.

A research brief summarising the main findings and the main report can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-childrens-centres-in-england-ecce-strand-1-first-survey-of-childrens-centre-leaders-in-the-most-deprived-areas>

² The first two phases of children's centres were established in the poorest areas, and were required to offer a much wider range of services than the centres established later. The centres described in this research are representative of Phase 1 and Phase 2 centres.

1.2 Children's Centres evaluation in England follow-up survey of centre leaders

June 2015

Eloise Poole, Alexandra Fry & Emily Tanner – NatCen Social Research

Aim and scope

This report was the eighth output from the Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (ECCE). The current report presents findings from the follow-up survey of Children's Centre leaders carried out in autumn 2013. The aim of this follow up report is to describe how Children's Centre services have changed between 2011 – when the first survey of Children's Centre leaders was conducted – and 2013.

The survey was conducted by telephone. The fieldwork took place between October and November 2013.

Report

The report explores change and continuity since the baseline survey in 2011 in relation to all key aspects of provision: management and governance; staff numbers, salary and qualifications; types of services including evidence based programmes; families and children using centres; and income, expenditure, and the impact of funding changes.

A research brief summarising the main findings and the main report can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childrens-centres-in-england-evaluation-survey-of-leaders>

2. Strand 2: Longitudinal Survey of Families Using Children's Centres

The Strand 2 longitudinal survey of families using Children's Centres, followed families who were registered with centres from when their child was 9 to 18 months old until they were 3 to 3.5 years old. It collected data on families' use of Children's Centres, other service use including childcare and early education, parent physical and mental health, family functioning, child health and diet, child cognitive and social-emotional development and socio-demographic characteristics. The data were reported descriptively in two outputs and were also used in Strands 4 and 5.

2.1 Strand 2: Baseline survey of families using Children's Centres in the most disadvantaged areas

April 2013

Ruth Maisey, Svetlana Speight and Sarah Haywood, with James Hall, Pamela Sammons, David Hussey, Jenny Goff, Maria Evangelou & Kathy Sylva – NatCen Social Research & the University of Oxford

Aim and scope

This report was the third output from the Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (ECCE). This report provides findings from the first survey of a longitudinal study of families using Children's Centres. These families were registered with a Children's Centre. The key aims of the longitudinal survey of parents were to:

- provide estimates of the level of take-up of various children and family services among families with different socio-economic characteristics;
- monitor changes in patterns of use over time; and
- collect data on different aspects of child development and family functioning in order to enable an analysis of impact on child outcomes from using different types services.

This report presents findings about families who, when their child was 9 to 18 months of age, were registered with Children's Centres that responded to the initial survey of centre managers (Strand 1). A total of 10,187 parents were selected from these 128 centres and invited to take part in the longitudinal survey of users. This resulted in 5,717 interviews. Participant families were interviewed in their homes by NatCen interviewers between January and April 2012.

Report

This report focuses on the baseline survey, carried out with parents when one of their children (the 'selected child') was aged 9 to 18 months old. The survey collected information about parents (including non-resident parents) and children in the household.

A research brief summarising the main findings and the main report can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-childrens-centres-in-england-strand-2-baseline-survey-of-families-using-childrens-centres-in-the-most-disadvantaged-areas>

2.2 Strand 2: Longitudinal survey of families using Children's Centres in the most disadvantaged areas

February 2015

Ruth Maisey, Eloise Poole, Jenny Chanfreau & Alexandra Fry – NatCen Social Research

Aim and scope

This report was the seventh output from the Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (ECCE). This report provides findings from across the three waves of the longitudinal survey of families registered with Children's Centres.

The longitudinal survey of families collected data at three time points, when the selected child was aged 9 to 18 months old and then again when the child was aged about 2 (by telephone in 2013) and about 3 (face to face in 2014). The surveys collected information on the extent of families' involvement with their named Children's Centre and their take-up of services elsewhere. It also collected information on physical and mental well-being, parenting and family functioning, and child development. The final wave included interviews with parents and the collection of child outcome data, resulting in interviews with 2,602 families.

Report

This report provides insight on Children's Centres from the perspective of families and the longitudinal survey provides a baseline assessment of families alongside early outcome measures from which to assess impact, and allows us to explore how families' use of Children's Centres has changed over time. The data presents a picture of Children's Centre families: the extent to which they use different services and how they have been faring in relation to the outcome measures we have selected for the study. We also show how these statistics have changed over the three years that the study has followed these families and how they vary significantly by families' socio-economic circumstances.

A research brief summarising the main findings and the main report can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childrens-centres-in-england-evaluation-survey-of-families>

3. Strand 3: Investigation of Children's Centre Service Delivery and Reach

Strand 3, the investigation of Children's Centres' service delivery, multi-agency working, parenting and reach, involved visits to 121 of the 128 Children's Centres sampled for Strand 2. The first of two waves of fieldwork were carried out in 2012 and 2013, to assess:

- the range of activities and services centres deliver
- leadership
- evidence-based practice
- parenting support services
- partnership working.

Strand 3 also involved a profiling exercise in 117 children's centre areas to assess their reach. This was done by comparing information about the centres and the families that use them to existing data on the demographic composition of the centres' catchment areas.

There are four outputs from Strand 3 and the data were also used in the Strand 4 analysis.

3.1 Strand 3: Delivery of family services by Children's Centres

July 2013

Jenny Goff, James Hall, Kathy Sylva, Teresa Smith, George Smith, Naomi Eisenstadt, Pam Sammons, Maria Evangelou, Rebecca Smees and Kityu Chu – University of Oxford

Aim and scope

This report was the fourth output from the Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (ECCE). The findings presented here are from the first wave of detailed fieldwork regarding the organisation and delivery of children's centre services. This fieldwork aimed to assess:

- the range of activities and services that centres deliver
- partnership working methods
- leadership and management
- evidence-based practice (EBP)
- area profiling of centre 'reach'.

The fieldwork reported here took place in 121 Phase 1 and 2 Children's Centres across England during 2012, and involved staff completing self-report questionnaires, fieldworker observations and document scrutiny, as well as face-to-face interviews.

Report

This report centres on the organisation and delivery of children's centre services and focuses on service delivery, multi-agency working and Integration; leadership and management; evidence-based practice; and reach and structure of Children's Centres.

A research brief summarising the main findings and the main report can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-childrens-centres-in-england-strand-3-delivery-of-family-services-by-childrens-centres>

3.2 Strand 3: The extent to which centres ‘reach’ eligible families, their neighbourhood characteristics and levels of use

June 2014

George Smith, Katie Field & Teresa Smith - Department of Social Policy and Intervention, University of Oxford

Stefan Noble, Tom Smith & Emma Plunkett - Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion

Aim and scope

This report was the fifth output from the Evaluation of Children’s Centres in England (ECCE). The aim was to provide new and up-to-date information on the areas served by the Children’s Centres and how well these were covered. The data collected also contributed to Strand 4 by providing robust information on the local context for each centre in the study. This report addressed three main questions:

1. How were the local areas, served or ‘reached’ by each centre, defined?
2. What were the principal characteristics of these areas and how were they changing over time?
3. How well were centres serving these areas in terms of take-up or ‘reach’ and levels of use?

This analysis went beyond the centres and their users to look in more detail at the local neighbourhoods and ‘reach areas’ they served. This study draws on three sets of data, which in combination address the three main questions:

- A survey of local authorities that contained one or more of the 128 centres from the national sample (Stage 1)
- An analysis of a wide range of relevant national neighbourhood data for each centre (Stage 2)
- A follow-up survey of the local authorities that processed children’s centre data centrally, to estimate take-up and usage (Stage 3)

Report

This report focuses on the extent to which centres ‘reach’ eligible families, their neighbourhood characteristics and levels of use. A research brief summarising the main findings and the main report can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-childrens-centres-in-england-ecce>

3.3 Strand 3: Parenting services in Children's Centres

July 2014

Maria Evangelou, Jenny Goff, James Hall, Kathy Sylva, Naomi Eisenstadt, Christine Paget, Susila Davis, Pam Sammons, Teresa Smith, Rebecca Tracz and Terri Parkin – University of Oxford

Aim and scope

This report was the sixth output from the Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (ECCE). The findings presented here are from the second wave of detailed fieldwork regarding the organisation and delivery of Children's Centre services for parents. It captured not only the views of the members of staff, but also of the parents who were attending the centres to obtain a broader picture of centre provision. The study aimed to collect information on:

- the provision for parenting and services for parents across the sample;
- staff perceptions on family needs;
- the range of parenting programmes delivered by a named children's centre and any associated centres within their cluster;
- how Children's Centres manage their services;
- staff perceptions of the benefits of services for parents and children; and
- parental views of Children's Centre services.

Fieldwork took place in 117 Children's Centres across England during 2013 and aimed to capture the diversity and range of provision available to parents. The study used a mixed methods design including staff self-report questionnaires and face-to-face interviews with both staff and parents.

Report

This report centres on delivery of parenting services; evidence-based practice; aims for families and parenting services; strategies and progression into the future and parental views and experiences.

A research brief summarising the main findings and the main report can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-childrens-centres-in-england-parenting-services>

3.4 Strand 3: Organisation, services and reach of Children's Centres

June 2015

Kathy Sylva, Jenny Goff, Naomi Eisenstadt, Teresa Smith, James Hall, Maria Evangelou, George Smith & Pam Sammons – University of Oxford

Aim and scope

This report was the ninth output from the Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (ECCE) and synthesises the findings from the earlier Strand 3 reports as well as reporting on changes between 2012 and 2013. Strand 3 visited 121 Children's Centres to assess:

- range of activities and service delivery;
- leadership;
- evidence-based practice;
- parenting support services; and
- partnership working.

Fieldwork took place in 121 Phase 1 and Phase 2 Children's Centres across England during 2012; 117 of which were visited a second time in 2013. The study used a mixed methods design, using both quantitative and qualitative methods including scrutiny of documents such as minutes from meetings, staff self-report questionnaires and face-to-face interviews with staff and parents; as well as data collected from 72 local authorities including postcode and administrative data from the centre catchment area.

Report

This report focuses on Children's Centres as an evolving service, leadership and management, multi-agency working and integration, targeting of services, evidence-based practice, parenting support and centre 'reach'. The report draws out the policy implications.

A research brief summarising the main findings and the main report can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childrens-centres-in-england-organisation-and-services>

4. Strand 4: Impact Analysis Studying the Effects of Children's Centres on Child and Family Outcomes

Strand 4 studied naturally occurring variation in the take-up and patterns of use of Children's Centres and their services amongst a sample of users to assess their effectiveness in relation to family and child outcomes. The analysis drew on quantitative data about Children's Centres and their characteristics (Strands 1 and 3), the use of Children's Centre services by children and families, and family and child outcome data (Strand 2) (Sammons et al., 2015).

4.1 Strand 4: Changes in resourcing and characteristics of Children's Centres – Additional research report

December 2015

Pam Sammons, Rebecca Smees, James Hall, and Jenny Goff with Kathy Sylva, Teresa Smith, Maria Evangelou, Naomi Eisenstadt, and George Smith – University of Oxford

Aim and scope

This report was the tenth output from the Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (ECCE). This report investigates how specific changes to resourcing (across the two financial years 2012-2013) and service provision relate to other centre characteristics, including organisational configuration. The following key research questions are addressed:

- Is there any relationship between changes in resourcing and the characteristics of centres' reach areas (e.g. geographical size, number of families with young children in the reach area, average neighbourhood deprivation of the reach area)?
- Is there any relationship between changes in resourcing and the characteristics of centres (e.g. number of staff at the centre, number of families registered at the centre)?
- Is there any relationship between changes in resourcing and the characteristics of the registered users of centres (e.g. neighbourhood deprivation of the registered users, financial disadvantage of the registered users)?

Report

This report is based on analysis of a sample of 117 centres and presents findings that summarise some of the changes to funding, resources and services that were captured via questionnaires completed by centre staff during the period 2012 to 2013 (comparing budgets across these two financial years). Specifically the descriptive analysis investigates associations to show whether certain centres were more likely to have experienced change than others, and what characteristics were shared by centres that were expanding rather than reducing services. This focus was chosen to follow up the main Impact report (Sammons et al., 2015) that investigated the effects of Children's Centres in promoting better outcomes for children, parents and families.

A research brief summarising the main findings and the main report can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childrens-centres-changes-in-resourcing-and-characteristics>

4.2 Strand 4: The impact of Children's Centres: studying the effects of Children's Centres in promoting better outcomes for young children and their families

December 2015

Pam Sammons, James Hall, Rebecca Smees, and Jenny Goff with Kathy Sylva, Teresa Smith, Maria Evangelou, Naomi Eisenstadt, and George Smith – University of Oxford

Aim and scope

This report was the eleventh output from the Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (ECCE). The Impact analyses addressed two main questions by linking data about the user sample and information about the centres at which they were registered:

- Does Children's Centre engagement improve child, mother and family outcomes?
- What aspects of Children's Centres (management structure, working practices, services offered, and services used) promote better family, parent, and child outcomes?

The impact results are based on analyses involving over 2,600 families registered at 117 Phase 1 and 2 Children's Centres serving the most disadvantaged communities in England. These analyses draw together data collected by earlier strands of the evaluation, linking surveys of user families and information about Children's Centres. Multilevel statistical models were used to test how far families' engagement with Children's Centres and use of their services showed measurable 'effects' on outcomes for the sample of children and families. The 'effects' of Children's Centres were calculated while controlling for the effects of important individual child, parent, family and neighbourhood characteristics that also influenced such outcomes.

Report

This report studies the 'effects' of Children's Centres in improving 13 measured outcomes for a large sample of users³. These outcomes (family, mother and child) were

³ Six measures of child outcomes were studied: children's *internalising* behaviours, *externalising* behaviours, *pro-social* skills, cognitive attainment, both language (naming vocabulary) and non-verbal reasoning (picture similarities), and one of health (whether or not a child was in poor health). For mother outcomes, two measures were collected: one focusing specifically on mental health, and the other on a more general measure of the mother's health status (better or poorer). For family functioning, six outcome measures were obtained. *Household Economic Status (HES)* identified workless household status (whether no parent in the household was working). The *Confusion, Hubbub, And Order within the home Scale (CHAOS)* provided an indicator of the structure of the home environment, while the early years *HLE* measured more specific features of the early years *Home Learning Environment* at child age 3 years plus. In addition, two measures of parenting were collected; *Parental Distress* and *Parent-Child Dysfunctional Interaction*.

chosen to reflect the aims of Children's Centres which were intended to support parents and families and in the longer term provide young children with a better start to school. Thirteen outcomes were measured through the longitudinal survey (Strand 2) that recruited a sample of user families registered at a named children's centre with a child aged 9-18 months (mean age 14 months) and followed up to age 3 plus (mean age 38 months).

A research brief summarising the main findings and the main report can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childrens-centres-their-impact-on-children-and-families>

5. Strand 5: Value for Money analysis

Strand 5 assessed the potential value for money of Children's Centre services. It drew on cost data collected from 24 centres (Briggs et al., 2012) and from an analysis of the associations between centre use and child and family outcomes. It also used existing evidence on the links between child and family outcomes when a child is aged three and later life outcomes and on the monetary value of outcomes (Gaheer and Paull, 2016).

5.1 Strand 5: Case studies on the costs of centres in the most deprived areas

November 2012

Nicola Briggs, Ashley Kurtz & Gillian Paull - Frontier Economics

Aim and scope

This report was the second output from the Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (ECCE). This report presents interim cost estimates for Strand 5 of the evaluation derived from a first wave of case study visits to twelve centres located in the 30 percent most deprived areas. A case study approach was used to collect cost information from twelve Children's Centres to ensure high quality data. While the presentation of information on the activities and costs of Children's Centres is of inherent interest, the primary purpose of this report is to describe how the cost estimates have been derived and to document the robustness of the cost data used in the value for money analysis later in the evaluation.

Report

The report describes the collection of the cost data and the construction of a cost per user hour for different types of services, detailing how complexities in the information were addressed to derive the final cost measure. In addition it describes the services, staff and venues in the twelve centres to give an understanding of the activities undertaken in the centres and the resources used in delivering those services. The variation in costs across the twelve centres and the underlying reasons for this variation are explored, concluding on the findings of interest from the cost data and on the robustness of the cost data for later use in the value for money analysis.

A research brief summarising the main findings and the main report can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-childrens-centres-in-england-ecce-strand-5-case-studies-on-the-costs-of-centres-in-the-most-deprived-areas>

5.2 Strand 5: The value for money of Children's Centre services

July 2016

Saminder Gaheer and Gillian Paull - Frontier Economics

Aim and scope

This report is the twelfth output from the Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (ECCE). It considers the potential value for money of Children's Centres. It draws on cost data collected from 24 centres and from an analysis of the associations between centre use and improved child and family outcomes using a survey of over 2,600 families registered at 117 Phase 1 and 2 Children's Centres serving the most disadvantaged communities in England. These two primary data sources on costs and outcomes are combined with existing evidence in two areas: (i) on the links between child and family outcomes when a child is aged three and later life and (ii) on the monetary value of outcomes. An overall monetary value of the benefits of services is estimated and compared to the costs of delivery to assess the value for money (cost effectiveness and cost benefit) of different types of Children's Centre services.

The original intention of this strand of the evaluation was to assess the overall value for money of centres, but this proved unfeasible for two reasons. First, no statistically significant associations were identified between the aggregate measure of centre use and better outcomes. Second, the prevalence of associations between individual service use and poorer outcomes suggested that the associations (with either better or poorer outcomes) may reflect selection bias in service use rather than any impact alone. In order to obtain some insight on value for money, the associations with better outcomes for individual services were used alone (with associations with poorer outcomes discarded) to derive value for money estimates based on hypothetical scenarios of what the value for money would be *if* there were impacts of these magnitudes.

Report

The report describes the cost data and the average cost of delivery for different types of services offered by Children's Centres and presents the associations between the use of the different types of services and child and family outcomes when the child is aged three. It reviews the evidence used to link outcomes at age three to later lifetime outcomes and to estimate monetary values for improvements in outcomes respectively and combines these four elements to estimate the size and sources of value for money of different Children's Centre services, highlighting the potential value of any interventions which may improve early childhood outcomes. A research brief summarising the main findings and the main report can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/evaluation-of-childrens-centres-in-england-ecce>

Evaluation of Children's Centres in England: Research Team

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