



Office for Standards
in Education

Children at the centre

An evaluation of early excellence centres

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Early excellence centres are a government initiative to provide:

High-quality integrated education and day care for children 0–5 years

Parental and carer involvement in the education and care of children

Support services for children, parents and carers

Effective early identification and support for children with special educational needs

Access to adult education and training for parents and other adults

Positive action to promote social inclusion, equal opportunities and race equality

They also aim to:

Raise the standards of early years provision by contributing to the training and development strategy of early years development and childcare partnerships

Develop effective multi-agency collaboration

Co-operate with schools and providers of out-of-school care

Evaluate the effectiveness of the centre's work

Introduction and national context

The first Early Excellence Centres (EECs) were established in the late 1990s. They were an innovative development for young children and their parents and carers, bringing an integrated approach to education, day care, social support and adult learning. A number of centres also provide one or more of the following childcare services:

- full day care for babies and young children under 3 years
- sessional care such as playgroups
- crèches
- before- and after-school care, such as an extended day for nursery children or for primary age children from local schools.

They have helped to pave the way for Children's Centres and Extended Schools. They also anticipated aspects of the concept of Children's Services, as articulated in the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) Green Paper *Every Child Matters*.¹

Between autumn 2001 and summer 2003, Ofsted inspected 23 of the centres and two Early Excellence Networks, to see how well they fulfil their intended purpose and to pilot the multi-disciplinary inspection of education, care and adult learning.

Many of the centres have evolved from existing local education authority (LEA) maintained nursery education provision. A minority stem from day nurseries or other types of provision. The remit for EECs has a scope that is unique in the education of children and young people. The successful models of integrated services that they reflect could have applications elsewhere in the school system.

The purpose of this report, therefore, is to provide an evaluation of the quality, standards, leadership and management in EECs, with a focus on:

- education in the Foundation Stage
- childcare
- family and community support, including adult education.

The report identifies features of effective practice and makes recommendations about areas where improvement is needed. The report will inform Ofsted's current work in refining combined inspections and the integrated inspection of EECs, Children's Centres and Extended Schools. We hope that the report will be especially useful to centres themselves, the governing bodies or committees that manage them, and local authorities or voluntary organisations to which they relate. Separate reports have already been published on all 23 centres inspected and two Early Excellence Networks. These are available on Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

¹ *Every Child Matters*, Department for Education and Skills, 2003.

Main findings

- ❑ The provision in three quarters of the EECs inspected is good or better.² The centres are responding well to the remit for an EEC. All are fulfilling the DfES criteria for EECs in the development of very good partnerships with parents; support for families; and, provision for children with special educational needs (SEN). Where provided, there is effective day care for children under 3 years and good adult education. Most centres provide good value for money.
- ❑ Children make good progress, often from a low starting point, in the Foundation Stage curriculum, although some areas of learning are developed more successfully than others. A quarter of the centres with maintained nursery classes provide education that is satisfactory, but no better. There is a strong association between the overall effectiveness of centres, the quality of nursery education and the leadership.

Leadership, management and governance

- ❑ The leadership of EECs is good overall and in the six most effective centres the leadership is of high quality. All the heads of these centres are experienced headteachers. They use their expertise in early education, together with rigorous and regular evaluation, to raise the quality of nursery education and the quality of provision of their support services.
- ❑ Most governing bodies and management committees provide sound governance and advice but in half of the centres their role, responsibilities and powers in relation to those of the local authority need greater clarification. There is a lack of clarity between their role and that of the local authority.
- ❑ The Early Excellence Networks inspected are complex and do not yet work effectively.

The quality of day care for children under 3 years

- ❑ The quality of the care and learning for children under 3 years of age in the majority of centres is good. Staff are knowledgeable about each child's needs and have close links with the children's parents and carers. Babies and toddlers respond with confidence and enthusiasm to the many opportunities they are given to explore and investigate.
- ❑ The provision of wrap-around, or extended, day care is well established and of good quality. There is growing evidence of the increased childcare facilities having a positive effect on reducing the effects of child poverty in some communities. For

² Gamesley EEC in Derbyshire was outstanding and the degree of integration of a wide range of services in Thomas Coram EEC in Camden was exceptional.

example, access to this provision enables parents and carers to attend adult education and other courses or to return to work.

The quality of education in the Foundation Stage

- ❑ In the Foundation Stage, the quality of teaching overall is good. Features of the most effective teaching are: good levels of knowledge about the Foundation Stage; well-planned, focused teaching of key skills; and accurate identification of what children already know across the areas of learning and of what they need to learn next.
- ❑ Teaching has most impact on children's personal, social, emotional and physical development. In these aspects, children are likely to exceed the early learning goals. Teaching is not as strong in mathematics, early literacy and aspects of creative development. Although the majority of children are likely to meet the early learning goals, children that are more able are not always challenged sufficiently.
- ❑ A third of the centres do not evaluate the quality of teaching and learning enough in the Foundation Stage to identify and act on strengths and weaknesses. There is a lack of knowledge about the strategies needed to take prompt action to address the weaknesses. Consequently, some children, especially the more able, are not making as much progress as they could. The absence of relevant management skills among some senior staff or of sufficient support by the LEA has constrained the development of effective systems for evaluating teaching and learning.
- ❑ Children with complex SEN make particularly good progress. This is because the support programmes and procedures for their development and inclusion into mainstream education are generally very well thought through. Where it is provided, support for children when, and after, they transfer to reception classes in primary schools is outstanding.

The quality of other services for adults and children

- ❑ Almost all centres have developed very well managed and often outstanding services for family support, adult education and children with special needs. This is due to very effective collaboration with other agencies such as the health authority, social services, Sure Start, the police and further education colleges.
- ❑ The centres that work with families from minority ethnic groups take many effective steps to communicate with, support and advise them. This boosts the confidence and self-esteem of parents and children and enables them to benefit from provision that they would not otherwise access.
- ❑ The majority of centres provide good support for staff in the private and voluntary sectors. Links with the maintained sector are not as well developed.
- ❑ Where there are good levels of communication and joint working between the centres, their LEAs and Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCPs), the centres' influence on early years policy is significant. Where links are

more tenuous and the centres' roles are not as well defined by their LEAs, their overall development has been slower.

Recommendations

In order to improve the management and resourcing of centres:

- governing bodies or management committees should have: a clear responsibility for the work and performance of centres; the delegated resources necessary to operate them; and a designated link officer in the local authority
- the management staff of centres should have access to high-quality in-service training that includes management development and curriculum matters.

In order to improve the quality of learning and raise the achievement of the most capable children:

- the headteachers and key education staff of some centres should: become more competent in the evaluation of teaching in order to identify strengths and weaknesses in teaching and learning across the areas of learning of the Foundation Stage; and observe and record children's progress in order to stimulate and challenge them more through better-planned learning experiences.

In order to make best use of centres' expertise and strengths, local authorities should:

- establish a mechanism for EECs to share their good practice more widely in order to support Children's Centres and other settings or schools that are developing similar initiatives
- provide information and training for headteachers of extended schools who are not qualified or knowledgeable about either the Foundation Stage or the requirements of the National Standards for day care
- make full use of the model provided by the centres when developing integrated services for children and their families.

Background

The centres

1. In autumn 2003 there were 107 EECs. Some of them have recently been redesignated as Sure Start Children's Centres. All but a few have LEA-maintained nursery education provision at their core, plus a range of linked services for parents, families and the community. A number of centres also provide one or more of the following childcare services:

- full day care for babies and young children under 3 years
- sessional care such as playgroups
- crèches
- before- and after-school care, such as an extended day for nursery children or for primary age children from local schools.

2. Managing the development of EECs is not an easy task. Heads and key staff in centres have particularly diverse and challenging roles. This is because EECs are breaking new ground, particularly in relation to family support, adult learning, and increased education for teenage parents. Innovation often takes place through joint work with further education colleges and agencies like Sure Start, health authorities, social services and local authorities, including EYDCPs.

3. All EECs have attracted additional funding needed in order to sustain existing services and to develop new initiatives. Currently, EECs receive funds from the local authority and a number of other sources including the smaller amounts of time-limited grant funding from the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB), the health authority, Sure Start, charities, local businesses, voluntary groups and their own fundraising activities.

4. Since the start of the EEC pilot programme in 1997, heads of centres have managed rapid change while developing and integrating new services. Confirmation of EEC status has usually triggered a building programme and significant redevelopment of the outside areas, in order to enrich children's learning. This work is often extensive, and lasts for one or two years. Centres have found ways of conducting business as usual, co-ordinating the expansion of services around the building works. For some centres this has meant the temporary location of services off-site.

5. By 2001, half the centres had seen a substantial change in senior management teams over a relatively short period, reflecting the rapid growth and evolution of EECs.³ Some heads have been faced with the task of amalgamating two or three groups of staff from different pre-school settings and developing them into one cohesive nursery education and childcare team. This has been in addition to the induction and training of

³ From: *Early Excellence Centre Pilot Programme Second Evaluation Report 2000–2001*, DfES.

new staff appointed to manage the centre's other services, such as drop-in facilities and outreach work. Heads of centres have spent time and energy in breaking down barriers between different groups of staff within their newly formed teams, negotiating pay and conditions and establishing equitable appraisal systems. This has inhibited the initial progress of centres.

6. It is common for EEC heads to manage large numbers of early years educators: nursery nurses, outreach workers and other support staff in the Foundation Stage, in relation to small numbers of qualified teachers. Nursery staff who are not teachers have different levels of expertise and varied qualifications. The teaching and support staff work in different shifts and this creates difficulties for the management of meetings and training sessions.

7. Of the 21 EECs inspected with maintained provision, 13 have governing bodies. The other eight have management committees, which tend to be advisory in function. At the time of their inspections, none of the centres with maintained nursery school provision had fully delegated local management, but most were working towards full budget delegation. Heads and chairs of governing bodies and management committees were facing the complex task of preparing for their increased financial responsibilities. Of the two EECs in the voluntary sector, one has a voluntary management group and the other has a committee.

The range of provision

8. The range of provision offered by EECs is diverse (see annex). Most of the 23 centres inspected are located in areas of significant economic deprivation. The provision of early education and extended care continues to be their core work and, with the exception of the primary schools, children from 3–4 years of age are the largest group catered for. There is no blueprint for what centres could or should provide. Each centre is developing its own services to meet the needs of its particular community.

The scope of the inspection programme

9. In July 2001, Ofsted was asked by the DfES to carry out pilot inspections of 20 EECs by July 2003. The criteria for selecting centres for pilot inspections were:

- the date of the last section 10 (school) inspection
- the date of entry to the Early Excellence programme
- the type and range of provision the EEC offered.

10. In total, 23 centres have been inspected since the pilot inspection programme began. Of these, six centres were part of two networks. These two Early Excellence Networks were also inspected.

11. The majority of centres provide childcare registered and inspected under Part XA of the Children Act 1989. In ten centres, these were carried out as part of the EEC

inspection. Nineteen of the EECs inspected have maintained nursery school provision and two others are based in primary schools. All 21 were inspected under section 10 of the Education Act 1996. The two EECs in the voluntary sector, and other centres that look after grant-funded 3 and 4 year olds, were also inspected under section 122. Adult education was inspected in 13 of the centres.

12. The inspections were based on the requirements for school inspections and the additional criteria for judging EECs taken from the DfES Memorandum of Understanding, which is an agreement which the DfES has with each centre, their LEA and/or partners about what each centre intends to provide. The EEC services that were inspected were those funded by the EEC programme and directly managed by the heads of centres. The inspections focused on:

- nursery education and childcare and, in the two primary schools, the primary education
- the extent and quality of the centre's integrated services for parents, families and other users
- leadership and management at all levels and of the centre as a whole
- the impact of the centres' work on other early years provision.

13. Inspection judgements were made about the quality and standards in these areas for each centre; their strengths and areas for improvement were also identified.

Findings

14. EECs are challenging to lead, manage and organise, and their success rests largely on the quality of response to this challenge. The best centres are leading models of integrated provision for the local community; the rest are well organised, and their successful response to their demanding remit is a reflection of the commitment of those who lead them.

Leadership

15. Overall, the leadership of EECs is good. Of the 23 EECs inspected, six demonstrate very good leadership across the whole centre, including the maintained provision. The heads of these six centres are very knowledgeable about provision for the early years and are experienced headteachers.

16. Key features of the most effective leadership seen in EECs are:

- a clear sense of direction for all aspects of the services provided
- a strategic plan for the fulfilment of the DfES criteria for EECs
- the ability to inspire and enthuse staff, parents and children

- a strong commitment to raising children's achievement coupled with the ability to identify the right priorities and to take effective action
- a commitment to providing an inclusive setting for children, parents and families
- the ability to develop a strong team that shares common goals for high-quality services and continued improvement
- the establishment of clear staff roles and line management
- high levels of expertise.

17. Some features of effective leadership are common to all the 23 EECs inspected. For instance, the heads and senior managers of all the EECs are strongly committed to the development and integration of services. Most of the centres have a clear direction for the expansion of facilities and creation of services that support parents, meet childcare needs, and provide 'inclusive' provision for children with SEN. This is clearly seen through the innovations and extensions to services that have already taken place.

18. In the most effective centres, the standard of leadership is usually high across all the services, including the extended day care and the nursery education. The heads and senior staff in these centres go about the business of creating and integrating services for parents, children, families and adult learners, but also keep a firm eye on the provision of high-quality nursery education. They encourage and support leadership development, clearly setting out what needs to be done to raise children's achievement. They keep what is being done under regular and rigorous review, and enthuse and motivate the staff and users of the centre to strive for further improvement.

In one very well led centre, the head is well qualified, has considerable expertise in her area of work, and is very good at communicating the main purpose and aim of the Early Excellence Centre. She places a strong emphasis on self-evaluation as a means of improving performance and raising achievement, and has accurately identified priorities for development and the action that needs to be taken. Consequently, the staff have an enthusiastic, professional approach to further improvement and are clear about what needs to be done. They demonstrate a strong desire to succeed.

19. In the less effective centres, the priorities for improving the quality of the main aspect of their core work – the children's education – have not been as well defined. Although competent and committed, the heads and senior staff do not have the skills to provide very clear strategic thinking. When faced with a welter of initiatives, their attention has been diverted from the quality of the education provided. Often, these heads have not been well supported by the LEA. In some instances, significant difficulties in the LEA have led to a fragmented approach to early years developments.

20. Where the heads are inexperienced in leading and managing, the process of developing a cohesive staff team and working towards common goals has taken too long. This has generally slowed the process of development and improvement, particularly in relation to the nursery education.

Management

21. The majority of centres are well managed and organised. Overall, however, the management tends not to be as strong as the leadership. There are a number of reasons for this.

- Most heads of EECs have not had access to external performance data provided for schools with older children which would help them to make comparisons with other nursery schools.
- Performance management schemes for teachers working in maintained nursery provision were implemented a year later than in primary and secondary schools. Furthermore, responsibility for EEC (nursery school) headteachers' performance management lay with LEAs, many of which have only recently delegated the responsibility to governing bodies. This caused delay to the cycle for some heads of centres.
- The establishment of an equitable appraisal system for support staff has been hindered by the differences in pay and conditions across the different services.
- At the time of their inspections, EECs with maintained nursery school provision have not been responsible for fully delegated budgets, and this has hampered financial and resource management, especially in relation to staffing.
- Generally, heads of EECs have not had access to sufficient management training.

22. There are only two EECs where management is judged to be very effective. Here, there are clearly defined and effective management structures. The teachers are responsible for the quality of education of the children in their care, and manage their team of family workers well. The family workers successfully manage the care and learning of the children in their 'family' groups. All staff are involved in the regular review of curriculum provision, teaching and children's learning. They share the process of celebrating success, identifying areas for development, and drawing together strategies for improvement. These strategies are seen in the centres' improvement plans, which have the right targets and indicators in place to ensure they move forward. Success in the nursery education is measured in terms of children's achievement across the areas of learning.

23. The most common features of well-managed EECs are:

- significant headship experience with Foundation Stage children
- leadership that is good or better
- an effective governing body or management committee

- strong working links and partnerships with agencies and other services
- good levels of local authority support
- thorough systems for monitoring the services provided, the quality of teaching, how well individual children are doing and, where they could be doing better
- secure links between staff performance objectives and training and the centre's priorities for improvement
- high-quality professional support and staff training.

24. In the most successful centres, family services and childcare existed before EEC status was conferred. These centres have not had to struggle to accommodate a deluge of new initiatives, but instead have been able to build effectively on existing services.

25. Where the management of centres is sound overall, there are relative weaknesses in the quality of teaching and the children's learning. For example, a few of the early years educators in these centres are still developing expertise in areas of the Foundation Stage curriculum, particularly in early literacy, mathematics and aspects of creative development. They lack confidence in finding ways of extending children's learning. Consequently, the more able children could be making better progress. Senior managers have not tackled these weaknesses at an early enough stage. Often the heads of these centres have not had access to appropriate training for managing the nursery education.

Monitoring and evaluating performance

26. All the centres inspected have well-developed systems of consultation which they use to evaluate and develop their family support services and adult education. They regularly consult parents and other users of the centre. Outcomes of consultations are often brought together in the local annual evaluations of centres' work. Centres are taking good account of parents' and other users' views through analysis of questionnaires and interviews.

27. In the most successful centres, staff have clearly defined responsibilities and contribute well to the process of self-evaluation across all services, especially the children's education. They have comprehensive, well-organised assessment procedures, which give them insight into the children's progress in all areas of their learning. They check and monitor the learning of different groups through careful observations to gauge the overall impact of adult interactions and to find out how well different groups of children are involved in activities. They use this information successfully to check on the quality of teaching and to evaluate whether the curriculum is meeting the needs of all children well enough. They then tailor the curriculum to meet the children's needs.

An audit of curriculum provision carried out by team leaders in a particularly effective centre, together with the very careful analysis of how well children engage in learning activities, uncovered weaknesses, for example in literacy skills and aspects of mathematical development. The right action is being taken to improve the children's achievement. It is clearly reflected in the development plan, and forms the basis for initiatives in teaching and learning, such as the provision of focused teaching activities to improve early literacy and numeracy. Here, the additional challenge posed to children has led to good progress.

28. However, a third of the centres do too little to evaluate the quality of teaching and learning in the Foundation Stage. Lack of senior staff management skills and insufficient support from the LEA have delayed the development of effective internal systems for evaluating teaching and learning. These centres have informal systems in place to check the quality of teaching, the curriculum and coverage of the areas of learning, but they are not systematic or rigorous enough to identify and take effective action on what needs to be improved at an early stage.

29. In general, centres with maintained nursery school provision have not been provided with sufficient advice about data. This means that senior staff cannot identify how well, and in which areas of learning, individuals, groups and cohorts of children are making most or least progress. Consequently, priorities for development are not clearly linked to improvements in teaching and children's learning and progress across the areas of learning is sometimes uneven. Although children make good progress overall, the more able could do better, particularly in aspects of early literacy and mathematical development.

30. In almost all centres, performance management for heads and teachers is still at an early stage, but most heads have made a good start in the process of aligning appraisal for support staff with different pay and conditions. In the strongest centres, this is now well established and staff objectives are clearly linked to action the centre is taking to improve its performance across services. Opportunities for professional development and training are better developed than the performance management cycle and, on the whole, are soundly linked to the centres' development plans. The most effective heads and senior staff have secured very good links between raising the achievement of children and adults and well-targeted training and professional development for all staff.

Governance and resource management

31. Overall, governing bodies and management committees do a satisfactory job. They act as a sounding board and offer advice and guidance for the centre, the community, and the local authority. Only a quarter of centres, however, have a management infrastructure that is really effective and influential on the centre's work.

32. Governing bodies, management committees and voluntary management groups show a good commitment to the work of the centres. Most meet regularly and have sound reporting mechanisms. However, the roles of half of the management committees

and half of the governing bodies inspected in EECs with maintained provision have not been clearly defined and this impedes their effectiveness.

33. In these centres, governors and committee members usually have a sound knowledge of what is working well, especially in relation to family support, but have less awareness of where, for example, the nursery education or adult education needs to be improved. In the case of governing bodies, this lack of awareness prevents them from challenging and supporting senior staff and acting as 'critical friends'. For management committees, the lack of clarity about their role limits the extent to which they can give advice about longer-term planning, financial decisions and the effectiveness of strategic decisions already taken. Where there are exceptions to this, and management committee members are well informed, the centres have strong support from their LEAs.

34. Where governance is unsatisfactory, the centres have faced significant difficulties in recruiting governors, have been poorly supported by the LEA and are unable to fulfil their responsibilities.

35. Well over half the centres inspected manage their resources well; one in five manage them very well. Most centres have been quick to identify and follow up potential sources of funding, but this requires a lot of time and energy. For some heads and senior staff it has led to 'initiative overload', and caused their attention to be diverted from the nursery education.

36. Lack of fully delegated budgets for EECs with maintained nursery school provision has meant that most have not had the flexibility of managing surplus (or deficit) funds, or for contracting staff. This has hindered their strategic planning and fragmented the management of staff and services. In addition, centres have to manage time-limited funding and find ways of sustaining existing services by attracting additional or new funding. In partnership with their LEAs, these EECs are working towards delegation in the next financial year or two, but this is a complex and challenging task, sometimes undertaken with very little training for senior staff, governors or committee members.

37. The centres' approach to consultation is a real strength of their work. The approach to other best-value principles is at an earlier stage in all but the strongest centres. The best centres have effective systems of self-review, regularly question the quality of all aspects of their work, and show a high degree of shared commitment to continuing improvement.

In a centre where the joint governing body provides very good direction, governors keep themselves well informed about developments, through a programme of visits, reports from both heads and through regular meetings. This means that governors are able to take well-judged decisions about the provision of existing and future services. They also play an important role in monitoring the centre's work by, for example, receiving and discussing both internal and external evaluations. As a result, they have a good awareness of the strengths of the centre's work, and where there is room for further improvements.

Early Excellence Networks

38. The Early Excellence Networks co-ordinate provision for children and their families between two or more centres and other providers in a local authority area or part of a local authority. Two networks have been inspected, one inner city and one rural, but these are not yet working very effectively. Neither was judged to be of good quality; one was unsatisfactory, the other was satisfactory.

39. Common difficulties for networks are: the lack of a clearly defined purpose and remit; the problems caused by significant local authority staffing reorganisations; and issues regarding their management which, until recently, had come under the EYDCPs, within social services. Consequently, at the time of their inspections, neither of the two networks were integrated in local authority or EYDCP structures or in the strategies for training and improvement.

40. There are some strengths of the Early Excellence Networks in the role of the co-ordinator, where it is well defined and the co-ordinator has qualified teacher status. Other relative strengths are the good practice across the networks in providing inclusive education for children with SEN, especially where this is an integral part of the LEA's structure and strategy.

41. Emerging strengths include the effective advice, guidance and support for families with different cultures and languages and the good opportunities for adult and parent education.

42. However, there are weaknesses in the Early Excellence Networks, the most significant of which lie in:

- the lack of understanding by all partners of the networks' remit
- the lack of robust quality assurance systems and the minimal evidence of the networks' quality and impact
- the ineffective working partnerships linking the maintained and voluntary sectors
- the lack of systems for sharing good practice.

The most significant consequence of these weaknesses is that much of each partner's work within the networks is carried out in isolation. This leads to a duplication of effort, roles and funding, for instance with regards to the provision of childcare places in the voluntary sector.

43. There is still a lack of self-review and awareness about where strengths and areas for improvement lie, which means that much of the partners' expertise is not yet used well enough to enrich the work of either network. Unless these weaknesses are overcome, the networks will not operate at an effective level. The interaction between the voluntary and maintained sectors has raised particular concerns. There is a conflict for the voluntary sector between maintaining viability and the purposes and aims of the Early Excellence programme. This has an impact on the extent to which voluntary sector partners are able or willing to involve themselves in the development of the network.

The quality of day care for children under 3

44. Full or sessional day care for children under 3 years of age is provided by 18 of the centres. All centres comply with the National Standards for childminding and day care and their provision for this age group is generally of good quality.⁴ It was only satisfactory in very few centres where the planning and provision for children's learning in some areas was inconsistent. Half of the centres with 2 year olds integrated them with the 3 and 4 year olds for some of the sessions. The other centres that have babies and children under 3 years group them by age. Some centres also offer respite day care for children whose families are under stress.

45. Where the provision was good or better, the quality of the care given by staff and the way they related to parents and carers was especially effective. Babies and young children are inducted and settled into the centre sensitively and particularly well. Staff are knowledgeable about each child's needs and have close and frequent links with their parents. This means that both staff and parents are very well informed about how well children are doing.

In one centre, for example, there are many informal opportunities for parents to talk to the staff about their child's learning and care. Staff go out of their way to share and solicit information from parents about their children. In addition, there are regular planned discussions with parents about their child's progress. Interpreters are available for parents whose first language is not English.

46. Babies and toddlers are given rich sensory experiences and different opportunities to stimulate their curiosity to explore and investigate. This often includes exploring the contents of baskets filled with interesting 'treasures'. Staff talk about the 'treasures' and guide and build on their responses.

The staff set out a range of beautifully presented materials, such as corks, shiny paper and scented bags, to give children a variety of interesting things to explore, using their senses. The adults were gentle, persuasive and encouraging and built effectively on things that the babies did. They helped them learn by naming and describing what was happening, and by demonstrating further actions that the babies might repeat. When the babies showed real curiosity in touching trays of paint laid out on the floor, staff extended their tactile experiences by helping them to use their hands to paint in different colours.

47. Good teaching of this type results in the children demonstrating very high levels of concentration and achievement. They explore with confidence and enthusiasm and show delight in the experiences provided.

48. Staff encourage children from an early age to become more independent and teach them how to take care of themselves and others. An example of this was when a

⁴ The Day Care and Child Minding (National Standards) (England) Regulations 2003, (SI 2003 No. 1996).

14-month-old girl, supported by an adult, was able to help find a clean vest for herself in a big bag of clothes. The involvement and sense of achievement were evident in her joy at accomplishing this.

49. As babies move to toddler groups or rooms they continue to make good progress. The seamless way that staff work together skilfully supports the children and each other as needed. They are sensitive to children who are less confident and uncertain and quickly give them individual attention and reassurance. Any upsets are quickly resolved in a positive way that helps children understand how to behave and relate to others.

50. Staff also capitalise well on opportunities to talk and listen to the children, asking them questions and confirming their individual responses. Both babies and toddlers go to books as a source of pleasure. They know their favourite books, how to turn the pages and look at the pictures. The staff build on and extend the children's existing knowledge by providing plenty of time to enjoy rhymes, stories and songs together and children enjoy joining in refrains.

51. In centres where the care and teaching are very good, most children, by the time they leave the toddler room, are confident in relating to known adults and in using the resources available to them. Some are beginning to count to five, recognise their own names and are attempting to write. They know how to mix dry paint and use paintbrushes to make careful brush strokes on their paintings. Equipment is used skilfully and children show good control filling and pouring ladles and jugs in the water tray, or rolling and cutting playdough to make cakes.

By the time they leave the toddler classes in one centre, most children converse confidently with others about what they are doing and what they want. They run safely and handle wheeled toys adeptly. Their achievements are in large part attributable to the attentiveness of adults as they share and build in children's interests, enthusiasm and achievements. Very good interaction between adults and children teaches children how to communicate. They use sounds, gestures, words and simple sentences to respond to adult questions about such things as where model animals are hiding. Staff invariably sit on the floor with children to sustain and develop play and learning. Their participation in role-play, such as a 'baby clinic', shows children, for example, how to take a telephone message, write up baby's progress and change a nappy. Books are used as a frequent source of reference to pick up on children's interests and develop their ideas. Children point to and label details in the pictures, often copy facial expressions, create their own sound effects and repeat key words. By the time they are approaching 3 years of age they can identify the repetitive refrains of 'core' stories such as 'We're All Going on a Bear Hunt'.

52. Where centres have 2-year-old children, they are usually included in the nursery classes with the older children. They use a particular area or small room with their key worker or member of staff for part of the morning and afternoon session. This gives them the opportunity to explore and play with others their own age in a smaller and less busy space. During other times, when they are integrated with the older children, they learn by observation and imitation, confidently joining in the activities.

In one centre, for example, toddlers join their 'family' group for meals and for some of the activities in the main part of the nursery. At these times they confidently explore and intently watch what older children are doing and, as a result, start to share and handle books and a wide range of equipment from an early age. Staff carefully consider the needs of these very young children in their teaching and introduce them to a widening and valuable range of experiences.

53. The quality of the learning of children under 3 in the majority of the centres is well planned and based on the staff's knowledge of child development and individual children's needs. The centres offer a rich and stimulating environment, with high-quality resources, and emphasise children's personal, social and emotional development, and their language and physical development. They successfully help children learn through play and positive reinforcement. Good assessment of each child's achievements and progress means that staff are well 'tuned in' to children's interests and learning needs. The system of daily review and planning for each child is used well to build on individual experiences from one day to the next. Often children's achievements and progress are collected into individual books by the staff and illustrated by photos and comments. These are displayed and shared with parents and the children.

54. Where early learning in the context of day care is less effective, it is because children's learning is receiving too little stimulus. A lack of interesting resources in a small minority of centres, and too little observation, recording and assessment of what children are doing, result in limited planning and inconsistent practice by care staff.

The quality and standards of education achieved by children in the foundation stage

Early Excellence Centres that provide maintained nursery education

55. The majority of children who enter maintained nursery provision have not experienced a day-care place and are below the expected levels of learning for 3 year olds.

56. In the Foundation Stage curriculum, children do best in their **personal, social and emotional development**. In almost all centres, they are on course to exceed the national early learning goals by the end of the reception year in their primary schools. In the majority of centres, children also surpass expectations in their **physical development**. Teaching is strongest in these two areas. All staff have a good knowledge of individuals and how young children learn; they build well on children's ideas and what they already know. As a result, children make good progress and develop good attitudes to learning.

57. In just under half the centres, children are on course to exceed the early learning goals in their **knowledge and understanding of the world**, particularly in their skills of exploration and investigation. In some aspects of this area, such as a sense of time and place, their achievement is not as high.

58. The majority of children are on course to meet the early learning goals in **communication, language and literacy** and **mathematical development**. However, very few are likely to exceed them. In one centre, children are unlikely to meet the mathematical goals because the teaching is weak. Overall, children are likely to meet expectations in their **creative development**; and in a third of centres children are likely to exceed the goals for this area.

59. Teaching is weakest in early literacy, mathematics and aspects of creative development because there is less emphasis on the direct, focused teaching of key skills, especially for the older and more able children. Here, staff who are not qualified teachers tend to lack confidence and subject knowledge.

60. In three quarters of the maintained centres, the teaching seen in the Foundation Stage was good. In one in five centres, the teaching was very good and in three centres it was satisfactory. Teaching was noticeably better in centres inspected in 2002–03 than in those inspected in the previous year.

61. Staff generally have secure knowledge of the curriculum guidance for the Foundation Stage.⁵ Their methods place much emphasis on play, practical experiences and the interactive processes of teaching and learning. Where teaching is satisfactory,

⁵ *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage*, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.

some support staff lack the knowledge and confidence to challenge and extend learning, and teachers give them too little guidance or training in these techniques.

62. Curriculum planning is good in just over half the centres; it is very good in one in ten. Where planning is not as strong, it does not cover the knowledge and key skills children should gain in all the areas of learning, especially mathematical development, early literacy and aspects of creative development. This limits the levels of challenge provided.

63. All the centres plan for a balance of child-initiated and adult-led indoor and outdoor activities which cover the six areas of learning. Where planning is very effective, interesting tasks are well matched to children's needs because the staff make very accurate observations of what children can and cannot do yet, and use their assessments to pinpoint what children need to learn next.

64. Where planning is less effective, it is not always made clear what is to be learned in the different activities, or how the learning of all children is to be extended. For instance, the learning objectives for some regular day-to-day activities, like simple problem-solving with numbers, are often too broad to give a precise focus to adult intervention and taught sessions. This leaves staff insufficiently aware of the possibilities for providing further challenge.

65. Almost all the centres inspected provide a stimulating environment and very good resources; they have used Early Excellence Centre funding well to adapt and enhance the environment. Resources are usually deployed effectively to give children regular access to familiar activities, in order to revisit key ideas and consolidate learning.

Children with special educational needs

66. The majority of the centres have a large proportion of children with SEN. Most of these children make good progress because the centres are very good at including them in all the activities. Staff get to know the children quickly; their needs are identified at a very early stage through induction procedures which involve parents well. Staff monitor the children's progress carefully and generally keep thorough records that have clear targets for development which translate into activities at an appropriate level. Where the provision is not as good, plans for the next steps in learning are sometimes too broad.

In a centre where the provision for children with SEN is very good, the wide-ranging assessments administered soon after children are admitted to the nursery ensure that children's needs are identified quickly. They also form the basis of a plan of action for each child. The children's individual education plans are excellent. They provide clear, short-term targets and guidance on how these might be achieved. High-quality ongoing assessment shows that the great majority of these children make very good progress.

67. Children with complex needs make particularly good progress because the support programmes and procedures for their development and inclusion into mainstream provision are very well thought through. Centres that make provision for children with complex needs are usually an integral part of their LEA's inclusion policy.

Where it is provided, support for children when and after they transfer to reception classes in primary schools is outstanding.

In the same centre, when children move on to nearby schools, staff provide helpful strategies for their teachers. Resources and advice are tailored to the children's needs and lead to sustained progress. Where children have moved to special schools, the liaison is of the same high quality.

Children learning to speak English as an additional language

68. A third of the centres also have high proportions of children from minority ethnic communities. In all these centres, children of different races worked and played together naturally and harmoniously. The centres are successful in responding to the diversity of the community. In centres where opportunities for children's development are excellent, the centre makes the most of the richness of other languages, religions and cultures. Parents whose mother tongue is not English read familiar stories in their first language and help to extend the bank of dual-language story tapes. Carers, friends from the community and visitors are encouraged to share aspects of, and celebrations from, their own cultures.

69. The majority of children learning to speak English as an additional language progress well, particularly where bilingual teaching assistants work with them, using the home language where necessary to help them to develop facility in English.

A nursery has linked with the LEA's language support team and is taking good account of helpful advice in assessing the levels of children's English language. Time is set aside each term for staff to observe the children so that their progress can be carefully monitored. Bilingual stories are told to targeted groups of children; these stories are of great benefit and also raise other children's awareness of different languages.

70. Good practice is characterised by an early assessment of needs, effective teamwork and clearly established staff routines. Parents are supported well and are involved in discussions about their children's progress, often with the help of interpreters.

The Foundation Stage curriculum

Personal, social and emotional development

71. In the vast majority of centres, effective partnerships with parents, well-planned induction procedures and good ratios of staff to children are significant factors in children's good achievement. The children settle quickly, become confident, and are taught effective strategies that help them to become independent learners and to take care of themselves.

72. Teaching in relation to personal, social and emotional development is a strength of all centres. Behaviour is managed well in all the centres inspected and it is often very good. Where it is very good, the older children talk about and learn to manage their own feelings.

A good example of this was identified in a centre where children are confident and assertive; they are taught to take control when others act in a way that they do not like. For instance they say 'Stop! Don't do that!' when they are in the nursery. Adults can often be heard asking children if they have told a friend in a 'big voice' not to be unkind.

73. A relative weakness in this area is the early learning goal to develop the children's sense of their own community. In only three of the centres inspected do children have a strong sense of their community through which they are learning to value their own and others' ways of living. In other centres, an awareness of different lifestyles is too often limited to religious and secular festivals.

Communication, language and literacy

74. Children make better progress in developing speaking and listening skills than in developing the early skills in reading and writing. In the latter, teaching and progress are good in about half the centres inspected and satisfactory in the remainder.

75. In most centres, language skills are assessed at an early stage and staff place an emphasis on developing speaking and listening skills. Consequently, the majority of children learn to speak confidently. Incidental opportunities for conversation are maximised and a commentary is usually maintained by staff to extend vocabulary. In this aspect, the effective teaching helps children to initiate conversations and 'have a go' at posing their own questions.

76. Listening skills are developed well. Good levels of questioning encourage children to listen, consider alternatives, describe, and to think things through for themselves. For instance, by the end of the Foundation Stage, the good progress in one of the centres with reception-aged classes was evident; children listened well, could explain their ideas and engage in detailed conversation.

77. Overall, there is insufficient direct teaching of key early reading skills and the application of those skills to early writing. The picture is better in centres inspected in the

second year of the programme, but this aspect is still a general weakness. Staff find effective ways of attracting children to books and in all the centres children are taught to handle books carefully and use them correctly. Where the approach to early reading is good, children are familiar with a good range of stories which they can re-tell and they can predict outcomes.

In one centre where the approach to early literacy is well thought out, a good focus is given to sharing and telling a wide range of well-chosen stories. These capture the children's attention well and the story telling is often enhanced by the use of puppets and other visual props from the nursery's 'story sacks'. The staff carefully include the children at the early stages of learning English by telling stories in both English and their first language. Consequently, when children play, their knowledge of book 'language' is evident. Staff enhance the effective teaching in this area by providing a home loan scheme, through which parents and children can borrow books. Staff also offer helpful guidance to parents about sharing books and developing important reading skills.

78. In too many centres, however, children receive much praise and encouragement but little direct teaching based on clear, specific learning objectives for early literacy. Although children are usually provided with reasonable opportunities to experiment with writing across a range of activities, older and more able children are often not challenged at all or sufficiently to use their developing knowledge of letter sounds when they attempt to write. This inhibits their progress. In the centres where there are better levels of challenge, children learn many initial letter sounds, can identify a few familiar words, and have a go at writing simple words and phrases.

In one very effective centre, many opportunities are provided for children to write. For instance they 'write' and send cards to one another, they scribe and copy-write labels and lists, and 'have a go' at responding to stories they have shared or early reading scheme books they have read at home. Younger children are encouraged to trace patterns and shapes in the sand with their fingers and older children are routinely taught to form letters correctly with the appropriate use of capital letters. As a result, by the end of their final term, the older children are able to write their own names correctly, copy-write competently, and are confident enough to write simple phrases with adult support.

Mathematical development

79. Children's mathematical development is satisfactory overall but, like early literacy, is not as good as in the other areas of learning. In about half of the centres inspected, teaching and progress are satisfactory but no better.

80. The development of mathematical ideas is too often an incidental aspect of activities and is most often related to counting and measuring. Staff do not always intervene at the right moment to fully exploit the mathematical potential of children's play.

For instance, when a child quickly sorted plastic bears by colour, she was not further challenged to sort the bears in any other way. Similarly, when a group of children learnt to build cars from wooden bricks, the lack of intervention from staff meant that they were not taught about the properties of the shapes they were using.

81. Children are generally taught well to recognise and count numbers to ten. Often, mathematical language to describe size, shape and quantity is also taught effectively; it is well linked to play experiences and everyday activities. Staff are not as confident, however, in their understanding of how to use mathematical ideas to solve simple problems or in aspects of calculation, like the addition and subtraction of low numbers.

82. Only a few centres do much to encourage the more able children to record their mathematical findings. There are too few planned mathematical activities in these aspects and not enough opportunities for children to work in small groups to talk about their mathematical ideas. Often, staff have not thought through precisely what children need to learn next and, as a result, the levels of challenge are not as good as they should be.

Knowledge and understanding of the world

83. In this area, effective teaching, characterised by good levels of questioning and explanations which prompt enquiry, helps children to describe or explain what they are doing. Staff encourage children to think things through for themselves. Very good first-hand experiences, both indoors and in very well designed outdoor areas, stimulate children's curiosity and encourage them to explore and investigate their environment. In the majority of centres this leads to good achievement in the foundations for later science work.

For instance, a group of reception class children were encouraged to investigate water flowing downhill. They interrupted the flow with their spades, tested the buoyancy of boats, and dug holes, watching them fill with water as they dug deeper.

84. There are well thought through approaches to designing and making activities and to the use of everyday technology like computers. These lead to good progress. Weaker aspects of this area of learning are the foundations for history and geography: a sense of time and place. Progress and teaching in these aspects are generally satisfactory but seldom strong.

85. Teaching to develop an understanding of the cultures and faiths of others is reported as a strength in five centres and a weakness in three. In the other centres it is satisfactory.

Physical development

86. In almost all centres children make good progress in their physical development. Teaching in this area is strong because most staff are knowledgeable and encourage children to try out new ideas. The provision of high-quality resources results in children becoming confident and making good progress. Staff understand how young children

develop physically and they achieve a good balance between letting children explore independently and providing assistance when necessary.

For example, in one centre staff helped a child to improve his performance at balancing on stepping stones without falling off.

87. Children are taught effectively to use tools and materials competently and precisely. They usually have access to a wide range of resources from an early stage. Consequently, in the majority of centres children are on course to exceed expectations in this aspect.

In a centre where parents are encouraged to follow up activities at home, they were surprised when their children showed that they could butter bread with knives and make sandwiches. These are skills they were taught in the nursery.

Creative development

88. Overall, teaching is satisfactory in this area. Strengths are the well-planned resource areas for art and design activities and the use of interesting artefacts. In a good number of centres children have regular opportunities to work alongside artists in residence and to see their own work displayed within and beyond their centres. Where this provision is combined with good teaching, children achieve well. Singing contributes to activities in most areas of learning with the result that children sing well and with enthusiasm.

89. Too often, however, there isn't enough teaching of key skills, partly because the purpose of some creative activities is not made explicit. Adults accept children's efforts readily without helping them to learn the new skills that would enable them to make what they do more interesting or different. In more than a quarter of centres there is not enough encouragement for children to talk about what they have done, what they want to do next and what they might improve. In only one centre inspected did the staff provide the driving force and enthusiasm for creative development needed to generate excellent teaching. Here, the children's achievement goes well beyond the early learning goals in art and design, and music, and prepares children especially well for the reception class and for Key Stage 1.

90. In just over a quarter of the centres inspected, high-quality role-play activities stimulate children's imaginations effectively. Where such situations are created by staff, they provide a starting-point for a wide spectrum of imaginative scenarios. Staff support children very well in these activities, the staff enter into character roles with enthusiasm. Life experiences, such as visits in the local area, further enhance their understanding of the world around them.

Early Excellence Centres which provide funded nursery education

91. The pilot inspection programme included funded nursery education for 3 and 4 year olds in two voluntary settings, and in separate provision from the maintained classes in seven maintained EECs. Overall, the quality of nursery education was not as high as that in maintained classes, but the key weaknesses were similar.

92. In these centres, teaching and learning are satisfactory and children make sound progress towards the early learning goals. Children with complex or other special educational needs are usually included well in all the nursery's activities. Overall, leadership and management are satisfactory, but there is insufficient emphasis on monitoring and evaluating the impact of teaching on children's learning and progress.

93. Strengths of teaching are the provision of a good variety of indoor and outdoor activities which capture children's interest. The curriculum plans cover all the areas of learning adequately, but there is a common weakness in the use of assessment. Regular observations are used to assess what children can do, but are not sufficiently well linked to the steps identified in the Foundation Stage curriculum guidance. They are not always accurate enough to be used for planning what children should do next.

94. Children do best in their personal, social and emotional development. They become confident, develop good relationships and social skills, and behave well.

95. The development of speaking and listening skills is stronger than those for early literacy. Staff are effective in using varied strategies to encourage children to listen well, and usually maintain a good dialogue with children. However, questioning by staff does not always encourage children to explain their thinking. There are similar weaknesses to those found in the maintained nursery classes in the teaching and learning of early literacy; in particular, not enough attention is given to identifying letter sounds and recognising simple words.

96. Although the provision for mathematical development is satisfactory overall, insufficient emphasis and opportunity are given to promoting the use of numbers and solving simple practical problems.

97. In knowledge and understanding of the world, there are good opportunities for designing and making things. However, there is little stimulation of children's interest in the natural world.

98. In creative development, well-paced and regular music and movement sessions encourage children to use their imagination.

The quality of other services provided

Adult education

99. Adult and community education is provided by 14 of the 23 centres inspected and this is invariably managed well. Centres have good links with their local further education colleges or community/lifelong education services, and together they offer a range of well-resourced learning opportunities for parents and other adults. The majority of the courses take place on site within each centre. All the centre managers frequently canvass parents and other users of the centre for their views as they are keen to provide what learners need and want. In this way, courses are geared to the needs of adult learners. Accredited courses include computer courses, basic skills courses such as numeracy and literacy, English as an additional language, creative and practical courses such as needlework or furniture restoration. Inspection evidence shows the quality of these courses to be good and often very good.

100. The staff in the centres are instrumental in encouraging and supporting parents to enrol on courses. The take-up is high, particularly when the courses are held at times when adults can attend and where flexible childcare such as after-school care, or a crèche is provided. This enables parents, mainly mothers but also a few fathers, who would not normally be able to take part to benefit personally and to increase their employment chances. The accessibility of the centres' courses is another factor, as one parent put it, 'Adult education is amazing here – it's right on the doorstep'.

101. In most of the centres, adult learners are achieving as well as students on award-bearing courses at other institutions. The qualifications they gain include National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ Level 3), City and Guilds, GCSE, and Computer Literacy and Information Technology. Over the last year in one centre, 63 parents achieved a qualification and 17 gained employment. The success is due to the very good quality of the teaching, which uses a variety of activities and methods to engage, teach and challenge the adult learners. Qualified staff adjust the pace and content of the teaching to meet the needs of the participants. Tutors give constructive feedback and frequently check students' progress towards their personal targets. Each session ends with very good summaries and forecasts which enable everyone to take stock of what they have learned and what to move on to next. In one successful session observed, the students willingly discussed their mistakes and were given helpful and encouraging advice on how to improve.

102. Students are appreciative of the tutors and say, 'Teachers are down to earth and really good', 'They show you how to do it until you are confident that you can do it!'. The students gain in confidence and self-esteem and become clear about what they want to achieve, for example, 'I did GCSE maths last year and am working towards being employed. I'd like to work in a school office'. One centre that is highly effective in enabling parents to gain the skills they need to get work became a victim of its own success as the fathers' group was discontinued when most of its members successfully gained employment.

Parent and family support

103. Much of the successful work that centres do with parents is focused on improving and developing parenting skills. All centres encourage and enable parents and carers to meet regularly at the centre with a member of staff or, in a number of instances, the attached health visitor or the health practitioner located at the centre. Courses such as 'Surviving parenthood', and 'How to manage your child's behaviour', are popular and well attended. For many parents these are welcome opportunities to meet other parents and share experiences, as well as introducing them to useful strategies for managing their child's behaviour and deepening their understanding of their child's development. Their self-esteem is boosted and they are more confident in responding to their child's needs. In one centre the attached health visitor is available to discuss problems and issues faced by parents at a weekly 'parent talk' session, where parents feel comfortable to talk about their concerns. In another centre a 'feeding' group meets with the health practitioner to discuss their children's eating problems.

104. All the centres inspected provide good opportunities for parents to gain more information. Parents are consulted about their needs and interests, and topics such as first aid, healthy eating, beauty therapy or local history are covered. A number of courses specifically aim to help parents to support their own children's learning and development. For example, during a family numeracy course and one on Story Sacks, parents learnt about the purposes of the activities and materials in the nursery and spent time working with the children putting into practice what they themselves were learning. In another centre, the family computer workshops involve children learning alongside their parents. This gives parents confidence to act as role models and children see their own parents learning. Initiatives such as the Early Start Programme linked to the Basic Skills Agency, and a family learning activity group called SHARE, take place and assist parents in knowing how to help their children at home with their literacy and numeracy learning. Parents make books, for example, and learn how to encourage early reading skills. Parents are enthusiastic and keen to be part of these sessions. They say that they gain a great deal of knowledge about how their children learn and that this helps them to know what they can do with their children at home. The quality of this work is evident from the parents' feedback and the rapid progress their children make when their parents apply the knowledge and skills they have gained. Sessions such as these also give parents the incentive and confidence to take their own learning further and gain additional skills and qualifications by attending accredited courses at the centre.

105. Other opportunities provided at the centres and sometimes in other locations by staff for parents and carers with their children include drop-in sessions for parents, carers and their babies or toddlers, such as 'play and stay' and 'parent and child play'. In one centre, staff identified the need for a drop-in facility for families in the community and successfully planned and evaluated the sessions with the result that over 50 mothers, fathers, grandparents, and other carers regularly attend the sessions. The staff consistently model good ways of working with the children and listen attentively to parents' concerns or views. Parents are able to observe how staff talk to, and play, with their children, as well as giving them opportunities to judge for themselves the

effectiveness of the different ways of handling young children. Parents reported that their children became more socially aware and were easier to deal with at home, which in turn led to a reduction of stress. One mother referred to the service as 'a life saver'.

106. Several centres provide excellent support through their outreach service. Outreach staff are adept at forming strong relationships with individual families and their children. Those families that are more vulnerable or isolated in the community are sometimes supported in their homes. For example, outreach family workers in one centre take active steps to reach the most isolated and vulnerable families in the community. Their success is particularly evident in the increased number of families from the Bangladeshi community that use the centre. Further testament to their effectiveness is the progress of some parents, drawn in through outreach work, on to informal non-accredited classes and accredited adult education courses.

107. The recruitment of bilingual staff in a few centres has successfully widened the participation of parents from minority ethnic groups who would not normally access such provision. The confidence and self-esteem of these parents are boosted; as a result, they are better able to approach staff to discuss their children's progress and to find ways of supporting them at home.

108. Outreach work for children with special needs and their parents provides very effective encouragement and guidance, often for families that have experienced considerable distress. In some centres, the practice that supports parents is excellent, as in the following examples:

At the earliest opportunity the staff at the centre offer help, advice and training. Parents speak with some emotion about the exceptional quality of support given to them. In many cases it has given them a clear understanding of their child's difficulties and needs, and how they can help. This has led to improved self-confidence among families that have often been stretched to breaking point. A strong desire to 'give something back' has led a group of these parents to establish the 'Parents' Link'. This provides very good support, especially to new parents.

Children whose complex needs are known before they reach nursery age get a wide spectrum of support. The work of the peripatetic Portage group is valued immensely by parents. Likewise, the 'Earlybird' scheme for families with children on the autistic spectrum provides many parents with a 'lifeline'. The parents are helped sensitively to come to terms with the challenges posed by their children's communication difficulties.

Centres involve parents at a very early stage through initiatives such as toy libraries which provide an invaluable resource for children with special educational needs because they provide regular access to good-quality equipment for parents and others to support children's development or through toddler and parent groups. In the centre, the toddler opportunity and parent support group (TOPS) provides outstanding support for parents and their children with special educational needs. Parents discuss and receive very good help for their children, from the specialist advisory staff attached to the centre.

109. Opportunities such as these give parents access to a wide range of high-quality services that benefit both the families and children in the community. Parents and carers appreciate this 'one-stop shop' approach. Parents of children with SEN receive a particularly good service. The needs of these children are identified early, they receive good support and there are good links with health professionals, especially speech therapists and physiotherapists.

110. In all centres, parents are encouraged to contribute to assessments of their children. In one centre it begins during home visits made by staff with a speech therapist. Children then attend the nursery for two afternoons a week and engage in a very well led language enrichment programme managed by the speech therapist or a member of the nursery staff. This is designed to enhance the children's language development, social skills and self-confidence. Children's spoken language and confidence increase significantly as a result of the programme. They are given simple follow-up tasks to complete at home. Their parents and carers find this particularly useful because it helps them to understand and become involved in their children's learning.

111. In a few centres, children with complex SEN are provided with support from EEC staff during their first year in primary school. This work provides children with invaluable support. Resources and advice are tailored to their needs and lead to sustained progress in mainstream schools. An example of this is an initiative that one centre calls School Start. It aims to give parents and their children, particularly those with SEN, a confident start to another nursery, pre-school setting or a reception class in a school. Very good links and working relationships have been formed with the agencies involved with the children and with key staff from the schools that the children transfer to. Parents can refer their child for this support or the nursery staff can recommend it to parents where they think children will benefit. At every step, parents are fully involved and encouraged to contribute information and their views about how well the support is working. Excellent review meetings are convened with all concerned by the family support co-ordinator. Staff awareness of an individual child and the family's needs is paramount and forms the basis of the discussion. Discussion includes how to build on children's strengths to maintain their progress and focuses on ways to resolve any issues that might affect their transition.

112. Families that are in difficulties are helped to deal with other agencies so that they can receive the help they need. Different ways of providing support are vigorously pursued. For instance, one parent recalled how she was given practical help during a family crisis which enabled her child to continue attending the centre's nursery. In another centre a nurture group for parents has been started. The centre has identified a small group of vulnerable children and their parents and gives the parents sensitive support to develop their skills in managing their children. A member of staff works with these parents to help them budget, plan, and shop, and cook healthy meals for their children. The food is prepared and eaten together in a flat available to the centre on a local estate. This work builds the parents' self-esteem and confidence in caring for their children very effectively.

113. In two of the centres inspected, there are successful programmes to support teenage parents. For example, a comprehensive network of support for parents aged 16–18 years, who wish to continue or return to education and training. It is very effective in providing educational assessments, one-to-one tuition and finding and locating suitable courses, as well as offering care for their children. The project workers and staff work closely with the parents, mainly young women, getting to know them and gaining their confidence. Staff visit the parents at home and help with practical issues, such as housing and benefits. The courses and workshops not only help young parents to extend their education, but also equip them with relevant parenting skills, such as first aid for babies, healthy eating and computing. Completed training has led to qualifications in such areas as literacy, numeracy, the GCSE, and General National Vocational Qualifications.

Working with other agencies and partners

114. All of the centres inspected have actively sought representation of different agencies on their Management Committee or Governing Body. This is a significant factor in the degree of inter-agency collaboration that the centres have achieved. Where an agency is not represented at this level, the work of the centre is not as effective. Most centres have the managers of their main services on their senior management teams and this results in effective team work. Good opportunities have been given to senior staff to work across different sectors. They have been encouraged to be innovative in developing integrated services to meet local needs. Most have grasped these opportunities and have been sufficiently well supported to ensure the successful provision of a wide range of services for families. This is evident in the carefully thought-out guidance and pastoral care for parents which directly benefits the well-being and learning of their children. Where courses for adult literacy and numeracy are provided, parents and carers are helped to improve their own basic skills and, as a result, give better support to their children. In this respect, the EECs are ‘ahead of the game’, and provide a model of good practice to be shared with other integrated centres and early years providers.

115. The success of high-quality support for families and children usually owes much to the very effective collaboration between the centres and outside agencies such as the health authority, the local authority including social services, Sure Start, police officers and further education colleges. Carefully developed partnerships with specialists have enabled the centres to extend good advice and support to parents, many of whom represent minority ethnic groups. Joint work has also ensured that centres are able to tailor a broad range of services to different families’ needs.

In a centre where the multi-agency support given to parents is a strength, the centre provides a range of well-organised and flexible services that are well matched to the centre’s aims of improving family stability, parenting skills and confidence, and to reduce isolation. Here the nurse practitioner gets to know the parents who use the centre and offers help and advice in an informal and non-threatening way.

Links with social services

116. Over two thirds of the centres have working partnerships with social services and are used by social workers for work with referred families, such as supervised contact visits and respite care.

117. Family assessment work is undertaken by one centre's staff. This involves careful observation, analysis and written contributions to social services' assessments. The centre is used for access visits for children who are living apart from their parents, and members of the staff often supervise these visits. Staff sometimes present reports in court, such as at custody hearings; this requires high levels of competence and confidence. The parents involved spoke highly of the non-stigmatising approach that the centre and its facilities have towards them. This is a valued aspect of the centre's work.

118. In most of the centres there is an allocation of places for children referred by social workers. Quarterly reviews are held by social services together with the centres' staff to look at the impact of support for these children.

119. In one centre the family co-ordinator has established a very good relationship with social services family workers who are based at the centre. This means that advice can be given quickly on such matters as benefits, parenting and budgeting. This is helping parents to appreciate that social services can be a valuable source of advice for families. Much of the good work of social services has been incorporated into the work of the centre, such as the very successful 'Surviving Parenthood' course.

Links with Sure Start

120. Links with Sure Start are developing in a number of the centres. They are better developed when Sure Start is sited within the centre or nearby in the local community, and when the initiative has been set up with the centre's involvement. An example of good working relationships is in a centre where Sure Start funds year-round nursery places to support young children living in the areas of social disadvantage. Support for parents and children who attend the centre through the Sure Start initiative is good. Senior staff and key workers make time to get to know both parents and children and take full account of their views and needs. The Sure Start teacher who works at the centre for more than half of each week provides an effective link between staff, parents and Sure Start workers beyond the centre, such as health visitors and speech therapists. This ensures that additional help can be provided whenever it is needed. The centre's role in extending its practice to other groups involved in providing childcare and education for Sure Start families is at an early stage. The current Sure Start teacher has also formed secure initial working relationships with other settings.

121. In another centre, the recently appointed Sure Start outreach worker and other centre staff have established strong links with parents and carers in the local community quickly. Parents have opportunities to socialise with other parents in sessions which are stimulating for their children, such as the new 'Early Start' groups. Careful planning and good co-ordination between work with parents and children are giving staff opportunities

to discuss how ideas from the sessions might be developed at home. Staff encourage children to join in with activities and successfully include all families sensitively, for example those parents who have a disability or speak another language.

Links with health authorities

122. Centres have a number of different links with their Health Authorities. One centre offers parents 'drop-in' facilities where they receive good advice from agencies such as the health authority. Parents successfully access courses like 'The Nippers Project,' which is run in conjunction with Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children, to develop parenting skills. Parents are clear about the benefits of the course, 'We are here to learn'.

123. Another centre's health authority provides the services of a health visitor for one day a week. The health visitor offers effective pastoral care and advice, and a broad range of short courses such as first aid. Parents gain confidence through individual discussion with the health visitor and, as a result, they are motivated to attend the short courses.

124. Some centres have a nurse practitioner on site. In one centre the nurse practitioner leads a valuable and highly responsive health advice service. Her intentions to build trust and create comfortable and easily accessible support are being successfully realised. The themes of healthy eating, giving up smoking and taking exercise are consistently reinforced and are highlighted effectively by special events and campaigns. When organising services such as baby massage, she successfully draws on expertise beyond the centre, such as that of a health visitor who contributes to the sessions and offers advice.

125. In a different centre the nurse practitioner gets to know parents who come to 'Stay and Play' sessions and nursery staff teach some of the courses for adults. The centre has formed very good working relationships with professionals beyond the centre, such as the consultant community paediatrician and therapists.

126. In one centre that caters for children with cerebral palsy and their families, there is a good working relationship between the physiotherapist and the early years educator. The sessions enable easy and purposeful interaction with children and their parents and carers. Teaching is very well focused on children learning skills of movement, listening and communication and is equally informative to parents. For example, while children touch trays of sand, coconut shells, pebbles and leaves with their feet, parents are made aware: 'we can feel with our feet and it hardens our skin for walking'. Teaching is well adapted to each child's particular needs.

Links with other partners

127. Three centres have a close partnership with a charity that provides counselling and other services for families. One of these centres has an excellent partnership with a 'Family Project' – a voluntary service which receives funding from local GPs, the health

authority and social services. Together, the centre and the project give support to a large number of families that have faced, or are facing, extreme difficulties and who would not normally access services such as these. There are shared systems for early intervention and quick referral to help children and families in difficulties. There is also frequent consultation with, and feedback to, parents about what has happened and how it might be improved. These have led to a high level of trust and confidence from parents and their families.

128. The second centre is part of a network of local support services and links with specialist agencies including the National Children's Home's Action for Children Cornerstones project. This provides family support and parent counselling, which complements the work of the centre by staff, health visitors and the community medical officer. Taken together, the two provide a very comprehensive range of assessment, therapy and support services. Where needed, centre staff accompany parents to their doctor and provide childcare while parents receive advice from other professionals.

129. A third centre has a partnership with Barnardos. The work of Barnardos includes support for a range of groups and individual families within the centre, the community or their homes. The service it offers is flexible and responsive to the needs of the community. Its caseload has expanded rapidly. Barnardos has very good relationships with other agencies that use the centre and is part of the very good overall support that the centre provides for a growing number of families. The way individual services work together, and the very good professional relationships that staff have with each other, are strengths of the centre. The centre is developing into a 'one-stop shop' where parents can get support and advice from a range of knowledgeable professionals.

130. In other centres the presence of speech therapists and health visitors at drop-in parent and child sessions gives parents firsthand access to specialist support and enables special needs to be identified at a very early stage, often while children are still under 3.

131. One centre is part of a further education college. Here, the centre staff liaise effectively with college staff. This benefits children, parents, staff and students. Children gain from story sessions when they join students in the nursery and in the college library to select from a wide range of books. Children and students also cook together in the early years college classrooms attached to the centre. This further extends the experience of the children, with benefits to their language and mathematical development.

132. A public library shares the site of another centre and is a good resource for all areas of the centre's work because the librarian liaises effectively with the head of the centre to meet the needs of the children and adults who use the centre. The library is well used and lending figures are rising. It supports the developing work of the centre well, stocking an extensive range of children's books and books for adult courses. In tune with the centre's home learning packs, the library has put together packs which include support materials which extend a book's central ideas. Toys in the toy library are well organised according to their suitability for children of different ages.

Links with childminders

133. Working links with childminders have only been developed in a few centres. One centre is well used as a meeting place for childminders for children to mix and develop new skills and as a support group for themselves. Users commented that the centre offers a wider range of activities, some of which they cannot provide at home. For example, one childminder who does not have a computer at home was observed sharing computer games with two children. Another childminder said she found the centre useful for providing messy activities that she would be reluctant to organise in her own home.

134. In another centre, staff identified that there was a need for local childminders to meet together to share their experiences. As a result of the good support from the centre, the childminders are no longer isolated. They now have a forum to exchange their ideas and they are being shown how to develop their skills in their interaction with children. They also have a supportive environment where their own 'minded' children can socialise with others and borrow toys.

135. The co-ordinator in one centre offers training to childminders to achieve accreditation by the National Childminding Association to become a network. However, in other centres, links with local childminders or childminding networks have either not been developed yet or are at very early stages.

Wrap-around care

136. The majority of the centres inspected provide affordable breakfast, lunch and after-school clubs. These are all well used and enable parents to work or attend training courses. A number of centres take older children to their schools after breakfast and pick up children from nearby schools at the end of the school day. Pupils from different schools mix well together and enjoy the activities provided. In a few centres this also included children from special schools. Centre staff work with parents to plan and review these children's activities in the club. Staff in all the centres welcome children warmly, especially the youngest, which helps those anxious about leaving their parents in the morning. Children settle quickly and well in a calm and relaxed start to the day. Centres offer children healthy meals or snacks and encourage them to help prepare and clear away the food. In one centre the breakfast club means that children not only have a breakfast but have someone they know to talk to about their problems. It has also helped to improve children's punctuality and attendance at school.

137. Staff relate well to the children and include their suggestions about how the club provides for their needs. Children are asked, through questionnaires, about how successful they feel the activities have been and what they would like to do. The children take part in meetings to discuss future events or club rules about how they behave to each other.

In one centre a children's committee has been formed with representatives from Year 1 to Year 6. The committee interviews candidates, forms agendas and produces minutes of their meetings. They make suggestions for activities as well as raising any issues they have and are consulted about resources.

138. Staff in all these centres offer a range of purposeful activities that take place both indoors and outdoors. Opportunities are made for older children to complete their homework, play sports or games, develop their computer skills, or relax with quieter activities. For children who attend the centre during the day, staff are careful to select different activities to those the children have already experienced. Often, staff work in the nursery classes as well and this gives young children continuity and helps them feel secure and settled.

Sharing good practice

139. Three quarters of the EECs disseminate their good practice well to other providers in the locality; over a quarter do so very well, and, in one, dissemination is excellent. All centres receive large numbers of visitors, representing local, national and international interest, and offer helpful advice, particularly in terms of setting up EECs. Heads of some EECs are often in demand as consultants or conference speakers.

140. Strengths of dissemination across most of the centres inspected lie in the effective links and good support provided to staff in the private and voluntary sectors. For example, a few centres give support and training to local childminding networks. Often these are developed through advisory outreach workers and through contributions to Foundation Stage training programmes. The sharing of specialist advice relating to provision for SEN is particularly strong in the centres that have additional places allocated for children with special needs. The sharing of good practice with the maintained sector is not as well developed.

141. In the centres where leadership and management are strong, good levels of communication exist between the centres, their LEA and the EYDCP, and the centres make valued contributions to early years policy decisions. The most effective centres play an integral part in LEAs' and EYDCPs' structures and targets for training and dissemination to all sectors.

For example: one centre has a very effective working relationship with the LEA and the EYDCP. The LEA's and EYDCP's targets are reflected directly in the centre's development plan, and the centre is successfully contributing to their realisation, especially as a source of training and advice for early years educators. The draft action plan for 2002–03, brings together the views of the staff of the centre, and includes ways to improve the standard of existing services as well as ways to widen them. The Chair of the Management Committee has ensured that there is an open forum for ideas as well as critical review of how well the centre is doing.

142. However, in some centres, links between the training and advice offered by the centres to staff in the maintained, private and voluntary sectors and the EYDCPs' targets for raising standards are still too tenuous. Too often, these centres are not

integrated well enough in the structure of their LEAs. This is because officers are unclear about the LEA's role in relation to EECs and how to support their development.

Annex – Range of provision

NB: the range of provision in the table below is intended as a guide to illustrate the diversity of provision in 23 centres. Services provided were identified at the time of each inspection and it is likely that Centres have developed, extended and/or amalgamated their services since then.

Range of provision	Centres in which the service is found	Centres in which it was inspected	Centres in which it was not inspected
<i>Nursery education</i>	23	23	
<i>Family support:</i>			
Parent, baby and toddler sessions (drop-in)	16	14	2
<i>Day care for under threes (including respite care)</i>	18	17	1
<i>Out of school care</i>	16	13	3
<i>Holiday play schemes</i>	10		10
<i>Crèche provision</i>	12	7	5
<i>Playgroup</i>	2	2	
<i>Introduction to nursery course</i>	2	2	
<i>Evening and weekend respite care</i>	1		1
<i>Supervised contact</i>	2		2
<i>Barnardo's support team</i>	2	2	
<i>Family workers</i>	6	5	1
<i>Counselling service</i>	6	2	4
<i>Parents' nurture group/guidance group</i>	2	2	
<i>Groups for children with SEN and parents</i>	4	3	1
<i>Portage worker</i>	3	3	
<i>Sure Start projects/links</i>	4	4	
<i>Home Start</i>	2	2	
<i>On-site health worker</i>	2	2	
<i>Health advice</i>	2	3	
<i>Family literacy/family learning/parents' courses</i>	12	9	3

<i>Fathers' group</i>	4	2	2
<i>Parents' link group</i>	1	1	
<i>Maths/toy/book library</i>	13	11	2
<i>Learning bags/story sacks</i>	3	3	
<i>Legal advice</i>	2	2	
'Outreach'			
<i>For hard to reach families</i>	6	6	
<i>For children with SEN</i>	3	3	
<i>Provision and support for teenage parents</i>	3	2	1
Adult and community education	19	13	6
<i>Partnership with FE /community centre</i>	1	1	
Dissemination:			
<i>Service for visitors</i>	23	22	1
<i>Advisory teacher service</i>	5	5	
<i>Training base</i>	14	14	
<i>Student placements</i>	23	23	
<i>Website</i>	3		3
<i>Childminders' support</i>	6	6	
<i>Research Centre</i>	1	1	
FAMILY/PARENTS'/CHILDREN'S/OUTDOOR CENTRE	7	6	1