

Children's centres in England

In December 2014 all 152 authorities in England were asked a series of short questions about the children's centre provision in their local area by ADCS, 78 (or 44%) responded to this request for information:

1. How many children's centres do you have in your area?
2. How are the centres organised eg clusters?
3. Has this provision altered in the last or current financial year, if so how?
4. Are you considering reshaping or remodelling this provision:
 - a) in the next financial year, if so, how?
 - b) in future years?
5. Do you have any other comments?

Children's centres in 44 of the 78 (or 56%) responding authorities currently operate in clusters, 10 (or 14%) use a 'hub and spoke' delivery model utilising a variety of venues including libraries and health clinics, 12 (or 15%) authorities reported that all centres stand alone and the remaining 11 (or 16%) use a mixture of the above arrangements. A wide variety of delivery methods and arrangements are used, in some areas the local authority is entirely responsible for delivery while in others all centres are run by external providers such as Barnardo's or the Children's Society. However in the majority of authorities a mixture of providers and approaches is employed - schools, the LA and voluntary and community groups.

15 authorities (or 19%) report they have closed or de-designated centres in the last year, 12 authorities (or 15%) have recently (in the last year) moved to cluster working, four have re tendered / re commissioned these services and two have brought this provision back in-house. Several authorities report that they have been able to maintain historic levels of provision by reducing opening hours, admin and staffing costs, by putting in place shared management structures and co-locating with other services. Children's centres are being increasingly used to offer services for 0 – 19s (or 25 with SEND) plus employment advice, drug and alcohol and housing services are being offered in these locations.

17 authorities (or 25%) report that they are planning to review their delivery and management models in future years with moves towards 'hub and spoke' operations or greater use of vol / comm organisations being cited as likely outcomes. Eight authorities (or 11%) are either considering or currently consulting on the closure of multiple children's centres in their areas, five (or 6%) are planning to adopt clustering arrangements. Five (or 6%) will be reviewing or renegotiating contracts and six (or 5%) are exploring new and better ways to integrate these services with health visiting services. Several authorities also reported their future plans will have a keen focus on the 'troubled families' programme in order to reach the most in need in their local communities.

The majority of responders noted that further reductions in future financial settlements will greatly impact the size, shape and scope of their future plans.

Respondents were asked for their comments on the current inspection regime and any thoughts on a future framework, here is an overview:

- Future models must move on from the original SureStart framework
- It should not be too place focused and allow non-centre based activity to be taken into account
- Focus should be on overall outcomes for children and their families rather than processes or engagement at a given location
- Future frameworks should align to the wider childhood offer and take into account the contribution of partners and multi-agency arrangements in an area (particularly health)
- Children's centres should be assessed as part of the early help offer
- The reach requirements should be reviewed as they no longer fit with the more targeted approach LAs have implemented in response to reducing resources - focus is increasingly on those with the greatest need
- The framework should allow differentiation between urban and rural provision – one responders suggested a return to rural proofing methods from the early days of rural SSLP eg rural areas tend to get less budget so less staff and resource but bigger numbers to reach and engage with
- It should take into account the wider children's service inspection process (SIF)
- Should have greater focus on the 0 - 2s rather than simply school readiness
- Be more flexible and adaptable, this provision has changed, is changing and will continue to do so in the future
- Reduce the burden and impact of inspection either by subsuming the assessment of children's centres into the SIF (suggested by four respondents), carrying out a single LA-based inspection, inspecting providers in an area or integrating / coordinating the assessment of a children's centres in or managed by a school with the wider school inspection.

Responses from all nine regions were received during this consultation exercise and a good mix of view of urban / rural, county / unitary authorities in the north / south are represented within the sample.

In summary the results of this 'dip-sample' show that children's centre provision is experiencing high levels of change and a multiplicity of models are developing with little consistency across local authorities / regions. This means it is going to be difficult to assess this provision in the future without having a great degree of flexibility to accommodate the emerging differences in priorities and approaches – not all authorities have the same focus and function.

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