
The Future of Family Services

Parent researchers from Brent, Leeds, Lincolnshire,
and the Young Dads Collective

With Gordon Cameron and Claire Harding



Executive summary

Parent-led research

This report is based on research led by four groups of parents, which they conducted with other parents in their local areas. Three of the groups included volunteers from Family and Childcare Trust's Parent Champions programme: in Leeds, Lincolnshire and Brent (North West London). The fourth group was run by the Young Dads Collective, who conducted research in Hackney (North East London) and Westminster (Central London).

The Family and Childcare Trust decided the main aims of the project and invited groups of parents to participate through our networks. Working in their four groups, the parents then decided on the research questions they wanted to ask and how they wanted to address them. In total, they conducted 465 surveys, 4 focus groups and a citizen's jury. The Family and Childcare Trust then brought the findings together and consulted with parents about the way they were presented and the recommendations made.

Key findings

Although the groups of parents worked separately, there were clear themes which emerged from the groups' research into early years and family services:

- ▶ **Stay and play:** Parents consistently reported that they valued and enjoyed services where they could take part in activities with their child. These were valued as social and learning opportunities for both children and parents.
- ▶ **Variety of services:** Parents reported using a wide variety of family services for themselves and their children, although some reported gaps in services for older children, parenting support, and crèche provision to allow parents to use specific services.
- ▶ **Communication:** Parents reported varied experiences of finding out about services. Although many parents found it easy to access local services, some reported that online information was not always up to date, and parents often reported that they had not used a service locally because they did not know it was available.
- ▶ **Community:** Parents often focused on the importance of early years services for building their social networks and meeting other parents. However, some felt that more encouragement was needed for a range of different groups to mix.
- ▶ **Availability and demand:** Many parents found it difficult to access good quality services. Sometimes services were only available at one specific time or location, and a few had waiting lists. Some parents said they needed services more in the winter, when outdoor play was less accessible.

Box 1: Current family services policy

The Government's current approach to family services derives from legislation and guidelines introduced over successive parliaments. Local authorities have a specific duty to provide a range of services for families with young children relating to health, early education, and parenting support. Most councils use children's centres as a local hub to deliver these services, either directly or indirectly by signposting families. Research suggests that the funding allocation for early intervention services will have fallen by 70 per cent between 2010 and 2020 (Action for Children, NCB and Children's Society, 2016).

Recommendations

This work has made clear the value of support services – both universal and targeted specialist support – for parents and children in the early years. Parents reported that services gave them opportunities to meet other parents and develop their parenting skills, and supported their children's wellbeing and development.

Getting services right in the early years is key to delivering the Government's agenda around supporting families and increasing social mobility. They can prevent children from falling behind before they start school, and set them up to achieve at school and beyond.

Working with parents and building on their experiences and insights, the Family and Childcare Trust is calling on the Government to publish a comprehensive strategy on their approach to family support in the early years, considering the full range of ways that support can be provided to families, including children's centres.

This strategy should:

- ▶ **Ensure adequate investment in crucial early years services from central Government** with earmarked funding for local authorities.
- ▶ **Effectively engage parents in the development of the national strategy**, and outline how parents should be involved in the development of local services. This is essential to make sure that services genuinely meet local families' needs.
- ▶ **Prioritise strengthening communities** by reaching out to and welcoming all families in the local area. This should include providing opportunities for parents to meet and socialise with other parents, and enabling them to provide peer to peer support. It should also include ways to engage with parents who are less likely to use services, including fathers and specific local groups.
- ▶ **Make sure families know about the services on offer locally** by providing clear and comprehensive information. This should also include helping parents to understand why they might want to use services and the potential benefits for them and their families.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all of the parents that responded to surveys and took part in the focus groups for this research. We are also grateful to Fiona Railton, Akbar Khan, Lalinca Lunga and Uche Aziaya for support in recruiting and facilitating parent researcher groups. We would also like to thank staff at the Family and Childcare Trust who have contributed to this work. They are Ellen Broomé, Josh Cottell, Megan Jarvie, Gertrúd Kiss, Alexandra Landes, and Ruben Vemba. Thanks are also due to Paul Abrahams at Ginger Design for design and Louisa Carpenter for proof reading.

About Community Playthings

A sound understanding of child development underpins Community Playthings' product design. Manufactured in the UK, furniture and equipment supports children's creativity, learning and play in schools and nurseries across the private, voluntary and public sectors.

In collaboration with leading educators and early years consultants, Community Playthings also publishes authoritative staff training resources. The most recent releases are *The Irresistible Classroom* and *A Good Place to be Two*.

Community Playthings has been creating child-friendly environments for over 50 years. For more information, visit: www.communityplaythings.co.uk.

About the Family and Childcare Trust

The Family and Childcare Trust aims to make the UK a better place for families. We are a leading national family charity in the field of policy, research and advocacy on childcare and family issues, with over 40 years' experience. Our on-the-ground work with parents and providers informs our research and campaigns. We focus on the early years and childcare because they are crucial to boosting children's outcomes throughout life and supporting parents to work.

Charity number: 1077444 Registered company number: 3753345

1. Introduction

This report is about services for families with young children under the age of five. These include parenting courses, health-related activities, playgroups and formal childcare. Services for families can be found in a range of settings, but since the emergence of the Sure Start programme, they are often integrated and provided together in local children's centres.

Children's centres and the services they offer tend to be highly valued by families, who use them as a place to play with their children, learn new skills and form communities with other local parents. By supporting families during the earliest, most important years of their children's lives, children's centres are designed to help children be ready to get the most out of school when they start, and improve outcomes throughout their education and into adulthood. By supporting children to start school on a more even playing field, they are also designed to narrow the attainment gap that exists between disadvantaged children and their peers.

While the impact of children's centres is difficult to measure, given the variation in how services are delivered, the influence of external factors, and the time it can take for gains to be made, national evaluations have shown lasting benefits for both children and parents (ECCE, 2009-2015; NESS, 2010). Measuring the wider economic impact of children's centres is also challenging for similar reasons. However, research published by the Department for Education recently concluded that such schemes could 'potentially generate substantial monetary returns over and above the costs of delivering the services.' (Briggs et al, 2010)

The delivery of children's centres, and of the Government's wider early years strategy, is currently undergoing significant transformation. The Government has invested heavily in free early years education, doubling working parents' weekly entitlement to 30 hours. However, as local authorities struggle to manage their own budget cuts, and following the 2013 removal of the Early Intervention Grant ring-fence, funding for children's centres and early intervention services in general has come under increased pressure. Research suggests that the funding allocation for early intervention services will have fallen by 70 per cent between 2010 and 2020 (Action for Children, NCB and Children's Society, 2016).

Given the uncertainty faced by children's centres and the potential benefits they provide for families and for wider society, it is crucial that they are in the best position to deliver the services that families need in the ways that work for them. The research described in this report sets out to understand this from the practical insights of the mothers, fathers, and other carers that use these services.

Box 2: Parent-led research

This project follows a 'peer-led' research approach. This is where members of the subject group adopt the role of the researcher and are involved in every stage of the research, from planning and design, through to data collection and analysis. One of the benefits of this approach is to maximise the quality of the data gathered; parents have a wealth of expertise related to their role as a parent that they can use to decide which questions need to be asked and what are the right ways to ask them.

The project involved four different parent researcher groups drawn from a range of backgrounds and locations in order to gather a variety of experiences. The Family and Childcare Trust recruited parent researchers through our networks and provided basic research training and information about the main aims of the project. The groups selected the research questions, designed the methodology, and conducted the research, with some support from Family and Childcare Trust staff when it was requested. The recommendations were developed by the Family and Childcare Trust in consultation with the parent groups.

Three of the groups included volunteers from Family and Childcare Trust's Parent Champions programme: in Leeds, Lincolnshire and Brent. The fourth group was run by the Young Dads Collective, who conducted research in Hackney and Westminster.

The parent researcher groups selected a range of different methods to gather parents' views on services for families with young children. Between them, the groups conducted 4 different survey questionnaires completed by a total of 465 parents. They also conducted four focus groups (two in Lincolnshire, and one each in Brent and Westminster), and one citizen's jury.

2. Key themes

The various research methods employed by the different parent researcher groups delivered a rich and varied set of data about parents' experiences and insights of services for families with young children. Summaries and further details of the findings of the individual parent researchers groups can be found in the appendices. This section draws out the key themes that emerged from analysis of the various datasets gathered from across the research groups.

2.1 Stay and play

Parent researchers across our case study areas were interested in the activities that parents most wanted, and which services they had used. For all four groups, 'stay and play' type activities emerged as a priority – although the language used to describe them was different in different groups.

In Brent, 80 per cent of parents surveyed reported having used stay and play activities. From the Leeds and the Young Dads Collective (YDC) research, stay and play activities topped the list of most useful services. In Lincolnshire, most parents had used stay and play, but for the few who were not able to they were regarded as a priority.

A number of the research groups highlighted some of the reasons for the popularity of stay and play services among parents. These came out particularly strongly during the focus group discussions. During the Brent focus group, parents said they particularly liked having access to a safe and clean environment that was well stocked with things for their children to play with. In Lincolnshire, one parent said they, *'always enjoy engaging with the playful nature of these activities.'*

Participants also indicated a number of benefits for parents, describing stay and play sessions as a good place to meet other parents. During the YDC focus group, one parent said the service *'creates interaction with other children and adults'*, and another said it was *'good for confidence and social skills.'* One group felt that stay and play activities were more important during the winter, when local parks were less accessible.

While stay and play services were generally popular, parents also pointed to things they would like to improve with regards to these services. In the Brent focus group, one mother said that the activities on offer were not varied enough, and were not very stimulating or educational. The criticisms parents had about stay and play services came out most clearly when parents were asked in two of the surveys why they had not used these services. One respondent described their experience of the service as *'overcrowded, unwelcoming, no clear booking system.'* Others explained that they did not know that the services were available in their area.

The most common reason cited for not using stay and play services were that there were simply none available during a time parents could attend, or in a location they could reach. This issue was a key focus of the Brent discussion group. Parents complained that because there are very few places in the local area that offer quality play groups, where they exist there are

long waiting lists. By describing what parents often did not have, this discussion highlighted what it was about stay and play that families needed. Fundamentally, these are places children can play with their peers in a safe, fun and stimulating environment. They also give parents the chance to socialise with other parents, and pick up new ideas from knowledgeable and welcoming staff.

2.2 Variety of services

Though parents involved in the research generally expressed a strong interest in stay and play activities, there was also a clear demand for a broad and varied range of services. These included other types of children's activities, specialist health and support services, and courses for parents and families.

Though there is wide variation in the extent of take up of different services, even the least attended services were nevertheless used by a significant number of parents. For many of these types of services, low rates of use are to be expected, as only certain groups of parents are likely to need them. These include support for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), family support services, and English classes for speakers of other languages. While these specialist services may be used by fewer parents than others, for the families that do use these services, they can often provide a great deal of support.

The YDC citizen's jury also highlighted the role children's centres have in identifying and looking after parents with needs which are not currently being met, including mental health issues. During the YDC focus group, one parent described how important their children's centre had been in providing vital support after they had experienced domestic violence: *'They gave me good support to separate with my man. They kept looking after me all the time till I gave birth to my son; he had a childcare protection plan for two years after.'*

Many parents were interested in activities for children that were more focused than those offered at stay and play sessions, including swimming and sports sessions, yoga, art, music and dance classes. A number of the services described by parents related to family health needs. These included baby weighing clinics, community health visitor meetings, breastfeeding support, mental health support, healthy eating and general family health advice. For those that had used them, these services were highly valued: *'I have used a lot of breastfeeding support services because I had lots of difficulty with that. It was really crucial for me at the beginning.'*

Findings suggest that, for parents, children's centres are sometimes the preferred places to receive support for health needs. In Lincolnshire, respondents were five times more likely to choose children's centres over health settings as preferred settings to receive antenatal care. Parents explained that children's centres offered more friendly environments that were convenient to access, and where they could meet and be supported by other new parents. As one respondent explained, in children's centres there are *'like-minded people around, who have more than likely experienced pregnancy so can be supportive.'*

Likewise, the participants of the Brent focus group explained that though fitness classes for new mothers were available at private gyms and elsewhere, as they lacked the family friendly environment offered by children's centres, they could be difficult for mothers to attend with young children.

Respondents also expressed an interest in courses that supported them as new parents. These included courses on home safety, sewing, first aid and healthy living, as well as courses to support children with autism, and behaviour management. The importance of fostering a family friendly environment for these services was also raised by a number of the research groups. Many parents explained that the provision of a crèche is often required for them to be able to attend services. During one of the Lincolnshire focus groups, parents discussed how courses should not only allow children to attend, but actively involve them. Such services, described by the parents as *'whole family learning groups'*, could address issues concerning the family as a unit, including family relationship support and healthy eating.

2.3 Communication

Findings from the parent researcher groups suggest that parents have varied, though largely positive, experiences with finding out about services. However, as many of the parent researchers distributed the surveys at children's centres they will have been less likely to reach people who struggled to find out about early years services. A lack of awareness of services was found to be a common barrier for parents' attendance, and parents highlighted a number of ways in which the communication of services could be improved.

In the Leeds, Brent and Lincolnshire surveys, most parents reported that it was easy to find out about services in their area. However, these responses range from representing 36 per cent of parents in Brent, to 92 per cent of parents in Lincolnshire. For all groups, it was clear that positive experiences were not universal. For instance in the Lincolnshire focus group, one mother said that she had moved to the area towards the end of her pregnancy but received no information from their midwife or health professionals about local available services. Instead, she had resorted to *'Googling "stuff for babies in Lincolnshire."*

Though the YDC group did directly ask about the communication of services, many parents reported that it was often difficult to find information on services as they are not advertised effectively: *'No one knows about [English classes]. We need more flyers around this area... for the children's centre and the other services.'*

Likewise, the Leeds group found that the most common factor that parents cited for not using a service was that they were not aware it was available. This was also shown to be a common barrier for parents in Brent.

The research shows that parents find out about services through a variety of different channels. The Brent survey asked parents to choose from eight different methods of communication to say how they found out about services. A variety of methods were selected by parents, with only 2 categories receiving fewer than 15 responses from a total of 72 respondents. Similarly, when parents responding to the Leeds survey were asked about the best way to inform parents about services for young children, there were a wide range of responses. Across both groups, the most commonly cited ways to find out about services included through friends and family members, through printed adverts such as leaflets, posters and flyers, and via the internet. In one focus group, parents discussed how a lack of printed publicity could exclude those who do not use the internet: *'if you're not a mum that goes online and search you are left alone.'*

Many of the parents responded with more than one method of communication for these questions. This may be because different methods serve different functions for finding out about services. For instance, leaflets can be useful for informing parents about what is on offer, newsletters and webpages can provide more up to date and accurate information about things like timetables, while word of mouth remains a trusted resource for finding out about quality.

The Brent group also asked how communication could be improved. Better use of the internet, such as a clear online booking system on a dedicated website, or up to date information on social media emerged from responses as a key theme. Several respondents described a smartphone app they felt was helpful for finding out about services for children available across London. The app was also a key feature of the follow up focus group discussion, with many parents saying they found it helpful and convenient to use.

2.4 Community

A key theme across the research groups was the importance of community. The opportunity to socialise with other parents was highlighted as one of the things they enjoyed most about attending services. This was particularly the case for stay and play sessions, but was also raised in relation to other specific activities, as well as for services for families more broadly. For instance, parents in Lincolnshire pointed to the ability to meet and get support from other new parents as a factor for preferring to receive antenatal care in children's centres over healthcare settings. In the YDC focus group, one parent described their local children's centre as representing a 'second home.'

Respondents said that social interaction is often a valuable part of many services, such as activities for children, and services related to health or adult learning. One parent described a family friendly sewing class she attended: *'You can get to know other people, your baby can play... I was spending so much time with her just changing her nappies, just feeding... it was just perfect, it was something different.'*

However, parents also suggested it was important to have services that were primarily designed to help parents develop networks. This could include parent support groups, day trips, or simply spaces where parents could meet up informally to talk and play with their children together. A demand for this sort of service was expressed in the Brent focus group, and also in the YDC survey.

The relationship between accessing services and developing networks was mutual. Not only did services allow parents to meet each other and develop communities, but existing networks were also a valuable way for parents to find out about what services were available. In the Leeds survey, 'word of mouth' was one of the top methods for parents to find out about services. Similarly in Brent, 'friends and family' was the most popular choice for parents to find out about what was on offer. The Brent survey, and the follow up focus group discussion, also found that many parents used social media to access local parent communities, and that these were seen by some as the best way to keep parents updated about local services.

The YDC group explored the significance of social connections for families with young children. They found that countering isolation was for some parents, particularly those who had recently moved into their neighbourhood, a key area where they would like more support. Parents also reported they would like to gain confidence, and make new friends. Services provided by children's centres were generally found to be very helpful in providing this support, with one survey response describing stay and play as *'good for confidence and social skills.'*

Research from this group also highlighted the complex relationship between support and access. In the YDC survey, parents indicated that a lack of confidence was a key factor for why they did not attend services. This theme was picked up in the focus group and during the citizen's jury where parents discussed feeling excluded or judged when using services: *'When health visitors come to my home I don't feel she's helping me, no I feel she's like policewoman and looking at what's wrong at my home.'*

Some parents described this as an issue of race and gender. During the focus group, one parent said they had in the past experienced racism from staff, while in the citizen's jury, fathers reflected on feeling excluded as early years services were often dominated by women. To address these issues, panellists at the citizen's jury proposed community-based solutions like family fun days and services that focused on engaging fathers.

2.5 Availability and demand

All of the research groups found that parents shared concerns with the shortage of available services to meet local demand. Respondents raised a number of issues relating to how services were either unavailable, or were not able to meet the needs of their family. Some of these issues have already been touched upon in this report: many parents find that even common services like stay and play sessions were not available to them; others would like to use a broader range of services, such as courses for adults and health-related services, but felt that these were either not available, or that they did not offer a family-friendly environment.

The findings reveal a number of other issues with the availability of services. From across the research groups, parents pointed to a number of barriers to accessing services they wanted: the services were not available locally; they were available at unsuitable times; there were not enough places; they were unaffordable; they were not child friendly or childcare was not available; or the quality of the provision was simply too poor.

The Brent parent research group found that certain services were more likely to present parents with barriers. Parents were more likely to report that fees were too expensive for childcare. Quality was most commonly cited as an issue for breastfeeding support services, where parents complained about receiving sparse or incorrect advice. Some parents cited a lack of childcare facilities as a reason for not using parent support groups, *'I don't have parents here. I want to do lots of different things, but because of my baby I can't do it.'*

Often, parents experienced these issues in combination. For instance, during the Brent focus group, parents reported that though there were a number of playgroups in their area, the quality was generally poor. The limited number of high quality sessions that were available were only open at certain times. Some parents were not able to access these because the timings were not suitable for them, while others experienced waiting lists of up to two months.

A number of the groups chose to ask parents about how the timing of services affected their ability to attend. In Leeds and in Brent, parents mostly reported a demand for services that were open during weekday mornings. However, for each of the categories, including afternoons, evenings, and weekends, there were parents who stated a preference and many others who reported no preference either way.

The need for services that working parents could attend during the weekend or in evenings, was raised during one of the Lincolnshire focus groups. A number of responses to the Leeds survey also revealed a demand for more services available during school holidays, which are often problematic for working parents. In addition, a parent in the YDC focus group explained that many services that demanded fixed schedules were *'not accessible if on zero hour contract or self-employed. [The routine is] more for people in certain types of employment.'*

A key theme during the Brent focus group was how the shortage of available services was particularly an issue during the winter, compared with the summer months, when the good weather and long days allowed parents to access parks and open spaces more often: *'for September, it would be nice to have some more indoor possibilities... It is difficult because the weather starts to turn bad.'* The group explained that over winter, between the hours when it gets dark and their children's bed time, there is often nowhere to go and nothing to do, which results in parents feeling especially isolated.

3. Context

3.1 Family support policy 1997 to 2017: Sure Start and children's centres

Britain has a long history of delivering programmes which support families and parents – governments began to intervene substantially in the early part of the twentieth century, and projects run by religious and voluntary groups existed from the eighteenth century and before. However, the election of the Labour government in 1997 marked a significant change to policy around supporting families in the early years. The new government's politicians and policy advisors believed that much of the educational outcomes gap between more disadvantaged children and their peers was down to early childhood experiences, particularly in terms of the parent-child relationship (Lewis, 2011).

Sure Start Centres were initially launched in 1998. It was believed that 'bringing together a range of education, health and other services targeted on the very young, will help to ensure that children, particularly those at risk of social exclusion, are ready to learn when they arrive at school' (HM Treasury, 1998). They were located in deprived areas, with services offered to all families in that area, to ensure that use of the Centres was not stigmatised (DfEE, 1999). The core offer was support for parents through parenting courses and home visits, 'stay and play' services, children's and family health services, and specific support for disabled children. Some centres also offered wider support services such as advice on benefits (Lewis, 2011). In 2004, policy was changed to make children's centres universal, although in less deprived areas they offered a narrower range of services (p.157 Sammons et al, 2015). Children's centres were expected to focus on supporting employment, and those in more deprived areas to directly deliver childcare (Lewis, 2011).

In 2011, the Coalition Government made changes to the children's centre programme, refocussing on a 'core purpose' of improving outcomes for young children and reducing inequalities in 'child development and school readiness', 'parenting aspirations and parenting skills', and 'child and family health and life chances' (DfE, 2013). This change in focus for children's centres coincided with the implementation of the government's austerity programme, with significant cuts across central and local government. Funding for children's centres has reduced significantly since 2010, with research suggesting that spending on the programme by local authorities reduced by 48 per cent in the five years since 2010/11 (Action for Children, NCB and Children's Society, 2016). The number of main children's centres reduced by 9 per cent over the same period (HC, 2016), and there are significant concerns that centres are being 'hollowed out': remaining open but with significant cuts to staff numbers and to the services on offer (Royston and Rodrigues, 2013). Prior to the 2015 election, the Government committed to consultation on the future of children's centres, but a date for this has not yet been announced.

3.2 Impact of children's centres and related programmes

Considerable resources have been devoted to assessing the impact of children's centres and Sure Start, producing important results. However, evaluating programmes like this is not easy. This is partly because of the nature of early years services which may prevent significant problems from developing years or decades later – the first cohort of children who used Sure Start are still in their early twenties. In practice families using a children's centre are using not one but a wide variety of programmes, and this varies between areas and over time (Melhuish et al, 2010). Finally, the rapid pace of implementation has made the selection of control groups for evaluation difficult (Lewis, 2011). This means that it is hard to attribute changes experienced by families to the availability of children's centres, particularly against a background of rapid economic and social change over the last twenty years.

The largest evaluation of children's centres to date, the Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (ECCE) was published as five separate reports finishing in 2015 (ECCE, 2009 – 2015). The results were fairly complex, reflecting the complexity of the programme and its delivery, but in broad terms the study found significant impacts on family functioning and the home learning environment, and consistent use of centres was associated with better mental health for mothers. Outcomes for children were less clear, although the study did note improvements in some aspects of children's behaviour at age three. Disadvantaged families were much more likely to be using targeted, specialist services for health and parenting support, but use of parent and toddler activities was more consistent across groups.

The ECCE findings are broadly congruent with those found in the final report of the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) study, which followed up a group of children who lived in areas where Sure Start was on offer at three points in time, up to age seven, and compared them to a group from the Millennium Cohort Study who lived in similar areas but did not have access to Sure Start (NESS, 2010). The study found that children in Sure Start areas experienced less harsh discipline from their parents, and a more stimulating home learning environment. For boys, but not girls, living in a Sure Start area was associated with reduced levels of parent-reported chaos at home.

3.3 Economics of children's centres

Given the very significant investment in children's centres and Sure Start, governments have been keen to establish whether they offer value for money. The difficulties of impact measurement for these complex interventions are also significant for economic assessment, as is the allocation of premises costs and overheads. These complexities led the research team working on the economic element of the Evaluation of Children's Centres in England study to take a per-service rather than full-centre approach to assessing the value for money offered by children's centres (Gaheer and Paull, 2016). Parenting support (both general and targeted) showed positive return on investment for government, and there were expected gains for wider society from higher future earnings for both children and parents. We know from other studies that children's centres led to improved wellbeing for some groups, but this is difficult to quantify and was not considered in the economic evaluation.

Overall, it appears that children's centres have the potential to deliver benefits in excess of their costs, but the long time-horizon of expected gains and considerable variation of delivery in practice mean there must be some uncertainty around any estimates. This issue is common in evaluations of early intervention projects and projects delivered during childhood, and it is likely that it will also be significant for future assessments of similar services.

3.4 Existing research into parents' views on children's centres and family support

Children's centres are consistently well-reviewed by parents who use them, with high levels of satisfaction in user surveys (Ridley-Moy, 2007; Frew, 2005; Cumbria County Council, 2011). There is probably an element of confirmation bias to this – there is no requirement to use these services, so parents who are not happy with them are likely to vote with their feet and not respond to surveys if followed up. Qualitative research tends to confirm the view that children's centres are often highly valued by the people who use them, although this does not necessarily translate into high levels of use – parental patterns of engagement vary considerably (Williams and Churchill, 2006; Sammons et al, 2015). Suggestions for improvement tend to be around expansion of services, either for longer hours or to cover different activities, or about the impact of cuts to staffing and services, rather than changes to existing programmes – although this may in part be an artefact of the types of questions asked and the tendency to use surveys or structured interviews rather than a more observational or free flowing style (Ridley-Moy, 2007; Frew, 2005; Cumbria County Council, 2011).

Perhaps predictably, less research has taken place with families who do not currently use children's centres. A recent study by the Children's Society looked at families in deprived areas who had not used the services. The researchers found that in most cases this was down to lack of information: 42 per cent had never heard of them, and almost three quarters were unaware of what they offered (Royston and Rodrigues, 2013). Similar results have been found in local surveys (Cumbria County Council, 2011). In qualitative work, some researchers have found a stigma around children's centres or a perception that the people who use them must be 'bad parents'; some potential users were upset or angry that their area had been labelled as deprived (Williams and Churchill, 2006). This suggests that there is a danger that the shift from universal to more targeted provision will strengthen the stigma around using children's centres and make it harder for parents to access the provision that they need.

Appendix 1: Summary of findings from parent research groups

A: Lincolnshire

Introduction and context

Parent researchers in Lincolnshire visited children's centres across the county, asking parents what they thought about the services that are available for families with young children. Across 24 areas, these parent researchers were able to reach 282 respondents. Parents also conducted two focus groups during which the survey questions were discussed in more depth. The focus groups were held in Waddington, a large village outside of Lincoln and in Stamford, a town in the south of the county. The 2 focus groups had 12 attendees in total.

Of the 282 survey respondents, the majority (80 per cent) were mums, with the rest being made up of dads (5 per cent) and others (15 per cent). Almost all (94 per cent) of respondents had, or looked after, at least one child aged 0-4, and a third (35 per cent) for at least one child aged 5-14. Of those with a child aged 0-4, the majority (61 per cent) had only one, and most of the remaining respondents (26 per cent) had two.

Summary

Parents report using a lot of the services currently on offer and finding it fairly easy to access services. The services used most by parents were those which provide activities for babies and young children. These were also the services parents reported most wanting to see more of. Many parents also supported the introduction of more services aimed at improving their and their young children's health, such as seeing the health visitor more frequently and attending weigh-in sessions.

Parents wanted services that bring families together. This might be in the form of parents' desire to attend more outdoor trips where parents and children alike get the chance to spend time with others. It may be in the form of a 'Dads Group' where dads are able to meet people with similar experiences to their own. Parents tended to say they wanted to receive services in children's centres rather than health settings. The most common reason was the atmosphere: friendly, relaxed and supportive, compared to 'sterile' health settings. This suggests that it is the access to people at children's centres; namely other parents, which makes them more attractive.

How easy it is to find services

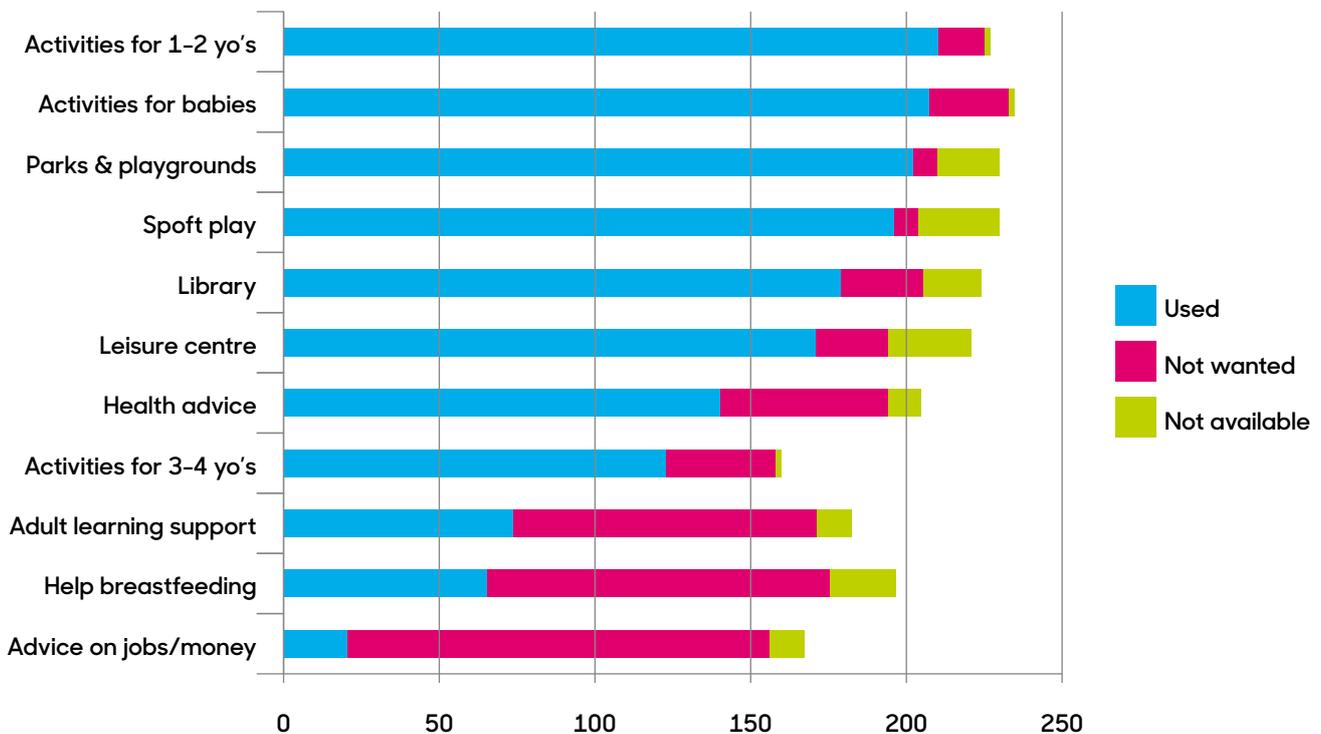
Almost all survey respondents said they find it either fairly easy or very easy to discover services for families with young children in their local area. Of these, about two thirds said they find it fairly, rather than very, easy, suggesting that there is room for improvement. This suggestion is bolstered by the findings of the focus group, where one mother said that she had moved to the area at 30 weeks pregnant and received no information from the midwife or health professionals. Instead she said she found herself '*Googling "stuff for babies in Lincolnshire."*'

Use of services

The survey presented a list of eleven services. Parents were asked whether they had used those services, had not wanted to use them, or if they had not been available to use. All parents responded to this question.

Parents reported using many of these services, with the average parent using six of the eleven services. The most used services related to activities for children (Fig 1). As well as generic options covering activities for babies and young children, specific services such as parks and playgrounds, soft play centres, libraries and leisure centres were reported as the most used services. One parent said about soft play centres that they '*always enjoy engaging with the playful nature of these activities.*'

Fig 1. Number of parents using services



Support for parents, such as adult learning support and advice on jobs and money were some of the least used and least wanted services. Almost half of parents said they did not want to use the latter.

Services were far more likely to be described as either used or not wanted than as unavailable. Of those services that were described as unavailable, leisure centres, soft play centres, playgrounds and libraries were the most cited. Several parents (nine) said that at least three of these four services were unavailable.

Desire for additional services

In the survey, parents were asked for three services that they would like to use but that were not currently available. This question was completed by 83 parents. Of these, over a third proposed more activities for babies or children, making this the most popular additional service. Examples included sessions involving baby massage, music and art, and swimming.

A quarter proposed more health services, mainly for pregnant women and babies. These included weigh-in clinics, health visitor meetings, and advice for parents. These also included specialist support, such as groups for children with special educational needs and disabilities. In focus groups, some parents reported a lack of services: one said, *'you can go for months without seeing anyone.'* Another said that her first baby is now ten months old, and that she had not seen a health visitor since the baby had been six weeks old. Health services were seen as playing an important social and emotional function for parents, as well as for babies.

When considering what additional services they would like to see, the parents at the focus group suggested that more services should take a *'family unit approach.'* They suggested that more of the family – including older as well as younger children – should be welcome at services, and that there should be *'whole family learning groups'* which address issues concerning the whole family such as fitting a child into an adult's life and vice versa, and healthy eating.

While some services do allow younger children to be present, parents worried whether older children could be taken too. Survey respondents also mentioned their desire for a crèche to be combined with services so that parents could bring their children.

Parents in this sample also valued services which allow them to engage with the community of other parents. For instance, many of the activities for children that respondents would like to see more of – baby massage, outdoor excursions and trips – are activities where they can meet other parents. Parents in the focus group suggested that a *'Dads Group'* should exist, where *'other like-minded dads are there.'* A small number of respondents also said they wanted more group activities such as cooking classes and even group holidays. These can be relatively small scale and cheap services; one parent wrote that she *'would have liked more coffee type activities to get to know other mums.'*

Where and when parents would like to access services

This group of parent researchers were interested in finding out where parents would like to access antenatal care. In the survey, parents were asked to choose between children's centres, health settings such as a GP surgery, or either. Most of those who responded selected either. Those who did make a choice were five times more likely to choose children's centres than health settings.

Parents were given the opportunity to provide a reason for their choice. The most cited reason for choosing children's centres was that they provide a more welcoming or friendly atmosphere, with one parent saying they provide *'a more relaxed and approachable environment than a sterile GP surgery.'* Another said that at a children's centre there are *'like-minded people around, who have more than likely experienced pregnancy so can be supportive.'* A handful of parents mentioned that a children's centre would be preferable because it would provide a gateway to other services offered by the centre.

Parents also said that children's centres were easier to access than health settings. This resonated with parents in the focus group, for whom the most important factor when considering the location of services was accessibility. They desired not having to travel too far to reach services, and for these parents accessibility included the availability of parking as they were drivers.

During the focus group discussions, parents highlighted the need for a range of services during the weekend or after work hours. Parents felt that free services were particularly difficult to access in Lincolnshire during the weekend.

B: Brent

Introduction and context

The Brent parent researchers initially used surveys to find out about how families used local services. Nearly two-thirds of the surveys were completed online, and the rest on paper. The group followed the survey with a discussion group to discuss the topics from the survey in more detail. The survey was completed by a total of 72 parents and carers, made up of 64 mothers, and the discussion group was attended by 7 parents.

Summary

The survey shows that the respondents would like to access a broad and diverse range of services. Though certain services are relatively underused, 'stay and play' activities are both highly used and highly valued. The most common reasons provided for not having used a service were because the services were not required or the parents were unaware that the services were available.

Most parents would prefer services to be available during weekday mornings, but many others stated no preference either way. Respondents particularly liked the friendly and welcoming aspects of services they had used, as well as the opportunity to meet other parents. They would like there to be more sessions and for key details to be publicised more effectively, for instance on a clear and simple website.

Though the majority of respondents felt that information about services is well publicised, use of the internet was one of a range of options suggested by parents to improve communication.

Use of services

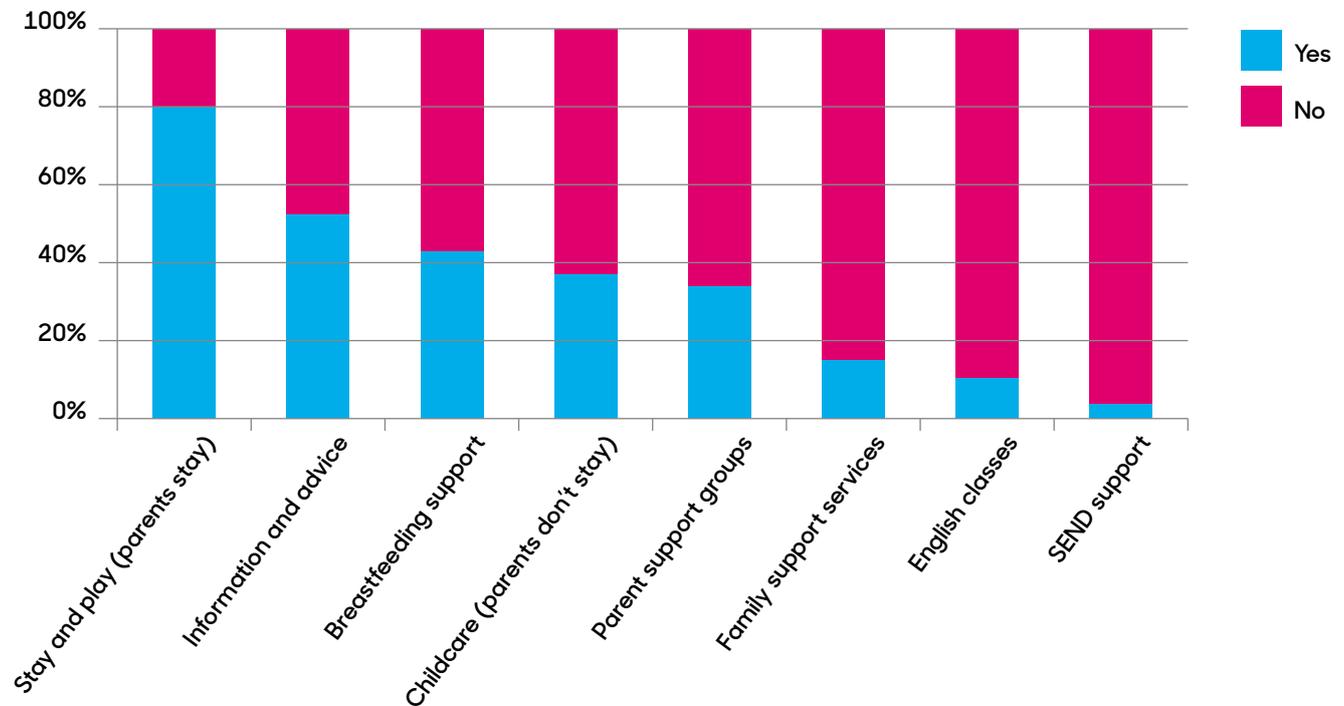
The respondents were asked to say whether they had or had not used a selected range of services (Fig 2). The survey finds that use of 'stay and play' is fairly high among respondents (80 per cent), though in general take up is relatively low across the different services. For some of these services, low rates of use are somewhat unsurprising, as many parents will not need them. These include support for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), family support services, and English classes for speakers of other languages. These findings were supported in the follow up focus group discussions, where parents also explained how valuable the services were to their families.

Respondents provided a range of reasons for why they had not used these services, though largely they reported it was because the services were not required, or because they were unaware that the services were available in their area.

Certain factors were cited more often for different services. Parents were more likely to point to a lack of need for not using SEND support, a lack of awareness of the service for not using family support, that fees were too expensive for childcare, that the quality was too poor to use breastfeeding support, and a lack of a crèche was stated as a reason for not using parent support groups.

Parents at the focus group discussed the lack of availability for quality services. Where they existed, there were sometimes very long waiting lists. One parent explained that she had been on the waiting list for one group for the past two months. The parents felt that a lack of access to services was particularly problematic during winter, when alternative spaces like public parks were less accessible.

Fig 2. Use of selected services for families with young children



As a follow up question, respondents were asked what other services they had used, or would like to use if they were available. Parents responded with a number of different services, including swimming and sports sessions, yoga, music and dance classes, and specific exercise courses for new mothers. During the focus group parents expressed a particular demand for post-natal fitness classes. While some gyms did provide these activities, they were often too expensive and not suitable for attending with young children.

How services are delivered

The parent researchers included a number of questions about how services should be delivered to better suit the needs of families. The findings reveal that 70 per cent of respondents (35) would prefer shorter sessions, but with more of them per week, rather than longer sessions but with fewer of them per week (15). Parents generally prefer sessions to be available during mornings (46 per cent) and during weekdays (52 per cent), rather than afternoons, evenings, or weekends, but many stated no preference for when sessions were available, though this in part could be a reflection of when the surveys were completed.

When parents were asked what they liked most about services they had used, the 'friendliness' of the staff and environment was a key theme in responses. A number of parents also pointed to the range and quality of the activities on offer, the ability to mix with other parents, and the convenience and flexibility of the services as things they particularly liked. At the focus group, parents added they liked that the services they used were relaxed, safe and hygienic.

In terms of things they would improve, most parents thought that more sessions should be provided, and for spaces to be bigger. Many also indicated they would like to see details about services better communicated, for there to be a broader range of activities and for sessions to be longer.

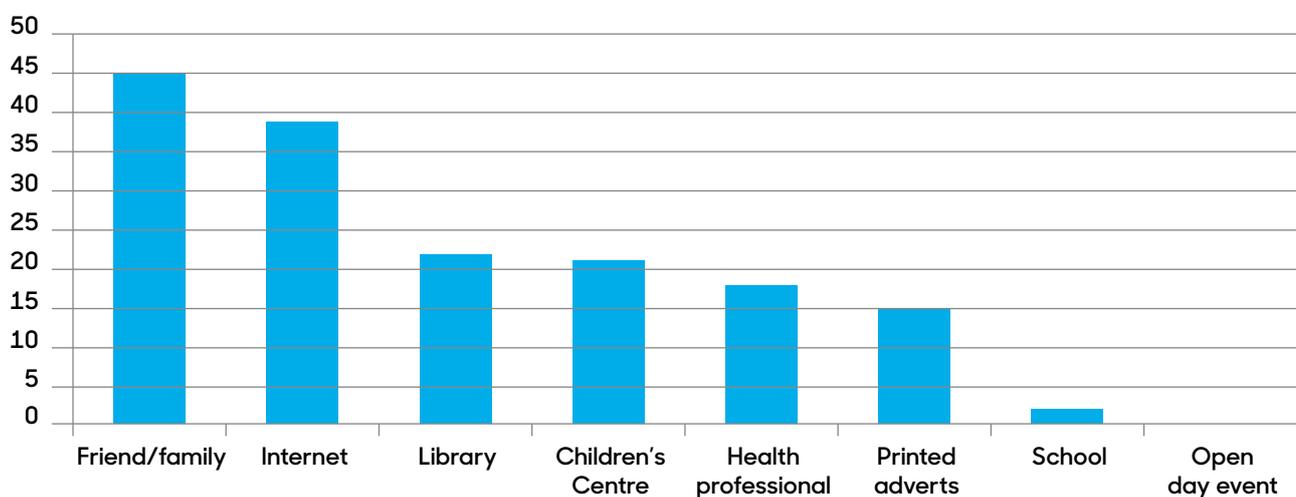
Finding out about services

The results of the survey suggest that parents had varied experiences in finding out about services for families with young children. Responses were broadly split between whether they found the process easy or very easy (36 per cent), difficult or very difficult (25 per cent), or neither easy nor difficult (35 per cent).

In contrast, when respondents were specifically asked about services they had used, the majority of respondents (59 per cent) felt that the way information was communicated was either good, or very good, though a quarter felt that this was either poor or very poor. Parents highlighted a range of different ways in which the communication could be improved, altogether listing 16 different methods. Better use of the internet, such as a clear online booking system on a dedicated website, or up to date information on social media emerged from responses as a key theme.

The survey provided 8 categories to choose from to say how they found out about services, and one 'other' category. A wide variety of methods were selected by parents, with only 2 categories receiving fewer than 15 responses (Fig 3). The most common way to find out about services is through friends and family members. The internet, libraries and children's centres were also common sources of information.

Fig 3. How do parents find out about services?



When parents were invited to provide other ways to find out about services, two mentioned local social media groups, and five referred to a smartphone app, which lists activities for young children across London. Many of the parents at the focus group also reported using social media and the same app to find out about local services. Parents described both of these methods as being very helpful and convenient for getting accurate details about what was on offer in their local area.

C: Leeds

Introduction and context

The Leeds parent researchers chose to use surveys to gather parents' views on services for families with young children. The parents divided into several smaller groups to reach a range of different communities across Leeds. They contacted people through children's centres and schools, and were also able to obtain a large number of responses at a community summer fun day in the Little London area of Leeds.

The group designed a questionnaire to explore how parents found out about services, what sort of services they used, and how they could be best delivered. The surveys were completed by 66 parents and carers made up of 48 mothers, 11 fathers and other people who look after children.

Summary

The findings from the survey suggest that parents value a wide range of services, with stay and play services felt to be particularly important. Many of the respondents had used a range of services, but where they had not it was often because they had not heard about the service.

Most parents preferred services to be available during the weekday and in the morning, though many reported that they had no preference. They tended to say they would be more likely to use services aimed at parents if they were free to attend, and if a crèche were provided. Parents generally found services they had used to be helpful or very helpful. They tended to like that services were friendly and that they gave them a chance to meet other parents, but suggested that services could be better publicised and that more places and sessions should be available.

Many parents felt that it was easy to find out about services for families with young children in their area. They pointed to a range of methods they thought would be best for letting parents know about services on offer. The use of printed adverts including leaflets, flyers and posters, was cited the most often by parents.

Finding out about services

People generally responded positively about how easily they could find out about services in their area with half (51 per cent) reporting that it was either easy or very easy. However, a sizeable minority (28 per cent) reported that it was difficult or very difficult to find out about services.

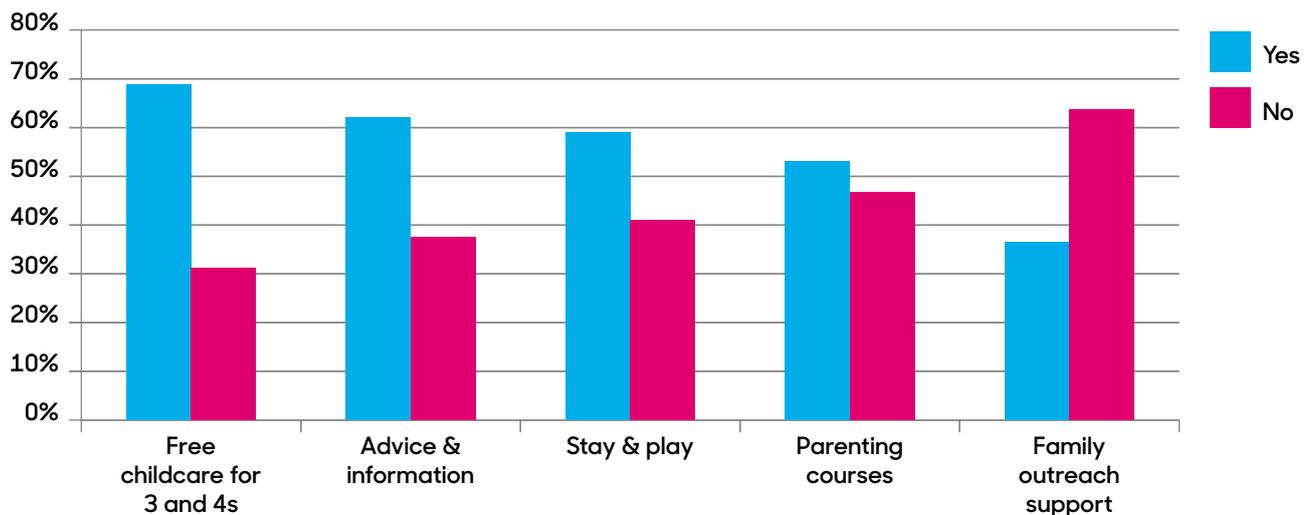
When asked what the best way would be to inform parents about services for young children, respondents pointed to a wide range of preferable methods. The most common preference for finding out about services was from printed adverts such as leaflets, posters and flyers. Other commonly favoured methods included 'word of mouth' conversations with friends and family members; online resources; and through other services such as schools, doctors and midwives. Many of the parents responded with more than one method for this question.

Use of services

Parents pointed to a wide array of services as being particularly important to them. Most parents cited childcare services such as playgroups, stay and play, and free childcare as one of the three most important services for them. A large number of parents also pointed to services with healthcare professionals including health visitors, doctors and dentists, and courses and information for adults, on topics such as healthy living, housing and jobs, as being valuable to them.

The researchers asked parents whether or not they had used a range of specific services (Fig 4). The findings generally show fairly high rates of use of services: more parents had used all of the services than had not, with the exception of 'family outreach support' services, which had nevertheless been used by over a third of respondents (37 per cent). The results also show that free childcare for 3 and 4 year olds, stay and play sessions, and advice and information for adults, were the most commonly used services by survey respondents.

Fig 4. Use of selected services for families with young children

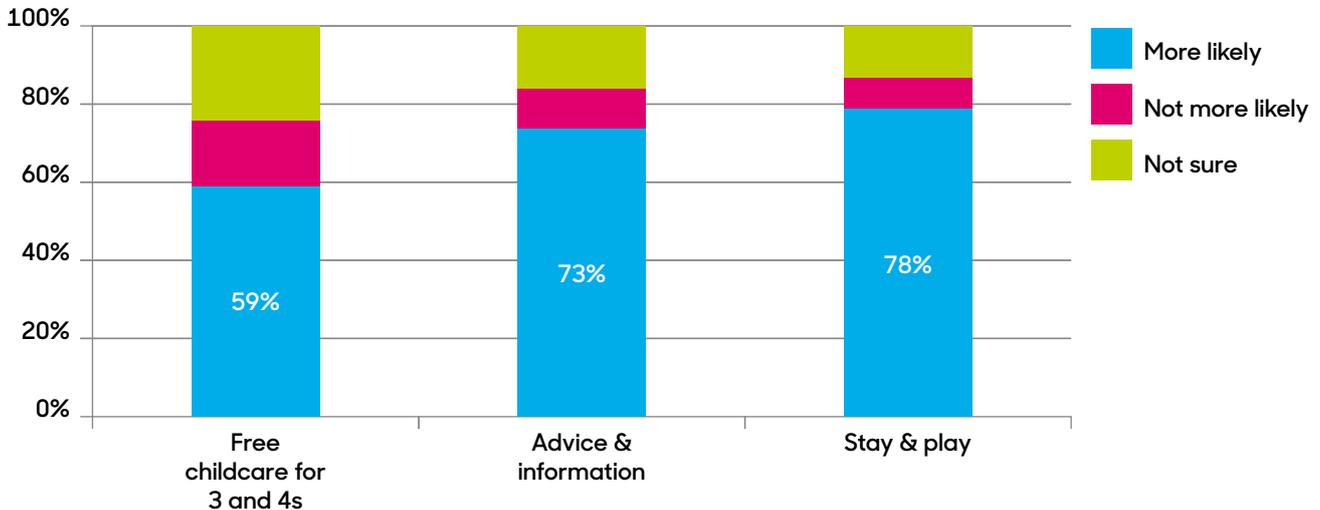


Some respondents provided reasons for having not used services. The most common factor cited for not using a service was because the respondent was unaware of the service being available. Parents also said they had not needed the service, they were not eligible, or they felt that the service was not of a high enough quality. The quality of the service was only raised as an issue for advice and information and family outreach support services. Reasons cited include, 'the staff seem not to care', and 'they don't have time.'

Parents were also asked about when they would like services to be delivered during the day and throughout the week. The results show that respondents generally favoured mornings and weekdays, rather than afternoons, evenings or weekends, though many reported no preference for either.

The parent researchers chose to ask whether services for parents would be more likely to be used if a health professional were present, if a crèche were provided, or if they were free to attend (Fig 5). Though respondents reported that all three of these factors would encourage them to attend services, responses suggest that free admittance and crèche provision are a stronger influence than the presence of a health professional.

Fig 5. How the following factors influence take up of services



Opinions of services used

The survey asked a number of questions about what parents thought about the services they had used, and how they would prefer them to be delivered. Respondents were overwhelmingly positive about their experience of services for families with young children. Some 84 per cent described services they had used as either helpful or very helpful. Only five per cent (three parents) thought they had been unhelpful or very unhelpful.

Parents were asked to comment about what they liked about services they had used, and how the service could be improved. The survey found that many of the respondents liked that services were friendly, that they allowed them to meet other parents, and that they made their children happy. A number of parents also liked the information and guidance they received from these services. When asked about what they would improve, respondents tended to suggest that the services could be better publicised, with more sessions or places made available, particularly during the school holidays. A number of parents also indicated that services should be provided in bigger rooms, and for longer sessions.

D: Young Dads Collective

The research

The Young Dads Collective (YDC) works with young fathers aged under 26 to effect change and raise awareness of the specific challenges young men face during their transition from young person to young parent. Parent researchers from the YDC put together a survey that posed eight questions about services for families with young children. The researchers spoke to 45 parents at children's centres in Hackney to ask their views.

They also ran a citizens' jury in Hackney and a focus group in Westminster to probe some of the findings from the survey. These locations were chosen because members of the YDC had existing connections there. The citizens' jury aimed to enable the parent researchers to question and learn from experts involved in service delivery.

All survey respondents looked after at least one child, most of whom were aged between zero and four. Most parents had only one child, and most of the remaining respondents had two. The vast majority of respondents (82 per cent) were mothers; the rest were made up of fathers and a small number of childminders and carers. The surveys were completed within children's centres, so are likely to over represent families already using early years services.

The researchers did not collect information about participants in the focus group, but a majority spoke English as a second language and had moved to London from abroad.

Services used

The parents completing surveys were frequent users of children's centres: three quarters of respondents visit a children's centre every week. This suggests that children's centre services are an important part of their weekly routine.

The parent researchers asked respondents about the services they had used. 'Development and play sessions' were the most used service. Many parents also used services related to health, such as help with healthy eating, breastfeeding or mental health. Parenting support was the third most used service.

Specialist services were less commonly used, but had made a significant impact on the families who had used them. One parent in the focus group who had been subjected to domestic violence said that support services at the children's centre 'gave me good support' and that they 'kept looking after me.' The citizen's jury panel discussed how children's centres can be a useful place to pick up and support parents with mental health issues.

Most helpful services

Respondents were asked what they thought were the most helpful and least helpful services used and why. Various development and play activities – baby clubs, play groups, messy play, stay and play and music classes – were most frequently cited as the most helpful services by parents. Many parents found these helpful because they enabled them to meet other parents, as well as benefiting their children.

Parents also found health services such as help with breastfeeding and healthy eating most helpful. One parent in the focus group was especially positive about healthy eating services, saying that she learnt new ways of cooking 'good, healthy food.' Support for parents such as childcare advice and activities for parents like a sewing course and trips were mentioned by a handful of parents as the most important services.

Only a minority of parents named services that they did not find helpful. For those that did, five named specific services that they did not find useful, which were all different, and two said that they had not been able to find the support they needed.

Areas where most support was needed

Parents were asked what areas they had needed most support in as a parent. The health and development of children was the most mentioned area, making up the majority of responses. Examples include parents needing help with breastfeeding, weaning, healthy eating and managing their child's behaviour. The remaining responses mostly referred to opportunities for both parents and children to socialise. For example, respondents said they had needed support with improving their children's social skills, requiring more group interaction. A handful of parents said they had needed support with making new friends themselves, lacking opportunities to interact with other parents.

The parents in the focus group also talked about the importance of children's centres in helping them to make friends and build their support network. Some also had different concerns, particularly around safety of outside spaces and fear of their children becoming involved in crime, either as victim or perpetrator. Parents here also said they had needed language support, and that they desired classes teaching English as a second language.

Why people do not access services and suggestions for improvement

When the surveys asked what factors parents felt prevented families from accessing services, various answers were given. Many parents said that it was hard to find information on the services on offer as services are not advertised well enough and online information is not always up to date. Other respondents suggested that some parents do not have an adequate level of English.

Some also said that there are not enough spaces for children at some services or the age group is too restricted. Parents with more than one child in particular said they found it difficult to find services that they could bring children who were different ages to. Other parents said that the venues are difficult to access or the hours do not match the schedules of the family. Parents at the focus group also suggested improvements along these lines, such as the introduction of more fliers with information on, bigger rooms to fit more children, and more activities for after school times.

Some survey respondents said lack of confidence was a deterring factor. This corresponds with some of the findings of the focus group and the citizens' jury where a sense of exclusion was cited as a reason that parents had not accessed services. In the focus group, parents mentioned having to face racism within services or feeling fear that staff would judge them as bad parents. In the citizen's jury, the exclusion of fathers from services for families was discussed. One person suggested that the gender imbalance of staff working in the early years sector may contribute to the sense of exclusion felt by dads.

In the last part of the survey respondents were given room to leave any comments on services generally. Many parents used this space to provide suggestions for improvements, such as changing the hours and number of places for different activities, reflecting some of the difficulties accessing services reported earlier in the survey. One parent said that services are inaccessible for people on zero-hour contracts or those who are self-employed. Another requested that childcare should be offered *'full time, so you can get a job.'* Two parents commented that services for children with special educational needs or disabilities are inadequate, with one suggesting that the staff need more training.

Community engagement

The chance to be with other parents in a supportive environment was crucial for those who took part in this research. Within the survey answers, stay and play and other children's activities were highly used and greatly appreciated. One parent highlighted that it *'creates interaction with other children and adults'* and another said that stay and play is *'good for confidence and social skills.'* Some parents found it important to suggest *'more day trips for the kids and family'* and *'space for parents to talk.'* Being alone can be motivation for some parents to go and meet others: *'great place to meet mums, feel less lonely.'* Within the focus group, one parent said that they didn't have a family here, but when they came to the centre, they felt like people there were their family.

However, some parents do not feel part of the community. Some parents reported a sense of exclusion, such as those in the focus group and the young dads themselves. One parent said they did not feel confident to go by themselves, whereas the citizens' jury pointed out the imbalance of how parents' involvement in their children's upbringing depends largely on the predetermined roles their genders are associated with. The citizens' jury proposed community-based solutions for tackling the difficulty of engaging a mix of people: family fun days and services focusing on engaging fathers. Several parents offered positive comments about the services they had received and commented on the positive impact that services had for them. One parent said the service they used was *'greatly needed everywhere, [it] became second home once [I] did start coming.'*

References

- Action for Children, NCB and Children's Society (2016). *Losing in the Long Run: Trends in Early Intervention Funding*
- Briggs, Kurtz and Paull (2010). *Strand 5: Case studies on the costs of centres in the most deprived areas*. Department for Education
- Cumbria County Council (2011). *Cumbria Sure Start Children's Centre User Satisfaction Survey*
- DfE (2013). *Sure Start children's centres statutory guidance*, Department for Education
- DfEE (1999). *Sure Start: A Guide for Trailblazers*, Department for Education and Employment
- Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (ECCE) (2009 – 2015). DfE/Natcen.
- Frew, R (2005). *Evaluation of parent satisfaction with Sure Start Wallasey*, Research Report for the National Evaluation of Sure Start, Department for Education
- HM Treasury (1998). *Modern public services for Britain: investing in reform. Comprehensive spending review: new public spending plans 1999–2002*. London: The Stationery Office
- House of Commons (HC) (2016). *Children's Centres: Closures: Written question – 55895*
- Lewis (2011). *From Sure Start to Children's Centres: an analysis of policy change in English early years programmes*. *Journal of Social Policy*, 40(1) pp71–88
- Melhuish, et al (2010). *Evaluation and value of Sure Start*, *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, 95 pp159–161
- Ridley-Moy, K (2007). *Sure Start Children's Centres: Parental Satisfaction Survey*, Report and Annexes 2007, Birkbeck University
- Royston and Rodrigues (2013). *Breaking Barriers: How to Help Children's Centres Reach Disadvantaged Families*, London: The Children's Society
- Saminder Gaheer and Gillian Paull (2016). *The Value for Money of Children's Centres (ECCE strand 5)*. Frontier Economics/ Department for Education
- Sammons et al (2015). *The impact of children's centres: studying the effects of children's centres in promoting better outcomes for children and their families (ECCE strand 4)*. University of Oxford/ Department for Education
- The National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) (2010). *The Impact of Sure Start Local Programmes on Seven Year Olds and their Families*. Birkbeck University/ Department of Education
- Williams and Churchill (2006). *Empowering Parents in Sure Start Programmes*, Research Report for the National Evaluation of Sure Start, Department for Education