

Family Hubs

A discussion paper

Co-ordinated local support and intervention for
children in need and their families

October 2016

Background

At any one time there are about 390,000 children in need and about 780,000 children are in need at some point during the course of a year.¹ These are children who are on social services' radar and who are considered in need of services but who do not reach the threshold of 'significant harm', as defined in the Children Act 1989.

The social cost and lost opportunities for children in need are high. They have some of the worst education outcomes of any children in our schools and 76.5% experience neglect, family dysfunction or acute stress.²

Surprisingly little work has been done on the outcomes for children in need. Last year the Rees Centre published research suggesting that children in need performed worse at school than children in care who have been in care for 12 months or more (but better than those who had been in care for less than 12 months).³ This is unsurprising. Children who have been removed from an unstable and neglectful environment and who have found stability elsewhere are likely to do better than those who have been left in that environment. However, it also means that a significant number of children are currently growing up in an adverse and destabilising home environment with poor outcomes and little recourse to consistent support.

Over the coming year, the Children's Commissioner will be undertaking research into the childhood experience and progression of this important group of children. Based on what is known already about the needs of this group, this discussion paper looks at how individualised and family support might be provided to support children in need to reach their potential. It highlights the potential for Family Hubs to co-ordinate and prioritise support for this neglected group of children.

¹ Department for Education, "Characteristics of children in need: 2014 to 2015", London, 2015, accessed via https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/469737/SFR41-2015_Text.pdf (Oct 2016) and accompanied Table B1 accessed via

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/469739/SFR41-2015_Tables.xlsx (Oct 2016)

² Ibid, Figure G

³ Rees Centre, "The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England: Linking Care and Educational Data", Bristol, Rees Centre/University of Bristol, Nov 2015, page 12

Why Family Hubs?

Consistent evidence demonstrates that one of the major obstacles to children in need flourishing lies in their disrupted home life. This suggests that interventions need to focus on strengthening family relationships and providing additional support for children outside the home environment.

Services are therefore necessary to help parents overcome the problems they are facing, and to help improve the confidence, skills and wellbeing of children in need.

Having dedicated teams working closely with vulnerable families is an important part of effective family support. This should involve supporting and challenging families and backing this up with coordinated and responsive action. At the same time, it is important to offer children the additional support that they need, be this additional support with learning and communication skills, help to develop behaviour and social skills, or support to build confidence and discover new opportunities.

Children's Centres have led the development of integrated support around the needs of the whole family. This is in contrast to many services at the sharp end that have struggled to join up or deal with crisis in a coordinated way. Children's Centres already:

- > Provide an environment for services to work together and not in isolation
- > Provide support to families with children throughout the age range
- > Offer and co-ordinate 'step up' and 'step down' support
- > Work with families as part of a team and deliver specialist interventions when needed.

Many areas are bringing a range of services together in this way around a next phase extension of their Children Centres. These Family Hubs offer the potential for a new model of delivery of co-ordinated support for children in need and their families.

What are Family Hubs?

In July 2016, the All Party Parliamentary Group for Children's Centres reported on their investigation into the future of Children's Centres and the message was clear – their future lies in the reassignment of funding and redevelopment of services to a Family Hub model. Initially proposed by the Centre for Social Justice in 2014, Family Hubs provide a more integrated, preventative approach to supporting the country's most vulnerable families. They are:

[“Local nerve centres coordinating all family-related support, including universal services and specialist help...to meet both parents' most pressing needs.”⁴](#)

By building on the existing infrastructure of Children's Centres and extending their offer to include support for parents, couples and all children regardless of age, Family Hubs deliver holistic, early intervention services to a whole community. Their introduction is a clear next step to co-ordinate existing services and support thereby creating better information-sharing networks, ensuring that children and families no longer go missing between services and making effective use of funds.

The lack of readily-accessible support for the entire family is having a troubling impact within the most vulnerable communities in which we see high levels of children who are in need, on child protection plans, or who are coming into care.

Family Hubs would coordinate statutory and voluntary approaches to tackling the root causes of intergenerational poverty, family breakdown, and poor outcomes for children. They have social mobility and family stability at their core.

Centre for Social Justice, "Fully Committed? How a Government could reverse family breakdown", London, Centre for Social Justice, July 2014, Page 20

What should Family Hubs deliver?

The range of services Family Hubs deliver may differ in response to the local context but broadly they will:

- > Prioritise access to existing or developing government programmes for families such as addiction support, mental health services, domestic violence, Troubled Families interventions, relationship support and parenting programmes.
- > Offer children specialist health and education support, including mental health, communication skills, behaviour management and mentoring.

The services will include:

New parent services

Family Hubs should provide a location for necessary parenting steps – [ante and pre-natal classes](#), [birth registration](#) as well as services currently delivered through the [Family Nurse Partnership programme](#). This would ensure that every new parent will come through the door providing early access to public and community-based services and networks for all, including those who are typically harder to reach.

Childcare and early education

High quality early education improves children’s development and helps ensure they are more prepared to start school. This should continue to be delivered through Family Hubs which would offer the existing 15 hours per week [free childcare for 0–2 year olds for the 40% most income deprived households](#). The current Government initiative to deliver 15 hours per week free childcare for all 3–4 year olds could also continue to be delivered from these premises ensuring continued stability for both parents and children extending to [30 hours a week](#) childcare as funding becomes available

Parenting support

Whilst families are benefitting from free childcare, Family Hubs should provide [parenting support programmes](#). This is already undertaken by some existing Children’s Centres. At the Woodland Academy Trust in Bexley, they adopted a ‘stay and play’ approach to their two-year old offer to improve the relationship between parents and their children. The results indicate that by combining two-year old childcare with relationship building between parent and child, children’s developmental outcomes are boosted.

Couple and relationship support

The Government has reiterated its commitment to supporting couples who are experiencing difficulties and giving families the tools they need to stay together. Family Hubs should provide [couples therapy](#), for example through hosting Relate sessions or adopt alternative approaches. Bromley Children’s Centres have pioneered ‘[relationally trained](#)’ staff who all provide advice and support to couples through their everyday work and interactions with children and their families.

The Troubled Families programme should also be integrated into the Family Hub offering, as could support for families where domestic violence has been present.

Specialist health support for children and parents, including substance misuse advice and mental health services could be delivered by Family Hubs.

Communication support for children in the early years and as they move through school could also be provided by the Hubs.

Learning and mentoring support to help families provide a positive learning environment and role models and mentors to support young people progress in school should be located in the Hubs. There may be the potential to fund this through the Pupil Premium.

Employment and training advice

Many Children's Centres have extended their remit to include [employment and training support](#) for parents who are accessing childcare. Family Hubs should either link to Job Centre Plus or a resident adviser to provide employment and job-seeking support. Such provision would also give parents the opportunity to receive debt, housing or benefits advice where necessary. This could also be delivered alongside at least a portion of the free childcare. This could include [English \(ESOL\) for non-English speakers](#).

Unlimited potential

The ideal Family Hub should be a friendly, accessible, community-based hub from which to be signposted to the most appropriate services. At the core of a Family Hub is its all-encompassing, community-based nature and as such there is great potential for a wide range of provision.

From birth registration to childcare to debt advice to substance abuse support, Family Hubs should provide a much needed one-stop-shop for a variety of issues that blight the country's most vulnerable families.

Many of these services are already funded. Bringing them together under one roof should reduce premises costs and may result in further cost savings by merging back office functions.

But the benefits will be much greater than the short term cost efficiencies. Services that are better integrated and joined-up will ensure that fewer children fall through the net and enable the capture of better data about individual and community needs allowing those who plan, commission and deliver services to make them more effective and responsive to local need.

Where are Family Hubs working?

Many individual Children's Centres are already delivering an expanded offer of services in response to the need within their community. Others have already started moving to a far more comprehensive family support model.

The Isle of Wight: Children's Centres on the Isle of Wight have been transformed into 'Early Help Family Centres'. They have been in operation since 2015 and importantly, required no extra funding to set up. Instead funds were consolidated from the existing Troubled Families programme, Early Help and Universal Services.

Access: As well as providing for families who have been referred by professionals raising a Common Assessment Framework form or by Children's Social Services, families can also self-refer to the Hub by calling, dropping-in or completing a form found in the back of Hub leaflets.

Support offered

Pre-birth	Early Years	Primary	Teens	Parents/carers	Additional support
Midwife ante-natal clinics	Health visitor clinics	Family wellbeing drop-in sessions		Adult education	A dedicated support worker for those with an Early Help Assessment to work with the whole family
Parent classes	Breast feeding/healthy eating/weaning advice	Parenting advice drop-ins and workshops		Counselling	Long-term family support worker for those with complex needs i.e. poor school attendance, DVA, anti-social behaviour etc.
Anti-natal relaxation	Early communication and language skills	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and autism advice	Counselling	Violence and domestic abuse advice and support	
	Stay and play toddler sessions	Play-based counselling for children	Youth services	Money management/budgeting	
	Starting school support		Sex and relationships guidance		
	Parenting skills for babies and toddlers				

Results: Given that the hubs have only been in place since April 2015, a thorough evaluation has not yet been possible. However, in management information there has been a significant increase in the number of families who have had contact with services and among these families, outcomes appear to have improved.

In the first six months, 313 new families were referred into the new service for targeted family support. Their outcomes are identified and agreed using an existing measure within children's services and management data shows that 54% of the families had improved scores within six months, 36% had remained the same and only 10% had shown a slightly degraded score. Although a thorough evaluation is necessary, these initial figures are promising.

More widely, the Isle of Wight is seeing a lower number of children entering care at later ages, more children in need being placed on a plan to address this need and more families receiving crucial family support.

Conclusions

There are concerns over the wellbeing and outcomes of children in need. Evidence suggests that they benefit from the right type of support being provided to them and their families. Some areas are already extending Children's Centres to co-ordinate services for children and families in this way.

The Government has yet to make an announcement on the future direction of Children's Centres which, if developed along the right lines, have the potential to champion a new approach to supporting children in need with a strengthened focus on the whole family.

A commitment to Family Hubs is a commitment to giving children in need and their families the tools to transform their lives, to reduce family breakdown, to give children the best start in life and improve social mobility.

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