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Why Children's Centres Matter

A Flow of Initiatives

Initiatives regarding Early Years and childcare are regular features in the news. Only in recent weeks, I have heard discussions about the simplified Early Years Foundation Stage; wider provision of nursery education for three and four year olds and disadvantaged two year olds; vouchers of up to 100 for parents and carers wishing to attend parenting classes; the introduction of the education, health and care plan to replace statutory assessment and statementing for children with special educational needs; the deregulation of childminding services so they are more accessible and affordable.

It is heartening to know there is so much concern and recognition that the early years of a child's life need good, rounded care. Yet, an alarm bell rings for me because I wonder just how joined up the initiatives really are. There is a risk that they run in parallel, duplicate, or are even at odds with one another. What steps are being taken to ensure they are integrated? And why are children's centres not receiving a greater mention in this regard?

The Role of Children's Centres

Children's Centres were phased in over the last ten years or so to serve as a hub for integrated services providing children aged 0-5 with a "sure start" in life within the context of the Every Child Matters Framework (be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution, achieve economic well-being). Look up the directgov website on the role of children's centres and it states:

Children's Centres provide a variety of advice and support for parents and carers. Their services are available to you from pregnancy right through to when your child goes into reception class at primary school... ..They bring all the different support agencies together to offer a range of services to meet you and your child's needs, all in one place. (www.direct.gov.uk select : Parents – Childcare - Sure Start Children's Centres)

A fine assertion indeed, but how accurate is it really?

A Mixed Reception

Gradually taking root in local communities, children's centres have come to receive high praise as places where children are helped to develop and grow, parents and carers can get help and advice, access a wide range of relevant services, meet others and socialize. At their best, they have also ensured there is early intervention for children at risk of falling through the net.

At the same time, though, they have had their fair share of criticism: while successful at providing universal services, they are inconsistent when it comes to engaging with the most disadvantaged and vulnerable; partnership working is not always effective with health, education, training and social services being fearful of sharing information and having priorities that do not always coincide; local agencies, charities and groups often work in tandem with children's centres, competing rather than sharing resources; some children's centres are located in buildings that are under-used failing to act as a thriving community hub. As a result, there is a concern that children's centres are simply not value for money.

What to Conclude?

Given these reservations, it is possible to draw quite different conclusions. At one extreme is the view that children's centres are an idealistic dream that cannot be realistically implemented and should gradually be phased out. At the other extreme is the argument that children's centres are still young and have not had time to bed down consistent good practice let alone demonstrate long-term impact on children as they progress in adulthood. Consequently, they need all the backing and support possible to ensure they build up to providing the solid, reliable service they are capable of. In the middle ground, is the view that the good they have brought to families and communities should be fostered and developed while they undergo some significant change to ensure greater effectiveness in those areas where they may be under-performing.

The Current Climate

In the current climate of austerity cuts and shifting ideology, it seems to be the middle path that has been chosen. Commitment to children's centres' core purpose of "improving outcomes for young children and their families, with a particular focus on the most disadvantaged families, in order to reduce inequalities" is assured at least for the moment. They are to continue serving as one-stop-shops and a safe space for children and families, bringing together multi-agency teams around the child when needs are identified, supporting parents and helping to ensure social cohesion in the local community.

Change, though, at a financial and structural level, is also called for to a major degree. The money that was formerly ring-fenced for "Sure Start" is no longer assured, having now been subsumed under the heading of the "Early Intervention Grant", which local authorities are responsible for allocating according to the specific needs of their regional and local areas. Overall, funding is being reduced by about 20% over the next two years while a system of "payment by results" is to be introduced.

In many local authority areas, children's centres are to be clustered rather than working individually with their own budget and core team targeting a specific local reach area. This, effectively, means a reduction in staff numbers and a greater sharing out of services across centres, with families commuting between them rather than accessing only the one nearest to where they live. It also means greater reliance on volunteer groups and individuals as well as the private sector.

Don't Throw the Baby Out with the Bath Water

The purpose of such changes is to arrive at sharper, more targeted efficiency and value for money. While I can embrace this to some degree, I also have grave concerns. It is distressing to witness the immediate impact of the change on staff, many of whom have lost their sense of job security and career progression even though they may have dedicated years of good work to the Early Years sector, training hard to ensure they are appropriately qualified. This cannot but have a knock-on effect on morale.

The degree to which they can provide a rich range of service delivery meeting local needs, both universal and targeted, is also becoming more restricted as fewer resources are stretched further. How can this be to the benefit of children and families? The main way it can be turned to advantage is by ensuring children's centres have the full scope and remit to collaborate with other organisations and initiatives by pooling resources and sharing good practice, information and facilities. This means giving them full backing and commitment as hubs for integrated services.

There is a real danger, however, that they may not receive such commitment as different initiatives, providers and services work in disparate ways according to their own tune. In such an instance, children's centres' true potential may be lost before they have had a chance to develop to the full. Far from allowing for greater efficiency and value for money, this could mean a wasted opportunity for children and families to draw on a pivotal resource for good in their local communities. It is with this in mind, that I have embarked on the **Walk for Loop Project and Events** of which the purpose is to raise awareness of children's centres and celebrate what they do and are capable of doing in the future.