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Department for Education Report on Sure Start Children Centres

Eleven years since the introduction of Sure Start children centres (the **centres**) and six years since the Conservatives obtained power in government - what changes have been made and what affect has different governance had on the centres? In addition to Michael Pavey's January article on this subject, it is also important to examine the report by the Department for Education on the evaluation and impact of children's centres in England (the **Report**), with the findings from 2011 to 2013 too profound to ignore.

The Report which was released in December 2015 analyses the centres from 2011 to 2013, during which time the Conservative/Liberal Democrat parties were in coalition governance. The Report observes centres across the UK to examine both the positive and negative affects that the centres have on the development of children (cognitively, verbally, socially, even physically) and also the well-being of the children's parents (mental health, physical health). The Report also shows the damaging affects inflicted on the children centres themselves; caused by: cuts to funding, closure, austerity, lack of trained staff - all detrimental affects of which the Lib-Con coalition appears to be the driving factor.

There is a reoccurring theme throughout the entire Report which demonstrates that the more funding a centre receives, the better the results. Whereas those centres which suffer cuts to funding are unable to offer their clients the appropriate services and thus positive affects are diminished. The results show that when centres do not suffer cuts to funding, the 'parental stress' and 'parent-child dysfunctional interaction' scores are lower whereas when centres experience cuts to funding, children's levels of misbehaviour and under-development begin to increase. It is interesting that these cuts to funding are affecting the parents as well as the children. The study proves this by showing a decrease in parental stress and greater scores on parent-child relationships. In addition, the study shows that parents whom attend well funded centres actually see an improvement on their state of mental health compared to those whom attend centres experiencing cuts to finances! If it wasn't bad enough that the governments

austerity measures are affecting children's development, the Report shows a 'double-whammy' in negative trends as the parents appear to suffer too.

The centres with better funding offered better services and more of them. The staff are better trained, the centres better maintained and managed, which in turn showed better outcomes in child development.

This is incredibly important as, although the centres are open to families from all backgrounds, the Report concluded that in reality people from disadvantaged backgrounds would be more inclined to use the services. This is partially due to the elimination of a certain stigma surrounding centres and also due to the fact that these centres offer a genuine support for struggling families. The statistics show that families on a low income are far more likely to use the children centres on a long-term basis. That can lead us to conclude that the cuts and closures of these centres will have a detrimental affect on those whom are already suffering the most.

It is important to note that these centres are not the be-all and end-all of solving issues with disadvantaged families, however, along with other services, these centres help to alleviate some of the difficulties they face. Centres are incredibly helpful at signposting other services that parents and/or children might need and where they can find it. Whilst the study accepts that this is a positive affect of centres, it cannot take it into account as it is incredibly difficulty to quantify. For example, a common experience was for parents to attempt to use the centres as a kind of councillor or therapist service, at which point the staff would have to refer them elsewhere as the staff are not qualified to provide such services. This is an example of the positive effects of centres which cannot be quantified.

It is important to be aware that the Report also highlights areas where the centres are ineffective or where there are decreases in the well-being of individuals who attend the centres. One such example is when an individual is suffering 'adverse life events such as bereavement'. When this is the case, the engagement with the centres is no longer statistically significant. An interesting finding of the study is a positive correlation (albeit a weak one) between consistent use of centres and an increase in mental health problems for parents. That being said, there appears to be no particular variable that determines consistent use of centres has a causal relationship with mental health decline. A more probable explanation is that those with worst health and more difficult personal situations would be more inclined to seek additional services from centres.

In this regard the centres appear to be doing a great job in finding and supporting those most in need. With regards to both these issues highlighted in the Report it seems that the issues affecting individuals are not borne within the centres themselves, but instead originate from extraneous variables.

Perhaps one of the most pertinent and eye-opening facets of the Report is the sheer fact that it was produced from the results obtained between 2011 and 2013. The short term nature of the study means that some long term affects may be missed and there is every possibility that centres which were suffering could see an upsurge in positive affects on those whom attend. However, if these results follow the same trend (and there is a strong argument to say that they will considering 2014 saw them suffering the worst funding cuts to date and and Chancellor George Osborne recently stated that more funding cuts are to come) then we can expect the centres to be in a far worse state now than they were before. The Report even takes account of the fact that ‘budget cuts have become a common feature’ post-2013 which are sure to have had affects on the ‘service provision’ and ‘potential to promote better outcomes for children, mothers and families’.