

Supported by



Implementing Sure Start Children's Centres

Petr Bouchal and Emma Norris

A decorative graphic in the bottom right corner of the page, consisting of several parallel diagonal stripes in shades of dark blue and grey, extending from the bottom right towards the center of the page.

About the authors

Petr Bouchal is a researcher at the Institute for Government. He joined the Institute in April 2012 and his work has focused on the Whitehall Monitor and on financial leadership in government. Prior to this he worked at the Open Society Fund in Prague, focusing on good governance. He has also provided research assistance to a University of Oxford project on parliamentary politics. Petr holds an MPhil in Politics from the University of Oxford and a BA in International Relations and Economics from Tufts University in the United States.

Emma Norris is a senior researcher at the Institute for Government and led the policy implementation project. She joined in July 2012 and works on the Institute's better policy making programme and on preparing potential ministers for government. She was previously an Associate Director at the Royal Society of Arts (RSA), and before that has worked at the Institute for Public Policy Research, the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy and was a President of Oxford University Student Union.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank a number of people at the Institute for Government for their help with this research. Jill Rutter, Marc Kidson, Tom Gash, and Peter Riddell for their guidance and comments on the project; Loren Bushell, Kerry Burkett and Candice McKenzie for organising our roundtable event; Hannah Stirland and Will Wright for assisting with the research; and Andrew Murphy who has managed the publication of this case study and the related publications.

We are also very grateful to the many people from inside and outside government who gave their time to be interviewed for this research or to attend our 'reunion' roundtable. Not all the participants are named in the report, but all of their contributions were invaluable in getting a rounded view of the policy.

Any errors or omissions are the responsibility of the authors.

Summary

In 2003, government committed to delivering 3,500 children's centres across the country by 2010. Sure Start children's centres were designed to deliver a place in every community that would provide integrated care and services for young children and their families, with a particular focus on closing the achievement gap for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The policy built on the targeted Sure Start programme, adapting and universalising its approach. The centres were planned, delivered, and run by local authorities, and financed by a ring-fenced grant from central government. 'Together for Children', a bespoke delivery partner organisation, provided further support to local authorities and ensured progress towards the target.

Government successfully delivered the 3,500 children's centres on time. Our research found that the political salience of the policy, the clear target and tailored delivery support, helped create the drive to succeed. Implementation also benefited from the department's willingness to rethink the institutional architecture it used for supporting implementation. However, the tight timescale and high visibility of the policy created some challenges and at times not enough attention was paid to learning from ongoing implementation.

Introduction

Context and origins

Sure Start children's centres developed as a national scale-up of Sure Start in the form of a universal service. Sure Start was a flagship Labour policy, announced in 1998 in Parliament. It was launched in 1999 as an area-based programme to deliver services and support to young children and their families, with £450 million (m) in funding in the first three years.¹ It was initially targeted at the 20% poorest wards in England.

Two government documents published in 2003 and 2004 outlined the shift from Sure Start to children's centres. First, *Every Child Matters*, a government strategy addressing young children in the round, proposed a shift from centrally-controlled, targeted Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs) to children's centres. These would be controlled by local authorities and be provided on a universal basis as part of the drive to integrate children's services. Second, the *Ten Year Childcare Strategy* concluded that children's centres would form part of the government's drive to increase the quality and availability of childcare and services for young children and families.

¹ Eisenstadt, N., *Providing a Sure Start: How government discovered early childhood*, 2011, p. 47

Concerns about the variability of local Sure Start service provision and about the programme's ability to reach the poorest families, identified by early evaluation work, strengthened the case for universalising the service.²

The policy model

Government committed to establishing 3,500 children's centres – some in dedicated new buildings, many on existing sites, including primary schools – that would transform the way services for families with young children were provided. They would provide or enable easy access to community health services, parenting and family support, outreach services, integrated early education and childcare, and links to training and employment opportunities for families with young children. As a result of these services children's centres would be a key mechanism for improving outcomes for young children, thereby reducing inequalities, and helping to bring an end to child poverty.

The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) published guidance about what was meant to be happening inside children's centres. This typically involved providing, or providing access to via information and signposting:

- childcare and early education
- information and advice to parents
- outreach and family support services
- drop-in sessions and activities for parents
- carers and children
- child and family health services
- links to Jobcentre Plus
- and support for childminders.³

Centres could also add other services based on their understanding of local need. However there were some differences in views among officials, politicians, and professionals about which interventions were most important and effective. This in turn meant that there was some uncertainty about how trade-offs between different activities and services should be navigated.

In terms of how implementation was organised, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) – that later became the Department for Children, Schools and Families, (DSCF) – owned the target for establishing 3,500 children's centres by 2010 but delegated responsibility to local authorities for planning and managing the children's centre programme in their area. This was later put on a statutory basis by the 2006 Childcare Act, which created legal duties for local authorities to establish and run children's centres. In 2009 further legislation was passed to put children's centres under local authority control on a

² Ball, M., *National Evaluation of Sure Start: Getting Sure Start started*, DfES, July 2002, p. 44, retrieved 10 July 2014 from <http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/implementation/documents/159.pdf>

³ Children, Schools and Families Committee, *Sure Start Children's Centres*, House of Commons, 2010, pp. 12-13, retrieved 10 July from <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmchilsch/130/13002.htm>

statutory basis. Local authorities were responsible for delivering their share of the children's centres target as agreed with the department.

The department provided ring-fenced funding for children's centres. While the complexity of funding streams makes it difficult to calculate total spending on children's centres since their inception, revenue funding was more than £500m annually between 2006 and 2011, reaching around £1.1 billion (bn) in 2010-11.⁴ Capital funding peaked in 2007-08 at around £280m.⁵ In addition to £430m capital funding for Sure Start between 1999 and 2006, the capital spend on children's centres totalled around £1bn.

The department initially relied on staff operating out of regional government offices to support local authorities and early year's professionals in delivering the programme, before tendering for a delivery partner in 2006, which led to the appointment of the consortium Together for Children.

Ofsted became involved in inspecting the quality of childcare in children's centres from 2006 and in 2010 its role widened to inspecting children's centres as a whole.

The challenges

The policy faced a series of implementation challenges that central government would have to overcome directly, or work with others to resolve.

- The fast roll-out of children's centres across the country, some of them in new buildings, meant there was a large capital investment programme which had to be managed and delivered to an ambitious timetable.
- Children's centres were intended to transform the way services were provided to families with young children by establishing integration and partnership. Departments and local services would need to overcome siloed ways of working to make this happen, both to develop services but also to share the data needed to ensure that families who would benefit from the services would make use of them.⁶
- To deliver the programme, central government had to act with and engage locally including with local authorities, early years' professionals and other frontline services which had varied levels of capability and had to compete for attention with other priorities.

⁴ Stewart, K., *Labour's Record on the Under-5s: Policy, spending, and outcomes*, 2013, p. 22-3, retrieved 10 July from <http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/spcc/wp04.pdf>; Children, Schools and Families Committee, *Sure Start Children's Centres*, House of Commons, 2010, para 98, which notes that it is difficult to know how much money was spent. Retrieved 10 July from

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmchilsch/130/13002.htm>

⁵ National Audit Office, *Sure Start Children's Centres: Memorandum for the Children Schools and Families Committee*, 2009, pp. 12-13, retrieved 14 July from <http://www.nao.org.uk/report/sure-start-childrens-centres-memorandum-for-the-children-schools-and-families-committee/>.

⁶ DfE, *Evaluation of Children's Centres in England*, 2013, Gov.UK website, points out that tension between professions and weaknesses around data sharing were still present in 2012. Retrieved 10 July 2014 from <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/evaluation-of-childrens-centres-in-england-ecce>

- The huge expansion of the Sure Start programme meant there was increased demand on the early years profession, in particular for people who could assume management and leadership roles in the new children's centres. The capacity of the profession to meet this demand needed to be assessed, and gaps would have to be filled.
- The places in which centres would be established were different, therefore it would be important to balance the prescriptiveness that was necessary to deliver a high-quality, consistent set of services to meet the 3,500 target, with the flexibility to ensure that the policy would fit with local circumstances.

Impact

Children's centres have largely been very successful. They played a crucial part in the development of services for young children and families, an area in which government was previously not involved, whereas now there is widespread agreement that early years interventions are critically important and that government needs to support them. Children's centres also helped generate and sustain popular support for early years' provision, as evidenced by widespread public concern about closures of children's centres after 2010. Children's centres are popular with parents and have achieved high take-up of services. Most importantly for this case study, the programme also delivered the ambitious target of establishing 3,500 children's centres located across the country within the specified timescale.

While the programme was very successful at delivering the target 3,500 children's centres, only partial evidence is available on the impact that the policy has made. This is partly because establishing cause and effect is difficult without a randomised design, and partly because impact on children's outcomes may only become apparent later in their lives so the evidence is not yet available.

The Evaluation of Children's Centres in England, by Oxford University, is due to report on its impact findings in 2015.⁷ In the interim, results from the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) – which ran alongside Sure Start Local Programmes from 2001 and tracked children in local programme areas – found improvements in outcomes at the time of the children's centres roll-out, some of which may be attributable to the improvement in quality resulting from standardisation.⁸

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Melhuish, E., *Memorandum submitted by Professor Edward Melhuish*, evidence for the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee Inquiry into Sure Start Children's Centres, Ev 1-4, October 2009, retrieved 14 July 2014 from <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmchilsch/memo/sure/ucss0202.htm>,

The story of children's centres

Development and planning

From Sure Start to children's centres

The 2004 *Ten Year Strategy for Childcare* committed government to expand Sure Start Local Programmes and deliver 3,500 children's centres by 2010 – a children's centre in every community. The 2006 Childcare Act created legal duties for local authorities to establish and run children's centres. Since the early 2000s, SSLPs had been increasingly referred to and conceived of as 'centres' rather than programmes anyway. The 2002 *Childcare Review* officially recommended that children's centres should be established in each of the 20% most deprived areas, and childcare services devolved to local authorities. But there were three main drivers pushing further expansion forward and towards greater local control.

First, there were growing calls to provide more integrated and joined-up services for young children and their families, in part spurred by the death of Victoria Climbié and subsequent Inquiry into how so many agencies failed to protect her. The resulting *Every Child Matters* Green Paper, published in September 2003, emphasised the need to provide joined-up services to improve outcomes for all children. The ECM agenda connected Sure Start to some of the most live and significant debates in government about children's services. But some interviewees argued that the very thing that made Sure Start distinctive started to get drowned out as it became part of a wider set of priorities. Sian Bufton, who was involved with local programmes and children's centres in the North East, said 'It doesn't belong to the community in the way it did and for some families, they now don't engage in the way they would when it was theirs.' However, many of our research participants recognised in retrospect that the children's centres programme would not have been viable if it were left outside of the scope of local integration of children's services.

Second, alongside the intention to integrate services for children, the expansion of children's centres was driven by the popularity of the Sure Start Local Programmes and demand they generated. For instance, in research conducted in deprived areas at the time, parents spontaneously mentioned Sure Start as a government service that made a difference.⁹

Third, the expansion to universal provision was also compelled by concerns to make Sure Start as inclusive and consistently high quality as possible. As one senior civil servant emphasised, there was strong awareness in the department about the limitations of the targeted model and the possibility that expanding Sure Start would help it reach more disadvantaged children and their families. A senior official in the department told us 'If Naomi had told me once – but she's told me 100 times – that not all poor children live in poor

⁹ Power, A., & Willmot, H., 'Bringing up families in poor neighbourhoods under New Labour', Hills, J., & Stewart, K., (eds.) *A More Equal Society? New Labour, Poverty, Inequality and Exclusion*, Policy Press, Bristol, UK, 2005, pp. 277-296, cited in Anthony Seldon, *Blair's Britain 1997-2007*, 2007, p. 425.

neighbourhoods.’ There was also a concern that the community-driven, parent-led nature of local programmes was resulting in the provision of services with variable quality. In an episode that illustrates this, in 2002 Andrew (now Lord) Adonis, then education lead in the Number 10 Policy Unit, received a leaflet inviting him to take his children to an aromatherapy session at the local Sure Start programme.¹⁰

As the policy evolved towards a more comprehensive and standardised set of services, there were concerns from some quarters about the shift of emphasis towards providing childcare and supporting the employability of parents. The worry was that this would drown out attention to quality of the early education offer. In one episode which became quite well known, Norman Glass, who had led the original Treasury review which led to the establishment of Sure Start, went public with his concerns in *The Guardian*, satirising the shift. ‘For poor mothers, work was the answer, and Sure Start was to play its role as a sort of New Deal for Toddlers.’¹¹ However, others we interviewed were clear that the expansion strengthened poverty alleviation and drove high-quality provision of children’s services.

Defining objectives

As the move towards expansion took place, the overall commitment to the scale and ambition of children’s centres was strong. Everyone continued to be committed to the values of Sure Start and believed in what they were doing. Margaret Hodge, who was a Minister for Children in the department from 2003 to 2005, recalled, ‘The buy-in across everybody was fantastic. Everyone was committed to it in central and local government.’ But there was less clarity about the purpose and objectives of an expanded programme. As Hodge went on to tell us, ‘interpretation and priorities differed’.

Partly this was simply a product of churn in the political system. Between 2002 and 2010, DfES and its successor, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) had four secretaries of state and responsibility for Sure Start and children’s centres passed between at least four junior ministers. Additionally, the programme carried the legacy of previous ministers who had been involved at the inception of Sure Start. Ministers were committed advocates for the policy, but naturally brought their own interests and ideas to the table. Some were interested in childcare, some in giving children the best start in life. Some saw early education as the path to improving outcomes while others wanted to focus on improving parenting.

But some research participants also argued that the shift to universal provision as part of providing a good start for all children shifted the focus away from targeted intervention, although the focus on poverty alleviation remained, and made it harder to clearly define what Sure Start’s priorities were. A former minister told us, ‘What we were trying to achieve was hugely ambitious. We wanted welfare to work. We wanted nurturing. We wanted to develop parenting skills. We wanted childcare, which we got right in terms of numbers but not quality.

¹⁰ Eisenstadt, N., *Providing a Sure Start: How government discovered early childhood*, 2011, p. 97.

¹¹ Glass, N, ‘Surely some mistake?’ *The Guardian*, 5 January 2005, retrieved 10 July 2014 from <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2005/jan/05/guardiansocietysupplement.childrensservices>

We wanted to be working with dads. We bit off more than we could chew by trying to do everything.’ According to our interviewees, the tensions inherent in wanting to deliver so many things were never fully resolved.

Shifting governance

The other big shift in the period running up to a universal offer was in the governance of Sure Start. Cross-departmental responsibility for Sure Start changed from DfES and the Department of Health (DH) to DfES (later Department for Children, Schools and Families, DCSF) and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) after the 2002 Spending Review. Further, Naomi Eisenstadt’s role changed from head of the dedicated Sure Start Unit to Director for Sure Start, Early Years and Childcare. She stopped reporting to a minister in the Department of Health and started reporting to Cathy Ashton, a junior minister in both DWP and DfES.

Subsequent ministers responsible for the policy however, held posts only in the education department. The eventual shift away from a unit that reported to multiple departments to some extent represented a change back to the more normal set-up in the Department for Education and Skills. But these changes were complemented by elements designed to strengthen cross-departmental co-operation in other ways, including through a cross-departmental programme board.

Preparing for the tasks ahead

The big implementation tasks that needed to be managed were:

- the delivery of the target – which partly relied on a fast and effective capital build programme, although co-location with existing services was also very common
- getting local players on board – mainly local authorities who would now be responsible for children’s centres
- identifying the practitioners who would play a role in managing and staffing the Centre’s themselves
- creating the conditions for real service integration.

These implementation tasks were for the most part executed successfully. First the target number of children’s centres was delivered by the set deadline, and the services provided in them were in high demand and popular with parents. Second, although it was not straightforward to get local authorities on board and ensure an adequate workforce was available, progress was made throughout implementation because of ministerial and official oversight, and the support of a delivery partner.

On some of these tasks, the department also undertook planning activity before implementation got underway.

On preparing for the capital build programme, the department produced guidance to support local authorities.¹² But it realised there could be no one-size-fits-all planning for local authorities across the country. Rural areas and urban centres would need to work differently. To this end, the department provided some further consultancy support once implementation was underway but also relied on local areas taking initiative.

Service integration was supported by comprehensive reforms taking place in local government. The Children's Act 2004 created a new role in local government, the 'director of children's services' (DCS), which concentrated responsibility for all locally-provided services for children across education and social services. This provided an opportunity for children's centres, as it provided a natural lever for integration, but it was not without challenges.

As we will show, the people occupying this new post were juggling multiple priorities and typically had backgrounds in education rather than early years. Sheila Scales, the director responsible for running the programme in the department, told us, 'Most of the people who got the jobs were ex-education directors, and early years just wasn't a thing you did on your way to getting that job.' This meant that prioritising the implementation of children's centres would partly rely on their personal commitment, although government would use ministerial and official involvement, as well as the ring-fenced funding provided, to further bring local authorities on board.

Establishing children's centres

The implementation of children's centres began in 2004. Implementation was staged, rather than happening at all once. The programme was rolled out first in the 20% most deprived communities in England (Phase 1, 2004 to 2006). This phase mostly involved converting existing SSLPs – but also provision established through earlier initiatives, such as Early Excellence Centres and Neighbourhood Nurseries – into children's centres, although there was some new building.¹³ The first phase was therefore mainly about rationalisation and branding. But it also involved moving to a common core offer, for instance building childcare into the standard services offered.

The second and third phases pushed this further – eventually covering all areas in the third phase. Centres in the second phase, rolled out from 2006 to 2008, brought the core offer to remaining areas in the bottom 30% of the deprivation scale. Centres in the third phase, established between 2008 and 2010, covered more affluent areas and did not have to provide childcare and early education places. This phase also relied on refurbishing and

¹² Sure Start, *Sure Start Guidance 2004-06: Overview and local delivery arrangements*, DfES, 2003, http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151715/https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/SSGuide-0406_part1.pdf; *A Sure Start Children's Centre for every community Phase 2 planning guidance*, DfES, 2005, http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/5829/1/Phase_2_Guidance-1.pdf; *Sure Start Children's Centres: Phase 3 Planning and Delivery*, DCSF, 2007, <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/8049/1/DCSF-00665-2007.pdf>

¹³ National Audit Office, *Sure Start Children's Centres*, 2006, p. 12; and Ball, M., & Niven, L., *Buildings in Sure Start Local Programmes*, 2005, retrieved 10 July 2014 from <http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/implementation/documents/328.pdf>.

converting existing facilities rather than new building.¹⁴ In these areas, it was expected that children's centres would build on existing services, including schools and nurseries.¹⁵

Managing competing priorities

As we explained above, the task of planning and developing children's centres sat with the newly-created directors of children's services in local authorities. There was often strong personal commitment to children's centres in local authorities, from the new directors but particularly, we were told, from mid-level officials. Nonetheless, local authorities did not always find it easy to prioritise children's centres, despite their commitment, because there were so many existing policy priorities already in train. High-risk and high-visibility areas such as school standards and safeguarding understandably had to come first. A former senior official in the department told us 'One shouldn't assume that they weren't interested in driving it, it's just that if you've got risks to children in your area, you can't afford to have them down your agenda.'

The government was also sending strong signals that improvements in schools were a priority. 'A lot of the messages from the Department for Education were about schools, extended Schools, school standards, teaching reform, and so on.' Directors of children's services therefore did not always have space to champion children's centres, even though the department worked to reach out to local authorities. A senior official told us:

We ran conferences with ADCS [The Association of Directors of Children's Services], Solace [the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives] etc., but these still engaged more the middle managers. Sheila Scales raised this explicitly in one of those meetings [by asking] "why would you not be more of a leader in this area?" Even when we went to ADCS meetings it wasn't very much on the agenda.

As we will show below though, the establishment of Together for Children as the new delivery partner helped address this challenge by working to bring local authority managers on board where necessary.

Creating delivery capacity

During the first phase of delivery, central government relied on staff operating out of regional government offices to provide support to local authorities in implementing the policy. But feedback from local areas, combined with a review of delivery conducted by the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit (PMDU), identified that this arrangement did not appear to be working well. Because government office staff typically had little experience with the services in question, they lacked credibility with local stakeholders and did not appear to be gaining the traction needed. They were, in the words of Sheila Scales, 'relatively junior people. They weren't strongly led or managed from the department, and so they were almost universally

¹⁴ Children, Schools and Families Committee, *Sure Start Children's Centres*, House of Commons, 2010, p. 18-19, retrieved 10 July from

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmchilsch/130/13002.htm>

¹⁵ *Sure Start Children's Centres: Phase 3 Planning and Delivery*, DCSF, 2007, <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/8049/1/DCSF-00665-2007.pdf>

regarded as an annoying irrelevance by the local authorities, who didn't see that they were going to bring anything to the party'. Although, our interviewees were clear that the quality of the staff varied regionally.

Consequently the department made the decision to let a contract for a new delivery partner to support local authorities implementing children's centres. In 2006 it appointed the consortium Together for Children (TfC), which consisted of Serco, 4Children and PA Consulting. This had some similar elements to the 'field force' model used in the delivery of the literacy and numeracy strategies from the mid-1990s onward. There was some frustration in central government about the efficacy of field forces though, and broader concerns about the proliferation of single-issue teams all working on different initiatives but often trying to engage the same people in local authorities. So departmental officials worked hard to ensure that the new support model was as effective as possible and worked in a way which added value for local authorities as well as the department itself.

Sheila Scales highlighted the tendering process, which forced the department to clearly specify its requirements for a delivery partner.

I was very anxious when we set up the Together for Children model that they would genuinely be seen as helpful by local authorities and were not just there to come around every week to say 'how many have you done', that they actually could help in the holy grail of sharing best practice, they would know what was happening somewhere else and they could discuss with the people charged with delivery what the issues were with making things happen on the ground.

During the tendering process, officials prompted bidders to find a leader for the consortium who had experience in the area and would be able to engage credibly with local leaders. The winning consortium was led by Liz Railton, a former director of children's services, who could rely on her knowledge of the area and contacts when she was running Together for Children. By changing the delivery model in response to feedback, and by rigorously specifying and contracting for the right kind of capability, the department created an effective delivery partner that would help overcome many challenges of implementation.

Making it happen at pace

Phases two and three of the children's centres rollout were more heavily focused on the delivery of new children's centres through a combination of new buildings and the establishment of centres in existing buildings, often schools. The commitment to deliver such a large programme – consisting in part of delivering a capital building programme – on a relatively short timescale was very ambitious, and although it did prove challenging for many local authorities, it was delivered by the deadline.

Senior officials who were involved with implementation in the department told us that the existence of an 'iconic' target itself was a highly-motivating factor in implementation. But other characteristics of the delivery model were equally important, including the close relationships the department was able to build with local authorities via the delivery partner Together for Children. Together for Children acted as an enforcer, pushing local authorities

towards their targets; as a supporting mechanism, providing assistance where needed; and as mentor and channel for spreading good practice. It also had the task of designating children's centres when they satisfied the criteria and provided the relevant services. Its effectiveness in supporting local authorities to deliver children's centres was partly based on its investment in building trust with them. This was made much easier given it was run by experienced, senior professionals with backgrounds in local authorities. But it was also careful to be open and transparent with local authorities as it went about its work. Liz Railton, the National Director of Together for Children, told us:

[They] were very careful about how we came about our work. We were very open to local authorities about what we were saying to government. We certainly weren't trying to bring tons of bricks down on any local authorities. We were genuinely trying to make them successful. Because we were quite close to government but also very open about what we were doing, people started to see that there was a conduit back to local government.

We were also told that rigorous project management kept implementation on track and highlighted problems early enough for resolution. The project management capability (largely developed by PA Consulting as part of the Together for Children consortium) enabled tracking of progress and a risk-based approach to supporting local authorities. Critically, this did not just mean local authorities got the support they needed, but that ministers were able to easily keep in touch with progress. This was facilitated by direct access to ministers, and what officials described as frank discussions between Together for Children and the department. Liz Railton told us, "No surprises" was really important to both sides... This was quite political, so it was important to give accurate information, to understand their [the politicians'] position.' A senior official in the department said:

There was a lot of discussion and debate and they [Together for Children] had a lot of access to ministers. As officials, we didn't seek to filter messages and they were very much around the table. That meant you had to have really trusted people in the team and we had a lot of confidence in how they operated.

The challenges of speed

The pace of the programme created challenges for delivery too though. Having to deliver the target of 3,500 children's centres meant much attention was focused on creating or establishing buildings which to some extent crowded out some of the other important implementation challenges, particularly quality and workforce development. This was particularly the case where centres were being built from scratch. One former minister told us, '[We] put too much into buildings and not enough into what went on inside them.'

Although there were obvious benefits to new buildings too. Clare Tickell, then Chief Executive of Action for Children, said, 'There is a building upside. One of the things that has made some centres more difficult to close is that they are these iconic places. Building has helped embed the policy. There were lots of problems with the building programme, but it was a strong signal.' We were also told that new buildings signalled an enthusiasm to invest in deprived communities.

The pace also created practical challenges in areas where deeper thinking was needed about how to make children's centres fit with local circumstances. In rural areas, for instance, implementers experienced a particular set of issues. Jan Casson, a locality manager in Northumberland, told us, 'There was no way I could put a centre in each community. Some communities consisted of three houses on their own.'

The department did work in advance on 'rural-proofing' its guidance on children's centres, but some of the practical details could naturally only be worked out in direct dialogue between officials in the department and implementers once delivery was underway. In one rural area, for instance, adapting the services to local need required spending more on fuel because it made more sense to bring the services to the community. While there was enough flexibility to eventually accommodate local circumstances, some research participants felt that the department could have done more to create appropriate channels for learning about and spreading good practice in areas that would find implementation more challenging.

Integrating services at local and national levels

The successful integration of services at a local level required joined-up working in central government. Specifically, clear signalling or incentives to Jobcentres and local health organisations were needed from DWP and DH to ensure they worked closely with children's centres. There certainly were instances of effective local integration, but the commitment to the aims of the programme that were apparent at a senior level in DWP and DH, did not appear to consistently translate into behaviour at local level.¹⁶ Sheila Scales said:

It was not evident that the things that they were rewarded for would be progressed any faster and better by using children's centres ... for the health service it would have been waiting times... [Staff in Job Centres] worried about getting people into jobs tomorrow, and working in this more slow-burn way with people in children's centres wasn't in their way of working.

Consequently, Job Centres and health providers locally did not always prioritise engagement with children's centres.

This could indicate that clearer messaging and incentives were needed from central government, but also points to the limits of central government's ability to drive service integration on the frontline. Indeed, as DWP found in its own research, local service integration often relied on a range of factors largely beyond the control of central government, including the personal commitment of centre managers to making local relationships work.^{17,18}

¹⁶ See Lewis, J., Cuthbert, R., and Sophie Sarre, 'What are Children's Centres? The Development of CC Services, 2004-2008', *Social Policy and Administration*, vol. 45 no. 1 (2011), p. 45-8 on integrating services and staff, who also found that integrating working practices across staff members working for different organisations was challenging for centre managers.

¹⁷ In a 2009 survey of 20 centres, Ofsted found that 'a weaker element of provision was found to be the link to Jobcentre Plus. No heads of centre were fully satisfied with the quality of the link'.

Developing a workforce

Children's centres generated considerable demand from parents. Ensuring an adequate supply of well-qualified early years professionals and centre leaders for the rapidly expanding network of centres proved to be more difficult than had been anticipated. Government had worked with a small number of highly-committed practitioners in Sure Start Local Programmes and – as it turned out incorrectly – assumed that this capacity existed all over the country. Indeed, in Naomi Eisenstadt's view, 'failure to pay attention to the workforce issue was one of the biggest implementation mistakes'.

Recruiting practitioners of adequate quality, fast enough to keep pace with the expansion was particularly challenging.¹⁹ One centre leader told us that they 'had to grow [their] own workforce', building up their qualifications over time, and that they 'really struggled on quality to being with'. As centres often integrated existing provision from organisations across sectors, the quality and level of qualifications was variable between centres and sometimes within them as well. In particular, voluntary providers typically had less-qualified staff.²⁰ One reason for this challenge was the fact that government was spearheading drives in a number of areas, notably school standards and the expanding the number of teaching assistants, which all increased demand on education-related workforces. These policies may effectively have been competing for prospective staff.

A related but separate task was to recruit the right people with adequate qualifications to manage children's centres across the country. While in many areas there were excellent children's centre managers, and many new entrants in the field, went on to gain qualifications that were shown to make a difference to the centres they were running,²¹ finding qualified managers initially proved difficult.²² Government took steps to address this though, most obviously through the National Professional Qualification for Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL) – a qualification that is now held by around 60% of Centre managers.

¹⁸ A report commissioned by DWP in 2008 found 'extremely varied' joint working but attributed it to a wider range of factors, including parents' ambivalence about Jobcentre Plus staff in children's centres, and lack of willingness on the part of children's centre managers. Dench, S., Aston, J., James, L., Foster, R., *Jobcentre Plus and Children's Centres: Research report No 485*, DWP, 2008 p. 22, retrieved 11 July 2014 from <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130128102031/http://statistics.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2007-2008/rrep485.pdf>

¹⁹ In fieldwork done in 2008 and 2009, none in a sample of 37 centres 'had the full complement of staff recommended by the 2007 guidance' (Lewis et al., p. 45)

²⁰ Melhish, E., Belsky, J., MacPherson, K., Cullis, A., *The Quality of Group Childcare Settings Used by 3-4 year old Children in Sure Start Local Programme Areas and the Relationship with Child Outcomes*, Gov.UK website, DfE, 2010, which found that childcare run by voluntary organisations generally had less well qualified staff, and that higher qualifications are associated with higher quality provision and better outcomes. Retrieved 11 July 2014 from https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/182027/DFE-RR068.pdf; also Lewis et al., 'What are Children's Centres? The Development of CC Services, 2004-2008', p. 42.

²¹ 'Memorandum submitted by the Institute of Education (IOE), University of London' as evidence to the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee inquiry into Sure Start Children's Centres, Parliament UK website, 2009, retrieved 11 July 2014 from <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmchilsch/memo/trainingsocwor/ucm2502.htm>

²² Lewis et al., 'What are Children's Centres? The Development of CC Services, 2004-2008', p. 45

This was developed by leaders in the sector, funded by the department, and since 2004 has been offered by the National College.²³

Ensuring quality and impact

Learning about what works and sharing best practice

Although the policy placed responsibility for quality and impact with local authorities, the department provided guidance on managing performance and quality, and where possible, Together for Children used its reach across the country to enable the sharing of good practice on setting up children's centres.

However, some practitioners thought the policy would have benefited from even more support for learning about what worked and the impact of interventions. Julian Grenier, a nursery and centre head in the London Borough of Newham, told us that there was 'no obvious mechanism to feedback on what was going well and what was not...[and] we never had enough time to stop and learn because of the pace, the numbers'. Additionally, evidence provided to the House of Commons Education Select Committee suggested that early years professionals, trained primarily to work with children and families, lacked the skills to devise and use measures that would allow them to understand the impact they are making and identify what works.²⁴

Later on, the department focused more strongly on building up the children's centre professional community in these areas, establishing a children's centre leader network in around 2009 to enable sharing best practice, led by an experienced practitioner and including centre leaders from each region. However, it is worth noting that the nature of the outcomes that children's centres aimed to affect made it particularly difficult to learn from results and calibrate practice based on evidence. Effects of early intervention are difficult to measure and some only occur much later in children's lives so data is often only available with long delays.

Over time, further new mechanisms were introduced to understand and improve the quality of services provided in children's centres. From 2006, Ofsted inspected the quality of childcare in children's centres, and from 2010, it also inspected the quality of children's centres as a whole. While it took time for Ofsted to develop measures that practitioners felt were useful, it did improve pressure for measuring and understanding impact. Jan Casson, who manages a number of children's centres in Northumberland, told us 'Ofsted developed its own measures that were quite thorough on outcomes – are you reaching the right people, are they coming, is it making any difference to them.' Although this initially 'surprised local authorities and some felt it wasn't making much sense... it has improved over time'. This appears to be demonstrated in the results. Of Centres inspected between November 2013

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 44

²⁴ Children, Schools and Families Committee, *Sure Start Children's Centres*, House of Commons, 2010, p. 51-3, retrieved 10 July from <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmchilsch/130/13002.htm>

and March 2014, Ofsted has found 49% to be 'good' or outstanding, with 8% judged inadequate.

Formal evaluation

In addition to the efforts described above, a number of formal external evaluations have taken place or are underway to assess the impact of Sure Start, and latterly children's centres. The department originally commissioned a team of academics at Birkbeck in 2001 to assess the effects of Sure Start Local Programmes. The first report on the impact of Sure Start, published in 2005, brought disappointing findings just as Sure Start was being scaled up. It found that while the programme had had no effect overall, children of teen mothers were actually doing worse on some measures as a result of the intervention. Although the research design of the evaluation set a high bar for detecting impact, the results undermined confidence in the policy for some time.²⁵ However, later data showed positive effects on parenting and home environment measures among those they surveyed, and the researchers attributed some of the improvement to the standardisation of services to the roll-out of children's centres. In 2011, an evaluation was commissioned from NatCen, Oxford University, and Frontier Economics, to look specifically at children's centres. The evaluators will publish their impact findings in 2015.

Ministers, politics and implementation

Political buy-in was critical to successful implementation throughout the period we examined. As described throughout, ministers were hands on, visiting newly-established centres to help keep momentum high and advocating to (and when necessary putting pressure on) local authority leaders about the importance of delivering the programme.

Some ministers, for instance Beverley Hughes who was Minister for Children from 2005 to 2009, also got closely involved in the management of the programme in the department. She took a keen interest in ensuring that progress was being made and that the target would be met. Research participants felt her close involvement made a significant difference to implementation. In particular, we were told by a former senior official that she 'held relentless weekly meetings and was absolutely down to the detail of what was happening at centre X and local authority Y. She mirrored on the children's centres side what Andrew Adonis was doing on the academies side. It is worth reflecting whether that level of ministerial scrutiny was one of the key reasons of success.' There was also a strong sense in the department that with such a public commitment to a delivery target, a lot was at stake and that the Prime Minister was personally interested in the programme.

But the flipside of ministerial engagement and prime ministerial interest was the fact that both before and during implementation, children's centres – and the original Sure Start programme – was a policy strongly associated with Labour. As a former official who also was also involved with the policy in local government said, 'Labour drove it through every council even where there was Conservative opposition – everybody called it Labour's

²⁵ Eisenstadt, *Providing a Sure Start: How government discovered early childhood*, p. 128.

flagship.’ But while this political salience was critical to delivery, in retrospect it also arguably had consequences for how likely any future government that did not include Labour would be to pick up the baton and take it forward.

From 2011-12, the ring-fence around the children’s centre grant was removed and some of the requirements around service provision were relaxed. This meant that local authorities decided whether to maintain existing provision in terms of services and number of centres. Available research shows that this has led local authorities as well as individual centres to provide services in a more targeted way and in some limited instances has resulted in closures and restructuring of Centres.²⁶ Although the Coalition’s change of emphasis means the programme is not continuing as originally designed, the infrastructure, many of the local services, and the ways of working it was built around, now serve as a strong foundation for refining service provision in an area which had little concerted public provision as recently as 15 years ago.

Conclusion and lessons

Children’s centres were a highly ambitious programme. They were an attempt to reshape local service provision in an area where services had been fragmented and where many different professions would have to work together. They built on recent, largely innovative and somewhat experimental work, universalising a previously localised service. They were implemented into a changing, and already crowded, institutional and policy landscape at the local level. Besides service transformation, they relied on a large capital programme delivered by local authorities with varying capacity and local circumstances. The implementation was very successful in terms of delivering the capital programme and to a large extent in terms of transforming services.

The complexity and level of ambition mean that a number of useful lessons can be drawn out from the story of children’s centres.

Provide clarity of purpose

Children’s centres benefitted from high levels of commitment. Those involved believed in what they were doing and this drove delivery. But there would have been value in being more precise about the objectives of children’s centres. The success of children’s centres depended on the integrated provision of a number of services and on establishing and sometimes building spaces where the new integrated service would be provided. To focus this complicated endeavour on improving outcomes for children, local authorities would have benefited from a clearer and more consistent statement of what outcomes children’s centres were meant to improve.

²⁶ Waldegrave, H., *Centres of Excellence?* Policy Exchange, 2013 p. 25, retrieved 11 July 2014 from <http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/centres%20of%20excellence.pdf> ; DfE, *Evaluation of Children’s Centres in England*, 2013, Gov.UK website, Strand 3 p. 95-6, retrieved 10 July 2014 from <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/evaluation-of-childrens-centres-in-england-ecce>

Examine local context and build on existing assets

The geographical reach of the policy meant that flexibility was needed for the policy to work in areas with specific needs (e.g. rural areas, where it was not possible to build a children's centre in each community and instead more money needed to be spent on transport). This was done to some extent, for instance in the form of the department's rural-proofing of the guidance, but it took effort and adjustment to make it work in practice and some of our research participants felt that government policies would benefit from more consideration of such specifics.

Implementation also successfully drew on existing local assets, for instance in many areas children's centres successfully co-located on existing school sites. Some of the more successful children's centres used other existing buildings, for example, a community fire station.

Use the various tools at your disposal to drive progress and stay in touch with how implementation is moving forward

Officials and ministers in the department used a number of approaches, and created capacity where needed, to ensure that the target number of children's centres was delivered.

The top-level target itself created much needed momentum in government and locally. This was supported by project management capacity embedded in Together for Children, which helped drive implementation locally and gave the department a trustworthy view of progress and challenges.

Implementation was also propelled by ministers when they got involved in the detail of delivery – which was in turn supported by effective and credible progress tracking – and when they used their voice to signal the priority of the policy to local leaders.

Assess capacity in the system

We heard that that DfES underestimated the need to build up capacity in the workforce, both of early years professionals and of children's centre managers. This was partially because the department had been working with a handful of enthusiastic innovative leaders and overestimated the availability of skilled and experienced professionals. This improved over time with the creation of the National Professional Qualification for Integrated Centre Leadership, but more comprehensive early engagement with practitioners could have helped the department assess and address potential capacity gaps.

Find or create credible organisations with the capacity to support delivery

Two years into the six-year implementation process, DfES acted on feedback about the efficacy of its existing delivery model, which relied on government office staff, and issued a tender for a delivery partner. The result was Together for Children, a consortium that brought together a charity, a project management firm, and Serco.

This was a highly effective model for delivery because it brought together project management capability with credible local and sectoral expertise. The consortium was led by a former senior local government official with experience of children's services. It was able to hire highly-experienced staff, so they were seen as a valuable partner by local authorities. It provided targeted support to local authorities, but also to help resolve issues between partners locally and to spread good practice, while the experience of its staff gave it credibility to act as a challenging partner where needed. Because TfC acted as a conduit between central and local government, ministers and officials also trusted it to tell the truth about delivery.

Balance the need for delivery at pace with other objectives

The pace of implementation made it difficult to use opportunities for building on existing knowledge and for learning about how the policy was affecting outcomes. Furthermore, the early focus on delivering children's centres, as new buildings or in existing locations, meant that thinking about quality and outcomes often happened later. Research participants felt that central government could have provided more opportunities for learning and sharing best practice, and that professionals and local authorities could have benefited from more support in areas such as measuring outcomes. This was something in which many early years practitioners were not trained.

Core priorities of other actors in the system can create barriers to alignment

Children's centres were one of many priorities for local authorities and frontline services. Job Centres were concerned with getting people into jobs quickly; local health services with waiting times. In a similar vein, directors of children's services were incentivised to prioritise high-risk and high-visibility areas of work such as safeguarding and school standards. There were natural links between children's centres and other initiatives and priorities, but some of those in the system treated them as competing priorities. Although central government is limited in its ability to drive local integration and alignment, earlier investment in clearly communicating and in exploiting those links would have supported local activity.

Use feedback and external challenge to adapt the system and your role in it

The move towards the evolved delivery model was the result of the department taking feedback seriously, both from local authorities and from the centre of government. Feedback from local authorities helped the department realise that the model of using Government Office staff to support local areas was not working as effectively as it might. Similarly, a PMDU review contributed to the decision to contract a delivery partner to provide support and undertake monitoring of implementation at the local level.