

Children's centres 'popular but under pressure to deliver more with less'

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Oxford researchers have highlighted how the role of children's centres across the UK has changed. According to their report, children's centres have increasingly become more focussed on the most disadvantaged rather than supporting families more generally in some of the poorest communities.

The research, commissioned by the UK Government's Department for Education, suggests that while children's centres continue to be popular,

almost half of the staff are dealing with families 'on [social workers](#)' books' who have complex needs and are increasingly the focus of their work. It says that the centres continue to have a valuable role in supporting some of the poorest communities. Yet it also warns that there is a risk of losing their welcoming open access services as a consequence of increased targeting of services towards the most vulnerable.

Children's centres offer services such as stay and play, parenting programmes, early learning and childcare, developing volunteers and provide breastfeeding support, says the report. Both staff and parents commented on the ability of centres to avoid stigma, while successfully reaching very disadvantaged families. However, the report also finds that alongside the challenges of more complex needs of families, children's centres also had less support from outside partner agencies than in the past.

Leadership and management were assessed in both the traditional standalone centres and 'clusters' of centres, where one senior manager is responsible for several units. It found 'clusters' had fewer well qualified staff and offered less provision for day-to-day [family](#) needs, such as emotional support for couples. Not surprisingly, the report also found that frequent reorganisation of centres and services led to more staff changes, and greater responsibilities and workloads for frontline staff.

Senior researcher Professor Kathy Sylva, from the University of Oxford's Department of Education, said: 'Our study shows that staff and managers in children's centres are working incredibly hard to meet the needs of their communities. Yet they admit and our qualitative data shows that their overall capacity is over-stretched. Delivering the impressive aims of the children's centre programme will require intelligent management and optimisation of resources to enable centres to continue to offer effective services that support families in poorer areas.'

The centres in this study were mostly located in very disadvantaged areas. Even the few found in less [disadvantaged areas](#) still drew a one third of their users from poor areas, says the report. Centres typically had a very high level of registration among families with children aged 0-4 and each centre dealt with an average of 770 children.

Researchers carried out face-to-face interviews or conducted questionnaires with staff and parents in 121 [children's](#) centres in 2012, with follow-up interviews in 2013. They also analysed data such as minutes from meetings and staff self-report questionnaires. Visits by the researchers assessed the range of activities and services that centres deliver. Data was also collected from 72 local authorities including postcodes of users and administrative data from the centre catchment area.

Provided by Oxford University

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