

**FINAL REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY REVIEW PANEL ON  
CHILDREN'S CENTRES**

*It has long been recognised that experiences in the early years of life have a highly significant influence on later development. More recently, there has been an appreciation that it is more effective for agencies to work with vulnerable families in a holistic way and with support focused and co-ordinated by a lead professional.*

*Work delivered through Leicestershire Children's Centres addresses both these matters. This Panel has scrutinised that work and concluded that it is and should continue to be valuable. We explain the value in some detail in our report but, put briefly, there are two key groups of beneficiaries. Obviously, one is the families who use the services delivered. The other is all of us, because the Centres' work reduces the demand for later, high cost, services and assists economic growth through the creation of a more skilful and confident workforce.*

*I should like to thank my fellow Panel Members for their contributions to our joint understanding of the issues and all those who have assisted the Panel, which includes, of course, some of the service users.*

**Richard Shepherd**  
County Councillor for Sileby & the Wolds  
richard.shepherd@leics.gov.uk



## Recommendations

- a) That the Cabinet be urged to emphasise the importance and the long-term savings provided by the early interventions offered in the County's Children's Centres, including their contribution to the work of the Supporting Leicestershire Families Programme, and commit to continuing to fund the Centres so that they may continue to support both children and parents to a meaningful extent.
- b) In the light of the large body of evidence demonstrating the importance of early help and intervention in improving outcomes and life chances for, and reducing public sector involvement with, individuals in later life, the Cabinet and the Lead Member, should use all means that are available to persuade central Government to make sufficient Government funding available and identifiable to support this work and ensure it can be maintained at the level necessary in the future.
- c) That the benefits of the Children's Centres, in terms of preventing later more specialised interventions with children and young people, be promoted to the two Leicestershire Commissioning Consortia, the NHS Commissioning Consortium and the Health and Wellbeing Board, with a view to requesting financial support for the Children's Centre programme from these bodies.
- d) That the benefits of the Children's Centres, in terms of improving the skillsets, confidence and employability of both the parents and the children that are engaged with, be drawn to the attention of Leicestershire Together and its commissioning boards, to encourage those partnerships to identify resources that could be added to the Centres' programmes in recognition of the long-term economic benefits of a better educated workforce.
- e) That a protocol is drawn up with University Hospitals Leicester Midwifery Service and/or Leicestershire Partnership Trust Health Visiting Service that requires that/those Service/s to ask all new parents to fill out a consent form allowing their details to be shared with their local Children's Centre.
- f) That, if the assessment of the pilot continues to be positive, that the Department encourage partners to sign up to the Multi-Agency Information Sharing Hub as it is rolled out County-wide.
- g) That information (in a variety of media) on the importance of the home-learning environment and talking and playing with children to their healthy development be produced and made widely available to parents and carers.

## Terms of Reference

1. The Scoping document for the Review included the following seven outcomes for the Review Panel:
  - (a) To provide clarity regarding the expected outcomes for children and families accessing Children's Centres
  - (b) To enable an understanding of the role of partnership work in achieving those outcomes
  - (c) To enable members to understand the funding and sustainability implications of current arrangements for Leicestershire's Children's Centres
  - (d) To review the current arrangements for quality assurance across Leicestershire's Children's Centres and identify improvements
  - (e) To test the processes in place to challenge unsatisfactory performance
  - (f) To provide clarity around the requirements of the Ofsted Inspection regime for Children's Centres and how these are to be met
  - (g) To develop an understanding of the potential impact of the Supporting Leicestershire Families programme on the Children's Centres.

## Membership of the Panel

2. The following members were appointed to serve on the Panel:

Mr M H Charlesworth CC  
 Mr D Jennings CC  
 Mrs H E Loydall CC  
 Mr J Miah CC

Mrs R Page CC  
 Mrs C M Radford CC  
 Mr R J Shepherd CC

The Scrutiny Commissioner Mr Shepherd was appointed Chairman of the Panel.

## Conduct of the Review

3. The Panel met on four occasions during December 2012 and January 2013. The focus of the Review was a day spent in Harborough District, visiting Children's Centres and observing the Harborough Locality Partnership Group's (LPG) Annual Conversation.
4. The Panel was supported in its work by Lesley Hagger, Interim Director of Children and Young People's Service (CYPS), Gill Weston, Improvement and Development Officer in CYPS and Moira O'Hagan, Locality Partnership Co-ordinator, CYPS.
5. During the day in Harborough District, the Panel met with a number of officers and representatives from other agencies, who are listed in Appendix A. The Panel also met with a number of parents.

## Background

6. The Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report on Children's Centres at its meeting on 21 November 2011, which included the outcomes of recent Ofsted Inspections. The Committee agreed to recommend that a Review Panel should be established. The Scoping Document was approved by the Committee on 11 June 2012.
7. A proposal was considered and approved in September by the Scrutiny Commissioners that the Review Panel should observe an Annual Conversation, in the expectation it would receive almost all the information and evidence it required in one day. The Panel therefore spent a day in Harborough District, visiting the Children's Centres at Broughton Astley and Lutterworth and observing the Harborough LPG's Annual Conversation.

## Leicestershire's Children's Centre Programme

*The Core Purpose of Children's Centres is to improve outcomes for young children and their families, with a particular focus on the most disadvantaged, so children are equipped for life and ready for school, no matter what their background or family circumstances. – Department for Education site, <http://www.education.gov.uk/a00191780/core-purpose-of-sure-start-childrens-centres> - accessed 4 February 2013*

8. Children's Centres are a statutory duty of top tier local authorities, health and JobCentre Plus, regulated through the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006, and are a local port of call for parents and carers when they need help or advice. While intended to be responsive to local need, they are subject to statutory government guidance and inspection by Ofsted.
9. The Centres allow parents to be and families with young children (including wider family members such as grandparents) to access early childhood services, such as: childcare; relevant social services functions of the Local Authority; health services for young children, parents and prospective parents; employment support from JobCentre Plus; and relevant information, advice and assistance. Not all of these services will be available within the Centres but rather the Centres will provide information and guidance on how to reach them.
10. There are approximately 35,000 children under five in Leicestershire, served by 39 Children's Centres. The County Council employs the team that forms the infrastructure for the Programme but the management is largely devolved to six Locality Partnership Groups (LPGs) (Blaby and Oadby and Wigston; Charnwood; Harborough; Hinckley and Bosworth; Melton; and North West Leicestershire). These are broad partnership groups, with representation from district councils, health, JobCentre Plus, the voluntary sector, police, youth service and children's services. LPGs are provided with strategic

targets (national and Countywide) and also set their own targets and performance indicators relating to provision made in response to local need.

11. The Centres are currently funded through the Early Intervention Grant (EIG), however, this grant will be subsumed into the County Council's settlement as from April 2013. The total budget for the Programme in Leicestershire is £6.44 million, with £2.7m devolved to the LPGs for locality commissioning purposes (calculated using a formula based on the number of under-fives in the area and the index of deprivation) and £2.8m for staffing costs. The rest of the money is taken up by the running costs for the Children's Centres and locality management costs: building costs are relatively low, as the programme focuses on outreach work. While the County Council has guaranteed the same level of funding for 2013/14 as was available in 2012/13, the total amount of funding the Council has will reduce in future years and the guarantee can not be repeated.
12. There is a focus in all LPGs on good quality outreach work to access families and communities based in villages without a Children's Centre. While all Centres provide a limited universal offer, such as baby weighing services, the programmes are largely targeted at the most vulnerable 20% of families with children under five.
13. Partnership working is essential to the success of the Programme: as well as forming part of the LPGs, partners are involved in running the Centres, the programmes and the services. Services are provided by a mix of voluntary sector, independent and statutory service providers; whilst referrals are made by the full range of agencies working with families, particularly health practitioners. Partners are also involved in the on-going evaluation of needs and how well services are performing and meeting those needs.
14. A focus of the Centres is supporting and training parents to provide some services for themselves: especially based in community facilities away from the Centres. This increases the reach of the Centres, benefits the communities and benefits the economic stability and wellbeing of the parents concerned, through increasing their skills and confidence.
15. The work with parents and families and the interaction provided with other children and adults is crucial to the development of the children concerned, for example, contributing to them being able to settle into school life when older.

### **Annual Conversation**

16. Children's Centres are required to carry out and report on regular self-evaluations, that are reviewed by Ofsted. To hold the management of the Centres to account (which in Leicestershire means the Locality Partnership Groups) and quality assure those self-evaluations, local authorities are required to conduct 'Annual Conversations' with their Children's Centres. In Leicestershire this is undertaken by the Executive Group of the Leicestershire Children and Young People's Commissioning Board (a partnership within the Leicestershire Together structure).

17. To date, there have been 11 Ofsted inspections of Children's Centres in Leicestershire (two of which were re-inspections). Nine of the Centres are rated as satisfactory and one as good. This compares to a national average of 70% of Centres being judged as good or outstanding. The particular issues arising from these inspections are: the cluster approach used in Leicestershire; the collection and use of data; parental involvement and the localities that have been the focus of inspection activity.
18. The Annual Conversation process in Leicestershire has therefore been designed, amongst other things, to enable the agencies involved to reflect on delivery of services provided by the Centres and better understand their effectiveness and challenges; to shift blockages; to ensure service users are involved, heard and responded to; and to prepare the ground for future Ofsted inspections. The Conversations have taken the form of a presentation by each LPG (represented by managers, staff, parents and officers or volunteers from other agencies involved in the Centres) to the Executive, followed by rigorous questioning and round table discussions of specific issues.
19. The Conversations have demonstrated that parental involvement in the running of the Centres and the decision making processes has been improved. The evidence from parents strongly indicates they feel valued and listened to, and that they have helped to shape services linked to local need. The Conversations have also highlighted where LPGs and individual Centres have experienced particular problems and these have been brought to the attention of the relevant officers and agencies to be resolved.
20. This is the first year the Annual Conversations have been undertaken. It is expected that this heightened accountability will have a positive impact on inspection outcomes.

#### **Links with Supporting Leicestershire Families (SLF) Programme**

21. The SLF Programme is an integrated, County-wide approach to supporting the most vulnerable families in Leicestershire, many of whom have experienced the same problems from one generation to the next. It has been accepted that there is a confusing range of public and voluntary sector services that work with many of these families, focusing on one issue, rather than working through the range of problems a family might be experiencing.
22. Families at risk of vulnerability are those two or more indications of vulnerability such as, poor housing, high risk behaviours, poverty, health problems, experience of crime or criminal behaviours, lack of education, domestic violence, poor parenting and lack of choices. Families with five or more are considered at high risk. The programme will take a family based approach with a view to using early interventions to enable these families to build capabilities, resilience and skills to promote effective parenting, improve educational performance, reduce worklessness and reduce incidence of anti-social behaviour.

23. The structure for the SLF Programme involves co-locating services in localities and using locality partnership solutions and delivery. This is very similar to the way the Children's Centre programme in Leicestershire has been designed. Interventions with the most vulnerable families will be co-ordinated by a dedicated Family Support Worker (FSW), with effective multi-agency relationships and information sharing to support the work to empower each family. It is expected that the support will be required over a relatively long period, for up to one year.

### **Key Findings of the Panel**

24. The Panel recognises the importance of early intervention to support families with young children because of the long-term benefits that arise from this and are clear that this work needs to be supported with adequate resources. The Panel feels that this finding underpins all of its subsequent recommendations.
25. Funding for the Centres is only guaranteed for one more year and there are real concerns regarding their sustainability going forward. The recent announcement that the Early Intervention Grant is to be subsumed into the County Council's settlement may make the identification of funding even more difficult. It is, however, recognised that the new funding structure does provide greater flexibility in developing and targeting the Programme and this is to be welcomed.
26. Many of the services provided through Children's Centres have a positive impact on the population's health; however, none of the arms of the NHS contribute any funding. The Panel notes that, from April 2013, the County Council will receive funding for Public Health functions.
27. The work with parents, including the input of JobCentre Plus, together with increasing attainment in the children who passed through the Centres, contributes more widely to the economic wellbeing of the County and is perhaps not recognised as widely as it should be.
28. The ability of Children's Centres to offer programmes based on local need is very important but the LGs do need to keep in mind the core purpose of Children's Centres and justify the need to extend any local programmes against that purpose.
29. The Local Authority has a statutory duty to complete Foundation Stage assessments, which take place in the Reception Year in schools: the relationship with schools remains, therefore, important.
30. Partnership working is crucial to increasing contact with families: essential if Ofsted outcomes are to be improved. The Panel is disappointed to learn that not all new births are registered with the Children's Centre Programme as this has, to date, relied heavily on individual relationships with health visitors in each area. This means that not all families have equitable access to the programme in Leicestershire and could miss out on supportive services that may improve outcomes for their children. A structured protocol for sharing the information does not exist.

31. Within each locality, families are free to access any Children's Centre (and can attend different ones for different services): it can be difficult to track families and their progress in these circumstances, particularly for Centres near local authority borders. It is the responsibility of the County Council to trace the outcomes for all families based in the County, even if they are using services based in the City, or another County. Whilst it is acknowledged that it is not possible to track all families using the services of the Programme, it is nonetheless important that each Locality evidences the progress that the most vulnerable families are making. A Multi-Agency Information Sharing Hub being piloted in Harborough and Hinckley and Bosworth may help with this. Although, in its early stages, progress is reported as good. Practitioners on the ground are saying that the ability the Hub gives them to access up-to-date information on new referrals to Centres is helping them to track families more effectively.
32. The Centres focus strongly on supporting parents to get involved in running the Centres and programmes. This needs to be maintained as new cohorts of parents come in and parents of older children move on. Parents/carers are involved in recruitment, volunteering, running programmes and sitting on decision-making bodies, up to the LPG itself. The Panel understands that, nationally, there is an aspiration for Children's Centres to become parent-run eventually: the Panel believes there will always be a role for professionals.
33. The Panel were concerned to hear that increasing numbers of children are arriving in nursery and pre-school settings with delayed speech and language or physical development. It is suggested this may be due to a lack of interaction by parents with their children to promote and encourage physical activity and speech. A lot of work is done through the Centres to help parents/carers prepare their child for the transition to school.
34. Concerns raised with the Panel include: welfare reforms and their potential impact on the most vulnerable families; public transport and social isolation for rural families; and funding, particularly from partner agencies.
35. The Supporting Leicestershire Families(SLF) Programme will operate on a similar model to the Children's Centres (locality based) and will work with many of the families known to the Centres, with a view to reducing the reliance of those families on services and improving their outcomes and attainment. There is clearly scope for the programmes to work together and share resources.
36. The Panel recognised the importance of the SLF programme both in terms of its potential to allow resources to be used more effectively and to enable people to live more fulfilled and resilient lives.
37. **The Panel makes the following recommendations:**
  - a) That the Cabinet be urged to emphasise the importance and the long-term savings provided by the early interventions offered in the County's



Children's Centres, including their contribution to the work of the Supporting Leicestershire Families Programme, and commit to continuing to fund the Centres so that they may continue to support both children and parents to a meaningful extent.

- b) In the light of the large body of evidence demonstrating the importance of early help and intervention in improving outcomes and life chances for, and reducing public sector involvement with, individuals in later life, the Cabinet and the Lead Member, should use all means that are available to persuade central Government to make sufficient Government funding available and identifiable to support this work and ensure it can be maintained at the level necessary in the future.
- c) That the benefits of the Children's Centres, in terms of preventing later more specialised interventions with children and young people, be promoted to the two Leicestershire Clinical Commissioning Groups, the NHS Commissioning Consortium and the Health and Wellbeing Board, with a view to requesting financial support for the Children's Centre programme from these bodies.
- d) That the benefits of the Children's Centres, in terms of improving the skillsets, confidence and employability of both the parents and the children that are engaged with, be drawn to the attention of Leicestershire Together and its commissioning boards, to encourage those partnerships to identify resources that could be added to the Centres' programmes in recognition of the long-term economic benefits of a better educated workforce.
- e) That a protocol is drawn up with University Hospitals Leicester Midwifery Service and/or Leicestershire Partnership Trust Health Visiting Service that requires that/those Service/s to ask all new parents to fill out a consent form allowing their details to be shared with their local Children's Centre.
- f) That, if the assessment of the pilot continues to be positive, that the Department encourage partners to sign up to the Multi-Agency Information Sharing Hub as it is rolled out County-wide.
- g) That information (in a variety of media) on the importance of the home-learning environment and talking and playing with children to their healthy development be produced and made widely available to parents and carers.

### **Equal Opportunities Implications**

Whilst a range of universal service provision is made available through Children's Centres (e.g. 2 year old health checks), the service is targeted to those families who are most disadvantaged and vulnerable. Services in localities are focused on where children experience the poorest outcomes and where there are the highest numbers of children on the Child Protection Register and Children in Care.

### **Resource Implications**

These are covered in the text of the report.

### **Appendices**

Appendix A – List of witnesses

*Richard Shepherd*

Richard Shepherd  
Chairman of the Panel

Michael Charlesworth



David Jennings



Helen Loydall



Jewel Miah



Rosita Page



Christine Radford

**Review Panel on Children's Centres: list of witnesses**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Role/Organisation</b>
Jill Allen	Family Outreach Worker, Broughton Astley Children's Centre, Leicestershire County Council
Donna Argo	Post-Natal Illness Co-ordinator, Home-Start, South Leicestershire
Naomi Blakemore	Family Outreach Worker, Lutterworth Children's Centre, Leicestershire County Council
Faye Clark	Family Outreach Worker, Lutterworth Children's Centre, Leicestershire County Council
Liz Clark	Head of Organisational Development, Leicestershire Partnership Trust
Maureen Curley	Leicestershire Partnership Trust
Amelia Day	Family Outreach Worker, Harborough District, Leicestershire County Council
Caroline Emmett	Little Rainbows Pre-School, Lutterworth
Brenda Fragona	Business Support Assistant and parent, Broughton Astley Children's Centre
Chris Freeman	Vice Principal, Thomas Estley College
Leigh Gregory	Health Visitor, Leicestershire Partnership Trust
Karen Hulet	Scheme Manager, Home-Start, South Leicestershire
Jo Johnston	Home-Start, South Leicestershire
Jackie Manning	Health Visitor, Leicestershire Partnership Trust
Helen Morrison	Health Visitors' Clinical Lead, Leicestershire Partnership Trust
Walter McCulloch	Assistant Director, Children and Young People's Service, Leicestershire County Council
Sam Nicholls	NHS Commissioning Consortia
Martin Pantling	Learning in Children's Centre Worker, Adults and Communities, Leicestershire County Council
Sharon Peverelle	Children's Centre Co-ordinator, Lutterworth Children's Centre, Leicestershire County Council
Julie Rogers	Family Outreach Worker, Harborough District, Leicestershire County Council
Rob Wade	Head of Children's Centre Programme (retired), Leicestershire County Council
Rob Wakefield	Local Partnership Co-ordinator (Harborough District), Leicestershire County Council
Gareth Williams	Director (retired), Children and Young People's Service, Leicestershire County Council

This page is intentionally left blank