

**The Mulberry Bush Child Care History Network
Centre for Social Policy, Dartington**

50 years of early years provision 1971-2021



Report of a seminar held in March 2022

Foreword

John Diamond

This set of papers covering aspects of the history of early years provision across the last 50 years, is a collaboration between the Dartington Centre for Social Policy and the Mulberry Bush Child Care History Network. Our original intention was to run a two day conference on the subject, but due to the complexities of the impact of Covid, this had to be cancelled. We then decided that the papers would be edited into a special edition of the Mulberry Bush online *Therapeutic Care Journal*, (www.thetcj.org) and the edition was published on June 1st.

We were delighted with the quality of the papers created from such an eminent group of writers with direct research, policy development and service delivery, and so we also decided to create this monograph as a way of ensuring lasting access to these important papers.

Our first paper by **Sonia Jackson** reflects on '**How the work of the Plowden Report (1967) sent Early Childhood care and Education in Britain down the wrong path, and why we have never found our way since**'. The paper explores how over the last 50 years, depending on the party in power, the needs of young children and their families has 'either been a focus of attention, or receded into the background, and consequently the basic shape of early childhood education and care as set in the Plowden recommendations has not changed'.

The next paper '**Transforming the early years 1975- 2005; a personal perspective**' by **Dame Gillian Pugh**, offers a detailed account of the history and development of early years services from her experience at the National Children's Bureau, the Coram Centre and as an advisor to the Dept of Education. Gillian traces the historical development of these services, and the reluctance of successive governments to support them until the tide began to turn, leading to the establishment of Sure Start in 1989.

This story is picked up in the paper '**Sure Start Review**' by **Naomi Eisenstadt** who was the first Director of the Sure Start programme. This paper explores the achievements and difficulties of establishing the service under the New Labour administration. As Naomi writes 'Sure Start was aimed at local areas with very high concentrations of poverty. Initial funding of £450 million over

three years was allocated for 250 Sure Start Local Programmes. Each programme would cover between 400 and 700 under fours living in some of the poorest neighbourhoods in England'.

Teresa Smith in her paper '**Narrowing the Gap? EPAs to Children's Centres 1971- 2021**' offers a focused overview of 50 years of research on implementation and outcomes for early years education and care.

In the last chapter, **Roger Bullock** reviews the changes that have been charted in the light of wider social, political and economic trends.

Finally, I would like to thank Michael Kelly for editing and formatting the report.

We hope you will enjoy these papers as an important analysis of the socio-political dynamics that surrounded the development, and in some cases the demise, of early years provision in England.

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How the Plowden Report (1967) sent Early Childhood Care and Education in Britain down the wrong path, and why we have never found our way since

Sonia Jackson

Abstract

The 1967 report of the Central Advisory Council for Education, chaired by Lady (Bridget) Plowden, was hailed as a breakthrough at the time. It was the first official recognition that the state has a role in the care and education of children before the compulsory school starting age of five. The key recommendation in relation to early years provision was that local authorities should offer part-time nursery education for nearly all four-year-olds and 'a good many' three-year-olds. Part time attendance should be the normal form of nursery education because 'young children should not be separated for long from their mothers'. The report was untouched by the second wave of feminism or by notions of equality and inclusion which informed early years policy in the Nordic countries and to a lesser extent in France and Italy. The pattern of short morning or afternoon sessions except for children in acute social need persists in the UK to this day. It ignores the needs of full-time working mothers, single parents and different forms of family organisation, especially among black and minority ethnic communities. Childminding, the major form of early years care outside the home, rated only half a sentence in the report. The crucial mistake was the failure to integrate early years provision with the statutory national education system, leaving it fatally vulnerable to political changes and economic downturns and making it the first candidate for cuts when local authorities fall on hard times.

Introduction

The first international conference that I ever attended was held in Copenhagen to share information about services for young children in European countries. I was invited by Roy Parker, Professor of Social Policy at the University of Bristol, to join a group of academics and practitioners from the UK, headed by Sir William Utting, a senior civil servant in the Department

of Health. The speaker from Denmark announced that they had just appointed a Commissioner for Children and made a decision that it was necessary to spend a much higher proportion of GDP on children of all ages, but especially on pre-school children. At the time, expenditure on children under school age in Denmark was at about the same level as in the UK.

One after another, speakers from the Nordic countries, France and Italy, set out ambitious plans to improve Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). I felt an acute sense of shame when Bill Utting tried to justify the chaotic patchwork of services in the UK on the grounds that they offered 'Choice and Diversity'. As a mother of young children myself, I knew this was simply untrue.

Access to formal early education was quite rare and depended on where the family happened to live. Even if you were lucky enough to live near a nursery school or an infant school with a nursery class, finding childcare to cover adult working hours was a constant problem. Organisations like BAECE (the British Association for Early Childhood Education, founded 1923) and the Nursery Schools Association had been campaigning for an expansion of nursery education for many years, with virtually no success. So the announcement by Sir Edward Boyle, then Minister of Education, that the Central Advisory Council for Education (CACE) was to be asked to conduct an enquiry on primary education in England, including pre-school provision, was widely welcomed. The appointment of Lady (Bridget) Plowden to chair the Council was rather accidental – she had sat next to Sir Edward at a dinner party – but it turned out to be an excellent choice.

Revisiting Plowden

What came to be known as the Plowden enquiry was the first major study of primary education since the Hadow Report in the very different circumstances of 1933. The committee, which met for over three years to consider its findings, was a rather curious mixture of experts, professional teachers and complete amateurs, guided by an able administrative Secretary, Maurice Kogan, a career civil servant who later became Professor of Public Policy at Brunel University. The most influential member of the group was probably Michael Young, although he kept a characteristically low profile. The final report, *Children and their Primary Schools* (CACE, 1967)

was extremely comprehensive, made extensive reference to the research available at the time and took evidence from a very wide range of organisations and individuals. The report was mainly drafted by another civil servant, Derek Gillard, who later noted caustically that the translation of the report into Welsh occupied four professors for nine months and sold 26 copies.

Why return to Plowden after so long? 185 out of its 197 recommendations were implemented, an astonishingly high proportion, but the main reason is that it continued to provide the basic framework for ECEC for the next 50 years, in fact up to the time of writing.

Chapter 9, entitled 'Providing for Children before Compulsory Education', noted that the under fives were the only age group for whom no extra educational provision of any kind had been made since 1944. This might have been taken as an opportunity for a fundamental rethinking of services for children under school age, as was done in many of the Nordic countries. But in line with the historic UK preference for piecemeal social reform, what happened instead was that modest additions were grafted on to the existing creaking structure. The only members of the committee who seem to have argued for radical change were those who were best qualified to do so by knowledge and experience: Professor David Donnison, Sir John Newsom and Michael Young, later Lord Young of Dartington.

Donnison was Professor of Social Administration at the London School of Economics, Newsom the author of an earlier report on 'less able' children, *Half Our Future* (Newsom, 1963) and Young, the founder of the Consumers' Association, the Advisory Centre for Education and later co-founder of the Open University among several other important organisations. These three entered a note of reservation to the final report which, if adopted, would have resulted in a much better service for young children and their families:

Day nurseries should be as much within the educational service as nursery schools, and responsible to education authorities. The problems that will arise through confining the under threes to day nurseries and providing all day nursery schools for the over threes will be formidable enough anyway, but less so if the responsibility for the reorganization rests with one authority rather than two....Moreover, the trend of modern thinking is to emphasise the educational needs rather than the purely physical health of children, including the under threes; and in accordance with this trend it would be appropriate for

nurseries, whatever the age of their children, to be part of the educational rather than of the health service (p.487).

Unfortunately this was too far ahead of its time for the other members of the Council and it was not until 1997, with the election of a Labour Government, that responsibility for the education and care of children under three was transferred to the Department for Education.

Expanding Early Years provision

During the Second World War, the government set up day nurseries to enable women with children to take the place of men away in the forces and to work in munitions factories. After the war ended in 1945, these closed quite rapidly because the prevailing view was that young children should be at home with their mothers (Jackson, 2010).

Most members of the Plowden committee were in agreement that there needed to be a substantial increase in pre-school provision. But how was the expansion to be achieved in a time when, as always, money and resources were tight, and there was already a severe shortage of teachers?

The answer, which seems to have met with no significant opposition, was to double available places at a stroke by making all nursery education part-time, with children attending for short sessions, either in the morning or afternoon. Clearly this coincided with the strong feeling of many members of the committee, possibly inspired by a misinterpretation of John Bowlby's research findings that any separation of a young child from her mother, even for a short time, was undesirable (Bowlby, 1951). The recommendation that there should be a 'large expansion' of nursery education was qualified by the statement that 'young children should not be separated for long from their mothers. Attendance need not be for a whole half-day session and in the earlier stages only one, two or three days a week will often be desirable'. It is clearly envisaged that the expansion will be led and managed by the Local Education Authority, but there is a rather condescending nod to the pre-school playgroups movement: 'we understand that the Pre-School Playgroups Association wish to continue and extend their activities...' It was acknowledged that a minority of children (estimated to be about 15 per cent) would need full-time nursery education for 'a variety of reasons', not specified.

However, it was very important that the case for a substantial extension of nursery education was accepted, not only on educational grounds but also for social, health and welfare considerations, foreshadowing a more holistic view of early years provision.

At this point, day nurseries make their first appearance in the Report as 'the proper place' for those children who have to be away from their homes before the age of three (p.122). What is meant by 'have to' is further explored in Paragraph 330 which is worth quoting in detail because it illustrates the fundamental ethos of the report:

The extent to which mothers of young children should be encouraged by the provision of full-time nursery places to go out to work raises a question of principle. Some mothers must work because they need the money. The government, for reasons of economic policy, wish to see more women working. But, to work full-time, a mother must expect that her child will attend nursery for extended hours and during school holidays. Our evidence is, however, that it is generally undesirable, except to prevent a greater evil, to separate mother and child for a whole day in the nursery.....some mothers who are not obliged to work may work full-time, regardless of their children's welfare. It is true, unfortunately, that the refusal of full-time nursery places for their children may prompt some of them to make unsuitable arrangements for their children's care during working hours. All the same, we consider that mothers who cannot satisfy the authorities that they have exceptionally good reasons for working should have low priority for full-time nursery for their children.
(p.128)

Since the publication of the Plowden Report, nursery education has continued to be provided almost exclusively on a part-time basis because it was predicated on two assumptions: that the nuclear family of wage-earning father and stay-at-home mother was not only the norm but the *desired* norm, and that nursery education should reflect and support that norm (Moss and Penn, 1996). Although Bridget Plowden herself was very active in public affairs and charitable organisations, as the daughter of an admiral who later became Master of a Cambridge College and the wife of a high-ranking public official, she would never have had to work for money or take full-time responsibility for the care of her four children. She seems to have had great

empathy for women less fortunate than herself but no first-hand experience of juggling work and childcare in the absence of any coherent state provision.

It is interesting to note that Margaret McMillan, along with her sister Rachel one of the most persuasive advocates for early education in Britain, was firmly opposed to part-time nurseries and classes:

A short nurture day is in great measure a waste of time and money. The great process which it exists to forward is not possible in short sessions broken by long intervals.
(McMillan, 1930 p. 37)

She also pointed out that half-time nursery schooling was often an excuse for avoiding provision of meals. Depriving a child of dinner was an important matter if it might be her only chance of a proper meal during the day. It is sad to reflect that this might have once been seen as a consideration only in poor areas such as McMillan's home town of Bradford. In 2022, with a so-called cost of living crisis looming, much talk of heating or eating, and food banks proliferating everywhere, it once again seems highly relevant.

What does part-time nursery schooling mean in practice? Two-hour sessions, either morning or afternoon, sometimes on only two or three days a week, confusing for the child and useless for the caring adult who has hardly arrived back home after accompanying the child to the nursery before it is time to turn round and go to collect her again. Mothers trying to hold on to a relatively well-paid job or build a professional career may have to patch together several different kinds of childcare, supplementing the meagre public offering by falling back on relatives, if available, playgroups, childminders and private nurseries.

The discussions of the Plowden Committee were virtually untouched by the second wave of feminism, which strongly influenced thinking in Scandinavian countries. For instance, there was clearly no idea that fathers could have any significant role in the upbringing of their young children. Or conversely that women could have interests and activities beyond domestic work and childcare, other than working because they had no man to support them. In Sweden, Denmark and Norway, childcare was recognised as necessary not only to enable women to work

and earn money, but to take part in civic affairs, participate actively as citizens in their communities and have some space to engage in sport and recreational activities.

From Welfare to Education

The pattern of offering ECEC on a sessional basis, bearing no relation to normal adult working hours, has persisted right down to the present, so that working parents on average incomes are usually obliged to patch together all kinds of different forms of provision in order to cover the hours of care needed, and during their children's earliest years when they most need consistency and stability rather than experiencing a variety of different settings and caregivers over the course of a week.

Despite energetic lobbying over many years by pressure groups and voluntary organisations, the official view, that government should have no role in the provision of care and education away from home for children under three, was very entrenched, and there was little change in early years services until the change of government in 1997. This coincided with a fall in the child population creating empty places in infant schools, which were filled by admitting four-year-olds to reception classes. In fact four, rather than the statutory age of five has become the usual time for starting school in the UK, two years earlier than in most other countries (Jackson and Cameron 2014; Brooker, 2002). There is considerable pressure on parents to send their four-year-olds to full-time school, as otherwise they risk not getting a place in the primary school of their choice. Moreover, the emphasis on childcare as a remedial service focused on families in difficulties or those thought to be providing unsatisfactory care for their children, which also dates back to Plowden, can be clearly seen in government guidance and policy statements through the following years (Jackson, 1993). In 1996 Moss and Penn commented that thinking about nursery education in the UK stagnated after Plowden, despite all the social changes and theoretical revisions that had taken place since then.

For a while, the election of a Labour government in 1997 seemed like a new dawn after so many years of inactivity. Almost immediately the government took the bold step of moving responsibility for all early years services from the welfare (social services) to the education sector, as advocated by Donnison, Newsom and Young in their note of reservation in the Plowden Report

so many years earlier. The greatest significance of this move was the implicit recognition that education begins at birth and not simply at the age of entry into formal schooling. Other legislative and policy developments followed, notably the 2004 Ten Year Strategy for Childcare, followed by the Childcare Act 2006, the first law to be exclusively concerned with early years and childcare. The intention of this Act was to bring early years within the mainstream of local authority services, but its provisions fell far short of the universal full-time early childhood education, with extended hours of subsidised childcare if needed, available to all children aged three to six years in Nordic countries, and in many other parts of Europe. Because it failed to embed pre-school education as a free universal service on the same basis as school-age education (as some members of the Plowden committee had unsuccessfully advocated), the important reforms introduced over this period remained highly susceptible to political changes, as the rise and fall of Children's Centres shows only too clearly (Eisenstadt, 2018).

Sure Start and Children's Centres

Sure Start was the largest new component of the 2004 Childcare Strategy, the first government programme ever to be targeted at the 0 to 3 age group. The ideas underpinning it were partly derived from the American Headstart programme, which showed very positive long-term outcomes from high quality early childhood provision, and it was based on sound research and practice knowledge embodied in the 'Birth to Three Matters' framework (Abbott and Langston, 2004). Sure Start was an area-based programme providing funds for a variety of early education, childcare and family support services for children under four in the most disadvantaged areas. Originally, every Sure Start Centre set up under the scheme had to include day care to enable mothers to work, but the funding arrangements greatly underestimated the cost of childcare and this element of the scheme rather quickly fell into abeyance. Despite this, Sure Start is generally regarded as one of the major successes of the Strategy. Evaluation was built in from the beginning and showed small but significant improvements in outcomes for children – enhanced language development for instance. Equally Important, the Centres were greatly appreciated by the parents who used them and the communities in which they were located.

Later, Sure Start Centres were rebranded Children's Centres, intended to provide early education, childcare, health services, family support and employment and financial advice in one location. The Treasury allocated substantial funds for the purpose and Children's Centres spread like wildfire, numbering 3,500 at their peak. It is notable that the idea of local centres of this kind, available to all parents 'within pram-pushing distance' had first been proposed forty years earlier by Jack Tizard, the founder of the Thomas Coram Research Unit, in the book *All Our Children* (Tizard, Moss and Perry, 1976).

Once again though, the fatal mistake was to set up Children's Centres as an add-on instead making them part of the statutory education system. The election of a right-wing government in 2010 effectively constituted their death knell. The original vision of a Children's Centre in every community, providing the basis of a universal ECEC service on the European model, reverted to the idea of a targeted remedial service aimed at families in difficulty or perceived to be failing. Over 400 Centres closed in the first two years of the coalition government and most of the others were hollowed out as a result of funding cuts. As they gradually reduced their activities, fewer people found it worth using them, so that local authorities could justify closing them on grounds of lack of demand (Eisenstadt, 2018). In the end they closed down almost as quickly as they had sprung up.

The privatisation of childcare in the UK

The Childcare Act 2006 referred to above obliges local authorities in England and Wales to ensure that there are sufficient childcare places to 'meet the needs' of working parents. However, publicly provided childcare has almost disappeared. Care for children of working parents is found mostly in the private sector, provided either by childminders or in day nurseries run for profit, and increasingly, by large commercial chains. In the absence of state provision, the number of private day nurseries has grown exponentially, charging fees that put them out of reach of families on average incomes, and meaning that women in professional jobs are essentially working for no financial advantage or are forced out of their professions altogether (Jackson and Forbes, 2015; De Luca, 2022 ; Siraj, 2022;). Mothers with fewer educational qualifications are forced to work part-time for low wages and turn to relatives, especially grandmothers, to fill the

gaps (Rutter and Evans, 2011). Low-income families spend 20 per cent of their income on childcare, compared with eight per cent on average spent by better-off families.

For children under three the most common form of day care is still childminding, usually known as family day care in countries other than the UK. Childminding only merited half a sentence in the Plowden report, where it is described as a 'new occupation' despite having been the main form of childcare for poor working parents since the time of Dickens (Jackson and Jackson, 1979). The National Childminding Association, which has played an important part in training and support since its foundation in 1976, is now called PACEY (Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years) but still uses the term childminding on its website (www.pacey.org.uk).

There continues to be a conflict between standards and costs. Childminding is no longer a cheap service for poor parents and the fees are only marginally lower than those charged by private day nurseries. They still do not provide a very good return for providers, with the result that the number of childminders has been declining steadily for the last ten years.

An early childhood curriculum

Until the late 1990s the idea of a structured programme for childcare did not exist in the UK. People who looked after young children outside the school system did their best to keep them occupied and happy, but were basically left to get on with it without much direction. That changed with the introduction in September 2008 of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), a national curriculum for children aged 0-5. It became a statutory requirement for every type of early childhood service, including childminding, to be enforced through inspection by Ofsted on a four-year cycle. It has been revised many times, usually to make it less demanding on practitioners, which was certainly necessary. The first version, for example, had a list of 69 Early Learning Goals (ELGs) against which children were to be assessed. Subsequent revisions (2012, 2014, 2017) reduced the ELGs to a more reasonable 17, but steadily shifted the emphasis from spontaneous, child-led activity in the direction of school-readiness. Trevor and colleagues argue that there is an unhelpful contradiction between a curriculum which recognises child-initiated activities and play as essential for children's development and the demands of a future-oriented,

prescribed and structured curriculum, primarily concerned with the impact of early years education on the UK's economic competitiveness within a global market (Roberts-Holmes, 2012). Although the terminology may be different, this has distinct echoes of the acrimonious debate that followed the publication of the Plowden Report between the proponents of 'traditional' and 'progressive' teaching methods (Scruton, 1987).

The ECEC workforce

We know that the quality of any early childhood setting is strongly related to the education and qualifications of the staff (Sylva et al, 2010). Professor Cathy Nutbrown was commissioned by the coalition government (2010-2015) to carry out a review of the early years workforce. She pointed out that there was no standard qualification for the work, but literally hundreds of different courses in further education colleges in addition to degree courses in Early Childhood Studies at universities. Nutbrown's final report made 19 recommendations designed to ensure that:

Staff are as good as they can be and have the skills, knowledge and understanding to make the most of the Government's investment in the early years. Working in the early years sector should be a recognized and fulfilling career that attracts the best men and women (Nutbrown, 2012).

The aim should be for every early childhood setting to be led by someone with graduate-level qualifications

The government minister, Liz Truss (HM Foreign Secretary at the time of writing) claimed that she had accepted most of the recommendations and incorporated them into the policy document *More Great Childcare* (DfE, 2013), but Nutbrown published an angry response accusing the government of 'shaking the foundations of quality'. She pointed out that the overall thrust of her report had been brushed aside and most of her recommendations had, in effect, been rejected (Nutbrown, 2013). Most importantly, the opportunity to rationalise the education and career structure of early years work was lost. In particular, the proposal for early years professionals to undertake a PGCE and be awarded Qualified Teacher Status was turned down, once again reinforcing the existence of a two-tier profession, offering those who work with the youngest children or in childcare settings as opposed to schools, lesser status and poorer pay and

conditions than those teaching older children. This makes it an unattractive career option for academically able young people, especially boys, perpetuating the gender imbalance in the profession. It makes the aspiration for every early years setting to be led by a graduate look more remote than ever.

More Great Childcare made the absurd suggestion that if those proposing to train as early years practitioners were required to have English and Maths GCSEs, the child-adult ratios could be relaxed to make care cheaper. Nutbrown pointed out that this made no sense at all:

The difference will be too few adults with too many little children, too few moments in the day for a toddler to have uninterrupted time with their key person, and too few early years practitioners to talk and work with children...Childcare may be cheaper but children will be footing the bill. (Nutbrown, 2013, p.9).

Or as Polly Toynbee pointed out in the *Guardian*, 'How do you fit six children into a buggy?'

At the time, the government was forced by the storm of protest to backpedal, but the idea has now resurfaced, ostensibly to make childcare less expensive for families during the so-called cost of living crisis and reduce costs for providers. Numerous analysts have pointed out that tinkering with the ratios will have a negligible impact on costs, but may well have the negative effects for children predicted by Nutbrown.

The impact of Covid

The Covid-19 pandemic has turned established patterns of work upside down, and it is too soon to know what the final landscape of employment will look like. An urgent debate is in progress about the advantages of continuing to work from home (for those who can) or returning to the office, full-time or part-time. However, anyone who thinks home-working is the answer to the problem of childcare has never tried it. Little children need, if not constant attention, at least constant availability. Attempting to work while looking after a young child means frustration and stress for parents, strained relationships, and an impoverished experience for children, probably involving long hours in front of screens with effects we do not yet know (Jackson and Forbes, 2015).

Conclusion

Looking back over the last fifty years, we can see that at some times, the needs of young children and their families have been the focus of attention and at others they have receded into the background, usually depending on which party is in power at Westminster. The basic shape of early childhood education and care as set in the Plowden recommendations has not changed; in most places it remains the 'hotchpotch' described by Jack Tizard and numerous commentators since. A recently published study of ECEC, from University College London, argues that there is no point in continuing to tinker with this broken system: what we need is *transformational* change in every aspect of early childhood services (Cameron and Moss, 2020). In fact we should get away from the idea of a separate sphere of 'care' altogether; the aim should be a comprehensive education system for children from 0 to 6, a unitary system of nurture and learning, a democratic system that recognises children as active agents in their own development and creates the best conditions in which they can flourish.

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Transforming the early years 1975 – 2005: a personal perspective

Gillian Pugh

Abstract

Services for young children in England in the 1970s were not a priority for government. They were available to only a tiny proportion of children under five, provided largely by the private and voluntary sectors, and few early years workers were appropriately trained. During the next two decades local authorities, practitioners and trainers began working together to create a more integrated approach to planning services, to devising a curriculum that responded to how young children learn and to improving the qualifications and pay of those working in early years settings. From 1997 the Labour government built on this work with an ambitious and transformative agenda, but despite very considerable progress was not able to create high quality and sustainable services for all our youngest children.

Early childhood services in the 1970s

Since the establishment of the first nursery school by Robert Owen in Scotland in 1816, the development of early education in the United Kingdom was, until recently, remarkably slow by comparison to much of mainland Europe. Publicly funded education became compulsory from the age of five in 1870, but many children were admitted to school from the age of two. Even with the introduction of some public day care centres during the 1914–1918 war, the predominant form of early education and care was state primary schools. This lack of appropriate provision within schools led to two parallel developments during the second half of the twentieth century: on the one hand the emergence during the 1960s of the voluntary sector playgroup movement; and on the other the growth of full day care to meet the needs of working parents, initially through childminding and, since the 1990s, of private day nurseries.

Services for young children in England in the 1970s were not a priority for government. By comparison to many of our European neighbours, there was little public funding for children before the age of five, when they started school. Different government departments were responsible for different forms of provision, and for none of them was it a priority. The

Department of Education, responsible for schools for children from the age of five, oversaw a small number of nursery schools, and nursery classes in some primary schools, taking children aged three and four. Rather more three and four year olds were going early into reception classes in primary schools, often inappropriate to the developmental needs of such young children. The Department of Health was overall responsible for registering playgroups, the small number of day nurseries run by local authorities for children deemed to be "in need", and the growing number of private nurseries and childminders. Curiously, the Home Office had responsibility for family policy.

At local level too there were multiple providers: local authority education, social services and leisure departments; health authorities; voluntary organisations; community groups; employers encouraging women to return to work; and private companies and individuals. And not only this, the various settings had differing ideologies, with different aims and purposes, different opening hours, making different charges to parents, staffed by workers with different levels of training and different conditions and pay. And it was often the poorest families that used the poorest quality provision. Local authority nurseries were used for the children of families supported by social services as being "in need"; private day nurseries and childminders were used by children of working parents; and part time nursery education and playgroups were used by parents who could fit in with the limited hours on offer.

Table 1 Under fives in England: population and use of services 1975, 1985, 1990¹

	1975	1985	1990
Population 0 – 4	3,227,900	2,973,400	3,189,400
Places per 100 children 0-4			
- LA day nurseries	0.8	1.0	0.9
- Private registered nurseries	0.8	0.8	1.8
- Childminders	2.6	4.7	6.4
Places per 100 children 3-4			
- Playgroups	23.3	33.8	33.2
Pupils as % of 3 and 4 year olds			
- Nursery schools and classes	10.0	22.5	24.5
- Under fives in infant classes	18.9	20.7	21.6
- Independent schools	2.1	2.5	3.2

¹ Source: Early Childhood Unit Statistics 1991, compiled from government sources

As the 1970s moved into the 1980s and the demands grew for a better response to the needs of young children and their families, it became clear that there were many different views and voices joining the debate. Was the emphasis to be on providing a better start for children – "nursery education" - as they entered formal school settings, or was it "day care" that was needed to enable parents to work, thus reducing the benefits bill and reducing poverty? Was the driving motivation equal opportunities for women, or meeting the developmental needs of children? Was the trigger for an increase in provision to be the value of intervening early to prevent or alleviate developmental delay, or reduce juvenile crime? Could better services for young children provide a safety net and parenting education for vulnerable families?

The government of the day was not impressed by any of these arguments. There was an abiding sense that young children were their parents' responsibility before they start school and that day care was a private matter, to be purchased as one might a washing machine. Successive Ministers claimed that there was no research on the effectiveness of early education, and the DES submission to the 1989 Education Select Committee argued that the private and voluntary sectors should take up the demand for expansion. As Secretary of State Kenneth Clarke MP claimed in 1991 "Nursery education for all children is not a realistic prospect".

There was a lack of understanding of child development and of how young children learn. Young children were only playing, and they could do that at home. And "anyone can teach young children – they don't need qualifications".

Early Childhood Unit, National Children's Bureau

In 1986 the Department of Health, aware of the rising concern about the lack of provision for young children, established an Early Childhood Unit (initially called the Under Fives Unit) at the National Children's Bureau in London which I was appointed to direct. The Unit's remit was to raise awareness of the needs of young children, to improve policy and service provision for children across social services, health, education and the voluntary and private sectors; and to support the raising of professional standards of practice. It sat well within the NCB's approach of working across all professional disciplines with a focus on the needs of children; and of using research to improve both policy and practice.

The Unit's first task was to establish the levels of early years provision, structures for coordination and levels of training in local authorities the UK. The ensuing report (Pugh, 1988), based on responses from 94% of local authorities, led to an extensive body of work across the country. Support was provided for many authorities, some of whom – Strathclyde, Sheffield, Manchester, Islington and Southwark in the first instance - began to integrate all their services within the education department. Working with representatives of all the main voluntary organisations in the early years sector, and with the statutory agencies (the Association of Metropolitan Authorities and the Association of County Councils), a policy document and framework for action was published – *A Policy for young Children: a framework for action* (Under Fives Unit 1989), accompanied by detailed costings for a comprehensive national child care service (Holtermann, 1992).

As these developments were taking place at local level across the country, two key pieces of national legislation were passed which appeared to pull in different directions. The 1989 Children Act, passed with cross-party support, was described at the time as the most important piece of legislation to impact on the lives of children. In addition to its main focus on the paramountcy of welfare of the child, the Act was the first major piece of legislation on services for under fives since 1948, giving local authorities a duty to provide for children in need, to register all day care provision for children under eight and to review childminding and day care every three years. Sadly the Act failed to establish a sound framework for developing a national and local policy on services for under fives, nor did it provide for increased expenditure on services or on training.

Whilst the Children Act was increasing the role of local authorities, the 1988 Education Reform Act was moving in the opposite direction. The introduction of a National Curriculum for children from the age of five failed to recognise the developmental needs of children in early years services from a few months old to five. And the introduction of local management of schools began what has become a steady decline in the role of local authorities.

Early Childhood Education Forum

Following on from its early collaborative ventures, in 1993 the Early Childhood Unit supported the establishment of the Early Childhood Education Forum (now called the Early Childhood

Forum) which brought together all the national agencies in the early childhood field – statutory, voluntary and private – some 45 organisations by 1998. In an attempt to avoid further "divide and rule" responses from government, the ECEF worked hard to speak with one voice. Its message was that early childhood care and education should offer children the same experiences, in response to their age and needs, whether they were with a childminder, in a day care centre, a voluntary sector playgroup or a nursery school or class. ECEF's policy message was that services had developed in response to political and economic factors rather than in response to the needs of children and their parents. ECEF agreed underpinning principles for early childhood education and care, and worked with practitioners across the country to develop and publish a curriculum for young children – *Quality and Diversity in Early Learning* (ECEF, 1998) - based on research into young children's development.

Concerned at the inappropriateness of teacher training for teachers planning to work with young children, and with the lack of progress on National Vocational Qualifications in child care and education, ECEF set up the Early Years Training Group, bringing together trainers from education and social work departments in universities, and trainers from the Preschool Playgroups Association and the National Childminding Association. One initiative that began to herald some real progress was the establishment of the first early childhood studies degrees at Suffolk College and Bristol University, and by 1997 there were 15 such degree programmes (see Abbott and Pugh, 1998).

The tide begins to turn

As early years practitioners, policy makers and researchers were beginning to work well together across the UK, the national educational establishment finally began to take note. In 1989 Secretary of State for Education, Kenneth Baker MP, set up a committee of enquiry chaired by Minister Angela Rumbold MP to look at the quality of educational experience offered to three and four year olds. Recognising that "attitudes and behaviour patterns established during the first years of life are central to future educational social development", this was the first time the Department for Education had considered young children as learners, had outlined an appropriate curriculum for young children and had examined the context of learning and the

importance of well trained staff. The report (DES 1990) was well received but was published on Christmas Eve and largely ignored by government. There followed a flurry of reports from other national bodies – the Royal Society of Arts (Ball, 1994), the Association of Metropolitan Authorities (AMA 1991) and the Audit Commission (1996) amongst them, together with a report from the House of Commons Select Committee and the National Commission on Education.

The first chink in the government's armour came in 1995 when, after years of saying there was no evidence on the effectiveness of early education, additional funding was announced for four year olds. Prime Minister John Major was finally persuaded by the research from High/Scope in the US that for every \$1 spent, \$7 was saved, with a particular emphasis on reducing youth offending (Barnett, 1996). At a memorable meeting between 35 members of ECEF and Secretary of State Gillian Shephard MP, all members present argued for an appropriate nursery curriculum and nationally agreed standards to apply across all settings, with properly qualified staff knowledgeable about how young children learn, parental involvement and a common system of inspection. The government's response was to create a market by introducing a pilot scheme in four local authorities of vouchers for parents to enable them to buy places for their children. This gave no funding for development of new provision, added a layer of bureaucracy and had a negative impact on the 85% of four year olds already in infant schools. There was considerable opposition to this scheme, but the election of a Labour government in 1997 put pay to vouchers and led to the first real expansion of early years provision.

A vision for the future

From my position as director of the Early Childhood Unit, and chair of the Early Childhood Education Forum, I began to promote the concept of a new type of service for young children, through discussions with politicians, talks at conferences, and publications, including a widely quoted article in the *Times Education Supplement* (Pugh, 1994). My "vision for 2010" was underpinned by two important concepts – that early years education runs from birth to six or seven, and that the needs of young children for education, day care and health care are inseparable. I envisaged an early childhood centre for children from birth to six attached to a community primary school, providing free nursery education for all children from three to six,

with an extended day for working parents, for children under three, and after school clubs and holiday provision. There would be drop in facilities for parents and for childminders, good support and adult education for parents, and proper parental leave (it is sometimes easy to forget that there was minimal maternity leave and no paternity leave in 1994). The health clinic next door facilitated the involvement of health visitors in the centre, and the psychologists, paediatricians, speech therapists and physiotherapists would be on hand to work with the children with special educational needs and disabilities who would be fully integrated into the centre. The curriculum would be based on children's social and emotional as well as their cognitive and physical needs. The staff were appropriately trained, and adult:child ratios were based on double the age of the child (ie. 1:4 for two year olds).

These proposals may not seem so visionary today, but it is a mark of how much progress has been made - despite recent cutbacks - that this was far from the reality of the 1990s.

A new government, a new agenda

For the new Labour government, elected in May 1997, children, and in particular a commitment to reducing child poverty, were high on the agenda of both the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the exchequer. The Treasury immediately set up a cross-departmental spending review on services for children under eight, organising a series of seminars addressed by researchers and practitioners in the field. There were plans not only to increase the funding for early years provision, but to change its nature and the way in which services were delivered. The immediate outcome was the National Childcare Strategy, published in 1998, and the Sure Start programme also established in 1998, about which Naomi Eisenstadt writes elsewhere in this report. Writing in 2000, I noted the very considerable investment and commitment in the first three years of the new government (Pugh, 2001)

- The National Childcare Strategy, bringing an additional £470 million to expand and improve childcare services for children from birth to three years, and out of school provision for children under 14 years

- The establishment of the Sure Start initiative, bringing £1.4 billion to 250 (later extended to 500) high-need communities to develop services for children under four and their parents over a five year period
- Increased expenditure of nursery education, with a place for all four year olds and for all three years olds by 2004 (these places to be in any of the wide range of types of provision)
- Transference of responsibility for all children under the age of eight from the Department of Health to the Department for Education and Skills, with the DfES taking the lead on all issues concerning young children
- The establishment of the Foundation Stage of early education, for children aged from three years to the end of reception. (This was later extended down to start from birth).
- Working families tax credit, which provided £70 towards the cost of childcare for one child and £105 for two or more children for low income families
- More family friendly policies in the workplace – improved parental leave and more flexible working arrangements
- The introduction of Early Years Development and Childcare partnerships in local authorities
- The establishment of the Early Excellence Centre pilot programme
- The establishment of an Early Years National Training Organisation, and the production of a national qualifications and training framework for the early years
- An integrated inspection service
- A recognition that early years services must meet the needs of parents as well as children.

Whilst this level of investment would have been inconceivable in 1990, and the speed with which new developments were being implemented was breath-taking, there was still no national debate about what an early years policy should look like, no overall vision, and the various

elements were still far from joined up. Even though the DfES took on overall responsibility for services for young children, there were still divisions between "early years", with a focus on universal part-time nursery education for three and four year olds; "childcare", seen as a fee paying service in response to parental employment; and Sure Start, a community based services for children under four as part of the anti-poverty strategy. The opportunity for a more radical reform of a confused patchwork of services was missed.

Multi-agency early years centres

In parallel with the slow movement towards a more joined up policy for young children at government level, there were some interesting attempts to create multi-agency centres that met the needs of children and families in local neighbourhoods. The first "combined nursery centre" opened in Hillfields in Coventry in 1971, bringing together funding from education, social services and health to provide care and education for children under five and support and access to further education for their parents. Ten such centres, including Pen Green in Corby and Dorothy Gardner in London, were described by Virginia Makins in *Not Just a Nursery...* published in 1997. Whilst enthusiastically described by the parents who used them, for their responsiveness to their needs and the quality of the children's experiences, the challenges in working across agency boundaries perhaps explains why there were so few across the country. Differences in funding streams, different pay and conditions for staff from different agencies, and lack of coordinated planning at central and local government level proved too much for many who wished to follow suit.

The announcement of the Early Excellence Centre pilot programme in 1998 gave the development of more flexible and responsive services a much needed boost, building as it did on those centres that were already up and running. The early excellence centres were expected to provide high quality integrated education and care services, access to extended day and holiday schemes, support for families, including parenting education, links to community health services, accessible and affordable adult training opportunities and support for other early years providers in the local area. Early evidence showed that the centres had substantial benefits for children, families and the wider community, through the bringing together of a range of services that met

families' needs without the stigma associated with specialist provision (Bertram et al., 2002). Looking back on the "vision" for early childhood units being based in primary schools, however, few of the centres were based in primary schools, and neither did they always link as closely as they might have done with emerging Sure Start schemes.

The Thomas Coram Early Excellence Centre, based in the Coram Community Campus in the Kings Cross area of London is one such example. The centre worked with 600 local families in the most deprived ward of Camden, offering a one stop shop in partnership with the local education and social service departments, the health authority and five voluntary organisations. An early evaluation of this centre (Wigfall and Moss, 2001) pointed to the value of the multi-agency approach and the sharing of skills, but also to the challenges of bringing so many services together.

A common approach to how and what young children learn

Despite the arguments in the Rumbold Report (above) of the importance of the content of learning and the context within which children acquire the disposition to learn, there were widespread concerns at the end of the 1990s that the National Curriculum and the national literacy and numeracy strategies were leading to pressure to formalise education at the earliest opportunity. It was therefore with some enthusiasm that a working party of early years experts developed the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (QCA, 2000) which provided a clear and unambiguous statement of the principles should underpin both learning and teaching. The guidance argued that an effective curriculum builds on what children can already do and includes opportunities for them to engage in activities planned by adults as well as those they initiate themselves, learning through play, talk and direct experience. This guidance, and the later *Birth to Three Matters* (DfES, 2003) were well received, and were later revised as *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (DfES, 2007) which included both these frameworks, together with national standards for day care and childminding.

At last all early years settings, both "care" and "education", were expected to adhere to the same standards for learning, development and care, and would only receive government funding if they did so.

Underpinned by research

From the 1997 Treasury-led cross departmental review onwards, the Labour government's early years programme was clearly informed by research evidence. Sylva and Pugh (2005) pointed to two lines of research which explain why early learning is important: studies on the development of the brain, suggesting that early learning contributes to the brain's developing architecture, and developmental psychology showing the importance of early interactions between the young child and caregivers. The neurological research confirms the importance of learning in the early years, whereas the psychological studies suggest which kind of learning is best. Following the US evidence cited above from the High/Scope project, the government invested in the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project, a large-scale longitudinal research study on effective early education. The EPPE project was hugely influential in demonstrating the positive effects of high quality preschool provision on children's intellectual and social behavioural development up to the end of Key Stage 1², and indicated that preschool can play an important part in combating social exclusion for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. These findings, together with those on the importance of quality (the highest quality was found in settings in the maintained sector which integrated care and education), well trained staff and the ongoing importance of the home environment, were all influential in the development of practice (through the work on curriculum and training) as well as policy (Sylva et al., 2010). The study was subsequently extended to follow the children into secondary school.

Every Child Matters and the 2004 Children Act

This review of the thirty years between 1975 and 2005 would not be complete with brief reference to the Labour government's flagship policy, *Every Child Matters*. The publication in 2003 of the Green Paper *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003) was described by the Prime Minister at its launch as the most significant development for children in over 30 years. Initially planned as a response to the Laming report on the circumstances surrounding the death of Victoria Climbié in 2002, the initial government remit was to focus on children at risk. But after discussion with

² Key Stage 1 is the legal term for the two years of schooling in maintained schools in England and Wales normally known as Year 1 and Year 2, when pupils are aged between 5 and 7.

many working in the field, particularly those who had been working on the early years policy developments, the report took prevention as its starting point and accepted the view that to support all children through well co-ordinated mainstream services was more likely to benefit those in need and at risk than a separate child protection service. The five key themes of Every Child Matters were

- A strong foundation in the early years
- A stronger focus on parenting and families
- Earlier interventions and effective protection
- Better accountability and integration locally, regionally and nationally
- Reform of the workforce.

The overall aim, and of the subsequent 2004 Children Act which created the legal framework, was to improve outcomes for all children and to narrow the gap between those who do well and those who do not, through reconfiguring services around children and families. All children were to be entitled to be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and enjoy economic well-being.

The ambitious long term vision emerging through the 2004 Children Act and the implementation paper *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (DfES, 2004) was the development of integrated education, health and social care through children's centres, extended schools and improved services for children and their parents, provided by better qualified staff. At central government level responsibility for most services were brought with the Department for Education (renamed the Department for Children, Schools and Families) under the direction of a Minister for Children. At local level the directors for social services and education were replaced by a director for children's services, and an integrated mechanism for planning and delivering services was established – a Children's Trust. There would also be a common assessment framework, an integrated workforce strategy, a common core of training and integrated inspection framework. It was a huge and ambitious agenda.

So near... and yet so far

Reviewing progress in 2005 (Pugh, 2006; Sylva and Pugh, 2005), it was clear that, since the election of a Labour government in 1997, there had been substantial investment in services for young children and their families, some of it universal and some targeted at the most disadvantaged communities. Fifteen hours of nursery education during school terms was now available to all three and four year olds, and the importance of the early years and of joined up working across health, social care and education was now firmly on the map. Sure Start centres for parents and children under three were widely welcomed in 520 communities, 107 "early excellence centres" had been established and 1400 neighbourhood nurseries were being established, though some had already closed. In 2003 the government launched a "children's centre" programme, building on early excellence centres and neighbourhood nurseries through a promise of a centre in the 20% most disadvantaged communities. The Foundation Stage curriculum had been well received and enthusiastically adopted by early years professionals in all early years settings, based as it was on clear principles and on the central importance of learning through play (Aubrey, 2004).

Early years services were now central to local and national planning for children, and were informed by research, and evaluation studies pointed to the effectiveness of many new initiatives. There was a growing emphasis on listening to children's views. There was a commitment to upskilling the workforce, with the establishment in 2005 of the Children's Workforce Development Council. Indeed, in 2004 the OECD commended England for the "tremendous progress" it had made.

But yet, despite the commitment of the Prime Minister Tony Blair and the Chancellor Gordon Brown to reducing child poverty, largely through enabling more parents to return to work, parents still made the major financial contribution to the cost of care, paying for private nurseries or childminders to suit their working hours, plus before and after school and holiday provision. There was low take up of working tax credit, intended to assist low income families with childcare costs, and with local authorities unable to subsidise places, nurseries were often forced to close as they failed to cover their costs.

Although the quality of the workforce is key to the effectiveness of early education, in 2005 only 50% of staff in day nurseries were qualified to NVQ level 3, and all were likely to be poorly paid. There were fraught discussions about how the proposed new "early years professional" qualification compared with qualified teacher status, and many of the teachers in nursery or reception classes were not appropriately trained to work with young children. So whilst the new curriculum developments were welcomed, a professionally trained and well paid workforce was still a distant dream.

And finally, what of the long term vision for an integrated and well-funded early years service? Government documents in 2004 couldn't quite decide what to call it, referring variously to nursery education, day care, childcare, early years services, the foundation stage and early education. It was still work in progress, and sadly much was to be dismantled in the austerity years that followed.

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Sure Start Review

Naomi Eisenstadt

Introduction

No history of early years policy and practice covering the last fifty years would be complete without Sure Start. The backdrop to the story is described in other chapters of this report. Suffice it to say that many people were involved in convincing key people in the Labour party about the importance of early childhood development before the Labour Party gained power in 1997. Several new Ministers, particularly Margaret Hodge, Harriet Harman and Tessa Jowell, were committed to early years provision both as a means to improve child outcomes as well as a crucial component of women's participation in employment. The Labour Party had signaled its commitment to improved early years provision in its 1997 Manifesto, promising a national childcare strategy and universal free early education for all four-year-olds. Combining early childhood policy with a more general policy about child poverty came later, within a year of Labour taking power.

Sure Start

Sure Start was announced as a new programme in Parliament in July 1998. It was born out of a cross government review on investment in early years led by a senior civil servant in the Treasury, Norman Glass. The review identified two main areas of importance. Firstly, several government departments invested in early years but the Government had no overall strategy or goals nor was there cross Whitehall coordination on early years policy. Even within the Department for Education (then the Department for Education and Employment) there was fragmentation between early education, led by the Schools Directorate, and childcare, led by the Women and Employment team. Secondly, evidence from the United States and from continental Europe indicated that high quality early years provision especially aimed at children from low-income families, could improve school readiness and narrow the gap between children living in poverty and their better off peers.¹ After widespread consultation with charities, think tanks, academics

and providers of children's services, a budget was agreed for the first three years of a new programme aimed at children under four living in very poor areas. Sure Start was born.

Among a proliferation of *area-based initiatives* set up by New Labour, Sure Start was aimed at local areas with very high concentrations of poverty. Initial funding of £450 million over three years was allocated for 250 Sure Start Local Programmes. Each programme would cover between 400 and 700 under fours living in some of the poorest neighbourhoods in England. Once the geographical area was agreed, the programme services would be open to all families with young children in the catchment. The assumption was that given the level of poverty in the chosen areas, there was no need to target by individual family need. Open access was a key feature, avoiding the stigma that can accompany targeted services. Each programme would deliver some services as well as joining up whatever services were already operating in the area. Required services included: outreach and home visiting, support for parents and carers, play and childcare, health advice, and support for children with special needs. Local Sure Start programme boards were able to decide on any other provision that would be needed to reach Sure Start established goals set out in its own Public Service Agreement. Local programme board membership included representatives from local statutory and voluntary agencies, and local parents.

Sure Start was seen at the time as a *flagship* of the New Labour Government. In keeping with the Government's Modernising Agenda, Sure Start was meant to be user not provider led, flexible and responsive to local needs, joined up across different agencies, focused on outcomes not inputs, and evidence based. There was and continues to be arguments about the final point. My own view remains that while the importance of early years services was clearly based on years of international research, the actual design of the programme was significantly different from models of provision in other countries. Academics advising the Government felt strongly that the design of the programme should conform to the tightly structured and manualised interventions that had been rigorously evaluated through randomized control trials. Ministers and providers of community services put the emphasis on flexibility and local decision making involving local parents. Moreover, each area selected for the initiative had varying degrees of services already in place. Local plans had to reflect what was already operating in the area. As discussed later on,

this diversity of local approach made the evaluation of Sure Start particularly challenging. in evolving policy.

A particular feature of New Labour that had profound impact on Sure Start was the frequency of ministerial changes as well as departmental reorganisations. Within the first year of Sure Start operating, the lead minister at the Department of Health, Tessa Jowell, was replaced by Yvette Cooper. Jowell's key interest was in mother-infant attachment; Cooper's interest was in women's workforce participation. Overall responsibility at the start sat with the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett, who was primarily interested in community development and increasing the role of the voluntary sector. All these interests had to be reflected in the ongoing design and guidance provided to local programmes from Whitehall. The spending review of 2002 agreed a doubling of Sure Start from 250 to 500 local programmes. Barely any services were yet to be set up; there was no evidence from a recently commissioned evaluation. Yet, Government was doubling the programme. Arguments against the rapid expansion were unheeded. Sure Start was already immensely popular with MPs and local people. Every MP wanted one for their constituency. This was probably the first programme set up by Government explicitly aimed at poor areas that everyone wanted. The rapid expansion of Sure Start continued, alongside a major reorganisation of children's services at local government level. A summary of the key changes to Sure Start over the years is in the box below.

- 2002 -Comprehensive Spending Review doubles Sure Start from 250-500 local programmes
- 2004- *Choice for Parents the Best Start for Children: a ten year childcare strategy* announces Sure Start Children's Centres for every local area, 3,500 to be established over three years
- Main control of the policy and funding moves from central government to local authorities. Sure Start rolled into wider children's policy of *Every Child Matters*. Early years funding ring-fenced within local authority settlement
- 2011- Coalition Government supports early years but renames ringfenced grant as Early Intervention Grant

- 2013- Coalition Government removes ring fence for Early Intervention Grant, rolling all early years funding into local government settlement
- 2014- By 2014, Sure Start cut in funding by 41%
- 2017- 16 Local Authorities closed half or more of their centres. 6 local authorities closed 70% of centres
- 2019- continued change; rebadged children's centres as *family hubs*. Not just early years but nought to nineteen targeted at families in need of social services interventions. Basic premise of open access in poor areas completely undermined.

Did Sure Start Work?

The evaluation of Sure Start has been subject to debates over years. The diversity of approach among local programmes meant a randomised control trial wouldn't work. Ministers also opposed RCT methodology. They considered it unfair to consult with local parents on what they wanted and then randomly refuse some of them access to new services. The continuing expansion of Sure Start presented real difficulties; the researchers were finding it hard to identify poor areas that did not have a Sure Start programme in order to compare Sure Start and non-Sure Start areas. The question is not 'did it work', but did it work under what circumstances and for whom? Sure Start was not an *intervention*. It was an attempt to reform local services so that they would work together at neighbourhood. Level. A consortium led by Edward Melhuish and Jay Belsky at Birkbeck College won the tender to evaluate Sure Start in its initial phases (National Evaluation of Sure Start, NESS). Kathy Sylva and Pam Sammonds at the University of Oxford carried out a subsequent evaluation of Sure Start Children's Centres (Evaluation of Children's Centres in England, ECCE). The biggest difference between the two evaluations was that NESS chose families at random from the catchment areas of Sure Start Local Programmes and compared them with children in poor areas that did not yet have Sure Start. They did not capture service use data. The ECCE study looked at families who actually used children's centres and looked at variety and frequency of services used. Both evaluations yielded valuable and new knowledge about the challenges of delivery at speed and at scale.

The NESS study included four impact studies. The box below summarises the findings.²⁻³

2005	2007	2010	2012
Some early promising results for non-teen mothers, but children of teen mothers living in Sure Start areas doing less well than children of teen mothers in non-Sure Start areas.	Improved child and parent results, and no differences between the children of teen mothers and non-teen mothers. Sub group differences disappeared.	Continued improvement in parent results. Some small improvements in child health and immunisations.	Continued improvement in parent results: better home learning environment, less home chaos, better mother life satisfaction. No cognitive or social differences between Sure Start and non-Sure Start children.

Findings from ECCE were similar, but they did find a correlation between service use and better outcomes. In summary ECCE found:

- Greater impact on overall family function and mothers' well-being; fewer effects on child outcomes
- Service use and specific characteristics of children's centres predicted better outcomes
- An indirect effect of reducing child externalising behaviour via improvements in the home learning environment
- Children's centres targeted their high need families for specialised services
- Children's centre use helped to reduce but not eliminate the corroding influence of disadvantage on child outcomes
- Families in poverty benefitted more from children's centres than families on middle incomes
- Children's centres experiencing cuts to funding were less likely to show improvements for families.⁴

The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) has recently been doing a separate evaluation of Sure Start. A health impact study was published in 2021 with some surprising and welcome findings

about its medium to long term effects on children. For very young children, under twelve months, Sure Start increased the likelihood of hospitalisations by 10%. However, Sure Start's effects on reducing hospitalisations during childhood and early adolescence more than compensated for the increase in hospital admissions for infants. At age 5, an additional children's centre per 1000 child population prevented nearly 3,000 hospitalisations compared to children living in an area without access to children's centres. For 11–15-year-olds, over 13,000 hospitalisations were prevented. The effects were particularly strong for boys from low-income families. It is possible that the increase in infancy acute admissions could be explained by more frequent access to primary care professionals who identified serious health problems early. The health effects on older boys could be explained by better self-regulation leading to fewer accidents.⁵ Hence the possibility that earlier changes in parenting styles could show later positive behavioural impact.

Both the NESS and ECCE studies point to some similar conclusions. Firstly, a programme targeted at poor areas with open access and assertive outreach can mitigate the impact of poverty on young children. Secondly, the Sure Start effects were mainly on parents, not on children themselves. The early guidance of the programme emphasised parental involvement and community participation. This was based on the assumption that improving parental well-being and parenting behaviours would improve cognitive and social outcomes for children. In terms of social development, the results were disappointing. However, it is possible, as shown in the IFS study, that the improved parenting and home learning environments would take time to demonstrably affect children and could have positive impact on younger siblings. For cognitive development, neither evaluation found differences between Sure Start and non-Sure Start children. It is possible that the cognitive development gains were masked by the expansion of free early education and care for all three- and four-year-olds. Hence the difference between Sure Start children and their peers was mainly to do with additional support for parents. All children by 2005 were entitled to at least 12.5 hours per week of free early education and take-up was very high. Finally, all three studies found the Sure Start impact was greater for children living in low-income families. Given the original intent of the programme, this is an important positive result.

What we got wrong

Retrospective views of Sure Start vary. The main criticism was that a programme designed for disadvantaged families got hijacked by middle class mothers. This was largely a London effect because of the mix of rich and poor families in areas like Camden, Islington and Hackney. These boroughs housed many journalists and senior civil servants, who themselves had young children and were often using their local children's centre. What was particular to one part of the country became an urban myth that was not borne out by the data. Sure Start before its expansion to all neighbourhoods was successfully serving the poorest families and all studies found that the benefits were accrued mainly to the poorest families and children.

Sure Start did suffer from over ambitious expectations. Cross government working is extremely difficult. Each Departmental Minister had his or her hopes for what the programme would achieve: stronger local communities, better health, education and social development for young children, increased women's labour market participation, reductions in child poverty. There were tensions to be managed between the DWP's aim of reducing child poverty by increasing female labour market participation and the Department for Education's aim of improving school readiness. The former aim is dependent on childcare that is low cost for parents. The latter aim is dependent on high quality provision with at least some graduate level staff. While subsidies were available for low-income families, the funding of childcare was complex and never adequate to ensure provision was good enough. Furthermore, many mothers were keen to work part time, so needed flexibility in the uptake of free childcare hours. Evidence on the impact of early education on child outcomes was largely based on regular four or five days a week attendance, often mornings or afternoons. Regular short sessions across the week are not as helpful for part time working as two or three long days.

A big surprise to the Treasury was how long it took for programmes to actually start spending Sure Start funding. The initial allocation of funding for the first 250 programmes was up to one million pounds capital and up to one million pounds per year revenue for three years. Most programmes unsurprisingly asked for the maximum amount allowed. The capital allocation meant finding appropriate places in very poor areas on which to commission new builds or refurbishments to existing premises. Each programme board had significant power over the

spend, so getting agreement on what and where to spend capital took several months. Deciding on activities, setting up local evaluations, hiring staff all took time. The NESS study found it took three years from agreement to get a fully functioning programme underway. Hence the first few years of Sure Start was significantly underspent. The key lesson is that community engagement and participation in designing both capital investment and a new service structure takes time and skill. Ministers assumed that the announcement was implementation. Civil servants thought it was posting the guidance. The actual task was complex and required a range of soft and hard skills.

Relevant to the above, there was a failure to recognise the skill mix required to set up a local programme involving parents, statutory and voluntary sector partners. There were some excellent examples of what a Sure Start programme should look like, notably the Penn Green Centre in Corby and Coram Family in Camden both of which had been running years before Sure Start. But creating such provision at scale was a huge task. We failed to put in place any arrangements for programme manager support and development. Teachers, social workers and NHS staff all have professional bodies and membership organisations that support their development. Nothing really existed for Sure Start managers who largely came from a mix of backgrounds including health, early years and special needs housing. Margie Whalley from the Penn Green Centre set up a master's level programme in interagency working in the early years. This excellent course filled a gap but required significant investment in time and funding for hard pressed managers trying to get new services up and running.

The popularity of Sure Start proved a mixed blessing. In 2004 the Government decided to offer a Sure Start Children's Centre in every neighbourhood, 3,500 centres in all. However, the generosity of the original funding was reduced; resources were spread more thinly, although Labour continued to fund the centres in poor areas more generously. This differential funding largely disappeared after 2010. Sure Start remained immensely popular. While he was Prime Minister, David Cameron's mother was on the picket line trying to save the children's centre in her area. Expansion greatly increased the awareness of and popularity of Sure Start, and opposition to closure, It also resulted in a weakening of the original model.

Where are we now

The Coalition Government in 2010 made commitments to continue with Sure Start, but the removal of the ring-fenced grant for early years services in 2013 was the death knell for its key principles: open access services for families with young children in all areas, with the funding weighted for poor areas. The drastic cuts in local government funding led to severe reductions in Sure Start Children's Centres. Those in the poorest areas experienced the most drastic cuts. Most were either closed or *hollowed out*; open fewer hours on fewer days with fewer services. The key feature of a centre open at least five full days a week with a range of services on offer was lost.⁶ Closures meant that potential users would have to travel further to attend a children's centre. Both these features meant the inevitable reduction in demand.

The Conservative government from 2015 heralded a repurposing of children's centres as referrals only centres for families deemed to require social work support. The essential features of community engagement, parents involved in centre governance, and the benefits of social mix to community cohesion were all lost.

More recently, Dame Andrea Leadsom argued in her Early Years Healthy Development Review that the first two years of life are particularly critical to future life chances. In October 2021 the Chancellor announced in his budget speech

£500 million over the next three years to transform 'Start for Life' and family help services in half of the council areas across England. This will fund a network of Family Hubs, Start for Life services, perinatal mental health support, breastfeeding services, and parenting programmes. It will also expand the Supporting Families programme, providing up to 300,000 with high quality multidisciplinary support. (Autumn Budget and Spending Review 2021)

Leadsom calls for a universal offer of information and advice for parents, probably delivered digitally, as well as an enhanced offer of face to face support delivered from Family Hubs located in lower income areas. She is also allocating funding to build a workforce more prepared for the special skills required to work with pregnant women and families with babies. Given the neglect

of early years and young families over the previous ten years, Leadsom is to be congratulated for getting integrated support for young families back on the policy agenda, with funding attached.

Conclusions

As can be seen from the other articles in this report, early years policy has been on and off the national agenda for decades. The post war assumption of one adult working full time to support a partner and two children has long been dismantled. A social security system that assumed women would stay at home at least until children started school has disappeared. As the economic pressure for both parents to work has increased, so has the social pressure for both parents to spend more time with their children. Successive governments have adopted policies to improve parental capabilities. While the Labour Government made huge efforts to reduce child poverty and to improve parents' capabilities, a rhetoric has emerged that largely blames poor parenting for the differences in outcomes between children from better off and low-income families ignoring the toll that low income puts on families.

Programmes to improve parental capacity are designed to narrow the gap while economic policy continues to increase pressure on families.⁷ Sure Start was one of a number of initiatives designed to improve outcomes for children, including massive investment in education, health services and tax incentives to make work pay. It is now over 20 years since it was announced in Parliament. Hopes for Sure Start were too high, and many mistakes were made. None-the-less it remains one of the most popular of all New Labour initiatives and is still warmly regarded by thousands of families that used Sure Start services as well as the thousands of staff who worked in local programmes and children's centres. Whatever comes next, and whatever it is called, the basic premise of community-based centres for families with young children that are open to all and offer a range of services must be a good thing. But it must be supplementary to the services that reduce pressure on parents; adequate income supports, parental leave policies and high-quality public services.

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Narrowing the Gap? EPAs to Children's Centres 1971-2021: 50 years of research on implementation and outcomes

Teresa Smith

This span of 50 years saw a range of early years initiatives focused on expanding early years services of different kinds, increasing take-up especially by disadvantaged families and in disadvantaged areas, and improving outcomes particularly for the most disadvantaged.

'Day care' is a slippery term with a number of meanings, from an all-encompassing term covering all forms of early years provision, to one explicitly referring to care for children enabling parents to work. The two principal drivers for daycare in the UK historically have been 1) educational, particularly for disadvantaged children, and 2) care as provision for children of non-coping parents, or as cover for working parents. These two strands interweave throughout the history.

The 1960s saw a scatter of nursery schools and part-time nursery classes (this was a historical distribution across the country) after the run-down of the war-time nurseries. There was daycare for statutory cases (family violence, breakdown), while the voluntary sector Preschool Playgroups Association (PPA), founded in 1962 as a pressure group for nursery education, ran groups for children's social development but not daycare: relatively few married women with young children worked full-time, and were mainly provided for by the growth in private childminding with poor standards.

The Urban Programme (1968) for disadvantaged areas took up the baton to expand nursery education, and included funds for nursery provision. The Educational Priority Areas (EPAs) programme, drawing on 1950s and 60s US interventions, focused on cognitive development in disadvantaged youngsters and led to part-time nursery classes in primary schools as proposed in Thatcher's 1972 White Paper, *Education, A Framework for Expansion*. But the driver was explicitly not day care for working women. Later programmes, in contrast, explicitly promoted daycare for working women: *Wraparound Care* (2000), and the *Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative (NNI)* (2001-4).

Over the last 50 years the rates of working (including full-time) women with children under five have dramatically increased, while families with children have fared badly in housing, benefits and wages; over the last 10 years cuts in benefits have fallen particularly heavily on households with children.

Our increasing understanding of the importance of high quality early years provision should be seen within this socio-economic context. The education focus and the need for parents to work are in dynamic tension. Most recent research shows that intervention programmes have modest but positive outcomes on children's intellectual and behavioural development and on family functioning. The tension between 'targeted' and 'open access/ universal' services continues. There is still no 'magic bullet' in early education, and still no clarity about how best to respond to growing demand for affordable child care and the need to narrow the attainment gap between rich and poor children.

Day care: the wider policy context

Roger Bullock

To draw these discussions together, I will try to relate what has happened in day care and early years provision in recent years to wider social and economic policies.

World-wide moves to the political right

I think it is reasonable to say that during the past decade there has been a political drift to the right across most Western countries. Although recent elections and the Covid-19 pandemic have halted some aspects of this and led to unexpected government actions, these have to be seen as something of a blip in a trend whereby governments have rolled back the state, delegated responsibilities to organisations and individuals, reduced taxes and trusted market forces to shape social policy. This, in combination with sizeable cuts in public spending, has led to a reduction in state intervention in people's lives and a concentration on the basics required by law. The effects have been varied; the emphasis on individual rights and responsibilities has partly protected issues like child protection and domestic violence but has shattered social work activity falling under the banner of family support. This has resulted in the well documented closure of youth centres and children's centres without this being an official child care policy.

The contraction of government responsibility

A common criticism is that the UK government is unaware of the damage this curtailment has inflicted, but I think this is an over-simplification. The growing deprivation experienced by large sections of the population and the widening gap between rich and poor are obvious. The dispute, as I see it, is more about boundaries of responsibility and what qualifies as legitimate government activity, and the fact that these limits have been tightened. An example was the Government's response to Marcus Rashford's petition to provide school dinners in the summer holidays. The Government's stance was not to deny the numbers of deserving children but to explain that it was not its job to feed them. Its responsibility stopped at ensuring that families had enough money to do so through financial benefits and taxation.

A latent agenda of the benefits system

The third point is that help for families that fall below the line for whatever reason relies heavily on financial support. But while this is primarily seen as relieving poverty and distress, historically it has had another more significant aim - getting people into work and participating in the labour market³. This is now a salient feature of universal credit which means that those facing difficulties in this respect, such as the chronic sick, disabled and lone parents, are at a considerable disadvantage of falling into a poverty trap. The Sutton Trust has shown how poor families miss out on rights to child care and early years education because of their limited employment and earning opportunities⁴.

A further problem is that these policies are justified by stressing the deficiencies of the individuals affected rather than the weaknesses of the social structures that determine their situation. As a result, day care that is oriented to facilitating employment or protecting rights is more likely to attract the present government's favour than provision delivering welfare *per se*.

The significance of departmental names

This hardening attitude has been marked by changes in the names of the responsible government departments. In the 1970s, social security and social services were combined with health in the DHSS (Department of Health and Social Security), indicating a broad welfare perspective. The 1997 Labour government adopted a similarly wide approach when it combined children, schools and families into a single DCFS department. What we have now is a department 'for education' which has responsibility for child welfare but fails to mention it, and another for 'work and pensions' which implies a straightforward and inflexible approach.

³ R. Parker and R. Bullock (2014), *A Historical View of the Concept of Severe and Multiple Disadvantage and of Responses to It*, www.centreforsocialpolicy.org.uk/papers.

⁴ Free childcare policy 'damages life chances of poor children in England', *The Guardian*, August 19th, 2021.

Conflicting views on the welfare state

While participants in this seminar are probably like-minded in that they are sympathetic to universal welfare services delivered by central government, it is important to appreciate that this is not everyone's view. Many economists see the welfare state as a fetter to economic growth in that it represses innovation, encourages passivity and spends money unproductively. The challenges to human survival that governments are facing allows them to dismiss domestic social problems as inevitable aspects of modern life largely caused by feckless behaviour. The political challenge for reformers is to fashion a manifesto that supports the home population without being racist or xenophobic; *Every Child Matters*⁵ attempted this in 2003 but struggled to maintain its benevolent ethos in situations when, for instance, childhood innocence turned into stropmy adolescence.

Government resistance to large scale interventions

A further problem is that western governments are reluctant to set up new state-run services because of the employment and pension responsibilities they create. The present UK government employs 1.4 million NHS workers, 625,000 teachers and 450,000 civil servants, some senior ones of whom have generous pension rights that are unsustainable for younger employees likely to live to a big age. If the government did ever decide to introduce a new nation-wide welfare activity, it is likely to give the money to charities and independent providers to avoid long-term financial liabilities.

The current situation

But despite the reduction in services, there is a clearly lot of goodwill circulating. 'What works' centres have been set up, the children's commissioner has launched *The Big Ask*, a 'once in a generation' 'Beveridge Report for children' with an ambitious call to rebuild childhood after the pandemic¹⁶, and the Government has published *The Best Start in Life* laying out plans to improve

⁵ HM Government, *Every Child Matters*, 2003, Cmd 5860

⁶ Delivered on March 21st 2021, available on www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk

babies' and children's healthy development⁷. In addition, Josh McAlister has published his *Independent Review of Children's Social Care*⁸ which recommends a 'fundamental shift in the way children's social care responds to families that need help' and the Nuffield Foundation's *Child Welfare Inequalities Project* reminds us of the need tackle structural poverty as well as presenting needs⁹.

The key question, therefore, is the perennial social policy challenge of how can we move from concern to action?

Moving from concern to action

Initially, the context seems favourable as there is anxiety about children's futures, facilitating legislation, an established service structure, a skilled workforce and public sympathy to paying taxes for welfare. All these are major pluses compared with countries that have poor facilities and minimal care budgets. But while they are a good foundation, they are not enough.

Despite the auspicious social climate, it is clear that if we are to protect day care from further cuts, we need to do more than continuously highlight deprivation and need. Heartfelt pleas fall on deaf ears at the moment and are unlikely to produce a serious dialogue with current ministers; revelations are usually side-lined by a brief ministerial statement that the Government is committed to the issue in question and is allocating extra money.

The earlier observations highlighted the need for an overarching theoretical dimension to ensure that all services are underpinned by the same welfare principles, and in this respect the UK is lucky to have the 1989 Children Act philosophy.

Then, the importance of systems has to be acknowledged. While fragmentation, specialisation and silo working are inevitable in a complex service network, interventions need be complementary rather than confounding. What we don't want is disjointed sentimentality, such

⁷ Department of Health and Social Care, *The Best Start in Life: A vision for the 1,001 critical days*, March 25th 2021. See www.gov.uk

⁸ J. McAlister, *The Independent Review of Children's Social Care*, 2022

⁹ The Nuffield Foundation, *The Child Welfare Inequalities Project: Final Report*, 2020.

as when corporations and individuals whose activities and products harm children advertise their generous donations to children's charities.

In addition to all of this, proposals have to be informed by sound evidence which is more likely to escape criticism if it is based on randomisation. Unfortunately, controlled trials are anathema to many working in child welfare but the reality is that if they choose to reject 'gold-standard' methodologies, they must also accept scepticism about their claims of success. An approach, regarding day care which *is* supported by research might stress that in an area for which the government accepts responsibility, namely child protection, interventions mostly comprise the family support services it has decimated.

There are many other influences that can sway public and political opinion, such as shocking incidents and endorsement by celebrities. But in the final and most arduous stage of service design all of this has to be 'Beveridgised', that is coordinated into a comprehensive and cohesive policy to convince the powers that be of its legitimacy and feasibility. The opportunity is there with the new government initiatives but the risk of fizzling out is ever present.

It is hard to be optimistic at the moment but if we are to push for progress, I would suggest that some of the ideas presented might be useful.

Contributors

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Dame Gillian was Director of the Early Childhood Unit at the National Children's Bureau from 1986 – 1997 and chief Executive of children's charity Coram from 1997 – 2005. She advised governments in the UK and overseas on services for children and families and has published widely. She was an adviser to the Department for Education from 1997 – 2010, adviser to the House of Commons Select Committee for children, school and families, a visiting professor at the University of London Institute of Education and chair of the Cambridge Primary Review advisory committee. In retirement she chairs an education trust and enjoys spending time with her eight grandchildren.

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