

Building a legacy worthy of Sure Start

The Government's Plan for Change casts a clear light on the importance and opportunity of pregnancy and early childhood. Get things right and we lay the foundations for the next generation to thrive; the foundations for the nation's future health, wellbeing and prosperity.

That's a huge responsibility to get right.

Over two decades of research on Sure Start – including the impressive set of follow-up analyses released today by the IFS - gives grounds for confidence that integrated early years services *can* make a decisive impact on multiple aspects of children's lives. And that those effects can be remarkably enduring.

But where are we now? And *how* do we best capitalise on this opportunity? How do we build a legacy worthy of Sure Start?

To answer that question effectively, it is essential to look back and consolidate learning from the experience of Sure Start, Children's Centres, initiatives like Better Start and Family Hubs, as well as learning from beyond these shores.

So where are we now? After austerity and the dramatic erosion of early childhood services, we saw a renewed government focus on integrated family support from 2021. Out of the ashes of children's centres emerged Family Hubs and Start for Life, the latter bringing a particularly welcome focus on the critical first thousand days of life. Across the 75 funded authorities and beyond, local areas continue to work incredibly hard to deliver family support. And of course, during the intervening decades since Sure Start, the science of early childhood development has continued to advance, bringing new insights about what works and the potential for even greater impacts in the future.

Today's Family Hubs share several common features with Sure Start Local Programmes – co-location of services for families; community governance; access to health and parenting services to name but a few. But there are also important differences: most obviously, considerably smaller budgets and an age range that goes right up to 19. And of course, there is also considerable diversity *between* Family Hubs themselves: diversity in terms of the stage of service implementation; age-profile of beneficiaries in practice; target population(s); local theories of change; configurations of services and so on. This diversity will undoubtedly provide fruitful insights into innovative and impactful ways of working.

But it's really important we 'get under the bonnet' and carefully examine the approaches different Hubs are taking; the ways they are working; and the factors associated with positive outcomes. The national evaluations of Family Hubs and Start for Life - due to be published next year - will provide an independent and expert assessment of the programmes and rich insights into process, implementation and impacts. It would be wrong to try and second-guess their findings now, but suffice to say we await their insights with bated breath.

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Right now, we are at an important juncture as we look ahead to the outcome of the Spending Review and its implications for funding of services for children and families. Policy makers have to balance the immediate imperative for families and communities to access much needed support - and the responsibility to forge a national programme capable of transforming outcomes for *all* children and families right up and down the country.

And it's that latter objective which I will focus on here. I want to highlight three key enablers which could really maximise the impacts of future investments in early childhood.

The first enabler is about our ambition and horizons.

1. We need a long-term ambition for early childhood.

Someone I interviewed recently described the implementation of Family Hubs as being "*a bit like building the plane as we were flying it*". It was in no way a criticism of the heroic individuals leading the policy, rather a sigh of resignation about the how we make and implement social policy in the UK.

What would really help is a shift away from short-term initiatives and precarious funding, to long-term planning horizons and investment in a sustainable infrastructure for the future. It doesn't have to be like this. It's not like this in other sectors; it's not like this in other countries.

In Norway for example, expansion of quality Early Childhood Education has been a twenty-year cross-party mission; an investment in the nation's human capital; a determined drive to unlock all children's potential. And it has delivered impressive results, with 89% of 1-2 year-olds and 97% of 3-5s now attending kindergartens; and demonstrated improvements in language, reading and maths, most notably for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Here, the Prime Minister famously talked about backing the builders. Perhaps the children's sectors needs to start thinking more like architects or engineers? If we are serious about transforming children's outcomes, perhaps we need to raise our horizons and envisage a bold blueprint for the future children's services we want to see?

2. We need an integrated early life course approach, joining up support from conception through to the school gate.

One of the most striking lines in the IFS report on Sure Start is that there was no single silver bullet. The authors found "*Sure Start worked because it took seriously the academic evidence on the relationship between all of the different aspects of child development*". Sure Start opened a door into a community and into a wider network of support. It worked because it sought to connect and mobilise the assets and resources in the wider system. And, to be frank, it operated at a time when the wider system was better resourced than it is today. The best local programmes had deep

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relationships with universal services – especially capitalising on the reach of midwifery and health visiting.

Based on decades of research and the landmark series of Lancet Reviews on ECD, the World Bank, WHO and UNICEF developed the Nurturing Care Framework which advocates for an integrated early life course approach. It brings together 5 domains of child development: health; nutrition; early learning, responsive caregiving; and safety and security. And it seeks to address the full ecology of influences around the family and child.

This sort of approach requires integration not just of front-line delivery in Family Hubs, but at every level.

In Blackpool Better Start, they take a whole town approach, raising awareness of the importance of early childhood and nurturing a culture of collective responsibility for babies right across the community, workforce and senior leaders. This allows them to harness the full power of all actors - public, voluntary and private - and elevates early childhood as a central strategic priority on the agendas of the local authority; ICB and all key players locally. This is all power to the elbow of their Children's Centres and Family Hubs.

And it is also about government taking a lead nationally, driving an integrated vision and strategy for early childhood and being willing to pull all of the levers necessary to break the cycle of disadvantage and ensure all children get the best possible start in life. This means tackling the structural causes of disadvantage, like poverty and housing – as part of an integrated strategy alongside more proximal arenas like maternity; early education; parenting and parent-infant relationships.

3. Set the framework for a new era of integrated early years support

As evidence comes on stream from the national evaluations of Family Hubs and Start for Life, inevitably government will want to take stock of the findings. This will be a critical moment to set the strategic framework for integrated early years support in the years to come.

First and foremost, the framework needs to clearly define the core purpose and distinctive contribution of integrated early years support. Flagship programmes frequently become subject to political whims, tussled over to achieve competing objectives, vehicles to be hijacked for the latest policy initiative. The framework should put in place boundaries that enable local leaders and practitioners to focus and get on with their important work helping families.

Drawing on best available evidence, the framework should set out a clear national programme logic, defining the core components of the model and carefully aligning activities and interventions to achieve the ultimate goal. Equally important will be defining the space for local areas to add, flex and adapt to fit with local contexts and specific local needs. Effective outreach and community engagement are just as important ingredients as evidence based interventions. Without this consistent

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framework, we risk letting a thousand flowers bloom and exacerbating current post code lotteries.

The framework should set a course for the long-term, with a staged approach to achieving scale. Implementation support, monitoring, evaluation and learning should be woven into the fabric of the programme, enabling continuous learning, adaptation and improvement.

So in sum, the new IFS findings on Sure Start add considerable weight to the case for investing in integrated early years services. But this is just one piece of the puzzle. If we really want to seize the opportunity of early childhood, then we need to be ambitious, think long term, draw on all of the available levers and build an integrated system of support from conception to the school gate.

Chris Cuthbert,
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