

Fulfilling their potential

the 'win-win' case for birth registrations in Children's Centres



Section one – Introduction and Executive Summary

Introduction

“Early intervention can forestall the physical and mental health problems that commonly perpetuate a cycle of dysfunction.”¹

There have been few other policies in the last fifty years considered to be more pivotal to the success of early intervention and cementing the links with vulnerable families than the establishment of children’s centres. Barnardo’s is one of the leading voluntary sector providers of children’s centres, currently managing 190 across England. These centres provide for a range of needs – from a broad service open to anyone, through to more tailored provisions focusing on particular issues including breastfeeding support, parenting classes and groups to support mums, dads and carers. They work in partnership with commissioners delivering essential services whilst also trying to proactively find and engage families who may not seek out services themselves but are nevertheless in high need.

Children’s centres were created with the purpose of improving ‘outcomes for young children and their families and reducing inequalities between families in the greatest need’.² Research has shown that early intervention has a significant positive impact for children and it is widely agreed that children’s centres are unparalleled in their ability to provide this. However, although children’s centres are popular amongst those that use them, there is still limited awareness for some new parents about what they offer.

Since their creation, the health and well-being landscape for pre-school children and their parents has significantly changed. Children’s centres have in some areas become community social hubs, providing services

and support to families with children under five, but could potentially offer so much more. Their proximity to the local community and the fact that they are not seen as part of the ‘establishment’ means parents may feel less intimidated or overwhelmed than engaging with other services (e.g. doctors, schools) and therefore more willing to access their services.

This report outlines how children’s centres can further support parents and children, by providing the mandatory birth registration service directly within local communities, with a particular focus on reaching the most disadvantaged families. During the course of this research, parents, children’s centre staff and registrars had the opportunity to set out the advantages, disadvantages and practical ways forward needed to establish this practice more widely.

Executive Summary

Barnardo’s experiences of running children’s centres and working directly with service users have led us to recognise not only their importance to many communities but also that their potential is not always being fully utilised. These crucial community hubs could reach more vulnerable families and assess their needs even more closely. By establishing the facility to register births within children’s centres, they could potentially reach families who otherwise may not access a children’s centre and encourage them to return to use other services. So why are more children’s centres not setting up this facility?

This is not a new idea, nor is it radical or unrealistic – our Benchill Children’s Centre has been offering this service successfully for over ten years. They currently register approximately 800 births a year. The centre also reports that 80% of families in their reach area are re-engaging with the centre after attending a birth registration. The research

¹ Graham Allen – *Early Intervention: The Next Steps*

² DfE The Department for Education (2013) *Sure Start children’s centres statutory guidance*, p. 7

found that 82% of our centres who responded to our survey said that if the arrangements were made in their area, it would help them with 'reach'. 91% also said it would help them to promote their services and improve engagement. However, our ability to develop this provision more widely in our children's centres is dependent on the capacity and commitment of relevant agencies.

The recent *Children and Families Act 2014* provided a crucial and welcome opportunity to discuss and debate legislating for the service of birth registrations to be routinely undertaken in children's centres. An amendment was put forward to make it mandatory for children's centres to offer this practice but progress stalled. During the Committee stage of the Bill, Ministers expressed warm support for the proposal, however it was agreed that as some are already offering this service, legislation was not thought to be needed. Instead, awareness raising and 'encouragement' of other children's centres to follow suit was deemed sufficient. Whilst support from Ministers for the service is welcomed and it is appreciated that the practice is slowly expanding, more concrete commitments need to be made to ensure that this strategy of encouragement actually leads to a marked increase in the uptake of the provision.

Some have dismissed the practice as a 'good idea' but not realistic to implement. As the UK's largest children's charity, Barnardo's believes that it is not just conceptually an attractive idea but actually highly plausible and workable. In fact, it is a far more practical and low cost proposal than providing disparate services to new families often quite a distance away. By offering the opportunity to visit a children's centre in order to complete the mandatory registering of a new baby, mums and dads can see for themselves the atmosphere and facilities of their local centre and hopefully return in the future. Our research found that registrars who were not

currently operating within children's centres shared these concerns about practicalities; however, 100% of registrars who did make use of children's centres would recommend the practice as they found a range of benefits from doing so. This suggests that more needs to be done to show that these logistical concerns may not always be well founded.

Moreover, one of the biggest obstacles faced by children's centres is the challenge of identifying the families who may be in need in their community. This is no easy feat due to a continuing lack of demographic information shared between local agencies. Birth registration gives the unique opportunity to spur families to come directly to the centres themselves in the first six weeks of their child's life, which in turn gives staff an invaluable opportunity to connect with them.

More recently, children's centres have faced ongoing financial pressures and budget cuts. Our recent calculations revealed an estimated budget decrease of over 35% for children's centres since 2010. It now seems logical to diversify use and offer services such as birth registration in order to optimise the resources children's centres have, whilst at the same time offering a plethora of advantages for vulnerable families.

The research in this report draws on the experiences of families and practitioners using and running a birth registration service in a children's centre, as well as registrars themselves. Their first-hand evidence suggests that the service is delivering wide-ranging and potentially long-lasting benefits to many vulnerable families across the country. This provision must not be added to the long list of 'postcode lottery' services relying on the will and whim of individual commissioners and providers. Barnardo's does not believe that it is essential for all children's centres to offer this provision, but for many vulnerable communities, it could be used as a key engagement tool for local authorities.

Recommendations

Given the positive impact the service can have, more needs to be done to encourage local authorities and children's centres to consider establishing a birth registration facility.

We therefore ask for the following commitments from decision makers:

- Local authorities should meet with their respective registrars to undertake a feasibility study of expanding this practice within their areas.
- Children's centres should consider promoting their services more widely to ensure that there is a clear understanding of the work they do and the benefits to families.
- The Department for Education should work with the Home Office in order to plan a concerted awareness campaign to progress the rollout further.
- A national Birth Registration pilot study should be established as recommended by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Sure Start Children's Centres. This pilot should take place in areas with a higher concentration of vulnerable families and build on existing birth registration pilots being undertaken in some children's centres across the country.
- Central government and local authorities should work together to educate and articulate, at a national and local level, what children's centres are and their value to families.
- A small start-up fund should be allocated by the Department for Education to incentivise and support the practice with local commissioners. This start-up fund should contribute to the resources needed by children's centres and registrars to establish the service.
- Birth registration good practice should be shared widely between registrars, local authorities and children's centres to encourage further uptake.



Section two – Context

What are Children's Centres?

Children's centres developed through the 1998 Labour government's Sure Start agenda, with the objective of giving each child 'the best possible start in life'. This was to be achieved by providing support for all children under five and their families through integrated, easily accessible local services in childcare, health and family support.

“...Early childhood services are made available in an integrated manner – managed by or on behalf of, or under arrangements made with, an English local authority.”³

Children's centres are designed to support the earliest years of a child's life where the opportunity to enhance their development and future outcomes is proven to be at its strongest. It is now widely agreed that 'the earlier the intervention in a child's life, the more effective and significant the impact it is likely to be'.⁴ This ethos of early intervention is at the very core of children's centres. They operate within the community to meet the needs of all children at their varying stages of development in the crucial early years.

Sure Start Local Programmes, as they became known, were intent on alleviating the effects of poverty on children by improving early years' outcomes and thereby enhancing the life chances for disadvantaged pre-school children.

Today there are approximately 2,800 children's centres across England, commissioned by local authorities and operated either by them or other public, private or voluntary providers.⁵ They tend to be located in various community venues such as church halls,

libraries and schools. Barnardo's currently manages 190 of these children's centres.

Types of services and facilities found in Children's Centres

Through multi-agency working, the centres provide a range of services to support parents, babies and pre-school children. Support is centred on the objectives of health and wellbeing, education and learning and parenting support and development.⁶

Health and well-being

Health and well-being services are designed to improve health outcomes of children and can include things such as:

- Antenatal registration and checks (midwives)
- Antenatal activities with partners (children's centre service providers) and parents-to-be, preparing for parenthood
- Postnatal checks for mum and baby
- Baby massage
- Weaning, baby food menus and practical one-pan cooking
- Exercise and fitness activities (e.g. parent and baby yoga)
- Safety in the home
- Paediatric first aid

Education and social development

Services for education and learning have the objective of enhancing children's educational, physical, emotional and social development. For example:

- Singing, talking, listening and responding activities (talk to your baby activities)
- Reading, story-time, poems and books; Bookstart activities/library membership
- Stay and play activities
- Crèches
- Adult learning activities guided by parental request

3 House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee (2010) *Sure Start Children's Centres, fifth Report of session 2009-10*. www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmchilsh/130/13002.htm

4 Best Practice for a Sure Start: The Way Forward for Children's Centres (2013) *Report from the All Party Parliamentary Sure Start Group*. www.4children.org.uk/Files/cffc42fe-49eb-43e2-b330-a1fd00b8077b/Best-Practice-for-a-Sure-Start.pdf

5 House of Commons Education Committee (2013). *Foundation Years: Sure Start children's centres, fifth report of session 2013-2014*. www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmeduc/364/36404.htm#a1

6 Rallings, J (2014) *What are children's centres for?* www.barnardos.org.uk/15733_what_are_children_s_centres_for_report_v2_hr.pdf

Parental support and advice

Essential support is available for parents too – for example, advice, courses and workshops on issues such as:

- Positive parenting
- Workplace skills
- Childcare
- Safeguarding
- Money management and budgeting advice
- Programmes for dads and male carers (with children and/or as a peer group)
- Specific support/activities for young parents and parents-to-be

Registering Births at Children's Centres

The *Births and Deaths Registration Act 1953* states that a child's birth should be registered in the sub-district in which the child was born but does not set forth where it should be done.⁷ In fact, various settings are used by local authorities, including libraries and hospitals and a small number of children's centres although these locations are not always promoted widely or the appointments are infrequent.

The responsibility for the registration service is split between the Registrar General, who is the Head of the General Register Office, and local authorities. The Registrar General administers the law relating to civil registration and local authorities are responsible for the organisation and delivery of the service in their area, which includes determining the locations where births may be registered. Local authorities are also responsible for appointing the registrars to carry out the duty.

Relocating this provision to children's centres has proven potential to help address a number of problems. It is estimated that at

least twenty local authorities across England already successfully provide this service or are piloting it in their children's centres.

This research provides further evidence of the positive impact these services are having on families.

Registering a birth

All births in England, Wales and Northern Ireland must be registered within 42 days of the child being born. This should be undertaken traditionally in a registry office for the area where the baby was born or at the hospital before the mother leaves. The hospital will tell you if you can register the birth there. If you cannot register the birth in the area where the baby was born, you can go to another registry office and they will send your details to the correct office.

Who can register a birth?

If you are married, either parent can register the birth. If you are not married and want the father's name to appear on the certificate, both parents must come to the registration appointment. If the mother is not married to the father, she can choose to register the birth on her own. The father's details will not then be included on the birth certificate.

⁷ www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Eliz2/1-2/20

Current Policy Context

Following the 2010 General Election, the Coalition Government asserted their support for early intervention investment. Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg said in 2011:

“If we can help youngsters stay out of care, and out of trouble, and out of jail, the social and economic benefits are huge. The long-term savings from helping the families with the deepest problems far outweigh the upfront cost ”.⁸

The All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Sure Start has been instrumental in advancing the cause and worth of children’s centres throughout the last parliament. The APPG was founded in March 2010 in order to enable parliamentarians with an interest in early years policy, and specifically in Sure Start children’s centres, to develop and share best practice.

A major report by this APPG in 2013 first suggested that the opportunity to register births in children’s centres could be *“a key lever in reaching and engaging with all families”*⁹. In this report, they highlight the impact of the provision and potential benefits attained for families and children’s centres.

However, in response to the APPG’s report the House of Commons Education Committee in their fifth report on *Foundation Years: Sure Start Children’s Centres* (2013)¹⁰ cited that local authorities were against the proposal of birth registration in children’s centres on the grounds of cost and staffing. It was decided that as a concept it was an ‘attractive idea’ and that local authorities should be permitted, but

not be obliged, to partake in the provision. Despite agreeing on the importance of using birth registrations as an early intervention tool, they remained *“unconvinced that it is necessarily a practical solution [to implement]”*.¹¹

Along the same lines, despite an amendment being put forward in the committee stage of the Children and Families Bill¹² that the provision of birth registration should be mandatory in children’s centres with a national roll-out, political will to legislate continued to lag. Although the amendment led to a very positive debate about the practice itself with unanimous agreement of its worth, it was decided that this was not a matter for legislation, but instead more promotion was needed. The Minister responsible for the Act, Edward Timpson MP, agreed that the Department for Education would investigate the benefits of the proposed system. Despite this top-level commitment though, the numbers of children’s centres engaged in instituting this facility so far remain low.

In a pre-election report (2015)¹³, the APPG for Sure Start argued again that centres have an *“almost unrivalled”* ability to reach children during their early years and once more suggested this practice as a means to extend reach and help more families. They recommended that the prospective government should be proactive in supporting the extension of this practice more widely, including establishing a national pilot.

Barnardo’s agrees and urges the new Government to commit to early intervention by bringing the birth registration practice into the 21st century and making it work for parents. Support at this most crucial time in a child’s development entails less effort, less expenditure and is easier to provide than other services that deal with possible future

8 Speech by Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg in London on 19 January 2011 welcoming the Graham Allen report on early interventions.

9 Best Practice for a Sure Start: The Way Forward for Children’s Centres – Report from the All Party Parliamentary Sure Start Group 2013

10 <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/meduc/364/364.pdf>

11 *ibid*

12 now Children and Families Act 2014

13 Pre-Election Report (2015) *All Party Parliamentary Group on Sure Start Children’s Centres*.

consequences. Birth registration provides the earliest possible opportunity to offer such support which can transform the lives of vulnerable children.

This provision does not need to be mandatory and in some areas it may be neither necessary nor feasible. However, in many communities, delivering this service will have huge benefits for local families, particularly more vulnerable ones, as well as for professionals. Moreover, as Ofsted inspection requirements for children's centres place more emphasis on area-wide reach and engagement with vulnerable families in particular, the benefits of a service such as birth registration to attract families into the centre in the first place are obvious. With such a 'win-win' policy it is clear more needs to be done to incentivise the practice and encourage the uptake within children's centres.



Section three – Research findings

Research Methods

Two children's centres were selected as primary research sites – Benchill in Wythenshawe, a densely populated area on the outskirts of Manchester which has been offering birth registration for almost 15 years, and Blyth, a small town in Northumberland which started offering this service in May 2014.

Interviews were conducted at each of these services with managers, outreach workers and registrars, as well as with the parents who came in to have their babies registered to get feedback on the service. In addition, a survey was carried out to all English registration districts. 67 out of 132 registrars replied.

Feedback covered in more detail later in the report shows that registrars with experience of registering births in a children's centre rate the service positively and recommend it as a 'win-win' initiative. Registrars did identify some barriers concerning resources and capacity which will need clarification for this provision to evolve. There is perhaps a general lack of understanding and awareness of why this provision is being advocated which could be potentially impinging on registrars' willingness to participate.

What are the benefits of registering births in Children's Centres?

The research concentrates on the benefits and impact of having a birth registration service located in a children's centre. It also presents the opinions of registrars themselves taken from the survey and explores reasons why it is not currently more widely practised. The following section outlines the key benefits identified during the research process.

Feedback from Parents

Accessibility

New parents can find it difficult to transport a new baby a number of miles to reach a distantly located registry office, especially if having to rely on public transport and potentially having to bring older siblings too. Parents commented that parking is often expensive and inconvenient in city centres.

Our research shows that registering births in children's centres has proven to be a popular service addition with parents. Where they have been given the choice between registering a birth at their local children's centre and the central registry office, it appears many have actively chosen to visit the former.

"It was either go to the council or come here and I thought it would be much easier to come here..."

The predominant reasons they gave were because it is "convenient" and "easy" which in most cases is due to proximity. Local centres are often much closer than registry offices, so inevitably parents chose to attend centres.

One of our centres in Wythenshawe attracted parents to the service who repeatedly described it as "closer" and "local" compared with registry offices. The Sure Start centre in Benchill is part of a large Wythenshawe council estate and for many vulnerable and less affluent new families living in that area, the time, effort and expenditure involved in travelling to the central registry office in Manchester can be prohibitive and stressful.

Parents also found it easier because it was "quick". Children's centres are more likely to offer drop-in services as opposed to appointments and, according to centre staff, these prove very popular. Parents like the idea of not having to make an appointment.

"We thought it was quite easy... short, sweet"

Despite ease and convenience being the initial reasons for parents choosing to register births in children's centres, once they have done so they have found it to be an extremely positive experience. Many parents suggest it is a less formal and bureaucratic approach and found it to be an extremely relaxed and friendly environment, something which was considered very welcome at this often sleep-deprived and stressful time. Other research by the APPG for Sure Start suggests that the convenience of the service being located in the community mutually benefits the registration service too as births are much more likely to be registered within the statutory time limit.

Reach, Engagement and Re-engagement

The popularity of the provision amongst new parents effectively extends reach and improves engagement for centres. More new families are making contact with centres, and although they may only be going to them because of convenience; it works effectively for centres.

“We would just never meet sixteen new families a week...”

Extended reach enables centres to engage with more families than they otherwise would. The initial engagement provided by the provision gives staff the opportunity to “make that link” and “get their message out”. Through meeting new families within the first six weeks, they get to “chat to parents”, “build that relationship”, promote their services, dispel misapprehensions and, most importantly, encourage them to come back.

“I’ll greet them at reception...I’ll go through all of the information...there’s lots of things they can get involved in from birth to five”

Staff are able to provide information about their services whilst parents are waiting to see

the registrar – giving out ‘information packs’ and ‘loyalty cards’ – and parents learn more about the role of children's centres and feel inclined to return.

Data collection – Outreach and Safeguarding

As well as improved engagement, with many new families going back to centres wanting to use their services, offering a birth registration service also works as a catalyst for centres to actively engage with parents they feel they need to. When meeting new families who have made contact with centres to register births, centres have the opportunity to collect data. They use things such as ‘outreach forms’ and ‘targeted support forms’ from which they can identify ‘vulnerable parents’.

“...there’s a tick box, items they may need support with...from there we can follow up if there’s anything further that they need, or just check on them and make sure anything’s ok.”

This helps extend support to families who may be hardest to engage. According to centres, it is often those that need support that do not generally come in.

“...we’d never meet them, they wouldn’t just come in”

Data from local health services about under-fives, is in many areas, notoriously difficult for centres to obtain, often because there is uncertainty over how far live birth data can be legally shared. The sharing of live birth data provides children's centres with key information needed to contact new families in their area and, according to a recent report published by The Children's Society (2014)¹⁴, this is currently one of the main barriers facing children's centres today.

¹⁴ Abdinasir, K and Capron, L (2014) *The right start: How to support early intervention through initial contact with families* – The Children's Society http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/live_birth_data_report_-_final.pdf

Their findings showed that almost half of local authorities who responded to their survey were not providing live birth data to their children's centres which makes it more difficult for the centres to be able to identify and reach families at the earliest opportunity. A birth registration service can help centres to develop their own information about their local community as well as engaging new families who otherwise may not be on their radar.

82% of our centres that responded to our survey said that having this provision would help them improve their data collection. From collecting data at the birth registration, families in need can be identified and centres are able to keep in contact with them to follow up and provide targeted support.

Safeguarding

Evidence suggests that mothers from lower-income families are more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression, to use harsher disciplinary methods and to have more limited social networks, which in turn impact on children's development.¹⁵ One study found that mothers in low-income households were more than twice as likely to suffer from postnatal depression as those in the highest income households, with other studies finding that (alongside antenatal depression, social support and a range of other factors) low income is a significant predictor of postnatal depression.¹⁶

Engaging with mothers most at risk of postnatal depression has an obvious advantage for safeguarding. Collecting data and identifying support needs means concerns can be picked up early on. According to one of our children's centres, once they've built up a relationship with new families, underlying problems can often come to the fore.

Registrars though, of course, are not required to note concerns so these can easily be missed

in registry offices. The experience of centre staff along with their 'outreach forms' means they can identify safeguarding issues within the first six weeks.

“There was a mum and she circled ‘I want to talk to someone in private’ [on the outreach form]... she said ‘I’m really sad’. It was really classic postnatal...if she’d not come to register the birth here nobody would ever have picked that up.”

Engaging Dads

Dads often find it hard to relate to postnatal or early years services. Children's centres offering birth registration can be very effective in helping to bring more dads in who otherwise might not ever engage. The centres interviewed for this study rarely attracted dads before, but birth registration provided a good opportunity for them to make and potentially sustain contact.

“We tend to get a lot of dads come in because they can’t register the birth if they’re not married, so the majority come with dad and...it means we get that engagement.”

However, re-engagement with dads remains a problem despite the provision, mostly due to work commitments.

“A lot of the dads who come are working, so we tend to not see them around.”

Many dads express interest in re-engaging with centres after the birth registration has taken place but explain the difficulties of work commitments. Centres sometimes

¹⁵ Gregg P et al, *Understanding the Relationship between Parental Income and Multiple Child Outcomes: a decomposition analysis*, CMPO, University of Bristol, 2008

¹⁶ 26 Leigh B and Milgrom J, *Risk factors for antenatal depression, postnatal depression and parenting stress*, BMC Psychiatry, 2008

provide Saturday ‘family days’ to encourage engagement with fathers but too often dads still “*have to try and work it around working*”.

Staff at our centres acknowledged difficulty in engaging with dads in the sense that ‘*those that would engage work, and those they want to engage, don’t*’. The service of birth registration provides that important opportunity for centres to capture dads and make contact at least once in the first instance.

“...they know we’re here, they know what we do, but often they are at work.”

Parents frequently come back and use further services.

“When you come they show you all the things you can do with the babies...I want to do the first aider stuff.”

“...it’s really good actually...all the groups they hold here, I think I’ll end up coming now”

Feedback from Staff

Improves reach

As parents have the legal responsibility to register the birth of their baby, locating this service within their children’s centre effectively works to bring parents into initial contact with children’s centres and introduce the services available. Trained staff at children’s centres are able to acquaint themselves with these families at one of the earliest points in their child’s life and offer support accordingly and on an ongoing basis.

Staff who have worked in children’s centres for over 15 years in some of the most deprived

areas told us that this is the best value service they provide. The set up costs were relatively low yet the improved reach it gives the children’s centre is far and wide.

“We were the first ones...we were the first in Manchester...very simple, we looked at how it would work, what days and when, and cost...all it cost us was the laptop they [the registrars] use and their travel.”

Builds relationships

They report that the birth registration sessions are always full and appointments are rarely missed. Parents appreciate the extra touches that make the event special, such as having photos taken. Now the staff are acquainted with the family, the relationships start to build and progress.

“The good thing about it is the mums come in for their antenatal classes, so we get to see them from day one. We follow them through the pregnancy, then they come and register the birth – and dads come...then we just follow it all on. We’ve got the baby group, baby massage and baby clinic...so we’ve already got that relationship with them. And it’s lovely for us to see



the baby's growing, and they do they move on from baby groups to Stay and Play and then they come into nursery.”

One of our centres is currently registering approximately 800 births a year and over 80% of families in their reach area are re-engaging after attending a birth registration. 82% of our centres who responded to the survey said if the arrangements were made in their area this provision would help them with 'reach' and 91% said it would help them to promote their services and improve engagement.

Dispelling myths

Accessing and familiarising themselves with their children's centre also effectively works to dispel any false assumptions parents might have had about the services and staff, therefore helping to improve reach for children's centres and increase levels of re-engagement. This can also subsequently support centres to engage

with families they may not otherwise know about – particularly vulnerable families and dads who may have not felt comfortable accessing the centre. Improved engagement has obvious advantages for safeguarding as well, with centre staff being able to identify concerns within the first six weeks as a result of birth registration.

Feedback from Registrars

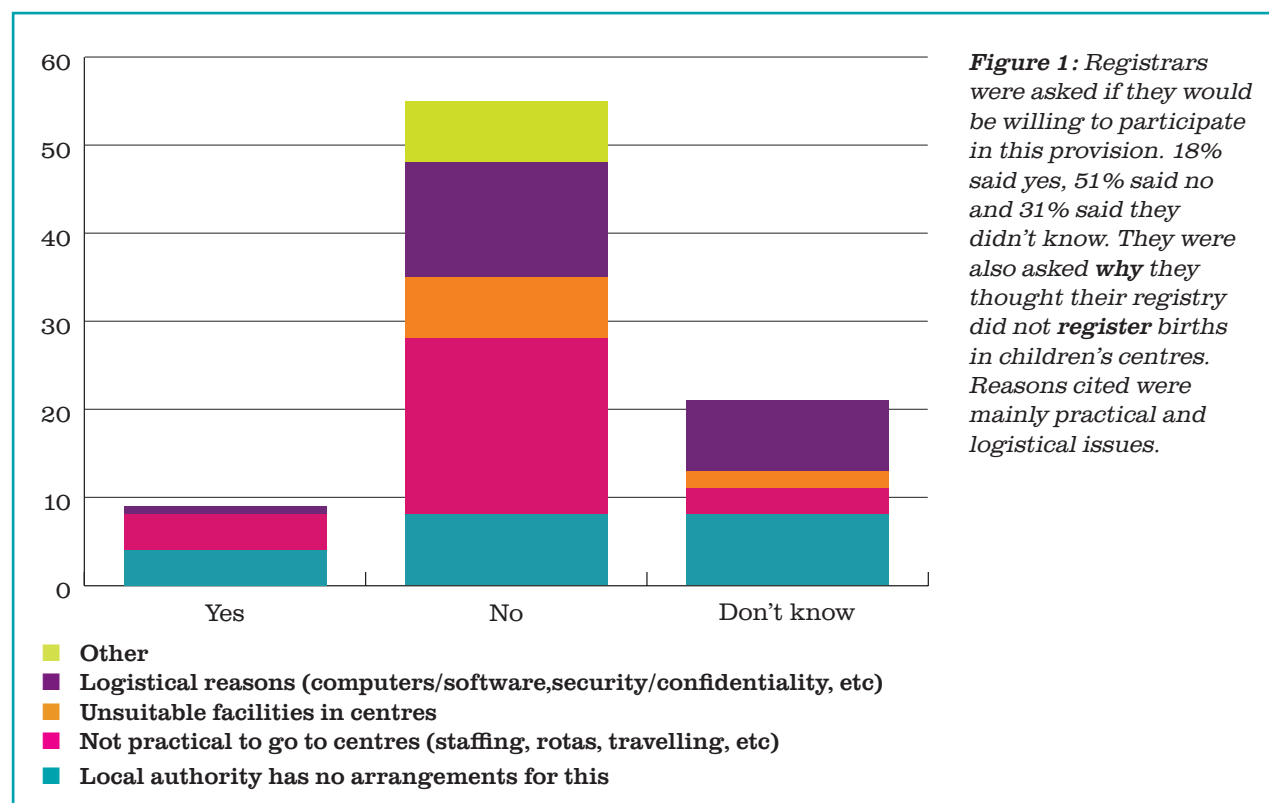
Positive experiences

Registrars that partake in registering births in children's centres are clearly positive about the provision.

“I think its lovely thing to do and I really enjoy it.”

“It's total win-win.”

60% of registry offices in England that were identified from our survey as currently being involved in this provision rate it as an



‘extremely positive service’. Some rated it *‘positive’* or suggested they are *‘neutral’* on the matter but there were not any negative responses from those who have experience in doing this. 100% also say they would recommend the provision.

According to one registrar, after an original trial in one town in Northumberland, they expanded the service to more areas in the county. The registrars work on a rota basis to cover different centres, other community settings and the town hall and it works effectively. They describe the service in children’s centres as *“lovely”, “nice”* and *“relaxed”*.

It also has advantages for the registrars themselves. According to one registrar, being *“less regimented”* means it is easier for them to get information from parents and also because some provide a drop-in service they do not have to spend time chasing parents.

“It is a win-win for both the local Registration service bringing the service into the community and for the Sure Start centre to engage with new parents.”

Resources, capacity and practicalities

A number of reasons were suggested as to why the provision was currently not being more widely practised, with absence of local authority arrangements, impracticality and logistical reasons being the most predominate.



Lack of resources and capacity proves the biggest problem amongst registrars. Many suggest that this provision would not be cost-effective and prove problematic for an *“already stretched”, “short staffed”* and *“low budget”* service. Registrars consistently express concern over the fact that at registry offices they register births, deaths and marriages and lack the resources and capacity for providing registration for just births elsewhere.

“Registrars register more than just births, and increasing budget pressures are the primary reasons why it is essential to operate the service from one service point in a city.”

“More advantageous to be in an office where we can do ALL appointments.”

Many registrars believe it is not practical to go to children’s centres because of staffing and travelling – especially in small districts where central offices only have a couple of registrars. They are required to multi-task and work with efficiency and state there is *“not enough staff”* for them to be *“out of the office all day”* and register only births in remote units– suggesting they can achieve more in the working day in their respective registry offices. This is particularly the case for some registry offices whose office is not situated in a maternity hospital district.

“We do not have a hospital in our authority. Registrations are minimal only 20 in a year.”

However, there are proven ways around this predicament. According to one registrar:

“We can register births, deaths and attest notices of marriage at one of our children’s centres and this works very well”

This registrar agrees with others that it would be an inefficient use of resources if only births were registered in each session – and say they could not continue the provision if that was the case, but it clearly offers a solution to registrars' biggest concern.

Logistical reasons such as “*who pays for the internet connection?*”, “*lack of office space*” and “*confidentiality*” also appear to be of some concern to registrars.

“As we use a government central database, there are implications regarding IT security and speed of network connections that make working in another office not viable at present.”

According to one of our children's centres that has been providing this service for 14 years, “*it was actually very simple [to set up]*”

“We had meetings here so the head registrar could come here, see the room...we organised the technology...had to work out the security element and all the practicalities of things...registrars were really on-board from the outset.”

Awareness and understanding

Just below half the registrars that responded to our survey were certainly not against exploring whether they could offer the provision. 18% said they would be willing to participate in such an initiative despite barriers to practicalities.

“It may possibly be something the district would consider in future”

31% answered ‘don't know’ when asked if they would be willing to participate and a few did not even know the practice existed.

“Not aware that the opportunity has ever arisen. Always willing to look at options”

The large quantity of registrars undecided on whether they would be willing to participate suggests a potential lack of understanding as to why it's being done. Registrars consistently mentioned they lack the resources for registrars to go out to register at “*other places*”.

“Not enough staff to cover different premises”

“Additional cost for providing multi sites”

One response states “*We provided such a facility at the hospital and found it underused and the service was withdrawn*”. Such comments that group children's centres amongst “*other places*” and dismiss them as simply another premises suggest to us that the purpose of this provision may be being missed. Unfortunately, this response is unsurprising.

There is a general lack of clarity and understanding over what children's centres offer and the potential impact they offer. This was noted by an Education Select Committee report published in 2013 and echoed in Barnardo's 2014 report, *What are Children's Centres for?*, which stated that:

“Despite their nationwide proliferation there is still low awareness and understanding of children's centres beyond their immediate target audience of families with young children”.¹⁷

¹⁷ What are Children's Centres for? – Jonathan Rallings, Barnardo's February 2014

The value of children's centres needs to be more widely espoused to registrars (and others beyond!) so that they are not perceived as just "*another location*". A better awareness of the rationale for relocating this provision might encourage greater support from registrars. The possibility of an initial start-up fund offered by Government would also allay fears from both registrars and centres themselves about the impact of the costs of resourcing the service.

Summary of research findings

Although parents' and children's centre staff's experiences of using children's centres for birth registrations are clearly positive, it is obvious that there is a real lack of awareness of the benefits from the perspective of registrars, especially as 100% of those who actually had experience of performing birth registrations in children's centres were supportive of the practice.

More needs to be done to share the evidence that relocating this service is not just a logistical issue but also has a significant early intervention impact.

The seven children's centres in Manchester that have registration facilities are amongst the busiest Sure Start centres in the City of Manchester area, based on the reach figures of the centres.¹⁸ Staff agree that having these facilities can really help to enable these centres to engage with families that they do not reach at present. It is time for local authorities to see the birth registration service as more than just a requirement – another duty to be met – but as a key means to support children's centre engagement with families.

Summary of key benefits, from the research, of locating birth registrations within children's centres

Setting up the facility to register births in children's centres:

- Improves access to data that enables children's centre staff to reach and support even more vulnerable families
- Enables the centres to engage directly with fathers who attend their child's birth registration
- Supports safeguarding by making contact with parents at the earliest stage of their baby's life
- Dispels parental misconceptions of what children's centres are and improves the likelihood that they will return to use their facilities in the future
- Makes the birth registration process a more bonding, convenient and supportive experience for new parents
- Reduces the likelihood of missed appointments, with registrars themselves praising the service

18 Best Practice for a Sure Start: The Way Forward for Children's Centres – Report from the All Party Parliamentary Sure Start Group 2013

Recommendations and Conclusion

In 2013, the Department for Education agreed to investigate the benefits of locating birth registrations within children's centres. Since then there has been relatively little update on the progress of this investigation despite extensive research undertaken by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Sure Start. In the meantime, some vulnerable families may be slipping through the net and opportunities to support children in need could be being missed.

The findings of this report suggest that the introduction of birth registrations within children's centres can be of demonstrable benefit, not only to parents but to services too. However, at present these benefits do not seem to have been as widely communicated as they could be across the country – particularly to registrars, who often do not fully understand the purpose of children's centres and their multi-agency approach.

Importantly though, it needs to be understood that birth registration is not a service that necessarily needs to be offered in all children's centres, but only where it might be expected to have some significant benefit – either through helping parents, or enabling more efficient, better services. Common factors which this report suggests as important in determining where birth registrations may work best, include levels of deprivation; areas with high proportions of babies born to unmarried couples (where the father will need to attend registration personally); children's centres with low take-up or high numbers of 'hard-to-reach' areas with a low proximity to an existing registry office.

Registrars' primary objections to offering the service outside of registry offices appear to centre around resource issues, but experience suggests that the service does not necessarily seem to be exceptionally costly to provide. It is hoped that more conversations about viability and pragmatism about costs will occur at local level. Where there is seen to be major benefit for the centre (particularly given Ofsted's focus on data), registrars and centres may well be able to work together to minimise or

share any additional costs as the examples in this report demonstrate. Central government has a role to play in helping to facilitate more conversations of this kind.

The promotion of birth registrations in children's centres during 2013 appears to have encouraged more authorities to investigate the local feasibility of offering this service – such as in Northumberland profiled in this report. We recognise that change cannot be implemented overnight but central and local government can work together along with charities and voluntary organisations to ensure that this 'win-win' practice grows and develops in the next five years. We believe that for relatively little cost, the potential benefits of rolling out this service are vast and significant. With more joined-up work and a concerted effort from all agencies involved, this provision can develop and evolve.



The following recommendations seek to address not only the practical issues of expanding this practice, but also the clear communication gap between local authorities and registrars.

Recommendations

- Local authorities should meet with their respective registrars to undertake a feasibility study of expanding this practice within their areas
- Children's centres should consider promoting their services more widely to ensure that there is a clear understanding of the work they do and the benefits to families.
- The Department for Education should work with the Home Office in order to plan a concerted awareness campaign to progress the rollout further.
- A national Birth Registration pilot study should be established as recommended by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Sure Start Children's Centres. This pilot should take place in areas with a higher concentration of vulnerable families and build on existing birth registration pilots being undertaken in some children's centres across the country.
- Central government and local authorities should work together to educate and articulate at a national and local level what children's centres are and their value to families.
- A small start-up fund should be allocated by the Department for Education to incentivise and support the practice with local commissioners. This start-up fund should contribute to the resources needed by children's centres and registrars to establish the service.
- Birth registration good practice should be shared widely between registrars, local authorities and children's centres to encourage further uptake.



www.barnardos.org.uk

Head Office, Tanners Lane,
Barkingside, Ilford,
Essex IG6 1QG
Tel: 020 8550 8822

Barnardo's Registered Charity Nos.
216250 and SC037605 17022dos15