



executive summary

targeting children's centre services on the most needy families

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Policy context

In 2011, the Coalition Government announced its continued commitment to Sure Start children's centres, but introduced a requirement to 'focus much more effectively on those families who need them the most' (DfE, 2011). This marked a clear policy shift towards 'targeted' services. Recent policy developments have also emphasised the importance of early intervention and focusing on outcomes. While the Coalition Government wishes local authorities to continue to prioritise funding for early years provision, it has removed the 'ring fence' on funding for Sure Start children's centres. Local authorities and children's centres therefore need to address the challenges of multi-priority policy agendas in the early years sector, and demonstrate their focus on supporting the most vulnerable families.

About the research

This research aims to provide local authority early years and children's services leaders, and children's centre managers, with **evidence of how children's centre services are targeting the most vulnerable families**. In particular, how they are defining, identifying and prioritising families in greatest need of support, and the practical implications of targeting for local authorities, for children's centres and for policy.

We carried out a **literature review**, followed by **case studies** in six local authorities which had given some consideration to the issues involved. The case studies included interviews with local authority staff, interviews and focus groups with children centre staff and staff from other services.

Who are children's centres targeting?

A Figure 1 shows children's centres are targeting specific groups and needs in response to their local communities. Children's centre staff were taking account of **risk factors**, **child poverty** and the importance of **early intervention** and prevention. They were also responding to local needs and demographics, and drawing on existing knowledge and services. However, children's centre staff framed their work as '**supporting the needs**' of children, parents and families, rather than in terms of 'targeting groups'. They avoided terms such as 'hard to reach' or 'needy', as they find them stigmatising and unhelpful.

How do they define greatest need?

Neither the literature nor the case studies provided a definition of 'greatest need', and centre staff emphasised the importance of exercising professional judgement and adopting a case-by-case approach: recognising that any child or family can be in great need at any time.

What data do they use?

Children's centre leaders, data managers and monitoring officers used a range of data to support their targeting. They used it both retrospectively (to demonstrate that they are working with disadvantaged children and families) and prospectively (to engage families and refer cases appropriately).

For children's centres, **local data**, and data from **midwives and health visitors** were the most important. Live birth data is not always available to children's centre staff, due to difficulties in gaining the relevant permissions from health services. Effective data sharing requires trust between professionals from the various agencies involved; and protocols to gain consent from families for their personal information to be shared.

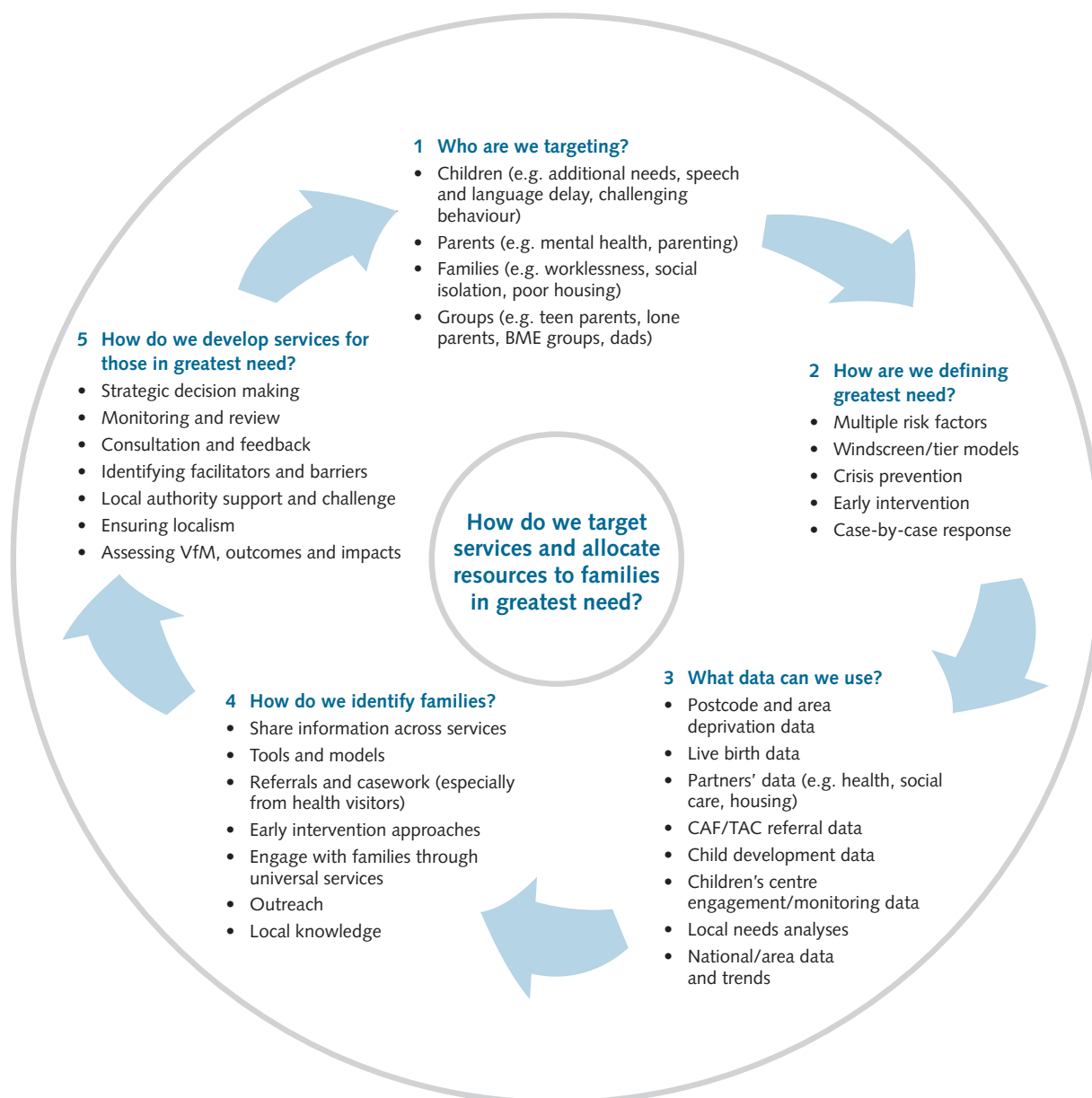
How are children and families identified?

Children's centre staff use a range of approaches to identify families in need of support. The evidence suggests that it is important for children's centres and local authorities to adopt a **combination of approaches**, rather than using one or two. This represents a good investment of effort because it increases the chance of identifying needs and targeting support appropriately. Building **long-term relationships with families** enables services to be well targeted and attuned to address the needs of children and families. There is also a need for staff to recognise when family or children's needs change, so that services can be appropriate and effectively managed.

How are effective services developed for those in greatest need?

Identifying and targeting needs and services effectively can be challenging to achieve in practice. In developing services for those in greatest need, children's centre staff emphasised the importance of access to high quality childcare. Their challenge is to deliver a mix of universal and targeted services whilst prioritising resources and refocusing on priority groups. Localism – local knowledge, targeting and partnerships – is key to the effectiveness of their work.

Figure 1: How children’s centres are focusing their resources



Implications

This research raises a number of practical considerations for local authorities and children’s centres which aim to be even more effective in identifying and prioritising their work with children and families. Implications for local authorities, for children’s centres, and for government policy are outlined below.

For local authorities

- ensure all children’s centres have access to local area data, broken down by ward and street level (where possible) and assist children’s centre staff in interpreting and using data
- help local partners to build trust, so they can share information and data effectively
- encourage children’s centres to use several approaches in identifying needs
- share models of ‘greatest need’ with operational leads and partners, including front-line staff
- share examples of effective practice in identifying and supporting needs, and in monitoring outcomes
- identify local needs and priorities while supporting children’s centre staff in making professional judgements to address the needs of individual children and families.

For children's centre managers/leaders

- use several approaches to identifying needs, rather than relying on one or two measures
- build trust and relationships with local partners, gathering knowledge from professionals
- gather local knowledge from families and parents (including through parent volunteers)
- identify parents who are not currently using the centre and seek to meet their needs
- promote universal services as the first step in engaging parents, building trust and identifying needs
- continue to promote targeted support sensitively to avoid stigmatising
- use family consent forms, to speed up signposting families to services and information sharing
- recognise the training and development implications, including: data management; responsiveness to family needs; and an ability to engage with families, build trust and offer support.

For policy-makers

- continue to recognise the value of 'universal' services as an opportunity for children's centres to engage with parents
- take account of the potential stigma attached to the term 'targeting the most needy families' and consider using the terms 'supporting families' or 'targeting support' instead
- emphasise the importance of targeting resources on disadvantaged families, but distinguish this from a focus on 'targeted services' (as identified in the CAF process) where misinterpretation might arise
- encourage children's centre staff to make professional judgements in addressing the needs of individual children and families
- consider what more could be done to encourage services to share essential data
- encourage national organisations to recognise and share best practice
- consider the implications for workforce development of the skills associated with identifying and evidencing impact on the most disadvantaged families.



This project was funded by the Local Government Education and Children's Services Research Programme



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Further information

For more information about this report visit www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LGTC01 or email Pippa Lord at p.lord@nfer.ac.uk