



A report on the views of parents/carers, staff and volunteers on services for under 5s delivered by Children's Centres and Library Plus in Northamptonshire September 2015

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“Ultimately, effective safeguarding of children can only be achieved by putting children at the centre of the system, and by every individual and agency playing their full part, working together to meet the needs of our most vulnerable children¹”

¹ HM Government. Working together to safeguard children - A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. March 2015

Summary

During May, June and July 2015 Healthwatch Northamptonshire (HWN) Children, Young People and Families working group visited Library Plus and children's centre services in Northamptonshire to hear from families, staff and volunteers about the services provided for children under 5.

HWN spoke to 22 staff, 11 volunteers and 44 parents in 17 libraries, 23 staff/volunteers and 35 parents/carers in 14 children's centres, and 26 'others', including an additional 15 mums.

HWN decided to carry out this piece of work following a number of changes by Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) to the children's centre contracts from August 2014. These changes initially involved the change of venue and reduction of hours to the Daventry East children's centre. Then, in November and December 2014 there was further consultation on the reduction of hours in an additional 25 children's centre venues and the moving of services completely from another 5, which were:

- Highfield, Wellingborough
- Manor, Raunds
- Nene Lakes, Earls Barton
- Brixworth
- Roade

HWN opposed the changes to Daventry East Children's Centre and the additional changes and closures to the other children's centres because of the lack of clear information provided by NCC to enable HWN to be confident that the changed arrangements would deliver improved services for children and families.

Some of the key themes that HWN heard from our attendance at the various NCC engagement events during the consultation period on the changes were:

- not enough activities currently provided for mobile toddlers in libraries
- issues around confidentiality and safeguarding in libraries
- new mothers with postnatal depression may go unnoticed in a library setting
- support for young children and families is vital for the future

- if the service is only targeting vulnerable families the valuable mixing of families and organic peer support will no longer happen

“the children’s centre used to be the ‘hub’ of the community. You made long-term friendships there”²

It was stated at the time that ‘the full details of the changes would be communicated to families during this transitional period, coming into effect from April 2015’³.

The timing of the HWN visits during summer 2015 allowed for the new service to be communicated to families and for the review of progress against the Key Performance Indicators as set out in the Accord⁴ signed on 5 February 2014 by Northamptonshire County Council (NCC).

There are 47,000 children in Northamptonshire aged between 0-5⁵ and in some areas higher levels of deprivation than the England average.

‘Experiences during the early years of childhood (including before birth) have lifelong effects on health and wellbeing: giving each child the best start in life and keeping them safe is essential’⁶.



² Parent comment

³ Consultation on changes to Children’s Centre venues 7th November 2014 - 19th December 2014. NCC

⁴ Signed agreement

⁵ Karen Cornick, Service Development and Transition Manager, Specialist Public Health Team presentation to HWN May 2015 ‘Update on Health Visitors and School Nursing Services in Northamptonshire’

⁶ Fair Society, Healthy Lives, The Marmot Review 2010

Key Findings

We found that:

- at more than half the libraries (9 out of 17 libraries - 53%), staff commented that communications and relationships between libraries and children's centres were improving. (7 libraries (41%) implied the relationship was poor or not as good as previously)
- where libraries formed partnerships to deliver health visitor advice this was much appreciated by parents who felt it was beneficial to their child
- however, 9 people (5 parents, 2 volunteers and 2 managers) across 8 libraries highlighted that it was now harder to see a health visitor
- where the library session, health visitor session and children's centre workers are together at the same time, albeit it only once a week, we heard that this delivers a more positive experience for parents/carers and promotes better working relationships between providers
- where drop ins to children's centres still exist and parents/carers can speak to a qualified member of staff this is appreciated and valued
- the work with families at children's centre is reported by staff to have become more focused and successful since the change in contract. Clear objectives have resulted in professionals able to identify specific responsibilities and have clarity about when outcomes have been achieved for families
- the ethos in libraries is welcoming but all 17 libraries said that they do not have either the space, facilities, staff, volunteers or expertise to run universal sessions for under 5s. A lack of space and/or poor facilities was mentioned by 18 people across 15 of the 17 libraries (88% of libraries)
- parents/carers told us that their children enjoyed the activities and toys available in the libraries
- staff in 7 libraries (41%) said that the under 5s sessions are not formally evaluated i.e. parents are not asked for their views or if they are the information is not requested by and sent to NCC

- sessions do not always correspond to possible uptake e.g. some weekend sessions have poor attendance (14 out of 17 libraries - 82%) and some weekday sessions clash with other local activities e.g. church parents and tots group or are not at convenient times (mentioned at 9 out of 17 libraries - 53%)
- in deprived and rural areas there is not always a library close by for universal services to be accessed
- 5 library managers (29%) said that they are pleased to be delivering the universal services for 0-5 year olds but 7 managers (41%) also said that they felt that the changes have been imposed on them with little or no consultation and planning
- volunteers are also enthusiastic about the potential for libraries to be a community hub, especially in areas of deprivation, however one manager told us that library volunteers are often not properly trained, Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checked or performance evaluated
- staffing levels are low across all libraries. Staff at 10 libraries (53%) we visited told us that volunteers are difficult to recruit
- library staff have to step in to deliver sessions when volunteers do not turn up, which can be particularly difficult in single staffed libraries. One library mentioned that they have no volunteers at all to deliver the sessions
- there is little or no information about children's centres in libraries and staff have had very little or no contact with children's centres
- there have been very few referrals or 'warm handovers'⁷ to children's centres from libraries. Only one library said they had made referrals. 11 had not made referrals and 5 did not tell us
- the separation of targeted services from universal services is recognised by staff and parents to have resulted in children's centres work becoming stigmatised (5 staff/volunteers and 2 parents in libraries, and 3 staff in children's centres mentioned this)

⁷ NCC website Get involved with Children and Families
<http://www.northamptonshire.gov.uk/en/councilservices/Jobs/volunteering/Pages/GetinvolvedwithChildrenandFamilies.aspx>

- there is an unknown number of families whose needs for a network of informal support are not being met by either libraries or children's centres. This unknown number of children and families that are not being reached is worrying
- data collection and sharing currently appears to HWN to be neither efficient nor robust . This makes it difficult to be confident about either the monitoring of the contract or the outcomes for families

“The child’s needs are paramount, and the needs and wishes of each child, be they a baby or infant, or an older child, should be put first, so that every child receives the support they need before the problem escalates⁸”

⁸ HM Government. Working together to safeguard children - A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. March 2015

Recommendations

Commissioners and providers could:

1. Develop and communicate a clear vision for the delivery of universal services for young children and their families that is understood and owned by all staff.
2. Use local consultation, including ongoing parent feedback, to develop a revised programme of activities that responds more closely to both local and parent/carer needs.
3. Engage in a process of close collaboration and regular discussion with all providers delivering universal and targeted services.
4. Draw up a plan ensuring the efficient and effective sharing of data and comprehensive delivery of services to families at every level.
5. Review the recruitment and training process for library volunteers, including urgently ensuring that all staff and volunteers receive an enhanced DBS check.
6. Offer a pathway of development for volunteers leading to an accredited qualification that will enhance opportunities for training and employment.
7. Undertake a detailed review of how accessible information is for both libraries and children's centre activities for the general public and all social and cultural groups.
8. Support each library to undertake an internal review of its suitability for children aged 0-5 years and implement an action plan.
9. Put children and parents/carers/volunteers at the centre of the improvement programme, enhancing public participation and community cohesion.
10. Commission an independent evaluation to critically assess whether the decisions around the children centre and libraries need revisiting. There should be a strong focus on further exploring the views and experiences of parents, staff, volunteers and local communities who may need access to services, but are not accessing them for a range of reasons. HWN would be happy to support NCC with this evaluation.

About Healthwatch Northamptonshire

Healthwatch Northamptonshire (HWN) is the local independent consumer champion for health and social care. We are part of a national network of 148 local Healthwatch organisations. Our central role is to be a voice for local people to influence better health and wellbeing and improve the quality of services to meet people's needs. We will report our findings to health and social care decision makers to improve and influence the quality of care.

Our rights and responsibilities include:

- We have the power to monitor (known as “Enter and View”) health and social care services (with one or two exceptions). Our primary purpose is to find out what patients, service users, carers and the wider public think of health and social care.
- We report our findings of local views and experiences to health and social care decision makers and make the case for improved services where we find there is a need for improvement
- We strive to be a strong and powerful voice for local people, to influence how services are planned, organised and delivered.
- We aim to be an effective voice rooted in the community. To be that voice, we find out what local people think about health and social care. We research patient, user and carer opinions using lots of different ways of finding out views and experiences. We do this to give local people a voice. We provide information and advice about health and social care services.
- Where we do not feel the views and voices of Healthwatch Northamptonshire and the people who we strive to speak on behalf of, are being heard, we have the option to escalate our concerns and report our evidence to national organisations including Healthwatch England, NHS England and the Care Quality Commission.



Methodology, including limitations of the project

A team of HWN staff and volunteers who are all authorised representatives (i.e. have received appropriate training and enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks) delivered this project.

The project began with 'mystery shops' to 21 libraries across the county (appendix 1) to observe (appendix 2) whether the venues met the services and activities specified at the NCC public consultation events held between November to December 2014 ⁹.

For Library Plus universal services, the services referenced during the consultation were:

- activities throughout the week in libraries - Rhymetime, Storytime, Toddlertime etc. - a percentage of which will be at the weekend
- accessible to all children under 5 and their families
- drop-in community hub - reduce social isolation and improve wellbeing
- opportunities and support for adults to continue with learning
- access to IT and WiFi to support online learning
- information and advice on a range of issues
- registration with children's centres
- opportunities to volunteer

HWN also added in our own observations, specifically:

- accessibility
- toilets/baby changing facilities
- how open/safe the environment looked/felt
- how welcoming
- buggy storage etc.

The mystery shops were then followed by visits to 17 libraries to talk to staff, volunteers and parents/carers (questionnaire attached as appendix 3) and visits to 14 children's centres (questionnaire attached as appendix 4), including Pen Green and Kingswood in the Corby area who are currently

⁹ Children's Centre Venues Public Consultation Daventry 21 November 2014
Northamptonshire County Council

working across 3 organisations, to develop a cluster model in line with the other children's centres in Northamptonshire. This work has to be completed by March 2016.

HWN spoke to a total of 161 people, including 94 parents/carers. Not included in the total are meetings with senior NCC staff and children's centre area managers.

In libraries HWN spoke to 22 staff, 11 volunteers and 44 parents.

In children's centres HWN spoke to 23 staff/volunteers and 35 parents/carers.

Also included in the total were 26 conversations with:

- 1 ex SureStart support worker
- 1 HomeStart manager
- 1 head teacher
- 1 nursery manager
- 1 head teacher at a nursery
- 15 mums across the county
- 1 mobile library/customer support
- 1 representative from Northamptonshire Breastfeeding Alliance
- 1 representative from The Northamptonshire Parent Infant Partnership (NorPIP)
- 1 county councillor
- 1 chair of governors - early years centre

HWN also received a copy of the minutes of a Northampton headteachers meeting in April 2015 where the impact of the changes in children's centre services was discussed.

Confidentiality was assured to everyone who spoke to us therefore no individual, library or children's centre is referred to by name or specifically identified throughout this report.

The questionnaires were carefully planned to avoid bias and elicit meaningful qualitative data from participants rather than being a tick box exercise.

The structured questions gave people the opportunity to express their opinions, both good and bad rather than simply giving yes/no answers.

Other issues and areas for future research e.g. the view that children's centres have a stigma attached to them and are for 'social services' families

also became apparent during the interviews. These require further exploration.

With more time, HWN would have liked to interview more parents/carers that do not access any services in libraries or children's centres and explore their reasons for not doing so. Other library users could also have contributed their views but were not within the scope of this project.

Library staff mentioned the time taken to help an elderly and disabled person complete a Blue Badge form and other activities e.g. bus passes. Libraries are now expected to deliver these services apparently without additional resources (both staff and volunteers). HWN is concerned that these additional demands on libraries, which only became apparent during this project, will impact on the delivery of services for the under 5s.

The delivery of services by health visitors was raised by 5 parents, 2 staff and 2 volunteers in 8 libraries. Health visitors are key service providers to families and their views on the changes to the system are crucial. HWN plans to undertake a more detailed survey with health visitors following our initial report published earlier this year.

Timing was another limitation. Varying the time of the project may have had a different outcome as we have more recently been advised of improving relationships between children's centres and libraries.

Libraries

Physical environment

There are significant variations in the quality of the physical environment between different libraries in their suitability to run events for children and families in a supportive context.

“I’m concerned about the prospect of Ofsted inspections and the fact that clearly some of our environment provision does not comply with Ofsted recommendations”¹⁰

For example, one library is new, light, spacious and welcoming and another library observed to be an old, cheerless environment with ‘a black beanbag almost entirely devoid of beans’ under a sign saying ‘you are welcome to breastfeed here’¹¹.

From our observations, it would appear that the suitability of individual venues was not sufficiently considered when the universal offer was transferred e.g. library size and location and how it impacts on what can be offered and other people using the library.

“there is a lot of poverty and isolation in rural areas and long distances between library access”¹²

One library that HWN visited was upstairs and the lift was broken on the day of the visit. The HWN volunteer encountered an elderly couple who were upset as the gentleman had struggled up the stairs and been told ‘Blue Badge applications are only on Fridays’. There was no notice to this effect and HWN was not aware that all staff could not process them. This is an issue that is out of the scope of this project but one that NCC needs to be aware of and address because as mentioned earlier the additional services library staff now have to deliver will also impact on the delivery of services to children and families.

Buggy parking is another significant issue, particularly with popular sessions which can get quite crowded with buggies creating difficulty negotiating around them.

Some under 5s activities are run when the library is closed to the public.

¹⁰ Staff comment

¹¹ HWN volunteer observations and comments

¹² NCC staff comment

We were told by 14 people (5 staff/volunteers and 9 parents) that toilet facilities are an issue in 8 of the libraries (47%). They are sometimes difficult to get to e.g. through other rooms, behind 'staff only' notices, require a key and/or unsuitable for wheelchairs.

We were also told by one parent that having no potties or children's toilet seats was an issue for potty training for her child.



Some libraries still have inadequate baby changing facilities (an issue at 7 out of the 17 libraries) or nappy bins, others have had issues with nappies being put in regular bins and cleaners refusing to empty them, with the result of a nappy being found wedged behind a radiator a couple of weeks later. The frequency of emptying of the nappy bins is also an issue.

“the nappy bin is not emptied frequently enough and it does get a bit smelly in there”¹³

HWN has since been given an updated version of the capital works programme for libraries¹⁴ however it does not address all the issues raised by HWN to make libraries a more suitable venue for families with small children.

¹³ Staff and parent comment

¹⁴ Received 3 September 2015

Under 5s Sessions

The under 5s session are run similarly across the county. Rhymetime appears to be extremely popular with other sessions, e.g. Stay and Play, less so.

10 parents (23%), 3 library managers (14%) and one volunteer (9%) across 9 libraries said that some sessions are run when it is apparent that a different time would make them more useful e.g. they clash with an already well established parents and tots group or they do not give enough time for parents/carers to either drop off or pick up other children from school.

14 out of 17 libraries (82%) said that weekend sessions are not very well attended. There appears to be very little flexibility for libraries to determine the timing of their own sessions.

“the management have been more concerned with the process and less concerned with the outcomes i.e. persisting in activities that attract low numbers so are obviously wrong for the area, on at the wrong time or on the wrong day”¹⁵

Staff told us that volunteers can be excellent but they may not always turn up, which has a direct impact on staff and other parents/carers.

“if no one turns up one of the other parents takes it on”¹⁶

Evaluation of sessions

We found that evaluation of the sessions is inconsistent and its purpose unclear. Parents are asked for their views and staff complete their own evaluations but 7 library managers (41%) said that no formal evaluations were sent to NCC. This appears to be too ad hoc for a service that will be subject to an Ofsted inspection in the future. There also needs to be some evaluation of the volunteers themselves and their service delivery.

“today, at this interview (with HWN) it is the first time I have been asked about attendance at activities and how popular they are”¹⁷

The families that attend the library sessions go to what they like or what is convenient for them and vote with their feet. This is a clear indicator of what sessions work and which ones do not, something libraries can use and build upon.

¹⁵ Staff comment

¹⁶ Staff comment

¹⁷ Staff comment

Evaluations must also target non users to find out why they do not attend what is a 'universal' service.

Parent/carer views

During the course of the project we heard that people want to go to what they like, are used to and/or is convenient for them. We didn't hear any evidence that suggested that families with greater needs go to the sessions in the libraries.

All the parents we heard from enjoy the sessions provided by the libraries and rated the library staff as friendly, helpful and welcoming.

Parents in libraries identified 6 main issues with the venues themselves e.g. room too hot, room too small, toilet access, no nappy bins, no buggy park and dangerous doors.

5 parents told us that they would like more access to Health Visitors via drop in sessions. Where this is already happening it is appreciated. Second time parents/carers/grandparents have noticed the drop off in Health Visitor services.

“the Health Visitor sessions are good but it would be nice to have trained staff available to ask questions of i.e. trained in child care”.

New parents i.e. those with a first child seem unclear about children's centre services. They are aware of them but think that they are for different people to them e.g. 'social services'¹⁸.

When we specifically asked, 3 parents/carers said that they would not confide in library staff if they had an issue with their child.

“although library staff are 'very nice', it's not what happens in libraries!”

One parent also mentioned that groups within the library can be 'cliquey' and this is can be a barrier to parents attending.

2 parents, 4 staff and 1 volunteer said that children's centres are perceived as being for 'problem families', 'troubled families' and 'not for families like us'. This perception should be explored further.

¹⁸ Parent comment

What else parents/carers told us in libraries:

“very cramped”

“no buggy parking”

“one toilet - has been out of order a few times”

“I would not get advice here, I would go to my child's nursery”

“people want to read, study and be quiet”

“I'm registered at a children's centre but not been since last year”

“library staff are brilliant. Always very friendly”

“library staff are friendly and approachable”

“love it”

“been coming for 10 years with grandchildren”

“my 2 year old was told off for making a noise in the library today”

“this venue's not ideal but in terms of what we get here it's great”

Promotion of sessions

There is little publicity about the sessions in some libraries and on the websites. Facebook is used regularly by some libraries but postings can be out of date e.g. one Facebook site was for Rhymetime 31 March in April and it appears that some libraries are doing very little to attract under 5s.

At one Play and Learn session HWN representatives visited there was only one mum and one baby attending. At another library Rhymetime is so popular that parents now have to book. Booking has to be done via email or Facebook as there are no direct lines to any library and everything has to go through the switchboard - at the time of the HWN visit computers and printers were not working.

Volunteering

“the council process of recruiting volunteers is very long winded”¹⁹

Opportunities for volunteering were found in all libraries and on the website but it was felt by library staff that there was little focus on getting volunteers for the under 5s work. Staff and volunteers also felt that volunteering through the online application process was too lengthy and people can lose interest. People approach library staff to ask if they can volunteer with something specific whereas to volunteer through NCC you have to apply for a specific and designated post.

“It is difficult to recruit volunteersothers have been put off by the fact that OFSTED is now involvedand also the mandatory DBS and safeguarding training has become too formalas has the fact that Rhymetime now has a prescribed format, whereas previously the library staff were able to be more relaxed about the content of the session.”²⁰

Volunteers to whom we spoke told us that they do feel valued and appreciated, although their training varies and their personal effectiveness depends on their own interests and experiences.

Safeguarding training for library volunteers is online and HWN came across several people, both volunteers and staff, who had not been enhanced DBS checked²¹. This was immediately raised as a safeguarding issue with NCC.

“configuring a service around volunteers is crazy”²²

Only one volunteer mentioned receiving free adult learning as an incentive for volunteering.

“we have no volunteers to run these sessions”²³

¹⁹ Volunteer comment

²⁰ Staff comment

²¹ HWN was informed on 3 September that 96% of staff and 99% of volunteers are now DBS compliant with only new recruits now outstanding

²² Staff comment

²³ Staff comment

Safeguarding and Health and Safety

There is no consistency about the categories of staff or volunteers across the county who should receive a satisfactory DBS check prior to commencing work/volunteering. This is a very significant safeguarding issue and one which we raised immediately with NCC once we were aware. After HWN raised the issue with NCC we were given a copy of the 'Children's Centres Services Safeguarding Audit' and assured that local issues have been identified and are being addressed.

We were told by one library manager that he/she had no record of whether volunteers had completed online safeguarding training. Where volunteers had not had the enhanced DBS check there was additional pressure on staff to keep an eye on volunteers. At least one volunteer we spoke to had not had an enhanced DBS or completed the online safeguarding training.

Staff frequently work single handed in libraries, which offers them no scope to deal with emergencies or other issues along with personal safety when working with the public, including volunteers. For example, some doors open automatically onto car parks etc. and toddlers have been observed running near and opening them. This needs to be addressed immediately.

“children can get to the door easily”²⁴

Nappy disposal is also an issue. Even where some libraries have nappy bins they are sometimes only being emptied monthly, which both parents and staff said is clearly not frequent enough. It is unacceptable to be told to take nappies home if children and their parents/carers are to be made to feel welcome.

Toilets are also frequently located through other rooms, including storerooms and staff rooms. They are not always easily accessible, sometimes even requiring a key.

An elderly gentleman with an 8 year old granddaughter was observed by our team asking to use the toilet in one library and was refused. If libraries want to be a 'drop-in community hub to reduce social isolation and improve wellbeing' these types of issues will need to be reviewed and addressed.

There is clearly a difference between somewhere the community can go for information and somewhere they can go for coffee/chat/meet friends/generally socialise.

²⁴ Staff and parent comment

Investment in resources - staff training and toys

We were told that approximately £100,000 from various sources e.g. staff vacancies and friends groups, has been spent on toys for the library service. However, from the conversations we had HWN formed the opinion that there appears to have been less investment in human resources i.e. staff and volunteers required to deliver the service.

“this was around the 100k mark and was the result in the main from staff vacancies, friends groups also contributed towards purchasing some items”²⁵

This seems to be changing with more training becoming available e.g. some staff have completed a 6 day training course which we have been told enables them to now identify early help families²⁶.

“we were provided with some fantastic toys in the previous financial year, a lot of money was spent”²⁷

The toys have presented other issues including storage and cleaning. This has added to staff time and one parent mentioned that the ‘toys need sorting as some are not suitable for little ones’.

“it would be nice to have time to clean the toys”²⁸

²⁵ NCC staff quote

²⁶ Children and Families Early Help Strategy NCC November 2013

²⁷ Staff comment

²⁸ Staff comment

Relationships between the Libraries and Children's Centres

We found evidence of a lack of clear relationships between libraries and children's centres, even when they are located in the same building. The co-located children's centres are there historically but now without a full time presence. Noticeboards in libraries are not up to date and libraries hold no or very little information about what services children's centres offer.

Lack of a relationship with children's centres inhibits referral of vulnerable families by libraries even if they could be identified. Awareness of the 'warm handover' is uncertain due to both the relationship and lack of training. Based on the conversations we had, we formed the impression that families who require more help and support may not use libraries. We only heard about one 'warm handover' during our project and the visits to libraries and children's centres.

“since the new contract we have had no contact with the children's centre. If we have concerns about a family there is a phone number to contact but I don't know whether that is the local children's centre or a central number. It is not an encouragement to refer a family I am worried about if I have no idea who and what I'm contacting”²⁹

Parents/carers are given limited information about children's centres when they first enter the library. Some are encouraged to register with the children's centres there and then or asked to do so at a later point. It is an online registration form and libraries have no way of knowing whether someone has registered at a later date or not.

“children's centres may be mentioned in loose terms but it takes 5 minutes to join someone up and then there will be queues forming”³⁰

We did not hear evidence during our project of a consistent and concerted approach to forge working relationships between the libraries and children's centres to ensure families were being offered the right level of support.

We heard about a few occasions where a member of children's centre staff has made an active effort to visit libraries and develop a positive relationship with library staff.

“not such a close connection as used to have (with children's centres)”³¹

²⁹ Staff comment

³⁰ Staff comment

³¹ Staff comment

“children’s centres should have a presence in the library”³²

“with the children’s centres it’s like all the balloons have been let go and it all needs to be caught/rebuilt”³³

We were also told by a parent that the children’s centre register is not up to date and does not feed through to the library registration session sheet. Every time the parent attends a library session instead of just ‘a tick’ on the registration sheet staff have to input the parent’s details again.

Staffing issues

We observed very few staff present in libraries. For example, in one library there was one manager and one assistant present when the volunteer did not turn up. Rhymetime then became an unsupervised Stay and Play session as the two staff were caught up with other customers.

Along with staffing levels we heard about other challenges, including a lack of clarity by the public recognising who is a member of staff or volunteer if someone requires assistance.

Some of the staff we spoke to clearly enjoy the new dimension of working with children but others find the work extremely challenging and uncomfortable. We heard that this might not be such a problem if there were enough staff to cover sessions, particularly if a volunteer does not turn up. If a volunteer is unavailable staff have to either run the session or cancel it.

“daunted. It was like ‘this is what you’re going to do”³⁴

“there were no choices, it was ‘we put the bid in³⁵, we got it, so do it”³⁶

Individual staff can make the service ‘great’ or just ‘ok’. A quality universal service should not have such wide discrepancies between service and delivery.

³² Staff comment

³³ Staff comment

³⁴ Staff comment

³⁵ It was an NCC Cabinet decision with no bidding for the universal service work however this does demonstrate a lack of communication and understanding between NCC and library staff (HWN opinion)

³⁶ Staff comment

Some libraries now have access to a customer adviser, which we were informed is a new role. One customer adviser delivers fortnightly under 5s sessions and we were told that it also enables the adviser to get to know the parents and children better. However, there has been no formal training to enable the adviser to identify families who require early help.

“a library isn't right, where there's nowhere to talk, where people don't expect to find anyone trained. It needs systems, training and back up and NCC seem to think that basic child protection is enough”³⁷

Staff views and perceptions

A lot of staff feel that the service is getting better although still very challenging in terms of what to do, how to do it, toy storage and cleaning, and lack of training. Training has apparently been very limited and there is a sense that everything happened too quickly, was imposed on them with no consultation and very little support.

“the extra work is enjoyable but is a constant juggle of space, moving furniture to accommodate various activities”

The original remit of libraries has been added to considerably and diverted to take on new responsibilities supporting families in a different way. However, this is not what families expect them to do and staff have had very little training and support to be able to identify a family with additional needs.

There is a general feeling that libraries, the lack of staff and the lack of privacy means that they are not the right place to listen to parents/carers concerns.

³⁷ Staff comment

What else staff/volunteers told us in libraries:

“we didn't realise how huge a task it was going to be”

“I'm an island”

“some staff just don't have the necessary experience of, or that much interest, in children”

“Shouldn't have to rely on volunteers”

“policies are not finalised and signed off, for example 'Storystomp' what's the point of it? We do it but what's the rationale?”

“the council process of recruiting volunteers is very long winded”

“I think it is good for the library just feel not well enough prepared for it. It feels all a bit hit and miss”

“staff seriously uncomfortable delivering some sessions”

“more comfortable now I've just done 6 days training”

“it's not what we signed up for”

“staff actually feel stressed”

“can't pick up on safety issues”

“customer advisers have not had enough training for working with small children”

“Health visitor drop-ins would be appreciated”

“warm handover doesn't exist”

“children's centre did not answer emails before - just starting to now”

Children's Centres

“The purpose of the ‘Children and Families - Early Help and Prevention Strategy’ is to enable children and families to access appropriate support as early as possible to help them maintain their quality of life, prevent any problems getting worse and reduce the demand for specialist support services.”³⁸

The targeted service to families ‘Keeping children safe at the centre of everything’ was set out as a high quality targeted response including:

- evidence based programmes
- skilled generalist and Common Assessment Framework (CAF³⁹) lead services
- parenting and family relationship support
- peer mentoring support, utilisation and advice
- school readiness
- domestic abuse support and advice
- teenage parent provision

The statutory definition of children's centres includes providing access to high quality universal services to all families who wish to use them.

HWN staff and volunteers made 14 visits to children's centres in Northamptonshire as part of this project.

It was not felt to be necessary to visit all centres in Northamptonshire individually as they are now run on a ‘cluster model’ for each area with a specific cluster manager.

We also spoke to both area managers for Action for Children and Spurgeons to be able to include their strategic overview in this report.

During the visits we spoke to as many people as possible, including cluster managers, other staff, volunteers, parents and carers. A total of 58 people, not including the area managers, was spoken to in children's centres, and a range of activities observed e.g. Healthy Baby, Health Visitor drop ins, Stay and Play.

³⁸ Early Help and Prevention Strategy NCC

³⁹ CAF replaced by Early Help Assessment (EHA) 1 June 2015

As acknowledged earlier in the report there are limitations to this review and HWN did not include the children's centre advisory boards in their meetings. Some of the boards have only met once or twice but we have been assured that library staff are now included in meetings, which is a positive move, and will assist better working relationships between the partner agencies.

We were told at the time that there had not been meetings between NCC, Libraries, Spurgeons and Action for Children which would also help foster better working relationships and the collection and sharing of data and good practice. Since meeting with senior library managers on 21 July we are now aware and reassured that this is improving.

Referrals

Referrals are coming through to children's centres from professionals e.g. health visitors and midwives, and also stepped down from social care as expected. This varies between clusters and we were made aware of at least one area where referrals are not coming through at the level expected but understand that this is now being addressed.

“before June this year our relationship (with libraries) was non-existent”⁴⁰

Staff have noticed that there is an increase in 'high level referrals' with families with more and complex needs.

“low level referrals are missing”⁴¹

The relationship between libraries and children's centres appears to have been very weak because of the lack of communication. However following changes in senior management and the preparation of the Annual Conversations⁴² this does appear to be changing.

Family support workers used to pick up on families through observations at universal activities in children's centres e.g. Stay and Play. Some children's centres are still committed to providing 20% universal sessions. However, low attendance at some sessions was mentioned as an issue.

⁴⁰ Staff comment

⁴¹ Staff comment

⁴² A meeting between commissioners and providers to discuss performance

“today we cancelled a parenting course because there were not enough referrals and you know the need is out there”⁴³

When asked exactly how many families a particular children's centre was currently working with the answer from two individual managers was that they did not know. Positive outcomes for families cannot be measured if they do not have the knowledge of who they are working with. We were consistently told about the issues with recording information correctly on Capita One.

“where are the ones below the radar?”⁴⁴

We formed the opinion that there is a gap in provision between universal services provided by libraries, which attract a small number of families, and the children's centres who deal with a number of targeted families. In between these two groups there is a third, larger group of families who previously relied on an informal network of support built up through children's centre universal activities and to which they are now effectively being denied access. This third group has had a safety net removed and is likely to form a larger cohort needing access to targeted support services in the future.

“the separation of universal services and targeted has been a disaster”⁴⁵

“picked up a lot from a universal servicewe miss a lot of parents”⁴⁶

Early help and targeted families are defined in Northamptonshire's Thresholds and Pathways document which has been agreed by all partners. However it is still unclear what a 'targeted family', 'early help family', 'troubled family', 'problem family', 'family in need' or 'social services family' actually is as the terminology varies between commissioners, providers and the public.

In HWN's opinion any child with a need should be classed as 'targeted' to prevent problems escalating.

Children's centre staff and other professionals also mentioned the perceived stigma attached to children's centres.

“with the splitting of services has come stigma and separation. Everyone needs some support at times”⁴⁷

⁴³ Children's centre staff comment

⁴⁴ Children's centre staff comment

⁴⁵ Local councillor comment

⁴⁶ Children's centre staff comment

⁴⁷ Children's centre staff comment

“the focus on tiers 2 and 3 has stigmatised the centre and families”⁴⁸

“we are aware that research shows that universal services are important to avoid stigmatisation”⁴⁹

Parent/carer views about children's centres

Parents using libraries also mentioned the stigma attached to children's centres and this was also reiterated by children's centre staff.

“I was in a violent relationship when I went to a children's centre with my baby son. There was always something I could slot into”

“you have to have a ‘problem’ and be ‘referred’ before they're interested”

“it's not for normal families anymore”

“friendships are important when you are a new or young parent, that's something they don't understand or value. Groups have been distributed to other centres. These are too far away unless you have transport and most of us round here don't have two cars or even one car, anyway it's too expensive”

“mix people up. If you just have families with problems mixing with families with other problems all you do is sit around getting depressed, there's no way out. Groups need a variety of people”

“be clearer about what targeted support means. If you don't know whether you need targeted support then you're not likely to ask for it. Anyway it's too much like social services”

“it's been a big mistake to stop the crèche and link with the nursery. If children are slow to develop they may need extra help to develop skills and confidence that we don't know how to give”

“we used to have a parents' lunch club. It was all about getting emotional support as well as healthy eating. That's all stopped now”

“the children's centres need to have open days to tell the local population what they are about. It's not been open enough and explained what they are doing and why we have lost so much of what we value and

⁴⁸ Parent governor of an Early Years Centre

⁴⁹ Children's centre staff comment

what we think we need. They have not consulted the community about these changes”

“not as many sessions - a real shame - could just walk in and they would find you a session to suit. Now you have to fill in a form for the session you are interested in”

“feel as though we are being pushed out”

Staff

Staffing has been a big issue for the children's centres. There has been a lot of staff turnover and they are still in the process of appointing permanent staff and continuing to use agency staff.

“we are understaffed across the patch”

HWN was also told that Family Support Workers (FSWs) ‘are carrying a huge caseload’.

Staff felt that new smarter working was a good thing as working with families could go on too long previously and develop a drift problem i.e. go on too long without a clear end date. Short term 6 month intensive working is seen as an effective way for families to see progress.

Staff told us that they felt that they were getting to the right families most of the time and having good success with them, however because of the lack of universal services some felt families with lower needs were falling through the net.

One of Ofsted's judgement criteria is that a children's centre ‘provides or facilitates access to universal activities and relevant services for targeted families, and monitors how many families use them and continue to use them until their needs have been effectively met⁵⁰.

⁵⁰ The framework for children's centre inspection. Ofsted April 2014

Peer mentoring

Spurgeons has its own peer mentoring system whereas Action for Children contract out to HomeStart. As peer mentors are still going through the training process there is currently a discrepancy between services between the two providers.

Home visits

The consultation on the changes to children's centre venues opening times that ran between 7 November 2014 and 19 December 2014 advised that the new model would 'visit more children and families in their homes where this is the best way to support them'.

Because of shortened opening hours in children's centres we were told that more home visits are being made and that 75% of one provider's visits are in families' own homes and are viewed positively.

However, we were also told by staff that "we spend a lot of time in the car, which is dead time" leading to unexpectedly large mileage claims.

Early Help Assessment Forms (EHA) (previously CAFs)

The allocation process at the EHA meetings has promoted a lot of discussion about professional responsibilities. Previously we were told that there was the temptation to leave families to the responsibility of the children's centres and programmes of intervention and help could go on indefinitely. Now that there are specific programmes, supported by the EHA, we were told that professionals across the board are now accepting their responsibilities and reviewing the help and support they give to families more frequently.

"new form is more family friendly but Common Assessment Framework (CAF) was more thorough"⁵¹

⁵¹ Staff comment

Staff views

One of the concerns raised by staff, both in libraries and the children's centres was that library staff are neither trained, nor skilled enough in identifying early help families. Universal services in children's centres help identify families which they can work with to prevent the levels of need escalating.

“libraries are not skilled to spot the families that need help”

There is also a real concern that libraries do not fit into the Ofsted framework and we found that early help families do not appear to currently go to libraries.

“it's a bit of a kick in the teeth that you've got qualifications and they're doing it without”

Information - e.g. timetables, web etc.

We found it difficult to get up to date information on what sessions were happening where. It is a confusing and complex search via the NCC website.

“our biggest issue is getting across what we do, what we offer, not only to parents but to other professionals”⁵²

There is little or no information in the libraries about children's centres and what services they provide, as previously identified, and although Spurgeons still produce brochures with sessions, venues, times etc. Action for Child sessions are advertised on the web and it is still very unclear what is on where. This lack of information about what was on and where was an issue previously raised by Healthwatch Northamptonshire as part of the December 2014 consultation exercise.

⁵² Staff comment

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

Key Performance Indicators are the measures used to identify whether a service is meeting its targets. The Accord (signed agreement) which sets out the KPIs for the services has been in existence since late 2013. We were told by library staff that the universal offer was 'imposed in a rush' in early 2015, 'we don't really know the full picture, there did not seem to be a gradual lead in which would give us time to prepare'. 'We send information in but don't get any feedback'⁵³.

HWN representatives met with NCC on 4 June to go through the KPIs as when previously requested we were told:

"We are happy to share this information but we are aware that our data sources have some limitations and we are not always able to access everything we need. We think it would be helpful if we could meet with you and then we can talk you through all the data and answer any questions you might have.

This would give you much better information and more detail than if we just sent something through by email"⁵⁴.

At the meeting HWN were advised that the KPIs were aspirational targets and because of the change in recording systems from eStart to Capita ONE there had been problems with data collection. However the direction of travel for all KPIs where the data was being collected was improving.

Where the data was not being collected we were assured that this was because of staff training and IT issues and NCC and partners were working on this to improve data collection.

We have asked for further information as it becomes available as we have demonstrated a clear interest in reviewing all data, including the performance data which indicates how the service is improving.

When evaluating the quality of leadership, governance and management, Ofsted inspectors must consider how well evidence and robust data are used to set and agree on performance and outcome measures that can reduce inequalities and improve the lives of target families⁵⁵.

⁵³ Library staff comments

⁵⁴ NCC 16 May 2015

⁵⁵ The framework for children's centre inspection. April 2014

Currently it would appear that the contracts between NCC and the providers of the children's centre services focuses on measurable quantitative data on those families reached, registered and signed up. NCC needs to develop a mechanism for also collecting the qualitative information about the actual impact on families and the outcomes for them.

Conclusions

Children's centre staff have told us that targeted/early help families that are being reached are benefiting from clearly set out programmes delivered by professionals with an improved understanding of their responsibilities.

However, generally there is a feeling among staff and by HWN that there is going to be a 'lost generation of families in need of early help'. The main concern, apart from 'why was it done?' and 'what money has been saved?' is 'what will be the future of the families and children being missed?'

A number of people feel that the current children's centre provision is not for them as there is a stigma attached to using children's centre services.

There is an unknown number of families and children who are not accessing libraries or children's centres which may lead to a greater need for targeted and specialist services in the future. The concept of prevention appears to have been lost in the narrowing focus of children's centres and the reduction of the universal role.

There is much less peer support for families in need from both professionals, volunteers and other parents/carers than there seems to have been before the changes.

There has been an absence of joined up working and effective communication between the libraries and children's centres. It depends more on the people/staff in the system rather than the system itself.

Although there was consultation on the changes in the summer of 2013 and the winter of 2014/15 it appears that little consideration was given to people's views and feedback on a service that affects so many families.

Current performance data is based on sign up and footfall rather than improved outcomes for families.

Thanks and acknowledgements

Healthwatch Northamptonshire would like to particularly thank:

- all the staff, volunteers, parents and carers, and other organisations, who shared their experiences of the current Library Plus and children's centre services
- the senior staff at Spurgeon's, Action for Children and Library Plus
- our authorised representatives who conducted the visits and gathered people's experiences

Appendix 1 - library and children's centre mystery shops and visits

Library Mystery Shops

Date	Library	Activity
02/05/2015	Oundle	Play and Learn under 5's
05/05/2015	Woodford Halse	No activity
07/05/2015	Thrapston	Play and Learn Under 1's
07/05/2015	St James	Rhymetime
07/05/2015	Raunds	Rhymetime
07/05/5015	Towcester	No activity
08/05/2015	Long Buckby	No activity
08/05/2015	Middleton Cheney	No activity
09/05/2015	Oundle	Play and Learn under 5's
11/05/2015	Daventry	No activity
11/05/2015	Northampton Central	Story Stomp
11/05/2015	Moulton	No activity
11/05/2015	Rothwell	Rhymetime
14/05/2015	Brixworth	Play and Learn
15/05/2015	Earls Barton	No activity
15/05/2015	Burton Latimer	Play and Learn
17/05/2015	Kingsthorpe	Play and Stay
18/05/2015	Rushden	Rhymetime
19/05/2015	Kettering	Rhymetime
26/05/2015	Weston Favell	No activity
31/05/2015	Wellingborough	Play and Learn

Library Visits

Date	Library
19/05/2015	Towcester
20/05/2015	Far Cotton
23/05/2015	Kingsthorpe
27/05/2015	Woodford Halse
28/05/2015	Burton Latimer
29/05/2015	Brixworth
02/06/2015	Kettering
03/06/2015	Oundle
03/06/2015	Moulton x 2 am and pm
03/06/2015	Thrapston
04/06/2015	Raunds
05/06/2015	Earls Barton
11/06/2015	St James
17/06/2015	Weston Favell
22/06/2015	Rothwell
23/06/2015	Daventry
29/06/2015	Wellingborough

Children's Centre Visits

Date	CC
08/06/2015	Kingsthorpe
09/06/2015	Woodford Halse
09/06/2015	Towcester
09/06/2015	Camrose
10/06/2015	Ecton Brook
10/06/2015	Pen Green
17/06/2015	Kingsthorpe 2nd visit
22/06/2015	Thrapston
22/06/2015	Oundle
23/06/2015	Kingswood
24/06/2015	Camrose 2nd visit
25/06/2015	Rushden
26/06/2015	Spring Lane
	Daventry

Appendix 2 - library observation sheet

Review of Children's Centre Services 2015 - Library Observations

1. Research info: (e.g. how many activity sessions for 0-5 are timetabled during the week e.g. Rhymetime, Storytime, Toddler time - including Sunday. Opening times etc. On a bus route etc.)
2. Date/time of visit.
3. Physical environment e.g. how clean, warm and welcoming it is, comfy chairs, lighting?
4. What activity did you observe? Any other comments about activity e.g. number of people attending?
5. Is it open? Can anyone wander in?
6. Is it accessible to all children under 5 (including disabled children and/or disabled parents) and their families?
7. Are there toilets available? Baby changing facilities?
8. Is there any confidential space for private conversations?
9. In your opinion is it a 'drop-in community hub' to reduce social isolation and improve wellbeing?
10. Is there information and advice on a range of issues? Wifi? Other opportunities for adults to continue learning?
11. Can you register with a Children's Centre? Where is the Children's Centre?
12. Other observations e.g. staff/public:
13. What are the opportunities for volunteering?
14. Anything else not mentioned above?

Appendix 3 - questions for libraries

Review of Children's Centre Services 2015 - Announced Library Visits

Please use the following prompt questions with staff, volunteers and parents to gather as much information as possible:

1. Name of Library:
2. Date and time of visit:
3. Activity observed: e.g. Rhymetime
4. Name and position of Library Manager/Staff member spoken to. (Please remind them that everything they say is **strictly confidential** and will not be attributed to any particular library or person).

QUESTIONS FOR: Library Manager/staff

5. How do you feel about taking on the provision of services for under 5's?
What have been the challenges?
6. Who decides which sessions are provided? How many people on average turn up? What sort of evaluation with parents do you do?
7. What is take up like at weekends? (If weekend sessions offered)
8. How do you recruit and support your volunteers to run these sessions?
What happens if someone doesn't turn up to lead the session? How easy/difficult is it to recruit volunteers for the under 5 activities?
9. When parents first register with the library what information are they given?
10. What information do you hold on what is available at children's centres?
11. What is your relationship with the children's centre? Who is your contact there?
12. How are you trained to assess whether a family needs to be referred to a children's centre?

13. How many families have you referred to a children's centre since the new contract started? How easy/difficult is this?
14. Is there any peer mentoring available and do you refer to Home Start? If so how many referrals have you made?
15. What is working well? (With the under 5's universal service provision)? (What are the barriers/challenges in providing this service)
16. What could be better?
17. Any other comments?

QUESTIONS FOR: Volunteer/or activity leader (Please state whether staff or volunteer)

18. What training and support have you received to deliver this session? Have you been enhanced DBS checked?
19. Has there been anything your volunteer training did not prepare you for?
20. Has your training taught you to identify troubled/early help families or families that need to be referred to a children's centre?
21. How do you refer a family to a children's centre?
22. What links do you have with the children's centre i.e. do you visit them? Do you know what services they provide? Do you have a named contact there?
23. Do you feel that this location is suitable for young children and are there any obstacles that need addressing?
24. What do you think is working well and what could be better?
25. Do you feel valued as a volunteer here? What do you like best about volunteering here? Like least?
26. Any other comments?

QUESTIONS FOR: Parents/Carers

27. Can you tell me how you first found out about this session in the library?
28. How often do you come?
29. Was it welcoming the first time you came here? What was your first impression?
30. Do you meet/make friends here?
31. Do you know anyone with young children who doesn't come to these sessions and/or why?
32. Do you feel that this is a good venue, toilets/baby changing etc. and why?
33. Are the timing of the sessions suitable and length of the sessions long enough?
34. Do you have any issues getting to this venue and why?
35. If you had a problem as a parent or needed advice is there anyone here you would talk to?
36. Are there any other services for children you would like to find here?
37. Do you have regular access with your health visitor or go to HV drop ins? (If yes, where?)
38. Have you ever been to a children's centre? Recently or previously?
39. Do you know where the nearest children's centre is?
40. Anything else you would like to mention about the Library service good or bad? Do you feel like there is anything missing from the service?
41. Any other comments:

Appendix 4 - questions for children's centre

Review of Children's Centre Services 2015 - Children's Centre Questions

Please use the following prompt questions with staff and parents/carers to gather as much information as possible:

1. Name of Children's Centre: Spurgeons/Action for Children/Corby?
2. Date and time of visit:
3. Activity observed and any comments if possible:
4. Name and position of Children's Centre Manager/Staff member spoken to. (Please remind them that everything they say is **strictly confidential** and will not be attributed to any particular children's centre or person).

QUESTIONS FOR: Children's Centre/Cluster Manager

5. How are early help families being identified and getting to you? (Probe relationship with libraries/Health Visitors/other professionals/organisations e.g. Norpip)
6. Do you think you are getting to the right families at the right time? (Probe - do you think you are missing children/families? What makes you think that, if yes? How can you be sure, if no?)
7. What are the child poverty levels for your area? (They should know this)
8. Is there a CAF for most of the families? Percentage if known?
9. How are the CAFs initiated? By whom?
10. What services do you offer?
11. Do you offer any universal services?
12. How do you allocate staff to sessions?
13. Do you have enough staff for the sessions?

14. What drop in sessions do you run?
15. Do you think you are providing the right sessions/services? Why?
16. What else do you think children's centres should be doing? Not doing? Why?
17. What peer mentoring is available through the children's centre? (If not using Homestart or other trained group ask how they choose, train and support peer mentors?)
18. How do families get to have a peer mentor?
19. Do staff visit families in their own homes?
20. How is a home visit identified as a requirement?
21. How are home visits perceived by staff and the early help families?
22. What help is offered to families to engage with sessions? E.g. transport, venues, incentives etc.
23. How are you ensuring target families starting Parenting Programmes successfully complete within 6 months of the programme starting?
24. What are you doing to support school readiness?
25. What is your offering for domestic abuse support and advice?
26. What is your teenage parent provision?
27. Anything else

QUESTIONS FOR: Other staff/or activity leader/other professional e.g. Health Visitor (Please state which)

28. What training have you had to enable you to identify early help families?
29. What do you see your role as when working with early help/targeted families?
30. Do you know enough about families when you first meet them to be able to work with them? (I.e. are you given enough information from other staff/professionals/libraries etc.?)

31. What sessions do you run? How often? Are there any at weekends/evenings?
32. What activities are the most popular here? (I.e. well attended). What are the least popular where attendance is usually low? Why?
33. Have parents asked for activities that they would find useful but are not provided here? If yes, what?
34. Do you feel that you have the time and opportunity to really get to know families and build up trust?
35. Do you think there are gaps in the current service provision?
36. Have you noticed a difference between the services now and the previous contract? What? Better or worse?
37. Anything else?

QUESTIONS FOR: Parents/Carers

38. How did you find out about the activities here? (Probe how they feel about coming to a children's centre)
39. How often do you come?
40. What sessions do you attend?
41. What do you enjoy/not enjoy about the sessions? Are they helpful?
42. How easy is it for you to get to the sessions? (Transport, cost, accessibility etc.)
43. Have you ever been offered one to one sessions or home visits? If yes, what was that like? Did you find it helpful etc.?
44. If you attended the children's centre before 1st August last year have you noticed any differences/changes? What?
45. Is there anything you would have liked to say to staff here but haven't found the opportunity to?
46. Anything else?



Right service, right place,
right time (NCC Nov 14)



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