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**Counting Numbers of Children’s Centres in the Most Disadvantaged Areas in England and Assessing their Impact**

1. Nadhim Zahawi, Minister for Children and Families, in evidence to the Science and Technology Select Committee (May 1st 2018), confirmed the importance of children’s centres to the government’s early education and social mobility strategies.  But we were surprised to hear him state that the number of children’s centres in disadvantaged areas had remained unchanged.

2.  Measuring the impact of children’s centres on children and families is a technically difficult and complex problem, though not impossible, as the Minister appeared to imply in an earlier parliamentary answer (February 2018): ‘Due to the wide range of services that affect educational outcomes for young children, it is not possible to draw a causal link between children's centre services and a child's educational attainment.’

**Counting the Number of Children’s Centres in Disadvantaged Areas**

3. At the select committee hearing (May 1, 2018) the Minister states on two occasions, at Q384 ‘The number of children’s centres that are open in disadvantaged areas has stayed constant’; and later, very forcefully, at Q460 ‘The overall number of children’s centres has stayed static; it has not decreased in any way’.

4.  As these propositions appear to conflict with the findings in our recent report for the Sutton Trust (*Stop Start*, published on April 5, 2018 by the Sutton Trust), we have gone back to the data to check. The data we used for the ‘headline count’ is in effect the ‘official data’,  from the then DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families) and from 2010 the DfE commissioned children’s centre database for 2009-10 and from the data listing children’s centres (formerly known as ‘Edubase’ now ‘Get Information about Schools’) on the DfE website for December 2017.

5. Comparing these sources shows that, as we reported in *Stop Start*, the proportion of children’s centres in the 30% most disadvantaged areas on the national standard IDACI measure was 54% in 2009/10 and had dropped slightly to 52% in December 2017, that is, the proportion is very similar between the two dates. However we also pointed out the number of centres had dropped overall - though we did not include the actual number of children’s centres in disadvantaged areas in *Stop Start*.

6. In terms of overall numbers there were 1952 children’s centres listed as being in the most disadvantaged 30% of areas in 2009/10 and 1599 in December 2017 – a drop of 353 centres by December 2017 (18% less). But as we noted in the report 336 children’s centres that were substantial Phase 1 or 2 centres in 2009/10 had become ‘linked sites’ rather than full children’s centres by December 2017. If we drop both the ‘light touch’ Phase 3 centres from the earlier period and the ‘linked sites’ from the latter period, the figures show 1885 substantial Phase 1 and 2 centres in the 30% poorest areas in 2009/10, and only 1263 full children’s centres in the same type of area in December 2017, a drop of 622 centres (33% less).

7. Also as we note throughout the *Stop Start* report the official figures in recent years appear consistently to overstate the actual number of children’s centres in operation as the database appears to lag the real world, and centres which are in the process of closing may still be listed as ‘open’. Also while the headline figures show the national position, another major finding in *Stop Start* was the sharp variation across local authorities with some keeping most of their centres going in some form and others closing 50% or more of their centres.

8. Whichever way these figures are taken they do not support the claim that the overall number of centres has remained the same. There may be confusion between proportions and overall numbers of centres; it may be that a different time period has been used, or a different definition of ‘disadvantage’. However, we have used the official datasets and the official definition of disadvantage that underpinned the original allocation of children’s centres across the country. We compared the programme at its high point with the current position in late 2017. Large scale closures probably began to take place after about 2012. A short range comparison over a year might pick up less change but it could give a highly misleading picture of what has happened.

**Children’s Centres: Assessing their Impact**

9. The most detailed attempt to assess the effectiveness of children’s centres was a study conducted by ECCE (Evaluation of Children’s Centres in England) research consortium commissioned by the DCSF/DfE between 2009-2015. This team included many researchers involved in the earlier EPPE/EPPSE studies on the continuing effects of early education on later development, following children from preschool into the secondary stage. The ECCE study used similar methods to measure effectiveness by following a cohort of 2,600 young children who had attended children’s centres. 'Establishing impact is therefore not a matter of identifying a single effect but rather, identifying and summarising a range of effects, across the sample of users and centres' , all sampled from more disadvantaged areas.  Reports from ECCE were published by the DfE in 2014 and 2015 but no follow up study has yet taken place on the longer term impact.

10.  On the basis of robust multi-level analysis, there were several positive findings on the effects of children’s centres in the ECCE final reports. These included a better home learning environment (this is linked to better child outcomes at school age) and a less chaotic home life; improved mothers' mental health, and better relationships between parents and children. Children, whose families had used children's centres services when they were toddlers, showed lower levels of behaviour problems when they were three years compared to families who used fewer services.  Although these changes were small, they were statistically significant and consistent across many outcomes and demonstrate that centres helped to narrow some of the gaps linked to poverty and disadvantage.

11.  Research on the local usage of centres (published by the DfE in 2014) showed that their users typically came from the immediate local area and their profile fitted closely with the overall local population. Coverage of young children under 5 in the neighbourhood was very high; registration was typically around 90% overall and around 55% of under 5s had made some use of their centre over a year. The 20% more disadvantaged families had spent more time at their registered centres.

12. The *Stop Start* (April 2018) report also concluded that in addition to the outright closure of children’s centres there were significant  reductions in service provision, with more part time opening, a smaller range of services, fewer open access sessions, and in some areas a focus on a much wider age range.

13. There is no doubt that further large scale closures of children’s centres are in process as local authorities grapple with severe budgetary pressures which they can no longer stave off by drawing on their reserves, as the recent National Audit Office report (*Financial Sustainability of Local Authorities*, 2018) makes very clear.  Using DfE data the NAO report concludes ‘from 2010-2016… spending on Sure Start fell by 49.8%’.

Disadvantaged areas have not been sheltered from the outright closure of local centres or the reduction in service provision, where centres have survived.

George Smith, Kathy Sylva, Teresa Smith, Pam Sammons and Aghogho Omonigho: *Stop Start: Survival, decline or closure? Children’s centres in England*, Sutton Trust April 2018.

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