

Written evidence from The Children's Society to the Oldham Fairness Commission

Introduction

The Children's Society is a leading national charity, driven by the belief that every child deserves a good childhood. We provide vital help to the most vulnerable children, young people and families in our society through a range of services. We work with around 48,000 children each year, supporting them and advocating on their behalf to tackle discrimination and disadvantage in their daily lives. Our services include children's centres, supporting children at risk on the streets, helping young refugees and advocating for the needs of young carers. Through our policy and research, we seek to influence public policy and practice as well as changing attitudes and perceptions of young people at all levels to enable all children and young people to have a better chance in life.

Across England:

- We run 59 projects delivering 173 services including children's centres, advocacy services and specialist support services for refugee and migrant children;
- We work in partnership with 40 local authorities;

Our services in Oldham:

- We run six children's centres in Oldham. They are commissioned in two districts: West Oldham, comprising of Alexandra, Coldhurst, Medlock Vale and Werneth children's centre and Royton, Shaw and Crompton, comprising of Royton and Shaw and Crompton children's centres.
- From October 2012 to 30 September 2013 we worked with over 4,400 children and had sustained contact with over 1,500¹.

The following recommendations should be included in the final recommendations of the Oldham Fairness Commission:

- A recognition of the importance of early intervention, in particular the services delivered through children's centres in tackling long term inequality and promoting fairness in society.
- The trialling of birth registrations in children's centres to promote the accessibility and access of children's centres, particularly for those families who are hardest to reach to ensure families are aware of the services available at the earliest possible stage.
- Local health services sharing live birth data with children's centres in their areas to improve the reach of these crucial services.

¹ Sustained contact is defined as seeing a family/child 3 or more time in children's centres or intensive work over multiple interactions requiring a case file opening in other services.

- Where possible, the co-location of health and other relevant services including baby weighing clinics, employment and benefit advice sessions, Child in Need meetings etc. should be located at children's centres.
- The local authority should consult with their local children's centres to establish whether a review of reach areas is needed to ensure that these areas are better aligned to supporting disadvantaged families.
- The Oldham Fairness Commission recognises the importance of early intervention in promoting fairness and supports funding in this area.

Fairness in Early Intervention to improve outcomes

Early intervention is crucial to tackle educational inequalities in later life. National evaluations of the Sure Start programme have found that children's centres support better parenting leading to less chaotic and improved learning environments in the home.

However, in order to be effective, services need to engage with families that would benefit from support. That is why in September this year The Children's Society published 'Breaking Barriers' – a report looking at the challenges faced by children's centres in engaging with the most disadvantaged families, and considering how children's centres can be better supported to reach these families.

This is particularly important in the context of children's centres facing an increasingly constrained funding environment. Excluding the value of the disadvantaged two year old offer, the Early Intervention Grant (EIG), which provides funding for children's centres, will be halved in real terms between 2010 and 2015, from £3bn a year down to £1.5bn.

- The compound reduction of the EIG in Oldham between 2010 and 2015 is over £31m. Oldham children's centres will receive a 10% local authority cut in their budget, beginning in the 2014/2015 financial year.

This will make the already challenging, often resource intensive task of engaging disadvantaged families, more difficult and make it even more important to ensure that available resources are used as effectively as possible to engage with the most disadvantaged groups.

'Breaking Barriers' sets out a number of recommendations to improve the accessibility of children's centres for some of the hardest to reach communities. If these recommendations are adopted locally this will lead to improved services in the early years and in turn better educational outcomes for children in later life. Our key recommendations include:

- **Piloting of birth registrations in children's centres. As we currently run six children's centres in the area we are able to support a pilot in Oldham.**

This would provide a new low cost opportunity for children's centres to engage directly with new families and encourage greater use of their services by disadvantaged families.

Registering births at children's centres would help to ensure that new parents know of the existence of their local centre and provide their first contact with it. It would also provide staff the opportunity to engage with families and highlight the support available at the centre.

- **Local health services sharing live birth data with children's centres in their areas to improve the reach of these crucial services.**

Many of our practitioners are particularly concerned that they are not able to access information about pregnant women or live birth data. This was usually due to issues with gaining permission from local health services.

We believe that all children's centres should have access to live birth data about the children born within their reach area. This would help to ensure that all families can be approached by the centre from the very start of a child's life to enable early engagement with services.

- **Where possible, health and other relevant services including baby weighing clinics, employment and benefit advice sessions, Child in Need meetings etc. should be located at children's centres.**

Our practitioners also reported that placing services, such as baby weighing clinics in children's centres helps get families through the door and introduces them to the other services available. Joint visiting, where a member of the children's centre staff accompanies health visitors was also identified as an effective way of engaging and supporting disadvantaged families. However, centres can struggle to have sufficient staff capacity to implement this.

- **The local authority should consult with their local children's centres to establish whether a review of reach areas is needed to ensure that these areas are better aligned to supporting disadvantaged families.**

Our 'Breaking Barriers' report found that transport and parents' working patterns are among the issues that can make it difficult for families to access children's centres. It can also be more difficult for practitioners to target families due to the geographical shape and size of their reach areas.

Practitioners also told us that in some cases, children's centres reach areas can be inappropriately shaped and sized to provide effective support. For example, one of our children's centres in the South West has a reach area approximately 10 miles long. As a result, it is difficult for it and others in a similar situation to reach local authority and Ofsted targets set for engaging with disadvantaged families. Practitioners find that in some cases families go to the centre closest to them, even if they are not in the reach area. This is a significant issue as the other centre is not able to count this family in their targets.

We would be happy to send a copy of our report to Commissioners for them to consider alongside our evidence. We would be delighted to see the importance of early intervention reflected in the Commission's findings.

Better Start in Greater Manchester

The Children's Society is currently leading a partnership bid in Greater Manchester as part of the Big Lottery's A Better Start programme. This aims to deliver a step change in preventative approaches in pregnancy and the first three years of life to improve the life chances of babies and young children.

In June 2014, the Big Lottery Fund will ultimately choose between three and five bids from across the country to make a significant investment in early years work – up to £50m over eight to ten years. The Greater Manchester bid is one of the final 15 out of over 140 initial applicants. The bid is closely aligned with the wider Greater Manchester public service reform-led early years strategy and focuses investment in wards in Oldham (Coldhurst), Salford, Bolton, Rochdale and Manchester. It is the ambition of The Children's Society to lead a successful bid, delivered in collaboration with partners.

- **The Oldham Fairness Commission recognises the importance of early intervention in promoting fairness and supports funding in this area.**

Development of a Children and Family Zone in Oldham

The Children's Society together with The Innovation Unit has designed a methodology to develop Children and Family Zones (CFZs) in areas of need. These zones will support and enable a concentration of effort in an area to tackle child poverty and adolescent neglect and will promote fairness and opportunity in this specific area.

A CFZ should be a place where:

- People want to stay and have high aspirations for their own future and the ones of their children.
- People can engage with services in flexible ways, and can access the support that is right for them, no matter at which point they connect with services.
- People have access to a wealth of volunteering opportunities, which enable them, not only to raise their own aspirations, but also to take ownership of, and shape some of the services delivered in their area.
- People mentor each other, and informal networks are valued as a legitimate source of support.

A CFZ is created through a partnership approach, with services designed that best meet local need. It will have the following principles:

- A place-based approach in a defined geographical area with clear authorisation, endorsement and engagement of local service users and partners.
- An alignment of our delivery, fundraising, campaigning and advocacy work in a local area.
- A shared vision of what 'good' looks like for children aged 0-19 facilitated by single leadership and shared resources

- Created through a process of co-production with local partners and the local community to build momentum and enthusiasm for the zone
- Based on in-depth community knowledge, ethnographic research and a deep understanding of the locality
- A commitment to embedding resource and decision-making within the local community

A CFZ in an area of need in Oldham would enable a review of services and a co-designed approach to services in a targeted locality delivering improved outcomes for children, young people and families. A CFZ could then form part of a response to tackling long-term fairness in communities.

If you have any questions about this submission please contact either

Lucy Capron
Senior Local Public Affairs Officer
020 7841 4494 or lucy.capron@childrenssociety.org.uk

Rob Jackson
Area Director
0161 763 2170 or rob.jackson@childrenssociety.org.uk