Introduction
The Children’s Society supports over 48,000 children and young people every year through our children’s centres and specialist services. We believe in achieving a better childhood for every child but have a particular focus on vulnerable and disadvantaged children. We seek to give a voice to children and young people and influence policy and practice so they have a better chance in life.

The Children’s Society currently runs 42 children’s centres across England. We welcome the government’s commitment to increasing parental and community involvement in Sure Start children’s centres. We believe parental involvement is essential to providing effective children’s centre services and ensuring centres are embedded in their local community. Moreover, we believe that young children themselves should also be included in the decisions made about children’s centres provision and practice.

Summary of recommendations

- **Recommendation 1**: Children’s centres need to offer a variety of routes to engagement with governance, to ensure that parents have the flexibility to engage with governance on the level to which fits their individual needs. This should include options requiring limited time commitment, such as participating in a survey about what they would like to see offered from their children’s centre, but also ensure that parents are aware of options requiring a more substantial time commitment (such as participation in advisory groups).

- **Recommendation 2**: Local Authorities need to ensure that all relevant local services (nurseries, GPs, schools) are providing information about local children’s centre services.

- **Recommendation 3**: Local Authorities must ensure that advisory boards are convened at times suitable to the needs of local parents, and in locations that are easily accessible for the most disadvantaged. Support should be offered with childcare and with the costs of travel to meetings.

- **Recommendation 4**: There should be a specified acknowledgement in the sure guidance that these families may require additional support and
encouragement, for example, for parents with disabilities, and parents who do not speak English as a first language.

• **Recommendation 5:** We would welcome finding ways to involve parents directly in decision making around budgets, commissioning and staffing of local children’s centres, involving parents more in these critical decisions as they were in the SSLPs. However, if parents were to be encouraged to become more involved in these decisions, additional training and support would be required to enable parents to effectively participate.

• **Recommendation 6:** All Children’s Centres should have clear terms of reference for an advisory board which sets out the responsibilities of the board, and should also consider how these responsibilities are balanced against those of the children’s centre staff.

• **Recommendation 7:** Children’s Centres should “target” particular disadvantaged groups in order to involve them with decisions about how centres are run. Local Authorities must ensure that Children’s Centres have access to comprehensive and up-to-date data about disadvantaged families within their reach area to ensure they are able to target them effectively.

i. How can it be made easier for parents and communities to get more involved in running centres?

Parents face a number of barriers to getting involved in the governance of children’s centres. Our children’s centre practitioners have found that some parents state that they do not have the time to get involved with work and other commitments taking priority. Many parents of very young children are extremely tired and struggle to get them to activities at the centre, let alone anything else.

**Recommendation 1:** Children’s centres need to offer a variety of routes to engagement with governance, to ensure that parents have the flexibility to engage with governance on the level to which fits their individual needs. This should include options requiring limited time commitment, such as participating in a survey about what they would like to see offered from their children’s centre, but also ensure that parents are aware of options requiring a more substantial time commitment (such as participation in advisory groups).

In many cases disadvantaged families are unaware of the services which Children’s Centres offer, and in some cases even the existence of a children’s centre in their local areas. In
order to make it easier for disadvantaged families to become involved in the governance of children’s centres, it is vital that advertising of children’s centre services in disadvantaged areas is made as effective as possible. Other local organisations need to play a role in this by distributing information about local children’s centre services.

**Recommendation 2: Local Authorities need to ensure that all relevant local services (nurseries, GPs, schools) are providing information about local children’s centre services.**

Our practitioners find that it can be particularly difficult to engage disadvantaged parents who may lack the confidence to get involved. There can also be specific practical issues that act as a barrier to involvement, for example, single parent families are unable to leave their children with someone else if they are attending a meeting at a children’s centre and it can be difficult to engage with parents whilst their children are with them. In addition, crèche’s and providing childcare for parental meetings can be very expensive for centres. We believe it is important to ensure that not just the most vocal and active parents and community members are involved in the running and day to day activities of children’s centres.

**Recommendation 3: Local Authorities must ensure that advisory boards are convened at times suitable to the needs of local parents, and in locations that are easily accessible for the most disadvantaged. Support should be offered with childcare and with the costs of travel to meetings.**

We support that the revised Sure Start statutory guidance states that more disadvantaged and vulnerable groups should have opportunities to have their views heard in the running of their local children’s centre. However, we believe support must be available to ensure that vulnerable families are able to become involved in children’s centres.

**Recommendation 4: There should be a specified acknowledgement in the sure guidance that these families may require additional support and encouragement, for example, for parents with disabilities, and parents who do not speak English as a first language.**

Sure Start Local Programmes had programme boards with responsibilities for budgets, staffing and commissioning within the SSLP. As SSLPs became Children’s Centres, these responsibilities have largely been passed to Local Authorities. NESS evaluation found that programme boards, which included parents, were often felt to improve the focus of the programme on the needs of the local community.

**Recommendation 5: We would welcome finding ways to involve parents directly in decision making around budgets, commissioning and staffing of local children’s**

centres, involving parents more in these critical decisions as they were in the SSLPs. However, if parents were to be encouraged to become more involved in these decisions, additional training and support would be required to enable parents to effectively participate.

ii. Are there particular types of support with getting more involved that parents and communities would find helpful?

- **Volunteering opportunities and training** – volunteering opportunities are important to increasing local involvement in children’s centres, they can also provide important routes towards paid employment. All Children’s Centres need to ensure that appropriate opportunities are offered to parents, and that the costs of volunteering are covered. A full training programme, adapted to their needs and responsibilities, should be offered to all volunteers.

- **Childcare** – parents need access to free childcare whilst they are participating in meeting and seminars regarding children’s centre governance, and to support them in other volunteering opportunities.

- **Travel costs** – in some cases, travel costs may be prohibitively expensive for parents who want to be involved in advisory groups. Children’s centre advisory boards should ensure that travel costs for meetings are covered, and where possible, meetings are convened at locations which are easily accessible by the most disadvantaged families.

- **Getting the message out** – in many cases lack of parental involvement with children’s centres may be driven by knowledge of their existence or the services that they offer. Children’s Centres must ensure they are finding ways to communicate with families with children in the early years about the opportunities available for participation in children’s centre governance.

iii. Where there are differences of view between parents and professionals who are providing services, how should these be resolved?

We believe that it is important that all children’s centres are led by professional management staff with experience of providing children’s centre services. Parental involvement with children’s centres must work alongside, and closely with, professional service delivery staff, with clear lines of responsibility in order to clarify on which occasions lead responsibility is with parents and on which occasions final responsibility is with professional members of staff.
Recommendation 6: All Children’s Centres should have clear terms of reference for an advisory board which sets out the responsibilities of the board, and should also consider how these are responsibilities are balanced against those of the children’s centre staff.

iv. How can we ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable families are reflected in any new arrangements?

Additional targeted support is vital to ensuring that the most vulnerable families are supported to be involved in children’s centre governance. This may include reflecting some of the issues highlighted above regarding getting the message out about children’s centres, and ensuring that families aren’t excluded because they need additional support.

Our centres have found that targeting particular groups and hoc discussion groups are effective in encouraging parental involvement from ‘hardly reached’ groups. In Swindon, our centres have enabled young parents and parents in supported accommodation to share their views through having informal discussion sessions with them on specific topics. For example, parents in supported housing took part in a survey into poverty which contributed to Swindon local authorities child poverty needs assessment and strategy.

Ad-hoc discussions are also used whereby parents are asked their views informally if they are present in the building or directly after sessions. Our centres have found that this works particularly well with more disadvantaged families who can have low literacy levels or low confidence levels and do not always feel comfortable in more formal settings.

Recommendation 7: Children’s Centres should “target” particular disadvantaged groups in order to involve them with decisions about how centres are run. Local Authorities must ensure that Children’s Centres have access to comprehensive and up-to-date data about disadvantaged families within their reach area to ensure they are able to target them effectively.

The Children’s Society are currently working on a “Breaking Barriers” report on the barriers to engagement with children’s centres amongst disadvantaged families. The report will explore barriers to engagement with governance, and will also consider how opportunities for involvement with children’s centre leadership can be used as a way in to building engagement to service usage amongst disadvantaged communities. We will look forward to sharing the findings from this report when it is completed in September.
v. Are there any particularly good examples of parental and community involvement that you would like to share with us?

Good examples of parental and community involvement from The Children’s Society’s children’s centres

As stated in the discussion paper, there are various ways that parents and communities can be involved in children’s centres from volunteering, consultation with parents, ad hoc discussions to joining parent forums, advisory boards and recruitment new staff. The following examples from our practice highlight where parents are provided with key support so that they get more involved with their local children’s centre.

Consulting with parents
Gauging and incorporating parent’s views are essential to providing effective and popular sessions and services in children’s centres. In our children’s centres parents are involved in planning activities and events, as well as, more practical considerations such as timetabling when sessions are and where they are held. In our Swindon children’s centres, parents evaluate all centre activities and this consultation has enabled the centres to move activities to more popular days/times and helped determine what courses for parents are put on for the year. In one of our children’s centres in Bradford, they ran a sex education workshop for parents in response to the high levels of teenage pregnancy on the local estate and parents suggested they also wanted an alcohol and substance misuse awareness course which was then provided by the centre.

Recruitment
Parents have also been involved in the recruitment of new staff for the centres in Swindon. They have interviewed prospective staff and observed candidates in group setting ensuring that staff fit into the ethos and work of the centre.

Volunteering
Parents are involved as volunteers across our children’s centres including formal structured volunteering opportunities, helping out during stay and play sessions and parents being supported to run groups. Volunteers are provided with information pack on policies and procedures and are always thanked for their contribution no matter how minor they perceive it to be. Involvement as a volunteer has encouraged some parents to get involved with their centre’s parent forum and advisory board. More formalised volunteering roles can also lead to employment opportunities as in Swindon one volunteer recently earned a childcare qualification and got a job locally and another young parent volunteer has undertaken a food hygiene course and is working towards a career in catering.

Parent and community volunteers can be powerful advocates for centre’s promoting them to the other parents and the wider community. This can be particularly important in Black and
Ethnic Minority (BME) communities as for example in one of our children’s centre in Bradford a Bangladeshi parent helps to run a session and helps with translating and this has encouraged other families from this background to use the centre. Also in Swindon two members of the local community provide volunteer administrative support and are strong supporters of the centre in their community. These community ambassadors and volunteers are an important part of encouraging involvement of parents from across diverse communities. There are informal community ambassadors in all our children’s centres. This role could be more formalised and developed to support greater involvement of parents and the community in children’s centres.

Parent volunteering is welcomed in all our centres but it can pose difficulties. Managing and supporting volunteers to develop can be time consuming for staff. Some of our centres have limited capacity for staff to manage volunteers. More support and resource could be provided in order to enable centres to have more parental and community volunteers.

**Involving disadvantaged parents**
Disadvantaged and vulnerable parents can be particularly difficult to involve in children’s centres. In some cases, it can be difficult to get them to engage with the services let alone encouraging them to become more involved in children’s centres governance and the running of services.

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**Children’s voice**
Listening and ensuring the participation of young children in children’s centres services is also important alongside parental and community involvement. Our staff are trained in children participation and listen to the views of young children and babies in a variety of ways in order to develop their preferred activities. For example, in one of our children’s centres in Bradford children were involved in choosing new toys and play equipment through looking through catalogues and sampling the toys. In our Eldene children’s centre in Swindon, children’s views were used to develop the reception area to make it more welcoming for children.