

A Fresh Start for Children and Family Support: Delivering joined-up place-based support through Family Hubs

Part 1: Building from the Foundations

The logo is a red circle containing the text "CENTRE FOR YOUNG LIVES" in white, stacked vertically.

CENTRE
FOR
YOUNG
LIVES

April 2025

Contents

About the Centre for Young Lives	2
Acknowledgements.....	2
Executive Summary	3
Introduction from Baroness Anne Longfield, Executive Chair of the Centre for Young Lives	6
Why we need joined-up family support.....	9
A recent history of joined-up family support	12
Our findings.....	17
How are budgets being spent at a local level?	22
Building on the foundations to create a new national infrastructure of support for children and families	25
Methodology	30
ANNEX A: Freedom of Information Request questions.....	32

About the Centre for Young Lives

The Centre for Young Lives, founded by former Children's Commissioner for England, Baroness Anne Longfield CBE, is a thinktank and delivery unit dedicated to improving the lives of children, young people, and families in the UK. Our focus spans from cradle to career. We promote the benefits of early help and intervention to break the cycle of disadvantage and support vulnerable children, young people and their families to flourish. We address systemic issues, such as poverty, mental health, and education disparities, advocating for reform where it's needed and a new social contract to help all children and young people to succeed.

Acknowledgements

The Centre for Young Lives is grateful to Impact on Urban Health for their support with this research and for recognising the importance of making the case for investment in joined-up children and family support. We also thank Bert Provan and the team at LSE consulting for providing their support with the analysis for this project, and for their expert advice and feedback as we developed this paper.

We thank our partners and colleagues at Nesta, Surrey Square Primary School, Carr Manor High School, Oasis Community Trust, Thrive at Five, Family Hubs Network, Foundations, the Centre for Social Justice, Unison, and many others. We are grateful to the 121 local authorities who responded to our request and particularly to the local authorities who engaged in a follow up call to share more about their provision.

Executive Summary

The benefits of place-based children and family support are well evidenced. The last Labour Government rolled out Sure Start across the early 2000s to deliver over 3,000 children's centres – one in every community. During the 2010s, national policy direction and funding cuts have resulted in the decline in place-based children and family support. The recent investment into Family Hubs since 2021 has been welcome, and there is a positive commitment from across government departments to build on this programme and maximise its impact for families in need of support.

Drawing on new data obtained from local authorities, this briefing takes stock of the current provision of children's centres and Family Hubs to understand the availability of place-based children and family support provided by local authorities across England. In the context of rising child poverty, widening inequality, record high severe absence, and a growing number of children arriving at school not ready to learn, this report makes the case for upscaling investment in local, joined-up support for many more children and families, and in turn addressing many of this government's most fundamental opportunity milestones and mission.

Key Findings

- **The landscape of children's centres has been left decimated and threadbare after more than a decade of cuts, whilst Family Hubs are of very limited scale and in their infancy. In 2023/24, spending on children's centres and Family Hubs by local authorities was less than a quarter of what was spent annually on children's centres in 2009/10.** This spending is funded through a mixture of non-ring-fenced funding from local authority finance settlements, the pooling of other local budgets in some places, and some welcome additional funding from the government's Family Hubs and Start for Life programme in 75 local authorities.
- **The number of centres has fallen and their volume and depth of services and support has also decreased.** There are now an estimated total of 2,100 hubs and centres across England, at an average spend of £275,000 per hub, just over half of the average spend per hub under Sure Start.
- **The funding that does exist is precarious and at high risk. 49% of local authorities reported cuts to their budgets for children's centres and Family Hubs** between 2023/24 and 2024/25. Local authorities in the Yorkshire and Humber region reported reducing their budgets on average by 10% reduction. One local authority is cutting its budget by 81%, which is likely to leave many children and families with nowhere to turn for support.

Key Recommendations

Securing the stock of existing provision will be vital in any Children and Family Hubs expansion programme. To secure the future of joined-up family support and meet the needs of more children and families, we recommend the government protect current funding for this provision for local authorities, before expanding provision to reach more families in need over the period of the Spending Review and beyond.

Securing and scaling up investment for place-based, joined-up children and family support:

- **The Government should secure the future of existing joined-up children and family support.** The Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care should fund a ring-fenced grant to local authorities to fill the current gap in local authority funding and secure the future of existing family support.
- **The Government should scale up investment through a ring-fenced grant to deliver joined-up family support to more children and families across England.** We recommend a phased and iterative approach to scaling up funding to children and family support, building over time to reach 2 million children in year nine.
 - Phase 1, costing £1.2bn over the Spending Review period, would sure up existing local authority budgets and scale up investment first to reach 200,000 and then 500,000 children in the final year of the Spending Review period.
 - Phase 2 calls for scaling up investment further over the following five years to reach 2 million children with £2.26bn of investment in year nine.

Recommendations for policy direction:

This briefing also sets out further recommendations to drive best practice in joined-up children and family support. We want to see the Department for Education issuing new guidance on the core provision of children's centres and Family Hubs, as was the norm during the 2000s. We recommend the Cabinet Office lead a cross-departmental taskforce to maximise the role of Family Hubs and children's centres as a springboard for a wide range of government policy. This should be supported by cross-departmental guidance encouraging the delivery of a range of new services from high needs to universal through children's centres and Family Hubs.

Finally, every local authority we engaged with in this first phase of research emphasised the benefits of greater integration with health at a local level. Local authorities and health services should work together towards stronger integration, including data-sharing, co-locating services and pooling budgets. We also recommend that additional investment in the Family Hubs budget continue to be jointly funded by both Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care.

Local Authorities are best placed to identify and respond to local need. The next phase of this research will include further engagement with Local Authorities across England to better understand the different models of provision and service delivery, to explore how future investment into children and family support budgets for local authorities could be best spent to deliver better interventions and outcomes for children and families in every community to deliver the Opportunity Mission for all children.

A note on joined-up family support

This report refers to joined-up (or integrated), place-based children and family support, by which we mean support delivered through either local children's centres or Family Hubs. In our Freedom of Information (Fol) request, we asked about the provision of both children's centres and Family Hubs, in recognition that both services are being delivered in different parts of the country with some similar overall aims and potential outcomes. Many local authorities continue to call their joined-up family support "children's centres", in part due to the need for continued recognition within the local community. Others have rebranded in line with Family Hubs policy from the government which has been in place since 2021. Some have both children's centres and Family Hubs.

Some Family Hubs offer very similar provision to that which was provided through children's centres, others are offering a much less developed provision for children aged 0-19 with an emphasis on the first months of life. This paper does not make recommendations about the relative benefits of children's centres as they compare to Family Hubs beyond the scale of funding and reach and recognises that some children's centres have converted into Family Hubs. Rather, we see them, broadly speaking, as under the same category of joined-up, local family support. In the section below we make the case for upscaling investment into joined-up children and family support through a costed model - we are referring to investment into both existing children's centres and Family Hubs, using the umbrella term 'Family Hubs' to capture all current provision of joined-up, local family support.

Introduction from Baroness Anne Longfield, Executive Chair of the Centre for Young Lives

It has been more than a quarter of a century since the first Sure Start centre opened and many of the challenges children and families face today are even greater than they were in the years leading up to that landmark programme.

Since 2010, early help and family support programmes have been hollowed out, denying some of the most vulnerable children and families the extra support they need to avert crisis or to boost life chances. The investment already announced by this Labour government has been very welcome and provides a foundation for further growth in this vital area of preventative support for children and families. This briefing paper makes the case for a fresh start for 'Sure Start-style' place-based joined-up family support.

It begins by providing the most comprehensive, up-to-date national picture of children's centres and Family Hubs funding available, revealing that in 2023/24 the amount councils in England spent on children's centres and Family Hubs was just a quarter of the amount invested in children's centres under Sure Start. Our research also shows that children's centres and Family Hubs are operating with a far smaller level of funding per hub, with local authorities spending half of what was spent on a Sure Start hub in 2006.

Worryingly, at a time when the Government has a target of ensuring 40,000-45,000 more children reach a good level of development before the end of this Parliament to reach its Opportunity Mission milestone, almost half (49%) of local authorities have told us they are having to make cuts to their budget for children's centres and Family Hubs. At the most extreme end, one local authority in the North West is reducing its budget for 2024/25 by 81%.

This should be a serious cause of concern for the Government. The present structure of children's centres and Family Hubs remains fragile, putting more pressure on our public services, particularly our schools and teachers. It is not sustainable.

I've been a strong advocate for the importance of early intervention and family support for over four decades. The disadvantaged families I worked with in the East End in my first job during the early 80s didn't feel they or their children would be a part of the explosion of creativity, enterprise and wealth happening along the river at Canary Wharf at the time. But they also showed me how things might be different - how with the right support at the right time, families can overcome challenges and become stronger.

I went on to work on the delivery of the initial Sure Start programme in the No 10 Strategy Unit in the early 2000s and ran a national children's charity which provided children's centres across England.

As I argued at the time, and still do now, high quality children's centres and hubs can be transformational for some families and children. Joined-up family support programmes can build resilience, support positive parenting habits and child development, and improve access to services and wider support. Studies have shown their positive impact

on school attainment, reducing hospitalisation, and reducing criminal activity for those children with access to a centre or hub, particularly the most disadvantaged children.

The need for a fresh network of family support has never been greater. Our public services have been severely squeezed for over a decade and are now ill-equipped to deal with the growing levels of complex needs among children and young people without significant reform. Too many young lives in England are blighted by poverty, by rising knife crime and antisocial behaviour, record levels of poor mental health, rising numbers of young people who are Not in Education, Employment, or Training, and the thousands of children arriving at primary school without having reached expected levels of development. The Covid pandemic rocket-boosted many of these trends.

Last year, the Prime Minister's "Plan for Change" established a welcome early years' ambition, with a commitment to increasing the proportion of 5-year-olds reaching a good level of development in the Early Years Foundation Stage Assessment to 75% by 2028. The Government's recent investment of £500m in a 'Families First' programme to drive and support reforms to intervene early and reduce crisis also provides a welcome foundation to build upon.

While Family Hubs have received an increase in funding over recent years, it has been very limited, and the scale of need is far greater than the level of investment.

Supported by Impact on Urban Health, the Centre for Young Lives has undertaken this initial research – the first of two briefings – to understand the state of provision of place-based, joined-up early intervention and family support in England today. With the support of economists at LSE Consulting, we are also presenting the scale and duration of investment needed to reach the families who need it, especially those with highest need, through a deepened and expanded rollout of hubs across the country.

In our second paper, to be published later this year, we will look more closely at the nature of provision across the country and make recommendations about how best practice can be learnt from and built upon to enable all children to have the opportunity to thrive.

This briefing concludes that current spend on integrated place-based support is insufficient. Indeed, many councils are likely to cut spending on centres and hubs further, and a national network of joined-up family support, providing crucial help and support to families most in need, requires new investment and a long-term drive and determination from the heart of and across Government. It should be a leading priority resourced across departments, nationally and locally.

It is my firm belief that this focus and determination will be necessary for the Government to reach its early years development goals target and to meet a range of others targets, from reducing unmet SEND need, to supporting skills development, reducing the impact of poverty, supporting mental and physical health, promoting educational attainment, supporting crime prevention, and promoting wider economic growth.

To tackle the generational problems holding us back as a nation, we will need to mend the patched-up, underfunded, postcode lottery that currently exists. We need a fresh start for family support.

Why we need joined-up family support

The evidence is well established: disadvantage holds children, young people and families back from their earliest years and throughout childhood, with children in more disadvantaged communities more likely to arrive in school with developmental issues, struggling with the impact of poverty, poor housing and with significant unmet needs.

Children who experience persistent disadvantage (eligible for Free School meals for at least 80% of their time in school) leave school on average 22.9 months behind their peers.¹ A child has an 80% chance of passing Maths and English at GCSE if they neither live in poverty nor require the support of a social worker. That figure falls to 65% where a child lives in poverty or needs a social worker, and to 13% where a child experiencing disadvantage also has Special Educational Needs.²

Previous research from the Centre for Young Lives in partnership with the Child of the North has highlighted the problems of some children arriving at Reception year way behind the level of expected development – including some four-year-olds still wearing nappies or unable to communicate or socialise with other children.³ In 2023/24, around 1 in 3 children (32.3%) did not reach a good level of development by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage.⁴ This rose to around 58.5% for children eligible for Free School Meals.⁵ The percentage of children with a good level of development is lowest for those who live in the 10% most deprived areas (measured using the IDACI index).⁶ This is in part compounded by the shortage of good early years provision, which is well evidenced to play a crucial role in supporting successful development in young children, including their social, emotional and physical health, their language skills and their behaviour – especially for those from deprived backgrounds.⁷

Several studies have shown ‘school readiness’ to be linked to wider outcomes across health and education. Over half of children who were deemed not ‘school ready’ performed below expected in their Key Stage 1 ready assessment, compared to only 6%

¹ EPI (2024), Annual Report 2024: Disadvantage. <https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2024-disadvantage-2/#:~:text=Disadvantaged%20pupils%20have%2C%20on%20average,from%204.8%20months%20in%202022>.

² Children’s Commissioner for England, “Building back better - Anne Longfield’s final speech as Children’s Commissioner. Children’s Commissioner for England,” Children’s Commissioner for England, 2021.

³ Centre for Young Lives, Child of the North, N8 Research Partnership (2024) An evidence-based approach to supporting children in the pre-school years; https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/65b6b3c3bd2e7d160db2dbc0/66fec552d5159812bc01ff6d_Pre-School%20Report%20Digital.pdf

⁴ Department for Education (2024) Early Years Foundation Stage Profile results: Academic year 2023/24; <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/early-years-foundation-stage-profile-results/2023-24>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Gialamas, A. et al (2015) Social Inequalities in childcare quality and their effects on children’s development at school entry: findings from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children; Epidemiol Community Health, vol. 69.

of children performing below expected who were deemed school ready.⁸ Children deemed not school ready were also found to be nearly 2.5 times more likely to be persistently absent from school, increasing to over three times when considering persistence absence over several academic years, and children who were not school ready are around three times as likely to be not in education, employment or training (NEET) at 16-17 years old.⁹ This evidence makes clear the need for early intervention to prevent the knock-on effects of children not reaching the expected level of development by the time they start school.

Policies introduced over the past decade have placed limits on the benefits some families could receive; the cap on benefits and the two-child limit which together currently impact nearly half a million families.¹⁰ If we do not address these problems in early childhood, we store up further issues for the future, with many children going on to experience limited life chances, poor educational outcomes, and greater risk of poor health, poor employment prospects and social and emotional problems.

Furthermore, it is important to recognise that there are an estimated 900,000 children living in poverty whose family are not eligible for free school meals.¹¹

The benefits of joined-up family support

Family support has an important role to play in supporting families with young children, as well as providing wraparound support for families facing disadvantage throughout childhood. Evidence shows that well-supported families are more resilient to difficulty and crisis and are better equipped to ensure that their children can reach their full potential.

Recent evaluations by the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) on the short- and medium-term impacts of Sure Start found that children that lived within a short distance of a Sure Start Centre during the first five years of their life performed 0.8 grades better in their GCSEs. The impact for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or ethnic minority children were much larger, with positive effects six times greater by GCSE level for children eligible for Free School Meals. The IFS estimated that for every £1 the

⁸ Centre for Young Lives, Child of the North, N8 Research Partnership (2024) An evidence-based approach to supporting children in the pre-school years; https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/65b6b3c3bd2e7d160db2dbc0/66fec552d5159812bc01ff6d_Pre-School%20Report%20Digital.pdf

⁹ Warburton, M et al (2024) Risk of not being in employment, education or training (NEET) in late adolescence is signalled by school readiness measures at 4-5 years; BMC Public Health, vol. 24.

¹⁰ Resolution Foundation (2024) Catastrophic caps: An analysis of the impact of the two-child limit and the benefit cap; <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2024/01/Catastrophic-Caps.pdf>

¹¹ Child Poverty Action Group (2024) The number of children in poverty not eligible for free school meals, by nation and region; https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-09/Free_school_meals_nation_region.pdf

government spent on Sure Start, there were benefits to attending children worth £1.09, solely through school outcomes.¹²

Sure Start also ensured greater support for children with SEND at young ages and reduced the need for EHC Plans (EHCP) in older children. Access to a nearby Centre at an early age was found to significantly decrease the proportion of children recorded as having SEND at ages 11-16 by 3%.¹³ By age 16, the probability of having an EHCP decreased by 9% (over 1,000 children per year). In fact, the programme's benefit in reducing the cost of SEND support for the government was found to offset around 8% of the total cost of implementing Sure Start. Given the current crisis in the SEND system, the impact of these early interventions on both cost and strain on the SEND system should be central considerations.

Another IFS evaluation also found considerable benefits in reducing youth crime from joined-up family support through Sure Start. Living within 2.5km of a Sure Start Centre reduced the share of 16-year-olds who had ever received a criminal conviction by 13%, while custodial sentences fell by a fifth.¹⁴ Furthermore, the IFS estimated that for every pound spent at its peak in 2010, Sure Start averted approximately 19 pence in public spending on youth justice and children's social care, equivalent to £500 million (today) of savings per attending cohort at the time.¹⁵ This potential impact also underpinned the Commission on Young Lives's recommendation for 'Sure Start for Teenagers' model of support, which has become the Government's Young Futures programme.

Access to Sure Start has also been shown to have a positive impact on child health. While access to a Centre was found to increase hospitalisations in a child's first couple of years, it also resulted in a significant reduction in hospitalisations among older children, more than compensating for the initial increase.¹⁶ At age 5, an additional Sure Start Centre per thousand children prevented over 13,150 hospitalisations each year for children aged 11-15, meaning the programme averted nearly twice as many hospitalisations among older children than it induced in one-year-olds. The IFS estimated that the financial benefits from reducing hospitalisations offset approximately 31% of the cost of Sure Start provision.¹⁷

¹² P, Carneiro and S, Cattani and N, Ridpath. (2024). *The short- and medium-term impacts of Sure Start on educational outcomes*. <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/short-and-medium-term-impacts-sure-start-educational-outcomes>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Carneiro et al (2024) The effect of Sure Start on Youth misbehaviour, crime and contacts with children's social care; <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-12/The-effect-of-Sure-Start-on-youth-misbehaviour-crime-and-contacts-with-children-social-care-1.pdf>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Catton et al (2022) The Health Impacts of Sure Start; https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/output_url_files/BN332-The-health-impacts-of-sure-start-1.pdf

¹⁷ Ibid.

A recent history of joined-up family support

Sure Start Local Programmes (1999-2004)

The last Labour Government announced the introduction of 'Sure Start' in their 1998 Comprehensive Spending Review.¹⁸ This included ring-fenced funding amounting to £540m (at that time) over the three years to deliver the Programme across the United Kingdom, of which £450m delivered 250 Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs) in the 20% most deprived wards in England to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty and social exclusion.¹⁹²⁰ Evaluation of the programme found SSLPs delivered economic benefits of between £279 and £557 per eligible child, alongside other positive outcomes such as maternal wellbeing and family functioning.²¹²² The 2000 Spending Review expanded on the programme to 500 SSLPs by 2003-4 to reach one third of all disadvantaged children under four, increasing investment to £500m in 2003-4.²³

Children's Centres 2004-2010

The Every Child Matters strategy and Ten-Year Strategy for Childcare marked the first shift towards Sure Start children's centres, aiming to deliver 3,500 centres by 2010 - one in every community. This represented a shift in Government approach towards delivering a more mainstream, universal offer to families across England. Responsibility for children's centres were devolved to local authorities to integrate children's services, including a legal duty on local authorities to establish and run children's centres in 2006. In 2009, children's centres were placed on a statutory footing.

¹⁸ HM Government (1998) Modern Public Services for Britain: Comprehensive Spending Review: New Public Spending Plans 1999-2002;

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7c6088e5274a7ee501a8e2/4011.pdf>

¹⁹ Children, Schools and Families Committee (2010) Sure Start Children's Centres;

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmchilsch/130/13006.htm>

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ Department for Education (2010) National Evaluation of Sure Start local programmes: An economic perspective; NESS Team led by Pam Meadows;

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7b2907ed915d429748d3d5/DFE-RR073.pdf>

²² Department for Education (2010) The impact of SSLPs on seven year olds and their families; National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) Team;

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7f4c6a40f0b6230268ea73/The_impact_of_Sure_Start_local_programmes_on_7-year-olds_and_their_families.pdf

²³ HM Government (2000) Prudent for a Purpose: Building Opportunity and Security for All: 2000 Spending Review: New Public Spending Plans 2001-2004;

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7ba913ed915d4147621cfd/csr2000.pdf>

	Coverage	Buildings	Early Education and Childcare	Other Services
Sure Start Local Programmes; 524 SSLPs in 6 rounds, 1999-2004	Selected areas in the 20% most deprived wards. On average, each SSLP would reach 800 children, but there were wide variations: catchment areas were to be restricted by 'pram-pushing distance'	Capital funding for early SSLPs ranged from £700,000 to over £1m. 84% of programmes constructed a new building or undertook such a major conversion that it amounted to a new building.	SSLPs were not required to directly provide early education and childcare, only to provide 'support for good quality play, learning and childcare experiences for children'. Provision of new formal childcare places by SSLPs was initially low; with more focus on services such as the families, parent and toddler groups and play sessions. Some SSLPs linked to local Neighbourhood nurseries instead of providing care directly.	Funding was based on plans to deliver outcomes rather than specific interventions. However, guidance stated that all SSLPs were expected to provide: outreach and home visiting; support for families and parents; primary and community health care and advice about child health and development and family health; and support for people with SEND.
Phase 1 children's centres. Approx. 800 centres including former SSLPs; 2004-06	Full coverage of the 20% most disadvantaged wards with a target number of children for each local authority to reach. The national target was 650,000 children.	Most would be developed from SSLPs, neighbourhood nurseries and Early Excellence Centres and maintained nursery schools, with some additional buildings or refurbishments.	Each local authority was given a target number of new childcare places to create through its Phase 1 centres. Integrated early education and care was to be available 5 days a week, 48 weeks a year, 10 hours a day. These new places did not have to be in the centre itself, they could be in local 'linked' settings of any sector, but a qualified teacher had to be appointed.	The full 'core offer', consisting also of: child and family health services; family support and parental outreach; parental involvement in service; links to Jobcentres Plus; and other services according to need, which may require alternative funding process.
Phase 2 children's centres. Overall number to 2,500; 2006-08	Full coverage of the 30% most disadvantaged areas and some centres outside these areas. On average, 800 children in the catchment area of each centre.	Guidance recognised that it may not be possible to deliver all services from one building, although this remained the preferred option.	There was no target for new childcare places in this round, but all centres in the 30% most disadvantaged areas were still expected to provide or provide access to integrated early learning and childcare for 0-5s, available 5 days a week, 48 weeks a year, 10 hours a day. Appointment of a 0.5 qualified teacher post remained a requirement.	The full core offer as above where centres were in the 30% most disadvantaged areas; more flexibility outside this area.
Phase 3 children's centres. Overall numbers to 3,500; 2008-10	Full coverage of the remaining 70% of areas, with centres catchment areas ranging from 600-1200 children depending on location and level of need.	Capital projects in this phase are expected to be limited to refurbishments and extensions of existing facilities/centres are expected to have a focal point identifiable as a children's centre with some form of activity for children and families on site.	There is no requirement to provide new early learning and childcare places in this phase, but there is discretion to do so where there is sufficient unmet demand. Where education and care is provided, the requirement for qualified teacher involvement applies.	Please 3 centres mostly developed from existing provision. The intensity of services varied according to levels of disadvantage and cluster arrangements allowed where appropriate to deliver full core across a number of centres. Vulnerable families should still have access to full core offer through their centre however this could be through providing advice and referrals to off-site services. The minimum range of services included: outreach; information for parents; drop-in and other activities; links to Jobcentres Plus, links to health services; and support for childminders.

Table 1: Developing Sure Start Children's Centres - Source: UK Parliament²⁴

Table 1 above sets out how requirements for service delivery developed and changed between 1999 and 2010.²⁵

At the peak of delivery in 2010, there were an estimated 3,630 children's centres across England, with funding reaching £1.7bn in 2009, equivalent to £2.5bn in 2022/23.²⁶ 54% of centres were in the 30% most deprived areas.²⁷ The table below shows the nature of different phases of rollout from SSLPs to Phase 3 children's centres.

The decline in early intervention support 2010-2021

From 2010, cuts to local authority funding saw a rapid decline in children's centres across the country. The introduction of the Early Intervention Grant in 2010 removed the ring-fenced budget for children's centres that had been in place. Between 2010-22, an estimated 1,340 centres were closed – more than one third – with 46% of local authorities closing at least half of their centres.²⁸ Ofsted Inspections of children's centres were ended and national guidance around the delivery of children's centres ceased after 2013.²⁹ The 2013 guidance outlined three 'core purposes' signaling a shift back towards a greater focus on families in disadvantaged areas.³⁰ The requirement to provide full daycare and qualified teachers to the most disadvantaged areas was removed, while centres were expected to act as signposting and information providers to other local services.

The Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (ECCE) identified three differing types of children's centre model; traditional standalone centres, clusters, and a hub and spoke model.³¹ The study found that while in 2012 the majority of centres offered five core services (stay and play, evidence-based parenting programmes, early learning and childcare, developing and supporting volunteers and breastfeeding support), there was a

²⁴ Children, Schools and Families Committee (2010) Sure Start Children's Centres; <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmchilsch/130/13006.htm>

²⁵ Children, Schools and Families Committee (2010) Sure Start Children's Centres; <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmchilsch/130/13006.htm>

²⁶ Department for Education (2019) Number of Children's Centres, 2003 to 2019: Annual Figures for the number of children's centres from 2003 to 2019 Ad-hoc notice; https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5dc18678e5274a4a9e0aeb45/Number_of_Children_s_Centres_2003_to_2019_Nov2019.pdf

²⁷ Smith, G., Sylva, K., Smith, T., Sammons, P. Omonigho, A. (2018) Stop Start: Survival, decline or closure? Children's centres in England, 2018; The Sutton Trust <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/StopStart-FINAL.pdf>

²⁸ UNISON (2024) Sure Start, Uncertain Future: Number of council-run children's centres has plummeted since 2010/11; <https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2024/06/Childrens-centres-report-final.pdf>

²⁹ Smith, G., Sylva, K., Smith, T., Sammons, P. Omonigho, A. (2018) Stop Start: Survival, decline or closure? Children's centres in England, 2018; The Sutton Trust <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/StopStart-FINAL.pdf>

³⁰ Department for Education (2013) Sure Start Children's centres statutory guidance; https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a74564ced915d0e8bf18901/childrens_centre_stat_guidance_april-2013.pdf

³¹ Department for Education (2015) Organisation, services and reach of children's centres: Evaluation of children's centres in England (ECCE, Strand 3) Research Brief, June 2015; https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/433854/RB433_-_Organisation_Services_and_Reach_of_Childrens_Centres_.pdf

marked shift towards a more ‘focused and targeted range of services for parents, and outreach to families in homes’.³² The main conclusion from ECCE was that, by 2015, the overall capacity of children’s centres was overstretched in their aims to meet the needs of those in their local communities.

Cuts to Sure Start funding came in the context of a wider reduction in funding, in particular early intervention funding across local authorities. Between 2010 and 2022, investment in early intervention support by councils in England fell by 46% from £3.8 billion to £1.9 billion, with the most disadvantaged local authority areas, where children’s and families’ needs are likely to be greatest, often making the biggest cuts to early support services.³³ Over the same time period, the total expenditure on late interventions and crisis such as youth justice, child protection and children in care has risen by 47%.³⁴ Today, local authorities are in a highly constrained and precarious financial situation that has coincided with an increase in demand of services, such as SEND support. In real terms, the core spending power of local authorities in 2025/26 is still around 9% below where it was in 2010/11.³⁵

Family Support in the 2020s

The Department for Education’s (DfE) Family Hubs programme began to return some very limited funding for joined-up family support to 75 local authorities in areas of high deprivation. The core aspect of this in terms of delivery was the Start for Life Programme. The Family Hubs and Start for Life programme is jointly led by the DfE and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC). Family Hubs have an extended offer in terms of age range to include children and young people aged 0-19 (25 for young people with SEND), with a key aim of providing more integrated services: a ‘one stop shop’ for families. In 2021, the then Government committed £301.75 million over three financial years into the Family Hub and Start for Life Programme in 75 local authorities. In November 2021, the DfE also launched a £12 million Family Hubs Transformation Fund to support 12 local authorities in England to transform their services into a family hub model and achieve integration at a systems level. Some additional grants have also been made available to accelerate the opening of a number of Family Hubs.

Under the new Labour government, a further £69 million was committed to Family Hubs in the last spending review, and in January 2025, a further £57 million invested in Start for Life bringing the total to £126 million. In December 2024, the Cabinet announced a £100 million “test and learn” fund, which would be tasked in part looking at how Family Hubs can increase the number of disadvantaged families they reach. Recent announcements of a ‘Family First’ programme which will bring £500m of early

³² Ibid.

³³ Franklin, J., Larkham, J., Mansoor, M. (2023) Children’s services spending 2010-11 to 2021-22; Pro Bono Economics; <https://www.probonoeconomics.com/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=64274c2e-73c3-4364-b995-4b31b6825dd8>

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ House of Commons Library (2025) Local Government Finance Settlement 2025/26, 4 February <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10184/>

intervention to local areas are welcome, and we support the suggestion in DfE guidance that local authorities should consider joining up these services with Family Hubs. Similarly, NHS England guidance on the rollout of neighbourhood multi-disciplinary teams (MDTs) for children and young people, aimed to provide improved access to integrated care as part of the new neighbourhood health model, listed family hub and early help workers as a part of a potential MDT model, a welcome commitment to continued integration between health and Family Hubs.³⁶

³⁶ NHS England (2025) Guidance on neighbourhood multi-disciplinary teams for children and young people; <https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/guidance-on-neighbourhood-multidisciplinary-teams-for-children-and-young-people/>

Our findings

Analysis of our FoI returns allows us to make assessments about the overall scale of investment in children's centres and Family Hubs across England, and the change in local authority budgets between 2023/24 and 2024/25. In this section, where we refer to 'hubs' in our findings and costed model, we are referring to the data received on both children's centres and Family Hubs. Our key findings are:

- In 2023/24 local authorities in England spent an estimated total of £577m on children's centres and Family Hubs, which is less than a quarter of the £2.5bn per year spent on children's centres at the peak of Sure Start.
- There is an estimated total of 2,100 children's centres and Family Hubs in England, about two thirds of the peak of Sure Start, which suggests that current provision is operating with a smaller level of funding per hub on average. We heard from local authorities that some centres operate with primarily targeted support on this stripped back funding.
- Local authorities are spending on average £275,000 per hub, around half of what was spent on an average Sure Start hub in 2006 (in 2023/24 prices).
- Between 2023/24 and 2024/25, 49% of local authorities are having to make cuts to their budget for children's centres and Family Hubs. One local authority in the North West is reducing its budget for 2024/25 by as much as 81%.

Local authority spending on children's centres and Family Hubs in 2023/24

Out of 121 FoI returns received, two local authorities reported that they did not provide any children's centres or Family Hubs, one authority in the South West and the other in the South East. The remaining 119 local authorities reported providing hubs or centres in some capacity.

In Table 2 we consolidate the data from the FoI returns in relation to numbers of hubs and their costs. Note that the comprehensiveness of data varies across the different questions in individual returns, so that calculating averages requires a different denominator in each case. The denominators are set out by type of authority in the supplementary rows under the main table.

Geography	Numbers of Hubs			Cost: total and average	
	FOI responses	Number of children centres or Family Hubs	Average hubs per authority	Total Spend 2023-24	Average per Hub spend
London Borough	27	272	10	£73,931,840	£271,808
Metropolitan District	34	396	12	£108,506,804	£274,007
Unitary	43	419	10	£122,615,493	£292,638
County	17	548	32	£144,366,234	£263,442
Overall	121	1635	14	£449,420,371	£274,875

Table 2: Numbers of hubs, total spend, and average spend per type of authority. Source: Local authorities who provided FOI returns.

As Table 2 shows, local authorities spend an average of just under £275,000 per hub or centre. This is just over half of the average spend per children's centre under Sure Start (£534,000).³⁷

County councils reported a higher number of hubs on average, while London Boroughs and Unitary Councils had a much smaller average of 10 hubs per local authority. This in part can be explained by the fact that on average County Councils reported almost double the overall average budget for 2023/24 compared to that of both London Boroughs and Unitary councils. The larger number of hubs on average reported for County Councils may also be explained by the fact that County councils often cover larger geographical areas and therefore provide a higher number of hubs.

Similarly, Table 2 shows the average spend per hub is fairly consistent across each type of local authority, ranging from £263,000 for County councils and £272,000 in London Boroughs. It is important to note that local authorities are delivering different models of hub provision, such as hub and spoke models or traditional one-unit centre models which result in a differing average spend per hub. For example, one London local authority we engaged with for this report explained their rationale for having fewer hubs with higher average spend per hub being due to the concentration of population across a smaller geographical area, and limitations on availability to provide additional buildings.

In Table 3 we have taken the average number of hubs in the different types of authority which responded to the FOI, and projected what this would mean if all authorities had replied with similar numbers of hubs.

³⁷ According to the NAO, in 2006 the average expenditure of Sure Start Local Programme children's centres was £580,000. For other centres the average was £350,000. The value of the second figure, in 2023-4 terms using HMT deflator tables, is £534,000. NAO (2006), Sure Start Children's Centres (Full Report). <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2006/12/0607104.pdf>

Baseline scenario - current cost of hubs including assumed hubs in Fol non returning authorities						
Type of authority	Total authorities of this type	Current hubs from Fol returns	All hubs estimated in place-based on above	Average current cost per hub	Total estimated current cost	Total Hubs
London borough	33	272	332	£271,808	£90,361,138	332
Metropolitan district	36	396	419	£274,007	£114,889,557	419
Unitary	59	419	575	£292,638	£168,239,862	575
County	24	548	774	£263,442	£203,811,154	774
Total					£577,301,711	2100

Table 3: Estimated total number of hubs including those authorities who did not respond.

What is the total national expenditure on children's centres and Family Hubs?

To enable us to provide an overall number of current spending on children's centres and Family Hubs, we took the current position as evidenced from the Fol returns, and then projected to cover all authorities which did not respond to the Fol request. This shows us that all local authorities in England are estimated to be spending a combined total of £577,301,711 to provide 2,100 children's centres and Family Hubs. These projections are summarised below in Table 4.

Adjusting for authorities who did not provide an Fol return			
Type of authority	Total authorities of this type	Average hubs per authority known from Fol	If all authorities had this average provision
London borough	33	10	332
Metropolitan district	36	12	419
Unitary	59	10	575
County	24	32	774
All	152	14	2054

Table 4: Estimated total spend on hubs and centres. Source: Analysis of Fol returns.

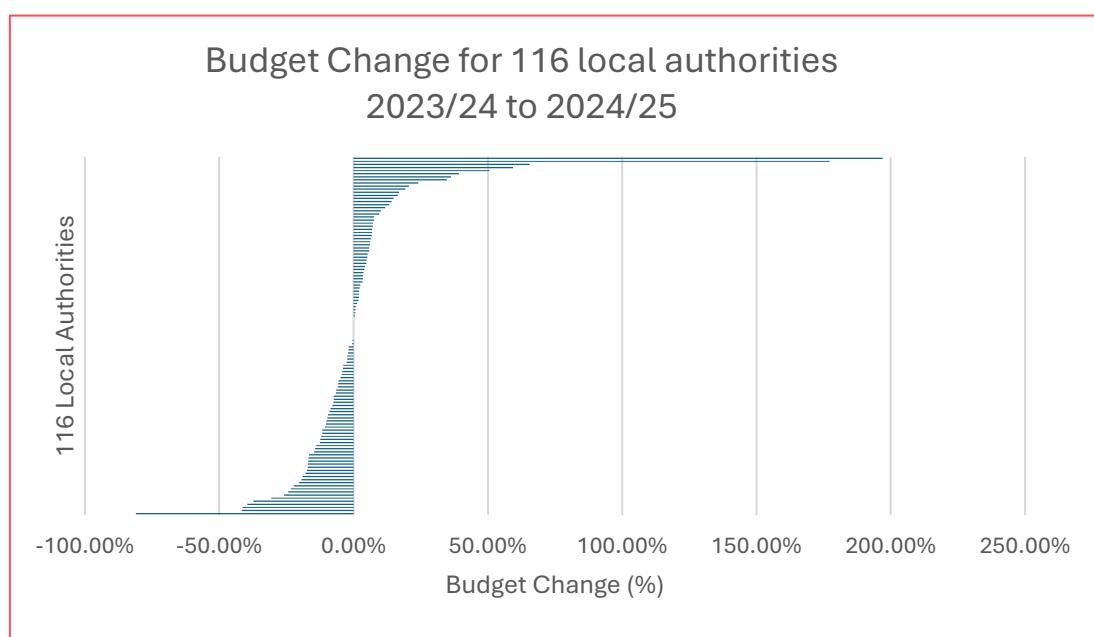
Budget changes between 2023/2024 and 2024/2025

Despite our findings that most local authorities are running children's centres or Family Hubs in some capacity in 2023/24, our research shows that this funding is not secure. We asked local authorities about their budget for children's centres and Family Hubs in 2024/25. It must be noted that there is a significant difference between local authority's reported budget and their actual spend which explains why the figures for this section of analysis are different to those using the actual spend of local authorities on children's centres and Family Hubs in 2023/24. The difference is shown in Table 5. The findings in this section draw on data from the 116 local authorities which provided information on their budget for 2023/24 and 2024/25. The below table shows the difference in overall budget and spend for 2023/24.

All local authorities which provided response on budget and spend (116)	Total Budget 2023/24	Total Spend 2023/24
	£444,162,271	£449,420,371

Table 5: Total budget and spend for 2023/24 for local authorities who provided information. Source: Fol returns.

The total budget for all children's centres and Family Hubs for the 116 local authorities that provided us with data decreased from £444,162,271 in 2023/24 to £437,012,229 in 2024/25. This reflects an overall budget change of a 1.6% reduction. There was however a significant range in budget changes across local authorities. One local authority in the West Midlands reported a budget increase of 197%, from £373,806 in 2023/24 to £1,110,000 in 2024/25 which reflected the establishment of four additional hubs across the local authority area.³⁸ Another local authority in the North West reported a reduction of 81% to their children's centres and Family Hubs budget, from £928,000 in 2023/24 to only £177,000 in 2024/25. This local authority merged existing children's centres into one family hub model.



Graph 1: Children's centres and Family Hubs budget change 2023/24 – 2024/25 for 116 local authorities.

Concerningly, 49% (57) of local authorities reported that their budget for Family Hubs and children's centres fell between 2023/24 and 2024/25. We added up the total budgets 23/24 and 24/25 for the 57 reporting budget cuts to estimate an average reduction of 11.5%.

Seven local authorities reported no change to their family support budget between 2023/24 and 2024/25, which reflects, in real terms, a budget cut due to inflation. To understand the nature of the reported budget changes to family support by local

³⁸ Note this was not one of the 75 local authorities which received additional Family Hubs funding.

authorities, we then looked at a regional basis and at the type of local authority (London Borough, Metropolitan District, Unitary and County).

Region	Number of local authorities that provided budget data, by region	Number of local authorities reporting cuts to children's centres and Family Hubs 23/24 – 24/25	Average budget change across local authorities in region 23/24 – 24/25 (%)
North East	9	6	-5.0%
Yorkshire and Humber	13	6	-10.1%
North West	20	10	-0.5%
East Midlands	7	5	-5.1%
East of England	9	3	+3.2%
West Midlands	10	6	-0.4%
South East	14	5	+7.9%
South West	8	3	+5.2%
London Borough	26	13	-4.0%

Table 6: Average budget change across 116 local authorities, by region. Source – Fol returns

As Table 6 shows, local authorities in the Yorkshire and Humber region experienced an average budget change of a 10% reduction. Local authorities in South East on average experienced a budget increase of 7.9% between 2023/24 and 2024/25. The highest cut was reported by a local authority in the North West (81%), and the smallest budget cut was reported by a local authority in the East Midlands (0.3%).

As shown below in Table 7, of the 42 Unitary authorities that provided a response, almost half reported a budget cut between 2023/24 and 2024/25. The average budget change among unitary councils was a 10% reduction. County councils on the other hand had an average budget change of a 6.5% increase.

Local authority type	Number of local authorities that provided budget data, by authority type	Number of local authorities reporting family support budget cuts 23/24 – 24/25	Average budget change 23/24 – 24/25 (%)
London Borough	26	13	-4.0%
Unitary	42	20	-10.0%
County	16	6	+6.5%
Metropolitan District	32	18	+1.3%

Table 7: Average budget change across 116 local authorities, by local authority type. Source – Fol returns

How are budgets being spent at a local level?

We spoke to nine local authorities and two non-local authority children and family support providers to understand more about the commissioning and delivery of children's centres and Family Hubs.

Some local authorities are in the early stages of moving towards a family hub framework, while others are still operating children's centres. Almost every local authority we spoke to described offering three core services: health visiting, parenting support and/or a family worker, and stay and play sessions. This was supported by an additional range of targeted support. Almost all local authorities delivered parenting support either through a comprehensive offer or other universal and targeted programmes, including parent-infant relationship and infant feeding support.

Over the last decade, the nature of the core offer has shifted towards parents and parental support, greater integration with local and other statutory services and signposting to community and third sector organisations and extending the offer to older children (0-19). This shift was largely reflected in conversations with local authorities, even those not receiving Family Hub funding. Compared to Phase 1 and 2 children centres under Sure Start, there was a reduced childcare offer.

Several local authorities had also developed services to respond to specific local need. For example, one local authority in the North East had strengthened its offer of support in relation to training and employment, housing, and safeguarding around issues such as child exploitation, all identified as key issues for families in the local area.

All local authorities we spoke to had health integrated to some extent into their children's centres and family hub offer, however the extent to which this was done varied across each. Several local authorities, in particular the five local authorities who were receiving DfE Family Hub funding and developing a Start for Life offer were focusing on integrating their service delivery with health services such as health visiting, midwifery and infant feeding support and perinatal mental health support.

Some local authorities, including a County council in the East of England, had gone further to integrate by pooling their budget for children and family support with their Public Health Grant and additional funding from their local Integrated Care Board to deliver a more holistic, joined-up approach through a co-commissioned contract. Funding from the PHG and ICB made up around 77% of the commissioning contract. This allowed for better joined-up delivery such as data sharing (for example, pregnancy notifications were shared with the Family Hubs) and a greater focus on early intervention and prevention.

The local authorities we engaged in this phase of research reported several different operating and delivery models for their children's centres and family models. These included 'hub and spoke' models, traditional one-unit models and cluster models, often dependent on the geographical characteristics of the local area. For local authorities

covering smaller geographical areas, several delivered a model whereby services were area-wide, with staff delivering services across all centres in the local authority area.

One metropolitan district council had a cluster model including several flagship hubs and a very high number of linked sites across the local authority area. Clusters were centred around schools, with a pooled budget for each cluster held by one school and used to commission early help services for the cluster area. The same local authority operated its flagship hubs across different areas of the metropolitan district, with service coordinators such as substance abuse, mental health and domestic abuse services operating across the area, delivering services through the hubs and sites within that area. These services were largely commissioned through the voluntary and third sector to provide support, advice and oversight to the hubs and linked sites in each area.

One local authority in the East Midlands covering a larger geographical area with more rurality delivers around 50 children's centres including 10 designated Family Hubs. They had made the decision to retain such a high number of centres to meet need across such a large geographical area. Similarly, a county council in the East of England made up of a combination of large towns and cities across a large area operated a 'hub and spoke' model. This constituted 12 flagship sites across each district that was linked with a greater number of outreach sites ('spokes') such as community centres, village halls and schools. Each flagship site retained a multi-disciplinary team that integrated health commissioned services such as health visitors and school nurses, with family support and community engagement workers.

Despite these differing models however, each local authority highlighted the need for and benefits of leveraging community assets such as existing community venues or voluntary and third sector organisations in providing joined-up, place-based family support and reaching children and families across their local authority area.

Some local authorities operated 'core' or 'backbone' teams in their area, responsible for coordination and delivery of children's centre and family hub services, rather than separate staff per hub or centre. We spoke with one provider operating in the West Midlands that was co-funded by the local authority to deliver joined-up, integrated family support to 2,500 children under five in the most deprived local area. The 'backbone team' consisted of five staff who coordinated services who worked with existing community services and organisations to deliver across five target outcomes such as parental wellbeing, parent-infant relationships and early language and communication. The provider reported an average annual cost of around £750,000 for a fully functioning 'backbone team' and for the delivery of their workstreams to provide support for 2,500 children under five and their families.

Almost all local authorities we spoke to reported that their centres and hubs are in areas of high deprivation across their locality to reach those with the highest level of need. For example, one local authority in London reported a footfall across all centres of 7,500 children, 61% of whom lived in the 40% most deprived areas of the borough. This data however does not amount to the full provision of children and family support as it

doesn't account for services delivered outside of the physical centres or hubs, and therefore they expected reach to be significantly higher.

Another local authority in the East Midlands collects data based on Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). They deliver 48 children's centres (10 of which are designated Family Hubs) that reached around 64% of those living in the top 10-30% areas of relative deprivation. Local authorities we spoke to expressed that were difficulties in collecting this data, while several informed us that they were currently developing new ways of doing so.

Building on the foundations to create a new national infrastructure of support for children and families

In the wake of the removal of the ring-fence to the Sure Start budget and significant cuts to local authority budgets over the last decade and a half, the provision of joined-up children and family support today is threadbare and, in some areas, precarious. Family Hubs funding from Government has provided a welcome addition of investment to some local areas and enabled many local authorities to begin to develop their provision. Yet our findings show that almost half of local authorities expect to cut their budgets for children's centres and Family Hubs between 2023/24 and 2024/25, putting the Government's good level of development on starting school target at risk and with it the Opportunity Mission.

The Spending Review provides the opportunity for a fresh start for a comprehensive early intervention and joined-up local children and family support. The time for small-scale pilots, and piecemeal investments is over. Recent long-term studies which demonstrate the clear benefits of integrated family support are based on well-funded provision. The scale of need among families is such that over time sizeable ongoing strategic planning and investment is necessary.

Securing and shoring up what is there

Securing the stock of existing provision will be vital in any expansion programme. Our research adds to the wealth of evidence on the precarious position of local authority finances. As a first and essential step, we recommend the DfE, and the DHSC, jointly fund a ring-fenced grant to local authorities to secure the future of existing joined-up children and family support, including the estimated gap of £7.1m between 2023/24 and 2024/25 budgets, and the continued provision of £126m in the Family Hubs programme. Funding should be prioritised for areas with the highest rates of poverty.

However, we heard from more local authorities than those which are predicting budget reductions that the funding for their children's centres and Family Hubs is at risk in the context of tight financial constraints local authorities are facing.

So, we recommend securing existing funding for local authorities by funding a higher proportion of their spend. Funding the continued delivery of 50% of existing provision would cost just under £1bn (£925,633,803.44) over three years. Funding the continued delivery of 25% of existing provision would cost just under £463m (£462,816,902) over three years.

A breakdown of these costs is provided in Table 8 and 9 below.

Cost to continue funding at current levels, assuming 50% local authority spend reduction in 24-5, at uprated prices					
Type of authority	2023-4 Spend	2024-5 prices	2025-6 prices	2026-7 prices	2027-8 prices
London borough	£90,361,138	£46,253,456	£47,357,049	£48,290,400	£49,235,759
Metropolitan district	£114,889,557	£58,808,900	£60,212,062	£61,398,769	£62,600,745
Unitary	£168,239,862	£86,117,499	£88,172,234	£89,910,003	£91,670,130
County	£203,811,154	£104,325,494	£106,814,667	£108,919,856	£111,052,130
Total	£577,301,711	£295,505,349	£302,556,012	£308,519,028	£314,558,763

Table 8: Cost to continue funding children's centres and Family Hubs at current levels, assumption 1. Source: Fol Returns analysis.

Cost to continue funding at current levels, assuming 25% local authority spend reduction in 24-5, at uprated prices					
Type of authority	2023-4 Spend	2024-5 prices	2025-6 prices	2026-7 prices	2027-8 prices
London borough	£90,361,138	£23,126,728	£23,678,525	£24,145,200	£24,617,879
Metropolitan district	£114,889,557	£29,404,450	£30,106,031	£30,699,385	£31,300,372
Unitary	£168,239,862	£43,058,749	£44,086,117	£44,955,002	£45,835,065
County	£203,811,154	£52,162,747	£53,407,333	£54,459,928	£55,526,065
Total	£577,301,711	£147,752,675	£151,278,006	£154,259,514	£157,279,382

Table 9: Cost to continue funding children's centres and Family Hubs at current levels, assumption 2.

Source: Fol Returns analysis.

Supporting more children

Many of the existing centres and hubs will be in areas of historically high need, but our research suggests that many areas with high rates of poverty and high rates of children who are not reaching a good level of development in the early years do not have the infrastructure support they need.

To reach this number, we spoke to a number of local authorities which held high quality comparable data on the cost of their centres and the number of children and families their centres are reaching. We found examples of local authorities that had prioritised the provision of integrated support with one local authority maintaining their funding for children's centres and Family Hubs at a high level since 2010, enabling them to reach 74% of under 5s in the area, and 84% of under 5s living in the most 20% deprived areas. We used this example as a model of a place-based approach which demonstrated what could be achieved with ongoing commitment and funding for local communities.

This data has informed our modelling to scale up provision across the country.

As Table 10 shows, this local authority spent £7.1m on children's centres and Family Hubs, enabling them to reach 6,424 children. By scaling up on these figures, we estimate that investing an additional £2.2bn would enable the government to reach a further 2 million children. Scaling up provision to reach 1m children (roughly the number of children living in deprivation in England), would cost £1.2bn. To reach 200,000 children (roughly the number of children who are not reaching a good level of development in the early years), would cost an additional £220 million a year.

Total Spend 2023/24	Children Reached	Cost per Child	To reach 200,000 children	To reach 500,000 children	To reach 750,000 children	To reach 1m children	To reach 2m children
£7,120,563	6,424	£1,108	£221,686,270	£554,213,676	£831,323,513	£1,108,431,351	£2,216,862,702

Table 10: Indicative model of upscaling local authority spending to reach more children. Source: LA

A pathway to scaling up family support over the next decade

Scaling up in a planned and strategic way would ensure a staged and iterative approach which would make the intention and direction of travel of government clear, over time building family support to reach 2m children over nine years.

Phase 1: 2026–2029

In the first year we recommend securing 25% of existing local authority budgets on children's centres and Family Hubs as additional finances in the spending review, including existing Family Hubs funding, to consolidate existing budgets and enable local authorities to prepare for expansion in the coming years. This will include building long term funding partnerships with key partners including health, employment bodies, the police and education.

In year 2, we recommend scaling up to reach 200,000 children (roughly the number of children who are not reaching a good level of development in the early years), rising to 500,000 children a year in the final year of the Spending Review period. If the model of our leading local authority is applied this would come to a total of £1.25bn over the Spending Review period. We believe that funding across all the first three years should be targeted in the areas with the highest rates of child poverty.

Phase 2: 2029–2032

In the following Spending Review, we recommend building a second phase of expansion to reach 1m children, with a £1.29bn investment in children's centres and Family Hubs.

Phase 3: 2032–2035

Finally, as shown in Table 11, we recommend scaling up further over five years to reach 2m children with £2.26bn investment in year 9. At present, HMT Deflators stop at 2029/30, as a result we have uprated year 9 to 2029/30.

Costs of provision per year in real terms (ex Y4, Y9) (Y1 = 2025-6)					
Y1: 25% top up of existing LA spend	Y2: Y1 and reach 200k more children	Y3: Y1 and reach in total 500,000 more children	Total spend over the SR period	Y4 as Y1 and reach total of 1m more children	Y9: reach 2m children
£151,278,006	£372,964,276	£705,493,682	£1,229,735,964	£1,263,318,802	£2,216,862,702
£154,887,450	£380,314,955	£719,304,807	£1,254,507,213	£1,288,215,896	£2,260,588,109
Up-rated prices					

Table 11: Costs of provision per year in real terms, scaling up investment over five years.

Investment in children's and Family Hubs for children and young people 0-19 (25) and their families in this way will have a hugely positive impact on improving outcomes for children and young people. Not only will the core support provided support the government to reach its early years development goals target, but it will also have an impact on meeting a range of targets from reducing unmet SEND need, supporting skills development, reducing the impact of poverty, supporting mental and physical health, promoting educational attainment, supporting crime prevention, reducing the number of children entering care and promoting wider economic growth.

By equipping local authorities to develop an expanded infrastructure of joined-up family support, the Government will be able to return recognisable one-stop-shop resources to communities, creating the opportunity to consolidate different elements of family support, from universal to targeted, and ensuring investment in children and families can be greater than the sum of its parts.

Further Recommendations

These early recommendations will be expanded in the second phase of this research which will be looking at differing models of delivery across local authorities.

- **The Department for Education should issue new guidance on the core provision of children's centres and Family Hubs.** Local authorities are best placed to identify local need and therefore should have flexibility to deliver services to meet local need. A "hub and spoke" model may be more effective in rural areas, for example. However, we recommend every local authority should deliver to a core set of services through their hubs and centres and should capture consistent data on the reach of these centres and hubs.
- **Family Hubs and children's centres should be used as a springboard for a wide range of government policy.** The Cabinet Office, Department for Education, Department of Health and Social Care, Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport should issue joint guidance encouraging the delivery of a range of new services from high needs to universal through children's centres and Family Hubs. This could include the additional £1bn for SEND services, £500m for Family First services, as well as support for youth justice, parenting programmes, employment support, and school attendance. Co-locating joint services in this way can help to ensure

government policy for children and families is bigger than sum of parts and can make the most of community assets through one recognisable local centre.

- **Additional investment in the Family Hubs budget should continue to be jointly funded by DHSC and DfE, as well as other departments when appropriate.** We frequently heard from local authorities about the value of integrated budgets which helped to secure integration between services at a local level.
- **Local authorities and health services should work together towards stronger integration;** such as implementing data-sharing agreements already in place in a number of local authorities, co-locating services, and pooling budgets.

Methodology

Our Fols

On 20 December 2024, the Centre for Young Lives sent a Freedom of Information (Fol) request to all Upper Tier local authorities (London Boroughs, Metropolitan Districts, Unitaries, and Counties) in England asking about their budget and spend on children's centres and Family Hubs in 2023/24 and 2024/25, as well as the number of children and families they support and the types of services provided. A copy of our Fol questions can be found in annex A.

Returns

We received returns from 80% (121) of local authorities. This is an excellent rate of return and to our knowledge our data give the most complete, up-to-date national picture of children's centres and Family Hubs funding at the time of writing. A considerable amount of financial and other information was provided, although not all returns provided all the requested information, and neither did all the information provided come in the same format or with the same level of completeness. In the analysis below, therefore, information about any one specific issue has been marked with the number of authorities where their return provided a clear response in relation to that issue. In table one we set out the numbers and percentages of responses we received which had usable information, broken down by the main types of Upper Tier authorities (and using ONS totals of all upper tier authorities, but excluding City of London).

Response Rates	All	Replied	%
London borough	33	27	82%
Metropolitan district	36	34	94%
Unitary	59	43	73%
County	24	17	71%
All	152	121	80%

Table 12: Response rates by type of local authority.

Of the 121 upper tier local authorities that responded to our Fol, we received data on their spend for children's centres and Family Hubs in 2023/24 from all 121 local authorities, as shown in Table 12. We also asked about budget for the previous (2023/24) and coming financial years (2024/25) and received complete responses to this question from 116 local authorities. From this data we were able to conduct analysis on budget changes, including those local authorities who are cutting their budgets for family support between 2023/24 and 2024/25.

Some local authorities provided data on the use made of centres, such as numbers of children and families who are being supported in each centre, but unfortunately it has been difficult to draw this together as different authorities provided different types of figures of usage. These included numbers of children using centres, numbers of families, and numbers of individuals which were not directly comparable.

Engagement with local authorities

In March 2025, we spoke to nine local authorities, and two non-local authority children and family support providers across four of the five regions in England, with a spread of at least one of the four different types of upper tier local authority. We asked them about the nature of their provision of children's centres and Family Hubs and sought further data on the running costs of the core provision of their children's centres and Family Hubs, as well as the reach of their hubs. An anonymised summary of these conversations is provided later in this paper.

In these conversations it was further clear that not all local authorities gather data in the same way and there is a need for consistency in reporting on the reach of children's centres and hubs in particular. This is in part due to the flexible and holistic nature of the model which involves a combination of universal and targeted support pathways and makes it difficult to capture information on unique interactions.

ANNEX A: Freedom of Information Request questions

December 2024

The following questions were sent to all upper tier local authorities in England.

1. How many children's centres and Family Hubs, operated or funded by your council or delivered in your local authority area, were open in 2023/2024. Please provide a break down by a) children's centres b) Family Hubs c) centres by another name. If you have this information, please also provide the postcode for each of these centres or hubs.
2. Please complete the table below providing your total budget and spend on children's centres and/or Family Hubs in 2023/2024 and budget for 2024/25. If you have this information, please provide a break down by each centre or hub. Please also list the funding sources for your children's centres and/or Family Hubs. Where there are partner contributions or co-commissioned services, please specify.

	Budget 2023/24	Spend 2023/24	Budget 2024/25
Total children's centres and Family Hubs			
Total children's centres			
Total Family Hubs			
Family hub 1 [insert postcode]			
Children's centre 1 [insert postcode]			
Children's centre 2 [insert postcode]			
Children's centre 3 [insert postcode]			
<i>Please add additional rows where necessary</i>			
Total local authority funding			
Total department for Education funding			
Total statutory partner / agency funding (please specify)			

Total trusts and Foundations funding			
Other funding (please specify)			

3. How many children's centres or Family Hubs do you expect to be available in your local authority 2024/5.
4. If you have this information, please let us know how many children and families used these centres in the last financial year (2023/24). Please provide a breakdown by each centre, if you have this information. Please also provide a breakdown by the age of the children supported by these centres or hubs using the following categories, if you have this information: 0-4, 5-11, 11+.
5. If you have this information, in the text box below, please list which of the following services are offered by children's centres or Family Hubs in your local authority area in 2023/24. If the service is provided within the centre, but delivered by an external provider, please specify. Examples of services might include: health visiting sessions; childcare; parenting or family support; support for mental health, addiction, or domestic abuse; pre-natal support; SEND support, support around engagement with school, including attendance; culturally specific support for racially minoritised children and families; activities for different age groups, including 0-4s; 5-11s; over 11s.
6. Please attach your council's overarching plan or strategy for children's centres and/or Family Hubs in your area.
7. Please also attach your Section 251 returns on Sure Start children's centres and other spend on children under 5-years-old.

