

Examining the impact of Covid-19 on children's centres in Bristol

Lessons for policy, practice & promoting life chances in the early years

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- develop research capacity by involving postgraduate students and early career researchers
- receive applications from and involving practitioners and policymakers as well as academic researchers.

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Summary

The goal of this project was to investigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's centres in Bristol and how they responded to it. We wanted to understand how the pandemic had affected their ability to function as organisations, and the work they do to support parents, children and families. Originally known as Sure Start children's centres, they work with families to reduce inequalities in child developmental outcomes, promote school readiness, and foster parental aspirations, skills and family health.

Starting in September 2020, we conducted an in-depth study across the city, involving 60 interviews with children's centre leaders and staff, key service providers and local experts with knowledge of the city's early years sector. Study participants were ideally placed to shed light on how their work has changed and on which services the centres have and have not been able to provide. The project offers a distinctive perspective on how the pandemic has negatively impacted families, children and local communities.

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 crisis has had a highly damaging effect on many children, families and parents. These effects are likely to be far-reaching, long-lasting, and entrench existing educational and social inequalities (Blundell et al., 2020; Montacute, 2020; Reay, 2020). The impact on children has been particularly severe. This is reflected not only in the levels of disruption to their education but also in increased levels of stress, anxiety and social isolation (YoungMinds, 2021). Repairing this damage will require significantly more than the £1.5 billion recently promised by the government to help children catch-up on ‘lost learning’.

Throughout much of the pandemic, there has rightly been a focus on school closures, the cancellation of exams, the challenges of home schooling and lost learning. However, at the beginning of the crisis, public and political debate around children, learning and education gave comparatively less attention to the early years and key anchor institutions such as children’s centres. This is despite an extensive body of evidence showing how critical the early years are for supporting child development, promoting educational opportunities and reducing attainment gaps (Stewart & Waldfogel, 2017). A positive development in recent months is that there have been calls to prioritise the early years in strategies for recovering from the pandemic (see for example Sutton Trust, 2021).

Sure Start children’s centres have been an important part of early intervention policy and services for the past two decades. Although there is substantial variation in how they are organised and run, they typically provide a critical range of services designed to support families and young children. Given their importance to many families and communities, and particularly those living in areas of high poverty and deprivation, we proposed that there was an urgent need to study the impact of Covid-19 on children’s centres, how they responded to the pandemic, and the challenges they faced.

2. Literature review

Sure Start children's centres were introduced two decades ago to support children and families living in some of England's most disadvantaged communities. However, in recent years significant numbers have closed or reduced the services they offer (Smith et al., 2018). This reflects reduced funding associated with years of 'austerity' and uncertainty about the role of children's centres in early years provision (Social Mobility Commission, 2019, p. 31). This is concerning because the evidence suggests that children's centres work: they improve parent-child interactions, health outcomes and the quality of the home learning environment – an important influence on educational and social outcomes (Cattan et al., 2019; Hall et al., 2016, 2019; Eisenstadt & Oppenheim, 2019; Sammons et al., 2015). Although our project has focused on the impact of Covid-19, it cannot be separated from the backdrop of austerity, funding cuts to local governments, closures of children's centres and the hollowing out of services.

Although some quantitative studies have evaluated changes in the number of children's centres, their overall effectiveness and their specific impact on health outcomes, what is largely missing, or at least significantly underrepresented, is in-depth and theoretically informed qualitative analysis of how children's centres work and the precise ways in which they support families. Some qualitative data on children's centres have explored the important but narrow perspective of key local authority personnel (Smith et al., 2018). Unsurprisingly, given the rapid development of events over the last 12 months, ours is the first study of how the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted on the work, experiences and perspectives of children's centre staff.

3. Research design

The broad aim of our project was to investigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the work of children's centres in the city of Bristol, and on their ability to support a wide range of disadvantaged and marginalised communities who are vulnerable to the economic and social impacts of Covid-19. The project was guided by the following research questions.

1. According to children's centre leaders and staff, and key services providers, how has Covid-19 impacted on children's centres as organisations, the services they offer, and the families that use them?
2. Following the initial 'lockdown' period, what are the key challenges facing centres in supporting and offering services to families and children, particularly those associated with promoting school readiness and tackling educational inequality?
3. How are strategies, responses and decisions developed and made in response to these challenges?

In order to capture a broad range of perspectives and insights, children's centre leaders and staff and a small number of local experts, policymakers, and representatives of key services were recruited from across all areas of Bristol. There are 22 children's centres in the city, organised around four 'hubs' which help to co-ordinate their activities.

There are three reasons why Bristol was the focus of the project. First, the city has retained a significant number of its children's centres and services; in other parts of the country, centres have been closed entirely or drastically scaled back. Second, Bristol is a large, diverse city with an urban core and large suburban periphery, with the highest levels of child poverty of any city in south-west England. The city provides sufficient scope to explore similarities and differences across children's centres that serve a wide range of socioeconomic and ethnic communities. Finally, Bristol has a sufficiently limited population of centres to study in a small-scale project.

As a key goal of the project was to understand people's experiences, actions, perspectives and the meaning that they attach to them, the project team decided that

semi-structured interviews were appropriate: they are sufficiently flexible to allow distinctive experiences to be explored but similar enough for comparisons across children's centres, hubs and roles to be made (Kvale, 2007). Prior to data collection, an interview schedule was developed and piloted which covered a range of relevant themes and topics, including past work experiences, the impact of Covid-19 on services, work, colleagues and parents, and organisational decision-making. Interviews typically lasted between 50 and 60 minutes, and all of them took place online using video conferencing software (Microsoft Teams or Zoom). Specific interview schedules were designed for people in different roles (for example, children's centre leaders who had a broader perspective on management and organisational issues, and family support workers who worked more closely with parents). Similar to the strategy adopted by Small (2009, p. 227) in his study of children's centres in New York, a process of 'sequential interviewing' was adopted – although the core focus of the interviews remained the same, new questions and topics were included to explore new issues and themes as they emerged (Small, 2009, p. 227).

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Bristol and the project team adhered to BERA ethical guidelines (BERA, 2018). Participants were provided with information sheets and consent forms, and had the opportunity to ask questions about the project. It was made clear to them that their responses would be confidential and that data would be anonymised so that no individual would be identifiable. They were informed that the city itself would, however, be identifiable in research outputs.

Data analysis began during the data collection phase through writing interview summaries and memos and identifying initial themes in the data. The interview summaries recorded key socio-demographic information on participants and noted initial themes and patterns emerging in the data. Once all the transcripts have been summarised, and read multiple times, they were entered into the qualitative data analysis software NVivo for more formal data analysis. This stage of data analysis is still ongoing and will focus on systematically coding the data and identifying key themes.

4. Findings & results

There are four indicative findings from the project that it is important to highlight, relating to staff, parents, food insecurity and the future role for children's centres.

4.1 CHILDREN'S CENTRE STAFF

Children's centre staff are resilient and committed professionals who have worked incredibly hard over the past year and more to maintain core services that support vulnerable and disadvantaged families. They have acted as an important but often underappreciated frontline service during the pandemic. In particular, they have focused on providing support to new parents and those experiencing domestic violence, food insecurity and mental health problems. Centre staff, the majority of whom are women, have also faced significant disruption to their work. Many highlighted increased workloads, anxiety and social isolation associated with periods of lockdown, working from home, childcare responsibilities and attempting to move services online.

4.2 PARENTS

Parents are facing a range of serious challenges that threaten the wellbeing of their families and the positive development of their children. The most common, and often interconnected, issues relate to social isolation, poor quality housing, domestic violence, poverty and destitution associated with unemployment and changes to Universal Credit, food insecurity and mental health. These challenges existed prior to the pandemic but have significantly worsened over the last year. Staff are deeply concerned about the long-term impact of this on children's social, emotional and cognitive development.

4.3 FOOD INSECURITY

Children's centres in Bristol have played a key role in tackling hunger and food insecurity since the Covid-19 crisis began – centres have helped to organise and run food clubs in collaboration with Family Action. Food clubs invite those at risk of food insecurity to become members for £1 and then pay £3.50 per week to receive approximately £15 of produce from FareShare (the UK's largest charity tackling food

waste and hunger). This has been a critical focus for children's centres during the pandemic. It has been important for tackling food insecurity, but it has also enabled staff to maintain relationships with families and engage them in other services. The rise of food clubs in children's centres and food banks in schools highlights how food insecurity may be becoming normalised and institutionalised within the education system – something that could be called the 'food banking model of education'.

4.4 THE FUTURE FOR CHILDREN'S CENTRES

The Covid-19 pandemic will continue to have far-reaching social and economic consequences that shape children's lives, including their physical, social and emotional development as well as their readiness for school. Throughout the pandemic, centres in Bristol have demonstrated their importance in supporting parents, children and communities. Children's centres can play a key role in the recovery from the pandemic provided that they receive secure and adequate funding and that staff receive high quality training and support. A range of participants in the study expressed frustration that children's centres, and the early years sector more generally, had been given insufficient attention and support by policymakers over the past year. There is an urgent need for a review, at both local and national levels, of the role these centres can play in supporting children's health, wellbeing and life chances.

5. Discussion, recommendations & conclusions

It is clear that the pandemic has had a range of negative impacts on both parents and children that will likely exacerbate existing social and educational inequalities (Blundell et al., 2020). This may have a significant effect on children's long-term physical, social, emotional and cognitive development (EPI, 2020). Our study has highlighted the fact that many vulnerable and disadvantaged families are facing a variety of interconnected challenges related to social isolation, reduced physical activity, poor quality housing and food insecurity. Our project has also highlighted how critical children's centres have been to Bristol's response to Covid-19. They have operated as a key frontline service that has targeted efforts and resources on supporting new parents, and those experiencing domestic violence, food insecurity and mental health problems.

This project, together with other emerging evidence, suggests that further targeted funding for the early years is needed to ameliorate some of the damage done to young children and families. The introduction of education recovery funds and strategies designed to make up lost learning is welcome, although current plans are unlikely to be sufficient. What is required is a co-ordinated, ambitious, holistic and national education recovery plan that recognises how critical the early years are, and focuses as much on social and emotional wellbeing as on children's cognitive development and school readiness. This will require levels of funding (£15 billion) similar to that suggested by Sir Kevan Collins before his recent resignation.

In Bristol and elsewhere, children's centres have been integral to supporting families despite significant challenges to their work over the last year. They have been able to do this because:

- they are effective organisational brokers that can support people in accessing a wide range of services
- they have focused their resources on helping those most in need

- they are connected to communities
- staff are highly committed to supporting children and their families.

There is a great deal of uncertainty about the future of children's centres, both as a result of the pandemic and due to recent discussions surrounding the introduction of family hubs (see for example DfE, 2021). Rather than the planned review of children's centres announced in 2019, our findings point to the need for a more comprehensive and high-profile official consultation on the future of children's centres, and for renewed attention to be given to the importance of early years in what is likely to be the 'Covid decade' (British Academy, 2020).

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