

Legislating for Sure Start Children's Centres (SSCCs)

Consultation Response Form

1 Do you support putting SSCCs on firm legislative basis?

Yes. Daycare Trust wholeheartedly agrees with establishing SSCCs within the legislative framework for children's services. We believe that the progress SSCCs have already made in providing integrated support for children and families is both admirable and essential. Given many centres are still only fledgling services (and a number are still yet to be established) we believe placing SSCCs within legislation will allow existing centres to grow unhindered and demonstrate their value over the coming years, as well as help to prioritise these services for policymakers in the future.

2 Do you agree that local authorities should have this duty?

Yes. Daycare Trust believes that, given the highly localised nature of services provided by SSCCs, it is crucial that local authorities should hold the duty to assess need and provide appropriate numbers of SSCCs in their area. The local authority is the best placed agency to establish – in conjunction with key partners – where SSCCs can best be placed to meet local needs and fit them into wider local strategic planning such as the Children and Young People's Plan and the duty to secure sufficient childcare.

3 Do you agree that these are the defining characteristics of a SSCC?

Not sure. Daycare Trust believes that defining SSCCs is a particularly difficult exercise – especially given the freedom that local authorities have had, thus far, to establish a range of diverse models to suit local need. The definition outlined in this consultation is somewhat loose, but we agree that this is necessary in order to capture all relevant provision within it.

4 a) Do you agree that these duties would reinforce partnership working between key local services?

Yes. Daycare Trust believes that the proposed new duties would help to reinforce partnership working between key local services. It is also hoped that they will help to increase the 'buy in' to SSCCs for partner agencies such as PCTs and Job Centre Plus by allowing them to become involved in strategic planning of integrated local services at all stages.

4 b) Are these the right partners to include?

Yes. Daycare Trust considers the partners indicated in the consultation document as appropriate to be included within the duty.

5 a) Do you agree these elements of current good practice should be included as requirements in the legislation?

Yes. Daycare Trust believes that it is essential that local stakeholders – as outlined in paragraph 23 – are consulted about all proposals regarding establishment of, closure of, and service provision within SSCCs. Without such transparency it may be difficult to develop the requisite trust of the local community which is vital to the success of so many of the objectives of SSCCs. To that end Daycare Trust feels parents views should be taken into account early in all strategic processes relating to SSCCs, and advisory boards with parental representation are an important component of this.

Daycare Trust also believes it helpful for local authorities to consult with local private and voluntary (PVI) providers (and prospective providers) of early childhood services before commissioning new SSCC services. This would allow strategic decisions for SSCC services to take account of the plans and priorities of PVI services operating locally to ensure existing provision is not duplicated or unduly affected, and possibly encourage greater partnership working between sectors. Where still in operation it might be useful for a member of the local EYDCP to be involved in the planning of SSCCs. This is likely to be most important when considering whether to provide childcare within SSCCs, but may also in some cases encompass non-governmental provision of other early childhood services.

Daycare Trust agrees that all staff and volunteers at a children's centre should be vetted. However, the cost of these checks should be paid for by the children's centre and not fall on the parent or staff member themselves.

5 b) Should there be any others?

Yes. Greater emphasis needs to be put on making sure that SSCCs improve the quality of monitoring data both to ensure that services are making an impact in the community where they are situated, and that they are delivering value for money. This was identified as currently a weak element of SSCC practice in the recent report *How Well Are They Doing?* (Ofsted, 2008).

Similarly a Daycare Trust report earlier this year identified the variable quality of monitoring of ethnicity of both staff and users in early childcare services (*Local Approaches to ensuring childcare for BME families*, Daycare Trust, 2008). SSCCs should be encouraged to lead practice in this area and help ensure their services are diverse and meeting the needs of all communities in the local area.

It may also be useful to embed the concept of outreach by SSCCs to fully realise the notion of centres actively seeking to serve the whole community. However, it is likely that this may be considered a matter for supporting practice guidance rather than something that can adequately be prescribed within legislation or the SSCC definition.

6 Do you agree that there should be a duty to inspect SSCCs at the request of the Secretary of State?

Yes. Daycare Trust recognises the value that Ofsted reports have in helping parents to make decisions on childcare and sees the inspection process as an important driver of quality improvement within the sector.

7 a) Do you agree we should take a power to make such changes through secondary legislation?

Not sure. Daycare Trust agrees in principle with the idea to outline potential future changes within secondary legislation. We would obviously welcome the earliest opportunity to consult on the content of any draft legislation.

7 b) Do you agree with the list of potential requirements?

Yes. The proposed list of potential requirements seems eminently practical. Daycare Trust would particularly support the facility to allow statutory levels of specified qualifications for staff as we believe this would help to raise quality within settings.

7 c) Can you think of any others at this stage?

Yes. It may be appropriate to include some of our suggestions around improved monitoring and the importance of outreach (outlined in our response to q.5b) within this secondary legislation.

8 If you are a SSCC provider, how would these proposals affect your organisation?

n/a

9 Do you have any other comments you would like to make?

Daycare Trust is particularly pleased that moves to put Children's Centres on a statutory footing are being pursued. As a creative force involved in developing the concept of Children's Centres we are delighted that eight years on this initiative has become a fundamental part of the UK's offer for children under five and their families.