

Annex D - Outline of legislative framework for Children's Centres

The Childcare Act 2006: General Duties

The Childcare Act 2006 (“the Act”) imposes a number of duties on local authorities. The general duty contained in section 1 is to (a) improve the well-being of young children in their area; and (b) reduce inequalities between young children in their area in respect of various matters, including physical and mental health and emotional well-being, protection from harm and neglect, education, training and recreation, the contribution made by them to society and social and economic well-being.

A “young child” is defined by the Act as a child during the period from birth until 31 August following the child’s 5th birthday.

In discharging its functions under the Act, a local authority must have regard to any guidance given from time to time by the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State published the “Sure Start Children’s Centres Statutory Guidance” in April 2013. A copy of this guidance is found in Annex 5.

Section 3 of the Act states that a local authority must make arrangements to secure that early childhood services in its area are provided in an integrated manner, which is calculated to facilitate access to those services, and to maximize the benefit of those services to parents, prospective parents and young children. “Early childhood services” are defined by section 2(1) of the Act. They mean (a) early years provision; (b) the social services functions of the local authority, so far as relating to young children, parents or prospective parents; (c) health services relating to young children, parents or prospective parents, (d) the provision of assistance to parents or prospective parents (employment and training) and (e) the service provided by the local authority under section 12 so far as relating to information and assistance to parents/prospective parents.

Section 3(3) of the 2006 Act states that the authority must take steps (a) to identify parents or prospective parents in the authority’s area who would otherwise be unlikely to take advantage of early childhood services that may be of benefit to them and their young children; and (b) to encourage those parents or prospective parents to take advantage of those services.

The Childcare Act 2006: Children’s Centres and Consultation

Prior to 2009, a local authority was free to determine how best to deliver the early childhood services under section 3. However, amendments were made by the Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009 which introduced new sections 5A-5E. Section 5A(1) of the Act states that arrangements made by a local authority under section 3 must, so far as is reasonably practicable, include arrangements for sufficient provision of Children’s Centres to meet local need. “Local need” is defined as the need of parents, prospective parents and young children in the authority’s area.

Section 5A(5) of the Act states that a service is “made available” by providing the service or by providing advice and assistance to parents and prospective parents on gaining access to the service. Local authorities must consider whether early childhood services should be provided through a Children’s Centre. A local authority must take into account whether providing a service through a Children’s Centre would (a) facilitate access to it; or (b) maximize its benefit to parents, prospective parents and young children: see section 5E of the Act. Section 5E(7) states that, for the avoidance of doubt, nothing in this section is to be taken as preventing a local authority or any of its relevant partners from providing early childhood services other than through a Children’s Centre.

Section 5D(1) of the Act states that a local authority must secure that such consultation as they think appropriate is carried out before any significant change is made in the services provided through a children’s centre (including a change to location), or before anything is done that would result in a Children’s Centre ceasing to be a Children’s Centre.

Statutory guidance

The statutory Guidance published by the Secretary of State is attached at Annex 4. Chapter 2 provides guidance on the duty under section 5A of the Act. Members are invited to pay particular attention to pages 9 and 10 of the Guidance. This states that local authorities should:

- ensure that a network of Children’s Centres is accessible to all families with young children in their area;
- ensure that Children’s Centres and their services are within reasonable reach of all families with young children in urban and rural areas, taking into account distance and availability of transport;
- together with local commissioners of health services and employment services, consider how best to ensure that the families who need services can be supported to access them;
- target Children’s Centres services at young children and families in the area who are at risk of poor outcomes through, for example, effective outreach services, based on the analysis of local need;
- demonstrate that all children and families can be reached effectively;
- ensure that opening times and availability of services meet the needs of families in their area;
- not close an existing Children’s Centre site in any reorganisation of provision unless they can demonstrate that, where they decide to close a children’s centre site, the outcomes for children, particularly the most disadvantaged, would not be adversely affected and will not compromise the duty to have sufficient children’s centres to meet local need. The starting point should therefore be a presumption against the closure of Children’s Centres;
- take into account the views of local families and communities in deciding what is sufficient Children’s Centre provision;
- take account of families crossing local authority borders to use Children’s Centres in their authority. Families and carers are free to access early childhood services where it suits them best; and

- take into account wider duties under section 17 of the Childcare Act 1989 and under the Child Poverty Act 2010.

The Guidance states that consultation must take into account the views of local families and communities in deciding what is sufficient Children's Centre provision and must take account of families crossing local authority borders to use Children's Centres in their authority.

Local authorities should consult everyone who could be affected by the proposed changes, for example, local families, those who use the centres, Children's Centres staff, advisory board members and service providers. Particular attention should be given to ensuring disadvantaged families and minority groups participate in consultations.

The consultation should:

- explain how the local authority will continue to meet the needs of families with children under five as part of any reorganization of services
- Be clear how respondents views can be made known
- Provide adequate time for those wishing to respond
- Announce decisions following consultation publicly and explain why decisions were taken

Summary

The broad duty therefore is to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that there is sufficient provision of Children's Centres to meet local need. Therefore, in considering any significant changes to or the closure of any Children's Centres, it is important that the local authority ensure it is satisfied as to:

- that a proper consultation has been undertaken
- the extent of the local need
- whether there are sufficient Children's Centres to meet that need
- if it is considered that there are not sufficient children's centres to meet local need then whether it is reasonably practicable to provide additional Children's Centres

ANNEX E

Click on link below to published Guidance:

Sure Start Children's Centres statutory guidance for local authorities, commissioners of local health services and Jobcentre Plus. April 2013

Alternatively cut and paste the following web address into the address bar on Internet Explorer:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sure-start-childrens-centres>