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Making the Transition from Sure Start Local Programmes to Children's Centres, 2003–2008

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Abstract

Sure Start local programmes (SSLPs), an area-based early intervention programme for under fives in England set up in 1998, was replaced by children's centres (CCs), a universal, mainstream service, under the control of local authorities in 2003. This paper uses qualitative data from three urban authorities in an exploratory study that investigates how far CCs differ from SSLPs, and how far they are more recognisably similar to one another than were SSLPs. We explore interviewees' understandings of the idea of an SSLP and of a CC; differences between the core offers of the two programmes in terms of funding, consistency, local responsiveness and the balance of services; issues arising from making CCs a mainstream service; and changes in governance in terms of information flows, lines of accountability and parent participation. We find that while CCs differ from SSLPs in significant respects, they also differ one from the other, and we offer some reflections on the possible causes of this.

Introduction

Sure Start was an area-based early intervention programme for under fives in England and a flagship policy for New Labour, which was intended to bring together a range of services, including family support, health services and support for special needs, as well for childcare and education. Reporting directly to central government's Sure Start Unit, the Sure Start local programmes (SSLPs) enjoyed considerable autonomy and tended to be particularly responsive to local parents. The final wave of SSLPs was not approved until 2002. But in 2003 it was decided that SSLPs would be replaced by a network of children's centres (CCs), providing universal coverage.[1] The reasons for the shift in policy were complicated and have been addressed elsewhere (Lewis, in press). What the shift was intended to mean at the local level was also somewhat unclear. Naomi Eisentstadt, the director of the Sure Start Unit set up in 1998 under the auspices of both the Department

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for Education and Skills and the Department of Health, wrote in 2003 to assure SSLPs that

> by embedding SSLPs in the local authority's strategic vision for the delivery of children's services in your area, we will ensure that the additional children's centres' funding will build on what you have already started and improve mainstream services. (Eisenstadt, 2003)

In this interpretation, the move to create a network of CCs to cover the whole of England represented the 'mainstreaming' of Sure Start into a universal service. This resulted in a trebling or quadrupling of the number of centres in each of the three local authorities studied for this project during the first two phases of policy development (between 2004 and 2008). The new CCs were called 'Sure Start Children's Centres' in the policy documents, but some local authorities never used this term, preferring 'integrated children's centres' and, increasingly, just 'children's centres'.

Notwithstanding the Sure Start Unit's assurances regarding continuity, the shift to a universal programme of CCs entailed some significant changes. First, their introduction meant not only turning SSLPs into CCs, but also the 'designation' of other facilities (such as neighbourhood nurseries, maintained nurseries, early excellence centres and family centres) as CCs, as well as the creation of new centres, often in conjunction with primary schools. Second, the official guidance made it clear that CCs in the 30 per cent most deprived areas were to provide 'a core service offer', which put considerably greater emphasis on the provision of childcare and education than had been usual for SSLPs. The guidance also set out government's expectations for the way in which the new service should work. Third, there were major changes in governance, with local authorities, rather than central government, assuming responsibility for CCs.

CCs were to be a universal, mainstream service, working in partnership with other services, such as health, at the local level. It was, however, acknowledged that there must be more support for those with greatest need, meaning that services would not be the same everywhere (DfES, 2006). Thus, centres in the 70 per cent better-off areas would provide a more limited range of services. SSLPs had developed largely in response to local needs and demands, and tended to be very different from one another. The more top–down approach to developing CCs makes it reasonable to pose the question as to how far CCs are different from SSLPs and how far they are more 'recognisably similar' entities. In this exploratory study of 'processes',[2] we can only begin to answer these questions; furthermore, we find that the answers are far from simple. While there is evidence of real change, we suggest that longstanding, deep continuities in terms of the fragmentation of both early years provision and the early years workforce have militated against the emergence of a more uniform service.

The first part of the paper describes the policy shift from SSLPs to CCs and identifies the main dimensions of change highlighted by the policy documents,

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which formed the starting point for the empirical investigation. The second part uses interview data first to document differences in the idea and role of SSLPs and of CCs, and second to examine how far the differences in the prescriptions for CCs in regard to the service offer, mainstreaming centres and changes in governance have resulted in more tightly specified provision.

Methods

The paper is based on interviews carried out with 18 staff covering all the CCs (three of which had been SSLPs), together with three local authority officers, in one urban local authority. A further 13 interviews were carried out in two other urban authorities in order to provide a check on the findings. In one of these, five CCs were visited (almost a fifth of the total), one of which had been an SSLP; and, in the second, six CCs were visited (three of which had been SSLPs), a much smaller fraction of the total number. Some 16 interviewees had experience of an SSLP (including the three local authority officers), 12 in the local authority in which they were interviewed. Appendix 1 provides information on the posts held by interviewees and on the origin of the CCs visited. The interview data from the three authorities have been pooled because, for the most part, the main issues were very similar for all three areas; the text indicates points of difference. The SSLPs usually became CCs in phase 1 of their development (2004–6). All but one of the CCs visited for this study were in the 30 per cent most deprived areas (CCs for the 70 per cent of better-off areas began to be developed from 2008). The interviews with staff who had not been employed by SSLPs are identified in the text and used as and when they further illuminate key points. Thirty-one interviews were carried out with one person; the remaining three interviews were carried out with two people, usually the centre manager and the head of the school on whose premises the centre was located. All interviews were transcribed and analysed manually.

Policy background

The SSLPs launched in 1998 offered outreach and home visits, support for families and parents (including support groups, drop-in and parenting sessions); support for good quality play, learning and childcare; primary and community health care and advice about child and family health; and support for children with special needs. They could also provide additional services in response to local need – for example, advice on housing or welfare benefits – and there was usually enough money to respond to parents' wishes regarding social events. Services could be provided by the SSLP, or money could be given to a provider – for example, to the primary care trust, to fund an extra health visitor.

Sure Start had strong ambitions regarding the development and empowerment of local communities (Glass, 2006). Naomi Eisenstadt (2002: 3

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and 4) commented that 'probably the most important' of Sure Start's principles was the injunction to involve parents and carers: 'The fundamental premise is that better outcomes can only be achieved with the active participation of parents.' Indeed, only provision for special needs and for early years' education focused on the child alone; other parts of the services offered by SSLPs were usually focused on the parent and child, or just the parent (Tunstill *et al.*, 2005a). The national targets set for SSLPs also focused on parents as much as the children, including a reduction in the proportion of workless adults in households and in the proportion of mothers who smoked, and an increase in the proportion who breastfed. Anning and Hall (2008: 4) have recorded their view that 'the story of Sure Start exemplified a tension between the rhetoric of local empowerment and the realities of central government control'. Nevertheless, SSLPs were given considerable autonomy as to *how* they delivered their services and met the targets.

The core offer for CCs was set out as: integrated early education and care, outreach to parents, family support, health services, information about other childcare providers and community services, effective links with Jobcentre Plus, and workforce training. This list overlapped considerably with that for SSLPs, but the focus on childcare and education, alongside the link to the employability agenda via Jobcentre Plus, together with the injunction to reach vulnerable parents, were new. In respect of the last of these, the interim report of the National Evaluation had made the damaging claim that Sure Start had not reached the most disadvantaged families, had only produced modest benefits for the moderately disadvantaged, and even small adverse effects for those most at risk (NESS, 2005).

In respect of childcare, the early official guidance set targets for the creation of new childcare places by CCs (DfES, 2003a) in line with the local authorities' obligation (from 2006) to provide a 'sufficiency' of childcare and, from September 2008, fully integrated early years education and full daycare. Expectations regarding the staffing of centres in the 30 per cent most disadvantaged areas were also laid out by 2007, and gave strong encouragement to the appointment of a teacher and a graduate early years professional (DCSF, 2007: App. 1), just as the targets set for CCs by central government focused more on children's cognitive achievements.

Government Ministers assured the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee that CCs were a continuation of Sure Start. Thus, CCs would be 'community driven, parent driven and will retain that essence of Sure Start which has made it so successful' (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2005a Q. 479; see also DfES, 2006: 3). But the introduction of CCs involved considerable 'up-scaling' in provision. CCs were to become a mainstream service under local authority control (DfES, 2006:3), working in partnership with other services in the public, private and third sectors. Indeed, the 2006 Childcare Act made health services and Jobcentre Plus statutory partners in providing services. How parent participation was to be fitted into the new model of governance remained opaque.

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Findings

The idea and role of a CC compared to an SSLP

Government spokespersons and documents represented the shift to CCs as something that built on Sure Start. While interviewees were broadly agreed that both the underpinning principles and broad goal of the two programmes – to do the best for children – were similar, one of the local authority officers commented that 'children's centres *were packaged as* Sure Start grown up [our italics]'. In addition, as another local authority officer observed, people's jobs had often 'evolved with the Government's agenda' in ways that were not always easy either to recall or explain to an interviewer. Nevertheless, interviewees revealed different approaches to CC provision.

SSLPs were described by one manager as 'tighter' because they were more often located in one place (with seconded staff: for example, health visitors) than are the CCs. In urban areas, CCs often conform to a 'hub and spoke' model, with a 'lead setting' identified by the local authority and other sites delivering other parts of the core offer, particularly childcare and education. As a manager put it: 'to me a children's centre is not a building . . . it's an umbrella, isn't it?'. However, as many respondents acknowledged, this made it 'confusing', 'misleading' or even 'meaningless' for parents, who tended to think of a children's centre as a building, when in fact it is a service. But the idea of a centre as a 'one stop shop' for people with children under five is difficult to sustain when in practice services are delivered in several different places. Front-line staff tended to talk more about the changes that had taken place than did managers, largely because CCs had affected their ways of working. In fact, there was little evidence as to a strongly focused perception of a children's centre; rather, views differed according to the particular institutional history of the centre and the approach taken by the staff, particularly the managers, which was in turn influenced by their different disciplinary backgrounds.

The longer history of development of both SSLPs and CCs is crucial for understanding the approach to centres locally. For example, four of the former SSLPs visited in two of the authorities had been based in maintained nursery schools that then became 'lead settings' for CCs. Three of the managers were nursery school heads, and were convinced that in essence the nurseries had continued to work as they always had – pre- and post-Sure Start – with one stressing that the nursery had always also included services to support parents. One of these managers felt strongly that the extra staff brought in by the development of the SSLP had worked in something of a 'parallel universe', as 'a team operating alongside the nurseries', focusing on securing community representation and bringing family support services together. Because of their background in early years education, these managers were convinced of the overwhelming importance of educational achievements for children – something that the CCs agenda also brought to the fore – and thus felt that in essence 'the

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nursery is the children's centre and the children's centre is the nursery'. The professional background of these heads and managers of CCs was crucial in forming their ideas about SSLPs and centres.

CCs serving the most disadvantaged areas were required to provide the core offer and to focus more strongly on educational outcomes for children and on increasing the employability of parents, shifts that were clearly recognised by respondents with experience of both programmes. However, paradoxically, it was not uncommon to find interviewees with *no* previous experience of Sure Start stressing the importance of parents' views about the services that should be provided and emphasising the importance of other parts of the core offer. Thus, a manager of a recently established children's centre run by a voluntary organisation replied to a question on the role of the centre thus: 'I like to refer to this as a family centre. We have to call it a children's centre, but . . . that is more government policy I would say. The role of this particular centre as I see it is to support local families.' While this manager had no knowledge of Sure Start, his priorities were more in keeping with the idea of an SSLP than of a children's centre. Indeed, a recent report on outreach work commented on the basis of work in 55 centres that 'although called CCs, in reality much, if not most, of their work is with parents who are adults' (Capacity, 2009: 4).

CCs should be seen as a service rather than a building. However, continuities in terms of both the institutional histories of the centres and the approaches taken by managers in particular seem to have been important factors accounting for different approaches to delivering the core service offer.

Changes in the core offer: issues of funding, consistency, local responsiveness and balance

Respondents were agreed that the bulk of *funding* for CCs is absorbed by labour costs and that there was limited room for the provision of services that might be requested by parents after core services had been provided. The funding per child for SSLPs was in any case much more generous. One local authority officer referred to this rather disparagingly as having provided money for services such as 'baby yoga' requested by middle-class mothers; a CC manager said that 'I've known [SSLP] managers who've bought ponies with Sure Start money'; while a voluntary sector provider in another authority referred to the 'bribe money' that had been available in SSLPs to fund trips to the seaside or leisure centre passes and thus to entice disadvantaged families into the SSLP. Certainly, SSLPs had enough money to respond to a wide variety of requests from parents and to particular local needs; all respondents who had worked in them considered that they had been well funded and many expressed the view that it could not be expected that such a level of funding would be sustained. In all the CCs visited for this study, there was a small amount of discretionary money – usually about £5,000 per year – to spend on additional services, but one manager said that her centre was

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unable to do even a quarter of the work with the money allocated to CCs that they had done as an SSLP (this centre was run by a voluntary organisation as a social enterprise and the manager thus was able to rely on other streams of funding). Several interviewees anticipated that future cuts in public sector expenditure would result in more charging and a more basic level of service.

Given the tighter service specification for CC, it is reasonable to expect that centres would offer a more consistent service than had SSLPs. One local authority officer commented that '[i]f you've got a universal service to offer, you can have it locally tailored to local need, but you need some consistency in the way it runs because of money and accountability'. But a second officer in the same authority was rather more cautious about imposing a more standard core offer across CCs:

> you've got greater control and greater consistency with CCs, because you've got the local authority involved ... [but] that can also be, you know, a disadvantage if it's not managed carefully, because you kind of, lose some of that, I mean, local identity's really important in responding to local need, so you have to be careful that you enable that to continue as well as keeping a kind of, centralised approach.

These comments about the differences in the nature of services provided by SSLPs and CCs wrapped up two issues: the extent to which the CC core offer resulted in greater *consistency* and the extent to which CC services were *less responsive* to local need.

The extent to which services became more consistent or standardised is difficult to assess. Some primary school heads who had only become involved in CCs since 2006 felt that services were still 'bitty' in the words of two interviewees, and wanted much *more* consistency. But an outreach worker, who had worked in the same place when it had been an SSLP commented regretfully: 'so it's a case of well, we've decided that the parenting programme we [the local authority] will offer is this, or the exercise programme we will offer is that and you will have to go on this training and then you have to roll it out'. Local authorities were advised, for example, to choose from 'evidence-based' parenting programmes (usually American and in one case Australian), one of the criticisms of SSLPs having been that they focused too much on responding to the needs expressed by local parents rather than delivering evidence-based programmes, which many felt necessary in order to achieve better outcomes for children (e.g. Rutter, 2007). Local authorities commissioned many services for all CCs in their authority, whereas SSLPs had done their own commissioning. This should have resulted in a more recognisably similar profile for CCs, at least within a particular authority. But as the last section showed, the history of each centre, together with the predilections of the manager, were sufficiently powerful to make even geographically adjacent centres rather different.

Nor was the nature of services necessarily more standardised in terms of delivery or quality. For example, while CCs were obliged to employ outreach

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workers, there was no one model for outreach work, in terms of staff qualifications or the numbers of visits to families that were expected, despite this work having been identified as much more important in the shift to CCs. Nor was there any real consistency in terms of the quality of childcare and education provision, despite the fact that from September 2008 providers registered with Ofsted have been obliged to work to the statutory framework for the early years foundation stage, which sets common standards for the development, care and education of children aged 0–5. Many managers of CCs reported being linked to private, voluntary sector and independent childcare and education providers over whose work they had no control.

Interviewees tended to agree that most of the elements of the core offer CCs were obliged to provide had been present in SSLPs, but that the *balance* had changed, with much more emphasis on childcare and education, on outreach work in order to make contact with the most disadvantaged families, and on the employability of parents, with the additional requirement that a worker from Jobcentre Plus (an executive agency of the Department of Work and Pensions, which provides services to support people of working age from 'welfare into work') be made available to work in CCs. However, one manager took the long view of changes in the balance of the service offer, commenting that while Sure Start had focused on young and vulnerable parents, now the focus was more on the speech and language development of children: 'The wheel turns and things go round . . . work that's happened in the past, fallen out of trend, [has] come back into play.' He felt that some of the work he had been doing prior to becoming an SSLP was now back in favour. Nevertheless, outreach workers who had experienced the Sure Start approach were unhappy about the greater emphasis on early years education, which they felt had in some CCs (especially in the newly founded ones attached to primary schools) put an end to 'fun days' with entertainers, balloons and face-painting, because the educational aim was unclear. Yet, in the view of the outreach workers interviewed (see also DfES, 2007), but not some of the managers or the local authority officers, such activities served to draw parents into the centre.

In several CCs that had been SSLPs, there were differing degrees of resistance to the shift in the balance of the core offer. One manager, who was also a nursery school head, was very much in favour of the new emphasis on early years education, but not on childcare as a means to increasing employability: 'I think it's quite difficult for people in early child education and care and health to take on . . . [P]eople [in SSLPs] felt passionately that it should not be about pushing parents into low paid jobs.' Thus, while her view of childcare and education provision was positive, she was nevertheless suspicious of linking childcare to employability rather than solely to child outcomes, fearing that an offer of both mediocre childcare and mediocre jobs would result.

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A second manager reported that daycare and education provision had not been developed because of lack of local demand. She was in the process of making a case to the local authority that there was a 'sufficiency'[3] of provision in their area, which had a large proportion of Asian families with relatively few working mothers, and that additional provision of childcare and education by the centre, which was run by a voluntary organisation, might endanger the businesses of other independent sector providers. This interviewee 'struggled' with the shift in the service offer to a greater emphasis on childcare linked to employability, which was additionally at odds with local perceptions about the proper role of mothers:

> We all know from research[4] that, you know, in the early days of the child's life, to have your parents, one parent at least around during that period is actually greatly beneficial. And yet on the other hand, in this government agenda around getting women back into work particularly, and the child care agenda, and I do struggle with that contradiction really.

A third manager in the same authority reported that he had been preceded by a Muslim manager, who had not developed daycare because of the preferences of parents for homecare in his area, but who had set up good partnerships to ensure the delivery of family services to support parenting. Finally, a voluntary sector manager of a CC and former SSLP agreed that often it was more important for someone to work with the parent to sort out the child's behaviour – 'if you've got a parent that's having an issue with behaviour management, putting the child in a nursery is not going to tackle that' – adding that support for the parent to work with the child should be judged the most important task for the centre in such cases.

CCs were not funded as well as SSLPs, and their money was largely absorbed by meeting the core offer. But, the imposition of a core offer did not result in greater consistency or in higher quality services. Nevertheless, change in the service prescriptions did result in a change in the balance of services above all. The emphasis on children's cognitive achievements and on parents' employability shifted away from the focus of the SSLPs on parent and child services, and on responding to parent demand. One interviewee remarked that SSLPs had been about 'working with families for the good of the family, rather than working with families for the good of the child and for that child achieving educational outcomes', which he felt was the case in CCs. A manager of a former SSLP commented that SSLPs had paid more attention to parents *qua* parents, organising trips out, parent groups and benefits advice, services that had not usually been 'rolled over' into CCs.

A universal service: mainstreaming and partnership

All interviewees welcomed the ending of the 'post-code lottery' whereby SSLPs had been permitted to serve only a particular geographical area, but making

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CC provision a universal service under the control of local authorities brought new challenges. SSLPs had often seconded staff from the provider and based them in the SSLP. Usually, SSLPs housed a number of staff from different disciplines on their sites. CCs are unable to operate like this. It was intended by central government that they would become 'permanent, mainstream community services' (DfES, 2006: 2) and as such would rely on working with other mainstream services in partnership to deliver a fully integrated service. It is often the case that relatively few CC staff work out of the lead setting; in fact, no centre visited for this project had the full complement of staff recommended in the official guidance. Indeed, the vast majority of the managers interviewed for this study were only appointed late in 2008, even though the National Evaluation of Sure Start (Tunstill *et al.*, 2005b) and the official guidance on practice for CCs (DfES, 2005) had drawn attention to the importance of leadership. A local authority officer talked energetically and optimistically about mainstreaming in terms of 'reshaping the workforce':

> We had a Sure Start local programme health visitor, we had a Sure Start local programme midwife, now what we're doing is we're saying 'no, actually, we need to reshape mainstream services around CCs' and that's what's really positive . . . Because the mainstream teams actually felt they didn't have to change while there was a dedicated worker, so now, you know . . . people are joining, developing joint plans for things that were previously just, sort of, around health or education, around immunisation, breastfeeding.

This interviewee felt that there was an upside to having less money than had been available to SSLPs, because:

> having less money makes you actually think how [to deliver services] . . . you can't just keep adding layers . . . because nobody changes the way they're working and you just create another, you've still got that silo over there . . . you've got to reshape the workforce.

A CC manager in the same authority also interpreted the changes in the ways of working that had taken place during the 2000s positively:

> So what was done three or four years ago by SSLPs, people have seen the benefit of and have changed their working practices so we can, you know, we can manage it with this sort of partnership arrangement really.

But neither the clarity nor the optimism of these ways of thinking about the changes in ways of working was widely shared, either in this particular local authority or in the others. Many interviewees saw mainstreaming and the need to rely on partnership working as having been necessitated by the reduction in the budgets of CCs. One voluntary sector provider commented that mainstreaming 'is kind of like "dream on" really, you know'. Most managers saw that operating a CC *required* partnership working, which had not necessarily been the case in an SSLP. Several also stressed the extent to which this in turn required 'goodwill' because many service providers had to contribute the time needed

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to attend meetings or to deal with the paperwork that resulted from the more intensive local authority monitoring requirements that had not been properly costed. Nor were the partnership arrangements always reliable. In all three local authorities respondents mentioned problems working with health visitors, who were understaffed, and with Jobcentre Plus workers, who were not used to working outside their offices.[5]

Nor was there consensus on whether SSLPs were advantaged or disadvantaged in adapting to the new ways of working. One manager was of the view that SSLPs started with 'bigger teams' and were better placed to begin work as CCs. However, another manager, who had not herself worked in an SSLP, felt that

> [i]t's been harder for the Sure Start workers than it has been for us really, because they have had to get used to the fact that they're working beyond a small area.

The challenges of working across boundaries and across different sites in 'hub and spoke' CCs, together with the need to integrate staff with different lines of accountability as well as training and terms and conditions of employment, are much stronger for CCs. As one CC manager who had experienced work in a SSLP put it: 'They did do integrated working, but within their own little building.' Furthermore, a voluntary organisation provider said that the SSLP workforce had not really been integrated, despite often working on a single site, and that 'silos' had continued to exist, something reinforced by a nursery head and CC manager, who commented that new SSLP staff had worked 'in parallel' with nursery staff (see above).

The shift from an area-based service to a universal, mainstream service necessitated partnership working, something that was broadly accepted – unlike the revised prescriptions for services – but which proved hard to achieve.

Changes in governance: information, accountability and parent participation

The more top–down approach to the control of CCs might have been expected to result in greater uniformity in governance. However, no centre visited for this study conformed to any of the models of governance set out in the official guidance (DfES, 2007). In addition, the vast majority of respondents in all three research areas reported a lack of 'interference' by the local authority. The closer monitoring that was required by local authorities was attributed largely to central government policy.

The main change perceived by centre staff had more to do with the flow of *information* than the degree of control that was exercised; indeed, three managers in one authority complained about the lack of guidance from the local authority. Two interviewees in another authority were more positive about the advice they had received, but commented that the local authority was a lot less 'transparent'

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than the SSLP had been. These people felt that they no longer knew as much about 'what is going on' in terms of the shifts in the policy of central government and the decisions made by the local authority officers. An outreach worker said that she had been used to meeting the SSLP programme manager every four to six weeks and had heard about developments in Sure Start programmes locally and nationally. Now she hears nothing about future plans and has never met many of the local authority officers with whom she deals; she referred to the officer from whom she regularly sought reimbursement for the fruit provided at the parents' forums as a 'virtual man'. Yet managers and providers of services complained about the number of different kinds of meetings that they were now supposed to attend. A provider of services to an SSLP only had to attend one meeting at that site on a regular basis, but in the universal children's centre service, providers may be commissioned to provide a service across all or a large part of a local authority, and it is impossible for them to attend regular meetings in a large number of CCs.

In part, problems of information and feelings that there was a lack of strategic direction flowed from the late appointment of managers in CCs. Some former SSLP programme coordinators became CC managers, but many moved into the local authority hierarchy to oversee the development of the new universal service. Virtually all managers and many front-line workers referred to the difficulties they had in sorting out lines of *accountability* in the new governance structures. For example, in a former SSLP that was run by a voluntary organisation, the manager reported to the voluntary organisation but was employed by the local authority, which was described by a front-line outreach worker as 'an interesting arrangement'. There were many similar examples. In the same authority, the head of a nursery school, which was the lead setting for a CC, said that she reported to the nursery's governing body but not to the CC, which she thought was 'a very odd situation'. Several managers said that they would much prefer to have direct oversight of the people working in their centres, as the managers of SSLPs had had over their seconded staff. An outreach worker commented that 'everybody is employed through somebody different', an aspect of partnership working that she found 'bitty' and difficult.

Finally, the new forms of governance affected *the role played by parents*, which many had felt to be of primary importance to the ethos of SSLPs. While many CCs visited for this study continued to 'consult' parents about services, ideas about the importance of their participation and empowerment had faded. Official guidance had suggested that parents should occupy as many as one third of the places on SSLP partnership boards, but parental participation in CCs was confined mainly to 'parents' forums', from which a parent representative might be persuaded to sit on one of the committees overseeing the work of the CCs. But as one manager commented: 'I don't see how it [the CC] can be parent driven in the same way [as the SSLPs]. . .the stuff around children's language

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development is not negotiable.' Bagley *et al.* (2004: 559) quoted an SSLP manager on the importance of meeting targets, but CCs have been driven much more by the core offer, national targets and local monitoring. Most interviewees stressed the importance of consulting parents (often via a survey) even if they were unable to respond to their desire for particular kinds of provision (which often had to do with leisure activities and would not help to achieve targets). As another manager in the same authority said, parents are asked to come in for a consultation and they are asked what they'd like, but the CC has to meet the core offer, 'so we have to reach a happy medium between what the parents want and what we can provide'. As encouraged by the guidance from central government, parents still have a 'voice' and are consulted (DfES, 2003b, Annex 2), but participation as a means to empowerment and community development has largely dropped off the CC agenda (see also Mulgan, 2008; Pemberton and Mason, 2008). One manager reported that parents were considerably less involved in the CC, with the parents' forum becoming a meeting for 'moans'.

Thus the new forms of governance have given rise to difficulties regarding the dissemination of information and the establishment of clear lines of accountability. Above all, a more top–down approach to CCs has meant less emphasis on the importance of parental participation. One local authority officer, who had been involved in Sure Start, admitted that 'sometimes I think, gosh, you know, where are the parents in this, whereas I think in Sure Start local programmes that was very evident'.

Conclusion

Statements made by Ministers and by the former Director of the Sure Start Unit stressing the continuity between Sure Start and CCs were misleading in many respects. There was considerable change in the nature of CCs as often 'virtual centres', compared to the usually more unified SSLPs, with their seconded staff; in the amount of money per child that was made available; in the nature of service provision with more emphasis on childcare, children's cognitive achievements and parents' labour force participation; in the obligation to work in partnership that followed from mainstreaming CCs; and in the more top–down patterns of governance, which gave considerably less space to parental engagement.

However, we did not find that the shift from SSLPs to CCs was also marked by greater uniformity. CCs differed from one another as well as differing from SSLPs. Indeed, there was evidence of considerable resistance to many of the key changes. In nursery schools that had been SSLPs and that became CCs, the heads (who were often also the CC managers) were happy to prioritise early years education, which was what they had always done and what they envisaged doing if CCs ceased to exist.[6] But this did not mean that they were convinced by the part of

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central government's goal for childcare that stressed the importance of increasing employability for parents. Two of the former SSLPs in one of the authorities continued to place a low priority on both childcare and education because of the low demand for this service in their neighbourhoods. They continued to hold both to the priorities established by SSLPs in favour of family support services and to the respect SSLPs had tended to give to the wishes of parents. It is possible that a larger study may find that this approach is relatively rare; however, we found a striking example of a newly established CC where the service priorities and aims also more closely resembled those of an SSLP than a CC. Many of the managers and service providers we interviewed, especially those who had worked in SSLPs, were of the view that attention to the parents' needs often had to precede or take equal place alongside a focus on outcomes for the child. Nevertheless, some front-line workers in particular stressed the changes that they felt they had had to make in order to adapt to the priority accorded early years education, for example by forgoing events such as community fun days which both they and parents valued. Front-line workers were particularly concerned about the new ways in which they were required to work, especially about the difficulties of working in partnership. But again, given the exploratory nature of this study, our findings regarding resistance to fully implementing the core offer, and differences in service delivery and in the experiences and views of managers and front-line workers require further research.

Mainstreaming CCs as a new, universal service involved the designation of a wide variety of institutions with different histories in the public and private sectors as centres, as well as the establishment of new centres. Managers came from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, which influenced their approaches. Indeed, there is no coherence in either the English early years workforce or in the nature of provision. While the 2006 legislation integrated childcare and education, there is still no common career path for early years workers, who are still split most notably between poorly paid childcare workers and better paid nursery teachers. The fragmentation of provision continues to be matched by the fragmentation of the workforce and, as Dahlberg *et al.* (1999) have observed, England has nothing to compare with the highly trained early years pedagogue working in the Scandinavian countries. These deeper continuities with the past account in large measure for the different approaches taken by CCs. Indeed, further research must determine the best analytical framework for exploring the wide variation in terms of service organisations and providers in CCs.

There does seem to have been an unequivocal change in one of the main organising principles of Sure Start: the participation of parents which, according to the former Director of the Sure Start Unit, had probably been the most important principle (see above). Two of the three local authority officers interviewed were as aware of this change as centre staff. While the oversight exercised by local authorities was commonly agreed not to have

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resulted in uniform, direct control, there was a diminution in responsiveness to local demands, due both to less generous budgets and the demands of meeting national targets tied to the core offer. Parental involvement in the governance of centres was minimal compared to SSLPs. While central government specifications and local authority control did not completely remove the autonomy that had been experienced by SSLPs and did not impose an instantly recognisable new institutional form, many interviewees felt that there had been a significant change in principles, as well as in practices, particularly around the requirement to work in partnership with other mainstream services.

It is also important to note that the pace of change has been rapid; the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee (2005b: 11) commented on the fact that children's services as a whole were undergoing 'transformational change' at 'formidable speed'. Indeed, little was learned from the development of SSLPs in this respect (Glass, 2006). As a manager of a CC that had been an SSLP put it:

> Everything has moved very quickly and I guess that one of the things that we have learnt, if we have learned anything, is that substantial change at least takes a long time to bed down.

For although respondents saw continuities between SSLPs and CCs at the overarching level of promoting child well-being, the transition nevertheless posed the need for significant changes to be made in all the areas considered in this paper. Furthermore, it is also reasonable to speculate that the new spending round beginning in 2010–11 is likely to bring more turbulence. One CC manager feared that future spending cuts might increase standardisation by reducing provision to a minimal level. Government has embedded CCs in legislation (via the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act, 2009), but at the time of writing it is too early to be sure that there will not be more fundamental changes to come. Further changes in the balance of services and in the target client group are possible.

Just as it was difficult to describe a 'typical' SSLP, so it is difficult to describe a 'typical' CC. CCs are not 'recognisably similar'. Much of the variation between SSLPs was attributed to the extent to which they responded to local need. CCs respond much less to local needs and demands and yet each centre visited for this project was also very different, and this applied to the newly established centres as well as to those that had had a previous existence as an SSLP or other institution. The head of one of the nursery schools that had been an SSLP commented:

> it's just so different everywhere . . . I think the discrepancy across each authority and between different authorities just is quite bizarre really . . . Nobody really knows what somebody else's centre means.

It seems that it is remarkably difficult to forge a recognisably universal, mainstream early years service out of the fragmented institutions and workforce that has characterised past provision.

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Appendix 1: Numbers of interviewees by type of site and job title

	Type of CC				
Job title	Ex-SSLP	Ex-neighbourhood nursery	Ex-early excellence centre	Newly created – co-located with primary/nursery school	Newly created – other sites
(1) Primary/nursery school senior staff		2		3	
(2) Manager of CC	3	2	1	9	2
(3) Combined role: head/deputy head of primary/nursery school and head of CC	3		1		
4) CC front line staff	4			1	
5) Partner organisation staff (not front line)	3				

In addition, three local authority officers were interviewed whose roles cannot be linked to a particular centre.

Explanation of categories

1. Senior school/nursery staff – head teachers and deputy head teachers of the lead setting who are not responsible for directly managing the CC.
2. Manager of CC – job titles vary, and may include 'children's centre manager', 'children's centre co-ordinator', 'head of CC' and 'programme manager'. Individuals responsible for running the CC on a day-to-day basis.
3. Combined role – includes individuals whose roles involve leading and managing both the nursery/primary school and the CC itself (although there may also be another individual responsible for day-to-day CC business)
4. CC front line staff – includes voluntary sector and PCT workers who provide a service at the CC.
5. Partner organisation staff – staff of voluntary sector organisations who do not themselves provide a service within the CC, but who manage staff who do.

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Notes

1 While there has been a considerable literature on Sure Start, much of it emanating from the National Evaluation of the programme (Belsky *et al.*, 2007; Anning and Ball, 2008), there is a paucity of literature on CCs.
2 Evaluation of outcomes will in any case prove difficult. For, while much more emphasis was placed on the importance of child outcomes in the transition to CCs, the national targets set also changed, making comparisons between SSLPs and CCs difficult.
3 In line with the requirements placed on LAs by the 2006 Childcare Act.
4 For a recent review of this research, see Hansen and Hawkes (2009).
5 Tunstill *et al.* (2005c) observed that there has been a lack of training for partnership working, although Bagley and Ackerley (2006) noted on the basis of their local case study that Sure Start professionals were committed to a partnership perspective.
6 In fact, the new funding formula for early years education makes nursery schools vulnerable to closure.

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