Best Start: A Fresh Start for Children and Family Support

Delivering integrated family support in a local context: Case Studies and Typologies

CENTRE FOR YOUNG LIVES

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From Sure Start to Family Hubs

The landscape of integrated family support has evolved considerably over the past two decades. Sure Start Local Programmes were rolled out in the late 1990s, and over the following decade evolved into Sure Start Children's Centres, implemented across three phases. By Phase 3 in 2010, centres reached the target of 3,500 set in 2004, albeit varied in the scale and scope of support across each. Reach varied from 600 to 1200 children per centre dependent on local need, but the majority (54%) of centres were in the 30% most deprived areas (based on the IDACI measure).[1] At the peak of Sure Start's delivery in 2010, there were an estimated 3,630 Children's Centres across England, with funding reaching £1.7bn in 2009, around £2.7bn in 2023/24 money. Since that time Government funding for both local authorities to spend on integrated, place-based family support has been drastically reduced and ringfences removed from local authority spending[2] It is not surprising then that as early as 2015, a DfE evaluation found that the rapid reduction in Government funding had led to a major reduction in the capacity of centres in meeting the needs of families. The cuts to funding precipitated a shift towards a more targeted range of services for parents and outreach to families at home, in line with a revised and narrower 'core purpose' for children's centres.[3]

The landscape of integrated family support today is far from what it was in the days of Sure Start. Cuts to funding and the closure of over 1,000 centres has pushed local authorities to evolve and adapt to new pressures and 'make do' with what they have.

Despite only half of local authorities receiving some, albeit modest, development funding from government to develop Family Hubs, the majority of local authorities we engaged with had adopted, or were working towards, a Family hub model of family support. Nesta found that roughly two-thirds of existing family hubs receive central funding through the Family Hubs and Start for Life programme, while twenty-two did not have any, and large parts of the country including Devon, Somerset and East Yorkshire are family hub 'blackspots' with very limited hubs, or in some cases none at all.[4] 80% of 0-4 year olds living in relative poverty (around 400,000) are able to reach

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[1] 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

[2] P, Carneiro and S, Cattan et al (2025). *The short- and medium-term effects of Sure Start on children's outcomes; https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-05/IFS%20Report.%20The%20short-%20and%20medium-term%20effects%20of%20Sure%20Start%20on%20children%E2%80%99s%20outcomes.pdf*

[3] HM Government (2015) Organisation, services and reach of children's centres Evaluation of children's centres in England (ECCE, Strand 3; Organisation, services and reach of children's centres

[4] Nesta (2025) Data can strengthen family hub rollout as new analysis reveals 100,000 children living in relative poverty in England have no access to vital services; A Fairer Start, Press release;

their local hub by a short walk, drive or public transport, however that leaves approximately 100,000 children (0-4) living in poverty are living outside of that proximity to a hub, an additional barriers to families accessing the support they need.[5]

However, many local authorities continue to deliver children's centres. Analysis of FoI returns of family support provision in 2023/24, from 124 upper local tier authorities, showed that Family hubs only made up 40% of total provision, with remaining children's centres constituting the other 60%.[6] Many local authorities converted previous centres into new Hubs, but continued to deliver remaining children's centres alongside a Family hub model.

The commitment to roll out 1,000 new Best Start Family Hubs is a welcome step forward to rebuilding a network of family support for communities. To establish this new network, we must understand the position local authorities are in and build on what is already being delivered – including support delivered by the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector.

This supplementary chapter sets out the different models of family support in operation across the country, following engagement with 15 local authorities across England. The Centre for Young Lives grouped findings together into four key typologies of family support. While each local authority has distinct operating models often emerging to adapt to local context and need, through consultation with local authorities and family support providers across the country, we have identified three recurring models of family support currently in operation across England.

A Hub and Spoke model

Most local authorities we consulted had elements of a hub and spoke approach embedded into their family support provision. In some places this was attributed to a need to adapt to changes in local service provision, with many local authorities forced to sell off their centres and work more flexibly and become more targeted. In others, it was a proactive approach based on an identified need to reach deeper into communities.

A hub and spoke approach situate hubs at the centre of a wider network of service delivery, adopting a strengths-based approach that draws on existing community assets and anchors, including physical spaces like schools, libraries and other community spaces, but also the existing support being delivered to children and families by voluntary sector organisations. The model can include a combination of fixed and mobile

https://www.nesta.org.uk/press-release/data-can-strengthen-family-hub-rollout-as-new-analysis-reveals-100000-children-living-in-relative-poverty-in-england-have-no-access-to-vital-services/

[5] Ibid.

[6] FoI returns from 124 Uppoer tier authorities: 645 Family Hubs, 1015 children's centres

satellite spokes and work to strengthen integration by joining up hubs with wider support services for children and families.

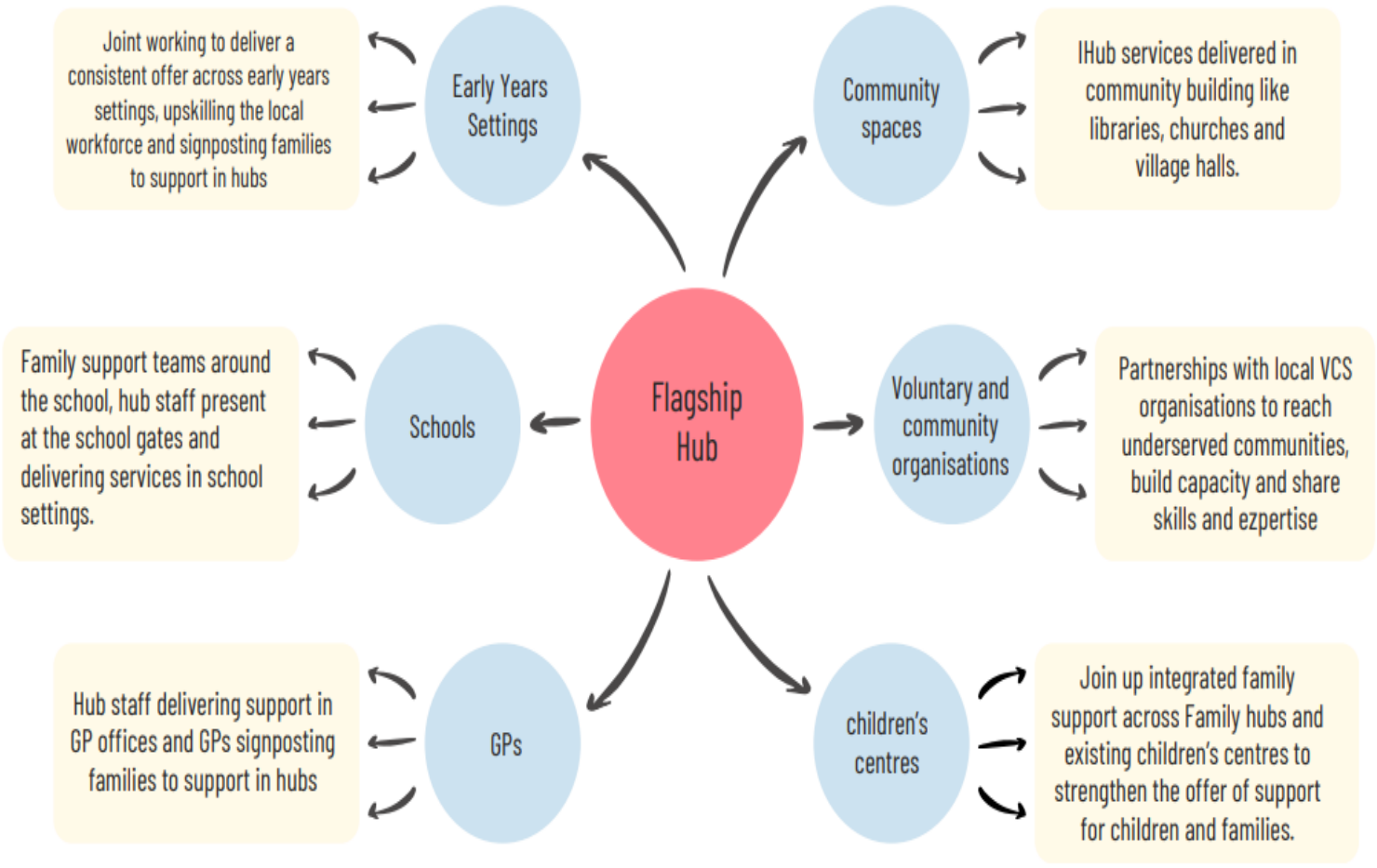


Figure 1: Example hub and spoke model

A hub and spoke model can support services to be more accessible to communities both in proximity – particularly in larger or more rural areas - but also through working with community organisations already embedded into and trusted by communities. This is particularly important in reaching communities that may traditionally be cautious about engaging with statutory services, and for designing and delivering services in a way that is responsive to the needs of local communities.

Case Study 1

Case study 1 is a London borough council operating across a small but densely populated geographical area. They deliver five family hubs and a further two linked sites, with an annual budget of £7.5m. In 2023/24, the local authority reports that this provided support to 6,424 children.

Each hub provides a core, multi-agency team that includes a locality leader, administration staff, an average of 6 family workers, a speech and language therapist, and staff members delivering employment and training, benefits advice and housing support. Strong partnerships with health services have enabled colocation of staff and data and systems to be shared so that engagement can be accurately tracked and outreach targeted effectively. Beyond the core team, services operate across the hubs and linked sites. A key priority was presenting the offer of support across hubs as a one-stop-shop service in the eyes of families.

This local authority had a particularly strong offer of family support in terms of the range of services delivered through their hub, which they attributed to a strong commitment across local leaders, including local politicians, to retaining these services and a fundamental recognition of the importance of early years. As a result, even throughout a decade of austerity, the local authority retained its early years budget allowing them to continue the level of support. Geographical context and limited availability in physical building space across the borough shaped their delivery, with funding used to build on the offer in the existing hubs rather than open additional hubs and using linked sites such as community centres and libraries.

Case Study 2

Case study 2 is a County council in the East of England that has been delivering Family Hubs since 2017. The geographical area consists of a combination of large towns and cities and more rural areas. Between 2010/11 and 2022/23, the Council closed 70 of its children's centres. The budget for family support has reduced since the days of sure start. There was an initial £2m removed from the commissioned contract when it was awarded, and the contract (coming to an end this year) tapered each year for the first seven years and flat-lined in the final three.

Today they deliver a hub and spoke model of support with 12 main Family Hubs 12 designated areas across the local authority area. This local authority has not received Family Hubs and Start for Life Funding.

Their unusually high spend on family support services, an annual contract of £38m, combines funding from the Public Health Grant, local authority children's services budget and the local Integrated Care Board. Together they co-commission a private provider, in partnership with a national charitable organisation, to deliver a fully integrated range of early help and 0-19 services, and children's community health services in parts of the County. They adopt an approach to support for children and families that delivers as a 'service without walls' that focuses on meeting the needs of family where they are through their network of family hubs and linked sites or 'spokes' consisting of schools, village halls, libraries and other community spaces. Hub services are delivered through multiple sites including school drop-ins and through local early years settings.

They have adopted a 'proportionate universal' model where universal services are available to all families, and families in need of additional support are supported by the teams or where required referred onwards for a more targeted service provision. Each hub is informed by a partnership board or advisory board to inform service design and delivery to meet specific needs of families.

In 2023/24, the local authority recorded just over 260,000 face-to-face contacts across Family Hubs for children aged 0-5, 5-11, and 11+. Due to the unique approach of this local authority's provision, the local authority identified challenges in recording strong reach data and are seeking to strengthen this aspect moving forward.

A Legacy Sure Start model

Several local authorities operate models of family support provision that have evolved in the wake of Sure Start. While some have managed to retain provision despite cuts to funding, others have been forced to remove most or all of the support once provided for children and families.

A small number of local authorities in England have been able to maintain all or almost all of their children's centres since the removal of the Sure Start ringfence in 2010. Usually this is down to a strong political and senior policy commitment to the model and dedicated funding streams which have continued to be prioritised since 2010. In these areas, as the local authority has not sold off or repurposed its children's centre buildings, the provision continues at "pram-pushing distance" out of many small centres which are well embedded into local communities. Often a small collection of these centres has been converted into Family Hubs which are part of a wider network of children's centres, often (though not always) operating under the same strategy and plans.

Case Study 3

Case Study 3 is a metropolitan borough council in the Northeast of England, operating a hub and spoke approach comprising seven flagship Family Hubs and 56 sites (remaining children's centres) overall across the area, with a budget of £8.5m in 2024/25. The 7 Family Hubs are based in existing Community Hubs and operate a locality model, targeted in the areas of highest poverty, but offering services city wide.

Services across each Hub differ based on specific identified need of the communities they serve. The local area is divided into distinct areas and include a Hub manager, Family Help Practitioners, social workers, administration staff and outcomes coordinators. Each wedge of the City (south, west and east) benefit from the expertise of specialist coordinators who work with families to address concerns relating to domestic abuse, substance use and mental health needs. Coordinators are commissioned from the voluntary sector, ensuring close links with host organisations and ensuring fidelity to their models of practice. Each Hub also benefits from their own SEND Coordinator in response to the growing needs of children and young people identified with additional needs and police officers who address community safety, alongside the wider team. The teams operate a fully integrated, multi-disciplinary model of practice. Outcomes Coordinators based in each Hub support the measurement of progress so that they can do more of what works.

An Early Help Front Door team support better identification of need and ensure families are signposted to the right service, at the right time. Early Help Practitioners within the front door team are co-located with the social work duty and advice team; each Early Help Practitioner is linked with a Family Hub to ensure the consistent sharing of knowledge, experience and skills.

Family Hubs work closely with a range of wider early help services including children's centres family services, youth work services, clusters, schools, health and the voluntary and faith sectors.

Case study 4

Case study 4 is a metropolitan borough council in the Northwest of England. It currently delivers 17 family hubs, all converted from original Sure Start children's centres. The council received additional DfE funding to deliver Family Hubs, spending a total of £3.5m across all 17 sites in 2023/24. They are in the process of delivering a new hub which will include co-located health services and a Youth Zone.

Family support operates along a 'corporate neighbourhood' approach with Family Hubs at the centre, with multi-agency teams including health, education and wider partners working in each neighbourhood. Each hub delivered a combination of universal, targeted and specialist services with an emphasis on evidence-based services that are tailored to meet the specific needs of the communities within each neighbourhood. They are currently undertaking an asset review across local authority and health services to explore how buildings can be better utilised to deliver joint working and release capital in other areas to strengthen the impact of investment.

Each corporate neighbourhood has a Family Hubs advisory board at a more senior level – expanded from previous Children's Centres advisory boards to include social care and SEND – which feeds into an all-age corporate neighbourhood board. Sitting under each Family Hub advisory board in each neighbourhood is an Early Help practitioner network to encourage join up across training and sharing of advice and information, alongside a parent and carer panel and a virtual panel for fathers.

Rochdale have an early help strategic board and early years strategic board which bring together senior leaders from strategic partners across the wider system and feed into the Children and Young People's Partnership board. The council has also developed a local authority-wide prevention strategy, underpinned by Early Help indicators developed in partnership with an innovation unit to identify system enablers and embed early help into the prevention strategy. In recent years they have integrated their early years and family support teams to bring elements relating to early years support including funding and advisory teams, areas SENCos, family support and Family hub staff. As a result, strategic leads for Family hubs and early education and childcare now sit in the same offices and are able to build those relationships to enable joint working and encourage joint working around quality, building space, and service delivery.

Case Study 5

Case study 5 is a local authority in a London Borough. The Council operates four flagship children and family hubs, with a total of fifteen sites including neighbourhood and satellite sites, delivering integrated family support with a budget of just over £2m in 2024/25. All of the existing Hubs have evolved from original Sure Start centres. The local authority area is characterised by inequality, constituting both affluent and deprived areas across the Borough.

Hubs are primarily located in areas of high deprivation across the Borough, each within fifteen minutes walking distance in communities. Three of the four flagship hubs are situated in and run by local primary schools. As such, support available for under 11s and their families is locality-based, around the primary schools. Children and families will be referred to hubs via the school, with Council teams doing home visits or meetings at the school to support families and signpost them to other services.

Due to political will and a commitment to retaining support for children and families during austerity, the Council has largely retained support and investment that was delivered under Sure Start, with many buildings even retaining the same branding. The Council also reported strong institutional memory in Council and Hub staff of the benefits of delivering integrated family support under Sure Start, which has helped to maintain the offer of support through national policy changes.

Recent restructuring in the Council has facilitated in strengthening the offer of joined up support for families in bringing together their Family Early Help offer, Children and Family Hubs, the parenting offer and 'Adolescent Sure Start' offer which provides support for children over the age of 11. Elements of the service are well integrated, for example parental mental health support attending stay and play sessions. Similarly, the Council emphasised the strategic role of Hubs in bringing together local partners offering support for children and families, learning on their vibrant VCSE sector to broaden the offer of support and work collaboratively. This includes facilitating regular 'briefing meetings' between the council and local community partners, and working with local providers o to commission local support for children and families.

<u>Adolescent Sure Start</u>

The Council operates an 11 plus, 'Adolescent Sure Start' team which offers drop-in services in Family Hubs and local community spaces to raise awareness among families accessing Hubs that there is a space where families with older, adolescent children can go for help specifically targeted at older children. The 11+ team sits alongside the under 11 team which operates on a locality basis, centred around local primary schools. For example, drop-in sessions by the 11+ team, at a library on a local estate has been successful in engaging families with older children. One Youth centre in the Southwark constituency also has a multi-agency delivery team, where the 11+ team are there every fortnight to support older children and their families.. Referrals to the 11+ team come from drop-in sessions run by the 11+ team, local schools, front-door MASH teams or youth justice teams. For example, local schools will make families with older children aware of the drop-in, or the team will be notified by schools of an at-risk child or family which the 11+ team will then coordinate with to carry out a home visit, meet with them at a drop-in session and support the family and

child to be connected with other services. Southwark emphasised the role of Hub managers in bringing together community organisations to strengthen the network of support for older children. For example, regular briefings bring community-based delivery partners for adolescent services around the table, alongside the Council, to facilitate funding bids for support services for older children.

A depleted Sure Start model

Many more local authorities have been forced to scale back Sure Start provision almost entirely as funding has been cut and national policy direction moved away from an emphasis on universal integrated family support. Local authorities in the Southeast and West Midlands closed the highest proportion of their children's centres between 2010/11 and 2022/23, closing 68% and 59% of centres respectively.[7] In these local authorities, most of the buildings for children's centres have been sold off over the years, and those that remain are operating limited and predominantly targeted prevision.

Case study 6

Case study 6, a County Council in the East Midlands, is an example of a local authority which scaled back their offer of family support due to financial pressures over the past decade. Delivering 54 children's centres under Sure Start, the local authority now only operates 12 across a large geographical area. In 2023/24, the council's 12 children's centres supported a targeted 0–5 service rather than open-access provision. Most costs related to the workforce delivering interventions, with building overheads met corporately and a Public Health contribution underpinning the model. The authority did not receive Family Hubs/Start for Life funding.

In 2017, the council took the decision to stop delivering open access services through centres, closing the centres to the public and now only delivering targeted services. Families' cases are held by a lead practitioner from a statutory agency, and they refer families to centres to receive a specific intervention that focuses on child development, school readiness and parenting support. Family support is often delivered by centre staff in the community, meeting the family where they are, and some parenting programmes are delivered virtually.

Despite receiving no previous Family Hub funding, the local authority is committed to the Family Hub model. They are working up plans to deliver 6 family hubs with linked

[7] UNISON (2024) Cure to children's centres hitting the most disadvantaged; Press Release; Cuts to children's centres hitting the most disadvantaged | News, Press release | News | UNISON National

spoked across health, community spaces and voluntary organisations also delivering services.

An independent 'backbone' team

Some local authorities have partnered with independent 'backbone' organisations to facilitate or coordinate the delivery of family support. These roles are often filled by national charities, and in some cases part-funded by philanthropy. This model can bring unique benefits to local systems in providing additional capacity to the local workforce and play the role of a neutral intermediary between statutory agencies to drive integration, support in clear strategic direction and prevent siloed working.

These organisations can also serve to encourage families to engage with services at the earliest opportunity, when they need it, by working to remove perceived stigma of accessing statutory services felt by some families – particularly those from marginalised communities who may have previous negative experiences accessing help and support.

Case Study 7

Case study 7 is a local authority in the West Midlands which has partnered with a charity sector provider to deliver integrated, place-based family support targeted specifically at the 0-5 age range. The organisation works with the local authority to identify areas where children are most in need of support, co-funded by the local authority and wider philanthropic partners. Joint funding from local authorities and philanthropic partners provides the backbone team and the workstreams they deliver.

Two hubs deliver support to a designated area that covers a population of 2,500 children (0-5). The model operates in a hub and spoke approach with a 'flagship' hub and extended service delivery through existing community assets such as schools, churches and community groups – and volunteers are involved in extending outreach into communities. The backbone team consists of five staff members that support local systems to increase the number of children reaching a good level of development by age five. The organisation works with local systems to target five key drivers of early outcomes to deliver that ambition – parental wellbeing, parent-infant relationships, home-learning environment, early language and communication and quality of education and childcare.

A backbone team of five staff who are focused on catalysing and facilitating local collective action to address the five key outcomes, and a further four members of staff focused on parent outreach and engagement. Together they work to:

- Support the development of a system-wide approach with local partners to increase GLD through facilitating strategic and frontline service level integration through regular stakeholder meetings from the most senior level (DCS, CEOs, Council leaders) through to service delivery partners across local settings such as Headteachers and early years settings – to ensure there is widespread local buy-in.
- Strengthen the evidence-based practice of professionals supporting families and share national expertise to upskill the workforce through work with local early years settings.
- Support community outreach of services through working with volunteer and paid parent champions to provide peer support to parents and carers and create better connections between families and the early years system. These are embedded into communities across GP offices, community centres and parent-baby groups.

Across 2023/24, there was a 51% reduction in the number of nursery school age children with significant language delays, and the delivery of five times more parent, baby and toddler groups across the area in which the backbone team was delivering support.

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