

**HEALTH SCRUTINY PANEL**

**FEBRUARY 2011**

**CHILDREN'S CENTRES AND BIRTH DATA**

**BACKGROUND**

1. At a meeting of the Health Scrutiny Panel in November 2010, a Member raised concerns that they felt merited attention by the Health Scrutiny Panel. Those concerns centred on Children's Centres and specifically, the level of intelligence they have access to relating to birth data for their geographical area of responsibility. The Panel was advised that a concern persisted that Children's Centres, in not having a sufficiently detailed picture of births in their area of responsibility, could not appropriately target services at those most in need of them.
2. The Panel agreed that this was a subject worthy of consideration and undertook to cover the matter in two meetings. To progress the matter, the Panel held a meeting on 7 January to which it invited senior representatives of Children Families and Learning and Midwifery Services at James Cook university Hospital.

**EVIDENCE**

3. The Panel opened the discussion at the meeting by asking representatives from CFL whether the above was a picture they would recognise. It was confirmed to the Panel that this scenario is an accurate one and the situation remains a matter of concern for Children's Centres and CFL.
4. The Panel heard that a lot of assumptions can be made about the effectiveness of sharing of information between agencies around birth data, although it remains the case that Children's Centres still rely heavily on parents making contact to develop a good knowledge of births in their area. It was confirmed that a significant number of parents do not, for whatever reason, approach Children's Centres. As such, Children's Centres only have a partial picture of their community.

5. The Panel was interested to hear officers' views on how the benefits of Children's Centres could be communicated to a wider cross section of parents/guardians, to ensure a better take-up of the services available, which may then bring the added benefit of gathering more data about local births.
6. The Panel was advised that health visitors would be a useful group of professionals to inform parents of the benefit of the local Children's Centre. This, however, is hardly systematic and was felt that other considerations (such as parents' questions about baby, healthchecks) may result in Children's Centres not getting mentioned.
7. The Panel heard that Children's Centres do have access to quarterly birth data from NHS Middlesbrough (Primary Care Trust), which is gathered via maternity services. Following receipt of that quarterly data, Children's Centres can compare and contrast with their recent 'sign ups'. It was reported to the Panel that when compared with such data, it looks as though 40%-60% of births are registered with Children's Centres.
8. The Panel noted that even if a Children's Centre recorded new baby 'sign up' of around 60% (the top end of the range quoted), it means that 40% of births are not engaging with Children's Centres and the services that they offer. It concerns the Panel greatly that the group not engaging with Children's Centres is precisely those who would benefit the most from the services on offer.
9. This point was accepted by officers from CFL as a ongoing concern and underlined the importance of Children's Centres having access to much richer and more detailed data about births in their area of responsibility. The Panel was keen to establish the extent to which the service had sought the assistance of registrars in receiving and collating birth data. The Panel heard that repeated attempts had been made to engage with registrars in the past, although those attempts at gathering birth data have largely been unsuccessful over a number of years, apparently due to legal barriers, as had requesting that registrars distribute information regarding Children's Centres. The Panel was assured that robust referral processes exist when it is believed that an unborn child may be at risk, or when a Common Assessment (CAF) has been completed. As such, it is clear that information can be shared effectively, so there is no reason as to why birth data could not be distributed equally as well.
10. Whilst the Panel accepted that better birth data would assist Children's Centres greatly, the panel was also interested in exploring the possibility of ensuring that Children's Centre and 'Surestart' was appropriately publicised, to ensure all who could benefit were aware of its services.
11. It was said that it is possible that Children's Centres are still perceived to be an 'institution', aimed at the disadvantaged and there is perhaps some work to be done to ensure that going to a Children's Centre is a normal thing to do.

12. Following the discussion with officers from CFL and Midwifery Services, the Panel was keen to speak with senior representatives of the Registrars Service, to explore the legal environment around the sharing of birth data and to establish whether any help could be offered to Children's Centres.
13. The Panel received evidence from the Registration Services Manager at a meeting on 18 February 2011. The Panel was advised that the legal powers and responsibilities placed on registrar services are quite clear and are as follows:
14. Section 564(3) of the Education Act 1996 provides for a registrar to make returns of births to a local education authority as and when required by that authority. This may be via printouts, electronically if the local education authority can accept them electronically or on any forms supplied by the authority. It was confirmed to the Panel that information provided is restricted to that contained in the registers, which is currently:

Reference no.

Date of Birth

Place of Birth

Name of Child

Sex

Name of Father

Place of Birth (Father)

Occupation (Father)

Name of Mother

Place of Birth (Mother)

Occupation (Mother)

Usual Address

NHS Number

15. It was confirmed that information can be supplied as and when required, but it was recommended that this is weekly, due to the high volume of birth registrations. Returns would include all births registered at Middlesbrough Register Office. This will include approximately 50% of non-Middlesbrough residents due to the fact that James Cook University Hospital is also the main maternity unit for the surrounding area. It was noted that any Middlesbrough resident that gives birth outside of Middlesbrough would not be included, as they are obliged to have the birth registered in the district they were born, although these numbers are small.
16. As such, it became clear to the Panel that if CFL (as the 'local education authority') requested the data, registrars would be obliged to provide it. This would undoubtedly be of huge benefit to Children's Centre staff in planning services, and understanding the location and frequency of births in their areas of responsibility.
17. The Panel was surprised see how simple it would appear to be for CFL to obtain the data and was somewhat surprised that CFL was not aware of the

provision, nor had it evidently had detailed conversation with registrars on the topic.

18. In addition to the above, it was confirmed that Registrars would have no objection to including Children's Centre literature with the birth wallets given at registration.
19. Following the points of clarification from the Registration Services Manager, the Panel felt that the issue had been investigated to the satisfaction of the Panel. It was clear that, upon request by the Local Education Authority, registrars are obliged to supply detailed birth data, which can be interrogated and used to assist Children's Centres in the planning of services.

### **Conclusion**

20. That the current legislative framework provides a clear opportunity for the Local Education Authority, including Children's Centres, to obtain sufficiently detailed intelligence on births to enable them to target services at those in most need of them. The Local Education Authority simply has to request the data returns from the registrar's service.

### **Recommendations**

21. That the Department of Children, Families and Learning undertake the necessary steps to receive regular birth registration returns that it is entitled, under legislative provision, to receive.
22. That the Department of Children, Families and Learning & Registrar Services establish a working relationship that ensures the dissemination of information to, and about the Children's Centres, at the time of registration.
23. That the Department of Children, Families and Learning, establishes systematic processes to ensure that the birth data is accurately and regularly disseminated amongst Children's centres.
24. That Children's Centres use that birth data to appropriately target services to those most in need of them.
25. That the Department of Children, Families and Learning reports back to the Health Scrutiny Panel, at an appropriate juncture, on how birth data is being applied to plan and market Children's Centre services to those who would most benefit from them.

**Councillor Eddie Dryden  
Chair, Health Scrutiny Panel**

### **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

26. Please see the minutes and supporting papers for the Health Scrutiny Panel on 7 January 2011 and 18 February 2011.

**Contact Officer:**

Jon Ord - Scrutiny Support Officer  
Telephone: 01642 729706 (direct line)  
Email: [jon\\_ord@middlesbrough.gov.uk](mailto:jon_ord@middlesbrough.gov.uk)