

# Briefing

## Sure Start children's centres: A post-occupancy evaluation

Most new Sure Start children's centres are performing well and are supporting the government's aim of giving pre-school children the best start in life. However, the two-year turnaround time allowed to build centres is proving very challenging for local authorities and the heads of the new centres. This is having an impact on design: although families are rating the centres highly, very few are rated as good by CABA's design professionals.



## Introduction

The provision of 3,500 Sure Start children's centres by 2010, one for every community in England, is central to the government's aim of creating the best possible start for pre-school children. Some 2,500 children's centres had been built by April 2008, with another 1,000 due for completion by 2010.

But how well are the new centres performing? And what lessons can be drawn from them for centres that are about to be built and for similar capital programmes in future?

This research, conducted by CABE, was commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). The study, which took the form of a 'post-occupancy evaluation' of 101 centres, was completed two-thirds of the way through the Sure Start programme<sup>1</sup>. Post-occupancy evaluations are qualitative studies that concentrate on the buildings

themselves rather than the quality or variety of service provision or the outcomes for the children.

This briefing sets out the key findings and recommendations from the research. The full report, available to download from [www.cabe.org.uk/publications](http://www.cabe.org.uk/publications), also includes detailed discussion of best practice in the design of children's centres and case studies that show what can be achieved.

Details of the research methods and objectives are set out on page 11.

## Findings

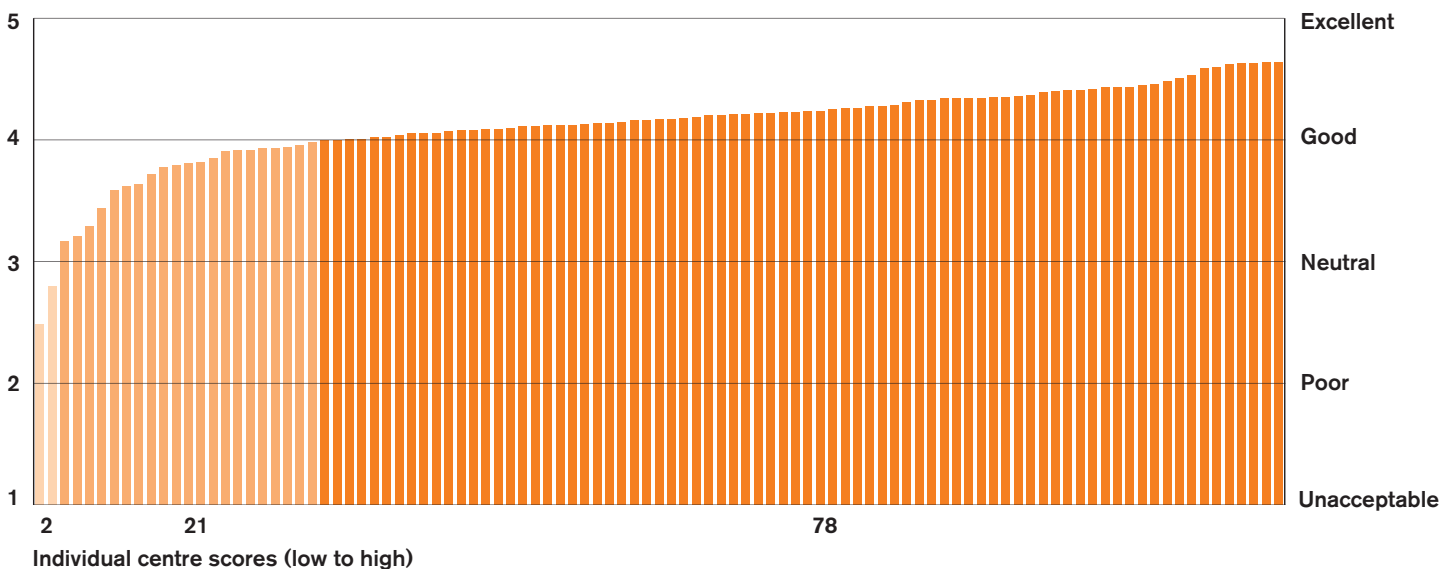
The results from the research into the children's centres show that the majority are considered good by the staff and parents, who are pleased to have the new facilities. On the whole, the centres are fit for purpose.

However, the architecture and design professionals – 'enablers'

working for CABE on a consultancy basis – who conducted the evaluations considered the design of very few to rank as good or excellent. In many cases, some fundamental aspects such as environmental sustainability, storage, adult spaces and external identity are either not well designed or not included. Designs also need to cater for a wider and more varied range of uses, since the buildings are more than just children's centres: they offer a wide range of family-orientated services.

Children's centres are small but highly complex buildings with relatively modest budgets. However, they need to be imaginative, inspiring and uplifting, as well as comfortable and practical. Elements that have prescribed space standards, such as children's play areas, or that have a dedicated separate budget, such as furniture and equipment, are well designed and specified and were given

**Figure 1** Users' views: scores for all centres show that users rated most as good to excellent



higher ratings by centre users. However, those elements that are not defined through standards and those without a dedicated budget, such as outdoor play areas and adult spaces, storage and environmental sustainability, were badly rated and lacking in both quality and provision.

The two-year turnaround time demanded by the Sure Start programme to date has proved very challenging for the local authorities and centre heads who have to act as the clients in the building process. The speed of the process for phase one (the centres in this research) has not allowed time for local authority service providers to form multi-departmental working group teams to finalise the service plans and inform the brief. Phase two has now been completed but this may be improved in phase three as local authority teams will already be established and will have experience of this building type.

The speed of the programme is also not allowing for proper involvement of staff, parents and the community in design decisions. Where this involvement has happened, it is shown to have had an important influence on the users' positive perceptions of the centres, above that of the actual quality of the building itself.

For more detail on these process-led problems, see the section 'Why is this happening?' on page 7.

### Overall ratings

Centres were scored by both enablers and users at between 1 and 5 on a range of specific features (where 1 was unacceptable and 5 excellent) then given an overall score based on the average of these feature scores.

#### Parents and staff think the centres are good to excellent

The majority of centres were rated good to excellent overall

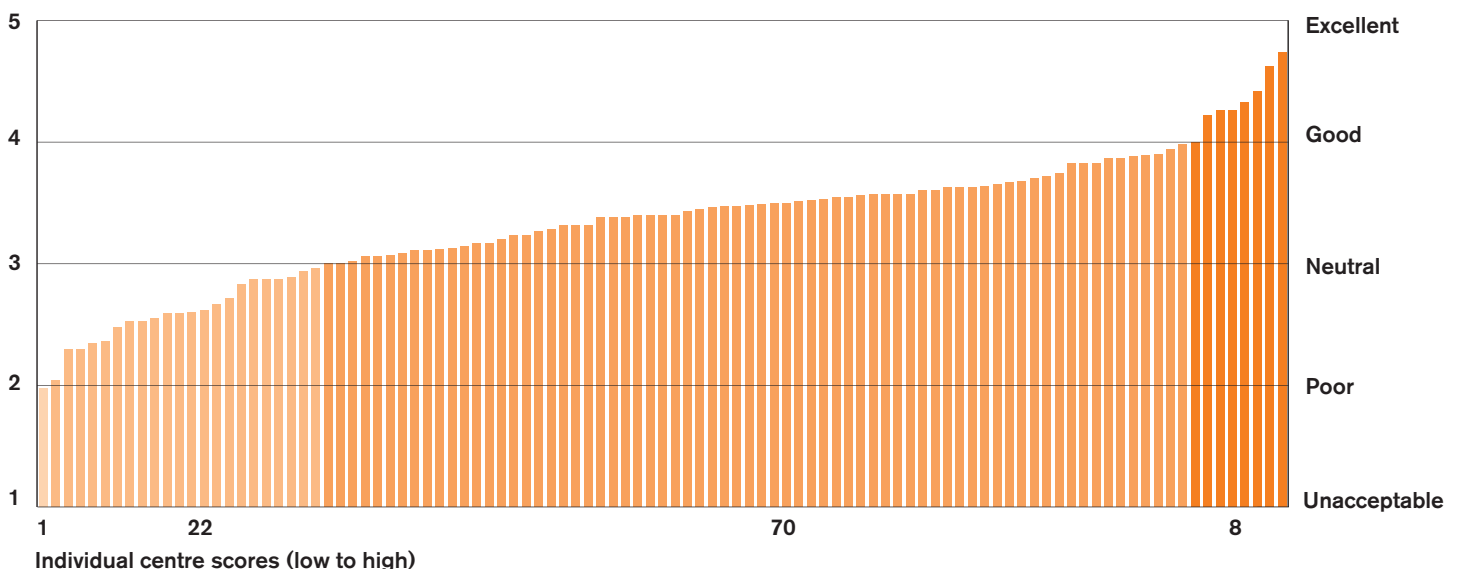
by the centre staff and parents<sup>2</sup>. Looking at the results of 2,075 questionnaires (Figure 1):

- 78 out of 101 centres were rated good to excellent overall by staff, parents and management and members of the public (4.16 was the average score)
- 21 centres were rated neutral to good
- two were rated poor to neutral.

Parents were very positive about almost all of the buildings and the benefits that they feel result from using them. They were particularly struck by the positive atmosphere and environment.

Staff were also positive, though marginally less so than parents. The positive response overall from staff appears to be contributing to staff recruitment and retention and to increasing their job satisfaction.

**Figure 2** Enablers' views: scores for all centres show that enablers rated most as neutral to good



## Enablers think the centres are neutral to good

CABE enablers rated the majority of centres as neutral to good, although they considered almost a quarter of them to be poor to neutral. Of the 101 centres (Figure 2):

- eight were rated good to excellent
- 70 were neutral to good
- 22 were poor to neutral
- one was unacceptable to poor.

Enablers found that the centres worked overall but that there was room for improvement. The designs that were appreciated had imaginative, child-friendly and well-developed ideas, but it is essential to get the basic things right first: sound construction; a comfortable environment in all respects; and the right size and arrangement of spaces. Their assessment reflects the fact that this does not happen enough. Enablers also thought that most centres did not show a particularly inspirational level of design.

## The designs

### A good centre will be well designed overall

Centres with a high overall rating generally achieved good ratings in all areas. This suggests that the designer/client partnership was strong, leading to a better understanding of the brief, more unified decision-making and a higher final quality.

A few centres were good on the whole but had a couple of very badly rated elements such

as transport or access that brought the overall centre score down. This does flag up the importance of the local authority choosing the right site. Robust feasibility studies that assess both service provision and the physical constraints of a site are a key consideration in affecting the overall quality and usability of the building.

[See recommendations 2 and 12](#)

### Well-rated elements

Children's play areas and babies' rooms were rated good by over 90 per cent of staff and parents and over 70 per cent of enablers, both in terms of quality of space and size.

Other elements that achieved high ratings from both centre users and enablers were:

- light
- atmosphere/feeling
- children's and babies' play equipment
- children's furniture
- windows
- colour and decoration.

### Areas of concern

Some design elements were repeatedly rated as poor or unacceptable. These were:

- lack of external identity, poor approach and signage
- insufficient storage throughout – with special problems being found with buggy storage and storage for flexible community spaces
- poor quality spaces for staff and adults (including community and training rooms)

- absence of measures to make the building environmentally sustainable, and lack of community energy strategies
- excessive noise from hard surfaces
- unimaginative, small outdoor areas with little weather protection and poor connections with indoor play spaces, and a lack of access to nature
- low rating for environmental comfort: bad thermal performance or conversely overheating and lack of cross-ventilation
- transport difficulties (either not well connected to public transport, or car parking provision insufficient). [See recommendations 4, 7, 11 and 17](#)

### Differences of opinion between centre users and enablers

Averaging across the group of questions covering each topic, the centre users scored their centres higher than the enablers for each group by between three quarters and a whole point (see Figure 3).

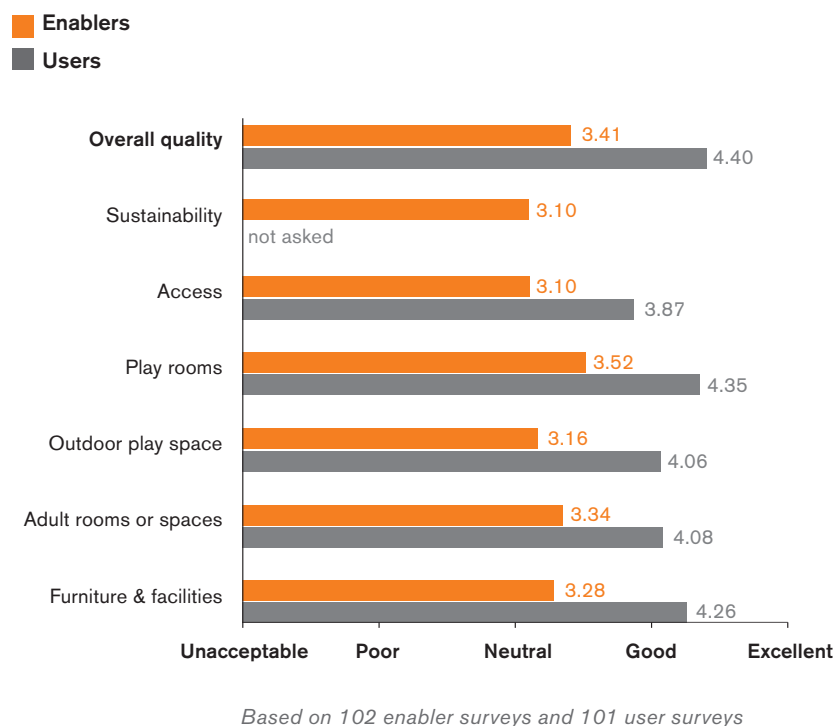
This difference in response is common to surveys where data from different groups of respondents is used. Parents benefit strongly from new facilities and are therefore likely to be the most positive about them. Staff were slightly more critical because they have to cope with any problems on a day-to-day level but they are also glad to have new facilities (see Figure 4). The professional view of a CABE enabler, on the other hand, is likely to be moderated through comparisons of the different centres they survey,

is less partial to the provision of services, and casts a critical eye over physical issues such as the way the building looks and performs.

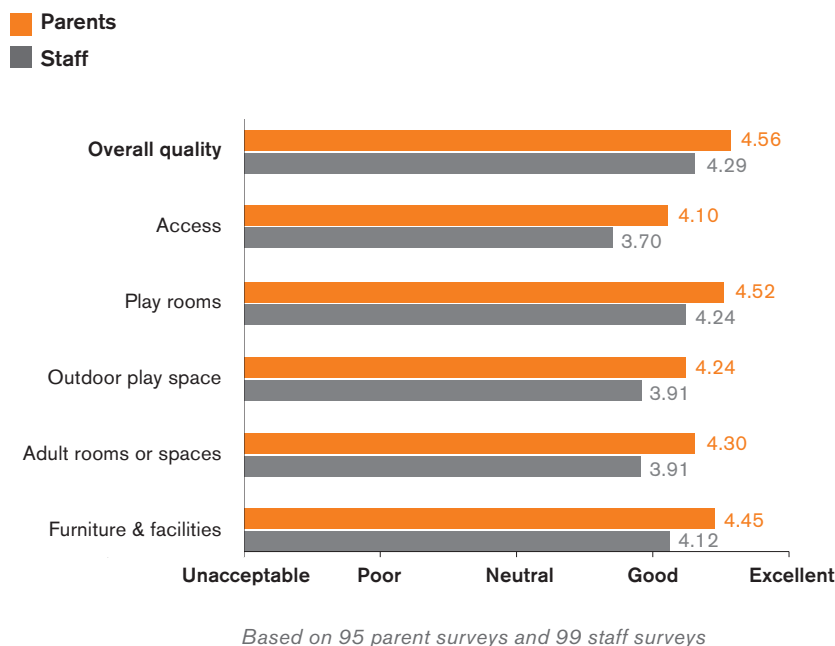
Why do users praise buildings that are seen as unremarkable by building design professionals? In most cases this is because they value service provision so highly, the operation and appearance of the building are secondary.

Looking at the users' responses, both where they gave ratings and in the sections of the questionnaire where they wrote what they felt, it seems that parents and carers were very influenced in favour of the centres by the excellent support given to their children and themselves. The centres built in phase one and covered by the study serve the most deprived areas and many parents and carers are unlikely to have had any similar provision in their area. Families who may have no outdoor space of their own at home will find the generous child play spaces especially welcome.

**Figure 3 All centres: enablers vs users**



**Figure 4 All centres: parents vs staff**



## The buildings

### Procurement

Out of 95 centres for which the procurement method was known, local authorities had used the following routes:

- 71 traditional procurement
- 16 design and build
- seven partnering
- one private finance initiative (PFI).

The PFI-procured centre scored poorly in terms of design quality, followed by design and build, with partnering then traditional construction being more highly rated. This suggests that for this scale of project the traditional procurement route is the most advantageous and has proved the most successful for control of budget and quality, with partnering also showing some successful results (see Figure 5).

### Building types

The schemes included in the study were:

- 49 new build, traditional construction
- 29 refurbishment
- 14 extension
- nine new build, modular.

Figure 6 shows the ratings against build type:

- modular build scores lower than other building types (although only nine examples are recorded).

The variations in enabler ratings are small but they suggest that special care needs to be taken with design and build and with modular construction.

### Siting

40 per cent of children’s centres were located next to existing primary schools, either as extensions or new builds. This follows the government’s agenda for extended schools and

wraparound care through the co-location of facilities. However, siting on school grounds does lead to a reduction in playground space for an existing school and also to access difficulties.

[See recommendations 2, 5 and 15](#)

### Diversity of buildings, and brief

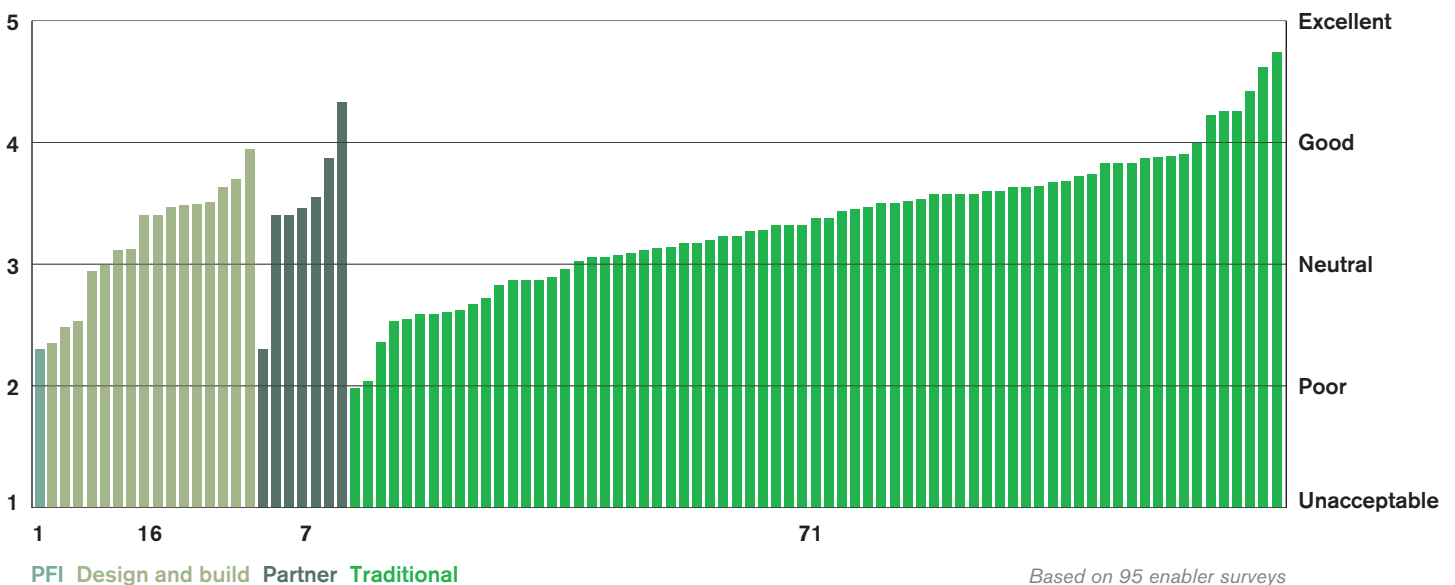
Each centre was designed according to the needs of the local community, the available site, the service provision of the local authority and the funds available. There was no ‘standard’ children’s centre: each is unique and will have a brief based on the area, site specifics and provision.

[See recommendations 2 and 10](#)

### Building standards

Results suggest that, with the relatively small budget available to most centres, only those features that form the core requirement and those that have dedicated budgets are being provided adequately. Elements

Figure 5 Enabler ratings by procurement type



such as adult space, outside space, storage and environmental sustainability for which there are no specific requirements or budget, are lacking in both quality and provision.

See recommendations 3, 5 and 15

### Why is this happening?

In addition to assessing the quality of the design of the individual buildings, CABE enablers also identified a number of process-led problems in their reports. Most of the issues that impact greatly on quality can be attributed directly to the short funding cycle, which is having a fundamental impact on the quality of the completed buildings:

- *Failure to involve stakeholders sufficiently in the briefing and design process*  
The most successful buildings involved staff and parents in a collaborative two-way design process, but this needs

sufficient time to be orchestrated, and designers who are skilled in user participation. The two-year programme provided for the Sure Start centres does not allow any time for consultation – this is a particular problem for the larger building projects.

See recommendations 2 and 10

- *Location and site difficulties*  
Meeting the timetable often means that sites selected are often already in local authority ownership, but they may be neither the best nor the most cost-effective to develop. Site appraisals by local authorities were often not completed in enough depth or they focused either on physical constraints or service provision, very rarely both. The two-year programme provided for the Sure Start centres allows no time to find new sites with good prominence and access.  
See recommendations 2 and 12

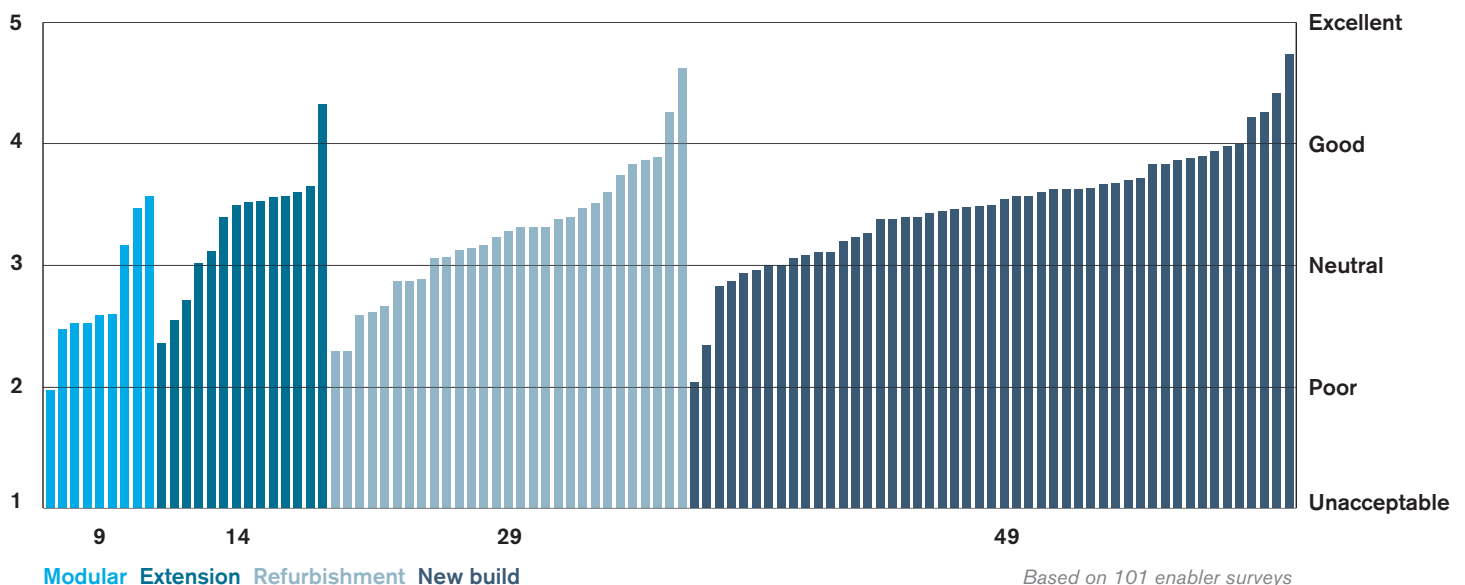
- *Complex service provision leads to difficulty in determining the brief*  
Preparing an accurate brief may not be possible when service provision from different local authority departments, or private providers, may not have been finalised. The brief for a children’s centre is very reliant on the formulation by the local authority of a comprehensive service plan.

If a totally different service is provided than originally intended, the relation of the spaces to each other and their size and location may not be entirely appropriate.

See recommendations 2 and 9

- *Uncertainty of funding*  
The basic funding of the children’s centres through the Sure Start capital grant is not sufficient to provide for good quality adult, community and ancillary spaces. Each authority will determine any extra funding in addition to the Sure Start grant to be allocated through

Figure 6 Enabler ratings by building type



a number of routes due to the different services being provided. The total construction budget may not be known until the bidding process. Centre managers and designers clearly identified this as problematic and conflicting with the need to produce a solid brief early enough in the programme. Funding from other government sources is difficult to co-ordinate in the timeframe.

See recommendations 3, 12 and 13

### Case study Pen Green Children's Centre, Corby, Northamptonshire

Pen Green has been a long-term project with funding from successive waves for different elements of an early years excellence centre.<sup>3</sup> Two child-orientated projects feature.<sup>4</sup>

#### Sure Start trailblazer project: The Beach

Behind a new entrance, and tying the whole development together, an L-shaped single storey suite of rooms around a fully glazed 'cloister' corridor links to the existing nursery to form a courtyard with a 'beach' at the heart of the centre. Overall, the development, designed by Greenhill Jenner Architects, is extremely successful. The 'beach' provides an exciting and inspirational focus for the centre and a clear statement about its values: children and the importance of play and learning.

Pen Green ©Charlotte Wood/Greenhill Jenner Architects



#### Neighbourhood nurseries initiative: The Nest

The new baby and toddler nest, designed by John Bovinck, adjoins the existing nursery, housing a playroom. The new extension is flat roofed with transparent end walls that connect to the small enclosed babies' garden and the main nursery garden. The nest is only small, but incorporates lots of exciting and playful design. Much of it is organised to allow children to explore the spaces as independently as possible, while being nurtured to feel safe and secure, with a warm and welcoming atmosphere.

#### What Pen Green does well

- a clear vision informed the design
- bespoke design of different areas
- creative design allows for fun and ingenuity of spaces suitable for children
- well-considered links allow relationships between children of different ages, community users and the natural environment
- provides a strong community focus
- makes good relationships between internal and external space.



## Recommendations

The recommendations emerging from the research cover the process of delivering children's centres and are also intended to inform policy for future capital programmes. They relate to the different roles involved in delivery and are aimed at anyone in central and local government concerned with public building programmes.

### Recommendations for central government and the DCSF

#### 1 Long-term quality

The government's own common minimum standards<sup>5</sup> in the public sector for the built environment should encourage local authorities to adopt good practice in procurement. However, many of the problems encountered show that this is not happening. The government should review its common minimum standards and:

- extend their mandatory status to local authorities and other bodies delivering public buildings
- ensure that long-term quality is the prime consideration above 'cost effectiveness'.

#### 2 Consultation and preparation

This study suggests that a children's centre will be more successful and receive higher ratings where there has been active user participation in the design and where the community has made decisions about it. Time for user involvement is not included as part of the programme and the two-year period is barely sufficient time in which to get the larger centres built.

The government should:

- allow sufficient time for local authorities to purchase new sites and do feasibility studies of existing sites
- include time in the programme for the establishment of new teams requiring inter-departmental cooperation within local authorities: these will take time to start to work together efficiently on new programmes
- allocate specific time for stakeholder involvement as an integral part of the programme.

#### 3 Funding

Funding issues, including uncertainties and changes in funding availability, are cited anecdotally as reasons why poor decisions are taken. The government should:

- ensure funding to provide long-term quality in terms of community resources as well as children's spaces
- maintain consistency of support to local authorities: changes in departments and policies are detrimental to long-term projects
- harmonise funding timetables between government departments to allow flexibility for local authorities to be able to secure the full range of funds for public projects and channel funding for capital projects through one source.

#### 4 Design quality

Building a design quality assessment into the process would help to minimise strategic mistakes and establish key priorities. The government should ensure that a design quality rating is built into the assessment procedure used by its technical advisors at the briefing stage as well as in the assessment of tenders.

#### 5 Outdoor play space

The government should set minimum standards for outdoor play, and consider funding this separately to achieve a high-quality play space for every children's facility.

#### 6 Environmental sustainability

The government should:

- set environmental standards as a requirement for all public sector procurement, including through local authorities and health care trusts, with targets: BREEAM 'excellent' for new build, and 'very good' for refurbishment
- measure and monitor consumption using an established common method, set consumption targets, ensure that these are achieved, and publish data for all public buildings<sup>6</sup>
- make whole-life costing mandatory for procurement of public buildings and publicly report the data on whole-life calculations.

## 7 Monitoring quality

Continuous improvement of the quality of public buildings can be achieved if the capital process begins with an evaluation of what works well. The government should:

- require design teams to submit accurate and comparable project data at the end of schemes
- introduce a procedure to log the procurement processes involved for all capital building projects
- make post-occupancy evaluation a condition of receiving capital funding for future projects.

### For local authorities

Local authorities act as the client alongside the users and have control over their own local interpretation of the process and the amount of support they provide. They will be responsible for the continued maintenance and running of the facilities and the success of the policy for children and families in their area is dependent in part on the successful design of these facilities. With phase three of the children's centres starting, the recommendations below are principally aimed at reinforcing and detailing some of the practices outlined in the standards that will make the existing system work better for local authority clients.

## 8 Best practice in procurement

Local authorities should use the Office of Government Commerce's common minimum standards<sup>7</sup> as a basis for best practice in the procurement of all public buildings but strive to

go beyond them to put quality and long-term viability at the heart of the agenda.

## 9 Becoming a strong client

Local authorities should:

- set up cross-departmental multi-disciplinary agency teams to steer capital projects – especially where there is no pre-existing partnership working
- establish a clear chain of communication between departments
- consider using client design advisors or design champions, especially where the centre is large and requires many integrated services
- set down a clear vision and conditions for success of the project from the outset to use as a benchmark as design progresses.

## 10 Involving centre users and stakeholders

One of the key findings in this report is that the involvement of centre users and other stakeholders in design development is vital to the success of children's centre projects.

Local authorities should ensure that specific time is allowed for users and the community to participate actively in the design of each building.

## 11 Choosing the right design team, especially the architect

Local authorities should seek to achieve best value by giving preference to design teams with demonstrable understanding of the sector – not just the lowest fee bid.<sup>8</sup>

## 12 Capital funding

A quick appraisal should be undertaken at the outset to define the best sites to use or re-use and which partners can be brought together so that full advantage can be taken of other funding.

Local authorities should seek additional funding from different internal and external funding streams to supplement the Sure Start grant.

## 13 Tight timetables and funding eligibility

Local authorities should ensure that timetables and the constraints built into them are communicated clearly to all parties.

## 14 Reviewing design quality

Local authorities should set an agenda with the designers to conduct internal client reviews of the design quality at different stages of the project.

## 15 Outdoor space

Local authorities should source additional funds and ring-fence funds for outdoor space and for essential refurbishment upgrades.

## 16 Be green leaders

Rather than wait for mandatory environmental sustainability standards in public buildings, local authorities should act now to be ahead of the game and:

- ensure that an environmental sustainability policy is put in place for the local authority area that includes a high standard for all new public buildings
- use whole-life costing analysis to ensure that facilities are both economic and sustainable

- monitor energy usage of public buildings through their lives to ensure that energy saving measures can be implemented and be seen as cost-effective
- work with energy providers to discuss options for authority-wide strategies for all public buildings, including children's centres, potentially using public buildings as the basis for a community energy system.

## 17 Post-occupancy evaluation

Local authorities should commit to using post-occupancy evaluation to discover issues with management and stimulate continued improvement of the building.

## Objectives and methodology

In 2007, the DCSF commissioned CABE to conduct a post-occupancy evaluation of 100 Sure Start centres (built mostly in phase one). The purpose of the evaluation was to:

- compile a record of what the Sure Start capital programme is achieving and how this is undertaken
- understand the quality of the buildings being provided and whether there are conclusions that can be drawn to improve later stages.

A methodology was formulated to:

- obtain the factual data for each of the centres
- gather the opinions of both users and built environment professionals on the quality of the centres



Granville Plus Sure Start ©David Sporo

- collect factual and anecdotal information on the process of making the buildings, wherever possible.

Buildings were selected from the 'SureStart\_on' database with a focus on those provided in the most deprived areas of the country, spread across the nine government regions in England and representing different building project types. A CABE enabler – a built environment professional with experience of building design and its evaluation – visited each of the selected centres.<sup>9</sup> Visits were agreed with the relevant local authorities and arranged between the centre manager and the assigned enabler. The quality of buildings and their suitability for use as Sure Start premises were assessed and recorded using questionnaires to centre users and professionals, notes from interviews with users, a report from the enabler, and photographs and information about the building.

## References

- 1 A separate report, *The National Evaluation of Sure Start*, which focuses on the outcomes for the children was researched by the Institute for the study of Children, Families and Social Issues, Birkbeck, University of London: [www.ness.bbk.ac.uk](http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk). A summary can be obtained on the Sure Start website at [tinyurl.com/5ovtd2](http://tinyurl.com/5ovtd2).
- 2 Centre users consist of staff of the Sure Start services, childcare staff, centre heads and managers, parents and members of the public who use the centres.
- 3 Early years excellence centres were established in the late 1990s as forerunners of children's centres.
- 4 A further more detailed case study of Pen Green can be found at [tinyurl.com/5lexyv](http://tinyurl.com/5lexyv).
- 5 The Office of Government Commerce's common minimum standards are available online. Go to [tinyurl.com/3kou3w](http://tinyurl.com/3kou3w).
- 6 The BREEAM assessment method does not require a target consumption to be achieved – only to be set. Some local authorities such as Leicester are implementing their own monitoring of public buildings and this has proven to be beneficial in understanding and reducing consumption and expenditure. The EU energy performance certificates will only come into effect for buildings over 1,000m<sup>2</sup>.
- 7 Local authority guidance to the Office of Government Commerce's common minimum standards is available online at [tinyurl.com/667cre](http://tinyurl.com/667cre).
- 8 This may not be relevant to local authorities where there is an existing architecture department.
- 9 All the enablers conducting the post-occupancy evaluations are professionally qualified in a relevant field such as architecture, surveying or project management.

**The government is funding 3,500 new Sure Start children's centres by 2010 in support of its ambitious plans to give pre-school children the best possible start. This post-occupancy evaluation by CABE for the Department of Children, Schools and Families presents the views of parents, staff and design professionals on the new facilities. It will be of interest to architects, centre heads, local authorities and the government and includes lessons applicable to future capital building programmes as well as the 1,000 centres still being built.**

1 Kemble Street  
London WC2B 4AN  
T 020 7070 6700  
F 020 7070 6777  
E [enquiries@cabe.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@cabe.org.uk)  
[www.cabe.org.uk](http://www.cabe.org.uk)

Commission for Architecture  
and the Built Environment

The government's advisor  
on architecture, urban design  
and public space

Published in 2008 by the  
Commission for Architecture  
and the Built Environment.

Graphic design: Duffy  
Cover image: Harmony Children  
Centre, Brent by Greenhill Jenner  
Architects ©Charlotte Wood

Research: Alexi Marmot Associates

Edited by: Julian Birch

Although every care has been taken in preparing this report, no responsibility or liability will be accepted by CABE, its employees, agents or advisors for its accuracy or completeness.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, copied or transmitted without the prior written consent of the publisher except that the material may be photocopied for non-commercial purposes without permission from the publisher.

This publication is available in alternative formats on request from the publisher.

CABE is the government's advisor on architecture, urban design and public space. As a public body, we encourage policymakers to create places that work for people. We help local planners apply national design policy and advise developers and architects, persuading them to put people's needs first. We show public sector clients how to commission buildings that meet the needs of their users. And we seek to inspire the public to demand more from their buildings and spaces. Advising, influencing and inspiring, we work to create well-designed, welcoming places.

