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Local Policy Proposal:

**Expansion of Children's Centres to Provide  
Universal English Language Learning Classes**



**Erasmus+**

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## PART 1: INTRODUCTION

The Sure Start programme is a policy established by Labour in 1998, for the delivery of early years' education and development through community based centres known as Children's Centres. Services provided by Children's Centres include childcare, information and advice to parents, and child and family health services. Studies have shown that the use of Children's Centres' facilities positively benefits mothers and families, and acts as a hub for the local community, building social capital and cohesion. Despite these benefits, the policy has lacked any sort of targeted focus on migrant families and mothers, which are often those that would most benefit from community cohesion. This proposal suggests measures that can be implemented to Children's Centres to maximise their access and appeal to migrant families and mothers, through English language learning, volunteerism, and third-sector collaboration geared towards helping migrant mothers and families.

## PART 2: SURE START CHILDREN'S CENTRES

### Brief History

In 1998, the Sure Start Local Programmes were an initiative for early years education and pre-school child development which targeted the 20% most deprived areas in England to connect core services of health, early education and play, and family support for the under-fours<sup>1</sup>.

By 2003, the local programmes shifted their focus to become Sure Start Children Centres. This was because not all disadvantaged children lived in the most deprived areas. Consequently, the children centres became a universal service to all pre-school children and families by being put in place in every community in England (3,500 centres). Local authorities played a greater role than the central government in determining the services of each children centre. Their main objectives shifted from child development to *childcare, family health and getting mothers back into work*. Today, there are 3,200 children centres, with 380 closing in the last 8 years<sup>2</sup>.

### Services provided

The services provided by Children's Centres varies widely between centres, and is a response to local needs. In general, however, Children's Services typically involve providing, or providing access to via information and signposting:

- childcare and early education

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<sup>1</sup> Alex Bate, David Foster, (2017) Sure Start (England) in *House of Commons Briefing Paper*, Number 7257

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

- information and advice to parents
- outreach and family support services
- drop-in sessions and activities for parents
- child and family health services
- links to Jobcentre Plus
- support for childminders<sup>3</sup>

### **Sure Start as a Local Integration Policy**

The Sure Start programme forms a strong basis for the integration of local migrant families and mothers into their community:

**The Coalition Government’s (2010- 2015) core aims for the programme include helping the neediest families and increasing community cohesion<sup>4</sup>. Our policy proposal builds on these aims by specifically looking to increase migrant integration within communities through these centres.**

The Government increased the programme’s focus on the neediest families, calling on local authorities to make sure that the services provided by CCs were accessible to disadvantaged families. Research by the DfE and NatCen show that low income and non-working families are more likely to stay engaged and use targeted services and early childcare. Disadvantaged families (non-working parents and those with poorer mental health) used more services directly provided by the children’s centre or signposted by the centre.

**Well-evidenced Children’s Centres’ programmes are more likely to be run through a mix of children’s centre staff and other organisations. This provides a good context to our proposal of increasing ESOL classes and third-sector collaboration within Children’s Centres.**

The important role that children’s centres play in providing effective multi-agency working is widely recognised, with less successful programmes more likely to be run by centre staff only. In terms of impacts, “Multi-agency working gave beneficial results for some child outcomes, such as pro-social skills and non-verbal reasoning”<sup>5</sup>

**Children’s Centres have the capacity to deliver a wider range of services, in line with our proposal**

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<sup>3</sup> Alex Bate, David Foster, (2017) Sure Start (England) in *House of Commons Briefing Paper*, Number 7257

<sup>4</sup> HM Government, *The Coalition: our programme for government*, May 2010, p19

<sup>5</sup> Department for Education, *The impact of children’s centres: studying the effects of children's centres in promoting better outcomes for young children and their families: Evaluation of Children’s Centres in England (ECCE, Strand 4): Research Report*, December 2015

The All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Children’s Centres, July 2016, has found that, in addition to Children’s Centre’s existing health and development work, many of their established strengths such as their family-friendly setting, strong local partnerships and reach amongst more disadvantaged families mean that they are very well placed to deliver a wider range of services<sup>6</sup>.

**Children’s Centres focus on, and positively impact, mothers and families – who are the key beneficiaries of our policy proposal.**

In 2010 and 2012, follow-up research conducted by NESS on children aged 5 and 7, showed significant positive effects of the programmes on eight of 21 outcomes: two positive outcomes for children (lower BMIs and better physical health) and four positive outcomes for mothers and families (more stimulating and less chaotic home environments, less harsh discipline, and greater life-satisfaction)<sup>7</sup>

A more recent study conducted by the DfE in 2015 (*DfE, NatCen 2009-2015*) also found some positive impacts for parents and for home life. The analysis by *DfE and NatCen from 2009-2015* showed more evidence of impact on outcomes for families and mothers, with fewer effects found for child outcomes<sup>8</sup>. It should be recognised that children’s centres were typically emphasising parenting and family services, therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that the more notable effects were found for improvements in family functioning and parenting, (and to a lesser extent, mother outcomes).

**Children’s Centres utilise existing buildings and assets. This means funding is not as expensive.**

This is important in the current funding environment within local authorities, and in the context of Brexit. It also means that:

**Children’s centres act as a space for the local community and are locally-led. This is important for community cohesion and migrant integration**

Previous research on community centres have proven that they provide a unique and valuable space for migrants in connecting them to the local community and offering a long-term

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<sup>6</sup> All Part Parliamentary Group. (2017). *Integration Not Demonisation*. Available: <http://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/themes/570513f1b504f500db000001/attachments/original/1504379228/TC0016 AAPG Integration not Demonisation Report.pdf?1504379228> [Last accessed: 1st February 2018]

<sup>7</sup> NESS, The impact of Sure Start Local Programmes on five year olds and their families, November 2010

<sup>8</sup> Department for Education, Children’s centres evaluation in England follow-up survey of centre leaders: Research report, June 2015

integration solution<sup>9</sup>. We propose the revival of children’s centres in providing local needs and services to foster greater interaction between and within migrant communities. We are pushing for a society that goes further than individuals simply tolerating each other, but where they can meet, mix and connect and form long-lasting relationships and skills<sup>10</sup>

It is crucial for Children’s Centres to be led with the needs of the local people at the core of their development process. In 2010, Lord Nash, who was the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Schools, said:

*“It is up to local authorities to decide how to organise and commission services from children’s centres in their areas. They are best placed to understand local needs and the different ways they can be supported locally.”<sup>11</sup>*

The APPG report on social integration reinforces this idea by stating how the central government should not dictate policy priorities<sup>12</sup>; integration is a fluid and flexible process which requires different needs and services.

## **PART 3: POLICY PROPOSAL**

### **English Learning Classes and Implementation**

Since the infrastructure for children centres is already in place, it is important to think about the services which they can provide. Our research has demonstrated how language competency is fundamental in facilitating interaction, aiding personal development and educational opportunities and therefore reaching one’s potential<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Neli Demireva, ‘Promoting Contact Through Local Community Centres’ in British Academy (eds) *If you could do one thing*, (2017), pp.26-31 Available

at:<https://www.britac.ac.uk/sites/default/files/British%20Academy%20YCDOT%20Essays.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> All Part Parliamentary Group. (2017). *Integration Not Demonisation*. Available:

[http://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/themes/570513f1b504f500db000001/attachments/original/1504379228/TC0016\\_AAPG\\_Integration\\_not\\_Demonisation\\_Report.pdf?1504379228](http://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/themes/570513f1b504f500db000001/attachments/original/1504379228/TC0016_AAPG_Integration_not_Demonisation_Report.pdf?1504379228) [Last accessed: 1st February 2018]

<sup>11</sup> Alex Bate, David Foster, (2017) Sure Start (England) in *House of Commons Briefing Paper*, Number 7257

<sup>12</sup> All Part Parliamentary Group. (2017). *Integration Not Demonisation*. Available:

[http://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/themes/570513f1b504f500db000001/attachments/original/1504379228/TC0016\\_AAPG\\_Integration\\_not\\_Demonisation\\_Report.pdf?1504379228](http://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/themes/570513f1b504f500db000001/attachments/original/1504379228/TC0016_AAPG_Integration_not_Demonisation_Report.pdf?1504379228) [Last accessed: 1st February 2018]

<sup>13</sup> Mike Chick and Iona Hannagan Lewis, (2017) Higher Education and Voluntary Sector Collaboration for ESOL provision, in British Academy (eds) *If You Could Do One Thing*, pp. 32-38, Available

at:<https://www.britac.ac.uk/sites/default/files/British%20Academy%20YCDOT%20Essays.pdf>



## **The need for English language learning in the UK**

According to the Migration Observatory, in 2014, the UK had a foreign-born population of 8.3 million, many of whom speak little or no English and lack basic education<sup>14</sup>. We are proposing that English language learning classes become more of a universal service whereby access to these classes are made widely available across community centres in the UK. The top asylum applicant-producing countries do not have English as an official language, making these classes even more important if we are to foster a welcoming environment for migrants. The fact that such a large proportion of our population enter our country without knowing any English makes their integration process into society extremely daunting and overwhelming, and inhibits their ability to progress socially or economically.

Moreover, there are more women than men who are migrating to the UK, and once here they are faced with physical and personal barriers which prevent them from learning English. These factors highlight the need for English learning classes to be more widely available and accessible, with a particular focus on migrant women.

## **Collaboration between educational organisations and third sector**

The provision of English language learning classes within children centres can be implemented through creating partnerships between educational structures and charities. The British Academy report provided an example of the benefits of this concept, where the Welsh Refugee Council and the teacher training department of the University of South Wales teamed up to help migrants in Cardiff learn English. This report stated that: “educational organisations are uniquely placed to enact a crucial role in the cultural and linguistic integration of migrants in the United Kingdom”<sup>15</sup>(p33). The partnerships between trainee teachers providing English language learning classes for migrants show mutually beneficial impacts. The trainee teachers gain an understanding of the needs and experiences of migrants, whilst migrants gain the language skills needed to integrate, gain employment and access services<sup>16</sup>. This idea takes into consideration all the core factors of a local-led, community based service, as well as offering a space where migrants can learn from students who can provide more of a service than many volunteers who are often stretched beyond their capacity.

## **Volunteering**

Volunteering is an excellent way to give back to your community and maintain motivation for migrants struggling to integrate into society. Volunteers at Children’s Centres will have an

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<sup>14</sup> Migration Observatory (Jan 2016) Migrants in the UK: An Overview  
[http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/migobs/Migrants%20in%20the%20UK-Overview\\_0.pdf](http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/migobs/Migrants%20in%20the%20UK-Overview_0.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

understanding of the locality and provide migrants with invaluable support and advice on their new surroundings. Volunteers from both established communities and those who are settled migrants both enrich the creation of a new community encounter. Migrants who have already been through the English-learning and integration process can inspire new migrants and share their experiences, whilst those from host communities can provide opportunities for encounter with the host culture and the support and understanding that that brings. Migrants learning from someone who has been through the same experience as them creates a less overwhelming environment and forms an important long-term relationship.

## **PART 4: BENEFITS TO THIS PROPOSAL**

### **1. Speaking English is key to integration**

There are numerous reports which support evidence for the universal service of English language learning. Successful integration within a community depends on a common language as this relieves daily pressures of social anxiety and isolation, provides individuals with employment opportunities, and overall empowers social mobility<sup>17</sup>.

The Wonder report ‘Empowerment through Education’, spoke to women who attended the Baytree centre in Brixton where they opened up about their troubling experiences of not speaking English:

*“I can’t talk to my neighbour, in seven years I have been in this block of flats, but I can’t really talk to my neighbours, can just say hello. When I go to the doctor, I cannot really explain myself. I went to school, but I can’t really understand. Maybe someone is bullying me but I can’t really understand to talk to them or say something back.”*

*“everyone was a big obstacle – you can’t explain yourself”<sup>18</sup>*

These quotes show the impact of not being able to communicate daily, which would consequently have devastating effects on an individual’s mental health and self-confidence. As the APPG claims, speaking English is “crucial to social mobility in modern Britain” as it allows you to understand your workplace rights, access employment opportunities and build a diverse

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<sup>17</sup> Mike Chick and Iona Hannagan Lewis, (2017) Higher Education and Voluntary Sector Collaboration for ESOL provision, in British Academy (eds) *If You Could Do One Thing*, pp. 32-38, Available at: <https://www.britac.ac.uk/sites/default/files/British%20Academy%20YCDOT%20Essays.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> The Wonder Foundation, (2016) ‘Empowerment Through Education: Women Breaking the English Barrier’, Available at: <http://wonderfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/Resources/Women%20Breaking%20the%20English%20Barrier%20%28Full%20Report%20Digital%29.pdf>

social and professional network<sup>19</sup>. Community centres can provide a safe space in which to access English learning classes, where teachers, volunteers and migrants can come together.

The Welsh Assembly Government's (2008) Refugee Inclusion Strategy describes successful integration as:

*“the removal of barriers which prevent refugees from becoming fully active members of society” and where there is “...the establishment of mutual and responsible relationships between refugees and their communities, civil society and government”<sup>20</sup>.*

Learning English empowers women and helps them to overcome such barriers and integrate into society. The Wonder Foundation spoke to women who had previously felt isolated and lacked confidence and asked them how learning English helped them to overcome personal and physical barriers. The women stated that learning English helped them to interact better with their families and support their children with schoolwork as well as helping them to find employment and develop their skills.

It is important to note that these classes do not only offer a chance for women to learn English, but it becomes part of a routine in which they can interact with others in a similar situation and gain skills in volunteering and giving back to the community.

## **2. Infrastructure already exists**

Physically, the revival of these Children's Centres is achievable since the infrastructure is already in place. There are huge benefits in the maintenance of established institutions as it will save a huge amount of money and time on building new resources<sup>21</sup>. Consequently, this produces a sense of familiarity amongst the local community who would otherwise be nervous at locating a different centre in an unknown environment.

## **3. Emphasis on childcare**

Many migrants who wish to improve their English language skills face barriers such as childcare. Having young children inhibits many women from finding the time, money and focus when

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<sup>19</sup> All Part Parliamentary Group. (2017). *Integration Not Demonisation*. Available: [http://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/themes/570513f1b504f500db000001/attachments/original/1504379228/TC0016\\_AAPG\\_Integration\\_not\\_Demonisation\\_Report.pdf?1504379228](http://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/themes/570513f1b504f500db000001/attachments/original/1504379228/TC0016_AAPG_Integration_not_Demonisation_Report.pdf?1504379228) [Last accessed: 1st February 2018]

<sup>20</sup> Mike Chick and Iona Hannagan Lewis, (2017) Higher Education and Voluntary Sector Collaboration for ESOL provision, in British Academy (eds) *If You Could Do One Thing*, pp. 32-38, Available at: <https://www.britac.ac.uk/sites/default/files/British%20Academy%20YCDOT%20Essays.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Neli Demireva, 'Promoting Contact Through Local Community Centres' in British Academy (eds) *If you could do one thing*, (2017), pp.26-31 [Available at: <https://www.britac.ac.uk/sites/default/files/British%20Academy%20YCDOT%20Essays.pdf>]

wanting to improve their English. Many women also feel that motherhood is their only role in life<sup>22</sup>. It is important for Children's Centres to continue to provide childcare services where English Learning classes are also taking place.

An older learner spoke about her successful experience and said,

*"it was easy to access class as it was only 2 hours a week and I got childcare"*

The Sure Start centres are predominantly focused on childcare, which is in line with our proposal, but more can be done to have childcare available in conjunction with English language learning classes. We are proposing for a greater emphasis on a structure where children can be looked after whilst their parents attend English learning classes.

#### **4. Two-way process: benefits migrants and local volunteers**

Other ways to maintain the efficiency of English classes and childcare within these community centres ultimately stems from utilising local assets. The Sure Start initiative strongly benefited from the collaboration between the local authority and the local community in deciding what services needed to be prioritised, based on their community's needs. This allows for migrants and non-migrants to openly discuss their needs and foster interaction between groups.

To create a more welcoming and supportive environment for migrants, we need to envision integration as a two-way process, whereby migrants are supported to become active members of our society as well as the host community successfully managing demographic and cultural change<sup>23</sup>. The APPG report 'Integration not Demonisation' offers a solution to the problem of seeing immigrants as security risks or 'the other' and rather calls for viewing them as 'Britons-in-waiting'<sup>24</sup>. This strategic and proactive approach can be reinforced within children's centres to help break down the subconscious barrier between 'them' and 'us' and remove fixed prejudices and discrimination.

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<sup>22</sup> The Wonder Foundation, (2016) 'Empowerment Through Education: Women Breaking the English Barrier', Available at:

<http://wonderfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/Resources/Women%20Breaking%20the%20English%20Barrier%20%28Full%20Report%20Digital%29.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> All Part Parliamentary Group. (2017). *Integration Not Demonisation*. Available:

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

## **PART 5: CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTATION**

### **Community-led initiatives take time.**

Both Sure Start and our proposal are largely run on community development principles (it is structured to allow local people, particularly parents, to participate fully in determining the content and management of the programmes).

### **Migrants are hard to reach.**

Hence, migrants and those which lack English language abilities have to be persuaded to participate, and appropriate outreach programmes must be set in place.

### **Funding for CCs has decreased since 2011:**

From 2011-12, the ring-fence around the children's centre grant was removed. This meant that local authorities decide whether to maintain existing provision of services. With councils continuing to face significant additional cost pressures, it is imperative that any current discussion around children's centres must consider the context of this wider funding landscape. In other words, this has subsequently led to councils attempting to reduce funding or shut down CC's due to competing demands for resources – but many councils have encountered opposition from local parents, showcasing CCs continued importance and relevance.

**However, our proposal of English language classes provision through volunteering and third-sector collaboration takes this into account by being inherently low-cost.**

## **PART 6: CONCLUSION**

Sure Start Children's Centres have a family-friendly setting and strong local partnerships. Their infrastructure already exists across communities, and research by APPG shows that they have a capacity to provide a wider range of services. We therefore propose a migrant-focused initiative of implementing universal English classes across CCs in England. English language learning is important to migrant integration, whilst childcare is often a barrier to learning for migrants. The provision of universal English classes throughout Children's Centres would not only ease migrant integration through language learning, but by creating a greater space for interactions between and within migrants and locals. As we are proposing English classes to be provided by a combination of volunteering and educational & third-sector collaboration, the implementation of this policy should be relatively low-cost, which takes into account the current wider funding landscape.

## Wonder Foundation

We empower vulnerable women, girls and communities through education.

Our work falls into two categories. Firstly, we support local, sustainable education projects in the UK and worldwide by sharing our knowledge and expertise, and helping secure funding through donations and grants. Secondly, we amplify the voices of our partners, and wider issues around female disadvantage, to influence policy and improve access to good quality education across the world.

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