



Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Foundation Years: Sure Start children's centres: follow-up](#), HC 1017

Wednesday 11 March 2015

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Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Department for Education \(SSF0002\)](#)

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Members present: Mr Graham Stuart (Chair), Alex Cunningham, Pat Glass, Caroline Nokes, Mr David Ward, Craig Whittaker

Questions 1 – 141

Witness: **Sam Gyimah MP**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Childcare and Education), Department for Education, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Good morning and welcome, Minister, to this session of the Education Committee, as we near the end of this Parliament. We are delighted to have you here to talk about foundation years and Sure Start children's centres. Perhaps I will begin by asking: do we make the most of them?

Mr Gyimah: Talking about children's centres specifically, local authorities are obviously responsible for them. Today, there are 2,000 children's centres—

Q2 Chair: Do we make the most of them, Minister?

Mr Gyimah: We are making the most of them. They are a great asset. A lot of investment went into them originally. Although they do not have to provide full day care now, we are seeing that, through a lot of innovation, local authorities are making the most of children's centres in their area in a targeted way to deliver services to families.

Q3 Chair: What would you point to as the most welcome innovation in children's centres in the last few years?

Mr Gyimah: One of the most welcome innovations is the fact that children's centres operate in clusters, sharing management and expertise, to deliver the right service for the local area. I think that is a welcome innovation, rather than having a one-size-fits-all approach, where services might be universally targeted but not necessarily universally taken up.

Q4 Chair: Is that clustering primarily driven by a new collaborative spirit—sharing the best across the area—or is it due more to cost-cutting and the fact that there are fewer senior people around, spread across more assets?

Mr Gyimah: I would say that the clustering is about making them more effective. You asked about an example of innovation, and if you bear with me, I will give you the example of Bromley, which I have got with me.

I have picked Bromley because they undertook a full consultation, as a local authority should, and reduced the number of children's centres from 18 to six. The six that they kept were based in the areas of highest deprivation. They created new roles to ensure that all parents and families could still access services. They have 21 family support and parenting practitioners who provide a full range of support. They have six children's centre support officers and they are reaching more families. As a result of this, the figure for their parent outreach services in 2011 was 15,000, but with six children's centres, they are now reaching over 71,000 families. That is an example of innovation leading to a more effective use of children's centres.

Q5 Chair: And also consolidations—do you support a reduction in the numbers of children's centres?

Mr Gyimah: No, what I support is that children's centres have to be effective and they have to deliver the right services for families. I do not believe that central Government can really dictate—prescribe is probably a better word—what the nature of the service should be in every single local area, because every local area is different. But you also have to remember that children's centres fit into a broader landscape of what we are doing in the early years. For example, public health commissioning is now going to local authorities, so when local authorities think about one role of children's centres—the parental support element—they will be thinking now about how that sits with children's centres, and they have to construct services and innovate in an effective way.

Q6 Chair: Do you have any indications yet of how that is going to work out? You have already talked about innovation. Are children's centres going to be used as real centres for public health work in the future?

Mr Gyimah: Well, I will give you one example from my perspective as the Child Care Minister. Over the last year, we have been working with the Department of Health on the integrated review that is bringing together the two-year-old check on the health visitor side and the education side, and the pilots were done through children's centres. In addition

to that, just yesterday I announced an early years check, which is the integrated review, but for parents whose children are not in early years settings. In terms of the pilots—the £300,000 towards the pilots—we envisage that children’s centres will be utilised. That is where you are getting health services—for example, health visitors—operating through children’s centres, and I see that as a big step in terms of making them more effective.

Q7 Chair: How have the Government got on with increasing the number of health visitors? I know that there had been a drop under the last Government, if I recall correctly, and then there was an undertaking to increase the number by—off the top of my head—4,000 in this Parliament. How has that progressed?

Mr Gyimah: The number of health visitors has increased by 50% in this Parliament.

Q8 Chair: Is that in line with what was promised?

Mr Gyimah: Yes. We have delivered on, certainly what was in the Conservative manifesto, which was to increase the number of health visitors linked to Sure Start centres. That has been delivered.

I will make a more general point if I may, Chairman. I want to correct the misconception that is out there that somehow hundreds of children’s centres are closing. Actually, the latest information—

Q9 Alex Cunningham: But they have closed, Minister. Eight hundred have closed. We have a list here of written evidence from Unison telling us that dozens and dozens and dozens more are to close as well.

Mr Gyimah: Can I give what I think the numbers are and respond to your point, Mr Cunningham? The latest data we have as a Department, from December 2014, tells us that we have 2,816 children’s centres and 674 additional sites open to families and children, and 142 centres have closed. The reason why there is a discrepancy—with all due respect, Mr Cunningham, Unison will say that, won’t they? The reason why there is a disparity in the figures is that some numbers do not take account of networks of children’s centres and the fact that in some situations the centre might run out of a local venue on certain days and provide some services at a certain venue and make referrals. Those are not accounted for in the numbers. That is why there is a discrepancy.

Q10 Chair: None the less, your favoured example of innovation was Bromley, and if everyone followed Bromley’s lead, we would have about 1,000 instead of 3,000, wouldn’t we?

Mr Gyimah: No, I thought it was a good example because—

Q11 Chair: But the point is that we were asking about numbers. It may be a more effective model. This Committee previously or its predecessor—I can't remember which—suggested that it would be better having fewer and doing it properly, rather than having some national network that pretended to do it but actually was hollowed out. We're not against it, but if you are going to talk numbers, it is a fair point to put to you that you mentioned Bromley, and Bromley has gone from 18 to six. If that was done nationally, you would see a massive reduction.

Mr Gyimah: I trust local authorities to be able to innovate and deploy these services in the way that works best for their local area. What I am against is a Minister sitting in Whitehall trying to prescribe to any local authority how best to configure these services in an effective way. I do not think that necessarily leads to the best outcomes. We know from the National Audit Office report in 2009 that there were inefficiencies in the system. We want this to be effective and to make sure that all the taxpayers' money that is going into the early years—in terms of not just children's centres but troubled families, health visitors, the free entitlement for two-year-olds and the early years pupil premium—gets to the right people and we end up with the right result.

Chair: We would certainly all agree that what really counts is outcomes.

Q12 Pat Glass: Good morning, Minister. The last time you came before the Committee, you were very new. I think you had been in post for a couple of days, and we were very kind to you.

Mr Gyimah: I think this is my first time before the Committee, although I did speak in a Westminster Hall debate that you called.

Pat Glass: No, you came before the Committee once, I'm sure. We were very kind to you, because you had been in place for just a couple of days. You have been there for a while now, so we are going to be a little less kind.

Chair: I think it was a seminar.

Q13 Pat Glass: Sorry, it was a seminar in front of the Committee. You will recall that one of our strongest recommendations was for greater clarity about the purpose of children's centres. You have been in post for a little while now. Is the core purpose clear to you, and would you let us know what it is, please?

Mr Gyimah: I would say the core purpose is sufficiently clear to allow local authorities to deliver the services that work best for their area; and, judging by what is happening on the ground, I think we can be encouraged that we do have a system in place that is working.

Q14 Pat Glass: Minister, I could mention local authorities, Barnardo's, Ofsted—there is almost universal agreement with this Committee that there is no clarity around the core purpose. Local authorities such as Buckinghamshire, which have very good records, and,

as I said, Barnardo's, Ofsted, etc., are calling for greater clarity, so could you just tell us what you think is the core purpose of children's centres? The rest of us just do not seem to be able to get to that.

Mr Gyimah: I would say that when I think of children's centres—one aspect of it is the full day care services. We have a situation now where 3% of children's centres offer full day care, but that has not had a detrimental effect on children in disadvantaged areas getting access to day care. It has gone up by 10% for full day care and by 42% for sessional care. In terms of the core purpose—my 11-month-old son goes to a nursery at a children's centre. Where a children's centre offers it and there is demand, that works. There is then the other side.

Q15 Pat Glass: At the time of our inquiry, we found—I imagine the situation has not improved—that only a third of children's centres had any children in them. If that is the core purpose, clearly two thirds are not delivering the core purpose.

Mr Gyimah: No, I am not saying that. Your question was what I see the core purpose as. There are two ways of looking at children's centres. One is from the perspective of full day care. From that perspective, I do not think that that has to be the core purpose of children's centres. Where they deliver it, where it works and where there is demand, that is effective.

Then there is the other way of looking at children's centres, which is around parental support and advice, maternal health and child health, and links with Jobcentre Plus. We are seeing children's centres offering those services, but in quite different ways. Some are offering them through clusters and some through stand-alone centres. That is absolutely fine, so long as the measurement, as the Chairman so eloquently put it, is based on the outcomes rather than our hard definition of the purpose.

Q16 Pat Glass: When your predecessor was here last, she said, given our concerns about the lack of clarity around the core purpose, that she was happy to go away and do some work on that. Has that happened in the DFE? Is there somewhere we can go where there is a list that says, "If you're a children's centre, this is your core purpose. This is what you should be delivering"?

Mr Gyimah: The statutory guidance for children's centres lays out quite clearly the expectations of them. That is what I would lean on.

Q17 Pat Glass: So why do you think all of these organisations like Ofsted, Barnardo's and local authorities are saying, "We don't know what the core purpose is or what children's centres should be doing"? Are they just not bothering to read the statutory guidance?

Mr Gyimah: No, I think there is—you have clumped together a number of organisations that would have different perspectives on children's centres. We are moving from a situation where there was a very strongly defined prescription for children's centres to

an environment where I would say we have innovation and quite a lot of change. Understandably, people will say, “We don’t know what the core purpose is.” As we move through it, what counts is: let’s focus on outcomes and let’s let local authorities judge how best to deliver key services.

The reason I say that is that the first children’s centres—phase 1 children’s centres—were started in 2004. That is over a decade ago. In the early years space, a lot has happened in the last decade in terms of how we intervene. We now have free early education for disadvantaged two-year-olds. We did not have that in 2004. As I mentioned earlier, we now have public health moving to local authorities. We did not have that in 2004. We have the integrated review that I mentioned. We did not have that in 2004. We have the troubled families programme. We did not have that in 2004. Given everything else that is happening in the landscape, it follows logically that children’s centres would be nimble and performing services that work for their area, rather than sticking to a prescribed definition that goes back 11 years.

Q18 Chair: So they don’t have one, then?

Mr Gyimah: They have, for example—

Q19 Chair: They don’t have a core purpose any more; it does not sound like it. It sounds like they can pick and choose, and do what they like. There is a lot of stuff going on and it is up to them. Is there a core purpose or isn’t there? If so, what on earth is it?

Mr Gyimah: There is a core purpose, and if you bear with me, I will try to get the exact definition.

Q20 Chair: I’ve got the exact definition. We have looked at it and found it wanting. It is interesting to find that the people who run the services and the people who inspect them both agree with us. I am waiting for light to be thrown on what on earth they are for. It is not clear to us and it doesn’t seem very clear to them.

Mr Gyimah: What they have to offer—parental advice and services—is for families. It is sufficiently broad that they can deliver the services in ways that work best.

Q21 Pat Glass: Given the lack of—

Mr Gyimah: It is flexible, I agree.

Q22 Pat Glass: Put that to one side for a second. Your predecessor accepted that there was a mismatch between the core purpose and the Ofsted inspection framework. She suggested—in what I thought was a bizarre episode—that the Ofsted inspection framework should resolve the core purpose. I am interested if you think that is the case—that Ofsted’s

framework should decide the core purpose. Given that the Ofsted framework consultation appears to be postponed, at least for a year, do you not think that the DFE needs to take some action on this?

Mr Gyimah: There is the Ofsted framework.

Q23 Pat Glass: We have confusion over the core purpose and a mismatch between the core purpose and the Ofsted framework.

Mr Gyimah: We can play semantics around “core purpose”; is it flexible or not? For me, the most important thing is that we have 1 million more people using these than in 2010. That is very positive.

Q24 Pat Glass: Minister, this was the question. Even your predecessor accepted that there is a mismatch between the core purpose and the inspection. For people at Ofsted there is complete confusion over what they should be inspecting. Should the DFE not take some action on that now?

Mr Gyimah: There is a mismatch because the original inspection framework was aligned to a very prescribed and hard definition of what children’s centres are and what they do. In an environment where we are moving from that definition to a hub and spoke model in some cases and stand-alone in others, Ofsted is looking at it on a more area-wide basis, rather than a specific children’s centre inspection. So yes, it is changing and the Ofsted framework has got to reflect that. That work is going on now.

Q25 Pat Glass: But it is going to be delayed for at least a year. In the meantime, inspectors do not know what they are supposed to be inspecting. How do we know if something is good or outstanding if even Ofsted does not know what it is supposed to be inspecting?

Mr Gyimah: It does: it inspects the reach, it looks at the management and leadership, and it looks at accessibility. Those are things that Ofsted can look at, whether on a stand-alone or area-wide basis. There is something they can inspect against, because they are inspecting children’s centres day in, day out now.

Q26 Craig Whittaker: Good morning, Minister. It is fairly safe to say that you seem content with children’s centres now being used more for targeted rather than universal services. What assessment have you made of the impact of such a shift towards targeted services? You just mentioned that 1 million more people are using them. Has there been a full assessment of the shift from universal to targeted services?

Mr Gyimah: What you see on the ground is still some universal services and some targeted services. It is not a binary situation of either/or. Ofsted inspection is one way to evaluate the impact. Kathy Sylva, a very respected academic on early years, is working on an

evaluation of children's centres in England impact report. The full report is due out in June, and that will provide a light on the impact. I look forward to that.

You started by saying that I seem content. I would not say that I am content; there is a lot more work that can be done in the early years. We are constantly improving what we are doing. I am slightly uncomfortable with the view that the current system, which is a little more flexible, cannot deliver. I think it can deliver and can make a difference.

Q27 Craig Whittaker: There has been a lot of play, not just in Government but the media and everywhere, about British values. What role can children's centres play in promoting British values?

Mr Gyimah: The best way to answer that is to say that where there is full day care, for example, they would have to teach the early years foundation stage as part of the early years foundation framework. The promotion of British values is a part of that framework, but I do not see such a role for children's centres if a mother is there for breastfeeding support or for stay and play. I do not see them having that kind of discussion. Where you have full day care, you would expect children's centres to deliver whatever is part of the curriculum.

Q28 Craig Whittaker: But apart from that, there is not really a role. Is that what you are saying?

Mr Gyimah: Not in promoting British values, no. I cannot say that I do not want to prescribe in one sentence, and then in another sentence say that they should be doing that.

Q29 Craig Whittaker: Sure. Let me ask you about the role of children's centres in early education and child care. You said earlier that they do not have to provide child care. Did you say that only 6% now provide child care?

Mr Gyimah: Of the overall child care market in the UK, full day care is—

Q30 Craig Whittaker: I think our evidence said it is about a third.

Mr Gyimah: Those are two different things. A third of children's centres have full day care, but if you look at that as a proportion of the overall child care market, it is 3%. Meanwhile, in the last decade, the child care market has grown by a third, so children's centres are a very small proportion of the full day care that is provided in the early years.

Q31 Craig Whittaker: Okay. Given that you have already said you are happy that the model is going towards a targeted service, and you have said that you want to be flexible with regard to how children's centres help disadvantaged children, for example, surely child care is the initial step to providing those families most in need with the care and attention that they need; so why would we not promote child care as a bigger model within that process?

Mr Gyimah: You are absolutely right, Mr Whittaker: child care is important. It is important from a Department for Education perspective, especially in the early years, because it helps with child development and school-readiness. It is important because it helps parents get back to work. It is important from a financial perspective because it hits the family finances. So I agree on how important child care is. Local authorities have a duty to ensure that there is sufficient child care in their area. The question then is how this is delivered. Your suggestion is that it should be promoted specifically via children's centres.

Q32 Craig Whittaker: No, I said that you are specifically taking the model of children's centres down the targeted route to target the most disadvantaged and families in need. Child care seems to be a great opportunity to get to those families, and yet you are saying that children's centres do not have to provide that. I understand that child care can be provided in other areas outside the children's centres, but if all the targeted support is in the children's centres, it surely makes sense to have it there.

Mr Gyimah: It makes sense if it works is my answer. There are lots of examples of children's centres delivering outstanding child care, but the previous requirement to provide full day care was not sustainable. We know from local authorities and providers that staffing and overhead costs were often not met by the fees that local parents in disadvantaged areas were able to pay, and where few parents worked, or tended to work part time, there was little demand for full day care. So it makes sense if it does work; if it does not work, there is no point in trying to promote child care through a children's centre.

Q33 Craig Whittaker: So if a Government-funded centre, whether it is through national or local government, cannot make them work on a financial basis because of overheads and costs, what makes you think that the most disadvantaged in our society can afford to then go forward and pay for a private provider that clearly will make it pay, because they will charge higher prices?

Mr Gyimah: That is a good question, Mr Whittaker. The answer is that private providers, who form 80% of the market, structure their businesses differently—but not just private providers; voluntary providers, too. When I spoke to 4Children, which runs a lot of children's centres, including a lot that have nurseries, it said one of the reasons why it could do it more efficiently than the local authority is that its pension deal is very different from the local authority pension deal. It is more cost-effective for 4Children, because the pensions it offers staff are very different from the local authority ones. That is a good example of where, if the local authority was doing it, the child care would potentially be a lot more expensive for parents than if a charity provider or a private provider does it.

You are absolutely right, though. Looking at the data, if I had not seen that the provision of child care in deprived areas had increased between 2010 and 2011 by 10% for full day care and for sessional care by 42%, I would be concerned, but I also know that the growth in child care in deprived areas especially and what we have seen in that—I will rephrase that. Where the original children's centres with day care have been preserved, most of them are in those deprived areas, but you can also go to a children's centre for stay and play, so it may not be sort of your full nursery provision, but—

Q34 Craig Whittaker: Let's go back to my question, because I want to press you on this. You made a statement that a lot of children's centres that are Government-funded—whether by local government or national Government—could not afford the overhead costs—

Mr Gyimah: That was the assessment of the National Audit Office, not my assessment.

Q35 Craig Whittaker: Sure. Therefore they push them out to the private providers—

Mr Gyimah: And the voluntary sector.

Craig Whittaker: And voluntary sector. So my question to you is: if your model around children's centres is primarily to target those most deprived and most in need, how, by pushing them away from a model that even the state does not seem to be able to afford, do we expect them to afford that child care, which plays a huge part in your core purpose, which is targeting services to the most deprived?

Mr Gyimah: Okay. If your question is about how they can afford child care as opposed to child care provision—so far, my answer has been around child care provision—in terms of child care provision now, people on low incomes can get 70% of child care support—

Q36 Craig Whittaker: Minister, I am not talking particularly about people on low incomes here. We are talking about those families who are in most need of support—families with kids on the cusp of going into care, troubled families, all those types of people. If we are pushing away from a centre that is supposed to be targeting them in particular, then how on earth do you expect this to work?

Mr Gyimah: I don't think you are pushing them away from that. Parents understand that, for example, if you need to see a health visitor, this is the place you go to; if you need parental support and advice, this is the place you go to; and if you need nursery provision, there may be somewhere else. You are not pushing them away because it is not offering child care—that does not follow at all. Parents, in the same way as everything we do, we know that we get different services in different places. It is the same thing here.

Q37 Chair: Isn't provision of child care weakest in the poorest areas? Isn't that one of the reasons we were looking to children's centres?

Q38 Craig Whittaker: That is not what the Minister said. The Minister said that primarily those that offer child care are in areas of deprivation—that is what he said.

Mr Gyimah: Yes. I think the point I was making is that when you look at where the phase 1 children's centres have been kept, most of them are in deprived areas. That is the point I am making.

Q39 Chair: Would you like to see more? We know about early years care, and early education, that quality is key. It is not just a bare provision; if you don't do well, there is some evidence to suggest that it can be counter-productive, so you spend money and worsen children's potential outcomes. So, quality is everything and in the poorest areas there is least likely to be a successful and prosperous private sector, or indeed a voluntary sector, which can cross-subsidise and the like. So, do you have a vision of seeing more child care provided through children's centres, given that—I think—a core purpose of children's centres remains trying to close the gap and ensure that poor kids arrive at school able to enter into education and lead happy toddler lives?

Mr Gyimah: As I said in response to Mr Whittaker, I think more child care should be provided through children's centres, if it works. You rightly touched on quality. If I look at the two-year-old entitlement that the Government introduced, which is 15 hours of child care for the most disadvantaged two-year-olds, our data as of January 2014—that is quite a while ago now—showed that people who were accessing that early education were accessing it from “good” and “outstanding” nurseries. That is a case of child care provision that is aimed at the disadvantaged and has quality linked to it as well. One way of making sure there is quality is through the inspection framework.

Chair: Right. We will come back to that.

Q40 Alex Cunningham: Minister, there is a very good book by a man called Darrell Huff entitled “How to Lie with Statistics”. I don't know whether you have had a chance to read it.

Mr Gyimah: I am not familiar with it.

Alex Cunningham: Well, we all use statistics to our own advantage, but isn't it a fact that in 2010 there were 3,631 children's centres, and now there are 2,861?

Mr Gyimah: I stand by the numbers I gave when we had the exchange earlier. Another way of answering your question is with the number of closures. The number of closures, by my data, was 142 children's centres, and eight have opened since 2010. That is because you have got different structures now. I know that, to put it bluntly, there are some parts of the political spectrum that want to make political points out of this. That is absolutely fine, but that is not what the data says.

Q41 Alex Cunningham: Okay. To be fair to you, the report also says that there are 674 additional sites. What are those additional sites? What do they do, and what range of services do they actually provide? Do they replicate the services that have been lost with the closure of 800 children's centres?

Mr Gyimah: Let me give you a sense of what I understand is happening on the ground. I do visit children's centres; I think I have been to at least one every month since I was appointed. Overall, what I am seeing is that the phase 1 children's centres are protected. They are the ones that are in areas of high disadvantage. The outcome of the—

Q42 Alex Cunningham: Sorry, Minister, I am asking you about the additional sites that everybody refers to. What are those additional sites? Are they a log cabin at the end of somebody's drive? Are they libraries? What are they, and what are they actually delivering? Are they replicating the services that have been lost with the closure of 800 children's centres?

Mr Gyimah: I mentioned the reach numbers to make it a lot clearer. We have got 1 million users, and the vast majority of parents are satisfied. Whether it is through additional, stand-alone sites or otherwise, there are 1 million users of children's centres. Those people would not be using the children's centres if they were just log cabins with nothing in them. You would not get that number of people visiting the children's centres. In the vast majority of cases, the hub and spoke model is being used to deliver our services, where you work out of a main children's centre but visit other community venues, and the services have been reconfigured. Where that is effective, we should welcome it.

Q43 Alex Cunningham: There is a piece of written evidence from Unison—for the record, I am a member of Unison—which tells us that dozens and dozens more centres are under threat, including in places such as Rotherham. With all its problems, it has been announced that 13 centres are at risk of closure. In Wakefield, it is 11 out of 23; in Swindon, seven; in Peterborough, eight; in Brent, 10 out of 17. The list goes on. You must be worried that this network is falling apart.

Mr Gyimah: The network is not falling apart. You paint—

Q44 Alex Cunningham: Dozens and dozens more closures—how many more do you expect to close?

Mr Gyimah: You paint a picture that makes it sound like we had a rosy world once, and now that world is less rosy. I pointed to the National Audit Office research, which found out that the way children's centres were structured before did not necessarily reduce inequality. Just 38 hours a week were spent on outreach to parents in the poorest communities, and they were not always reaching vulnerable families. If you had to draw one conclusion from the National Audit Office report, it would be that there was a need to make them more effective. Unison can come up with its figures, although I do not recognise those figures, but we have got to focus on the outcomes. There is more being spent on early years and early intervention now than before.

I gave the example of troubled families, because that is the most important thing. In 2015-16 we are spending £200 million on the 400,000 most troubled families in this country. We can focus on whether a children's centre is offering the same service as it was a decade

ago, or we can focus on whether we are doing something about troubled families. I would like to do the latter.

Q45 Alex Cunningham: I suggested earlier that we can all use statistics to suit ourselves, and Unison will use them, but what research have the Government done over the past few months to determine what is happening at children's centres across the country with the potential for closure?

Mr Gyimah: We do obviously get data from local authorities and go through that.

Q46 Alex Cunningham: So you are expecting more closures.

Mr Gyimah: I am just looking at the information I have here. As at 30 November, 39 local authorities had closed children's centres, and nine of them contributed more than 55% of the 142. So there is not this world that you paint of vulnerable and disadvantaged families being denied vital services because of children's centre closures.

Q47 Alex Cunningham: But we are still seeing evidence that centres are closing.

Mr Gyimah: The highest one is Bromley, which is why I picked on it. But when you look at the reach, that has increased. So I dispute, first, the world that you are painting of children's centres closing on such a scale, and secondly and most importantly, the idea that somehow vulnerable families are not getting key services.

Q48 Alex Cunningham: Haringey council has announced a £1.4 million cut in funding for children's centres. It says that the total funding has reduced by 50% since 2012. What is happening about things like that?

Mr Gyimah: If you bear with me, I can take you through the funding. To put my cards on the table, one of the challenges around looking at the funding now versus pre-2010 is that you had a capital element and a revenue element. Obviously a capital element was needed when the Government were establishing the network.

Q49 Alex Cunningham: Are you suggesting that the cut in funding is related to mixing capital and revenue?

Mr Gyimah: No, I am just taking you through the structure of the funding before, and what it is now. The structure before was capital and revenue. The capital was absolutely necessary because we were establishing a new network. Now, what we have got is overall funding, which in the form of the early intervention fund has gone up from £2.3 billion to £2.4 billion. That is obviously un-ring-fenced funding going to local authorities. But more importantly, it does not include a lot of the other funding that is available for early years intervention. For example, health visitors and the troubled families programme are not

included in that £2.4 billion. So there are significant amounts of money going into it. It is up to local authorities, who have the flexibility and the resources, to decide how best to use that money to support their children's centres.

Q50 Alex Cunningham: Can I ask you about specialist services for the youngest children with special needs, behaviour support and all that sort of thing? How are you ensuring that the centres are delivering that? That is a matter of quality and real, deep need, as described earlier by Craig.

Mr Gyimah: In the case of children with special educational needs, all parties agree with the SEN reforms that my colleague in the Department, the Member for Crewe and Nantwich, brought forward, which are the biggest that we have had in decades. Through those, every child should have a plan provided by the local authority. In terms of specific detail on how that applies to them, I will work with him to write to you on that, because that is his area of expertise.

Q51 Pat Glass: Can I take you back to funding? You said that funding has increased, but the early intervention grant has had 16 different grants rolled into it, so the amount that you are talking about—an increase from £2.2 billion to £2.4 billion, did you say?

Mr Gyimah: £2.3 billion to £2.4 billion.

Pat Glass: That is not just about children's centres or early years. That also has to provide what a local authority delivers for SEN, behaviour management, CAMHS and a whole range of things that were not in there before. So in effect, it has been a cut, hasn't it? You have given slightly more money, but you have got to deliver a whole range of things—

Mr Gyimah: No; for example, I will give you the early years pupil premium, which is to make sure that children from disadvantaged backgrounds do not fall behind.

Pat Glass: Well, that is not what I am talking about, but you can tell me about that first.

Mr Gyimah: When different Governments come in, they always recast things in the way that suits their priorities; but what I am saying is that, in terms of the early years, there is a lot of funding that sits outside the £2.4 billion that we are not accounting for—so not only has it gone up from £2.3 billion to £2.4 billion, but there is additional funding tied to some of the services that you mentioned, which is not accounted for here.

Q52 Pat Glass: You are going to have to clarify that a little more. For me, it is fairly simple. The budget was £2.2 billion and that went on early years children's centres. It is now £2.4 billion, and it has got to pay for SEN for every child in this country; it has got to pay for CAMHS; it has got to pay for behaviour support. It is paying for a huge range of services—not just children's centres.

Mr Gyimah: Yes, because it is early intervention funding.

Q53 Pat Glass: You have said that, but it is a cut isn't it? It is effectively a massive cut in children's centres.

Mr Gyimah: Can I explain why it is not? It is not, because local authorities now have the flexibility to deploy that resource locally, as they see fit, to deliver the services. One local authority may make the decision that it will cluster its children's services to deliver some of the resources and use other means to deliver some of the other services. That is fine. The scenario you paint is a scenario where the only way of delivering the services is via the children's centre.

Q54 Pat Glass: No, I am not, Minister; I am saying that what was a budget exclusively for children's centres has gone up by £0.2 billion and become an early intervention budget, and it covers a huge range of other things, so all those things have been cut, including children's centres. To argue anything else is really bizarre.

Mr Gyimah: I do not think it is bizarre at all, because we share the same objectives.

Pat Glass: Disingenuous, then.

Mr Gyimah: No, we talked about troubled families—the families that really need it. There is £200 million going into that, which was not there before. If you are going to argue that there has been a cut, you need to tell me what was being done about those troubled families before. So it is not in the early intervention fund—that is £200 million of targeted funds. What we have got is that the pots are coming from different places, but there has not been a cut.

Q55 Pat Glass: So for my local authority that has lost 40% of its budget, there has not been a cut.

Mr Gyimah: I do not know the circumstances of your local authority. We know that different local authorities are in different situations. I say this knowing very well what strain local authorities are under. In my own constituency there is a children's centre in Hurst Green, and we got the letter from the local authority saying that they were going to put it out to consultation. So I am going through this as a constituency MP as well, and I understand the pressures on the local authority, not so much on this but across the board. It is also about how they make services more effective. We live in an environment now where we have got to make sure that every taxpayer pound goes as far as it can. Local authorities are having to do that across the board.

Q56 Alex Cunningham: Earlier, Craig shared some concerns about some costs associated with child care, and Gingerbread reported today that not only have child care costs rocketed, but half of one-parent families are borrowing to pay child care costs. Some parents are going without food in order to meet that. What role do you think children's centres could have in trying to provide more cost-effective child care in order to help parents such as those?

Mr Gyimah: I have not seen the Gingerbread report, so I am only responding to your interpretation of it. What we are doing to help provide child care support for people is, first, that you have got the free entitlement.

Q57 Alex Cunningham: I appreciate that, but we are actually focusing on children's centres. Couldn't child care be developed more in children's centres and targeted at those one-parent families who cannot afford to eat because they are having to either work or stay at home? What is the answer? Can children's centres help?

Mr Gyimah: They can help where it works. What I like about our current scheme is that some of those parents will be getting 70% of their child care costs paid for them, and they can then spend that money wherever they want to. You are saying we should prescribe that the child care has to be provided in a children's centre. You do not necessarily have to do it that way, because when it comes to child care different parents want different things.

Q58 Alex Cunningham: Lots of parents, Minister, cannot afford child care. What are we going to do about it?

Mr Gyimah: What do you say to the parent who feels that they want child care in a domestic setting, so they really want a childminder instead? What do you say to the parent who thinks that the best child care or early years provision in their area—

Alex Cunningham: I would say to them, "We need to provide you with more resources to do it."

Mr Gyimah: So we give them the money and they spend it in the child care setting that best works for them. There is nothing that says that it has to be a private or a voluntary nursery, or a childminder, because no one size fits all when it comes to child care.

Alex Cunningham: They still cannot afford it, Minister.

Mr Gyimah: Can I just say one thing about closures, which I skated over, Chairman? There is a presumption against closure when it comes to children's centres. Local authorities have to consult the community and families before they do so. So we have to be conscious of that. That is the environment—there is a presumption against closure.

Chair: Thank you.

Q59 Mr Ward: Can we talk about language, Minister? One person's flexibility may be another one's lack of consistency; one person's reconfiguration may be another's reduction in service; and one person's movement away from one size fits all—to quote—could be another person's rag-bag of provision.

On the reconfigurations, which, according to the Government, is to meet the needs of local communities, where have you identified that the reconfigurations—which some would

argue are reductions in service—have been carried out to meet the needs of local communities, as opposed to people trying to do the best they can with a reduced budget?

Mr Gyimah: As I am seeing in my constituency, that is the purpose of the consultation exercise that a local authority would carry out.

Q60 Mr Ward: But is that being done as a result of a reduction in resources, or is it to do with reconfiguring on the basis of the identification of actual needs in the area?

Mr Gyimah: I think the two are inextricably linked. I do not think they are separate. A local authority gets its share of the early intervention fund. It has to assess what the need is and how best to deploy the financial resources available to it. You cannot separate the two. It is right that you link the two, because it means that you have services that actually work. Right at the beginning of this session, I said that just because a service is universally offered, that does not mean that it is universally taken up. So it is right that they go through the exercise of thinking, “What is the need? What is the budget? How best can we use this effectively?”

Q61 Mr Ward: We are talking about early years, which it is commonly agreed across the political spectrum is a fundamental area of public policy. In your view, has the provision of early years education, support and intervention increased or reduced over the last three or four years?

Mr Gyimah: I think this Government have done more than any Government before to support early years and child care.

Q62 Mr Ward: So there has not been a reduction, in your view, in this area.

Mr Gyimah: No. We have actually increased the spending, and if you allow me I will go headline what we have done.

Q63 Mr Ward: Can you just talk about what people can expect in terms of a guarantee? For example, if I was a parent in a poor family household and I moved into an area, what would the guarantee be of what I would be able to receive—wherever it was in the country?

Mr Gyimah: In terms of child care, you will get 15 hours if you have a three or four-year-old, whereas you got 12 and a half hours before; if you have a two-year-old and you are in the 40% most disadvantaged, you will get 15 hours of child care, which you would not have had before; if you are on working tax credits, you will get 70% child care support paid for you, moving up to 80%, so that could be up to £6,000. We have legislated for tax-free child care, which will knock a fifth off the cost of child care for parents. For those whose family is in a particularly difficult situation—one of the 400,000 troubled families—there is a specific and targeted programme. They will get access to a health visitor, as before, and stay and play services are available, as is parental support and advice.

In the autumn statement, the Chancellor announced a £5 million pilot through children's centres, specifically to help lone parents gain the basic skills to get back into work. Just yesterday I announced the early years check, which is for parents whose children are not in early years settings to get an education check and a health check for their child. At the same time we have the integrated review, which is £2 million. All of this is money being dedicated to the early years, because it is important.

Q64 Mr Ward: Never mind the quality of the provision, what about the extent of it? In particular in terms of the children's centres, is it not just a lottery what I receive if I move into an area?

Mr Gyimah: No, you'll get the service. The difference is that the delivery mechanism could be quite different. So you might live in an area where there was a stand-alone children's centre that offered all of these, and you would get them all in one place, but in another you would get some services, maybe from a—

Q65 Mr Ward: Are you saying that that is equal provision?

Mr Gyimah: You will get the service, but it might not be at the same site.

Q66 Mr Ward: Isn't it a lottery, the extent of the provision I would get depending on where I moved to?

Mr Gyimah: What was ineffective was where we tried universal provision and we had some people who clearly did not need those services—using the services because they were there, but not really paying for them. What we want is more targeted and effective services. That is the most important bit—and to judge outcomes.

Q67 Mr Ward: I suppose that is what I am trying to get at. In terms of the reconfiguration on a national scale, what was done to identify these areas where you say services were not really required, to reduce the resources in those areas and to ensure that they were available, as a guarantee, in the areas in which they really were needed? That would have been a national strategy, would it not?

Mr Gyimah: That is why you allow local authorities to do this, because they understand the need in their local areas the best. They have to consult and work with the community to achieve the right solution, and it should not be for someone in Whitehall to decide the nature of provision in Bolton or anywhere else.

Q68 Mr Ward: But we do that in schools, do we not? There might be a difference in quality, but I am guaranteed to know what I will receive if I move from one part of the country to another, in terms of primary or secondary provision.

Mr Gyimah: What we are talking about here is a suite of services, some of which might be needed and some of which might not be needed to the same extent in different areas, but we are also recognising that the delivery mechanism does not have to be the same for people to achieve those services.

Mr Ward: But where is the national strategy that identifies where that particular suite of services is required—in this area, but not in that area—and follows that with the resources?

Chair: I think we have done this to death, David. Can we move on?

Q69 Caroline Nokes: Looking at the most recently available Ofsted data, it would appear that the quality of children’s centres is declining: fewer than half of them reached a “good” standard. Do you think that this is accurate? Do you think that this is the picture as it actually is, or is there a problem with the inspection process?

Mr Gyimah: The first thing to say is that we have raised the bar with Ofsted, and we have done that for early years as we have done for schools, and rightly so. In terms of the inspection process, as we discussed earlier, there is a need for the framework to reflect the fact that we have different models of children’s centres now. The framework was changed in April 2013, but more work needs to be done. That said, I think it is right that we raised the bar.

Q70 Caroline Nokes: Are you content that between April and June last year, only 3% of children’s centres were rated at “outstanding”?

Mr Gyimah: No, I’m not content at all.

Q71 Caroline Nokes: What other evidence have you looked at with regard to the quality of provision in different types of settings? For example, have you been looking at the cost-effectiveness of the way in which children’s centres are run by different providers and in different configurations?

Mr Gyimah: That is around the work that Ofsted is doing, and we will get a sense of that. As I mentioned, on the evaluation of children’s centres in England, the impact report, which is to be published in June, will help to go some way to actually understanding the issues.

Q72 Caroline Nokes: Do you think your ongoing work with Ofsted is going to lead to a position in which questions raised by Ofsted during inspection reports will provoke the same reaction in an authority as questions about schools?

Mr Gyimah: Sorry, I didn’t understand the question.

Q73 Caroline Nokes: On Ofsted inspections of children's centres, we have heard that the most recent figures from them show that fewer than 50% have reached a good standard. Do you envisage a situation where that would provoke the same reaction as it does with schools? For example, would you be looking at a situation where you might be putting children's centres into special measures—do you see direct intervention as a way of raising standards?

Mr Gyimah: Local authorities are responsible, so you would expect them to take the appropriate action.

Q74 Chair: That does not apply to schools, does it?

Mr Gyimah: Sorry?

Chair: That doesn't apply to maintained schools, does it? We don't trust them to do it because too often they don't, which is why we have Ofsted and put schools in special measures—because we recognise that the reason why lousy services continue is because someone keeps funding them unless someone does something about it.

Mr Gyimah: What has often happened in practice in the early years and children's centres is that sometimes it makes sense—although we have been having a long discussion about a universal offer—to align two children's centres and have them share management, so that there is a good manager helping to run another children's centre that is not performing well.

Q75 Chair: Sorry, Minister, Caroline's question about the fact that, fortunately, thanks to Ofsted—although it is controversial at times—fundamentally, failing schools are not allowed any more. They are all over the newspapers, something is done and it is taken seriously—if there is a concentration and a cluster, we get major speeches and Ministers rush to act, support and increase rigour. Caroline's question was this: there is cross-party belief that early intervention is absolutely critical, particularly for closing the gap, which is also the central challenge for Government—how we create a more just outcome—yet when only 3% of children's centres are found to be outstanding, there is a big shrug and you say, "Well, it's up to the local authority." We don't accept that in schools, and, if anything, early years should be more important than schools for giving us the socially just outcomes that all of us want. That is the question.

Mr Gyimah: I wasn't shrugging that, you know, "It's down to the local authority." If that were the case, what it would mean is that—

Chair: That is the case.

Mr Gyimah: No, I mean that in that event, it would mean, for example—

Chair: That is the event.

Mr Gyimah: No, the children's centre not reaching the sort of families that it should be reaching—

Q76 Caroline Nokes: No, we are not saying that centres are not reaching the families. We are saying that they are not good.

Mr Gyimah: Can I answer the question? If you interject every two seconds I can't answer the question—

Q77 Chair: We will be as gentle as we can, Minister, but please do answer the question we are asking. It is not about reach, but about the quality. Ofsted, who are the only people we have to tell us, tell us that the centres are not very good in too many cases. We want to know whether that is going to be taken as seriously as we think it should be. That is the question.

Mr Gyimah: Of course it should be taken seriously. The reason why I mentioned reach is that if a children's centre requires improvement and the reason why is that, for example, it is not reaching the people it should be reaching, I would expect that a local authority would work with it to reach those people. That could mean in some cases getting new management involved. That is the best way to achieve improved outcomes there.

Q78 Caroline Nokes: Where is the new management coming from? From the local authority or someone else?

Mr Gyimah: From creating a cluster—I mean, that is the discussion I am having with my local authority.

Q79 Caroline Nokes: So the Department is not going to step in, in the same way that it does with schools—we are not going to see children's centres in special measures and taken away from local authority control because they have not been good enough.

Mr Gyimah: The current way in which we are operating is that local authorities decide how best to use their resources to deliver those services. If there is a children's centre that is failing, you would expect the local authority to work—

Q80 Caroline Nokes: You have no plans to step in, because you are leaving it to local authorities.

Mr Gyimah: Please don't put words in my mouth. What I have said is that the way it works is that local authorities will work with those children's centres. Children's centres are not the same as schools. Children's centres are different in different parts of the country, so you cannot say that—

Q81 Chair: Are they less worthy of intervention? Is that the point?

Mr Gyimah: Absolutely not. There are some things that—

Q82 Chair: So they are as worthy of intervention, but just don't get any?

Mr Gyimah: It is how you do it and who does it, rather than whether or not there should be intervention. I am saying that the question of whether or not there should be intervention is done at the local authority level, rather than directed by central Government. That does not mean that, in this context, that cannot be effective.

Q83 Caroline Nokes: But they are inspected centrally. They are sufficiently important to have the same or a similar sort of inspection process as schools.

Mr Gyimah: They do not have the same inspection processes. It is done by Ofsted, but—

Q84 Caroline Nokes: No, but they are inspected by Ofsted; they are not inspected by the local authorities. They are not sufficiently hands-off that we think the local authorities are in place to run and inspect them. So there is an inspection process. The report of that ends up on the desk of the local authority, whereas if a school was failing to meet certain requirements, it would be put into special measures and the local authority would be deemed to be not up to the job to do that.

Mr Gyimah: When Ofsted inspects a children's centre, it inspects against three things: the management and leadership, accessibility and reach. If the children's centre is failing to do those things, the local authority is, and should be, capable of working with the children's centre to improve.

Q85 Caroline Nokes: Do you see anything coming out of the forthcoming joint policy working group being established by Ofsted? How is the DFE going to be involved in that, or is it again going to be left to local authorities?

Mr Gyimah: If you bear with me, I think I might need some inspiration from officials on that specific question.

Chair: It was in the memo you sent us, but if you write to us on that, that might suffice.

Mr Gyimah: Thank you.

Q86 Pat Glass: Minister, I talked a little bit earlier about the lack of clarity around the core purpose. Can I move on to what we think is the lack of clarity around measuring

outcomes? UCL has put forward a framework for measuring outcomes right across the three strands of children's centres' work.

The new Children's Commissioner, who was the chief exec for 4Children, told this Committee that one of her key priorities is the development of a national outcomes framework for children's centres. We as a Committee recommended that the Government develop a national outcomes framework in consultation with the sector. When your predecessor was here, she agreed that there is insufficient information about the outcomes of children's centres. What we do know, as Caroline said, is that 50% of them are simply not up to scratch according to Ofsted.

Given what you were saying earlier about the fact that these should be about not just narrowing the gap and school readiness, but parental support and the child's and mother's health, do you think the Government should now take a lead in providing and developing a consistent outcomes framework, to give some kind of basic standard that says, "This is what every children's centre should be delivering in terms of outcomes"? I accept that they are all different. There are diverse providers that do different things in different places. In the coastal areas, it will not be the same as in the cities. But should the Government be looking at outcomes and saying, "We need to have a consistent framework here"?

Q87 Chair: Sorry, Minister, before you answer—given where we are at, with a general election around the corner, no course of work, including this, can conceivably be completed before the election. You are in a position to cut loose and say what should happen.

Mr Gyimah: I am quite loose at the moment.

Chair: Just feel free.

Mr Gyimah: It is a very good point. In terms of where we are, we are not planning to prescribe a national framework. What we are funding is the development of tools that children's centres can use to drive and monitor the delivery of their services. There is a 4Children outcomes framework due out in March this year, which will provide a tool to enable individual children's centres and their partners to identify the needs and target groups they have to fix.

Q88 Pat Glass: So will these tools be consistent right across the country? You're not saying, "We're going to measure you on this," but rather, "This is what you should all be looking at in terms of outcomes."

Mr Gyimah: We're not going to have a national framework.

Q89 Pat Glass: No, but you said that there were some tools.

Mr Gyimah: The 4Children tools—yes, exactly.

Q90 Pat Glass: It's going to be left to the voluntary sector. It appears, Minister, as if the Government do not have a strategy around children's centres, do not take them very seriously and do not have a plan for if they fail. It just feels as if it doesn't really matter to the Government.

Mr Gyimah: That is not the case. We would not be investing so much in the early years if we did not want to achieve those outcomes. Local authorities should be held to account for outcomes for their children across the piece. There is a strong reason to do so. That might not be what you want to see, but that could be an effective way of doing it.

Chair: The point of the outcomes framework is to allow that to happen. The Government are investing vast amounts of money. Various evidence suggests an outcomes framework. There is complexity, cross-silo working, co-ordinated services, different approaches and different players—all the more reason to try to have an outcomes framework that allows you to see through all that noise and be able to work out who is doing well and who is not. Until you do that, you cannot tell who you should set up as a beacon authority or a beacon cluster. It is a bit confusing, isn't it? Wouldn't this be useful? We have an election coming up and I encourage you to cut loose and speak freely. Why would it be harmful to have an outcomes framework to help inform this and allow Ofsted and anyone else—parents, councillors, MPs and taxpayers—to have a look and see whether this is working out properly?

Q91 Pat Glass: This just would not be acceptable with schools, would it? There are huge amounts of public money going in here. If we said, "Well, we're just going to let schools come up with what they want and have a thousand flowers. We're not going to judge them", there would be an absolute outcry. Surely this has to be helpful—not prescriptive, but helpful.

Mr Gyimah: What I would say is that Ofsted is doing quite a lot of work on the Ofsted framework. That is a serious piece of work. We would not have asked for that serious piece of work if we—

Q92 Pat Glass: To be fair, Minister, they are telling us—we can see why—that they are struggling with this because they do not know what you want. They are trying to come up with a framework, but they do not actually know what they are supposed to be looking at and measuring.

Mr Gyimah: Of course it is challenging for anyone when everything has to be prescribed and we could—

Pat Glass: We're not talking about that.

Q93 Chair: The definition of outcomes—it's not that difficult. It would just make life a bit easier for everyone, including Ofsted, to inform their framework, if they were absolutely clear about what you wanted.

Mr Gyimah: We do have the early years foundation profile, which is out later on, where we look at children's development. If you look at the last year, it went up by—

Q94 Chair: But you've emphasised yourself that there's far more than that. It is not just about school-readiness; it is about things that, Pat said, repeating yourself—

Mr Gyimah: In terms of other—

Q95 Chair: Will you think about it, Minister? Let's say we'll seek to extract that. Will you go away and think about it and look again? You would satisfy us if you said that you would go away and ask the Department to look again at whether an outcomes framework could be useful. It is not meant an attack on Government policy; it is simply trying to find a way of ensuring that the vast sums of money going into this area are directed to the most positive outcomes for the children and families concerned.

Mr Gyimah: Mr Chairman, I am here to satisfy the Committee, believe me. I am happy to look at the outcomes framework, but I do not want to give the impression that we are not seen—

Q96 Chair: Don't ruin it. You have said that you are happy to look at the outcomes framework. That is an entirely adequate response.

Mr Gyimah: But—

Chair: If you do that, that's fine.

Q97 Pat Glass: One of the things that we recommended was that the Government should fund research into parental engagement in the home and narrowing the gap. We saw that as a major element in developing the gap and in trying to narrow it. Is that something that you would be prepared to look at?

Mr Gyimah: Sorry, could you repeat the question?

Q98 Pat Glass: When we looked at this, we saw that there were clear links between family engagement and learning in the home, and the gap developing. We asked the Department to go away and fund some research into that so that we could see what would work. There is lots of stuff going on. Some children's centres are really good at this. I have seen things—I cannot remember the name—where books are sent home and children are reading with their parents' help. Are you looking at funding some research into how effective learning in the home can be in narrowing the gap? I'm not asking for huge amounts of

money; I am just asking for some funding to look at what we thought was really important: parental engagement with learning in the home.

Mr Gyimah: We know from the EPPE research—which was a major piece of research involving 3,000 children over some 17 years—that the home learning environment has a massive impact on development, as well as early education. We have that research available, and there is a successor piece of research, the SEED research, which among other things looks at the two-year-old entitlement. We have that research available, and great work is being done. For example, Barnardo’s has the “five to thrive” programme, which is really good and evidence-based; you have Incredible Years—

Q99 Pat Glass: But those things—the Incredible Years things—are later. We are talking about the very early years, concentrating on children’s centres. There is some great stuff going on, and Incredible Years is not necessarily about engagement with learning in the home. Could the Department look at funding research into the specific issues of parental engagement with learning in the home during the early years?

Mr Gyimah: In addition to the EPPE research, there is quite a lot of research already out there. I am willing to get you the list before committing to funding a new piece of research. This is an area that is very well researched.

Q100 Pat Glass: Okay, so how does the Department review the research that is currently going on? I am thinking about things like the Early Intervention Foundation report that we have recently seen. How do you review how effective that is? How well does the Department do that?

Mr Gyimah: The Early Intervention Foundation work is evidence-based and provides guides for children’s centres to use. I don’t think I understand what you are driving at with your question. Is it whether we are reviewing the report?

Q101 Chair: Turning research evidence into practice. That is the same thing we get in education generally. How do we get it out of the universities, or wherever, and into classroom practice? The speed and effectiveness with which we can do that will lead to quicker, evidence-based policy making, teaching and provision.

Pat Glass: Maybe even a national outcomes framework.

Mr Gyimah: I have sought to please the Committee by saying that we will look at the outcomes.

Chair: You have, and we are delighted.

Mr Gyimah: One of the great things about early years is how much of what is being done policy-wise has been driven by evidence. The EPPE research, which I mentioned, in part guided the previous Government’s introduction of the free early entitlement for three and four-year-olds, and we have built on that. We continue to do more. The early years pupil

premium, again, is based on that kind of research. Not one of you has disputed that. People across the political spectrum recognise the evidence base and the policy that we are building. We may put the emphasis in different areas, and we may see different means for achieving that aim, but one thing we can definitely say is that we are all operating from the same evidence base in terms of the importance of early years and early intervention.

Q102 Pat Glass: Can I ask about improvement in children's centres? We have heard that 50% are not up to scratch, according to Ofsted. Should improvement be led from the sector itself, or is there a role for teaching schools and schools in this?

Mr Gyimah: There is a role for teaching schools, which are fantastic. Of course I would say that we have put £100 million into teaching schools, and a number of children's centres are involved in our teaching school alliances programme. In January, we announced another £5 million. I was at a children's centre in Bristol, and they are very much a part of this. And it is not just children's centres that are part of this; I know that you are passionate about maintained nursery schools, and they are part of this too, which is great. That is a way to get best practice shared in the sector.

Q103 Pat Glass: Nursery schools, and how outstandingly good they are, are my hobby horse—90% of nursery schools have been judged outstanding. Is there a role for nursery schools as teaching schools in the early years sector, and leading improvement in children's centres? Given that there is a long way to go, Minister, and we have this fabulous set of schools, 90% of which are outstanding, should they not have a role in improvement in children's centres?

Mr Gyimah: Absolutely. I can see out of the corner of my eye the indomitable Margy Whalley from the Pen Green centre. I took up your suggestion at the Westminster Hall debate and went to visit Pen Green maintained nursery school and children's centre. I said then and say now that it is the Rolls-Royce of early years work. It is absolutely brilliant. Based on that and a number of other maintained nursery schools that I have seen, they are a much-valued part of the landscape. One thing they can do is share that expertise. There are 16 maintained nursery schools that are designated teaching schools and more than 100 that are part of a teaching school alliance. They are receiving a share of that £100 million pot.

Q104 Pat Glass: So you would see them as part of the solution.

Mr Gyimah: I see them very much as part of the solution.

Pat Glass: Thank you.

Q105 Chair: Are there any downsides to the teaching school alliances that are not led by nursery schools? Are early years going to get lost in the standard teaching school alliance, with a lack of specialist understanding?

Mr Gyimah: If I understand your question correctly, you are suggesting that nursery schools should lead the teaching.

Q106 Pat Glass: Yes.

Mr Gyimah: I would say, from my eight months in the job, that best practice comes from a number of areas, of course. Maintained nursery schools are brilliant, but there are some children's centres that are doing great work. It is right that we structure it in such a way that where the best practice is that we are getting it. The criticism I get is from the opposite end: why don't we have any of the private nurseries as teaching schools doing this? That is the normal criticism I get from the sector. We have a good programme now where good children's centres and great maintained nursery schools can share their expertise.

Q107 Pat Glass: But presumably if private nurseries were outstanding, they would be considered as the leading teaching school.

Mr Gyimah: As part of the alliance.

Q108 Pat Glass: May I suggest you visit Rachel Keeling nursery school in Bethnal Green, which is outstanding? It is one of the most inspirational places I have ever been. It is leading the teaching alliance, and that includes primary and secondary schools. Go and have a look; it really is incredible.

Mr Gyimah: I will have a look. I agree with you that, in terms of raising quality in a constructive way and getting sector-led improvement, teaching schools are the way forward. ,

Q109 Chair: On nursery schools, what are you doing, and what should be done, to ensure we do not lose any more outstanding centres? I went to Hornsea nursery school in my constituency recently. It is a remarkable place, with remarkable parental engagement on a remarkable site. It was fantastic to see excellent early years education as well as care going on there. What should be done to ensure we don't lose any more?

Mr Gyimah: Mr Chairman, you raised that in the Westminster Hall debate and I subsequently wrote to you about it. They are fantastic, but the discussion we have had so far around early years is that a lot of the funding is not ring-fenced and local authorities deploy the funding in a way that best delivers the outcomes in their local area.

Against that backdrop, it is difficult to argue that maintained nursery schools should be put in a separate category. What I have done—further to the debate, my correspondence with you and conversations with a number of maintained nurseries—is ask the Department to look again at the issue of academy status, because I understand why some maintained nurseries would want to opt out of local authority controls, in a sense, to get ring-fenced funding through another route. I have asked the Department to look at it again. They are a vital part of the landscape.

Q110 Pat Glass: They are, Minister. Ministers go all over the world to look at the best, yet we know that they are the best for early years provision, not just in this country, but in western Europe. You could write a letter to local authorities telling them not to close down any more.

Mr Gyimah: Well, there is a presumption against closure. They have to consult—

Q111 Pat Glass: Yes, but that is easy to do. If you were to write a letter saying, “No more,” that would make a huge difference. I leave that with you. You would satisfy the Committee enormously if you did that.

Mr Gyimah: I would love to satisfy you, Mrs Glass.

Chair: I hate not to speak with a united voice; I am less convinced of the power of ministerial missives. Occasionally, going for structures, such as academy funding flow—“As long as you deliver what you are supposed to do, you get the dosh, and you get to carry on doing great stuff”—gives me even more confidence than from letters from Ministers.

Q112 Alex Cunningham: Minister, we have already talked a little about the need for proper provision for vulnerable children. What more can be done to ensure that families with children in need are put into contact with children’s centres?

Mr Gyimah: You are right, Mr Cunningham, that the welfare and safety of children is paramount. What matters is the quality and impact of the services, not necessarily where they are based. It is, again, for local authorities to decide where they place social worker and, for example, child protection services. They are free to place such services in children’s centres if they wish.

I do not think this is something that the Government should dictate, but the statutory guidance is clear that it is important that children’s centres have robust systems in place to ensure that families can access early support before they reach the thresholds of social care, and we recommend that children’s centres should therefore have access to a named social worker. We expect local authorities who decide not to adopt a named social worker model to put appropriate arrangements in place for children’s centres to take the necessary child protection action.

Q113 Alex Cunningham: That’s great, but as you say, it is not necessarily in children’s centres, but, despite the closures, those centres are still a huge network and they could play an even greater role in reaching out. Are you offering any additional advice to the centres and local authorities to reach out to many of these people who are still not part of the system?

Mr Gyimah: Do you mean, are we offering advice to local authorities on how to—

Alex Cunningham: Yes.

Mr Gyimah: I think the statutory guidance is clear that they have got to put in place the structures and systems—

Q114 Alex Cunningham: Okay; you've already said that. Do you see children's centres playing a particular role in your child protection strategy?

Mr Gyimah: We keep going back to the fundamental principle here, which is: do you want to prescribe a children's centre to do A, B and C? I guess the common thread of what I am saying is: I don't think it should be prescribed, but we should ensure that where they are reaching or coming into touch with vulnerable people, the system works in such a way that those people get the services that they need.

Q115 Alex Cunningham: Personally, I would have thought that whether it is a children's centre, a nursery, a school or a university, surely they should all be part of the strategy to deal with child protection, but we can leave that there.

When can we expect to see an improvement in sharing live birth data with children's centres? I know that some work has been going on about that, and it could be very helpful to them.

Mr Gyimah: Sorry, on your previous question there was another point that I missed. There are a number of initiatives where local partners already work in innovative ways to share information about a child and their family. We have got the multi-agency risk assessment, which provides a forum for sharing information for other representatives such as children's centres. Having those sorts of things in place does help when you are dealing with vulnerable families.

Sorry, your follow-on question was about—

Q116 Alex Cunningham: It was about sharing birth data. I know that there will be some sort of e-learning package coming out on information sharing, but when can we expect children's centres to be properly included in that loop?

Mr Gyimah: Can I get back to you in two seconds on that? I am just going through my papers.

Q117 Alex Cunningham: Perhaps I can ask an extension to that while you are getting your act together. How are you encouraging schools and children's centres to share information more effectively?

Mr Gyimah: I think this is one of the recommendations that you made, so I just want to turn to the right page—here we are. In terms of data sharing and where we are now, we said in our previous response that more could be done. We acknowledged that more could be

done to share data between professionals. There are no legal barriers to information sharing, provided that the appropriate agreements are in place, and in many local areas it is happening.

We are making progress on strengthening guidance on health services and local authorities sharing data. For example, we have identified a process for putting in place appropriate arrangements to enable a local authority to apply for its own data sharing agreement with the Health and Social Care Information Centre. We are supporting that process by providing, later this year, a standard format for applications and agreements to minimise the work required of each local authority. We are working with 4Children, our strategic partner, to communicate that to local authorities and children's centres.

Q118 Alex Cunningham: Along with that, will you be issuing guidance to local authorities and health authorities to say that it is time that more than half of local authorities were sharing live data? Do you believe that that should be the case?

Mr Gyimah: Yes.

Q119 Alex Cunningham: Are you going to issue advice specifically on that—that they must start to share live data, subject to the necessary precautions that have to be in place?

Mr Gyimah: Absolutely. With regard to the e-learning package that you specifically mentioned, that is going to be done by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, and I expect it to publish it some time this month.

Q120 Mr Ward: I want to talk about the two-year-old offer, Minister. We were told repeatedly that it was not just about the provision of early education for two-year-olds but about quality provision, and that that was absolutely crucial. Do you believe that there is enough high-quality provision for all two-year-olds, particularly in deprived areas?

Mr Gyimah: The data we have goes back to the January before we extended it to 40% of two-year-olds last September, and was that something like 85% were in good and outstanding settings. That is very encouraging. As we extend the offer we have to make sure that take-up is with settings that are good or outstanding. Some could be nurseries or childminders. It could be a whole range of other settings, but we have to work to make sure that that is the case.

Q121 Mr Ward: So you are confident that the quality of provision, particularly in deprived areas, will be of a high standard.

Mr Gyimah: The last data point that I have suggests that. As we have extended it, we need to work hard to make sure that that is the case. I know that there are some local authorities in which there might be two-year-olds getting a place in a setting that perhaps requires improvement but is working towards good, so the local authority might judge that it is fine for it to offer the two-year-old offer. But quality is very much our focus.

Q122 Mr Ward: The reason I ask is that there have been concerns about the level of funding that has been made available to support the two-year-old offer. I think it might be your patch—Buckinghamshire county council—

Mr Gyimah: Buckinghamshire is not my patch. Surrey is my patch.

Mr Ward: Perhaps originally—I thought it was. It is worried about what it regards as the inadequacy of funding and believes that the average rate of £5.09 an hour, which would give £20.36 per group of two-year-olds, is insufficient to provide high-quality provision. Would you, overall, be of the view that sufficient funding has been made available for the two-year-old offer?

Mr Gyimah: It is a £755 million programme, and £5.09 an hour, as you have said. In most parts of the country, that is more than it costs to provide child care to two-year-olds per hour. The challenge that providers have found is that some local authorities top-slice the funding. So you have a different picture depending on which local authority you speak to.

Q123 Chair: Are you going to do anything about that?

Mr Gyimah: Yes; it is something that I take seriously. One of the things we have done is publish a benchmarking tool so that providers and the public can see what local authorities are getting and how much they are choosing to pay different nursery settings.

Q124 Chair: Do you think that will be enough? In the past—it went on for years—local authorities would basically top-slice schools’ funding so that central Government had to give more and more. It had to be 80%, or 85%—I can’t remember the numbers. Because the Government found that publishing it and doing all the rest of it did not stop local authorities top-slicing the money, they forced them to delegate it down. They had a sort of top runners scheme and said, “Well, if one council can manage to do it and run central services effectively, so can the rest of you.”

Mr Gyimah: That is where we started. If we do not get the right response from local authorities, we might have to take more action. I believe it is generously funded.

Q125 Mr Ward: Wouldn’t that be contrary to the principle of allowing local authorities to decide for themselves?

Mr Gyimah: But we are explicitly giving local authorities £5.09 per hour now. For example, the local authority should not say that if you are a maintained nursery, you get £5.09 per hour, but if you are a private nursery, you don’t get that. That is not the policy; they are not delivering a policy in that instance.

Q126 Mr Ward: Okay.

Do you have any information on the drop-out rate for two-year-olds, which was raised with us as an issue?

Mr Gyimah: I do not have that information to hand, but 55% of two-year-olds are currently enrolled in early education. For a programme that was introduced two years ago, I think that is encouraging. There is a lot of work to be done. I have spent quite a lot of time on the take-up of the two-year-old offer.

Q127 Mr Ward: Could you provide us with information on the actual completion of the offer, rather than the number that have signed up for it? We have evidence of a high degree of drop-out for those who are signing up for the two-year-old offer.

Mr Gyimah: I don't know what you mean. What is your definition of drop-out—that someone goes for a month, three months or six months?

Chair: They do not stay in the provision; that's all. They sign up and then do not continue. If you could write to us with that information, we would be very grateful.

Q128 Pat Glass: Would you also have any information on geographical take-up?

Mr Gyimah: I do have information on geographical take-up.

Q129 Pat Glass: I was in a village school recently and was told that not one of the children who were eligible had taken up the offer. That, I thought, was a bit worrying.

Mr Gyimah: Just to reassure you, one of the things that the team and I do is analyse the geographical take-up, because we noticed the regional variation. Even when you adjust for demographic profiles, it is huge. You have some local authorities where there is 85% take-up and others where it is something like 30%. So it is a big issue for us. A lot of our work with local authorities is focused on those that are below where we expect them to be.

Q130 Pat Glass: So will you write to us on that and on those who drop out of the system?

Mr Gyimah: We can definitely get that information to you.

Q131 Chair: What I have always had problems with is that the two-year-old offer is so prescriptive. It is aiming at 15 hours, not 10 or 20—it is not based on need. Someone has come up with this figure of 15 hours. First it is 20% of children, then it is 40% of children. Again, there is no statistical basis for that. There is no peculiarity about it. It is a funding thing, and it is phenomenally expensive in terms of the Government's commitment to early years. It's no wonder we have pressures elsewhere; £750 million a year is a phenomenal amount of dosh—I should stop saying that word.

The question is: was that the right way to do it? If you genuinely believe in trusting the front line to deliver outcomes, should you not have said to local authorities, “Here’s your share of £750 million. Here are the outcomes we want: we want the poorest children to be fixed. You may be doing an intensive 30 hours with some, and with others you may choose to do a big parental in-home engagement-in-education exercise, if you think there is the evidence for it. Go and sort it out, rather than give 15 hours a week, even though it might be necessary to have 35 hours for some and four for others”?

Mr Gyimah: The 15 hours is based on a reasoned assessment of what could make a difference from an early years perspective. If you go back to the EPPE research I referred to, it tells us that there is a huge difference between children who attend pre-school and those who don’t in their eventual educational attainment. It also says that what they need is a little and often. If it is a little and often—if it is 15 hours over the week, that is half a day of early education for two-year-olds.

Some might say it should be more and some that it should be less, but it is based on a reasoned assessment of the evidence. That is not to say that in some cases a child getting more hours would not benefit. Based on where the research is, that is where we have ended up.

Q132 Caroline Nokes: Can I take you to the issue of teaching in early years settings? How much progress do you think has been made towards equality between teachers in early years and those in the rest of the profession?

Mr Gyimah: It depends on what you mean by equality.

Q133 Caroline Nokes: Shall we talk status and pay?

Mr Gyimah: We have introduced the early years teacher status. If you are to cut to the chase of whether teachers in the early years earn the same as teachers in schools, in the vast majority of cases the answer is no.

Q134 Caroline Nokes: Do you have a strategy to address that? I think we would all agree that it is important in early years settings that those who are teaching are valued and appreciated, and that the status they have is of the same standing as those in the primary setting. Do you have a strategy to get to that point, or is just a vision?

Mr Gyimah: There is one way you could try to do that, which is to insist on QTS for the early years. The policy challenge around that is that 80% of the early years sector is private. We are not in the business of stipulating salary rates for the private sector. We would have a situation where the maintained sector had QTS, with associated pay rates, and the private sector—80% of child care provision—was operating in a different way. That is the conundrum.

One way in which we can raise quality and get quality into early years is by having more nurseries in schools, for example. This week we announced that new free schools can

bid for funding to create nurseries. Schools have more graduates in the system, so you can deal with that, but also, schools are based in the community. We have been pushing more nurseries in schools. That is one strategic way to do it.

We have to remember that in the early years, specifically with child care, what you want to deliver for parents is high-quality, available and affordable child care. It is a very careful balancing act of raising the pay and status of the sector, without at the same time creating a situation where suddenly child care becomes more expensive for parents.

Q135 Chair: So, we can't, basically.

Mr Gyimah: No, we are finding ways to do it. I have mentioned having more nurseries in schools as one way. We are trying to get Teach First into early years. We are working at ways of getting the quality into early years, so that parents can get high-quality but affordable child care.

Q136 Caroline Nokes: Are you tracking the rates of pay in the private sector?

Mr Gyimah: There is a lot of research out there on this. The last piece of research I saw on this was the LaingBuisson survey, which was a market survey that did quite detailed and extensive work on pay rates in the child care sector. The good news—I can get the exact details to you—is that pay rates have actually gone up over the past few years in the child care sector.

Q137 Caroline Nokes: Across the whole range, or just in the private sector? Have you done a comparison of the maintained and private sector?

Mr Gyimah: It is a detailed piece of research. I can get that over to you.

Q138 Chair: That must have had a knock-on effect on the affordability. As you say, it is a balancing act. We are trying to marry the vision that your predecessor set out of a seamless integrated work force for nought to 19, which sounds great, with you then coming up against a pretty solid rock of saying, “Well, as most of the provision is in the private sector and the parents are already priced out of it, how on earth can you get the graduates and Teach First early years people on that career path and get the right people to want to go into it, without destabilising it?”

That is what we are looking at—whether you can marry those things together or not. If we cannot create an integrated, seamless, single-status profession for nought to 19, would it not be better if we said so or identified those areas within it where we could do it, in order to act as beacons for the rest but not mislead people into thinking we can do something that is fundamentally impossible given the economics?

Mr Gyimah: Once again, Mr Chairman, you have summarised the dilemmas around this policy very well. To go back to Pen Green and something that I noticed there, as well as

a conversation I had with Andreas Schleicher, who is the author of the PISA rankings—he said, in terms of what graduates look for, that we focus very much on pay and status. But that is not the only driver; career progression is also a driver. If you solve the pay issue but someone does not feel they are getting the progression because they are working in a very small setting, you are likely to lose them, because that sort of person might want to go to a more senior job.

What I noticed at Pen Green, where the staff retention rates are very high—they even had people working there whose children had gone there—was that because of the diversity of what they do, there are a lot of different opportunities for people to progress within the organisation. If we are really trying to solve the issue of getting graduates into the sector for quality but also pay and status, we have to think about progression.

The truth is that for early years, we have a lot of quite small settings. That does not exactly work. It is not as simple as saying, “Okay, once you solve the QTS thing, you’ve solved the issue of getting graduates into the sector. They’ll come in and they’ll stay.”

A final point is the market dynamics. We now have a situation where we have more people in work than ever before, and early years is competing for talent, not just with schools but with lots of other sectors.

Chair: So I said it looked impossible and you have said, “Chairman, it’s worse than that.”

Q139 Mr Ward: Would you consider commissioning a review of the support available for the training and development of all children’s centre staff?

Mr Gyimah: One of the ways we can get continuous professional development in the early years is through the teaching school alliances. That will really help to raise the quality and experience in the sector.

Q140 Mr Ward: Concerns have been expressed about parity of esteem in the work force, parity of pay and so on. But another area is CPD and staff development. Do you not see that it would be of value to commission a review?

Mr Gyimah: No; I have said that we have a programme in which we have invested £100 million—the teaching school alliances. That programme is about expertise and best practice. I expect that programme to help develop that, rather than commissioning a new review.

Q141 Mr Ward: Finally, on leadership, the National College recently ran the national professional qualification in integrated centre leadership. I understand that there was going to be a review of this. I don’t think that has concluded, but could you tell me what is to replace the NPQICL, if anything at all?

Mr Gyimah: I will have to get back to you on the NPQICL.

Chair: We look forward to hearing from you, Minister. We are delighted that we have managed to have you before the Committee before the election. Thank you for giving evidence today. We look forward to hearing from you on the various issues that we touched upon.

Mr Gyimah: Thank you.