



## Report

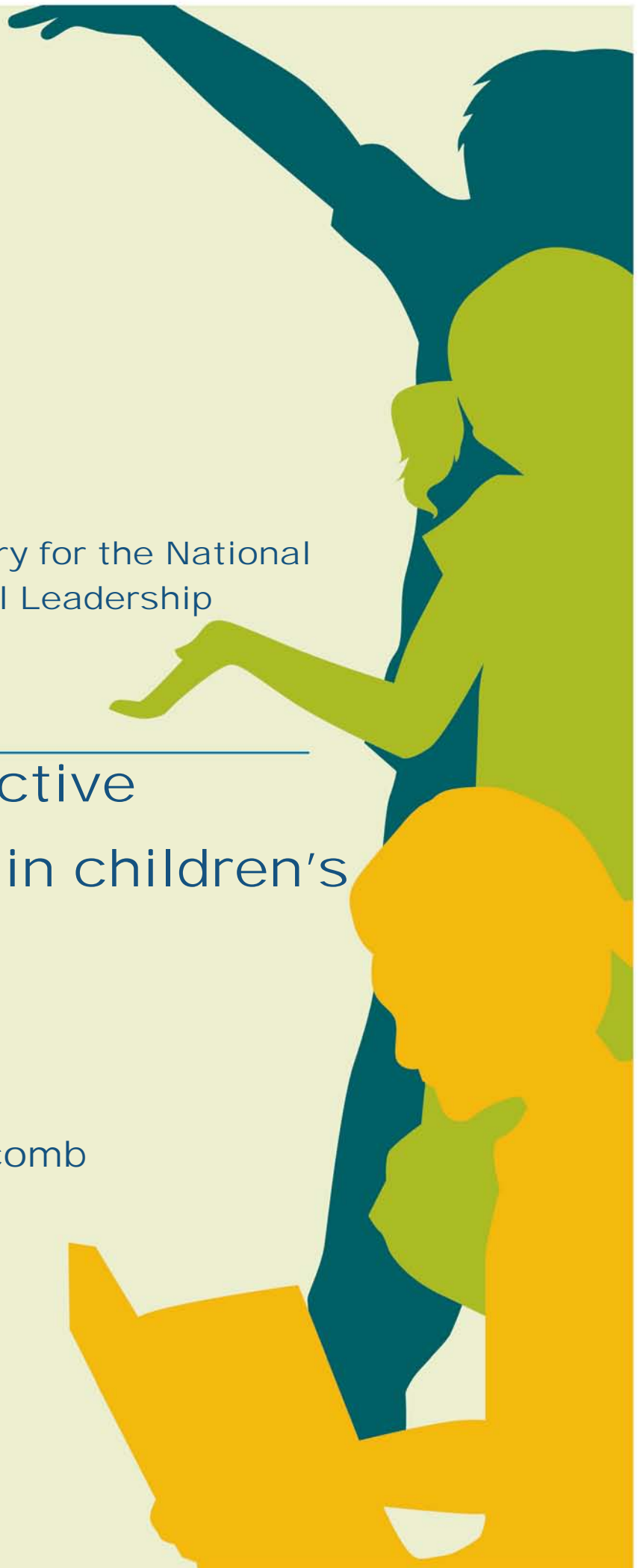
Research Summary for the National  
College for School Leadership

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# Highly effective leadership in children's centres

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# Research summary

The National College commissioned this project research to investigate the nature of highly effective leadership in Sure Start children's centres and the development of system leadership. The study included a rapid review of research and policy, case studies of 25 centre leaders identified as 'highly effective'<sup>1</sup> and practitioner workshops to validate the findings. The project took place between summer 2011 and spring 2012.

The network of children's centres has grown rapidly over the past decade. The Sure Start local programme was announced in 1999 and by 2010 more than 3,600 centres were operating throughout England. The coalition government's decision to remove the ring-fence on funding for Sure Start in 2011 has led to a period of intensive change, including local authorities seeking to rationalise their expenditure on children's centres and to outsource responsibility for running centres to other providers.

New models of children's centre organisation are developing in response to the current policy environment, including a reduction in funding for children's centres. The most common new models are:

- a cluster of children's centres working together on strategic goals
- a cluster model with a locality manager who is directly responsible to the local authority
- a hub-and-spoke model, whereby the leader of a hub centre is responsible for the work of satellite or 'spoke' centres

Other dimensions of centre organisation of increasing significance are: centres working as part of other organisations, such as schools, 0-19 services or combined centres for children and families and the increasing involvement of 'chains' operating across more than one local authority.

## What are the main challenges for children's centre leaders?

Leading a children's centre is an inherently complex and difficult task given the breadth of the remit and the need to work effectively with partners in other services to improve outcomes for children and families. The recent period of change has intensified the challenges, producing a loss of experienced leaders and resulting in a period of uncertainty for leaders and staff. The key challenges are:

- leading in a time of intense change
- maintaining high-quality services in the face of uncertainty and funding cuts

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<sup>1</sup> Including five case studies of 'good' leadership

- maintaining staff morale and motivation
- keeping an appropriate balance between universal and targeted services
- dealing with increasing number of vulnerable families, combined with fewer sources of support
- managing limitations in the understanding by other agencies of the contribution made by children's centres, combined with a perceived low status of early years' professionals
- tackling barriers to effective data-sharing between partner agencies.

### How were highly effective leaders addressing these challenges?

The *most* effective centre leaders are **change managers**. They see change as an opportunity to be proactive and solutions-focused, taking the opportunity to reshape today's world to create solutions for tomorrow. They also have a high degree of **emotional intelligence**, demonstrated through resilience, optimism, motivation, intuition, and the ability to form strong relationships and work in partnership to make a difference for children and families.

### Core behaviours of highly effective leaders

The research identified eight core behaviours displayed by highly effective children's centre leaders. These are:

1. **Having a clear vision to improve outcomes for children and families**
2. **Engaging responsively with families**
3. **Using evidence to drive improvements in outcomes**
4. **Using business skills strategically**
5. **Facilitating open communication**
6. **Embracing integrated working**
7. **Motivating and empowering staff**
8. **Being committed to their own learning and development**

Each of these behaviours is underpinned by a set of key knowledge, skills and attributes, including change management, distributed leadership and emotional intelligence. Highly effective leaders understand their role in setting the vision and culture, which they pursue in partnership with staff, other service providers, parents and other stakeholders.

### Core behaviours of system leaders

System leadership is about leading across the foundation years to develop a self-improving system. It involves driving improvement and challenging each other with rigour. The research identified three main ways in which system leadership can

operate: centre-to-centre, across other foundation years' settings and leading service development.

The research identified seven core behaviours of system leadership:

1. **Investing in the bigger picture**
2. **Focusing on achieving best outcomes for children and families across the foundation years**
3. **Using key knowledge and evidence across the system**
4. **Creating partnerships serving children and families across the system**
5. **Leading and constructing collaboratively across the system**
6. **Building system leadership capacity**
7. **Improving practice and tackling underperformance across the system**

These behaviours are built on effective leadership within children's centres, but require leaders to act strategically to improve outcomes for children and families outside of their own centre's reach area.

The research found that the concept of system leadership was not well understood by centre leaders. Nevertheless, the case studies showed that leaders were taking on aspects of system leadership, and were interested in expanding their role (for example, through the pilot early years teaching centre initiative). One of the underpinning abilities demonstrated by centre leaders involved in system leadership is an investment in horizon-scanning, combined with a strong grasp of the situation on the ground and an ability to operate in a politically astute manner.

## Implications for NPQICL

The research team asked children's centre leaders and staff for their views on the National Professional Qualification for Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL). This found overwhelming support both for the qualification and the intention to develop a modular course. Centre leaders were concerned that the course might be shortened in future, and wanted to retain opportunities for reflection and professional exchange. They wanted any revised NPQICL to be aimed at postgraduate level, but argued for more routes into and onwards from NPQICL.

## Future challenges

The key challenges for children's centre leaders were:

- remaining positive in a time of continuing change
- improving the status of staff working in children's centres
- ensuring positive impact and improved outcomes
- addressing the barriers to system leadership

- making difficult decisions in a time of scarce resources
- developing future leaders.

Centre leaders were concerned about the challenges of leading across split sites (eg, in hub-and-spoke models) and did not want to lose touch with the communities and families they serve. They also pointed out that many of the current leaders are approaching retirement, and were concerned about the supply of future leaders.

## Key messages for policy and practice

The report contains detailed recommendations for policy and practice. These can be summarised as follows.

- National policymakers need to recognise the key contribution of children's centre leaders to our society. They need to do more to encourage joined-up policy development and joint working across education, health, employment, housing and social care.
- There is a role for national government in providing support and information to children's centre leaders, for example through clear and timely information, the Children's Centre Leaders Network (CCLN), and the early years teaching centre initiative.
- There is a need to secure the future pipeline of highly skilled and well-prepared centre leaders of the future.
- NPQICL should be retained at Master's level, with clear progression routes into and beyond this qualification.
- National and local policymakers should recognise the implications of new models of children's centre organisation, and ensure that centre leaders have adequate access to support. The concept of system leadership has potential benefits for the sector, but needs further explanation and development.
- Children's centre leaders should make the most of existing links to support one another. Highly effective leaders have a wealth of experience and skills which could be better utilised to develop new leaders and address underperformance both within their own settings and across the foundation years.

## Research methods

The project had four strands:

- **Strand 1: a desk study of published and semi-published literature** involving a rapid review of UK policy documents and research evidence (2003–11), using systematic searches of relevant databases and internet websites and gateways, and recommendations from the National College
- **Strand 2:** a call for evidence via NFER's network of links with local authorities asking them to contribute relevant documentation on models of leadership in children's centres

- **Strand 3: 25 case studies across a range of children's centre settings**, 5 focused on highly effective<sup>2</sup> leadership in single-centre settings, 5 on good leadership in single-centre settings, and 15 on system leadership and new/emerging models. Each case study involved interviews with local authority staff, children's centre leaders, children's centre staff, staff from other agencies and parents (totalling 158 interviewees)
- **Strand 4: practitioner workshops** at the British Early Childhood Educational Research conference and three regional workshops with the CCLN to validate findings and develop recommendations.

### Further information

For more information about this research visit [www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/ELCC01](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/ELCC01) or email Caroline Sharp [c.sharp@nfer.ac.uk](mailto:c.sharp@nfer.ac.uk)

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<sup>2</sup> These categories of 'highly effective' and 'good' were based largely on Ofsted inspection reports, coupled with other information, where relevant. The 15 system leader case studies included

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