The St Thomas Children’s Centre provides integrated services for families with children aged 0-5 years in Birmingham’s Attwood Green area. The Children’s Centre plays a crucial role in early intervention and acts as a hub for the local community.

Demographic change and social exclusion

Birmingham has just over 1 million inhabitants. Children aged under 16 years represent 22% of the population and this is forecast to rise by 47,500 by 2028. Between 2001 and 2008, the city’s birth rate increased by 21% - higher in the inner-city neighbourhoods - creating significant pressure on early years services, education and health care.

Birmingham is very ethnically diverse. Some 50% of children are from minority groups, and this is set to rise to 64% by 2026. One of Birmingham’s most deprived and diverse areas is the Ladywood ward. Unemployment is high at 24.4% and 45% of children live in poverty. Most children in this area enter early years care and education with skills that are lower than expected for their age.

Best practice solution: St Thomas Children’s Centre

Established in 2000, the St Thomas Children’s Centre integrates childcare, early education, health, employment and support services for pre-school children and their families in Attwood Green in the Ladywood ward. It is one of several Sure Start centres in Birmingham, which aims to give children aged 0-5 years the best start in life and provides universal integrated services under one roof.

The St Thomas Children’s Centre serves as a ‘one-stop-shop’ for its users, helping to identify and address potential problems at an early stage to prevent more intractable problems from emerging later on. The centre is designed to cater for 1,000 children a year from a variety of backgrounds.

The centre operates a drop-in facility to help with issues such as domestic abuse, housing and debt. It also helps families to access health services. In addition, the centre assists parents who are furthest from the labour market: it directs them to relevant training courses and job vacancy services, as well as offering English courses for speakers of other languages. The centre provides parenting classes, a counselling service, computer literacy training and advice for asylum seekers and refugees.

Successes

One of the key successes for the St Thomas Children’s Centre is its work in partnership with local agencies, to enable:
- information sharing
- referrals by partner agencies
- encouragement by local professionals, such as midwives and health visitors, for parents to attend the centre
- housing association links to ensure housing advice and assistance.

The management board includes representatives from the local community to ensure that the centre’s services continue to meet their needs.

The success of the centre has been recognised by the national education standards organisation, Ofsted. In its most recent inspection in 2010, the St Thomas Children's Centre was rated 'outstanding', and is 'extremely well' managed.

Between spring 2009 and spring 2012, 1,350 women attended antenatal clinics at the centre. To date, the centre has engaged with over 70% of workless households with children; 77% of ethnic minority families in the area have accessed the centre and in the year between spring 2009 and spring 2010, 3,041 people attended the centre’s stay and play sessions.

Challenges

Initially, the main challenge for the St Thomas Children’s Centre lay in winning local support. Many people believed that the needs of established residents would be overlooked and that the centre would only address the needs of newly-arrived communities.

Another challenge was for the professional teams and organisations involved to change their work style. Traditionally, they all worked separately, which can result in gaps and overlaps in services. The centre introduced new integrated ways of working. Strong leadership was needed to change mindsets.

The centre also had to ensure that personal client information could be shared safely and sensitively with different statutory agencies.

The main challenge today is sustainability, as funding streams are no longer protected.

The future and sharing the good practice

Disseminating best practice is an integral part of the work of the centre. It shares policies, procedures and practice with other Children’s Centres and professionals, both locally and nationally.

The Council's Business Plan 2011+ highlights demographic change as a key policy driver in relation to children, young people and families. This reflects the vision of the city’s strategic ‘Be Birmingham’ partnership and its Birmingham 2026 strategy.

Despite funding cuts, the St Thomas Children’s Centre will be trying to maintain its current level of services wherever possible.

Funding

The centre received £300,000 a year in funding, from a variety of sources, including Birmingham City Council, national budgets, the EU and the Arts Council. However, all Children’s Centres in Birmingham have recently been subject to a 20% cut in funding.