

Conservative Party Childcare Consultation: Pre-school Learning Alliance Response

THE PRE-SCHOOL LEARNING ALLIANCE

BACKGROUND

The Pre-school Learning Alliance is the largest voluntary sector provider of quality affordable childcare and education in England. Through direct provision and its membership of 15,000 nurseries, sessional pre-schools and parent and toddler groups, the Alliance supports over 800,000 children and their families in England. The Alliance also develops and runs family learning, training and accreditation programmes, offers information and advice and campaigns to influence early years policy and practice.

The Alliance is committed to the needs of children and to the principle that parents are their children's first and most important educators. In Alliance pre-schools staff work with parents, supporting them in the management of their children's behaviour and in activities which can be a source of enjoyment and learning at home. The Alliance also believes in the value of learning through play and the importance of play in children's development.

ALLIANCE RESPONSE TO THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY'S CHILDCARE CONSULTATION

1) Children's Centres and SureStart

Definitions and continuity of initiatives

The government's current 10-year strategy for childcare is primarily framed around two central initiatives – children's centres and extended schools. Before any firm analysis can be made of the strategy it is important to try and distinguish how the two initiatives differ and where they overlap. This is the Alliance's current understanding of children's centres and extended schools and how they relate:

- Children's centres only deliver services to children up to the age of five years old or their families (except sometimes in the case of older disabled children).
- Extended schools may provide services for both school-age children and under fives, although their core focus is on providing for school-age children.
- Some extended schools may be providing childcare and education for the under-five age group through a nursery class or a yearly reception intake. Others may contract a pre-school as an independent service.
- Childcare is not a core service for children's centres, but extended schools must be able to facilitate access to childcare from 8am-6pm for school age children by 2010.
- Neither children's centres nor extended schools necessarily have to locate all services on-site, but they must demonstrate the ability to signpost parents or children to core services (such as childminders for instance).
- The government sees advantages to some children's centres being located on primary school sites. Often children's centres are managed within the school's existing management structure.
- Both children's centres and extended schools are expected to work together where appropriate to ensure a continuity of care for parents and children.
- Children's centres have developed from the original Sure Start projects set up in the late 1990s. Sure start was postcode-specific targeted at the poorest communities in the UK, but strict eligibility criteria meant it failed to reach families in need who lived in poorer areas within more affluent wards. Children's centres represent an attempt to universalise the broader principles of Sure Start, but without such intensive concentration of resources (hence the quoted figure of average spending per head reducing from 1200 to 250 per head).

However, it is difficult to pinpoint with certainty at any one time how the initiatives are progressing. The direction of children's centres and extended schools and their inherent relationship has shifted several times over the five years since they were announced. For instance, initially it had been intimated that early years education was a service which extended schools should provide, and grants had been made available to pathfinder extended schools for this purpose. However, since 2006 the DfES has stated that early years education is *not* a 'core service' for extended schools – meaning that whilst they would not discourage Private and Voluntary (P&V) settings moving onto school sites, state funding (either capital or revenue) should not be used to support this. Policy u-turns such as this have made it very difficult for local authorities, and near impossible for the P&V sectors who are often not kept directly informed, to keep up to date in order to strategically plan and support the roll out of services on the ground.

Children's centres

As the largest voluntary sector provider of childcare within children's centres, the Alliance strongly believes in the initiative, and feels it can succeed in providing access to a range of services for children under five and their families. However, for this to happen there are some key challenges which need to be addressed:

- **Sustainability:** The key challenge is ensuring that once children's centres are fully established, they are maintained. There is currently some apprehension as to whether an initiative as wide-ranging as children's centres will receive the necessary economic commitment from government, which is essential to ensure the success of the programme. Some local authorities are reporting that they simply do not have enough resources to establish adequate services in the first place, and all areas are concerned whether children's centres will continue to receive the necessary funding to maintain services in the medium to long-term. The centres are highly unlikely to be able to generate sufficient income to become sustainable by themselves. As they are now becoming the hubs of local services for the under fives, their disappearance would leave local services in disarray. If centres are forced to close it is likely that the worst impact will be on the low-income communities which most need them and are unable to afford services elsewhere – it may also help to sow further distrust in a government who are likely to be perceived as 'taking away' and 'not caring'. The results of the Comprehensive Spending Review later this year will be crucial in determining the immediate future of the initiative.
- **Flexibility:** Children's centres need to be able to respond to the local demand and provide the services which the community needs or wants. For instance, in some communities there may be a far higher demand for sessional care rather than full daycare. If this is the case children's centres should be allowed to judge whether it is economic to spend money on opening in periods where few or no children attend childcare services (e.g. early in the morning or late in the afternoon). Current guidelines stipulating what *must* be provided can make this extremely difficult.

- **Partnership:** Educational philosophy is dominant in the development of children's centres and appears to be taken for granted. However, it must be remembered that children's centres are not simply 'mini-schools' and the needs of the under-five age group are not the same as school-age children. Health, Social Services, Jobcentre Plus and other sectors are also core services operating in children's centres. For all agencies to work together with maximum effectiveness the Alliance would like to see a more egalitarian approach ensuring all services work in equal partnership in children's centres (and also extended schools).
- **Monitoring:** The Alliance would be concerned that without adequate monitoring of the performance of children's centres, it is unclear whether they are succeeding or not. A recent National Audit report (Dec 2006) highlighted that over half of the local authorities consulted were failing to monitor the performance of services and a similar number were not identifying the cost effectiveness of services.
- **Management:** Although there is facility for the P&V sectors to manage children's centres, the majority remain under control of local authorities or schools. This can mean the centres are less attractive to many communities who may have had bad past experiences with education or social services. The Alliance would like to see more schools and local authorities work in partnership to deliver their children's centre objectives.

Overall the Alliance would caution that far too much money has already been invested in the children's centres initiative for it to be abandoned. The government must continue to show its belief in the initiative by making available the necessary resources to ensure its future success. The Alliance believes that investing in today's young children will have innumerable benefits, both socially and economically, as this generation grows up.

Care for disabled children

Due to changing attitudes and legislation, the quality of the care given to disabled children has improved; however, there still remain problems in specific areas such as in extended care:

- **Transportation:** There are reports of children being on buses for too long and traveling too far from their home locality. This could be rectified by new policy on the transportation of disabled children stating that a child should only be on a bus for a maximum length of time and within close proximity to the child's home.
- **Training:** Many staff have not worked with children with additional needs before or been trained in relevant support systems such as BSL/Makton/PECs etc. There is sometimes a lack of knowledge on how to handle, position and care for such children and manage their other complex difficulties. There needs to be regular training for all new staff change attitudes, raise awareness of barriers and help develop new skills to meet children's individual requirements.

- **Lack of equipment:** Children's centres and extended schools are often not equipped adequately for children with specific physical needs, e.g. standing frames etc. An equipment assessment should be made to ascertain what is required and what may be needed in the future. This might be funded via a resource pool shared by local services.
- **Activities:** There is sometimes a lack of relevant stimulating activities in services for disabled children, especially those with physical and communication difficulties. Planning of activities should always take into account the differing requirements of children especially those with profound and complex needs and reasonable adjustment should be made.
- **Admissions:** There is still poor admission to extended school places - e.g. children denied a place because of their impairment - despite this being unlawful. Admissions and Inclusion policy should always state how equality of access is implemented.

2) Private and Voluntary Childcare Provision

A level playing field between P&V and state providers

One of the principal problems in creating a level playing field in childcare supply is the power that local authorities currently have to manipulate the local childcare market. On the one hand state provision has increased rapidly in line with expansion of the sector as a whole and these services are, at least to some degree, controlled by local authorities. Yet on the other hand the local authorities also act as commissioners of childcare services in their local area. This creates an inherent conflict of interest, with the local authority able to (willingly or otherwise) influence the market to their favour. Some examples are as follows:

- Nursery Education Funding (NEF) for both P&V and maintained settings is distributed from the central government to local authorities as part of the Direct Schools Grant (DSG) for all 0-16 education funding. Local schools forums then decide how much of the DSG is actually allocated for NEF. This allows the local authority to decide how much it wishes to give P&V settings, and the remainder is usually redirected into schools. This has led to vastly different rates of NEF reaching P&V providers from authority to authority.
- Some schools have been permitted to establish their own pre-school or nursery provision on site, regardless of whether there is sufficient P&V provision already in existence nearby. This has had the effect of putting some P&V providers out of business. It is against advice given in the guidance document *Childcare In Extended Schools* (DfES 2002).
- In commissioning P&V providers to provide childcare services on school sites, often stipulations are made that schools will receive the NEF within a nursery class. This not only makes the P&V childcare services unsustainable in most cases, it also restricts parental choice.

Furthermore the Childcare Act 2006 is soon to require local authorities to assess the childcare need and the sufficiency of supply of childcare in their areas. The Alliance feels that if childcare is to be provided through the market rather than the state, then the state must not be allowed to have undue influence on the way the market operates.

The P&V sectors also experiences disparities in overhead costs in when compared to state provision. Schools and local authorities do not have to pay rent on their own buildings – which can make a big difference in the sustainability of any services run from these buildings. P&V providers, though, cannot absorb these costs into other budgets in the same way. Local authorities need to be allowed the flexibility to offer reduced or peppercorn rents to services commissioned in their building which are beneficial to the local community. The Alliance is not opposed to contracts stipulating that P&V providers are required to share excess profit with local authorities. But the reality is that most childcare providers have very low profit margins already and many make a loss – if local authorities reserve the right to take profits maybe they should also be required to help share the burden of any losses?

Staff/child ratios are also different in maintained settings where the presence of a qualified teacher permits nursery classes to operate with 1:13 ratios for children of three and four years old, whereas P&V providers must operate at 1:8. The government has proposed raising the ratio for P&V providers to 1:13 too, but the Alliance would be concerned that this is too large a group for children of such a young age. It would be preferable to require nursery classes to operate to the lower ratio to level the playing field.

Finally private providers, particularly, face substantially more costs than voluntary or other providers in regard to rates they are charged. P&V providers are also not allowed to offset VAT in way that local authorities can. This means that a universal level of NEF discriminates against them. The Alliance would suggest that it would be worth exploring whether registered private providers of nursery education could have their tax burden reduced, although it recognises that this could be difficult to implement without opening tax loopholes elsewhere.

The P&V sectors currently provide the vast majority of childcare places in the UK and it is unlikely that this will change without substantial investment in increased state provision. The current government have made it clear that they wish childcare to be provided by the market with only limited elements provided as part of the welfare state (e.g. the Nursery Education free entitlement). P&V settings can often respond more flexibly to the needs of parents. Voluntary settings, in particular, can be more successful in using their independence to reach out to those families who may less trusting of state services. The Alliance supports the mixed market approach, provided that state and P&V settings compete on a level playing field (see above).

Free part-time education

The Alliance lobbied hard for the introduction of free part-time nursery education and strongly feels that it should continue to be available to parents. The government announced in 2004 that the free entitlement will be extended from 12½ to 15 hours per week by 2010, and that parents will be permitted to take it more flexibly (e.g. over 3 sessions of 5 hours). The Alliance feels that any debate about further extensions to the current provision should be framed with the best interests of children in mind. The extension of the offer may bring long-term benefits, but it might also be beneficial not to overstretch limited funds and to restrict the universal extensions to NEF at the current level - the money saved might instead be able to be reallocated provide supply-side funding for providers. This would promote sustainability and could allow some settings to subsidise childcare for families in most need. More analysis is needed of what is an appropriate length of time for young children to spend in pre-school, and also what the economic effects on providers will be.

The flexibility element will be particularly difficult to deliver. A large number of settings operate on a sessional basis and these will not be able to offer the continuous entitlement over three days as they are not permitted to open for more than 4 hours at any one time. Full daycare providers also face problems, though – for them to offer a stand-alone session at an appropriate point in the day may makes it extremely difficult for them to sell the remaining hours. For instance if a setting that opens from 8am-6pm has to offer a stand-alone 3 hour sessional place from 9.30am-12.30pm it will be almost impossible to find any parent wanting to purchase the 8am-9.30am space that it leaves unfilled around it. Previously providers had countered this problem by charging a ‘top-up’ fee. The government indicated this was not acceptable in their 2003/4 guidance on providing the entitlement, but it was only in the 2006 Code of Practice that they made the rules unambiguously clear and outlawed this practice.

The Pre-school Learning Alliance strongly supports the principle of an entitlement to nursery education being offered free at the point of delivery. If settings charge top-up fees it undermines this principle, preventing parents from accessing their free entitlement at the setting of their choice and helps to create a two-tier system. However, the Alliance also recognises that where settings experience a shortfall between what is given in NEF and what it costs to provide the session, there are three stark choices facing government –

- 1) Increase the level of NEF to cover the real cost of the place provided.
- 2) Allow parents to pay the difference (e.g. u-turn on top up fees)
- 3) Provision closes in a number of areas.

This is a very real problem threatening to disrupt the commendable aims of the free entitlement, although at the moment it is primarily a regionalised phenomenon. The acute problems being felt by some settings – particularly private, sessional providers in London and the South East – are not necessarily representative of the wider P&V sectors which are already providing the entitlement at current levels of funding, or in some cases, below that level. However, if the issue is not addressed it may spread further to other areas of the country. In order to reduce inequalities the Alliance believes that:

- NEF funding should be separated from the Direct Schools Grant and ringfenced, with a maximum amount local authorities may use for administration so that providers receive the same amount whenever they are based.
- Nursery education should be funded at the same level whether the provider is in the maintained or PVI sector. Giving higher cost nurseries much higher levels of NEF is likely to create perverse incentives for other cheaper settings to raise their own costs knowing that they will be subsidised to do this.
- Annual increases in the NEF grant should be linked to the rate of inflation using an index which reflects increases in the minimum wage.
- Regional weighting should be added to the basic funding rate in areas where settings operate with high overheads – e.g. London and the South East.
- Possibilities for offering discounted rates and VAT levels for providers of the free entitlement, might help to level the playing field between private and other types of setting.

The Alliance supports an Independent Review of Early Education Funding in order to ascertain how providers can best be funded to provide this important service.

Education vs care

The free entitlement currently distinguishes between education and childcare. The government funds early education for three and four year-olds but feels that care is a private matter dependent on parental circumstances. The Alliance feels that this barrier is fundamentally artificial. It sees education and care as inseparable – for the under-five age group one cannot be provided without the other. Children of this age do not distinguish between when they are being ‘educated’ and when they are being ‘cared for’. The Alliance feels that continuity of care is particularly important for this age group. Children should not be moved from provider to provider throughout the day simply in order to fulfil adult criteria of whether they are receiving “care” or “education”.

3) Financial support for families

Supply vs demand funding

Currently there is a mixture of supply and demand side funding for childcare in the UK. Supply side funding includes money paid direct to providers from the state in the form of sustainability grants and capital funding grants, as well as state provision. Demand side funding is primarily delivered through means such as the childcare element of the working tax credit, or the employee voucher discount. It is widely assumed that the money paid to providers of the nursery education free entitlement is supply-side funding. However the Alliance would argue that as it is only paid on a headcount basis for most settings, in practice it operates more as a demand-led source of funding. This difference is subtle, but important when considering issues of sustainability.

The Pre-school Learning Alliance supports a mixed approach to the funding of childcare – supply side funding is crucial for preventing the market withdrawing services from areas where it is unsustainable, and demand side funding helps to ensure that services are responsive to parental need, by putting purchasing power into the hands of parents. However, it is unsure whether the current balance between these types of funding is as effective as it could be.

On the demand side there are several problems with the tax credit system:

- The system is complex for parents to navigate around – many eligible parents need significant help and have to seek advice from their childcare provider in order to claim.
- Tax credits only help families already in work not those out of work who are often the very families which would most benefit from the services.
- The administration of the credits is costly and difficult – the problems of overpayment have been well-documented in recent years.
- There is opportunity to fraud, with parents registering their child at a setting and then withdrawing them once the tax credits begin payment.

The Alliance suggests that it may be more productive to re-direct the childcare element of tax credit payments via childcare providers who are often better equipped to negotiate the system and can help reduce fraud.

There should also be more funds directed into supply-side funding, though, particularly for settings operating in areas which the market would not normally provide for. There has been a misapprehension that once some initial 'start-up' money is injected to establish a service, then in a short time it will be able to support itself. In the majority of cases this is a fallacy – childcare enterprises, particularly if situated in deprived areas need ongoing financial support to ensure their sustainability.

An interesting discussion of the balance between supply and demand side funding can be found in the IPPR report *Equal Access: Appropriate and affordable childcare for every child*.

Poverty and worklessness

Current political thought makes strong correlations between child poverty and worklessness. Indeed it is one of the central factors behind the expansion of the childcare sector, as available childcare removes one of the principal barriers to parents being able to join the workforce. However, the Pre-school Learning Alliance would be concerned to ensure that childcare really *does* help to reduce poverty. In many cases childcare will only allow parents to move into low paid jobs, and childcare costs (even after tax credits and assistance schemes are taken into account) can often mean that the parents are little better, and sometimes worse, off than being unemployed and claiming benefits. This can obviously act as a disincentive for many to enter the workforce, especially when they could be spending time with their children at similar income levels.

Thus it is important to remember that making affordable childcare available is not by itself a panacea to poverty – it is only one factor within a much wider agenda. However, childcare and early education services can be an important first step to alleviating some of the problems experienced by parents (lone or otherwise) who may be experiencing social isolation or exclusion due to poverty. Community pre-school services are particularly effective at this, with an ethos strongly based around involving parents – actively encouraging participation within the setting through assisting with sessions or even the governance of the group. The pre-school culture is also more effective at pro-actively reaching out to families that might not otherwise access services, and is assisted by the fact that it is independent from the state (which can often attract distrust from certain communities). This can help to provide those most isolated with a first step to integration through the needs of their child – once involved the pre-school can identify

However the Pre-school Learning Alliance would be concerned to ensure that any plans for pre-school care are shaped around the needs of children first and getting parents into the workplace second.

Maternity and paternity support

The Pre-school Learning Alliance welcomes the extension of maternity and paternity support as it helps parents.

4) Employers and Workers

Employee vouchers

The Alliance feels that the £55 employee vouchers have been extremely useful for parents, but is concerned that lower paid parents run the risk of losing significant quantities of tax credits by claiming.

5) The Childcare Workforce and Quality

Quality of provision and qualified childcare workers

The Alliance believes that there is a strong link between quality of provision and the qualification levels of staff. Practitioners need to demonstrate a sound understanding of child development – particularly of their emotional development – as well as how young children learn best and how to provide for that. EPPE research strongly suggested the link between qualifications and quality.

Since 2001 the UK has taken backward steps. The National Standards lowered the qualification bar from level 3 to level 2. This was to try to develop the workforce that was required of the daycare strategy. However, low qualified staff find the work demanding and many leave rather than go for higher qualifications, so the idea that there will be a gradual and incremental upgrading of qualification levels over time has proved wrong. To upskill the workforce, a clear qualification bar must be set not at the minimum, but at where we aspire to be. All staff should be level 3 as a minimum, or otherwise be assistants at level 2 in training – no more than 20%. Local authority nurseries used to employ staff who were all qualified to level 3 and above, with lots of in-house training opportunities. This was important for settings dealing with complex ‘child in need’ families. Nowadays, children’s centres can operate on 50% staff qualified to level 2 and 50% unqualified, supported by a couple of level 3 supervisors and managers. The idea that teachers will improve things is largely erroneous. To deliver quality in settings the whole work team has to up-skill – not simply be led by a very qualified person. The idea that practitioners can train and work at the same time has led to demands being placed on trainees that are difficult to fulfil without theoretical knowledge - something which is sadly missing from vocational training. Frameworks such as Birth to Three Matters and the Foundation Stage (soon to be EYFS) require a good level of knowledge if they are to be delivered effectively and make a real difference to children. Otherwise under-qualified practitioners deliver in a perfunctory way, depending on being told how and what to do rather than confidently taking materials on board and knowing what to do.

Management and leadership roles

The Alliance recognizes that the expansion of the childcare sector presents huge challenges in recruiting sufficient numbers of leaders to work in children’s centres and the multitude of other services which are being established. The recent consultation *National Standards for Leaders of Children’s Centres* was disappointing in that the draft standards place an overemphasis on leaders having professional knowledge relating to children instead of focusing on management skills. It is the Alliance’s experience that a children’s centre leader is primarily a facilitation and management role co-ordinating a number of services within a building, with the services themselves managed separately by qualified professionals. It fears that there may not be enough candidates of sufficient calibre for the leadership role from within the existing sector and in order to deliver 3,500

centre nationwide it may be necessary to recruit managers from other sectors with transferable skills.

Pedagogue model

The Alliance believes that it is not the 'model' of other countries that makes the difference, but the inadequacies in the UK system with its often antagonistic split between vocationally training practitioners and academically trained teachers. The early years professional status is a step in the right direction to provide a more academic training to vocationally trained practitioners, but teachers find it threatening, and there is a sense of it becoming competitive. It is true that salaries etc have not been clearly thought about either. It might be more useful to have one professional grade that can be accessed via the vocational route in a career progression or accessed academically. The resultant title, pay and status should be the same, though.

Attracting a more diverse childcare workforce

One of the main barriers to a more inclusive workforce is that first settings need to have an idea of the demographics of their workforce and community. Data collection on staff and adult users is essential in working toward a more diverse and equal workforce. Many settings collect monitoring data for children using their services. Inclusion research carried out by the Alliance in 2006 found that although settings kept records of children's data, the majority did not feel the need to utilise these beyond the initial data collection. Very few settings were pro-active in monitoring and utilising data to ensure settings reflected the local community. Such data needs to be analysed on a regular basis.

Annual research carried out by the Alliance's General Membership Questionnaire on early years settings shows that settings do collect data on the ethnicity, gender and disability status of their staff (but not on age) and further Alliance research has established specific inclusion issues within the collected data:

- 28.2% of settings used translation services to make literature more accessible in home languages
- 32.1% provided materials accessible to disabled people
- 38.9% provided materials in community languages
- 44.6% provided signing support
- 59.6% promoted general activities to involve fathers or male carers
- 51% provided training on equality issues

More men, disabled people, and members of the black and minority ethnic community are needed to achieve a more balanced and diverse workforce. By auditing the provision, settings will be able to identify who is missing from their workforce. In areas with a higher incidence of members of black and minority ethnic groups in the community there is a particular need to develop localised strategies to attract such people into the sector and train them. There is also evidence to suggest that senior management are less likely to come from marginalised or minority groups. Overcoming this issue requires real strategies, not just lip service recruitment value statements about aiming to be an equal opportunities employer and valuing diversity.

The Alliance would suggest that the primary means to attract a more diverse workforce would be through improving pay and conditions. The present workforce comprises largely young women, often white, living at home with parents, travelling to cities where pay is higher, and who don't have the responsibility of independent living (wages are too low for that). Many leave permanent jobs to work for agencies where they earn more money and have less ties and responsibilities to their jobs. This is not good for children, nor for the industry. Salaries are not attractive to men – they can earn much more in other kinds of employment.

6) Informal Care and Information

Funding informal care

Although the aims are laudable, the Alliance has identified distinct difficulties in providing state funding to support informal care. Most pertinent is the question of how informal care should be defined in the first place? What stipulations would be necessary to make a carer eligible? For instance, would a grandparent minding a child for 10 minutes whilst a parent pops to the shops be eligible to claim money for that time? The vast amount of informal care is provided within family networks – at what point does a child cease to be within their unpaid family environment and enter a subsidised and semi-regulated care environment? Too much intervention in private family arrangements could create accusations of a nanny state. Currently many grandparents and other informal carers register as childminders with Ofsted in order to allow tax credits to be claimed by parents. It is likely that any effective scheme designed to subsidise informal care would need to be framed similarly, although maybe a 'lighter touch' registration and inspection regime could be introduced for informal carers?

Additional problems with funding informal care might include:

- *Training* - Without training there is no guarantee of the quality of care that the state is paying for.
- *Tax* - There are potentially complicated tax implications for carers receiving money.
- *Fraud* - Any system is likely to be very easy to defraud relating to the problems of definition and the lack of supervision highlighted earlier.

Given these problems the Alliance believes a better approach would be to use existing formal services to engage more flexibly with informal carers. Informal carer groups - already operating in some areas - could be established as a core part of children's centres allowing carers to network and to access information or training.

Information services

Children's information services (CIS) have now been statutory since near the beginning of the decade. However, awareness levels among parents are still low despite most local authorities engaging in extensive local promotion. It may be that the CIS function and accompanying Childcarelink website need to be advertised more widely as *nationally* available services to raise their profile.

Additionally it is key that childcare is promoted and supported by other services. Midwives, health visitors, social workers and other professionals working with babies or young children and their families need to be able to promote and refer to childcare and relevant information services.

Families of disabled children often are more likely to be given information due to their close proximity to other services, but the development of a central information point for early intervention is crucial. Settings need to be encouraged to use Early Support guidance and materials.

It is important that any strategy to increase the reach of BME families recognises the different attitudes between ethnic groups to formal childcare. Some communities may use extended families for childcare. It is important to work with each individual community who will be able to advise on the most appropriate service to target at parents in that community.

7) The role of Government

Ideology

The government's role in relation to childcare is greatly dependent on ideology. The fundamental question is whether childcare is a service that should be provided by the public or the private sector. Across developed countries childcare is delivered (and valued) in a variety of different ways ranging from the almost entirely market-led (USA) to the welfare state model (Sweden, Denmark). Most systems, though, adopt a mixed economy approach balancing state involvement in the wider market.

In the UK this balance has been significantly realigning in recent years. The state's role in providing childcare has increased exponentially over the last decade. The free entitlement of nursery education, nurturing of out-of-school care, and the government-led expansion of the early years sector has put state involvement within the childcare market at an all time high. The Pre-school Learning Alliance has welcomed the long overdue emphasis that has now been placed on childcare and the increased state funding that has been made available both within maintained and P&V settings.

Nevertheless the current system is still designed within a market-driven framework. But the Alliance is becoming increasingly concerned that too much regulation and intervention is beginning to distort the market and prevent it operating as it should do. Local authorities are being given greater powers to control the supply of childcare within their jurisdiction to help to ensure sufficiency. But in practice this has meant Local Authorities are now acting as commissioners of services (e.g. contracting Children's Centre provision; distributing and monitoring Nursery Education Funding) at the same time that they are directly providing early education and childcare. This creates conflicts of interest for many local authorities as they are often charged with making decisions arbitrating between P&V providers and state services – it is understandable that they will sometimes unavoidably favour their own provision above benefiting independent businesses or charities. But it is also not surprising that many P&V providers are concerned that they are facing unfair competition as they try to survive in the new childcare landscape.

The Pre-school Learning Alliance would suggest that more measures need to be taken to stop local authorities being placed in this position. For instance – perhaps the Nursery Education Funding for P&V providers could be distributed by an independent national body rather than being merged with the monies earmarked for state providers as part of the Direct Schools Grant. This would prevent the temptation for money to be 'topliced' into school budgets and ensure that P&V providers would be receiving their full allocation of funding, tempering some of the recent criticism in the 'top-up' fees debate.

The Alliance also feels that central government needs to play a role in managing the extremes of the market. If the early years are to be a foundation for life then the services which parents and children access need to be consistent and supported. Their integrity hinges on universality and all children must be able to access quality childcare provision regardless of their postcode. The government must act to prevent any market malfunctions which may jeopardise this commitment.

8) The Future of Childcare

Play

The Pre-school Learning Alliance sees play as the principal means by which children in the early years age group learn – play and education are intertwined. Indeed play is education. Therefore it is important that under-fives receive properly integrated seamless care. Particularly important is the continuity that comes from planning around a whole day. It is not helpful where children are moved between settings for 'education' and 'play' – the children do not understand the differences imposed by adults and it can be unsettling.

The Alliance does not believe that any extension of formal education would be beneficial for the early years. If anything the Alliance feels that the shift to formal education should be pushed back a year or two in line with other EU countries, many of which outperform children in the UK on many academic comparisons.

Emotional and physical development

Children's emotional development is strongly linked to positive relationships which are far more difficult to sustain with a young, under-qualified, and transient workforce. Unfortunately day nursery hours are not best suited to mature practitioners as they may have family responsibilities, so it is hard to achieve a balanced team. The current trend is worrying.

Outdoor play plays a significant part in physical development, as well as other areas such as cognitive development, social development etc; with settings being able to operate with no outside facilities this is severely hampered.

On top of this it is the Alliance's point of view that childcare is only likely to impact on the emotional and physical development of children if it is:

- (a) properly integrated with other services
- (b) adequately resourced
- (c) engages with parents

In the last decade the UK has moved closer towards these objectives, but as the recent UNICEF report showed - highlighting the UK as the worst place in the developed world for children to grow up in - it has far more to do before it can really claim to be delivering the start in life that all its children deserve.

Preparation for school

Parents have a key role to play – not just childcare providers. Partnership is important to protect children and prepare them for life. It is also important to remember that each age/stage is not just a preparation for the next, but important in and of itself. Children should be allowed to enjoy childhood for its own sake, rather than being moulded for adulthood.

The question might then equally be how can we make school ready for children? Too many four year olds are going to reception classes where they are being taught too formally when they should still be in play-based settings. Too many children at three and four years old are having to cope with a core school day backed up by 'wraparound' after school care, rather than experiencing the continuity of full day care provision in one centre. This does not prepare children for anything. Adults and professionals need to remember that babyhood and early childhood are very special and sensitive times and all our services should be based around that fact. Policy makers need to ask themselves what they would expect for their own child and carry these thoughts into their policy decisions.

Improving the life chances of all children

The Alliance feels that progress has been made in developing initiatives to support disabled children and those with special educational needs. The introduction of the Early Support programme is a recent innovation and there is already evidence that this joined-up approach is making a vital difference to disabled children and their families. A similar approach for other excluded and marginalised group could be equally as effective and should be considered.

The kind of discrimination that affects life chances and damages other excluded and marginalised children and families (especially those from black and minority ethnic communities) is complex as there are factors which are beyond the parameters of early years services. Those working in the early years need to rethink the whole approach to 'multiculturalism' and 'inclusion' – it may be useful to conduct some long term studies of black, minority, mixed families and marginalised groups to look at what factors come into play at critical times of family life,

The issues that society is facing today were unheard of when policies and legislation on equality were developed in the 70s, 80s and 90s, and the early years sector has had to constantly reposition, evaluate, re-direct its focus and thinking. The 2006 Equality Act will hopefully give much needed support to strengthened the previous equality legislation helping highlight the issues that beset families in our settings, especially in areas of deprivation.

**Pre-school Learning Alliance
February 2007**