



Document: **Response to *Choice for Parents, the Best Start For Children: A Ten Year Strategy for Childcare*, a DfES consultation**  
Date: **December 2004**

## **Background**

The Pre-school Learning Alliance has a network of over 15,000 community-based early years settings, that provide funded nursery education and childcare for half a million children. The Alliance is the single largest contributor to the National Childcare Strategy, the Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative and will play a major role in the development of Children's Centres. Through our expansion project we have created in excess of 20,000 new childcare places over the past two years. For more than four decades the charity has provided vocational training for staff working in pre-schools and adult and community learning and family development programmes for parents. During 2003-04, the Chief Inspector for Adult Learning named the Alliance as one of the top training providers in the country. The Alliance has also developed a quality assurance scheme for early years settings, which has received Investors In Children status.

The defining characteristic of community pre-schools is the involvement of parents in the care and education of their children and their involvement in the management of the setting. Each year, over 20,000 adults participate in courses of study – vocational or otherwise – as a result of their involvement in their children's pre-schools. Typically, these are adults who left school early with minimum or no qualifications, many are lone parents and a substantial proportion uses this experience of learning as a springboard to finding work.

The Pre-school Learning Alliance supports the Government's vision **“to ensure that every child gets the best start in life and to give parents more choice about how to balance work and family life.”** We welcome the substantial investment by Government in the early years and in the development of affordable, high quality childcare. In particular, the charity welcomes the significant attempts that are being made to combat child poverty, the biggest problem facing children in Britain today - and its consequences.

The charity has a long-standing relationship with DfES and the Treasury and works closely with officials to ensure that pre-schools can continue to play a pivotal role in the delivery of the Government's ten-year strategy for childcare. The Pre-school Learning Alliance not only contributes to the achievement of the Government's five outcomes for children; being healthy; staying safe; enjoying and achieving; making a positive contribution; and economic well-being, but also works to widen participation in further education, combat social exclusion, facilitate the move from welfare to work and support the eradication of child poverty. At the heart of all of our policies is our work with parents, and for parents, who we recognise as the main educators of their children.

The Alliance's mission is to help children to succeed; create the childcare which families need; and build learning communities. We are pleased that the strategy demonstrates that the Government has taken on board many of the issues and views that the Alliance has

lobbied for over the past three to four decades. There is a real synergy between the work of the pre-school movement and the vision within the Government's ten-year strategy for childcare:

- **Choice and flexibility: parents to have greater choice about balancing family life**
- **Availability: for all families with children aged up to 14 who need it, an affordable, flexible, high quality childcare place that meets their circumstances**
- **Quality: high quality provision with a highly skilled childcare and early years workforce, among the best in the world**
- **Affordability: families to be able to afford flexible, high quality childcare that is appropriate for their needs**

***(Choice for parents, the best start for children: a ten-year strategy for childcare, Dec 2004)***

This paper sets out the views of the Pre-school Learning Alliance about the vision for childcare outlined in the document, *Choice for parents, the best start for children: a ten year strategy for childcare*.

### **Genuine partnership**

Every Child Matters is based on the need for effective partnership working across all early years services and providers, co-operation being key to successful delivery.

The Government has firmly placed local authorities in the driving seat, we therefore need to ensure that lead members and officers are fully aware of their role and responsibilities and have a sound understanding of the issues.

The charity supports the government's view that local authorities should act as long-term purchasers of childcare services from a range of providers. Where partnership works most effectively, the local authority views the voluntary sector as an important strategic partner and engages with providers in the development and delivery of services. However, while many local authorities have strong relationships with voluntary providers and an overall commitment to genuine partnership, it needs to be recognised that others may not.

Our evidence suggests that authorities that work with all partners offer improved flexibility and choice for parents accessing childcare. The charity would like to see partnership working form part of local authority performance assessment targets, with local authorities that perform well gaining more autonomy, and those performing less well being the subject of more central control. The Pre-school Learning Alliance, like other main provider bodies, is currently contracted to work with a large number of local authorities across the country. We need to ensure that the process of local commissioning does not create an excessive focus on process rather than delivery. The delivery of the strategy must therefore include:

- **A statutory duty for local authorities to ensure effective consultation with all partners in the development and delivery of early years services**
- **A mechanism for effective monitoring, to ensure a consistent approach to the commissioning of services across the country**

Partnership must also extend to work with parents. Parents are the first and primary educators of their children. While early intervention can make a significant difference to the life chances of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, without parental involvement these gains are in danger of being lost. This was the main finding of the Head Start studies in the U.S.A which have shown that early education can lead to long term gains in adult life, but only where parents are involved actively in the pre-school programme. For over forty years, the Alliance has worked with families to support education in the home and to engage parents in their own learning. Community based pre-schools are typically managed by parent committees, alongside trained staff, helping to foster a culture of transparency and trust.

The charity believes that parents are a huge untapped resource when it comes to the expansion of childcare. Harnessed in the appropriate way, parents can have a major impact on developing early years services that match local need. We remain concerned that until recently the culture of parental involvement has been lacking within mainstream early years and childcare services and has not been sufficiently visible within the current policy framework. The roll out of the ten-year plan should include:

- **A commitment to fully funded parent forums across the country to ensure parents have a voice in the development of local early years services**
- **The requirement for full consultation with local parents when childcare services are planned**
- **The rights of parents to be full partners in early years education and childcare, regardless of whether their children are educated in private, voluntary or state provision**

### **Accessibility and affordability**

We welcome the extension of the entitlement to early years education to 15 hours and longer term to 20, for 38 weeks a year for every three and four year old, together with the flexibility for parents to use their entitlement to best suit the needs of the family. However, there is a separate and additional case for subsidising childcare for parents on low incomes or those not in work. Often the support offered to parents using childcare settings, and/or the respite of having a child looked after for a few hours, and/or the assistance with their children's development, might be factors that will have a positive bearing on the parent's confidence and capacity to take up paid employment.

Childcare is a necessary, but not sufficient, prerequisite for parents, particularly lone parents, to return to work. More consideration needs to be given to the obligation of employers to provide childcare and/or childcare incentives for staff, together with flexible working arrangements.

The expansion of childcare requires considerable investment by Government. To date, the Government has committed substantial resources to fund services, particularly in areas of social and economic disadvantage. Additional funding must be allocated in order to expand services to meet need beyond traditional Sure Start areas and to ensure that existing provision remains sustainable. We were surprised that there was no mention within the strategy of the entitlement to funded places for 2-year-olds, as previously announced by the Chancellor. We ask for the Government to clarify the position with regards to funding arrangements for 2-year-olds.

However, sustainable services will not be realised simply by investing more money. The Alliance urges the Government to look at new approaches to funding to ensure that providers have stable investment for the long term and that parents get the early years services they want and need. This might include direct local and regional grants to providers, linked to quality indicators.

We broadly welcome the development of the Transformation Fund. However there are currently more questions than answers in relation to the fund. We eagerly await further details on the Transformation Fund including, how organisations can bid for this funding, the criteria that will be used for the distribution of funds and the timescales for implementation.

The ideal for families must be universal childcare available for all who want and need it. The present network of pre-schools, nurseries, out-of-schools clubs and childminders should be developed, along with children's centres to meet local demand. We are mindful of the need to value and provide services for "stay at home parents," parents who are taking maternity or paternity leave, or those that choose to stay at home during their children's early years. We welcome the extension to maternity leave and the right to transfer leave to fathers, at the same time we are mindful of the concerns of small organisations with regards to 'who pays' for the entitlement.

The delivery of new childcare places and provision currently relies heavily on the non-maintained sector. Whilst the Alliance welcomes and supports the development of children's centres and extended schools, it needs to be acknowledged that parents want and need to have choice of childcare provision. Furthermore an unintended consequence of developing these programmes may be to divert resources away from existing, successful local provision. The Government therefore needs to ensure funding, that is not time limited, is made available to secure the future sustainability of existing provision e.g. neighbourhood nurseries, sessional pre-schools and parent & toddler and other 0-3 settings. The strategy should:

- **Review of the Child Tax Credit system to assess take up and the extent to which it is an effective means of funding childcare in the long term**
- **Consider a system of direct funding to give providers a stable and sustainable footing, linked to quality indicators**
- **Work with employers to provide childcare and/or childcare incentives and flexible working arrangements for parents, and give due consideration to 'who pays' for maternity entitlement**
- **Ring-fence Sure Start funding within local authority budgets, to secure the future of local programmes**

- **Clarify the remit of the Transformation Fund and how it will be delivered and accessed**
- **Develop detailed funding arrangements and commitment to 2-year-olds**

## **Inclusion**

While there is some mention within the strategy to children with special educational needs (SEN), and the special role of the voluntary sector in providing support, it is our view that the strategy does not go far enough in addressing the issues that parents of children with SEN and/or impairments face, when trying to find accessible and affordable childcare to meet the needs of their child. Our evidence suggests that finding appropriate childcare for children with SEN or impairments is still a lottery. All too often there is a reliance on the goodwill of early years provision in the non-maintained sector, bearing any additional costs with little or no assistance from the local authority.

One of the key aims of the strategy is to ensure all children can benefit from early support. We know that this support is needed very often before the child is of pre-school age. It is therefore vital that the strategy unlocks the mechanism to enable every child to reach her/his full potential. Known barriers to inclusion include a lack of trained staff and resources and the strategy needs to address these key issues as a priority.

We note that the strategy plans to build on the work of the Early Years Support Programme (ESP) to achieve better services for children with SEN and impairments under three, through the introduction of key workers to support families. We would urge that existing early years practitioners are utilised in this role, as their knowledge of child development and work with families would make them natural choices to provide support and information to families. Delivery of the strategy should include:

- **A statutory duty for local authorities to meet additional childcare costs for children with SEN or impairments within all early years settings**
- **Access to training for all early years staff to breakdown barriers to inclusion**

## **Recruiting and valuing an expanded workforce**

The vision of universal childcare will only be realised if major changes are made to the recruitment and training of the childcare workforce. The recruitment and long-term retention of the 180,000 additional early years workers identified by the government is one of the greatest challenges facing the sector. The capacity of early years settings that work closely with parents and volunteers, should be recognised as potential recruitment ground when considering how to grow the childcare workforce. Unless root and branch changes are made to the way in which staff are recruited, trained and paid, further expansion will be undermined.

Those of us working in the childcare sector recognise the link between high quality experiences for children and the calibre of staff that provide the care and education. However, the perceptions of those outside of the sector with regards to working in childcare

needs to change, if we are to meet the challenge and to attract more people, in particular men and those from black and minority ethnic groups into the childcare workforce. Dedicated staff assume enormous responsibility, yet are among some of the lowest paid and undervalued workers in the country.

The much-debated all-graduate profession is not a straightforward issue. The ultimate aim should be to recruit and retain a workforce with the highest levels of childcare qualifications, including graduates. However, we need to be realistic about where we are going to recruit these new professionals from and as importantly, how we can retain them in the longer term. An all-graduate workforce will not come cheap and would necessitate massive investment from Government. While the ten-year strategy contains the laudable objective of 'radical workforce reform', there is no commitment to this level of funding.

Many childcare workers struggle to access training to gain qualifications or continue their professional development. Flexible access to training and further qualifications is necessary to widen the participation of those currently within the workforce and those who wish to pursue a career in childcare. Until there is a pay structure linked to qualifications, experience and responsibility, with terms and conditions comparable with those in the public sector, there will continue to be a net loss of experienced people from the current workforce. We welcome the opportunity to participate in the consultation on the qualification and career structure and would advocate that the 10-year strategy must deliver:

- **Support for a range of routes to qualifications that meet individuals' learning needs, within a national framework**
- **An equitable pay and conditions structure to include all early years professionals that recognises qualifications and responsibilities**

## **Conclusion**

We are pleased that the Government has committed to a ten year strategy, with an emphasis on quality and ensuring that every child gets the best start in life and giving parents more choice about how to balance work and family life. The Governments commitment on paper and the progress to date is evident however, it is our view that the strategy is the beginning of a long journey, a journey that begins from now.

Much of the delivery of the strategy, which is ambitious, depends on consultation on core elements, in this respect we would urge that a specific timetable for consultations and implementation thereafter, is drawn up as a matter of some urgency, in order for organisations concerned with the delivery of the strategy to be better informed and prepared.

The Pre-school Learning Alliance is fully committed to the delivery of high quality early years services that meet the needs of families within local communities. It is our belief that the Alliance has a major role to play in the delivery of the ten-year strategy, we are therefore committed to the delivery of the Governments plan and to working in partnership with other key agencies in order to implement the plan.

For more information on the Pre-school Learning Alliance's response to the 10 Year strategy for childcare, please contact Andrew Fletcher on **020 7833 0991** or by email to [andrew.fletcher@pre-school.org.uk](mailto:andrew.fletcher@pre-school.org.uk)