



Document: **Response to the Green Paper *Every Child Matters***
Date: **December 2003**

Background

The Pre-school Learning Alliance warmly welcomes the Green Paper, *Every Child Matters*, and its underlying aim to give every child the best chances in life. The government's vision for a reform of services to children and their families fits so closely with the aspirations of the charity's mission and with its established ways of working. *Putting the Child First* sums up the agenda for change set out in the Green Paper and it also enshrines the philosophy of the charity.

We particularly welcome:

- the recognition of the vital role played by parents in their children's education;
- the focus on universal services that every child uses so that no child falls through the net;
- the highlighting of the importance of early identification and intervention for children with learning difficulties or disabilities;
- the emphasis on integrated services for children and families through Children's Centres and extended schools;
- the commitment to go on tackling child poverty through an extension of the principles developed in Sure Start local programmes;
- the creation of planning mechanisms at both national and local level to ensure better co-ordination and to support multi-agency approaches and work in partnership;
- the recognition of the link between high quality services for children and a well qualified and better paid workforce in childcare; and
- the appreciation that the full involvement of the voluntary sector will be an important determinant in the achievement of change.

The translation of the vision set out in the Green Paper into practice and provision on the ground presents an enormous challenge to all involved in work with children and families. The Pre-school Learning Alliance would wish to play a full part and pre-schools have much to contribute to the securing of a major transformation in children's services. There are, however, particular challenges for the voluntary sector's participation and the Pre-school Learning Alliance urges consideration of the areas set out below.

Working in partnership with parents

Improving communication and consultation

It is good to see in the Green Paper the recognition of parents as the first and most influential educators of their children and of the failure of public policy in the past to pay sufficient attention to supporting parents and helping families when this is the key to improving the lives and chances of children. By bringing policy on parenting and family support into the Department for Education and Skills, alongside policy on children, the government is addressing this, putting partnership with parents at the heart of its proposals for change. The Pre-school Learning Alliance welcomes this and the emphasis on improving communication with parents, especially in vulnerable families and those in which children have special needs. The development of the "information hub", with improved information collection and sharing, could go a long way to securing better communication so long as all those working with the children, including pre-school staff, and parents can contribute to it. The Common Assessment Framework, the development of multi-disciplinary teams and lead professionals will provide greater clarity and coherence which will help communication with parents and provide better protection for children.

The charity's campaign 'Changing **lives changing** life' has in its Charter for Parents and the Early Years the call for there to be full consultation with parents to ensure provision matches family need and for the formation of parent boards for all early years' settings. We know that across Europe there is increasing emphasis on working with parents as stakeholders in the provision of early years' services. In Denmark, parents constitute a majority on kindergarten and family daycare councils and legislation gives parent boards in municipal centres the right to influence their operation and the use of their budgets. In Norway, every child centre has a parents' council. We hope that the government in developing the proposals for change in the Green Paper will consider similar action as one important way to secure the involvement of parents in their children's education. The charity is currently running a pilot project with five local authorities that have endorsed the Charter to provide exemplars for parental involvement and we expect the good practice developed through this pilot to be rolled out during 2004

Developing networks of support

We welcome the proposal to develop Children's Centres, which will take a holistic approach to the needs of children and families and will integrate services to meet those needs. We would expect to see some of our pre-schools and Neighbourhood Nurseries expanding to fulfil this role. There also needs to be investment in frontline activities, such as parent and toddler work, and the informal care sector with a commitment at local level to fund groups that support parents. The Pre-school Learning Alliance has over forty years experience of work with Parent and Toddler Groups and recognises their importance. For many parents they are the first support network, which engages them in their children's education, in their own personal development and in the governance and management of the group. Volunteering in the group often leads parents to further voluntary activity in the community. An injection of funding for training and for developing the skills of parents who volunteer could pay rich dividends in creating lively, learning communities.

Inclusive practice through support for particular needs

The needs of vulnerable children and families have rightly been the driving force for this Green Paper, which recognises the importance of diversity within a coherent framework and of choice for parents. It is also clearly important for families to have easy access and this means providing services in the communities in which people live. The Green Paper picks out groups with particular needs and across the country the Pre-school Learning Alliance has exemplars of inclusive and best practice with these groups. Innovative work has been carried out in Hull Prison by the Pre-school Learning Alliance's branch in Humberside. Punch and Judy Pre-school in Kensington and Chelsea caters for families newly arrived from many different countries and for those with little or no English. In our Barnsley and Lewisham branches, high quality work has been developed with fathers. For many years, our Wakefield Branch has been finding creative solutions, which enable children with special needs to be part of mainstream pre-schools. First Steps Nursery in Bath, an Early Excellence Centre, has found many ways to support lone parents and those who left school with no qualifications to take up learning again and to move into employment. We are currently conducting research into ways to support families from black and minority ethnic communities. Isolation, the lack of transport and scarce community provision often compound to make life more difficult for parents living in rural areas. For such parents, the local pre-school is very often the main focus of support.

Our course, Putting the Child First, shares with the Green Paper the understanding that in order to protect the most vulnerable children we need to get things right for all children.

Opportunities for learning

Through involvement in their children's education and participation in pre-schools, many parents discover their own learning needs and also the means to satisfy them. In pre-schools there are opportunities for informal and family learning as well as for taking part in courses. The charity's course and information pack, Looking at Learning Together, has been one of the most successful means of providing learning for parents. We propose to update and revise this during 2004 in the light of what we have learnt through its use by hundreds of parents. Lack of funding hinders further development of this work with parents. Pre-schools could do a great deal more to expand basic skills training and to widen family learning if easily accessible mainstream funding were available. We hope that this will be one outcome from the Green Paper's proposals. The charity has clear evidence that parents who are involved as volunteers in pre-schools often use this as a route into training and employment.

Delivering for children

The right to play

The importance of play, not just for very young children but for all children, is clear from research into children's development. Through play, children gain confidence. They learn to control their bodies and to find ways to make sense of the world. Play helps children to learn strategies for exploration, for thinking and for building relationships with other people. For over forty years the Pre-school Learning Alliance has championed a play-based, child-centred curriculum for young children. The Green Paper proposes a cultural change in the way we provide for children and this will surely include the provision of opportunities for children to play, indoors and outdoors, in safe and stimulating environments.

Security and continuity of care

In the Charter for Parents and the Early Years, which is part of the charity's campaign 'Changing **lives changing** life', we call for continuity of care for children, recognising the crucial importance of this in bringing up secure and confident children who will realise their full potential in all areas of their lives. We are glad to see our vision shared in the aims of the Green Paper. We will have to be particularly imaginative in finding ways to develop the cooperation and co-ordination required to achieve the improvements we want for children.

Children in poverty

We applaud the government's continuing commitment to the elimination of child poverty. One of the ways the government has sought to do this has been through widening opportunities for parents to work by increasing the number of childcare places. The Pre-school Learning Alliance has played a significant part in this expansion, by providing 12,000 new childcare places and by working with many of the Sure Start programmes to provide a range of services including home visiting, toy libraries, parenting groups, crèches alongside courses for parents, adult learning opportunities and drop in facilities. We welcome the ideas for the further development of this contained in the Green Paper. It was, and is, obviously right to concentrate first on children living in the 20% most deprived wards but a significant proportion of children in poverty live outside these areas. The proposal to mainstream Sure Start principles is a way to address this. The charity is well-placed to assist and would simply caution that full consultation with existing providers is imperative if problems are to be avoided. One of the results from past inadequate local consultation was the net loss of childcare places. The programme to extend the services based in schools, which could expand universal provision, is also a welcome development and the Pre-school Learning Alliance, through its Expansion project, has been working to "match-make" between schools and pre-schools to help to achieve this. Again, there needs to be full consultation to make sure that an extended schools' agenda does not have unintended consequences for the viability of voluntary sector settings.

Children with special needs

The Pre-school Learning Alliance is delighted that the Green Paper urges greater attention in their early years for children with special needs, through earlier identification and intervention, improved communication and better support services for them and their families. Such a programme would greatly enhance their life chances and significantly reduce the pressure on their parents. We are currently undertaking research with SENCOs in pre-schools to look at the training they think they need in order to fulfil their roles more effectively and the results from this should be helpful in the devising of any strategy for work with children with special needs and their families.

Integrating policy and ensuring delivery

National service standards

We welcome wholeheartedly the government's proposals to introduce national service standards, which will rationalise targets, streamline planning requirements and simplify funding streams while retaining flexibility at local level. This change will bring to an end the fragmentation, conflict of messages and diversity of arrangements that created barriers to delivery, especially for national voluntary organisations like the Pre-school Learning Alliance. Previous mechanisms placed undue emphasis on processes at the expense of delivery and the government did not always get the best return for its massive investment in childcare.

We look forward to helping to establish the cooperation between local authorities, other public, private and voluntary organisations that will improve outcomes for children and to contributing our experience as an organisation with a nation-wide perspective.

Structures that support cooperation and coordination

The creation of the post of Minister for Children signals the commitment of the government to integration and the Pre-school Learning Alliance is delighted that there will be a single department, working across the whole of government, to produce clear accountability for services integrated around the needs of children. We welcome the proposal to bring forward legislation to mirror this national cross cutting approach at local level, with the creation of Directors for Children's Services, Children's Trusts and a lead council member for children. We hope that this new local structure will build on existing good practice in partnership working and, again, we think that the involvement of the Pre-school Learning Alliance with nearly all the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships gives us great insight into the conditions that promote cooperative and rational arrangements.

Delivering quality

Provision for training the workforce

The link between quality services for children and well-qualified staff is well understood. We welcome the proposals to increase the skills of people working with children and think that the development of a new Sector Skills Council for Children and Young People's Services will be important in setting standards and helping people to understand the many different skills required to deliver integrated services for children and for families. Training together will help to break down barriers between practitioners and increase mutual respect and this, in turn, will improve the experience of children and families. Funding will be needed to enable pre-schools to ensure their staff can benefit from training opportunities.

Remuneration for staff

We welcome the proposal for the development of a new Children's Workforce Unit in the Department for Education and Skills to look at better remuneration for childcare workers and at incentives to retain staff and encourage their continuing professional development. Pre-school staff are amongst the lowest paid staff in the childcare sector, averaging £6 per hour. Indeed many are employed at the level of the national minimum wage. We estimate that there are approximately 105,000 workers in voluntary sector pre-schools and this is a substantial proportion of the childcare workforce. Pre-schools settings would also benefit from support for activities above contact time with children. For example, the record keeping required from SENCOs is often carried out in the named person's own time as voluntary sector pre-schools can have difficulty in providing directed time for such duties. This clearly puts considerable pressure on all involved and does not secure the best planning for children in need.

When the strategy is developed by the Children's Workforce Unit, it will be important to make sure it includes and supports small employers like pre-schools and the Pre-school Learning Alliance should have an important role as their umbrella body.

Regulation and inspection regimes

The further streamlining of the inspection regime is to be welcomed as it will reduce the administrative burden on settings providing integrated services and also help parents to understand how to choose good quality provision for their children. Any new system would need careful introduction. Recent changes to the inspection regime have scarcely had time to bed down yet and further change could undermine the present position in pre-schools and daycare settings of high levels of achievement of the quality standards.

In summary

The Pre-school Learning Alliance welcomes the Green Paper, and anticipates with pleasure a White Paper which will:

- put the child at the centre of all services;
- give support to parents through fully funded support networks and learning opportunities;
- plan resources which can be accessed by the most disadvantaged and excluded parents and children;
- provide a qualification base which offers core training for childcare, with further professional and specialist development;
- provide an improved pay and reward structure for those working in childcare;
- enable childcare professionals to work more effectively together in planning and delivering for all children so that vulnerable children are better protected; and
- legislate for National, Regional and Local Government to work with the Voluntary Sector to improve planning and provision for children and their families.

The Pre-school Learning Alliance looks forward to participating fully in the discussions and dialogue in the months to come. We think that our long experience of working in partnership with parents and our understanding of ways to develop and increase parents' full participation in their children's education will be a particularly helpful contribution to achieving the way forward set out in Every Child Matters.