



Document: **Submission to Education & Skills Select Committee – the Work of Ofsted**
Date: **October 2005**

1. Introduction

1.1 The Pre-school Learning Alliance welcomes this opportunity to submit comments on the Work of Ofsted. We are a leading educational charity specialising in early years, with over forty years experience of working with children and families. The Alliance provides practical support to over 15,000 early years settings and makes a positive contribution to the care and education of over 500,000 young children and their families each year. We encourage and actively promote parental involvement and partnership-working in all aspects of our work.

1.2 The Alliance is the largest voluntary sector provider of Neighbourhood Nurseries and Children's Centres, having opened 29 new nurseries in the last two years, of which 22 are designated as Children's Centres. The charity is a major employer of early years professionals within the sector and aims to be involved in 100 Children's Centres by 2008.

1.3 Since Ofsted assumed responsibility for the regulation of daycare services in 2001, the charity has worked closely with the inspectorate through the National Consultative Forum to develop a framework that helps to ensure high quality childcare services. We welcomed the introduction of the National Standards in 2001 as a tool for providing reassurance for parents that their children are being looked after in a safe and stimulating environment.

2. New frameworks for inspection

2.1 Changes to the inspection framework introduced in April 2004 were welcomed by the Pre-school Learning Alliance. We believe that no notice inspections can act as a means of maintaining and improving quality standards in childcare. We are encouraged that the inspection regime is subject to ongoing scrutiny to ensure it provides the necessary reassurance to parents that their children are being cared for in a safe, stimulating environments.

2.2 The Alliance has also supported changes to the grading scale to strengthen integration. We are keen to establish how quality assurance schemes can support the inspection process. The Alliance's accreditation scheme Aiming for Quality, endorsed by Investors in Children, helps settings to improve the quality of provision beyond the minimum standards required by Ofsted. It is important that these schemes remain distinct from the inspection regime and that the government continues to use Investors in Children as a badge of quality.

2.3 The charity broadly supports a more efficient system of inspections as outlined in the proposals for a single inspection body. The proposal would mean that Ofsted would join with the Adult Learning Inspectorate to make a single inspectorate and a more streamlined system of inspections. We would express some concern over the particular expertise of the inspectors, who will need to have specialist knowledge of the early years. A more generalised inspectorate could mean a move away from sector specific inspections, with

inspectors lacking the appropriate training to accurately appraise early years settings. We await the consultation responses with interest.

3. The Childcare Bill and proposed changes to inspection

3.1 The recent consultation on the forthcoming Childcare Bill proposes a series of changes to early years settings. We support the proposal to develop the Early Development and Learning Framework (EDLF) to bring together the care and education elements of the existing regime. In particular, we are encouraged by the commitment to consult with strategic partners to develop the new framework.

3.2 It is important that the EDLF is applied consistently across early years settings and that standards are not relaxed for school settings. With increasing numbers of young children attending school before statutory school starting age, it is important that those schools offering early years services are inspected using the same criteria as pre-schools, nurseries and childminders. Any perception of a different regime would risk undermining parental confidence and eroding quality.

3.3 In implementing the proposed EDLF, it is crucial that the government and Ofsted adopt a phased approach to ensure that providers plan and prepare effectively for the new regime. The early years and childcare sector is subject to change and providers would welcome the opportunity to contribute to the development of the new regime and access sufficient information and support to prepare them for the new framework.

3.4 The Alliance has a number of concerns around the proposed de-regulation of childcare services for 5-8 year olds and the voluntary Ofsted Childcare Register. In particular, we are concerned that the proposals will undermine improved outcomes for children and generate confusion for parents, practitioners and providers. To deregulate care for children attending extended care undermines the objective of appropriately safeguarding children.

3.5 There is a lack of information within the proposals as to how the new regime will work in practice. It is unclear how a provider's suitability to be on the register will be assessed, whether staff working with children will require minimum qualification levels and what action Ofsted can take to support inadequate providers to improve practice.

While standards in settings are improving, the proposed register will do little to improve practice and meet the long-term objective of high-quality childcare in all settings.

3.6 We are also concerned about the 'softer' issues relating to the proposed changes. In particular, they raise the possibility of generating confusion among parents as to how their chosen childcare setting is inspected, when and by whom. Moreover, settings consider inspection to be an important part of the service they offer, as a means of ensuring continual professional development and demonstrating good practice to parents. The introduction of the voluntary register risks eroding confidence in inspection among parents and practitioners.

4. Early years inspection reports

4.1 Evidence from Ofsted's Annual Review of Inspections in August, following the revised inspection framework was broadly positive, particularly for sessional early years settings.

The Alliance was encouraged by this, as sessional care provides parents with a variety of childcare options.

4.2 We would welcome a further clarification on the grading system for childcare settings. For example, the 'satisfactory' rating is a broad category and will include settings that offer higher quality than others. In providing a sliding scale or greater detail in the report, it may be possible to distinguish still further between settings that are nearer to a 'good' or 'unsatisfactory' rating.

4.3 We would stress that parents should be considered a crucial part of the inspection process. As first and primary educators of their children, parents can be an integral part of the service a setting delivers. They also look to Ofsted to provide additional reassurance that their children are being cared for. We would welcome a more 'user friendly' reporting system for parents with a detailed and clear breakdown of the inspection.

5. Annual Report 2004/5

5.1 The Chief Inspector's Annual Report shows a broadly positive picture of quality in early years settings. Ofsted's Firm Foundations report, published earlier this year, showed that 99% of settings were rated satisfactory or above and the Annual Report highlighted 40% fewer actions taken against childcare settings. Despite these improvements, the Alliance believes that there is more to be done to ensure that all settings deliver care and education of the highest quality.

5.2 We agree that Ofsted has, in conjunction with other agencies such as local education authorities, had an impact in securing quality improvements in the childcare sector. However, charities such as the Alliance have also contributed to this improvement.

Our network of support on the ground, coupled with relevant publications, provide information and resources for early years settings to help continuing development. Quality assurance schemes, such as Aiming for Quality, scheme also help to drive up the standards.

5.3 Good leadership is important in maintaining quality, as the report rightly mentions. There is sufficient evidence across all sectors to suggest that effective leaders and managers are integral to ensuring quality provision. On-going training beyond Level 3 is necessary to maintain effective management skills, including self-evaluation. The Alliance is currently delivering a CACHE level 4 certificate in Managing Quality Services in the Early Years. Such tailored training will make a major contribution to the role managers can play in the success of the setting.

5.4 The priority being given to self-evaluation is a step forward in that it demonstrates that quality improvement is an on-going process. The Alliance is encouraged by the admission that self-evaluation will not replace a formal inspection process. We would ask Ofsted to look at the way self-evaluation can be more effective. Critical self reflection is not an innate skill. Rather, it has to be learned. The adult learning sector, which successfully adopted this technique, took a long time to develop the skill of self-evaluation amongst staff. The Alliance would like to see Ofsted providing further guidance and support to managers and staff in this area.

5.5 The improved use of data from inspection outcomes is welcome. The Alliance recognises the need for parents to be given the information they need in order to make

choices about which childcare setting they choose. Parents are key to many childcare setting's success and without their support groups would find it extremely difficult to survive. However, we believe that putting the complaints history of settings on the Ofsted website may have a negative effect. A setting which may have had a complaint made against them in the past should have addressed these issues. The group may be of a higher quality than it appears on the website and this could give a distorted picture to parents and undermine their long-term sustainability.

5.6 Foundation stage unit reports demonstrate that quality is better with Investors in Children endorsed quality assurance schemes than without. We disagree with the government's implicit proposals in the Childcare Bill to remove the Investors in Children scheme. With Ofsted moving to a three-year inspection cycle, quality assurance schemes can continue to be key drivers in improving standards of provision. Having established Investors in Children, the government should aspire to establishing it as a widely recognised brand synonymous with high-quality childcare.

5.7 Reducing the inspection cycle to 3 years is a welcome development as settings will be able to see their improvements on a more regular basis. The effective use of triggers, such as management changes, staff turnover etc, would improve standards, as the inspector will see the setting more often and be able to inform any new managers of their expectations.