



Document: **Response to *Building Civil Renewal: A review of Government support for community capacity building and proposals for change***
Date: **March 2004**

BACKGROUND

The Pre-school Learning Alliance welcomes this acknowledgement of the importance of supporting community capacity building as the first step in securing civil renewal.

The Pre-school Learning Alliance supports 15,000 affiliated community-based pre-schools across England, which provide funded nursery education and childcare for 500,000 children. The Alliance is the single largest contributor to the National Childcare Strategy and to the Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative.

Parent management committees run the majority of our member pre-schools; that is, people from within the communities they serve lead them.

The charity's mission is to help children to succeed; create the childcare which families need; and build learning communities. In the delivery of this mission, the charity not only contributes to the achievement of the Government's early years' and childcare targets, 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.

We are a specialist national infrastructure organisation, with a regional and local presence. Our activity in support of groups includes start-up and development with a focus on best practice, funding and finance opportunities and personnel.

For many years we have been arguing for long-term, sustainable support at local level – both for the groups themselves, and for the local network that supports them. A new pre-school, or neighbourhood nursery, in a deprived area can help kick-start the regeneration of that area, and it is this support at local level which is vital to allow that start-up to happen.

VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

Six key values – providing crucial basis for process of community capacity building:

Social justice
Participation
Equality
Learning
Co-operation
Environmental justice

Eight key principles – turning the key values into real working practice:

Flexible, reflecting local needs & preferences
Democracy
Empowerment
Inclusion
Self reliance
Sustainability
Partnership working
Recognition and valuing

Are these values & principles acceptable bases for shared understanding?

Yes. Another principle, related to empowerment and self reliance, might be self determination.

Sustainability is one of the most important principles. If this is lacking, the others all come to nothing.

KEY COMPONENTS FOR COMMUNITY LEVEL INFRASTRUCTURE

Four key components outlined in the Review:

At least one representative and inclusive forum or network
At least one physical hub or base for individual and collective community activity
Access to generic community capacity building workers
Easy access to small grants

Views & comments on key components welcome. Examples of neighbourhood structures which demonstrate a high level of inclusiveness.

Of these, we would see the third (access to generic community capacity building workers) as being slightly less important. In our experience, specialist support workers are the most productive at local level i.e. for our members, Pre-school Development Workers. Our pre-

schools would find little use for a generic development worker. The provision of a base, an actual building where people can come together, as well as appropriate funding access, are both very important.

A parent management committee runs most of our pre-school member groups. Committees operate at a neighbourhood level. They attract a wide range of people, with varying sorts and levels of skills. Involvement in the committee often acts as a catalyst for people, who find the enthusiasm and confidence to develop new areas of their lives. For example, involvement in a pre-school and work on its management committee can lead people into further training, into employment, into other volunteer roles and into taking part in civic structures like parish councils and school governing bodies.

OPTIONS FOR SUPPORT AT COMMUNITY LEVEL

Option A – neighbourhood action planning

Examples of local practice where neighbourhood action planning is working well, or is problematic.

Whenever a parent-run pre-school decides to expand – for example, to open a new lunchtime session – ‘neighbourhood action planning’ is taking place. A democratic decision has been taken, in the light of prevailing local conditions, as to the best way forward for the pre-school in responding to the needs of its community. This is a rolling process of development at local level, and with the right advice, information and support, works very effectively.

The most common cause of problems in this scenario is where the wider early years context, something an individual pre-school cannot control, is skewed unfavourably. For example, a local authority may decide to open a new childcare setting three minutes away from the pre-school’s door, effectively saturating the market without considering evidence of demand. Here, neighbourhood action planning falls foul of non-consultative planning at a ‘higher’ level.

Option B – replication of tested approaches through one or more national agencies

Examples of effective community development approaches by national organisations.

Our approach generally is to invest heavily in the skills and knowledge of our “local level” of specialist development workers, who have the day to day contact with groups on the ground. The national arm of the organisation also works closely with our regional bodies to ensure that messages, information and advice delivered to member groups are consistent at all levels.

Even where we do have a nationally-led project which directly involves groups, the support of local staff is still crucial to that project’s success.

Option C – investment in key local ‘anchor’ organisations

Views on role of key anchor organisations & how they can be supported.

We view the role of our local branches (from which our local development workers operate) as absolutely essential in fostering a healthy local community centre infrastructure. So much of the work we do to secure a vibrant pre-school sector is at local level – with local authorities, local partnerships such as the EYDCPs, on Sure Start local programmes – and our local branches are the lynchpin of this work.

Our local branches are most effective where they experience true partnership working with key agencies from the statutory, voluntary and private sectors. As most power rests with the statutory agencies, mechanisms need to be found which acknowledge the power imbalance and seek to value the contribution of each member of the partnership.

Options A, B & C are not mutually exclusive, but views on what priority should be given. Any other approaches?

Options A, B & C all have the potential to have a powerful positive impact on community capacity building. However, our experience tells us that Option A, getting support down to the community groups themselves is the most important strategy. This would be closely followed by investing in local anchor organisations (Option C), which is essential for sustaining and developing healthy community-led initiatives, whether it be a pre-school or social action centre.