



Early Childhood Education & Care: Making Investment Count **Summary Report of a Parliamentary Seminar**

Introduction

On Tuesday 9th February 2010 the Earl of Listowel hosted a parliamentary seminar at the House of Lords. The seminar was organised by the National Children's Bureau and The Michael Sieff Foundation. The event brought together policymakers, academics, practitioners and journalists to debate key issues around early years investment and quality under the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) quality framework. It was conducted in the form of a focused seminar under Chatham House rules with speakers and participants encouraged to contribute in a frank and straightforward way. This report is a summary of discussions and key issues raised.

Background

The Michael Sieff Foundation is currently delivering a five-year conference programme focused on prevention through the developmental process, starting with the early years. Copies of the report of the Foundation's Annual Residential Conference 2009 and information about forthcoming events can be found at: <http://www.michaelsieff-foundation.org.uk>

The NCB through its Early Childhood Unit has a dedicated programme of work involving its networks, training, policy and practice and a focus in 2010 in its Firm Foundations Campaign, developed in consultation with the Early Childhood Forum¹. The overall aim of the Campaign is to promote the importance and benefits of good quality early years provision and to demonstrate the consensus and support that there is within the sector and amongst parents and the wider public for investment in early years.

The Firm Foundation Campaign's key messages are:

- Universal entitlement to high quality early years education and care for all young children
- Real partnership with parents, carers and families in educating and caring for young children
- Consolidation and continued improvement of recent developments in early years education and care
- Greater investment in early years education and care to reduce inequality and tackle disadvantage
- Good quality early years workforce through improving training, pay and conditions





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Presentations

The Earl of Listowel opened the seminar welcoming guests, acknowledging the partnership between NCB and the Sieff Foundation and the great progress that has been made in early years services over recent years.

As Chair, **Sally Russell, Director of Netmums** spoke briefly about her experience as a parent and the challenges of making childcare choices, highlighting the importance of flexibility and trustworthiness in childcare providers. Sally presented views of the 6,000 Netmums members who participated in the recent Netmums Politics Survey and who identified Sure Start Children's Centres and tax credits as popular policies. 4 out of ten members identified childcare as an issue that they would vote on and 70% of members had felt let down by childcare at some point.

Dr Chris Pascal, Director of the Centre for Research in Early Childhood made a passionate case for both celebrating what has been achieved and continuing to strive for a world-class service for all young children and their families. She focused on the benefits to children of good services to ensure they are given the opportunities to be the competent and successful learners they are born to be. In order to achieve this she argued that children need affectionate adults to care for them with the time and intelligence to support their learning. Chris wants early childhood education and care to move from being the *Cinderella* service to being the *Belle of the Ball*!

Jody Aked, Researcher at the new economics foundation (nef) presented findings from the nef and Action for Children report, *Backing the Future* about the economic and social benefits of early intervention and investment. The report considered European comparisons and found that the UK comes bottom of the pile on almost every preventable social problem yet spends a third more on addressing their consequences than the next most troubled nation. Using a Social Return on Investment assessment model the report concludes that for every £1 of investment in universal services in a Sure Start Children's Centre (SSCC) £4.60 in social value is generated. The report recommends a different way of valuing children and the replacement of conventional cost-benefit analysis with the SROI model. In terms of early years, the report recommends cross-party commitments to universal childcare and parental leave provisions.





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The Baroness Delyth Morgan, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children, Young People and Families (on behalf of Dawn Primarolo, Minister Of State) highlighted the enormous changes that have happened in early years services since 1997 with £25 billion invested, childcare places doubled, the introduction of the free entitlement for 3 and 4 year olds, 3,000 SSCCs delivering services to 2.7 million families, and the tax credit system. She identified Government aspirations to ensure a qualified workforce with all daycare settings to be led by graduates and high quality for all children.

Annette Brooke MP, Liberal Democrat Spokesperson on Children, Young People & Families spoke about Liberal Democrat policy on early years and reminded participants that Children's Centres had long been a policy commitment of the Liberal Democrats. She set out the policy approach as being one of giving parents choice with a financial commitment of 12 months parental leave fully interchangeable between parents, and an aspiration of 19 months total shared, interchangeable parental leave with neither parent having more than 12 months and single parents having the total 19 months; the right for all workers to request flexible working; providing childcare for non-working as well as working parents and increasing the free entitlement to 20 hours from 18 months of age. She acknowledged that a lot had been achieved since 1997 and made an impassioned plea to keep aspirations for young children and their families high. She gave her support to the EYFS but identified the need for reform, particularly in relation to the early learning goals and highlighted her concerns about unqualified workers delivering the EYFS.

Maria Miller MP, Shadow Minister for the Family spoke about Conservative policy and agreed that early years needed to be prioritised because of the impact on later social problems. She made the case for a sustainable early education network involving quality staff, quality education and quality childcare to enable parents to work. She acknowledged the £21 billion that has been invested in early years but questioned its efficacy in reaching the most disadvantaged children. She highlighted the disparity in quality provision evidenced by the numbers of inadequate nurseries in disadvantaged areas, nursery closures and reductions in childminder numbers. She identified good quality training and a trained workforce as the key priority. She agreed with Annette that the EYFS has some problems and that it must be made easier for providers to administer quality. She also said that flexibility was important for parents and there was real need to sort out funding of early years services to ensure sustainability.





Discussion and debate

The presentations stimulated a very lively and interesting discussion around the following issues:

- The need for better pay for early years workers, its relationship with improving quality and how to ensure that parents do not carry its costs
- The length of post-natal parental leave offered
- Whether childcare and education is principally about helping parents to work and whether it should be offered to non-working parents
- The impact on employers of longer parental leave and the recession
- The merits and impact of the EYFS in improving quality
- Developing practitioners understanding of children's emotional needs and child-centred practice
- The importance of working together with parents and sharing knowledge
- How to meet parental needs for part-time, flexible and responsive childcare
- Training as the key to improving quality
- Whether parental choice can or should be the objective for early education and care
- Concerns about the decline in childminder numbers and the need to understand childminder practice
- Ways in which early years services can enhance community cohesion, challenge discrimination and narrow the disadvantage gap
- The need for support to providers in business planning for sustainability
- The proportionate impact of early years investment on improving life chances and tackling social problems such as youth crime
- How to move the focus and make the case for early investment

Priorities for the next 5 years

At the end of the event, participants were asked to identify the key priorities for developing and improving early years services over the next 5 years. A number of common issues emerged which are summarised here into 6 key themes: **workforce training and development, safeguarding, partnership with parents, Early Years Foundation Stage, investment and funding, and interagency working**

For nearly all participants, **workforce training and development** was a critical priority along with the connected issue of improving **workforce pay and conditions**. Specific points made were:

- develop a coherent strategy between the Training and Development Agency and the Children's Workforce Development Council





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- resolve the confusion between Qualified Teacher Status and Early Years Professional Status
- harmonise approaches in the PVI and maintained nursery sectors in relation to pay, conditions, training and qualifications.
- dedicated funding, training and long-term support for level 3 practitioners and targets and graduate leadership
- ensure that childminders and out-of-school practitioners have the same training and development opportunities
- ensure that all training is centred around the unique needs of each and every child, including disabled children and an understanding of children's emotional and social development

Safeguarding in particular emerged as a priority area for training with most emphasis on the need to ensure that early years workers are equipped with both the understanding and skills necessary for safeguarding and early intervention. Some specific issues raised were the suggestion to allocate a health visitor or social worker to children known to be at risk for their first 5 years following the US Head Start model, internet safety issues for very young children and the need to provide children with equal protection in law from physical assault.

Partnership with parents as the starting point for early years services was another key area on which there was a lot of consensus and it was acknowledged by many as the best way to support children's learning and development. There were many comments about supporting and enabling and respecting what parents have to offer. Another key point raised was about parental choice and ensuring that mums and dads have an awareness of what quality looks like when they make childcare choices, along with providing more flexible childcare available to meet the changing needs of work patterns.

Unsurprisingly there was a lot of emphasis on the **Early Years Foundation Stage** and the need to strengthen and embed it. A number of participants proposed extending the EYFS to Year 1 or up to seven years of age as recommended in recent reviews and as is provided for in the Welsh equivalent. Some participants advocated parental choice about deferring primary school start dates and continuing play-based learning. One participant identified the need to realign the literacy early learning goals. Another wanted to minimise the time spent on EYFS related administration. There was one point raised about OFSTED and the need to improve its effectiveness and consistency of judgement and to ensure that it provides constructive support for improvement.

Investment and funding was a key theme and there was unanimous support for prioritising





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investment in the early years. One participant stated that it was the best way to counter the gap between disadvantaged families and the rest. Specific points about investment and funding were:

- ensure that childcare is affordable, flexible and good quality
- extend the provision of the free entitlement to all two, three and four year olds and resolve the funding shortfalls so settings can provide it sustainably
- ensure funding follows the child so that all parents have choice
- invest enough money into the Early Years Single Funding Formula so that quality can be maintained
- Level the playing field on access to funding locally for private and voluntary nurseries.

One participant suggested the need to secure the future of maintained nursery schools and other excellent settings specifically so that they can fulfill a centre of excellence role.

Several points were made about the need to ensure **better interagency and partnership working** both within Children's Centres and between agencies; local authorities, schools, health and all local childcare providers – including private and voluntary. The importance of the attitude and approach of individual staff in adopting a joined up approach across agencies and getting to know each other was also identified. A separate but related point was made about understanding the local community and recognising the potential role of early years services in building community capacity.

There was one specific point made about health services and the need to invest in a major programme to improve service system for pregnancy and first two years, including rethinking midwifery/ health visitor roles.

Endnote

It is heartening that the issues identified as priorities for participants at this seminar chime very well with the key messages of the Firm Foundations Campaign. The intention is to promote this report and the campaign itself far and wide to continue to make the case of investing in our youngest children.

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ⁱ The Early Childhood Forum is a coalition of 61 professional associations, voluntary organisations and interest groups involved in early years

