An Analysis of the Responses to the DCSF Childcare Sufficiency Guidance Consultation Exercise - March 2010

Following an announcement in the Department’s LA e-mail of December 17 2009, a public consultation on the draft revised Childcare Sufficiency Guidance ran over a 10 week period from December 18 to February 26 2010, using our DCSF e-consultation website. As well as inviting local authorities and some others to comment on any aspect of the draft, we included a series of specific questions to obtain their responses on a few key issues. The questions are listed at Annex A below.

A total of 36 responses were received to the consultation - including 22 from individual local authorities, 8 from Government Offices responding on behalf of local authorities in their area, and from each of the five main national early years and childcare organisations. In addition, a number of meetings and consultation events were held during the consultation period to enable LAs, providers and other groups to assess the guidance in workshop format and offer comments. These were logged and considered alongside the specific responses sent to us.

The majority of respondents to the consultation felt that, overall, the draft guidance was helpful, but equally most were keen to see further clarification of particular parts of the text. There were mixed views (though majority support overall) for the contention that local authorities would welcome a stronger steer, or a possible model, on the content and format of the sufficiency assessment and action plan. Many LAs were able to identify further topics that the guidance might cover, and that more case study and best practice material would be valuable (though the latter question drew a “not sure” reply from a sizeable number of respondents). Most local authorities said they were very well, or well, placed in terms of preparation for their assessment and had just been awaiting confirmation that the draft guidance contained no new significant requirements.

The main issues raised by respondents were as follows:

**Age ranges**

Several responses highlighted the fact that Ofsted do not collect data disaggregated by the same age ranges as specified in the 2007 Regulations relating to childcare sufficiency assessments. We accept that the age ranges specified in the regulations will need to be reviewed and possibly updated in light of further consultation, but this can only take place following a further public consultation, which could not be completed in time for the 2011 round of sufficiency assessment and action planning. Meanwhile the guidance suggests that local authorities may wish to adopt a set of age ranges which aims to reflect what the consultation has indicated would be appropriate and helpful. We recognise that these may not be appropriate in all cases, although we would encourage local authorities to use them where possible in order to promote greater consistency.
**Encouraging more consistency in Sufficiency Assessment and Action Plan methodology**

Most local authorities (though not all) argued for our giving them a stronger steer, including possible models, on the content and format of both the Sufficiency Assessment and Action Plan.

In terms of the Assessment, we have provided links to a series of toolkits and other documents to help local authorities in activities, such as data collection and surveying of parents. To assist LAs action plan (the priority of the two at most of the regional meetings that we attended), we have refined and supplemented our suggestions as to plan content, provided a suggested template and will make a number of examples available on our dedicated Every Child Matters web page.

**Clarity of LA responsibilities**

Many local authorities felt the guidance could more clearly differentiate between their statutory responsibilities, and what the guidance was recommending in terms of best practice. They urged us to do so using consistent language and terminology.

We have revised the guidance so it makes clear in its introduction that duties are set out in legislation are things the LA must do; powers (also set out in legislation) are things LAs could do; but the text also refers to what the LA should do, where we feel there is a strong and compelling reason for a consistent approach across all local authorities. We have used this terminology throughout the sufficiency assessment and action planning chapters.

**Locating childcare in the wider context of LA responsibilities**

Local authorities and GOs have also pressed for the guidance to make more explicit reference to childcare’s place within the range of LA responsibilities.

We have increased the emphasis on the links between childcare sufficiency and the commissioning of childcare and Children’s Trusts, the Children and Young People’s Plan and associated Local Area Agreement targets, and made mention, for the first time, of LAs’ Sustainable Community Strategies Framework and the new Local Economic Assessments.

We will also continue to promote these messages over the next few months whilst the assessment process continues.
**Child poverty**

A number of local authorities and GOs asked for stronger messages in the guidance on the importance of childcare in addressing child poverty.

We have strengthened the text of the context, and access for vulnerable families, chapters to highlight the important role that childcare plays, and made links between the Sufficiency Assessment and Action Plan and the Child Poverty Needs Assessment and Strategy. We will also continue to promote the interdependence of the two agendas over the next few months.

**Rearrangement and brigading of text**

A strong message in the responses was that we should look again at the ordering of the chapters of the guidance to give it a more accessible structure.

We have reordered the final version by positioning the critical assessment and action planning chapters much earlier in the document; reworked the initial chapters that introduce the guidance and outline the basic tenets of childcare sufficiency; and brought together the treatment of commissioning and procurement.

In addition to these issues, we have also added detailed drafting amendments that we feel confident have helped to strengthen and clarify particular parts of the text. Particular examples include: ensuring its wording accords with that of the 3 and 4 year old code of practice; giving increasing emphasis to the importance of quality improvement at key passages of the text; updating the full time learning for 4 year olds paragraphs; including the main messages from the Families Green Paper; and coverage of some sustainable development issues.
Annex A - Consultation Questions

We asked the following questions as part of the consultation exercise:

• Is the draft guidance structured in a way that makes it easy to use? If not, what should change?

• Are there any sections of the guidance where you would find it helpful to have greater clarification?

• Should the Government do more to encourage greater consistency in the approach used by different local authorities?

• Would local authorities welcome a stronger steer (or a possible model) on the content and format of the published sufficiency assessment?

• Would local authorities welcome a stronger steer (or a possible model) on the content and format of the published sufficiency action plan?

• Are any key policy and delivery topics not covered?

• Would more case study and best practice material be valuable? We would be pleased to consider including any case studies forwarded by local authorities, either in the guidance itself or on our supporting website.

• Do you have any other comments on the draft guidance – generally, or on specific details, or on particular chapters?

• How well advanced is your authority in preparing for the next assessment:
  o Very well – just waiting for the draft guidance to confirm there will not be any major new requirements
  o Quite well – the draft guidance has helped us to confirm the authority’s broad approach and will allow detailed planning to start
  o Getting started – the draft guidance has come at the right time and will help the authority move forward
  o Not started – the local authority has been waiting for the guidance before starting any planning

• How does your Authority plan to carry out the Sufficiency Assessment and action planning:
  o In-house – using staff who are already employed in administering childcare sufficiency
  o In-house – using staff who are appointed specifically for the purpose
  o Outsourced – to another public sector body
  o Outsourced – to a private sector body

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