

Next Steps for Early Learning and Childcare

Building on the 10-Year Strategy

Summary





Introduction

Everyone agrees that the first few months and years are the most important in a child's life. And that the experiences children have when they are being cared for out of school really shape them.

In 2004 our 10-Year Childcare Strategy set out an ambitious vision and plans to change radically early learning and childcare in this country. A huge amount has been achieved, thanks to the dedication of many working in the area, giving parents more support and choice, and children a better experience. Five years on we want to take stock and address new and future challenges. In a time of global economic downturn, families face increased financial and emotional pressures so improving early learning and childcare is as important as ever.

Early learning and childcare is important because it:

- promotes good child outcomes – ensuring all children, and especially the most disadvantaged, reach their full potential;
- supports employment – responding to changing patterns of employment and ensuring that all parents can work and stay out of poverty; and
- helps families make choices – recognising families quite rightly expect to be in control of the choices they make in balancing work and family life.

Progress on early learning and childcare

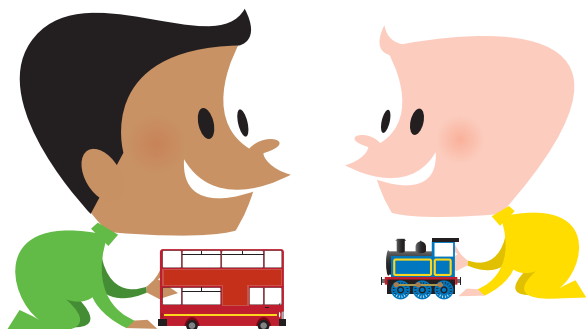
- maternity leave extended to 12 months and pay from six to nine months;
- new right to request flexible working for all parents with children up to age six – or age 18 for disabled children;
- almost 2.3 million children and their families can now use one of almost 3,000 Sure Start Children's Centres;
- near universal take up of free early learning and childcare places for three and four year olds – the offer is 12½ hours per week, rising to 15 by 2010;
- free early years places for two year olds in the most disadvantaged communities;
- all children in early years provision accessing a single, play-based framework – the Early Years Foundation Stage;
- a new specialist graduate qualification for early years workers – with nearly 5,000 Early Years Professionals trained or in training;
- around 460,000 working families across the UK with children aged 0-14 better off through the childcare element of the Working Tax Credit; and
- £640 million invested over 2008-11 so that services are delivered in high quality settings, and accessible to all, including disabled children.

There are signs that improvements are starting to have a positive impact on children's lives. The 2008 Foundation Stage Profile results show that:

- 21,000 more children achieved a good level of development at age five than the previous year; and
- the lowest achievers and those from disadvantaged areas are starting to catch up; the gap between their achievement and their peers' narrowed since last year.

It is mothers and fathers who bring up children – not Government. But parents need help and support. We know that the choices parents make are complex and there is no single best package of care which works for all children and all families. Modern services must support families by providing parents with a range of options, including information that enables them to make choices and decisions. Whatever the care environment, services must be available, affordable and flexible; and provide the safest, best quality experiences for every child.

The public, private and voluntary sectors are jointly responsible for delivering this vision of early learning and childcare and we will only succeed when working in partnership.



Care by Parents, Family and Friends

Mothers' and fathers' time is precious. They want to be there when it counts most for their children's wellbeing. Most know that it's what children and parents do together in the home that is most important for giving them the best start in life. Family and friends also often play major roles in caring. And family friendly employment practices can give employers and employees valuable flexibility – helping to keep businesses profitable and people at work.

A number of major changes have supported families to provide good quality care for their children when they are at home. Close to 2.3 million children and their families can now access early learning and childcare, maternity and child health services, and support for parents through Sure Start Children's Centres. We are on track to have a centre in every community by 2010.

We want to build on this progress by doing more to value and support parents, as well as friends and relatives who care – especially grandparents whose role can sometimes be overlooked and undervalued. We will work with partners to:

- ensure that Families Information Services, Sure Start Children's Centres and Extended Schools take account of the needs of friends and relatives who care, as well as parents;

- undertake new research on how early years practitioners can best help families to support their child's development; and
- promote the importance of all family services, and involve and support fathers.

"Nursery has been a learning curve for me as well, as it's given me the confidence to take part in all kinds of activities with Molly. We can learn and play together which is brilliant"

Father, Bristol

Reducing the pressures on parents' time is vital too. Family structures and working life have changed, with more women in paid work, more single parent families, fewer people living close to extended family, and different and increased demands from jobs.



Government has made huge progress on this already. In 1997, there was no paternity or parental leave and only 18 weeks maternity leave and pay. Today, mothers have 12 months maternity leave and nine months maternity pay; fathers can take two weeks paid paternity leave; and parents have 13 weeks parental leave. Some 84 percent of mothers take all their entitlement to nine months paid maternity leave, and 93 percent of fathers make the most of new paternity rights by taking time off around the time of their child's birth. Meanwhile, the right to request flexible working has already benefited more than six million people, and contributed to a real cultural shift in attitudes and behaviour – 78 percent of parents' requests to employers to work flexibly are ultimately agreed. But we will not stop here. We will:

- extend the right to request flexible working to parents – fathers and mothers – of all children aged 16 and under; and
- comprehensively assess policies on parental leave, once the European Commission has considered proposals on maternity and paternity leave.



What's on offer for 0-14s

Easy, regular access to good early learning and childcare provides invaluable support for parents seeking to balance work and family life. The unique benefits to children's social and emotional wellbeing and thinking skills across the age range, but especially for two, three and four year olds, are clearer now than ever before. It makes even more of a difference for disadvantaged and vulnerable children and families.

That is why we have invested record amounts to strengthen what's on offer. The number of registered childcare places has more than doubled since 1997. Through the first ever Childcare Act in 2006, Local Authorities have been given responsibility for ensuring enough childcare is available locally to meet the needs of parents of all children up to the age of 14, and older for disabled children. The Childcare Act also places a duty on Local Authorities to improve wellbeing and reduce inequalities, and to do so by integrating services so they are more accessible.

We will continue to work with Local Authorities to ensure they meet their duty to secure sufficient childcare, and we will be expecting them all to publish action plans stating how they will do this.



95 percent of three and four year olds take up at least some of the free early learning and childcare hours they are entitled to and places are being made available for disadvantaged two year olds across some Local Authorities. Next we want to build on the reach and flexibility of free places. We have said that we will extend the three and four year old offer to 15 hours a week across the country by 2010, and ensure that it is offered on a more flexible basis – this is already happening in 34 pathfinder areas with positive effects on take-up reported. We are now also announcing that we will:

- make free early learning and childcare places available to the most disadvantaged two year olds in every Local Authority, as a first step toward a universal offer for all two year olds; and
- ensure that parents have the choice to stretch the free offer for two, three and four year olds over more than 38 weeks a year to cover holidays and keep costs constant, helping parents to budget.

In the longer term, once the free offer to all two year olds is in place, we will also look at enabling parents to choose whether to take up the free hours on offer when their child is two, or transfer part of them to have more free hours at age three and four.



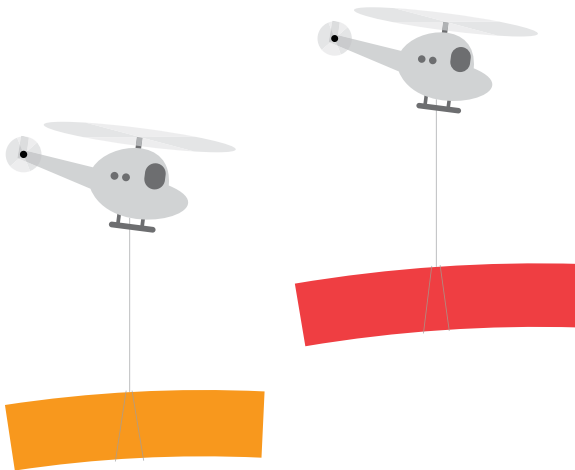
Case Study: Stretching the free offer over more weeks

Greenwich Council has found that for some parents, fewer free hours per week over more than 38 weeks of the year helps to make childcare more affordable by keeping costs constant across 'term' and 'holiday' times.

The council converts the weekly entitlement into hours and advises providers that parents can access up to 570 per year. Examples given to providers, or to parents seeking advice, describe the entitlement being available as:

- 11 hours per week over 51 weeks
- 12 hours per week over 47 weeks
- 13½ hours per week over 42 weeks

The Council is able to integrate this flexibility into their current systems.



The range of activities for school aged children is also improving. Major investment in youth, play, sports and arts activities is benefiting this age group. And more than 15,000 schools now provide access to the full core offer of extended services. This includes access to supervised activities in a safe place, and childcare for primary school children, from 8am-6pm and in the holidays, in line with what families want locally. We expect all primary and secondary schools to offer this by 2010.

Yet parents remain very concerned about childcare and activities options for school aged children, and many struggle to find cover during school holidays in particular. Parents are particularly sensitive to costs when it comes to out of school activities and care and we are therefore investing £265 million between 2008 and 2011 so that those least able to pay can access some extended schools activities each week.



But we need to do more to increase access to affordable provision for all school aged children. We are taking new steps to unlock the provision that exists and make out of school, and particularly holiday care, a strategic priority for Local Authorities, schools and their delivery partners by:

- expecting Local Authorities to put particular focus on 5-14s and working intensively with a small group of Local Authorities to identify best practice;
- encouraging more providers of care and activities for school aged children to be registered with Ofsted so that parents are entitled to use tax credit support to access them;
- asking Jobcentre Plus to work more closely with schools to provide parents with access to financial support and information; and
- consulting on how the School Report Card may take account of access to extended services through the forthcoming White Paper on 21st Century Schools.



Quality of early years provision

While access to early learning and childcare is paramount, the quality is equally important. Evidence shows that the impact of quality is second only to parenting in terms of shaping outcomes for children.

All children up to the age of five who receive childcare now benefit from a single, play-based framework for learning, development and care – the Early Years Foundation Stage. And we have introduced a specialist graduate qualification for early years practitioners – there are now nearly 5,000 Early Years Professionals either trained or in training. And the proportion of staff working in full daycare with at least a relevant level three qualification (equivalent to A-levels) went up by 15 percent between 2003 and 2007.

The Early Years Foundation Stage gives us a framework for excellence but the impact it has will depend on the workforce who deliver it and their partnership with parents. Over the next few years, we want to ensure that the early years sector is able to attract and keep the best people, and to create a culture of self-improvement, to provide truly world class provision.

A job in childcare is distinct from that of teachers working with older children, and the kinds of people attracted to working in the early years sector may be different, but it is just as an important a role. This should be properly recognised.

We have already stated our commitment to getting a graduate in every full daycare setting by 2015, and our intention to continue to provide financial support for settings to achieve this through the Graduate Leader Fund.

To demonstrate the importance we attach to attracting, developing and retaining a high quality workforce, we will also:

- ensure that everyone working in early learning and childcare, from nursery nurses to childminders, has a full and relevant qualification of at least level three (equivalent to A-level) and consider making this a requirement from 2015;
- consider making it a legal requirement that every full daycare setting has a graduate from 2015; and
- pilot a programme to attract top graduates into the workforce.

"I think when they're younger it's about how to find good childcare, where the staff really know how to relate to the children and create a stimulating environment"

Mother, London

To encourage the best practitioners to stay on and support their career development and progression we will work with partners to:

- develop career pathways and reward commitment and excellence across the workforce;
- promote a training and development framework and create an annual training expectation or ‘entitlement’ for all early learning and childcare practitioners up to graduate level;
- explore creating an ‘Advanced Skills’ graduate professional role in disadvantaged areas to allow graduates to progress in the sector without moving into management roles;
- help the highest quality settings to share their good practice; and
- expand Every Child a Talker in the most disadvantaged areas – this programme teaches early years practitioners the best ways of promoting children’s language skills. Techniques are learnt and passed on between staff.



Information for families

Information empowers families to make the right choices for them and to demand good quality provision. When parents are able to make informed choices it creates momentum amongst providers to create services which are affordable, available, high quality and sustainable.

Since 2004 we have worked with Local Authorities to improve the quality and accessibility of local advice and information about childcare to parents. The sufficiency duty puts clear legal responsibility on Local Authorities to provide advice and information to parents and prospective parents. And steps have been taken to improve the quality of information and brokerage support offered through Families Information Services, as well as to develop a new National Helpline, Families First standards for quality, and a Parent Know How Information System.

Now we want to secure and build on this progress so that information becomes more transparent to parents and local and central Government.

Parents tell us they want more and better details on costs and quality of childcare to compare services and provision more easily. Many say they do not know where to go to get help when choosing childcare and report having to go to a range of different places. Information on what is available for disabled children is also weak.

Therefore, we will work with partners to collect more comprehensive information from childcare providers and make delivery partners more accountable for providing and disseminating information, including:

- setting an expectation that all providers supply information on prices, staff qualifications and vacancies;
- creating a single national price comparison website on childcare which allows parents to compare providers on information about quality and price, and including views from parents;
- extending the current service provided by the national helpline number and developing a contact centre that will be able to advise parents on national childcare programmes;
- streamlining Government helpline numbers for childcare to ensure that there is a single point of entry for all telephone enquiries; and
- creating a 'Ready Reckoner' to enable advisors in Families Information Services, Children's Centres, and Job Centre Plus to calculate more easily how much support for childcare each family should receive through tax credits.

A vision for the childcare comparison website

Lisa lives in Birmingham and has a two year old son Jack. She is thinking of going back to work but wants to be reassured that there is quality childcare for Jack near to her office, where she would feel happy leaving him for the day. Lisa's friends work closer to home so couldn't give any personal recommendations about settings. She has received information about childcare options from her local Families Information Service and now wants to find out more about each setting. She has recently been told about a Childcare Comparison Website which works in a similar way to price comparison websites that she has used before e.g. to find a suitable tax free ISA (www.fsa.gov.uk/tables). By typing in her postcode, Lisa can immediately see what childcare is available in her area and where there are current vacancies. She is then able to select a number of settings, including childminders, and compare prices, opening times and staff qualifications. She can also access Ofsted inspection reports and can read about other parents' experiences on a message board. In this way Lisa is able to judge the quality of the settings and see how much she will have to pay per hour. The website will allow her to compare providers close to her work but also in other areas, so she can make an informed decision that best suits the needs of her family. At all times, Lisa will be able to get help and advice from her Families Information Services including information on financial support that she may be entitled to.

Making childcare affordable

No child or family should be prevented from accessing high quality childcare provision, or the type of childcare they favour, because of cost.

A lot of direct financial support is already available. Parents who use registered childcare can get up to 80 percent of the costs paid through tax credits – the childcare element of the Working Tax Credit currently gives financial support to around 460,000 working families across the UK. Employer Supported Childcare schemes provide vouchers that can be used towards the cost of childcare. And the Free Childcare for Training and Learning for Work scheme supports adults (aged 20 years and over) to undertake training leading to work by paying for childcare and travel costs.

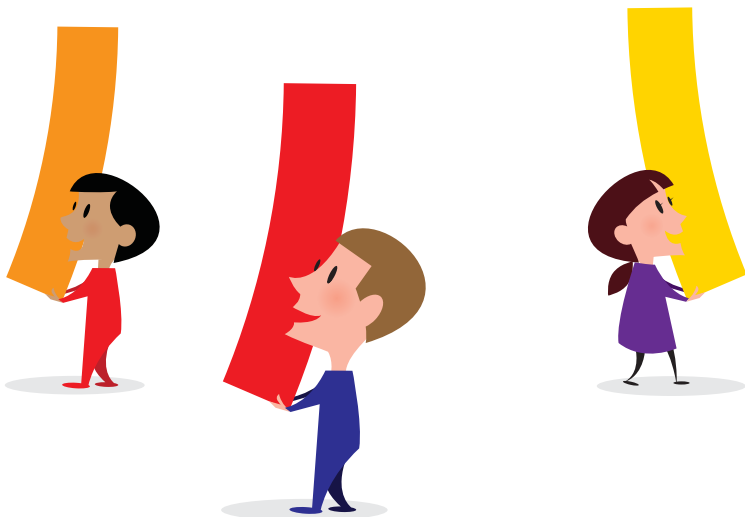
While some early learning and childcare is free, most parents who work will need more childcare for their children. In tight economic times, getting support to work is more important than ever. But many parents have told us that they find this challenging and the tax credit system can be difficult to use. And some families face more financial pressures than others.

To build on the progress of recent years, and help families cover costs we will:

- pilot ways to access the childcare element of tax credits differently, linking payments more closely to outgoings and making early learning and childcare more affordable;
- pilot a more generous support system for families with disabled children and lower income parents living in London where costs are higher; and
- help parents navigate the financial support available by piloting Job Centre Plus advisors and others providing intensive and active guidance through the system.

“Getting help for childcare through tax credits has been a massive help. Without it I don’t think I could have made our finances balance... Now Charlie has fun at his childminder’s, playing with other children all day and I have been able to go back to work”

Mother, Manchester



But there are other things we can do as well to keep costs affordable. Government and Local Authorities have a role to ensuring the childcare market operates efficiently and delivers quality and value for money. We will strengthen the role of local government in managing the market by:

- setting out clearer expectations of Local Authorities' duty to actively manage the market, to ensure there is sufficient early learning and childcare available, make the best use of resources and meet parents needs as effectively and efficiently as possible;
- using price and quality information to support Local Authorities in their market management activities, strengthen accountability, and help central government inform funding allocations;
- exploring the principles and practicalities of linking funding for the free entitlement more closely to the impact individual providers make to children's outcomes in the future; and
- working with stakeholders on developing new networking approaches for childminders so they can deliver the free entitlement and other funding and enhance the quality of their provision.

Next steps

This document spells out the next steps in our long-term vision to make early learning and childcare a truly world class and modern public service. It proposes a number of policies which we would like to explore further with families, the sector and other relevant stakeholders over the coming months. We will only succeed if we continue to work in close partnership with all of you.

Over the coming months we will provide a number of opportunities to discuss and explore the next steps more fully, nationally, regionally and locally, on and off line. We want future decisions to be built on intelligent dialogue and debate which is informed by the views and expertise of the public, private and voluntary sector.

We want these plans to reinvigorate the important relationships we've built over the last decade, and kick-start a new phase of partnership and delivery. We look forward to working with you.

To make your views on early learning and childcare, and the proposals in this publication known, please contact us at nextsteps.childcare@dcscf.gsi.gov.uk.



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