

Norway

Auspices

In Norway, responsibility for ECEC policy lies with the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs (BFD), and within the ministry, to the Department of Family Affairs, Child Care and Gender Equality. BFD co-ordinates all matters on early childhood and has convened a cross-ministerial Committee for Child and Youth issues, which meets regularly at senior official level. The Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs has responsibility for schools, out-of-school care and the training of teachers in general. In recent years, much responsibility has been devolved to Norway's 19 counties and 435 *kommuner* or municipalities, which for the most part, have unified school and early childhood services into one department. The county governor administers the State grants to *familiebarnehager* (family day-care), *barnehager* (kindergarten), and *apen barnehager* (open kindergartens or drop-in centres for parent and child, led by a trained pre-school teacher). The county also informs and supports the different municipalities in the region on ECEC questions and policy. There is a national regulatory framework for *barnehager*, the *Barnehager Act*, 1995. An important *Framework Plan for Barnehager* was elaborated in 1996, which provides guidelines to *barnehager* concerning values and objectives, curricular aims, and pedagogical approaches.

Developments

In Norway, an integrated system of services for children from 0 to 6, with a well-established and quite extensive system of publicly-funded *barnehage* has existed for many years. Underpinning the system is a well articulated vision of children, both individually and as a social group, of their place in society and their relationship with the environment.

For 2001, the Norwegian Government has committed itself to increased funding of *barnehager*, so as to avoid excluding certain categories of children because of costs to parents. The government aims that by 2005, state grants will cover 50% of costs, municipalities will underwrite 30%, leaving a maximum 20% to parents. These measures have still to be agreed by the municipalities. In addition, as access had been variable across Norway, it is a political priority to achieve universal access for all children under 6 years. From figures supplied by the Ministry, full access (based on a coverage rate of 80% but not necessarily meeting full demand) for children over 3 has been reached this year, with full access for the younger children being postponed to 2003. Plans to recruit up to 20% male workers in the *barnehager* have also been renewed, but using present means, these goals may be difficult to achieve.

Quality issues are also being addressed in these new initiatives. A new, three-year programme has been announced to improve overall quality in the *barnehage*. Special attention will be paid to children with special educational needs, staff recruitment will be broadened and improved, while parents as consumers will be consulted more widely about their needs and expectations with regard to opening hours and programmes. The *barnehage* has an important role in terms of preventive child welfare, and supports will be provided to enable it to accompany effectively children with disabilities, children from low-income families and bilingual children.

Context

Expenditure on ISCED Level 0 institutions as a percentage of GDP: 0.6%.

Labour force rates: in 1999, 81.4% of women aged 25-34 years participated in the labour force. 37.3% worked part time.

Parental leave support: universal 52 weeks maternity leave at 80% earnings (or 42 weeks at 100%). A one month paternity leave is included in this quota. Time accounts are used to enable parents to combine partial parental leave with flexible work hours.

Attention to children with special educational needs before they enter compulsory schooling: a) Children with disabilities: general inclusion of children with disabilities, who have a priority right to services. In 1997, nearly 2% of children in *barnehager*

had a disability, and 3% received additional support; *b) Children from low-income families*: The child poverty rate in Norway is 3.9% after redistribution; *c) Ethnic and bilingual children*: Norway has an indigenous ethnic group, the Sami who constitute 1.7% of the population. Sami language kindergartens are funded generously whenever there is a concentration of Sami families. New immigrant groups constitute 3% of the population, with 28,000 children in primary schools (just less than 6% of school population) registered as non-native speaking children. Less than 40% of these children attend a *barnehager* in the larger towns. The government has funded the hiring of minority ethnic workers in *barnehager*, but largely as bilingual assistants rather than as pedagogical staff.

Provision

47% of *barnehager* are public (municipal) and cater for 58% of children using the service. Private *barnehager* are more numerous but smaller, and cater for 42% of children. Both receive subsidies from the government amounting to 32% (public) and 38% (private) for their costs. Municipalities also have the duty to provide funding to their own and private providers, but often fail to support adequately private providers. Costs to parents range – depending on the municipality, income and the type of care chosen – from 28%-45% of actual costs (see “Developments” above). In addition to family allowances and lone parent (22% of families) allowances, all parents are allowed tax deductions to cover care and kindergarten costs. Research shows that low-income parents pay proportionately higher for a place in a kindergarten (c. 19.5% of income) compared to middle- (11%) and high-income families (c. 8%). There is also a Cash Benefit scheme that provides a cash grant to a parent who looks after a child at home, or who places a child in an ECEC context that does not receive state grants (e.g. with a childminder). The amount of the grant is almost equivalent to the state subsidy per child paid to kindergartens, i.e. about \$400 per month. In principle, there are sufficient places for all children over 3 years in grant maintained *barnehager*, as the lowering of the school age to 6 years freed many places. Provision rates are as follows:

0-1 year: care is predominantly home care by parents. Only 2% of children are in centre-based care.

1-4 years: over 48% of enrolment. Given the high participation of mothers in the work force, it may be presumed that many parents are choosing to use family and informal child-minding. The goal of the Ministry is to have full coverage (meeting demand) for children under 3 years by the year 2003.

4-6 years: currently, demand is considered fully met with enrolments of just 80% of the age group.

Child-staff ratios: for children 0-3 years, the ratio is 7-9 children per trained pre-school teacher. For children 3-6 years, the ratio is 14-18 children per trained pre-school teacher; and for children in family day-care, a trained pre-school teacher must be available for every 30 children. In addition, the 1995 Act also stipulates that the number and level of staff must be sufficient to carry out satisfactory educational activities based on the Framework Plan.

Staffing and training

Head teachers and teachers in kindergartens have 2-3 years tertiary level training at one of the state (17) or Christian (2) university colleges. About a third of trained staff in Norwegian *barnehager* are ECEC teachers, a relatively low proportion of lead personnel. Further, because of recruitment shortages linked to the expansion of the system, only 80% have a formal qualification. Their status, pay and working condition compare unfavourably to those of primary school teachers. Assistants who make up the bulk of the staff, have no particular qualification, but with the 1994 reform of upper secondary education, assistants in the future will have the secondary level diploma of “child and youth worker”. Men make up 6.6% of total kindergarten staff. A ministerial plan 1997-2000 aimed to bring the proportion of men up to 20% by the end of 2000. Issues of status, pay and working conditions may need further consideration before the goal can be achieved.

OECD policy issues

Among the issues for policy attention identified by the OECD Review team for Norway were:

Issues of equity and access: despite the high level of subsidy and policy attention provided, inequalities exist both in access (provision varies with respect to areas and social groups) and funding (private *barnehager* receiving much less support from municipalities than public). The commitment to more government spending, achieving consensus with the municipalities about national ECEC goals, and greater attention to children in need of special support are important contributions to addressing these inequalities.

Issues of diversity: in recent decades, diversity issues have become a challenge for Norwegian society. An ECEC system in which multi-cultural recruitment and a greater emphasis in programmes on tolerance and anti-racist practice can be formative for young children, and give confidence to their families. A challenge is posed to provide a values framework that public and private *barnehager*, and minority and majority families, can accept.

Issues of staffing: although well-trained, only a third of staff in Norwegian *barnehager* are qualified teachers. Their status, pay and working conditions compare unfavourably to those of primary school teachers. Staffing in the SFOs (school-based, leisure-time activities), an expanding sector, a particular challenge, as staff have little or no training. The intent to pursue better gender balance in staffing is noteworthy, and shows an awareness of the child's need for both men and women as role models.

The possible negative effects of the Cash Benefit Scheme: the review team, while recognising the choice and equity arguments advanced in its favour, drew attention to possible downstream effects, such as the impact of the Scheme on equity and the quality of provision. Rather than encouraging more parental care of children, the CBS may become a financial incentive to some parents to continue working and place their children in unregulated, informal care. In parallel, according to some Norwegian surveys, the parents most likely to take the benefit *and* remain at home with their children are lone mothers, mothers with several young children and/or low-income, one salary families. In short, the positive results for children from this expensive measure may be meagre.

Issues of evaluation and monitoring: although the Ministry collects relevant statistics and indicators, and supports a range of research, the amount of government funding allocated to ECEC research, development and evaluation activities remains modest, compared to the size and importance of the sector. Data collection for the ECEC system at national level, and the responsibilities of the actors at different levels (state, region, municipalities) need to be further considered.