

United Kingdom (England)⁵⁷

Auspices

Historically, responsibility for ECEC policy in England has been shared between national and local government. Services for children from birth to age 3 were in the province of the Department of Health, while the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) had responsibility for children 3-5 years. In an effort to have better articulation of policy, and to overcome the division between education and care, the responsibility for implementing policy and delivering planned outcomes was assigned to the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE). In addition, a new Children's Unit has recently been established at Cabinet level to co-ordinate the work of the major ministries in favour of children.

Developments

Since 1997, the government has launched an unprecedented effort to increase investment in families and young children, and to develop a wide-ranging plan of action that will expand and reform the early years system. In May 1998, a *National Childcare Strategy* was announced, to be implemented by locally based, *Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships* working in concert with the local education and social services authorities (see Box 3.7 in Chapter 3). Special funding for disadvantaged areas has been allocated through the *Sure Start* initiative. A pilot *Early Excellence Centre* programme was established in 1997 to test integrated approaches to care and education. In the year 2000, *Curriculum Guidelines* for the Foundation Stage (3-5 years) were published, to help practitioners to plan how their work will contribute to early learning goals. A *Childcare Tax Credit* (CTC) for parents working a minimum of 16 hours per week, has also been instituted, targeted at low-income families.⁵⁸ The Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) will formulate national standards to ensure that all children receive good quality service, and that providers are clear about the standards they must meet. Already, the accumulation of these initiatives is radically altering the picture of early years provision in England. It is estimated that 1.6 million new childcare places will have been created by 2004, and a further 80 000 childcare workers recruited. In addition, local education authorities are now required to provide an early education place (of two-and-a-half hours daily) for all 4-year olds by 2001 (target already reached), and for all 3-4 year olds by September 2004. It is anticipated that 80% of these new places will be provided by playgroups, voluntary and private providers.

Context

Expenditure on ISCED Level 0 institutions as a percentage of GDP: 0.4%.

Labour force rates: in 1999, 75.1% of women aged 25-34 years participated in the labour force. 35.8% worked part-time.

Parental leave: universal 18 weeks paid maternity leave, plus an entitlement to a further unpaid 22 weeks and to an unpaid four weeks annual leave over for three years, until a child reaches 5 years. A further extension of parental leave is being considered.

Attention to children with special educational needs before their entry into compulsory schooling: a) *Children with disabilities:* the growing awareness of the benefits of mainstreaming children with disabilities is leading to their increased inclusion in ECEC services. Recently, the government has announced a significant increase in investment for these children; b) *Children from low-income families:* for the United Kingdom, the child poverty rate after redistribution is 19.8% (OECD

57. The OECD review focused on England, but the review team also visited Scotland which has taken a slightly different approach to ECEC policy. Please see the UK country note for more details on Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.

58. The CTC can be worth £70 per week (c. \$100) or meet up to a maximum of 70% the costs of registered childcare.

average: 11.9%). About 23% of children under 6 years are being raised by a lone parent; *c) Ethnic and bilingual children:* 6% of the British population is composed of ethnic minorities (esp. London, West Midlands where the proportion may rise to 15%). As research indicates that immigrant children are seriously underachieving in education, policies to prevent discrimination and racism have been strengthened, and very significant investment made in the Sure Start programme for disadvantaged families and their children from 0-4 years.

Provision

Compared to most other European countries, ECEC provision in the UK is starting from a low base. In general, children 0-3 of working parents are cared for by private childminders, playgroups and day nurseries. Until the recent Childcare Tax Credit, children in these services were not eligible for public funding, unless they qualified for special services or were considered to be seriously at risk. From 3-4 years, almost all children tend to join playgroups or nursery schools, moving toward reception class as they come to 4 years. All 4-year-olds are in state-funded primary school reception classes (the majority) or in nursery school provision, operated mostly by local authorities. All 5-year olds are in primary and reception classes. Provision patterns are as follows:

0-1 year: almost all children are cared for by parents or, informally, by relatives and childminders.

1-3 years: care provision is mostly private, *e.g.* childminders or day nurseries. Provision statistics on a full-time equivalence basis are not available. 20% of 2-year olds attend a playgroup, two-thirds of which are run by church or voluntary associations, and one-third by private persons or agencies.

3-4 years: c. 90% of children participate in some form of early education programme. 55% of 3-year olds attend a playgroup and 29% of the age group are in nursery school or nursery class, generally for two-and-a-half hours per day.

4-5 years (compulsory education begins at 5 years): all children have a guaranteed early education place. Local education authorities currently provide 59% of early education places for 3- and 4- year olds mainly through nursery schools and nursery classes (2.5 hours daily during school terms), and reception classes for 4-year olds of 6.5 hours daily, from 9 a.m. to 3.30 p.m., during school term. The private sector (generally companies or trusts) provides about 30% of places in independent, fee-charging schools, while community and voluntary agencies provide a further, non-profit 9%.

Child-staff ratios: the regulation ratios are: 4:1 in opportunity groups and special schools; 4:1 and over in local authority nurseries, depending on the age of the child; 8:1 in private day nurseries, playgroups and nursery schools; 10:1 in nursery schools with trained teachers and nurses; 13:1 in nursery classes and early years units; 30:1 in reception classes (but in practice, much less).

Staffing and training

A significant divide in training levels exists between early care (0-4 years) and early education (4-5 years) personnel. Only 20% of care personnel, mostly in opportunity groups and day nurseries, have a university or tertiary qualification. In fact, the majority of childcare workers – and many classroom assistants in the reception classes – do not have formal training, except for some hours required by a few local authorities. On the whole, childcare staff have poor conditions of work, are paid much less than the average wage and do long hours with little access to training or support. The government has recognised these concerns: it has introduced a national, minimum wage which improved the wage situation, and is attempting to bring coherence to the patchwork of recruitment approaches and training schemes. Teachers in the education sector are better paid and protected. They have a four-year university or teacher training qualification, some with a specialisation in early years education.

OECD policy issues

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

Progress requires continued funding: provision in the UK has begun from a very low base. It is now benefiting from significant funding and a radical reform of policy, co-ordination and planning. These reforms will require continued strong funding over the coming years if progress is to be maintained and a stable, national ECEC system established.

Co-ordination issues: the 1998 *National Childcare Strategy* and the creation of the locally based, *Early Years Development and Childcare (EYDC) Partnerships* have already improved co-ordination significantly. A key to further movement is continuing government support to the EYDC Partnerships, who have the capacity to bring together different services and constituencies at local level, and overcome the institutional divide between care and education.

Expanding toward full-time access for children: present access to early education for children under 4 years is part-time, that is, 2.5 hours daily, and there is a need to re-examine whether the time available is sufficient to address the

social, emotional and language needs of children, especially ethnic minority and children from low-income families. Pilot projects are being set up which will deliver part-time education with wraparound care. These pilots, alongside the *Early Excellence Centre* programme and other local initiatives will help to inform thinking about approaches to full-day provision.

Staff recruitment, training and status: careful recruitment and training of personnel is a pre-condition to establishing an acceptable early education and care system. Levels of recruitment and training need to be reviewed across the care system and, in the interests of retention, improvements in salary levels and conditions of work considered. Recruitment of staff from ethnic backgrounds remains a priority.

Creation of a quality assurance and inspection regime that will respect diversity: The difficulties faced by children – many from low-income backgrounds – to conform quite so young to national academic demands have not always been recognised. Greater attention is now being given to this concern. It is generally agreed that realistic outcomes and competencies can be defined only after consideration is given to the context, developmental stage and needs of young children.

A need to increase work-family supports, e.g. parental leave, flexible work scheduling. As mentioned above, serious investments are being made in poorer families, to provide them with support to find work and with early childhood services. A further extension of parental leave is also envisaged. These policies – along with more family friendly work practices – are to be encouraged, with a particular concern that they should serve equality of opportunity for women in the workplace.