

Flexible offer and extension to the free early education entitlement offer

The British Association for Early Childhood Education firmly believes that all young children are entitled to high quality education in their earliest years. We welcome increased flexibility and choice for parents if this leads to more children accessing high quality early education. However increased flexibility does not necessarily result in quality. Careful attention will need to be given to ensuring that provision is sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of local parents while still maintaining the quality and consistency of experience we know is vital for young children

Introduction

As outlined in the 10 year strategy, from 2010 the government in England has made a commitment to extending the free entitlement of nursery education hours, accessible from the term following a child's third birthday, from 12.5 to 15 hours a week for 38 weeks a year. Parents who wish to do so will be able to take up the free entitlement more flexibly across a minimum of three days. They will also be able to purchase additional hours to enable them to balance work and family responsibilities. The government's reason for these changes is to increase choice for parents by moving away from free hours that can only be accessed as 2½ hours per day over 5 days. The hope is that more parents will be able to take up paid work or training opportunities, which will help break cycles of poverty. As well as the changes to the way in which parents can access the free entitlement, there will also be changes in how the free entitlement is funded in the maintained, private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sectors.

Our Association welcomes increased flexibility and choice for parents if this leads to more children accessing high quality early education. However increased flexibility does not necessarily result in quality. Careful attention will need to be given to ensuring that provision is sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of local parents while still maintaining the quality and consistency of experience we know is vital for young children. For our youngest children this consistency is about being with the same small group of adults and children and about a routine that flows with the child offering an appropriate balance between stimulation and rest, child and adult initiated activity. The Key Person approach is emphasised in the Early Years Foundation Stage.

In this paper we will outline the way in which the policy is being introduced in the pathfinder authorities, highlight some of the challenges the new policy presents and identify a few of the things you will want to think about when implementing it.

Introducing the scheme

Securing delivery of the free entitlement is a key part of local authorities' new commissioning and market facilitation role which was set out in the Childcare Act 2006.

From April 2007 the roll-out of flexible 15 hours free provision has been piloted in 20 pathfinder areas. They are exploring ways of extending the hours between which the free entitlement is available across the day with half the pathfinders testing between 8am to 4pm and the remainder between 8am to 6pm. Settings are providing access to longer sessions of different lengths, for example by extending across breakfast and lunchtime so that the full entitlement can be accessed over three days. Some are exploring the development of clusters of providers who together can offer flexible provision in response to parental demand.

Challenges

If parents opt to take the free entitlement at more than one provider there will be challenges in providing continuity of care for children and seamless services for parents.

It is important that any change to funding formulas to provide greater stability to the PVI sector do not destabilise the provision in the maintained sector. The quality of provision and continuity for the child has to be each local authority's first priority.

There is concern about the operation of the flexible offer in local authorities who already provide a high proportion of 9.00-3.30 places for 3 and 4 year olds in maintained provision. If they have to decrease funding to the maintained sector it may lead to a decrease in choice for parents.

Local authorities need to be able to take account of the quality, appropriateness and cost of provision in coming to funding decisions. While admissions policies in the maintained sector usually give priority to vulnerable children, children with SEN and children with disabilities, this is not always the case in the PVI sector. Funding needs to reflect this difference.

The maintained sector also has higher costs due to qualification requirements and premises. The higher expectations are good and lead to the better outcomes for children identified by EPPE and Ofsted inspections. However they come at a cost and this needs to be reflected in the funding. Issues of quality must be addressed otherwise funding could be directed at lower cost providers whose costs reflect lower quality environments and, possibly, lower staffing costs.

From April 2008 local authorities are under a duty to reduce inequalities and improve outcomes of all the young children in their area through the planning and provision of early childhood services, including the free entitlement. National and local statutory targets in relation to this duty have been set by April 2008. Achieving the targets will be dependent on the quality of provision. If increased flexibility is inappropriately introduced and funded, it will lead to a reduction in quality and will undermine the authorities ability to improve outcomes.

Things to think about

- All providers will not be required to meet every parental request for flexibility, it is the local authorities who will have a responsibility to assess local demand and plan provision accordingly.
Have you talked to your local authority about their plans?
- In its role of commissioning the free entitlement, the local authority should secure high quality early learning and care in accordance with the Early Years Foundation Stage.
What will local authorities do about settings that are not of high quality but who currently receive funding to offer the free entitlement?
- From the child's perspective the best option is attending a high quality single setting for core hours and additional hours with a consistent group of adults and children. Alternatively a good childminder network working closely with the school or setting can provide the continuity needed for the child.
If this is not possible how will you work with one or more other providers to ensure continuity?
- Parents want the best for their children. Think about how you talk with parents about taking the entitlement and the implications of different choices.
How can we balance the needs of the parents with the needs of the child?

References

The extension to the free early education entitlement for 25 per cent of 3 and 4 year-olds: Interim Guidance for local authorities July 2008

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DCSF (2008) The Early Years Foundation Stage: setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five, revised edition, London: Department for Children, Schools and Families.

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The British Association for Early Childhood Education (Early Education), founded in 1923, is the leading national voluntary organisation for early years practitioners and parents with members and branches in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Early Education promotes the right of every child to education of the highest quality. It provides support, training, advice and information on best practice for all those concerned with the education and care of young children from birth to eight.

It is an established national organisation with the expertise and experience to support the development of the early years workforce.

Early Education's objectives and main activities are to:

- provide a national voice on early childhood education, advising central and local government and the media;
- acknowledge and encourage partnership and involvement with families;
- disseminate information about national initiatives through training, publications and the website;
- offer information, advice, guidance and consultancy to develop high quality integrated services for young children and families;
- organise training courses, conferences and seminars;
- manage major projects on key national issues;
- support a network of branches and regional networks throughout the UK;
- publish material on early childhood education and child development;
- produce a termly journal *Early Education* and newsletter *Integrate*;
- maintain a historic archive and library;
- maintain a comprehensive website.

Membership subscription includes the termly journal *Early Education*, regular newsletters and mailings, reduced rates at training, conferences and branch events and voting rights at the annual general meeting.

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