

PRESS RELEASE FROM THE BRITISH ASSOCIATION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION.

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BLACKBURN INNOVATES: QUALITY OF CHILDREN'S CENTRES DECLINES

Blackburn with Darwen have laid a memorandum before Parliament to extend by a further two years the alternative governance arrangements that have been in place since 2004 for seven of its nine nursery schools. At that time the local authority secured the agreement of the DfES to opt out of the statutory requirement for the governance of maintained nursery schools which would have given its nine nursery schools a delegated budget and the same autonomy and powers as all other schools as they developed into children's centres

The authority achieved this through the Power to Innovate, a procedure whereby a local authority may apply to have a particular piece of legislation suspended if it can demonstrate that such a suspension will give it time to develop something more innovative and raise educational standards. Blackburn with Darwen argued that school governance was not the best model for the multi-agency centres it wished to develop and requested the suspension in order to work out an alternative model.

The British Association for Early Childhood Education (Early Education) is alarmed at the impact this innovation has had on the quality of children centre provision in Blackburn with Darwen. Two of the schools retained their governing bodies and delegated funding and acted as a control group – they are now children's centres and manage additional services effectively. The other seven have lost their headteachers and, since those heads had a 4/5 teaching load, nearly half the teaching input has also disappeared leading to a dilution in the quality of education.

There were many existing examples of centres which had combined extended services for children and families with their core nursery school provision, and successfully managed the whole, including multiple funding streams, through their nursery school governing bodies. Indeed it was this model of integrated centre which the DfES funded EPPE research project (*The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education*, Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2003) found to be most effective in promoting young children's intellectual and social development, and to have a continuing influence on their subsequent progress in school. A significant factor in the high quality of these centres was having a head who is a qualified teacher and a good proportion of qualified teachers on the staff.

In light of this evidence it was remarkable that Blackburn with Darwen was allowed to proceed in the way it did and even more remarkable that it has applied to continue a process which has already impoverished the quality of educational experience offered to its youngest children. Early Education is gravely concerned about the implications of allowing the authority to extend the innovation and urges that a thorough and impartial evaluation takes place of the use to which it has already been put.