

Early Years - Fresh impetus for childcare strategy [GB]^[1]

Source: Children and Young People Now

Format: Article

Publication Date: 4 Feb 2009

AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

The government's 10-year childcare strategy has the aim of providing free and flexible childcare in every community. Children's minister Beverley Hughes speaks to Ross Watson about how this commitment can actually be realised.

Children's minister Beverley Hughes is excited about the updated 10-year childcare strategy, which was published yesterday (28 January). She believes it clearly outlines the government's commitment to providing a world-class public service, offering free and flexible childcare to all. The sentiment is irrefutable but questions remain over where the money to pay the people providing this service will come from.

If the government makes it a legal requirement to have all practitioners qualified to A-level standard (NVQ Level 3) by 2015, as discussed in January's New Opportunities white paper and reinforced in the updated childcare strategy, Hughes says there will be some dedicated funds to support this mission, possibly in a similar form to the graduate leader fund. But as for addressing the issue of low-pay in the sector, the government appears happy to maintain a laissez-faire approach, with Hughes believing "the market" will determine its next steps. However, she adds: "People who are highly qualified will be able to command more pay and we are going to have to take that into our considerations"

She cites the challenges of providing high quality care in a mixed-market that is still affordable and sustainable, as the key issues affecting low pay, and says: "We have to let the market take those issues forward and that will throw up issues for the government to deal with as and when."

The emphasis on letting local authorities manage the market more does not stop there. Every authority will now be expected to complement its Childcare Sufficiency Assessments with action plans on how they will actually secure sufficient childcare. "This is part of a process of getting local authorities to have a much more detailed knowledge of demand and supply," says Hughes.

She denies it is an admission that the government's original guidance was not clear enough, despite recent research showing that many authorities identified mapping demand and supply as an area in which they needed more help (CYP Now, 27 November 2008).

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Three areas that the government has made a conscious effort to move on from the original 10-year strategy are: childcare for disabled children; quality of overall childcare; and access to more care for five- to 14-year-olds. The latter is something that Hughes says authorities must make a strategic priority. "Developing after-school and holiday care is a big ask from parents who often say this is where the gap is," she says. The strategy encourages providers of care and activities for five- to 14-year-olds to register with Ofsted so parents can use their tax credits to access the provision. "We are telling local authorities, this is something you've got to make your priority now," she adds.

In terms of quality, Hughes is adamant that this is the key to ensuring the rest of the strategy is delivered accordingly. The strategy builds on the New Opportunities white paper by creating advanced skills roles for graduates who want to move up the early years ladder without going straight into management, as well as a pilot programme to attract the top graduates.

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- reprinted from Children and Young People Now

Region: Europe ^[2]

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