

Wider government reforms scrutinised after ratio U-turn^[1]

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Source: Nursery World

Format: Article

Publication Date: 13 Jun 2013

AVAILABILITY

Read online^[2]

EXCERPTS:

The early years and childcare sector may have won the battle against plans to change childcare ratios, but the focus will now shift to the other childcare reforms set out in More Great Childcare.

Speaking in Parliament last week during the report stage of the Children and Families Bill, education and childcare minister Elizabeth Truss confirmed that she would press ahead with the Government's plans to introduce childminder agencies, tax-free childcare, and the Early Years Educator and Early Years Teacher qualifications.

The minister told MPs, 'The current childcare system is not working for parents,' with families facing some of the highest costs in the world.

She said that the Tax-Free Childcare scheme would provide childcare support for 2.5 million families, in contrast to the current childcare voucher system, which is offered by just five per cent of employers.

A formal consultation on the Tax-Free Childcare scheme will start shortly and last 12 weeks.

In the meantime, a new clause was voted in to the Children and Families Bill on Tuesday to allow HMRC to start work on developing a new IT system, so that parents will be able to access the system online.

Ms Truss also spoke about childminder agencies, which she said would 'offer an alternative to working completely independently' for childminders and would be 'a one-stop-shop, a simpler process for childminders to enter the profession'.

The Department for Education (DfE) has written to more than 60 organisations interested in trialling childminder agencies, including nursery chains, academies, schools, national childcare organisations, children's centres and local authorities.

The trials will begin later this summer and the minister said she would say more on this in the coming weeks. The DfE will consult on childminder agencies following the trials.

While the debate on ratios has now been put to rest, early years organisations remained concerned about the other planned reforms, which have as yet not received as much scrutiny.

Childminder agency proposals are a particularly contentious issue. One childminder who attended a meeting recently with her local

authority said she was concerned about how little other practitioners knew about childminder agencies.

She told Nursery World, 'My local authority is worried, not just about its role in support and training but also about the prospect that childminders in agencies would not need to have individual inspections, which could mean childminders with "satisfactory" grades would be able to offer the free entitlement if the agency has a higher grade.'

Liz Bayram, joint chief executive, Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY), said, 'There are proposals to help improve the qualifications of nursery workers but no clear plan to improve qualifications for childminders.'

'The only option that has been put forward is for childminders to join an agency if they wish. However, this has been roundly rejected by those working in the sector as likely to reduce quality and increase costs, as it is likely that childminders will be charged a considerable fee for joining these agencies. This uncertainty needs to be resolved for childcare practice to be able to progress.'

Ms Bayram also called for the Government to publish its response to the evidence it gathered via the Childcare Commission last year.

Despite the reduced role of local authorities in quality improvement, Ms Truss insisted that 'they have an important role to play in early education and childcare'. She added, 'I want local authorities to continue to attract high-quality providers and encourage schools to offer more nursery places and childcare.'

But the National Day Nurseries Association is concerned about the Government's proposal to encourage school provision for young children.

Chief executive Purnima Tanuku said, 'Any early years provision must ensure age-appropriate practice and environment, be subject to the full EYFS and the same level of inspection, and also offer the flexibility parents need.'

'We're urging the Government to look carefully at how to maximise the use of places in nurseries, playgroups and childminders, before any investment that duplicates existing provision.'

The reduced role of local authorities and new role for Ofsted as an "agency of improvement" with Ofsted ratings alone to be the deciding factor in whether providers can offer funded nursery education places is another worry.

'For this to work we need to ensure an effective model of quality improvement for providers. Peer-to-peer support has been proposed, but that needs proper resourcing with time and funding,' said Ms Tanuku. 'It's vital the sector can trust in robust inspection and a transparent appeals process if things go wrong.'

Childminder Penny Webb, whose petition against the ratio plans gathered more than 20,000 signatures, has launched a second petition - Stop, Listen, Consult (<http://pennysplacechildminding.com> ^[3]) asking for the Government to reconsider the proposals in More Great Childcare.

She told Nursery World that the early years sector was not against change and that there are admirable aims that led to the proposals, but the Government needs to show it is listening to the concerns being expressed and consult fully with the sector.

She noted that Ms Truss had confirmed that the ratio plans would not go ahead because of a lack of cross-party support. 'I find this a worrying statement, because despite the huge number of parents, early years practitioners and leading experts expressing their concern, the Government has not taken notice.'

'People are frustrated with this lack of listening and determination to carry on regardless being demonstrated by the Government, which needs to be reminded that these are children we are talking about, not a balance sheet.'

-reprinted from Nursery World

Related Link:

Editor's view - It was politics that won the day on ratios ^[4], Nursery World, 17 Jun 13

Excerpts:

The Government climbdown on the proposal to relax the staff:child ratios in nurseries and childminders felt like a huge victory for the early years sector. Moves that the vast majority of those working with young children believed would be harmful and would seriously affect the quality of practice had been defeated, representing a complete U-turn on the More Great Childcare plan.

The early years sector is diverse and widely spread. Often it is hard for professionals to get together to push for change. This felt different.

Petitions were signed by thousands. Parents joined the protest through Netmums and Mumsnet. The growing power of social media in particular eased communication, with Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn on fire with calls to action.

So why, in the Children and Families Bill debate where the ratios reverse was officially confirmed, did education and childcare minister Elizabeth Truss give as the reason the failure to secure cross-Government agreement? No mention of the overwhelming disagreement from practitioners and parents, or the consultation that provoked so much negative feedback. No mention of the evidence and research that the sector highlighted to prove its case.

All power to Nick Clegg for killing off the ratios proposals, but it seems as though it is politics rather than the indisputable arguments from all in the early years community that won the day.

Now there are further battles to come with other aspects of More Great Childcare. The problem is that most of these are not as easy to get to grips with as ratios, which chimed immediately with parents too. Childminder agencies, loss of local authorities' role and two-year-olds in school may be much harder to counter.

Region: Europe ^[5]

Tags: legislation and regulation ^[6]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/node/7292>

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