Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe

England

Until relatively recently, the provision of publicly-funded education and care for children below compulsory school age (five) was a matter for local decision. Many local authorities provided nursery schools and nursery classes for children over the age of three, and/or admitted children to primary school at the age of four, but they were not obliged to do so and provision was patchy. Outside the public sector, some children attended private fee-paying nursery schools and classes. Many more attended voluntary sector playgroups, which kept fees affordable by relying on volunteer and community support. Full-time day-care, where available, was provided mainly by the private sector and paid for by parents. Voluntary and private sector provision was regulated and inspected in respect of the quality of care provided but not in respect of the educational programme.

In 1998, a statutory duty was placed on local authorities to ensure the provision of pre-school education in their area.

In 1999, the *National Childcare Strategy* was published. This aimed to raise the number of childcare places available, make childcare more accessible and affordable, and improve the quality of care across different types of setting. Childcare tax credits were introduced for low and middle income parents.

An entitlement to part-time pre-school education was introduced for all four-year-olds in 1999 and for all three-year-olds in 2004. Free provision has since been extended to some two-year-olds in deprived areas. The necessary expansion of places was achieved in part by providing funding for places in the voluntary and private sectors. The funding was accompanied by new national guidance for over-threes which ensured that the public sector and the funded voluntary and private sectors were working to the same national curricular goals. Under these arrangements, working parents were now able to access a free early education place and top this up with additional fee-paying hours. This place might be in the same setting that also provides for under-threes, in a similar model to the “unitary settings” described elsewhere in this report.

From April 2008, local authorities have a new duty to secure sufficient childcare for working parents. This means that they are expected to facilitate and support the private and voluntary sectors, not that they must provide the childcare themselves (although they may do so in certain circumstances).

The new quality framework for early learning and childcare, the *Early Years Foundation Stage*, is mandatory from September 2008. It brings together learning and development and welfare requirements regardless of the type, size or funding of the setting. It forms a single framework of requirements from birth to age five/six, thus ending the distinction between education and care and between birth-to-three and three-to-five provision.

These developments in education and care form part of a wider programme of reform which emphasises the integration and improvement of all services for children and families, including health and family support as well as education and childcare. The aim is to improve outcomes for all children and also to narrow the gap between those who do well and those who do not. This means combining universal services with greater support for those in most need. There is an emphasis on protecting vulnerable children and ensuring that children do not slip through the net. These aims are expressed in the *Every Child Matters* framework which sets out five outcomes for all children: being healthy; staying safe; enjoying and achieving; making a positive contribution; and achieving economic well-being. For the early years, the Sure Start programme makes an important contribution to delivering these outcomes; a network of Sure Start Children's Centres provides a range of integrated services designed around local needs, but including early education, health and family support services as core elements.

Wales

A distinctive feature of provision in Wales is that the Welsh Assembly Government believes that the Welsh language is an integral part of the Welsh national identity and acknowledges that its aim of creating a bilingual society must be rooted within early years education. There is additional support for providers who can contribute to providing bilingual or Welsh medium education and care.

As in England, until relatively recently, the provision of publicly funded education and care for children below compulsory school age (five) was a matter for local decision. Many local authorities provided nursery schools and nursery classes for children over the age of three, and/or admitted children to primary school at the age of four, but they were not obliged to do so and provision was patchy. Outside the public sector, some children attended private fee-paying nursery schools and classes. Many more attended voluntary sector playgroups, which kept fees affordable by relying on volunteer and community support. Full-time day-care, where available, was provided mainly by the private sector and paid for by parents. Voluntary and private sector provision was regulated and inspected in respect of the quality of care provided but not in respect of the educational programme.

1998 saw the publication of the *National Childcare Strategy in Wales*. This aimed to benefit children and support working parents by ensuring good quality, affordable childcare for children in every community. The strategy for Wales was introduced within a UK-wide framework of government initiatives, such as childcare tax credits for low and middle income parents.

Also in 1998, a new statutory duty was placed on local authorities to ensure the provision of pre-school education in their area. An entitlement to part-time pre-school education was introduced for all four-year-olds in 1999 and for all three-year-olds in 2005. The necessary expansion of places was achieved in part by providing funding for places in the voluntary and private sectors. The funding was accompanied by new national guidance for over-threes which ensured that the public sector and the funded voluntary and private sectors were

working to the same national curricular goals. Under these arrangements, working parents were now able to access a free early education place and top this up with additional fee-paying hours. This place might be in the same setting that also provides for under-threes, in a similar model to the "unitary settings" described elsewhere in this report.

Provision of childcare remained uneven, however. The Welsh Assembly Government set out actions to address this in its 2005 childcare strategy, and subsequently committed, in its 2007 coalition agenda for Wales, *One Wales*, to "progressing the provision of universal, affordable childcare … including extended free high quality childcare for two year olds in areas of greatest need". From April 2008, local authorities have a duty to secure sufficient childcare for working parents.

From September 2008, all children's learning from age three to seven is being brought into a single statutory *Foundation Phase* curriculum. The new curriculum emphasises learning through play and first hand experiential activities and allows time for children to consolidate their learning before moving on to the next stage of development.

These developments in education and care form part of a wider programme of reform which emphasises the integration and improvement of all services for children and families, including health and family support as well as education and childcare. The aim is to improve outcomes for all children and also to narrow the gap between those who do well and those who do not. This means combining universal services with greater support for those in most need, with an emphasis on protecting vulnerable children and ensuring that children do not slip through the net. Two programmes which play an important part in delivering these outcomes for pre-school children are Cymorth (the Children and Youth Support Fund, 0-25 years) and Flying Start, the initiative for the youngest children (0-3 Years), which invests intensively in the most disadvantaged areas.

Northern Ireland

Provision in Northern Ireland shares some features with that in England and Wales. In Northern Ireland, as in England and Wales, an expansion of part-time pre-school education places over the last decade was achieved by government funding of places in a range of settings including the voluntary and private sectors. All funded providers are expected to follow the same curriculum guidance and are subject to inspection. Northern Ireland also shares the UK-wide framework of childcare tax credits for low and middle income parents which can be used to access full-time day-care places provided by the private sector.

However, there are also some important structural differences. Children in Northern Ireland reach compulsory school age earlier, at four years two months. Provision of pre-school education and childcare is not a statutory requirement in Northern Ireland. However, the Government has set a target to provide one year of pre-school experience for every child whose parents want it and participation in the immediate pre-school year is now almost universal.

In the most disadvantaged areas, Sure Start local programmes have been established for children under the age of four and their families. These programmes are a partnership of statutory and voluntary and community organisations. They are designed to meet local needs while containing the core elements of early education, health and family support.

Currently the Department of Education is leading on the development of a 0-6 strategy which will link education and care to improve outcomes for children.