

NORTH LANARKSHIRE COUNCIL
REPORT

To: Education Committee	Subject: "MEETING THE CHILDCARE CHALLENGE" - A SCOTTISH OFFICE CONSULTATION PAPER
From: Director of Education	
Date: 27th July 1998	
Ref: JMcG/LL	

PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report advises members of the publication of a Scottish Office Consultation paper setting out proposals for the development of a national childcare strategy for Scotland. It also includes an appendix containing the council's response to the paper, the contents of which require homologation by committee.

RECOMMENDATION

The education committee is asked:

- (i) to note the publication of the Scottish Office consultation paper and to homologate the contents of the council response.
- (ii) to refer this report to the social work committee for its information and interest.

Michael O'Neill

Members wishing further information about this report should contact:

Michael O'Neill, Director of Education, on 01236 812307 or
Jim McGuinness, Head of Support for Learning, on 01236 812280

A copy of the consultation paper is available in the Local Government Library, 4th floor Civic Centre, Motherwell.

NORTH LANARKSHIRE COUNCIL : DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

“Meeting the Childcare Challenge”
- A Scottish Office Consultation Paper

Report by Director

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 1.1. On 19 May 1998 the government launched a consultation document “Meeting the Childcare Challenge” setting out proposals for the development of a national childcare strategy for Scotland. The paper describes a rationale for such a strategy and states the government’s belief that good quality and affordable childcare should be available locally for all children up to the age of 14 years. The paper attempts to draw together a number of strands taken from a range of existing strategies with the stated aim of bringing coherence to the field of childcare.
- 1.2. The consultation paper posed a number of key questions and invited responses by 28th July 1998. Subsequently this deadline was extended by the Scottish Office to 14 August 1998. Given the timing of publication it was not possible to consult committee prior to the submission of a council response. A council submission was made within the allotted timescale and a copy is included as Appendix 2 to this report. The views of a number of council departments, including social work, have informed the production of our response.

2. A SUMMARY OF THE MAIN POINTS OF THE PROPOSED STRATEGY

- 2.1. “Meeting the Childcare Challenge” has been produced in the wake of a series of announcements and initiatives made since May 1997 and makes reference to other key papers, including “Education in Early Childhood” which was the subject of an earlier committee paper. The new paper addresses issues relating particularly to the needs of working parents but is consonant with the earlier consultation in its theme of developing an integrative approach to education and care services and in its determination to achieve coherence in relation to staff training and qualifications.
- 2.2. The paper sets out the government’s intentions to:
 - (i) raise the quality of care by improving regulation, adopting quality assurance arrangements, establishing an “Early Excellence in Practice” initiative, enhancing the status of childcare and ensuring an increased supply of staff within a coherent framework of training and qualifications.

- (ii) improving the affordability of care through a number of measures including increased child benefit, improvements to the taxation system and assistance with childcare costs as part of the New Deal framework.
 - (iii) making childcare more accessible, not only by funding an increased level of provision, but also by ensuring that types of provision being developed are informed by parents' needs and preferences.
- 2.3. The mechanism envisaged for delivery of the strategy is the establishment of "Local Childcare Partnerships" which are to be set up and co-ordinated by local authorities. These partnerships would be built up from the early years forums already being developed as part of the arrangements already announced for the replacement of the former "voucher" system for pre-school education. These partnerships are to include private and voluntary sector providers, employers, LECs, FE colleges, health authorities and parents. The consultation paper suggests that the partnerships would begin to audit local provision and that these audits should be linked in to the Children's Services Plan for each authority.
- 2.4. The paper indicates that a "Scottish Childcare Board" has been established. The board will offer advice to the government and will produce the necessary framework within which the local childcare partnerships would operate. The government will set a range of objectives and will identify priorities and targets for childcare provision.
- 2.5. The paper sets out a list of key consultation questions. These form the basis of the council response.

3. RECOMMENDATION

- 3.1. The education committee is asked:
- (i) to note the publication of the Scottish Office consultation paper and to homologate the contents of the council response.
 - (ii) to refer this report to the social work committee for its information and interest.

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“MEETING THE CHILDCARE CHALLENGE”

- A Scottish Office Consultation Paper

A Response by North Lanarkshire Council

1. General Comment

North Lanarkshire Council welcomes the publication of the consultation paper and the opportunity to make a contribution to the development of a national childcare strategy. We note with pleasure and approval the commitment of central government to place childcare as “a major policy priority”. There is no doubt that many organisations, including councils, have for many years felt deep concern at the fragmented nature of early years services and the lack of an integrated package of measures to support the separate education and childcare elements of provision. The production of a strategic framework to enable the needs of children and parents to be addressed will be a major step forward and will facilitate appropriate development at a national and local level.

In formulating responses to the specific consultation points views were sought from other departments of the council. Our 3 early years forums were also invited to submit their views and these have been useful in informing our submission. However the timing of the publication of the paper at the threshold of a major holiday period created difficulties for officers in attempting to canvass a wider range of opinion.

2. Responses to Specific Consultation Points

(i) **Should there be a single national recognition scheme for childcare arrangements which meet certain specified standards?**

Such a scheme would certainly be welcomed but, in practical terms, it is difficult to see how it could be achieved. The detailed Scottish Office guidelines on the implementation of the 1989 Children Act are a good example of this difficulty. The guidelines are clearly open to interpretation and different councils apply them in different ways according to their circumstances and needs. However similar national guidelines providing a broad framework for the maintenance of standards in childcare would be appropriate.

In relation to this issue recent press publicity following the conviction of a childminder for the murder of a child in her care has highlighted the issue of private arrangements for childcare between parents and

nannies. Consideration should be given to this matter within any national scheme for the recognition of childcare arrangements.

(ii) Has this chapter covered all the main ways in which the supply and recruitment of childcare workers can be increased?

References within “New Deal” to the creation of a pool of childcare assistants have given rise to concern within this council. It seems likely that these workers may not be required to meet the training standard which North Lanarkshire would find acceptable. The government’s intentions on these training standards need to be spelt out more clearly.

Similar a greater degree of specificity would have been helpful in relation to the reference to funding of Further Education courses. In North Lanarkshire we would wish to see such courses offered at HNC (Childcare and Education) level or equivalent.

Has the issue of training for workers in other areas, such as out of school care, been considered?

There is also a reference in the chapter to “urban programme”. Such funding is targeted to specific areas. Any national standards should be equally accessible across Scotland.

(iii) What action is needed to gain acceptance and use of a coherent training and qualifications structure?

A reduction in the number and range of different programmes and courses would be helpful. Benchmarks should be set nationally, by the Scottish Qualifications Authority, which would allow trainees to establish the level of training appropriate to their needs and previous experience. These benchmarks would also offer a correlation between levels of training and the broad range job opportunities within the field of childcare.

(iv) How can we assist in strengthening the quality of care provided through the informal sector?

The development of home/school/community partnerships in North Lanarkshire provides a good model for assisting carers to access informal training opportunities in areas such as parenting skills. There is a clear role for community education in facilitating such developments through locally based training programmes supported by creche provision.

(v) Are there groups of families other than those described in this chapter who merit help with childcare costs?

The chapter appears to be comprehensive in its coverage of target groups. However there may be families who do not qualify, because of their adequate financial circumstances, for all of the assistance available in cost terms but who are significantly disadvantaged in accessing childcare opportunities. For example, they may live in an isolated community or may be coping with disability within the family.

(vi) Are there types of childcare, or localities or age groups of children, that particularly require attention under the strategy?

There are 3 points worth raising in this context:

- (i) The current guarantee of a nursery place for 4 year olds extends only to 5 half-day sessions over a period not exceeding 33 weeks per annum. This is clearly inadequate for parents who wish to work or to enter further or higher education. Recent announcements in the comprehensive spending review about the extension of this facility to 3 year olds are clearly welcome but once again offer only a part-time place.
- (ii) Out of school care, before and after school and during holidays, has been extended by the consultation paper to cover a much wider age range. Coping with young teenagers up to the age of 14 years presents different challenges which the paper does not obviously acknowledge.
- (iii) Issues of isolated communities and related aspects, for example, the provision of transport need to be addressed.

(vii) How should good quality childcare information services be funded and managed?

Local authorities are ideally placed to co-ordinate information services. The publication of the triennial review under the 1989 Children Act and the children's services plan under the 1995 Children Act would provide a sound basis for the incorporation of childcare information services. However this could only be achieved if the necessary resources were made available to expand on the existing systems. The consultation paper seems to place local authorities in the role of "soliciting" resources from potential partners in the local childcare partnerships. Experience has shown that resources intended for the promotion of childcare when channelled through other agencies do not always reach that target. Local authorities need to be properly and directly resourced by central government in order to ensure a comprehensive information service.

Some problems may arise in the management of certain types of information. For example, would childminders be happy to have their details circulated on the internet?

(viii) What areas should be covered by the proposed minimum standards for childcare information services?

The idea of minimum standards is commendable. However the level of information suggested in paragraph 4.17. of the consultation paper is unrealistic. "Current vacancies" information would be changing daily. Recent research conducted on behalf of the pre-school division of SOEID has illustrated the difficulty in making comparisons on a unit costs basis among a plethora of providers all offering widely differing levels of service. We would suggest the following information as the basis of an information service:

- Provider's name/address
- Registration status of provider
- General (brief) description of provision e.g. nursery, child minder, out of school care
- Number of places
- Availability of full-time places (yes/no)
- Age range

Any other aspects to be included would require careful discussion with providers.

(ix) What childcare information is best offered at national level?

At national level the emphasis should be placed on "signposting" of information and services. The following aspects could be included:

- Details of government policy.
- The range of possible provision.
- Advice on benefits/tax credits etc.
- Local authority contacts and telephone numbers.
- Helpline service.

In relation to the "helpline" suggestion it is perhaps worth noting that the helpline established by the voucher agency last year actually caused problems e.g. in not realising that arrangements in Scotland differed from those in England!

(x) How can the effectiveness of childcare partnership at local level be maximised?

It must be emphasised that most authorities are only now establishing early years forums and therefore experience is limited. It is difficult to

predict how easily local childcare partnerships will develop and the promised detailed guidance will be eagerly awaited. The idea is a sound one in theory but is liable to be fraught with difficulty in practice, at least in the short term. Funding arrangements will likely be the key to successful partnerships.

(xi) Does this chapter set out correctly what should be done to improve national and local data on childcare?

The chapter has an “anecdotal” flavour to it. It certainly covers a wide range but is hardly comprehensive. At a local level we would refer back to the answer to consultation point (vii) and the significance of triennial reviews and children’s services plans under the 1989 and 1995 Children Acts respectively.

(xii) Have the tasks to be carried out at local level been identified correctly?

The proposals set out in the consultation paper are a welcome recognition of the importance of good quality childcare in all of our efforts to support the social and economic regeneration of our community and at individual level to reduce social exclusion. However the speed and scope of development is presenting a major challenge to our capacity to deliver what is required. For example, the delivery of the pre-school education guarantee to 4 year olds has stretched staff to the limit. Similar guarantees are now to be delivered for all 3 year olds. Early years forums are only now “bedding in” but are already expected to evolve into local childcare partnerships.

The council welcomes all of these developments but there is a clear need to establish a long-term development plan, properly funded, over a period of 3 to 5 years without the fear of further dramatic change in the interim.

(xiii) What are the barriers to employers, including small and medium sized companies, developing family friendly employment practices, including help with childcare, and how can employers be encouraged to recognise the benefits?

The main barriers are financial and attitudinal. Workplace nurseries may provide part of the answer but are not always the most convenient for workers using public transport. Many companies could consider financial incentives to employees through the provision of financial assistance with childcare costs. Perhaps central government could provide a proportion of such finance to companies demonstrating such a commitment to their employees’ childcare needs.