

# The Children's Society's response to the early years and childcare deployment consultation

March 2013



## About The Children's Society

The Children's Society supports nearly 48,000 children and young people every year through our specialist services and children's centres. We believe in achieving a better childhood for every child but have a particular focus on children who have nowhere else to turn, such as children living in poverty, young carers, young refugees, children at risk on the streets, disabled children and children in trouble with the law. We seek to give a voice to children and young people and influence policy and practice so they have a better chance in life. We run nearly 40 children's centres across England, a number with nurseries attached.

## Introduction

Support in the early years is crucial as it has a major impact on a child's development and long-term outcomes such as on educational achievement and health outcomes<sup>1</sup>. High quality early years and childcare settings provide children from all types of backgrounds with the best start in life.

The Children's Society supports the government's focus on improving the quality of early years provision and on ensuring that the early years workforce is highly qualified. However, we have concerns about the implications of the government's proposals to relax staff:child ratios in childcare settings. These are outlined below.

This response is based on our experience as a provider of group settings so we have not responded to the proposals to change staff:child ratios for childminders. For this response we consulted with the practitioners and managers who work in our nurseries and we consulted with parents who use our children's centres and nurseries.

### Summary of recommendations:

- 1. The government should bring forward proposals to improve the pay and status of the early years practitioners and professionals to ensure a more qualified workforce.*
- 2. The government should reconsider the proposal to introduce higher staff:child ratios for staff working with two year olds and under twos in childcare settings.*
- 3. The government should pilot the impact higher staff:child ratios would have on settings, staff and children. If this policy is taken forward, it should be implemented gradually to allow for staff, settings and children to adjust accordingly.*
- 4. If higher staff:child ratios are implemented, all staff that count in the ratios should be at least level 3 trained and there should be a qualified graduate in each setting using these ratios.*

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<sup>1</sup> As outlined in the Marmot Review and Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study: The Marmot Review (2010) Fair Society, Healthy Lives; Sylva, K., Melhuish, E. C., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. and Taggart, B.(2004),The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Technical Paper 12 - The Final Report: Effective Pre-School Education. London: DfES / Institute of Education, University of London.

## Increasing quality: recruiting and retaining highly qualified staff

Evidence from the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study<sup>2</sup> found that there is a positive relationship between the qualifications of staff and ratings of quality, and that children make more progress in settings where staff have higher qualifications. Highly qualified staff are therefore at the core of high quality early years and childcare settings.

The Children's Society runs a number of nurseries and our practitioners and managers know how difficult it can be to recruit and retain highly qualified staff. The main challenges, as highlighted by the Nutbrown Review<sup>3</sup>, are that the rates of pay for early years practitioners are low and the status of the profession is also still far too low. As one of the parents we spoke to put it:

*"As a society we completely undervalue that childcare role."*

Graduate led provision is key to higher quality provision but the level of staff pay must reflect this. In comparison, careers such as teaching, nursing or midwifery can be significantly higher paid than the early years.

Childcare settings face considerable difficulties in increasing staff pay. Most of our nurseries are in deprived areas where the children who attended are mainly in government funded places where funding to pay staff higher salaries is not available.

The major initiatives that would improve retention and recruitment of highly qualified staff in the early years are an increase in pay scales, improved continued professional development and investment in advertising and campaigns to improve the status of childcare as a profession.

*Recommendation 1: the government should bring forward the pay and status of the early years practitioners and professionals to ensure a more highly qualified workforce particularly with regard to funding nurseries in deprived areas.*

## Relaxing child:staff ratios

We have serious concerns about the proposals to relax the staff:child ratios in nursery settings for those working with two year olds and those under two. Our nursery practitioners are generally supportive of ratios remaining as they are and parents we consulted were similarly in favour of maintaining current staff:child ratios as one parent said:

*"I feel that at the moment the ratios we have are just about manageable"*

<sup>2</sup> Sylva, K., Melhuish, E. C., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. and Taggart, B.(2004),The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: *Technical Paper 12 - The Final Report: Effective Pre-School Education*. London: DfES / Institute of Education, University of London.

<sup>3</sup> Professor Cathy Nutbrown (2012) *Foundations for Quality: The independent review of early education and childcare qualifications* Department for Education: London

Our practitioners have highlighted the following issues with this proposal:

- That it will lead to deteriorating quality in early years settings.
- Having to work with more very young children per staff member creates practical difficulties.
- It could have potential negative health and safety implications.

There is evidence that the quality of provision in early years settings can deteriorate as ratios rise<sup>4</sup>. Children under two need a considerable amount of care and supervision. High quality provision for babies and toddlers under two years old is effectively fostered through close interactions with the staff. Relaxing the staff:child ratios will reduce these interactions and undermine these relationships.

Our childcare practitioners were concerned about the practical difficulties of increasing ratios and the impact this would have on the quality of provision. As one of our practitioners pointed out:

*"Having higher qualifications does not mean we have more hands or eyes to ensure four two year olds are safe and supported."*

If a child needs one to one attention, the other members of staff have almost double the number of children to manage. For example, two members of staff looking after twelve two year olds would mean one member of staff providing one-to-one care such as nappy changing or feeding and the other member of staff having sole responsibility for all the other children.

Practitioners were similarly concerned about having to look after four under two year olds especially babies aged between 3-6 months as they need particularly intensive attention and support. This increase in ratios would make it more difficult for practitioners to provide quality support and to observe and track the development of babies and toddlers.

Parents also highlighted that their young children need close attention and care:

*"You have some children who are extremely in need of one to one attention at a young age."*

*"Very often they go to nursery [and] they haven't learnt how to share, their attention span is very short, and they need to be attended to in a more one-to-one [way]."*

Practitioners were also concerned that the welfare and safety of children would be compromised with these new ratios as with less staff, they may not be able to meet the needs of all the children in their care. There was also a particularly concern about fire evacuations, for example one adult having to get four babies out of a building. Moreover, there were concerns about how staff would be able to take these babies and toddlers outside safely for outdoor play with these ratios.

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<sup>4</sup> Mathers, S., Sylva, K. & Joshi, H. (2007) *Quality of Childcare Settings in the Millenium Cohort Study*. DfES Research Report SSU/2007/FR/ 025.

Overall, our practitioners had concerns about the practical and safety issues relaxing ratios would have and fears that this could lead to lower rather than higher quality early years provision.

*Recommendation 2: The government should reconsider the proposal to introduce higher staff:child ratios for staff working with two year olds and under twos in childcare settings.*

As one parent we consulted said:

*"I think you should have both, you should have better qualified childcarers, particularly in group settings, and also the high staff ratios."*

### **Qualifications staff should have in settings**

If the government is set on relaxing staff ratios, this must be implemented gradually and there must be high qualifications criteria that settings must follow in order to operate these higher ratios<sup>5</sup>.

This change of policy must be implemented slowly to allow existing staff to prepare, plan and train to meet the new requirements for higher qualifications to work in childcare settings. We support the Nutbrown review's recommendations that *'there should be a gradual move to Level 3 for early years workers counting in staff:child ratios in group settings, so that all staff counting in ratios are qualified by Level 3 by 2022'*. We also believe that this move to higher staff:child ratios should be piloted to see what impact it would have on how settings are run, on staff and on children themselves.

If staff:child ratios are to be relaxed, staff qualifications must be set at a level that ensures high quality and we believe that the ratios should be based on the individuals working with children so that only the practitioners with suitable levels of qualifications should be involved in direct provision at the higher ratio.

We agree with the Nutbrown Review and the 'More Great Childcare' report that we should move towards all early years workers having at least a C in GCSE english and maths. However, we do not believe that this is a strict enough criterion on its own to ensure effective provision at higher ratios, since this does not have any bearing on staff members' experience of working with young children.

We believe all staff should be qualified to at least level 3 (other staff can be working towards this level but should not be counted in ratios) and there should be at least one senior practitioner that is a qualified graduate in each setting. Level 2 staff should be expected and supported to progress to level 3 within five years to ensure a more skilled workforce.

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<sup>5</sup> In answer to question 4 of the consultation

However, even in settings where staff have these qualifications we would still have concerns about higher staff ratios for children aged two and under (as outlined above).

*Recommendation 3: The government should pilot the impact higher staff:child ratios would have on settings, staff and children. If this policy is taken forward, it should be implemented gradually to allow for staff and settings to adjust accordingly.*

*Recommendation 4: If higher staff ratios are implemented, all staff that count in the ratios should be at least level 3 trained and there should be a qualified graduate in each setting using these ratios.*

**For more information please contact:**

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