**Foundation Years: Sure Start children’s centres – Government response**

**Written evidence submitted by TACTYC**

**The association for the professional development of early years educators**

TACTYC is a membership organisation, with over 500 members. Our activities include:

**advocacy and lobbying** - providing a voice for all those engaged with the professional development of practitioners through responding to early years policy initiatives and contributing to the debate on the education and training of the UK early years workforce;

**informing** – developing the knowledge-base of all those concerned with early years education and care by disseminating research findings through, for example, our international [Early Years Journal](http://www.tactyc.org.uk/EarlyYears.asp), annual conference, website and occasional publications;

**supporting** – encouraging informed and constructive discussion and debate and supporting practitioner reflection, the use of evidence-based practice and practitioner-research through, for example, our [newsletter](http://www.tactyc.org.uk/newsletter.asp) and website ([www.tactyc.org.uk](http://www.tactyc.org.uk)).

For ease of reference, our submission is organised in line with the headings of the Committee’s report. Our prime concerns are:

* **The needs of children** should be central to policy development, rather than the current emphasis on parental employment, important though that is.
* **Quality of provision** is crucial. This depends on consistency of support as well as the qualifications and continuing professional development of staff, particularly in leadership. Both these issues are compromised by uncertain funding and the long standing lack of investment in staff training together with recent Ministerial statements that Level 2 is a sufficient qualification and that up to 50% of staff can be unqualified. This will not address the needs of families in the most disadvantaged areas.
* **Multi-agency working** should be a priority across health and social services as well as education. Local Authority teams could promote this within their vital training role.

1. **Purpose and effectiveness of children’s centres** 
   1. **Priority services: children or parents**

1.1.1 Children’s welfare and wellbeing should be the first priority

1.1.2 As the two year old pilot showed, it is essential that children are placed in high quality settings

1.1.3 A stronger emphasis on parenting skills is needed; there is a fundamental weakness in the two year old offer which does not address the situation of vulnerable families and low parental aspirations – there is little benefit in removing vulnerable children from their homes for a few hours and returning them without addressing the needs of the whole family

1.1.4 The situation of 2 year olds and younger children living in dysfunctional families who do not meet current criteria of disadvantage should be addressed

**1.2 Central government policy on early years**

1.2.1 *More Great Childcare* and *More Affordable Childcare* focus on the provision of childcare for the benefit of working parents and society and do not take sufficient account of children’s needs. These should be central to policy, and should be the starting point for cross-party consensus leading to longer term strategic planning that will enable the secure and stable development of provision which safeguards rather than compromises children’s wellbeing.

1.2.2 We question the expectation that schools will be open for very long hours in order to allow parents to have flexible access to daycare for their children, especially as many do not have the facilities and appropriately qualified staff to provide a suitable environment for such long days. It is more beneficial for children’s outcomes to attend early years provision for shorter, more frequent sessions than using the entitlement in two long days. This issue applies to other settings in the PVI sector too. Employers should be encouraged to offer more flexible working for fathers as well as mothers, and childminders should be foregrounded as providers for very young children, who need close and responsive contact with a key adult who knows them very well.

1. **Outcomes depend principally on staff qualifications and training**

2.1 **Early Years Teachers**

2.1.1 Although Government recognises the importance of having well qualified graduate staff, and continues to support the training of early years professionals, now to be called teachers, their lack of QTS means that they do not have comparable status, pay, or career opportunities as school teachers. As a result, many EYPs/EYTs move on to gain QTS, rendering the situation unsustainable.

**2.2 Early Years Educators**

2.2.1 Staff below graduate level also need to be well-trained and with educational and career progression possibilities to ensure a strong consistent workforce. It does no good to supposedly raise the bar with the EYE qualification including GCSE requirements, and then rule that Level 2 will continue to count in ratios and set the very low standard of half of all staff qualified at least to Level 2

2.3 **Maintained Nursery Schools**

2.3.1 State nursery schools deserve practical support in addition to the Minister’s acknowledgment of their quality. They have a crucial role as Early Years Teaching Schools and in Teach First as well as many other aspects of training across the sector. Nursery classes in primary schools do not have comparable resources and skills to undertake this work effectively and it is very costly for the PVI sector generally to release suitably qualified and experienced staff to train others. There are issues for areas with no centres of excellence able to offer high quality training and work experience.

2.3.2 It is worth noting OFSTED’s endorsement of EPPE’s findings that maintained nursery schools and children’s centres based around them achieve the best outcomes for more disadvantaged children in poor areas.

1. **Accountability**

**3.1 Inspection**

3.1.1. Good and outstanding settings still have room for improvement, and may deteriorate very quickly, particularly with staff turnover, so should continue to be monitored.

3.1.2 Ofsted inspections of children’s centres are very data-led at present. All involved need to be confident that inspectors are able to assess the quality of provision and the impact of support on service users. The Government response says that they are working with Ofsted to ‘improve and strengthen’ the inspection regime – it is to be hoped that this will lead to better qualified and trained Ofsted inspectors and greater consistency of practice. Infrequent inspections do not provide OFSTED with enough evidence for them to become sole arbiters of quality, so the loss of Local Authority monitoring and support is a concern.

**3.2 Use of data by Centres**

3.2.1 It would be useful to bring evaluation of early years on to a par with the performance of schools and social care. The LA inspection framework should include an assessment of the effectiveness of children’s centres and early intervention as well as safeguarding.

1. **Reaching children and families in need**

**4.1 Child protection and children in need**

4.1.1 Data sharing is a crucial aspect of work, particularly in relation to the needs of disadvantaged families. It is currently very poor between key agencies in too many areas, which hinders children’s centres in reaching their priority groups and potential service users. A stronger lead from the DoH and social services as well as the DfE is required.

**4.2 Joint Working**

4.2.1 The findings of the implementation study of the 2 year old Integrated Review show that joint training across services is crucial. It should inform initial training as well as CPD.

**4.3 Transitions**

4.3.1 The importance of sharing broader information between childminders and nurseries on entry to school cannot be overstated, especially in the context of baseline assessment, which risks labelling children prematurely.

1. **Commissioning and planning**

**5.1 informed local knowledge**

5.1.1 Local Authorities, with their detailed knowledge of their local demography and changing levels of provision, have a vital role in planning and commissioning places.

5.2 **Decision-making and governance**

5.2.1 Local Authorities could have a strong role in developing governance; most already have long experience in governor training, and could help in strengthening links with schools and other agencies.

5.3 **Monitoring and support**

5.3.1 There is a growing gap in monitoring and support for children’s centres, which OFSTED and regional commissioners will not be in a strong position to fill. The role of Local Authorities in quality improvement should be retained. They are best placed to provide the frequent, flexible and fine-tuned monitoring and support that struggling settings need, and their role in training at all levels is informed by local knowledge. Because they are in touch with centres of excellence in their area, they can broker supportive partnerships effectively.

5.3.2 Local Advisory Boards: LAs also have a central role in supporting the statutory advisory boards, which are currently struggling. Unless there is clearer guidance/expectations the advisory boards will just fade away, as some already have. Closer working between local authorities and Children’s Centres (on sharing and analysing data and the improvement of EYFS provision) would mean that advisory boards are better informed and more confident at holding the Centre to account.

5.3.3 Evidence based interventions: Local Authorities also have a role in linking settings with advice and guidance from the EIF as it emerges, and also in alerting the EIF to effective practice in their areas. Higher Education should be centrally involved in this process.

1. **Workforce and leadership training and development**

6.1.1 It is unrealistic for the government to expect private and voluntary providers to pay the full rate for well qualified staff; many are resorting to zero hour contracts, and cannot afford to pay the recommended living wage.

6.1.2 The loss of Local Authority support for training and CPD is felt across the country. It is not realistic for heads of small providers to identify needs, research suitable training and pay the costs. Even where they can work as a consortium, scarce time as well as money has to be invested in identifying and paying for relevant training. It is not enough for OFSTED to “ask to see training plans” and inspectors are not well placed to make recommendations on training, let alone become responsible for quality improvement.

6.1.3 The chronic problem of pay and conditions in the sector is a serious issue, which is not resolved by re-naming early years professionals as teachers and requiring comparable entry requirements for the training.

6.1.4 As Professor Nutbrown recommended, there should be a radical review of EY teacher training to ensure that child development, effective pedagogy including the role of play in learning, and working with parents and other professionals are included in initial teacher training.

6.2 **Leadership**

6.2.1 Leaders of excellent schools, children’s centres and settings can make a significant contribution to the initial training and professional development of early years workers, but this must not be undertaken at the expense of their primary professional responsibility for the children and families with whom they work. These settings are relatively small, and do not currently have the capacity to release experienced staff for additional work unless extra support is invested in them.

**7. Additional comments**

7.1 **Links with schools and transitions** between Year R and Year 1, as well as from nursery to school should be reviewed; in most countries, there is a coherent early years phase which continues to the age of 6 or 7 before the start of formal education. This is based on a good understanding of effective early years pedagogy which prepares children effectively for school, starting when they are mature enough to benefit from a more formal approach.

7.2 There are **counter-productive downward pressures** in England, from the limited view of school readiness, the Y1 phonics check, and unrealistic expected standards in the EYFS Profile. Our schools admit children when they are relatively young, and should be ready for them, appreciating what they are able to do rather than adopting a deficit model. The proposed baseline assessment needs to be viewed in this context. Termly rather than annual entry to school is better for nurseries as well as for children, as admissions can be managed more effectively and younger children benefit from the older role models.