

Fair Foundations

Policies for Early Years

Policy Paper 62



Contents

Definitions	3
Summary	4
The Vital Role of Parents	6
Early Years Centres	8
2.1 The Vision of the Early Years Centre	8
2.2 A Link with Every Child	9
2.3 Health Care	10
2.4 Education	10
2.5 Social Services Support	12
2.6 Support for Families and Communities	12
2.7 Links with Other Providers	14
A Professional Workforce	15
3.1 Training in Nurseries and Pre-Schools	15
3.2 Training for the Whole Sector	17
3.3 Individual Attention for Every Child	18
3.4 A Professional Body	18
3.5 Registration of Nannies	19
A Guarantee of Quality	20
4.1 Inspections	20
4.2 Quality Assurance	20
4.3 Teaching Guidelines	21
An Affordable System	22
5.1 Support for Working Parents	22
5.2 Support for Parents at Home	23
5.3 The Role of Government	24
Making it Happen	26
6.1 Building on Reality	26
6.2 The Vision for 2020	26

Definitions

Adult:child ratios: the current adult:child ratios for nurseries are as follows:

- 1:3 for children under 2.
- 1:4 for 2-3 year olds.
- 1:8 for 3-5 year-olds where the adult has a Level 3 or lower qualification.
- 2:26 for 3-5 year-olds where one of the adults is a qualified teacher and the other has Level 3.

The number of children childminders may care for is judged by OFSTED during the registration process, but this will not normally include more than one child under twelve months.

EPPE study: Effective Provision of Pre-School Education study; a major longitudinal study of different early years providers and the outcomes for children, run from the Institute of Education at London University. It has considered issues such as the social and economic backgrounds of the children, the qualifications of the staff and the standard of care and education offered.

Foundation Stage: the first stage of the National Curriculum, established in 2000. It takes children from when they can first claim the Nursery Education Grant when they are three until they start the Key Stage 1 curriculum in the September after they turn five.

High/Scope: a study undertaken in the USA, starting in the early 1960s, looking at the outcomes for children from disadvantaged homes who were given very high quality early years support, as against the outcomes for similar children who had no pre-school support. The findings from this study have led to the claim that for every \$1 spent on early years support, \$7.16 can be saved later on.

NVQ Levels: Qualification levels which allow academic and vocational qualifications to be compared. Level 2 is equivalent to 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C, Level 3 is equivalent to 2 A Levels at grades A-E, Level 4 is equivalent to a Foundation Degree, Level 5 is equivalent to an Honours Degree and Level 6 is equivalent to a Masters Degree.

Nursery Education Grant: the fund which gives all children over the age of three access to two and a half hours a day of early years education for 33 weeks per year. This can be delivered by any registered provider, including private and voluntary sector nurseries and childminders.

OFSTED: the Office for Standards in Education. This is the body responsible for registering and inspecting all early years providers, as well as inspecting all maintained schools.

Sure Start: a Government programme designed to help under-privileged children and families, aimed at raising the aspirations of whole communities. It is currently available to families living in the 20% most deprived council wards in the country - but this only covers a small proportion of the most disadvantaged families in the country.

Working Tax Credit: the Government's financial support for working parents paying for childcare. The amount parents receive is calculated according to the amount they earn, and is paid in six month blocks.

Wrap-around care: care which allows parents to work a full day (for example 8am-6pm) with their children moving between different sorts of care and education, either on one site or moving between sites. This can apply to school-aged children who go on to other clubs or provision after school as well as to children in the early years.

Summary

This document considers the early education and childcare system in England, for children below statutory school age. It does not apply to Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, where these issues are devolved.

It presents a vision of a system where all children and families have access to a wide range of services, which they can choose to use or not as they wish. This document concentrates on state-provided services. However, we do support private and voluntary sector providers, and we want to uphold the good work they do whilst ensuring that all providers offer a high quality service. In some cases this support may involve providing space for groups to meet or assistance for volunteers. In other cases it may just involve the state keeping out, and allowing informal groups to remain independent.

The document is based upon the proposals agreed in the Liberal Democrat Conference Motion *Foundation for the Future* (September 2002), to raise the start of formal school to the year in which children turn seven. This would mean that most children would be six at the time they started primary school, rather than four as is presently the case, but they would be in full-time compulsory pre-school from the term before their fifth birthday.

Certain principles underpin this paper, and all the policies proposed in it:

- that early years services should be focused on the needs of children and their families, and should aim to prepare every child for a successful future;
- that it is particularly important to support children who are living in poverty or who have special needs, to ensure that they are not left behind;
- that one of the best ways to aid children's development is to support the adults who care for them, both families and professionals; and
- that young children are as important as older children, and therefore parents should have the choice of care and early education providers who are very highly skilled.

Liberal Democrats will support parents in caring for their children by:

- providing better education about the demands of parenthood to secondary school pupils;
- making parenting classes more generally accessible to parents wherever they live, without stigma;
- providing Centres for every local area, where parents can choose to go for routine services and help and advice about the problems they face.

Liberal Democrats will establish Early Years Centres to provide better services and more choice for parents by:

- creating a link with every child, through health visitors, drop-in sessions, toy libraries and more formal provision;
- ensuring that every child living in poverty has a link to a Centre within the next parliament;
- taking particular action in relation to children with disabilities or special needs;
- integrating health, education and social services facilities in one place;
- providing all routine children's health services;
- providing a day nursery for babies and young children, with pre-school care and

- education for children up to the start of primary school;
- providing support for families in need;
- offering support for parents such as help with basic skills and finding jobs, as well as advice about parenting skills;
- acting as training centres for other early years professionals so that the standards across the sector improve.

Liberal Democrats will support the workforce in becoming more professional by:

- ensuring there are qualified teachers in or linked to every nursery;
- requiring heads of nurseries to have qualifications in early education and in management;
- ensuring staff in nurseries have a right to five days training every year;
- encouraging childminders and nannies to train in similar ways to staff in nurseries;
- maintaining low adult:child ratios so that all children get the attention they need;
- establishing a professional body for early years staff;
- opening up registration procedures for nannies.

Liberal Democrats will guarantee the quality of early years provision by:

- ensuring that all nurseries, childminders and nannies are inspected regularly and rigorously, but taking account of their different aims and ethos;
- creating a consistent national Quality Assurance scheme, which takes account of local needs, but encourages all providers to improve;
- creating a level playing field between different providers, so that wherever children receive care or early education they are assured of a comparable standard.

Liberal Democrats will ensure that parents, employers and the state play their part in funding the early years system by:

- extending a fairer and more efficient form of financial support for working parents: the Working Parents Playscheme;
- making parental leave more flexible, so that parents can choose how to take their leave in the first year of their child's life;
- ensuring Local Authorities have the funding to provide Early Years Centres, and the freedom to design early years systems which meet their local needs.

The Vital Role of Parents

1.1 The most influential people for every young child are its parents. Whether one parent, or both, is at home all the time to care for their child themselves, or whether some of the caring is undertaken by other people, parents have an irreplaceable role in bringing up their children. However it is not easy to be a parent in isolation, and most parents welcome the support of family, friends and neighbours. Although government can only play a limited part in encouraging or forming these informal support networks, Liberal Democrats believe that they are very positive, for parents and children alike.

1.2 Not all parents have these support networks, however. Teenagers or lone parents are particularly likely to feel isolated. They may be cut off from family, find it difficult to make friends and do not have the confidence to seek help from professionals. In these situations it is often the children who suffer, with parents unable to cope, or having unrealistic expectations of what their child should be able to do at different ages.

1.3 In an age of smaller families where fewer children gain experience of childcare from looking after younger siblings or cousins, the education system has a greater role to play in ensuring that young people have some understanding of young children. In addition, our increasingly mobile population causes more people to move away from their own parents, who can be a great source of support when they become parents themselves. The citizenship agenda within schools is one way that this can be approached, with discussions about relationships and parenting forming part of the secondary curriculum. However, most teenagers learn more from spending time with young children than from theoretical discussions, and there are good examples of schools and nurseries linking teenagers with young children during the GCSE years.

1.4 Parents need most support when they are actually expecting a child or when their baby has arrived, however. Health visitors and midwives currently offer support around the time of the birth, but unless a family is experiencing obvious problems this support tends not to last very long. Many health visitors feel frustrated at the lack of funding to offer parenting classes, even though there is demonstrable demand. Some parents with good support networks around them can feel relieved when the health visitor has made the last visit, and they are “free” to be parents on their own. Other parents, however, may still be feeling unprepared for parenthood, and are left with nowhere else to turn.

1.5 **Therefore Liberal Democrats will put in place a system which gives all parents easy access to support and advice, but which does not force people to use services they don't want, unless a child is at risk.** A central point where child specialists from the health, education and social services fields are all available to see children and their families, without parents having to make a special appointment because of a specific problem, would increase the information and help on offer to parents, and reduce the sense of isolation many new parents experience.

1.6 These professionals would aim to build up a relationship with parents, and to share insights about their children's learning. Building up this relationship can be particularly difficult where the family comes from another culture, however. For families who have just moved to this country, the birth of a child can be their first prolonged contact with British authorities. Even where the family has been in this country for some years, or even more than one generation, they may not have built up an understanding of how children's services work. It is therefore very important that staff working

with families are trained to put parents and families at ease, and are prepared to use other languages or employ interpreters as necessary. It is also important that staff are open to learning lessons from the traditions of childcare in other cultures, to find new ways of engaging with children.

1.7 At the moment healthcare is often the only service that families from other cultures use. This may be because they are anxious about the types of services on offer, or it may be because they have a strong community based around their culture which meets many of their needs. Children can benefit immensely from growing up within a strong community, but they can also benefit from the very different experiences on offer through formal early years services. There is much evidence, notably from the recent EPPE study, to show that children from all backgrounds gain from early years services which put them in touch with highly trained professionals. Families should not have to choose to use either informal, community-based care or more formal care, but should be able to combine the two to suit them. **Liberal Democrats will require the early years system to be responsive to the views and needs of parents, so that no child or family is left isolated because of inflexible procedures.**

1.8 In recognising the role of parents, it is necessary for us to acknowledge that many parents choose not to care for their child full-time themselves. Where parents have decided to entrust their child to someone else's care, they generally want to be assured that that care is of a high quality, and that the person concerned has some understanding of children. This is particularly important where the state is providing the care. Therefore we want to give parents a wide choice of different types of care, all of which meet minimum standards. This aims to give parents peace of mind, and to increase the options open to them.

1.9 An important context in relation to young children and their families is housing. Families living in poor quality or crowded housing face very significant difficulties in bringing up their children, and this housing can have implications for the physical, emotional and educational well-being of the child. These issues will be considered in more depth in the Liberal Democrat Policy Paper on Housing, which is expected in March 2005.

Early Years Centres: integrated services for the whole child

2.1 The Vision of the Early Years Centre

2.1.1 Our concept of an Early Years Centre is close to some of the current Early Excellence Centres, but would have a wider remit. It is close also to the Government's proposed Children's Centres, but rather than being the exception, **we want to see Early Years Centres across the country, serving every community within two parliaments.**

2.1.2 The Early Years Centre would sit within the organisational framework of the new Children's Trusts proposed in the Government Green Paper *Every Child Matters* and would involve professionals from the three fields which deal most closely with young children; health, education and social services. It would offer a range of services to all children and families. Services would be on offer to children and families from the point of conception up until the child starts formal school, which under a Liberal Democrat government would be in the year the child turns seven, although all children would be in a compulsory pre-school setting from the term before their fifth birthday. For the details of this proposal, see section 2.4.

2.1.3 Parents would be able to choose from the services offered by their local Centre, from using full-time daycare to only visiting for health check-ups. In some areas the Early Years Centre would be attached to the local primary school, helping to make the transition into formal school easier. In other areas it might be in a completely separate location, with more room for the wider range of professionals who would operate from it. In rural areas it could involve a mobile unit, which would travel from village to village so that people could access the services without making lengthy journeys. This might mean

that on a certain day every week a "mini Early Years Centre" would operate from the village hall, for example. This might include the toy library, and would certainly involve having trained professionals available to offer help and advice.

2.1.4 Wherever the Early Years Centre was located, it would be guaranteed to have high quality outdoor play space, enough appropriate indoor space for the different age groups of children having daycare or pre-school education there, good adult:child ratios, highly qualified staff, and good outreach facilities for parents and families. The aim of the Centres would be to provide parents with all the facilities they need in one place, so that it is easier for parents to choose which services to use. They would still be welcome to choose to use other services in other places, and if the daycare or early education places at the Early Years Centre were full there would be advice to help parents choose somewhere else.

2.1.5 In setting out this vision it is important to understand that there would be no compulsory element to the provision, until the term before a child's fifth birthday at which point they would enter the pre-school. A parent who stayed at home full-time caring for their child themselves might use very few of the services, or on the other hand might enjoy going to the drop-in sessions where they could receive support and advice from other parents as well as trained professionals. Equally, these parents might prefer the atmosphere of a playgroup or other voluntary sector provider. They would still be able to make these choices. A parent who worked full-time and therefore needed daycare for their child could choose to use the Early Years Centre nursery, or could choose to use a private or voluntary sector nursery, a childminder, a nanny or other

provision relevant to them. The point of the Early Years Centre is to offer choice to parents so that they can provide for their child as they see best, not to force anyone to use services they do not need.

2.1.6 In this context, we value the provision offered by private and voluntary sector providers, from playgroups to daycare nurseries to workplace crèches, and from childminders to nannies. We want parents to have maximum choice in deciding how to care for their child, and so they also need a wide choice of providers of different sorts of care. We support the work that these other providers do, and we do not envisage the Early Years Centre taking over from them in any way. Rather, we hope to see the Centres working with other providers in their area to share best practice and to offer mutual support. However, there is a limit to the support that the state can offer independent providers without threatening their independence, and so we have focused here on state provision.

2.2 A Link with Every Child

2.2.1 **It is an important part of our vision of an Early Years Centre that eventually they should be available to everyone.** Too many children from deprived homes who would benefit from Sure Start provision do not live in a Sure Start area, and so do not have access to that support.

2.2.2 We recognise that establishing Early Years Centres across the country will take time, but it is important that each one offers services to all local families. The Centre would be the main provider of NHS ante-natal classes in each area, and so contact would be made with new parents at that point, and then babies would visit the Centre for their inoculations, giving another opportunity for contact to be made. Health visitors and midwives would be based in the Centre, and would be able to tell the families they visited about the services on offer. There would also be the option for parents

with children to come into the Centre at any time to get advice.

2.2.3 **Our aim is that there should be an Early Years Centre serving the 50% most deprived council wards in the country in the course of one parliament, and to cover the whole country in two parliaments.**

This substantially builds on the Government's commitment to cover the 20% most deprived wards, and means that most children living in poverty - the children who are in most need of this type of support - will have a Centre in their area by 2010. However, not all children living in poverty live in the 50% most deprived wards, and children can be identified by social services as having particular needs without living in poverty. Therefore every child living in poverty, or identified by social services as having particular needs which would be best met in an Early Years Centre, would be linked to their nearest Centre by 2010, even if they did not live in one of the catchment areas. Where necessary, transport would be provided to enable children and their families to get to their nearest Centre. This provision would still be voluntary, however, and if a family felt that their needs would not be met in a Centre they could choose not to use those services.

2.2.4 Talking in terms of covering council wards does not mean that every council ward would have its own Centre. Rather, it means that every child in the wards covered would have access to a Centre within sensible travelling distance. Exactly what this means in each local area would be left up to individual Local Authorities who understand the particular needs of their area, and the transport available.

2.2.5 This link could be particularly important for children with disabilities and other special educational needs. These children are just as likely to live in a wealthy ward as a deprived one, but high quality early years support gives them the time to develop at their own pace, together with

encouragement from skilled professionals to extend their learning appropriately. Early intervention for children with special needs can vastly improve their later chances, and this multi-agency approach is very beneficial for them. At the moment, many nurseries do not cater for children with disabilities or special needs because of the higher costs involved. **All Early Years Centres would be required to make appropriate provision for children with mild to moderate special needs**, and the range of health and educational professionals on site would benefit them, by allowing them to move between mainstream provision with other children and therapy specific to their needs.

2.2.6 Where children have more profound needs the integrated approach of the Centres would still aid early identification, but it would not always be possible for Centres to provide for these children on-site. However, every Centre, working with parents, would ensure that appropriate provision was found, and that the needs of the child and the family were met.

2.2.7 **All Early Years Centres would support the parents of children with special educational needs, so that they can understand how best to help their children.** The parents of children who have behavioural difficulties can often feel particularly isolated and unable to cope. The health, education and social services professionals at the Centre would all have a role in helping families to address their children's problems.

2.3 Health Care

2.3.1 Whatever other services the parents of young children choose to use, all parents welcome easy access to good healthcare. At the moment this is generally provided by the local GP and hospital. Our plans would not change this greatly, although we do propose to relocate these services.

2.3.2 **Rather than asking parents to make separate trips to the GP and hospital if their child needs a vaccination, or has an on-going health need, we would offer all routine children's healthcare services in the Early Years Centre.** This might mean a GP operating permanently out of the Centre, or possibly being based in the Centre on some days and in a normal surgery on others. All Early Years Centres would have specialist nurses on site, able to administer routine vaccinations and to offer advice to parents about their children's health and physical development. Health visitors would also be based there.

2.3.3 Specialists such as speech therapists or child psychologists would also spend time in Early Years Centres. At the moment some children with particular needs do not get the attention they should have early enough, because their parents were anxious about going to a specialist, or because it was a long journey to a different hospital or clinic. As far as possible, we want to see these specialists travelling to Early Years Centres rather than families going to clinics, so that they can see experts in an unthreatening environment.

2.3.4 The health provision in the Centres would also look to identify children with special educational needs early, so that those needs can be met more effectively. The sooner that children can be helped, the more successful they are likely to be during their pre-school year, and through primary school when they get there. However, wherever possible this should not remove children from mainstream provision, as the aim should always be to meet children's individual needs in the context of inclusive services.

2.4 Education

2.4.1 Children are learning from the moment they enter the world, and everything they experience is educative. There is no one

moment at which their primary need ceases to be “care” and starts to be “education”, but this false divide has dogged British policy towards children. It is important in this context to recognise that very young children learn best through play and exploration, and that successful early education should focus on enjoyment rather than on forcing children to acquire formal skills. It is also important to recognise that young children are as much in need of contact with highly trained teachers as older children, and benefit just as much from that contact.

2.4.2 For many children the move to “education” based provision rather than “care” based provision can be disruptive. Even where children already attend a nursery full-time, they may have to change rooms and be with different adults when they are receiving their half day of funded nursery education, as opposed to their wrap around daycare. Although many settings achieve more effective provision, there needs to be greater consistency across the sector so that there is the least disruption to children. In Scandinavian countries, which have a long record of excellent early years provision, this division is not made at all, and children receive a balanced mix of care and education in all settings.

2.4.3 This divide has been exacerbated in recent years by the emphasis on the acquisition of formal skills. Many parents feel that unless their child is starting to read, write and do basic arithmetic by the time they start school they will be left behind. The Foundation Stage curriculum for three to five year-olds, which puts a much greater emphasis on play and exploration, has helped to correct this misapprehension. However, the pressure on schools to prepare children for the SATs they take when they are seven means that there is still too great an emphasis in some schools and other settings on sitting children down and giving them formal instruction, rather than on allowing

children to be children. **Liberal Democrats would abolish national tests for seven year-olds.**

2.4.4 There is a lot of evidence - most recently in an OFSTED report comparing the primary education systems of Sweden, Denmark and England - that an early start to formal school can be counter-productive in the long term. Swedish children learn in a pre-school setting until they are seven, where the emphasis is on developing them as rounded people who are confident in their abilities and in themselves. By contrast English children are in statutory school by the time they are five, and the emphasis is far more on giving them basic skills in literacy and numeracy. Not surprisingly given this, English children are ahead of their Swedish counterparts in literacy and numeracy when they are seven - although they are much less confident speakers - but by the time they are fourteen they have fallen some way behind. The time taken in Sweden to develop children’s personalities, and to give them a thirst for learning by encouraging them to explore the world around them, pays dividends.

2.4.5 Therefore the education offered for children in Early Years Centres in the last year before they start formal school would be focused on developing their social and communication skills. Children with strong verbal skills who are used to exploring the world around them through play are likely to get the most out of school. Children who are already enjoying acquiring literacy and numeracy skills would be encouraged in that, but other children who are not ready for learning in this way would be given the time they need to develop. By being based in an Early Years Centre, or another linked setting of the parents’ choice, children would also benefit from having health and social services professionals involved with their development.

2.5 Social Services Support

2.5.1 Traditionally there has been a stigma attached to families needing support from social services. This has sometimes led to families who were in need of that support trying to evade the attention of their social worker, often to the detriment of the children. Where social services nurseries were established to support the most deprived children and their families, these had limited success.

2.5.2 This is partly because these nurseries were not able to provide the interaction between children of different backgrounds which the recent EPPE study has shown to be so important. Where children from under-privileged homes only play and learn with other children from similar homes, they tend not to develop so well. Where they meet children from more advantaged homes, however, who can act as role models and who come to the situation with a more positive and ambitious outlook, they develop much faster. There are reciprocal benefits for children from more advantaged homes.

2.5.3 Islington has shown this in practice, with a unique model of early years services. Islington has a very diverse population, with extremely wealthy families living side by side with some of the worst poverty in London. In the past Islington council had several social services nurseries, to cater for the many children who have special educational needs, or who are at risk in their home environment, or in care. This was not producing a good service, because the deprivation of the children was reinforced by their contact with each other and the stigma that was conferred on them. Now the system has changed so that the maintained nurseries in the Borough are open to all parents, but a third of the places are reserved for children who have been referred by social services, whose development is much improved as a

result. The other places are available at a graduated cost, dependent upon the parents' income. The proof of the success of the system is that many parents who could pay to send their children to a private day nursery, choose instead to pay to send them to an Islington council nursery because of the high quality service they receive there.

2.5.4 The system in Islington was designed to meet the needs of their unique demography, and is not applicable everywhere, but it shows that integrating social services and mainstream provision can be very successful, for all children. An Early Years Centre would aim to do this, so that children who need particular support, either full-time or for a certain period, can receive that free of charge, but without being segregated.

2.5.5 In addition to giving families access to the daycare and nursery education facilities, the social services aspect of Early Years Centres would involve having specialist social workers operating out of the Centre, so that families can visit their social worker in an unstigmatising environment. The wider work of these social workers would include advising families on child protection issues, and identifying families having problems so that either the social workers or another of the Early Years Centre professionals can offer appropriate support. This would include working with voluntary agencies in this field, such as Home-Start, and with children's charities.

2.6 Support for Families and Communities

2.6.1 The prime focus of our early years policy is always the child, and the needs of the child, but caring for a young child can put extreme strain on parents and families. Very often the best way to support a young child is to support the parents and wider family, because in most circumstances

children are best served by being with their parents, particularly if they can be helped to develop their parenting skills. This is one of the clear lessons that has been learnt from Sure Start, but rather than this support being the exception we want to make it available to all children and families.

2.6.2 Therefore a large part of the Early Years Centre's work would be to make contact with parents, and to work with them to provide relevant and useful services. At the most practical level, all Early Years Centres would have toy libraries so that parents can give their children a wide experience of different equipment without huge expense. This could particularly include a range of specialist equipment for children with special needs. There would be drop-in sessions where adults can bring their child to socialise with other children, giving them the opportunity to talk to other parents or trained staff. This can be a vital resource for carers who feel lonely and out of their depth.

2.6.3 Early Years Centres would have a role in educating parents and families, because the better parents understand their children, the better the future chances for their child. If local educational attainment is low, the Early Years Centre might run basic skills classes in literacy, numeracy or ICT, or link up with a local Further Education College which could provide these services. If unemployment is a problem locally, the Early Years Centre might cultivate links with an employment service, so that parents who come into the Centre with their child, but who might avoid visiting a Job Centre, can pick up information about job opportunities. In areas where a large proportion of families have English as an additional language, the Early Years Centre might run English classes.

2.6.4 These services work well for parents who are engaged in their child's development and the Centre, but they do nothing to draw in parents and families who are harder to reach. Therefore outreach workers in Early Years Centres would have a responsibility to

make contact with the hardest to reach families in their area, to try to provide relevant and helpful services to them, following the model of Sure Start units. This would not force parents to use services, but would act as an information service, explaining to parents the benefits to their children of the services, and would aim to ease any anxieties that may stop parents going to the Centre. If a parent still chose not to use the Centre, that would be their legitimate choice.

2.6.5 Outreach might mean Centres having mobile units similar to the ones we have proposed for rural areas, which go out to housing estates where there is low take-up of early years services. Equally, it might mean extending the work of health visitors who go into homes to see children, so that other services can be delivered on this more individual basis, or funding health visitors to stay in contact with certain families for longer.

2.6.6 Nurseries can have a wider role in local regeneration. Home-Start, a voluntary sector fore-runner of Sure Start, has shown how much parents can benefit from mutual support from other parents, and that they may be more receptive to advice from other parents than from professionals. Early Years Centres would aim to support initiatives such as this in an appropriate way. This might include giving Home-Start and other providers space within a Centre, or supporting the volunteers working on these projects. **The Centres should be a vehicle for promoting understanding of children throughout communities, in a way that is sensitive, responsive and which supports the informal and voluntary work which is already being done in many parts of the country.**

2.6.7 In addition, voluntary sector nurseries and playgroups, which are often staffed by parents who gain skills and qualifications through their work, can contribute to a general rise in skills and

aspirations throughout a community. Another way Centres could build local regeneration would be to give the community evening access to ICT facilities which are used by the children during the day. Centres could also offer space to after-school or holiday clubs for older children, so that parents do not find themselves with a four year-old in the Centre nursery who is cared for all the time, but an eight year-old who has started school and who needs other care during the holidays or after school. This would help parents who want to work slightly longer or more consistent hours, boosting the income of the family.

2.7 Links with Other Providers

2.7.1 It is not only parents and families who benefit from having access to the facilities of an Early Years Centre. Other early years providers, such as childminders, nannies and private and voluntary sector nurseries, would all gain from close links. Moreover, Early Years Centres would benefit from working in partnership with the private and voluntary sectors. There are complementary skills and experience in the maintained, private and voluntary sectors, which should be exploited for the benefit of all children.

2.7.2 A useful way of visualising this is a wheel, with one hub: the Early Years Centre, but many spokes: the other providers. Childminders and nannies might choose to use the Centre in many of the same ways as parents and families, by using the toy library

and the drop-in sessions. Other nurseries might tap into the expertise of the different professionals at the Centre. Certainly they would be able to call on the health and social services support at the Centre for a child at their own nursery.

2.7.3 Smaller providers such as community playgroups would also be able to link into the Early Years Centre. If they could not employ a teacher full-time themselves they could have access one day per week to a trained teacher employed by the Centre who was responsible for overseeing their work, and maintaining the quality of their service.

2.7.4 In addition to these direct links with other providers, all Early Years Centres would have a role in training the professionals of the future. Sections 3.1 and 3.2 address this issue in more depth, but all Early Years Centres would offer placements for those training to be early years professionals, whether in the health, education or social services fields.

2.7.5 Many health, education and social services professionals have experienced the benefits of some common training, enabling them to work together more effectively. **We envisage the Early Years Centres being a natural focus for such training in relation to young children in the future, particularly for managers who need to understand how to integrate the three services.**

A Professional Workforce

3.0.1 If we are to offer our children high quality early years provision, a more professional workforce is essential. This means more and better training throughout the sector, ensuring that the ratios of adults to children in every setting are appropriate for that setting and for the age of the children, and that these ratios reflect the experience and skills of the adults, creating a professional body for the early years sector and a rigorous system of inspection and registration.

3.0.2 Once children are five, and are in full-time school, we accept that they should be taught by trained, professional staff. There is a general perception, however, that younger children do not need this contact with people who have a deep understanding of their needs. This perception is despite the clear evidence of the importance of the early years, and of the improved progress of children who spend some of their time in contact with people who have studied the early years in depth. They will have a profound impact on the development of that child, and so it is important that as well as being trusted by the parents, they are able to support the child appropriately. **Moreover, Liberal Democrats believe that where the government offers a service, it has a duty to maintain high standards and to promote best practice.** In designing training, we need to understand the different roles of different sectors of the workforce, and we need to ensure that training is easy to access.

3.1 Training in Nurseries and Pre-Schools

3.1.1 At the moment the early years workforce is predominantly female, and often staff do not have many academic qualifications, although they may have completed vocational childcare training.

They are often very committed and hard-working, but studies such as the EPPE research have shown that children's development is improved when they are in contact with professionals who have a deep understanding of children's development and learning. Children will tend to enjoy learning most when they are given the freedom to explore ideas through play, but it takes highly skilled staff to enable this to happen. It is important that all members of staff understand how to observe children effectively.

3.1.2 There is therefore a difficult balance to strike. The involvement of women who often have had children themselves and have therefore become interested in childcare, who may not have done very well at school but who are prepared to work towards vocational qualifications is valuable. It is essential, however, that they work in a well-organised environment under the guidance of an experienced and well-qualified colleague. Leaders are needed who know about child development and how young children learn, as well as the early years curriculum, and who are skilled at working with other adults. The involvement of people who have studied the all-round development of children at a high level, who are skilled at designing activities which will stretch children by allowing them to discover things for themselves, and who can identify the stimulus that will open a door in the child's mind is vital.

3.1.3 It is therefore necessary to develop a specialised workforce. There need to be common qualifications so that there is one clear ladder taking people from sub-Level 2 to qualified teacher status or other relevant post-graduate qualifications, with appropriate training opportunities for all staff, whatever the stage of their career.

3.1.4 To enhance the specialist skills of the workforce, Liberal Democrats would introduce a new qualification of Qualified Early Years Teacher, which would be offered at the same level as current teaching qualifications (either a four year undergraduate degree or a single postgraduate year, or through employment-based routes). This would focus on the three strands of early years provision - health, education and social services - with the specialism in early education and a basic understanding of the other two strands and how to work with professionals from different backgrounds.

3.1.5 In order to level up the standard of care and early education across the sector, there will need to be an expansion in the number of early years teachers. Liberal Democrats advocated at the 2001 General Election that all trainee teachers should be given a pro rata salary for their training year, and this would apply to early years teachers. In addition, many primary schools are experiencing falling rolls, and so teachers who have been working with slightly older children might decide to move into the early years.

3.1.6 It is vital that this qualification is attractive to people from groups which have not traditionally worked in the early years. There are generally few men and people from ethnic minorities and other cultures in the workforce, and this can lead children to have unconscious assumptions about the type of people who work with young children that they carry with them into adulthood. Therefore Early Years Centres should try to involve people from these under-represented groups, and look at ways of encouraging such people to work towards qualifications. It may also increase the take-up of early years services amongst families from other cultures if their community is represented in the workforce. Having qualified teachers from a range of backgrounds is particularly valuable in raising the aspirations of all those in the local community as well as in improving relations between staff and families.

3.1.7 It is a fundamental aim of Liberal Democrat early years policy that there should be a level playing field, so that whatever provision parents choose they can be assured of a comparable level of quality, even though the styles of delivery may vary. This is particularly important in relation to staffing levels. At the moment every maintained nursery has to have at least one qualified teacher, but there is no similar requirement for private or voluntary sector providers. Therefore we propose that every early years setting should have at least one qualified early years teacher involved in their work, who can lead the planning of activities and advise on training for other staff.

3.1.8 A minimum standard would be that every nursery, however small, would have a qualified teacher attending the setting for a day every week. Where it is impractical for a setting to employ a teacher full-time, they could share a teacher employed by the Early Years Centre, or a group of private or voluntary sector nurseries could work together to employ someone who would move between the settings. The teacher would lead the planning and evaluation of the curriculum, design activities for the children, help other staff to develop their skills and maintain standards.

3.1.9 This regular involvement from a highly trained professional would help all nurseries to continue to improve their provision, and might encourage other staff to train further. This would be just as important for community playgroups and workplace crèches as for other providers, and we would aim to give them enough options to ensure that no provider had to close as a result of these requirements.

3.1.10 Maintained nursery classes attached to primary schools may be led by a head trained to teach much older children, and unaware of the specific needs of the early years sector. Therefore we would make it a requirement of anyone taking a headship in a school with an attached nursery that they

take a course in managing the early years, particularly looking at facilitating the dialogue between professionals of different backgrounds, most notably from the health and social services fields as well as education, and discerning the needs of very young children. It is also important that they are able to understand the ways young children learn, and the early years curriculum.

3.1.11 Managing provision in the early years involves very particular challenges. **We would require every head of an Early Years Centre to have at least a Level 5 qualification in one of the three strands of provision, and to have taken management courses relating to the other two strands.** By having this high level of expertise in every Centre, heads would be better able to support the development of all their staff. In maintained nursery schools the same requirements would apply except that every head would be a qualified teacher, rather than potentially being from the health or social services fields. In private or voluntary sector nurseries we would also require the head to be a qualified teacher, although if their teacher was shared with other settings, there would be a deputy head dealing with day to day issues, with at least an NVQ Level 4 in early years, and some management training.

3.1.12 It is not only those who are teachers who need good qualifications, however. **It is a Liberal Democrat aim that everyone working in the early years sector should have or should be working towards a relevant qualification, whether that be vocational or academic.** That might be an NVQ Level 2, enabling the person to work with children under the supervision of other staff, it might be an NVQ Level 3 enabling them to be in charge of certain activities, it might be a NVQ Level 4 enabling them to take on many responsibilities, or it might be a Level 5 qualification enabling them to supervise and manage a setting. At present only 50% of the staff in a private or

voluntary sector setting need to have a qualification at all.

3.1.13 It is vital that there should be a clear ladder linking these qualifications, so that someone starting out with a Level 2 can see how they could get to a Level 5 and manage a nursery. Whether or not many people are in a position to climb the ladder to that extent, they would certainly be encouraged to develop their Level 2 into a Level 3, benefiting themselves and the children. This would be supported by existing Liberal Democrat policies to give everyone an entitlement to Level 2 and Level 3 tuition throughout their lives.

3.1.14 In order to do this, Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is vital. Teachers in schools are required to undertake five days of in-service training each year, to help them refresh and improve their skills. **To increase the status and professionalism of the early years sector, Liberal Democrats would extend this to all staff in early years settings.** It can be difficult for private and voluntary sector nurseries to offer training because of the costs of bringing in supply staff to cover absence, or of closing the nursery for a day. However, by making it a statutory requirement that all registered nurseries must close to allow five training days each year, providers in the private and voluntary sectors would be relieved of pressure from parents to stay open. The benefits to children of working with staff who are continually updating and improving their skills are enormous, and most parents will quickly realise that the advantages outweigh the inconveniences.

3.2 Training for the Whole Sector

3.2.1 Childminders are now inspected at least once every two years, and have to prove at these inspections that they still meet the registration requirements. Once the registration process is optionally extended to

nannies, these same conditions would apply. However, on-going training still tends to be the preserve of nursery staff, because it is easier for them to take a day to go on a course. For a childminder, a day spent on a training course is a day without pay, and so many are understandably reluctant to do this beyond what is required for registration.

3.2.2 One way of helping childminders and nannies to improve their skills and to gain qualifications is to encourage them to link into an Early Years Centre. **All Centres will have a role in training other professionals, and so they could design courses specifically for childminders and nannies.** This could involve half day sessions with crèche facilities for the children, for example, or could be based around evening study. The links that many Centres will establish with local FE Colleges to improve the basic skills of parents could also be useful here, with Centres and Colleges working together to design programmes to support childminders' development whilst recognising the pressures of their work.

3.3 Individual Attention for Every Child

3.3.1 Wherever young children attend early years provision, it is vital that they receive enough individual attention and encouragement. Therefore it is crucial that the ratios of adults to children are high and appropriate to the age of the children and the skills of the adults.

3.3.2 It is also important for the professionalism of the workforce that staff are not expected to look after too many children at once, or their time will be spent almost exclusively ensuring the safety of the children, rather than engaging the children in conversation, designing relevant activities and supporting their development. Only where all staff feel that they are working at a high level and that their contribution is important to the progress of the children will their morale and professionalism increase.

3.3.3 **We propose no changes to the current ratios that apply in maintained nurseries, but we want to see these ratios applied across the whole sector** (see the Definitions), so that wherever children are they are assured of high levels of individual attention. It is vital that the ratios always reflect the qualifications and experience of the staff, as well as the age of the children. Some existing settings might find meeting these staffing levels difficult, but we believe that it is necessary for the well-being and development of children that all providers work towards these standards. They would act as a statutory minimum, but many settings, particularly Early Years Centres, might need to have more adults, partly because they would have staff with very different expertise, and partly because some staff might be engaged in training others.

3.4 A Professional Body

3.4.1 A professional body can act as a union, as an information service, can undertake research into matters of interest to the profession, can represent the views of the profession as a whole, and its very existence can create a sense of common purpose amongst its members. The professional body can also act as a self-regulator and can keep a register of those people who are licensed to practise the profession.

3.4.2 No such body exists for early years professionals. Teachers specialising in the early years are registered by the General Teaching Council, but the majority of early years staff, who have vocational qualifications, are not covered by it. This leads to a general sense that the early years workforce is not a valued profession, and creates an unnecessary division between those who are qualified teachers and those who have vocational qualifications.

3.4.3 This needs to change if we want to attract high calibre professionals to work throughout the early years field. **Liberal**

Democrats would establish a professional body to cover all early years professionals, from those in permanent employment working towards NVQ Level 2, to those with postgraduate qualifications, and covering all sectors of the workforce. It would work closely with the GTC, so that qualified teachers could be registered with both bodies without having to meet conflicting registration requirements. This would follow the example of the medical profession, where a nurse can be registered with the general Royal College of Nursing, and with a body which represents a particular specialism.

3.4.4 As a first task the professional body would keep a register of all those who are qualified to work in the early years field, so that employers and parents can check qualifications. It would also draw up a code of conduct, and would hold the power to strike people off the register, either temporarily or permanently, if they violated that code, whether or not their actions constituted a criminal offence. This would also give parents a benchmark against which to judge the quality of the provision they and their child experience.

3.5 Registration of Nannies

3.5.1 A final step towards creating a more professional workforce is to enable all those working formally with children to be registered, so that parents can satisfy themselves that they have the qualifications they claim to have and that they have been checked by the police. There is now a registration procedure for childminders and for all staff in nurseries and pre-schools. However, this is still not the case for nannies.

3.5.2 Since nannies, more than childminders, tend to work only for one family at a time, trying to regulate their work is difficult, because it interferes with a private contract made between the nanny and the family. However, many nannies operate through agencies, and good agencies already have vetting procedures, so that they know that anyone they recommend is of a high quality. **Liberal Democrats would introduce a voluntary registration procedure open to nannies who do not want to use an agency.** This gives parents the choice of using a registered nanny who has been checked, or an unregistered one at their own risk.

A Guarantee of Quality

4.0.1 Creating a more professional workforce is not a good enough guarantee of quality. Just because someone has registered, has undergone training, and has not been struck off the register of the professional body does not guarantee the quality of their provision. Therefore appropriate inspection procedures are necessary, which coupled with Quality Assurance procedures which promote improvements to provision, offer parents some assurance that their chosen provider is up to standard.

4.1 Inspections

4.1.1 Inspections for early years providers currently fall into several possible categories. OFSTED, the schools inspection body, now has responsibility for registering all daycare providers, but there is one form of inspection to look at the care offered, and another form of inspection to look at the funded nursery education. Although these are being brought together under OFSTED, they remain very different from the more detailed inspections of the Foundation Stage in maintained schools.

4.1.2 If we are to create a level playing field between different providers it is important that all inspections require certain minimum standards, such as levels of staff qualifications and adult:child ratios, and that all staff have access to appropriate training and have guidance on how best to develop their skills. Beyond that all inspections would be expected to consider both the welfare of the children and their developmental progress, although there should be flexibility to take account of the aims of different providers, such as the differences between nurseries and childminders.

4.1.3 Inspections for Early Years Centres would also have to take account of the

different services and professionals involved. At the moment OFSTED inspects integrated centres such as Children's Centres, but OFSTED teams may not have the training and experience to assess the quality of, for example, the social services functions. However, it is also important that the overall quality of service should be assessed.

4.1.4 **Therefore we advocate a system where OFSTED inspects every Centre once every four to six years, looking at the whole service, and assessing how well the different strands work together.** Members of the inspection team should be drawn from the different professions represented in the Centre, to ensure that all aspects of the Centre's work are judged fairly. **However, there would also be annual Local Authority visits.** These inspectors would have a specialist knowledge of one of the three strands, and would have experience of early years settings, as well as the effectiveness of work with parents, training for staff and adult education. They would build up a detailed knowledge of the Centres they visited, and would offer advice and support to Centres about how to act on the findings of their OFSTED inspection. The visits would aim to pick up problems a Centre was having without waiting for the OFSTED inspection, which could be as much as six years away, and would take the role of a critical friend. These inspectors would make submissions to the OFSTED team, but would not otherwise have a role in the OFSTED inspection.

4.2 Quality Assurance

4.2.1 Quality Assurance (QA) is a useful way of helping providers to raise standards. QA schemes accredit settings which evaluate their provision and help to improve standards in a wide range of areas which influence the quality of children's experiences. Most sectors have purpose-designed schemes which meet their main aims, but many Early

Years Development and Childcare Partnerships prefer to use their own schemes, which have been devised to apply across all local settings. This range of options, which vary in coverage and emphasis, mean there is little consistency across the country.

4.2.2 The government has relaxed its target of 40% of registered early years providers to have or be undertaking QA by 2004. However, Liberal Democrats want to see all early years providers offering the high standard of service and development which is supported by QA. **We would therefore require all registered providers to have or, if they are new, to be working towards harmonised QA accreditation by 2007.**

4.2.3 It is not only the quality of staff that contributes to the quality of the early years experience for a child, but also the quality of the premises and resources. Too many settings lack an outside play area, which is essential for physical development, or do not have sufficient play equipment. Others do not have exclusive use of their premises. **In order to address this problem Liberal Democrats believe that nurseries should be able to bid for funding to help them get exclusive premises or outdoor space.** It would be up to local authorities and local Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships to decide which nurseries in their area would get a share of the money. In dividing funds between areas, priority would be given to those areas where the current provision is poorest.

4.3 Teaching Guidelines

4.3.1 Teachers understand the needs of individual children, and have been trained to meet those needs and deliver a curriculum in the most effective way. Liberal Democrats trust teachers to teach. However this does not mean that there is no need for guidance. For older children we have recommended abolishing the National Curriculum and replacing it with a Minimum Curriculum Entitlement, which would guide teachers

about the knowledge or skills children should have gained at the end of courses or years, but would not prescribe how children should learn. This model is equally applicable to the early years.

4.3.2 The Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage helps early years practitioners working with three to five year-olds by laying out the learning goals children are expected to reach by the end of the reception year, basing learning on play and exploration. "Birth to Three Matters" offers a framework for practitioners working with younger children. Both sets of guidance make it clear that children develop at very different paces and rightly concentrate on how to encourage children to take the next steps in their development rather than forcing them on when they are not ready.

4.3.3 Liberal Democrats recognise the value of formative assessment and would use summaries of children's progress at the end of the Formative Stage, and later stages, for planning future learning provision rather than as the basis for value-added measures. However, it is vital that children in the early years are given the freedom to learn with enjoyment, exploration and play, and are allowed to investigate new skills and concepts for themselves. There needs to be a balance between teacher initiated activities and child initiated activities, which should be given equal weight. There are many ways of delivering a curriculum such as this, and Liberal Democrats will continue to review the latest research in order to give practitioners the most effective guidance.

An Affordable System

5.0.1 One of the problems which affects many parents at the moment is how to pay for early years care. Tax Credits are supposed to help working parents with the cost of registered provision, and the Nursery Education Grant provides all children over the age of three with half a day of nursery education for 33 weeks each year. Many parents are still left without provision, however, either because of a lack of places or because they can't afford it. Equally, other parents are trapped in work because they cannot afford to lose their salary even though they would like to stay at home and care for their child themselves.

5.0.2 Parents, employers and the state all have a role to play in caring for future generations, and in funding that care. Government has a duty to ensure that the balance is right and that the most important priorities are met.

5.1 Support for Working Parents

5.1.1 **Liberal Democrats support the right of parents to choose whether to continue working after the birth of their child.** We believe it should be possible for the mother or the father to give up paid work either part-time or completely, or for them both to continue in work and provide other care for their child.

5.1.2 Parents who choose to continue in paid work can currently apply for the Working Tax Credit to help with the costs of registered early years provision. This can be for a childminder or a maintained, private or voluntary sector nursery, but it cannot be for a nanny, as they are currently unregistered, nor for family members. Many parents complain that a family member cares for their child so that the child never has to be with strange adults, but that they pay their

relative and so deserve to be helped with those costs. However, we believe that the state should only support care which reaches the minimum standards we have outlined, and it is impossible to judge the standard of unregistered care.

5.1.3 The Tax Credit system is over-complicated and inflexible and places undue burdens on the tax system. Parents have to claim the money in six month blocks, so that a parent whose working hours change during that six months, and who therefore needs more childcare, gets no extra help until the six months are up. Equally, parents can register their child at a nursery, and claim the money, but withdraw their child straight away, so that they receive the benefit of the Tax Credit for six months whilst they are not paying nursery fees. In addition, by having a centralised system for which parents have to apply, there will always be people who do not understand the help that is on offer to them and do not claim the support they deserve. Finally, childcare costs in some parts of the country are much higher than in others, but the Tax Credit takes no account of this. Rather than having a centralised and bureaucratic system, it would make more sense for decisions about funding support to be taken more locally.

5.1.4 There is currently a small system operating in a few places which is a model for wider development. It is known as the Working Parents Playscheme, and attempts to involve parents, employers and the state. It works by an employer, of any size, designating a nursery as their "workplace nursery"; under our proposals this could be the Early Years Centre nursery or it could be another nursery. The nursery does not have to be geographically close to the employer, and nurseries can be workplace nurseries for more than one employer. Employees with children are then offered places at the nursery at subsidised rates, with the

employer paying the remaining fees direct to the nursery. These costs are tax deductible, because they are counted as part of the cost of employing parents. Nurseries often prefer this to the Tax Credit system because they have the employers' fees paid directly to them, giving them a reliable income that allows them to plan for the future. **Liberal Democrats would develop this model and encourage more employers to take part, with the aim of it replacing the Working Tax Credit as the staple means of providing parents with financial support.**

5.1.5 In some areas it may be appropriate to develop a system like Islington's, where a certain proportion of places in the Early Years Centre are allocated to different groups of parents. Under this system some places could be reserved for children referred by social services, but the majority of places would be community places, with parents who work or study as a priority, and the fees dependent upon the family's income. To allow the Centre to earn money to pay for this, some places could be "marketed", as happens in Islington, where high earners or parents from outside the area pay the market rate for a place.

5.1.6 This could be a model for funding the daycare places in Early Years Centres. The higher standard of care and education offered to children in an Early Years Centre might well attract higher earning parents even if they had to pay slightly more for a place. Equally, the availability of places for children whose parents are not able to pay the full fees would maintain our commitment to a universal service.

5.2 Support for Parents at Home

5.2.1 We entirely support parents who choose to give up paid work to care for their child full-time themselves. At the least, we want to give all parents a realistic option of taking leave around the time of their baby's

birth, so that they can build up a strong relationship with their child. Sweden, which has one of the best early years systems in the world, also has a strong parental leave entitlement, so that babies can spend nearly all of their first year at home with one of their parents.

5.2.2 By contrast, the UK has one of the worst parental leave entitlements in Europe. Mothers are entitled to 26 weeks ordinary maternity leave, with a further 26 weeks if they have been working for the same employer for more than two years. After the first six weeks this is paid at £100 per week or 90% of her salary, whichever is less, which leaves many mothers unable to afford to take more than the minimum leave period. Since April 2003 fathers have a right to paternity leave, but this is only two weeks and is also paid at 90% of their salary or £100 per week, whichever is less. If a father wants to care for his child for the whole of the first six months or year, therefore, he has to give up work completely, whereas a mother has the provisions of maternity leave.

5.2.3 **Liberal Democrats would equalise rights between mothers and fathers, to give families the flexibility they need to decide their own arrangements.** We propose a period of 26 weeks parental leave, to be taken during the first year of the child's life, paid in the same way as current maternity leave, which can be split between the mother and father as they choose. Beyond that they should be able to choose to take a further 26 weeks additional parental leave, on the same conditions as at present. Parents could therefore choose to split their leave so that the mother takes 13 weeks in a block at the time of the birth, with the father taking 1 week at that time. Then she could return to work, and he could take 12 weeks leave, bringing them up to their 26 week total, or they could take their 13 weeks at the same time and reduce the total length of time they could spend at home with their child, or one of them could take all of it in one block.

5.2.4 By ensuring that the total amount of time taken by parents is no more than the current levels, and that the payment levels in the short term are no higher, the overall burden on business should not be significantly increased. **After the first year of their child's life working parents would still be able to ask for flexible working as they can at present, but we would keep these provisions under review, to see whether in the future it is possible to do more to help parents with young children.**

5.3 The Role of Government

5.3.1 Government has an important role to play in ensuring that future generations receive a good start in life. It benefits the whole of society if our children grow up to be confident, rounded individuals with a sense of social responsibility. The building blocks for these characteristics are all laid well before a child reaches school, and that is why it is so important that this country develops a high quality, universally available early years system which supports parents and focuses on the child.

5.3.2 The costs to government are setting up and running the Early Years Centres, helping working parents with the costs of childcare, and altering the parental leave system to make it fairer and more flexible for families.

5.3.3 Early Years Centres will not be as expensive as they may first appear. Most of their functions are already occurring, but in other places, and the role of the Early Years Centre will be to pull those activities together to make them more efficient and accessible to parents, and to enable professionals to work more closely together. This should not result in hugely increased expenditure beyond setting up the Centres in the first place, although there will be ongoing costs associated with better adult:child ratios, better qualifications and

the higher salaries that flow from them, and more outreach work. The long-term benefits of high quality early years care, such as reduced rates of criminal activity and better educational attainment leading to better job prospects, far outweigh the short-term costs. Various research exercises such as High/Scope have suggested that \$1 invested in the early years can save as much as \$7 in the health and criminal justice systems later on.

5.3.4 The present government has already embarked on a programme of creating Children's Centres, which are similar in many ways to our proposed Early Years Centres. The House of Commons Library has estimated that to extend these to cover the 50% most deprived council wards in the country would cost £650m over two years on top of current planned government expenditure. Full costings of how Liberal Democrats would fund this expenditure will be laid out in our next General Election manifesto, but possible sources of funds are savings to general government budgets, the Child Trust Fund and income from parents and employers paying for daycare.

5.3.5 The Child Trust Fund has been proposed by the government to give every new born child £250, with further top-ups from the government at the ages of 5, 11 and 16, and extra amounts for the most deprived children. The fund will mature on the child's 18th birthday, and it will be up to them how to use it. The fund is intended to help 18 year-olds with the costs of university education - which we would reduce by scrapping tuition fees - and to get them into the habit of saving.

5.3.6 **Liberal Democrats would consider using this money to pay for Early Years Centres.** It would be more effective to spend that money on children early, rather than waiting until they are 18, when the money will probably have lost value through inflation and is just as likely to be spent on a car or a holiday as on education or

training. The House of Commons Library has estimated, based on government forecasts, that the total cost of the Fund will be £370m per year, which could be used to meet the £650m needed over two years to pay for Early Years Centres. This would be an on-going funding stream, and so could be used to finance the running costs of the Centres as well as the initial start-up costs.

5.3.7 The costs of changing the main form of financial support to working parents from the Tax Credit to the Working Parents Playscheme would be negligible, because the money would be more efficiently administered through the Playscheme than the Credit. The cost of offering more flexible parental leave, allowing parents to split time between them would again be negligible, since no more time or money would be taken or paid, there would just be greater flexibility for parents about how to take it.

Making it Happen

6.0.1 We have laid out the Liberal Democrat vision for early years support in this country. It is a vision where every child and family has an entitlement to an extensive range of services, but is able to choose which services to use to fit in with their needs and lifestyle. However, delivering this vision will take time. Many more daycare places are needed to meet demand, and wrap-around care is often disrupted by the division in the system between “care” and “education”.

6.0.2 Equally, there is insufficient support for parents. In Sure Start areas - currently only about one third of the 20% most deprived council wards in the country - there are outreach programmes, but these services are needed throughout the country. The availability of drop-in sessions and facilities such as toy libraries are very patchy, and many parents are left feeling isolated and out of their depth.

6.1 Building on Reality

6.1.1 The reality of the system at present is that there are a lot of very good early years centres, whether they are called Children’s Centres, Early Excellence Centres or just plain nurseries. The government has recently announced the first 32 settings that will be designated Children’s Centres, and aims to reach at least 650,000 pre-school children in the 20% most deprived council wards by 2006. This is a start, but it fails to take account of the needs of all children by concentrating on such a narrow proportion of the most disadvantaged, and it does not even guarantee to reach all the areas of greatest deprivation.

6.1.2 However, the Children’s Centres and many other nurseries will be of a standard to be converted into our vision of Early Years Centres, based upon the standard of their indoor and outdoor space, and the

possibilities for extending their provision to include health and social services. There will inevitably be a need for some new build, or conversion of other sites, but it will be possible to build on existing centres in many cases, or to use primary schools where falling rolls have left space unused. Liberal Democrat proposals to raise the start of primary school to six would also release space in schools which could be converted.

6.1.3 Crucially, a Liberal Democrat government would set the standards and objectives and leave it to local government to deliver the services in whatever way is best for their local community, taking into account their starting point.

6.1.4 We aim to have designated Early Years Centres to serve 50% of the council wards in England within one parliament, starting with the most deprived. This should meet the needs of all children living in poverty, but where there are children living in poverty who do not have an Early Years Centre by 2010, we will link them to a Centre and provide travel or outreach facilities if necessary. Over the following parliament we would aim to increase the coverage of Early Years Centres to 75% of wards, and finally to 100% of wards.

6.2 The Vision for 2020

6.2.1 It is crucial in implementing this ambitious vision that it does not become a political football, with governments from different parties moving targets to meet their own ends, rather than focusing on how to create the best start for all children. Progress has to be gradual, or it will not have time to take root. A realistic longer term project where all the elements work together effectively, will be better than a system which may be in place ten years earlier, but which is not sustainable.

6.2.2 So what would the system look like for Vicky, born in 2020 to Jack and Chloe? Firstly, her parents would be able to choose how to take their parental leave entitlement, so that Chloe could take 18 weeks, for example, and Jack 3 weeks at the time of her birth and a further 5 weeks after Chloe goes back to work. This enables Vicky to bond well with both her parents, and to enjoy nearly six months at home with them. Throughout this time they have benefited from the support of their local Early Years Centre, firstly through ante-natal classes, and subsequently through advice sessions with the midwife and early years educator. The Centre nurse who specialises in nutrition was able to answer their questions when Vicky started on solid food, to ensure that she received the right balance of nutrients. Vicky particularly enjoys going to the drop-in sessions where she can play with the Centre equipment and choose new toys from the toy library, and her parents can pick up valuable advice and support at the same time.

6.2.3 When both Jack and Chloe go back to work Vicky starts off being cared for by a childminder, who is taking a training course with the Early Years Centre. She goes to the Centre a lot, both with her childminder and her parents, and is used to the environment there, so that she is comfortable going there for her vaccinations.

6.2.4 Just before her second birthday Vicky's behaviour becomes more challenging, as she tests the boundaries that her parents are setting for her. They are able to talk to several of the professionals at the Early Years Centre about this, who offer them advice about how to deal with these challenges in a positive way. Chloe is also put in touch with an ICT course by the Centre because she had talked to the staff about needing to gain skills.

6.2.5 Around the time of her second birthday, and following advice from the Early Years Centre, she moves to a day nursery where she can learn to socialise with other

children. The nursery is headed by a qualified early years teacher, and also has another teacher coming in one day a week from the Early Years Centre to boost the provision available. She still goes on regular trips to the Early Years Centre, partly to use the toy library. One of the teachers at the day nursery wondered whether she might be having trouble with her hearing, and so after talking to her parents used the nursery's link with the Centre to make an appointment for her to see a specialist, allowing her to be observed and assessed in an environment where she was comfortable, without having to travel to a separate clinic.

6.2.6 When Vicky is four she moves to the Early Years Centre full-time. It is an easy transition because she knows several of the staff, and has made friends with some of the children during the drop-in play sessions. She stays at the Centre through the compulsory pre-school year, and moves to primary school just before her seventh birthday. By the time she gets there she is a confident speaker, and is able to articulate complex thoughts. She has a vivid imagination, and can play constructively with a wide range of other children. She was just starting to read and write and enjoy early mathematics during her pre-school year, but in the atmosphere of primary school she is quickly able to build on her emergent skills and knowledge, without losing her thirst for learning and exploring the world for herself.

6.2.7 This is just one example of how parents could choose to use the services on offer; there will also be parents in rural areas who access services in their village hall, parents who care for their children full-time and who go there occasionally, and parents who use the nursery facilities as soon as they go back to work. The flexibility which is offered to parents in this way really puts power in the hands of the users to design a solution which works for them and their family, backed up by a highly trained, professional and integrated workforce.

This paper has been approved for debate by the Federal Conference by the Federal Policy Committee under the terms of Article 5.4 of the Federal Constitution. Within the policy-making procedure of the Liberal Democrats, the Federal Party determines the policy of the Party in those areas which might reasonably be expected to fall within the remit of the federal institutions in the context of a federal United Kingdom. The Party in England, the Scottish Liberal Democrats and the Welsh Liberal Democrats and the Northern Ireland Local Party determine the policy of the Party on all other issues, except that any or all of them may confer this power upon the Federal Party in any specified area or areas. If approved by Conference, this paper will form the policy of the Federal Party, except in appropriate areas where any national party policy would take precedence.

Many of the policy papers published by the Liberal Democrats imply modifications to existing government public expenditure priorities. We recognise that it may not be possible to achieve all these proposals in the lifetime of one Parliament. We intend to publish a costings programme, setting out our priorities across all policy areas, closer to the next general election.

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Note: Membership of the Working Group should not be taken to indicate that every member necessarily agrees with every statement or every proposal in this Paper.

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