

The early years: what practitioners and policy makers need to know

Early years briefing

BRIEFING PAPER 3: THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION'S COMMUNICATION ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE [COM (2011) 66] (Published February 2011)

What is the Communication?

The Communication outlines the views of the European Commission on the significance of early childhood education and care and its relevance to European economic and social policy. It outlines a direction of travel for national governments and a framework for European collaboration. It was produced by the Commission as a policy statement to influence related activity, and for consideration by the Council of the European Union. The Council consists of relevant ministers from Member States: Tim Loughton, Conservative MP and minister for children and families at Westminster, represented the UK at the Council meeting on 20 May 2011.

Some aspects of education and employment are 'competencies' of the European Union, meaning the EU may pass legislation and spend money on these areas, but historically support for early childhood education and care came under broader equality and employment policies.

By formally adopting the conclusions of the Communication the Council agreed areas to take forward jointly, but there is no legal requirement to enact the recommendations. However it is an important step towards a pan-European agreement on what every government should (and should not) do in the years ahead. It also opens the door to using European funds to implement policies in line with the Communication and adopted conclusions. Thus the recommendations mark a significant development in taking seriously the needs and best interests of young children themselves, rather than as secondary aspects of adult employment policies.

The Communication should encourage an Open Method of Coordination across Europe on early childhood education and

care. This is the voluntary development by Member States of national and regional guidelines following endorsement of a broad policy, such as this Communication. Expert networks share and benchmark practice as a source of mutual support and to encourage adherence to policy guidelines. In the past, this has been a way to introduce policy areas that have later been adopted as EU competencies. That could, and should, be the case with early childhood education and care.

A more direct and immediate impact may be through the European Structural Funds allocated to each nation, including Scotland. Both the Communication and the Council conclusions recommend Structural Funds to support early childhood education and care policies. The next round of European Structural Funds will be allocated this autumn, although the exact amount has not yet been determined.

What are the main messages of the Communication and the conclusions?

There have been many in-depth studies of early childhood education and care, most notably *Starting Strong I and II* by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development,¹ and the most extensive EU study to date in *Working for Inclusion: the role of the early years workforce in addressing poverty and promoting social inclusion*.²

The Communication and Council conclusions are not detailed outlines of how early childhood education and care should be organised, but recommendations to which Member States should aspire.

They recognise:

- Increased investment is needed, including using "European Structural Funds in line with the goals of the

Europe 2020 strategy".

- The benefits of a more integrated approach nationally, regionally and locally, with collaboration of different policy sectors such as education, culture, social affairs, employment, health and justice.
- Providing high quality early childhood education and care is as important as ensuring availability and affordability.
- Equitable access to high quality, inclusive early childhood education and care is particularly important for children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds or children with disabilities or special educational needs.
- Integration of 'care' and 'education'. In many countries 'care' services have different (often less) funding, and are managed, inspected and staffed separately from young children's education.
- Increased involvement of, and support for, parents.
- Development and professionalisation of the workforce is needed, focusing on developing competencies, qualifications and working conditions; increasing the prestige of the profession; and bringing more men into the sector.
- Identification and support for children with learning difficulties or special educational needs within a mainstream learning environment.
- Promotion of European research and data collection to strengthen evidence for policymaking and programme delivery in early childhood education and care.

Ministers noted the Communication could contribute to the Europe 2020 strategy, in particular the objectives of reducing early school leaving and lifting 20 million people out of risk of poverty and social exclusion.

What is the significance of the Communication and

conclusions for Scotland?

European Ministers invite Member States to do three things:

- Analyse and evaluate early childhood education and care services locally, regionally and nationally in terms of availability, affordability and quality.
- Ensure measures aimed at providing generalised equitable access to early childhood education and care and reinforcing its quality.
- Invest in early childhood education and care as a long term growth-enhancing measure.

Availability of childcare places

The Communication restates the 2002 Barcelona targets of full day places in formal childcare for at least 90% of children aged between 3 and compulsory school age, and **at least** 33% of children under 3. Scotland, counted as part of the UK, has not met either of these, providing **full day** formal services for only 5% of children under 3 and 24% of children from 3 to compulsory school age (see Children in Europe³). The Communication adds the important requirement that these childcare places be "of a high quality". Attempts to increase the number of places in Scotland need to take this into account.

Integrated systems

Systems for early childhood education and care are divided between Westminster and devolved governments.

In Scotland, care and education are also divided between different systems, including initial education, inspection and funding.

Scotland continues to embed division through qualification, inspection and training systems.

Universal services

The Communication emphasises "generalised equitable access" services, based on research showing that target groups can be difficult to identify accurately; may stigmatise groups in unhelpful ways; and may lead to segregation at later stages of education. This is relevant currently with targeting a predictable option when facing budget cuts. Policy in Scotland must retain the universalist aims of the Scottish Government and CoSLA's Early Years Framework and ensure non-equitable access does not result from attempts to cut budgets.

Structural Funds

The Communication and conclusions specifically mention Structural Funds, inviting Member States to:

"... make efficient use of all relevant EU instruments in the fields of lifelong learning and research, as well as the European Structural Funds in line with the goals of the Europe 2020 strategy, in order to promote the above aims".

Scotland submitted a response to the

Europe 2020 strategy in May 2011 with reference to the child poverty strategy, of which the Early Years Framework is part.

European Structural Funds for 2007–2014 have already been allocated in Scotland: the Commission will decide on Structural Funds from 2014 this summer. The strands relevant for early childhood education and care are the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF): areas of underspend, to be clarified in October 2011, may provide opportunities for investment in Scottish early childhood education and care over the next 2 years under the Council's guidelines.

Longer term policy implications arise from the nature of Structural Funds, which require suitable matching funds from other bodies. Given Structural Funds could potentially support a more holistic view of early childhood education and care, matched funding may become more flexible and follow this European level policy lead.

A report, The Cost of Childcare, was published by Children in Scotland in February 2011. A more detailed report outlining the state of early childhood education and care will be published later this year. These Scotland-focused reports will aid policymakers to influence the Westminster Government's response and involvement at EU level.

If you have any comments about this briefing or suggestions about professional practice or strategy, then please contact Sara Collier at scollier@childreninscotland.org.uk or on 0131 222 2412.

This document is one in a series of Children in Scotland briefings that highlight issues, research or areas of policy that have a particular impact on children's early years and on the diverse workforce that provides services for this group. This work is supported through grants from Esmee Fairbairn Foundation and the Scottish Government's Child and Maternal Health Division.
Published by Children in Scotland – working for families and their children (SC003527)

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