

Key points: Children in Europe conference with Children in Scotland and Highland Council
8 June 2010, Inverness

A Sense of Place: environments, community and services for young children

*Place and community as well as families can shape children's lives, informing their sense of identity, social relationships and understanding of the world. The conference explored and debated some of the issues concerning this raised by Children in Europe's current issue, **A Sense of Place: environment, community and services for young children.***

Practitioners and policymakers from across the UK joined speakers from Italy, Norway and Belgium to look at a range of policy issues, including place-based, family and intergenerational learning and the potential offered by integrated area-wide approaches to social, educational and economic development.

Among the key points raised:

- Place-based learning, with its focus on 'connectedness' with communities, is as relevant to inner-city neighbourhoods as rural areas and has a key role to play both by itself and in association with family and intergenerational learning in delivering Curriculum for Excellence and Getting it Right for Every Child. It also has a significant contribution to make in delivering health. The conference was asked to reflect on "what schools are for" and challenged to consider if this should mean "helping children and young people to develop the attitudes that will lead them to contribute fully to their community". The possibility was raised of an *action learning network* with a practical focus on how to encourage a greater focus on place-based learning and realise its full potential.
- Urban as well as rural children can benefit from more outdoor learning, which has an important role to play in place-based learning and can help support children's right to a natural environment; provide a basis for learning and employment locally; and boost gender equality in the employment of men in the children's sector.
- There needs to be much closer cooperation and understanding between those responsible for rural development and development of models for young children's services. The farm kindergartens developed in a number of countries, including those in Norway and Italy described at the conference, offer an important means both of providing much needed, popular and stimulating

services for young children and offering farmers an opportunity to enhance their income. These connections need to be made and ways found of mobilising resources at a local level.

- The conference heard of work undertaken in Italy on strengthening links between towns and the surrounding countryside and the potential this offers both urban and rural areas in enabling better planning of urban food consumption, greater rural control over agriculture and other resources and the development of multifunctional agriculture and 'social farming'.
- In developing services – and a workforce – for rural areas more flexible models and multifunctionalism remain important with an ongoing need to explore ways in which this can be used. This includes flexible qualifications: the pedagogue model and strategies for developing the rural childcare workforce in rural Belgium both attracted considerable interest in this context in the workforce session. Family and intergenerational learning programmes were also of interest to delegates.
- 'Clustering' of services in various ways – as described in Portugal, where clustering has been used to bring together schools and other services at a local level, share some administrative functions and develop collective access to social support – were felt to offer an interesting development to the learning communities in Scotland of relevance to both urban and rural areas.
- There is a need to identify within the current system what is blocking progress and what needs to change in order to achieve more effective provision. A sense that issues are being revisited repeatedly, but not progressing, was expressed.
- A stronger lead needs to be taken by agencies such as the Care Commission in addressing what is seen as sometimes an overly risk averse culture and regulation.
- There is too wide a gap between rural and children's organisations. More encouragement needs to be given to supporting and sharing innovative models and practice. Information and opportunities for discussion and exchange of experience – such as those offered by the *Children in Europe* magazine and conference – were seen as an invaluable means of helping to raise aspirations and develop better understanding and collaboration in taking these issues forward.