

RT HON BEVERLEY HUGHES MP

US/UK EARLY YEARS CONFERENCE

KEYNOTE SPEECH, 10 JANUARY 2006

Introduction

Thank you

I am very pleased to be here in the wonderful city of New York. And I'm pleased to be talking about such an important issue. Let me thank all the conference organisers, PEW & CED. It's a great opportunity for my colleagues to share experiences and learn how we can go forward with this agenda.

I want to start with two simple but fundamental questions: why do the early years matter so much?

Why should governments get involved as they have in the UK?

I am far from complacent. But we can genuinely talk about a revolution in early years policy in the UK. Since 1997 the Government has invested at an unprecedented level of resource to achieve fundamental change.

While for decades the challenge of balancing work and family life has been one parents have had to face, it is only relatively recently that the importance of early years education and childcare have become a matter of considerable *political* debate. Indeed in the UK it can – as I know only too well sometimes – be highly controversial.

So why does it matter so much?

Let me start with the core motivation for me and the UK government – it's about a vision of a more socially just and fair society. It springs from our core political values.

For most people the idea that a child's life chances are determined not by their own abilities or efforts, but by who their parents were or where they happen to live, is unfair. This is certainly what I believe. I want to see every child able to dream, aspire and achieve irrespective of who their parents are.

Yet we've had to face an uncomfortable truth – in the UK in recent decades who your parents are seems to have become more important, not less, in determining life chances. Responding to this challenge will take time – in some cases decades. And any strategy must also be multi faceted. In the UK it has meant:

- tackling labour market discrimination;
- increasing family incomes - we have pledged to abolish child

poverty by 2020 and ...

- ... relentlessly pushing up educational standards. Standards for all children, but particularly the most disadvantaged.

But high quality early years provision has to be a cornerstone of that reform. It's needed to reinforce and strengthen other changes – it is at the heart of forging a fairer society.

Its large and growing body of research confirms this. Work which merits particular attention is that of Leon Feinstein from the University of London's Institute of Education. It tracks the performance of bright and below average kids from when they are toddlers. The bright but poor 2 year old starts to fall behind his or her less talented, but better off, contemporary before they even start primary school which in the UK is 5 years old. Potential just being thrown away.

What's more, a large and growing body of evidence shows the situation is far from hopeless. We know high quality early years provision can improve the life chances of all children, irrespective of background. And crucially it can help the disadvantaged and vulnerable children most. I'm drawing here on the UK Effective Provision of Pre-School Education study – EPPE. This authoritative study shows that just two years of high quality pre-school education can lead to the development of a child being four to six months ahead of those who had no pre-school experience of group care outside their home.

What is more, those who had begun their pre-school education not

at 3, but when they were 2, benefited even more. At the start of primary school, they were 10 months ahead of contemporaries who had not had pre-school provision.

So without a coherent and comprehensive approach to early years, any talk, any political aspirations, of greater equality of opportunity or social mobility is nothing more than warm words.

But even if someone didn't buy the social justice case and shrugged their shoulders at all this, there are other – more instrumental – arguments; and we've heard some of those today.

First, any country wishing to compete in the modern world can't afford to ignore the potential of any of its people. So low or poor levels of literacy are not just a social problem – they are an economic problem. The toddlers and babies of today will begin their adult lives in a very different world from our own.

Just think - if we are asking ourselves how the West will respond to the incredible growth of China and India now, then what will the situation be in 20 years time? Not one, I wager, where we can afford to have wasted a scrap of talent.

Second, we also know that prevention is better than cure. The costs of failure are very significant. It costs society in the form of anti-social behaviour and poor health and other problems. And it costs government – the tax payers – money. Effective early years provision is also about helping families break out of the cycle of poverty and worklessness. It is all about preventing problems and

building up children's and their family's capacity to cope and excel.

And third, there are the more immediate labour market benefits. Across the western world more and more women work. This is emphatically to be welcomed – and encouraged. We know work is the best route out of poverty and it is often how women gain a greater sense of independence. But working, for many, is not always possible without childcare.

Mothers – and indeed fathers – now demand better support to take difficult decisions about balancing home and work life. They want flexible arrangements and greater parental leave. And they rightly demand affordable, available early years provision that guarantees a safe and high quality positive learning environment for their child. For us in the UK, it's imperative that what we want to achieve for young children has to fit with the needs of working parents. Otherwise, at the very least, disadvantaged kids in particular either will not take up early education or spend at least some of the time in poor quality alternative care.

In the UK this is a demand we ignore at our peril.

The UK response

So the case for high quality universal early years provision is one grounded in values of fairness and opportunity. But it is also emphatically one based on more pragmatic economic foundations.

So, let me now say a little about the policy these debates has led to in the UK.

Though we still fall some way short of the levels of spending in some Scandinavian or continental European countries, the pace of the increase in investment is significant and impressive. We have invested over £17 billion in these services since 1997. In 2004/5 we spent over three times more than the annual spend we inherited in 1997/98. And this has resulted in tangible improvements for children and families:

- First, there is now a guaranteed free part-time nursery education place for every three and four year old. When I say this is universal, that's what I mean. The vast majority of parents are taking up this offer for their children – virtually all 4 year olds and about 96% of 3 year olds. This was the first strand in our approach of, if you like, progressive universalism: universal provision within which there is a targeted focus on disadvantaged children, and I very much endorse the point made by Dave Lawrence.
- Second, we have 90% more registered childcare than we did 8 years ago. This has helped us to increase the employment rates of lone parents significantly, in particular.
- And third the pioneering, multi-agency Sure Start Programmes - offering a range of early learning, health and family support to children in disadvantaged areas - have been established in many of our most disadvantaged

communities now.

- Finally alongside those measures we are progressively extending paid parental leave and flexible working arrangements.

Just over a year ago now we published a Ten Year Strategy for Childcare. This set out ambitious plans to build on this record, and ensure that both children and parents - whatever their background - should have access to high quality services tailored flexibly according to their needs and circumstances.

Its two centre piece goals that we want to achieve by 2010:

- First, there will be 3,500 Sure Start Children's Centres throughout the country. We have learnt important lessons from early Sure Start and have solid foundations to build on. These Sure Start Children's Centres will not be restricted to deprived areas; there will be one in every community in the country, with the heaviest investment targeted in disadvantaged areas.
- Secondly – extended schools. Every primary and secondary school will provide access by 2010 to a range of out of school hours activities. This must include a guaranteed childcare place for all children aged 3 to 14 between 8am and 6pm each weekday, all year round.

- Thirdly our Childcare Bill, now going through parliament, is giving statutory force to these commitments. For the first time, it brings integrated early education and care into the mainstream of our modern welfare state. It is the first UK government Bill dedicated to childcare and early education.

But it is not about creating a centralised state-run service. Being best placed not only to understand the needs of local communities, but also to co-ordinate a diverse market of providers, local government will have a key strategic role working with parents and voluntary and independent providers to make this a reality.

That is why the Childcare Bill places a duty on local authorities to improve the outcomes of all children under 5. Specifically whilst meeting that objective they must also work to reduce inequalities between different groups of children and take all steps to ensure there is sufficient childcare. And it is why they will also be required to take all reasonable steps possible to ensure there is sufficient childcare to meet the needs of their local communities, in particular families on low incomes and with disabled children.

The third major objective of the Bill is to bring together different regulatory frameworks for the under 5s into one coherent system. So where we currently have one regulatory framework for childcare and another for early education and learning, in the future these will be brought together. This will be the Early Years Foundation Stage – from birth through to five. Plus every setting in every sector will have to meet standards.

This is a bold vision. It is about nothing less than embedding the state's role in ensuring adequate, affordable and quality childcare and early education for its citizens. And we know that we have an enormous delivery challenge. There are numerous issues we must still grapple with.

For me the challenges which exercise me most are all about quality. Much of what we aspire to achieve hinges on ensuring quality. It is only with high quality that early year's provision can be that engine for social mobility. And it is only with high quality that early year's provision will be truly preventative. So just let me finish by talking a little about two issues we will have to face if we are to deliver high quality.

Integration

The first is the challenge of integration. Evidence shows that bringing together care and learning will help all children, but particularly, the most disadvantaged.

It is why we have created the Early Years Foundation Stage I mentioned earlier and – related to this – why we are integrating the inspection of early years settings.

But we are also seeking to bring together a full range of different services. We have a strong base of services – especially our universal health system. But services are still too poorly joined up – fail to add the value to each other that they should – and are

often difficult for parents to navigate. Whilst many UK practitioners are successfully pioneering an increasingly integrated approach to early years services, we need to go much further.

That's why we are breaking down the traditional professional silos between health, care and education; between the interests of parents and the interests of children; and integrating services to heighten their accessibility.

The Right Workforce

The second challenge I'd like to mention regards the workforce. This is truly crucial to quality.

Looking across the children's workforce: whilst we recognise the importance of distinct professional expertise, the total of what can be achieved by drawing professionals together is much more than the sum of the parts. We have worked hard to strengthen more coherent joint working by different agencies.

So, for example, we are proposing an integrated framework of qualifications for the children's workforce. Rather than a plethora of different qualifications and few opportunities for progression between different parts of the workforce, there will be growing coherence.

Specifically on childcare and early education we are taking action significantly to improve skill levels. We are working towards having a graduate level leader in every Children's Centre by 2010,

and in everywhere offering full daycare setting by 2015. And we are looking to increase the skills of the non-graduate workforce too. All because this is the route to improving the quality of care and children's life chances. We have achieved much but again I know we must continue to push and aim higher.

We are looking, for example, at how we can increase diversity in the labour force. In particular how can we increase the proportion of men in the sector? We need to draw on as wide a pool of talent as possible to ensure that children continue to get the best quality care and education.

Conclusion

So it's a huge and sometimes daunting agenda.

But those of you here from the UK will know how far we have come in recent years. You will know how much *can* be achieved with a fair political wind. And as we grapple with many difficult issues I know how important seeking to learn lessons from around the world will continue to be. I have learnt much from this visit already, including excellent presentations from the seminar today. I just hope that those of you from the United States can learn from us as well.

I hope that we can continue to talk about how to achieve our vision. One of high quality early years provision which is both essential for economic competitiveness and grounded in values of

fairness and opportunity.

Thank you

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