

Pre-school Learning Alliance

Strategy Unit's report: Improving the life chances of disabled people

The Pre-school Learning Alliance (Alliance) welcomes the Strategy Unit's report on improving life chances of disabled people. The Alliance supports strategic measures to remove barriers and effectively include people with disabilities within society.

Our response to the report concentrates on the issues relevant to the remit of the early years sector of our organisation:

- Early years and family

The views of our members have been used to support our comments in this response.

Early years and family support

5.1

The report acknowledges the issues for families of children living in poverty. We are pleased that the report focuses on this issue for children and families from minority ethnic families. However, reference to the low take up of benefits such as Disability Living Allowance(DLA) for such families does not take into account that applications for this and other allowances are often complex and difficult to complete without support. Simply providing an interpreter would not be sufficient enough to help complete the DDA application. The applicant requires expert guidance to complete the application effectively. This expert guidance should then be translated into spoken and written language relevant to the individual translation needs of the applicant.

5.2

The ability to access 'ordinary' lives are identified as important. We agree that the individualised budget approach is essential in providing choice to children and families if used to access equipment, childcare, transport, support services and housing.

This section of the report highlights specific issues for families when accessing early education, play and childcare. Access to affordable childcare and early education is an issue but so are attitudinal barriers towards disability within society. The Disability Discrimination Act and the Special Educational Needs & Disability Act helped promote a more positive perception of disabled people. However, we believe that attitudinal barriers still remain the biggest obstruction to inclusion. Our organisation provides comprehensive training for the early years sector, which tackles all the issues now generally recognised as barriers to inclusion.

The Alliance is disappointed that the Unit chose a maintained nursery school as the only example of good practice in this section. Another example from a non-maintained early education setting would have proved a more balanced view. Maintained nurseries have been compliant with relevant legislation since 2002, whereas, the non-maintained pre-school sector has had regard for disability legislation since 1996 (DDA). The non-maintained sector have accrued many examples of good practice, which could also be used.

5.3

In accordance with duties outlined in part 3 of the Disability Discrimination Act our member settings are working towards improving access to facilities for disabled users with the use of access audits and plans.

The report specifically highlighted the lack of specialist equipment for disabled children. Early years staff report that funding for equipment and resources is often complicated and patchy. However, the lack of equipment is not the only issue. We are especially concerned that parents often bring in much needed

equipment to early year settings in order to cover the shortfall in available resources, or specialist guidance. Although this enables children to access play and education opportunities it is highly unsuitable and unsafe. We advise our members on systems for obtaining equipment and referral onto relevant professionals. However, members report that despite using the appropriate systems the process is held up because of the shortage of relevant health professional to provide support for children/ staff guidance and training/ and information on obtaining or using equipment.

5.4

As indicated above the Alliance regards the lack of specialist professionals as an issue within children's services. This lack of expertise can bring the whole inclusion process to a halt for many children and their families. An early years practitioner can often undertake speech and language activities with a child, as many are play based. However, staff are unable to undertake other specific actions, as a relevant specialist should only do these. Including children with complex physical impairments requires precise measuring, positioning and handling of children especially with regard to using equipment. Unless qualified in this field, practitioners are unable to undertake this role. We consider that the national shortfall in professions such as occupational therapy appears to be critical in some areas of the UK. This shortage is causing frustration within the early year sector because it hinders the good work we are doing around improving inclusion for all children.

The report identifies a lack of joined-up working and strategic planning on the ground, leading to gaps in service provision. Poor cross agency working can be an issue within the early years sector. Lack of communication, misinterpretation of each other's roles and 'ownership' of clients can cause problems within the statutory and voluntary sector. In order to work towards an effective professional partnership, disciplines need to learn to work together in a coordinated and collaborative manner. We believe that the transdisciplinary model is the most effective model because it looks at the needs of the child and the whole family. However, current legislation and

guidance uses the term interagency. Working towards a transdisciplinary/
transagency model will provide more effective practice across disciplines.

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