

Will it work?

The long-awaited workforce strategy needs to tackle staff recruitment, retention and underpin quality provision. Is it the blueprint the sector needs? asks *Charlotte Goddard*



When the early years workforce strategy was finally released on 3 March, 14 months after it was first announced, it was greeted with a sigh of relief. It contained the decision to scrap the need for Level 3-qualified staff to hold GCSEs in English and maths – a response to a vigorous campaign from across the sector since the requirement was introduced in 2014.

‘The main positive impact of the strategy for us is on GCSE requirements, and the introduction of functional skills, both as training providers and as employers,’ says Julia Mason, director of operations at nursery chain Children 1st. ‘When the GCSE requirement was in place we had a much smaller pool of candidates to choose from.’

However, the removal of the GCSE requirement, with functional skills brought in as an alternative, is only one aspect of the document. The sec-

tor has now had time to mull over what else it contains – and, just as importantly, what is missing. ‘The question is, does the document hold up as a strategy or was it just a vehicle to get the announcement about GCSEs out?’ asks Michael Freeston, director of quality improvement at the Pre-School Learning Alliance. ‘It contains a good analysis of the challenges the sector faces, but do the actions which the government says it will take add up to a strategy?’

DÉJÀ VU?

In some ways, says Mr Freeston, it seems that not much has changed in the discussion about workforce and qualifications since 2006, when the Government’s Children’s Workforce Strategy set out strategic aims including recruiting and retaining more people in the children’s workforce, improving skills, and making every early years setting graduate-led. Professor Cathy Nutbrown raised many of the same issues in her

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Government-commissioned review of early education and childcare qualifications in 2012. Her recommendations, only five of which were accepted in full, included a gradual move to having only Level 3 practitioners and above count in child/staff ratios; Level 2 English and maths as entry requirements for Level 3 courses; and a new early years specialist route to Qualified Teacher Status covering birth to seven-year-olds.

The Government’s response a year later included the introduction of the role of Early Years Teacher, although an EYT does not have true parity with a QTS in salary, training and opportunities, despite Government assurances that the two statuses were equivalent because the entry requirements are the same. Following a drop in the number of EYTs, the new strategy marks a shift in thought, with the proposal to allow Early Years Teachers to teach in primary schools, but there are concerns that this could impact negatively on early years settings, ➤



with schools potentially offering better salaries and conditions. 'We struggle to retain our early years professionals and Early Years Teachers, and this will make that situation worse,' says Stella Ziolkowski, director of quality and workforce development at the National Day Nurseries Association.

The current strategy does not repeat earlier aspirations to have all provision led by an early years graduate. 'This may be a tacit acceptance of the fact that the cost of employing graduates is beyond the budgets of many providers, particularly those operating in disadvantaged areas,' says Mr Freeston.

Julie Hyde, associate director at Cache, which is part of awarding organisation NCFE, welcomes the

move to create more effective Level 2 qualifications. 'It is a good thing that the Government recognises the value of Level 2 practitioners because there has been quite a drive in the past to create a Level 3 workforce, and that has been a challenge for the sector to afford,' she says. 'Everyone would love to employ only Level 3 staff, but that is untenable.'

NEW WORLD

Although many of the same workforce development issues as 11 years ago are still being hashed out, in other ways the sector is quite different. 'Seventy-seven per cent of the workforce is now Level 3-qualified, and 91 per cent of settings are Good and Outstanding, so notwithstand-

'Everyone would love to employ only Level 3 staff, but that is untenable'

ing all workforce issues, we have come a long way as a sector,' says Mr Freeston. 'The challenge will lie in delivering the strategy to align with the progress the sector has made.' According to the earliest available Department for Education data, 51 per cent of all staff were Level 3-qualified in 2009.

The financial landscape also looks very different, with increases in business rates and the minimum wage, and the roll-out of the 30 hours with its attendant funding discrepancies hitting settings hard.

The new strategy cites the 30 hours as one of the reasons why the sector needs recruitment support. 'If there is anything missing, it is where the funding for training is going to come from – the private sector does not get a lot of help there,' says Cathy Griffin, director at Children 1st. 'The 30 hours will be a challenge to the whole sector: it relies on us having qualified staff, but if we don't have the income, we can't pay staff to deliver it. While the strategy is good, it is not covering everything it needs to on the financial side.'

EARLY YEARS WORKFORCE STRATEGY: KEY POINTS

The strategy sets out how the Government will 'remove barriers to attracting, retaining and developing' the workforce.

Level 2 – the Government, along with the wider sector, will develop criteria for Level 2 childcare qualifications.

Level 3 – GCSE rule reversal in place (since April 2017).

Specialist graduates – consult on proposal to allow those with EYTS and EYPS to lead nursery and Reception classes in maintained schools.

Careers advice – promote childcare as an employment option through a variety of means.

Quality of training – conduct training needs analysis for early years tutors and trial an exchange programme for FE tutors.

Diversity of the workforce – set up a task group to look at gender diversity.

Developing career pathways and the Skills Plan – establish a panel of professionals, which will include early years employers, to advise on the

development of a new 'childcare and education' route.

Continuous professional development – develop an online portal of existing CPD, and new training on SEND, speech and language and business management.

Supporting children with SEND – provide training grants and develop a 'SEND in early years' qualification.

Sector-led quality improvement – provide funding to encourage schools to share best practice.

‘Cathy Nutbrown talked about quality of training, further education, improving ongoing personal development, and the strategy is definitely in line with what she was saying,’ says Ms Ziolkowski. ‘It is a good thing overall – my concern is that there needs to be some funding to support it.’

MORE UNCERTAINTY

The strategy talks of working with the sector to implement proposals such as the development of new qualifications, and says there will be a series of events for employers and stakeholders to discuss next steps. However, the election means things went very quiet on the Government side. ‘There has been nothing in terms of stakeholder events,’ says Ms Ziolkowski. ‘It should be about sitting around a table with employers and discussing how it is all going to pan out, and building the strategy around the skillset employers want, not necessarily what the DfE wants.’

Continuing professional development is an important aspect of the strategy for managers (see box). Professor Chris Pascal, at the Centre for Research in Early Childhood, says, ‘That’s where there is a big challenge. A lot of CPD was provided by local authority teams, and in most cases those teams have gone. But the strategy does not say how CPD is going to be provided, by whom, and how will it be funded.’

Professor Pascal is concerned that in an attempt to deliver accessible and sustainable CPD, online delivery will be at the forefront. ‘The kind of CPD that makes a difference is based on improvement and development in the workplace, where you can get engaged in real-life improvement strategies,’ she says.

The strategy does not take into account the post-Brexit world, says Professor Pascal. ‘A lot of early years people were learning through visits to Europe, as part of a workforce programme that developed practice through EU projects, which they will no longer be able to access,’ she says. ‘If we are talking about developing a world-class service, and I hope that we are, you can’t just sit in a cocoon. Where is our international strategy, promoting fantastic British practice abroad and learning from other countries?’

While many aspects of the workforce strategy are welcome, its lack of a clear timeline and operational plan means opinions on its workability are hard to form. ‘We are in a very fluid time,’ says Ms Hyde. ‘Some of these proposals are aspirational, but that is not to say having them on there is wrong. However, I am not sure the strategy is fully formed – I’d like to think we are constantly striving for the best outcomes for children and families, and sometimes it is a challenge to balance excellent quality care and financial stability.’ ■



Better careers advice in schools is one aim of the Workforce Strategy

Timeline

June 2012

Publication of Professor Cathy Nutbrown’s Government-commissioned review of early education and childcare qualifications.

January 2013

The Government publishes *More Great Childcare*, setting out plans to improve early years qualifications by introducing tougher entry requirements and bringing in the role of Early Years Teacher and Early Years Educator. Just five of Professor Nutbrown’s 19 recommendations were fully accepted.

November 2015

Education and childcare minister Sam Gyimah announces the development of an early years workforce strategy.

November 2016

The Government consults on literacy and numeracy requirements for Level 3 staff.

March 2017

The *Early Years Workforce Strategy* is published.

2017

The strategy says the Government will review the early years initial teacher training routes during 2017.

September 2017

The Government will publish guidance for local authorities and early years providers on how an inclusion fund and a targeted disability access fund can be used to support workforce development and SEND specialism.

December 2017

A group of early years sector stakeholders will report to the DfE on factors influencing the recruitment of men into childcare and present possible solutions.

2018

During this year the Government and stakeholders will develop a qualification for early years staff who want to specialise in SEND.

March 2018

Conclusion of a feasibility study into developing a programme to grow the graduate workforce in disadvantaged areas.

September 2019

The launch of support for early years tutors to keep practice relevant and effective.