



**Head Office**

City Reach  
5 Greenwich View Place  
London E14 9NN

Tel: 020 7512 2112  
Fax: 020 7512 2010  
info@4Children.org.uk  
www.4Children.org.uk

Monday 9<sup>th</sup> June 2014

Dear Sir/Madam,

**Re: Parliamentary Inquiry into Childcare for Disabled Children**

4Children welcomes the opportunity to submit written evidence to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Childcare for Disabled Children.

4Children is the national charity all about children and families. We have spearheaded a joined-up, integrated approach to children's services and work with a wide range of partners around the country to ensure children and families have access to the services and support they need in their communities. We run Children's Centres as well as family and youth services across Britain. We develop, influence and shape national policy on all aspects of the lives of children, young people and families.

The provision of childcare for disabled children represents an issue of fundamental importance to many families across the country, and as the consultation document points out it remains a significant and persistent problem despite a major increase in childcare places as a whole over the last 15 years. 4Children is highly supportive of initiatives to address this gap, and recognises that doing so could yield a number of substantial benefits for disabled children and their families, such as enabling parents to return to work and supporting disabled children's attainment at school.

In this brief response, we will highlight the need for more appropriate premises and training to address the needs of disabled children, as well as a particular gap that exists around childcare provision during summer holidays and support during school holiday periods. We will also discuss the role that Community Childcare Hubs and Childminder agencies could prospectively play in supporting provision for disabled children, and the opportunities that these wider developments in the sector might bring.

**The need for appropriate premises, training and summer holiday provision**

The consultation document rightly highlights the enormous challenges that can be faced by the parents of disabled children when it comes to accessing childcare, stating:

finding appropriate, good quality childcare for a disabled child can be extremely difficult, and in some cases, impossible. These problems increase as children get older. While their non-disabled peers attend less structured activities around the school day and during school holidays, disabled children continue to need childcare for longer.<sup>1</sup>

We would support this analysis entirely, and believe that directing further investment and resource towards provision for disabled children is entirely justified, given how restricted their parents' childcare options are. In particular, we feel the lack of properly equipped premises can often be a barrier to providing appropriate care for disabled children, and that there is a very real case for capital funding to be made available to providers to enable them to adapt their sites to care more effectively for more disabled children.

Training is another key issue, and the consultation recognises that there are the implications from the Nutbrown Review in this area.<sup>2</sup> Given the additional needs of disabled children, the provision of high quality childcare will require well trained staff with a clear understanding of what disability means and how specialist care should be provided. Indeed, this is particularly important when supporting children with developmental conditions such as autism, where a child's needs might not be immediately obvious.

We would also highlight the lack of provision during school holidays as being a particularly significant issue, as even in circumstances where schools are able to run extended days to provide support for a disabled child, the school holidays will be a period when the need for appropriate care will be especially acute. Consideration therefore needs to be given to how this specific gap can be filled, and within this it may also be worth examining how access to holiday clubs and activities can be improved, as these could potentially provide alternative options to formal childcare if appropriately structured.

A number of issues therefore need to be addressed if we are to successfully enhance the provision of childcare for disabled children, and as previously stated in some cases this will demand additional investment, which in our view is entirely justified. However, it is also important to reflect on how wider developments within the childcare sector might provide levers through which provision can be improved moving forward, and it is to this issue that we now turn in considering the prospective role of Community Childcare Hubs and Childminder agencies.

### **Community Childcare Hubs and Childminder agencies**

Community Childcare Hubs (a model of co-ordinated childcare provision developed specifically by 4Children) and Childminder agencies (which were legislatively enabled by

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<sup>1</sup> *A Parliamentary Inquiry into childcare for disabled children*, p. 1

<sup>2</sup> *A Parliamentary Inquiry into childcare for disabled children*, p. 6

the Children and Families Act 2014) represent two important developments in the infrastructure which can underpin childcare provision, and it is useful to consider the contribution that each of these could make to improving the provision of childcare for disabled children.

Community Childcare Hubs are a model developed by 4Children, currently being trialled around the country, that can help to address these concerns. Hubs work with Children's Centres, schools and other existing local service providers to provide blended, high quality and flexible childcare to meet the rising demands of today's parents, and encompass various types of childcare settings, including childminders and nurseries.

The Hubs project brings together early years providers and schools, to enhance learning and development to improve the outcomes of all children no matter what early years provider they attend. Each of the Hubs is working closely with its providers to improve quality through sharing best practices, targeted Continued Professional Development (CPD) and training.

Therefore, the Hub model would enable information about available provision for disabled children to be co-ordinated and disseminated to parents in a particular area (especially significant given that, as the consultation points out, only 29% of parents said they found it easy to find out about providers that could cater for their child's disability),<sup>3</sup> as well as potentially being a mechanism for building capacity around provision for disabled children within the sector through training, CPD and best practice.

Separately, Childminder agencies have now been legally enabled, and as agencies develop it will be worth considering whether they provide a lever for improving support for disabled children. We believe that as agencies are established, there is the potential for more 'specialised' agencies to emerge providing specific support and services for particular groups, such as children with special educational needs, and that it will therefore be important to take advantage of the opportunities offered by this process to support provision for disabled children.

In summary therefore, we believe that the provision of childcare for disabled children is a highly important issue, and that additional investment and resource in this area is very much justified. Equally, wider developments within the sector could prospectively offer opportunities to enhance provision in this area, which it will be crucial to capitalise on wherever possible.

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<sup>3</sup> *A Parliamentary Inquiry into childcare for disabled children*, p. 3

If you would like to discuss any of the points raised in this response in more detail, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,



Anne Longfield  
**Chief Executive, 4Children**

Tel: 020 7522 6929

Email: [anne.longfield@4Children.org.uk](mailto:anne.longfield@4Children.org.uk)