



Sarah Teather MP

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Annette Brooke MP
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Your ref: cp/surestartAPPG
2010/0107093POST

25 February 2011

Dear Annette,

Thank you for your letter of 21 December with questions from the December meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Sure Start. Please accept my apologies for the delay in replying.

I am pleased to hear that the APPG have welcomed a number of policy developments. Sure Start Children's Centres are at the heart of our vision for early intervention, and the network of children's centres is critical to the Government's wider programme for children and families.

I understand that Tim Loughton addressed some your questions when he attended the APPG on 9 February; however, for completeness I have included full responses to each of the questions below.

What will the transfer of functions from the CWDC to the DfE mean in practice and will the changes be led by someone who comes from a practice background rather than civil service?

We are in the process of carefully considering all CWDC's current functions in the light of the Spending Review before deciding what will end, what will continue and where responsibilities will lie from April 2012. We are exploring the most appropriate way to deliver those functions which need to continue, including the possibility of delivering them through an executive agency of the Department. My officials are working closely with CWDC to ensure as smooth

a transition as possible.

What is the rationale behind the end of graduate leadership in Sure Start Children's Centres? The group understands that there may be differences in the qualifications for those leading full-time care and sessional leaders? If this is the case, what are the changes in required qualifications and what is the reasoning for this?

Those teaching in free schools will not be required to have QTS and the schools white paper advocates moving teacher training from universities to schools

– is the end of the requirement to have a qualified teacher in Sure Start Children's Centres part of the change in the way we view pedagogy?

We have not ended graduate leadership in Sure Start Children's Centres.

We have, however, removed the overly prescriptive requirement for all children's centres in the most disadvantaged areas to provide full day care - even when there was no demand - and it does not make sense to retain the associated requirement that this provision be delivered by both a Qualified Teacher (QT) and an Early Years Professional (EYP). These centres now have the choice of employing just one of a QT or an EYP to lead their full-time or sessional care.

The changes we have made were to give flexibility to Sure Start Children's centres, and to free them, as far as possible, from central diktats. We know the quality of early education is a key driver of good outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged children, and so where children's centres offer early education it is crucial that this is of high quality. The government remains committed to investing in the quality of the early education and childcare workforce, and will develop proposals to support this later this year. The recent Local Authority and school funding settlement provides for the ongoing support and development of the workforce. Continued national investment in the early years workforce includes the funding of places on the Early Years Professional Status programme and the New Leaders in Early Years programme which began in November.

What happens if local authorities do not use Sure Start budgets for Sure Start services? Has the department considered incentivising good practice in early years, example of offering a kitemark for early years-friendly councils?

The Early Intervention Grant (EIG) will provide a substantial source of finance for local authorities. It is not ring-fenced so gives new flexibility to enable local authorities to act more strategically. The Government has made clear to local leaders that this funding should go directly to vital frontline services, like Sure Start Children's Centres, and spending decisions should involve local professionals and communities.

We have responded to requests from local leaders for greater responsibility and freedom at local level to pool and align funding. I know local authorities are looking carefully at their budgets at the moment and are having to make difficult decisions. This is not easy, but good local authorities are restructuring with care, and looking at methods of clustering centres to merge back-office functions. They are considering the evidence which shows what is effective and using it to inform their decisions. They are thinking about how to make best use of children's centres to support early intervention and reach the most vulnerable families in ways that can enhance life chances and save public money in the long term.

Sure Start Children's Centres are high priority for the Government: we have made sure there is enough funding in the EIG to maintain the network, accessible to all, whilst ensuring centres improve their focus on identifying and supporting the families in greatest need. Local authorities continue to have duties under the Childcare Act 2006 to consult before opening, closing or significantly changing children's centres and to secure sufficient children's centres provision to meet local need, so far as is reasonably practical.

We are exploring how to introduce payment by results as part of the EIG (including for Sure Start Children's Centres). Further details will be provided early in 2011. We will promote transparency by working with the sector to measure the key outcomes and incentivise reform and effectiveness through payment of local authorities and providers by results, working with a number of authorities to develop a fair and effective methodology. Greater local transparency of data, with payment by results, will increase local accountability for Sure Start funding and ensure funding goes to services which have proven effectiveness. We have begun a consultation on changes to data local authorities are required to report on their expenditure on children's services so that local authority expenditure on Sure Start Children's Centres would be published from 2011-12. With regard to an early years kitemark, we are considering quality improvement work as part of the proposals for early years reform that we will be developing over the next few months, and will be looking at a range of options.

What will the criteria be to qualify for the free childcare for disadvantaged 2-year-olds? How will the roll-out of the childcare be monitored and how will the government ensure that councils provide enough places?

We will seek the views of the Early Years sector and voluntary group to define disadvantage. This will ensure the funding is targeted on those children who would benefit most.

The Government believes that local authorities should be free to take their own decisions about their local needs and priorities. This is why there are no ring-fences within the Early Intervention Grant. Local authorities will recognise the need to increase investment in early education for two year olds over the next two years as we move towards a legal duty to provide free places for all disadvantaged two year olds from 2013. *Future plans for Sure*

Start talk about an increased targeting of services. As a significant proportion of Sure Start Children's Centres' activities are targeted already, what does the department envisage as being different in the future?

We recognise that many Sure Start Children's Centres are providing excellent targeted support to families with the greatest needs. We want to build on and extend this existing good practice. We have made clear that we want to retain the national network of Sure Start Children's Centres with a core universal offer, while also ensuring they deliver proven early intervention programmes to support those families in the greatest need. We will be working with local authorities to develop effective ways of identifying those families most in need of support, to increase voluntary and community sector involvement within children's centres so that organisations with a track record of supporting families can get more involved, and to increase the use of evidence based programmes in children's centres so that state support goes to services which have proven effectiveness.

I hope that that this information is helpful and thank you once again for your letter. Sally Burlington, who leads the work on children's centres in the department, will shortly provide a response to the additional questions raised at the APPG on 9 February. My office is also trying to arrange a suitable time for you and Anne Longfield to meet me, and so there will be an opportunity to discuss any of these issues in more depth, if you wish.



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