Where are the Men? Gender Segregation in the Childcare and Early Years Sector

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What is This?
WHERE ARE THE MEN? GENDER SEGREGATION IN THE CHILDCARE AND EARLY YEARS SECTOR

Heather Rolfe*

Men are a small minority of childcare workers, and this has contributed to skills shortages which have affected the sector’s ability to meet rising demand. The paper looks at current initiatives aimed at recruiting men, particularly through the Government’s National Recruitment Campaign, and the benefits which might be gained from their inclusion in the workforce. It explores the barriers to men’s employment in the sector, including men’s own perceptions of gender roles and attitudes towards ‘women’s work’. The paper identifies a range of measures which might lead to greater effectiveness in both recruiting and retaining men to the sector.

Keywords: childcare; employment; gender segregation; men; stereotyping

JEL classification: J24

Introduction

The childcare and early years workforce has been a focus for government employment policy in recent years because of its role in enabling women to work and in reducing child poverty and inequality (see Land, 2004). The childcare and early years sector is also a relatively large employer, of an estimated 279,000 paid staff across a wide range of childcare settings, including day nurseries, playgroups and after-school care, and a further 83,000 childcare workers in primary schools (Mori, 2004a). It has been expanding as a result of increased demand for places, and the provision of part-time nursery places for three and four year olds. This process of expansion has not been easily accomplished: the sector has experienced difficulties recruiting and retaining staff (see IDS, 2001; Rolfe et al., 2003), so that carrying through plans for expansion have proved to be somewhat challenging.

One of the reasons for the sector’s problems with recruitment and retention is undoubtedly the sector’s over-reliance on a small section of the labour force: young white women. The predominance of women in the sector is striking. Men account for only 2 or 3 per cent of childcare and early years workers, justifying the Equal Opportunities Commission’s description of the sector as a ‘gender ghetto’ (EOC, 2003, p. 3). Some research has suggested that the sector’s traditional reliance on young women with low qualifications is becoming increasingly unsustainable as they both become fewer in number and seek other employment opportunities (Cameron et al., 2001a).

Therefore, the recruitment of men is seen as a matter of necessity, so that the sector can expand to meet demand, rather than of ensuring equality of access to employment opportunities.

Difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff, and concerns about equal opportunities, have led to pressure on the sector to employ a higher proportion of men. The aims of the Government’s recruitment campaign, first launched in 1998 and linked to the National Childcare Strategy, have included an increase in men’s participation in the childcare and early years workforce. This has been pursued by raising the profile of childcare as a career, through advertising and other activities at national level and locally through the work of local authority childcare and early years partnerships. However, after many years of policy, good intentions and hard graft, the proportion of men in the sector is still low.

This paper explores existing literature and debates on men in childcare and early years, identifying benefits to their participation, the barriers to entry and how these might be overcome. The paper also reviews recent policy and practice in relation to men in childcare and early years, focusing on examples from the sector and from the work of local authorities. It draws out the implications of findings from this range of academic and policy sources for further research, policy development and practice.

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The scarcity of men in the sector: why is it a problem?

All sources of data on the workforce show men at around 2 or 3 per cent, a figure which has remained steady in the past decade despite national and local recruitment campaigns aimed at men. In numerical terms, they form a group of fewer than 8,000 workers. As table 1 shows, the most recent Childcare and Early Years Workforce Survey (2002–3) found men to be only 1 or 2 per cent of workers in all settings except for after-school care.

Data on trainees in childcare and early years also shows men to be in a small minority. In Modern Apprenticeships (now known as ‘Apprenticeships’) they are only 3 per cent (EOC, 2004a; Miller et al., 2004). As table 2 shows, not only are they a small percentage of childcare and early years trainees, they are small in number. This may be explained partly by the shortage of apprenticeships in the sector.

Data from elsewhere in Europe shows some variations but men are usually well below 5 per cent of the workforce (see Cameron et al., 2003). Denmark has the highest proportion of male childcare and early years workers, where they are 8 per cent of the workforce. This is largely accounted for by their presence in settings caring for older children, for example in after-school care. As in the UK, they are almost absent in settings for the under-threes (Cameron, 1997, 2004; Christie, 1998).

One of the most interesting features of men’s employment in childcare and early years is their greater presence in settings for older children, both within the UK and internationally. In after-school care they are almost 10 per cent of the workforce, and they are more likely to be found working in larger after-school settings, in London and other high-density areas (Mori, 2004b). The possible reasons for men’s presence in this type of setting, and their absence from others, are discussed later.

The scarcity of men in the sector is seen as a problem from a range of different perspectives: it is seen as an issue for government plans for workforce expansion to meet parental employment and childcare objectives; secondly, as an issue for equal opportunities and diversity given the extreme gender segregation within the sector; and as an issue for the quality of childcare.

Men are needed to meet the rising demand for childcare

The problems of a predominantly female workforce have come strongly into focus with government plans to expand the childcare and early years sector. The need to recruit men to the sector was recognised at an early stage in policy development and since 2000 the Department for Education and Skills, through Sure Start, have run a number of campaigns aimed at recruiting men (see later). In addition, the sustainability of the current workforce has been questioned in literature on the childcare workforce: as noted earlier, it has been argued that the sector’s traditional reliance on young women with low qualifications is becoming

Table 1. Paid workforce composition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Childcare</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full daycare</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playgroups</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of school clubs</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childminders</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursery schools</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary schools with nursery and reception classes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary schools with reception classes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: MORI, 2004a, p.18.

Table 2. Modern Apprenticeships in childcare and early years 2002–03

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Females</th>
<th></th>
<th>Males</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Per cent</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Per cent</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Foundation MAs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>5,151</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early years care and education</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>533</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Advanced MAs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>3,975</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Early years care and education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>–</td>
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<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare services (FE)</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early years care and education (WBL)</td>
<td>915</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>318</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Miller et al., 2004, p. 95.
unsustainable as they seek other employment opportunities (Cameron et al., 2001a). At the same time, the single largest source of untapped labour supply in the EU is women of prime working age (Rubery et al., 2001). Therefore, men are not the only alternative, particularly when many of the currently inactive are mothers. Indeed, these are currently seen as the target group by many childcare and early years employers (see Rolfe et al., 2003). There are stronger arguments for greater diversity: recruiting from one half of the workforce is inefficient and not the best use of human capital (see EOC, 2004b). Well-motivated individuals with the qualities required to work with children are likely to be ignored if the recruitment pool is restricted by gender. There is evidence that this is accepted by employers: Fuller and colleagues, in research on young apprenticeships, found that the majority of employers agree that recruiting both young men and young women into their sectors would help solve skills shortages (Fuller, 2005). In addition, childcare employers in the same study agreed that recruiting more young men would improve the image of their sector and be good for business.

While workforce expansion and concern about skills shortages has clearly been the driving force behind this action, there is also an explicit acknowledgement of the benefits to childcare. The Green Paper, Meeting the Childcare Challenge, which introduced the National Childcare Strategy, stated:

‘Working with children tends to be seen as a predominantly female occupation. Yet male carers have much to offer, including acting as positive role models for boys – especially from families where the father is absent.’ (HMSO, 1998)

It is on these benefits which childcare experts in the fields of research and policy have focused. The childcare and early years literature identifies a range of perceived benefits to increasing the employment of men in childcare and early years. Although children are seen as the principal beneficiaries, benefits are identified for the workforce and for men themselves. This literature does not have a strong empirical base and as Cameron and colleagues note, there are few studies of early childhood workers at workplace level (see Cameron et al., 2001a). However, there is widespread agreement that the sector, and the quality of childcare, would benefit from greater gender diversity.

**Gender diversity can challenge stereotypes and provide different types of care**

Much research-based literature on the benefits of employing men focuses on the benefits to children in receiving care from both men and women. The argument that has received most support in literature on the childcare and early years workforce is that a mixed workforce challenges stereotypes and demonstrates gender equality to young children. It is seen to have an educational value and to enhance the quality of childcare (see Cameron et al., 1999; Moss, 2000). Some research presents the views of adults associated with childcare and early years, for example college lecturers and parents, that children benefit from seeing men in non-traditional roles (Thurtle and Jennings, 1998; Daycare Trust, 2003). Such benefits are difficult to prove empirically because this would involve surveying young children who are unlikely to be able to articulate such complex beliefs and views. Therefore, the debate suggests the likely benefits to children of a mixed-gender workforce, rather than providing evidence. For example Jensen, writing from Denmark, argues that the quality of childcare is enhanced for children because it introduces them to different styles of caring, playing and instructing (Jensen, 1996, p. 21). The assertion that men and women have different caring styles, which can benefit children, is criticised by Christie as assuming ‘essentialist’ concepts of male and female behaviour, which have a biological basis (see Christie, 1998, p. 8). However, given different upbringing and social roles, it is highly probable that men will bring different skills to the work, reflecting their own gendered upbringing and culture. Research suggests that some parents value such differences and the tendency among men to engage in physical and ‘fun’ activities (see Cameron et al., 1999)

**Male childcare workers can provide role models for children**

An argument commonly found in literature on gender in childcare, and government documents (see above) is that men provide role models for young children, particularly to boys and children of lone mothers (see Ruxton, 1992; Jensen, 1996; Murray, 1996). It is suggested that children can benefit from seeing a man in a caring and responsible role, particularly in terms of improving their behaviour and relationships with others. This view is found among the general public (see Daycare Trust, 2003), in campaign literature and features in media coverage of men in childcare and early years (see for example, Children Now, 2004).
While it is almost universally accepted that children would benefit from being cared for by men as well as by women, the idea of male childcare workers as role models has been questioned by a number of childcare researchers. First, there is some confusion about what model male childcare workers are to provide (Cameron et al., 1999, p. 163). While female childcare workers may see themselves as role models for the service or profession, delivering a high standard of care, men are seen as representing ‘masculinity’ or even fatherhood, and sometimes a confused picture is apparent. As Owen states, it is not clear whether men provide role models by being ‘traditional’ males in a female environment, for example by engaging in ‘male’ play activities such as sport, or by challenging stereotypes by adopting a more traditionally ‘feminine’ and caring role (Owen, 2003b). Other contributors to the debate do not see this as a contradiction and argue that it is the combination of an interest in ‘traditional male pursuits’, such as sports, and a caring attitude which can be most valuable in reducing sex stereotyping in childcare settings (see Hill, 1990, p. 37). Research findings suggest that men negotiate their way through this maze and establish their own role and ‘masculine’ identity in occupations where they are under-represented (see Simpson, 2004).

The idea of men as role models has also been challenged on the grounds that children of lone parents are in particular need of their example. The actual situation of these children, and those with present fathers may be more complex: Christie argues that men are not ‘absent’ in the lives of most women lone parents, that some ‘present’ fathers have little involvement with their children, while some who do not live with their children provide emotional and other support. (see Christie, 1998). Despite such objections, the belief that men can act as role models is supported by childcare employers, by parents and by the general public. Fifty-three per cent of over 2,000 people interviewed by Mori for the Daycare Trust agreed that a benefit of employing men in childcare was to ‘provide positive male role models for children, and 57 per cent saw a benefit in ‘children being cared for in a mixed gender environment’ (see Daycare Trust, 2003). Previous NIESR research found that perceived benefits to children of lone mothers and role models for boys were factors that positively disposed employers to recruit men (see Rolfe, et al., 2003). It is likely that these beliefs are reinforced by government activity, particularly through the national recruitment campaigns (see later).

The workforce benefits from diversity

As well as the perceived benefits to employers and to children, the workforce, both current and potential, is seen to benefit from gender diversity. Benefits are identified in teamworking, childcare practice and job satisfaction, which benefit employers as well as the workforce. The childcare workforce literature refers to the benefits of a more ‘balanced’ team, of men and women, and argues that the gendered nature of employment in childcare both reinforces the notion that it is like ‘substitute mothering’ and at the same time renders gender issues invisible (see Moss, 2000, p. 12). It has been suggested that a mixed-gender workforce would challenge perceptions of childcare as an extension of women’s work in the home. It is also seen as having the potential to bring issues of gender and gender difference to the fore. Moss describes how, in Norway, the presence of men in the workforce has led to debate on whether there are feminine and masculine ways of caring (Moss, ibid.). It is also possible that more discussion of gender issues at workplace level might lead to improvements in childcare practice, for example in challenging stereotyping in relation to toys and activities.

One of the main potential benefits in increasing male participation is the job satisfaction which may be experienced when an individual chooses their occupation free of the constraints of gender stereotyping. When an occupation is freely made, one would expect higher levels of job satisfaction. Therefore, one of the potential benefits of greater gender diversity in the childcare and early years sector is the job satisfaction of men themselves. Childcare workers are known to enjoy high levels of job satisfaction through working with children. Surveys on job satisfaction have found childcare workers to be more satisfied than workers in most other occupations. Analysis of the British Household Panel Survey places childcare workers among the most satisfied occupational groups (see Rose, 2003). Although sample sizes are small, data from the survey shows nursery nurses, educational assistants and other childcare workers all among the top ten most satisfied employees (see table 3). Studies of childcare workers confirm that levels of intrinsic job satisfaction are high (Cameron, 1997; Rolfe et al., 2003). The small number of studies that have asked men about their experiences of working in the sector have found these to be highly positive (Penn and McQuail, 1997; Peeters, 2003). There are indications that intrinsic levels of job satisfaction are particularly high and that negative aspects concern factors such as the reactions of others.
The benefits of recruiting men to the sector would therefore appear to be both considerable and wide-ranging: in resolving skills shortages, improving workplace practices and the quality of care for children. What then are the barriers to their participation in the sector?

What are the barriers to men’s employment in childcare and early years?

As we have described, men are a very small proportion of the childcare and early years workforce. Existing evidence, although limited, suggests a relatively low level of interest among men towards working in childcare and early years. This would seem to rule out the possibility of employer discrimination in recruitment as a major factor in men’s under-representation, although it is conceivable that men are deterred by expectations of discrimination. Research by MORI for the Daycare Trust found 70 per cent of men said they would not consider working in the sector. At 27 per cent, the proportion who said they would consider working in the sector could be considered high, given that men are only 2 or 3 per cent of the childcare and early years workforce. However, there may be some distance to be travelled between considering a job and seeking training or employment. The limited research on young people’s attitudes towards working in the childcare and early years sector also suggests a relatively low level of interest among boys. For example, a survey of 212 pupils aged 14 and 15 found 12.5 per cent of boys were interested in working with children, compared to 66 per cent of girls (see Cook, 2005).

The consensus in current literature and policy debates is that pay and the status of childcare as women’s work are the key factors which deter men from employment in the sector. Recent research has also highlighted concerns about allegations of child abuse (see Daycare Trust, 2003). We will consider the possible role of each of these, and some related factors, for example part-time work and employment practices.

Low pay

Research has highlighted the role of low pay in problems of recruitment and retention in the sector (Owen, 2003b) and there is reasonably strong evidence that pay is a barrier to men’s participation. Studies report that employers, local authorities, childcare employees and the general public all see low pay as a deterrent to men (Rolfe et al., 2003; Smith et al., 2004). Research by MORI for the Daycare Trust found that almost half of more than 2000 adults interviewed said that better pay would encourage more men to work in childcare and early years (Daycare Trust, 2003).

Childcare and early years workers are low paid. As Table 3 shows, the Childcare and Early Years Workforce Surveys report pay levels for non-supervisory childcare staff at little above the minimum wage, which was £4.20 an hour at the time of the survey in 2003 (£5.05 from October 2005). Within the childcare and early years sector some variation is found according to type of provider, with out-of-school care paying slightly higher rates. Pay levels among early years staff are higher than in childcare, reflecting public sector pay rates and qualification requirements. However, the highest pay rates, found among nursery nurses in early years settings, were still only £7.50 an hour in 2003. As Smith and colleagues point out, in 2003 this compared to average hourly earnings in the UK of £9.66 for all workers and £8.33 for women (Smith et al., 2004).

Earlier research by NIESR, in which data was also collected directly from employers, found a similar pattern, with lowest levels of pay among part-time workers in playgroups, and higher levels in early years settings such as schools (see Rolfe et al., 2003, p. 38). Research by the Thomas Corum Research Unit (TCRU) reports evidence of nurseries having to take action to raise wages with the introduction of the minimum wage (see Cameron et al., 1999). Other recent research on employment in childcare and early years reports that many nursery workers are paid at the lower threshold of the minimum wage (see Rolfe et al., 2003; Smith et al.,
2004), including the ‘development’ rate for workers receiving accredited training, which is currently £4.25 an hour for 18–21 year olds and £3.00 an hour for 16–17 year olds (from 1 October 2005).

Research by the TCRU has found that most childcare and early years students and workers live either with their parents or partner who is usually in full-time employment (Cameron et al., 2002, p. 582). This suggests that many childcare workers can only work in the sector because they are financially supported by someone else. Given continuing expectations on men to be the prime earner (see Hatten et al., 2002), it is perhaps not surprising that few men are employed in childcare and early years. The report of the 2003 Childcare and Early Years Workforce Survey states that pay levels had changed very little from the previous survey in 2001 (see MORI, 2004a, p. 18). Therefore, while efforts to recruit more men have increased, these have not addressed one of the key barriers identified by research.

Pay has been found to lead to turnover in the sector. Research on the destinations of childcare students and nursery workers found inadequate pay among the most frequently cited reasons for dissatisfaction and for wanting to leave a nursery job (Cameron et al., 2001a; Rolfe et al., 2003). Low pay is also recognised as a problem by employers, in both recruiting and retaining childcare and early years workers. NIESR research has found that, while private childcare providers, including day nurseries, believe that low pay contributes to the high staff turnover they experience, they feel they cannot increase pay without raising fees, which would affect take up of places (see Rolfe, et al., ibid.). Research in the United States has suggested that low pay is less a factor in retention than in recruitment because staff are aware of low pay when they take up work in the sector (see Manlove and Guzzel, 1997). However, this ignores turnover which occurs because of workers’ changing circumstances, for example wanting to leave the parental home to live independently or with a partner. This may be a particular issue for men, yet there is no data on rates of turnover among male childcare and early years workers. Available data shows only the gender of current childcare and early years workers, not those who join and leave. The Government’s Childcare and Early Years Workforce Surveys collect retention statistics from employers, but these are not broken down by gender. The absence of this data leaves some uncertainty about where the problem lies, whether with recruitment or retention of male staff, and therefore at how gender segregation can be addressed.

Although pay is seen as a key factor in deterring men from the sector, a number of researchers have remarked that men are still a small minority of childcare and early years workers in countries with higher pay rates and more full-time employment opportunities (see Moss, 2000; Bertram and Pascal, 2000). Therefore it is argued that other factors deter men, in particular the low status of childcare and its status as ‘women’s work’ (see later).

### Hours of work

The predominance of part-time employment in the sector is likely to be a factor in men’s under-representation in childcare. The Childcare and Early Years Workforce Survey shows marked variations across the sector, but that most employment is part-time, temporary or through self-employment (see MORI, 2004b–i). Almost all staff in pre-schools and playgroups work fewer than 30 hours a week, with the average at only 16 hours. Similarly, most staff in out-of-school care work fewer than 30 hours a week. Childcare and early years workers in primary and nursery schools are part-time, with the exception of teachers and nursery nurses. In these settings and elsewhere, much work is temporary, during term time, or in the case of holiday care, out of term-time. Childminders, who account for 26 per cent of childcare workers, are self-employed and therefore regulate their own hours. The Childcare and Early Years Workforce Survey shows their hours to be diverse, with some working very long hours, and others working part-time (see MORI, 2004f).
The predominance of part-time working in the sector is partly accounted for by the relatively short hours of much childcare and early years provision in Britain. Many childcare and early years settings offer sessional care, usually a number of morning or afternoon sessions rather than a full working, or even school, day. These settings, which include playgroups, crèches and nurseries, often employ part-time staff for reasons that include cost and flexibility (see Rolfe et al., 2003). Although one would expect part-time working to be a deterrent to men, they are actually found to have a stronger presence in parts of the sector where part-time working is the norm, including after-school care and play schemes. There is evidence that some combine this work with study and, although in some cases this will be working is the norm, including after-school care and play schemes. There is evidence that some combine this work with study and, although in some cases this will be working is the norm, including after-school care and play schemes. There is evidence that some combine this work with study and, although in some cases this will be for childcare and early years qualifications, in other cases it will not. Therefore, a proportion of men holding part-time jobs in the sector are there only as temporary workers (see Rolfe et al., 2003). Other men in part-time jobs are likely to have two or three such posts and to be in effect working full-time. This pattern of working is likely to be found among women as well as men in the sector (see IdeA, 1999; Scott et al., 2001). Therefore, the fact that men are found to be in parts of the sector offering part-time rather than full-time opportunities does not suggest that shorter hours are an attraction of the job.

Evidence from a number of research studies has reported hours of work as a source of dissatisfaction among female childcare workers. Scott and colleagues found that half of the women they interviewed, across a range of childcare settings, were unhappy with the hours available to them. Others said that the part-time hours of work offered to them fitted in with their own childcare needs, but resented the lack of opportunity to extend their hours of work, when this suited them, for example when their children grew older (Scott et al., 2000). Research by NIESR has also identified mixed views on the hours of work offered in the childcare and early years sector, with some workers preferring to work short and dispersed hours and others finding them awkward (see Rolfe et al., 2003). These findings suggest that the hours of work offered by some childcare and early years settings may not suit people seeking full-time work. This may be viewed as a disadvantage by many men, and one which could be reduced if settings were to combine part-time jobs to create more full-time positions.

**Poor terms and conditions of employment**

The childcare and early years sector is reported to offer poor terms and conditions of employment, such as pension rights and sick pay, poor career structures, and lack of consistent training (Vernon and Smith, 1994; Bertram and Pascal, 2000; Daycare Trust, 2001). Research by the TCRU has found that only 10 per cent of the childcare workforce are members of an occupational pension scheme (see Cameron et al., 2002, p. 582). A number of studies, including one of 35 childcare providers and 130 interviews with employees and management (Smith et al., 2004) have found that many childcare workers work on temporary employment contracts or no written contract at all (see Scott et al., 2000). Research refers to poor management as a factor in staff turnover, particularly within the day nursery sector. Staff talk of ‘lack of respect’ from management as contributing to staff turnover and high levels of stress, resulting in ‘burnout’ (see Cameron et al., 2001b). This includes being ordered to carry out tasks such as washing dishes, and to take babies’ cot linen home to wash (see Rolfe et al., 2003, p. 68). Research on managers in the sector has found poor practices in relation to training and staff development, poor planning and staff supervision and limited non-contact time for administrative work and staff discussions (see Vernon and Smith, 1994). Although such factors may lead to turnover, it is unlikely that they are widely known outside of the sector. Poor terms and conditions may deter women as well as men and while they may help to explain turnover, they are unlikely to be a key factor in gender segregation.

**Limited entry routes**

Apprenticeships are a potential entry point for young men. However, a number of barriers to entry through the Apprenticeship route have been identified. The report of phase one of the EOC’s investigation into gender segregation and Modern Apprenticeships reports a shortage of employer placements in the sector. This is seen to result from the introduction of technical certificates requiring off-site training, an arrangement that many childcare employers do not favour. In addition, many employers prefer not to recruit workers aged below 18. As a consequence, few childcare employees now enter through the Apprenticeship route (EOC, 2004b). Data available from the Learning and Skills Council on success rates of apprentices suggests that fewer young men than young women complete full training leading to NVQs or the full framework qualification. The number of male apprentices is too small for statistical analyses to be reliable and it is difficult to draw conclusions from this. However, it...
could reasonably be argued that it would be easier for careers advisers to suggest childcare as an option for young men if training opportunities were easily available. Therefore, lack of such opportunities may contribute to gender segregation.

**Men’s perceptions of gender roles and the status of childcare as ‘women’s work’**

The perception of childcare as ‘women’s work’ is seen as a major deterrent to men. Research refers to the conceptual link between childcare and ‘mothering’, whereby childcare is seen as an extension of women’s traditional role and is undervalued (Penn and McQuail, 1997). As researchers at the TCRU point out, the fact that childcare work is equated with mothering, and has low pay and status, makes it difficult for many workers to see it as a career (see Cameron et al., 1999). Some childcare and early years job titles are also seen as barriers to men’s participation in the sector. ‘Nursery nurse’ and ‘nanny’ are the most strongly ‘gendered’ job titles (see Thurtle and Jennings, 1998).

The status of childcare as women’s work may be a particularly strong deterrent to young people who are considering their career options. Lloyd comments that young men are both more likely than women to express firm opinions about ‘men’s work’ and ‘women’s work’, and have most to lose from current changes in demand for skills (see Lloyd, 1999). Research commissioned by Careers Scotland found that boys are significantly more likely to stereotype occupations than girls (see Employment Research Institute, 2004). This is reinforced by recent research for the EOC which found that 80 per cent of girls might be willing to learn to do a non-traditional job, and 55 per cent of boys (see Fuller, 2005). The Careers Scotland research, which included a survey of 2148 pupils aged 13 to 15 and interviews with 82, found that significantly fewer boys than girls felt they were suited to jobs in traditionally female occupations such as care assistant, nurse and teacher. There is also some evidence that the occupational aspirations of young people from less privileged or working class backgrounds are more stereotyped than their middle class counterparts (see Hesketh et al., 1990). This has implications for sectors such as childcare which recruit predominantly from these social groups.

Issues of status and sexuality may be especially important to young men when considering their career options, because they relate directly to personal identity. Within this, ‘masculinity’ may be a particularly important factor. Therefore, it is possible that employment which challenges self-identity may be unattractive, although other features of the work may be appealing. Simpson argues that ideologies and discourses of gender play a part in promoting and perpetuating the sexual division of labour and notions of ‘men’s work’ and ‘women’s work’. Quoting earlier work by Morgan (1992) she states that

‘... notions of work are central to masculine identities and organisations exist as major sites for the construction and reconstruction of ‘what it means to be a man’ (Simpson, 2004, p. 351).

Moreover, she suggests it may be easier for women to enter male jobs, and to adopt ‘compromised femininity’ than for a man to choose ‘women’s work’.

The status of childcare as women’s work may help to explain why men are a higher proportion of those working in after-school care, where the work may be seen as having a stronger emphasis on play and education than on childcare. There is evidence that men are recruited to such work with experience in youth and community work (see Scott et al., 2000). Further factors are likely to include the opportunity to combine after-school care with other part-time jobs in childcare and youth work, the higher average rates of pay in public sector play work, compared to employment in the private childcare sector and the ‘steam-roller’ effect, where men are attracted to settings where other men are working (see Meleady, 1998).

Although the small number of studies which include the perspective of male childcare workers generally report very positive experiences of working in the sector (see above), they also reveal negative experiences. Many of these stem from the attitudes of others that childcare is not a man’s job. Family and friends are reported to be often unsupportive towards men who choose to work with children (see Thurtle and Jennings, 1998, p. 632). Owen and colleagues found that, while female childcare workers were supported by family and friends, men experienced a mixed reaction, often of surprise (see Owen, 2003a, p. 105). Men also reported teasing from friends who suggested that they merely sit around all day. Although female childcare staff report such attitudes of others towards their work (see Rolfe et al., 2003), male childcare workers may be more sensitive to suggestions that they do not have a ‘proper job’ because their employment choice is more unusual for a man.
Although such problems, and the feelings of isolation they engender, seem to diminish over time (Owen, 2003a), this may be because only the more committed or thicker-skinned workers stay. As stated above, levels of turnover among men are not known.

The issue of sexual abuse is undoubtedly a major issue deterring men from seeking employment in childcare and early years. Men working with children report being questioned on their motives, and suspected of having perverse sexual intentions (Penn and McQuail, 1997; Rolfe et al., 2003). In research by NIESR for the DfES on recruitment of childcare and early years workers, a young male nursery assistant explained how his school friends, his parents and their friends had almost discouraged him from becoming a childcare worker, by suggesting that childcare was not a job for a ‘normal’ man. He also described people’s reactions on hearing he works with children:

‘Older people (adults) look at you a bit funny, like you are a bit dodgy, a paedophile or something. It’s more looks than what they say although they sometimes say to me “isn’t that a bit weird?” I just walk away and swear under my breath.’ (Rolfe et al., 2003, p. 51).

There are also reports of men being treated differently while on training courses. This includes being asked to provide the ‘alternative’ male viewpoint, which could draw unwelcome attention, or being questioned on their motives for working with children (see Thurtle and Jennings, 1998, p. 637; Meleady, 1998, p. 229). Being in a minority can be an uncomfortable experience, and evidence suggests that this may be a key factor discouraging men from working in childcare and early years. The importance of a ‘critical mass’ in encouraging others may help to explain the greater proportion of men in out-of-school provision and also why settings such as the Sheffield Children’s Centre have found it easier to recruit men once some were in post.

### Attitudes of employers and parents

There is evidence that employers recognise the benefits of recruiting men (see above) However, little is known about the role of recruitment practices of childcare and early years employers in retaining or reducing gender segregation. Research by NIESR suggests that informal recruitment methods are common in the sector, for example using advertising of vacancies through word of mouth or notice-board (see Rolfe et al., 2003). This same research also found that employers see the barriers to recruiting men as considerable and do not see it as their responsibility to help overcome these, but that of the Government, through advertising or through services such as careers education and guidance (see Rolfe et al., 2003). Literature identifying good practice in the employment of men frequently highlights only a small number of childcare and early years providers, in particular the Sheffield Children’s Centre which has aimed at having equal numbers of male and female workers for some years to promote positive gender role models, challenge stereotypes and to reflect the care provided at home (see Meleady, 1998).

Although parents and the general public generally support the employment of more men in the sector, particularly on the grounds that they provide role models (see above), there is also a level of concern identified in research involving parents, college lecturers and the general public about potential abuse from male workers (see for example, Thurtle and Jennings, 1998; Cameron et al., 1999). This in turn may affect employers’ practices, and their willingness to recruit more men. Research commissioned by the Daycare Trust found that, although 77 per cent of respondents, who included parents, were in favour of more men working in childcare, 57 per cent saw one of the main barriers to men’s employment as ‘risks of paedophiles working with children’ and 56 per cent agreed that ‘people could be suspicious of a man working in childcare’ (Daycare Trust, 2003). This is somewhat surprising given that cases of sexual abuse in childcare are extremely rare, and do not all involve men (see Cameron, 2001; Owen, 2003b, p. 4). One possible explanation for this level of concern is media coverage over the issue of child abuse which has included the assertion that abusers may target childcare settings (see Owen, ibid., p. 4). At the same time, there is also evidence that parents see child protection procedures at the recruitment stage as helping to ensure that only suitable workers are recruited (Cameron et al., 1999; Owen, 2003a). The other possible reason for parental concern is the sheer novelty of men in childcare and early years settings which makes them appear more unusual and a focus of interest. It is interesting that in Denmark, which has a higher proportion of male childcare and early years workers, the issue of potential abuse does not arise in debates about the childcare and early years workforce (see Jensen, 1996, p. 25).

Little research has been carried out on the perspective of employers on this issue to gauge the effect of either...
media coverage or parents’ concerns on their practice. However, previous research by NIESR suggests that employers recognise that cases of abuse in childcare settings are rare but are concerned about parents’ attitudes and potential allegations of abuse in their settings. Employers have responded by establishing procedures which ensure that only suitable people are recruited. These have been seen as necessary to protect both employees and children from allegation and harm, and to reassure parents. In some cases this has involved changes to staffing arrangements, for example working in pairs and excluding men from some duties involving children undressing. Some providers said that this had staffing implications and therefore might be a consideration in recruitment, but were reluctant not to employ men, since their presence was seen as a positive advantage (see Rolfe et al., 2003, p. 51). At the same time, employers did not consider how their recruitment methods might disadvantage men, particularly the use of informal methods because these usually result in recruitment of individuals with similar characteristics to the existing workforce. Further research is required to establish the role of employers’ practices and the influence of parents in maintaining gender segregation in the sector.

**Removing barriers to employment: the role of government initiatives and agencies**

Having established some of the benefits and barriers to employing men in childcare, the focus of the rest of this paper is on initiatives aimed at increasing the employment of men in childcare and the work of government agencies and an assessment of their potential impact. Much of this work is being carried out through the National Recruitment campaign, now directed by the Sure Start Unit and carried out by local authorities. The aim of the National Childcare Strategy, introduced in 1998, was three-fold: to improve the quality of care; to enable more families to be able to afford childcare; and to expand the number of childcare places and improve information about what is available (DfEE, 1998). In July 2000, the Department for Education and Skills launched a National Childcare Recruitment Campaign, aimed at raising the profile of childcare as a career through a television and press campaign. This has been followed by further campaigns, which have targeted men as well as other under-represented groups, including older workers. Local authorities have also been delivering the national recruitment campaign since 2000, under the direction of Sure Start. The focus of these campaigns has been on advertising and recruitment approaches, with an increasing emphasis on identifying the most effective approaches.

The objectives of the National Childcare Strategy and national campaign are delivered at local level by Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCPs), located within local authorities and acting under the direction of the central Sure Start Unit. Local authorities are expected to help to meet the increased demand for early education and childcare places, and facilitate the new recruitment needed to achieve this. This requirement is reinforced by the new Childcare Bill (2005) which increases the requirements on local authorities to ensure that the childcare market meets the needs of working parents and provides quality care and early years education. The bill updates and extends the duty on local authorities to provide information to parents seeking childcare. Local authorities are also required to provide information advice and training to people intending to provide childcare as registered childcarers and are entitled, but not required, to provide this for employees or those seeking employment in childcare (Childcare Bill, part 1, clause 13).

Local authority EYDCPs were originally given targets for recruiting groups currently under-represented in the early years, childcare and play sector workforce. They were expected to recruit a minimum of 6 per cent men, and to set higher targets where they believed these could be achieved (see EYDCP Implementation Planning Guidance, 2002). Clearly, this was an ambitious target, given that men were (and still are) around 2 per cent of the workforce, and it was not achieved. Local Authorities are no longer required to meet targets for the recruitment of men, or other under-represented groups, although the most recent guidance includes ‘Maintaining the drive to recruit and retain men, people from ethnic minority groups, people with disabilities and older workers’ as one of five key objectives (see Sure Start, 2004, p. 27). One of the key elements of Sure Start recruitment strategy is ‘Targeting specific ethnic groups and other under-represented groups by offering advice, support and information locally’ (see Sure Start, 2004a, p. 49).

As stated earlier, the emphasis of the Government’s campaign has been on advertising and promoting childcare as an option for men. Most recently the Sure Start Unit has been testing a series of job and audience-specific advertisements in volunteer local authority areas. The job-specific advertisements cover four areas
of work: pre-school, playwork, nurseries and childminding; while the audiences selected are men and older workers. Sure Start has also developed video, DVD and CD-ROM products aimed specifically at attracting men into childcare for distribution to all local authorities, job centres, Connexions offices and schools. Despite the continued emphasis on marketing, there appears to be a growing recognition that marketing childcare to men may not be sufficient to attract them to work in the sector. Therefore, the Sure Start Unit has also been working with the Daycare Trust to improve targeted marketing and support for recruitment of men and to develop a 14–19 strategy with schools and careers services to target young men in Year 9 onwards. This has included working with cluster groups of local authorities to improve and develop local training, employment and career pathways. Work has also involved local childcare employers, Connexions and schools careers services. Projects are also analysing the views and experiences of men, including those who enquire about careers in childcare and do not go ahead. It is intended that the work of the cluster groups will lead to the development of a range of practical resources as a resource pack for local authorities when targeting men for recruitment to the sector. This broadening of focus in the work of the national recruitment campaign is likely to be more effective than the earlier emphasis on advertising the meeting targets.

**Local authority recruitment activity**

NIESR collected data on recent local authority activity in relation to the recruitment of men through an email circular to all local authority childcare lead officers for the Equal Opportunities Commission. A range of activity was reported, including advertising in venues frequented by men, using men in advertisements and holding ‘men in childcare’ recruitment events. Local authorities had produced recruitment publicity, such as leaflets and posters with images of men in caring roles, and some have produced videos for screening at recruitment events. Promotional material had been distributed by local authorities to venues in their areas, including libraries, sports facilities, schools, playgroups and job centres. A number had also produced radio advertisements featuring male childcare workers (see Rolfe, 2005).

A number of local authorities have held one-day recruitment events aimed specifically at men. These have been held at shopping centres, leisure centres and other public venues with stalls distributing information and promotional gifts. Some local authorities have held larger events. For example, Kirklees EYDCP recently held two *Men Into Childcare* recruitment drives at sports centres. One of the aims of the campaigns was to raise awareness among men of full-time job opportunities and improved pay rates in the sector. The events featured men who have retrained as childcare workers, including a former truck-driver working as a childminder.

Some local authorities have targeted publicity at venues where men are more likely to be found. These include the use of large displays at football grounds. For example, North East Lincolnshire Children's Information Service (CIS) has produced a ‘banner board’ for display at the Grimsby Town FC stadium with the slogan, ‘Think working in childcare is just for women? . . . Think Again!’ and photographs of local male childcare workers with children. The Sure Start Unit has expressed an interest in measuring the effectiveness of banners at football matches and more generally in exploring the possibilities of reaching men through sporting events, including through programme advertising and sponsorship (see Sure Start, 2004b). The trend is therefore towards more imaginative advertising as a way of attracting men to jobs in childcare and early years. The question is whether such initiatives are sufficient, and whether they do more than raise awareness of opportunities in the sector and challenge gender stereotyping. To address this question we look at work which is more closely targeted, at particular groups of men or at measures to overcome barriers, including training and careers guidance.

**Targeting groups of men for more effective recruitment**

Local authorities appear to accept that there is no ‘quick fix’ to attracting men to the sector. A survey of all local authorities by the Sure Start childcare recruitment team identified the main barriers to working in childcare as considerable and including pay, the perceived job status and the perception that childcare is ‘women’s work’ (see Sure Start Childcare Recruitment Team, 2004b). Possibly in recognition of this, some local authorities have targeted at least some of their work more closely at selected groups of men, where they feel that intensive work could reap benefits. Groups targeted by local authorities have included men in areas of high unemployment, those attending father and toddler groups and men from black and ethnic minority groups. NIESR found a small number of examples of targeted work in research for the EOC: Nottingham EYDCP had
made links with a local fathers group with a view to informing its members about career opportunities in childcare; in Rochdale the local authority built on an existing successful course for women by developing a basic skills parenting course for fathers, with the aim of promoting entry to careers in childcare; and Bradford City Council has run a project promoting career opportunities in childcare, early years and playwork to men, particularly black and ethnic minorities, through men to men-only ‘orientation’ courses, where participants are informed about the opportunities available in the sector. Such approaches, particularly those including information about opportunities to gain skills and qualifications, would seem to have more potential than blanket publicity aimed at recruiting men. There may be particular scope for recruiting older men, in their fifties and sixties. The potential benefit in recruiting from this age group is often over-looked by childcare employers, largely because of ageism (see Rolfe et al., 2003).

Initiatives aimed at improving training and skills

We have referred to the barrier of low pay and poor development prospects. There is a growing recognition that, if men are to be recruited in any numbers, barriers such as low pay and poor career prospects must be overcome. In March 2005 former Children’s Minister Margaret Hodge emphasised the importance of high quality childcare through increasing the opportunities for training and career development in stating that,

‘Increasing the professionalism of childcare will lead to better pay, both of which will attract more men into the sector’ (Observer, 2005).

The Government’s Children’s Workforce Strategy, which addressed skills, qualifications and training issues raised in the Children Act 2004, identifies a need for better development and career progression among other workforce needs. It proposed measures to increase workforce skills by developing a consistent skills base with training at a range of skill levels and easier movement across different services and for the creation of early years professions (DfES, 2005).

Training may have greater potential to attract men than jobs alone. Previous research has suggested that courses for mature entrants would be particularly attractive to men who are considering childcare work options (Cameron et al., 1999). A number of local authorities offer introductory childcare courses for men to encourage male participation. These have been held by local authorities in a range of locations, principally larger cities, and have been targeted at men in work as well as the unemployed. Initiatives report some success in attracting men, and in outcomes for men themselves in obtaining jobs in childcare and early years. However, they do not overcome some of the main barriers identified to men working in childcare, particularly pay and career opportunities. Evidence from elsewhere in Europe suggests that training can attract more men into childcare and early years, but that this might depend on the skill base of the training and the nature of the work resulting from the training. In Norway and Denmark trained ‘pedagogues’ are able to work across a range of settings with children and young people aged up to 18 (see Cameron et al., 2003). The work has a higher knowledge and skill component and, in turn, pay and status. The Flemish Government has recently run a successful recruitment campaign to training courses in out-of-school childcare, alongside an increase in salaries (see Peeters, 2003). Such measures may be key to attracting men and offering training without increases in skill and pay may not be sufficient to sustain local training initiatives in the UK in the longer term.

The Government made a commitment to workforce reform in the green paper Every Child Matters. This led to the formation of the Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC), which will form part of the federated UK Skills for Care and Development Skills Council. The CWDC has the enhancement of the role of the workforce as a key aim, focusing on training provision, career development and greater workforce mobility, and integration of childcare and early years workforces. The Children’s Workforce Strategy proposes measures by which this can be pursued (see DfES, 2005). The council was formed very recently, in November 2005, replacing EYNTO, the UK Sector Skills Council (SSC) for Early Years and Childcare, and this may give a new impetus to work on promoting gender equality in the sector.

Improving careers guidance

One aim of the CWDC is to ensure that people who work with children have the best possible advice, as well as training. Careers education and guidance may play an important role in encouraging or discouraging men to consider working in childcare (see Gould, 1997). There is evidence that the status of childcare as women’s work is a particularly strong deterrent to young people who are considering their career options. We referred earlier
to notions of masculinity and self-identity as barriers to entry to childcare occupations. As Peeters points out, it can be particularly difficult to encourage young men to consider an occupation which they regard as female at a time when they are developing their self-identity (Peeters, 2003, p. 7).

Connexions, the guidance service for young people, and schools careers services, have been criticised for doing little to challenge stereotyping and to encourage young people to consider non-traditional choices, including childcare for boys (EOC, 2004b). Other recent research for the EOC found only 15 per cent of girls and boys in a sample of 566 pupils said they had received advice or information about non-traditional placements for work experience (see Francis et al., 2005). Clearly, schools and careers services are only one influence on young people’s careers choices. Parental influence continues to be strong, including between fathers and sons (see Wadsworth, 2002) but it is not well understood. In particular it is not known whether parents and other family members actively discourage young people from non-traditional choices or reinforce traditional options, although there is some evidence, cited earlier, that family and friends are often unsupportive about male childcare workers’ career choice (see Thurtle and Jennings, 1998, p. 632).

There are indications that men may choose childcare as a ‘second chance career’, sometimes following a period of unemployment and a review of options (Cameron et al., 1999; Scott et al., 2000; Owen, 2003a; Peeters, 2003). This is similar in some respects to the experience of women who choose to work in the sector while their own children are young and then stay (see Mooney et al., 2001a and b). It has been suggested that men from working class backgrounds, unemployed as a result of industrial restructuring, are a potential recruitment pool for the sector, if they are given the necessary training and support (Hill, 1990). The NIESR review found a number of projects that had successfully recruited older men to childcare projects, with experience of looking after their own children including as single parents (see Rolfe, 2005). The appeal of childcare to men in their fifties and sixties should not be over-looked, particularly given that many will have experience of caring for their own children or grandchildren. For some older men factors such as the availability of work locally and job satisfaction may override concerns about masculinity and low pay. It is also possible that issues of gendered self-identity, which are so important among young men, may decline with age. This highlights the potential for adult information, advice and guidance services, now delivered through Learning and Skills Councils under ‘nextstep’ to attract adults, including older men, to the childcare and early years sector. However, targeted guidance of this sort may not be sufficient to increase significantly the presence of men in the sector. In order effectively to sell childcare and early years as an employment option to men across age groups and from different backgrounds, the sector must offer an attractive package, including training, qualifications, pay and prospects.

**Conclusions**

This paper has explored possible explanations for why the childcare workforce is almost exclusively female. Research highlights the role of pay and poor career opportunities as factors deterring men from working in childcare and early years, as well as the status of childcare as ‘women’s work’. The Government has shown a commitment to reform of skills, qualifications and training in the sector through recent strategy and legislation, including the green paper *Every Child Matters* and the Children’s Workforce Strategy arising from the Every Child Matters programme. The newly formed Children’s Workforce Development Council has the enhancement of the role of the workforce as a key aim, as well as expansion of workforce size. There is a possibility that progress towards improved training provision, career development and workforce mobility will make the recruitment of men a more realistic task. Additional government investment, through the Transformation Fund to assist local authorities to develop high quality childcare, shows a level of commitment which will need to be sustained through continued investment in training in early years and childcare. The development of Sure Start Children’s Centres, which is given further endorsement by the Childcare Bill (2005) offers scope for remodelling of jobs to combine childcare, education and play for children of all ages, and to create full-time jobs. These might be designed to involve enhanced skills and knowledge, which should be reflected in higher pay.

The weight of evidence suggests that it is unrealistic to expect a significant increase in men’s participation in childcare employment without an increase in pay rates in the sector. Not only is low pay an issue in itself, it contributes to the low status of childcare, which undoubtedly presents a major barrier. However, there are problems in raising pay rates because, as Peter Moss points out this issue of the *Review*, despite government
assistance, a substantial proportion of the costs of childcare and early years education in the UK is borne by parents (Moss, 2006). Government policy aimed at reducing the cost of childcare to parents may allow providers to pay increased rates, and there may be scope for further subsidisation of public sector provision. Moves towards professionalisation in early years and childcare and the creation of more full-time jobs, by combining part-time positions, may also be effective in attracting men to the sector and bringing about a long-awaited change in image for childcare.

Despite issues of low pay and status, childcare workers, including men, enjoy high levels of job satisfaction. This is important because dissatisfied workers cannot deliver the quality care that parents increasingly expect and that the Government has endorsed. Evidence that some men working in the sector discovered by accident that they enjoyed working with children, after spending years in jobs they disliked, suggests there are other men who would find they enjoy the work, if barriers to their participation could be overcome. There may be a particularly rich untapped source in older men who have cared for their children and grandchildren. The current situation, where employers recruit from only half the population, cannot be efficient and is unlikely to allow for the expansion which current policy requires. Measures in place to improve training and career prospects would appear to have most potential to attract men to the sector, but the barriers are many and no single measure will act as a magic wand. Creating greater diversity within the sector will require continuing commitment to workforce change and coordination between Sure Start, guidance services, the Sector Skills Councils, local authorities and employers.

NOTE

1 EYDCPs are staffed by local authority employees (or others on service level agreements) and have a consultative body drawn from organisations with an interest in local childcare and early years provision.

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