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The Tickell review of the Early Years Foundation Stage – what does it mean for playwork?

Following the publication of Dame Clare Tickell’s review of the Early Years Foundation Stage earlier this week, SkillsActive’s senior policy manager for playwork, Chris Martin looks at what the review will could mean for the playwork sector.

Dame Clare Tickell’s report to Government contains 46 recommendations which propose a radical simplifying of the Early Years Foundation Stage framework, encouraging flexibility and reducing bureaucracy within the existing overall approach. There is likely to be a consultation over the summer with a final document published later this year which will lead to any changes in legislation next year, and so the report should be seen as part of a dialogue rather than an end result and there will be opportunities to comment and lobby.

There are no proposals to radically change the existing approach. It is still very educationally focused, ‘play-based’, and rooted in developmental psychology. It still applies to all settings who cater to children in the early years, from 0 to the 31 August after their fifth birthday.

The report does recommend a drastic simplifying however, which should, with some large provisos, help playwork settings to deliver the EYFS while still working to the Playwork Principles. The framework recommends keeping welfare requirements and simplified learning and development requirements. However our recommendations that playwork settings should be exempt from the learning and development requirements, but should also have met the requirements of a quality assurance system based on the playwork principles, have not been adopted.

The ability to opt-out in general looks to be greatly curtailed, although there is the recommendation that Government consider enabling ‘professional organisations representing groups of independent schools to seek exemptions on behalf of the
schools they represent' and for all settings within the Steiner-Waldorf Foundation to be exempt from some of the early learning goals.

It is proposed that the early learning goals are reduced from 69 to 17 and a simple scale established to assess progress. The terminology of ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ settings has disappeared, replaced with the term ‘wraparound and holiday provision’.

The recommendations also structure the framework into:

### Three prime areas of learning:

1. Personal, social and emotional development.
2. Communication and language.
3. Physical development.

### Four specific areas ‘in which the prime skills are applied’:

1. Literacy.
3. Expressive arts and design.
4. Understanding the world.

### Three characteristics of effective teaching and learning to be highlighted:

1. Playing and exploring.
2. Active learning.
3. Creating and thinking critically

One of the biggest underlying tensions has been in the very different philosophies of the playwork sector and educationalists, characterised by the phrases ‘balance of adult-led and child-initiated activities’ and that the EYFS should be delivered through ‘planned purposeful play’. This tension is discussed in the report and the term ‘learning through play’ explored, although Dame Clare’s interpretation may not please all. Essentially what she is saying is that all supportive interactions between professionals and children which make ‘the difference between what a child can do on their own, and what they can do when guided by someone else’[1], ‘could be described as learning or teaching interactions’.

While this initially may appear to contradict the ethos underlying the role of the playworker, we need to look beyond a knee-jerk reaction against this and look at the semantics, examine the wording pragmatically and philosophically, and engage in debate around its meaning and any potential opportunities.

Dame Clare states that ‘I recommend that the EYFS requirement relating to delivery through play is clarified, including emphasising that this does not preclude more adult direction or teaching, and by setting out what playful adult-directed learning looks like.’[2] Again although this does not on the surface give the message playworkers would hope, the promise of seeking further clarity is to be welcomed, particularly when combined with the statements contained in Ofsted guidance on play provision.

### Playwork sector recommendations

In partnership with Play England, we consulted the sector last year and fed a series of recommendations into the review based on what we were told:

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<tr>
<th>Playwork sector recommendations</th>
<th>What the report says</th>
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<tr>
<td>Playwork settings should be exempt from the learning and development requirements but should have met the requirements of a quality assurance system based on the playwork principles.</td>
<td>All settings are subject to these requirements, but they will be simplified and there will be more flexibility for providers.</td>
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<td>Playwork qualifications should be recognised as the only ones that are suitable for playwork settings.</td>
<td>The report does not cover this.</td>
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<td>The qualification requirements should be altered so that holiday playschemes should be able to use staff with or working towards the playwork award at level 2 to count in staffing ratios.</td>
<td>The report recommends this.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The qualification requirements for the Early Years Register are aligned with the childcare register. This will make it more straightforward for employers to understand their responsibilities.</td>
<td>The report does not cover this.</td>
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Ofsted inspectors should attend mandatory training in play and playwork. The report calls upon Ofsted to review the inspectorate and set minimum standards of training and qualifications.

Workforce
The report places a great emphasis on the workforce, as well as talking about qualifications (see next section), highlighting the importance of supervision, professional development, and career pathways. It also acknowledges views of early years as being easier or of lower status than school teaching or other careers working with children. The report recommends challenging these perceptions as well as developing a qualifications progression structure leading to higher-level qualifications and identifying clear career pathways. There is also a recommendation to review early years training and ensure qualifications are fit for purpose.

Qualifications and training
Dame Clare has listened to the views of the playwork sector around holiday playschemes, and the level 2 playwork award is recommended as being suitable for holiday playscheme settings, which is extremely important and to be celebrated and supported to ensure it remains part of the proposals.

The report makes no mention of preferring playwork or early years qualifications for settings in general, allowing scope for employers to choose playwork qualifications that meet the criteria. There is a recommendation that the early years sector as a whole move towards being a graduate-led profession with a minimum of a level 3 qualification for all practitioners. This is generally extremely important as it strengthens the case for this to be the ambition for playwork settings – although there are huge financial implications in this.

Inspection
Ofsted and the inspection regime were given a high profile, and Dame Clare has been, in this case as in many others, very candid about highlighting the views of the sector and weak points in the existing process. She calls for Ofsted to review the skills and knowledge of their inspectorate 'with a view to setting clear minimum requirements for all early years inspectors in terms of experience, skills and qualifications.' This is to be welcomed, and the playwork sector needs to engage to ensure its inclusion in this.

There was an acknowledgement that there were conflicting messages about the need for paperwork, with the recommendation that 'as with Ofsted, local authorities avoid creating burdens for practitioners arising from requests to collect unnecessary data and information, and to keep paperwork that is not required by the EYFS. Instead, they should find other ways of testing the strength of practitioners’ ability to support children’s development.' There was also a recommendation that practitioners should not fill in written risk assessments before a trip, but must be able to show they had considered the risks. This ties in well with the process of dynamic risk-benefit assessment recommended by SkillsActive.

Dame Clare also recommended that inspections should recognise the characteristics of different settings, namely of ‘wraparound and holiday provision’, and recommends that existing Ofsted guidance should be embedded within the EYFS. Their guidance on play settings is generally very good, with the real issue being that many of their inspectors do not take heed of it! This is something that the sector can take forwards.

Conclusion
The report is both frank in setting out what the issues are and ambitious in what it is proposing, especially in an age of austerity although I believe it looks, quite rightly, beyond this. There are many opportunities for the playwork sector to engage in dialogue and lobbying around important issues, and a need to re-examine its relationship with and approach to the proposals. With the release of the report, the sector can now take this as an opportunity to further lobby Government to present the case for playwork, although it is important to realise we may not see any significant changes until the process is completed next year.

