

## Reorganisation of child care in Flanders

### 'Child care' is a fashionable concept

You hear it in meetings and read it in publications – 'the new concept of child care'. And 'centres for child care' or 'CCCs' are also the talk of the town. Sometimes, though, it is as if the concept only involves CCCs, but it is more than that. The press is talking in particular about the child care shop for parents.

Is this concept a new 'in' word? Is it turning child care upside down? Will it change your organisation or your work? It's time for more information on this important project.

### Why and how?

Nowadays child care looks very different from the way it did a few years ago. Ever more parents are making use of it. For example, there are different backgrounds, different opinions, children who need special care.

The child care sector itself is being professionalised. To a great extent, recognised child care facilities decide for themselves what quality they want to achieve and how. Registered childminders now have social security – representing recognition of the importance of their work. Ever more attention is paid to the skills of the people providing child care. Some forms of child care are successfully exploring a new way of working, with mini-crèches, neighbourhood and local services, childminders working together. Local Consultation is increasingly broadening its scope from out-of-school care to child care as a whole, and to incorporation of it into the local authority's social policy.

Thus child care in Flanders is on the move. And Flanders can be proud of its child care. The government and the sector are endeavouring to provide an adequate number of child care places, while putting the main emphasis on quality. However, once in a while it is good to stop and think. What do we want to achieve with child care? What works well, and do we want to keep it in place? Where can we make improvements? Minister Inge Vervotte is addressing this challenge. In consultation with all those involved, she is setting out the direction that child care in Flanders wants to pursue, and how this can best be organised.

Today the ideas that have been developed are still general ideas, but they will be given concrete form in the coming years in consultation with all those involved, and will lead to new regulations for child care.

### What do we want to achieve?

#### **1. In addition to its economic and educational function, child care also fulfils its social function**

Everyone knows and accepts that child care exists for working parents. We call this the **economic function** of child care. We are already a little less familiar with the importance of child care for parents who are undergoing training or going on job interviews, so that they can get a job later on. This child care is less easy to plan for – it is often required at very short notice and at irregular intervals. Other families also fall by the wayside. For them child care is too big a step – the language, the facility, the way of working and the support workers, who don't always know the families' home life inside out. Yet child care needs to work to counter exclusion of risk groups and to promote their integration. It is through this **social function** that child care makes a contribution to a socially just society. A locally oriented approach and cooperation with other organisations are very important here.

Children are born into a family with the education and habits of that family. In addition, from a very young age children spend a certain amount of time in child care. Child care must give every child a chance to explore in its own way. It is an excellent place to get to know other people and to learn to treat them with respect. We call all this the **educational function** of child care.

We call the economic, social and educational functions of child care the **three societal functions of child care**.

## **2. Parents and children can count on all child care being safe and reliable**

Child care must offer high quality. Everyone is agreed on this. Historically, however, a large number of differences have developed. Every type of child care has its own rules, with its own quality standards. Sometimes the differences are well considered, sometimes not. In any case, they are not always clear to parents. Sometimes parents cannot actually say exactly by whom their child is being cared for – is it a mini-crèche or an authorised family day care provider, a childminder who works with others or independently? Apart from the price that they have to pay, what matters to them is that their child should be safe and should feel good. Sometimes, however, parents cannot choose where to take their child. For instance, they may accept the first child care facility that can offer them a place.

This means that all children and their parents, wherever they end up, must be given the same opportunities. Every child and every parent is entitled to the same basic quality. This does not mean that there should no longer be any differences, but these differences must be well considered and bound up with the individual characteristics and resources of the facility.

However, the basic requirements that every child care facility must fulfil must be the same everywhere. Think, for example, of the prevention of cot death or the right of parents to discuss issues with the facility.

## **3. Child care is accessible to all families**

Child care must be affordable, and must be available reasonably close to home. Accessibility also means paying attention to other thresholds. For underprivileged groups, the way of registering or the people involved may, for example, constitute an obstacle.

Clear, well-organised provision via a ‘shop counter’ can also help to make child care better known to the public and more accessible.

## **4. Child care facilities work together**

Working together makes you stronger. Facilities can share their knowledge locally, harmonise their approaches, and combine their resources. Not only will this help them to work more efficiently, but the three societal functions will also be tackled jointly. Provision will be attuned to local needs.

### **No child care without a licence**

If you systematically look after a number of children who are not part of your family, you will need a licence. This licence will involve meeting basic quality requirements, which will be comparable for all types of child care.

These requirements relate to working with children and parents, the infrastructure and the establishment, safety, health, cooperation and quality guarantees.

The licence will include some requirements that are applicable to everyone and some that vary depending on the type of child care:

- group child care or provision by a childminder;
- a facility for family child-minding or a facility for home child care;
- preschool care or out-of-school care.

The compulsory licence means an end to the old system in which notifying the authorities sufficed and there were no compulsory standards to be met. After all, all children have a right to high-quality child care.

### **Child Care Centres (CCCs)**

A Child Care Centre or CCC is a group of licensed child care facilities that work together in a structured manner. This cooperation may be local or regional.

As a minimum, the provision includes preschool care, out-of-school care, child care in a group context, and child care in a family context.

In addition to its economic and educational functions, the CCC also fulfils its social function.

Admission policy is strongly geared to accessibility, including for risk groups. Occasional or urgent child care can be provided, and children with special care needs are accepted.

In addition to the basic provision, a CCC may also offer more, such as home child care or family support.

In a CCC, the facilities attune their quality dynamic to one another as far as possible. They combine their knowledge and, in some cases, also their resources.

In order to attune their operations to local needs, they develop a social and educational child care project. They involve the local authority in this, as well as the Local Child Care Consultation, users, and any other parties involved.

Both the facilities that are currently known as recognised and subsidised facilities and independent facilities may form part of a CCC. Various organisation structures are possible:

- different child care facilities under one organising management board;
- an overarching legal structure for autonomous child care initiatives;
- autonomous child care facilities that conclude a cooperation agreement.

Socially speaking, the CCCs are facing an enormous and important challenge. To meet it, they need to have a broad social basis and they must operate on a large scale. They also deserve government investment and support.

Some child care facilities are already endeavouring to work together in this way. It is our wish that in the future child care as a whole should develop in this direction.

### **Where do we go from here?**

The broad outline is there. A lot of work is still needed to draw up the regulations and organise the financing. This will be done in consultation with the organisations and people involved.

It will be possible for 16 pilot projects to be launched in 2006. These pilot projects will try to put the general principles into practice and to acquire concrete experience. What are the possibilities and the sticking points? How can we apply this on a larger scale?

Child and Family will brief the sector well on the conditions for being considered for a pilot project. Information sessions will be organised throughout Flanders and Brussels. See [www.kindengezin.be](http://www.kindengezin.be) for full information under Professional/Vernieuwing via proefprojecten [Innovation via pilot projects].