

At the beginning of May, the Government celebrated its first birthday, rather quietly. No sign of a Smarty Arty or a party magician. Perhaps they decided to continue the frugal, austere tone of the first year and so there was no place for any razzmatazz.

This year has certainly been tough for the sector. The Coalition came to power warning us of the dire consequences of a public debt of £1,000,000,000. They told us that we had little choice but to join together and help the Government get us on a stable economic footing. If we didn't, the very children we knew and cared for would suffer far into the future. As a sector, we responded constructively to the public cuts and efficiencies implemented to help reduce the debt. However, we're far from safe. There's more to come.

Many of us were keen that a new Government would just settle in and not try and change everything (the previous Government introduced much that was very good for children), and happily it hasn't. Our new Minister, Sarah Teather MP, appeared to value the importance of universal care and education for three- and four-year-olds, although she describes it as 'school readiness' which caused some consternation (we all know that early childhood is a period of life in its own right; it's not a preparation for anything). She committed the Government to extending the two-year-old pilot. I was delighted, as the pilot has been a very helpful and correctly-funded project which has touched the lives of many of our poorest families.

That said, we've had five significant reports, which seem to be the framework for a strategy. Graham Allen pushed the importance of parenting and reinforced the principle of early intervention. As my Grandma would say, "A stitch in time saves nine". Frank Field examined how we address child poverty now that it's increasing again. The Munro report looked at safeguarding and how to avoid any more children being murdered within their families. The Wolf report examined how we support young learners and apprentices, many of whom are

many happy returns?

The Coalition Government has celebrated its first birthday; what shall we write in its birthday card? **June O'Sullivan** offers some suggestions...



trainees in our nurseries. Finally, the Tickell Report reviewed the EYFS. Tickell listened to the 3,300 people who responded and kept the majority of the EYFS with some minor changes – a relief, as it's a good document.

So, what do we put on the birthday card?

- Great about universal childcare and education, but remember it's only useful if it's good quality and that care and education remain integral. Early years is not just about education.
- Well done for the two-year-old pilot. Make it universal, but ensure those children go to settings which understand and like two-year-olds. Link the offer to parent support, including opportunities for training and work.
- Child poverty is reduced when parents work. Keep a wide range of properly-funded childcare and education support, including holiday and after school services.

■ Make Children Centres multi-generational and open to local people so they can contribute as well as access friendships, advice and happy experiences. Children Centres need to be central to reducing isolation and creating community networks.

■ Don't give up on training and development; quality is the core of what we do. Make sure our qualifications have child development at the core. Keep the Graduate Workforce idea, and ensure all leaders of services have a relevant degree and the right level of experience.

■ Graham Allen MP has pushed for measurement, social investment and payments by results. Work with us on this. Don't lumber us with complex monitoring systems that take us away from children. Don't lose sight of what it is we're really here to do.

Happy Birthday, Coalition, from the Early Sector – remember to send us a party bag of cake, chocolate, bubbles, and a yo yo so we can have a little fun.



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find out more
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