



A BLUEPRINT FOR EARLY EDUCATION AND CARE



National Day Nurseries Association

Foreword by CHRISTIE & CO

As Managing Director of the Childcare & Education sectors at Christie & Co, and with almost 25 years of experience within the sector, I am incredibly proud to support this report, “A Blueprint for Early Education and Care”.

The early years of a child’s life are a critical phase, one that significantly influences not only their individual outcomes but also shapes the outcomes of our society as a whole, encompassing social justice, social mobility, education, health, and social care. It is therefore imperative that the Government puts children at the heart of every discussion, strategy and action, thus enabling every child to have the best possible start in life.

This report puts forward a compelling vision for the future of early education and care, and outlines 10 key recommendations that resonate deeply with our commitment to foster and support excellence in provision across the nation’s early years education and care sector.

The call for a national commission to comprehensively review the purpose, structure, funding, and regulation of early education and care is both timely and necessary. Such a commission, akin to the historic Royal Commissions of the past, would bring together the voices of parents, practitioners, policy experts, and the wider community. By seeing past political cycles and focusing on evidence-based, consensus-driven recommendations, we can craft a resilient and enduring strategy for early years, creating a strong foundation for every child.

The report’s emphasis on a child-centric policy framework is commendable. Ensuring that the wellbeing and interests of children and families are at the heart of early years policies is a fundamental principle. Engaging with parents and carers as stakeholders, promoting high-quality learning environments, and addressing barriers to accessing early years support are all vital steps toward achieving this goal.

Changing public perceptions through language and curriculum adjustments is another crucial aspect of the report. Shifting from ‘childcare’ to ‘early education and care’ in government guidance and introducing neurodevelopment into the national curriculum will create an equitable standing for the sector alongside primary and secondary education.

Addressing funding and infrastructure challenges is equally imperative. An annual review of the cost of delivering high-quality early education and care and the adequate provision of funding to meet those costs is essential in order to ensure the sector remains sustainable. Furthermore, implementing a universal, fully-funded childcare system, coupled with targeted support for those in need, can level the playing field for families and providers.

At Christie & Co, we have worked closely with providers across the UK for decades, extending our reach in recent years to equally support providers and policy makers across the globe. Many of the challenges the sector faces are the same as in other countries. The next government has the opportunity to set our nation apart by creating a solutions-based strategy for the sector which has the potential to shape the outcomes for early years, for this generation and future generations.

In conclusion, this report provides a comprehensive roadmap, and the beginning of solutions, for transforming early education and care. It also offers ministers and policymakers an opportunity to collaborate in forming a strategy that looks past the election cycle in order to create a framework with a longer-term time frame that can improve future generations’ outcomes.

This report facilitates the opportunity for all stakeholders, from policymakers to practitioners, to embrace these recommendations and work together to create a more inclusive, equitable, and high-quality early years sector.



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Foreword

The first five years of a child's life really count. This is when up to 90% of brain development occurs. It's when children learn about themselves and their place in the world. They learn the building blocks of language and how to interact with the people and things that they encounter.

The home is where it all starts, with family and friends. But there is also a crucial role for formal early education and care. Early years professionals instil wonder, curiosity and a lifelong desire to learn which is so important for all children to thrive and reach their full potential. They offer them memorable learning opportunities which open up a world of possibilities and make a difference that lasts a lifetime.

What we want to do, and what a child-centric policy should achieve, is to give early educators the resources, skills, time and opportunity to focus on what they do best: nurturing and caring for our youngest children to give them the best possible start in life.

Bringing together a wide range of views, voices, experiences and expertise to shape this Blueprint has been an important and inspiring process. We are immensely grateful to those who gave their time to join roundtables that informed this report, as well as all the research and policy papers that have brought us to this point. We want to formally acknowledge and thank all the organisations who have contributed to the discussions.

As a charity, NDNA has been fighting for better outcomes for children through high-quality early education and care for nearly 25 years. We hope that this Blueprint can help shape the debate for the coming years as we enter a crucial stage for our children, families, the early years sector and our communities.

With all political parties recognising the importance of early education and care to our children and the economy, we need to see concerted and concrete action in all the areas identified in this Blueprint. This issue needs cross-party attention and support as well as cross-governmental working. Only then can we tackle any issues which may be holding our children back and stopping our vital early years sector from giving them the best support possible.



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Recommendations

- 1** Launch a national commission into the future of early education and care.
- 2** Create a new policy framework for the early years that is child centric.
- 3** Change public perceptions on early years, by introducing government guidance for all publications to utilise the term 'early education and care' rather than just 'childcare' and introducing child development to the National Curriculum.
- 4** Create a comprehensive national dataset, encompassing education, health and social care for all children, to enable an individualised, consistent and holistic approach to child development.
- 5** Commission an independent annual review into the cost of delivering high quality early education and care.

6 Implement a system of universal, fully funded early education and care provision that supports all children, families and working parents, with more targeted support to those who most need it.

9 Revise the curriculum for all early education and care qualifications to ensure that these adequately address the specific needs of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.

7 Remove Business Rates from all early education and care settings.

10 Develop a regulatory system for the early education and care sector that is proportionate, effective and fit for purpose.

8 Create a sustainable workforce strategy for the early education and care sector to build resilience and provide professionals with the training and respect they deserve.

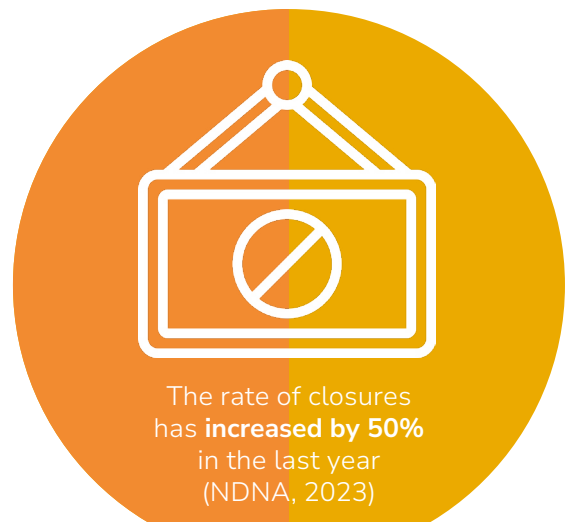
Introduction

The National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) is the national charity representing private, voluntary and independent (PVI) children’s nurseries across the UK. We are the voice of the 24,000-strong nursery sector, an integral part of the lives of more than a million young children and their families.

Our vision as a charity is to see all children and families flourish through excellent early years education and care. Our mission is to therefore lead and empower the sector so that nurseries and the early years workforce deliver sustainable, high-quality education and care. The ethos behind NDNA’s charity vision and mission is to support excellence among the early years workforce, and to drive quality and sustainability in early years enterprise.

To achieve this, our approach is to ensure that the child is at the centre of all that we do. The graphic to the right exemplifies our model for early education and care, which places the child at the centre, demonstrating the foundational nature of the early years and the role the providers and their workforce play within their communities and the economy.

There has been no more important time in recent years than now, as we look ahead to the coming general election, to ensure the principles of quality, excellence and child-centricity are front of mind for our political leaders as they decide their policy platforms. A survey conducted by the Early Education and Childcare Coalition, published as recently as September 2023, found that 42% of the public say that a party’s plans for early education and childcare will be key in choosing who to vote for at the next general election (Early Education and Childcare Coalition, 2023). Indeed, the current state of the early education and care sector in England is extremely fragile. Research by NDNA shows that the rate of closures has increased by 50% in the last year, predominately due to chronic underfunding of early education and care places. Every setting closure is devastating to children, their families, staff and communities, with the biggest burden being borne by those in the most deprived communities; 37% of closures took place in the 30% most deprived areas of England (NDNA, 2023). The sector is in agreement that a change is needed to guarantee sustainable, high-quality early education and care for our children.



37% of closures took place in the 30% most deprived areas of England

In pursuit of this change, NDNA convened a range of focussed policy discussions, bringing together organisations with specific roles in the early education and care sector as well as others with a wider remit to make the case for Rescue, Review and Reform. While we drew on the experience and expertise of our many members, we also sought to bring together voices from across academia, policy and politics to discuss the biggest issues facing our sector today. Importantly, we intentionally included a wide range of voices to create recommendations that work for governments, parents, practitioners, providers and, most importantly, children.

This Blueprint is the result of these conversations. There was huge consensus on the fundamental issues that plague early education and care provision, whilst opinions differed on how to achieve the needed change. Ultimately there was far more that united us than divided us. In the Blueprint, we have sought to emphasise the points of consensus throughout both our discussions and the wider literature, and produced ten recommendations around the following three fundamental themes:

- **The purpose and quality of early education and care**
- **Funding and infrastructure**
- **Workforce and regulation**

What follows is the thinking behind our recommendations – a framework that we believe should inform all policy discussions ahead of the next general election, independently of the political affiliation. Over the course of the next year NDNA will be working with all major parties and the sector to develop these ideas further. We will ensure that all parties are aware not only of the challenges, but also the evidence-based, expert-informed solutions that will secure sustainable, high quality, child-centric early education and care provision that is fit for purpose and ready for the future.

A note on quality

What constitutes ‘quality’ in early years means different things to different people, such as children, parents, practitioners, regulators, individual communities and governments; local and national. Furthermore, it can be defined at different levels, such as at structural and system levels, or at process or programme levels. We use the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, current research on best practice, and the knowledge of our early years community to articulate the elements that underpin this in early education and care provision. Further information on this can be found in NDNA’s Quality Statement.

We passionately believe that children should be at the heart of all policy making and that quality can only be achieved when all early education and care providers are sustainable and lead by dedicated leaders. Strong leadership provides a vision for the setting and supports practitioners to be reflective individuals with a commitment to continuous professional development. In turn, this helps to ensure that every child gets the best start in life. This includes children from all backgrounds and abilities, where early assessment of their needs, capabilities and interests helps to secure any additional help they may need.

All children must have a secure, safe and joyful experience in their early education and care provision, where they are helped by skilled and committed practitioners to gain the knowledge, skills and emotional well-being they need for their future life.



The purpose and quality of early education and care

A lack of recognition and value for early education and care is one of the most significant hurdles to the sector’s recovery and future success. The value of primary education to individuals and society is widely and well acknowledged. Yet, the learning and development happening before the start of the school journey is still not understood by society as a whole.

There is a misconception that the age of five is the starting point for education. In fact, early brain plasticity means that the early years are of vital importance to later development. The Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education project (EPPSE), (Taggart, et al., 2015) investigated how children’s outcomes and development are influenced by early education and care provision. This found that children who attended early education and care provision received, on average, better GCSE results, and were more likely to achieve five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C compared to children who did not attend. In addition, children who attended higher quality provision were also better at self-regulation and social behaviour, and less inclined to hyperactivity.

As the Royal Foundation has commented, research such as this is why “the quality of provision accessed by a child is absolutely critical for longer-term benefits.” (Royal Foundation: Centre for Early Childhood, 2021) Yet, a historical patchy and poorly funded provision has resulted in generations of children growing up with inequalities entrenched before they even step through the doors of a school. This is hampering the life prospects of many children and undermining efforts to improve social mobility. “Childcare” is a commonly used umbrella term for this sector. However, the term fails to recognise that this is a stage of education with equal

value to primary or secondary education. It devalues the professionals who work in it, misleads the families who rely on it, and most of all diminishes the influence and impact it has on the children. A common complaint during our roundtables was that professionally trained educators were commonly regarded as ‘just’ looking after children or being ‘babysitters’. This has significant repercussions, with families failing to take up provision because they believed that they could provide care themselves, thereby delaying their children’s exposure to important experiences for physical, social, emotional and cognitive development. For this reason, this report recommends “Early Education and Care”, rather than childcare, and calls upon others to do the same.

If we are to address practical issues around funding, infrastructure and workforce, we must first understand why we need to take action. We are seeking to achieve a sea-change in how society perceives early education and care, to adequately reflect the importance of this life phase as shown by extensive research. We want to see the Government formally acknowledge the early education and care sector’s educational significance, and most importantly to treat it accordingly. We also want this emphasis to reach parents, so that they are empowered to make informed decisions for their children to give them the best start in life.



1. Launch a national commission into the future of early education and care.

The first years of a child's life are fundamental, not just for the outcomes of individual children, but also for the future of society as a whole, cutting across areas of social justice, social mobility, education, health and social care. We should, therefore, treat the early education and care provision that children receive during this time as a priority.

We believe that a bold, independent review into the purpose, structure, funding, and regulation of early education and care in England is necessary. This should be similar in structure, tone and weight to the Royal Commissions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which were used to debate and establish policy on social issues of the greatest national importance.

Such a high-profile and comprehensive review would involve listening to the voices of parents, practitioners and policy experts, and making recommendations that reach beyond election cycles and that are above politics. This will help to inform a long-term, 'built-to-last' strategy for the early education and care sector based upon evidence and consensus, rather than short-term policies designed to last until the next election cycle.

2. Create a new policy framework for the early years that is child centric.

The interests and wellbeing of children and families must always be at the heart of any early years policy. We are living in a golden age of research and academic study into the impact of the early education and care on young people's experiences and outcomes in life. We are calling for a holistic, joined-up approach from central, local and regional government which prioritises this, optimising cognitive and social development to ensure every child has the very best start in life.

When it comes to policies that benefit families, a key pillar of this approach will be the involvement of parents and carers as stakeholders. The home learning environment is crucial to the success of any early years policy so they must be engaged and understand the value of early

education and care. We must also acknowledge the indirect benefit that they receive from early years policies such as more flexibility to retrain or return to work. There must also be an effort from policy-makers to understand and address barriers, including perceptions of utilising government funding, to maximise take-up of support in the early years. By involving families and carers as key stakeholders, we could guarantee that the benefits of child and family centric early years policies are felt by all.

At present, families may be encouraged to make decisions about early education and care based upon misplaced societal priorities, focusing upon working patterns over true educational benefit to children. A media focus on the struggles of working parents has informed this view. We do not intend to disregard the importance of these issues, and our roundtable participants agreed that there is valid concern around the impact of a lack of access to, or low quality of, provision on parents and families. A survey of 2,000 mothers by the Centre for Progressive Policy in 2021 found that almost half (46%) "struggled to find suitable childcare" and if women had access to adequate services, and could work the hours they wanted, they would increase their earnings by between £7.6 billion and £10.9 billion per annum (Franklin & Hochlaf, 2021). This focus has also informed Government policy, with the recent Spring Budget focusing on its relevance to economic inactivity.



46% of mothers struggle to find "suitable childcare"
(Franklin & Hochlaf, 2021)

However, this perspective risks detracting from the immense benefit to the children themselves and creates a misguided focus on quantity of provision over quality. We believe that the focus should be on early education and care, not solely childcare, and this change has to start at a Governmental level.

3. Change public perceptions on early years, by introducing government guidance for all publications to utilise the term 'early education and care' rather than 'childcare', and introducing child development to the National Curriculum.

The attention, support, education and care given to children in the first years of life sets the foundation upon which primary, secondary, higher, and further education is built. It is when children develop their sense of self and where they fit in the world around them that provides vital input to their later mental and physical health. To convey the importance of a child-centric system to legislators, educational professionals and the wider population, we call on the Government to formally adjust its language to refer to 'early education and care' in place of 'childcare'. This would have the effect of creating parity of esteem between the early education phase and the wider system of statutory age education. We encourage Government to work with the sector on the implementation of this, and to value the contribution of the early years in the same way as primary and secondary education and educators.

We also call for the rollout of the Secondary Education around Early Neurodevelopment (SEEN) programme across England as part of the national curriculum to foster a societal shift in how the population understands cognitive development and the importance of the early years. Through this, we can inspire the next generation of early years professionals with a love and passion for early childhood development, but also help the next generation of parents to make informed decisions for their children.

Further to this, there should also be some level of SEEN integrated into post-natal nursing and midwifery check-ups and across the Health and Social Care system to instil among parents a better understanding and awareness of the vital importance of this period of a child's life.

To convey the importance of early years to society, commitment needs to be cross party and cross Government departmental priority. Research by the London School of Economics (LSE) for the Royal Foundation suggested that as a society we could save £14 billion a year in England alone by addressing issues in children's early years. Changing the official language to refer to 'early education and care' instead of 'childcare' will help shift the emphasis from simply taking care of a child's basic needs, to early education, while giving it the credibility of official Government policy. It would also bring the language used in England in line with that used in most countries of the world.

In order to expand provision, as the Government plans, we will need a larger workforce. This will be discussed in depth in a later chapter, but raising the status of the sector and reiterating its importance to children's development was consistently seen as a challenge to be addressed. Participants at roundtables repeatedly mentioned the struggle to hire enough skilled staff, and partially attributed this to the lack of value assigned to their work. Through shifting social perceptions of early education and care, not only can we draw attention to the benefits for children, but also to the hard work, expertise, dedication and value of early education and care professionals.



4. Create a comprehensive national dataset, encompassing education, health and social care for all children, to enable an individualised, consistent and holistic approach to child development.

Environment and nurture heavily impact children's behaviour, development and educational attainment, but if early education and care professionals are aware of a child's unique circumstances, they can adapt their provision and address their needs accordingly. For a truly inclusive society, we cannot allow individuals' educational and professional attainment to be set back almost as soon as their life has started.

Through the tracking of data for each child from birth via a system similar to that used for the Universal Pupil Number, we can allow professionals across education, health and social care to monitor a child's progress in health and education throughout their life. This will ensure that the correct interventions are made, and that early education and care professionals can truly know a child when they arrive on their first day at a setting and subsequently throughout their education. A new unique number for each young person would also allow for funding to be more easily apportioned on an individual basis, ensuring that any targeted funding can follow a child throughout their early years.

This would function similarly to the Universal Pupil Number, with the key difference that it would start much earlier – potentially at birth. We see similar systems already in place in countries such as Norway where it smooths transitions between different stages of education and equips providers with all the information they need to provide tailored support. It would also better reflect the developmental importance of the early years.

Early education and care settings have reported difficulties in getting information from health services about children where they might have additional needs. Attendees at the roundtables spoke of the challenges of moving children from early education into primary school, with this forming an “artificial breakpoint”. Changes in environment and adult interaction can prove stressful for young children, and so monitoring their progression and social or health concerns is key. This would be especially beneficial for children with SEND or from difficult home situations, whose behaviour could be better understood and managed over time. It would also equip early education and care professionals with the information necessary to manage the child's behaviour and their own stress.

This dataset should have significant security, bearing in mind the sensitivity of citizens', and particularly children's, personal data. Caution should be used regarding the subject's privacy, boosting the support provided for them without excessive data-gathering. The data could also potentially be deleted on them reaching adulthood, or earlier.

Conclusion

We are seeking to create a societal shift in how the early years is viewed and respected across our country, so that its vital importance to development and education is understood, in line with best practice and scientific research. While ‘childcare’ as a concept is easily understood for most families, it can be seen as holding back debate and progress. Changing the terms in the debate could be a first step to societal and policy shifts that will be life-changing to many. The child must be placed at the heart of early education and care. As this would signify a break from recent policy perspectives, a national commission is necessary to realign policy perspectives, producing a brand-new framework fit for future generations. A dataset for children in early education and care that facilitates information sharing between health, social care and education providers would also reaffirm their place at the centre of the discussion.

During the early years of a child's life, they begin to manifest their potential – educationally, socially and developmentally. In the current system, by the time they enter primary school, inequality between children is already entrenched, often reflecting broader regional and economic trends. Correcting this is not just a question of boosting future productivity, but of social justice and unlocking the potential of every individual child.



Funding and infrastructure

Despite the significance of early education and care to both child development and economic activity, and its prominence in the 2023 Spring Budget, there remains a severe lack of support for service providers. The Government has placed its hopes on them to free up parents so that they can return to work, but it remains to be seen whether they actually have the capacity to achieve this. As was clearly agreed at our roundtables, providers are conscious of significant demand for their services, but fear they lack the infrastructure and funding to deliver.

NDNA research found that there was a 50% increase in closures from 2022 to 2023, compared with the previous year (Argile, 2023). Further research supports this concern for the future of early years provision. A Department for Education survey in May 2023 found that 47% of group-based providers reported that their income was not sufficient to cover their costs (Adams, et al., 2023). When the previous survey of this kind was carried out, emerging from the financial impacts of the pandemic in winter 2021, 35% of providers reported that their income was insufficient. The financial situation is dire for many providers, and this has deteriorated over the past few years. Further research supports this concern for the future of early years provision. A Department for Education survey in May 2023 found that 47% of group-based providers reported that their income was not sufficient to cover their costs (Adams, et al., 2023). When the previous survey of this kind was carried out, emerging from the financial impacts of the pandemic in winter 2021, 35% of providers reported that their income was insufficient.

NDNA's own research has shown that, of closures from 2022 to 2023, 37% were in the 30% of most deprived areas of England. If the Government is keen to maintain its focus on 'levelling up' the UK, ensuring that children in deprived areas do not receive less educational value in the early years will be fundamental to this goal.

Supporting early education and care providers is not only a social good and a benefit to a child's wider education journey, but it also makes economic sense. As previously established, there are many parents who would return

to work if not for a total lack of affordable, available childcare. The Centre for Progressive Policy calculated in 2021 that if women had enough early years provision to work the hours that they wanted to, their increased earnings would generate £28.2bn in economic output (Franklin & Hochlaf, 2021).

There is also a human cost to the lack of support for providers. As was expressed clearly at our roundtables, early education professionals often regard their role as a vocation rather than just work; they can see the tangible benefits of quality early education and care and enjoy providing nurturing and enriching activities to children.

Therefore, being forced to close their doors is devastating for settings' owners, their staff and families. It is also counterintuitive, considering the many benefits they provide to local communities and the economy as a whole.



47% of group-based providers reported that their income was not sufficient to cover their costs (Adams, et al., 2023)

5. Commission an independent annual review into the cost of delivering high quality early education and care.

Any government must ask itself if the current level of high quality early education and care provision is sustainable, available and accessible for all children and families to ensure a fully functioning mixed economy.

We believe that this is not currently the case and call on the Government to commission an annual financial review to provide independent guidance and recommendations on the current state of provision, funding and pay. These recommendations would enable funding to keep pace with broader economic forces and would prevent the sector from being unsustainable. The current system fails to address the real cost of delivering high-quality early education and care and undermines the efforts to improve the status and recognition of early years professionals. It is particularly concerning that many of the recent setting closures have been in lower socio-economic communities, which has a negative impact upon social mobility.

Funding for early education and care provision is only effective in so far as there are the spaces available for children and settings can operate sustainably. Increasing the number of children receiving funded provision without ensuring this is adequately funded does not only risk a child's early development; it also sets many providers up to fail. These providers are inheriting years of underfunding: an Early Years Alliance Freedom of Information Request uncovered that back in 2015, the Government predicted that by 2020, it would cost £2bn to fully fund the sector – according to Ceeda analysis, only £300 million was provided (Early Years Alliance, 2021).

The current system is seen by both parents and providers as overly complex, with inconsistencies and conditions at a local authority level as to how funding is distributed. Funding subsequently goes unspent, creating reserves or offsetting other school budgets in central and local government budgets. This money must be ringfenced and used to support the sector. A simplified system would also enable greater accessibility and support for families. Furthermore, a core tenet of any revised funding system must be that funding follows the child and reaches the provider directly.

We must also recognise the nuances that exist in funding early education and care places for children of different ages. The cost of caring for a one year old does not equate to the cost of caring for a four year old. Funding must be realistic regarding the time, energy and stimulation required by small children, and the cost of staff with adequate training and experience to provide this.

This review should also consider underspends, and how to ensure that all of the funding allocated reaches providers. NDNA Freedom of Information requests relating to 2021 to 2022 early years funding found that 62% of Local Education Authorities (LEAs) reported an underspend totalling £45.8 million, and that only 12% of LEAs reported that some or all of their underspends would be passed to providers (NDNA, 2023). If fixed, this is an easy win for government; this is funding which has already been allocated. It also demonstrates a dire need for the system to be simplified.

6. Implement a system of universal, fully funded early education and care provision that supports all children, families and working parents, with more targeted support to those who most need it.

To create a system that is inclusive, fair and maximises take up of high-quality early education and care, we urge the Government to continue to provide a universal offer to all children and families. This will ensure that all children receive the necessary amount of time in early education and care, building firm foundations for a child's future and levelling the playing field for families across the country.

Any additional hours beyond this should be funded or part-funded through identifying those families who have the greatest need but the fewest resources to afford further hours of early education and care for their children. This will help to sustain settings in some of the most deprived areas of the country. Additional targeting should also consider the impact of SEND, with funding increased accordingly. A starting point for this system could be an increase in the Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) in line with primary school pupil premium.

Once implemented, it is important that this system is regularly scrutinised to fully understand the impact of funding on different groups. This includes measuring the effect on take-up, the number of parents who have been able to return to work either part time or full time, and the longer-term impacts on children. This data should be used to shape and inform future policy.



62% of Local Education Authorities (LEAs) reported an underspend totalling £45.8 million (NDNA, 2023)

At our roundtables, attendees agreed that some universal provision is necessary, in recognition of the educational benefits from early years education. Without this, children from more affluent backgrounds will continue to receive these benefits, whilst children from deprived backgrounds lose their provision, and enter primary school at a disadvantage. The targeted funding on top of this baseline number of hours would further level the playing field.

Targeted funding would also enable providers to better tailor their support for children with SEND, with funding adjusted upwards in these cases. Roundtable attendees cited providers who actively sought to welcome these children, but due to financial and staffing concerns they potentially lacked sufficient resources to meet all the needs of the children. Recognising the heightened needs of children with SEND through improved funding would increase the availability of provision to their families and improve their experiences in the early years.

7. Remove Business Rates from all early education and care settings.

Early education and care is necessary to the development and wellbeing of the next generation and should be given equitable standing in the wider education system by local authorities. The current system taxes the space which providers give for the education, development and learning of young children in the same way as retail, hospitality or manufacturing businesses premises. At the same time, the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework requires settings to offer minimum spaces for children according to their age. Furthermore, current inconsistencies among how the Valuation Office assesses properties means that some settings are charged based on the number of children. This provides a disincentive for taking on more children at a time when, according to research commissioned by the LGA, 9 out of 10 councils are concerned that nursery closures in 2023 will be significant and undermine sufficiency - seriously threatening the number of places on offer to children (Reed & Parish, 2023).

To simplify the system and reduce the burdens on all private and voluntary childcare providers these businesses should be made fully exempt from business rates.

A source of agreement at our roundtables was that providers needed clarity and consistency on business rates, which have a significant impact on their operating costs. Furthermore, if we are to recognise the importance of early years to educational development for social good, we cannot treat this provision as a luxury, limited to only those who can afford it. To do so would entrench educational inequality, and subsequently would reduce social mobility, as well as undermining the importance and necessity of the early years.

We are not alone in calling for this. In July 2023, the House of Commons Education Committee advocated that “HM Treasury should grant all early years providers an exemption from business rates” (House of Commons: Education Committee, 2023). Meanwhile the Federation of Small Business’s recommendations, published in 2018, stated that: “the UK Government should create a new 100 per cent business rate relief for childcare providers in England, with central Government fully funding the costs of any childcare provider relief and for local councils to be fully reimbursed.” (FSB, 2018) Figures from 2018 estimated that exempting nurseries from business rates would cost the government roughly £120 million per year, but discussants at our roundtables felt that this would make a major positive difference.

Where business rates are based on the number of children cared for by providers, removing the rates could increase the number of places available. Attendees at our roundtables spoke of nurseries which already had the infrastructure to expand their operations but could not afford to due to business rates.

Considering Government itself has recognised the value of the sector at its Spring Budget, removing these expensive, unnecessary and complicated business rates would demonstrate its commitment to its own pledges. More businesses would survive, and the number of places would be maintained or increased.

Conclusion

We are calling for the early education and care sector to be fully involved in attempts to expand its provision, rather than having these imposed upon it. A myriad of factors have resulted in the country facing a cost-of-living crisis, and providers are feeling this acutely. If they are allowed to be sacrificed, the impact will be felt throughout future generations, as well as causing families to struggle in the short term. In recognition of its importance, the sector needs greater support, as well as a proper collaborative investigation into how best to support it. Once it has been strengthened, we need to consider how to nurture it in the long term and reduce the need for emergency funding in the future.



Workforce and regulation

The success of the early education and care sector rests entirely on the heads of its workforce, and yet the workforce is demoralised, underappreciated and underpaid. Early educators are entrusted with our youngest children, and hold significant influence over their education, welfare, health and safety. They are responsible for caring for children facing a wide variety of challenges, ranging from SEND to turbulent home lives and physical disabilities, all whilst also shaping their cognitive and social development. These vital professionals deserve to be respected and paid accordingly.

In NDNA's 2019 workforce survey, we found that the sector was suffering from a "full-blown crisis", with a staff turnover of 24% (NDNA, 2019). This crisis remains unaddressed. Most affected are the most qualified professionals: Onward reported that in 2015/2016, 83% of the workforce was qualified to at least Level 3 – the level required for managerial positions (Guillaume, 2022). In 2018/19, this had dropped to 52%. An exodus of more qualified teaching staff from primary education would spark headlines and panic: a lack of recognition for the sector has resulted in these figures slipping under the radar.

The sector is facing issues with recruitment, as well as retention; the lack of pay and recognition has filtered through into the education of the future workforce, with new students increasingly put off by early education and care when looking at working in education. Anecdotally, attendees at our roundtables spoke of hearing that students were being actively advised not to enter the industry, even after applying for training courses; instead, they were encouraged into primary and secondary education.

It is well acknowledged that we are living through a cost-of-living crisis. A survey of over 10,000 individuals conducted by the Resolution Foundation, published in April 2023, found that 44% of adults had used their savings to make ends meet, while 16% of adults in low-income families ate less or skipped meals for 7 days in the previous month (Broome, et al., 2023). This has hit all industries, and the early education and care sector is hardly unique in being affected. However, we must still consider the significance of this context to discussions around workforce given that long term underinvestment has often made this more acute for early education and care workers. Research by the Education Policy Institute from January 2019 warned that 44.5% of these workers claimed state benefits or tax credits (Bonetti, 2019), before the pandemic hit; this is a vitally important workforce which is often not paid enough to gain financial independence.

This taps into a broader problem acknowledged during the roundtables; trained staff do not feel respected, despite doing work which requires aptitude, experience, and considerable emotional and physical effort – work which is also highly rewarding and consequential. Salary is central to this discussion, and attendees at our roundtables often pointed to it as the single most significant issue facing the workforce. Ensuring that pay within the sector is competitive is not optional. Onward reported in 2022 that the average wage for the workforce was £7.42 per hour; it added that the average wage in the retail sector was £7.09, and the average pay across the female workforce more generally was £11.37 (Guillaume, 2022). Attendees noted that providers were losing their staff to supermarkets, who provided work at a similar pay level but with more flexible hours and less physical and emotional stress. This is simply not



sustainable and undermines the very professionals who are nurturing our future generations.

8. Create a sustainable workforce strategy for the early education and care sector to build resilience and provide professionals with the training and respect they deserve.

A long-term workforce strategy must be brought forward to ensure the early education and care sector can recruit and retain high quality professionals to work in settings. This should address the capacity, skills and availability of a qualified, experienced and skilled early years workforce.

A lack of appropriate remuneration is driving many highly skilled early years practitioners away from the sector, or putting many off from applying to join it in the first place. In addition, we advocate for a review of all early education and care qualifications to ensure that they reflect the work that practitioners do and the skills they need.

Finally, the value and impact of short-term initiatives to increase recruitment must be reviewed to ensure resources are being used effectively, especially amid high turnover of staff.

Qualifications also require review, in order to recognise the sector's role in the education system. The Education Policy Institute's 2018 review of the evidence around structural elements of quality early years provision found, unsurprisingly, that: "The vast majority of the texts we analysed found that staff training and professional development - intended as both pre-service, or initial teaching training (ITT), as well as in-service, or continuing professional development (CPD) - are associated with increased positive outcomes for children." (Bonetti & Brown, 2018). Yet there remains a lack of clarity as to what qualifications are best for the children, and which providers are currently able to deliver. The industry needs consensus on the issue, as well as for providers to be supported in training up their workforce.

9. Revise the curriculum for all early education and care qualifications to ensure that these adequately address the specific needs of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.

As we see an increase in the number of children diagnosed with SEND, we must re-skill our workforce to ensure we can meet the needs of children now, in addition to supporting families. Therefore, we call on government to integrate practical training for all early education and care professionals that reflects the day-to-day needs of children with SEND as part of the EYFS.

This will not only ensure practitioners have the skills they need, but will also help to de-stigmatise children living with SEND. Further training on inclusion will also ease the transition to mainstream primary settings once a child reaches five, reducing the need for resource-heavy remedial work that is often needed at present.

Ensuring that our workforce is at least adequately equipped to support children with SEND goes beyond best practice; it should be seen as an educational and safety necessity. Introducing thorough training on how to best meet the needs of children with SEND would first and foremost improve developmental outcomes for the child, who would receive better tailored care, attention and education. This would be the case also for those children not yet diagnosed; as pointed out by the Sutton Trust, children with complex educational needs often lack an official diagnosis in the early years, with this taking time to obtain. Furthermore, as it has been suggested that children with SEND are more likely to move from nursery in one setting or school to reception in a different school, providing better support in the early years could ease their introduction to primary school (Archer & Merrick, 2020).

SEND training may reduce stress on the providers and professionals themselves, through ensuring that they can anticipate and prepare for certain situations, fully understand a child's behaviour and achieve the best possible outcome for that child's development. It is also of significant emotional value to the parents to know that their child is in safe hands, and not to have to explain their child's requirements at length to all professionals at their early years provider.

We are not alone in calling for this. The cross-party House of Commons Education Committee has advocated that "training for ECEC [Early Childhood Education and Care] practitioners in identifying and managing SEND, including Speech and Language, Learning Disabilities and Autism, should be part of the mandatory training requirements set out in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Statutory Framework" (House of Commons: Education Committee, 2023). This recommendation should be adopted urgently, for the benefit and safety of the growing number of children with SEND.

10. Develop a regulatory system for the early education and care sector that is proportionate, effective and fit for purpose.

The current regulatory landscape is widely agreed to create an unproductive culture of fear amongst setting owners and staff. In order to create a more productive and collaborative relationship between regulator and the sector, the role of Ofsted must be reviewed to ensure its primary aims are supporting child development and supporting the workforce.

Fundamentally, whether the current inspection process improves quality must be assessed. We suggest a system in which meaningful engagement on the purpose and outcomes of inspection activity is the norm rather than the exception, with more attention paid to continuous improvements of quality within a setting not an on-the-day snapshot. Furthermore, there must be a complaints procedure to learn from and continually develop the process of inspection to ensure it is a productive and helpful tool, rather than an ever-present source of stress and demotivation.

Ofsted has recently come under significant scrutiny for its impact on educators, and attendees at our roundtables spoke of feeling considerable pressure from inspections – for a small number of already struggling providers, they noted that a negative inspection outcome could be the fatal blow to their business. Meanwhile, the Sutton Trust commented in 2020 that “One of the problems with an Ofsted-style model of maintaining threshold standards via inspection, is that it is not effective at quality enhancement” (Archer & Merrick, 2020). It noted that some providers were unable to receive local authority support with boosting quality unless they received a “requires improvement” Ofsted rating.

Some attendees also noted that inspectors could be particularly strict, focusing on specific regulations whilst failing to take a holistic view of the establishment and its outcomes for children. This was mentioned in connection with SEND provision, which was often not taken into account - a setting without children with SEND might subsequently perform better in inspections due to more predictable child behaviour. It was questioned whether this incentivised settings to exclude SEND children altogether, making it harder for their families to find care, and penalising those settings which do provide support.

Whilst the regulator has a role in ensuring children’s safety, well-being, learning and development, significant change is needed to restore trust in inspections and the outcomes. Inspectors need to be more willing to work in partnership with providers and staff, and consider all of a setting’s circumstances, as well as issues facing the sector more broadly.

Conclusion

Providing investment and guidance for the workforce is not optional if we want to have a thriving early education and care sector; this is not a role that can be automated or bypassed. Staff need to be paid sufficiently to retain them in the sector and trained sufficiently to provide the best education and care to children. They also need to be respected by society at large, and by regulators - any review of the sector has to take a holistic view of its circumstances and consult with the staff cooperatively. It also has clear economic sense: investing in the workforce is investing in the economic activity of the children’s parents. But ultimately, these are the educators and care providers to our youngest children, shaping their minds at the most crucial time for their development and they should be recognised as such.

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Institute for Fatherhood

Institute for Fiscal Studies

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NCFE

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