

NCFE

Sector Skills Collective

From childcare to lifelong development: building the early years workforce

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Foreword

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The early years workforce builds the bedrock for children's futures. It supports child development, family wellbeing, and lays firm foundations for lifelong learning and lifetime outcomes. Yet, as demand for childcare and expectations of providers increase, the workforce faces significant recruitment, retention, capacity, and professional recognition challenges.

As the UK's leading assessment and awarding organisation serving early years professionals, NCFE has a unique perspective on both the challenges and opportunities facing the sector. Through our work with thousands of learners, practitioners, employers, and training providers, we see the passion, commitment and expertise in the profession, but also the concerns about workforce capacity, career pathways, skills development, and the future attractiveness of the sector.

We believe responding to these challenges requires collective action. That is why we put together the Education and Early Years Skills Collective, bringing together practitioners, employers, training providers, sector leaders, and other stakeholders from across the education and early years landscape.

The Collective aims to create a shared understanding of workforce challenges and develop practical, evidence-based solutions to strengthen recruitment, retention, skills development, and professional progression, ensuring the voices of those working in and leading early years settings are at the heart of the conversation.

This report is the first step in that journey. It reflects the insights and expertise of those who contributed to the inaugural Collective discussion for education and early years, highlighting both the urgency of the challenges and the opportunities available if we act decisively.

The future of early years provision depends on a workforce that is skilled, valued, resilient, and sustainable. Investing in that workforce is an investment in children, families, communities, and the future prosperity of our society.

Executive summary

The early years workforce is fundamental to children's long-term development and preparation for the education system, while also supporting family wellbeing and enabling parents, particularly women, to work.

Early years practitioners are educators as well as childcare professionals, with a central role in keeping children safe. High-quality provision depends on skilled professionals who can identify concerns early, build trusted relationships, and work effectively with education, health, and children's services.

The Education and Early Years Skills Collective identified significant progress across the sector, including government investment, greater recognition of early years education, increased emphasis on inclusion, and growing investment in mentoring and supervision. However, these advances remain constrained by recruitment and retention pressures, inconsistent leadership capability, limited CPD and professional recognition, and growing safeguarding pressures.

Recent safeguarding failures across children's services reinforce the importance of investing not only in statutory compliance but in workforce capability, leadership, and organisational culture. Safe, high-quality provision requires experienced practitioners, confident leaders, and cultures that encourage professional curiosity, reflective practice, and appropriate challenge.

Addressing these challenges requires a workforce strategy built around three pillars: professional expertise, confident leadership, and a culture where safeguarding and continuous learning are everyone's responsibility.



Strengthening the early years workforce

There was overwhelming consensus within the Collective that early years is one of the most important stages of education. High-quality provision supports children's cognitive, social and emotional development and helps reduce inequalities before they become entrenched.

Expanded funded childcare, greater emphasis on SEND, and increased recognition of early years as education rather than simply childcare have reinforced its importance. However, workforce challenges remain the greatest barrier to consistently high-quality provision.

Pay does not always reflect practitioners' responsibilities, while leadership capability varies significantly. Practitioners can move into management because they are excellent practitioners without structured preparation for leading people, developing teams, supporting staff wellbeing or creating psychologically safe cultures.

These pressures also affect safeguarding. Recruitment difficulties, workforce instability and high turnover can weaken continuity of care and the trusted relationships and collective knowledge needed to recognise and act on concerns early.

Retention should also be viewed differently. Progression into wider children's services need not be seen as a loss if practitioners continue improving outcomes for children. The priority should be a connected children's workforce rather than protecting professional silos.



Making continuous professional development part of every early years career

A recurring theme from the Collective was that professional learning should not end when an entry-level qualification is achieved. Qualifications should provide the foundation for careers built on continuous, modular learning that allows practitioners to develop specialist knowledge as responsibilities evolve.

Flexible, stackable CPD would enable practitioners to build expertise throughout their careers while responding to new evidence, policy and practice. It should also strengthen safeguarding capability through reflective discussion, scenario-based learning and multidisciplinary collaboration.

Mentoring and supervision should be central to this approach. They can improve confidence and wellbeing, support retention and strengthen leadership by creating cultures where learning, reflection and safeguarding are continuous.

The Collective also emphasised that high-quality teaching remains paramount. Practical learning, real-world case studies and scenario-based approaches help learners develop professional judgement more effectively than theoretical knowledge alone. Wherever possible, programmes should be delivered by educators with current sector experience who can bridge evidence, policy and practice.



Developing leadership capability and safeguarding practice

Leadership emerged as one of the sector's greatest development needs. Practitioners can become managers because of their practice expertise, rather than because they have developed leadership skills.

Effective leaders require expertise in communication, critical thinking, professional confidence, coaching and mentoring, decision-making, reflective supervision, and team development.

Strong leadership is also fundamental to safeguarding. While statutory training establishes minimum expectations, children are safest where leaders promote professional curiosity, encourage appropriate challenge, support reflective supervision, and create environments in which concerns are identified, reported, discussed and acted upon promptly.

Recent safeguarding reviews across children's services have demonstrated that organisational culture, communication and professional judgement are as important as policies and procedures. Staff need to feel confident raising concerns, challenging practice and contributing to improvement. This depends on positive organisational cultures supported by effective leadership and clear accountability.





Raising the status of the profession

Professional identity remains a significant challenge. Early years practitioners are highly skilled educators with significant responsibilities for children's learning, development and safeguarding, yet their contribution is not always recognised in the same way as other education professionals. The language used to describe the profession, including the distinction between practitioners and teachers, influences public perception, recruitment and confidence.

Greater recognition of practitioners as educators, alongside clearer career pathways and improved professional development opportunities, would strengthen recruitment and retention. Appropriate pay and sustained investment in professional learning would reinforce that early years is a valued profession requiring specialist expertise.



A more connected children's workforce

Children's development does not happen within the boundaries of a single organisation, and neither should workforce development.

Stronger collaboration between early years settings, schools, health services and social care would improve support for children while creating clearer opportunities for career progression. Integrated working can also strengthen safeguarding by enabling concerns to be recognised, information to be shared appropriately, and children to receive more coordinated support.

Transitions are particularly important. While considerable attention is given to preparing children for school, greater consideration should also be given to what schools can learn from early years practice, particularly play-based pedagogy, child-centred learning, and relationship-based approaches conducive to learning and development at Key Stage 1.

This reflects a wider shift from preparing children for the next educational stage towards supporting lifelong development, wellbeing and safety from the earliest years.

Policy recommendations

The recommendations below reflect the collective expertise of practitioners, employers, training providers and sector leaders involved in the Education and Early Years Skills Collective. While perspectives varied, there was strong consensus that coordinated national action is needed to strengthen recruitment, retention, professional development and workforce capability:

Establish a national approach to continuous, modular and accessible CPD that supports lifelong professional learning and keeps pace with evolving evidence, policy and safeguarding practice.

Develop structured leadership, mentoring for effective supervision, and safeguarding leadership pathways so practitioners are prepared for management before promotion and equipped to create safe, reflective organisational cultures.

Strengthen professional recognition through clearer career pathways, improved public understanding, and recognition of practitioners as educators and safeguarding professionals.

Embed practical, scenario-based learning throughout CPD, particularly in safeguarding, leadership and professional judgement.

Improve collaboration across early years, education, health and children's services to create a more connected workforce focused on children's lifelong development, wellbeing and safety.

NCFE activity and the wider policy landscape

NCFE is already contributing to the development of the early years workforce through qualifications, CPD and engagement with sector partners. This includes the development of a Level 3 SENDCo qualification and SEND CPD packages, alongside work to ensure our offer reflects evolving EYFS requirements.

Through membership of the Speech and Language Alliance, NCFE contributes to sector discussions and policy around speech, language and communication. While we are not directly involved in delivering Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI), this provides valuable insight and access to a wider professional network.

Our qualifications are also informed by collaboration with practitioners and specialists. For example, the Working with Babies and Children Under 2 Years of Age qualification was developed with input from the Birth-3 Local Specialist Leader at Bristol Early Years Teaching Hub.

This activity sits alongside government-led initiatives including Early Years Child Development Training, Maths Champions, Stronger Practice Hubs and the Early Years Leadership NPQ, which support workforce knowledge, leadership and practice. Access is dependent on policy priorities, regional funding and local availability.

Looking ahead, NCFE has opportunities to build on this work, particularly around mentoring, reflective practice and safeguarding. Our Professional Practice Framework provides a foundation for further developing support for reflective practitioners, while changes to the EYFS provide an opportunity to ensure qualifications and CPD remain aligned with emerging workforce needs.

Looking ahead: next steps

The future of early years depends on the confidence, capability and professionalism of its workforce.

Greater public recognition, expanded childcare entitlement and increasing emphasis on inclusion provide reasons for optimism, but workforce and safeguarding challenges remain.

Stable teams, confident leaders and continuous professional learning create the conditions in which children can flourish, families can be supported, and concerns can be identified and addressed early.

We need to build a profession characterised by continuous learning, confident leadership, strong safeguarding cultures, and greater professional recognition. Qualifications are the starting point, not the destination.

By investing in practitioners throughout their careers, strengthening leadership and safeguarding capability, and improving collaboration across the wider children's workforce, we can build a more resilient profession and provide every child with the strongest possible foundation for lifelong learning, wellbeing and safety.

