

# Putting quality at the heart of the early years

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## Executive summary

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The Government is investing substantially in the early years through the new offer of 30 hours of free early education and childcare for working parents and the 'tax-free' childcare scheme, each of which will be available to parents from late 2017. Yet this investment has, to date, not been matched by adequate attention to the importance of quality in the early years policy agenda. The forthcoming early years workforce strategy, announced by the Government this year, will be the first initiative touching directly on support for early years professionals since the *More Great Childcare* paper in 2013, which itself contained proposals that met objections among early years professionals and were not implemented. It is not since the late 2000s that the Government set out and implemented an ambitious agenda to raise quality in the early years.

The Government has rightly chosen to invest in the early years at a time of fiscal austerity. However, that investment has not been balanced: new spending on support with childcare costs must be matched with investment to raise standards and help the children with the greatest need for support in the early years. This year, the Family and Childcare Trust has published research highlighting the association between early years wages and Ofsted inspection grades, and an analysis of the importance of the local authority role in supporting quality (Maughan et al, 2016; Butler and Hardy, 2016). Our aim has been to show that national policy, early years funding and quality are inextricably linked.

Quality matters most for children who are most likely to fall behind in the early years. Supporting these children requires that settings have the right structural resources in place, such as expert, well-motivated practitioners with sufficient time to monitor children's development and plan care; the right processes, such as arrangements for continuing quality improvement and professional development; and joint-working between early education and childcare settings and wider early years services. These characteristics do not occur incidentally but require positive action from settings themselves as well as recognition by local and national funders and policy makers.

This paper seeks to identify pragmatic opportunities to raise quality in the early years in the short- to medium-term. The paper discusses seven areas of policy and sets out recommendations for policy makers and early years stakeholders:

### A. Supporting early years practitioners

The introduction of an integrated early years curriculum and rising expectations of the role of early years services in improving developmental outcomes have all contributed to an expanded role for early years practitioners. Attention has rightly been given to the challenge of raising the number of qualified graduates working in the early years. However, higher expectations have not been matched with sufficient support or recognition for non-graduate early years practitioners who spend the most time caring for children.

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### Recommendations

- ▶ The Department for Education should develop a new workforce settlement for early years staff who do not have a graduate qualification, with a clear progression framework and continuing professional development standards.
- ▶ The Department for Education should establish an early years workforce advisory council to maintain progress in the transition to a fully-qualified, graduate-led early years workforce.
- ▶ The Department for Education should re-commit to a vision of graduate-led early education and childcare by making teaching in the early years a priority area for teacher recruitment and incorporate early years into the Teacher Supply Model.
- ▶ Early years practitioners, unions and representative organisations should work together to initiate an independent, practitioner-led commission on professional representation for early years professionals.

## B. Regulation and quality improvement

The trend of rising Ofsted grades for early years settings has not been matched by a significant narrowing of the gaps in outcomes between the most and least disadvantaged children. Ofsted inspections capture a snapshot of practice in an early years setting and may therefore offer a limited picture of the extent to which settings are contributing to good outcomes for children.

Regulation and quality improvement policy should be based on evidence about the structural characteristics and practices in settings that make a difference to children. England benefits from integrated regulatory standards covering learning and development as well as safety and welfare through the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework, but this framework is not being used as effectively as possible to improve outcomes for children.

### Recommendations

- ▶ Ofsted should collect a richer range of quality metrics as part of the inspection process, including staff qualifications, turnover and retention rates.
- ▶ Ofsted should consider publishing online the separate grade for early years provision in schools.
- ▶ The Department for Education should make sure that future revisions of the EYFS framework include requirements for settings to have in place effective arrangements for continuing quality improvement and curriculum leadership.
- ▶ The Department for Education should consider incorporating a requirement in the EYFS framework for settings to show how they promote the involvement of children from a range of social backgrounds.

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- ▶ The Department for Education should make sure that statutory early years guidance for local authorities should continue to highlight the importance of an effective strategy to support high quality early education and childcare.

### C. Monitoring children's development

The EYFS framework is a strength of early years provision in England and provides a widely supported model for understanding, monitoring and responding to children's developmental needs. However, recent efforts to integrate the EYFS progress check at age two and the two year old health check delivered through the universal Health Visitor Programme have stalled. The early years has also been side-lined by steps to introduce a baseline assessment in reception class at the expense of the EYFS profile assessment, potentially undermining the evidence practitioners and commissioners need to improve services in the early years.

#### Recommendations

- ▶ The Department for Education and the Department for Health should jointly conduct a stock-take of progress in implementing the integrated review at age two, identify barriers to delivery and ensure local authorities continue to move towards effective integrated models.
- ▶ The Department for Education should retain a mandatory EYFS profile assessment at age five.

### D. Integrated early years provision

A great deal has changed about early years provision since the children's centre programme established the aspiration of a universal early intervention network in the mid-2000s. In particular, access to free early education is far more widespread and starts for many children at age two. Integration of early years settings and early intervention support is therefore critical to meet the aspiration identifying and supporting the needs of children and families as early as possible. The funding challenges faced by the children's centre network also mean that it is more important than ever that services like free early education that are comparatively protected play a full role in supporting families.

#### Recommendations

- ▶ The Department for Education should issue statutory guidance on delivering free early education and childcare requiring local authorities to promote links between early years settings delivering free care and children's centres to maximise the reach of early intervention services.
- ▶ The Department for Education should issue a revised statutory children's centre framework encouraging children's centres to make links with early years settings as far as practicable to support outreach, target services effectively and maximise reach and impact.

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### E. Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

The early years are the first opportunity to identify and respond to each child's unique needs and ensure that they are supported to fulfil their potential. Unfortunately, children with SEND tend to fall behind before they reach school, in part because the quality of early years support is variable and expectations can be inappropriately low.

SEND expertise has been overlooked for too long in the early years and the current policy framework is confusing, with unclear roles and responsibilities. Steps to increase investment in inclusion in the early years are welcome, but further action is needed.

#### Recommendations

The Department for Education should:

- ▶ set out clearer requirements for local authorities to make available sufficient qualified early years area SENCOs to support early years settings;
- ▶ clarify the SEND coordinator role and the level of qualifications and training that they should hold; and
- ▶ meet the Nutbrown Review recommendations for more substantive SEND content in early years qualifications.

### F. Links between early years settings and families

One of the key differences between children from disadvantaged families who do well in school and those who do less well is a positive parental attitude to home learning and education.

The early years is an important opportunity to support home learning. Unfortunately, we have relatively limited evidence about how to support the home learning environment effectively. We do know, however, that early years settings can effectively engage parents in their child's development and learning.

#### Recommendations

- ▶ The Department for Education should convene an expert working group to update the *Early Home Learning Matters* guidance and extend to later age groups (up to five).
- ▶ Once pragmatic expectations are established for early years providers, subsequent revisions of the EYFS framework should include a requirement for settings to seek to support home learning.

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### G. Enabling environments

The physical environment has been neglected by policy makers as an element of high quality early education and childcare. Some characteristics of the physical environment interact particularly closely with learning and development: settings must have sufficient indoor and outdoor space to provide safe, warm and secure areas for small groups of children, should be free of external noise pollution and must ensure good air quality. One area where early years settings can particularly make improvements is in encouraging physical activity in line with national health guidelines for the early years.

#### Recommendations

- ▶ The Department for Education and Department for Health should commission research into the influence of the physical environment in early years settings on high quality early education and levels of physical activity.
- ▶ This research should include, or be followed by, a survey of the early years estate.
- ▶ Using this research, the Department should develop a strategy for the early years estate to ensure that existing and new settings maximise the potential of the physical environment to contribute positively to children's development.

### Early Excellence Fund

These are seven areas where there are clear opportunities to make a substantial difference to quality in the early years. Our full recommendations in each area are set out below. To support a proactive agenda for quality in the early years the Government should commit as soon as possible to a new **Early Excellence Fund**. The fund should seek to support four aims:

- ▶ ensuring there is at least one experienced early years graduate in every setting delivering free early education, prioritising settings delivering the targeted two-year-old offer;
- ▶ providing financial incentives for settings to provide training and professional development for non-graduate staff in settings with a low turnover;
- ▶ supporting quality networks in each local authority; and
- ▶ increasing the number of qualified early years special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) to provide advice and support to settings.

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We estimate that the cost of an effective fund to meet these aims would be £111 million.<sup>1</sup> This figure should be considered against approximately £2 billion of new funding that will ultimately be invested through reform of funding for free early education, the 30 hour offer and the tax-free childcare scheme.

The Government has chosen to focus primarily on delivering reform of early education funding, the 30 hour offer and the tax-free childcare scheme in the near future. These priorities have, to date, left relatively little scope for investment in quality. An Early Excellence Fund would provide balance and ensure quality is central to the early years policy agenda.

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<sup>1</sup> The proposed fund consists of four elements:

An early years graduate fund to pay for training incentives and salary supplements to put an experienced early years graduate in each setting delivering the two-year-old offer that is not already graduate-led. We estimate that this will require an additional 4,500 early years graduates at an average additional salary cost of £6,000 per graduate, totalling £27 million.

A training fund of £25 million offering an annual £5,000 grant to private and voluntary early years settings with a low turnover – with eligibility criteria to be set by local authorities – to support continuing professional development.

£26 million to support graduate-led early years quality networks linking leading high quality settings with other early years providers in each local authority. This figure is based on an estimate of the cost of supporting an average of three networks in each local authority with a dedicated staff and training budget for each network.

£33 million to increase the number of qualified early years special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) to a ratio of one SENCO per 20 centre-based PVI settings. We estimate the cost of an additional 800 qualified early years area SENCOs at a total of £4.8m million in one-off training costs and £28 million in ongoing salary costs.

The actual cost of schemes to increase the number of early years graduates and qualified SENCOs working in settings would be capped by the number of training places available and initial costs would therefore be lower than these estimates.



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# 1. Introduction

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In 2004 the *Effective Provision of Preschool Education* (EPPE) study, the first UK longitudinal study of a national sample of young children's development, published its first findings (Sylva et al, 2004). The study showed that pre-school education enhances children's development and is particularly beneficial for the most disadvantaged children. The settings that were most successful in supporting children's development were integrated settings such as nursery schools that employ staff with higher qualifications, deliver a balanced curriculum and have a social mix of children. The study also identified that the quality of the home learning environment is more important for a child's development than parental background, summarising 'what parents do is more important than who parents are'.

The findings of the EPPE study are consistent with long-standing international evidence that gaps in developmental outcomes in the early years for children from different socioeconomic groups can be reduced through public policy interventions (Cunha and Heckman, 2007). The policies that are most effective are those that supplement children's family environments directly through resources (primarily income and housing), through formal early education and through interventions such as high quality antenatal care and health visiting programmes. High quality early education is not a magic bullet – it must be part of a broad strategy to support family resources and be followed up by investment in later education – but it is a vital element of an effective strategy to support good long-term outcomes for children and families. This paper seeks to identify what progress has been made towards responding to the insight into high quality early years provision offered by research evidence and identify opportunities for future progress.

High quality is central to shared aspirations for the UK early years system. Some settings are more effective than others in supporting children's development and there are well-evidenced reasons this may be the case, such as the ability of staff to understand and respond to each child's development needs, and the ability of integrated programmes to develop partnerships with parents and make links with family support and early intervention services. Yet the concept of quality can be difficult to pin down. There are regulatory indicators such as Ofsted grades, tools used by practitioners to benchmark practice such as the Early Childhood Environment Ratings Scale (ECERS) and research evidence such as the EPPE study. Parents may also have a unique understanding of quality, noticing particularly, for example, the warmth of staff-child relationships or the quality of the physical environment in a setting.

Past research has considered the different definitions of quality held by different stakeholders (Mathers et al, 2012). Parents, professionals and researchers tend to define quality in a way that reflects sincere but pragmatic priorities, asking different questions such as 'What is best for my child and my family?', 'What will make this a successful setting?' or 'What will improve educational outcomes in school?' The priorities that emerge from these definitions often overlap but can also conflict. One defining tension in early years policy, for example, has been between the imperative of affordable care and the need for investment in well trained, well paid educators.

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## 1. Introduction

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The majority of long-standing early years services in England such as nursery schools, nursery classes and pre-schools were founded primarily with the aim of supporting children's development and are largely publicly funded. A number of local services pioneered integrated services incorporating education, childcare and family support, ultimately informing the roll out of the national children's centre programme. The rapid expansion of early years provision in the late 1990s and 2000s was in contrast driven by a combination of rising maternal employment and the introduction of free early education for three and four year olds (with choice for parents effectively allowing the offer to be used as a voucher scheme), and more generous support with childcare costs through working tax credit and employer-supported childcare vouchers. These new services were inevitably cost conscious since the majority of income came (and still comes) through parental fees.

The UK therefore has a legacy of fragmented policy in the early years, where initiatives and funding that affect early years services have often been focused on 'childcare' to support working parents or 'early education' to support children's development. The early years landscape today contains a variety of services but the pattern of state-funded early education, private and voluntary services and patches of integrated provision remains intact. It is easy to over-simplify trends in the quality of services but this pattern undoubtedly presents a structural constraint that any debate about quality in the early years must contend with.

The argument set out in this paper is that policy makers must change their mind-set, and focus on delivering high quality integrated early education and care, in order to deliver the type of high quality provision research evidence demonstrates will make a difference to children's outcomes. This means ending the divide between 'early education' and 'childcare' in policy making. Existing policy and funding frameworks in England do not drive high quality integrated early years services. Instead, processes and structures drive fragmentation and there is a tolerance of 'good enough' early years provision. This approach is failing children and families whose life chances could be improved through a better approach.

Quality in the early years is a complex and problematic concept. Through notions of quality in education, society embeds values and assumptions. These issues can be felt particularly acutely by those working in the early years where education and care can have a significant influence on a child's development. A point of particular tension in the UK in recent years has been concerns among early years practitioners about 'schoolification' – the inappropriate imposition of academic teaching and assessment expectations onto the early years.

One reason for these tensions is that early years practitioners have not for some time felt like partners in early years policy making. This paper seeks to encourage policy makers to re-engage not only with quality issues but with those working in the early years.

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## 2. Opportunities for policy makers

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### A: Supporting early years practitioners

The early years workforce has the greatest influence on the quality of education and care children receive. Qualifications are most often used as proxies for the capability of early years professionals, largely in response to evidence of a strong association between the presence of qualified staff and setting quality (Sylva et al, 2004; Mathers et al, 2011; Mathers et al, 2014). However, settings that are most effective in supporting children's development are distinguished not solely by the presence of one or more graduates, but a number of additional structural characteristics relating to staff including (OECD, 2012):

- ▶ staff-child ratios and 'out of ratio' time to monitor children's development and plan care;
- ▶ staffing structures, supervision and management;
- ▶ quality monitoring and improvement, including curriculum leadership;
- ▶ participation in continuing professional development and training;
- ▶ staff wages; and
- ▶ the rate of staff turnover.

These factors add up to a complex and multi-faceted picture, with a range of influences interacting and shaping care. It is perhaps easy to over-simplify the policy levers needed to support staff and raise quality.

#### **Staff qualifications**

The qualifications profile of the early years workforce has improved significantly in recent years. Different types of early years provision nevertheless have different workforce characteristics. Schools are required to deliver teacher-led care in early years provision for children aged three and over and support staff must have a 'level three' early years qualification (box 1 below provides examples of what each qualification level means in practice). In private and voluntary early years provision, these requirements do not apply and the qualifications profile is mixed (figure 1). Likewise, registered childminders are not required to hold an early years qualification, although many do.

## A: Supporting early years practitioners

### Box 1: Qualification levels

Level	Qualification
1	GCSE grade D to G, level 1 NVQ
2	GCSE A* to C, level 2 NVQ
3	A-level, level 3 NVQ, Early Years Educator
4	Level 4 NVQ (for example, Early Years Advanced Practitioner)
5	Level 5 NVQ (for example, Diploma in Leadership for Health and Social Care and Children and Young People's Services), foundation degree
6	Honours degree, Early Years Teacher, Qualified Teacher Status
7	Master's degree, Postgraduate Certificate of Education, National Award for Special Educational Needs Co-ordination
8	Doctorate (PhD)

There is significant variation in the proportion of children in free early education accessing graduate-led care (figure 2). On average, 49 per cent of two year olds in free early education and 79 per cent of three and four year olds receive graduate-led care in England. These figures incorporate children in both maintained and PVI (private, voluntary and independent) settings. For two year olds, the proportion of children in PVI settings receiving graduate-led care rose one per cent between 2015 and 2016. For three and four year olds, the proportion of children receiving graduate-led care in PVI settings has risen by three or four per cent in the last five years but rose only one per cent from 2015 to 2016. There is significant variation in progress among local authorities, with the proportion of three and four year olds in PVI settings receiving graduate-led care remaining flat or falling in fifteen per cent of local authorities between 2012 and 2016 (Butler and Hardy, 2016).

It is likely that slowing progress reflects a combination of the gradual winding down of support for early years graduate training at local authority level and declining recruitment to early years teacher courses. At the moment, there are a number of routes to qualify as an early years teacher (see box 2) but perversely those already working in the early years can face the greatest barriers to qualification. Rising entry standards and growing awareness of limitations of EYT status – lower pay than qualified teachers and limited job opportunities – may undermine recruitment. Many of the early years practitioners that became Early Years Professionals under previous training initiatives had been long-standing early years practitioners. The 'low hanging fruit' among committed staff may as a result have been consumed by previous initiatives.

In addition to ensuring that teaching in the early years is an attractive prospect, the Government can help by introducing and funding a requirement for graduate teaching leadership in every setting with a realistic implementation timeframe. This would provide a framework for workforce planning and recruitment. In particular, this should include incorporating the early years into the Teacher Supply Model used by the Department for Education, which is used to monitor and plan sufficient teacher recruitment, and building clear routes into teaching roles for good early years practitioners who cannot access existing routes.

## A: Supporting early years practitioners

### Box 2: Graduate entry routes in the early years

Around 13,000 new teachers enter primary phase Qualified Teacher Status training courses each year.<sup>2</sup> Primary phase QTS courses cover ages 3-7, 3-9 or 5-11 in accordance with National College for Teaching and Leadership training criteria. These courses are designed to prepare teachers to teach in primary schools with nursery classes. Students may access loans through Student Finance England to pay tuition fees and cover maintenance costs. Entry requirements for QTS courses require A-level or equivalent qualifications and at least five GCSEs at grade C or above, including English and Maths.

The vast majority of qualifying teachers will enter state primary schools, where they will receive a salary in line with the nationally negotiated teacher pay scale. In 2016, qualified teacher salaries start at £22,467 outside London in 2016/17 and teachers are entitled to automatic pay progression (up to in £33,160 in the 'main' pay range) provided knowledge, skills and performance targets are met. A small number of newly qualified teachers may enter independent schools.

Separately, around 2,000 places are available to study towards an Early Years Teacher (EYT) qualification, which focuses on the Early Years Foundation Stage framework and children age zero to five.<sup>3</sup> In 2014/15, however, 860 students took up places on EYT courses.<sup>4</sup> The content of the EYT course is directed by the National College for Teaching and Leadership. EYT students can enter PVI early years settings in graduate leader roles, although some may enter in non-supervisory positions if graduate roles are not available. Starting salaries may be similar to those for a QTS role at £19,000 to £23,000 but there is no framework for pay progression. The EYT qualification does not qualify students to teach early years classes in maintained settings, which requires QTS status.

There are four routes to gain an EYT qualification:

- ▶ Existing graduates may study full-time for one year and receive £7,000 towards course fees as well as a bursary of up to £5,000 from the Department for Education.
- ▶ Graduates already working in early years settings may follow an employment-based route, studying part-time for one year. Students can access £14,000 of support (£7,000 to help cover course fees and a £7,000 grant for the setting to cover additional costs while a student is training).
- ▶ A three or four year (with placement) undergraduate course is available and is supported through undergraduate funding arrangements by Student Finance England.
- ▶ Finally, there is an 'assessment only' route available to experienced practitioners, which takes place over three months and is self-funded.

2 Department for Education and National College for Teaching and Leadership (2016) Initial teacher training: trainee number census - 2015 to 2016

3 National College for Teaching and Leadership (2015) *Allocations Methodology: Early Years Initial Teacher Training Academic Year 2016/2017*

4 National College for Teaching and Leadership (2015) *Annual report and accounts for the year ended 31 March 2015*

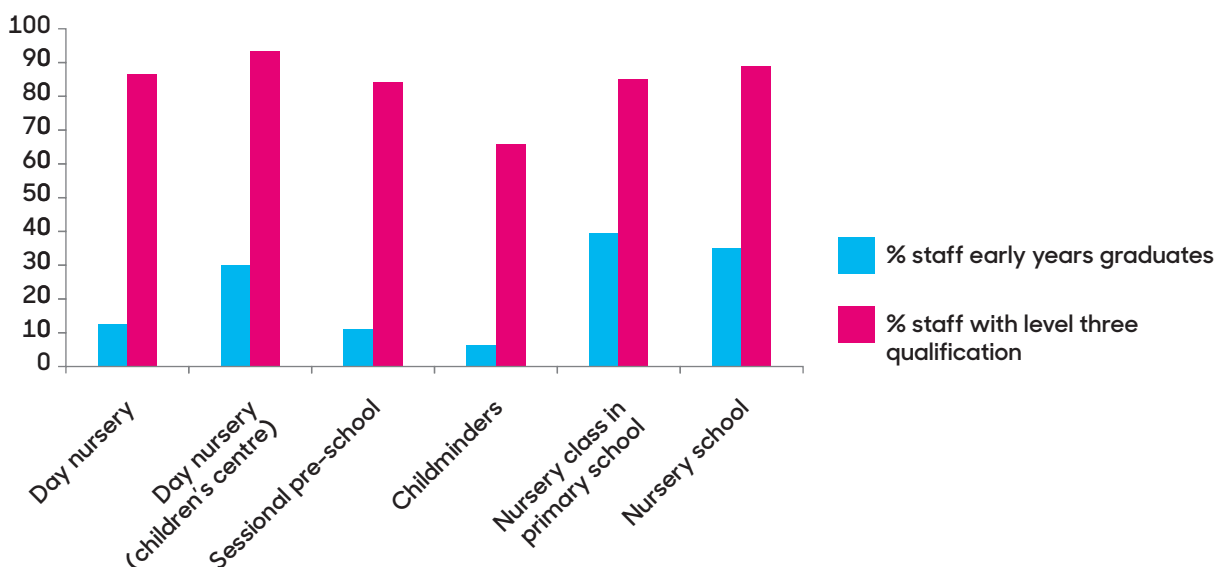
## A: Supporting early years practitioners

Entry requirements for these courses are set by training institutions and vary but are typically less rigorous than for QTS status. Students must, however, have GCSE English and Maths at grade C or above and pass a professional skills test in these subjects.

Finally, early years staff that do not have a degree may study, usually over two years, towards a foundation degree to provide a platform for obtaining an EYT qualification. Students can access a tuition loan to cover course fees but do not have access to the grants available to EYT students.

The Nutbrown Review recommended integrating the EYT and QTS qualification routes into a new specialist birth to seven early years route to QTS status. The Review highlighted that a status that is not the same as QTS will never be seen as its equal, holding back recruitment in the early years, and that there are no teacher training routes covering the birth to three age range. The Government did not accept this recommendation but instead reformed the Early Years Professional status into a new 'Early Years Teacher' birth to five status. The Government has, however, aligned entry standards for EYT and QTS courses.

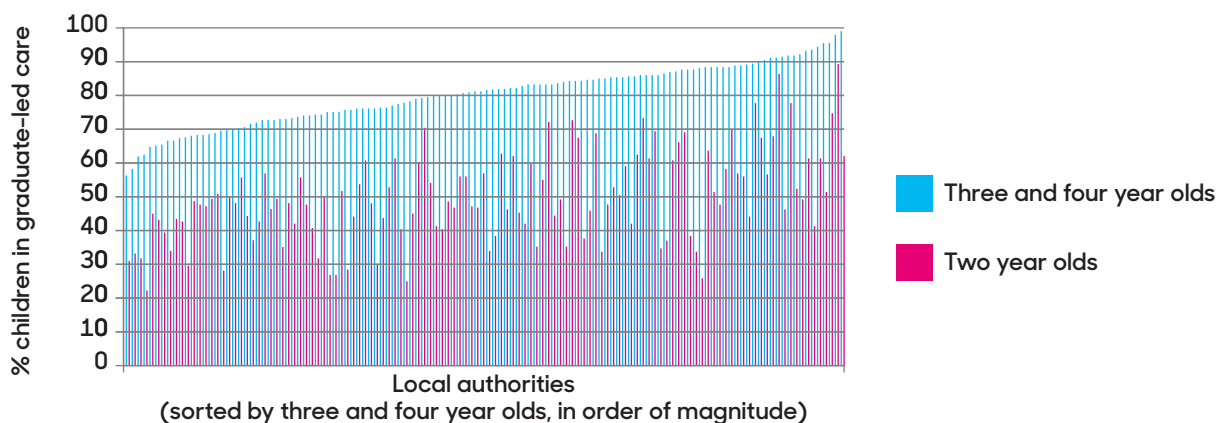
Figure 1: Proportion of early years practitioners with graduate or level three qualifications



Source: Brind et al (2014) Childcare and Early Years Provider Survey 2013

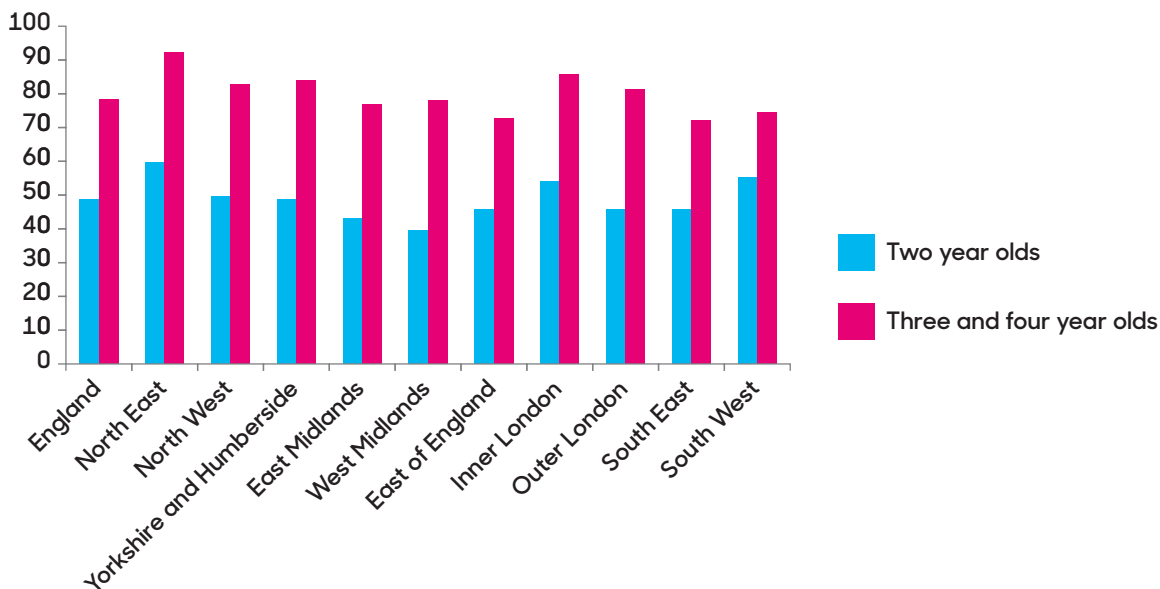
## A: Supporting early years practitioners

Figure 2: % children receiving graduate-led free early education by local authority



Source: Department for Education (2016) Education provision: children under 5 years of age, January 2016

Figure 3: % children receiving graduate-led free early education by region



Source: Department for Education (2016) Education provision: children under 5 years of age, January 2016

## A: Supporting early years practitioners

### Staff wages

There are sharp differences in pay for staff in maintained and private and voluntary settings (figure 4). The link between staff pay and quality in education is well-established (OECD, 2012; Maughan et al, 2016). Pay affects recruitment and retention: current levels of pay mean that it is very unlikely high calibre graduates who wish to work with young children will train as early years teachers (rather than as primary school teachers). Skilled non-graduates with a range of professional options are also likely to be discouraged from pursuing work in the early years. Established staff in private and voluntary settings will tend to aspire to a comparably well paid role in a maintained service, making it difficult for PVI providers to attract and retain experienced staff. There is also good evidence that, for educators, pay relative to the local labour market influences performance: in the case of PVI early years provision, salaries tend to compare poorly to local wages for skilled professional occupations and the salaries of peers in maintained early years provision and schools.

Figure 4: Hourly wage by practitioner role and setting type

	Private or voluntary daycare	Private or voluntary sessional pre-school	Daycare in children's centre	Nursery class	Nursery school
Non-supervisory staff	£6.80	£7.30	£8.60	£10.20	£11.50
Supervisory staff	£8.70	£8.90	£12.60		
Manager	£11.20	£10.80	£17.30		
Teacher				£19.40	£22.50

Source: Brind et al (2014) *Childcare and Early Years Provider Survey 2013*

The PVI-maintained 'fault line' in pay and conditions in the early years poses challenges for service development. Private and voluntary providers struggle to attract the qualified, motivated and skilled staff they need to deliver care that meets increasingly demanding quality standards, while schools struggle to deliver the flexibility that is increasingly expected of them because staff terms and conditions make it difficult to offer wraparound care outside the school day and during school holidays.

The Family and Childcare Trust recently explored the relationship between staff pay and setting quality (Maughan et al, 2016). Mean hourly pay was £0.93 higher in settings rated 'outstanding' by Ofsted than those rated 'good', and £0.52 higher in settings rated 'good' than those rated 'requires improvement' and 'inadequate'. Average mean hourly pay in 'requires improvement' and 'inadequate' settings was less than the living wage in all regions of England. In the majority of regions, mean hourly pay for settings with 'good' grades was more than the living wage, and mean hourly pay was higher than the national living wage in 'outstanding' grades for all regions.



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## A: Supporting early years practitioners

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There are a number of reasons pay might affect setting-level performance and Ofsted grades. Higher pay is likely to reduce staff turnover leading to more stable staff structures and consistent growth in experience and skills. Settings that offer higher pay are also more likely to invest in continuing professional development. Higher rates of pay could also function as a proxy indicator of the resources available to a setting to invest in non-wage quality factors such as out-of-ratio time to monitor children's development and plan care.

The fault line in pay in the early years cannot be ignored indefinitely. Raising both staff qualifications and wages significantly would require a rethink of the way early years services are funded because the fees needed to support settings would be far more than parents could afford to pay. The Family and Childcare Trust developed proposals for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's strategy to solve poverty in the UK that show how funding could be reformed to deliver high quality care while controlling parental fees (Butler and Rutter, 2016). However, these proposals require sustained long-term investment and could not be implemented immediately.

Cooke and Lawton (2008), set out proposals for an aspirational early years pay framework that would not dictate pay but would set a floor for each role, agreed on a regional basis by early years stakeholders. Professor Iram Siraj in her review of the Scottish early learning and childcare workforce also suggested that the Scottish Government develop a pay scale for the early years that is binding for maintained provision but 'aspirational' for private and voluntary providers (Siraj, 2015).

A pay framework developed by government, local authorities and leading early years providers would have a powerful normative role. Government and local authorities would also be able to use their leverage through funding free early education and childcare to raise wages. While improvements in pay would be capped by what it is practical for providers to offer, if the Government, local authorities and providers can agree on reasonable floors, reflected in funding for free early education and childcare, significant improvements can be made. These rates might begin at a pragmatic level based on an analysis of the wages needed to attract and retain high calibre candidates in the context of local labour markets.

### The Nutbrown Review

A number of wider structural factors affect early years staff. In 2010, the then government commissioned Professor Cathy Nutbrown to lead an independent review of early education and childcare qualifications. The subsequent *Foundations for Quality* report published in 2012 found that many qualifications lacked rigour, depth and consistency and were not systematically equipping practitioners with the knowledge, skills and understanding they need to provide high quality care (Department for Education, 2012b). The report contained a suite of recommendations designed to address these issues and raise expectations of what it means to work with young children and attract the best people into the early years workforce.

## A: Supporting early years practitioners

Four years later, the Government's record of implementing these recommendations is patchy (figure 5). The Department for Education acted to simplify and reform early years qualifications through new Early Years Educator (EYE) and Early Years Teacher (EYT) qualifications, with a new requirement that staff entering EYE courses have a GCSE in English and Maths at grade C or above. Some of the Nutbrown Review's key recommendations, such as requiring that all staff delivering the EYFS have a level three qualification, creating parity between EYT status and Qualified Teacher Status and strengthening SEND content within qualifications have not, however, been taken forward.

The requirement for staff entering EYE courses to have a GCSE in English and Maths at grade C or above was later shifted to a requirement that trainees have these qualifications at the end of a course due to the difficulty training providers have experienced attracting students with the requisite qualifications. The Department for Education is now (November 2016) consulting on how this requirement can be implemented in a way that is viable for early years settings. This issue illustrates that while there are widely shared aspirations for a higher qualified workforce, the practical steps needed to achieve it – higher pay and status, particularly – lag behind these ambitions.

**Figure 5: Implementation of the Nutbrown Review recommendations**

Recommendation	Action
1. The Government should continue to specify the qualifications that are suitable for staff operating within the EYFS, and the Teaching Agency should develop a more robust set of 'full and relevant' criteria to ensure qualifications promote the right content and pedagogical processes.	The Teaching Agency has developed a new set of 'full and relevant' criteria for the Early Years Educator level 3 qualification. However, concerns have been expressed about the content of the criteria. The Association for Professional Development in the Early Years (TACTYC) stated that the criteria 'offer an inadequately narrow view of early years learning and development' and argued that the focus on school readiness and directive approaches, without an emphasis on play and exploration, is inappropriate to evidence-led early years pedagogy.
2. All qualifications commenced from 1 September 2013 must demonstrate that they meet the new 'full and relevant' criteria when being considered against the requirements of the EYFS.	Met.
3. The previously articulated plan to move to a single early years qualification should be abandoned.	Met.
4. The Government should consider the best way to badge qualifications that meet the new 'full and relevant' criteria so that people can recognise under what set of 'full and relevant' criteria a qualification has been gained.	Met: qualifications now badged as 'Early Years Educator' and 'Early Years Teacher'.

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5. The EYFS requirements should be revised so that, by September 2022, all staff counting in the staff:child ratios must be qualified at level 3.	Not met.
6. The EYFS requirements should be revised so that, from September 2013, a minimum of 50 per cent of staff in group settings need to possess at least a 'full and relevant' level 3 to count in the staff:child ratios.	Not met.
7. The EYFS requirements should be revised so that, from September 2015, a minimum of 70 per cent of staff in group settings need to possess at least a 'full and relevant' level 3 to count in the staff:child ratios.	Not met.
8. Level 2 English and Mathematics should be entry requirements to level 3 early education and childcare courses.	Met.
9. Tutors should be qualified to a higher level than the course they are teaching.	Accepted – the Department for Education will promote as good practice
10. All tutors should have regular continuing professional development and contact with early years settings. Colleges and training providers should allow sufficient time for this.	Accepted – the Department for Education will promote as good practice
11. Only settings that are rated 'Good' or 'Outstanding' by Ofsted should be able to host students on placement.	Accepted – the Department for Education will promote as good practice
12. Colleges and training providers should look specifically at the setting's ability to offer students high quality placements.	Accepted – the Department for Education will promote as good practice
13. The Department for Education should conduct research on the number of BME staff at different qualification levels, and engage with the sector to address any issues identified.	Kept under review by the Department for Education.
14. Newly qualified practitioners starting in their first employment should have mentoring for at least the first six months. If the setting is rated below 'Good', this mentoring should come from outside.	Not met.
15. A suite of online induction and training modules should be brought together by the Government, that can be accessed by everyone working in early education and childcare.	Not met.
16. A new early years specialist route to QTS, specialising in the years from birth to seven, should be introduced, starting from September 2013.	Not met.
17. Any individual holding Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) should be able to access routes to obtain QTS as a priority.	Not met.
18. I recommend that Government considers the best way to maintain and increase graduate pedagogical leadership in all early years settings.	No action taken.
19. I am not recommending that the Government impose a licensing system on the early years sector. However, the Government should consider supporting a sector-led approach, if an affordable and sustainable one emerges with widespread sector support.	No action taken.

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### Professional and personal development

The differences between staff in different settings are not limited to qualifications. Staff in schools have the benefit of contractual terms and conditions that guarantee a certain amount of training as well as access to the wider school budget and support structure. The structure of school provision itself supports professional development with inset days and time outside term-time dedicated to preparation and development. Some early years group providers are able to replicate a similar level of support, but survey evidence suggests that small single site settings with limited resources tend to struggle to do so, particularly where local authority support is limited (NDNA, 2016; PACEY, 2015).

There are a number of barriers that hamper professional development in the early years. PVI settings that do not have graduate-leaders often operate a relatively simple staffing model with carers, supervisory room leaders and a setting manager. Staff may acquire specific responsibilities such as acting as the setting SEND coordinator or curriculum lead. Pay differentials between staff can be limited, however, which dampens incentives to take on more responsibility. For many staff there are limited expectations of continuing development, limited support to access development opportunities and minimal rewards for doing so.

A teacher in early years provision in primary school in contrast has access to the same routes of progression as other teachers, such as supervising the early years provision in the school, becoming a deputy head and in some cases a headteacher. (However, nursery nurses – staff with level three qualifications in schools – do not have access to this progression.) Crucially, teacher progression is linked to both incremental pay improvements as well as more significant salary increases with role changes. This means there are strong incentives for teachers to engage proactively with professional development. Childminders do not have the same opportunities for progression. However, where childminder networks exist, these can provide opportunities for childminders to progress into leadership, training or mentoring roles.

There are three elements to improving progression opportunities: a clear knowledge and skills framework supporting continuing professional development standards; clear progression pathways aligned with standards in the EYFS framework that recognise that a higher level of expertise is necessary for certain roles; and meaningful financial incentives to progress.

The early years sector is representative of a wider problem that effects workforce progression in other low-paid sectors where small pay increments between entry level and the next tier of responsibility can create limited incentives to train or take on additional responsibility (D'Arcy and Hurrell, 2014). Moving into a supervisory role appears, on average, to be linked to a premium in private and voluntary settings of 28 per cent. This is a substantial increase but should also be seen in the context of relatively modest average hourly pay for supervisors of £8.70, still well below the average of £10.20 earned by non-supervisory staff in a nursery class. It is difficult for settings that cannot offer higher wages to avoid this mid-level trap, which inevitably acts against retaining good staff.

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Each of these barriers has a solution. There is too much ambiguity about the appropriate expertise for professionals occupying different roles in a setting. Offering more clarity about the right level of experience and expertise for those who supervise staff, lead teaching and the curriculum and act as a SEND coordinator would create more progression steps. The Nutbrown Review, for example, set out a suggested career pathway for early years professionals, with a 'Senior Practitioner' role as an interim step between practitioner and teaching positions. Committing to an early years workforce in which care is graduate-led would also create a progression route available to far more early years practitioners. An early years CPD framework, discussed in box 3, would provide structure and impetus to in-service training and development.

### Box 3: Developing a continuing professional development (CPD) framework for the early years

Currently, the statutory EYFS framework requires that:<sup>5</sup> *Providers must support staff to undertake appropriate training and professional development opportunities to ensure they offer quality learning and development experiences for children that continually improves.* In practice, this requirement may result in a wide range of outcomes, from a carefully structured CPD programme to the minimum necessary to demonstrate compliance to Ofsted.

There is already a wealth of support available to settings to support CPD in the early years. This includes, for example, CPD pathways developed by national early years organisations such as PACEY, the National Day Nurseries Association and the Pre-school Learning Alliance as well as CPD programmes developed by local authorities. These offers tend to have similar characteristics, centred around a commitment to undertake a certain number of CPD hours each year supported by an accessible training programme to support practitioners to meet the commitment.

The EYFS framework and commercial training offers are not driving a consistent commitment to professional development in the early years. Without clear standards, the level of CPD to which practitioners have access is likely to remain variable and dependent on setting-level decisions. While providers should be able to respond to the needs of their staff, a situation in which participation in CPD is optional and often reflects resource constraints is not acceptable for a professional workforce. A clear framework would benefit practitioners and provide the structure for government and local authorities to work with providers to overcome resource barriers.

CPD frameworks developed in other fields provide examples of the process through which standards could be agreed and implemented in the early years. The 'Standard for teachers' professional development' produced by the Department for Education provides one model. The standard sets out expectations that professional development should:<sup>6</sup>

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5 Department for Education (2014) *Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage*

6 Department for Education (2016) *Standard for teachers' professional development: Implementation guidance for school leaders, teachers, and organisations that offer professional development for teachers*

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- ▶ have a clear focus on improving pupil outcomes;
- ▶ be underpinned by robust evidence and expertise;
- ▶ include collaboration and expert challenge;
- ▶ be sustained over time; and
- ▶ prioritised by school leaders.

The standard sets out a clear expectation that professional development is not a one-off activity or the ad hoc completion of external training activities, but should be a sustained, coherent programme which includes structured, collaborative activities to build expertise and embed expert practice.

A different example of a development framework for a sector containing staff with variable levels of qualifications is the Dementia Core Skills Education and Training Framework, which aims to support delivery of appropriate and consistent dementia education and training for the health and care workforce.<sup>7</sup> The Framework breaks skills into subject areas, such as 'Dementia risk reduction and prevention' and 'Living well with dementia and promoting independence', and clearly identifies which professionals should be concerned with which subjects. Key learning outcomes and links to relevant guidance and standards are then provided for each standard to guide professional development. The framework also sets expectations about the expertise and knowledge of those who deliver training.

The framework was developed by Skills for Health, Health Education England and Skills for Care through an expert group including relevant Royal Colleges, health, social care and education sector organisations, which was supported by a larger reference group, including service users and carers, and online consultation.

Ultimately, a CPD framework for the early years should be a unique framework developed in collaboration with early years stakeholders. Key elements of a CPD framework that reflect good practice but are absent from the policy and regulatory frameworks that set minimum standards include:

- ▶ A suggested minimum commitment of hours.
- ▶ A programme of training and activities that supports *personal* development as well as professional development.
- ▶ The requirement for those who make decisions about professional development and deliver training to have the experience and background to do so to a satisfactory standard (and clear guidance to provide clarity on what this means).
- ▶ A structure for post-qualification knowledge and skills development to recognise higher level skills and link so far as possible to remuneration.

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<sup>7</sup> Skills for Health (2016) *Dementia Core Skills Education and Training Framework*

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An early years CPD framework would provide new opportunities. For example, all settings are now required to identify a SEND coordinator. It is unsatisfactory for these coordinators to have no specialist SEND knowledge or training, but nor is it likely to be possible to put a qualified postgraduate SENCO in every early years setting for the foreseeable future. A knowledge and skills framework can set expectations for practitioners moving into the SEND coordinator role and drive improvement within realistic constraints.

- ▶ Given the expertise of, and work already undertaken by, early years organisations, developing a national agreement for CPD is far from an unsurmountable challenge. As policy aspirations for the early years rise and the early years workforce approaches the point at which all practitioners have a minimum level 3 qualification, expectations for CPD should be set at a higher level. However, higher standards must be matched with sufficient investment for providers to deliver CPD.

### Professional representation in the early years

One reason relatively little progress has been made in improving conditions for early years staff is low levels of professional representation. There are over 400,000 professionals working in the early years, but no clear organisation providing professional leadership for practitioners. Many staff are no doubt union members and some also belong to early years organisations such as the Pre-school Learning Alliance, which offers both setting and individual membership, and PACEY (formerly the National Childminders Association). The National Day Nurseries Association also acts on behalf of PVI day nurseries. These organisations, which are the dominant voices in public representation for the early years, have successful track records but are not well-placed to (nor have sought to) act as representative bodies for practitioners, in part because of an unavoidable conflict of interest in representing both setting managers, often also business owners, and staff.

The absence of leadership for practitioners in the early years is felt in an imbalance in public debates – in the media and in political discussion – about early years policy and funding, which focus primarily on political issues such as childcare fees and setting-level issues such as financial sustainability. These issues are, of course, important, but do not provide a comprehensive perspective and tend to pull focus from the circumstances of staff who have the most impact on children's experiences. Without a strong public and political voice, practitioner issues are inevitably pushed aside when difficult decisions are made about policy and resources. This is far from inevitable in a large, professional workforce.

There are a range of potential models to strengthen professional leadership in the early years. Cathy Nutbrown considered the merits of licensing but did not find that it would add sufficient value if other recommendations to improve qualifications and access to CPD were accepted, particularly in light of the potential costs (Department for Education, 2012). In contrast, TACTYC

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has argued that there is a long-term need both for a licensing body and a Teaching Council or similar body for the early years (Payler and Wood, 2014). The closure of the College of Social Work and the General Teaching Council offer recent lessons in the potential for workforce initiatives led by the Government to struggle if they do not enjoy the full support of either the Government or professionals.

Professional representation is not the only option to promote higher workforce standards. Box 4 sets out a recent example from Australia where the Government has asked a regulatory body to undertake work to attract and develop high quality early years professionals and support professional development. This approach is less likely to promote more balance in early years policy making through strong advocacy for professionals but would be a constructive route to address failures in existing professional structures in the early years.

### Box 4: Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority

The Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority has responsibility for supporting professional development and leadership opportunities and promoting the role of early childhood practitioners, for example by:

- ▶ Engaging with the sector to identify and promote quality professional development and encourage participation.
- ▶ Developing guidance for management, leadership and governance of organisations that highlights effective practices that attract, retain and develop a professional workforce.
- ▶ Building further understanding among parents and the community about the importance of qualified educators who support children's learning and development.
- ▶ Recognising and promote excellent practice within the ECEC profession.

Source: [www.acecqa.gov.au](http://www.acecqa.gov.au)

The fragmentation of early years provision means that staff and settings of varying types tend to have separate identities and priorities. At present, it is unclear that any specific group or organisation is well placed to provide professional leadership. Yet there are clear shared priorities and values among early years professionals. Existing professional bodies such as the Royal College of Nursing show the potential of a workforce of a similar size to that in the early years to support an effective representative organisation that does not license professionals.

A professional organisation for the early years must have a clear purpose and remit, be independent and have the confidence of its members. As the early years workforce becomes increasingly professionalised, the relevance and viability of a new professional organisation is increasing. Although there are significant hurdles in establishing such an organisation, a starting point is to recognise that there is a void in professional representation, improve understanding of the needs of staff that are not being addressed and support practitioners to take ownership of the issue.



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## A: Supporting early years practitioners

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### Recommendations

- ▶ The Department for Education should develop a new workforce settlement for early years staff who do not have a graduate qualification, with a clear progression framework and continuing professional development standards.
- ▶ The Department for Education should establish an early years workforce advisory council to maintain progress in the transition to a fully-qualified, graduate-led early years workforce.
- ▶ The Government should re-commit to a vision of graduate-led early education and childcare by making teaching in the early years a priority area for teacher recruitment and incorporate early years into the Teacher Supply Model.
- ▶ Early years practitioners, unions and representative organisations should work together to initiate an independent, practitioner-led commission on professional representation for early years professionals.

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## B: Early years regulation and quality improvement

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The early years regulatory system in England is led by Ofsted, which registers and inspects providers (see box 5). The current regulatory framework was established in 2001 when the registration of early years services was transferred from local authorities to Ofsted. The role of Ofsted would be to inspect providers against national minimum standards. To complement Ofsted, local authorities retained responsibilities to support early years providers in their area. The regulation framework was updated through the Childcare Act 2006, which placed stronger duties on local authorities to work to improve outcomes for children. At the time, this was explained simply:<sup>8</sup>

*The Childcare Act 2006 places a duty on local authorities and their partners to improve outcomes for all young children and reduce inequalities between them. Fulfilling this duty requires a broad and inclusive strategy, part of which should focus on the provision of high quality early learning and care.*

Guidance provided to local authorities emphasised the importance of a broad strategy to improve quality, involving for example a system of quality support and challenge at a local level and strong partnerships between the local authority, settings and each setting's community. Following the initial guidance produced in 2008 to support implementation of the Childcare Act 2006 (quoted above), no further guidance for local authorities has been developed.

The coalition Government pursued a programme of deregulation which affected local authority work in the early years. Local authorities had been able to withhold funding for free early education from providers that did not achieve good Ofsted grades and often made funding conditional on participation in a bespoke local quality monitoring programme. Amendments to regulations from 2014 required local authorities to fund providers (except those with 'Unsatisfactory' grades) regardless of participation in local quality improvement support.

Local authorities retain duties set out in the Childcare Act 2006 to improve outcomes for children, but statutory guidance from the Department for Education on delivering free early education and childcare no longer draws a direct link between promoting high quality early education and meeting these duties. The role of local authorities is instead more narrowly framed in relation to supporting providers with poor Ofsted inspections grades.<sup>9</sup> There has therefore been both a retrenchment in the amount of activity local authorities are required to undertake and a change in the nature of this activity.

A recent Family and Childcare Trust report gathered data from 89 local authorities on their current practice in supporting quality in the early years (Butler and Hardy, 2016). The survey suggests that most local authorities continue to offer a basic universal service to providers, including updates on early years policies and frameworks, access to a subsidised training programme and an

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8 Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008) *Early Years Quality Improvement Support Programme: Guidance Tools and Materials to support local authority Early Years Consultants and leaders of early years settings in quality improvement.*

9 Department for Education (2014) *Early education and childcare: Statutory guidance for local authorities*

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## B: Early years regulation and quality improvement

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annual visit. However, additional support is now primarily only delivered to providers with 'Requires improvement' or 'Unsatisfactory' Ofsted grades. Local authority early years staff raised concerns about this trend, highlighting that they now have a limited ability to spot and respond to quality problems at an early stage, so tend to intervene late rather than early; sometimes find it difficult to engage providers with support and training that can help improve practice; and no longer have a strong platform to engage with providers and meet duties to reduce inequalities between children.

One reason the local authority role remains important is that the practice of using Ofsted grades as the sole proxy of quality is problematic. Research looking at deprivation and quality indicators known to predict children's outcomes suggests that Ofsted inspections are a relatively broad brush measure (Mathers and Smees, 2014). Ofsted grades do not capture a finely grained assessment of a setting's success in supporting children's development in areas most strongly associated with outcomes, such as language and reasoning, and do not include important information on factors that influence care within the setting such as the social mix of children and staff qualifications and turnover. Past research has also questioned the extent to which inspection grades 'capture a rich and complete picture of quality' (Mathers, Singler and Karemaker, 2012). Mathers and Smees (2014) suggest that Ofsted could collect data on setting characteristics and known quality predictors during inspections, such as staff qualifications and the social mix of children, and should consider what additional measures could be gathered.

It is unlikely to be feasible to return to a situation in which local authorities may compel providers to participate in local authority-led quality improvement arrangements. There are now a diversity of approaches to quality improvement, with large group providers particularly tending to develop in-house arrangements. Nevertheless, it is also unsatisfactory to allow providers that cannot make such arrangements themselves often due to resourcing issues, or in a small proportion of cases are disinclined to do so, to go without support.

Two steps would help to close these gaps. The EYFS framework could be amended to require settings to demonstrate effective quality monitoring and improvement arrangements. This would not dictate specific arrangements but set a clear expectation of meeting good practice. The Department for Education should also be more positive about the local authority role in working with early years settings to drive early intervention strategies and to collect sufficient local intelligence to catch problems at an early stage and design quality support effectively.

Finally, one simple step Ofsted could take to improve the transparency of early years inspection outcomes is to publicise early years inspection grades in schools. Primary schools with early years provision receive a distinct early years grade each time the school is inspected by Ofsted. Early years provision in a school is inspected in line with the grade descriptors in the Early Years Inspection Handbook. However, although this grade is available in the school inspection report, it is not published alongside the school inspection grade. As a result, overall school grades tend to be conflated with the quality of early years provision. This undermines transparency in early years provision and means parents may not have the information they need to make good decisions about where to arrange care for their children.

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## B: Early years regulation and quality improvement

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### Box 5: The early years registration and inspection framework

Regulation in the early years rests on a statutory framework set out under the Childcare Act 2006. The Act itself includes learning and development and safeguarding and welfare requirements under section 39. These requirements are given practical substance through the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework, which is also a statutory document issued under the Childcare Act. The EYFS sets out:

- ▶ seven areas of learning and development, three of which are 'prime' areas such as 'communication and language', which are complemented by four 'specific' areas where the prime areas are strengthened and applied such as 'literacy';
- ▶ early learning goals, which summarise the knowledge, skills and understanding that young children should have gained by the end of the Reception year;
- ▶ assessment requirements (when and how practitioners must assess children's achievements, and when and how they should discuss children's progress with parents and/or carers); and
- ▶ safety and welfare requirements covering issues such as child protection, staff qualifications and ratios, food and refreshments, health and medicines, and the safety and suitability of the premises.

Early years settings are also required by the Childcare Act to register with Ofsted. Ofsted in turn is required by the Act to inspect every setting. Ofsted must inspect a setting within six months of registration. Subsequent inspections occur within a fixed four year inspection cycle. The last inspection cycle ran from 1 September 2012 to 31 July 2016, and the current inspection cycle runs from 2016 to 2020.

Ofsted prioritises inspections using risk-based criteria. If concerns are raised about a setting or there is a high turnover of managers, Ofsted may arrange an early or repeat inspection. Good settings are therefore more likely to be inspected at the end of an inspection cycle. This system ensures that all settings are inspected at least once in each four year cycle, but also means that settings can go more than four years without an inspection (for example, a setting inspected in the middle of the last inspection cycle might be inspected at the end of the current cycle with a five or six year interval).

Ofsted has developed an Early Years Inspection Handbook which sets out how registered early years settings will be inspected. The handbook includes an evaluation schedule which sets out in detail how an inspector will judge how well a setting is meeting the learning and development and safeguarding and welfare requirements of the EYFS framework. The handbook also sets out how Ofsted inspectors will discuss concerns and areas for improvement with a setting before finalising an inspection grade.

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## B: Early years regulation and quality improvement

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### Recommendations

- ▶ Ofsted should collect a richer range of quality metrics as part of the inspection process, including staff qualifications, turnover and retention rates.
- ▶ Ofsted should consider publishing online the separate grade for early years provision in schools.
- ▶ Future revisions of the EYFS framework should include requirements for settings to have in place effective arrangements for continuing quality improvement and curriculum leadership.
- ▶ The Department for Education should consider incorporating a requirement in the EYFS framework for settings to show how they promote the involvement of children from a range of social backgrounds.
- ▶ Statutory early years guidance for local authorities should continue to highlight the importance of an effective strategy to support high quality early education and childcare.

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## C: Supporting and monitoring children's development in the early years

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Monitoring children's development is an integral part of high quality care. Prior to the introduction of the EYFS framework, three documents shaped practice: the non-statutory *Birth to Three Matters* and *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* and a set of regulatory national minimum standards (Department for Education and Skills, 2004, 2000 and 2003). The EYFS framework, which was introduced in 2008, sought to build on existing practice guidance and create a consistent approach to care, learning and development from birth, helping to raise quality and reduce the number of changes that children and families experience. A further aim of the integrated standards was to improve early identification and support wider integration of services such as health visitors and children's centres.

The Tickell Review found that the introduction of the EYFS framework, an integrated framework of welfare and learning and development standards in the early years, had a positive overall impact (Department for Education, 2011). Practitioners have a shared understanding of the stages of children's development, a well-evidenced ethos built on the unique child and play-centred pedagogy, and a clear understanding of safety and welfare requirements to be adhered to by every setting.

Alongside the EYFS framework, the Government introduced the EYFS profile assessment, which must be completed for each child before the end of the academic year in which they turn five (usually in reception class). The primary purpose of the EYFS profile assessment is to provide year one primary school teachers with reliable and accurate information about each child's level of development to support them to plan and respond to each child's needs. The EYFS profile assessment data is also valuable to commissioners and professionals to help them understand trends in local child development and monitor how well early years services are supporting and improving outcomes for children.

The future of the EYFS profile assessment is uncertain as the Government seeks to create a new baseline assessment in reception class (see box 6). The prospect that the EYFS profile assessment will lose its statutory status has created concern among professionals both about inappropriate testing in the early years through new baseline assessments more narrowly focused on school readiness and the loss of a valuable way of understanding trends in early development and improving local early years services.

Following the Tickell Review, the Government committed to introduce an 'integrated review' for two year olds, which links the health and development check that is part of the universal Healthy Child Programme and the mandatory EYFS framework progress check at age two. Implementation pilots suggested the checks have the potential to be successful but revealed challenges including new training requirements for staff in early years settings, instances of a lack of trust between professionals, data sharing obstacles and the need to find ways to communicate well about the review with parents (Blades et al, 2014).

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## C: Supporting and monitoring children's development in the early years

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Many early years professionals have concerns about aspects of the early years curriculum and assessment. These range from relatively practical issues, such as caution about the influence of the curriculum on practitioner habits, focusing on deficits rather than recognising each child develops at a unique way and supporting their development, to dissatisfaction with the squeezing of an early years curriculum in the birth to age five period rather than a more coherent zero to age seven (Payler and Wood, 2014). One strong theme of concern is 'schoolification' in which the growing emphasis on literacy and numeracy at an early stage in primary school affects expectations in the early years in a manner that is not age-appropriate.

The push towards accountability for performance in schools has disrupted coherent arrangements for monitoring children's development in the early years. The Government risks a drift from properly evidenced approaches to monitoring development and undermining the evidence local base communities need to support children. Monitoring of children's development in the early years through the integrated review at age two, the process of tracking children's development in early education using the EYFS framework and finally the EYFS profile assessment in reception class can never offer a simple yardstick of 'achievement'. Instead, these tools support professionals to understand and respond to each child's needs to best support their development, as well as the evidence needed to identify trends in outcomes within settings and areas and improve services.

It is right that monitoring and assessment arrangements in the early years are child-centred and it is bad policy to prioritise assessment arrangements that suit schools at the cost of high quality care in the early years. It is likely the root of these problems lies to some degree in the relatively arbitrary line drawn in England at age five between the early years and primary school and the lack of integration of policy frameworks across age groups. This contrasts, for example, with arrangements in Northern Europe where children have a right to free early education but begin school at age six or seven, and notably also in Wales where children start school at age five but a zero to seven Foundation Phase curriculum is in place (OECD, 2012).

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## C: Supporting and monitoring children's development in the early years

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### Recommendations

- ▶ The Department for Education and the Department for Health should conduct a stock take of progress in implementing the integrated review at age two, identify barriers to delivery and ensure local authorities continue to move towards effective integrated models.
- ▶ The Department for Education should retain a mandatory EYFS profile assessment at age five.

### Box 6: The Early Years Foundation Stage profile assessment

The EYFS profile assessment is administered in the final term before a child reaches age five, usually in reception class. The main purpose of the assessment is to provide a reliable, valid and accurate assessment of individual pupils at the end of the EYFS. The assessment is used to help parents and teachers understand a child's development and support a smooth transition to key stage one.

The EYFS profile assessment involves making a judgement against each of the 17 early learning goals set out in the EYFS, such as listening and attention, literacy and numeracy, and making relationships. A short commentary is also provided on the three characteristics of effective learning 'playing and exploring', 'active learning' and 'creating and thinking critically'.

The assessment is not a test: assessment is based on the knowledge of early years practitioners, in consultation with parents, of each child's development gained through daily interaction with the child. A process of moderation overseen by local authorities is designed to ensure the consistency and accuracy of assessment judgements. Data from the assessment is collated nationally by the Department for Education, which publishes figures on the proportion of children meeting the expected level of development.

The Department planned that the EYFS profile assessment would no longer be compulsory from September this year. The rationale for this change was the introduction of a new baseline assessment when a child enters school that would make it easier to assess the progress that children make in school. Unlike the EYFS profile assessment, the baseline assessment would be a computer administered 'test' with a narrower focus on three areas of learning: communication and language, literacy, and numeracy. However, in the light of evaluation findings that different versions of the baseline assessment available to schools were not sufficiently comparable to serve as a basis for national assessment, the Department for Education chose not to require schools to administer the baseline assessment. As a result of this decision, assessment arrangements in the early years are currently in a state of limbo, although the Department has stated that it remains committed to the principle of baseline assessment.



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## D: Integrated early years provision

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Through free early education, early years settings are a part of a local early years network. For most families, contact with this network consists primarily of the health visitor programme, free early education and some contact with a children's centre. There are two key links between early years settings and children's centres: the role of universal free early education as part of integrated early intervention network in maximising the impact of children's centres and their ability to reach and target the families that will most benefit from support; and the role of children's centres as drivers of high quality early education and childcare.

In England, local authorities have a statutory duty to provide sufficient children's centres to meet local need 'so far as is reasonably practicable'.<sup>10</sup> In turn, statutory guidance for children's centres states that they should work in an integrated way with other services to share information appropriately and identify and support families in greatest need.<sup>11</sup> These responsibilities support a duty on local authorities to reduce inequalities in outcomes between children in their area and provide early years services in an integrated manner.

Statutory guidance for children's centres highlights that children's centres meet their core purpose through sharing expertise with other early years settings to improve quality. This aim was central to, and shaped, the roll out of the children's centre programme (HM Treasury, 2004). The potential role of children's centres in local early years networks includes:

- ▶ direct cooperation to ensure integration of all early years settings with wider early years services, including health visitors, parenting support and targeted programmes;
- ▶ the delivery of information and advice about childcare provision, and support with childcare costs, for parents;
- ▶ quality support consisting of training and collaborative networks;
- ▶ childminder networks that provide quality support and brokerage, linking childminders with centre-based settings and schools;
- ▶ support for informal carers through drop-in services;
- ▶ business support for providers, particularly small and voluntary settings and childminders; and
- ▶ market intelligence for local authorities on parental demand and the provision of early years places.

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<sup>10</sup> Childcare Act 2006, sections 3 and 5

<sup>11</sup> Department for Education (2013) *Sure Start children's centres statutory guidance: For local authorities, commissioners of local health services and Jobcentre Plus*

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## D: Integrated early years provision

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### Box 7: Children's centre services

Children's centres are envisaged as 'one-stop shops' joining up services for young children and their families. Children's centres seek to be community based, responsive to local needs and focussed on tackling early disadvantage. Most children's centres will offer some childcare and even where they do not, centre staff will help parents access other local childcare. Centre staff will also help parents access other services their family needs either by offering services at the centre or linking parents with other providers in the local area. This includes:

- ▶ early education and childcare places that fit with families' needs, whether in group settings, with childminders, or at home;
- ▶ parenting and family support;
- ▶ health advice, including health visiting and midwifery;
- ▶ preventative services to support children with additional needs early in a child's life, including outreach into communities; and
- ▶ support and help for parents to move into training and work.

*Source: HM Treasury (2004) Choice for parents, the best start for children: a ten year strategy for childcare; Department for Education (2013) Sure Start children's centres statutory Guidance For local authorities, commissioners of local health services and Jobcentre Plus*

Evaluation of the children's centre programme suggests that, on average, around half of families in a children's centre's reach area with children aged zero to four have some contact with a children's centre, although the proportion of families with regular contact (20 or more each year) is somewhat lower at 13 per cent (Sylva et al, 2015). Take-up of free early education varies but nationally is 68 per cent for two year olds and 95 per cent for three year olds.<sup>12</sup> One reason for close collaboration between children's centres and early years providers is simply to maximise the reach of children's centres.

Children's centres are one provider of training and quality support for early years providers, alongside providers themselves, a market of for-profit training and advice services (often including not-for-profit services), and local authorities. It is difficult to make precise judgements about the scope and nature of collaboration between children's centres and early years providers as data is not collected routinely on this collaboration. 4Children reported that 78 per cent of children's centres that responded to the most recent children's centre census reported working with private childcare providers (4children, 2015).

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<sup>12</sup> Department for Education (2016) Education provision: children under 5 years of age, January 2016

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## D: Integrated early years provision

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Children's centres are contending with challenges including volatility in service organisation and structures and declining resources: estimates vary but it is clear that funding for children's centres has declined by at least one third from a peak in 2009 and, under government spending plans, will continue to decline in this Parliament (Butler and Rutter, 2016). As resources have decreased, the amount of children's centres that provide early education and childcare on site has also declined: in 2015, only 45 per cent of centres that responded to the 4Children children's centre census delivered early education and childcare (4Children, 2015).

Integration with wider early years services appears to have been one of the less successful aspects of the children's centre programme. Despite clear policy aspirations, the delivery framework for children's centres did not put a strong emphasis on prescribed work with early years providers. This allowed for local flexibility but also perhaps left in doubt the importance of an integrated network of local provision. The challenge of coordinating and securing buy-in from mixed local childcare providers could also have been under-estimated, with the result that an important but challenging aim is now marginal to the children's centre programme.

Close cooperation between early years providers and children's centres has if anything become more vital as the amount of childcare that children's centres themselves provide declines. The policy rationale for the children's centre programme rested in significant part on the importance of multi-professional collaboration and service integration. Pilots for the two-year-old offer demonstrated that the most effective programmes developed partnerships with parents and made links with family support and early intervention services (Gibb et al., 2011; Georgeson et al., 2014). In practice, however, the extent to which the two year old offer early education and wider early years services are integrated, and the nature of this integration, varies significantly from area to area.

The commissioning, design and delivery of children's centres has evolved substantially in recent years. Children's centre numbers have fallen but also evolved through models such as family centres (catering to a wider age range of service users) and 'hub and spoke' networks. The result is an increasingly diversity of models and a shift to a balance between 'full' centres located in the most disadvantaged areas and hub and spoke networks to meet need more widely. Under current Government spending plans, local authority budgets will continue to fall and children's centres are likely to continue to experience significant instability.

It is unlikely to be helpful to promote prescriptive models in this context, but the universal early education offer could be better used leverage the benefits of children's centres in driving effective early intervention. This can be achieved by amending the statutory children's centre framework to include requirements for children's centres to seek to make links with early years providers. Similarly, the EYFS framework could require that early years settings establish working relationships with children's centres.

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## D: Integrated early years provision

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The benefits of making these links are potentially substantial. Early years professionals may lack the knowledge and skills needed to identify and respond to needs among children and families. In future, strong links between the universal health visiting programme, children's centres and free early education have the potential to create a 'seamless' early years offer from birth to school which acts as a platform for effective early intervention.

One example of the importance of upskilling practitioners arises from the growing interest in relationship support services and the 'family hub' model. In order to direct parents to help through relationship support and mediation services, most front-line staff need help to have conversations with parents about what's going on between parents and how this impacts on the family. If this type of capacity building work does not take place, parents may not access support even when it is available. Work to embed relationship support must therefore reach outside of specialist settings to a community of providers, including early education and childcare settings.

The relationship between early years providers and children's centres ultimately cuts to wider questions about the future of the children's centre programme. Different policy routes will provide for different opportunities for local services to collaborate. The ongoing risk is that retrenchment in ambition for the children's centre programme or an increasingly flexible conception of the programme leads to greater fragmentation of early years provision. This would represent a very significant missed opportunity to maximise the impact of a universal free offer in leveraging investment in support and early intervention in the early years.

### Recommendations

- ▶ The Department for Education should issue statutory guidance on delivering free early education and childcare requiring local authorities to promote links between early years settings delivering free care and children's centres to maximise the reach of early intervention services.
- ▶ The Department for Education should issue a revised statutory children's centre framework encouraging children's centres to make links with early years settings as far as practicable to support outreach, target services effectively and maximise reach and impact.

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## E: Special educational needs and disabilities

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A recent review of the links between special educational needs and poverty describes the range of circumstances in which the concept of SEN may be applied (Shaw et al, 2016). In some cases children have clearly identifiable difficulties, disorders and disabilities that may impair learning. However, some difficulties children experience are not easily characterised or diagnosed. Behavioural difficulties can particularly be difficult to characterise and there are risks both of over- and under-diagnosis. Children may also have additional needs because of external circumstances in their life, such as a chaotic home environment.

The complex, multifaceted nature of SEN means that the concept should be treated with some caution. A child-centred system should not make blunt distinctions between children with additional needs and those who follow a 'normal' path of development. Every child's development is different and in a high quality system every child should benefit from care that is responsive to their needs.

Supporting children with SEND poses unique challenges in the early years. Many settings are relatively small and do not have the capacity to employ staff with a specialist SEND qualification or meet any additional costs of care for children. Settings therefore rely on a local infrastructure of specialist support, usually facilitated by a local authority, but this support can be patchy and limited.

The statutory SEND code of practice published under the Children and Families Act 2014 sets out the responsibilities of early years providers and local authorities to support children with SEND:

- ▶ All early years providers must have arrangements in place to support children with SEND. These arrangements should include a clear approach to identifying and responding to the needs of children with SEND.
- ▶ Maintained settings must designate a teacher as a SENCO, who has a prescribed SEN qualification or equivalent experience, and have both a SEN policy and accessibility plan.
- ▶ Other group settings must designate a member of staff as a SENCO (but there is no prescribed qualification or experience for this member of staff).
- ▶ Childminders are encouraged to identify a person to act as a SENCO. Childminders in a network or agency may share the SENCO role.
- ▶ Local authorities should ensure that there is sufficient expertise and experience amongst local early years providers to support children with SEN and must ensure that all providers delivering free early education places meet the needs of children with SEN and disabled children.

These obligations have strengths and weaknesses. The statutory SEND code of practice may have encouraged local authorities to shift the burden of support to providers and the 'SEND coordinator' in each setting. This approach could have benefits in encouraging settings to develop their own SEND expertise and capability, but could also leave settings under-supported when caring for children with specific or high needs that require specialist input.

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## E: Special educational needs and disabilities

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The majority of local authorities continue to employ early years area SENCOs or have comparable arrangements to provide specialist inclusion advice to PVI settings (Butler and Hardy, 2016). Area SENCOs have a critical role in assessing the needs of children, training and advising staff and coordinating support packages. A scarcity of area SENCOs contributes to delays in assessment and limited support, training and guidance for non-specialist staff and ultimately a lack of access to care for children with SEND.

Guidance on the early years area SENCO role does not appear to have been updated since 2002. At that time, local authorities were advised to maintain a ratio of one area SENCO for every twenty early years non-maintained childcare settings. However, while the requirement for maintained settings to employ a qualified SENCO has been put on a statutory basis, the requirement for local authorities to employ sufficient early years area SENCOs to support non-maintained settings has not. As a result, there are wide variations in practice.

The early years are the first opportunity to identify and respond to each child's unique needs and ensure that they are supported to fulfil their potential. Unfortunately, children with SEND tend to fall behind before they reach school, in part because expectations are not sufficiently high and the quality of early intervention to support children is variable (Shaw et al, 2016).

The Department for Education recently outlined some welcome steps to improve inclusion in the early years through embedding clear expectations in model funding agreements, an inclusion premium for free early education places, and by encouraging local authorities to create a dedicated inclusion fund to provide tailored support for individual children with SEND. These steps should have a positive impact on quality and the proportion of children with SEND able to participate fully in the free early education and childcare offer.

Nevertheless, inclusion challenges are closely associated with structural workforce and funding challenges in the early years that are not easily resolved: in PVI settings, few staff have SEND expertise at the level of a school SENCO, and any setting wishing to offer daycare (hours in addition to the free offer) to a child that requires additional supervision will in most areas need to meet the additional cost from the setting budget, which is prohibitive for many settings.

These challenges will not be easily resolved but, in addition to the steps already proposed by the Department for Education, there are pragmatic steps to make rapid progress. First, the number of special educational needs advisors per local authority is lower than necessary to deliver advice and support to all PVI providers (Butler and Hardy, 2016). Qualified early years SENCOs, which must be in place in all maintained settings, have a number of roles, including providing support, advice and training for non-expert staff to support high quality early education and care for children with SEND. A change to the statutory SEND Code of Practice to introduce a clear requirement for local authorities to make available sufficient qualified early years area SENCOs to support PVI early years settings is a relatively low cost route of driving higher quality care for children.

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## E: Special educational needs and disabilities

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Second, the SEND Code of Practice includes a requirement for each PVI setting to identify a 'SEND coordinator'. However, the role and responsibilities of SEND coordinators can be unclear. Staff who support children with additional needs must have the knowledge and skills to do so. Many settings only employ staff with an advanced early years qualification (which has SEND content) or equivalent experience, in the SEND coordinator role. This is a sensible model and should be the basis for national guidance for the SEND coordinator role. Settings that do not have staff that fulfil these criteria should receive support and funding to upskill staff.

Finally, the Nutbrown Review highlighted the importance of SEND content in early years qualifications. The Early Years Educator qualification specification nevertheless does not include a requirement for SEND content.<sup>13</sup> Since most staff entering early years settings will enter the early years workforce with a level three qualification, the absence of preparatory SEND knowledge and training hampers good practice. Substantive SEND content should therefore be included in the early years qualification specification, and is also an area where CPD has clear potential.

These steps would over time build capacity in early years settings, particularly those in the PVI sector, and ensure that sufficient expert support is available to providers to access advice, support and training to deliver high quality care to children regardless of their needs.

Early years provision does not rest on a rights-based structure. Although all children have an entitlement to free early education, this entitlement is enforced loosely and its statutory basis is less strong than the entitlement to a school place. Not only is there evidence that children with SEND in many cases do not take-up free provision, there are areas of the country such as inner London where take-up among all children is low (Contact a Family et al, 2016; Rutter, 2014). For childcare beyond the hour encompassed by free provision, there is no entitlement to provision.

The soft statutory basis of the entitlement to free early education and childcare, and the absence of a right to access childcare beyond free hours, provides the conditions for discretionary commitment to inclusion. However strong the goodwill and aspirations of professionals, children do not have a right to a place at a setting, or to access care at the same fee as any other child. With finite resources, local authorities inevitably ration support and children with SEND are among those most likely to miss out. We set out constructive short- to medium-term steps, but the long-term basis for genuinely inclusive provision is a right to free early education and childcare.

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13 National College for Teaching and Leadership (2013) *Early Years Educator (Level 3): Qualifications Criteria*

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## E: Special educational needs and disabilities

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### Recommendations

The Department for Education should:

- ▶ set out clearer requirements for local authorities to make available sufficient qualified early years area SENCOs to support PVI early years settings;
- ▶ clarify the SEND coordinator role and the level of qualifications and training that should be held by a SEND coordinator; and
- ▶ meet the Nutbrown Review recommendations for more substantive SEND content in early years qualifications.



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## F: Links between early years settings and the home

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Many aspects of the environment around a child influence their social and emotional development. This includes, for example, the health and wellbeing of parents and carers; attitudes to child development and education; and parenting styles (Goodman and Gregg, 2010). These factors are linked to family resources and children from poorer backgrounds tend to experience less advantageous caring environments than children from better-off families. Most of these factors may be affected by social policy, such as the health visitor programme and support through the social security system, and some may be influenced specifically by early childhood services.

The EPPE study demonstrated the specific influence of the home learning environment on children's development. Broadly, home learning refers to constructive learning and play activities undertaken by parents with their children. Subsequent evaluations of the children's centre programme, which specifically set out to promote home learning, show that children's centres have some mixed success influencing the home environment but that doing so effectively is difficult (Sammons et al, 2016). One reason targeted children's centre programmes may have had less effect than hoped is the limitations of targeted programmes, which can experience difficulty reaching and engaging with parents. Free early education and formal childcare represent opportunities to support home learning in a universal and non-stigmatised context.

The focus of early education policy has tended to fall primarily on learning and development within a setting. The EYFS framework was intended to act as a bridge between parents and a setting and cites 'good parenting and high quality early learning' as important influences on children and requires that practitioners work in partnership with parents.<sup>14</sup> However, specific practice requirements within the EYFS framework relate to sharing information with parents about their child's development rather than seeking to support parents to create a positive home learning environment. In contrast, the statutory framework for children's centres includes obligations to improve outcomes for young children and their families in parenting aspirations and parenting skills, and child and family health and life chances.<sup>15</sup>

The differences in obligations placed on different types of early years providers means that there is a two tier set of expectations in regard to how early years settings will seek to support child development. There are of course different structural features of children's centres and registered early years settings that mean the former are better equipped to seek to influence the family environment. The challenge for policy makers is to ensure that early years settings work to support the home learning environment within their competence and capabilities.

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<sup>14</sup> Department for Education (2014) *Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage*

<sup>15</sup> Department for Education (2013) *Sure Start children's centres statutory guidance*

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## F: Links between early years settings and the home

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Early years settings are well-placed to positively influence the home learning environment. Following health visitors, early years professionals will have the most sustained contact with children and their parents before school. There are ample opportunities to foster and encourage learning and development outside the setting through in-setting activities. These can range from discussing home learning with parents in regular parent-practitioner meetings to planned 'stay and learn' sessions for parents involving guided activities with their children and practical resources such as book and toy libraries. The universal nature of early education means that settings are well placed to provide non-stigmatised support for home learning while providing differentiated advice and support depending on the needs of each family.

As noted elsewhere in this paper, there are also opportunities for settings to work closely with children's centres to ensure that parents who stand to benefit from wider support the most are able to access assistance. Early years settings should not compromise their focus on supporting each child's development as well as possible. However, early years professionals should be encouraged to take a holistic understanding of their role, where early years provision is an integral part of a network of support seeking to help families thrive in the early years.

There are some barriers to extending the role of early years provision in supporting families. Early years professionals can be reluctant to risk over-stepping boundaries. Some settings may also have a high proportion of staff who are relatively young, are not themselves parents and may lack sufficient training and experience to feel confident broaching difficult issues with parents. These are real challenges for staff but are issues that can be overcome in the long run through ensuring there are sufficient experienced, qualified and well-supported staff in settings. Whalley (2006), for example, draws on practitioner experience to show how early years staff can work closely with parents and communities, and guidance commissioned by the Department for Education provides practical advice for professionals on early home learning (Family and Parenting Institute, 2009).

Recent research suggest the beginning of participation in formal childcare or free early education may counter-intuitively lead to less focus by parents on home learning as families may assume the burden of learning has shifted to the setting (Hunt et al, 2011). Parents also often begin using formal childcare because they move into work, or increase their hours of work, which can leave less time and energy for activities with their children. Nevertheless, this research also found that parents who began using formal childcare wanted more information about what children should be doing at their age and what activities parents can do at home. This suggests parents should be encouraged to promote home learning by early years settings, that they may face some practical and information barriers to doing so, and that they value support and advice from early years practitioners.

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## F: Links between early years settings and the home

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### Recommendations

- ▶ The Department for Education should convene an expert working group to update the *Early Home Learning Matters* guidance and extend to later age groups (up to five).
- ▶ Once pragmatic expectations are established for early years providers, subsequent revisions of the EYFS framework should include a requirement for settings to seek to support home learning.

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## G: Enabling environments

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There is limited robust research that considers the role of the physical environment in early years settings on children's learning and development. As a result, it is difficult to draw strong conclusions about the impact of the physical environment on children's outcomes. A review of the existing evidence base by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) found that:<sup>16</sup>

*Overall, changes to the physical environment of early years settings are unlikely to have a direct effect on learning, once an adequate building standard has been achieved. Moving to a new building or learning space could be an effective part of a process of change designed to alter behaviour or facilitate the use of new learning strategies, but there is no evidence that new buildings or particular aspects of architecture or design improve learning by themselves.*

The EEF finds that clearest evidence of the importance of the physical environment relates to the role of the environment in effective learning strategies. Well-designed spaces, or the fact of implementing a change to the physical environment, can act as a catalyst for positive behaviours among staff and children. EEF notes that there is some evidence that outdoor learning environments can change behaviour, for example, by increasing group interaction, but it is not currently known whether this leads to improvements in learning. The impact of 'ambient' factors such as the colour of the environment or the presence of soothing music appears to vary according to personal preference.

EEF found evidence that two environmental factors are important. High noise levels and poor air quality (such as higher CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations than recommended levels) both have a significant detrimental impact on cognition and learning. In each case, these factors reflect the location of a setting, but can also be managed through good design, such as noise dampening windows and air filtration equipment.

It is worth noting that the evidence considered by the EEF is limited and should not therefore be considered as a broad judgement on the role of space, outdoor activities and play in the early years. Successful approaches to early education and care foster play and harness children's curiosity in their environment to create learning and development opportunities. Rich opportunities may be created through relatively limited means through the use of physical media and roleplay. However, the scope and quality of indoor and outdoor space should not be sidelined in a pragmatic assessment of the conditions necessary to support high quality care.

The physical environment in early years settings is shaped by the EYFS framework, which broadly requires that providers must ensure that their premises, including overall floor space and outdoor spaces, are fit for purpose and suitable for the age of children cared for and the activities provided on the premises. Specific standards set out minimum space requirements per child, a requirement to provider access to outdoor space (onsite or off, so long as offsite space is accessible daily) and a requirement to carry out a risk assessment and ensure the safety of the setting. Except in childminding settings, there should be a separate baby room for

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<sup>16</sup> Education Endowment Foundation (2016) Early Years Toolkit: Physical Environment, <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/resources/early-years-toolkit/physical-environment>.

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## G: Enabling environments

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children under the age of two. Providers must also ensure that there is an area where staff may talk to parents and/or carers confidentially, as well as an area for staff to take breaks away from areas being used by children. There do not appear to be any limits on the location of a setting, except so far as a premises could not reasonably be deemed 'fit for purpose' or meet these criteria.

These requirements provide relatively broad parameters for the design of a setting and buildings vary from purpose built structures with multiple rooms divided by age group to large open spaces, often divided into areas, and shared space in community buildings. Providers are influenced by the need to provide a space that is acceptable to staff and parents but are also subject to commercial pressures to limit costs and pragmatic constraints such as the availability of suitable premises, which may particularly be a challenge in urban areas.

Early years settings and quality support staff often use tools such as the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS), which provide more detailed assessment criteria focused on the role of the environment in children's development, activities and learning. Each scale, for example, provides guidance on provision of an 'exciting and accessible learning environment' and resources to support specific types of play linked to learning and development. More so than the EYFS framework, the ECERS and ITERS scales draw out explicit links between the physical environment of a setting and learning and development to inform the design and layout of settings.

Unfortunately, there is limited evidence available on the quality of the physical environment in early years in the UK. Settings that offer a stimulating environment and ensure that children access fresh air and extend their learning outside every day are likely to meet the EYFS requirements (so long as safety and inclusion standards are met). Ofsted grades are therefore unlikely to capture the extent to which the environment of a setting supports learning and development to its maximum potential, and will not touch on subtle noise or air quality issues.

The four UK chief medical officers have produced guidance on physical activity that includes pre-school children, *Start Active, Stay Active* (Department for Health, 2011). There is strong general evidence on the association between a lack of physical activity and poor health. Although there is less evidence specific to the early years, there is emerging evidence that sedentary behaviour is associated with obesity as well as lower cognitive development.

The CMO guidance advises that children of pre-school age who can stand and walk need opportunities to play that allow them to develop their fundamental movement skills and master their physical environment. Specifically, children should be physically active daily for at least three hours spread throughout the day. Reducing sedentary time and breaking up extended periods of sitting is also strongly advised for children during the early years.

The importance of physical activity in the early years should be put in the context of wider health challenges. Physical activity typically declines with age, so it is important to establish a high level of activity early in life to encourage activity patterns later in childhood. As parents and

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## G: Enabling environments

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carers are fundamental to children's activity levels, helping to increase awareness and establish active patterns in the early years can also influence later patterns of behaviour.

Early years settings have an increasing influence on children's levels of physical activity, particularly in urban areas where opportunities for play areas are shrinking due to changes in the environment and a decrease in tolerance of risk (Pate et al., 2004). Recent research of a sample of children in formal early education found that all children in care were meeting the Chief Medical Officer guidelines (Hesketh, 2015). However, this activity was largely light intensity rather than the high intensity activities more strongly associated with health benefits, and when higher intensity activity was undertaken, it could displace higher intensity activities at home.

The EYFS framework puts a strong emphasis on physical development and activity and early years settings. Facilitating child-led or adult-led play as well as more structured activities should therefore make a significant contribution to daily physical activity. There is some evidence that physical activity tends to be greater in centres with higher staff qualifications (Dowda et al., 2004).

In the light of evidence of the health and development benefits of physical activity for children, it is important that public health guidance is joined up with regulatory standards and practice in the early years. To date, this link does not appear to have been made as explicitly as it might and it is not clear the extent to which every setting has the opportunity to ensure appropriate levels of physical activity. In particular, there may be scope to encourage more intensive physical activity and seek to ensure that patterns of activity in the setting inform more active patterns of activity at home.

### Recommendations

- ▶ The Department for Education and Department for Health should commission research into the influence of the physical environment in early years settings on high quality early education and levels of physical activity.
- ▶ This research should include, or be followed by, a survey of the early years estate.
- ▶ Using this research, the Department should develop a strategy for the early years estate to ensure that existing and new settings maximise the potential of the physical environment to contribute positively to children's development.

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## 3. Conclusion

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This paper has sought to show that there are many strengths and positive aspects to early years provision in England, but that there are clear opportunities to do better for children and families. A central theme of the recommendations set out is the importance of holistic, collaborative and integrated policy making and practice. The best early years services are already exemplars of this ethos, but the fragmented nature of early years funding, regulation and policy also gets in the way for many settings and practitioners.

The recommendations identified focus on pragmatic short and medium term opportunities. It is important to note, however, that no country has achieved a well-qualified early years workforce without a supply-side funding system where early years services are funded directly through stable grants. The UK currently has a hybrid funding system, where a proportion of early years services are funded directly through free early education while the remainder of funding consists of parental fees, supported in many cases by subsidies through tax credits or vouchers. This system has a limited potential to leverage higher qualifications and wages because investment in staff is capped by what it is realistic to charge parents.

The *Creating an Anti-poverty Childcare System* paper sets out an approach to ending an unsustainable fault line between staff pay and conditions in maintained and private and voluntary early years settings through supply-funded early years provision (Butler and Rutter, 2016). This will require a new approach to funding services, with a greater role for the state and full integration of 'early education' and 'childcare' funding alongside investment over time to equalise wages across settings. The sooner the Government engages with this challenge, the earlier early years services will live up to public and professional aspirations for high quality provision.

Each section of the paper touches on an opportunity. It should be no surprise that those who work with children are the first priority for high quality early years provision. The early years workforce has not received the attention it merits in early years policy. Supporting early years staff is not simply a question of recognition or status, but of practical action to improve working conditions. At present, there are insufficient incentives or pressures to prompt serious change. In addition to highlighting how staff can be better supported, this paper makes suggestions about mechanisms such as workforce representation that would help translate commitment among early years professionals into change.

The Ofsted inspection system in its current form minimises poor quality care but does not drive 'deep' quality improvement in settings and may in fact be masking mediocre quality in some settings. Indeed, research based on more fine-grained and robustly evidenced quality measures suggest a less positive picture of quality than do Ofsted grades. Policy makers should heed the insight these indicators offer and seek to build a system of quality monitoring that is less crude, is evidence-based and promotes a continuing commitment to quality.

Monitoring children's development in the early years has taken a back seat to a school-centric assessment agenda and the future of the EYFS profile assessment remains uncertain.

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### 3. Conclusion

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The concept of an integrated review at age two has been pursued but following initial implementation efforts effectively stalled, with most EYFS framework and health reviews apparently taking place in isolation. There should be no testing in the early years but it is imperative that professionals are supported to monitor and respond to each child's needs. This requires continued progress in learning how to successfully implement a universal integrated review at age two and retention of the universal EYFS profile assessment.

Despite the clear evidence that integrated early years provision is central to better outcomes for children, fragmentation, and for many settings isolation, remains characteristic of early years provision. This drift from an integrated vision is in part a consequence of reductions in children's centre funding and the ambition of the children's centre vision. But there is also much that can be done to integrate early years settings with children's centres and early intervention services. It is a huge missed opportunity to allow universal free early education, in which the vast majority of children will participate, to be neglected as a platform to identify and respond to children and families' support needs.

On the same grounds, there is much more that early years settings can do to support a positive home learning environment. Many professionals do, however, need training and support to work in new ways. Through relatively modest steps – developing expert guidance and raising expectations of staff – the Government can foster cultural change that has the potential to make a significant difference to outcomes.

The early years is a crucial period for children with SEND but early education is currently failing to prevent these children from falling behind before they reach school. There are unique SEND challenges in the early years: identification is low, reaching children with targeted support is difficult and there are greater risks of misdiagnosis. These issues only reinforce the need to build expertise and capacity among practitioners and settings. Improving support for children with SEND should be considered an integral characteristic of a high quality system. A system that is responsive to the individual needs of each child with SEND is likely to be one that is responsive to the needs of every child. There has been far too much complacency about the extent to which early years provision is meeting the needs of children with SEND and it is only by recognising this failure that progress will be made.

Finally, the physical environment in early years settings has been relatively neglected by policy makers. Very little has been done to identify the physical characteristics and practices of settings that affect learning and development and physical activity. Funding pressures and low margins mean that it is particularly important that the Government and regulators are attentive to the physical environment in early years settings, which are often located in premises that are not purpose built. Good evidence should be developed to guide standards and shape an early years estate that reflects high aspirations. There are also several important issues concerning air quality and noise that we know affect learning and development and can be addressed pragmatically in the short-term.



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### 3. Conclusion

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Attitudes to quality in early years services reflect the kind of environment we choose to create for families with young children. The strengths of existing early years provision, such as the EYFS framework and patches of high quality integrated provision across the maintained and PVI sector, reflect what can be achieved when government and communities choose to raise aspirations. Unfortunately, there has been a regression in expectations in recent years, with more attention placed on the scope of free provision and childcare affordability than the nature of the early education children receive. Change requires a new commitment to high quality in the early years.

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