

The Fair Education Alliance’s Early Years Working Group submission to Labour’s review of early years

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The Fair Education Alliance (‘FEA’) is a coalition of 280 of England’s leading organisations from business, the third sector and education, all working towards a world where our education system is fair – where no child’s educational success is limited by their socio-economic background. This submission has been compiled by the FEA’s Early Years Working Group, comprised of a range of practitioners and organisations delivering programmes and support to children in the early years. We would be delighted to discuss our views and experiences on any of the below in greater detail.

Review eligibility for, and access to, affordable education and childcare provision for children ages 0-4.

High-quality early child education and care (ECEC) needs to be accessible to every child regardless of their family’s circumstances or SEND status.

The complexity of the current system acts as a barrier for low-income families. Uptake of childcare support that is available through Universal Credit is low, and the multiple schemes that interact to provide ECEC can be confusing. The consequence is that not all families claim their full childcare entitlement. Further, applying for a place at a provider, together with (if relevant) providing evidence that they are in receipt of certain benefits and eligible for a place, can be daunting for parents, especially for those who speak English as an additional language or lack access to digital technology. When schemes are promoted as “free childcare” parents may not understand the benefits to their child of accessing, for example, the disadvantaged 2-year-old offer or the universal offer for 3 and 4-year-olds, and those not taking up these entitlements are often from the most disadvantaged families.

There is worse provision of ECEC in poorer neighbourhoods and a staggering lack of provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)¹. Over 80% of local authorities do not have enough childcare for children with disabilities; with a 3% reduction from 2022 to 2023². Government funding for the early years entitlements do not cover costs³, leading providers to prioritise parent-paid places in some cases and making most nurseries reliant on cross-subsidy from parent-paid fees. The mismatch between available SEND funding and the cost of supporting children with SEND or other vulnerabilities and needs is a further issue.

If the Government were simply to extend funded hours to all children, it would not solve the problem of access – those providers that survived the reforms would still be incentivised to prioritise fee-paying families over children without SEND or other vulnerabilities and needs. There must be properly funded places, as well as the funding, training, and incentives for providers to accept and support funded places and children with SEND. We would suggest that we unlink Disability Access Fund (DAF) from Disability Learning Allowance (DLA), as many families are not yet ready to apply for DLA so early in their child's life, and this means the setting cannot access DAF funding. This creates a further barrier to accessing their entitlements. At a time when 57% of nurseries say they are not going to be able to accept any more children with SEND once the new entitlements come in, we need to be removing these barriers rather than maintaining them.

The IFS have also recently documented that the quantum of disadvantage funding has remained the same⁴ while the number of disadvantaged children has increased, spreading support thinner at a time when it needs increasing. Disadvantage funding needs to make up a sizeable proportion of total funding to support and incentivise providers to operate in disadvantaged areas and to take more under-resourced children.

We need to:

¹ <https://www.coram.org.uk/news/coram-survey-finds-childcare-shortages-nationwide-with-the-most-disadvantaged-children-missing-out/>

² https://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/sites/default/files/Resource%20Library/Childcare%20Survey%202023_Coram%20Family%20and%20Childcare.pdf

³ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-provider-survey/2023#content>

⁴ <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-12/IFS-Annual-report-on-education-spending-in-England-2023-new.pdf>

- Bring the Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) in line with the rate allocated to primary pupils, which is currently set at around a quarter of the rate allocated to primary pupils. This targeted funding boost would remove barriers to nurseries providing places to low-income families and to children with SEND⁵.
- Extend funded hours to children whose parents are in training, enabling children to receive quality care while their parents gain the skills needed for employment. If needed, low-income parents should be prioritised for funded hours.
- Remove the requirement for children to receive Disability Learning Allowance (DLA) for a setting to receive Disability Access Fund (DAF). Settings should not be financially penalised for being inclusive.
- Make the system less complex for families to navigate. There is currently a mixed market of provision and piecemeal system of funding entitlements. Whilst there may be advantages to there being a plurality of settings, there is no advantage to the complexity of funding. Streamlining entitlements and applications would benefit all parents, but particularly those parents living in areas of disadvantage and those who speak English as an additional language.

Examine ways to increase the quality of provision in early years, both inside and beyond the school system.

In the past year, we have seen childcare rise to the top of the priority list for both the Labour and Conservative Party. It is clear why this issue has salience with voters – childcare in England is less affordable than ever, and among the most expensive in the world⁶.

However, childcare which aims to increase workforce participation is not synonymous with quality early childhood education and care, which aims to give every child the best educational start in life. When we talk about ECEC policy, we must acknowledge that these goals – economic growth and child development – are not always aligned. We need a comprehensive ECEC strategy that can deliver on both.

⁵ https://nlt.cdn.ngo/media/documents/APPG_EY_Paper_DIGITAL.pdf#page=14

⁶ <https://data.oecd.org/benwage/net-childcare-costs.htm>

We know the current approach leads to stark academic inequality: poorer children start reception an average of 4.8 months behind their wealthier peers, accounting for 40% of the attainment gap at 16⁷. Low-income children also often have language skills that are below the age-related expectations at the time they enter reception – putting them at an educational and social disadvantage⁸. However, we also know that quality ECEC can help close gaps in development between disadvantaged children and others. Without quality provision for all, the gap that exists at the start of reception is unlikely to close. It is a false economy to invest in cheap childcare solutions that are not of sufficient quality to raise children's outcomes and close the disadvantage gap. Investing in quality ECEC in the UK has the long-term potential to create future expenditure savings of a £16.13 billion⁹ spend linked to ACEs that could be avoided if preventative action were taken in early childhood.

Looking at childcare provision, a growing proportion of poorer children access childcare from private, voluntary, and independent (PVI) settings rather than maintained ones. PVI settings located in deprived areas and serving disadvantaged children are more likely to be of lower quality than those operating in more affluent areas¹⁰, whereas the gradient of quality maintained settings is the opposite, being higher in more disadvantaged areas. There is also a substantial gap in qualification levels between staff in PVI and maintained settings, with the former also making greater use of temporary staff¹¹.

When the Government announced its extension of free nursery hours in the Spring 2023 budget, it acknowledged the delivery challenge in this by increasing the ratio of children to staff. However, this raises concerns about quality (most severely, the quality of provision to children with SEND¹²) and will put more pressure on an already beleaguered EY workforce¹³.

Furthermore, when we discuss the quality of provision to support early childhood development, we must recognise the importance of the home learning environment (HLE). The HLE is one of the strongest predictors of a child's development in the early years. The HLE influences outcomes at five over and above factors such socio-economic status, maternal education, and family income¹⁴. A good quality

⁷ <https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2023/>

⁸ <https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2023/>

⁹ <https://centreforearlychildhood.org/report/>

¹⁰ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/child-poverty/tackling-disadvantage-through-childcare>

¹¹ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/child-poverty/tackling-disadvantage-through-childcare>

¹² <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/646ca30371a2ef6a657e9309/t/65482050ded6710668b8b62a/1699225681784/Retention+and+Return.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/early-years-workforce-review/>

¹⁴ https://nlt.cdn.ngo/media/documents/APPG_EY_Paper_DIGITAL.pdf

HLE can mitigate the effects of disadvantage, even into the teenage years, and can moderate the impact of socioeconomic background on cognitive skills and socioemotional difficulties.

We understand more than ever how much the period between pregnancy and age three is critical in shaping children's life chances. This is based on evidence of brain formation, communication and language development, and the impact of relationships formed during this period on children's social and emotional development and subsequent mental health¹⁵.

We know a greater proportion of disadvantaged children spend their early years in a home setting, but that wealthier children are more likely to access enriching experiences at home that support their language and social development. For example, middle and upper-income children are more likely to be read to, to go on educational outings, and to experience 'language rich' HLE's in comparison with their low-income peers. Much of this support could be accessible to all with the spread of knowledge and awareness, but this is a key driver of the disadvantage gap¹⁶.

To increase the quality of provision in early years, both inside and beyond the school system:

- Given the significant impact the Home Learning Environment has on children's outcomes, there must be a far greater emphasis and strategic focus on the home learning environment in early years policy, as well as the education sector. This includes establishing shared outcomes across the services supporting families (such as those the Children's Commissioner has advocated for¹⁷) and having clear channels by which families can receive help and guidance.
- As we respond to the economic need to make ECEC more affordable, quality must remain a focus, the greatest part of which is workforce (as described below). There must be sufficient funding to meet the actual cost of quality provision.
- All childcare settings should be supported and incentivised to meet the needs of children with SEND and other vulnerabilities. This includes training for Early Years practitioners across

¹⁵ https://nlt.cdn.ngo/media/documents/APPG_EY_Paper_DIGITAL.pdf

¹⁶ https://nlt.cdn.ngo/media/documents/APPG_EY_Paper_DIGITAL.pdf

¹⁷ <https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2022/12/cc-family-review-outcomes-framework-annex.pdf>

settings and others interfacing with young children – such as health visitors – to identify needs early and deliver effective support.

- We must support those parents whose children are at home before reception, either due to parental choice or to the access issues discussed above. Disadvantaged children are less likely to access ECEC in settings outside the home than their peers. All families need to understand the dramatic impact that the home learning environment (HLE) has on outcomes, and receive the recognition and support needed to enable them to support their children’s learning at home. Family Hubs and the Start for Life Programme could provide a conduit for the requisite information, guidance, and training. Support for home learning should be a core element of what Family Hubs deliver as the model is rolled out nationally. Early years settings could be a resource to support this, and education should be integrated more actively into the Family Hub agenda or any successor policy.

Consider a long-term plan for the early years workforce.

A huge part of ensuring quality is having enough well-equipped staff. The early years workforce, like the school workforce, is experiencing a stark recruitment and retention crisis. There are difficulties recruiting qualified staff, a high proportion of EU nationals in the workforce, and concerns that older, more experienced, and qualified staff who retire will not be replaced with similarly qualified staff¹⁸.

Contributing factors include low pay – which providers cannot afford to increase – the low status of the profession, and a lack of progression opportunities. The results – staff turnover, and a growing number of under-qualified or less experienced staff – will negatively impact disadvantaged children¹⁹.

As it is in schools, a strong workforce is fundamental to quality ECEC. We need a long-term strategy to build and maintain the workforce through:

- Better pay and increased respect for the profession, including through opportunities for career progression and professional development - including in SEND provision.

¹⁸ <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/the-early-years-workforce-in-england/>

¹⁹ <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/early-years-qualifications-and-outcomes/#:~:text=Having%20a%20graduate%20working%20in,are%20evident%20across%20>

- Consideration of how we can maintain a variety of routes into the profession and create new ones. For example:
 - How can we help young people overcome the current barriers to entry into the early years workforce, such as the high proportion of students without the required GCSEs to gain entry onto new T-levels?
 - If we allow parents to access childcare entitlements for family learning and training, as recommended above, how do we enable that to be route into the early education and childcare workforce? Could Family Hubs play a role in delivering this training?

We must address this, or we will likely face a further drop-off in the supply of early years practitioners. These factors must inform a holistic, long-term strategy for recruiting, training, progressing, and rewarding the early years workforce. A strategy which recognises the importance of the early years workforce and one that invests accordingly.

To close, our shared mission as the Fair Education Alliance is to ensure every child has access to a great education, regardless of their socio-economic background. This starts from birth, and access to high quality education and care is essential in our fight to equip every child to find fulfilment in work and life. As detailed above, we need to invest in the supply and affordability of quality settings outside the home, a long-term strategy for a strong and capable workforce, and support for carers to provide rich home environments. The costs are real, but these will reap both huge social benefits and long-term savings. More than this, they will lead to a fairer future.