

APPG for Early Education and Childcare

Tuesday 9 December 2025, 11am – 12.30pm

Online

Chair

James MacCleary MP

Speakers

Professor Verity Campbell Barr, Professor in Early Childhood Education and Director of Plymouth, Institute of Education at the University of Plymouth

Janet King, Sector Manager for Education and Childcare at NCFE

Secretariat

Juliette Collier, Campaign for Learning

1. Welcome and introductions

The Chair, James MacCleary MP, and Secretariat, Juliette Collier, opened the meeting, outlining the focus on current challenges within the Early Years (EY) workforce, recent government announcements, and opportunities to build a strong and sustainable early education and childcare sector. Thanks were extended to the sponsors for their support of the APPG.

2. It is rocket science: Professionalising the early childhood workforce in the UK - A comparative analysis of early years workforce policy in the four UK nations

Presenter: Professor Verity Campbell-Barr, Professor in Early Childhood Education and Director of Plymouth Institute of Education at the University of Plymouth

Overview: The project reviewed national and international literature, conducted interviews with over 80 expert stakeholders, and held focus groups. It aimed to identify positive interventions and effective policy implementation for a positive change in the EY workforce.

[Link to presentation](#)

Key challenges for the UK Early Years workforce were identified as:

- Recruitment and retention difficulties
- Fragmented qualification systems across sectors and nations
- Limited career progression and low professional status
- Low pay and insufficient recognition of the profession
- Perceived divide between the EY sector and teaching professions

- Underrepresentation of men and ethnic minorities
- Government funding constraints impacting workforce sustainability.

Examples of Good Practice

UK examples:

- England: Graduate Leadership Fund brought leaders together, shared practice, and gave recognition
- Scotland: Initiatives to upgrade qualifications and grow leaders gave recognition and status
- Northern Ireland: cross-sector mentoring and guidance across sectors strengthened quality and collaboration
- Wales: Joint curriculum development bridged the care/education divide.

International examples:

- Ireland: Sector-wide consultative approach to developing an EY workforce strategy, commitment to degree-led staff, collaboration with universities to embed professional competencies
- Estonia and Germany: local adaptation of training with FE/HE institutions
- Canada: group-based mentoring supporting newly qualified staff.

Cautionary notes from international models:

- Local flexibility should not dilute national standards
- Avoid too many training routes. Maintain a core pedagogical knowledge base
- Shift focus from minimum to aspirational, high-level qualifications
- Clarify status and expectations in relation to the teaching profession: resolve the relationship with teaching; early years professionals provide foundational learning and should not have lower qualification expectations.

Ireland's degree-led implementation model:

Ireland introduced a degree-led, professionally recognised EY workforce model.

- Degrees tailored to work with 0-8-year-olds and jointly overseen by education and children's departments
- Implementation frameworks focusing on areas such as consultation, competency, alignment of university programmes, and independent quality review

- Emphasises the importance of professional titles, consistent standards, and a structured approach to improving workforce quality.

Focus group findings on implementation:

- Minimum qualifications essential for quality
- Broad support for a graduate-led workforce with clear progression
- Need to address the proliferation of qualification routes to ensure employer confidence
- Recommendation for minimum introductory experience (30 hours) working with children before apprenticeships
- Emphasis on grounding qualifications aligned to child development, play pedagogy, safeguarding, SEND, family support and professional values
- Support for strengthened pathways from Level 3 to Level 6, with induction periods for newly qualified staff
- Address the divide around Qualified Teacher Status (QTS)
- Registration welcomed but dependent on a secure qualification framework, and must be linked to pay and conditions
- Commitment to greater diversity and inclusivity within the workforce.

Policy enablers and suggested implementation sequence:

- Clear and coherent policy direction, with realistic pacing
- Strong consultation and communication with the sector
- Opportunities for shared learning and local flexibility/adaptation
- Recommended order:
 - Strong foundation of quality qualifications
 - Pay scales (in consultation with the sector)
 - Professional progression framework
 - Confident registration system.

3. Investing in the workforce to establish and sustain high-quality early education environments: current context and recommendations

Presenter: Janet King, Sector Manager Education and Childcare, NCFE

Overview: The presentation underscored the importance of quality and sustainability in the EY sector, particularly given current policy directions. It emphasised the crucial role of a high-quality, sustainable early years workforce in shaping children's development and future, highlighting ongoing challenges like low pay, difficult working conditions, and high turnover rates.

She discussed the balance between policy ambitions and sector realities, the importance of clear qualifications and career progression from entry to advanced levels, and cited recent research linking qualified staff to better developmental results

for children.

Factors disrupting EY workforce stability:

- Low pay, worsened by cost-of-living crisis
- Challenging working conditions and post-COVID shifts in expectations
- Lack of financial incentive for progression: staff advancing their qualifications often see no corresponding pay rise
- Confusing qualification structures: need for robust, fit-for-purpose qualifications (full, relevant, and specialised CPD)
- Recruitment and retention concerns.

Research highlights:

- More time in EY education correlates with improved vocabulary and social skills
- Most EY graduates stay in the sector but lack financial incentives
- High turnover (16% in group-based provision) negatively impacts child-staff relationships, particularly affecting children with SEND.

Current challenges and expansion pressures:

- Rollout of funded entitlement from September 2024 to children from 9 months
- Financial strain on providers delivering funded places
- Anticipated findings from the Baby Room project (2027) on specialised training needs
- Policy goals (e.g., 75% good learning by end of EYFS) depend on sustainability
- Concern: While 219,000 children are expected to benefit from expanded entitlement, 57% of nursery staff are considering leaving the sector.

Summary of current qualification framework (England):

- Level 1: Introductory, often pre-16
- Level 2: Apprenticeships or technical occupational diplomas (full and relevant for practice)
- Level 3: T-Levels, apprenticeships or adult workforce diplomas
- Level 4-6: CPD, specialist qualifications (e.g., SENCO), HE degrees
- Overall, the standards are consistent with DfE criteria, but there is still confusion post-reform.

Conclusion:

- Policy must align with sector needs/research, and be implementable
- Strong qualifications, progression, mentoring and supervision needed

- Call for fair and equitable investment and positive recognition of the sector's professional contribution.

4. Discussion and Q&A highlights

Key points raised:

- V Levels: Question raised on how the new V Levels will link in with EEF Qualifications - Confirmed that these will not provide a license to practice, focusing more on theoretical understanding rather than placement-based training.

Sector Crisis: Described the sector as "on its knees" due to underfunding, high business rates, National Insurance costs, and competition from school nurseries (with different ratios/costs). It was highlighted an impending crisis in under-two spaces, preventing parents from returning to work. The statement was acknowledged stating this "inherent contradiction" in government policy, where laudable aims are undermined by a flawed funding model that makes private businesses unviable and ignores the staffing crisis.

It was further noted that policies like increased free entitlement or minimum wage increases, while good, can create "domino rally effects" on local employment markets if the wider system is not considered. The officers emphasised the importance of collective advocacy and using sufficiency data for 2025/26 to highlight future capacity challenges, especially for 2-year-olds.

Concern expressed about completely removing "unqualified" staff, as many excellent leaders started as volunteers or unqualified local community members who gained confidence through experience and training. It was clarified that the recommendation is for a "working towards" status with a realistic timeframe, allowing for clear progression pathways and pause options if life events occur.

It was encouraged to engage with local authority skills agendas to ensure early years are included, as childcare is foundational for economic activity. The chair added that new elected mayors and reorganising councils are good points of contact for advocacy.

Concern raised about the recent removal of formal training requirements for childminders on the Early Years Register, fearing it lowers quality perceptions. Professor Verity Campbell-Barr supported the need for minimum standards and acknowledged a specific project is researching childminding nuances.

Comment raised which echoed concerns about high costs (business rates, VAT) and the significant administrative burden of managing funding, suggesting a centralised, tax-free payment system like in Germany to free up providers to focus on staff development.

The chair reinforced that making EY businesses unviable is a "false economy" because the sector is crucial for economic growth by enabling parents (predominantly women) to re-enter the workforce.

5. Next Steps and Closing Remarks

Professor Verity Campbell-Barr's Research Next Steps: The research team will hold country-specific events to tailor recommendations. They will work with the Department for Education (DfE) to explore implementation, identifying potential "quick wins" like moving towards a 50% graduate-led workforce (from the current 48%). The emphasis remains on working with the sector and learning from past models of local authority support.

Janet King Closing: Reaffirmed the sector's strength and professionalism, the good intent of policy, and the need for a foundational, prioritised, and manageable approach to reform.

James's Final Thoughts: Thanked all participants, acknowledged the gender imbalance in the sector, and emphasised the indispensable nature of early years work in raising and supporting future generations amidst a rapidly changing world.

APPG AGM: The Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Early Education, Olivia Bailey MP, has agreed to speak at the APPG's AGM in Westminster on the provisional date of 3rd March.