



Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Support for childcare and the early years, HC 969](#)

Tuesday 31 January 2023

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Members present: Mr Robin Walker (Chair); Caroline Ansell; Miriam Cates; Mrs Flick Drummond; Anna Firth; Andrew Lewer; Ian Mearns.

Questions 1 - 67

Witnesses

I: Helen Donohoe, Chief Executive, Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY); Neil Leitch OBE, CEO, Early Years Alliance; Laura Barbour, Early Years Lead, The Sutton Trust; and Megan Jarvie, Head of Coram Family and Childcare.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Helen Donohoe, Neil Leitch, Laura Barbour and Megan Jarvie.

Q1 Chair: Good morning and welcome to today's session, the first session of our inquiry into support for childcare in the early years. I am delighted to have a strong panel here this morning, and the relevance of this inquiry has been shown by the fact that we have had more than 1,700 pieces of written evidence submitted, which is welcome from our perspective. It will be a lot of work for our clerks.

I am pleased to welcome Neil Leitch OBE, Chief Executive of the Early Years Alliance; Megan Jarvie, Head of Coram Family and Childcare; Helen Donohoe, Chief Executive of the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years, better known as PACEY; and Laura Barbour, the Early Years Lead at the Sutton Trust.

If I can start, you have all raised concerns over the complexity of the current childcare entitlements. What problems does this cause and what steps do you think need to be taken to create a more coherent childcare system? Perhaps Helen would like to start.

Helen Donohoe: Yes. At the moment, the funding of childcare and early years is formed around at least eight streams, three Government Departments, and a combination of subsidies, benefits and grants. It is directed at local authorities but not ringfenced. The end result is that both parents and providers experience a huge amount of bureaucracy. We know particularly among vulnerable families—for example, those looking to use the two-year-old offer—it is far too complex.

Something like 40% of people who are entitled to tax-free childcare take up the childcare. There should be 1.2 million families able to access that stream but less than half of that use it. The whole pot comes to around £5 billion but it is divided up into a complex mesh of streams and the sum does not add up to its parts. We feel that the whole system needs reform—for example, withdrawing tax-free childcare—because, no matter how much publicity it gets, no matter how much they try to promote it, it still has not shifted.

Q2 Chair: We will come back in some more detail on that piece. The challenge is that tax-free childcare reaches a huge number of people and, of course, it is the only bit that currently provides support in the pre-two-year-old and post-four-year-old spaces. It is an interesting one, but I do want to come back.

Perhaps I can come over to Megan now on that opening question and the challenges of the complexity of the system.

Megan Jarvie: I completely agree with Helen that we have an incredibly overcomplex system that is also lumpy in terms of when parents get support. It means that a lot of parents miss out, cannot work out what



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they are entitled to and, even if they would have been better off working, might not know that they would have been better off working.

We can do things to promote the current system and try to explain it and there are things that we could do better there, but we need to make the system simpler. The way of getting parents to understand it is having an understandable system rather than more work around promoting it.

Laura Barbour: At the Sutton Trust, we have particularly looked at the eligibility criteria. I have two examples. There are different eligibility criteria for the three different entitlements, whether it is at two or the two different ones at three, and we have the feedback that providers feel that they are caught in the middle between two different, contradictory policy offers with different objectives. It leaves parents confused. They do not know what they are eligible for at which age.

On the more micro level, there is also the fact that eligibility has to be renewed every term so you get people having to come back. It creates additional administration for local authorities, settings, parents and so on. Providers call for greater simplicity and more certainty so that they could plan and the families could plan. We support that. Our overall recommendation is to make the offer universal with an uplift of funding to provide equal access.

Neil Leitch: It is difficult to add to what colleagues have said, to be fair, but the system seems to have been developed by a series of bolt-ons. We add and we add and we add. Over the last 10 years, for example, we have had something like 22 early years Ministers and Secretaries of State and each one has brought their particular element to the table. That inevitably makes it a hybrid system. Nothing is clearcut and there is, frankly, no strategy either as to what it is should look like.

Q3 **Chair:** Part of the reason why we as a Committee were keen to look into this area is the recognition of that complex overlaying of policies, many of which are there for worthy reasons, but it is about how you now make it work for a system as a whole. Certainly, we are keen to hear from you on that.

On this point about the eligibility criteria, particularly for the 30-hour entitlement, that issue of needing to reregister regularly is clearly one of the challenges, but there are also other inconsistencies and challenges there. It struck me as fairly extraordinary that the Onward report pointed out that if you have a child born after April, they are likely to get only one year of nursery support funded versus a child born before who will get two. That seems remarkable and it surely would make sense to change that even if you were not overhauling the system. Have you had conversations with the Government about that over the years? Is there any simple solution to that?

Neil Leitch: Yes, change the criteria. We need to ask the questions. Why is the policy there in the first place? Why put barriers in terms of time



lags that prohibit some parents accessing it? Dare I say, to the common person, it seems pretty obvious that you would do it from the point when a child becomes eligible but you move that eligibility forward. We do not.

Q4 Chair: It is about linking, I guess, to the term and the September school year, which is part of the problem there, but there must be a way of simply changing the eligibility to fit around that.

Megan Jarvie: That does also cause problems for families that want to move into work. The 30 hours is related to work. If you get offered a job in May, you do not become eligible for the 30 hours until September. What do you do for that period of time to make childcare work?

Q5 Chair: Helen, I wanted to come back to this point on the tax-free childcare. Clearly, the take-up is significantly lower than the Government originally anticipated. It has been worked out that the Government have spent £2.3 billion less over five years than their original projections. Is there an approach to increasing the awareness and addressing this or is it better to move away from that tax-free approach altogether?

Helen Donohoe: Ultimately, it would be better to move away from the tax-free approach and to simplify the whole system.

On the point of raising awareness, we would welcome a big campaign to highlight the value of early years as a career, for example, but in terms of take-up, beyond the complexity of the system, we know that if you go into local communities and you talk to people, it works. We were funded by the DFE to do some work called the Together for Twos programme. We did some work with Jobcentre Plus, going into communities where people were, particularly more vulnerable and more disadvantaged families, and talking through the system, talking through the options for childcare, particularly childminders who provide a particularly flexible offer. Those predominantly young single mums who did not realise they were entitled to a childcare place for their two-year-olds managed to secure their 15 hours, get themselves some part-time work and turn their lives around. That happened because one human being was talking to another human being in a setting where they felt safe. It could be a children's centre, a jobcentre or a playground. We know anecdotally that when we do drop-in sessions in playgrounds that word of mouth gets around. That works much more than a showy campaign that people do not feel they relate to.

Chair: That is a good point about direct engagement.

Q6 Ian Mearns: Has anybody ever attempted, given the complexity of this system, to produce a plain guide to the different complexities?

Helen Donohoe: There is a Government website, Childcare Choices. I invite you to have a look at it.

Q7 Ian Mearns: There is a plain guide and there is a Government website. Has anybody out there ever tried to produce a plain guide? I understand



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the point you make that someone one to one can understand the complexities of the individual who would need to apply for all this and, therefore, guide them through, knowing what they know about the individual. However, has anybody produced a plain guide to all this?

Megan Jarvie: There have been plenty of guides. The struggle is that it is not plain. Producing a plain guide for something that is not plain is challenging.

Neil Leitch: You cannot uncomplicate a complicated system. That is the reality of it.

Q8 **Chair:** The other thing that is striking on the tax-free offer is that even of the people who have registered for an account and are taking it, only about half of them use it. It has risen to half only relatively recently. It implies that the system is simply too complicated to use for a lot of people.

Megan Jarvie: There is poor awareness as well as the complexity of the system.

Q9 **Chair:** In a lot of other countries, there is a different approach to this altogether. There is effectively tax-free childcare because they take the childcare cost out of gross income rather than net income. One reason why we face this challenge of affordability in this country is that our approach is focused on people paying out of net income and then getting some kind of rebate through the tax-free childcare system. Is there an argument that if we had a genuinely tax-free childcare system, it would work more effectively and simply?

Neil Leitch: The system itself contradicts the whole levelling-up agenda. It is one that biases parents who have cash flow. If you talk to a parent living in financial deprivation and you ask them if they have effectively 80% to put up front so that they can get their additional 20%, I'm afraid they are not the families that have that cash flow. It completely contradicts the levelling-up policy and it contradicts work that we might want to do in terms of the greatest return on human capital investment when we invest in children who struggle and families that struggle. Abandonment of the policy as it currently stands would be, for me, the only way forward and, for the Alliance, the only way forward.

Q10 **Chair:** Abandon the policy but, clearly, replace it with something else. What would the Alliance suggest?

Neil Leitch: We would quite like that £2.3 billion or £2.4 billion to go straight into the shortfall of funding that exists in the entitlement programmes. I know that we will get to that, I am sure, within this discussion, but a redirection of the money. When I spoke to a previous Chancellor and raised the question of the underspend and suggested that it might be placed elsewhere, the response was, "We have other programmes that are oversubscribed". My point is that that money was intended for the early years sector and we have a crisis at this time. The



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money would be better utilised, rather than spent elsewhere, propping up or supporting where we know there are deficiencies, and that is in funding.

Q11 Chair: The Sutton Trust recommended a more consistent offer across the piece and more consistent for two, three and four-year-olds. Tax-free childcare subsidises childcare for the under-twos in a way that no other part of the system does. What would you propose for that area?

Laura Barbour: For the under-twos? To date we have been very much focused on the three and four-year-olds and the twos. We have not been looking at the under-twos. It has not been our area.

Chair: I know there has been some suggestion, particularly in the think-tank world, of potentially doing more for that group. The issue that we hear and have seen in our written evidence as well is that parents feel the maternity/paternity arrangements run out before any kind of childcare comes in. If we want to incentivise people to be able to continue with their careers, there seems to be a gap in that space.

Q12 Ian Mearns: I am interested in this question of the departmental underspends. As I understand it, three different Departments—DWP, DFE, HMRC—all contribute to the mix. You have talked about underspends there, Neil. Which of those three Departments underspend or is it all of them?

Neil Leitch: We come, I suppose, face to face with the Department for Education. When we did our freedom of information request on the adequacy of funding back in December 2018, the Department for Education acknowledged that at that particular point in time.

If I may, I will go back. In December 2018, we asked the Department for Education, "If you think that you adequately fund the entitlements, can we have your computations and your figures?" Unsurprisingly, we were told to go away, so we filed a freedom of information request. Two and a half years later, with the intervention of the Information Commissioner's Office, the Department released a heavily redacted document. That document said, not my words but the Department for Education's, "To adequately fund the entitlements will require an additional £2 billion and that is not affordable".

It also predicted that it would have to pay a rate by 2021 of £7.49 per hour for every three and four-year-old. As a sector, we were paid in that year £4.89, a significant shortfall. In fact, I have calculated that even at the current investment levels, even if we had zero-rate inflation, to catch up to the £7.49 we would have to wait until about 2038 or 2040 to get to that point. That is ignoring what has happened since 2021 in terms of inflation in double figures and so on.

The Department for Education gave those statistics. The Department for Education is responsible for the free entitlement. That is where I would say that the funding needs to be redirected to.



Q13 **Ian Mearns:** Given that out of the 1.2 million families that are entitled only half take it up, that would imply to me—

Chair: That is the tax-free bit. That is the Treasury's bit.

Ian Mearns: That is the Treasury's bit. That is an underspend as well, isn't it?

Neil Leitch: That is why I assume it would be passed across to the Department for Education. The Treasury has overall responsibility for the fiscal policies in this country. Early education, surely, must be a priority but it is not seen as that. It is seen as predominantly babysitting. It is not about education; it is about getting parents back into work. All the narrative and all the rhetoric is about getting parents back into work.

Q14 **Chair:** There is an interesting discussion there. I always make the case to the Treasury that you can do both through this. You can both invest in early years education, support children to be more school-ready and help to stimulate minds, and also support the productivity piece by helping people continue with their careers. That should be a win-win. It should be additive and that you look at both rather than one or the other. It feels to me at the moment like a lot of the public discourse is about that element of childminding. As Helen pointed out, a lot of childminders are skilled in the early years. It is quite striking.

In terms of the redirection, I wanted to be absolutely clear on this. The Sutton Trust has said to make the overall offers more consistent. Neil said he wants all that underspend from the Treasury effectively to be put into the two-year-old offer as it stands. Is that right?

Neil Leitch: I would like a strategy. As it stands, that is the answer. I would want to transfer the money. But I want a strategy for the early years sector and we do not have that. We do not have a 10-year strategy. We do not have a five-year strategy. In fact, we do not have a 12-month strategy. If you ask colleagues within the Department for Education, whether they be Ministers or officials, what parents should be paying as a percentage of their income in five years' time, you will not get an answer. What should we pay our educators in five years' time? What should their professional progression be? You will not get an answer. That is because we deal with one crisis after one crisis after one crisis, but there is no vision and no strategy. Until we get that, we will just flounder along.

Chair: There are lots of supplementaries. I will bring in Caroline and then Flick.

Q15 **Caroline Ansell:** Thank you very much. You will not be surprised to hear that when I asked local childminders and parents what they would like me to raise this morning, the funding rate and entitlement was one of the top three.

What you described, though, would be to hardwire into a system that you



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think needs completely revising. When you talk about how there is no strategy, is there precedent elsewhere for the strategy that you have in your mind's eye? Where would you pivot to and what would that look like for us here?

Neil Leitch: I look to the Scandinavian countries, where they have a professional workforce, where society values and recognises the importance of early childhood and where they have caps in terms of affordability.

I will give you an example. I am often interviewed on a particular radio station in London and the presenter says to me, "Neil, why should other people be paying for other people's children?" I always respond with the same thing and that is that we never ask that question when a child hits the age of five. We accept that when they walk through the school gates, if we fail to educate them, if we fail to care for them, they will cost us billions further down the line. Yet we do the complete opposite here.

That is why I argue that we need a real strategy for early years. It will save us fortunes moving forward. Other countries have done it. Other countries invest. It is no coincidence that in the tables for the OECD countries, the one table that we top is where a woman's salary in terms of spend is the highest percentage in early years education and care. We are top of that table. We are far from the top when it comes to percentage of GDP that is invested within OECD countries. We are at the other end of the spectrum.

Caroline Ansell: That is a profound illustration. Thank you.

Q16 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** That half answered it, but how exactly would you direct that underspend? It is all very well saying that to the Department for Education. How will that impact on the complexity of childcare or will you give it back to parents? Can you be a bit more detailed?

Neil Leitch: Increase the rate of entitlements. If you increase the rate of entitlements, you are likely to get fewer providers going by the wayside. We have seen record closures with 5,400 providers closing their doors in the last 12 months. Therefore, accessibility for parents would improve and providers would not be forced to marginalise sometimes parents who are only taking the entitlements, because at the moment they are reliant upon those parents who take additional hours to cross-subsidise.

Again, that was in the response to our freedom of information request. The Department for Education acknowledged that prices for parents who do not qualify for the entitlements could go up by up to 30%. They knew that parents would have to cross-subsidise the shortfall in funding. One hopes that an additional funding stream would obviate part of that problem.

Mrs Flick Drummond: Miriam will go into that.

Q17 **Miriam Cates:** Yes, to pick up on a couple of your points, I completely



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agree that the system is ridiculously complicated and hard to navigate. Even for those people who do claim it, it does not necessarily fit with their lifestyle and it does not work with shift work. I completely accept that.

However, I want to challenge the premise of the fact that is often quoted that childcare is more expensive in the UK than in a lot of the OECD and the figure you quoted. All the evidence we have seen is that childcare is a higher proportion of women's or families' net income than anywhere else in the world. That is true. What is also the case is in the UK we are an outlier in how we take money off families to start with. We do not tax households. We do not have the same child tax credits.

Is it the case that we take more money off families with children compared to people without children than in other countries so people's net income is lower and, therefore, de facto, the cost of childcare is a higher proportion? I have not seen evidence that childcare itself is objectively more expensive in this country. It is just that we take more money off people to start with. Do you recognise that?

Neil Leitch: I do not disagree with that. The cost of early years care and education in this country is not dissimilar to other countries. I do not disagree with that, but the investment is lower.

Q18 **Miriam Cates:** Is the answer, therefore, to do what other countries do and give families with children a tax break to recognise the cost of raising children and allow parents themselves to feed that money into the system however they would like to do it, rather than have more state funding direct to the early years providers and bypassing the parents?

Neil Leitch: I disagree with that because that is about taxpayers. That is about a back-to-work agenda. We would argue that every child deserves the right to a strong, good education and that should not be based on your earnings. That should be based on developing young children—

Q19 **Miriam Cates:** That would be my second question. I fully agree with you. Childcare should not be about back to work. That is not what I am saying. I am saying give families the choice of what they do with their money. Anyway, we will come back to that.

I have a second challenge. Is it the case that formal education before five is the best way to outcomes? I suggest that we are, again, an outlier in the OECD and our over-50s are more skilled than the current generation. Yet I bet that none of our over-50s were in formal childcare and, in fact, they would have started school later than the current generation. What children need in the very early years, the first 1,001 days particularly, is a strong bond with parents, a safe environment, love and care, not phonics or formal education. If you get those first 1,001 days right, you do not need formal education before the age of five.

Megan Jarvie: We have a fantastic curriculum in the early years. The early years foundation stage recognises what supports children's development in those early years. It is not about sitting at a desk and



being taught numbers and things like that. There is strong evidence on the benefit of high-quality education in terms of children's outcomes right up to GCSE.

It is not an either-or between with the bonding with your parents and time at home and a strong home learning environment. In fact, there is a real opportunity that high-quality early education can improve that home learning environment if parents are effectively brought into the learning and care environment and understand what is taking place within that setting and how they can support that at home as well as in education.

Helen Donohoe: It is important to acknowledge that the greatest benefit is for those children who are disadvantaged at home. Yes, you are absolutely right. What goes on at home is crucial and advantages every child, but those who are disadvantaged at home get the greatest benefit. It is not just formal education. There is overwhelming evidence that childminders in particular can support emotional health in children who are experiencing difficulties in other aspects of their lives—and that help often extends to mum and dad if they are experiencing difficulties—and communication skills and the so-called softer skills with that interaction away from solely the family home. Group settings enable children to learn to share, to experience peer groups and all those things, as well as EYFS, which are important when they go to school, and those skills for future life.

Megan Jarvie: Often when I look at the EYFS, I think that some adults I know could benefit from these things. It is about how you create good human beings.

Q20 **Miriam Cates:** Isn't that the point? That can be a formal or an informal setting. The important thing is that it happens.

That leads me on to the next question that I am supposed to ask. We were talking about people in particularly deprived households who need this benefit but sometimes, particularly in deprived areas, priority is given to parents who are entitled to the 30 hours or who can top up the additional fees that nurseries have to charge because the hourly fee is not enough. Is that widespread? Is it particularly in deprived areas or do you see it in all areas?

Laura Barbour: Across the board, we know that only 20% of families in the bottom third of income distribution, for example, qualify for the three and four-year-old offer and, overall, 70% of families in the top half qualify. You immediately have a system that is fundamentally unequal in terms of access from the starting point. That also then has a knock-on effect on the provision, as you say, in disadvantaged areas. For example, they are no longer able to provide, in fact, the whole 15 hours because they have to prioritise the 30 hours, so you do not get, potentially, any universal provision. We had 38% of councils saying they were having difficulties delivering places for disadvantaged two-year-olds since the introduction of the full 30 hours. A quarter of PVI settings said the



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number of universal 15-hours places had declined within their settings and were being particularly taken up by more disadvantaged families.

Neil Leitch: There is a sufficient level of providers that have to balance the books by being selective about who gets the 30 hours and when those 30 hours are applied. Parents do not always get the hours that they want. It is not just me saying this. A provider in the recent APPG openly said, "We restrict parents because the other option is to go bust".

Q21 **Ian Mearns:** Can providers literally not afford to provide places to poorer families because they want only the free hours they are entitled to?

Neil Leitch: As well as representing 14,000 nurseries, preschools and childminders, in our own right we are an operator of early years education and care and we operate about 60 settings. Interestingly, four years ago, we operated 132 settings. We have closed over half of our complement exclusively in areas of deprivation. We have a disproportionate number of parents who take just the free entitlement. You will see from that path the challenges that we have in keeping those settings open.

Q22 **Ian Mearns:** The mix of what is happening is creating an inverted priority in terms of what should be happening day to day and week to week. Do you agree with that, Neil?

Neil Leitch: Absolutely. As I said, it seems to fly in the face of any levelling-up agenda. It is the complete opposite. I come back to that point. These are the families and children that you argue would benefit most from support and care.

Megan Jarvie: We have done a survey of local authorities that manage their local childcare markets and 43% of them said they were seeing early education places close in their local area and the number of places reducing. Our survey coming out next month looks at sufficiency of places and it will be interesting to see in that whether we see a decrease in the sufficiency of places because we did see a small decrease last year.

All this discussion links into the discussion we had about the complexity of the system. The reason it is so complex is we have different policies, some that pull in an education direction and some that pull in a back-to-work direction, rather than trying to bring those together and look at how we have high-quality providers that can support work and support children's development.

Chair: Consistency across the piece and bringing things together coherently would surely release some of the funding that is currently trapped in the system for the benefit of children. Miriam, can I bring you back in on parents?

Miriam Cates: Flick, have you asked your question?

Mrs Flick Drummond: No.



Chair: Sorry, Flick, apologies.

Q23 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** I will supplement that. You talked about getting to know about the different systems in the playground. Particularly in deprived areas, we want to find out whether there is enough awareness of childcare support and, if there is not, what needs to be done to make sure they are aware of their entitlements.

Helen Donohoe: I have been trying to persuade the DFE to analyse this data for a long time. We do not have a sufficient disaggregation of provision in relation to deprivation, but my instinct is—and as you can hear from the other panellists—that it is market forces. If people cannot pay enough, then there is not an incentive to provide.

We have already talked about deprivation in terms of families. There is a huge amount of deprivation among providers. Half of early years workers are on in-work benefits. The average wage is about £8.50 per hour. We know that childminders barely break even. The workforce is overwhelmingly female and overwhelmingly exhausted. Something like 40% of staff leave within two years of starting in the sector. It is a perfect storm, given all those pressures.

It is complex because different families, different cultures and different communities have different ways of bringing up children. There is not one model that fits all. Instinctively, there are areas of the country where good-quality childcare is impossible to find. If you are a childminder in a nice suburb of London with double-income professional parents, you can make a lot of money.

Q24 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** How many local authorities have you found allow childminders to have children in their homes? I have heard that some local authorities will not let you use your home for childminding. Have you found that a problem?

Helen Donohoe: There are certain restrictions, but no. Another thing we are working on with the DFE is dispelling some of the myths around childminders in their homes. There are few restrictions provided you have the space.

Q25 **Chair:** I have heard that there has been an issue with some registered social landlords, because they have a ban on businesses in general, applying that to childminding. Clearly, given the benefit that that is likely to bring to the communities that they support, it would be useful if there could be a clear exemption there.

Helen Donohoe: We are working on that. That is coming upstream. There are a few areas that the DFE is working on that could smooth out some of the unnecessary regulations. A lot of them are myths anyway.

Megan Jarvie: I will make two points about that deprivation question. We run a programme called Parent Champions, which is parent volunteers who go out and raise awareness, particularly of the two-year-



old offer. We find that there are personal barriers to using childcare. If it is not the norm within your culture, you would not even consider it and you see it as childcare rather than the education of your young children. You mentioned it earlier. The need for that individual conversation and that individual approach can be powerful. Our volunteers are recruited from within the communities that are least likely to take up childcare. There is a bit more of an affinity and a trusted voice. That is the approach that is needed. A flyer that tells you, "This is what you are entitled to" will not touch the sides of overcoming some of those barriers to childcare.

I also wanted to make a point about how the childcare landscape can look different in different local areas. Often, deprived areas will have a bigger proportion of school-based providers, which tend to be teacher-led, be very high quality and have good outcomes but might not have the same longer hours that support work. That can be the point where you have the choice between that type of provision or a long journey to a childcare provider that might be unaffordable that supports work. That can act to keep you out of work rather than help you move into work.

Chair: That is an interesting point. We will come back to Miriam. Apologies.

Q26 **Miriam Cates:** Thank you. We were talking about the barriers to accessing childcare, some of which is complication, some of which is rigidity, some of which is the hidden or added costs. You have covered that well.

Are those the only barriers? I do not know if you have seen a report from the Centre for Social Justice, "Parents Know Best", which has some interesting polling from Public First. It shows that the majority of people prefer to look after their own children themselves and the lower down the socioeconomic groups you go, the more that preference is expressed. Could it be the case that it is not just about cost and practical barriers but that some people in some communities do not want to put their children in formal childcare? Is that a problem?

Neil Leitch: I suggest that it is probably about balance. I was asked a while ago to speak at one of the large supermarket's annual conference and the chief executive said to me, "Can you talk about how you can get predominantly mums back into the working environment?" I said, "I will talk about it but I would like to interview some of those people". Nearly everybody said that they would change their working patterns. Nearly everybody said that they felt they were rushed back to work way too quickly. Colleagues were in tears, telling me that they went home at 5 or 6 o'clock in the evening, spent an hour with their child and felt guilty. They would buy them more sweets and they would buy them more toys because they felt they missed time with them and they missed those precious moments when they walk, talk and all the rest of it.

I could not agree more. It is not balanced. We do not do enough to support parents' needs. This is not one environment that suits everybody.



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We need to have a family approach. In other countries they do. They are much more supportive of families rather than—and I come back to it and I make no apology—getting mums back into the working environment.

Miriam Cates: Looking at the Government's current policy offer, it is hard not to deduce that the No. 1 priority is getting parents back in the workplace and not what is best for the child and the family as a whole. I completely agree with you on that.

Megan Jarvie: We need to look at how the benefit system also mandates work for—

Q27 **Miriam Cates:** Benefits and the tax system and how it all pushes people into this one particular lifestyle choice that the Government thinks is best.

That leads me on to the next question. We have this provision from the age of two for some but three for all, which we say is either to get parents back to work or for education depending on our slant on it. Between six months—which is when maternity pay tends to expire—and three years, there is no current policy offer apart from tax-free childcare, which we know is underutilised. If we are not going for a policy of getting everybody back into the workplace, what would you suggest is the correct offer to families in that timescale?

Megan Jarvie: There is also universal credit within that period but—

Miriam Cates: Yes, but, again, there are barriers to using that.

Megan Jarvie: There are huge barriers, yes.

Miriam Cates: But for people who are not eligible for universal credit and are not eligible for the offer from age two, we currently have no policy in that two and a half years. What should the policy be?

Megan Jarvie: This is where we would look to reform the system entirely. We want there to be an entitlement to a childcare place for every child where parents pay only what they can afford and where there is a sliding scale based on what that is and then parents have a genuine choice about working or staying at home and how much to work. At the moment, we feel that parents' choices are constrained and that there are different forces. For example, for low-income families, universal credit mandates that they must seek work at a certain age. That takes away some of that choice. For other parents, who genuinely want to work and see the benefit of work, they cannot afford to work because of the childcare costs. It is hard to see the tweaks that we can make to the current system to enable that. That is why we need to look again at the whole system.

Q28 **Miriam Cates:** Would you make that universal so that, regardless of whether mum goes back to work, there is that offer available?



Megan Jarvie: Yes, there is and parents pay what they can afford. There is little evidence that parents use more childcare than they need for all the reasons that you have said. Parents quite like their children and want to see them.

Miriam Cates: Does anybody else want to come in on that?

Neil Leitch: It is variable. We have to remember that some parents struggle to cope constantly and do need support. Early years providers, I suggest, go a lot further than what we perceive to be care and education. In our settings, many of the conversations are about, "He does this in the evening. I cannot sleep". Those conversations take place. We are not funded for it but they take place and they take place in just about every setting, I suggest. It is about balance.

There is also strong evidence, as Helen alluded to right at the beginning, that young children—two, three and four-year-olds—benefit from socialisation.

Q29 **Miriam Cates:** I suppose my pushback to that would be that it does not have to be in a formal setting. Certainly, in some communities and in the past, parent groups and mother-and-toddler groups have provided that. They do not exist to the same extent anymore, partly because so many more parents have gone back to work. I agree with you that maybe in early years settings we need to push the focus back on what this does for the whole community rather than just how this gets parents back into work.

Neil Leitch: I agree, but I would not want you to think that early years settings are mini primary schools. I am sure you do not. They are environments where children learn through play. They discover. That is pretty critical. I remember one senior politician, who was an early years Minister and had gone out to see a few settings, came back and said she felt that preschools were breeding unruly toddlers and there was no sense of discipline and so on. They were probably children who were excited. They were probably children who were enjoying what they were doing. They were probably children who were learning through play. It is important that we understand that we are not advocating and certainly early years settings do not operate in the same way as primary schools.

Megan Jarvie: I am a parent of two young children and I feel like I know quite a lot about child development in the early years. There are things that my childminder has taught my children that are so far beyond my skillset and ways that she has supported their development, which is something quite special and recognises the absolute expertise of our early years educators.

Helen Donohoe: I would add to that, which builds on Neil's point as well, the importance of integration at the local level. In the past, it might have been a children's centre or a family hub. Whatever we call it, it is somewhere where people can come together because there is an



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integration with safeguarding as well that is important, the early intervention and spotting those families that struggle. It is supporting the families as well as the children. We can get in there early when people struggle. Where there are great community groups and great community networks, children thrive, of course they do, but they do not, unfortunately, exist everywhere.

Q30 **Caroline Ansell:** I had one question to Megan, who said that the contribution of parents should be set at what they can afford. I was wondering how you would identify that and whether it was a percentage.

Megan Jarvie: I was not sure about the level of detail we want here. We have a whole policy piece that we have set up. Families in poverty would not pay. Below the poverty line, childcare would be free. Above that, it would start at 50 pence an hour and go up as families earn more. For a second or subsequent child, you would pay less per hour than for your first child, recognising the additional barriers on your income. It would go up to £4 an hour.

Chair: The rest would be covered by a Government subsidy for those hours, presumably, through taxes.

Megan Jarvie: Yes.

Q31 **Ian Mearns:** Going back to Miriam's point, the problem is that many children develop well within the family setting and many others do not. We have children coming into reception classes in primary schools who are not toilet trained, who cannot use a knife and fork and who cannot communicate at the age of four. That shows that they have missed out within the family setting because they have not been in a childcare setting from the age of two onwards. Of course, they have missed out on that vital early developmental education but also personal development from their perspective.

Neil Leitch: The pandemic emphasised that, without a doubt. One of the positive things, I guess, that came out of the pandemic was that parents started to increase the value of early years providers. They recognised that this is not just about childcare. This is about developing and so on. That is one reason why we had and we continue to have so many children coming into settings that have social and emotional development delay. It is inevitable. It comes back to that point about ensuring they can socialise and they can play. We had children in high-rise apartments who spent literally all their time on their mum or dad's phone rather than doing the things that many of us, I am sure, did when we were young like digging mudholes.

Ian Mearns: Appropriate interaction with other children and adults is quite often a major stress as well.

Laura Barbour: We hear this from head teachers as well. In primary schools, 93% said that they recognised that time spent in an early years setting prior to attending primary school made a significant difference to



when they arrived in school, particularly for children from more disadvantaged families.

Q32 Mrs Flick Drummond: Moving on to the workforce and providers, the Social Mobility Commission published a report on the stability of the early years workforce in England. It said that there have been signs that the early years workforce is increasingly unstable with too few new entrants to replace those who leave the sector. You have alluded already to the numbers that leave. What main concerns do you have relating to the early years workforce in particular?

Neil Leitch: I will leave it to others first, but I feel quite strongly about this.

Mrs Flick Drummond: Who would like to kick off on that one?

Laura Barbour: I will kick off. At the Sutton Trust, we would like to see a well-qualified, high-status and better rewarded profession across the whole sector, but we see that low salaries and a lack of career status are leading to a recruitment and retention crisis. This is in turn driving down quality. We have a situation where 33% do not have either English or maths at GCSE or both. We have staff turnover of 24% compared to the UK average of 15% or 18%. We have a sharp drop in level 3 qualifications.

You mentioned particularly access to entry level. Our workforce review again has identified a dramatic drop in entry-level 1 to 3. That also included apprenticeships. We talked to the training providers about this, who suggested that it was funding, time commitments and then workplace training requirements. They also recommended—and we suggested—that we embark on an independent inquiry to explore that in more detail. In a way, they were hunches, but they thought that we should look further at digging down to understand.

Q33 Mrs Flick Drummond: Do you recommend that they should have a level 3 qualification across the board for all staff working in early years?

Laura Barbour: No, but to be aiming for a higher percentage. Certainly, we have asked for a reinstatement of what was called the graduate leader fund. We have called it the leadership quality fund. That was a pot of money that not only supported settings to support the staff to advance their training while they are in the settings but also, when they achieved their higher qualifications, it also enabled settings to reward them with a higher salary. That is another issue. Even if you can persuade and they can find the time and the settings can give them the time to achieve higher qualifications, they then do not get the recognition in terms of a salary uplift.

Mrs Flick Drummond: It is quite difficult for career progression, I suspect. Anyone else?



Helen Donohoe: There is not even a career narrative. For a young person at a school or college, there is no sense that this is a valued career or a recognised career to go into. From the beginning, it is downtrodden. We surveyed 1,500 childminders and early years practitioners. Almost 50% of them said their mental health was depreciating because—pay is important as well, of course—of the lack of recognition and a sense that they are valued, the same as we value nurses and firefighters as part of that public infrastructure.

I reiterate all the things that have been said about the lack of qualifications and people leaving because they can earn more money in a more flexible environment in an Amazon warehouse or a supermarket. Of most concern to us is the huge decline in childminders. The number of childminders has halved in 20 years. We project that by 2035 we will have only about 1,000 childminders left in the country. That is from 60,000 20 years ago, which is a huge loss to the childcare infrastructure because of the skills they have, the flexibility they provide, and the mental health support and emotional support they give to families.

Unless drastic action is taken—and that action, we propose, is around support to go into childminding as a profession and some form of narrative around it being a profession, not just a babysitter, because they do exactly the same as every other early years practitioner does, the EY First, safeguarding, Ofsted rated, yes. We know one major barrier is the time it takes to become qualified as a childminder. It can take almost a year and, while they do that, many will have their own young children. Generally speaking, they do not come from high-income backgrounds. We work with the DFE to talk about bringing back start-up grants—not a huge amount of money but just an incentive to come into the system—and then, coupled with the reform of the funding streams and the entitlements, making it a sustainable career that people can enjoy. At the moment, they stick at it for the love of what they do but that is not enough anymore.

Q34 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** What are the reasons for leaving childminding? You say it is pay but also recognition?

Helen Donohoe: It is a variety of reasons. It can be circumstantial. If you have done 20 years of childminding, you are probably ready to say that enough is enough. Some people do it because they want a change. They might have been a nurse previously or a teacher and they want to spend more time at home. They might have their own young children or grandchildren and that runs out when they grow up.

Generally speaking, it is lack of morale. It is lack of resources. They are expected to go the extra mile but not be rewarded for all the qualifications it takes and all the work it takes. They are self-employed so they do it on their own, generally speaking. For a vast number of childminders, if they did not have a partner who could subsidise their income, it would not be feasible. It is not a solid basis on which to have a significant and important part of childcare and early years provision.



Q35 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** Neil, you have lots of ideas about the workforce, you said.

Neil Leitch: One of the biggest reasons is that recruitment and retention is a crisis that we have never witnessed before and we have used up the good will of people, frankly. By way of example, if you go back to the pandemic, many providers opened up their doors to ensure that essential workers had continuity in care and education. They would go home and they would turn on the television and see that 1,000 people had died and the clinical evidence at that particular point in time was pretty poor. They had no support from the Government for PPE. They got home testing just a few days before it was generally made available to the public.

We did a survey of 1,400 providers. We also talked to people who had indicated that they were leaving the sector. Some 35% said that they were considering leaving the sector, which is a pretty substantive figure. The single biggest reason they gave for leaving was not money. It was not pay. It was feeling undervalued by the Government. That was 77%. The next was work stress, anxiety and so on. Then, for around 54%, it was pay. These are about environmental factors, not just pay.

It is interesting that it continues. With all the policies about supporting people who had contracted Covid and, therefore, funds being available for alternative staff, that was given to schools. Schools had home testing. Early years got nothing. If they felt marginalised, we should not be shocked by that.

When you get into a position whereby you have that statistic and you have more jobs available than people unemployed, don't be surprised if people who are at the bottom of the pile when it comes to earnings and are stressed and are undervalued decide to move on. Still to this day the DFE issues statements that thank teachers for keeping pupils at schools safe during the hot summer weather. Have you ever tried to keep a three-year-old or a four-year-old out of the hot weather? There is not a word about the early years sector. They are seen as subservient within the whole education system.

Finally, when you talk to people that come into the sector and you ask them why they do it, they do not use words like, "I want to make big bucks, profit and loss accounts, balance sheets, return on investment". They use words like, "Love. I want to care for a child". These are soft factors but they are the most important. As a parent, I would rather hear those words any day from somebody looking after my child. They are undervalued.

Megan Jarvie: To back up what Neil said, we did some research on the impact of Covid and it found exactly that. Morale was at an all-time low. The difference in treatment between school educators and early educators was felt sorely. They were dealing with that at the same time as they were seeing children coming back to their settings with much higher needs as a result of Covid. That has created a pressure on



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workers. In a survey we did of local authorities, 90% said that they were seeing severe difficulties around recruitment and retention in their area. It is a worrying stage.

To back up what I said earlier about how there is strong evidence about the benefits of early education, that is high-quality early education. We know that these experts who work with our children are the biggest determinant of quality and the respect that is needed and the support that is needed to enable them to do that job.

Q36 Mrs Flick Drummond: What would turn it around, then?

Laura Barbour: I am thinking back. One of the key things is that we do not have routes for early years teachers to get full parity of status with qualified teacher status. That is absolutely at the forefront. You set that as your highest bar. We do not have that in the first instance.

Mrs Flick Drummond: To turn it around, that would be a starter, then?

Laura Barbour: That would certainly be a starter, yes.

Megan Jarvie: It is not just pay, as Neil said, but it is also pay.

Q37 Chair: Of course, part of the challenge there as well is that teachers are a graduate profession. The majority of people in the early years settings outside of leadership are not. It is how you provide the incentives and the support for people to move in a direction that allows it to be a graduate profession.

I was struck when you were talking about your leadership support scheme. During my time at the Department I worked on the NPQs. The Government are subsidising CPD in a way that they never have before when it comes to teachers. There is an NPQ for early years leaders but that is available only in the school system. Would you like to see that offered to the independent and voluntary sector in the early years?

Laura Barbour: Yes, we think there should be parity across the maintained and PVI sectors. There should not be a difference there.

When we recommend, as Neil has said, the requirement for an overall uplift in funding, we always say it has to be attached to particular quality indicators. It is not just an uplift in the funding. It will be related to specific areas.

Q38 Ian Mearns: There was a Government aim to have a degree-level professional in every setting. What did the Government do tangibly to fulfil that aim?

Neil Leitch: Nothing because it is unaffordable. At the moment, people qualify and the further they go in their qualifications, they get to a point where they are attracted into the school environment because of that recognition. In terms of changing it, it is about mindset. Until you get



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early years considered to be a fundamental part of the education system, none of this will ever change.

We possibly need a Cabinet Minister specifically for early years, given that this is the point when you shape the life chances of our future generations and create kind children who will not be a burden on society, will generate more revenue and will cost us less in crime and in health. Why would you want to turn the tables around and focus predominantly in that area rather than what we do? If you look at investment in higher education, the James Heckman graph goes up like this but it should go the other way up, like this, if we want to reap the benefits further down the line.

Ian Mearns: Given recent experience, having a Cabinet Minister might not be all it is cracked up to be.

Q39 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** They talk about having degree apprenticeships for teachers, which I have issues with, but would that be relevant to early years as well? Would that be a good way forward of giving them parity?

Neil Leitch: It is relevant, but the practical experience is that the earnings are not there. You perhaps attract people in and then they wake up. They can get higher earnings elsewhere and more support elsewhere because providers struggle to staff their settings at this particular point in time. They do not have enough people to get more capacity. Yes, if the infrastructure was solid—and there is not enough support for apprentices. They are, again, cross-subsidised by the setting. It needs a complete revamp.

Q40 **Andrew Lewer:** I have an initial question to you, Megan. Coram's most recent childcare survey reflected that only 59% of local areas have enough childcare for parents who work full-time. Were some areas experiencing more shortages than others?

Megan Jarvie: Yes. There is not a particular picture of certain regions of the country having bigger shortages. There is a picture of certain groups particularly struggling to access childcare. Disabled children always come out around 20%. This year it was 21% and it was a slight drop on last year. Only 21% of areas have enough childcare for disabled children.

The other gaps are parents working atypical hours, so shift workers or anyone outside the 9.00 to 5.00, or with older children. It is slightly outside the scope of this inquiry, but it is worth noting that childcare does not stop when children start school. There is also a need for good wraparound provision at school.

It does vary by local areas. Parents want hyperlocal childcare. They want childcare that is on their street, in their area, where they are going. You get the biggest benefits when parents come together as a community. That can bring benefits to the family as well. Even if there are enough places across the local authority, it will not necessarily serve every parent well. There is a need to be able to plan right across a local authority.



Q41 **Andrew Lewer:** What happens if you have only 20% or 21% coverage and you have these other gaps?

Megan Jarvie: Children miss out. Disabled children are less likely to take up their early education entitlements. We see that children with disabilities can start school behind their peers, not related to their disability but because they have missed out on so many other developmental activities in their early years. That is one of the real barriers. Often they will delay their start in early education. When it is such a small amount of time when you get particularly that three and four-year-old place—it can be just three terms—if you miss one term or two terms it has a big impact on your learning and outcomes. We will come on to this later, but this area needs attention to try to get responsive funding so that providers are able to make the adaptations needed so that they are welcoming to every child and accessible to every child.

Q42 **Andrew Lewer:** We will come on to that later but, broadening out now, a related issue is trying to get to grips with this relationship. PACEY and the Early Years Alliance have both expressed concern over the Government's consultation on changing staff-to-child ratios. Some fairly strong opinions were expressed about that, in fact. If those proposals go ahead, what implications would that have on the sector, Neil?

Neil Leitch: It would be disastrous. We did a survey of our members when the policy proposal was leaked. Given that they struggle financially, you would think that they would look for every opportunity to create additional revenue. Of 9,000 responses—a record response to any survey that we have ever done—nine out of 10 providers said that it would jeopardise the wellbeing of the children who they care for and educate. Nine out of 10 said that they would not implement it. Of those that said that they may implement it, only 2% said that they would pass any benefit across to parents. It will not work. Nobody wants it.

I find it absolutely ironic that at a point in time, on the very day that it was leaked from No. 10, we had His Majesty's Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman of Ofsted, on the radio and television telling us that young children's development had stalled and they needed more time, more effort and more support than ever before.

We also have, as we have alluded to, a workforce that is on its knees. It is as if some individual—and I have used other words in the past to describe the individual—has said, "What is the worst possible time that we can implement changing adult-to-child ratios? Let's do it when the workforce is on its knees and children need more care and support". It is absolutely disastrous. It is the lowest common denominator. I do not understand why we would even consider it. Nobody wants it. Parents do not want it.

Q43 **Andrew Lewer:** What is so disastrous about this particular change in ratio from one to four to one to five? What is it about that particular



figure that makes it so dramatic?

Neil Leitch: Educators struggle to cope as it currently stands. I said to one Minister recently, "Have you ever tried to walk across the street with five children?" He said to me, "Why would I want to walk across the street with five children?" That is not the point.

Chair: It was not Jacob Rees-Mogg, then?

Neil Leitch: Chair, what can I say? It is also about creep. It was interesting that in the consultation it went beyond four to five. There was a supplementary question that said, "What about moving from eight to 10 for three and four-year-olds?" This is the thin end of the wedge.

We should pride ourselves that we have good-quality care and education in this country, not go to other countries and find the worst bits without looking at it in context. That is what we are doing. It is disastrous. With every breath in my body, I will battle this personally all the way down the line. Nobody wants it. We will make children commodities.

Laura Barbour: We have discussed that this is not just about childcare. It is about early education and it is about quality early education. When we looked a few years ago at quality, a favourable adult-to-child ratio came out as one of the most important in terms of providing the warmth for the youngest children and that attention from a small number of adults. There is no doubt. More favourable adult-to-child ratios promote better adult-child education, the key to quality, and this is associated with better outcomes.

Chair: Sorry, Caroline, you wanted to come in.

Q44 **Caroline Ansell:** Previously, you signposted the Scandinavian countries and you then talked about picking the worst without context. What are those comparative ratios across the international scene? What is that context?

Neil Leitch: They do vary. It is interesting, for example, in Denmark. I met recently with a colleague who met with Her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales and we were talking about ratios. They have flexible ratios. Do they ever use them? No, they do not. They also have additional support in terms of auxiliary staff who will lay out activities and so on. Again, I argue that we do not compare like with like in any way whatsoever. We have an infrastructure that does not allow us to have any flexibility so ratios will just be a damning position.

Q45 **Caroline Ansell:** Are you talking about reshaping the workforce? You might have a lead practitioner with a different ratio but you would have support staff working alongside them. Is that what you have in mind, then?

Neil Leitch: Let those who do this job determine what is in the best interests of a child. Hidden deep in the Department for Education's



website is a graphic that has five elements. It is an internal graphic that officials are meant to, basically, go through when they develop policy. One of those elements is: who made you the expert? They should ask that question. I suggest that these proposals were put forward by people who know diddly about early years. Do the job. Do the job for a week, never mind your lifetime, and see if you would want more children to care for and educate. I don't think you would. Not you personally; "one" would.

Caroline Ansell: I like a big family. I was a teacher, too.

Neil Leitch: You are welcome. We are short of people.

Q46 **Ian Mearns:** In a nutshell, an additional child from four to five is only one more child to some people but, putting it another way, it is a 25% increase across the sector. Given the attrition in the workforce, given the stress and given how undervalued people are, it could be like a bale of straw that will break many camels' backs.

Megan Jarvie: That 25% one is helpful. If we said to any of you, "Can you take on 25% extra work?", what would your response be? It is a big chunk extra.

Q47 **Caroline Ansell:** There are growing class sizes all the way through the sector.

Neil Leitch: If you do eight hours day, add another two hours to it; you would be pretty cheesed off by that.

Helen Donohoe: It adds to the point about lack of respect for the work that colleagues do. Most PACEY members that we spoke to said it feels like a kick in the teeth. It is another tinkering without the desired strategic vision. Possibly but not most importantly—the child's outcomes are the most important—it will not deliver what it is intended to deliver. It is a poor policy.

Chair: There is also a question around the trust of parents putting their children into settings. As we have heard already, parents value that close engagement. Ratios appear to be quite important to parents based on certainly the feedback that we get and on the surveys.

Andrew Lewer: I was going to just make sure Helen got her say on this big issue. There are a lot of questions today about ongoing processes and problems, whereas this is potentially a big policy shift. I wanted to make sure everybody got an airing. What I am genuinely picking up is that the ratios is one thing that is more indicative of process and over-detail rather than systemic change, which seems to be the much more favoured approach. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you. Anna, you have been waiting patiently. I will bring you in.



Q48 **Anna Firth:** I would like to move on to looking a little bit at how early education prepares children for the transition to primary school. We are all aware of the Study of Early Education and Development report, which followed 6,000 two-year-old children from 2013. It is a big longitudinal study that has made that link between good-quality childcare and better outcomes, which we have discussed. That is a big question and you might want to pick up on just one aspect of it. If I could ask everyone that question, how should early education prepare young children for the transition to primary school?

Helen Donohoe: I touched on it earlier. There is the more academic side of the EYFS, which prepares children for numeracy and literacy. Just as important is the social, emotional and communication skills that they develop being among their peers and trusted adults. It gives them the basic foundations for that journey that they go on to from five years old.

Q49 **Anna Firth:** I thought you might want to touch on the seven learning goals in the EYFS and whether you think they are the right ones and whether you think there is the right balance between them.

Helen Donohoe: They have reviewed the EYFS in the last couple of years. The balance is broadly okay. We went into pages and pages in our response so I will not relay that again. Broadly, it is about its application. It is quite an open framework and its application in the high-quality setting is important, but it does combine all those.

I personally feel literacy and numeracy are a little bit too literal and prescribed, but again it is down to a good, highly qualified leader and setting to say, "This is appropriate for our children". Children in one setting will be different to another, whether they are more advantaged, English is their first language, and so on. As long as the framework is there for practitioners to use, it is a world leader and we should be proud of it.

Megan Jarvie: I would agree with that. There is such huge potential within it as a framework. The continuation between early education and reception is a nice one as well, so that there is not too much of a jolt on starting school and the change of approach. The crux of it is enabling settings to deliver it to its full potential, which we have talked about a lot already. Yes, it is a good piece that we have and we should be proud of it.

Laura Barbour: From a Sutton Trust point of view, we would also see it as a crucial period for tackling inequalities before children reach school age. Again, I would reiterate the point I have made that there should be equality of access, particularly in that three and four-year-old phase just before children reach school so that they all have the same opportunity to attend a similar number of hours, which there is not at the moment.

Megan Jarvie: That is a very important point that we should dwell on a little bit. What we are seeing at the moment is better-off children getting



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twice as much early education as disadvantaged children, as a result of the 30 hours policy.

Laura Barbour: We do not know that they are directly related but the gap was reducing up until 2017, which coincides with the introduction of the 30 hours, and it has since then been widening again. As Megan says, there is a double advantage going to the relatively better off.

Megan Jarvie: There is a slight incoherence as well. At two years of age we target disadvantaged children and then we switch over once they turn three.

Laura Barbour: To Neil's point, that would not be something that we would accept, children getting to spend more hours in school because their parents are working, and that is exactly what is happening.

Neil Leitch: I would agree with all that, I have to say, but emphasise that we are trying to ensure that we have children who transition and have a desire to learn and discover. That is critical. If you do not have that desire, then you are going to struggle, full stop. We are not about churning out a factory line of children who can write their name and count to 10.

There was a point that I think Helen made. We have to be very careful that we do not have an overemphasis on reading, writing and maths. The skills that are equally important in terms of learning and probably more important for your desire to learn are creativity, physical development, and social and emotional development, and I do slightly worry that if you can write your name and count to 10 that is it.

Caroline Ansell: It is easier to measure.

Megan Jarvie: Absolutely.

Neil Leitch: It is, and that is perhaps why we default to the easy option. Outcomes, as opposed to outputs, are hard. Skilled educators can see and understand it and, given the right resources, can focus in on those areas.

Q50 **Chair:** Neil, do you agree with the point about the overlap from early years in schools being a good thing? There has been some debate about that over the years. I hear from some of the nursery providers in my patch that they see, in some respects, unfair competition from schools that are opening nurseries because they do not have to pay business rates or VAT. They see that as a competitive disadvantage for them. Would you say, on balance, it is a good thing that the first year of school is considered part of the early years?

Neil Leitch: Definitely. There are commercial considerations there that clearly do feel unjust because you are trying to do the right thing by young children, but if you are talking about children's development and you are talking about transition, that should be interlinked. That should



be a natural progression. We often argue, “Are children ready for school?” Of course, people working in the sector say that school should be ready for children, and I have to say that colleagues who I talk to from schools do value that, do recognise that. They see that if a child is, in my terminology, lagging behind, they then have to do something that they describe as “catch-up”.

Q51 **Anna Firth:** There is an American educationalist whose name escapes me now who said that an overemphasis on literacy and numeracy at a very young age may well teach the children to have those skills to count and to write their name but at the expense of their desire to want to use them. I just wonder if you recognise that as a quote and a philosophy and whether you want to reflect on that and on the early years framework. Are we getting the balance right between care and education?

Megan Jarvie: I think what you are getting at is the high level of skill we are asking for from people working in early education and care. That is a valid challenge and it is something that experienced, qualified staff know exactly how to do.

Neil Leitch: I would agree, but I do not think you have to be qualified. Parents do that every single day and so do educators working in early years settings. You are surrounded by people, whether you are qualified or not, who are skilled and you learn from them.

I find the qualification idea really interesting. Before I was involved in early years I chaired the Finance Industry Standards Association, which regulated second mortgages or endeavoured to regulate second mortgages. I have no maths qualification and I cannot work in a setting because I do not have a level 2 qualification. I could chair the Finance Industry Standards Association but I could not work in an early years setting. We have to be very careful when we talk about qualifications and overqualification.

Q52 **Chair:** Can I ask on that—

Neil Leitch: Is it a mortgage question or is it something else?

Chair: No, it is not a maths question. Again, a number of nurseries I have been talking to in my constituency have said this. The requirement to take your NVQ level 3 that you have GCSE maths and English is, they think, unreasonable, particularly the maths element of that. You need the English to write reports and they see some value in that. Fundamentally, you want to be able to support children to become numerate; you do not need to be able to teach children the elements of GCSE mathematics. Is that something that you would recognise as a broader concern?

Neil Leitch: Absolutely. To be fair to the Department for Education—I am trying to be discreet here but it is too late—I believe it is something it is looking at. I think it recognises that there is almost an oversubscription in that requirement. As long as it is clear that you have skilled people



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within the environment who can share those skills and so on, and you are supporting children to a desired level, not overemphasising, not overburdening, then we think that is absolutely fine. People would want to progress but at the moment we make it a restrictive factor. I agree, Chair.

Ian Mearns: I honestly thought the whole purpose of the setting was just to prepare every child for their primary school baseline assessment and that is it.

Q53 **Anna Firth:** My last question is particularly for Laura. The Sutton Trust has raised concerns about the current system being too focused on childcare and not having enough emphasis on education, particularly for disadvantaged children, which is something that you referred to earlier.

Laura Barbour: Yes.

Anna Firth: I wonder if you would like to elaborate on that.

Laura Barbour: As I say, it is about the essential criteria by which children are able to enter the setting in terms of the hours that they are eligible, particularly the 30 hours at three and four years of age. At a top level that might look like you are getting 15 hours, but what might happen is that children are forced to take that in two days so that you do not get the quality of attending the setting for five days, perhaps, where you would get more of an experience. It has repercussions in terms of the detail of the education they are receiving.

Anna Firth: More flexibility in the system?

Laura Barbour: Yes, and fairness, really.

Anna Firth: Does anybody else want to comment on that?

Megan Jarvie: It is a point I feel like I have already made so I might be repeating myself, but it is recognising that both can be achieved at once. One of the biggest problems we have within the system is pulling in different directions, pulling towards parental employment or pulling towards outcomes for children. They can both be done at the same time. That is why we have called for the reform of the system to focus on doing that, rather than having lots of different well-intentioned policies on top of each other that create some of the incoherencies in the system.

Laura Barbour: Sorry, just coming back on one thing, I know Megan has talked a lot about the evidence for high quality but it is particularly so for the most disadvantaged. Again and again they are the cohort that particularly benefits, and they are the ones who are not getting the full opportunity at the moment.

Anna Firth: Last word?

Helen Donohoe: I have nothing to add.



Q54 **Caroline Ansell:** That is a very neat segue because we are going to look now at the provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities. I think, Megan, you said earlier this group are the least likely to take up that entitlement and yet would benefit, potentially, the most, rather like some of the children from disadvantaged backgrounds we are talking about.

My own experience is that we have just seen in Eastbourne a brand new specialist facility purpose-built for nursery-aged children, a new value accorded to the learning that is being offered to those children, but conversely nursery settings closing because of workforce and cost-related issues. It is a very mixed picture. One parent said this to me on the provision for SEND, "You're expected to know as a parent that different teams are in charge of different things. There is no joined-up working, no central place for multiple assessments, the system cannot cope with the number of SEND referrals and it is extremely isolating."

My question then is: do you think the early childhood education and care system is providing the right support and funding for these young children?

Megan Jarvie: I would say no, as a short answer, unfortunately not. The picture that you paint of families being pulled between different teams, getting lost and feeling that they have to fight, is one that we see a lot with the families we work with. Despite having a lot of contact with different types of professionals, be those health professionals, local authority or care, early education might never come up. They might never get recommended to take up a childcare place. Awareness can be very low as well.

One of the things we see is that children with SEND tend to be clustered in school-based settings, maintained settings, rather than PVI settings. There is no right or wrong on that one but what concerns me is parental choice and whether parents are able to choose what works for them.

One of the challenges is how long it takes for additional funding to come through. There is additional funding out there for children with SEND but it might not arrive at the setting in time for them to be able to use it to provide the care that they need to provide. One of the things that we see as a result of that is that parents are less likely to work. There are many reasons but this is one factor that means that mothers in particular are less likely to work and poverty risks are much higher as well.

Q55 **Chair:** On that issue of additional funding coming through, is that varying from one local area to another or is that a consistent problem with the way the funding system works?

Megan Jarvie: I am not sure on that, actually. I do not know if anyone else would know.

Chair: It would be interesting to understand that better.



Neil Leitch: I think it is a global position. When we did our research this time 11 months ago, with a report called “Too Little Too Late” that was specifically about SEND, 92% of providers said that they effectively funded children themselves out of their own pocket and half of those also said that the delays were extreme. You have to imagine that that is a fairly universal position. That is not to say that there will not be some local authorities who give it more emphasis and where more concern is attached to it, but generally it comes across as an absolute disaster.

It was interesting again, Chair, that in a recent APPG meeting—it may not have been the last one but the one before—you had a provider openly say, “We will not take SEND children because we cannot get funding for them and we have to dedicate more staff, more work, and so on”. That is a sorry state of affairs but that is because of the system. It is a burden on providers.

Q56 **Caroline Ansell:** Is it that they cannot get funding in a timely fashion, cannot get it because it did not meet thresholds—

Neil Leitch: Often the children have moved on by the time they are almost there for the funding. It is that bad.

Megan Jarvie: There is also the point of the benefit of inclusion for all children as well. If children with SEND are clustered in school provision, then we have children who are missing out on that diversity of other children who they can play with, meet and socialise with.

Q57 **Caroline Ansell:** Presumably, this is not around diagnosis, this is simply around assessment processing?

Neil Leitch: Correct, yes.

Caroline Ansell: For some of these children, their situation will be quite well understood from a very young age.

Megan Jarvie: Some. Some parents also tell us about issues around diagnosis. Often during the early years they are still fighting for diagnosis.

Q58 **Ian Mearns:** The thing is, though, that in mainstream schools lots and lots of youngsters have special educational needs or disabilities but only a very small proportion of them end up getting an education health and care plan. It is about those youngsters as well, not just the ones who would end up getting an education health and care plan later on but those other youngsters who have special educational needs who will not, but still have a major challenge in learning.

Neil Leitch: You would think, again, if we work on the principle that prevention is better than cure, you would want to identify it at a really early point. I would also say this. I am not sure that we fully understand the emotional reluctance of some parents to recognise that their children may need additional support. It is a big thing as a parent to go, “I think



my child needs more support”, and I do not think there is enough emotional support for those parents to come forward. There is a stigma there, not for everyone but some.

Ian Mearns: Particularly given the number of disadvantaged children who are not getting into the system at all, that would be an opportunity, if they were getting into the system, for early identification of special educational needs that the parents might not have been aware of.

Q59 **Caroline Ansell:** I recognise the truth of what you are saying. I had a child with special educational needs, who has special educational needs, and have navigated the system.

To your point, Helen, and your submission, I think you were saying in workforce terms that all staff would have or could have the confidence and the skills to provide those learning experiences, nurturing and support for children with special educational needs. To what extent do we need to look at these specialist centres or specialist staff who might be directed by an EHCP, or is this more of an inclusive mainstream approach, or could it be, or should it be?

Helen Donohoe: I do not think there is one answer to that. Given what we have just discussed over the last hour and a half, the difficulties, the struggles and the systemic problems of the sector, it is just an illustration of how children with specific needs, be they extreme or mild, are at the bottom of the pile. An ideal system would look at each child and give each child what they need, be that specialist care or be that more generic. Ideally, we would have as inclusive a model as possible, as was said, for the benefit of all children, but some children will have more specific needs. At the moment they are out of sight, out of mind.

Q60 **Caroline Ansell:** Childminder-wise, what is the situation for those childminders who might take on such children?

Helen Donohoe: Again, I would reiterate my earlier point: it is hugely worrying that childminders are disappearing from the sector when we know they can provide very specific, emotional, one-on-one, home-centred, whole family support flexible around the hours needed by parents, which is obviously crucial where there are more complexities.

Megan Jarvie: There is a particular issue with childminders about those more flexible ratios. If a child needed one-to-one or sometimes one-to-one care that can be harder to provide when you only have one professional. Is that right?

Helen Donohoe: I don't know.

Megan Jarvie: Okay. I think!

Q61 **Caroline Ansell:** What improvements would you seek, short, medium and long term?



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Megan Jarvie: Responsive funding. Right at the beginning I said that a reformed system would have an entitlement for an early education and childcare place for every child. There would be an assumption that every child will get a place and they will all be accessible. Then you work out who pays for it and how, but the child gets their education first and gets their care.

Neil Leitch: I would say funding the hours they attend as well, not just the entitlement hours but the time that they are there. It does not stop just because your 15 hours runs out. They need additional support.

Chair: Presumably, an entitlement to hours linked to special needs would also potentially benefit the mental health of parents, their ability to support their child over the longer term and so on and so forth, if it is done right.

Q62 **Caroline Ansell:** What more can be done to encourage or support parents to take up the offer? You talked a little about the stigma and the emotional mountain to climb.

Megan Jarvie: Meeting parents where they are at with their own barriers. I talked about our parent champion scheme, which really goes right into communities to have those conversations. A lot of our schemes particularly specialise in SEND as well, because there will be particular trust issues. You know your child's particular needs incredibly well. Can you trust a setting to be able to meet those needs? That is one of the reasons why they might need extra support to be able to take up that childcare place, but again so important in terms of getting ready for schooling as well. You need that personalised approach for some of the groups that are least likely to take up childcare and are the most disadvantaged. With a lot of families just knowing it exists is enough to enable take-up, but that is not the case for all families.

Q63 **Caroline Ansell:** Does there need to be a stronger voice for a lead practitioner? A lot of parents talk about that multi-agency approach where they have much involvement, as you say, but perhaps that voice around early years and early learning is not heard in the wider landscape.

Megan Jarvie: That is an interesting question and not something I have put a lot of thought into. I think parents want to feel like there is someone who knows their child and who they know. That key worker link is important.

Q64 **Ian Mearns:** Neil, in your evidence you detail the impact of closure of Sure Start children's centres. Could you expand on your findings, please?

Neil Leitch: From a very pragmatic perspective, particularly in some of the areas where we work, we found parents used Sure Start as their central point of support. With either the contraction in services or the closure of Sure Starts, we have seen increased expectation on early years settings that they will plug that gap. I do think it is important that early years settings engage with parents and families as much as the child.



This is about community; it really is about community. If you do not have the funding, if you do not have the staff, if you do not have the infrastructure, all it does is pile additional pressures on you, full stop.

I will give you one very quick example that sticks out in my mind. I will remove the expletives from it because it is part of it; not my expletives, I should add. I was visiting a nursery, and normally when I visit any nursery I like to make my own way and people are happy with that, but on this occasion the nursery manager said to me, "Neil, I want to pick you up. I will collect you, take you the nursery". "I'm fine." "No, no, I'll collect you." In the car journey all she talked about was the number of children that she had that needed additional support in that particular setting, and I am thinking to myself that I came from a single-parent family, I was in a care home, I have seen it all.

We arrive at the setting. We go outside. There is this little boy, a three-year-old. The setting is right next to a reception class and there are two reception class teachers, and he looks up at them and he says, "You F'ing B, bitch". No context, but that is what he said. I apologise for the language but you need to understand the context. She went bright red. I tried to remain cool but I was pretty stunned.

We go back into the office and she starts to talk to me about this little boy, who has already been excluded from two preschools, and she says, "I spend my life almost one-to-one care with that individual because other parents are saying, 'You keep him away from my child'," and so on. She said that three months ago he came into reception, his dad brought him in, he climbed up on the couch, she said, "Get down, Alex", he grabbed her arms, pulled her in, headbutted her in the nose and broke her nose. She spoke of that child with such loving care despite all that had happened, but fundamentally she said the parents were struggling. They had no idea. They used to attend a Sure Start centre. Now there is nothing, so she does the job.

- Q65 **Ian Mearns:** I think many primary school heads would agree with you from their perspective as well, because that continuum seems to have gone on. An awful lot of things used to be provided and it is now almost the expectation that the primary school in the locality, from nursery through, will pick up the cudgel, as it were. The Government have responded to this in a way, inasmuch as they have created a network of family hubs in 75 local authorities. First and foremost, only 75 out of 150. What role do you think the family hubs can play in supporting parents and young children?

Neil Leitch: To your point, it is only 75 as opposed to every local authority, but it has to be a start so I am certainly not critical of it. We have to ensure that they do not come across as distress centres where people go because of alcohol, drug abuse, or relationship breakdown. We have to be very careful that they develop into family support centres rather than, dare I say, glorified social services.



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Ian Mearns: A preventative mechanism as opposed to crisis management.

Neil Leitch: Integrated into the community, part of the community, not a place that nobody wants to be seen standing outside.

Megan Jarvie: Also recognising the benefit that can come from bringing families together who can learn from each other. I think it is worth pointing out that however much early education and care children are having, they are going to be spending more time at home with their families. I thought I knew all about it until I had a child and then I realised how clueless I was. You do need some support and advice, you do need a bit of help in order to do it, and particularly to do it well rather than just—well, scraping by is probably enough a lot of the time. Creating a place that families want to go can be very effective in limiting the demand for services because it helps parents to get some of that support from each other as well.

Ian Mearns: I can tell you categorically, Megan, I have two who are 39 and 40 and it never ends.

Q66 **Chair:** I think Miriam wants to come in. Just talking about families wanting to go, people coming to the settings and so on, part of the objective with the family hubs is also to do outreach and get people out there. It is what you talked about, Helen, the importance of coming to the parent and engaging. That needs to be a part of the policy.

Helen Donohoe: Yes. I would say that whatever you call them, whether they are children's centres, Sure Start centres or family hubs, they are only as effective as the people within them. It comes back to morale, being well resourced, rewarded and valued, but also integrated. Health visitors should be talking to social workers, who should be talking to early educators. It is how we get back to that position. The most effective children's centres were the ones that were fully integrated across strategic, relevant population—

Megan Jarvie: And were engaging antenatally as well. It comes back from parents that they feel that is a time where they could have been getting ready and learning a lot.

Q67 **Miriam Cates:** Just to come in on the family hubs, because I was part of Andrea Leadsom's parliamentary advisory board that worked on the Start for Life proposal, first, the idea of the 75 is that it is a pilot and the Government have agreed that if the pilot is successful the intention is to roll it out to the other 150. The intention is that they are universal. They are not for "troubled families"—a terrible term—but universal.

One of the ideas put forward during the review was that they should become the place where births are registered. I think this does happen in perhaps Leeds and Manchester. Every family has to go through the door. Not only does that have a safeguarding function but everybody sees what support is available, whether that is community led or integrating



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professionals, and that that is the place where support starts. Again, the evidence shows that if you get those first 1,001 days wrong, if the child goes through some sort of trauma or addiction, those kinds of things, then it does not matter if you have the most brilliant early years care from the age of three, it is too late. In theory, if it is universal and it is that kind of offer, is that something that you think would very much enhance the offer? Do you have anything to add?

Laura Barbour: Yes. In fact, Sutton Trust has another piece of research coming out today and once again it emphasises the importance of the home learning environment. Certainly, one thing that the evaluation coming out of the Sure Start centres did find was the positive impact on the home learning environment. We also did a report that looked at the state of the children's centres in 2018 and it was not a great picture, with over 1,000 centres having closed and so on. We welcome the family hubs initiative but with some concern about the zero to 19 and losing that real focus on the early years, where all the different services, as Helen mentioned, come together with families to provide support. With something like the home learning environment in particular, it is sometimes about sharing, modelling and watching your peers.

Megan Jarvie: I would back that up. A group of parents I was working with just recently were saying how difficult it is when your children start school and the networks that you have had suddenly disappear. That is one of the advantages of the nought to 19 offer.

Chair: Very good. Thank you very much. It has been an extremely useful session with a lot of valuable feedback. It is very clear this is going to be an interesting inquiry as we go forward with it. I am very grateful for your expert feedback.