

Education Committee

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

Tuesday 21 February 2023

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Members present: Ian Mearns (in the Chair); Caroline Ansell; Miriam Cates; Mrs Flick Drummond; Anna Firth; Kim Johnson; and Andrew Lewer.

In the absence of the Chair, Ian Mearns was called to the Chair.

Questions 68 to 117

Witnesses

I: Emma Gardner, Quality Manager, Early Years and Childcare, Spring by Action for Children; Gemma Rolstone, Director of Quality, Puffins Childcare, Devon; Kara Jewell, Childminder and Nursery Director, Sparkle Lodge Early Years, Portsmouth; Dr Julian Grenier CBE, Head Teacher, Sheringham Nursery School and Children's Centre, East London; and Professor Celia Greenway, Deputy Pro-vice Chancellor and Professor in Education (Early Years and Child Development Lead), University of Birmingham.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Emma Gardner, Gemma Rolstone, Kara Jewell, Dr Julian Grenier CBE and Professor Celia Greenway.

Q68 **Chair:** Good morning and welcome to the Education Select Committee. My name is Ian Mearns. I am the MP for Gateshead and I am chairing this morning's session because I am afraid our Chair, Robin Walker, is indisposed. We hope Robin has a quick recovery from his ailment.

We have a session this morning on support for childcare and the early years and it is not like one of our normal evidence-gathering sessions. We are in the round, we are among friends and we are going to ask our witnesses to tell us what they can in response to questions from members. This is the second oral evidence session in this inquiry.

I will go around the table and ask our guests to introduce themselves.

Emma Gardner: I am the Quality Manager at Spring by Action for Children and we have a group of nurseries and out of school provision across the UK.

Gemma Rolstone: I am Director of Quality for Puffins Childcare, which is based in Exeter. We have five nurseries, an out of school club and a small training company providing apprenticeships as well.

Dr Grenier: I am Julian Grenier in Newham, east London. We also lead East London Research School and London's early years stronger practice hub.

Professor Greenway: I am from the University of Birmingham. I am a Professor in Education, specialising in early years and child development, but I was formerly a practitioner working in the nursery sector.

Kara Jewell: I am a childminder from Portsmouth and I also run a nursery, Sparkle Lodge Early Years.

Q69 **Chair:** Thank you very much. You are all very welcome. My first question is: what are the main challenges you face with nursery costs? To what extent does the current funding rate support those costs? Who would like to come in on that first?

Kara Jewell: I come from Portsmouth and I have looked at our historic funding rate. In 2003 when I registered as a childminder our funding rate was £3.02 per hour. It is now set to go to £4.69, so our funding rate has gone up 55.3% in 20 years while the minimum wage has risen by 131.56%. One of our main problems is the low funding rate and the more free hours that children claim the higher the cost for parents.

Gemma Rolstone: Staffing costs are the biggest burden on childcare providers because our staff are our business. For most settings the staffing bill equates to around—well, 65% is what we would like the industry target to be, but with the way that minimum wage is going,



certainly from April, for most people that will rise to 75% of their total expenditure will go on staffing. That leaves very little room for rent, energy bills, business rates, training and all of the other things that come along with it. That is our biggest struggle.

Dr Grenier: We hear similar stories from the 100 or so private nurseries that we work with as a stronger practice hub, but with a quick shift to the maintained sector roughly 10% of nursery schools have closed in the last 10 years and more are due to close soon. That is largely due to the inadequate hourly rate that colleagues have talked about. In the school sector nursery classes, the hourly rate is not covering the costs for schools. The maintained sector is suffering with this funding as much as the private and voluntary sector is.

Q70 **Caroline Ansell:** May I ask a quick question of Kara? You will not be surprised to learn that we have heard on a number of occasions how funding is presenting as a real challenge—settings are losing staff and they are closing. You opened a setting just last year. What gave you the confidence to do that in this funding landscape?

Kara Jewell: To be honest, there is not the confidence. I have a degree and I have looked and I could be earning £42 per hour if I went off and worked with my degree but I would be doing my sector a disservice.

When I started there was about 60,000 childminders. Within 10 years that is set to be 1,000. It is a real worry. A number of childminders locally have closed and there is a number of families who have no childcare provision. I have done it because I feel it is fair for the children. The children are missing out. It is not a good time to be opening a nursery and in fact there have been no profits in my nursery. I have not taken a wage for myself. I have run that nursery from pretty much 6.00am to 10.00pm because there are families out there who need the place.

Caroline Ansell: It is a huge personal investment.

Q71 **Kim Johnson:** I have a question for Gemma; I know that you have worked in the sector for 25 years, Gemma. The last Labour Government provided significant funding to the early years sector because it was seen as a way of dealing with child poverty but also an opportunity to get particularly more women back into the labour market. What do you think needs to happen in going back to those days and addressing some of the challenges that you are facing now?

Gemma Rolstone: We need significant funding into the sector. My nurseries were founded by my mother and her business partner. It came from when she was a working parent and wanted to make sure that there was the ability for women to return to work. That has always been part of our core function, providing childcare to support families but also providing jobs for women. If my staff go on maternity leave, they can't



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afford to come back to work because they can't afford the childcare fees even with staff discount.

- Q72 **Chair:** That is very interesting. Thank you very much indeed. How does the application of business rates and VAT-exempt status affect the running of your provisions as a nursery?

Gemma Rolstone: Business rates has always been a contentious issue in early years because in the sector we see this as a possible fix that could easily happen quite quickly. We had exemption during the pandemic, which was enough to save a lot of settings. Business rates will be calculated differently from this April for early year settings and a lot of settings still don't know this. I have five settings. For one of them the business rates are included in our rent and service charge but for the other four settings this year my business rates were £55,936. From 1 April under the new rateable calculation, that will go up to £84,096 and at this precise moment I am not entirely sure that will work.

The formula is changing. For some reason it will be calculated based on the registration number on your last Ofsted report. Ofsted don't use that figure any more. That was quite an outdated system where you would have to work out the space and stick to that. If you wanted to take one extra baby and take off a two-year-old you would have to go for reregistration and go through the whole process again. Now they are a lot more flexible about that in the summer term you have more pre-schoolers and in September you tend to have more babies.

The numbers ebb and flow so you can use your space as you see fit, but there is still a number on our old Ofsted reports. That will be multiplied by a base unit charge and the base unit charges are different depending on your postcode. In Devon we have found them as low as £250 per unit and for one of my settings—I am not quite sure why—it is a £800 per unit calculation, yet the funding rate is the same across the board.

- Q73 **Chair:** Those figures that you have talked about look like something between a 50% and 60% increase. That is really interesting—bonkers, but interesting.

Kara Jewell: Thankfully, our business rates are included in our rental so it does not directly affect me, but there is a local nursery who five years ago heard about the 30 hours, wanted to increase her capacity to take the children because she knew there would be a lot of children and her business rates doubled. Her floor space by Ofsted did not double; her floor space increased by 10%. Her business increased by double due to the rateable value.

- Q74 **Chair:** That is really interesting. Have you looked at the possibility of VAT registration for partial exemption?

Gemma Rolstone: VAT has always been an issue in early years that we have asked to have looked at. It has never been clear why something would be different. Sometimes we get treated as education and other



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times we don't. This is one of the situations where we don't and so we have to pay VAT on everything, which again is a substantial amount for a small business.

Q75 Chair: It seems to me that there is a difference in the way in which VAT is being treated for day nurseries as opposed to maintained nursery schools; is that right? It is categoric that is correct. Okay.

Dr Grenier: Although to come in briefly, that is right about VAT. Some maintained nursery schools pay rates and other local authorities exempt them from rates but the funding is the same, so that is creating a problem for the maintained nursery schools that are not exempt from rates whereas all other maintained schools are. The early years sector gets hit harder by the regulations than the rest of the school sector.

Chair: Does anyone want to come in on the general rating and VAT theme before we move on?

Q76 Anna Firth: Can I ask Gemma for one point of clarification? You said that sometimes you are treated as education and sometimes not. Can you expand on that?

Gemma Rolstone: There is a feeling that we are held to the standards of having to provide a minimum service, the same as schools, yet on the flipside we are expected to do that on exactly the same funding while having all of the other pressures of business rates that schools don't have and VAT as well. From the figures I have given, you can see it is a significant—

Q77 Anna Firth: The point I am interested in is the VAT. When do you attract VAT and when do you not? It is the inconsistency there.

Gemma Rolstone: We are VAT exempt, so we don't charge it but we have to pay it, whereas schools can claim. If I was to go on a local authority course, let's say a safeguarding course, and a colleague from a local maintained nursery went, I would be paying 20% more for the same course because I would have to pay VAT and they are able to claim it back.

Anna Firth: Got it.

Q78 Caroline Ansell: Julian, on a point of clarification, you talked about local authorities providing exemption. Is that within the gift of local authority by local authority? Are we seeing huge regional disparities and different priorities according to local authority?

Dr Grenier: That is right. Some local authorities exempt maintained nursery schools from rates but in effect the way they exempt them is they charge them and then they put the money back in the school budget. Other local authorities don't do that and that is why some of my colleagues in the maintained nursery school sector are struggling because they are paying rates and, as we have just heard, the costs are going up.



Q79 Caroline Ansell: That seems extraordinary in a levelling up type of context. What are the regional disparities, if you see the map? Are there particular areas of the country that are better accommodated than others?

Dr Grenier: I don't have that information, but the rest of the school sector does not pay rates. It feels very strange that the early years sector, where the maintained nursery schools are the smallest and in a way the most fragile schools in the system, nevertheless many of them pay rates and the primary up the road doesn't.

Q80 Mrs Flick Drummond: Talking about recruitment and retention of staff, it is evident that it is difficult to recruit and retain. What are your views on that and what are the challenges?

Emma Gardner: This is a significant challenge for us. A lot of our time is spent on recruitment of staff. The average across England as a whole is around 24% turnover. That can mean that you are putting out recruitment drives to try to attract people. You need to be able to meet your qualified ratios, so you want people to come in who already hold those qualifications.

However, when people come into the setting it is either not what they thought it was going to be so they leave or there is not the status that there should be, so it is not a career that people see themselves staying in. That can mean you spend a lot of time training people up, going through those processes and then they leave quite quickly. That is a massive drain on time and resource. It is very costly to get people in the door. Part of the issue with that is the urgency to get people in the door, to be able to act as part of the workforce, means that at times you are having to compromise the quality of the induction period that you give them.

Professor Greenway: This is probably a more personal reflection than academic evidence, but over the last 20 years I have trained about 2,000 people to be nursery practitioners or nursery teachers. I don't find it hard to keep in touch with them because I see them in local retail. I see them in shops, vets, as dental assistants; I don't see them in the nurseries that I visit. I thought that was a useful personal reflection, following on from Emma Gardner's point.

One of the things that you are looking at is the reasons why we believe people are not staying in the profession. Status and salary is part of it but I often think that the emotional labour aspect of early years is overlooked. Often we are the first people that a parent sees after they have had a crisis. We have to know about everything. We know about child protection, we are experts in child development, psychology, even in philosophy, pedagogy, different types of learning. We have to be all of these things but we don't have the same status as teachers. One of the reasons I went on to train teachers as opposed to nursery practitioners was because of that difference in status.



Kara Jewell: I can pick up on quite a few parts. On the subject of status, I have a new male practitioner in my setting. He has come in as a volunteer because he wants to foster and he has worked in retail for a number of years. He said, "Never in my wildest dreams would I want to work in early years. I thought before I walked through the door that all you did was play." It has really opened his eyes and my nursery has opened as inclusive, so we take any child who walks through the door if we have a space. That means we have a number of children with additional needs. About 80% have arrived with additional needs or child protection cases or dual language or both. For him to get to his qualification for what I would need him in ratio will take 48 months. It will cost him £3,000 or it will cost us in apprenticeship levy.

I had another lady who came in who had always wanted to work in early years. She had heard about it, always wanted it but couldn't start because she was not qualified. I put her through her qualification and three months later she came and said, "I'm really sorry, it is not for me". I have done a lot of training and I believe if you want to represent your sector you need to understand it. I have got involved; I have taken myself through university. By the time I leave university it will have cost me £34,000. If I went to be a primary schoolteacher, my starting salary would be £38,000 but if I go in as an early years teacher, because that is where my passion lies, my starting salary would be £16,000.

My staff are paid £9.60—trust me, if I could pay them their worth, I would be paying them in gold. They work all day. They do not go home and close off in this job. They go home carrying children, carrying families. We have had parents diagnosed with cancer recently. We have children who are risk. We have had children removed from families. We have met so many children and all of that for minimum wage and that is without all the statutory duties, the Ofsted inspections, the regulation, the bookkeeping.

We get told to charge parents for additional services. How do we charge them for being their mentor? How do we charge them for comforting them when their nan is dying of cancer? We do not get paid for that. It is a common thing in early years. You don't go into early years for the money. You go into it for the children but my staff would get paid more for putting a tin on a shelf, and my male practitioner said that. He said, "I have come from retail where I pay staff more money for doing less work and they go home".

Q81 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** What can we do to attract people into the sector?

Emma Gardner: I think it needs to be seen as a career that has progression, possibilities, that we are paid a wage that represents the hard work that we do. We did a workforce survey this year and the results showed that our workforce are stressed, tired, and feeling workload pressures. We need to pay a wage that represents the pressure and responsibility that they are carrying.



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Professor Greenway: I think we could mirror the maintained sector in the non-maintained sector by creating an early careers framework in the same way as the school sector does and have a different levels and mentoring. The early years stronger practice hubs is an excellent idea but we need them across the country and we need mentoring, continuous support and parity across the sector. We need the understanding that if you get level 3, which is a good qualification, what can you do with level 3, what is your progress, what can you be as a level 3 practitioner?

Gemma Rolstone: The other issue with recruitment, particularly with training, is that in our industry we can't leave our work for a day to go and do a training course and then come back and pick up where we left off. We have to have enough staff to be able to release staff for training.

I am sure that Kara and Emma will agree that staff meetings have to happen out of hours or sometimes on Saturdays, which we all try to avoid in the sector because when you have worked a 40-hour week on your feet, which is emotionally and physically demanding, the last thing you want to do is training at the weekend but we have no other choice.

As well as the mental load and a stressed workforce, it is incredibly difficult to offer pastoral care to our staff within the working week because there literally is not enough time in the day to do that. We have found that has been a big struggle and staff have left because they are stressed and have reached the end and feel like they want to go and do something that is not so emotional.

Kara Jewell: As a childminder, I have supported a number of colleagues who have said, "I am struggling. I am working 72, 80 hours a week without any of the training that I need and I need this. I can't take a break because the families need me. If I get called for court service, jury service, I have to send exemptions." Families depend on these people. People in early years eat, sleep and breathe their families. They do not shut off. For me it is a real shame that when we see publicity about a childminder, about a nursery, they are the people who have just put the child in front of the telly. I would welcome anyone to come and spend one day in my nursey and see what actually happens.

As I said, I have recruited a number of people who have children with additional needs. I need people who can support those children but the qualification I can accept is early years educator. I have reached out to local charities who support those children at weekends and they have to come to me as an unqualified member of staff.

To be here today, I have had to double staff in case somebody goes off. You take people now who you would not have taken 10 years ago because they don't have the work ethic, they don't have the understanding of the children's needs, but you have to meet your legal requirement. To say one level 3 and 50% of all other staff, level 2 and above—I have all these brilliant staff but they cannot count in ratio. If my



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qualified staff need to go to the hospital with their child they are scared to go because we may have to close the nursery.

That needs to change and we need the general public to realise that early years is crucial. The Government talk a lot about the first 1,001 days; we are those people.

Q82 Kim Johnson: Our Education Select Committee is doing an inquiry on careers guidance at the moment and some of you have alluded to the fact that people enter into the sector unaware of what the job entails. Celia specifically, what do you think needs to happen in looking at careers guidance and providing better information and awareness of the sector so that people can go into it better informed?

Professor Greenway: I think that school careers need advice and going for a week in a nursery school does not quite do it. They need more experience than just dealing with a week working with a small group of children. They need to go and observe for longer periods. It should not be seen as an easy option and sometimes with careers advice it is, "You care about children, go and work with children". That is the wrong advice to give. The advice should be, "You are interested in child development or you are interested in helping families". It is more complicated than just playing with a child and it needs informed careers advice.

Chair: We have heard that so often recently, haven't we? There we go.

Q83 Miriam Cates: I want to pick up on the stress and the emotional strain on your staff that you were talking about. Looking after small children is always going to be physically intense and demanding. I have three children of my own and I was a stay at home mum. Looking after after small children is relentless from a practical and physical point of view.

I have visited several primary schools recently and they are saying similar things about the increase in emotional demand in family breakdown, children who are starting their school lives with quite severe emotional behavioural problems and needs. It is that straw that is breaking the camel's back on top of the physical demands, the issues of budgets and pay. Do you recognise that? Do you think the pandemic has had anything to do with that or has it been a steady growth in needs?

Dr Grenier: I think that it is little understood, exactly as colleagues have said. It might seem quite simple to spend your day with young children but it is incredibly demanding. It is physically demanding, emotionally demanding and intellectually demanding to do this work. I think that the wider public, the wider system doesn't understand that yet.

In answer to your specific question, yes, it has always been very difficult but it is very, very difficult at the moment. I am not sure that people who are not working with two, three, four-year-olds for example, who suffered so much during the lockdown period, whose families suffered so much, I have the faintest idea how difficult it is. We offer our staff team what we call work discussion, which is overseen by a consultant child



psychotherapist, because I am not sure we could keep the show on the road if we were not able to meet some of the emotional needs of our staff team and give people a space for that discussion.

We are really fortunate to be able to do that. We are a research school; we have links with universities and other people and we can do it. It should not be like that. Everyone should offer that; everyone should be there to understand and look after the huge emotional impact that this all has on staff. It is just not good enough.

Q84 Andrew Lewer: Recent data from Ofsted shows that there has been a decline in the number of childcare providers. I am aware that we have touched upon some of this already but could you nevertheless clarify what you think are the main reasons for early years provisions closing?

Dr Grenier: I asked our childminder lead in our stronger practice hub, Honey Kaur, to comment on the issues that she thinks are affecting childminders and leading people to stop childminding. She has raised a number of issues and one of them is the enormous pressure on those individuals trying to run a business, meet the needs of the children from their own homes, work very long hours, often quite lonely, often quite isolated. In addition she feels that it is much harder now to settle in children. It takes a lot longer; there is a lot more anxiety in the parent group about leaving children with someone else. Finally, that there has been significant changes in working patterns and many families are now looking for more flexible options, bringing in other family members. They can't afford it, but that undermines the business of the childminder.

I think it is fair to say that she would describe it as a perfect storm. A whole range of different things have all come as pressure on to the childminders she is working with through our stronger practice hub and they are really struggling.

Kara Jewell: In early years we are often the people who first meet a child after their health checks. I spoke to a health visitor local to me and she said that they see a parent when the child is first born. They go back at six weeks to meet the parent, mainly to check the parent's well-being. They see the child but it is mainly to check the parent. They then have a one-year-old and a two-year-old check that are non-compulsory.

The statistics from the Institute of Health Visiting say that only 54% of health visitors can deliver the six-week check because they are that pressed and 15% can deliver the two-year-old check. We meet a child when they walk through our door and that is the time you find that the child is living in an abusive environment, has never seen a person before. Particularly during Covid they have never seen a face. These families are really pressed.

There are children walking through the door who within 10 minutes you will go, "This child needs serious help" and you are working with that child and the family. Often the families don't know what to look at and



you finish your work at 7 o'clock at night and that is when you are writing your referrals. The pressure on a childminder on their own is immense.

Professor Greenway: To add a dimension to that, I think that the closure of children's centres is an aspect that has made other services more stretched. I have some stats from the Midlands, and in 2010 there were 189 council-run children's services and only 75 remain. The multi-agency referral that used to happen in a children's centre that perhaps prevented a small concern getting bigger has stopped. That means the other services have more put upon them.

Emma Gardner: To go back to the closure of settings, for us it is about the sustainability and daily juggling. If you are not able to fund having a spare member of staff in the building, you are constantly having to look at whether you need to close rooms in your setting or you need to close the setting altogether because if you can't fund having that extra body in the building, that makes operating challenging. That is why settings find it comes to the point where they need to close the doors.

Gemma Rolstone: Yes, I echo that. For a lot of settings it is around not being able to safely staff the setting and also a lot of providers feel that they have been undervalued. During the pandemic we were expected to continue working. There is nothing like a mother handing you her child and saying, "You are the first adult who has ever held my child other than myself" to bring home the reality of how important our job is. I think a lot of providers have reached the end and have had enough and feel like they can't give any more.

Q85 **Andrew Lewer:** I will go back round in reverse order to ask you. I know we don't have a crystal ball and I know we have had an unbelievably complex and tense time in the world in the last few years, but do you anticipate an increase in the number of places closing in the years ahead or not? What is your view about how it looks?

Gemma Rolstone: I think the landscape is at risk of shifting and that a lot of the very important small providers who give an awful lot more than the basics will close. It will be filled in other ways that may not necessarily be the best for children and families.

Emma Gardner: I certainly think that funded places in settings that take funded children will reduce dramatically because it is just not sustainable.

Professor Greenway: Yes, because schools increasingly in the maintained sector are having to use their budgets to support the nurseries in their schools and the nurseries, therefore, are closing.

Kara Jewell: Picking up on the childminder rate, from 60,000 to 1,000 is a massive decline and I don't think until we hit that figure anyone will go, "Oh, dear". Nurseries and childminders can't do everything. We need to recognise that the whole sector is working really hard and it is going to get bigger. The lower the funding rate—that percentage increase of



funding is a massive thing and there are ways that more money can come to the front line but it gets held up in other parts of the early years system as well.

Dr Grenier: I think that the business model is very fragile in areas like where I work in Newham in east London, which are poor communities. The worry is that we are at a kind of tipping point. The flipside of that is if I look back over say the last three decades, where we are now is incredible compared to where we were 30 years ago. With strategy and energy we can do this and we have done it before.

Andrew Lewer: That is a good note to end on.

Q86 **Anna Firth:** I have a very slight diversion, if I may. Last week I went to a child development centre called the Lighthouse Centre in Southend, knowing that we are doing this study. They take children from zero to 16. I would love to have your comments on two points. First, they said that they are noticing anxiety and developmental delays that they put down to Covid in the young children that they are dealing with. I would very much like to hear if you agree with that.

The second thing that one of the senior directors pointed out to me is that they are seeing an increase in parents thinking that the children have some sort of developmental delay or condition, which is actually behaviour not an actual clinical or psychological condition.

I asked the question: what could we do to help with that? The answer was it would help if we taught child development in schools so that parents have more knowledge and more understanding and therefore are less anxious and not passing on the same anxiety to all of your staff at various points. It is those two points: Covid and do we need to go back to teaching child development in schools?

Professor Greenway: I have a PhD student looking at self-regulation in nursery and reception. Self-regulation is the issue; there has been a delay with children learning how to self-regulate. I see the other practitioners nodding around the room.

People don't really understand the importance of self-regulation, and I don't blame them for not understanding. It would be fantastic. Child development was taught in school but it was taught for students who were not able, so it was not taught to all students. It is like the old version of home economics, which was taught to people who were not on an academic pathway, but what if we had parenting classes for everybody, regardless of whether they were going to be a parent or not, because we don't learn to parent? We learn from our own parents, so if we have not had good parenting we revert back to the learnt model that we have had. It has to be for everybody. There should not be any stigma. We tend to intervene when there is a problem whereas if it was universal that would make a difference.

Q87 **Chair:** Kara, you are champing at the bit.



Kara Jewell: Picking on Celia Greenway's point, I wanted to do child development at school. I was really interested, but I was an A* pupil and they would not let me do child development—"You can't do that, that is for other students".

If we look nationally, the national reading age is nine and in Portsmouth it is seven. Some of the information for parents is so highly above their understanding that they do not know. I spoke to a parent at length yesterday about her child and the behaviour he is displaying. She said he is ADHD and I said, "No. What time did he go to bed last night?" and she said, 11.30, he wanted to watch his cartoons". I said, "What time did he get up?" and she said six o'clock. I said, "When you wake up after a day where you have had no sleep, how do you feel?" She said, "I need a coffee and everyone needs to get out of my way". I said that is exactly what your three-year-old is experiencing.

It is not necessarily parents who are looking to recognise an additional need. They look at their child's behaviour and they don't know what the situation is. There is a number of children where additional needs are not recognised but where do parents go? They go to the internet, to information that is not up to date, not relevant or way above their understanding.

Chair: Or totally bogus.

Kara Jewell: Yes. If you have ever researched a medical condition, you become sure you have had cancer and your leg is going to fall off. This is what our parents are experiencing and our children are growing up with. They are going to the internet and will learn the same.

Q88 **Kim Johnson:** I want to go back to the previous question about closure of childcare provision. Have you thought about whether because of the changing landscape of the workforce market, the fact that so many people now work precarious zero-hours contracts and more people are working from home, that has an impact and more people resort to informal/unregulated childcare?

Gemma Rolstone: I think so, definitely. There are considerably fewer children who attend nursery for four or five days a week than there were when we first started our settings. Also there are the changes in maternity law and I absolutely do not begrudge women having the capacity to spend longer at home with their children, but when I had my children it was 18 weeks and my children were in nursery full-time from four months old, so that has an impact.

Absolutely families are looking for cheaper options by doing shared childcare or balancing it with other things and inevitably the patterns of working have an impact. If people want to work part-time they will try to have a longer weekend, so nurseries are often full in the middle of the week and under capacity at the beginning and end of the week. Then the parent comes in and says, "I want these four days" and you can't give



them those. You can give them three but you can't give them the fourth one because that is the day that that particular room is at capacity, for example.

It has definitely shifted with how parents work and what they want and with shift patterns as well. We try to accommodate shift patterns but it is very difficult. If parents are perhaps in the police force, they tend to get their shifts quite far ahead but that can impact on you have to hold a full-time place open for only a three-day-a-week income.

Kara Jewell: I am afraid I am coming back to the funding rate—not just the low funding rate but at the last general election you probably all saw there was a battle for who would give the most free hours of childcare to families. Those free hours lift the cost for everyone else because businesses have a break-even point. The average cost of an hourly place in Portsmouth is £6. From April our funding rate will be £4.69, so the shortfall per hour per child is £1.31. A child using 30 hours term time is £39.30 per week but if you look at a staff member on a 1:8 ratio, that is £314.40 for those hours. The families then have to make up the additional cost.

Through the free childcare a lot of families have been told, "Use your free places" so we say to them, "Can you pay extra to cover things?" As I said earlier, we can't ask them to pay us to send them an invoice but we might say to them, "Can you pay us to take your child to the park?" That goes against everything I believe in. Why would I take half of my children to the park because their parents can pay and the other half can't? We have to find a way to compensate that. If the parent says, "I will ask my universal credit to pay" they write back, "This is an additional charge you don't have to pay". The parents then go to unregulated childcare, putting children at risk to save the money because there are no places.

Q89 **Miriam Cates:** Kara, can you expand on the kind of care that a childminder offers compared to a nursery? What are the advantages and disadvantages and why do parents choose childminders instead of nurseries in some instances?

Kara Jewell: In one way the answer is that they are the same. Childminders and nurseries are inspected through Ofsted. They are both inspected through the early years framework and have exactly the same expectations on them.

As a childminder, I could offer more flexibility. I could have a family with shifts, like Gemma was talking about, and I would offer the place to someone and I could share the place. I was creative with my business model. If I took a child to a school nursery because that was their choice, and at the time I was a governor of a maintained nursery so many children went there, I would offer a funded place to a parent during those hours. The parent was not charged but what they liked about me being a childminder is I could get in the car in the morning and go, "What has your day been like? Okay, we're off to soft play."



As a nursery, you don't have that flexibility, but parents sometimes want a nursery because they know what a nursery is. A childminder is just somebody who puts their child in front of the telly. It is a very old model in their heads and actually they do the same. All of the roles I alluded to earlier, childminders do those. It is about parental preference and parents' understanding. When I am asked, "What is better for my child, a nursery or a childminder?" my answer is, "Go and see five of each and you decide".

Gemma Rolstone: Also childminders offer something that nurseries don't, particularly for families where they have perhaps a school-age child and a small child. Childminders often will do school pick-ups and drop-offs as well. They offer extended wraparound care that is all in one place. Sometimes you get families who come into a nursery and the baby room is an incredibly daunting place and they feel like that is not the right place for their child. There have been many occasions over the years when I have said to families, "I think you need to go and look at a childminder. I think that would much better suit you and your family."

If you went into any of our nurseries they would be very different, and that is because parents are very different and children are very different. I am worried that we will end up with a box that is the same and that will not meet the diverse needs of all families. As a private provider, childminders offer, as Kara said, the same standards of care but they offer something that is a much better fit for some families.

Q90 **Miriam Cates:** You have spoken about why people perhaps are not registering as childminders or why they are stopping being childminders and all the pressures, financial, emotional and everything else. What practical steps could be taken from a legislation point of view as well as a funding point of view that might encourage more people to register as childminders and stay childminders?

Kara Jewell: I have been a PACEY champion and previously a PACEY facilitator, which is the professional childminding association. Sorry, I have probably quoted the name incorrectly there. I have met a number of childminders and when I started nobody knew the childminder next door. You could live in the same road as another childminder and you did not know each other. I spent a lot of time bringing together the childminders and saying, "We can support each other, we can do this together" but some of them have said, "I can't face Ofsted. They turned up at my front door. She had already told me I wouldn't get outstanding because she doesn't give a childminder outstanding, so forget that before she has even walked through my door."

I have had brilliant inspections and I have had inspections that are challenging. When that person judges you in your home, you are judged on your home as well. I don't want someone to judge my home; I want someone to judge my providing of education to children. I am not going to call it childcare because it is far more. But some of the childminders said, "I am going to register with an agency" and one of them moved out



of Portsmouth. She said, "I've had enough of Ofsted, I have registered with an agency. I have got support now. I am not on my own." The agency has recently been judged as—I can't remember the exact term—unsuitable. They are not providing the support to the childminders because they have had an influx. There has been a massive increase in the number of childminders saying, "I have moved away from Ofsted".

That childminder has now messaged me and said, "I am having to register with Ofsted because half of my children are funded and I can no longer accept the funding". That for a person working on their own is significant. We need childminders to be recognised for the individuality they offer, just like nurseries. I think there is something in there about regulation. I agree that childminders should be regulated but we should also be supported and that is the reason many childminders have gone for nurseries. I have always had my registration with PACEY and the National Childminding Association because you pay for support on top.

Q91 Kim Johnson: Panel, some of you have mentioned about ratios and, as you will be aware, the Government have suggested proposals to make changes to ratios from 1:4 to 1:5 for two-year-olds. I want to know your thoughts on those proposals and what impact they are likely to have on the childcare sector. I can see you are looking as if you want to respond to that, Gemma, so I will start with you.

Gemma Rolstone: I think we all do. I think we are all going to jump in with the same thing. It is probably better if you heard from my staff about the change in ratio and that is that they would all leave the sector if the ratios were increased. They are already stretched and stressed, there is already a huge emotional toll on it.

In addition to that, when you talk about a ratio of 1:5 for two-year-olds you are not actually about a ratio of 1:5. You are talking about a ratio of 1:9 because if there are too few in a room with 10 two-year-olds and one of them needs their nappy changed, that leaves one person to provide the care and attention for nine children. Miriam, you said about having three—just imagine! It would become crowd control and nothing more and you still have all the additional things that need doing for those children, the parent support, the cleaning of the room, the preparing, snacks and meals, answering the door, all of the other things that come along with managing and supporting children's development from an observation and assessment point of view.

That is why the two-year-old funding was introduced. We know that they are the most crucial age group. Why would we take educators away from that age group when they are the most critical and particularly at the moment where those are the babies that were born during Covid? We know that they are the trickiest. They come with the most baggage and so why would we take that away from families then? Self-regulation is so important for future success, more so than almost anything else, and executive functioning and self-regulation is what my practitioners focus on with young children and you can't do that. It takes time to support a



two-year-old in working through those big emotions that they have to help them understand what is going on in their little brains. Why would we take away educators from age group?

Q92 **Chair:** Emma, you want a 25% increase in your workload; is that right?

Emma Gardner: Exactly, yes. We have just sat and heard all the evidence about how much support these children need and the impact of Covid on speech and language, and what we are suggesting is reducing interaction. If you are a member of staff working in a room with a lot more children, there will be less time for attachment and connection moments, which as we have just been talking about are so crucial for self-regulation. Plus we will also get an increase in the pressure on the workforce, paperwork pressure. A lot of the staff in our settings might have 10 key children at one time so that can mean that they are responsible for assessment, observation, working very closely with the children, with the parents. If we start to increase the ratios we will increase the number of key children and quality will only go down.

Kara Jewell: Interestingly, I asked my staff before this meeting and one of them said, "You want me to do 25% more work for no more money, but it is not just the money. You want me to do 25% work but I am going to give these children 25% less." You have probably guessed; I have looked nationally at other figures and in Scotland they have a 1:5 ratio. However, their qualifications are levels 6 and 7. Our qualifications in comparison are level 3. As a childminder I wanted to go from a level 3 up. I wasn't able to because I did not support enough staff and the same with a number of qualifications. They told me that as a childminder I can't. But in Scotland the rate of pay is around £15 per hour currently; our rate of pay is £9.50.

I think that there is a lot to it, but 80% of brain growth happens before a child is three, so if we get it wrong then we are getting it wrong for the rest of their lives.

Professor Greenway: That is exactly what I was going to say, Kara. It is like comparing apples to pears comparing the Scottish system to our system because the lead practitioner has a degree, which was an aspiration in 2010 under the Childcare Act. It has not been enacted for various reasons, so we could not staff it in the same way. Other OECD countries may have higher ratios but have a different qualification structure and, therefore, a different pay reward and recognition structure. I think that all of the lived experience that the nursery workers and nursery managers have said today is compelling evidence that we should not change the ratio.

Q93 **Kim Johnson:** Out of interest, are any of you aware what consultation was had with the sector before the Government put forward these proposals?



Professor Greenway: There was consultation put out, wasn't there, which everyone objected to. The Coram Family and Childcare, Childcare England, the teaching unions and the Child Poverty Action Group all objected at the time.

Q94 **Kim Johnson:** Thank you. Picking up on your point, Celia, about the comparison between here and Scotland, we have spoken earlier about the status of the sector. There is a suggestion that the EPI and Sutton Trust have called for the reintroduction of the graduate leader fund, which focused on recruiting qualified early years practitioners. Would taking that step be beneficial to the sector in improving the status?

Professor Greenway: There are successive research studies. If you go back to 2005, the EPPE research, "The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education", which is a seminal paper in our research field, recommends a highly qualified workforce. I am not saying that everybody has to be a teacher. We are talking about a range of qualifications. Having a graduate lead was an aspiration. I like to say that foundation degrees were not a bad idea. They were funded and they encouraged people from the sector to move on. Other OECD countries and our neighbours in Scotland have a graduate-led workforce. The recent Ofsted report looking at best practice indicates that there is a need for a highly qualified workforce. Degree apprenticeships could be a way forward but only for big providers because you would have to be a trust, a large local authority to pay into the apprenticeship levy but they could be a way forward.

You would expect somebody from the university sector to say that I am supportive of a degree-level entry, but I am not saying that everybody has to be a teacher and I want to make that point clear. I think that there is definitely room in the sector for a distinctive early years qualification, not just a teaching qualification. One of the things that I wanted to say today, which highlights Kara Jewell's point about the difference in the postgraduate qualifications, is if you took a standard ITE qualification, an initial teacher education qualification, that gives you QTS, qualified teacher status, your earning potential is far greater than if you took the EYITT qualification.

The entry qualifications are exactly the same. You have to have a degree, you have to have maths, English and science, so why the disparity, why the lack of promotion opportunity? If you get QTS you can teach in any sector, so you can get promotion in a maintained school, you could be a head of key phase. EYITT restricts you to a limited job opportunity and I think that our problem is that we don't have that clear progression.

Chair: For the sake of our watchers on Parliament TV, QTS is qualified teacher status?

Professor Greenway: Qualified teacher status, yes.

Chair: And early years initial teacher training. Okay, that is what we have heard there. Thanks very much. Does anyone else want to come in



on that?

Gemma Rolstone: You picked up about degree level apprenticeships and I think that they are a good way forward. I am currently teaching and mentoring a group of my senior staff through the level 5 early years lead practitioner, but the funding is the issue. If you are big enough to pay the apprenticeship levy that is fine. If you are a single site nursery that is probably also fine, but there is a group of us in the middle who are struggling with apprenticeships because there is a cap of 10 on the number of apprentices we can have and it is 10 across all five of my nurseries. Often when you say the word “apprentice”, people think of the 16-year-old who has left school and does not know what they want to do, but for us it is important that our staff are all doing something at some point.

We encourage further training. As a training provider, twice we have come in the top 100 apprenticeship providers. Five years ago we had 50 to 60 staff doing apprenticeships across all of my settings. It is less than half that now and one of the biggest issues is the funding because we are capped at 10. We have to beg, steal and borrow to get funding for any more than that, which is not easy.

We have never ever managed to get a response from the levy application service. We have only managed to get it through knocking on the doors of local authorities, people we know who work for a big company that might have some spare levy. Even if you get levy transfer, it is not guaranteed for the whole qualification, so it could be taken away at any moment. That is difficult. We have pushed this topic and have been told that the apprenticeship cap only affects about 5% of employers, but what if all of those are early years? That is a huge problem for us, and we still do not know if we are going to be able to take on any more staff, or whether that is going to be reset next year. We are significantly down on the numbers of staff that we can train.

Dr Grenier: My first reflection is that I was on the expert group for the Nutbrown Review of early years qualifications about a decade ago, and it is fair to say it has been a wasted decade. Many of the points that have just been made powerfully were made in similar rooms to this 10 years ago. We have not moved forward.

The second thing that strikes me is thinking about the root causes and the symptoms. There are things we could do around the symptoms. Yes, there are things we need to fix around apprenticeships and funding. We need more graduates, especially for those areas serving underserved, disadvantaged communities. Those are the kids who will disproportionately benefit from having graduate level practitioners, and we need to do something about that.

What is the root cause? Why do we have early years teacher status that pays half the salary of qualified teacher status? Why do qualified teachers get a two-year early career framework that is funded, and early years



teachers get no follow-on support at all? Why do our level 3s get such poor access to continuing professional development?

It is because early years is seen still as the Cinderella, the poor relation. Imagine a situation where teachers in sixth form were paid half of what teachers in GCSE classes were paid. It is a completely unfeasible scenario, but we accept this in early years. Yet, as colleagues have said, the two-year-old's brain is 80% of the size of an adult brain. Incredible things are happening to these young children that can help them down life paths for good or for ill. It is a really sensitive phase of development. Any person you asked would say how precious babies, toddlers, twos, threes, fours, five-year-olds are. There is no dispute about that, but we have created a sector and a workforce that does not reflect any of those realities and does not reflect any of the research that we have about the importance of it. We have frittered 10 years away when Cathy Nutbrown set a positive agenda in her independent review for the Department.

Kara Jewell: Picking up on colleagues' points about the qualifications, I remember sitting in my first lesson for my degree and the member of staff leading said, "None of you is sitting here just because you want to learn about education" and I said, "I am." She said, "Nobody does that. Everyone goes on to a high-flying career" and I said, "I have a high-flying career. I am in early years" and she said, "What will you gain from this?" I said, "I will gain the knowledge that I can share with the families and if I am lucky, I can count in qualifications in five years' time when I have spent all this money and have 13 three-year-olds, but why would I?"

Going back to Gemma Rolstone's point the increased ratio does not mean increased support. Increased ratio means less support. If I had a 1:13 ratio and a child needs their nappy changed, what do I do? Leave 12 children running? All this money, and we are not getting it right.

Q95 **Anna Firth:** Carrying on with the theme of early years qualifications, provisions also employ staff with no formal early years qualifications. In your view how do those staff fit into the workforce and how could we design a training programme so that perhaps if they want to advance they can, no compulsion? How does that side of the workforce work and how can we make it work better?

Kara Jewell: I feel as though I am dominating. I do apologise. For me, some of my unqualified people are very eager. They want to learn, they want to come in. There are some qualified who are fantastic; there are some qualified who I do not get that vibe from.

For me, if it is going to take 42 months for them to count as qualified, what do I do in the meantime? Some of these people have a level 3 in health and social care, but I need to put them through 43 months to get the qualification. We could have a six-week assessment-only route to get them from a level 3 in health and social care, because what we are often told is they do not have the assessment.



My degree, my master's, will not count because I do not have early years initial teacher training. Why? Why would I need to do a master's and early years initial teacher training to count as qualified any higher than level 3? I have been assessed at my level 3. I have been assessed through other things. There should be ways and there should be trust in the sector. We know our staff; we know who we like. We know whether our staff are better with the younger children, the older children, whether the childminders are giving the best care. Why are we not trusted to make those professional judgments, just like any other industry?

Emma Gardner: To back up what Kara Jewell said there, this is really common for us with recruitment. We get people come to us who have degrees, and they might be in childhood studies, however because there is no practical element to that degree we cannot include them in our qualified workforce. So they come in or do not come in, because we need a qualified person, and then we have to put them through NVQ3s and level 3s take quite a lot of time, when those people are coming in with high levels of education and hit the ground running and know very well what they are doing, but we are not able to include them in our qualified workforce.

Q96 **Anna Firth:** Would you support what Kara Jewell has said about a six-week assessment route?

Emma Gardner: Absolutely. A fast-track route would encourage graduates to remain in early years as well.

Professor Greenway: To follow on from that, of course you do have a BA with qualified teacher status, but we do not have the equivalent for our sector, which is quite significant. There is no equivalent, because we do not have qualified teacher status.

Julian Grenier talked about the Nutbrown Review, and the Nutbrown suggested that there was a series of mandatory online assessed programmes that staff could undertake and work through at their own pace to enable them to qualify. Given Gemma Rolstone's description of how workers find it very difficult to find time in the working day—and it is the same in a maintained nursery school—you would have to get cover. It is an expensive business, so it has to be built in.

The other thing is we talk all the time about staff development and people having the time to do it. It should be part of people's contracts. In schools you have teacher training days, and they are built into the way the school is managed. We do not have that equivalent, because the funding is not the same.

Q97 **Chair:** Big ideas for early years?

Professor Greenway: Yes, huge ideas. I think the early years stronger practice hubs, looking to our sector to learn from each other, is another way of facilitating a programme.



Dr Grenier: Building on that, one of the things we have learned as a research school and as a stronger practice hub is, first, there is a huge demand for professional learning across practitioners with no qualifications all the way through to level 2, 3 and so on. Unfortunately what is often out there for practitioners are things such as one-off training days, conferences—faddy professional development that is not based on evidence or strong research. The evidence tells us that professional development needs to be very well designed and sustained.

Our rule of thumb is you are looking at at least 20 hours probably over a period of a year done in chunks if people are going to change their practice on the ground and get better at their work. Practitioners really want to get better and I think the stronger practice hub programme is full of promise, but we have a very long way to go. We have not only an underqualified workforce, but a workforce that does not have the opportunities, as Celia Greenway was just saying, for their ongoing professional development, which should be the norm, not an unusual thing. Everyone should learn as they work and get better at what they do.

Q98 **Chair:** It sounds to me at the moment as if everything is quite piecemeal. There would need somebody to put their foot on the ball somewhere and pull together a workforce development plan for the sector. Would colleagues agree with that?

Dr Grenier: If you look at the early career framework for teachers, we can do this. It is ambitious and well-planned. There are many good things about the ECF. It is perfectly possible to achieve this and we should achieve it for our sector. We should have it.

Gemma Rolstone: The intention of the Nutbrown Review was to drive and improve the quality of the qualifications in early years. What has happened over the last 10 years is that we now have a significantly less well-qualified workforce. The NDNA workforce survey in 2015 showed about 83% of staff level 3 qualified. In May 2021 it is down to 57%. The bodies are still there, but they are being filled by unqualified staff. When a child's brain is interacting with you, it does not stop and think, "I will not talk to you, because you do not have a degree. I am going to go and talk to that member of staff" so the interactions must be of the same quality, regardless of where that adult has come from. We do desperately need a structured, focused and quicker route for those who perhaps come with previous experience to accelerate them through and to get them qualified.

Q99 **Anna Firth:** Can we go on to T-Levels now? In 2020 the new T-Level in education and childcare was launched. What has been your experience of hosting the industry placement or recruiting T-Level graduates? Gemma Rolstone?

Gemma Rolstone: The training arm of my company was originally started because even when staff came to us from college we felt as if we



were having to completely retrain them in our approach and our ways and how we wanted them. That has not changed at all.

We have work placements from T-Level qualifications and there is no difference from the ones that we have had in the past at all. The experience and knowledge of our apprentices who have been working with the children on the front-line far exceeds that of any of those that we have had from the college route.

Anna Firth: So is it the college bit that is not working as well as you would like? The bit that is in your hands, the industry placement is presumably the same, but it is the college bit. Why is that?

Chair: The colleges will be working with curriculum, which is developed somewhere else though, won't they?

Q100 **Anna Firth:** What could we do to improve that?

Gemma Rolstone: The thing in early years is that you need the lived experience of working with children and you just cannot get that in any other environment, which is why degrees that do not have placements are not considered as qualifications on our framework. I have been working in early years for over 25 years and every day a child teaches me something new. You must learn in the moment, and that is the difference. What you see on a PowerPoint or in a classroom is completely different to that lived work experience and that is the difference. The placements are just not long enough or intense enough, almost, to provide the experience that they need.

Kara Jewell: Picking up on Gemma Rolstone's point of 25 years in the sector—mine is about 22—where are the people asking those in the sector, "What do you need from your qualifications?" Why are we not saying, "We have seen this somewhere else; let us use it"? Why are we not going to those practitioners and saying, "We are writing a training programme. What do you need your practitioners to know?" I think that is the bit that we are missing.

Anna Firth: Does anyone else want to come in on T-Levels?

Chair: I have a funny feeling several of our guests do not have any experience of T-Levels.

Professor Greenway: I checked yesterday before I came. We do accept T-Levels as a Russell Group University, but we have not recruited anybody on to our BA education programme.

Dr Grenier: We took a decision that we would use the level 3 early years educator apprentices route rather than T-Levels, because it is a more vocational programme. It specialises in the early years phase and we felt that the more generic T-Level would not necessarily give us the staff who have the expertise in the birth to five age range, which is what we need. So that was our individual decision as an employer.



Gemma Rolstone: To jump back in on that, the difficulty is that you can go and do a T-Level qualification in two years, term time only, thank you very much, and an apprenticeship to get to level 3 will take you a minimum of 30 months full time now, because of the changes to the apprenticeship framework.

Q101 **Caroline Ansell:** Not on T-Levels but related, you talked about consultation and the opportunity to feed in and provide challenge and lived work experience. Again thinking a little of the parity or not with teaching in other years, what has been the best consultation that as a sector you have seen or experienced? What are the organisations or the best vehicles and how does that consultation take place and how could it be improved?

Kara Jewell: Getting out on the ground and speaking to us, rather than a written consultation. Often consultations for early years are put out at Christmas when we are all packing away, trying to get the children out. I had in my head, "I must respond to this consultation" and I missed the deadline by an hour. When are you asking us what times are good? Why do we get consultations? Really good consultations are those where they come to the sector, they speak to us, on days that we are training, they speak to us and say, "These are the sorts of questions. What else do you want to add?"

Q102 **Caroline Ansell:** Are you describing individual settings? I think you spoke earlier in our session about how you had brought childminders together so that you could work together. My question related to those perhaps bigger vehicles or platforms. I see that very readily with some of the teaching unions, and I do not often see that championing of the very earliest years. Is there a gap in the market?

Professor Greenway: Yes. We used to have something called the Early Years Development Cluster, early years and child development clusters grouped together across the sector, maintained and private, regionally. That made consultation easier because we would have regional events.

When the foundation stage was launched we were consulted at regional level and then again at national level, so we had different ways of responding to a consultation, and we could also come together as a group to discuss and then feed into a consultation.

Q103 **Caroline Ansell:** What does it look like now? You have very eloquently described the challenge for individual childminders. Now to add a consultation response to that heady mix where you are writing referrals at 7.00 pm, what does the consultation platform look like now?

Professor Greenway: The trusts were already established. The partnerships were established previously and were a mechanism of gaining consultation, rather than being formed purely for consultation.

Dr Grenier: Again one of the things that the Nutbrown Review did was hold regional meetings. As early years adviser in Tower Hamlets at that



point, I took Cathy Nutbrown to visit childminders in early years settings. She did a lot of on-the-ground work, as well as the online survey. I feel that where we have moved to is a place where first the Department for Education no longer funds major research programmes such as the EPSI project, which was a world leading piece of research, and secondly that consultations are done without the level of engagement with people on the ground that was once the norm.

Gemma Rolstone: Some organisations support in different sectors—there is PACEY that Kara Jewell mentioned, there is NDNA, the Early Years Alliance—but none of them is unionised. As far as I am aware there is not a union that early years workers, if they are not in the school sector, can join. That has definitely been missing and I know that sadly there is a bit of apathy towards individual voices, particularly with things such as online consultations. We have been shouting for so long and nobody is listening, so why spend another two hours filling that form in when I need to go to sort out my staffing or other business issues?

Q104 **Anna Firth:** Do you think the GCSE maths and English requirements to work as a qualified practitioner are necessary requirements for the sector and if so, how can we support people to get them? If they are not necessary, how can we deal with that?

Kara Jewell: I think it is very important that people have English and maths skills. Whether that has to be a GCSE is doubtful. If a practitioner who walks through my door has their level 3, they have their QTS but they do not have their English and maths, why am I saying to them, “You do not have Pythagoras theorem. You do not count in ratio”? What is the relevance?

I do think that people should be able to speak English if they are supporting children in English, but often they are part of a team. Whether they are a childminder working in isolation, they have other people they can draw upon. There need to be enough skills to support these children for their understanding. Are we missing a lot of people, again, an additional cost, an additional thing? My deputy manager has her assessment this week in maths for her level 5. If she fails that, she cannot count in ratio again as a qualified practitioner.

Dr Grenier: I think in a way we understand that something such as GCSE English or maths is used as a general bar, rather than a sense that we need all the knowledge that we gained through that qualification in our daily roles.

Early years, as we have been saying as a group, is a very skilled profession. We know that the early stages of learning to communicate, to love books, early reading and writing, children’s early understanding of number, are all foundational for future success in education. The research is getting ever stronger on those points. I cannot see a future that I would feel excited about if we were not expecting that our practitioners at least had that minimal bar of the GCSE English and maths. It is not easy



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to teach early maths to a three-year-old or a four-year-old and if you do not have the understanding and the confidence yourself it is going to be even harder. I think it is an important minimum expectation for the profession.

Q105 Anna Firth: Can I push back on that for a moment? I totally get the argument that you want to have the senior practitioners with GCSE maths and English, but I am not sure I completely understand why that would be necessary for people who are just starting out. They are not teaching GCSE maths to these children. They are teaching numbers, as you pointed out, they are teaching phonics. Could there not be another qualification level that would be sufficient for those practitioners, while accepting that for the nursery as a whole of course you want to have some practitioners with those qualifications?

Dr Grenier: Absolutely there should be a framework that helps people go from being unqualified onwards in their learning. If we are talking about a qualification, I do not think that the minimal standards that we have set should be diluted anymore. In an early years environment at any point children might be exploring number. They might want to share a book with you, and you cannot set up that environment so that those things will only happen with practitioners with a certain level of qualification. I think it is what we should expect for our kids, and I think it is what we should expect for our qualified practitioners as a minimum.

Q106 Anna Firth: Are there other views on that?

Professor Greenway: We may be doing our sector a disservice if we dilute the standards of entry. We have been talking about parity, recognition and progression. I agree with Julian Grenier that there needs to be a framework.

Yes, you perhaps could have a starting point, but if you need to progress within an early years career you do need maths and English. A quick Google search shows that everybody asks for maths and English at level 4, 5 or C equivalent to progress, or even as an entry requirement for a career. If we want people to stay in the profession and to progress and to have parity with the sector with other sectors, and we have been talking about the maintained sector, the maintained sector would not employ somebody without GCSE in English and maths.

Q107 Anna Firth: Before coming to this session I did some research for jobs, and you can become a teaching assistant with no formal qualifications whatsoever. Now, I am not suggesting that a teaching assistant is the same thing as an early years child practitioner, but it is a way of becoming a teacher. A lot of people do start with routes like that. What is wrong with that? Somebody might want to start without these formal qualifications. They are not teaching the children simultaneous equations. We want them to have a pathway, a ladder, whereby they will attain these qualifications at some point. What is wrong with that, and surely that would help widen the appeal of the profession and help with the



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workforce crisis that you have?

Chair: I will bring Julian back in on this.

Dr Grenier: Yes to entries for lots of people. That is important. But we need to remember for example the research that told us that adding teaching assistants to classrooms could lead to poorer levels of attainment among the children, because putting underqualified and undersupported staff to work with children of any age is not a good thing. We have learned a lot about effectively supporting TAs and as a system the Education Endowment Foundation has done a lot to help schools to change that position, but the initial position was that a lot of money was put into TAs and they had a negative impact on children's attainment. It is never a good thing to have children who need the highest level of support with the staff who have the least qualification, the least pay and the least supervision. That would be my thought there.

Gemma Rolstone: This is the issue that always divides the early years sector, and I think there are two prongs to it. While we do want the absolute best for our youngest children, and we know the research points towards the better the qualified staff the better the outcomes for children, you are not paying us enough to have all of our staff at that level. In addition to that, the sector is still viewed as the sector that you go to if you are female and you are not doing particularly well at school and you maybe babysat your next door neighbour's children once. That is still the image, the careers advice we have talked about. Unless all of that changes we are not going to have a workforce that is at that minimum standard.

What has happened since the maths and English requirements were brought in is that the overall qualification levels in the sector have gone down. I am now spending more time teaching maths than I am teaching child development to my apprentices, because they cannot achieve without that. That is a tricky position. The phase when it had to be GCSE and not the equivalency of functional skills and you had a bunch of 17-year-olds asking what "Romeo and Juliet" had to do with being able to help children cut their own snack up was a particularly traumatic period—I'm not going to lie.

There is room for a framework of career progression, but we have some incredibly capable, passionate and amazing staff in our sector who are just never going to get level 3 maths. There has to be something that values those people. If I have a staff member now who has come fresh with a level 3, has not much experience and a practitioner with a level 2 who has years and years of experience and whose interview is incredible and is passionate and meets all the things that I would ever want for children, that is the one that gets the job, because the requirements say we must have a certain number of level 3s. Something needs to change there.

Anna Firth: Absolutely. Thank you. Kara Jewell just wants to say one



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more thing, Ian.

Kara Jewell: It was picking up on Julian Grenier's point, and it is absolutely crucial that the people supporting our youngest children have the knowledge. However, I can teach maths walking down the road with children. We can look at bus numbers. We can look at how many squares are on the pavement. There are ways that this could be done that would still bring that qualification level for the children, but maybe in a more practical sense for those who will not achieve.

Q108 **Chair:** Thank you very much. This has been skirted around and touched on, but I want to ask about continuing professional development. What experience have you had on providing CPD to staff within your provisions and do you have any recommendations on how CPD can be improved in the early years workforce? Emma Gardner first, please.

Emma Gardner: Because of staffing challenges, what tends to happen is that we prioritise mandatory training, or this is certainly what I have found. You will go down the route of your safeguarding training and your paediatric first-aid when there is so much other essential training around supporting behaviour that should sit within that essential training that you do not necessarily have the time to provide.

Probably a good example is that currently I am trying to roll out across our whole workforce of 35 nurseries that every single member of staff will attend training on supporting positive behaviour. That is the centre of some of the challenges that we are having with children at the moment and their personal, social and emotional skills. This training is online and to release somebody to do that training online I must have a spare member of staff in the building to cover the room that they are coming out of, to go to sit at the computer to do that. In a lot of our settings at the moment we have to pull managers into those ratios because of the challenge to recruit staff. It is a massive challenge. The training is there. The quality of training is good.

Q109 **Chair:** Are you saying the training is available, but you cannot access it to the level that you want?

Emma Gardner: Absolutely, yes. The challenge is having to do it within those working hours, because people have worked 40-hour weeks and to ask them to stay behind after work, often at their own cost for their own childcare, just does not work for our workforce.

Dr Grenier: I completely support that. That is what we hear from the PVI nurseries, the roughly 100 that we are working with, that releasing staff is difficult. We do not have a profession where there are a minimum number of professional development hours everyone must complete every year and the funding to enable that. That I think is what a better supported and better qualified workforce would look like, as in other professions, where you undertake a certain amount of professional development.



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We have worked hard as a research school on a programme called Manor Park Talks, which is for the settings across Newham and my colleagues Fliss James and Melissa Prendergast have had a lot of success working with a large number of nurseries. What we have learned about effective professional development through that is first the importance of evidence-informed practice, and I think the early years has a long way to go to get into a place where PD is more evidence informed, that it needs to be sustained, that there need to be clear mechanisms to show practitioners what the practice looks like, to explain the theory behind it.

There needs to be time for reflection as well as time for learning. There needs to be support coaching and mentoring to change practice on the ground. Everyone needs to change, not just the eager trainees, and so we need the leaders who can support everyone to get better, not just the keenest.

We almost certainly need to aim to do a lot less, but what we should be doing in early years we should be doing a lot better. I think there are encouraging signs of a move towards more evidence-informed approaches, and I am hopeful that is something we will get better at as a sector through the stronger practice hub programme.

Gemma Rolstone: We have all spoken about how important CPD is and how the qualifications we have at the moment are not fit for purpose. As others said, a lot of focus is on those statutory things but we want to teach our staff far more than that. There are skills that need that time away, but also the support, mentoring and coaching in the setting to ensure that staff get it right. We have the issue of when we have it, so it must be flexible, probably online but on demand online. In my nurseries, a Tuesday afternoon might be a really good time but for Kara Jewell she can only release staff on a Thursday morning. These are the types of issues we have.

I run a lot of twilight sessions for my staff. They happen at 6.00 pm because that is the only time we can fit it in, and we do them on a Tuesday when a particularly well-known takeaway company does half price pizzas, and I bribe them. We have to be creative about how we do it, but it is important because a lot of those enrichment skills, how brains develop, those types of things, are missing particularly from apprenticeships because we put so much effort into end point assessments, which are unnecessary, and those functional skills, we are missing a lot of opportunity to teach staff straight away and we must reteach them later.

Professor Greenway: I think training should be across sector, and that it should be, as Julian Grenier was saying, research-informed, but we need to share our research more with practitioners. We have a number of specialisms within early years that are largely ignored. We have all bandied about terms today such as "self-regulation". We know, we live



the experience, we work in that environment. We do not share enough about our expertise.

Before I came, I jotted down a list of the things such as if you were to look at something like an MPQ framework for early years specialists. We talk about needing good early years leadership, but we also need people who could lead specialisms within nurseries. We have emergent literacy, we have emergent numeracy, we have outdoor learning, we have music and creativity. We have SEN. All of those things happen, but we do not talk about them enough and we do not share good practice enough.

Kara Jewell: As a childminder sometimes regulation was a significant barrier. I spoke earlier about a 14-hour day for a childminder, which is quite standard. They then go to the training and are told, "Oh, well, our provider closes at 6.00 pm." Unfortunately the childminder wants the training at 7.00 pm when they have had their lunch. I am speaking from experience. Trust me, lunch is an unknown in early years quite often.

As a childminder, we must update our knowledge all the time. The compulsory training for safeguarding is three hours. You would do that regularly. I can leave my childminding assistant for two hours if my childminding assistant is in; if my childminding assistant goes sick I cannot leave her, but I have a two-hour window from the time I leave to the time I get back. A basic safeguarding training is three hours. They do not offer that in the evening because the people who teach it do not want to. Are we not creating that? I had one assistant; I got her registered with Ofsted; it took nearly a year. She went off sick for a short period and a nursery manager offered to help me but I said, "You are not approved by Ofsted to work for me. You cannot" and we would walk 12 children every day in the rain because I could not get her on a first aid course that met the times that she was available. Our staff are eager to learn. We want them to learn; we want to share our knowledge with them, but it is a watered down version because we send one member and they have to cascade it to 12 people.

Q110 **Miriam Cates:** I think my question has probably been covered, but I want to go back to something we were talking about earlier, about the family support that you provide. In one of the early sessions we had with some other witnesses we asked the question, "What is childcare for?" and that seems to be at the heart of some of the problems, discrepancies and contradictions within the system.

There is an argument that childcare is there to help people go back to work, so it is providing a service. There is an argument that childcare early years is about education, preparation for school, laying the foundations. Clearly one of the most important and demanding roles that you play is an extension of social services, family support, whatever you want to call it, and it is something that in the past was passed on from parent to parent, was passed on within the wider, extended family, was passed on within the community. In a lot of communities that does not



exist anymore.

I was struck by your saying that sometimes you have parents come to you for whom that is the first time they have had any support with parenting. I am listening to the expertise in this room and thinking, "Would your time not be better spent with people who are about to have a baby?"

Kara Jewell: It would, but then who is looking after the children we care for?

Q111 **Miriam Cates:** Agreed. You are right; the first 1,001 days are absolutely crucial. If you are born into a two-parent family with a stable relationship in a decent house with wider support from the family and community you have won life's lottery. If you do not have any formal education before you start school you are going to be fine. That is the statistical likelihood. You are picking up the pieces at age two of children who have had difficult, deprived, traumatic, troubled, abused first two years, which however brilliant you are, and you clearly all are, you are not going to remediate, sadly. You need more investment, and you need more funding; I completely agree. How do we use your skill and expertise where it counts, which is at the very beginning of the child's life to support parents? Not to take children away, but to support parents. That seems to me where your expertise could be most usefully employed.

Kara Jewell: It is before they are born. It is as soon as a parent finds out they are going to be a parent, whether that is six weeks into the pregnancy or 36 weeks. They are scared. Children do not come with a handbook. We all know that children are very different.

I spoke to a parent yesterday who became a parent at 17 in quite difficult circumstances. Her child has autism, does not sleep for more than two hours. Her nan has just been diagnosed with terminal cancer, a nan who does not speak to her because she became a teenage parent. This poor woman is crying out. It just feels awful. I am away from her today and that does not feel right.

What could we have done back when she was 15 to help her? What could we have done to support her? How do we support her when her child is sleeping for two hours? Where are we before? Why are we dealing with it afterwards?

Dr Grenier: Who cannot be struck by the power of that? The evidence probably tells us a few things. First, it is about a system rather than any individual service or person, so we need the health services to work well with the early years services and to work well with schools. Where I work, the state of housing is unbelievable and there does not seem to be any national attempt to ensure that housing is suitable for families with young children.

We need a whole-system approach. One of the other footholds we have in this is that the national evaluation of Sure Start children's centres



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showed us that the two-generational impact—in other words the child in a high quality nursery plus the families being able to access parenting classes and family support and health services—that two-generational approach looked really effective, but of course what we have seen in the last decade or so is that whereas we had a network of children's centres we now have what is at best a rump. I am proud that I still lead a children's centre, but there are not many of us left now.

Q112 Caroline Ansell: My question relates specifically to the situation you just described. What is the panel's experience of family hubs, the new generation, if you will, Sure Start centres designed for supporting families all the way through, but still with that important and strong focus on the early years? I just have an emerging family hub, I think it would be fair to say, in my constituency so my own experience is very limited, but hopes are high. Is there experience of it round the table?

Chair: I think there was a plan for 75 in 75 local authority areas, but that is going to be preceded by trailblazers in about a dozen places.

Miriam Cates: We have 75 agreed, 14 trailblazers. That is about having more funding rather than necessarily coming on stream first. If the pilot of 75 works, it will be rolled out to the remaining 75, but it is early days.

Caroline Ansell: If any of the panel had experience of a family hub I would be interested to hear it.

Q113 Chair: Is it not too early days for them at the moment? I do not know.

Emma Gardner: I do not have any experience of that in our organisation currently.

Kara Jewell: I am quite fortunate, being from Portsmouth, because it is a unitary authority and they push for everything. Any trial that comes out, they are there. We do have family hubs and previously we had children's centres and there are some real benefits, but again I still feel we can go further.

Q114 Kim Johnson: I want to talk about Sure Start programmes and to say that all of the things that you were saying were needed were there with Sure Start programmes, identified and located in most disadvantaged communities. Sadly, 13 years of austerity has seen the demise of Sure Start centres and I do not believe that the family hubs that Caroline Ansell was alluding to will provide the same level of support that we saw with the Sure Start programme, sadly. I just wanted to say that.

My final two questions are about SEND. We know that those early years practitioners are well-placed to identify early those children who require an EHCP, but we also know that there are lots of delays. What is your experience of that? Also, once an EHCP is provided, what is the impact on early year providers in terms of the delay in funding to support those children. Emma Gardner?



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Emma Gardner: It is a massive issue. I could talk all day just about this. To get an EHCP within the early years is incredibly difficult. They are incredibly unusual and rare in the early years. Usually what would happen is that providers would go down the route of the inclusion funding, but what we are seeing now is that that money is being guarded more and more because it is so limited. That means that thresholds to be able to access that money have gone through the roof.

Many children in our settings would require a one-to-one support to be able to be safe within the setting, but what is happening is that either the settings soak up that cost into their own budgets, or unfortunately must limit the number of spaces for children with SEND, or have to say, "You can come but we can only accommodate for very short periods of time." Added to that is the increased waiting times for other services, such as speech and language.

We now see a group of children who are just sitting within our early years settings who we are supporting with that early intervention, but it is sitting within the skills base that our early years workforce are able to provide that support with. We are not able to reach out to speech or language or occupational therapy teams to get that more specialist support. We see that they can go all the way through to school now before we are able to push them through for that support.

Gemma Rolstone: SEND is a huge issue. We all know that early intervention is what works best, yet SEND provision and funding is all front-loaded towards primary and secondary education. I did smile when you said about an EHC plan, because we just do not get them. In early years we put all the work in to get it in place for when the child goes to school. There is nothing before that.

Waiting times in my local authority for a speech and language first appointment assessment is currently about 94 weeks. We cannot put a child in for assessment until they are two. They are not going to get anything before they go to school. We are doing our best, but we have had to send children off to school knowing full well that the moment they hit that reception class, the gap is just going to get wider and there just is not the provision there to be able to sort it out.

There is no specialist funding. There is inclusion funding, but it varies between local authorities and it does not cover much, and it only covers those funded hours. For a lot of families, we can only offer either the 15 or 11 hours or 22 or 30 hours and cannot offer them any more, because we just do not have the resources there. The highest level of funding we can get in my local authority is an additional £3.95 an hour. That is not a staff member.

Q115 **Chair:** In a nutshell, am I right in saying that you believe that within the sector there is a significant element of unmet need?



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Gemma Rolstone: Absolutely. Settings are doing their best, but it is a bit of a chicken and egg situation. We work with practitioners and we can give them the training and understanding that they need but SEND is so complex.

Every child is individual and will have different needs, behaviours and personalities, even if they fall under the same diagnosis, if they have a diagnosis before they go to school, which is also virtually impossible. Again, our multidisciplinary assessment time is about two and a half years at the moment, so we can guess, but there is no specialist support there for anyone to be able to come in and say, "Yes, you are right. This is what it is; this is what we need to do" so a lot of it is about all we can do if you can get an EHC plan accepted, is to get it ready there for the school.

Professor Greenway: I work with Professor Karen Guldberg who is an expert in autism, and she is undertaking some research into excluded children in marginalised families. I asked her about current statistics before coming here. A key issue for children with autism in families is the lack of prediagnostic screening in early years and therefore the post-diagnostic support that needs to be put in early is not being put in early.

There are currently 122,000 people on the waiting list for diagnostic assessment for autism in England alone. Some of the early research coming out of the research into marginalised families and excluded children suggests that absenteeism and exclusion is increasingly seen in the early years. I think the lived experience is reflected in those research findings.

Kara Jewell: I have a number of children in the nursery and as a childminder who have these complex needs. I have children at two who have been turned away from 12 nurseries, not because the nurseries do not care but because, as Emma Gardner and Gemma Rolstone said, there is no funding for these children. I have a speech therapist come in to see three children who were due to start school and I said, "Do you have any other children in the nursery?" and she said, "They are probably on my waiting list, but that is 912 children." That is an excessive load. As Julian Grenier said, we are in a broken system. It is not just what is going on in early years. These families have nowhere to go and when they get to the point of diagnosis, there you go. I am writing the EHCP requests at 3.00 am.

Dr Grenier: It is a broken system at the moment. If we rewind, a lot of this is about child poverty. The Marmot Review tells us that child poverty is corrosive to children's health and development and children born into poverty are much more likely to be described as having a special educational need. Again, we try to deal with the symptoms and not the causes.

The second thing is that NHS services, as colleagues have said, are appallingly overstretched. I asked our SENCo, Lindsay Foster, and she



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said we identified 32 children as having SEND last term and 18 of those had been identified by health and other agencies first. That is 14 children whose families had suffered and struggled and tried to keep the show on the road without the NHS support that they needed. There are huge issues around families from minority backgrounds, parents who struggle with their literacy who are given 12-page forms to complete about their child's strengths and weaknesses, so of course they again miss out on the funding that they are entitled to.

There is so much to do and when we fast forward it, by the time the kids get to the end of the EYFS, by the end of the reception year, children described as having SEND are 12 months to 20 months behind other children. Gaps in attainment tend to double by the end of primary, double again by the end of secondary. Those children face a titanic struggle when they get to the school system and nothing could be more urgent than fixing that broken system at every level.

Q116 Kim Johnson: We are still waiting for our paper, are we not?

Gemma Rolstone: Two things: one is about early identification. Again, often families who have struggled only come to a practitioner when they are eligible for the three-year-old funding, for example. In one of my settings I have a baby in the baby room who is displaying quite significant autistic traits and we are all excited about that because we can work with them and that family.

By the time they get to us at three and a bit, those parents have just done the best they can to cope with the situation in hand and the sleep pattern is all over the place. With the eating, if there is any, there are significant issues. There are toileting issues. We are all excited that we have a toddler because we can work with them now and not have those habits and traits that come from perhaps just what parents do to cope.

The other issue is with the funding and again it may be different in all local authorities, but for my local authority if I want inclusion funding for a child next term—I think I have missed the deadline; I would have had to have put in the form—we have had half-term, haven't we?—a week ago Friday, for the child to have the funding next term, but the funding does not come through at the beginning because we do head-count week and then it does not come through until the adjustment, so I would not get the funding until the end of July.

Emma Gardner: Another thing add to that is that most local authorities will not release inclusion funding unless you are 24 months behind developmentally where you are expected to be, which is hard when you are two.

Kim Johnson: Thank you so much for your candid responses to my questions.

Q117 Chair: That brings the session to a close just before midday. Is there



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anything that we should have asked, that we have not asked?

Dr Grenier: I have just put a note at the bottom of my notes about disadvantaged children, children from low income backgrounds, because we have had this 10-year period where we made no progress on narrowing the gap. The latest EYFSP outcomes are significantly worse for children from poorer backgrounds. Not only have we made no progress recently, but as a result of Covid we have gone back and we must do more for kids from low income families as a priority.

Kara Jewell: I want to pick up on Julian Grenier's point about children from disadvantaged backgrounds. If you are saying 10 years, in a few years' time they will become parents themselves, and the system will grow and grow. For us, there is also just so much about hidden disadvantage. Some children may not meet the criteria for early years pupil premium because their parent works, and just a couple of hours can take them off the radar. We need to be aware that the criteria for disadvantage may not meet the needs of all families.

Gemma Rolstone: Again on disadvantaged families, I know we have not talked about pupil premium but it is significantly less in early years than it is in schools, and again it is paid sometimes when the child has already gone to school so you cannot do a lot with it then. That is a huge concern for the core of us who are so passionate. That is what we are here for, helping those children, and we find our values compromised because there just is not the funding there. We cannot offer families what they want because we must be restrictive to make our businesses survive and we cannot offer the extra support that we would love to be able to give with all the expertise and knowledge that we have. We are being stopped because of the funding.

Chair: Thank you all very much. I have found this to be an absolutely fascinating and massively informative session. It will be an important part of our overall inquiry into support for childcare and the early years. Thank you all very much indeed.