

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Early Years: Improving Support for Children and Families, HC 1264](#)

Tuesday 11 November 2025

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Members present: Helen Hayes (Chair); Jess Asato; Dr Caroline Johnson; Darren Paffey; Mark Sowards; Peter Swallow; Chris Vince; Caroline Voaden.

Questions 1-40

Witnesses

I: Dr Tammy Campbell, Co-Director for Early Years, Inequalities and Wellbeing at Education Policy Institute; Lydia Hodges, Head at Coram Family and Childcare; Professor Eva Lloyd, Emeritus Professor of Early Childhood at the University of East London; and Sarah Tillotson, Early Years Lead at the Education Endowment Foundation.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Tammy Campbell, Co-Director for Early Years, Inequalities and Wellbeing at Education Policy Institute; Lydia Hodges, Head at Coram Family and Childcare; Professor Eva Lloyd, Emeritus Professor of Early Childhood at the University of East London; and Sarah Tillotson, Early Years Lead at the Education Endowment Foundation.

Chair: Good morning and welcome to this public evidence session of the Education Committee. I welcome members and witnesses to our first evidence session in our new, large inquiry on early years and improving support for children and families. We are delighted to get it under way today.

I have a couple of housekeeping announcements. As you all know, it is Armistice Day. Shortly before 11 o'clock, I will suspend the Committee's proceedings so that we can hold a two-minute silence from 11 o'clock. I believe that the Division bells will ring at the start and conclusion of the two minutes. I will ask those who are able to do so to stand.

May I ask any Members who would like to do so to put on the record any interests relevant to this inquiry?

Chris Vince: I am chair of the APPG for young carers and young adult carers; its secretariat is Carers Trust. I am also a member of Unison,

which I believe we are taking evidence from today.

Peter Swallow: I am a member of Unison.

Darren Paffey: I am also a member of Unison.

Mark Sowards: I am also a member of Unison.

Jess Asato: I am, too.

Chair: Thank you, everybody. May I ask our witnesses to introduce themselves?

Lydia Hodges: I am Lydia Hodges, head of Coram Family and Childcare. We are a children's charity that focuses specifically on early years and childcare. We carry out social policy research and we have community programmes for parents in local areas.

Professor Lloyd: I am Eva Lloyd, emeritus professor of early childhood at the University of East London and visiting professor at University College London. My background is in psychology. It is a great pleasure to be here.

Sarah Tillotson: Good morning, everyone. I am Sarah Tillotson, early years lead at the Education Endowment Foundation.

Chair: And Dr Tammy Campbell is joining us online.

Dr Campbell: Good morning, everyone. I am Tammy Campbell, the lead for early years at the Education Policy Institute, where I am one of the research directors. I am also a visiting fellow at the London School of Economics.

Q1 **Chair:** The Government have set a target of 75% of children being school-ready by 2028. How useful is school readiness as a measure of child development in the early years?

Professor Lloyd: It is a risky target, because it is the only target and there are many issues around measuring this development. Dr Campbell has written research on this. There is research on the risk of bias in the fact that teachers measure this at the end of the reception year, and after a heavy year: if we believe some research, they will have spent two and a half hours every day attending to children's physical needs.

The other important aspect is that we know, from the excellent data that the early years foundation stage profile reports collect, that the majority of the children who fail to reach a good level of development are children experiencing disadvantage of different kinds. They are children with SEND, children whose first language is not English or children from low-income families. The target risks the very good work that schools and early years settings do on adding value to those children's experience and progress, which is not yet quite complete by the time they come to the end of reception year. The risk is that that might be ignored and that there might even be a tendency or pressure to concentrate—as Sarah Cattani at Nesta



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has said—on the ones who are closest to the line, and to neglect the children who have a long way to go.

I think the evidence is compelling that reception class and early years settings are coping with an increased number of children with severe developmental delays. We urgently need to find out the reasons for that.

Dr Campbell: I will not repeat any of that, but I largely agree. One thing I will flag is that the foundation stage profile assessment takes place at the end of the reception year, so it is not even a school readiness assessment as such. The children have been in school for a year, which is quite a substantial chunk of time for a four or five-year-old.

But we do have an assessment that takes place right at the beginning of reception: the reception baseline assessment. When it was introduced, it was quite controversial. There was a lot of discussion about whether or not it was a good idea. It places a burden on teachers and has issues for children settling in. Given that it exists, however, and is placing that burden, the question is why we are not making more use of that assessment. If we want things to feed into monitoring and targets, that is something that we should revisit.

Q2 **Chair:** What is the typical age range over which children reach the 12 behaviours and skills that comprise the early years foundation stage?

Professor Lloyd: Shall I say seven? The age of seven is the classical figure, isn't it? But one thing about the early years is that children develop at different rates. That does not mean that they do not get there in the end. Boys are different from girls, too.

It is interesting that recently Switzerland, which was rather late in introducing early years education, also introduced a measure like the early years foundation stage profile. Its findings are just like ours, with boys, children whose first language is not French, German or Italian, and all that. We also have to remind ourselves about our early school starting age. Tammy has just said it: they are in school and there is a lot of downward pressure. In other European countries, children have a longer early years experience with less formality. Finland is a major example, achieving better than our children do. It also has less child poverty.

Dr Campbell: I very much agree about the downward pressure. Specifically, a lot of the children who are supposedly not reaching a good level of development at the end of reception are the summer-borns. We see a gradation from August through to September. Most of the children just age up and develop, and they hit the supposed target in time, so there is a danger of forcing expectations that are not appropriate for children of that age. We want to be careful about that.

Q3 **Chair:** Before we move on, do you want to say anything more about whether there are unintended consequences of the single target for 75% of children to be school ready?



Dr Campbell: This has already been mentioned, but there is a real danger that because we have a single top-line target, the marginal children—the ones who can just make it—will be pushed and then other children will be neglected. That is how targets work: they shape behaviour. What we do not want is children with special educational needs and disabilities, children from low-income families or children who have other needs being neglected because they are seen as unlikely to make this very specific threshold target. We do not want to incentivise those children being ignored in early education.

Professor Lloyd: One of the unintended consequences will be that the Government miss their target. Having invested so much in that, it would be a great pity. Other forms of research could complement this target to dig deep into what is happening and how it can be improved. The RISE meetings that have been held around the country recently on what goes on in reception class have all highlighted some issues that need addressing urgently. The data collection by the Department for Education is very good, but we need additional in-depth research to unpack this further.

Sarah Tillotson: It would be useful for the Government to support the implementation of research that would diversify the other measures that we have for the early years age range, so that we are not relying on the early years foundation stage profile as our national source of education data. We could then track children's progress, and the target could be weighted more to progress, rather than outcomes.

Q4 **Mark Sewards:** Good morning, everybody. I will start with Dr Campbell and then come to the witnesses in the room. Could you please say, in as few words as possible, what you consider the most important reasons why children are not ready for school?

Dr Campbell: Over the past decade, we have seen a rise in child poverty and a deepening of poverty and extreme deprivation. Families with children under five are the most likely to be in poverty. We know that poverty is detrimental to child development for many reasons, including the stress that it places on families and their capacity to parent. It means that parents and carers are not able to buy resources for their children. The No. 1 factor affecting early child development, that is malleable at the policy level across Government, is poverty.

We should not forget the impacts of covid. In the discourse about what is going on with young children, we sometimes seem to just forget that that happened. That is still playing out. The covid babies are entering school now, so we should bear that in mind.

We have talked about questioning the very premises behind school readiness and age-appropriate expectations, so I will not go into that again. The key malleable causal factor that we can do something about across Government is poverty.

Lydia Hodges: I agree with Tammy: I think poverty is the No. 1 issue. Who are the children least likely to reach a good level of development? After children who have special educational needs and disabilities, it is children who are eligible for free school meals. Only just over half of children who were eligible for free school meals last year met a good level of development, compared with 72% who were not eligible for free school meals, so we are talking about a gap of 20 percentage points. With 4.5 million children living in poverty, and with 48% of them under five, that is a factor that should not be understated.

The costs and expectations of modern family life are very different from those of a generation ago. With rent, mortgage, food, bills and all those things, it is now almost impossible for most families to have only one parent working. Most families with two parents will need both of them to be working, which means more parents working more and having less time with their children. Parents really feel that pressure to keep up and have the time that they need to spend with their children.

Professor Lloyd: I spoke to the head of a lovely primary school in east London—it gets “Outstanding”—about the nursery class. Among the 15 children, three were non-verbal and the others had no developmental problems at all. We need to remember that in the current discourse around school readiness. I fear that sometimes the impression created is that children across the board come to school in nappies. That was an anecdote, but the evidence is not like that. Most children will be at different stages of development but will be perfectly okay to enjoy and keep up with the nursery or reception class experience.

The growth in children with really serious developmental delays, rooted in their background and neglected health issues, is so concerning. That is why I am really pleased about the strategy’s plans for the expansion of Best Start family hubs and so on. We have had years of not meeting targets for checks at two and a half years. We need much more input from health visitors. All those things need more support and boosting, so we can get in there as early as possible. If we intervene at the reception year, we are already too late. As Lydia says, poverty and health are so closely linked.

Sarah Tillotson: I endorse what the other panellists have said about poverty being one of the leading causes of children not reaching their early learning goals. In addition, even before the extension of the working families entitlement for additional funded hours, those families were already accessing more funded childcare, and childcare in general, than disadvantaged families. There is something to consider there about whether that is having an impact on attainment at the end of reception.

It is useful to think about the fragmentation in the early years education sector, compared with schools. Once children start reception, they are there until year 6, and maybe they move to another school after that. In the early years age range, in the small period between zero and five, a child could potentially attend three different settings. It is crucial that they are supported by a small group of adults they have a strong relationship



with, and potentially a key worker who works with them for a long period. There is also a lack of integration and handover of those children as they move through that fragmented system. That really needs looking at. Some policies that the Government are supporting as part of the best start in life strategy might do that, but it needs monitoring and evaluation to ensure it is implemented effectively and delivering on that.

- Q5 **Mark Swards:** The Government published their “Giving every child the best start in life” strategy back in July. It referred to a survey by Kindred Squared, which said that one of the top three reasons why children are not ready for school is that their parents are spending too much time on electronic devices and less with their children—although I completely appreciate what you say, Professor Lloyd, about the data saying that lots are. That same survey said that children are also spending too much time on electronic devices themselves before they get to school. Does any of our witnesses have a view on that?

Lydia Hodges: It is true to say that electronic devices are much more common in everyday use than they were. We see our very youngest children using them for more than the recommended hours in a lot of families.

But this is a societal issue. All of life is online, and I am wary of judging parents over that. School meals are paid online; nurseries all have apps and sometimes send multiple updates every day; all our bills are paid online; shopping is done online; I cannot get a GP appointment unless I do it online; many services are discouraging people from phone calls and are closing physical buildings. It is not really possible to live your life without being online. It is quite easy to look at the parent who is on their device in the playground while their child is playing, but they might have to be on it to submit information for their benefits.

It is a fact of life that we need to be mindful of, but we need to help parents and families to show the difference that can be made through interacting with their children in other ways, using the evidence-based research and helping people to protect their time with their children, but it is a fact of life that we cannot really escape. I believe that in the Kindred Squared survey, although parents identified that as an issue, their top selected issue was working too long hours in order to make ends meet.

Mark Swards: That is absolutely right.

Dr Campbell: I agree very much with the point about not selectively picking up on things like this and parent-blaming. It can be a distraction from the core issues we talked about—poverty, the structure of life now, and so on. Everyone feels very strongly about the shift that has happened societally, and if you ask pointed questions about this, you will get answers that can support the view that this is all down to parents being on devices so much, but even to the extent that parents are on devices more, we can ask, “Why is this something that is being used as a resource so much?” and “Why are people not able to access alternatives?” A key part of the family hubs strategy is to have an online offering—that



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demonstrates how much it is embedded—but we also want to question the extent to which that is desirable in policy, or how much we want to push back against that. I very much agree that we do not want to slip into this parent-blaming narrative, when parents are dealing with so much else.

Mark Sowards: I very much appreciate that we do not want to fall into that narrative.

- Q6 **Dr Johnson:** I appreciate your point that parents being on phones means less interaction with their children, but what about children themselves being on phones? If you go out for a meal in a restaurant, you often see a child being occupied for a long period of time with a screen, rather than pencils and crayons or toys and other things you might have seen in times gone by. To what extent are phones affecting toddlers' concentration, attention span and development?

Professor Lloyd: I appreciate your views, because I think you have a lot of professional experience of seeing that yourself. We need more research to look at the relationships and at which children are doing that. Is it necessarily the children who are not performing very well or who are easily distracted or whatever? At this moment, it is quite early to say. I share your concern, although I do not see it that much. It could be early, but I can see how my six grandchildren have come to grips with something that was absolutely not there when I raised children. It is an enormous challenge, but we need more research before we can identify this as a really major factor.

Sarah Tillotson: The Government-funded cohort study, "Children of the 2020s", is looking specifically at screen use, and has the potential to look at its short and long-term impacts on children's outcomes and other variables. That will be a really good place for that research and conclusion.

- Q7 **Jess Asato:** I understand that we lack an evidence base, although I think some studies are now showing links between developmental delay and screens. Should babies be given screens to watch? In your professional judgment, would that have an impact on their speech and language development particular?

Professor Lloyd: I seem to remember that sort of debate about television when I raised my children. One of the answers then was, "Well, you watch with the children." If you are going to do this with an under-1, you watch something with the child, and then it is a wonderful learning opportunity. When do you start with a baby? It is hard to imagine. But it doesn't feel good, and it is different. When anything involves parents or carers doing joint activities with children, even if it involves screens, it is better.

- Q8 **Mark Sowards:** Will the "Giving every child the best start in life" strategy address the needs of the groups that are persistently falling behind? I want to focus on those who are eligible for free school meals and children from Gypsy and Roma and Irish Traveller heritage families. We will come to SEND in a moment, but we will leave that to one side for this question.



Dr Campbell: Specifically on children who are picked up as eligible for free school meals once they are in school, they are, as has been mentioned, entitled to the least time and the least amount of early education and care before school. That is really problematic, because all the evidence indicates that high-quality early education and care has the potential to be most beneficial for children in poverty. It is completely contrary to the idea of the best start in life for all, and it is not being addressed yet. It should be rectified so that the playing field and access to entitlements are more equal, and children should not be penalised for having parents or carers who are not working, cannot work or are not working for enough hours.

I will quickly pick up on other points, since we are talking specifically about the free school meals group. Another big issue in the early years is entitlement to free school meals itself. Most children in early education settings are not entitled to free school meals; only children who attend maintained schools or nurseries and attend before and after lunch are. Our research indicates that local authorities and settings are confused about this, and it is not necessarily happening in the maintained settings.

We know that children under five are most likely to be in poverty and in food poverty, so we think that parity with the later years could be funded and supported. We have universal free school meals in early primary school. Since we have this push—where the assumption is more and more that children are expected to be in education in the early years while their parents work—we think that free school meals should be properly extended down into that phase.

Q9 **Mark Sewards:** Do you think the Government strategy addresses these things?

Dr Campbell: Not yet. It definitely does not address the lack of parity in access to early education and care across different income groups and social groups. At the moment it is moving in a direction where it is supporting more advantaged children.

Sarah Tillotson: We welcome a lot of the Government's best start in life strategy, because we think there is some good potential in there for improving outcomes for disadvantaged children. Some of those things are related to improving the quality of practice, which involves the uplift to the early years pupil premium, financial incentives to draw early years teachers towards working in settings in disadvantaged areas, and increasing funded access to evidence-informed professional development, such as the maths champions programme and the Nuffield early language intervention. We know that those things can improve children's outcomes, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, so that the gap closes.

More research is needed to monitor whether the interventions to improve quality can sufficiently offset and close the attainment gap by the end of reception, while funded childcare is extended to other children and at an earlier start point. Improving quality is good, but we need to find out

whether that is enough to make a difference in funded time for working families.

Mark Swards: Brilliant stuff.

- Q10 **Chris Vince:** It sounds a bit strange to be talking about young carers when we talk about early years, but I know from my experience, having worked with a charity for young carers before I came to this place, that young carers are getting younger. We need to do a lot more to collect data to recognise who is and who is not a young carer. That is probably the case for a lot of the areas we are talking about—I know Mark has a follow-up question on SEND. Do we need to do more to collect the data in order to be aware of young people's challenges so that we can cater for them? It is all well and good to say, "We want young people to be school ready," but until we know what challenges they face, that is quite difficult. Does anyone have any thoughts on that? Tammy is nodding at me; do you want to say anything, Tammy?

Dr Campbell: Just that I agree with you. From the bits of data we have, we can see that children are getting more and more responsibility in this direction, and it is possibly becoming more prevalent, but it is hard to know exactly how much more prevalent it is becoming, and who is affected, because we do not have the data yet.

There is a new flag in the national pupil database for young carers, once they are in statutory school, so to some extent you can track that back and see who may have been young carers in the early years, but the data is not really being collected in the early years, and we do not really know yet how good the school-age data is. I agree that data is something we need to do better on.

Chris Vince: Thank you.

- Q11 **Dr Johnson:** Lydia, you talked about the shortage of time for many parents, and it seems to me that in the early years there has been a shift in children spending increasing amounts of time away from their parents and in formal childcare, and that the state seems to be pushing in that direction, with more funded and paid-for childcare—more tooth brushing and breakfast giving, and taking on more and more of the role of the parent. When it comes to a child's development, do you think that that is desirable? Instead of taking children from their parents into state-funded care, would it be better for the state to focus its resources on supporting parents to spend time with their children in those early years?

Lydia Hodges: I think we need both of those things. We need the freedom, choice and ability for families to choose what works for them. I do not think we have that at the moment. Due to the pressures of things like the cost of living, as well as society's expectations and the differences in gender roles, many families are not able to make the choices they would make if they were able to financially, or in their personal circumstances. We need both those things so that families can choose what is right for them.



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There is clearly a drive to get more people, and particularly more mothers, back into work, supported by funded childcare, but what we have at the moment, as both Tammy and Sarah have said, is making childcare cheaper for a lot of mums and dads who were already in work, rather than perhaps helping other families into work. There is an argument for that, because increased economic activity increases a family's ability to buy books and do things with their children that they might not otherwise be able to do, so there is an argument for both of those things, but at the moment there is perhaps not enough on supporting families to be able to give children the home learning environment that they might otherwise choose.

Professor Lloyd: It is a very important point, particularly if we look at the data from, for instance, the SEED study, which show that the impact of the home learning environment ultimately counts for more in terms of children's developmental outcomes and educational outcomes than the impact of early childhood education and care.

Anything that we can do to support families to enjoy their children is so important, because I feel that, currently, the way we have organised our society and our communities interferes with parents being able to enjoy their children. Nought to five are the magic years. It is also about children enjoying their parents, with parents not being harassed and worried—not just in low-income families but across the board. They are almost relieved when their children are out of the early years and things maybe become a bit more predictable—or maybe not. That is important.

As Lydia said, we need both. It is about a very wide-ranging set of interventions. It is definitely about family-friendly employment practices, and more opportunities for young families to enjoy services that are not early childhood education and care but community services. For example, stay and play in children's centres and one o'clock clubs—are there any left? There are all these things that have been suffering so badly in the last 14 years and more that really need supporting and building up again.

It is also about family-friendly communities. We have examples from the Nordic countries that take account of the economic value of parents rearing their children. They say, "Well, we have to make allowances for that in terms of how much they work and how much direct money they get to support their children and in that child-rearing task." That is done not just through subsidies for using early child education and care, but through the tax system or the benefits system, and in other ways, for doing that incredibly important job.

Sarah Tillotson: We think it is really important that the Government are clear about the desired goals for funded childcare. What is good for children and their development might not necessarily be best for supporting parents back into work and workforce participation.

The accumulation of different agendas has caused a really piecemeal and confusing network of funded entitlements that is difficult for both providers and parents to navigate. That needs to be addressed and simplified. We



need to think about the parent's place in among that funded childcare system. If the Government see improving children's outcomes as the most important reason for funded childcare, that is the research that needs to be drawn on to make those decisions. What is the attendance pattern or relationship support that is needed to improve outcomes for children?

Q12 Mark Swards: Thank you for those answers. As somebody with a one-year-old and a four-year-old, I wouldn't mind a bit of the predictability that you referred to, Professor Lloyd.

On SEND, the Institute for Government has stated that 10% of children with autism were school-ready last year, and 0.6% of children with severe disabilities were school-ready last year—quite understandably, given the circumstances. Is school readiness even an appropriate measure for children with SEND? Should we consider something else?

Lydia Hodges: One of the issues with the "good" level of development is that it is quite a blunt tool. You have got it or you have not; it is an in or out. That is something we leave behind when we go into more formal schooling and have levels of achievement, whether that is A to whatever or 0 to 9. It is a real in or out and it does not leave any nuance for progress, particularly for summer-born children and particularly for children with special educational needs and disabilities. That can be really dispiriting for the people who are working with those children in those settings, and for parents. They may have made huge progress, but to be told that they are still somehow not good enough—it is this idea of a "good" level of development—is really difficult, particularly for children with SEND.

We do not do it later on, once children have an education, health and care plan. The marker for applying is whether or not the child is making expected progress, and that expected progress is not compared to children who do not have an additional need. It is specific to that child and their learning needs. We are not doing that with the "good" level of development for children with SEND. That nuance is particularly important for those children, and it would be good to have some nuance and some of that context. The idea initially was to let schools know where the child was at so that they knew what they needed to do next, when that child was in year 1, but I do not know that they are always getting that context if they are just getting "met" or "not met" in a bunch of areas. If we could have that, it would not only be better for parents and children but much more useful for the people charged with looking after them.

Dr Campbell: Related to that, a lot of research shows that because there is tension between the foundation stage profile—all the different areas being developed, with a lot of thought to what children might be doing at different ages and stages—and it being compressed into this threshold measure. That impacts practice in schools, and we lose the positives of the foundation stage profile, namely all these different areas where it could be useful for practitioners to look at how children are doing—maybe they need some more help with this bit; maybe they have a strength here. Instead, if you look at the statistical distribution of schools on the



foundation stage profile, you can very obviously see a concentration, and that it is all about pushing people over the threshold and scoring people in a way that means that they either have or have not met the supposed good level of development. It is true that it is incredibly dispiriting as a parent to be told, "Your child is not good. They have not developed well." For schools, the threshold measure is not particularly useful. It is about thinking about that tension between uses. We now have the new high-level national target, and we talked before about unintended consequences, but going back to your question, for children with different disabilities and needs in the early years, having that high-level 75% average target is not particularly useful.

Professor Lloyd: It really was a shameful statistic that you just cited. I want to go back to the fact that when getting school-ready, many of the children with SEND will have missed out on early years provision. Although we have claimed for many years that we have got a universal system, we have not done what it takes to make it universal for all children, irrespective of any particular challenges that they face. That has to be changed. Coming back to your earlier question, as it currently stands, the extra time for working parents is not going to deliver that. This is a major challenge within the strategy, which I hope will be addressed. In many ways it was an inherited strategy, and it reflects an approach that is actually not that common in Europe—or in the rest of Europe, as I still think we are part of Europe. The fact that everything is free is only the case in seven other European countries; in most of the European Union, parents pay income-related fees. This incredibly generous offer has actually led to us cutting out more and more children, especially as child poverty levels rise. That is not the intended aim of the strategy. There will be colleagues appearing before the Committee, I am sure, who will have a lot more detail about what actually happens on the ground—I will not try to go into the detail. But it has got to be addressed.

- Q13 **Peter Swallow:** Just to pick up on Dr Campbell's point, we know that one of the challenges in the SEND system as it currently stands is that children's additional needs are not being picked up and support is not being put in place early enough. I want to think about how school readiness or any other measures could be used to help to spot those children with additional needs, who had not yet been picked up, so that we can get the support in place earlier. Is there any way of using this framework to identify those additional needs much earlier than we are currently?

Professor Lloyd: You will have to start much earlier. I would go back to the point I made about the two-year check. Of course, some children will be identified at birth. Also, a lot of the issues that are going to challenge them may be transient issues; they do not have to be permanent issues that they take into school—but they may become permanent issues. So the earlier the better. That also means that we need to train our early years workers to be better at identifying behaviour that is not along the continuum of what will help them. That is very much the case with



language—I will leave literacy, and just say language development—and things like that.

- Q14 **Peter Swallow:** It is important to note the statistic that only 10% of children diagnosed with autism will meet that school readiness. Obviously, the number of children at that early age who are going to be diagnosed with autism is going to be vanishingly small compared with the overall number of children who will have autism.

Professor Lloyd: Absolutely, and I have experience of this very close to me: one of my grandchildren was fine in the early years, but he lasted only two weeks in school, and his autism was finally then diagnosed. Yes, there is an awful lot that we need to do, and we need to put in much more support. If choices have to be made, I would say that it would be extremely important in early childhood education and care to gradually introduce income-related fees, and to use some of the available money to work on that, so that we can have a more inclusive system.

Dr Campbell: We can have all the frameworks and everything, but it is about whether people actually have contact with services—that is the key thing. Coram's work has shown, year after year, that there is insufficient provision for children with disabilities. It is not being addressed at all through the roll-out of the funding entitlement, and it is probably being made worse by the focus on working families, so children with disabilities are less likely to be accessing early education and care.

More widely, we also know that we have stripped back services in health and social care, so I think that is the core thing. It is not so much about the frameworks; it is about people not actually having contact and access to GPs, health services, health visitors and early education. They are then not coming into contact with professionals who may have the knowledge to give support and start people on pathways to diagnosis, if that is appropriate.

- Q15 **Peter Swallow:** That leads on nicely to my next question, which is specifically about the balance between getting more family and parent support in place, through Best Start family hubs and other means, and the expansion of childcare and early education entitlements. There is a balance between those two goals of the Government, as well as a balance between the responsibilities of national Government and the responsibilities of local government and other parts of the ecosystem—you quite rightly mentioned health there. Is this all clear enough and adequately supported, or would you say that the balance between those different facets of the support are somewhat out of line at the moment?

Dr Campbell: I would say not so much that it is imbalanced, but they are all somewhat inadequate at the moment. They are all somehow at the bottom end of the seesaw in some physically weird way. We have talked about the inequities in entitlements to early education and care, and we have also touched on child poverty and the massive issues with that at the moment. We know that poverty has consequences for health, growth, physical and cognitive development, maternal mental health, family stress



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and parenting. It then has knock-on impacts in access to services, resources and experiences, as well as the ability to travel and attend the family hub. As a result, it impacts on the home learning environment as a whole, so it all interlinks.

This comes back to the cross-Government point; we need a balance and consciousness of how all this interlinks. If the DWP does not do something in addressing child poverty and making sure that parents are not unfairly sanctioned, and things like that, it will have knock-on impacts that we will then see once children are in statutory education at an older age.

I am not sure whether that quite answered your question. I think all the three strands are important: the home learning environment, early education and care, and the more holistic family support and opportunities for fun and play, or the ability to be picked up if you have disabilities or additional needs. In an ideal world, all of that would be in place and be sufficient.

Q16 Peter Swallow: Ms Hodges, we perhaps do not have enough of all the ingredients, but broadly speaking, is the Government's policy of Best Start family hubs in every local authority area, and funded childcare for working families, at least the right recipe?

Lydia Hodges: In terms of your question about balance, it would be beneficial to take another look, both within those policies and across them. The Government are estimated to be spending £9 billion, I think, on funded childcare, and backing those family hubs in every area, which we absolutely support, with £500 million. There is a big difference there.

Sure Start, at its peak, in today's money, would cost about £2.5 billion. It covered ages nought to five; family hubs cover nought to 19, and up to 25 for young people with a disability. It is a much greater scope and the amounts of money are much smaller.

As others have said, I want to be really specific about how different those early years entitlements are for families. Children with working parents can access a Government-funded entitlement from when they are nine months old, for 30 hours a week, but disadvantaged families have to wait until their children are two at the earliest, and only get 15 hours per week. That means that a child with eligible working parents will get three times as much Government-funded early education as a disadvantaged child by the time they start school.

It is a really big difference in a child's life, and if we were to apply that to any other type of education—to primary or secondary school—and to say that those children had to wait until they were older to start, and could go for only half the time, we would not be very surprised when they did not do very well at GCSEs, for example. Early years is not the same, but the balance in how much of that investment is going to disadvantaged children is not right at the moment.

This also applies across policies; it is about the balance of money, as we said earlier, spent on food for example. On food poverty and food



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insecurity, it is fantastic that the Government have recognised that in the strategy and are giving free breakfast clubs in primary schools and extending free school meals to all children eligible for universal credit. However, that policy is not fit for purpose in early years because of the sector make-up, so it is not addressing that issue in early years where poverty is greatest. In terms of balance, we need to look across the piece again at where that investment is going.

Professor Lloyd: I want to pick up on the important point that Lydia makes about the difference in access. One of the questions that has arisen is: are we on a downward trajectory in terms of access to the 15 hours' entitlement? I fear we may well be. There is the new initiative of school-based nurseries; schools want to deliver the 30 hours as well. It is the 30 hours that are the spanner in the works in accessing the 15 hours.

There is very good research, led by Ivana La Valle working with the Centre for Evidence and Implementation—Lydia was also part of that—that has shown the problems and how local authorities can try to overcome them in creating access to the 15 hours. That is, of course, provision for two-year-olds, which has gone down enormously, but this is a big issue facing us.

When you look at the system for a moment, really from the perspective of education, you say, "Okay, this is an education service whose access is largely determined by parental employment status." Now, I think we have a problem. I know what the education department of the OECD would say— it should all be free. Now, this is something that is going to take time for a lot of OECD member states to achieve, but it is certainly an issue we should address.

Q17 **Jess Asato:** How confident are you that Best Start family hubs will take what worked from the Sure Start programme and provide what families genuinely need?

Professor Lloyd: I would like to be very hopeful that they will. As Lydia has already pointed out, the money currently in the system is nowhere near what the money was at the time. We have to remember that the conditions in which young children grew up, at that time, were very different; things have deteriorated a lot.

There is also a lead-in time before we can get all these additional family hubs up and running with the right mix of family support staff. There is a question about the role of family hubs in relation to the provision of early childhood education and care. I remember that, after a couple of years of the Sure Start initiative, it was suddenly decided that Sure Start centres should have a 50-place nursery on site, so when you visited Sure Start centres you were often visiting building sites.

That whole issue remains quite vague at the moment in terms of the hubs being places to signpost parents and deliver additional services. There is a lot that needs sorting out, but as I say, I am hopeful because there are so many good people out there who are looking at these issues and at how this can be made to work for the largest number of children as possible.



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Dr Campbell: I agree with the hopefulness. The position we are in now is good because we have a lot of data going back, a lot of information and a lot of people still around who were there when early Sure Start was developed and implemented. It is really important not to ignore or lose any of that learning from that period because there are a lot of clear messages.

I do not want to speak on behalf of the experts on this, but people such as Naomi Eisenstadt have a lot of clear messages from that period that should be learnt from. We also have things including the IFS evaluations, which showed the times that Sure Start seemed to work best. All of that should feed into the development of the new hubs.

Q18 **Jess Asato:** We have heard evidence from Triple P that the Department of Health is lagging behind the Department for Education in terms of its preparation for Best Start family hubs. What is your assessment for the effectiveness of cross-Government working in that area?

Lydia Hodges: The strategy made some really helpful references to places where Governments could work across departmental areas, such as the parental leave review. That is always complicated, and we recognise that, because of competing policy areas. It will be essential to have Health onboard, particularly given the constrained circumstances that we have, and that they also have, including the pressures on speech and language services. Family hubs can, with the right support, alleviate a lot of those pressures.

We have seen from studies that having speech and language-themed stay and play sessions can help children who have just a few difficulties to develop out of needing to be on that assessment pathway and can reduce some of those timeframes, so it will definitely be important for them to be part of the conversation, so that we do not charge ahead without them.

Chair: We will suspend the sitting at that natural break. Order.

The Committee observed a two-minute silence.

On resuming—

Chair: We will resume with a question from Darren.

Q19 **Darren Paffey:** Thank you, Chair. Thinking about the quality of childcare settings, what is clear is that the Government want to expand largely by relying on the private sector and the market to provide the majority of places, but we know that there are international examples where rapid expansion has led to a diminishing of quality, which we obviously want to avoid. In your view, how should the Government use the leverage of expanded entitlements to ensure they are driving consistent quality in early years settings? Perhaps we could start with Lydia, please.

Lydia Hodges: There is a real opportunity with the Government being the biggest purchaser of childcare places—estimated to be 80% upwards—to address some of the gaps and some of the areas that they would like to

achieve more in, through conditions attached to that Government-funded entitlement.

It means that there is a change in the sector. Previously, there was much more of a contractual relationship between a parent and a private business. That has to be different now, because the funding is different.

We have an amazing sector, with some really fabulous providers, wonderful settings and dedicated, skilled and experienced people. But there is considerable variation, which is normal in this kind of a market.

There is a section of our sector that is focused on being a profit-making business and our research into the take-up of the disadvantaged two-year-old entitlement in particular, which Eva mentioned earlier, showed that it was those types of settings that were more likely—not exclusively, but more likely—not to act in an inclusive way, to be less connected to their community, and less likely to collaborate with their local authority.

At the moment, local authorities have few levers to manage that, because they rely on that market for sufficiency. I think that is where national policy could step in and create some more levers for local authorities to manage that better and to incentivise those settings that are delivering in the way that makes sense for their local community.

Professor Lloyd: One of the challenges for the strategy now is how to implement all these good intentions without strengthening, for instance, the power of local government. It floats the idea of having much more oversight of entry and exit in the market—to make public funding conditional on meeting certain criteria. For me, the main criterion in relation to quality is the status of the workforce. We still see that, certainly in larger, for-profit market providers, workforce conditions are much less good than they are in the not-for-profit section of the market.

This is of course an extremely hot potato for the Government to grasp—intervening in the market—but huge amounts of public money are going into the system at the moment. Compared with other public services, early years is getting an enormous amount, and this is not unique to England—it is happening in other countries as well. In relation to workforce policies, lots of money goes in this particular area of public services. Workforce is the critical issue. Unless we improve its status, pay and conditions, and unless we have a good-quality workforce plan that comes at the same time as everything else, and not after, we are going to waste a lot of public money.

The strategy notes that there is a risk with private equity-supported large chains in this market. That is a risk. It is still a relatively small percentage of the market, but it is growing fast: it has doubled in size over five years, and it gobbles up small providers. The majority of providers in this market are still small private providers. Not-for-profit providers have declined quite dramatically, including in disadvantaged areas. The strategy mentions wanting to support the impact economy, but if the Department



wants to do that properly—it will need to work with other Departments, particularly the Treasury—it will have to grasp the nettle.

Sarah Tillotson: As others have said, there are significant opportunities with the funding entitlement, as well as risks that it will affect the quality of the provision that children receive. In terms of risks, the rapid expansion is likely to drive the recruitment of unqualified staff—for example, higher numbers of apprentices and those who are completing the experience-based route for qualification. That will potentially undermine quality. The expansion is for the younger age group, and it is particularly concerning that professional development and evidence-informed practice for staff who work with that age group are much less established. We need to really invest in both research and professional development to ensure that quality is at least maintained, if not improved.

Some further unintended consequences are worth mentioning and require monitoring. The funding rates might distort provider behaviour, but potentially in a positive direction to start with. Childminders are suggesting that they are more interested in taking two-year-olds, because the funding rate per pupil is higher than for older pupils. Childminders have a ratio of 1:3 and are consistent care givers, and those two items are associated with higher-quality provision, so it might be helpful that childminders are taking on that younger cohort more readily. However, the distortion might disadvantage two-year-olds when they are ready to take up places, because the places have already been taken up by younger children who are from working families.

Restricting access to the funding to three time points in the year will create administrative and logistical challenges for providers, which might affect quality, particularly with children moving between rooms when they are not developmentally ready. Then there is this change in the key person for children, so there are lots of things to consider and monitor.

Dr Campbell: I will make a couple of additional points that have not been made so far in terms of things to consider and monitor. There are some worrying findings in terms of quality—early findings from early research—that the change in ratio requirements might be having negative effects on settings, with staff being overstretched and firefighting. There are also worrying findings in the recent research by Coram and colleagues that there may be differentiation between different children in the same setting according to their basis of attendance—between children who attend just on the basis of funding for low-income or the universal offer, as opposed to those maybe being put in a different room with higher quality provision, whose parents can pay for extras and cross-subsidise things. That is another one where there is emerging research that we really need to keep an eye on—that kind of in-setting differentiation and the impact of the changes of ratios in stretching staff too far.

Q20 Darren Paffey: My next question is just to Sarah Tillotson. You have stated in evidence that the stronger practice hubs vary in expertise. Do you have any brief thoughts on how we can get all stronger practice hubs brought up to the level of the best ones? What is the best strategy for

achieving that?

Sarah Tillotson: We think the stronger practice programme will play a really central part in the Government's delivery of improving quality. We have provided explicit suggestions to the Government about how to improve and support the current stronger practice hubs and the expansion to have more stronger practice hubs. We can provide that to the Committee if it is useful. To briefly share some of the top headlines on that, we think there needs to be considerable and continued investment in training and support for both the existing stronger practice hubs and the new stronger practice hubs. We know from our research schools network, which is a comparable or similar network for schools, that to build capacity in the system, to have the knowledge and to use evidence to inform your practice, but to then support others to implement that, takes quite a lot of expertise, knowledge and effort, so continued investment in training will be really important for those hubs.

There needs to be a clear framework for scaling the delivery of professional development programmes and the evaluation of that delivery and impact. That is the only way to ensure value for money for the Government—to maximise the potential of that professional development and its impact on pupils and pupils' time. Also, it is important that the hubs themselves are modelling evidence-informed practice. We do not want them developing their own professional development without that evaluation in place and scaling it up with the promise that it would improve children's outcomes, but we do not actually know that it could.

Finally, there needs to be a supportive process for hubs to collaborate on a kind of centralised framework with templates and content to support their implementation. There are a lot of hubs there. It is quite hard to quality-assure all the activity that they are doing, and it is not very efficient for them to be producing very similar content but all in different ways, so there could be some kind of support for the hubs to work together to produce centralised webinars, and that could be built on for local adaption and rolled out.

Q21 Chris Vince: I want to move on to Ofsted. Again, this is a question specifically to Sarah, but if other people want to come in, please do. You state in your written evidence that there is a mismatch between Ofsted finding 98% of settings to be good or outstanding and the current low levels of attainment—I think that was touched on in previous questions. My question is: is the Ofsted framework not fit for purpose? Does the Ofsted inspection framework align with the Government's policy on school readiness as it currently stands? I realise we are running out of time, so I will put the two questions together. Are you content with Ofsted's current assessment of quality in early years settings?

Sarah Tillotson: We feel there is a bit of a mismatch between Ofsted findings that 98% of early years settings are good or outstanding and similar data for schools. Standardised measures of provision quality in cohort studies like SEED found that on, average, provision on those rated skills was adequate. Only 25% of settings, on the more education-focused



quality measures, were good or better. On top of that, the early attainment levels from the early-stage profile and that widening disadvantage gap suggest that, if the majority are good or better, those gaps should not be present. There is something to think about there.

In our response to Ofsted's consultation on proposed changes to its inspection framework, we welcomed the focus on tackling the impact of socioeconomic disadvantage. That has been put more central to the framework. Ofsted's commitments to strengthen the expertise of lead inspectors in early years settings, through better training, to support them to identify elements of high-quality practice, could support that.

The more granular ratings of provision might enable us to have a better understanding of the quality of practice than the previous framework. Ofsted has had a good go at making some changes there. We want to see, as that framework is rolled out and the inspection data comes in, whether there is a better picture of what quality of practice is like.

Dr Campbell: Obviously, we need to acknowledge that there are lots of issues with Ofsted, and we do not necessarily want to take the stats at face value. Leaving that aside and just looking at the stats, the 98% does not stand up once you dig beneath that top line. For example, if we look just at the 5,600 full early year provider inspections that took place most recently, since September 2024, only 91% of them resulted in a good or above judgment. So 9%—that is more than 500—were judged requiring improvement or inadequate.

According to Ofsted stats, there are about 47,000 providers on the early years register, so only about 12% were inspected over that most recent period. What is also important is that, according to Ofsted's reporting, as of March this year, 77% of eligible providers on the register had received a full inspection. So, almost a quarter have not been inspected at all.

I note that the Department for Education's submission to the Committee says that from April 2026 it is going to fund Ofsted to inspect all new early years providers within 18 months of opening. That acknowledges the fact that not everywhere has been inspected. There has been a really big lag for a lot of places. There could be a lot going on that is not being picked up by these current top-line stats.

Chris Vince: That is really useful, thank you.

Q22 Caroline Voaden: I would like to move on to talk about access to childcare and affordability. "Giving every child the best start in life" restates the Government's mission to ensure that a child's background does not determine their future success. You have all voiced concerns that the most disadvantaged children will not benefit sufficiently from the Government's early years policy.

I think that goes back to what Sarah said earlier about the intended goal of the Government's early funded childcare programme. Is it to enable parents to go back to work? Is to get children school ready? Is it to close the disadvantage gap? To start, could you all briefly summarise your main



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concerns about the different access to childcare that we can see across the piece? Could we start with you, Lydia?

Lydia Hodges: My main concern about that is that it is far too skewed to children who are already more likely to do well in life, both in early years and later. It is far too complicated for everybody. We have a real problem with two-year-olds in particular. We have two different entitlements: families who are eligible for both and families eligible for neither. It does not really work for anybody.

I am particularly concerned about the way in which it is communicated. Very often, the 30 hours policy is talked about as addressing disadvantage for children. It is talked about being for all children; it is expressly not for all children. It has the express opposite outcome of addressing disadvantage.

Professor Lloyd: I am also concerned that the balance is lost at the moment. Much more needs to be done to create a system that offers provision that is perhaps not linked entirely to employment. I had the pleasure of working with the Irish Department of Children on a new funding model for their system. They had already, in the context of a truly cross-Government strategy, introduced 20 hours for every parent, irrespective of their employment status, from the time a child reached the age of six months. Neither there nor here do we have a guarantee or a legal right to a place. The Government intend for that to be there, but cannot enforce it at the moment—they cannot make it. At the moment, I can see the perspective of providers in the market. While many of them would like to offer 15 hours, it is more and more difficult to do that, because despite the huge amounts of money going in, it is still not enough money—especially for three and four-year-olds—to make a surplus or a profit.

Q23 **Caroline Voaden:** We are going to move on to talk about the funding in a minute. Sarah, what is your main concern about access?

Sarah Tillotson: If the Government see improving children's outcomes as the most important reason for funded childcare, we need to draw on research that has looked at the impact of attendance and hours on children's outcomes to inform what the policy design should be. The EEF's position is that we do not think there has been sufficient evidence on the impact of this earlier start age, particularly down as far as nine months old, or what the best attendance and attendance pattern is for any children, let alone disadvantaged children. Where there has been high-quality evidence, it has often been extending attendance down by one year and looking at three and four-year-olds attending, instead of when they would have attended at four and five years old. Most of the research is for that older age group.

When extra hours have been looked at, it has been looking at extending from part time—so just mornings—to full time, so mornings and afternoons, which is quite different from the way that this policy has been rolled out. In those cases, it has been positive, but we really do not know



of the impact on outcomes for those younger people. We really encourage the Government to implement, support or fund research that could study this. If funding hours is one of the most expensive early years interventions, then it needs to be properly studied, and policy aligned with that.

Dr Campbell: I echo Lydia's concerns. I also add that it concerns me that the extensions, as we have discussed, are relying very heavily on the private profit-making providers. That is likely to benefit those with more buying power, who are inherently more advantaged, rather than serving children in more disadvantaged positions.

Q24 Caroline Voaden: Thank you. I will quickly follow up with Lydia. In your written evidence, you said—you have just gone over it—that the current patchwork of entitlement is complicated, fragmented, difficult for parents to understand, and difficult for local authorities and childcare providers to navigate. What would be your proposed solution to improve the current fragmented nature of the system? What is your golden bullet idea?

Lydia Hodges: Universal childcare—I think it has to be. It is far too unfair at the moment. I recognise that that is expensive and that we have a financial envelope, but we need to think about where that money is going and what we want to achieve with it. At the moment, I would be very interested in any research that shows, for example, how much money is spent and could potentially be saved through administration of multiple different systems.

We also need to look at the early years as we have it now, much of which is governed by education legislation created for the primary and secondary school age sector, and how fit for purpose that is here. We do not have the same protection for access for children with an EHCP in early years. Technically we do in legislation, but in practice we do not because of the difference in the market. That legislation only applies to maintained settings, which are 17% of the total providers that we have and provide only 22% of places. It really is a postcode lottery for parents. It is the same for children who are looked after, or were previously looked after: their access to a school place is protected for primary and secondary years but not in early years.

With regard to universal childcare, particularly for two-year-olds and up—as Sarah said, we do not really have the evidence base for nine-month-olds—we already have so many two-year-olds covered, how much more would it really be to make that universal and get rid of the complication as a good starting point?

Q25 Chris Vince: Going back in time a little, in terms of provider types how has the childcare landscape evolved over the past decade? You can go further back if you would like, but bear in mind the time. What impact have these changes had on the availability of childcare places? Also, again putting two questions together for the sake of time, do you think that school-based nurseries being opened in the places that were suggested will help to mitigate some of the childcare deserts you have touched upon?



Professor Lloyd: Of course we all know that there was, starting from '97, quite massive development, and interesting choices were made at that time by the Labour Government—for instance, to not extend the provision of school-based early years provision but to promote the market as being quicker to develop and, the argument goes, more innovative. I would dispute that and quote the work of my colleague at UCL, Mariana Mazzucato on the advantages of working closely with Government on innovation and development. But a lot of good things, including best start programmes, were set in place over the years. Then we had quite a long period where really the market has been left to look after itself. That is what markets do, especially when there is a lot of public money involved. It is about the location and how much money can be made on the hours that are not funded by the Government.

What we have then also seen, as in some other countries, notably the United States, is the presence of private equity. That has meant that the stability and sustainability of this growing childcare market has been seriously undermined. I know that the Secretary of State for Education was very critical of that before the election in July, but obviously the realities here are that everybody has to face what is in place. It means that the provision is not where the strategy would want it. As I have already said, the 30 hours offer means I am also concerned about what school-based nurseries can actually offer. Although we are now in a wonderful period of accelerated change, with real attention to the early years, there are still a lot of issues we need to address.

Dr Campbell: On school-based nurseries, so far there is not a massive number being opened. It has relied on schools bidding to open them, so it has not been a very precisely, directly targeted initiative. The information I have seen does not necessarily seem to indicate a direct link between area deprivation and where they are being opened, though I note that the DfE says in its submission that in phase 2 it is going to make that link more explicit and intentional.

Looking back in history at the more targeted openings and initiatives, a good one to explore—if we are allowed silver bullets, although again it would be expensive—would be the option of more local authority-maintained nursery schools being opened in deprived areas. They have tended to be higher quality, with qualified staff, and to serve children from low-income families and with special educational needs and disabilities. I think that putting that on the table would be a good idea.

Q26 **Dr Johnson:** It seems to me that there is a presumption that the state is better than parents in your answers, with the request for universal childcare and more childcare, more children spending more hours away from their families in state-funded and provided childcare, and a move away from private sector childcare to local authorities and state provision. But what about parents? Parents are more likely to be parenting away from their wider extended family than they used to be, perhaps because more of them have gone to university and moved away from home.

When I did my paediatric training, I was taught a lot about when children



should sit, stand, walk, babble, have a pincer grip, hold pens, scribble, draw circles, squares or people, wipe their face, wash their hands or go to the toilet—all the different things that children should do—and a little about how to support children in the transition between those different stages. Would it not be good to give parents more autonomy and more information about what their children should be doing and at what stages, what is normal developmental progress, and how to support through play each stage of that development? That is, give parents the autonomy to help their own children, rather than encouraging the state to continue to do it at ever greater expense and—apparently, it would seem—with less good quality than parents in the past.

Professor Lloyd: Parents, especially on the birth of a child, particularly a first child, are very open to learning about those aspects of development. There are so many things to learn. It is actually an area in which the Early Childhood Centre of the Royal Foundation has done some excellent work of highlighting the importance of the early years. Parents also have to deal with the realities of their lives at the moment, so anything that makes it easier for them to spend time with their children and support them is excellent.

On the whole, when we look at the surveys of parents—we have now had excellent sources of data for a number of years—we see that, certainly by the time children are coming to age two, parents are really looking for opportunities for their children to socialise, if nothing else. That is, being with other people, because being with babies can be a very lonely time.

On the past, we do not really know enough about how much time parents spent with children. We know a bit about fathers spending less time than they do now, do we not, but it is difficult to look back and say, “What was the quality of interaction from a historical perspective?”

Q27 **Dr Johnson:** Sorry, my question was more about the answers that have been given so far—they seemed to suggest, more state, more nursery, more provision, and less time with families for the children. I am wondering where the evidence is to suggest that, with the right support, parents cannot be better than the state in many ways at delivering that childcare and getting their children ready for school.

Dr Campbell: I am certainly not, and nor I think are the other witnesses, necessarily endorsing an explicit mandatory early years phase when all children must go to universal early education. Lydia made the point earlier that this is about choice, and it is about the fact that choice is very constrained at the moment in a lot of different areas for different parents. The more advantaged parents have more choice at the moment, so one of the reasons we are variously leaning towards having, possibly, more of a universal, free-at-the-point-of-contact and simpler system is that it would enable people to make much more of a straightforward and less constrained choice, based on their individual circumstances and their individual preferences, where all those enormous complications and structures that mean certain people do not have the choice are alleviated.



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Chris Vince: I should declare an interest as the father of a one-month-old baby.

Professor Lloyd: Congratulations.

Q28 **Chris Vince:** Thank you—I was having flashbacks to the weekend. Lydia Hodges, you partly answered this in response to the question Caroline asked earlier, but in your evidence, you stated that “there is a clear argument for extending statutory admission duties to private, voluntary and independent sector providers as a condition of receiving Government funding”. You have touched on the issue and what that change might solve, but could you expand on that?

Lydia Hodges: As I mentioned, education legislation protects access for disadvantaged children. Any school named on an education, health and care plan has to take that child in primary or secondary, unless they have a very good reason not to. That is specifically set out in legislation. However, we have an early years sector where the majority of places are provided by private, voluntary and independent providers, and that same duty does not apply to them. We are talking about small numbers of children who have an EHCP in early years; however, in early years it will very much depend on what happens to be in that family’s local area.

The same is true for looked-after children, and they are top of the list in terms of priority for places. In early years, children who are looked after are at a critical point in their lives, particularly if they are moved around a lot. There are sometimes quite long waiting lists for nurseries and childminders. If you did not have the chance to put your name down for a place when you were pregnant, because you were not pregnant—the child you are looking after has come to you under a different system—then you are instantly disadvantaged. Extending statutory admission duties would level the playing field for those children to make sure that they get the place that they need and address that disparity.

Q29 **Peter Swallow:** Ms Tillotson, how can the uplift for the early years pupil premium be more effectively translated into enhanced funding for early years settings?

Sarah Tillotson: There are several reasons why the early years pupil premium is currently underclaimed. It might partly be that the amount and the existing uplift are not sufficient. In any case, it is too early to say if that initial uplift, to £570 per child for the year on average, would support people to claim it more and incentivise those claims. Context has a strong bearing on that—£570 to a childminder is quite a lot of money compared to a large group-based provider that might only have one child due the early years pupil premium. In particular, the burden of the claims mechanism—the admin and time cost to collect that money each term—might also be causing a lower number of claims. Some local authorities have had success in pivoting to an auto-enrolment mechanism for free school meals eligibility. That could also be rolled out for local authorities to support EYPP claims.



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Even when there is a potentially higher claim rate, that does not guarantee that money is spent well. The EEF has been working quite closely with the Government to support and raise awareness of the purpose of the early years pupil premium grant and encourage spend that influences the quality of practice and children's outcomes. We understand the emotive and moral arguments for educators using money to subsidise things like food, trips and toys, and those poverty gaps really need closing, but we think that this money could have a greater long-term impact if invested in professional development, assessment tools and leadership time to monitor the impact of this spend. We would really like to see those changes and are working with Government to see whether we can evaluate the impact of changes in those different ways and whether it could improve quality and outcomes.

- Q30 **Peter Swallow:** That was really clear, thank you. Dr Campbell, your evidence discusses extending free school meals provision in the early years sector. I would love to know why you recommend that. Also, can you touch on the costs involved, how it could be delivered and whether there are any challenges in its deliverability?

Dr Campbell: The reason why we recommend it is just because there is this glaring lack of parity between primary school and early years. As I said before, we know that food poverty is most extreme in the early years, and it is a really crucial developmental stage. It really does not make any sense that, at the moment, there is this push and assumption of children being in early years settings, but there is no parity of food provision.

However, as you say, our research has discovered that there are potentially a lot of delivery challenges. If it were to be extended, it would need to be done properly, and potentially with different models in different areas. For example, not all pre-schools have kitchens or the capacity to have catering staff. I think that it would need to be a well-funded model that allowed flexibility at the local level to do things in a way that worked for the setting, depending on its size and staff.

We have not costed that up fully. Obviously, it is not going to be cheap, particularly if it is going to allow that flexibility, but the starting point we are coming from is that it is something for which there is a really good argument, and we should do it regardless of cost, which I know is easy to say.

- Q31 **Peter Swallow:** Fair enough. It is obviously your role to say such things, and the Government's role to consider them alongside the costs. Professor Lloyd, we talked a bit earlier about how local authorities need to be more proactive in securing sufficient early education and childcare places. I thought it would be helpful to pin down some specific recommendations that you might have on how they can do that, and how they can also promote inclusive practice in settings and still meet their sufficiency duty. In a conversation that I had with my local authority just this week, I was struck to hear that providers do not necessarily even need to tell a local authority when they are setting up, and that obviously creates challenges when a local authority is trying to manage provision across the area.



Professor Lloyd: Yes, I actually mentioned exit and entry to the market earlier. These are some of the key issues, and the strategy does use the word “power”, so it is about how we are going to do that. Of course, one of the things that we have seen over the last 15 to 18 years is the reduction in funding for local government, and the resulting shrinking of early years teams, which might be just a couple of people. It is a huge task, so even if they wanted to be close to supervising what is going on, they do not have the power or personnel—that is very difficult.

When we look further across, outside our borders, we will see that the role of local government is often very important in supporting the local market and enforcing particular regulations that relate to both early years in schools and the market providers. That is where you start from, when you want to see that sufficiency duty being exercised more widely.

Again, as you say, in practice, you have already seen what happens, and that is not good enough. It means that in disadvantaged areas the issue of choice is non-existent for parents, for instance. I know there was a small amendment before last year’s election that the Labour party supported about giving local authorities the power to set up their own provision, if there are problems with provision. It just made me smile because, at the moment, that would be a very tall order for local authorities.

Q32 Caroline Voaden: Dr Campbell has already touched on this, but what evidence do you have of the impact of any changes in staff-child ratios that were introduced in September 2023.

Professor Lloyd: I will talk from personal experience. For the last seven years, I was a trustee of a charitable social enterprise, Acorn Early Years Foundation, which is based in the south midlands; it has 17 nurseries and provides catering for other nurseries—school food, nursery food and so on. When this was broached in ‘23, it was very clear that there was no way that our staff were going to be happy with, shall we say, that extra child, and we made sure that that would not occur across the board. I was chair for the last three years—I stepped down at the end of my term. I was dealing on a weekly basis with all the issues that arise in this very intensive work of education and caring for very young children. We said, “No, we will not implement that.” The other thing we do not implement is the option of not paying for nursery food. The food is free as part of the offer.

Q33 Caroline Voaden: So your belief was that the change in ratios would affect the quality of the care that those children would receive.

Professor Lloyd: Yes, definitely. There might be times when we have other people there to help with lunch or whatever, but in the long sessions when the children are playing and learning, no, it is not the right answer.

Sarah Tillotson: We do not have up-to-date evidence on what people are doing or the impact that it is having, but what we know about smaller-ratio providers having better-quality provision should be held in mind.

Caroline Voaden: The gold standard.

Q34 **Jess Asato:** What is the unique contribution of childminders to the early years landscape, and what should the Government be doing to address the 50% decline in childminders over the last decade?

Lydia Hodges: Childminders are such a valuable part of the sector. This comes to the earlier question from the Committee about how provider types have changed. The number of providers has gone down year on year, but the number of places provided has gone up. That is largely due to the decline in childminders, but they still provide 153,000 places. They can often be the choice for the parents of children who have special educational needs and disabilities or of very young children, because of the smaller, more home-like environment. They are also much more likely to be flexible and to be available outside of Monday to Friday, 9 till 5. That is one thing that our sector has not cracked yet, and a lot of parents work those hours.

Childminders can also provide continuity through to school age. A lot of childminders do not just work in early years; they do before and after-school care. For children, that can be an important relationship. They can sometimes be a good option in rural areas that do not have the concentration of children to open a nursery, as well as in some cities, where space is at a premium or rent and rates are very expensive. They play an important part.

They have suffered particularly from the recent changes. Because of the smaller numbers, they are more impacted by things like changes to the funding rates. Unlike bigger providers, they are not able to take advantage of economies of scale. They are also doing everything themselves. A provider that is part of a big chain can employ somebody with the skills to do finance, admin and communications, and to deal with all the complexities of the funding system, but a childminder is trying to do everything and be everything.

We need a specific workforce strategy that looks at the unique contribution of childminders and at what we need to do not just on recruitment, but on supporting them through registration and up to, for example, the first Ofsted inspection. We should also look at how well the funding models work and whether they need to be changed to account for the different ratios that childminders use. We have different funding models for maintained nurseries that take account of the fact that they have a different structure, need a SENDCO and things like that. There is precedent for there being different models for different provider types, and we should look at that for childminders. If we lose them from one area, early years, we will lose them from the school-based sector as well.

Q35 **Jess Asato:** Thank you. Professor Lloyd, you state in your evidence that pay in the early years workforce was 14% lower in medium to large profit-making childcare groups than in non-profit-making groups. Do we have explanations for that? How much do we know about the variation in pay within profit-making providers?



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Professor Lloyd: That research has been followed up; Antonia Simon at UCL has done further research on why nurseries close. That study in '22 was looking at one sample; *The Guardian*, with Joseph Rowntree Foundation money, has looked at a much bigger sample of large groups and come up with quite stunning figures. I referenced it in my submission, but I cannot produce all the statistics here, so I will have to go back to that.

I would like to move across to something else, if you will allow me. The early years workforce is such an urgent issue, and I am quite surprised that the excellent Employment Rights Bill that has been going through Parliament has not tackled the issue at all. I am trying to find out why. I have asked some questions in my submission—that is probably not the right place to ask questions, but I asked whether it was because there is not a ready workforce strategy to link it to, or a careers structure.

Excellent work has gone on in recent years, but there is still quite a lot of room for paying staff a very low wage, given the enormous amount of debt carried by large providers, and asking parents for huge amounts of money. Parents are less and less willing to understand why they have to pay huge amounts in fees for the hours that are not covered by the Government, even now. We have to remember that if you are really working full time, we are talking about 50, 51 or 52 hours in a nursery for your child.

Q36 **Jess Asato:** In evidence, the Education Policy Institute refers to the turnover of staff in group-based providers being twice as high—16%—as in school-based providers. Is that explained by pay differentials, or are there other factors?

Dr Campbell: There are various reports and pieces of research indicating that pay is key, but it is also other factors—for example, changes to the ratios and worsening working conditions, in combination with children with higher needs, and children needing more support in recent years and post-covid. An interesting report by the Early Education and Childcare Coalition and its collaborators talked about a vicious cycle where skilled and experienced staff leave, and agency and temporary staff are used. That puts more pressure on the permanent staff, and that leads to more staff leaving. There is also, of course, underfunding of other services and agencies, which places more pressure on early years staff to meet the needs of children. The research by the coalition also shows that staff are leaving to work in related roles in other parts of education, social care and health. That suggests a continued interest in the area, and the possibility that people might return if pay and conditions were better.

Q37 **Caroline Voaden:** The Department for Education says, in its written evidence, that it is meeting the challenge of pay in the sector by uplifting funding rates. Dr Campbell and Professor Lloyd, what evidence do you have, if any, of providers passing these uplifts on to staff, as implied by the DfE?



Dr Campbell: I do not have evidence that they are, but Professor Lloyd might. There is a big question here about why we do not have pay scales for the early years sector, as that would better ensure that it is passed on to staff. We have pay scales in other parts of education and in related sectors. We have talked about much of the recent expansion being in the private, profit-making sector with large, private-equity providers. By their nature, they will use some of the funding to feed into profits for shareholders. We have talked about how we need something in place to ensure that the increased public funding is passed on to staff, who are key in serving children.

Professor Lloyd: Thank you for that question. It allows me to make the point that I have no evidence that any extra money is going to increase staff pay beyond the minimum wage, which has been uprated. From everything I have seen in different systems and in the system here, I have come to the conclusion that it is not possible to create enough money for staff pay if you continue to take the money from per capita funding streams that are coming into the setting. These are unreliable, because they go up and down—even between terms. It also does not really recognise that these businesses deserve to be supported in their own right if they are doing a good job, rather than the amount being absolutely linked to bums on seats every term.

I was very lucky that in Ireland I was part of a group that recommended to the Government that they create an independent funding stream for providers with the condition attached that it should be used, among other things, for uprating pay and improving conditions for staff in line with the workforce strategy that was published at the same time as the new funding model. That recommendation was accepted in its entirety by the Irish Government. There are three funding streams there. First, there is a funding stream that is a supply-side funding stream for early education—let's call it that. Secondly, the national childcare scheme subsidises parents for additional hours, or hours for younger children; as I mentioned earlier, children have a right to 20 hours of something from the age of six months to the age of 15. Thirdly, the core funding stream is there for providers, although they have to account for it and there are conditions attached.

Chair: I will bring in Caroline Johnson very briefly.

Q38 **Dr Johnson:** You talked about increasing pay for staff and about reducing the ratios of children to staff. The Government have also added the national insurance rise, which has made things much more expensive. All that puts up the cost of childcare, making it more expensive and harder to deliver. How do you square that circle?

Professor Lloyd: Sorry I did not catch the last few words.

Dr Johnson: You have talked about increasing the pay of people who provide the service, which would put childcare costs up. You have talked about lowering the ratios so there are fewer children per staff member, which would also put the prices up. The Government have also raised



national insurance contributions and lowered the thresholds, which have an effect on the providers and make it even more expensive to deliver childcare. How do you square that circle? You talked about affordable childcare—or even free childcare at one point—but how does that work? Where does the money come from?

Professor Lloyd: It is difficult. This is public money. Delivering this service, if it is to be a good service, will always be very expensive. There has to be a national debate and cross-Government agreement about its value. I think the whole issue should be approached from a value-based position: “Yes, we think this service makes a huge difference to all children”—that is the big one to address, if parents want to use it—“and this is what it’s worth to us.”

Q39 **Darren Paffey:** How can the DfE improve both the coherence and the evidence base of qualifications in the early years sector?

Sarah Tillotson: A highly qualified and skilled workforce, supported by strong leadership, is really important and crucial for the delivery of quality provision. We welcome the Government’s ambition, as part of the “best start in life” strategy, to have an early years teacher in every setting. Previous Government initiatives, such as the graduate leader programme, which EPI has studied, highlighted that those interventions work, both to increase the number of degree-level qualified staff in PVI settings and to see that translated to improvements in children’s outcomes, in both the short and long term. So, we have evidence already of what can be done.

However, there are broader issues than funded access to training that need addressing, to create and raise the level of qualifications in the sector and ensure improvements to quality and outcomes. First, the “best start in life” strategy has a clear progression framework, potentially associated with pay scales, that can enable educators to enter the workforce and progress with on-the-job training to qualified teacher status. There also needs to be harmonisation of those courses and qualifications, to enable educators to work across the early years age range, and in different setting types. Currently, that is not the case and is adding to complication and flight from PVI providers as soon as people are qualified.

We require a national specification of career roles that has a focus on quality. For example, in the school sector we have pedagogical leads among the early years leaders or co-ordinators in schools, but that role is not well replicated in the PVI sector. I think that supports a flatter organisational structure of people who are working in the rooms and potentially at level 3, and the managers who are at level 6, and there is no supportive progression point that helps people to move through.

I can take an example from EEF’s work in partnership with Government in the school sector. We recommend a robust system and process for ensuring course content of qualifications, professional development and training delivery, to ensure it is high quality and grounded in evidence. The work we have done with schools is supporting the delivery of an



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evidence-informed golden thread of expert knowledge and practice, starting with the courses people receive in pre-training, all the way up to qualifications such as NPQs. We would like to see something similar for the early years.

Q40 Darren Paffey: Evidence suggests that the staff in baby rooms are generally less qualified than staff in the rest of the early years sector. Would the package of recommendations you have just outlined deal with qualifications for those working with under two-year-olds? Or are there specific different things you would recommend? Is that already covered?

Sarah Tillotson: All those things would contribute to that, but in addition we think there needs to be significant investment in research for that age group. Currently, EEF's remit starts from two-year-olds upwards, so we can't contribute to the growing need to support evidence generation in that area, and support the scaling up of professional development for that group.

Chair: That brings us to the end of our session. I thank all our witnesses very much for coming to give evidence. It has been an interesting and helpful session for the Committee. If there is anything you feel you were unable to get across in enough detail, please feel free to write to the Committee, which we would welcome.