

Written evidence submitted by the British Association for Early Childhood Education

Call for evidence: Inquiry into Childcare and the Early Years

Early Education is a national charity advocating for high quality early education, especially for the most disadvantaged families, and supporting early years practitioners in developing their practice. We have members from across the early years sector, mainly in the maintained sector but also private, voluntary and independent providers and childminders, local authority early years teams, universities and college departments supporting teacher and practitioner training and research. We have particular expertise in early years pedagogy and children's learning and development.

How affordable and easy to understand is the current provision of childcare in England and what steps, if any, could be taken to improve it, especially in relation to families living within the most deprived areas in England?

The complexity and patchiness of current funding for early childhood education and care (ECEC) mean that it is not affordable for many parents and the system of entitlements is hard to understand. There is least support when children are youngest and provision is most expensive (for children aged 2 and under). Requirements to access that require parents to have up front funds before they can claim back (for deposits and advance payment of fees, or putting money in a Tax Free Childcare account) weight the system towards those who already have more resources.

For families in more deprived areas, access to ECEC is particularly impacted by under-funding. In the 10% most deprived areas, 61% of provision is in schools, compared to only 23% in the 10% least deprived, and even voluntary sector provision is scarcer (5% compared to 13%)¹ demonstrating that not only is it difficult to make a profit in these areas, it is often not even possible to break even. Early years provision in schools has the advantage of being teacher-led and therefore higher quality², but there is a hidden subsidy in order to achieve this because many schools have to subsidise their nursery provision³ as funding rates are insufficient.

To address this, government needs the rates for the funded entitlements to reflect the actual cost, and to provide additional funding for children from low income families. We have addressed the cost of this in [Solutions for an improved early years system](#), although that does not cover the detail of how much funding should be targeted towards disadvantage, what the criteria would be, and how it should be allocated. The current criteria for Early Years Pupil Premium are narrower than the equivalent for schools, cover a smaller proportion of children and provide a lower amount per child. Yet, combating disadvantage earlier is more effective, so we argue that any disadvantage funding for the early years needs to be at least as widely applicable and a similar percentage of the funding allocation to that targeted to addressing disadvantage in schools.

¹ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/cc-vision-for-childcare-oct-22.pdf>

²

https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Quality_inequality_childcare_mathers_29_05_14.pdf

³

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1071812/Frontier_-_SCEYP_2021_Finance_Report.pdf

Whether the current Tax-Free Childcare scheme, and support for childcare from the benefits and tax credit system, is working effectively or whether these subsidies could be better used within other childcare subsidies

In recent years, government spending has shifted towards working parents and away from the benefits system.⁴ Additionally, local authorities which used to use their discretion to provide free full-time places to families in greatest need are no longer able to do so. The system is therefore becoming less responsive to the needs of the most disadvantaged families, and more focused on middle-earners. Support through the benefit system needs to move away from the requirement for parents to pay deposits and fees up front and claim them back via Universal Credit, which creates a barrier for those without access to savings. Similarly, Tax Free Childcare is premised on parents having cash up front to put into their TFC accounts. Government should explore options which allow provision to be free or subsidised at the point of delivery by the provider (with clear and transparent regulation of any additional charges), with parents working out their entitlements via a single portal.

What challenges do early years providers face in terms of workforce, including recruiting, and retaining qualified staff, and the barriers faced by individuals joining the profession? To what extent has the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated workforce challenges?

Recruitment and retention of staff is a long-term issue exacerbated by the current gap between the early years and other sectors such as retail which increasingly provide more attractive pay and conditions. Inadequate funding of the government entitlements means that providers have to minimise their staffing costs, with an increasing use of younger, less well-qualified staff, eg more apprentices.⁵ This can create a cycle of retention issues as less experienced staff are not able to access support from experienced colleagues and may become demoralised and leave the sector.

The pandemic may in some cases have exacerbated the issue, for instance the additional stress and lack of recognition the sector received may have caused some practitioners to exit the sector; the pressure on provider finances may have impacted on pay and conditions. But more significant are the long-running systemic issues: the poor pay and status, the under-funding, the lack of clear career progression opportunities, the failure to recruit more men into the workforce (the sector is effectively only recruiting from half the potential workforce). Staff are attracted to other jobs which offer better pay and conditions and lower workloads and levels of stress, or simply cannot afford to stay in the early years if they cannot make ends meet.

It is worth noting the systemic differences between maintained and non-maintained settings. The latter require more highly qualified staff (including qualified teachers), and, as part of the public sector, offer better pay and conditions. Their retention levels are better⁶ and they have older, more experienced staff. All of these factors improve quality, but at a cost. Yet, even maintained settings are struggling to recruit and retain staff in current conditions and are having to cut staffing costs.

Individuals who have undertaken early years qualifications are clearly being put off by the poor pay and conditions, sometimes before even starting in the sector. We have reports of students who had completed early years courses opting to work in local distribution warehouses instead of in the early years because the pay was higher than if they were to work in an early years setting. If they have been steered towards a “hair or care” training route because they were perceived as low academic

⁴ <https://ifs.org.uk/education-spending/early-years>

⁵ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-provider-survey/2022>

⁶ *ibid*

achievers, as it still too often the case, not because of their suitability to the role, their motivation to join the sector may easily be lost. The sector needs to attract the best candidates with the right skills and attitudes, but this should not mean that it relies on a vocational calling as a substitute for adequate pay, conditions and status.

Whether the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system is meeting the needs of pupils with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND), and the improvements that could be made to better support young children with SEND within early years provisions.

Our members report growing incidence of SEND among the children coming into settings. Some of this appears to be a long-term trend, but it is compounded by the number of children whose needs went undiagnosed or without support as a result of the pandemic. Additionally, the impact of the pandemic on children's development means many children need additional support and time from staff, and that it may be harder to identify those with long-term needs from those with shorter-term developmental delays.

This need to support increasing numbers of children with SEND comes at a time when underfunding, recruitment issues and lack of expertise among the workforce are all making it harder for the ECEC system to meet those needs. We have a high proportion of maintained nursery schools (MNS) in membership. MNS have historically been the place of first choice and last resort for children with SEND due to their expertise and their admissions policies which prioritise children in greatest need. Our MNS report that they are facing increased demand for places for children with SEND and complex needs, including those turned away by private and voluntary sector settings and primary schools which are unable to meet their needs. Unfortunately, the lack of funding for SEND support in many local authorities means that MNS and other settings which take on children with SEND are often having to pay for support out of core budgets. Increasing levels of deficit among MNS make this unsustainable, limiting their ability to support the children with the greatest needs.

MNS offer places not only to children of nursery age with SEND but also those who defer Reception places and those who cannot access a Reception place in a special school or a suitable primary school. Where MNS provide places to statutory school age Reception age children, there is no consistent means for them to access funding, meaning it is a lottery whether the local authority funds the places. Where funding is received it is not on the same level as would be awarded to a primary or special school, despite the fact that MNS are taking these children because no other suitable provision can be found, and where the alternative is for a child to have a reduced timetable at a primary school or no place at all. There is an urgent need for DfE to create a route to allow MNS to offer and be funded for specialist Reception places where this is deemed to be in the best interests of the child.

Pressures on other specialist support services such as Speech and Language Therapy and Educational Psychologists have a further knock-on. Settings are having to support children with SEND who have not been able to access relevant professional services, and the level of expertise within settings to know how to meet children's needs is very variable. The delays accessing specialist services is also causing delays in applications for Education and Health Care Plans (EHCPs). MNS and other early years settings which support children with SEND to go through the process of obtaining an EHCP in many cases receive no additional funding to support the child or recognise the staff time needed to help with the EHCP process. It is clearly in the best interests of the child who needs an EHCP that it should be in place before they start in primary school, and it is in the interest of the primary or special school who will then receive appropriate levels of funding. However, if early years settings are not funded to support the EHCP application process or the needs of the child, we will see

increasing numbers of children who need an EHCP arriving at school without one, and possibly without any experience of being in nursery.

One successful model which addresses this is where local authorities fund assessment centres within an MNS (or other provider). The school/setting receives guaranteed additional funding to provide this so that children in need of an EHCP can be assured of an inclusive nursery environment and the expertise to support an EHCP application. The continuity of funding is vital to retention of specialist, expert staff. Not every child with SEND needs an assessment centre place, but it is an effective means of ensuring a core of suitable places, especially for those with the most complex needs.

Included as an appendix below is a set of recommendations from MNS headteachers about the changes needed to enable them to continue to provide expert support to children with SEND and complex needs. In brief these are:

1. Additional SEND support funding needs to be paid to the provider prior to EHCPs being secured (despite the SENIF and DAF funding, many early years providers receive little or no funding for children with SEND prior to an EHCP being in place)
2. SEND support funding needs to match actual costs (too often the hourly cost of staff is higher than the additional funding provided)
3. More MNS should be funded to be assessment centres
4. MNS and LAs should work to fast-track the EHCP application process
5. MNS should be enabled to offer Reception provision for children with SEND, including for children of statutory school age, funded at the same rate as special schools.
6. There should be a consistent principle of allowing children who have been permitted to defer their reception year (as per DfE guidance) to be funded in nursery for a full year. (These are often children with SEND, even if they do not have an EHCP.)
7. The requirement for MNS to have a QTS SENCO should be recognised in the funding formula. The workload for SENCOs in MNS needs to be recognised – in some cases this is effectively a full-time role, but current funding is insufficient to cover the costs.

To what extent does the early years system adequately prepare young children for their transition into primary education, particularly children from disadvantaged backgrounds?

Unicef define school readiness in terms of “ready children”, “ready schools” and “ready families”.⁷ In reality, children are ready to learn from birth, and the EYFS recognises the role of positive relationships, enabling environments in enabling the unique child to learn and develop. Early years providers who follow the principles of the EYFS, with a strong focus on the Characteristics of Effective Learning, should therefore be giving them a strong start that will enable them to learn and flourish in school.

The early years system can help prepare children and families, but schools also have a vital role in creating good transitions, including in terms of how they work with feeder settings. Home and setting visits by schools have always been an important part of the transition, and these were obviously curtailed or went online during the pandemic, and transition processes are therefore continuing to evolve.

Some aspects of current policy do not promote strong partnerships between schools and feeder providers. For example, the move to judge schools on progress from the Reception Baseline

⁷ <https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/sites/default/files/file/schoolreadinessandtransitionsunicef.pdf>

Assessment to Year 6 means schools have no incentive to partner with settings to raise the level of attainment prior to Reception.

Transitions to school for the most disadvantaged children are helped by the fact that the disadvantaged children are more likely to be in a school-based nursery than their more advantaged peers. For those who are not, the transitions may be more significant, but there is much good practice in the early years sector in supporting children with the transition to primary.

The EYFS includes the Reception year, so children should experience a relatively seamless transition from nursery to reception in terms of pedagogy and curriculum. However, a tendency by Ofsted and DfE to treat the Reception year as though it were primarily a preparation for the National Curriculum is problematic. A Reception year based on the principles of good early years pedagogy is more likely to set children up will to learn in KS1 than a watered-down Year 1 approach.

The extent to which the reduction of Sure Start Children’s Centres has affected children and families, particularly children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the role of Family Hubs.

Early years providers report that children and parents/carers particularly missed out on parenting support and services from children’s centres during the pandemic. Many young children had had little or no time with their peers that they would normally have experienced through stay and play, toddler groups, post-natal groups, etc. Parents and carers were isolated, with restricted opportunities for peer support or access to professional services, including health visitors. This has had noticeable impacts on children’s development and learning.

However, even prior to the pandemic, there was extensive evidence that there was a reduction in the availability of children’s centre services and that this impacted on children and families.⁸

It is too early to tell what impact the Family Hub programme will have, but given that it will initially operate in only half of all local authority areas and that the budget allocated is small compared to the reduction in spend on children’s centres, it seems unlikely that it will be able to replace the services that have been lost.

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⁸ <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/sure-start-childrens-centres-england/>
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childrens-centres-in-england-research-brief-strands-1-to-5>

Appendix: The role of MNS in supporting children with SEND: issues to be addressed

The following paper summaries issues relating to SEND support raised by a group of headteachers of maintained nursery schools (MNS). It includes recommendations for both local authorities and government which could make best use of the expertise of MNS for the benefit of children with SEND, especially those with severe and complex needs.

Background

It is well-documented that children in the early years have long struggled to get their needs assessed and access suitable early education provision. Funding is lacking across the whole SEND system, and children of non-statutory school age have often been lower down the priority list than their older peers, despite the fact that earlier intervention can prevent needs escalating and save costs down the line.

Not all early years settings have the expertise to support children with SEND, especially with complex needs, especially pressures on relevant services and hurdles accessing additional funding. By contrast most MNS have above average proportions of children with SEND and have significant levels of expertise in meeting a wide range of needs, including complex ones. However, they do so without sufficient – or sometimes any – reimbursement of the extra costs involved. After multiple cycles of staff cuts and efficiency savings, with growing deficits, their ability to do this is now seriously compromised.

This paper addresses several changes needed to the current system to allow better and more consistent support for children with SEND (especially those who cannot be supported elsewhere in the education system) to be delivered by MNS, in partnership with local authorities, primary and special schools.

The challenges

The growing incidence of SEND in the age group and the impact of the pandemic are increasing need, while the capacity of the system including specialist services, PVI, primary and special schools is under strain.

As the provider of first choice and last resort for children with SEND and complex needs, MNS are increasingly being asked to take:

1. nursery-age children with SEND whose needs PVI and primary schools are unable to meet.
2. summer born children who are deferring their reception place for reasons linked to SEND
3. children who are of statutory school age, but whose needs cannot be met by local schools, and whose only alternative is a reduced timetable at a primary school or no place at all.

Some local authorities and schools commission MNS to deliver reception provision in the third case, but others struggle to work out how to do so within the regulations. MNS which offer reception provision receive less funding than a primary or special school would do for the same child.

The solutions

MNS are well placed to meet the needs of these children and want to do so. They have a pool of relevant expertise and a principled commitment to never turning away the children who need them most. However, there are barriers within the current system which need to be addressed to provide this group of children with the support they need.

- 8. Funding needs to be in place prior to EHCPs being secured** For too many children who need an EHCP, this will not be finalised until near the end of their time in nursery, meaning that the MNS (or other EY setting) receives little or no additional funding despite the additional staff time needed to support the EHCP application, as well as meeting the child's needs. Point 3 below provides one mechanism to deal with this, but it will not cover all cases, so a wider change to the system is needed.
- 9. SEND support funding needs to match actual costs** Even where SEND funding is provided, too often the hourly cost of staff is higher than the additional hourly rate for the child, even when the support needs to be 1:1.
- 10. More MNS should be funded to be assessment centres** There are multiple successful examples of MNS being funded as assessment centres by their LAs, and this model should be much more widespread. Assessment centres can offer specialisms such as support for autism or communication and language delay, or a wider range of needs which other settings may not be able to cater for. By providing consistent levels of funding, specialist staff can be retained in MNS to ensure children receive the quality of support they need. Assessment centres are an effective means of ensuring children who need EHCPs can secure them prior to moving on to a mainstream primary or specialist provision. Without funded places, MNS are left supporting children with extensive needs without any additional funding (which usually only kicks in after the EHCP is secured). This is increasingly unviable in the current circumstances.
- 11. MNS and LAs should work to fast-track the EHCP application process** A number of LAs are looking at ways to streamline the EHCP application process to recognise the expertise of MNS staff in assessing children's needs and gathering the necessary evidence. This benefits children, frees up specialist staff time and ensures there is funding in place to meet children's needs without driving MNS further into deficit.
- 12. MNS should be enabled to offer Reception provision for children with SEND, including for children of statutory school age, funded at the same rate as special schools.** This is needed to provide flexibility in the system as there is not always sufficient special school provision to meet children's needs. When that is the case, MNS are often the best and sometimes the only provision able to meet these children's needs. The alternatives may be children being offered only a reduced timetable at a primary or no place at all. At present MNS can offer Reception provision on a temporary basis, but DfE has refused requests for successful arrangements of this nature to be made permanent. Instead, the school or local authority may have to commission the MNS to deliver this provision, which requires the approval of the ESFA. This is complex, and even when in place the funding given to MNS is not the same as a primary or special school would receive for equivalent provision, in terms of the base rate and pupil premium. The complexities also include the inspection arrangements when the responsibility for the provision is split across schools. MNS seek to act in the best interest of the child, but the current inadequate funding puts this in jeopardy.
- 13. There should be a consistent principle of allowing children who have been permitted to defer their reception year (as per DfE guidance) to be funded in nursery for a full year.** At present there is inconsistent practice between LAs as to whether they fund the summer term if the child is of statutory school age. There is a tension between the DfE guidance encouraging LAs to allow summer born children to defer entry to Reception when it is in their best interests, and the funding regime which does not make provision for funding them in a nursery after they are of statutory school age. These are often children with SEND, even if they do not have an EHCP.

- 14. The requirement for MNS to have a QTS SENCO should be recognised in the funding formula** The workload for SENCOs in MNS needs to be recognised – in some cases this is effectively a full-time role, but current funding is insufficient to cover the costs.

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