

Written evidence submitted by Bristol City Council

Introduction

Bristol City Council is the local authority for Bristol as is made up of 34 wards, with 70 councillors and is led by the Mayor of Bristol. The city is a centre of economic growth and productivity, with a higher than [national average employment rate](#) of 81.8% compared to 78.5% and a higher than national average gross weekly pay of £623.60 compared to £613.10. This economic growth and productivity, however, is not equally accessed and shared across the city, with [41 areas in the top 10% most deprived in England](#), including 3 in the top 1%. [19.7% of children in Bristol are in low-income families](#) and 28% of children are considered disadvantaged.

The result of this inequality is a lack of equitable access to childcare and early years provision for families experiencing multiple deprivation. This inequity has long-term consequences, with 3 of 5 of the worst performing areas in the country for Higher Education participation being in South Bristol (where there are significant concentrations of deprivation). Bristol City Council is committed to providing accessible and affordable childcare and early years education via its Maintained Nursery Schools and by supporting the sustainability of our diverse range of providers. We have also worked with partners from across the city to develop our [Belonging Strategy](#), which outlines our approach to ensuring children have access to education that is inclusive and values diversity.

Bristol currently has 510 registered providers (including 289 registered childminders), a number which has remained steady since before the pandemic. Bristol's last Childcare Sufficiency Assessment assessed our provision as sufficient.

Childcare Entitlements

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?

Various polling and research underlines the fact that childcare in England is not affordable. [Research from the TUC](#), for instance, highlights that the average full-time nursery bill for a family with a two-year old had risen from £11,300 in 2012 to £14,200 in 2021. The problem of affordability is being exacerbated by [inadequate funding for the 15 and 30 hour Early Years Entitlement](#), the result of which has led to providers having to raise fees and other associated costs, or scale down provision; in Bristol – prior to the surge in inflation throughout 2022 – 75% of providers were considering reducing the number of childcare places – some permanently – due to rising costs and workforce shortages.

The government should take the following action to improve the affordability of – and access to – childcare in England:

- Increase funding for the current Early Years Entitlement offer to ensure that providers can provide the entitlement without making a financial loss.
- Commit to extending the 30 hours Early Years Entitlement to all 3- and 4-year-olds.
- Increase investment in the Maintained Nursery School supplement on top of the recent £10m investment. As you will see from Appendix A, Bristol's Maintained Nurseries are responsible for providing care and support to a higher proportion of children from the city's

most deprived areas (as well as other underrepresented groups) and so their sustainability is vital to achieving equity in education and childcare.

- Urgently publish and consult on its plans to improve the number of childminders working in the sector and deliver a fully funded plan for improving workforce recruitment and retention within the sector overall.
- We have welcomed the DfE's Family Hubs funding but are concerned that the department's expectations and vision for the programme will be undermined by the short-term nature of the funding. Moving forward, the government must move away from a competitive bidding process and commit to rolling out a long-term settlement for Family Hubs across the country.

We welcome the government's adoptions of an amendment that will define childcare as 'national infrastructure' to the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill. This will enable local authorities to plan for and fund physical infrastructure, but it must be met with the right investment to fund affordable places and a sustainable workforce.

Are the current entitlements providing parents/carers with sufficient childcare, and to what extent are childcare costs affecting parents/carers from returning to work full-time?

There are two fundamental issues with the current provision of Early Years Entitlement:

- **It does not extend far enough:** We are particularly concerned that the 30 hours entitlement is inaccessible to many parents and carers who face barriers to accessing employment.
- **It is inadequately funded:** While we welcome some of the adjustments made to the Early Years National Funding Formulae, the overall levels of funding means Bristol has only seen an increase of 9p (per hour, per child) for the 2-year old entitlement for 2022/23 and the 3- and 4-year old entitlement has only risen by 6p (per hour, per child) since 2017/18.

Rising costs of delivery have resulted in a marked increase in providers having to significantly scale back places or close altogether; with up to 20% of providers closing in other local authority areas in the South-West. This is creating a serious placement sufficiency issue and particularly affects provision for children with SEND.

Recent [ONS data](#) from April – June 2021 highlights the stark difference in employment rates for those who are either more likely to take on greater shares of childcare or face greater barriers to accessing childcare provision:

- **Working mothers:** Only 69.3% of mothers aged 25-34 were in work, compared to 89.5% of women with no dependants of the same age and 92.4 of fathers of the same age. In 2019, the figure was 70.8%.
- **Lone parents:** Only 51.8% of lone parents were in full-time work.
- **Larger families:** Only 39.5% of families with three or more children had both parents working full-time, compared to 57.7% of families with only one child.

Recent research has [estimated](#) that if women's participation in work was as high in the UK as a whole as it already is in the south-west of England, it could add £48bn a year to the UK's economy. Aside from being individually excluded from the benefits of work, parents – particularly women, lone parents and parents of larger families – are being restricted from contributing positively to the economy more widely.

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.

Our experience with supporting parents is that the Tax-Free Childcare scheme is often difficult to navigate and contains too strict an eligibility criteria. We are also concerned that the total amount a family can claim via Universal Credit for childcare costs has been frozen since 2005, while prices have risen substantially since then. This of particular concern as a significant proportion of households on Universal Credit are in work. Bristol would support further consultation on wider reforms to simplify the various childcare schemes.

Early years provision

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?

The primary cause of the current workforce crisis is poor pay. The [average hourly wage](#) across the workforce in England in 2020 was £7.42, with research suggesting [45% of the workforce were in receipt of state benefits or tax credits](#). This has been caused by an historic underfunding of Early Years provision and will not improve unless the sector begins to receive above inflation increases in funding. While the rise in the National Living Wage is welcome for employees, without the necessary increase in funding, providers will likely be forced to consider scaling back their provision further.

The workforce crisis has also been created, in part, by barriers to employment and a lack of career progression once in the sector. Our local FE college in Bristol has reported a significant reduction in applications to the new Early Years T-Level because of its over-reliance on assessment by examination. Providers have also reported that the requirement to have Maths and English GCSE for a Level 3 qualification also limits in take. The Early Years workforce must be well equipped, but this must involve a greater focus on functional skills and a clear pathway for progression once employed.

Workforce issues have been developing long before the pandemic, but the various lockdowns served to reinforce financial difficulties through minimal support for the additional operational costs of staying open (as was required) through these periods, and lack of access to the business reliefs that other sectors were provided. Our providers have made it clear that Brexit has been a significant barrier to recruiting suitably qualified staff; Early Years workers should be added to the Home Office Immigration Shortage List to enable providers to recruit from outside the UK more readily.

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.

The current funding shortfalls and workforce shortages are having a disproportionate impact upon children with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND). In some areas of Bristol, the decline in provider capacity has resulted in insufficient placements for children with SEND and children with safeguarding concerns. Even when places are available, provider's capacity to fulfil their obligations under the Early Years Foundation Stage and SEND Code of Practise is compromised by:

- A lack of funding to recruit and retain SENCOs with the qualifications and skills to identify the potential needs of a child,
- A lack of time to work with parents and carers, and other staff to adapt provision to meet the needs of children with SEND.

Strengthening identification of SEND needs in Early Years is essential to improving the longer-term outcomes for children and young people with SEND. The following steps should be prioritised to strengthen early years practise around SEND identification in the EYFS progress check and within settings more broadly:

- Provision of clear statutory guidance of the role of external agency and health partner involvement in assessments.
- An improved qualification and training offer for all EY practitioners with additional evidence-base training for EY SENCos. Specialist training in speech, language and communication should be prioritised.
- Facilitation of better data sharing between education, health and care partners, including information from the EYFS progress check.
- Government must do more to address the national shortage of health visitors.
- Provision of greater clarity over responsibility for follow-up intervention services and support.
- Government must prioritise increasing Early Years funding instead of reducing staffing ratios as this risks further reducing capacity of EYP ability to identify the needs of children in their settings.
- Government should invest in childcare places, do more to promote childcare support to families and simplify the process for applying for child tax credits to increase the number of children attending Early Years placements.

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

It is widely acknowledged by [numerous academic studies](#) as well as [UNICEF](#) and that the first seven years, indeed the [First 1000 Days](#) of a child's life are the most important. Children and families need support for developing strong attachments, connections and early learning for wellbeing and social interactions that enable them to be happy and capable members of society.

The current revised EYFS and the DfE's non-statutory Guidance (Development Matters) do not provide sufficient focus on the need for [strong attachments, belonging](#) and play that all children need in order to be prepared for transition into primary education. There is too much focus on literacy and maths outcomes over personal and social development, communication and language and the importance of physical development and integration of skills. [Research](#) shows that preschool programmes that focus on letters and numbers negatively impact on children's later outcomes at primary age, with particular negative impact on the most disadvantaged children.

[The EPPE longitudinal research study](#) demonstrates that pre-school experience enhances development in children and that an earlier start (under age 3 years) is related to better intellectual development. It also shows that disadvantaged children benefit significantly from good quality pre-school experiences. It also shows that higher qualifications of staff are linked to settings with higher quality scores and the progress that children make. Current workforce pressures are pushing qualified staff to the bare minimum, which will have a detrimental impact on the most disadvantaged children.

The emphasis placed on literacy and maths by DfE and high stakes accountability for phonics and maths by Ofsted make it challenging for many settings to fully embrace [Bristol's Belonging Strategy](#) which provides evidence-informed approaches to supporting children's learning dispositions, outcomes, behaviour and attendance.

We are against any proposals to relax ratios in the sector as this would further entrench the lack of focus on developing positive social, emotional and mental wellbeing.

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.

As [research demonstrates](#), the integration of health, care and support through Sure Start Children’s Centres has had a range of positive impacts for children and families, particularly those from deprived areas. We agree with the [Commission on Young Lives](#) that cuts to the Sure Start programme was a ‘historic mistake’. Bristol is currently remodelling its Sure Start Children’s Centre provision in the face of these cuts, and will have to scale back the number of centres that offer Early Childhood Education and Care. Our centres have been positioned in areas of the city experiencing multiple deprivation and so will impact upon vulnerable families most acutely.

We have welcomed the DfE’s Family Hubs funding but are concerned that the department’s expectations and vision for the programme will be undermined by the short-term nature of the funding. Moving forward, the government must move away from a competitive bidding process and commit to rolling out a long-term settlement for Family Hubs across the country.

Appendix A: Percentage of demographic groups represented in Bristol’s Maintained Nurseries (in academic year 2021/2022) compared to the total 0-18 population:

Demographic group	% Children in Bristol’s Maintained Nurseries (2021/22) ¹	% Bristol’s 0-18 population ²
Children in top 10% most deprived LSOAs in England	40.1%	15% ³
Children eligible for Free School Meals	23.6%	27.9%*
Children receiving SEN support	11.8%	17.9%*
Not ‘White British’	53.6%	28.4% ^{4*}
Black African	13.1%	7.5% ^{5**}
English Not Main Language	27.8%	8.6%**

**This figure represents the proportion of Bristol’s total population*

***This figure represents the proportion of Bristol’s total population in education*

January 2023

¹ Source: [Statistics: childcare and early years - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

² Source: [Statistics: childcare and early years - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#) (unless otherwise stated)

³ Source: [Deprivation \(bristol.gov.uk\)](#)

⁴ Source: [Census 2021 \(bristol.gov.uk\)](#)

⁵ Ibid.