

Request for proposals

Practice review: Early Years Pupil Premium decision making in early childhood education and care settings

Context

At the end of early years education, there is already a wide attainment gap between socio-economically disadvantaged children and their peers. In 2023, the gap measured at the end of Reception year stood at 4.6 months, wider than the pre-pandemic gap of 4.2 months in 2019 ([EPI, 2024](#)).

Evidence indicates that high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) can have positive and long-lasting impacts on children's outcomes, particularly for socio-economically disadvantaged children ([Bonetti & Blanden, 2020](#); [Sylva et al. 2014](#); [Pascal et al. 2020](#)).

In the school system, quasi-experimental evidence has found that following introduction of pupil premium in 2011, relative attainment for pupil premium-eligible pupils improved steadily until 2019 ([Gorard et al. 2021](#)).

Early years pupil premium (EYPP) therefore holds strong promise for narrowing the early attainment gap and improving outcomes for socio-economically disadvantaged children.

However in the first decade since its introduction in 2015, a range of barriers likely limited its effectiveness in meeting the objective to improve attainment for disadvantaged children. Those include: low quantum (max. £388 per child p.a. in 24-5, compared to £1480 in primary school); complex claims and payment systems; limited support for settings on how to spend it well to meet objectives; and no provision of a reporting mechanism.

With no national data collection and a complex ecosystem of ECEC providers, there is little available information on attitudes, behaviours and choices in relation to EYPP in settings in this period. We do know that Early Years Pupil Premium has been substantially underclaimed ([Coram Hemsalls, 2020](#), [Education Policy Institute, 2025](#)). Responses to the EEF's Annual Survey in 2024 indicated that spending did not reflect the best available evidence on approaches to closing the attainment gap (EEF unvalidated data, 2024).

In April 2025 government introduced a 45% uplift to the EYPP to a maximum £570 per child p.a., and [new guidance for local authorities](#). To coincide with this, the EEF published a new online [Guide to the Early Years Pupil Premium](#), the first national guidance to support effective spending choices by settings.

The EEF has hailed the 2025 uplift as a "[positive first step](#)" and is now scoping potential activity to contribute to further development of EYPP policy. This might include increased work mobilising evidence to support practice improvement in settings in relation to EYPP, evidence generation such as policy evaluation.

To help inform this activity, the current practice review sets out to map current behaviours, attitudes and beliefs of leaders in early years settings in relation to the Early Years Pupil Premium. We are also interested in any perceived or observable change which might be associated – or not – with the April 2025 uplift.

Aims of the practice review

This review aims to map current practice in relation to EYPP among leaders across early years setting types, and to explore any reported changes which may be associated with the 2025 uplift.

What we learn will inform how the EEF:

- Designs a range of potential activities in 2025-28. which may include:
 - o Universal and targeted system support driving effective decision making in settings
 - o Policy evaluation of reform to the Early Years Pupil Premium
- Engages with opportunities to influence further policy reform in 2026-7.

As new information in an under-researched area critical to the EEF's mission to break the link between family income and education outcomes, it will also contribute to wider ongoing activity at the EEF including:

- o Building the early years programmes pipeline
- o Content and engagement for ECEC settings and middle tier organisations
- o Development of evidence mobilisation infrastructure for the early years
- o Advice to policymakers on strengthening the early years system

Research questions

Main research question:

What are the behaviours, attitudes and beliefs of decision makers in early years settings in relation to the Early Years Pupil Premium, and how do these compare with reported behaviours, attitudes and beliefs prior to 2025? This may include:

- Behaviours in relation to claiming EYPP
- Behaviours in relation to planning and spending choices
- Beliefs about the purpose of EYPP
- Beliefs and attitudes towards socio-economic disadvantage and approaches to addressing it
- Beliefs and attitudes in relation to research evidence

Secondary research questions aim to support the implementation of future research identified through this practice review. Teams may not be able to answer all secondary research questions and should articulate the scope of their proposed practice review in their proposals.

Full list of potential secondary research questions: *(those we have identified as most important are towards the top of the list)*

A Has there been any perceived change in setting leaders' reported behaviours and associated with the 2025 uplift?

B To what extent are setting leaders aware of and accessing support on EYPP spending (national, regional, local), and what is their response to this? To what extent has this reportedly changed since April 2025?

C What changes, if any, have local authorities made in setting-facing activity in relation to Early Years Pupil Premium in 2025 to date?

For all identified research questions, research teams should consider any differences across the full range of early years setting types (maintained and school-based, private voluntary and independent (PVI) and childminders, and in areas of high disadvantage, and/or areas with a wider than average gap between attainment outcomes for children eligible for FSM and their peers.

Methodological considerations

We are open to proposals that answer the primary and secondary research questions using a variety of methods and are open to suggestions of innovative approaches.

It may be appropriate to adopt a mixed-methods approach, triangulating data from several sources, which may include survey(s), interviews, focus groups, and/or analysis of policy documents. We expect that the research team will develop a study plan prior to searching the evidence base or collecting data.

Please describe any ethical clearance that you will need to obtain if conducting primary research that collects data from participants. Please also clearly specify your legal basis for processing personal data, as well as your legal basis for processing any special category data, according to the GDPR [Art. 6](#) and [Art. 9](#), respectively.

Outputs should include a written report and a presentation of key findings to EEF. The EEF may request some informal interim discussion of early learning during regular catch ups with the research team, at appropriate points and with the agreement of the research team (see proposed timeline, below).

Who should apply?

Research teams with experience of conducting qualitative and/or quantitative research in education.

We are interested in proposals from single research teams or from consortia with complementary expertise and where the consortium can demonstrate that they will work well together to ensure the quality and efficiency of the project. This call for proposals is open; researchers do not need to be part of EEF's panel of evaluators to apply.

We accept applications from legally constituted organisations and not from individuals. The organisation does not have to be based in England. If you are based outside of England, you will need to demonstrate how you will ensure that research outputs are relevant to the English education system.

What does a successful proposal look like?

Teams should submit a proposal, which will:

- Indicate how the research questions are being answered by the design.
- Involve a **strong team** with prior experience of similar research, including research expertise related to the approaches being investigated. Please include CVs of proposed team members, highlighting relevant expertise. Please describe the role each team member will play in the study, and the amount of time that they will give to the study.
- Provide a **detailed description** of the research project. This should include:
 - A detailed description of the practice review methodology.
 - Any available background scoping work that supports your assessment of the identified strategy.
- Provide a clear project management plan for completing the research in achievable timelines, including:
 - An assessment of risks to the completion of the research and how these will be mitigated.
 - Confirmation that members of the proposed team have the capacity and availability to complete the research.
 - A timeline which includes key touchpoints at which the team will brief EEF on emerging themes/findings, as well as a presentation of findings before a final written output.
- Represent **good value for money**. All applications must attach a budget using the attached template with reasonable disaggregation across cost categories such as staff costs for each evaluation team member; other staff costs (e.g., research support); administrative costs; data collection costs; and any other costs (with details). We expect the project to fall outside the scope of VAT.
- Be approximately **2,500 ~ 3,000 words long**, excluding CVs, budget and references.

What criteria will be used to award funding?

The research proposals will be scored under the following criteria each with their respective weighting and using the scoring scale indicated below.

- I) Capability and relevant experience of core project team (35%)
 - The proposed team demonstrates experience conducting research in education, including in the methods proposed for this practice review.
 - The proposed team demonstrates understanding of the evidence/existing research, context and expertise that are relevant for the areas for the practice review.
- II) Methodology and approach (50%)
 - The proposed practice review methodology is well defined.
 - The proposed research design will provide high quality evidence to answer the identified research questions.
 - Key risks to project delivery are identified and appropriate strategies to mitigate these risks are proposed.
 - The proposal describes the research team's approach to research ethics and data protection, including but not limited to GDPR compliance and specifying legal bases for processing personal and special category data.
- III) Value for money (15%)
 - The proposal is clearly costed and demonstrates value for money.

Scoring Criteria	
0	Totally fails to meet the requirement - information not available
1	Meets some of the requirements with limited supporting information
2	Meets some of the requirements with reasonable explanation
3	Fully meets the requirements with detailed explanation and evidence
4	Exceeds the requirements with extensive explanation and evidence

How to apply

Research proposals should be sent to Rachael Emmett, Senior Monitoring and Evaluation Manager, (rachael.emmett@eefoundation.org.uk) by 5pm on 4 August. If you have any questions, please contact Kate Burls, Senior Early Years Policy and System Support Manager (kate.burls@eefoundation.org.uk).

Timeline

Task	Date
Deadline for proposals	5pm, 4 August
Selected applicants notified	8 August

Set up meeting / Work commences	~18 August
Bi-weekly check-ins	TBC e.g. 2, 16, 30 Sept, 14, 28 Oct
Preliminary presentation to EEF team	~15 December
Final report	12 January

References

- Bonetti, S & Blanden, J (2020). Early years workforce qualifications and childrens outcomes. Education Policy Institute <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Early-years-workforce-qualifications-and-childrens-outcomes.pdf> [Accessed 19.07.24]
- Department for Education (2025). Early years pupil premium: guide for local authorities [Early years pupil premium: guide for local authorities - GOV.UK](#) [Accessed 20.06.25]
- Education Endowment Foundation (2025). The EEF Guide to the Early Years Pupil Premium [Early Years Pupil Premium | EEF](#) [Accessed 20.06.25]
- Education Endowment Foundation (2025). Our response to DfE's £2 billion boost to early education [Our response to DfE's £2 billion boost to early education | EEF](#) [Accessed 20.06.25]
- Education Policy Institute (2024). Annual Report <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/annual-report-2024/> [Accessed 19.07.24]
- Education Policy Institute (2025). Who has been registered for free school meals and pupil premium in the National Pupil Database? Implications for research and policy [FSM-report-March-2025 PDF.pdf](#) [Accessed 20.06.24]
- Gorard, S., Siddiqui, N., & See, B. H. (2021). Assessing the impact of Pupil Premium funding on primary school segregation and attainment. *Research Papers in Education*, 37(6), 992–1019. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2021.1907775> [Accessed 19.07.24]
- Hempsalls (2020). Supporting the Local Government Association (LGA) to consider how effectively the Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) was being accessed and used. <https://www.coramhempalls.org.uk/assets/attachments/pages/Hempsall's-LGA-EYPP-effectiveness-FINAL-report-150520.pdf> [Accessed 19.07.24]
- Pascal, C, Bertram, T, Cullinane, C & Holt-White, E. (2020). COVID-19 and Social Mobility Impact Brief #4: Early Years. Sutton Trust. <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Early-Years-Impact-Brief.pdf> [Accessed 19.07.24]
- Sylva, K, Melhuish, E, Sammons, P, Siraj, I & Taggart, B (2014) Students' educational and developmental outcomes at age 16 (EPPSE Project). DfE. <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:eda164e0-5005-41c6-aee5-9d4eadf2c118/files/m98b4c5d765f56c819db0b1f5821a30c4> [Accessed 19.07.24]