

Written evidence by Education Endowment Foundation (EYS0092)

Education Select Committee

Early Years: Improving Support for Children and Families

About the Education Endowment Foundation

1. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) is an independent charity dedicated to breaking the link between family income and educational achievement. Our mission is to support the education sector to transform outcomes for socio-economically disadvantaged children and young people from age 2 to 19. We do so by enabling early years settings, schools, and colleges to focus on delivering high-quality education, based on evidence and what works best in practice.
2. We hold a unique position in the English education system, with three key roles:
 - **We summarise evidence** We synthesise global evidence base to find out what is already known about improving teaching and learning.
 - **We build evidence** We develop, evaluate, and scale up programmes and approaches that aim to boost outcomes for children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.
 - **We put evidence to use** We help policy makers, leaders and educators to use evidence to deliver improved outcomes for children and young people from lower-income families.

Summary

The call for evidence covers wide-ranging areas of inquiry in which the EEF has significant expertise. In this response summarises key sources of relevance to the inquiry's three themes, with a focus on answering questions where our expertise is most relevant. We make recommendations as follows:

1. Increase the supply of well-evidenced professional development programmes
2. Improve local systems to support effective use of the early years pupil premium
3. Accelerate development of the evidence base for quality provision for 0-2s
4. Develop a national assessment pathway for early communication and language
5. Invest in further research related to measuring the quality of early years provision
6. Prioritise evidence mobilisation within the expansion of Stronger Practice Hubs
7. Deliver a career progression framework which is comprehensive and founded on high-quality evidence
8. Reform childcare entitlements for lower-income families to address the access gap

We hope that this submission is useful to the inquiry and would be pleased to offer further information or insights.

Quality: practice improvement

Does early years provision currently provide sufficiently high-quality early education and care?

3. There is robust evidence for the positive impact of early education and care on children's outcomes, especially for socio-economically disadvantaged children (e.g. Bonetti & Blanden, 2020; Crowley et al, 2025). Features of structural quality (including ratios, staff qualifications and physical space) and process quality (including curriculum and pedagogy) predict children's later academic outcomes, with stronger effects for children of parents with lower qualification levels (Sylva et al, 2014, 19). Studies indicate that the highest quality provision is delivered by the maintained sector (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2018).
4. There is a strong relationship between attendance and children's outcomes: SEED found that for the children in the 20% most financially disadvantaged families, each additional hour of formal childcare per week was associated with 4.5% higher likelihood of achieving the expected standard at Key Stage 2 (Crowley et al, 2025).
5. However, at a national level, children's early attainment remains below pre-pandemic levels (DfE, 2025a), and there is a widening disadvantage gap at age 5 (EPI, 2025). Challenges in relation to equity of access are also likely a key driver of low early attainment (see Section 6 below).
6. Activity to improve educator practice can transform children's outcomes, and may have an even greater impact on outcomes for young children in early years settings than for older children in schools. For example, children in early years settings implementing the whole-group Maths Champions programme made an average of 3 months' additional progress in maths, with indicative findings that those in receipt of early years pupil premium made an average of 6 months' additional progress (Robinson-Smith et al, 2024). For comparison, year 7 children in receipt of whole-class delivery of Maths Mastery (designated a promising programme by the EEF) made 1 month's additional progress (Jerrim, 2015). This higher potential impact of improvement activity in the early years may be attributable to factors including children's developmental stage, and may also reflect lower existing levels of process quality in early years settings than in schools.
7. Professional development programmes (packages of well-evidenced approaches and implementation support for settings) therefore represent a key lever for building quality in the early years. Since 2021, the EEF and the Department for Education (DfE) have worked to boost the number of effective early years programmes through initiatives such as the Accelerator Fund (2021-25) and Stronger Practice Hubs (2022-ongoing), in areas including communication and language, early maths and personal, social and emotional development. To date, the EEF has commissioned independent evaluations of 67 early years programmes, and identified positive or promising findings in 8 of these, with 20 still in progress.
8. We welcome the government's commitment to funding increased access by settings to the best-evidenced early years programmes: this is a model for evidence-informed policy making delivering value for money. This includes ongoing funded delivery of the best-evidenced programme in the English education system, the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI-R), and scale up of Maths Champions. We would like to see the government continue to pursue this approach to scaling up successful programmes, and to align this with their approach to programme development through curriculum hubs, whose remit includes Reception year.

9. The EEF views early years pupil premium funding (EYPP) - additional funding paid to settings per child from a lower-income family - as a high-potential enabler for improving outcomes for disadvantaged children, and therefore for all children. EYPP offers targeted income with which settings can fund well-evidenced activity to build quality in response to local need, for example by engaging in a programme and/or delivering targeted support in response to individual need (EEF, 2025a). Pupil premium policy is more mature in the school system than in the early years, and there is evidence of its association with improvement in the relative attainment of socio-economically disadvantaged children at primary school (Gorard et al, 2022). We strongly welcome the government’s commitment to continued reform of EYPP, enacted thus far through uplift to the rate in April 2025 and associated guidance (DfE, 2025b). However continued evidence-based policy reform is required to address a range of barriers including low income received by settings, ineffective local claims and payment systems, and limited access by setting leaders to support with effective spending.
10. The EEF is working closely with the government on several strands of its ‘Best Start in Life’ (BSIL) strategy. We would like to see the government take the following additional actions in this area:

Recommendation 1: Increase the supply of well-evidenced professional development programmes

11. The government should prioritise investment in continued innovation and scale-up of well-evidenced programmes in key areas for children’s early development. This would multiply the value of government system support reforms including the expansion of Stronger Practice Hubs, Early Language and Maths leads, school-nursery partnerships and the uplift to the Early Years Pupil Premium by giving advisers and settings more well-evidenced interventions to point to and choose from.

Recommendation 2: Improve local systems to support effective use of the early years pupil premium

12. The government should be ambitious for early years pupil premium reform, including boosting resource at a local level to improve claims and payment systems and support for setting leaders. There is a critical intersection with the urgent need to redress stark inequity of access by disadvantaged children, for the majority of whom there is no entitlement to education and care before age two (see Recommendation 8 below).

Recommendation 3: Accelerate development of the evidence base for quality provision for 0-2s

13. The government should act quickly to address an evidence gap in relation to approaches and professional development programmes that can improve quality of provision for 0-2 year olds.

Quality: outcomes measures

How useful are the current metrics for assessing outcomes?

14. The current arrangements for assessing early cognitive outcomes have shortcomings which limit decision-makers’ understanding of the national and local picture and their ability to target resources, and make it more difficult to track children’s outcomes and implement research in a cost-effective manner.

Weaknesses in key measures include:

- The Early Language Identification Measure at age 2 is not currently repeatable with other ages.

- The met/not met structure of the EYFSP Good Level of Development (GLD) score obscures nuance in attainment patterns, such as that of a child who has not yet reached GLD but has nevertheless made significant progress from a low starting point. This may risk perversely incentivising schools to target resource towards ‘key marginal’ children at the expense of those working further below GLD.
- The removal of a statutory duty on local authorities in relation to EYFSP moderation could impact its validity and reliability as a measure.

Has cross government working on early years improved?

15. The Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) at age 5 is the unique data collection point in early education. Earlier collection of statutory health service data at age 2 is inconsistent. With DfE funding more two-year-olds’ access to settings, renewed efforts are needed to support integrated checks or data sharing between education and health at this timepoint to enable improved data use, which would better enable settings to respond to early identification of need.
16. Overall, poor data integration across services in the early years present barriers to tracking children’s progress. We welcome the BSIL commitment to a unique child identifier, which has promise for improved data sharing in the early years if guidance is offered to promote effective use. The government should also identify further opportunities to support data and knowledge sharing across sectors at national and local level, and between settings so that they can use data to provide early support for children. Some local areas have worked to integrate service delivery, including examples of effective communication between health visitors and early years settings, with settings’ implementation of targeted and universal interventions for communication and language reducing demand for specialist support (e.g. NESTA, 2025). An update to the cross-government ‘Best start in speech, language and communication’ guidance could be the place to drive forward this work.

Recommendation 4: Develop a national assessment pathway for early communication and language

17. The government should consider extending early language assessment (for example, through further development/use of the ELIM measure) to more age groups, introducing mandatory reporting by services, and delivering guidance on effective cross-service data sharing including use of the unique child identifier.

Quality: accountability and measurement

What role does Ofsted play in the quality of early years provision? Does it have the right focus in early years? What other aspects of early years provision could it consider?

18. There appears to be a mismatch between Ofsted’s findings that 98% early years settings are good or outstanding (DfE, 2025c), standardised measures of provision quality in cohort studies (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2018) and the current low levels of early attainment and widening early disadvantage gap. This should be an important area of focus in implementing new inspection arrangements. Ofsted’s commitment to better match the expertise of lead inspectors with settings may help with this.
19. In our response to Ofsted’s consultation on proposed changes to the early years inspection framework, we welcomed its focus on tackling the impact of socio-economic disadvantage (EEF, 2025b). We also

highlighted some risks in relation to the size of the framework and its potential to divert setting leader capacity away from other quality improvement activity with high-capacity demands, such as effective implementation of a high-quality programme (ibid).

How useful are the current metrics for assessing quality?

20. Early years leaders benefit from a number of useful process quality tools (for example, ECERS, ITERS and SSTEW) which enable effective audit of practice and environment at setting level. However, these are too time-intensive to implement at scale to monitor quality at national level, or to deliver cost-effective research.
21. Exploratory analysis from the SEED cohort study offers promise, highlighting a smaller number of factors related to quality which could predict children's outcomes (Melhuish & Gardiner, 2021). However the current government-funded cohort study 'Children of the 2020s' will not explore features or distribution of setting quality (University College London, 2025).
22. Ofsted's recent framework changes offer more granular assessments of provision (six areas assessed with a five-point scale); in time, research should consider if the framework sufficiently measures quality to predict children's outcomes.

Recommendation 5: Invest in further research related to measuring the quality of early years provision

23. The government should support development of a cost-effective measure of provision quality and further national research identifying features of and tracking quality in early years settings, including future cohort studies.

Quality: system support

What role will the increased number of Stronger Practice Hubs play? Who else will be responsible for rolling out best practice?

24. The expanded Stronger Practice Hubs (SPH) programme is central to the delivery of BSIL commitments on improving quality. The cohering role of the hubs for imminent new BSIL system support structures (including early language and maths leads, post-inspection support for settings, and school-nursery partnerships) further increases the imperative for hub activity to be founded in the best evidence for effective practice.
25. From the EEF's current involvement with SPHs, we are aware of variation across and between hubs in terms of the depth and level of expertise around evidence-informed practice and evidence-informed change.
26. The Research Schools Network (a collaboration of 33 schools across England, supported by the EEF) is proving successful in driving improvement in the school sector. This indicates the potential for structures mobilising evidence through regionally embedded peer-to-peer leadership to deliver improved outcomes for children in other sectors (Gu et al, 2021). While the relative complexity of the early years sector

presents challenges, this only increases the need for a network to support coherence and improvement. The Research School Network is well established and there has been considerable and continuing investment in training, support and processes to help build and share expertise. In relation to SPHs, then, the government should consider how to balance responding to pressures for urgent delivery with efforts to embed quality.

Recommendation 6: Prioritise evidence mobilisation within the expansion of Stronger Practice Hubs

27. In our view, this is a pivotal moment for the government to further develop the SPH programme as key to driving quality improvement. As the hubs programme grows, it is essential that there is effective support – and appropriate evaluation – to ensure the quality of the advice and activity that hubs provide and signpost settings towards.

Has cross government working on early years improved?

28. Some areas of early years policy development continue to present alignment challenges. For example, it appears that there is variation within government around whether Reception year policy development is led by early years or schools-facing teams. The design of new regional support for settings and schools (for example, through new early curriculum leads and the RISE programme for schools) should prioritise the delivery of a coherent and coordinated offer through architecture including Stronger Practice Hubs and Curriculum Hubs. The BSIL school-nursery partnerships initiative holds promise in this area.

29. Other BSIL initiatives (for example, the expansion of Stronger Practice Hubs, curriculum leads, and school-nursery partnerships) have promise, and their success will hinge on harnessing sufficient capacity, expertise and motivation to enable system join-up locally between the offers of education, health and local authorities and between different early years providers.

Workforce capacity and sustainability

What is the current position with recruitment and retention in the early years workforce? Is it on a positive or negative trajectory?

30. The government's ability to deliver on its BSIL objectives relies heavily on the capacity and capability of the early years workforce. Of 368,100 early years staff nationally, the majority (75%) are in group-based providers, with only 16% in school-based providers and 8% childminders (DfE, 2024a).

31. There is evidence that the early years sector is unable to recruit at the rate at which existing workers are leaving. In 2024, private group-based providers had the highest turnover rate at 18%, and school-based providers the lowest at 8% (Haux et al., 2022; Hardy et al., 2023). High turnover is driven by factors including low wages, lack of professional development and career progression opportunities, long hours, and competing pressures on the majority female workforce including family responsibilities (Flemons et al, 2025).

32. There is a link between the retention of staff and their qualification level (Haux et al., 2022; Hardy et al., 2023). The introduction of the experienced-based route in 2025 is likely to have exacerbated growth in the unqualified workforce (Pascal et al, 2020). Lower-qualified staff have a high turnover rate and are overrepresented among those leaving the sector, while there is lower turnover and a lower leaver rate for higher-qualified staff (Haux et al., 2022; Hardy et al., 2023).
33. Early years staff are more likely to stay with an employer offering high quality professional support. However, a 2020 report found that early years educators do not tend to consider settings' professional development offers adequate (Social Mobility Commission, 2020).

Is there the right balance of qualification and training levels for the early years workforce to provide high-quality care?

34. A highly qualified and skilled workforce, supported by strong leadership, is crucial to the delivery of quality provision (Pascal, et al 2020). The presence of a degree-qualified member of staff within PVI settings has been found to be associated with improved outcomes for children in both the short and long term (Bonetti and Blanden, 2020). 42% of paid staff in school-based settings hold a degree or equivalent; only 11% of staff in group-based providers and childminders are qualified at this level (DfE, 2024).
35. Courses may confer an Early Childhood Studies degree, Qualified Teacher Status (in relation to provision for 3-8 year olds in the maintained sector) or Early Years Teacher Status (0-5s in the non-maintained sector). Degree courses are reported to be widely variable in content and quality, and take up of the EYTS qualification is relatively low (Pascal et al, 2020).
36. In 2021, the DfE launched a National Professional Qualification in Early Years Leadership (NPQEYL). The EEF quality-assured the use of evidence in the DfE's content framework and providers' training materials. There have been challenges securing sufficient demand across the sector for this qualification, indicating that there is more to do to establish a clear pathway of professional development and to support early educators' capacity to engage in it, to mirror the training progression available to teachers in the school sector.
37. In the school sector, the EEF's role as evidence guardian in teacher professional development reform has delivered an evidence-informed 'golden thread' of expert knowledge and practice running from pre-service training to the highest-level leadership qualifications. In contrast, DfE content frameworks for early years qualifications across levels have not been developed with the same foundation in quality-assured evidence, and curriculum criteria for qualifications from Level 2 and 3 to degree level and leadership qualifications such as the NPQEYL are not connected.
38. Activity delivered through Stronger Practice Hubs has surfaced a gap in support for educators working with under 2s and childminders, particularly those not registered with an agency or where there is limited local authority outreach. The government could play an increased role in systematising and incentivising the provision of support for educators working with under 2s and childminders to ensure they can access networks and high-quality professional development.

Recommendation 7: Deliver a career progression framework which is comprehensive and founded on high-quality evidence

39. We strongly support the government’s ambition to increase the number of more highly qualified staff in early years settings and in disadvantaged areas, to develop an evidence-informed ‘golden thread’ career progression framework, and to establish an early years workforce register, as set out in the BSIL strategy. Implemented well, this initiative has transformative potential for quality development and workforce retention. Key components in of a high quality ‘golden thread’ progression framework should include:
- Robust systems and process to ensure that training is high-quality and grounded in evidence, including expert drafting of the overall framework, and quality assurance of the framework and of content and delivery created by training providers. In the early years this should include all routes to qualification, both pre-service and in-service, including apprenticeships.
 - National specification of career roles which have a focus on quality. This might include, for example, a clearly defined role for a ‘pedagogical lead’ in each setting, equivalent to schools-based Early Years Leads/Coordinators, to support colleagues with quality improvements and pay progression opportunities.

Access and affordability

Why and where are geographical gaps in childcare provision (“childcare deserts”) forming and what can be done to reverse this?

40. Analysis from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) of the distribution of Ofsted-registered provision reveals stark geographical disparity by neighbourhood (ONS, 2024). There is variation in access to childcare within a reasonable travel time by local authority, with deprived and rural areas the worst off: the most deprived areas offer 32 per cent fewer places per child than the national average (Pollard et al, 2023; Reed & O'Halloran, 2024). It is possible that the declining availability of provision in more deprived areas is in part driven by resourcing pressures experienced by for-profit childcare providers, for whom a business model is incentivised which can capitalise on the ability of more affluent parents to generate income through top-up payments (for example for out-of-term-time hours and/or consumables).

Is affordability of and access to provision more difficult for certain groups of parents or children? What should be done to address this? How can early years settings become more consistently inclusive?

41. The existing early years system in England provides less time in early education and care to the children from low-income families – the group who stand to benefit the most (Reed & O'Halloran, 2024). Among the poorest fifth of parents with young children, only a third (36 per cent) use formal childcare, compared to double that (73 per cent) in the highest earning households.
42. It is likely that the expansion of funded childcare for working parents will have negative consequences for children from lower-income families. Only 20% of families in the bottom third of the earnings distribution qualify for the entitlement of 30 hours’ funded childcare a week from age 9 months (Sutton Trust, 2021; IFS, 2023). Children from relatively more affluent families are, therefore, entitled to twice as much education and care, and from a younger age, than those from families receiving additional support (FRAS) (who can claim up to 15 hours a week from age 2).

43. This inequality is further exacerbated by the impact of this policy on availability of places in settings. More affluent children attending for more hours, occupying more places. Furthermore, because working parent entitlement starts at 9 months, by the time parents with the FRAS entitlement seek a place at age 2 fewer places remain available to them. There is also evidence that families face barriers to take-up of the FRAS entitlement, including difficulties with claiming and accessing funded hours (La Valle et al., 2024).
44. We welcome the BSIL commitment to increase take up of the FRAS entitlement. However, in light of the system level barriers outlined above, we urge the government to immediately review the age at which FRAS entitlements are introduced, as well as the number of hours offered.

Recommendation 8: Reform childcare entitlements for lower-income families to address the access gap

45. Improving disadvantaged children’s access to, and hours spent in, high quality education and childcare should be among the highest priorities for this government. The scope of any review and reform of entitlement arrangements should extend across all means-tested and universal entitlements.

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