DfE Early Years Workforce Strategy

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Summary
This briefing is on the DfE's Early Years Workforce Strategy (March 2017) which sets out plans to support the early years sector by removing barriers to attracting, retaining and developing the early years workforce.

The briefing will be interest to local authority officers and members with responsibility for early years provision as well as practitioners across the early years sector including training providers and voluntary organisations. There are specific issues around recruitment, retention and continued professional development (CPD) of the sector's workforce.

Overview
The strategy has been developed in the knowledge that a child's experiences between birth and age five will have a major impact on their future life chances: these experiences are the combination of ‘good parenting and high quality learning that gives children a broad range of knowledge, skills and understanding ... for good progress through school and life’.

The quality of early years provision in England is improving with 91% of settings rated by Ofsted as good or outstanding in 2016, compared to 74% in 2012. Also in 2016, 77% of group based staff held at least a level 3 qualification relevant to childcare and 29% at least a level 6 (degree level). Evidence shows that the quality of staff is particularly important for supporting the development of disadvantaged children, with the gap between their development and those of their more advantaged peers narrowing from 19% in 2013-14 to 17.3% in 2015-16. Research indicates that settings that employ more high-quality staff are more likely to attract a good or outstanding rating from Ofsted.

The purpose of the strategy is to support the delivery of good quality early years provision for all children from birth to five years. The Government aims to support early years providers to deliver free entitlement places, including delivering the 2015 manifesto commitment to provide 30 hours of childcare for eligible working parents from September 2017.

This early years workforce strategy is also intended to build on the reforms introduced through More Great Childcare published in 2013, that contained the Coalition Government's approach to raising the quality of early years provision and a response to the Nutbrown review of qualifications. Since 2013, the Government has developed national Early Years Educator (EYE) qualification criteria to ensure that level 3 qualifications prepare trainees effectively for a level 3 role, and introduced early years initial teacher training. In April 2015, the Early Years Pupil Premium was introduced so that providers can use it to ensure that staff can effectively support the development of disadvantaged children.
The DfE has worked with stakeholders to identify the challenges in attracting, retaining and developing good quality staff that they think the Government could help to overcome. The strategy is informed by engagement with front line staff, employers, training providers and membership organisations, as well as a consultation on literacy and numeracy qualifications for level 3 Early Years Educator (EYE) staff, that attracted over 4,000 responses. Following publication of the strategy, a series of events for employers and stakeholders will take place to discuss the strategy and next steps towards implementation.

**Briefing in full**

**Attracting staff to join the sector**

In the run up to the delivery of 30-hours childcare offer, the DfE priority is to ensure that the Government is supporting the sector to recruit those dedicated to working with young children and their development and care. The early years strategy, dealing with attracting individuals to take up a career in the sector, focuses on following five areas:

**Qualification requirements at level 2 and 3**

Staff who hold a level 3 Early Years Educator (EYE) qualification must have achieved GCSE grade C or above in English and mathematics to count in level 3 staff : child ratios, and this requirement, introduced by the Coalition Government in September 2014, was not applied retrospectively. It was signalled that from 2016, GCSEs would be required on entry to training. The GCSE requirement was introduced following the Nutbrown report, *Foundations for Quality* (See Related Briefings), that highlighted the importance of early years staff having the appropriate numeracy and literacy knowledge and skills, to help them support the early learning of young children.

In November 2016, the DfE carried out a consultation on the kind of knowledge, skills and qualifications in English and mathematics that are required to perform effectively in a level 3 role, and received 4,072 responses. The findings suggested that the sector welcomed the ambition of the GCSE requirement for the transferable skills acquired and for career progression, but that there were concerns about the impact of the requirement on the recruitment of level 2 and 3 staff. These concerns are supported by entry data for people starting a level 3 childcare apprenticeship that indicates that there has been a decline of approximately 40% since the requirement was introduced. However, it is unlikely that the issues are totally related to qualification requirements.

The strategy identifies barriers to recruiting both level 3 and level 2 staff. Employers report that they are experiencing difficulties recruiting level 3 staff because there are too few candidates with GCSEs, and because the requirement was not applied retrospectively, employers can be reliant on newly qualified staff each academic year to fill roles. The strategy does conclude, however, that it is essential for staff to hold an English and mathematics qualification as well as a childcare qualification, because it is 'vital that childcare qualifications provide staff with an understanding of child development, including how children acquire language and become numerate ... (and) the appropriate level of ability and confidence in their skills to communicate with a range of audiences such as parents, health workers...and other professionals'. On level 2, employers report that recruiting and retaining staff has become more challenging because the GCSE requirement is discouraging people from entering the sector and from progressing within it. An additional message from the consultation was that the content of level 2 qualifications does not always give
trainees the knowledge and skills that they need, even though there are many available qualifications.

**Key actions are to:**

- broaden the current English and mathematics requirement for level 3 EYE, including for apprenticeships to level 2 qualifications, including Functional Skills. The EYE will be amended with effect from 3 April 2017, to enable staff with an EYE qualification and level 2 English and mathematics qualifications to count in the level 3 staff : child ratios. The change will affect anyone who holds an EYE qualification, began studying for one since September 2014 or takes an EYE up in the future. Employers who wish to continue to apply the GCSE requirement can continue to do so;
- continue to require English and mathematics qualifications on entry to employment, aligning childcare English and mathematics requirements with other apprenticeship routes and increase their appeal;
- work with the sector and awarding organisations to develop criteria for the content of level 2 childcare qualifications. The criteria will support level 2 workers in gaining the knowledge and skills they need to progress towards level 3 study and with a new level 2 apprenticeship standard in mind, and enable employers to recognise suitable training and qualifications more easily. The new qualifications are expected to be available from September 2019.

**Specialist graduates**

Early years teachers meet the same requirements as trainee primary school teachers and successful trainees are awarded Early Year Teacher Status (EYTS) once they have shown that they meet the Teachers' Standards (Early Years). To date, 16,000 specialist graduates in the EYFS for 1-5 year olds have been trained. Settings that employ an early years teacher can operate a 1:13 staff: child ratio for three- and four-year-olds, in recognition of the additional training and expertise these graduates have in leading the learning and development of young children. To encourage the best graduates into the early years workforce, bursaries are provided for eligible trainees of early education.

**Research evidence** suggests that the quality of early education and care for pre-school children is enhanced when practice is led by specially trained graduates. Settings which gained a graduate leader with EYPS (the predecessor to Early Years Teacher Status) made significant improvements in quality for pre-school children compared with settings which did not. However, though many employers recognise the value that specialist graduates bring to their settings, some find it difficult to attract and/or retain specialist graduates and would like more opportunities to develop staff already in their workforce to become specialists. Other barriers that need addressing are that early years teachers are currently restricted to maintained settings as regulations do not allow them to have a leading role in nurseries or reception classes and there is a shortage of specialist graduates in disadvantaged areas. Nuffield Foundation research (2014) looked at provision for disadvantaged three- and four-year-olds, and found that where settings employ trained graduates, the quality gap between settings in disadvantaged and more affluent areas is narrower.

**Key actions are to:**

- consult on amending regulations to allow those with EYTS and its predecessor EYPS, to lead nursery and reception classes in maintained schools. This is to ensure that the
specialist training and status of early years teachers are recognised in all types of early years settings;
• review the early years ITT routes in 2017 to maximise the impact of the programme;
• conduct a feasibility study by March 2018 into creating a programme that specifically seeks to develop the graduate workforce in disadvantaged areas. The DfE will engage with the sector in exploring ways to target support where it is most needed;
• consider how wider work on strengthening QTS could offer positive opportunities for raising the status and parity of early years teachers.

Careers advice
The strategy aims to ensure that early years is a career of choice, with careers advice reflecting the diversity of roles available, providing information to students and career changers to help them make informed decisions about routes into the sector. It is intended that the breadth of opportunities should be available for those working directly with children as an EYE or pedagogical leader, or those managing and leading an early years setting, and child minders, who are self-employed and working from their own homes.

Schools, sixth forms and colleges all have a statutory requirement to provide independent careers guidance to twelve to eighteen-year olds, universities provide careers advice and adults can access it though Jobcentres and the National Careers Service (NCS). Government provides a range of support to help schools and other education institutions provide good quality careers advice, and works with the NCS to provide free, up to date impartial information, advice and guidance. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) helps people to move from benefits into work and DWP Jobcentre Plus Work Coaches support claimants to identify work opportunities available to them.

Ofsted inspection of careers advice provision as part of school inspections has reported that many schools could improve the support that they give to students by proactively liaising with local employers. Combined with information and advice, this would help young people to make choices about their futures.

The main barrier that needs addressing in this area is the fact that the early years sector does not have a strong reputation for offering good career progression or varied career opportunities. Currently, most advice focuses on those roles related to the statutory qualification requirements in the EYFS such as the practitioner role at level 2 and 3, early years teachers and setting managers, and advice does not tend to cover wide opportunities that early years staff may consider as part of their career path. The strategy document stresses that it is important that young people and adults have access to information and advice about the full range of possibilities in the sector, and that early years employers influence the provision of careers information and advice in their local area for young people and career changers to explore.

Key actions are to:

• continue to work directly with careers organisations to encourage more volunteers from the sector to work with schools and colleges to promote early years careers;
• work with the Education and Employers Charity to promote opportunities in the early years sector through a series of events bringing together employers, those working in the sector and schools and colleges;
ensure that the information and advice provided through the National Careers Service reflects a wide breadth of roles across the sector, including careers pathways developed in partnership with early years employers;

ensure that the DWP promotes childcare as an employment option via their Jobcentre Plus Work Coaches, and as a self-employment opportunity for people claiming Universal Credit or an existing benefit;

work with the National Apprenticeship Service to raise awareness of early years apprenticeships, including funding and recruitment support systems, among early years employers, career organisations and schools.

Quality of further education training

The strategy is keen to promote the idea that, 'those who deliver training to staff and new entrants to the sector...inspire their students and provide a high quality learning experience'. Further education tutors who deliver early years training and apprenticeships play a critical role in preparing new entrants and existing staff to bring high quality early years provision to children and families. The Education Training Foundation (ETF), owned by the FE and training sector since 2013, has a role to improve the quality of FE and training in England and support workforce development. Ofsted evidence from August 2016 shows that inspection outcomes for general FE colleges were 71% judged good or outstanding, a decline from 77% in 2015. There was no specific data on the quality of early years teaching available, but stakeholder feedback on the strategy revealed concerns about the lack of knowledge and recent experience of the childcare sector among tutors.

The main barrier to improvement here that needs tackling according to the strategy, is that the quality of training is not consistent, resulting in some staff being unable to perform the role that they are employed to deliver.

Key actions to deliver are to:

- conduct a training needs analysis for early years tutors and trial a Professional Exchange for this part of the FE workforce to enable tutors to share challenges and effective practice;
- work with early years tutors to design and implement support from September 2019, that meets the development needs in relation to keeping their practice relevant and effective.

Gender diversity

The strategy commends the need for a diverse early years workforce which better reflects wider society and helps to enhance young children's experiences. Male practitioners are seen as positive role models for boys, particularly if their own father is absent. However, evidence shows that from 2008-2013, the proportion of male staff in the workforce has remained at 2% (Provider Survey 2013). Meanwhile a Pre-school Learning Alliance led survey in 2012 found that 98% of parents wanted men to be involved in childcare. The perspective that childcare is a female occupation is the key barrier to the recruitment and retention of men in the early years sector.

Key actions to deliver are to:

- set up a task and finish group of early years stakeholders to consider gender diversity in the sector in more depth. The group will report by the end of 2017 on the factors influencing the number of men in childcare and possible solutions. The group will work with the DfE, sector stakeholders and existing networks for men working in childcare.
review data collections with the aim of improving understanding of overall diversity in the early years workforce, across all groups.

Retaining and developing staff
The DfE has received a strong message from the sector that difficulties of retaining staff have a big impact on settings, and the actions outlined in the strategy seek to identify ways to address these issues. This part of the strategy focuses on four areas as set out below.

1. Development of career pathways
The aim of the early years strategy is to further support the workforce to develop both professionally and personally, and want staff to understand how to achieve their career goals. Wide variation in staffing structures makes the objective of developing a single career path for staff in the sector challenging, yet it provides a helpful planning tool in order to explore the range of job roles and opportunities on offer.

Stakeholders have given evidence to the DfE that there is confusion and a lack of knowledge about training pathways related to the sector, particularly around levels 4 and 5, and that there is a lack of understanding outside the sector, about the level of qualification needed. Since the publication of the Post-16 Skills Plan and The Sainsbury Review of technical education in July 2016, the DfE has been working to map occupations within the early years sector, so that career pathways are clear to employers and employees. These reforms are seen as marking a fundamental shift towards a simplified, high status system with a common framework of 15 technical routes, encompassing all employment and college-based activity. Each route will be underpinned by occupational standards, which will set out the knowledge, skills and behaviour required for occupational competency. The Government's role is characterised as facilitator within the process, working with the sector to support the development of new qualifications and apprenticeships.

Key actions to deliver are to:

- as part of the implementation of the Skills Plan, to establish a panel of professionals, including employers from within the early years sector, to advise on the developments of the childcare and early years occupational route.

2. Continuous professional development (CPD)
The strategy stresses the importance of CPD for enhancing practice, acquiring new skills and keeping up to date with requirements and approaches. Evidence from the study of early education and development (SEED) reveals that it is the high-quality settings that prioritise on-going CPD to develop professional practice and to support staff retention.

Through the EYFS, providers are required to support staff to undertake appropriated training and professional development opportunities to ensure they offer quality learning and development experiences for young children. However, some smaller providers struggle to afford good quality CPD for staff, as well as self-employed child minders. The Nutbrown report stated that 72% of respondents to the inquiry identified cost of both training and for cover while staff are away, as the main barrier to accessing CPD. A further barrier identified in this strategy, is that many local authorities have stopped offering free CPD to early years setting, either reducing their offer to cover mandatory training only or retaining a wider range of training for which they charge.
The SEED report supports the Nutbrown recommendation for a ‘blended approach’ to training, including work-based learning and support, mentoring and visits to other settings and suggests solutions to the lack of free or low cost CPD available locally, such as internal training and development activity and learning through experience and observing other colleagues.

Key actions to deliver are to:

- develop, through a voluntary and community sector grant, an online portal that sets out career paths, brings effective online CPD together in one place, and provides online training modules;
- provide training through voluntary and community sector grants on SEND, speech and language development and effective business management.

3. Supporting children with SEND

The key strategy objective in this area is to ensure that all early years staff feel confident that they can support a child with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) to access and enjoy their early years setting. All early years providers in the maintained, private, voluntary and independent sectors that are funded by the local authority, must have regard to the SEN Code of Practice. Maintained nursery schools must identify a member of staff to act as SEN coordinator, and other providers in group provision are expected to identify a SENCO. Many organisations provide training for early years staff to help them offer tailored support to all children and meet the needs of children with more specialist needs. The Government recognises that providing good quality provision for children with SEND can attract higher costs, so that through the Early Years National Funding Formula in April 2017, a new targeted early years Disability Access Fund of £12.5 million will be introduced.

Nevertheless, evidence shows that in 2016, 72% of children with no identified SEN achieved expected levels of development in all five EYFS areas of learning compared to 25% who were accessing SEN support and just 5% of those with Education, Health and Care plans in place. (Early years foundation profile 2016 by pupil characteristics) The key barrier that the strategy identifies, is that the parents of children with SEND can experience difficulty in accessing a suitable childcare place for their child. While there are many skilled practitioners in the sector working with children with SEND, the priority is to ensure that all staff have the knowledge and skills to meet the needs of all children in their care and support their development and learning.

Key actions to deliver are to:

- fund a range of training and development opportunities through Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) grants including the development of training and online resources;
- work with organisations specialising in SEND to develop a qualification for early years staff who want to specialise in SEND by 2018, doing so in the context of the implementation of the Sainsbury Review of technical education;
- develop guidance for local authorities and early years providers by September 2017, on how an inclusion fund and a targeted disability fund can be used to support workforce developments and SEND specialism.

4. Sector-led quality improvement

In the Early Years National Funding Formula consultation, the Government announced £5 million a year up to 2020 to support quality improvement in the early years and a quality funding
supplement for local authorities. The strategy acknowledges that the quality of early years provision is high with 91% of providers rated good or outstanding in 2016. However, regardless of Ofsted ratings, all settings should be striving to improve their provision and outcomes for children through sharing good practice and embedding a culture of continuous improvement. There is limited evidence on the availability of quality improvement support. Local authorities are required to support those rated less than good by Ofsted but there is no requirement for those above this threshold. A Family Care Trust study (2016) confirms that the majority of local authorities concentrate on their statutory requirements and do not offer wider support for those at risk of declining quality. The variability of this LA quality improvement is regarded as the main barrier to address by the early years strategy.

Key actions to deliver are to:

- expand relationships between schools and early years providers via the teaching school network. Up to £3 million funding in 2017/18 and 2018/19 and up to £1.5million in 2019/2020 will be allocated to meet local needs;
- support the development of 'buy back' models for quality improvement services in some local authority areas whereby early years settings purchase support. The DfE will work closely with local authorities and providers to develop models of support that are sustainable for all types of early years providers, particularly in local authority areas facing difficult challenges;
- seek to achieve a geographical spread when identifying teaching schools and local authorities to participate in the quality improvement work outlined.

Comment

Every profession faces dilemmas in relation to its longer-term qualification and status aspirations, and balancing those with the shorter-term needs to recruit and retain sufficient staff in order to deliver its particular services. In early years, the evidence for the impact of better qualification and graduate leadership is very strong and is particularly compelling in relation to disadvantaged young children. The action related to reviewing early years graduate entry and further developments is very welcome.

The recruitment priorities in the sector are being driven by the need to deliver the 30-hours childcare pledge for working families, which is putting many early years settings under great pressure. The widening of the GCSE requirement for level 3 qualifications to include Functional Skills in English and mathematics is therefore welcomed by the sector, though some commentators are still concerned about the lack of clear progression towards recruiting sufficient staffing levels in time to deliver the 30-hour requirement. A further concern for the Government is how to avoid the accusation that entry levels are being diluted and professional standards threatened in a sector where Ofsted claims that improvement is taking place across all kinds of settings. One consideration could be for the Government to review the quality of Functional Skills in the context of the Sainsbury Review and the Skills Plan, to ensure that that while it is a very different qualification from GCSE, it is of comparable quality and fully fit for purpose.

The proposals for career pathways and better CPD are positive though needing far more detail. It is very unclear from the strategy what a careers structure and pathways could really look like in the sector, and while the importance of CPD is acknowledged, there is no commitment to a professional framework and entitlement as there has been in the school sector in recent times.

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While it is difficult to create national frameworks within the professional diversity of the sector, there does need to be better investment underpinning this strategy to support robust staff entry and retention proposals and their salary implications.

External Links

**DfE Early Years Workforce Strategy** (March 2017)

Related Briefings

**Early education and childcare -cost and funding- DfE research** (March 2017)

**Ofsted: Annual Report of HMCI 2015/16** (December 2016)

**DfE Consultation: Early Years National Funding Formula** (September 2016)

**Early education and childcare costs, DfE economic assessment** (May 2016)

**NAO: Entitlement to free early education and childcare** (May 2016)

**DfE consultation: The thirty hours free childcare entitlement** (May 2016)

**Childcare Survey 2016 - Family and Childcare Trust** (March 2016)

**Creating an anti-poverty childcare system - JRF Report** (March 2016)

**Ofsted – Teaching and play in the early years – a balancing act?** (August 2015)

**Ofsted – 2015 Early years annual report** (July 2015)

**Childcare Bill** (June 2015)

**Childcare – where next? – Family and Childcare Trust** (June 2014)

**Early Years – Ofsted annual report – 2012-13** (May 2014)

**Tax-Free Childcare-HMT consultation and implications for Universal Credit** (September 2013)

**More affordable childcare: DfE statement, statutory guidance and consultation** (July 2013)

**More great childcare: DfE plans for early years provision** (January 2013)

**Childcare Sufficiency and Sustainability in disadvantaged areas** (January 2013)


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