



Workforce challenges and professional practice in early years

Supporting recruitment, retention and professional identity in a changing sector

The early years sector has always relied on dedication, passion and a deep commitment to supporting young children and families to function.

However, in recent years, workforce challenges have intensified to an unprecedented level, with many providers describing them as such. Recruitment difficulties, staff shortages, relatively low pay, increasing expectations and expanding childcare entitlements have created a complex landscape for leaders and practitioners alike to navigate.

At the same time, expectations around professionalism, the quality of provision and outcomes for children continue to rise, and whilst funding is generally increasing year-on-year, in real-terms, this does not always match the rise in expectations or demand.

Early years settings are now navigating a delicate balance: maintaining high-quality practice while managing workforce pressures that affect sustainability, morale, and long-term planning.

This guide explores the current workforce challenges facing early years education in England, examines the latest data and trends, and offers some practical strategies which settings can use to strengthen professional practice and build resilient teams for the future.

The current workforce landscape

The early years workforce plays a vital role in children's development, school readiness and family well-being, not to mention their importance in guiding future outcomes and giving our future generations the best start.

Yet the sector is experiencing significant structural pressure. Government analysis in recent years suggested that **around 40,000 additional childcare practitioners would have been needed by September 2025** to meet expanding funded childcare entitlements for younger children.

This expansion increases demand at a time when recruitment pipelines are already under strain, and no published data to date shows that the sector has recruited anywhere near 35,000–40,000 additional staff.

All the available reports consistently highlight significant challenges, not successful delivery.

Key workforce trends

Recent national data highlights several important trends in the early years workforce:

- The total number of childcare providers in England fell to around 53,600 in 2025, continuing a gradual decline
- Childminder numbers continue to drop significantly, with long-term reductions since 2018
- Staffing shortages remain widespread, with nurseries averaging over four full-time vacancies per setting in sector surveys
- Around 78% of providers report difficulty recruiting staff

Although overall workforce numbers have grown slightly in recent years, demand is increasing faster than supply, creating ongoing instability.



Recruitment challenges: why settings struggle to attract staff

Although the sector needs more staff, there are a number of historical and contemporary reasons that the early years sector struggles with recruiting and retaining staff.

Understanding these fully can give settings an advantage in the field if they try to address some of the issues raised.

These include:

1. Comparatively low pay compared with other sectors

One of the most significant barriers to recruitment is pay disparity between early years educators and those working in other parts of the education system. Research shows those working in early years earn around 36% less than workers in comparable roles with similar qualifications and working patterns.

This creates several problems:

- Qualified staff move into schools or other education roles
- Graduates choose alternative careers
- Recruitment campaigns struggle to compete with retail or hospitality wages

For many potential candidates in today's competitive environment, their passion alone is not enough to offset the financial pressures they face, particularly during a cost-of-living crisis.



2. Statutory qualification and ratio requirements

In England, settings must meet statutory staff-to-child ratios, meaning recruitment is not simply about numbers of staff, but about the age, experience and qualifications those staff have.

In other devolved nations, the ratios can vary, but the same principle applies.

Recent sector analysis highlights:

- Level 3 qualification numbers have fallen significantly in recent years, yet this is a key qualification level that most settings need to count in ratios. Around 93% of nurseries say they need more Level 3 practitioners
- Current training routes are not producing enough qualified practitioners to meet demand
- Managers frequently report having enough staff available but being unable to count them in official ratios, creating operational strain and limiting the number of places for children that the setting can offer

3. Perceived low status of the profession

Despite the complexity of early childhood education and the burgeoning research available about the importance of the first five years of life, the early years sector often struggles with professional recognition.

Many people outside of the profession still refer to it as “just childcare,” said in a tone that assumes it is easy and should come naturally to all, which those within the profession understand to be fundamentally untrue.

Common perceptions and misunderstandings include:

- Early years is viewed primarily as “just childcare” rather than the education of our youngest at their most vulnerable and formative stage
- Limited public understanding of practitioner expertise and role
- Fewer visible career pathways compared with other educational settings such as schools, colleges and universities, which are often considered as high-level, academic professions reserved for the ‘brightest and best’

This perception directly affects recruitment, particularly among younger entrants choosing between different careers in the education sector.

4. Expansion of funded childcare entitlements

The rollout of funded childcare for eligible children from nine months old in England has increased demand rapidly, without there necessarily being the required places available.

While beneficial for families and their ability to work, this expansion means that many providers now face the additional challenge of expanding their provision without sufficient corresponding growth in their qualified workforce.

Reports from the industry warn that staffing shortages could limit available places or reduce opening hours if recruitment does not improve.



Retention challenges: why staff leave

Recruitment difficulties are compounded by issues in retaining qualified staff once they have joined the profession. Many early years settings are facing a deepening retention crisis, with providers struggling to keep the skilled, qualified staff they need to deliver high-quality care and meet statutory ratios.

Studies suggest:

- Staff turnover in early years settings remains high, around 24% annually in some surveys.
- More than half of nursery staff have considered leaving the sector

Despite the sector's vital role in children's development and in supporting parental employment, the workforce is characterised by low pay, high workload, limited progression routes, and growing financial pressures.

These conditions have created a cycle of instability in which experienced practitioners leave faster than new staff can be recruited, undermining both the sustainability of provision and the quality of children's early learning experiences.

Against this backdrop, managers and staff need to understand the key drivers behind poor staff retention so they can shape effective policies to combat the decline and ensure the success of the expanded childcare entitlements.



Key reasons practitioners leave

There are always personal reasons for staff leaving a setting, but there are also general reasons which affect the sector. Here are some of the most common:

Increasing workload and emotional demands

Early years work requires a high degree of emotional labour, safeguarding responsibilities and constant supervision. This is often demanded while the setting struggles to deliver effective protected planning time and breaks due to staffing pressures, leading to problems managing workloads.

Limited progression opportunities

Only around half of early years workers feel that a clear career progression exists within the sector. Many describe it as offering limited opportunities for meaningful career progression, creating a sense of professional stagnation that fuels attrition.

While the work itself is skilled and demanding, many staff feel that the pathways beyond Level 3 practitioner roles are often unclear, inconsistently funded, or poorly rewarded, leaving staff feeling that advancement requires leaving the sector rather than growing within it.

Leadership roles are few, and qualifications can be costly to pursue, and pay differentials between the levels are often minimal, meaning additional responsibility rarely comes with an increase in salary or status that reflects the true nature of the work.

This lack of a visible, valued career ladder contributes to the perception that early years is not a lifelong career, discouraging talented practitioners from staying long-term and weakening the sector's ability to build and retain an experienced workforce.

Well-being and burnout

Staff shortages increase the workload for the remaining team members, creating a cycle where increased stress leads to further departures and the cycle spirals downwards.

Staff burnout is increasingly common in early years settings, driven by the relentless combination of high emotional demands, rising administrative pressures, and chronic understaffing that leaves practitioners feeling exhausted and overwhelmed.

Often, people feel that leaving the profession is their 'only way out.'

The professionalism challenge

Professionalism is increasingly recognised as central to workforce sustainability and is being encouraged from both within the profession and from statutory regulations and expectations.

This increasing demand for professional practice requires a workforce with:

- Strong pedagogical knowledge
- Reflective practice
- Ethical responsibility
- Continuous professional development (CPD)
- Professional identity and confidence



However, workforce pressures can push these professional development ideals down priority lists as managers are forced to focus on maintaining ratios and daily operations.

Yet paradoxically, strengthening professionalism may be one of the most effective long-term solutions to current workforce challenges.

So, what can practitioners, managers and setting owners do to alleviate the problems they currently face?

Building a sustainable workforce: practical solutions

While many issues require national policy change, settings are not powerless and can take meaningful local action if they understand the issues properly. Here are some suggestions on ways you can combat the challenges:

1. Strengthen professional identity

Leaders can actively reshape how staff view their role to help improve the status of the profession from within.

Practical strategies include:

- Use professional language to describe roles such as *educator* or *early childhood professional*
- Share research linking early years education to lifelong outcomes
- Stress the importance of child development in the first 5 years and how this is influenced by professional practice
- Celebrate practitioner expertise with families and communities
- Display qualifications and achievements within settings to raise the profile of your staff members

When practitioners see themselves as professionals and promote this accordingly, staff retention can be improved, and the status of the profession is raised with their families and in their community.

2. Create clear career pathways for all staff

Staff are more likely to stay with you when they see a clear future which aligns with their experience and expertise. Settings can develop internal progression routes by:

- Establishing a clear route, e.g. trainee → practitioner → room leader → mentor → deputy manager
- Encouraging and developing staff for specialist roles (SEND champion, well-being lead, curriculum lead, outdoor specialist)
- Offering coaching or mentoring responsibilities to more experienced staff

Even small settings can introduce role specialisms that increase ownership and motivation.

Remember to also compensate staff who take on additional responsibilities in some way so that their expertise is rewarded and seen to be rewarded.

3. Invest in CPD and upskilling staff

Upskilling your staff will help you improve the quality of provision and staff retention.

People are more likely to stay in a setting where they feel valued and where their own career aspirations can be met.

Effective approaches include:

- Peer mentoring systems
- Short focused training sessions
- Online learning opportunities
- Collaborative reflection meetings
- Longer-term apprenticeships at all levels
- Time off for study leave
- Consider offering sabbaticals to retain staff in the long run

Government guidance acknowledges that ongoing learning is essential but challenging when recruitment pressures exist, highlighting the need for increased flexibility in training models.

4. Support staff well-being

Retention improves when well-being is valued and becomes part of an organisation's culture rather than an occasional initiative or annual tick-box exercise.



Examples of best practice in this area include:

- Protected breaks
- Realistic workload expectations
- Emotional support conversations
- Supervision focused on reflection and growth, not just compliance
- Flexible working where possible

Small adjustments often have a significant impact on staff morale, which can make the difference between staying and leaving.

5. Rethink approaches to recruitment

Traditional recruitment methods may no longer be sufficient in a recruitment crisis, and some 'blue-sky' thinking might be needed to turn things around.

Some settings are becoming increasingly successful when they approach things slightly differently, including:

- Recruiting for values and then training to increase skills
- Building links with colleges and apprenticeship providers
- Offering work experience placements more often
- Promoting career stories through social media channels to increase reach
- Creating 'return to early years' pathways for experienced staff who may have previously left the profession

Flexible staffing models and long-term planning are increasingly recommended across the sector as people try to fit work around their other commitments.

6. Develop leadership capacity

Strong leadership is consistently linked to the ability to retain staff and create loyal teams.

Effective leaders:

- Model professional practice
- Communicate a clear vision
- Recognise and celebrate staff achievements
- Involve teams in decision-making to gain buy-in and ownership, especially if change is initially resisted
- Empower the staff below them and encourage responsibility

Developing effective leadership and empowering others into leadership roles should be seen as a workforce strategy, not an optional extra.

7. Raise the status of early years locally

While changes in a nation's attitude towards early years will take time, settings can influence the perception of the sector within their own communities and make a positive impact.

Consider:

- Sharing your career structure with parents
- Hosting professional workshops to empower parents and train other professionals
- Displaying an 'early years careers' board in a prominent place
- Collaborating with local schools to promote early years as a lifelong career opportunity
- Highlighting curriculum work publicly
- Promoting best practice within the setting and with families
- Raising the profile of the profession by showcasing new research and ideas

When families and your local community better understand the educational value of early years provision, professional respect for the sector grows.

Collaboration across the sector

No single setting can solve the workforce challenges mentioned in this guide alone, and there will need to be a concerted effort from government as well as from within the sector itself if things are to improve.

Reaching out to others in your area, holding discussions and seeking a collaborative way forward is one way to ease the problems, at least locally.

Collaborative approaches may include:

- Shared training between local settings, cutting costs and raising the profile of your setting
- Encouraging local and national practitioner networks
- Joint recruitment events
- Shared specialist staff across settings or within groups
- Mentoring partnerships

Collective solutions can help to reduce the feeling of isolation and strengthen the professional culture across your own local areas.



Looking ahead: a sector at a turning point

The early years sector is facing significant pressure, but as with most things, times of challenge also present moments of opportunity. The growing recognition of the importance of early childhood development and the longer-term impact it has, has placed early years education at the heart of national political and policy discussions. Workforce challenges have highlighted the need to rethink professional identity, career structures and long-term sustainability. The future of the sector will depend not only on additional funding or expanding provision, but on how confidently early years professionals can articulate their value to themselves and others.

Professional practice is not separate from workforce sustainability. It is the foundation of it. When practitioners feel valued, skilled and professionally recognised, they are far more likely to remain in the sector and continue providing the high-quality care and education that young children need during the most important years of their lives.

Settings are not powerless, and the profession is full of motivated, well-educated people who will find a way through. By strengthening professional identity, investing in staff development, supporting well-being and creating clear progression pathways, leaders can build resilient teams even within challenging circumstances.



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