

Appendix 6: Headline and detailed recommendations arising from the Educoach stakeholder engagements

KCC's Director of Education commissioned an external consultant to hold stakeholder engagement events and surveys to submit a report meeting the following scope:

- To undertake engagement to seek the views of a staff, providers, parents and other stakeholders in relation to EY support and provision within Kent
- To undertake data analysis in relation to early years provision
- To identify what a core offer of early years support might look like
- To understand gaps in the current provision
- To produce a framework of priorities for the strategy informed through the above

The stakeholder engagement took place in November 2022 and was held in the form of in-person and virtual workshops and online surveys which were disseminated to providers, professionals and parents/carers. Across all engagement activities, 446 people engaged in the process.

- 65 people attended face to face events
- 149 people attended virtual events
- 3 sent emails
- 229 completed surveys (46% parents, 43% Providers, 11% Professionals)

Themes and outcomes

Early Years workforce

The early years workforce is large and varied. This is because of the 'split system' nature of early education, and means that practitioners may work as sole childminders, or in nursery settings and schools. Some provision is funded by the government; other provision is funded privately. The scope of the EYFS also means that teaching staff in maintained nursery schools, maintained nursery classes and reception classes are considered part of the early years workforce, although they work to school teachers' pay and conditions and hold qualified teacher status.

Retention

High staff turnover rates could negatively affect the relationships between staff and children if it means that staff do not know children well. A report by the Nuffield Foundation has described the early years workforce as poorly paid and undervalued. The House of Commons Education Committee considers that barriers to progression for early years teachers should be removed to improve the recruitment and retention of a skilled, high-quality early years workforce.¹

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/best-start-in-life-a-research-review-for-early-years/best-start-in-life-part-1-setting-the-scene>

In Kent, the issue of low morale is echoed across the sector and the perception that they are not a valued part of the workforce contributing to children's outcomes. Feedback at the recent Early Years Countywide SENCo Forum in November, reflected this. Stakeholder engagement with stakeholders held in November 2022 involved numerous professionals voicing their feelings that they were an extremely undervalued workforce. The disparity in pay also means that it is becoming more financially unsustainable, subsequently it is more appealing for nursery staff to move away from working within the early years sector to other similar pay scaled jobs that has a lower stress environment.

Training

The EYFS statutory framework sets out rules that determine the ratio of adults to children in early education settings. Generally, the younger the child, the higher the adult-to-child ratio. For children aged three and over, these ratios are also determined by the level of qualification that practitioners hold. For example, if a practitioner in a setting has a level six qualification, then the permitted ratio of staff to children is one staff member for every 13 children, compared with one staff member for every eight children if staff have lower-level qualifications.

In 2012, the Nutbrown Review highlighted that the qualification system for early years was ineffective and overly complex.² Many of the qualifications available did not produce a workforce with the knowledge and skills to provide high-quality early education. The review recommended that staff should hold level 2 qualifications in English and mathematics before they could achieve a level 3 early years qualification. This recommendation was implemented by the government, who made it a requirement for early years practitioners to hold GCSEs in English and mathematics. However, from 2017, this was amended to any level 2 qualification in English and mathematics, including functional skills qualifications. This was because the GCSE requirement resulted in a recruitment shortage; currently, 33% of the early years workforce do not hold either an English or mathematics GCSE.

Having a qualified teacher in an early years setting has the greatest impact on the quality of provision.³ A 2021 study synthesised the findings from surveys of early years managers and practitioners about Continued Professional Development (CPD). The study noted that surveys that are carried out by sector organisations are the primary means of finding out what CPD is taking place in the sector, and that as a result, there are gaps in what we know about CPD in the early years.

The study also found that many early years managers limit staff training opportunities to those that are mandatory (safeguarding, health and safety, and first aid). One of the surveys examined in this synthesis, which was carried out by the National Day Nurseries Association, found that, in 2015, 39% of nursery managers reported that they could not afford to fund any non-mandatory training. A further

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/best-start-in-life-a-research-review-for-early-years/best-start-in-life-part-1-setting-the-scene>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/best-start-in-life-a-research-review-for-early-years/best-start-in-life-part-1-setting-the-scene>

Education and Training Foundation study found that practitioners were keen to participate in professional development activities, but cost is a barrier to accessing CPD.

It has been identified in Kent from engagement with professionals that capacity issues often mean that staff in settings have no time to attend additional training to develop their skills. The recent I CAN Early Talk boost training programme is evident of this, even though the training was offered for free, phase two engagement numbers were considerably lower compared to the first phase, the reasons cited were mostly because staff were not released to attend the course due to no other colleagues being available to backfill and their release time was not funded.

The Impact of Covid-19

All stakeholders expressed, in varying degrees and language, that Covid-19 had negatively impacted on children's development. In particular speech and language, social skills (independence and developing friendships) and physical development. There are services still using Covid-19 strategies, such as assessments and interactions online or by phone, rather than face-to-face. Some settings have maintained their policy of not allowing parents onto the premises. Parents report the difficulties of working from home and missed opportunities for social interaction and one-to-one attention for their young children. All stakeholders acknowledge that Covid-19 was a challenge, but most are keen to move on and many references were made to the use of Covid -19 as 'an excuse to not do what should be done'.

The Culture of Inclusive Practice in Early Years in Kent

The culture of inclusive practice in early years in Kent is variable. Some settings gave positive examples of inclusive practice. Other settings reported concerns that a lack of trained staff meant that they were unable to support children with high needs. The Early Years Survey of Parents by the Department for Education (DfE) found that affluent families have a greater demand for formal childcare than deprived families. The engagement reflected this when one provider from an affluent area proclaimed that their private setting had a certain reputation for excellence in their area, as this setting had a long waiting list, they could 'pick and choose' who attended their setting to ensure the child and family fitted in with their setting's culture.

Core Provision for children in early years with SEND

Professionals and Providers each provide a range of services that they believe should be available for all under-fives in Kent. Much of this support is already in existence. However, support in different districts varies and the offer is not consistent across the county. It was suggested that with strategic alignment, these services could work together and be referred to as Kent's Early Years Core Offer, resulting in clearer strategic direction for all stakeholders.

Third Sector support

During the engagement with stakeholders, parents, carers and professionals spoke highly of the support that not-for profit organisations have provided to children and

their families with SEND. One parent found a charity through online research and praised how the support they provided her helped her understand how to meet her young child's needs when she didn't know where to look and guided her to the local authority. However, the support that has been provided is inconsistent across the county and some of the workforce also felt that their work was not recognised by the local authority.

With the introduction of the 2014 Children and Family Act and EHCPs, the Government initially funded a national 'Independent Support' Project. In Kent, this project had been led by Beams on behalf of Totius, a partnership of four parent led charities (one in each area), Space2beme, Includes us 2 and 4us2. The project ended in July 2018 and it is currently unclear how KCC works with independent support services if there is no funding link with the local authority.

There could be a potential gap in how the local authority works with third sector support when it comes to joining up and promoting partnership working.

Parents

Low Confidence

Parental confidence in the local area's ability to meet their children's needs is at an all-time low and during the Ofsted and CQC inspection in 2019, many expressed their concerns. In September 2022, almost two thousand parents took the time to share their views with inspectors during a survey ran by Ofsted as part of the re-visit. Attention was drawn to the poor communication and inconsistent system.

Parents do praise the hard work and support of many individual schools, medical and local area staff and organisations. However, parents feel that they are 'lucky' if they find someone who listens to, and acts on, their concerns. For example, the special educational needs information and support group for Kent (IASK), and the special needs advisory and activities project, 'SNAAP', which offers weekly 'stay and play' sessions, were commented on positively.⁴

This was reflected during the engagement, when asked what parents/carers thought were the most challenging things facing the early years provision in Kent, 20% said SEND discrimination and 18% stated staff level variation. During virtual workshops, parents also discussed their own experiences with the system and voiced their frustration at the lack of effective communication provided for their child with SEND and how they must re-explain their situations to different agencies they come across within the process.

Parent learning

During the engagement discussions on the impact of Covid, it was felt by several professionals that the developmental delays of children were also related to other factors such as their home environment, habits (such as pro-longed use of tablets or watching TV) and the lack of parent's knowledge in recognising behavioural needs

⁴ Ofsted letter to Kent County Council <https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50198218>

(in particular new parents). It was felt by professionals that there was something to explore in terms of providing parents with learning opportunities about their child's behaviour.

Actions for Improvement

The stakeholder report concluded by outlining some priorities that the local authority should focus on for early years, most of which are priorities KCC is already committed to as part of its determination to address issues raised by the latest Ofsted re-visit and the recognised challenges within the sector. The report recommended a series of actions for improvement:

Recommendations from Educoach	
Headline	Recommendation
1) Strategic planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are currently separate plans for each service which can lead to fragmentation, silo working, gaps in service provision and a 'disconnect between services' (referred to by practitioners and providers). Investigate effective multi-agency practice and consider aligning the three-year strategic plans from Kent County Council; Early Years Health, Health visiting; Early Help (for Early Years); TEP for children 0-5; into one Early Years Plan.
2) Alignment of Early Years Education Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider reviewing the complex structure and lines of accountability for education staff.
3) Review SEND Support and Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider undertaking a review of Early Years funding to ensure equity wherever a child is placed.
4) Positive Inclusive Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a positive inclusive culture and raise and improve the quality of inclusive practice across all settings. To consider a Kent Inclusion Quality Mark or agreed and celebrated benchmark of inclusive practice. There is already a good basis for this in the "Good Practice Guidelines" (TEP). This would give settings and those evaluating settings, including parents, a greater certainty of the quality of the inclusive practice. Parents may then have more confidence in a setting that has met a certain proven level of expertise. This may increase parental confidence and lessen the need for the protection of an EHCP.
5) Improve Communication streams for all stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider centralising all information for parents, professionals, and providers. Whilst there is a wealth of information, the challenge to know what is available, where it is and how to access it is confusing, even for professionals. This might ensure that children and families are at the centre

	of provision and service planning.
6) Improve access to consistently high-quality EY education training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As with communication, consider creating one single point of information for training that includes local training offers such as TEP, Specialist services, Early Help and Health and wider opportunities such as the government's post Covid recovery plan for Early Years.
7) Raise the profile of EY provision in and across Kent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider developing strategies that will improve the status, respect and positive regard for those working in settings. Providers consistently requested changes to how they are referred and would like to be referred to as Early Years Educational Professionals (rather than childcare providers).
8) Develop an effective EY recruitment and retention strategy, for all EY staff.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider developing an explicit EY education recruitment and retention strategy. KCC could consider providing and promoting a training and career pathway from volunteering right through to leadership by using bespoke and already established training offers. Advertise this career pathway as a benefit to working and staying in the EY sector in Kent, for example, one pathway could be offered as, you could start by volunteering and become a leader in the sector.
9) Targeted support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase the frequency of contact for advice and support for settings, as well as consideration for linked advisers for settings.
10) Improve transition and continuity of provision across the 0–5 age range and into KS1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider the development of a transition policy to ensure the continuity of provision and services across the 0 – 5 age range with or without an EHCP. For example, a system for transition of EY children from one phase/setting to another, clarifying guidance and mandatory procedures outlining what must be done as opposed to what could be done.