



Childcare & Education Expo Advisory Board White Paper

Monday 26th January 2026

Insights from the First Advisory Board Meeting of the Year

Executive Summary

The first Childcare & Education Expo Advisory Board meeting of the year surfaced a clear and consistent message: early years providers are operating under unprecedented pressure, with risk, responsibility, and complexity accelerating faster than support, funding, or workforce capacity.

Across leadership, workforce, SEND, digital risk, parent engagement, nutrition, funding, and partnership models, the Advisory Board highlighted a widening gap between expectations placed on providers and the tools available to meet them. There was strong consensus that the sector does not require more theory, but rather practical guidance, legal clarity, operational support, and real-world case studies.

1. Leadership, Management & Wellbeing

Leadership in early years has become increasingly high-stakes. Owners, managers, and childminders now carry ultimate responsibility for safeguarding, compliance, financial sustainability, workforce management, and parent relationships, often with limited external buffer.

While staff wellbeing has rightly gained prominence, leader wellbeing remains largely invisible. The cumulative impact of inspection pressure, legal exposure, staffing shortages, funding uncertainty, and parental challenge has significantly elevated the risk of burnout, isolation, and decision fatigue among senior leaders and owners.

There is growing recognition of the ripple effect of leader wellbeing. Where leaders are unsupported or overwhelmed, staff stability, organisational culture, and quality of provision are directly affected, creating a cycle that is difficult to break.

As expectations continue to rise, leadership can no longer be viewed purely through a compliance or operational lens. Sustainable quality depends on leadership resilience, adaptability, and the ability to lead through constant change without personal depletion.

The following sessions at Childcare & Education Expo London 2026 directly support these themes by addressing leadership pressure, decision-making, and change management:

- *Early Childhood Leadership: Balancing Pedagogy, Policy, and Practice*
- *Leading Through Change: Embracing a Shifting Sector*

- *HERDING CATS: Leading in Education*

These sessions collectively reinforce leadership resilience, reflective practice, and realistic approaches to managing complexity in a shifting policy landscape.

2. Workforce, Recruitment & Employment Law

The early years recruitment market remains constrained as board members report a limited candidate pool, reduced choice, and minimal scope for extended trials or assessment periods. Hiring decisions are increasingly made under pressure, with far higher consequence if appointments do not succeed.

At the same time, employment law is becoming more complex and more tightly enforced. Providers are navigating an increasingly difficult balance between safeguarding responsibilities and employment protections, particularly when early concerns arise but have not yet reached formal thresholds. Flexible working requests are appearing earlier in employment, adding further complexity to workforce planning, consistency of delivery, and team equity.

The Employment Rights Act 2025 represents a major inflection point for the sector. Providers are already expressing concern about its implications for probation periods, dismissal processes, Statutory Sick Pay, funding alignment, and long-term workforce planning.

In a sector dominated by small teams and tight margins, legal missteps carry disproportionate risk. There is strong and growing demand for clear, practical, early-years-specific employment guidance that reflects safeguarding realities rather than generic corporate models.

The Childcare & Education Expo London 2026 programme addresses these challenges through the following sessions, which provide practical strategies for recruitment, safeguarding, and people management in a legally complex environment:

- *People First: Recruiting, Retaining, and Leading a Multi-Generational Workforce*
- *Safeguarding & Safer Recruitment*
- *Recruitment and Retention: Approaches That Make a Difference*

3. SEND, Inclusion & Training Pressures

SEND demand in early years is increasing in both volume and complexity. Settings are now routinely acting as frontline identifiers, supporting children with emerging needs for extended periods while waiting for external assessment and intervention pathways that are often slow or inaccessible.

In February 2026, the Department for Education published new SEND reforms aimed at transforming support across early years, schools and communities, with a £4 billion investment to make provision more inclusive and responsive at the earliest stages. This includes the creation of an Inclusive Mainstream Fund for targeted interventions, an Experts at Hand pool of specialists (such as educational psychologists and speech and language therapists) to be available locally, and a significant expansion of dedicated SEND support places, including additional funding directly for early years settings. These reforms signal a shift toward more timely and tailored support and underpin the need for settings to be equipped with the right resources and expertise.

Alongside these reforms, proposed training requirements have raised significant concern about capacity. While the value of skilled, confident staff is widely accepted, there is growing anxiety that additional training expectations risk becoming another compliance burden without

corresponding increases in staffing, funding, or hands-on support, particularly in early years settings where SEND expertise is already stretched.

A clear sector message has emerged: awareness training alone is insufficient. What is needed is practical resource, additional capacity, and operational support that reflects the intensity of SEND provision in real settings. In this context, the Government's proposals to increase specialist support availability and to invest in mandatory SEND training for all staff represent positive steps, but settings remain cautious about the implementation gap between policy intent and on-the-ground capacity.

Childminders face particular pressure, highlighting the need for training models that are flexible, accessible, and designed for lone-provider contexts.

Without systemic support, SEND expectations risk being absorbed almost entirely by providers, widening inequality and stretching already fragile provision to breaking point.

4. AI, Digital Risk & Cybersecurity

AI is already influencing day-to-day operations in early years settings, often in unexpected and challenging ways. Providers are encountering AI-generated parental complaints, repeated or vexatious submissions, and increasing data protection challenges, including CCTV requests that fall outside lawful retention periods.

Digital risk is no longer confined to IT systems alone. It now intersects with safeguarding, governance, data protection, and reputational management, creating new forms of exposure for providers.

There is strong interest in practical case studies, clarity on reasonable response thresholds, and guidance that positions AI within cybersecurity and risk management, not just productivity or efficiency.

Digital tools are evolving faster than regulation or sector guidance, leaving providers exposed to new risks without established norms or benchmarks.

This topic is addressed at Childcare & Education Expo London 2026 through the following session, providing a foundation for the informed and responsible use of AI in leadership and operational contexts.

- *AI in Action: How can Leaders use AI Today?*

5. Parent Engagement, Screen Time & Behaviour

Parent engagement dynamics are shifting. Growing concern is being raised about parental phone use at drop-off and collection, alongside children's screen exposure and its impact on communication, behaviour, and school readiness.

Practitioners are largely compliant with internal phone and safeguarding policies, but enforcement alone is proving insufficient. The greater challenge lies in supporting parents to understand developmental impact and aligning expectations across home and setting.

Without shared understanding, behaviour concerns risk becoming relational rather than developmental. Clear, evidence-informed guidance can support partnership rather than conflict.

The Childcare & Education Expo London 2026 programme offers strong coverage through the following sessions, designed to support practitioners to engage with families while promoting healthy development:

- *Parent Partnerships & Difficult Conversations: Supporting All Families*
- *The Digital Playground: Integrating Technology & Play for Enhanced Learning*
- *Fizzy to Calm – Supporting Behaviour and Regulation Through Movement*
- *Beyond Behaviour: The Power of Connection in Early Years*

6. Nutrition, Food Provision & Packed Lunches

Nutrition has emerged as a strategic issue rather than a peripheral concern. Cost pressures are driving increased reliance on packed lunches, with high levels of ultra-processed food and growing complexity around food allergy management.

Providers are navigating tension between inclusivity, safety, affordability, and nutritional standards, often without consistent guidance or parental alignment. Nutrition is increasingly recognised as both a child development issue and a social equity issue.

Food provision sits at the intersection of health, inclusion, and family circumstance. Poor alignment risks widening developmental and health inequalities.

7. Funding, Local Authorities & System Inequality

Concerns persist around the flow and utilisation of early years funding. Reports of local authority underspend, inconsistent interpretation, and regional variation remain widespread. These inconsistencies disproportionately affect childminders and smaller providers, deepening systemic inequality across the sector.

Greater transparency and shared best practice could unlock more effective use of existing funding and reduce postcode disparity.

8. School-Based Nurseries & Partnership Models

Expansion of school-based nurseries is accelerating. Alongside this trend sits a clear opportunity to explore partnership-based models between schools and PVI providers, offering alternatives to standalone provision.

Well-designed partnerships can enable shared resource, continuity for children, and more sustainable growth pathways.

Without collaboration, expansion risks fragmentation. Partnership models offer a route to resilience rather than competition.

9. Ofsted Inspections, Notifications & Regulatory Confidence

The introduction of the updated inspection framework has created areas where providers are seeking greater clarity. In particular, there are differing interpretations across settings regarding notifications and how these are reflected in leadership and management judgements.

A key consideration for providers is ensuring that notification procedures continue to support robust safeguarding culture and transparency. Maintaining confidence in the notification process and its alignment with inspection outcomes is essential for operational planning and leadership decision-making.

Clear and accessible guidance helps providers align day-to-day practice with the inspection framework, reinforcing transparency and effective safeguarding processes. This supports leaders in making informed decisions while navigating complex operational requirements.

10. Re-centring Play in a High-Pressure System

Amid rising regulatory and operational pressures, the sector risks losing sight of its foundational purpose: supporting children's learning, development, and well-being through play. Current national indicators, including declining literacy and numeracy outcomes and concerns around children's happiness, suggest that the system may not be fully delivering on this core principle.

Play was discussed as the primary vehicle through which children develop resilience, creativity, problem-solving ability, collaboration, and self-agency, skills widely recognised as essential for an uncertain and rapidly evolving future. The challenge for providers is not simply to allow play, but to design and facilitate environments where rich, meaningful, child-led play can thrive, supported by skilled educators who scaffold learning without diminishing agency.

As digital influence, societal expectations, and family dynamics continue to evolve, maintaining play as joyful, inclusive, and fundamentally human requires intentional leadership, training, and resourcing. Re-centring play within policy and practice was identified as critical not only to improving child outcomes, but to sustaining the creativity, purpose, and resilience of the workforce itself.

Conclusion

The Advisory Board meeting reinforced that the early years sector is navigating layered, interconnected pressures. The Childcare & Education Expo London 2026 programme addresses many of these themes, providing a strong foundation for further discussion, guidance, and sector leadership.

By continuing to connect policy, practice, and lived experience, and by amplifying practical solutions, the Expo remains well positioned to support providers through a period of significant change.