Where Early Years Stands: Sector Priorities for 2026

Findings from the Childcare & Education Expo Advisory Board, May 2026

Executive Summary

The second Advisory Board meeting of the year highlighted a sector under sustained and intensifying pressure. Early years providers are navigating an increasingly complex landscape shaped by workforce shortages, rising demand, funding constraints and escalating expectations from policy, inspection frameworks and families.

The board discussed a widening disconnect between policy intent and delivery reality: while many current reforms are well-intentioned and designed to improve outcomes for children and families, their implementation often fails to sufficiently account for the operational conditions within settings. This misalignment is resulting in a series of unintended consequences that place additional strain on already stretched provision.

Across workforce, SEND, funding, training, parental engagement and system design, there is a clear and urgent need for greater alignment between policy and practice. The sector is increasingly calling for practical, standardised approaches, clearer communication and solutions that are grounded in the lived experience of those working directly with children on a daily basis.

Policy Implementation & Sector Reality

A significant disconnect persists between government policy and the day-to-day realities of early years provision. While the overarching ambitions of policy are broadly supported, there is growing concern that decision-making processes are too far removed from frontline practice to fully understand their practical implications.

This gap manifests in several ways. Policies are often designed without sufficient consideration of operational delivery constraints, including staffing ratios, physical environments and the variability of children's needs. Engagement with practitioners currently working in settings can be limited, resulting in a lack of insight into how policies translate into practice. In addition, implementation models frequently mirror school-based systems, which do not always align with the developmental and care-focused nature of early years provision.

The result is a recurring pattern in which well-intentioned policy is undermined by impractical execution. Providers are frequently required to interpret, adapt and operationalise policies retrospectively, often within environments already experiencing significant pressure. This reactive approach not only increases workload but also introduces inconsistency in delivery across the sector.

Workforce, Recruitment & Retention

Workforce challenges remain the most pressing and persistent issue across the sector. There is a continued shortage of qualified and experienced practitioners, alongside increasing difficulty in attracting new entrants with the necessary skills, resilience and long-term commitment.

Recruitment is further complicated by the perception of the sector as low-paid and high-pressure, particularly when compared to alternative roles that offer similar or higher wages with reduced responsibility. This has contributed to rising levels of attrition, with practitioners leaving the sector entirely in search of more sustainable working conditions.

At the same time, providers face limitations in their ability to offer competitive salaries or clearly defined progression pathways, largely due to funding constraints. This creates a cycle in which recruitment challenges exacerbate workload pressures for existing staff, increasing the risk of burnout and further attrition.

The expansion of funded childcare to younger age groups has intensified these pressures, increasing demand for practitioners with specialist knowledge and experience in baby and toddler care. However, this area of expertise remains particularly difficult to recruit for, further widening workforce gaps.

A key concern is the preparedness of new entrants. Many practitioners are entering the workforce without the practical knowledge or confidence required to operate effectively in early years environments. This places additional pressure on managers and senior staff to deliver in-house training and support, often within already constrained timeframes.

To improve recruitment and retention, the sector must strengthen its value proposition and reposition itself more clearly. Key opportunities include:
· Promoting clear career pathways and progression routes
· Highlighting the diversity and breadth of roles within early years
· Emphasising the purpose, impact, and long-term outcomes of the work
· Increasing flexibility and creating more supportive working environments

Repositioning early years as a skilled, impactful, and rewarding career is essential to long-term sustainability.

Training, Qualifications & Professional Standards

There is growing concern that current training pathways are not adequately preparing practitioners for the realities of early years practice. While qualifications provide a foundational understanding, they are often perceived as lacking depth in key areas that are critical to day-to-day delivery.

Particular gaps exist in relation to child development, SEND, and provision for children under three. In many cases, there is a noticeable disconnect between qualification content and the practical application required within settings. This is further compounded by limited exposure of training providers and educators to current sector conditions, resulting in learning that can feel outdated or disconnected from real-world practice.

As a result, providers are frequently required to bridge the gap between qualification and competence through internal training, induction, and ongoing professional development. This places additional strain on resources and contributes to inconsistency in practice across the sector.

There is a strong need to establish more consistent and standardised approaches to training. This includes the development of core training expectations that are recognised across the sector, alongside more practical and accessible learning models that reflect the realities of early years environments. Investment in “training the trainers” is also critical to ensure that those delivering education and qualifications are equipped with up-to-date knowledge and practical insight.

Without meaningful reform, the burden of developing practitioner competence will continue to fall disproportionately on providers.

SEND, Inclusion & Capacity Pressures

SEND provision continues to represent a significant and growing area of pressure within early years. There is an increasing number of children presenting with complex and emerging needs, often requiring sustained support over extended periods.

Access to external support and assessment pathways remains inconsistent and, in many cases, delayed. This results in settings taking on the role of primary support providers, often without the necessary training, funding, or specialist input required to meet these needs effectively.

Variation across local authorities further compounds these challenges, creating inconsistencies in both funding and provision. This lack of uniformity contributes to inequality of access and places additional administrative and operational burden on providers working across multiple areas.

There is a clear need for more practical, application-focused SEND training that equips practitioners with the skills and confidence to support children effectively in real-world settings. Greater consistency in funding and provision is also essential, alongside improved alignment between inspection expectations and the realities of delivering inclusive practice.

Without systemic support, SEND pressures risk becoming unsustainable, placing significant strain on providers and widening existing inequalities.

Funding, Costs & Financial Sustainability

Despite increased government investment, financial pressures across the sector continue to intensify. Rising staffing costs, increased demand, and ongoing investment in training and compliance are contributing to a widening gap between funding rates and the actual cost of delivery.

Funding structures themselves are often complex and inconsistent, creating additional administrative burden and uncertainty for providers. In many cases, increased funding is absorbed by rising operational costs, limiting its intended impact.

This creates a challenging financial environment in which providers are forced to make difficult decisions to maintain sustainability. For many, this includes increasing fees, which in turn impacts affordability for families and undermines the broader objective of improving access to childcare.

The cumulative effect is a system in which financial pressures are felt at every level, with limited flexibility to absorb additional costs or invest in long-term improvements.

Expansion of Early Years Entitlements

The expansion of funded childcare from nine months has significantly increased access for families, but has also introduced a range of operational challenges.

Demand for baby places has risen sharply, requiring higher staffing ratios and more specialised care. However, the workforce is not currently equipped to meet this demand at scale, particularly given existing shortages and gaps in training for under-three provision.

In addition, the structure of funding - often aligned to term-based systems - does not reflect the developmental needs of babies. This has led to clustering of start dates, creating logistical challenges around settling-in processes and placing additional pressure on staff capacity.

These challenges highlight the need for delivery models that are specifically designed for early years provision, rather than adapted from school-based frameworks. Greater flexibility and alignment with developmental stages would support more effective implementation.

Administrative Burden & Operational Complexity

Administrative demands continue to grow, with staff required to manage increasing levels of documentation, compliance processes, and funding-related administration.

This shift has a direct impact on the quality of provision. Time spent on administrative tasks reduces the time available for meaningful interaction with children, which is central to early years education and development.

The cumulative effect is increased stress and dissatisfaction among staff, alongside reduced efficiency within settings. In many cases, administrative processes are seen as overly complex or duplicative, adding little value to outcomes while significantly increasing workload.

There is a clear need for simplification and standardisation across administrative systems. Reducing unnecessary paperwork and streamlining processes would enable practitioners to focus more fully on their core role.

Conclusion

The early years sector is operating within a highly complex and evolving environment, where expectations continue to rise while capacity remains constrained. The challenges identified are interconnected, with pressures in one area often amplifying those in another.

Across all themes, the need for alignment between policy and practice is clear. Effective solutions must be grounded in the realities of delivery, supported by practical guidance, consistent systems, and meaningful investment.

At the same time, there is cautious optimism. Opportunities exist to standardise training and provision, simplify funding and administration, strengthen professional identity, and improve collaboration across the sector.

By addressing these areas collectively, the sector can move towards a more sustainable, equitable, and effective system that supports both providers and the children and families they serve.

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