childcare & education EXPO

Where Early Years Stands: Sector Priorities for 2026

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

Executive Summary

The final Advisory Board meeting of the year brought together a wide cross-section of the sector - nursery leaders, suppliers, and SEND specialists - to inform the wider concerns of the sector as 2026 draws to a close.

A clear thread ran through the discussion: the sector is not short of information, but short of usable, practical guidance it can act on immediately. The board raised a number of live sector concerns: the arrival of AI and technology into daily practice; the ongoing difficulty of making early years an attractive long-term career choice for young people; a rising and under-addressed need to support the wellbeing of educators themselves; and continued confusion and inconsistency around new safer sleep requirements.

This paper summarises the key discussion points raised by board members, to inform Nursery Leaders Network members.

Practical, Solutions-Focused Support Sought by Nursery Leaders

A strong and recurring insight from board members is that nursery leaders and managers have reached saturation point with theory, statistics, and diagnosis, without being given the practical means to act on it. One board member described running a course for multiple nursery managers who wanted to be told, in concrete terms, exactly what to do differently - not simply that "interaction needs to be checked" or "sorted," but how. This was compared to a visit to the doctor: leaders already know their symptoms and want to be told how to treat them, rather than hear the diagnosis repeated back to them. The same frustration was raised in relation to Ofsted inspections, where settings are told what grade they have received and what is wrong, but not given guidance on how to put it right.

This same board member shared a striking recent experience of spending a full day across three nurseries and not witnessing a single incident of challenging behaviour. On investigating why, they discovered each setting was doing something distinct and rarely discussed elsewhere; in one case, an entirely different approach to staff recruitment and interviewing. They felt this illustrated how much practical working knowledge exists across the sector in the hands of practitioners who are not necessarily well-known names, but who hold valuable pieces of the puzzle.

Board members also described the practical difficulty of information reaching the people who need it most. Most practitioners working directly with children cannot attend sector events themselves, due to staffing ratios, so it typically falls to a manager to absorb content and then relay it back to a busy team already managing competing demands day to day. Members noted this "last mile" problem - getting insight from the person who heard it to the person who needs to apply it - as one of the more persistent barriers to translating good ideas into everyday practice.

A further insight, raised in relation to this same theme, was that the type of practical support needed varies significantly by audience: what a hands-on practitioner needs day to day is different from what a manager needs, which is different again from what someone growing or starting a setting needs. Members felt this distinction is often lost when sector support and guidance is pitched too broadly.

Safer Sleep Requirements & Regulatory Guidance

New safer sleep requirements generated the most detailed, and at points most contentious, discussion of the meeting, with board members sharing candid first-hand experiences. From a supplier's perspective, one board member described the past six months as dominated almost entirely by customer conversations about cots and compliance. Some manufacturers remain confident their existing sleep pod products are fit for purpose despite not meeting the new guidelines, and are actively lobbying the sector to support their position; some providers are content to continue using this equipment under their own risk assessment, while others, particularly larger groups, have already purchased new compliant cots - a costly step, and one complicated further by rising demand for baby places following recent changes to funded hours. They noted that some settings are now declining to take children under twelve months simply because they lack compliant sleeping space, and observed a strange irony in the fact that a low-cost travel cot can meet the new guidance as readily as a far more expensive one, despite both replacing equipment some in the sector still consider safer.

The board noted growing inconsistency in how the guidance is being applied, with some Ofsted inspectors accepting sleep pods as compliant while others are marking settings down for using them, creating confusion and a sense of unfairness for providers trying to do the right thing. One board member described their experience where the previously used coracle-style sleep pods gave staff much clearer sightlines across a room of ten, twelve or more sleeping children than fully enclosed travel cots now do, and argued this represents a greater, not lesser, safeguarding risk under the new guidance. They reflected more broadly on a disconnect between decision-makers and those working directly in nurseries day to day, and raised an open question about what mechanism, if any, exists for the sector to formally challenge or feed back on a regulatory decision it disagrees with.

A third board member shared a specific and troubling example of this disconnect in practice: a query their organisation raised with the Department for Education concerning children with medical needs whose sleep environment or equipment might reasonably need to differ from other children's. The response, in this account, was contradictory: stating on one hand that no exceptions to the guidance would be permitted, while separately confirming that sleeping arrangements must be suitable for children's individual needs and that medical evidence should be taken into account where relevant. They noted this left providers with no clear workable answer.

On a more constructive note, one board member shared that process is being made through gathering research from across the sector, intended to strengthen the evidence base available to providers when discussing or disputing the guidance with Ofsted.

Career Pathways, Meaning & Workforce Appeal

Board members shared a wide range of insight and first-hand experience on what makes (or could make) early years a genuinely attractive long-term career choice for young people. One recurring observation was that the sector “runs on passion,” and that real people talking honestly about real career journeys; child minders, practitioners and managers describing where they started, where they have got to, and what they still aspire to - resonates far more than abstract messaging about the sector.

A separate line of insight came from research shared by one board member working in specialist SEND provision, who described current research into what young people want from work more broadly: above all, a sense of meaning. They reflected that the sector does not always make clear just how transformational the work of an early years educator is – shaping “the humans of the future” - and felt this message is under-used with young people considering their options. The same research pointed to a second, more practical trend: young people increasingly want to “dip in and dip out” of work, favouring a portfolio of part-time or varied roles over a single full-time position. They noted some providers are already responding by restructuring a single full-time post into several part-time roles to accommodate this preference. Separately, they raised a wider pedagogical point: rather than the early years phase existing purely to make children “school ready,” there is a growing trend - including examples already used in primary schools around the country, and a recent mention in The Green Party’s manifesto of extending the EYFS to age seven - of early years pedagogy shaping how primary education itself is delivered.

Building on this, another board member linked the meaning behind the sector directly to job security: in a climate where AI is displacing roles across many industries and leaving many young people uncertain whether their job will exist in a few years, they felt early years stands out as work that cannot be automated and offers a rare, visible sense of long-term growth. They proposed that hearing directly from young practitioners describing an ordinary working day - rather than from more senior or experienced voices - would resonate far more with people considering the profession, since the relatability of a peer carries more weight than distance and seniority. This same research on meaning and flexibility was also connected to a real policy shift already underway in Scotland, where the childcare qualification has been restructured into a dip-in, dip-out format.

AI & Emerging Technology in Early Years

One board member reported a marked and recent increase in queries from nurseries about how to manage the arrival of AI and wider cyber developments within their settings. Leaders are grappling with two connected challenges: how to use new technology in a genuinely productive way, and how to do so while keeping parents and children safe and reassured. This was acknowledged as a highly relevant and increasingly unavoidable topic for the sector as technology becomes more embedded in daily nursery life.

Staff Wellbeing & Mental Health

Raised in the board meeting as a topic not yet given enough attention, the wellbeing and mental health of early years staff themselves - as distinct from children's wellbeing, which tends to dominate sector conversation - was flagged as an increasingly urgent concern. One board member described encountering this theme repeatedly and independently across very different settings within the space of a single week. They described this as a clearly cross-country pattern rather than an isolated concern, and noted that existing statistics on educator mental health are already troubling.

Our board members connected this directly to the sheer volume of change and complexity staff are being asked to absorb and adapt to, reflecting that it is difficult to see how educators are expected to take on continual new requirements and regulatory shifts on top of the pressures they already carry day to day. Their view was that the sector needs to hear from specialists who can speak to the experience of the adult, the educator, rather than defaulting to a focus on children's wellbeing alone.

Conclusion

Across every theme discussed, a consistent picture emerges of a sector that is experienced, passionate and resourceful, but increasingly stretched by the gap between the volume of information, regulation and change it is asked to absorb, and the practical, everyday support available to act on it. Leaders described wanting to be told how to solve problems rather than simply told what those problems are; practitioners are quietly innovating in ways that rarely get shared beyond their own four walls; and the people delivering care and education to young children are themselves carrying a growing, largely unaddressed weight of pressure.

Board members were equally candid about areas of continued confusion and disagreement within the sector itself - nowhere more so than around new safer sleep requirements, where genuine safety concerns, inconsistent regulatory interpretation, and a sense of limited voice for those working closest to children all came through strongly.

Taken together, the discussion reflects a sector that remains driven by real purpose and connection to its work, even as it navigates a period of significant pressure, uncertainty and change.

With thanks to the Advisory Board:

Alice Sharp
Early Years Consultant, Author and Trainer
Alice Sharp Ltd

Andrew Clifford
Director
Red Dog Early Years Services

Angela Gamble
Information, Advice and Guidance Manager
CoramPACEY

Caroline Negre
Director & Owner
Raphael Nursery

Caroline Wright MBE
Director of Early Childhood
Bright Horizons UK

Cary Rankin
Ex CEO
Thrive

Catherine Mole MBE
Chief Executive
Dingley's Promise

Cheryl Warren
Director
Aperion Training

Clare Roberts OBE
CEO
Kids Planet Day Nurseries

Courteney Donaldson
Managing Director - Childcare & Education
Christie & Co

Elaine Sagar
Chief Executive Officer
Sunflower Group

John Warren
Early Years Consultant, Author and Trainer
Alice Sharp Ltd

Kirsty Love
Operations Director
The Old Station Nursery Group

Mandy Richardson
Managing Director
Naturally Learning Ltd

Michelle Burns
Early Years Business Manager
Hope

Natalie Bishop
Managing Director
Little Years Nursery

Olivia Corbin-Phillip
Early Years Consultant
Stories with Liv

Paul Moore
CPD Manager
Busy Bees

Sarah Ellis
Business Development Director
Early Years Alliance

Sarah Mackenzie
CEO
Storal

Saudaa Nadat
Area Operations Manager
London Early Years Foundation

Sue Lee
Managing Director
Morton Michel Ltd

Tim McLachlan
CEO
NDNA

Ursula Krystek-Walton
Head of Quality Development
Thrive Childcare & Education