

Placed-based policy making: A Bristol case response to the early years workforce crisis

Dr. Frances Giampapa, Dr. Victoria Bowen, School of Education, University of Bristol

About the research

The Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector is facing a workforce crisis marked by recruitment and retention challenges. Public spending is increasing (CIVITAS, 2024) with the unprecedented expansion of childcare entitlements announced in 2023, but this has added stress on an over-extended workforce.

We are working with leading national ECEC organisations (Early Education, Early Years Alliance & NAHT), and local partners (Bristol and Beyond Stronger Practice Hub, Bristol City Council, Bristol City College & childcare settings) to develop a Bristol solution-focused response. This research targets the lived experiences of leaders, managers, teachers, and practitioners, across local authority nurseries and PVI, with knowledge and experience of the everyday impact of this crisis.

As we conclude our data collection process, several key areas for action have emerged. Given the current national focus on the ECEC sector, the ongoing expansion of free entitlements, and the Government's unprecedented investment, this is a crucial time to share our findings more widely.

Key findings

Our findings so far from diverse knowledge exchanges and focus group interviews point to interlocking complex areas for change:

- **A need to shift societal mindsets from 'childcare' to a profession:** Educators saw themselves as highly skilled professionals, trained in child learning and development with expertise in different child-led pedagogies. This illustrates a need to better communicate the roles and responsibilities of early educators as professionals valuing them similarly to primary teachers.
- **'Future proofing' the sector is needed:** there was agreement over ensuring the profession is attractive to new recruits, and that they had a deeper understanding of the everyday realities within ECEC settings. This includes a need to re-think apprenticeships and early education programmes across colleges and HEIs so that they are fit for purpose. Offering diverse opportunities to those that have a vocational drive to be early educators is imperative, alongside formally recognising the long-time experience of many educators who have dedicated years to supporting children and families.
- **Targeting funding is required:** Many educators felt that funding should be targeted at improving staff salaries, training, and operational resources to ensure high-quality ECEC, specifically targeting areas with high needs or demographic pressures, to ensure that providers can meet the staffing and operational demands without sacrificing quality.

Policy recommendations

Enhance the Status and Professional Recognition of ECEC

- Rebrand the ECEC sector to reflect its educational value, shifting the perception from 'childcare' to an essential component of early education
- Establish pay parity between ECEC professionals and primary school teachers to recognise their expertise and critical role in child development
- Introduce structured career progression opportunities, including leadership pathways, to attract and retain skilled professionals in the sector

Prioritise Quality over Quantity in Workforce Development

- Develop diverse and accessible entry routes into the sector, including high-quality apprenticeships and work-based training that prepare individuals for the realities of ECEC settings
- Create a national standardised training and qualification framework to replace the current fragmented system, ensuring clear career pathways and improved workforce stability
- Implement formal recognition programs for experienced ECEC professionals without existing qualifications, enabling career advancement based on skills and experience

Establish a Strategic National and Local Vision for ECEC

- Develop a realistic and sustainable funding model that ensures competitive salaries, improved working conditions, and career progression opportunities for ECEC professionals
- Allocate targeted funding to areas with high needs or demographic pressures to support staffing and operational demands without compromising quality
- Strengthen local and national coordination to align pay structures, workforce planning, and funding strategies, ensuring the long-term stability and quality of ECEC provision

Further information

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Contact the researchers

Dr Frances Giampapa, Frances.Giampapa@bristol.ac.uk

Dr Victoria Bowen, victoria.bowen.2018@bristol.ac.uk