

GMCA OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

TASK AND FINISH REVIEW

Building a Stronger Early Education and Childcare Workforce



Chairs Foreword



As Chair, I am proud to present this Task and Finish Review into workforce retention and quality within early education and childcare. Throughout this process, I have been heartened by the evidence and insight shared, which have given me genuine hope that excellent early education and childcare is not only possible, but achievable here in Greater Manchester.

It is important that we shift our thinking: Early education and childcare is not simply a cost to be managed, it is an investment in our economic infrastructure. High-quality early education and childcare provision benefits the whole of society, and as such, its success must be a shared responsibility. Early childhood education (ECE) is, as UNICEF underscores, the most transformative investment a nation can make to give every child a fair start and tackle inequalities from the outset. It is essential for ensuring school readiness, laying the foundations for learning, and supporting lifelong wellbeing.

The need for action has never been clearer. Recent data from Greater Manchester Poverty Action reveals that approximately 30.4% of children in our city-region are living in poverty. This is a stark reminder that we must do more to support our youngest residents and their families.

Our review demonstrates that giving children the best start in life leads to higher educational attainment, better economic opportunities, greater self-worth, and citizens who are eager to contribute to their communities. The evidence shows ECE can help close the disadvantage gap, ensuring that children from all backgrounds have the same opportunities to thrive.

To achieve this, we need a sector that prioritises quality over profit. Providers must be held to account for the standard of care and education they deliver. This review also makes it clear that our early education and childcare workforce is the cornerstone of quality provision. Supporting, developing and retaining talented

professionals is fundamental if we are to realise our ambitions for children in Greater Manchester.

We therefore call for fundamental reform of the sector. In particular, we urge the Government to honour its commitments to early education and childcare, including the introduction of professional registration for the workforce, a simplified funding model, and greater devolution so Greater Manchester can tailor support to meet local needs.

We are starting from strong foundations, this review has highlighted extensive examples of existing work within GMCA programmes, including our longstanding work on School Readiness, and at a locality level where we are beginning to see impact. However now is the time to go further and faster, focussing on how we use the breadth of our cross policy work to drive improvements in retention and quality.

With determination and collective effort, and in line with our Greater Manchester Strategy pledge to narrow the school-readiness gap between Greater Manchester and England, we can ensure that every child in our city-region has the best possible start in life and begins school ready to learn, grow and thrive. I commend this report to all those who share our commitment to a fairer and more prosperous future for Greater Manchester.

Chair of Overview & Scrutiny Comments



To be inserted

Thanks and acknowledgements

The Group would like to extend thanks to those who directly helped support and shape this review:

- Miriam Loxham, Senior Principal (Early Years and Family Help), GMCA
- David Ottiwell, Senior Research Principal, GMCA
- Ezra Lampesberger, Lead Analyst (School Readiness), GMCA
- Jamie Fallon, Children's Service Senior Project Manager, GMCA
- Dr Mat Johnson, University of Manchester
- Lucie Stephens, Early Education and Childcare Coalition
- Tim Bowman, Director of Education at Stockport Council and Chair of the GM Directors of Education Forum and Early Education Leads Group
- Rukhsana Ahmed, Headteacher, Longsight Community Primary School and Family Hub
- Adele Reynolds, Principal Manager Education, Work and Skills, GMCA
- Sharon Kelly, Senior Principal Skills Manager, GMCA
- Joe Crolla, Industry Skills Intelligence Lead, GMCA
- William Clarke, Inclusive Economy Policy and Programmes Lead, GMCA
- Beth Sharratt, Local Industrial Strategy Policy and Programmes Lead, GMCA
- Ian McArthur, Director, GM Good Employment Charter
- Ailsa Burton, Challenge and Intervention Officer, Oldham Council
- Cllr Mark Roberts, GM Portfolio Lead for Children and Young People
- Michael Cullen, GM Lead Chief Executive for Children and Young People

Calendar of meetings

- 18 September 2025 – Initial scoping session.
- 23 October 2025 – What does the data show us?
- 18 November 2025 – The impact of the national model.
- 4 December 2025 – Main drivers for workforce turnover and retention.
- 16 December 2025 – Best practice locally and national.

- 9 January 2026 – What further actions could the GMCA and its partners take?
- 23 January 2026 – Consideration of draft recommendations.
- 25 February 2026 – Draft report to GMCA Overview & Scrutiny.
- 25 March 2026 – Final report to GMCA Overview & Scrutiny.

1. Introduction

1.1 Early education and childcare provision constitute a foundational element of the economy in Greater Manchester and across the United Kingdom. Despite its critical function in supporting early child development, school readiness and enabling parents to re-enter the workforce, it has not been afforded due recognition.

1.2 The withdrawal of all early education and childcare provision would precipitate significant economic disruption, yet the sector continues to be undervalued and perceived as less skilled. The past decade has posed considerable challenges for early education and childcare professionals, although this period remains central to educational development.

1.3 In July 2025, the Department for Education released a national strategy titled *Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life*. This strategy underscores the importance of the early education and childcare workforce and introduces several targeted initiatives to enhance capacity, quality, and sustainability. Key commitments include:

- Financial incentives to improve recruitment and retention.
- Enhanced training opportunities and career progression, including leadership roles in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).
- Professionalisation through the introduction of a registration requirement.
- Collaboration with Mayoral Strategic Authorities to develop clear prequalification pathways, thereby increasing the number of Level 3 qualified practitioners.

- Explore giving local authorities and Mayoral Strategic Authorities new powers to make sure there are enough places locally and parents have a good range of early education and childcare options, including childminders.

1.4 While the refreshed focus on early education and childcare and the importance of high-quality early education and childcare is welcome, there is a need for further detail on exact policy and the level of resource available to support targeted initiatives as well as a review of funding to support sustained improvements to pay levels within the sector.

1.5 The GMCA Overview & Scrutiny Committee has regularly reviewed reports on children's 'school readiness' over recent years. Concerns persist that, despite regional and national efforts, progress has stagnated or declined in some areas.

1.6 This review has allowed for a comprehensive examination of factors affecting early education and childcare, focusing specifically on workforce quality and retention. It offers carefully considered recommendations designed to catalyse meaningful change, recognising the current moment as an opportunity for significant progress. Early Years, Early Education, and Childcare are all fundamental to providing environments in which children can thrive, develop, and prepare for successful transitions into school and later life.

1.7 As Greater Manchester moves further towards a prevention model through its work on Live Well and the Prevention Demonstrator, early years must play a part in these conversations. Supporting children and their families to lay the foundations for emotional development, social development and academic attainment is the key enabler to preventing unemployment, poor mental health and issues (such as isolation) in later years. However, since 2010/11, early intervention spending in England has fallen by more than £2 billion, a 42% drop. Meanwhile, spending on late-stage, crisis-driven residential care has risen to £3 billion, an all-time high¹. While exact, universally agreed cash values are not

¹ <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/childrens-services-spending-reports>

yet available (and several studies note the need for better quantification), current UK evidence strongly indicates that early education and childcare intervention can generate substantial medium- and long-term savings, especially by reducing demand for costly crisis-driven services. Reversing some of this decline in early intervention could slow or reverse the rising trend in late intervention costs potentially saving hundreds of millions to billions over time. Though the NSPCC report does not quantify the exact savings, the pattern is clear, late intervention costs increase when early provision is reduced. A recent 2025 IFS review of Sure Start² estimated that every £1 invested generated around £2.05 in benefits, driven by improved educational outcomes, better school attendance and reduced hospitalisations.

1.8 The broader implications of a strong early education and childcare sector extend beyond measurable outcomes. However, for parents of children under five, access to affordable, reliable childcare is often the deciding factor in whether they can work at all. Parliamentary, Treasury and independent economic analysis consistently identify childcare availability as a primary labour-supply constraint in the UK economy³. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development adds in their review titled ‘How does access to early childhood education services affect the participation of women in the labour market?’ that the effect is strongest for parents of children under three, where childcare costs and scarcity are highest⁴.

Quality is the golden thread that is essential for excellent early years provision.

1.9 Robust early education and childcare should combine high-quality learning for children with accessible and affordable childcare for parents, both of which are critical enablers of economic growth and the preventive focus underpinning the Greater Manchester Strategy’s vision of inclusive prosperity. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimated in 2023 that closing

² [The short- and medium-term effects of Sure Start on children’s outcomes | Institute for Fiscal Studies](#)

³ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmtreasy/757/75704.htm>

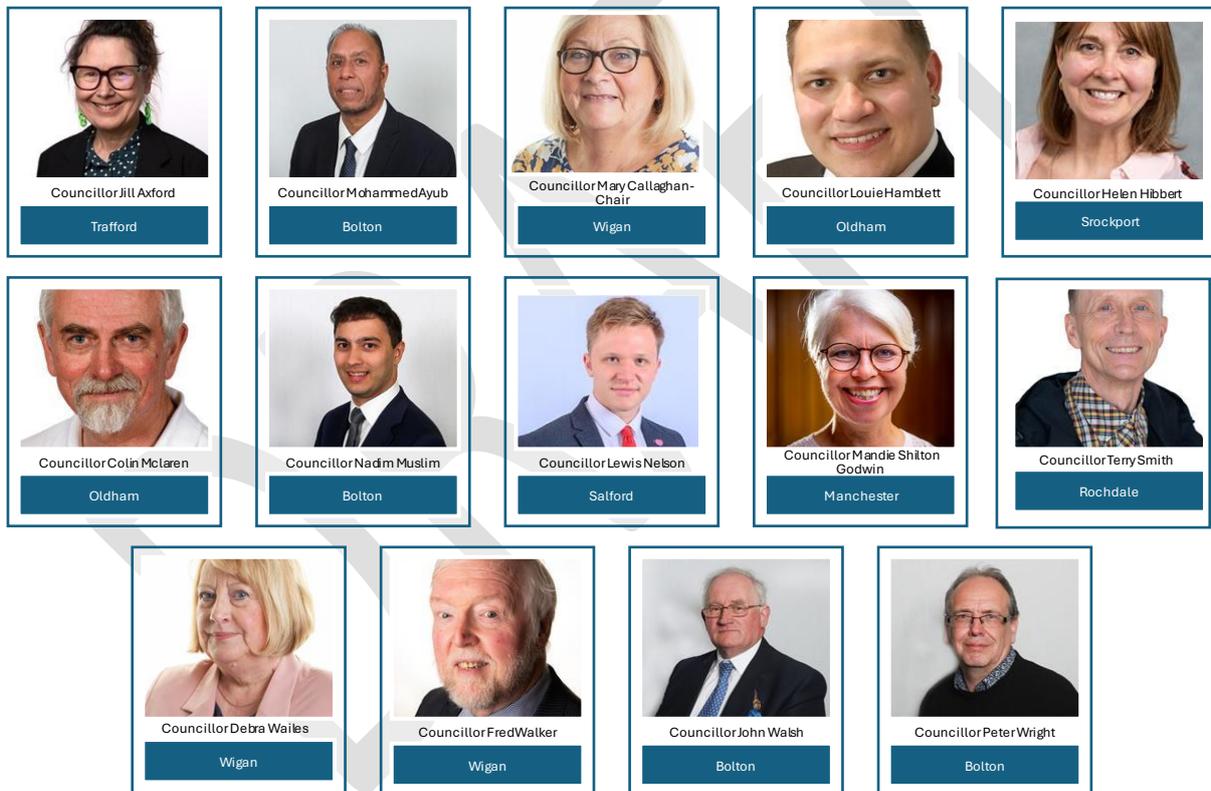
⁴ https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/how-does-access-to-early-childhood-education-services-affect-the-participation-of-women-in-the-labour-market_232211ca-en.html

gender employment gaps, including through childcare investment, could increase GDP by 5–12% over the long term in advanced economies. Furthermore, Price Waterhouse Cooper estimates that increasing the female labour market participation to match men could add £170–£200 billion to UK GDP over time, with childcare availability cited as a core enabler (PwC, Women in Work Index, 2022).

- 1.10 Facilitating opportunities for parents to return to work earlier or to increase their working hours, where this is right for them, can help raise household incomes, reduce reliance on benefits, and lower the risk of child poverty. Research indicates that maternal employment is one of the strongest safeguards against child poverty, and that enhancing the affordability of early education and childcare would significantly increase disposable income for low- and middle-income families (Resolution Foundation, 2023; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2022).
- 1.11 Between 2014 and 2024, the proportion of children living in relative low-income households in Greater Manchester increased from 22.0% to 30.4%, representing approximately 188,540 children affected by poverty in 2024. This equates to over 55,000 0–5-year-olds.
- 1.12 Quality early education and childcare is integral to robust economic and social infrastructure and should be recognised as a strategic priority within the Greater Manchester Strategy. Preventive intervention strategies must emphasise the role of early years in supporting timely SEND identification, school attendance, and readiness to engage with learning, as interventions at the point of school entry may be too late.
- 1.13 A comprehensive early education and childcare offer should provide diverse and accessible options, centring care within its approach. Provision must reflect varying family structures and needs, recognising that not all families have informal support networks or require standard hours of care.

1.14 Ensuring the effectiveness of early education and childcare is a collective responsibility, requiring collaboration across departments and organisations. Workforce challenges, particularly around retention and quality, are consequences of prolonged underinvestment and inadequate professional recognition. By prioritising early education and childcare as a key enabler of improved life chances, economic viability, and regional growth, Greater Manchester can establish itself as a leader in effective early childhood policy.

2. Membership



3. Purpose and scope

3.1 The group agreed that the scope should focus on Greater Manchester's early education and childcare sector, including group based PVI (private, voluntary and independent) nurseries, childminders, and school-based nursery provision and the purpose of the review should be –

- a) To identify actionable recommendations for GMCA and its partners to improve retention in the early education and childcare workforce, through current available opportunities.
- b) To identify enablers required from Government to address the wider structural challenges.

3.2 The research contained in this review attempts to address the following questions, from a combination of shared literature, conversations with expert witnesses and available data.

- What are the main drivers of workforce turnover and retention issues in the sector?
- How does the national model for early education and childcare provision (specifically funding rates) impact recruitment, retention, and quality?
- What best practices or innovative approaches exist locally, nationally, or internationally?
- What further actions can GMCA take to support retention, professional development, and workforce stability, within available policy levers at city region level?

4. Recommendations

1. Recognise early education and childcare as social and economic infrastructure enabler and its impact on prevention.

Quality early education and childcare is integral to Greater Manchester's social infrastructure and economic growth. Supporting young children with SEND requires careful observation, responsive practice, and strong partnership with parents at a stage where needs are still developing. To make early SEND support as effective as possible, there needs to be national recognition of the specialist skills involved, along with a clear professional status that reflects this complexity. Practitioners also need protected time, supervision, and space for reflection, given the emotional and cognitive demands of the role. These measures collectively demonstrate how robust

early education and childcare provision can act as a preventative tool, fostering social and economic wellbeing for families and communities. It is also essential to monitor closely any post-report Government proposals arising from the SEND White Paper and assess their potential impact on the Review's recommendations, ensuring that Greater Manchester remains responsive to emerging national policy changes.

- a. Identify quality early education and childcare as part of the required social infrastructure for economic growth in Greater Manchester and a key component to preventing poverty.
- b. Adequate resources, training and provision to be provided for children with SEND or for those who require support with emotional regulation in early education, including ensuring the role of Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) in every setting.
- c. Utilise the Prevention Demonstrator to evidence the prevention approach to early education and childcare and the impact on health budgets.
- d. Recognise the impact that inadequate childcare has on employment opportunities, and work with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to incentivise part time and flexible hours to employers.

2. Make early education and childcare a desired career choice.

There are both opportunities for school leavers and adults to find a fulfilling career in early education and childcare, where they can make a real difference to the development of children in their care. However, current societal views often see it as a lower grade job that requires few skills. It is important that this false perception is addressed through a wider understanding of the roles and responsibilities within the sector, along with measures to increase the status and professional recognition of practitioners, to recognise their vital role in fostering secure attachment through long-term, trusting and nurturing relationships built over time. Increasing the sense of value is a contributing factor to the overall mental health of the workforce, and wellbeing packages should be standardised.

- e. Offer targeted education careers information, advice and guidance attracting more people into the early education and childcare sector, building upon national campaigns and local initiatives but providing simple and accurate information about career pathways.
- f. Develop more adult skills pathways to attract mature and experienced people into the sector, bringing with them their life experiences.
- g. Support the Government's commitment for a professional registration requirement that would put early education and childcare practitioner roles on a par with other valued roles such as nursing and teaching.
- h. Promote wellbeing packages, recognition schemes and positive organisation cultures through a commissioned case study to develop an evidence base of outcomes that can inform the scaling up of practices.
- i. Create opportunities at a local authority and combined authority level to celebrate and increase public recognition of the profession.
- j. Challenge and shift entrenched cultural attitudes that undervalue early education and childcare.

3. Increase data insight without additional burden

There is a lack of granular GM-level workforce data which hampers effective policy development. Improved data collection focused on staff numbers, qualifications, turnover and progression, as well as understanding of provider types and risks would help to appropriately target intervention. To strengthen this work, more emphasis must be placed on achieving these improvements without placing additional burden on providers. A combined and coordinated approach across agencies is essential so that data requests are streamlined and channelled through a single, consistent mechanism rather than multiple, overlapping asks.

- k. Identify cross policy enablers and develop a comprehensive GM workforce plan for early education and childcare that threads quality throughout.
- l. Embed the Workforce Data Test and Learn Project (currently in delivery) to enable the collection and analysis of appropriate workforce data that supports innovation, intervention and enables providers, local authorities and GMCA to develop appropriate strategies to address challenges.

4. Champion the real living wage for all early education and childcare staff

Low pay has consistently been identified as a key driver of staff turnover, with many practitioners leaving the sector for better-paid roles elsewhere. The current national funding model often does not enable providers to pay staff the real living wage, contributing to recruitment and retention difficulties. By lobbying for a fair and simplified funding model, and piloting support for providers to assess financial implications, the sector can share best practice and demonstrate the impact of paying the real living wage, which is likely to improve workforce stability, morale, and quality of provision. It is also important to create a clear pathway for early education and childcare providers to achieve the Good Employment Charter by removing existing barriers and increasing incentives.

- m. Lobby for national reform including a fair and simplified funding model that expects providers to pay the real living wage.
- n. Pilot support for providers to model the financial impact of paying the real living wage and share best practice.
- o. A specific pathway to achieve Good Employment Charter for the early education and childcare sector to be considered, that looks to remove current barriers and seeks to increase the incentives to become a member.

5. Invest in career progression, continued professional development and training

A lack of career progression, limited continued professional development and insufficient training are major causes of staff turnover in early education and childcare. Current training pathways are confused, underfunded and create barriers for potential achievement. The national funding model also prevents providers from investing in staff development which undermines recruitment and retention. Evidence supports investing in funded professional training, standard progression routes, a culture of wellbeing, and substantial work experience to help stabilise the workforce and improve the quality of provision.

- p. Commitment to permanent funded professional training for early education and childcare staff to develop into level 2 and level 3 practitioners.
- q. Promote a culture of wellbeing that creates a standard approach to how the workforce should be valued in all settings.
- r. Ensure a standard progression pathway and quality leadership model in all settings.
- s. Encourage all early education and childcare work pre-qualification and MBACC courses to include a substantial element of work experience to ensure that potential new starters have a clear understanding of the realities of the sector.

6. Promote integrated models and social purpose businesses

Through piloting integrated service models and linking early education and childcare providers with primary schools and family hubs, children and families would benefit from more seamless support throughout their formative years. This holistic approach is underpinned by the need for consistent, high-quality provision and shared best practice.

- t. Pilot integrated service models which link early education and childcare providers with a primary school and/ family hub in order to provide a model that supports children and families through their first 11 years of development.
- u. Offer social purpose leases and support the development of cooperatives, community interest companies and social enterprises, ensuring awareness of the opportunities through these models and advocating for consistent funding.
- v. Consider how revised planning regulations can better enable local authorities to embed family hubs and early years provision within the essential infrastructure for new housing developments and strengthen their ability to capture social value across geographical boundaries.

7. Pursue market reform and national policy influence

Further devolution to the GMCA and local authorities would support national market reform and the ability to influence national policy, enabling a standardised approach to government funding and improved oversight. Strengthened oversight and policy are viewed as essential for ensuring consistent, high-quality provision and workforce stability, ultimately benefiting children, families, and the local economy.

- w. Undertake work to develop evidence informed recommendations for further devolution including the possibility to determine market reform and future market management, providing a flexible approach to the use of Government funding against agreed outcomes but with a local determination of model.
- x. There should also be a requirement for full transparency in funding so that parents clearly understand, in financial terms rather than hours, the percentage Government will fund and what they are expected to contribute in addition to this.

8. Strengthen partnership working to create spaces for sector voice

At present the sector is under-represented in the places where it needs to have influence, often due to the inability of managers/leaders to leave settings due to required ratios or other pressures. However, in order to identify where the GMCA, local authorities and Government can support the sector, there needs to be the opportunities for their issues, concerns and ideas for innovation to be heard, especially regarding the development of the workforce education, training and skills offer across Greater Manchester.

- y. Ensure that there is an early education and childcare representative on the GM Employer Integration Board to ensure that education and training provision remains relevant for the sector.
- z. Understand how best to support the early education and childcare sector in Greater Manchester to access available funding for innovation and create a tailored approach to support sector engagement.

5. Workforce Retention & Quality in Early Years

5.1 Around the globe there are shortages in the early education and childcare workforce and reasons for these are similar in England to those in other countries. An Ofsted review of the stability of the workforce in England identified 6 main barriers: low income, high workload and responsibilities, over-reliance on female practitioners, insufficient training and opportunities for progression, low status and reputation, and negative organisational culture and climate (Ofsted, 2023).

5.2 Research finds that, in the aftermath of Covid-19, an increasing number of early years practitioners (EYPs) are no longer prepared to accept such unreasonable working conditions. The intrinsic rewards of working with young children are becoming increasingly overshadowed by the collective workforce experience of exhaustion and stress. As a result, many early childhood education (ECE) professionals are leaving the workforce in order to preserve their mental health and wellbeing (Solvason, et al., 2025).

Covid-19

5.3 Research shows the role that Covid-19 played in further intensifying the challenges that already existed prior to the pandemic. For example, in 2018, the Early Years Alliance (EYA) conducted research which highlighted that administration and paperwork, financial pressures, pay, and workload were the top factors contributing to stress in the ECE sector (Early Years Alliance, 2018). In 2021, 'feeling undervalued by the government' was the chief reason for those wanting to leave the profession (Early Years Alliance, 2021). The Social Mobility Commission found similar factors of influence but further identified demanding child-to-staff ratios, high levels of responsibility and unfavourable tasks as contributing to practitioner dissatisfaction (Social Mobility Commission, 2020).

5.4 During the pandemic, ECE workers faced unprecedented health risks while working in close contact with vulnerable children and children of key workers.

They were affected by severe staff shortages due to a myriad of factors including staff illness, the need for some staff to shield, positive covid-19 cases and self-isolation, staff having health concerns about working, and having to cope with the absence of those taking care of their own children (Solvason, et al., 2025).

Government and Policy Support

5.5 A recurring issue in literature and research is the limited government and policy support for the early years sector. Archer (2024) explains that government policy 'frame[s] the early childhood educator as both "in need of improvement" and the Early Years Professional as a driver of quality improvement but with limited government support to do so'. In this context, ECE practitioners report struggling to keep up with the continuously changing demands of evolving policy and statutory guidance. Despite striving to provide children in their care with a high-quality experience, it is argued in research that EYPs remain among the most under respected and underpaid jobs in the education sector (Solvason, et al., 2025).

5.6 Data from 2020 provided by Lightcast, a vacancy analytics platform, showed that in Greater Manchester demand for early education and childcare staff outstripped the wider GM labour market by some margin. There were 2.7 times as many roles posted in October 2025 compared with 5 years previous, but demand tended to be seasonal, peaking in March/April each year. However, these advertised roles were largely entry-level as only 5% of adverts require a degree.

5.7 The number of children with SEND has increased significantly over the past few years and is anticipated to further increase. At an early years stage these children may not yet have had these needs identified with appropriate support in place which can result in additional pressures on practitioners whilst determining how best to interact with a child. Yet training, resources and funding do not recognise the importance of this development stage for a child who is SEND, resulting in no additional Government funding.

- 5.8 Additionally, funding given to early education and childcare settings to support disadvantaged 3 and 4 year olds (the early years pupil premium) is just over a third of the amount given in pupil premium funding to primary schools (Gov.uk, 2025; Department for Education, 2025).
- 5.9 The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) Spending Review evaluated the impact of rising costs, taxations, employer National Insurance Contributions, minimum wage rises and utilities amongst others which are impacting employers funding availability to employ a graduate-led workforce. It found that the private sector especially is unable to compete for, and retain, high-quality trained professionals unless Government intervention and a career strategy are forthcoming (IFS, 2025).
- 5.10 The Good Employment Charter in Greater Manchester has over 1200 supporters and 160 members, however only a few of which are early education and childcare providers. The Charter targets sectors with high levels of precarious work, including early years, hospitality, and retail and provides a set of standards that they must adhere to in order to receive an accreditation. Despite efforts to engage early years employers, including dedicated meetings, uptake has been low due to concerns about meeting the required standards under current sector conditions.
- 5.11 As of September 2025, over 80% of the childcare market in England is Government funded, with funding rates largely set centrally, leaving local authorities with limited influence. This shift has reduced providers' ability to generate additional income, particularly affecting smaller providers in areas of high deprivation who may rely entirely on government funding. It has also enabled the growth of larger, extractive private equity models of provision, which are less likely to reinvest funding in workforce and quality of provision and more likely to require parents to pay costly add on charges for food and activities.
- 5.12 There are 21,200 group-based providers out of 54,700 total early years providers in England (2024 data⁵). These group-based providers cover private,

⁵ <https://ndna.org.uk/latest-provider-statistics-show-pvi-sector-crucial-to-expansion/>

voluntary and independent settings. The Education Policy Institute states that a substantial majority of these group-based settings are private, and 43% of private settings are now part of a chain, indicating clear profit-driven ownership models⁶. Data from the Department for Education (2019–2024) consistently shows that most group-based places are delivered by private, for-profit providers, and that this share continues to rise with no indication of these profits being transferred back into the sector. This national model does not provide a standard approach to using the funding, nor does the current lack of transparency ensure robust oversight and appropriate challenge. It is important to acknowledge, however, that across Greater Manchester a significant number of private providers deliver high-quality care and education, playing a vital role in the local early years system and contributing positively to outcomes for children and families.

5.13 Further devolution could strengthen the role of the GMCA and its local authorities in market reform and future market shaping, recognising the advantages and opportunities of actions at a city region scale and the need for place-based strategies that reflect the needs of local families and communities. This would result in the GMCA and the GM local authorities having a stronger role in oversight and market shaping akin to the adult social care sector and reinforcing their sufficiency role.

5.14 Government funding to early education and childcare providers should be determined by their commitment to pay the real living wage. Clear messaging is needed to show that paying the real living wage can improve staff retention, which in turn strengthens the quality of provision and reduces recruitment time and costs for nursery managers.

5.15 Research indicates that practitioners face increasing pressures linked to evolving statutory requirements and policy expectations. While practitioners are expected to deliver high-quality experiences for children, concerns remain

⁶ <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/what-does-the-reliance-on-private-providers-mean-for-young-children/>

regarding the adequacy of support and resources available to meet these expectations.

5.16 Safety and assurance in early years settings also contributes to ensuring the highest standards of care. There is a need for training and support to enable all practitioners to be confident in all aspects, including safe sleep practices.

5.17 The Cabinet Office has recently appointed a team to examine the role of mayoral combined authorities in early education and childcare, an opportunity for Greater Manchester, given its comparatively advanced progress in this area, to influence national thinking. The forthcoming refresh of the GMCA School Readiness Programme may provide a practical route to test, learn from and scale approaches aligned to this review's recommendations.

Low Pay

5.18 Focussing on the issue of low pay, it is important to acknowledge that pay in the early education and childcare sector is considerably below national averages for other comparable professions (Early Years Alliance, 2024). The responsibilities that are associated with the EYP role and the pay received are imbalanced. In 2020, a Social Mobility Commission report identified that the average early education and childcare (female) workforce hourly pay was £7.42, drastically below the average female workforce hourly pay of £11.37 and the £12.57 it averaged at the time for the total population. 13% of the workforce earned less than £5.00 an hour and many early education and childcare workers were found to be taking on second jobs to make ends meet (Social Mobility Commission, 2020).

5.19 McDonald, Thorpe, and Irvine (2018) point out that some practitioners are only able to remain in the sector through the financial support that they receive from their parents, partners, or themselves through additional employment. These poor pay conditions, according to one 2022 study, are also resulting in 44.5% of the early education and childcare claiming state benefits to manage the financial detriment and 10% of EYPs living in poverty (Vardy, 2022).

- 5.20 Since 2017, the National and Living Wage rates have increased by between 35% and 46%, however, for three years the hourly rates paid by councils, which are set by central Government, did not increase and the cumulative impact has been a mere 13% increase in hourly rates since 2017 (National Day Nurseries Association, 2023). London Economics' recent modelling commissioned by Save the Children revealed that 16,000 early education and childcare workers are paid below the existing National Living Wage. The analysis found that bringing their salary up to legal levels and ensuring all staff are paid at Real Living Wage levels (£12.60 per hour), would cost an additional £228 million per year (Save the Children, 2025).
- 5.21 Despite the recent rises, pay in the early education and childcare sector is lower than both in the general workforce and for similar workers. In 2022/23, early education and childcare workers earned 36% less on average than other workers who had similar working patterns and characteristics. Research also shows that limited opportunities to differentiate pay mean that staff with greater levels of experience and qualifications can nonetheless earn similar rates of pay as their less-experienced peers (Flemons & Worth, 2025).
- 5.22 A good salary indicates worth to an employee, yet few early education and childcare settings in Greater Manchester pay the real living wage. Recent data shows that 14.4% of jobs in Greater Manchester pay below the real living wage, disproportionately affecting women and part-time workers. In this way, the issue becomes one of social justice as it could limit the possibility of financial independence for women. In April 2026 the real living wage is set to rise by 85p an hour to £13.45 per hour. Since the increase in minimum wage in April 2025, there has been an increased financial pressure on early education providers that has already led to a rising closure risk, reductions in places and funded hours, as well as delayed expansion, or exits planned for late 2025 and 2026.
- 5.23 A large Early Years Alliance survey of over 1,000 providers found that 28% said they were likely to permanently close within the next year, closures were

most likely among private and voluntary providers and smaller nurseries and childminders were especially vulnerable⁷.

Pay should reflect what is deserved by those in the role, as parents are placing their children into the care of another and therefore expectations are rightly high.

Quality

5.24 The underfunding of the sector, alongside low wages, has a direct impact on quality. Swain (2024) states that the expected starting salary for an early years teacher (EYT) at the time of the research was between £18,000 and £20,000, averaging an hourly pay of £9.86 per hour– well below National Living Wage. Prospects, a teaching career website, further states that “The profession is known for its low pay when compared with other roles, but it is recognised throughout the sector that while early years workers deserve higher salaries, this can’t happen without more funding.” (Swain, 2024). This is demonstrated in the statistics of graduates, which show that only 37% of Early Years Teachers had had a pay rise since graduating, compared to 66% of those who graduated with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). Researchers believe that this difference in pay is indicative of the Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) qualification becoming extinct as fewer and fewer people are opting to qualify as such (PACEY and Voice, 2018).

5.25 There has already been a reduction in the proportion of qualified staff in early education and childcare settings. The National Day Nurseries Association found that as early as 2019 the number of unqualified staff had increased by 16% compared to the previous year and the number of graduates had fallen by 3% due to staff leaving the sector (National Day Nurseries Association, 2023). Today, between 20-25% of the national early years workforce do not hold a level 3 or higher qualification (Flemons & Worth, 2025).

⁷ <https://www.evalliance.org.uk/news-events/news/families-face-rising-early-years-costs-families-and-setting-closures-providers-warns/>

5.26 In order to combat the recruitment and retention crisis, the Government introduced the ‘Do Something Big’ recruitment campaign in April 2024. As part of this scheme, which concluded in March 2025, new recruits were incentivised to join the sector with a £1,000 ‘golden hello’ bonus. However, a recent evaluation of the scheme shows that it failed to boost early years recruitment of new and returning practitioners, especially in geographical areas of need. The evaluation showed that the scheme mainly attracted unqualified candidates and that there were concerns new starters would leave after the 12 weeks in the role which it took to receive the incentive. Further, the financial incentive reduced some recruits’ universal credit payments, meaning that they did not benefit from the full £1,000 bonus (IFF Research; London Economics, 2025). The DfE financial incentive scheme is currently operating in Bolton, Rochdale and Trafford.

5.27 Recruitment is not only a challenge at employment stage, but also at enrolment onto courses, as highlighted by recent drops in FE college and apprenticeship intake alongside rising vacancies. The national campaign was ‘*Do Something Big*’. GMCA has since launched its own city-region campaign, designed to more closely reflect the experiences of providers, children and families across Greater Manchester. This campaign showcases eleven case studies from settings across the city region and has been funded through the GMCA School Readiness Programme. Phase 2 of the campaign will begin in February 2026, further strengthening efforts to encourage people to take active steps toward a career in the early education and childcare sector.

5.28 It has been shown repeatedly that early education and childcare can have a positive effect on children’s developmental outcomes when the quality of service is high (The Sutton Trust, 2024). High-quality childcare also delivers long-term economic returns by improving children’s outcomes. High-quality early education and childcare provision is linked to better educational attainment, improved employment prospects, and higher lifetime earnings (Heckman, 2011; OECD, 2022⁸)

⁸ https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-economic-outlook/volume-2022/issue-2_f6da2159-en.html

5.29 However, there are concerns about the quality of provision on offer and concerns that the rapid expansion of childcare entitlements is having a detrimental effect on quality (Early Education and Childcare Coalition, 2025). In part, this is due to the amount of funding given to providers for the 15- and 30-hour working parent entitlements being lower than the cost to settings to provide these hours (Early Years Alliance, 2024).

5.30 The funding provision is so complex that it often hinders potential business models and results in many variables. Currently school funding models are simpler than early education and childcare funding models. A simplified funding model would allow for informed provision and a greater standardisation across the sector.

5.31 Greater Manchester currently has limited examples of alternative early education and childcare delivery models. The Longsight Community Primary model of early education provision demonstrates potential benefits of a more integrated approach, offering consistent support for families and clearer pathways for staff development within a single organisational structure. This model consists of a private day nursery, primary school, and family hub all under a single point of leadership and in this instance, on a single geographical footprint. It provides a 'campus based' feeling that creates a sense of belonging, something which the LiveWell approach seeks to achieve in recognition that people are much more likely to seek advice, support and take steps towards living healthier if they are in a safe environment where they feel they have a place.

5.32 Local authorities are being funded to develop and deliver Family Hubs, with funding confirmed until 2029. Family Hubs are intended to integrate early years and family support services, providing accessible 'one-stop shops' within each community. While this national funding commitment strengthens the foundations for effective delivery, further work is still required to ensure long-term sustainability and to fully embed Family Hubs and Live Well within a broader network of support across health, local authority, education and VCFSE partners. One potential mechanism to support this could include exploring amendments to

local planning regulations so that planning authorities can secure infrastructure funding from developers, with a specific allocation for community facilities such as Family Hubs and Live Well Centres, helping to maximise social value.

5.33 Drawing from evidence from other countries, case studies have shown that increased provision at a lower quality actually has a detrimental effect on developmental outcomes for children. In the late 1990s, there was an expansion of cheap, subsidised childcare places in Quebec, Canada, which aimed to provide childcare places to all children aged 0-4 at a cost of \$5.00 (about £4.00) per day. Research published in 2023 found that this expansion reduced the quality of provision, leading to negative outcomes for children in the long-term, including worse health outcomes, lower life satisfaction, and higher crime rates later in life (The Sutton Trust, 2023).

5.34 This same Sutton Trust research has gone on to suggest that it is not the provision of early education and childcare per se, but specifically high-quality provision, that is key to closing the gap in educational inequalities. Higher quality settings have been shown to have positive effects on long-term developmental outcomes; however, this effect weakens in low-quality settings (The Sutton Trust, 2023). Research suggests that high-quality early education and childcare is particularly advantageous for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, whereas poor or low-quality provision can be damaging to both wellbeing and educational outcomes. An analysis of Ofsted ratings of early education and childcare providers showed that high-quality provision was less likely to be found in the most deprived areas compared to least deprived areas (The Sutton Trust, 2024).

5.35 The workforce development approach developed by the GMCA, GM REFLECT, includes an early education and childcare workforce competency framework, which can be used by practitioners to complete a self-evaluation identifying strengths and areas for development. In Oldham, leaders and managers are encouraged to participate in local provider networks to share best practice and collectively explore sector-wide challenges. While such networks exist in most local authorities, Oldham's approach aims to widen access by

holding sessions on different days and at varied times, recognising that smaller providers may find daytime attendance difficult. Offering financial support to enable participation would likely boost engagement further, and there is an opportunity to consider how a similar model could be strengthened and rolled out across Greater Manchester, including how staff can be supported to be released from their settings to take part. In addition to this, peer to peer support is offered where practitioners can meet to discuss their individual challenges, issues and ideas for innovation. This is likely to be the most successful way of scaling up and spreading quality-focussed schemes across Greater Manchester.

Qualifications and Training

5.36 One of the main factors affecting the quality of provision is the level of staff qualifications. In England, there are no minimum qualification requirements for early education and childcare staff, although setting managers must hold an approved level 3 qualification and at least half of all other staff must hold an approved level 2 qualification (Department for Education, 2025). While most staff nationally are qualified to at least level 3, an increasing number are not, and few early years staff hold a degree (with the exception of teachers in reception classes). GMCA analysis also indicates that the proportion of the early years workforce in Greater Manchester who are unqualified has increased over the last two years of available data. The issue of staff qualifications is directly linked to adult-to-child ratios, as settings can only operate higher ratios where a practitioner with a higher-level qualification is working directly with the children.

Qualification level	Qualification title	Equitable job title
Level 1	Introductory courses	
Level 2	Diploma and awards	Early Years Practitioner
Level 3		Advanced Early Years Practitioner
Level 4	Advanced Practitioner Certificate	

Level 5	Senior Practitioner Diploma	Early Years Lead
Level 6		Early Years Teacher

5.37 The Education Policy Institute has recently found that staff with higher qualifications tend to be mature, with almost half being over forty and a fifth being close to retirement. This further adds to the qualifications shortage, alongside the increasing number of EYPs leaving the sector altogether (Vardy, 2022).

5.38 Studies from across the OECD show that staff with better qualifications are generally more able to deliver high-quality provision. While qualifications alone do not guarantee better teaching, evidence suggests that highly qualified staff are more effective in providing a stimulating environment and engaging in high-quality interactions with children (OECD, 2025). They may also be better equipped at understanding children’s starting points and adapting curricula accordingly. Practitioners in a roundtable discussion stated:

“It is essential that young children are met by observant and knowledgeable practitioners who recognise children’s current development and are capable of building on this, whether cognitively, emotionally, socially or physically.” (Ofsted, 2023, p. n.p.)

5.39 The National Day Nurseries Association’s (NDNA) workforce surveys between 2015 and 2019 tracked a downward trajectory in the proportion of early years education staff holding a level 3 qualification. This decreased from 83% in 2015/16 to 52% in 2019. Their joint work with the Education Policy Institute found that in May 2021, the proportion of level 3 staff was 57%. Additionally, in 2018 1 in 7 staff members were unqualified (did not have a relevant GCSE or level 2 qualification) whereas in 2023 this applied to 1 in 5 early years workers (National Day Nurseries Association, 2023). According to 2025 official statistics, this ratio is 1 in 4 in GM currently (GMCA, 2025).

- 5.40 NDNA research found that 7 in 10 providers did not have sufficient staff to operate at maximum capacity and 54.5% of providers did not have sufficient staff to deliver the full 30 hours for 2-year-olds. On average, the research found that 3.3 more staff are needed for nurseries to operate at their maximum capacity, which would add thirteen places per setting. Crucially, these staff shortages are not evenly distributed across qualification levels, with only 6.5% reporting shortages in non-qualified staff, compared to an overwhelming 92.7% reporting vacancies for qualified staff at level 3. Around a third of providers state that they have need for both staff qualified below level 3 and staff qualified above level 4 (National Day Nurseries Association, 2025).
- 5.41 Recent research highlights that early education and childcare settings are experiencing particular difficulties in retaining and recruiting staff with higher qualifications and states that EYPs are leaving the sector to seek better paid positions. Many EYTS-qualified staff retrain or seek additional training to gain Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) to get the increased salary and benefits associated with QTS and through working in schools (Solvason, et al., 2025).
- 5.42 Both awards require C grades in three core GCSEs (English, Maths, and Science), a DBS check, and to have passed an English and Maths professional skills test. However, a lack of parity between the two qualifications means that the benefits of QTS are not replicated for those holding EYTS, which DfE suggests might be due to the flexibility QTS affords. Save the Children acknowledges that QTS allows for greater flexibility, moving staff around within a school and covering a full age range, but also highlight that it lacks the specialism EYTS provides which can positively impact on pedagogy for younger children (Hudson, et al., 2022).

5.43 This leads to fragmentation within a sector where many people are sceptical towards the rewards associated with higher-level qualifications, where no increases in pay or status are ensured, or even likely, as a result of such qualifications. Further, there is general recognition that the qualification and training pathways that cater to the sector are confused, under-developed and unsustainable (Sakr, et al., 2023).

5.44 There have been good initiatives to boost professional development within the sector, including the Early Years Professional Development Programme (EYPDP) which provided national funding to practitioners who completed three core modules with content created by industry specialists: Communication and Language; Early Mathematics; and Personal, Social and Emotional Development. It is important that practitioners are also financially rewarded to undertake training, especially if its outside their working hours. The EYPDP was part of the UK government's Early Years Education Recovery Programme, which aimed to address the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the early years sector. The programme had a significant positive impact on participants, with 98% feeling more confident and knowledgeable, and 94% motivated to continue working as early education and childcare practitioners after completing the programme⁹. However, programmes such as this have been time limited and there is currently no further funding allocated from the Government to practitioner training.

5.45 In 2023/24, early education and childcare training activity across Greater Manchester showed a strong preference for apprenticeships, with 1,321 apprenticeship starts, reflecting the clear and established route many young people take into the sector. Classroom-based learning remained comparatively low at 1,114 starts, though providers report a good rate of progression from Level 2 to Level 3 programmes, supported by GMCA's ongoing work with the GM Colleges Early Years

⁹ <https://www.edt.org/insights-from-our-work/early-years-professional-development-programme-evaluation-report-shows-positive-impact-on-knowledge-confidence-and-retention/>

Curriculum Group. Adult Learning participation was lower still, with 663 learners, suggesting scope to better promote these pathways for adults looking to retrain or reskill. Although T-Levels remain a relatively new option, uptake has been encouraging, with 326 Early Years T Level starts and further growth expected in 2025/26.

5.46 With regards to adult learners in 2024/25, 66% of courses were at level 1-2 and 30% were at level 3 with an age demographic split of 12.1% between 9-23 years old, 17.5% between 24-30 years old, 63.2% between 31-49 years old and 7.2% aged 50 plus.

5.47 Some new entrants have been unprepared for the realities of working in the early education and childcare sector, resulting in many moving on quickly to other roles. This challenge is also reflected in the high attrition rate among early education and childcare T-Level students, where a significant proportion of young people choose the qualification but leave before completing it, often due to a mismatch between their expectations and the demands of the role. It is therefore crucial that courses provide substantial, meaningful and early work-experience opportunities, so that prospective staff gain a realistic understanding of early education and childcare before taking on their first paid role.

5.48 To address this, Greater Manchester introduced the Education and Early Years T-Level in September 2020, which includes a 45-day industry placement alongside learning in areas such as child development, safeguarding and special educational needs. This programme is now offered across all nine FE colleges in Greater Manchester, with the largest cohorts in Bury, Oldham and Stockport/Trafford College. Uptake has continued to grow, with a 33% increase in Early Years Education T-Level students in 2025/26, creating a corresponding rise in demand for high-quality placement opportunities across the sector.

Career Prospects, Development, Benefits, and Mental Health

5.49 There is a cultural view in England that undervalues and under-appreciates the sector, where early education and childcare educators are often seen as

simply childminding. However, the reality is that it is a highly complex role that requires significant responsibility and judgement in relation to care, understanding of child development and acute sensitivities in order to deal with issues such as safeguarding. A professional registration may be one way to increase the inaccurate and unfair bias that a career in early years is less demanding than other sectors, in addition to a workforce culture that understands everyone's roles and how they all contribute to a quality early education and childcare setting.

5.50 Outside of local authority employment, early education and childcare practitioners do not usually have union representation or any kind of voice, and their conditions of work may not cover the usual benefits such as pension, sick pay, and holidays (Solvason, et al., 2025). Further, Haux et al. (2022) reason that the ECE workforce depletion echoes these aspects of disparity and insecurity. They especially focussed on the immense pressure and workload faced by practitioners in the early years. The Social Mobility Commission (2020) contend that it is these heavy workloads that contribute to the increased turnover in the workforce, again impacting the quality and availability of early education and childcare services.

5.51 These pressures also impact the mental health of the workforce, with wellbeing within the workforce being at an all-time low. Results from a 2025 survey show that 48% of the workforce never or rarely feel relaxed, 88% are regularly upset by unexpected events, 76% regularly feel unable to cope and 66% are regularly overwhelmed by difficulties (Solvason, et al., 2025). There is a clear need for standardised wellbeing structures across the sector, with an infrastructure that recognises the psychological load that is given to practitioners and reduces the risk of attrition.

5.52 However, the same survey shows that 89% indicated that their job had a positive impact on their wellbeing, though they emphasised that this was despite the stresses and strains of their job. A practitioner stated "working with the children is rewarding but the job is so hard and tiring" (Solvason, et al., 2025, p. 145) and a manager added "we are expected to do more and more, yet the pay

doesn't rise in line with this. I didn't sign up for this" (Solvason, et al., 2025, p. 145).

5.53 The practitioners engaged in this review reflected how rewarding it can be to work in the sector and that there are some key workers who have stayed throughout their career. This is not only beneficial to the individual, but also the nursery provider as it allows for continuity, succession planning and reduces recruitment costs. However, there needs to be a number of factors lined up in order for a high level of retention, including pay, a positive work culture, training and development and career progression. It is also important to note that not all staff are looking for progression, and therefore feeling valued in their role would be more important. This sense of being valued can come through employee benefits such as sick and holiday pay, or small bonuses like an additional day's leave on your birthday. In Oldham, an event was organised by the local authority to celebrate and recognise the early years sector, the sense of feeling valued through this event and the presence of senior leaders and politicians was evident for attendees. Where this has happened in other areas of GM too, it has really played a part in increasing parity and esteem of the sector.

5.54 Wellbeing is absolutely key to staff happiness and retention as a result. This culture of valuing employees has to start from the top, as it is the people who make an excellent early education and childcare setting, not the place.

5.55 In other literature and industry commentary, common sources of stress have been found to be workload (52%), paperwork stress (39%), worry about their employers' sustainability (33%), and Ofsted (27%) (National Day Nurseries Association, 2023).

5.56 According to recent research by the EECC, around half (48%) of nursery staff are considering quitting their job in the next 12 months and moving to another job in early education and childcare, and even more (57%) are considering leaving the sector altogether. Just under a quarter of childminders (24%) were planning to leave their role and the sector in the next 12 months. Even among those who initially considered their job in the early education and

childcare sector a long-term career, a quarter are now considering leaving (Hardy, et al., 2023).

5.57 It can appear that young people who have struggled with academia are pushed towards a career in early education and childcare, however with Maths and English GCSE requirements for a level three qualification, this can often become a barrier to those students who are actively encouraged into the sector, thus contributing to the lack of qualified staff.

5.58 However, the Manchester Baccalaureate (MBacc) provides a system change that will connect young people to employers and reach opportunities in fast growing sectors which includes early education and childcare. Its ambition is that by 2030 there will be an MBacc offer in every GM school, college and special provision and guarantee that every young person has a clear path to high quality jobs in the city region¹⁰.

5.59 The early education and childcare sector features prominently on the Greater Manchester Apprenticeship and Careers Service (GMACS) website, highlighting available pathways for young people into a career in early education and childcare at whatever education stage they are currently at, supported by advice and support via BeeLine, Greater Manchester's digital service to support the MBacc.

5.60 A Employer Integration Board has been formed to bring together leading businesses committed to shaping skills provision in their sectors and galvanising industrial support for the MBacc, and it is essential that there is an early education and childcare representative on the Board to ensure that there is a continued drive to attract more young people to the sector and that learning provision can remain up to date with the requirements of providers.

5.61 Each MBacc gateway has an Employer Supporters Action Network. It is also important that there is a broad representation from the early education and

¹⁰ <https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/what-we-do/work-and-skills/technical-education-city-region/the-greater-manchester-baccalaureate-mbacc/mbacc-a-2030-vision/>

childcare sector engaged in this so that wider links can be made and opportunities for work experience and placements can be increased. Being an active member of such networks not only increases the voice of the sector but also enables the wider system to have an understand what missing skills need collectively addressing. In Oldham it was recognised that even the cost of a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) for a volunteer was a barrier to more people experiencing what it may be like to work in the early education and childcare years sector, so Get Oldham Working have been funding this cost as a further incentive to settings to offer more voluntary placements. They also recognise the challenge of progressing from a level 2 to a level 3 qualification and offer skills conversations and interview preparation to help employees grow in their confidence. The support required to bridge the gap between level 2 and level 3 is essential and through Get Oldham Working, there is an innovative bridging qualification being developed that could really remove barriers for level 2 staff wanting to progress. Examples of good practice such as this could be the types of innovation which are scaled up across Greater Manchester.

5.62 Upskilling the current workforce is as important as attracting new talent and the EY competency framework, GM REFLECT, developed with Manchester Metropolitan University and the GMCA, is a significant tool that can be regularly used to identify development needs and skills gaps. This provides a digital tool for self-evaluation and signposts to available resources in order to address identified gaps including seven free to access eLearning modules aligned to the framework. Data insight captured through this framework is also highly useful to inform workforce development strategies and the direction of local authority, combined authority and local resources, without adding an additional burden to providers.

5.63 The early education and childcare sector has long been viewed as an extension of “traditional women’s roles” such as caring, nurturing, and domestic responsibility. Government analysis notes that women and young people dominate the workforce, reflecting broader social expectations around who

performs childcare¹¹. According to the House of Commons Library briefing (2024) on the childcare workforce in England, 97% of staff in school-based early years provision and among childminders are women and 98% of staff in group-based early years provision (e.g., nurseries, pre-schools) are women¹². These deep-rooted stereotypes make childcare a profession socially coded as “women’s work,” discouraging male participation. The early education and childcare workforce remains highly gender-segmented, with women comprising the vast majority of practitioners. Research highlights the value of a more gender-diverse workforce, noting potential benefits for children’s experiences and for addressing wider workforce shortages.

5.64 Recognition should also be given to the wider skills required in bridging the gap between the nursery setting and home, from sharing information with parents on emerging needs to supporting them as home educators. During these years of a child’s development, settings can often provide the only regular professional contact with families before they enter the education system. Early education and childcare practitioners are often the first to identify developmental concerns, however this topic of conversation can be quite challenging as not all parents are receptive. Therefore, this requires a degree of sensitivity, understanding and confidence from the practitioner that is often above their skills and initial training.

Scale of the Challenge

5.65 Analysis suggests that it is these factors that are leading to a ‘crisis in recruitment and retention in the early education and childcare sector with qualified and experienced staff leaving the sector due to poor salaries and conditions’ (Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood, 2021, p. 34) and the sector facing ‘unprecedented staff recruitment and retention challenges’ (La Valle, et al., 2022). As of 2021, 20% of ECE practitioners seriously considered leaving the sector and overall staff turnover was at 15%.

¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-stability-of-the-early-years-workforce-in-england/the-stability-of-the-early-years-workforce-in-england>

¹² <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9948/>

5.66 These recruitment challenges have led some nurseries to close permanently, as they are unable to staff settings safely. Others have opted for temporary closures or reduced intake or capacity in parts of the nursery so that staff can be redeployed. The summer term of 2022 saw a 65% increase in nursery closures compared with the same period in 2021. Nursery closures are more likely to occur in areas of deprivation with 15% of closures in 2021/22 happening in the 10% most deprived areas of England (National Day Nurseries Association, 2023). Nursery closures are of particular concern in areas of high deprivation, where early education and childcare settings often provide essential access to family support, safeguarding pathways, and early intervention services.

5.67 The GMCA have attempted to support growth in the sector through the Foundational Economy Innovation Fund, which was established to support innovation and address productivity challenges in foundational sectors such as health, social care, education, retail, and hospitality. The fund operates through a challenge model, providing grants to businesses to test and scale innovative ideas. The foundational economy refers to the parts of the economy that provide essential goods and services, are relied on daily or routinely by the whole population and support collective wellbeing and economic resilience.

5.68 In 2023, the first round of the fund supported 40 projects, including several focused on early education and childcare workforce issues such as recruitment and retention. Two projects received further funding to scale up: one developed an online platform to connect part-time workers with early education and childcare settings, and another explored increasing the involvement of fathers in the workforce. Both projects have continued independently following the grant period.

5.69 It was noted that sector engagement in the second round of funding was lower, attributed to recent changes in national legislation and funding models affecting early education and childcare providers. Only one early education and

childcare project was funded in the latest round, focusing on increasing the number of Level 3 qualified staff and developing holistic family support roles.

5.70 The capacity within the sector to engage with such funding opportunities had also evidently reduced, perhaps reflecting how the increased pressures have reduced the capacity for nursery staff to consider opportunities for innovation. It was reported that Glasgow is set to launch a pilot fund focused on childcare settings in 2026, which may provide valuable insights into how best to address the specific needs of the sector and proactively support early education and childcare providers with innovation.

5.71 Local data that could provide a full and clear picture of our early education workforce is sparse; however, practitioners are constantly asked to provide all types of data, sometimes from central Government and as a result are often less responsive to these 'scatter gun type' requests. In the last 6 months a workforce test and learn project has been mobilised in GMCA to co-design new approaches to the collation, analysis and use of workforce data. This is part of a 3-year programme of work led by the Early Education and Childcare Coalition, which aims to build capacity and raise the status of the early education and childcare workforce.

5.72 Early education is not about the teaching or assessing of under 5s but about supporting early cognitive and emotional development and giving them access to opportunities and skills that will set them up for school and reduce inequalities that might impact on their overall wellbeing and educational attainment later in life. Alongside their emotional and social development, early education and childcare focusses on language acquisition, speech and literacy. Speech and language delays are common and follow a social gradient with analysis showing 34% of children and young people in Greater Manchester having a speech, language and communication need. The early education and childcare sector plays a huge role in the development of early communication skills which are essential for a good start in life. As children move into their school years speech and language, emotional and social development can often be a strong indicator

of their educational achievements, as those who are not able to develop their basic skills will often find the education system unachievable and as a result become NEET (not in employment, education or training).

5.73 In summary, good quality early education and childcare provision is fundamental to the prevention agenda, serving not only as the cornerstone for child development but also as a catalyst for broader social and economic growth across Greater Manchester. By investing in early education and childcare, we lay the groundwork for improved life outcomes, reducing future inequalities and supporting healthier, more resilient communities. Prioritising high standards in early education and childcare settings is therefore not just a matter of educational policy, but a strategic investment in the region's long-term prosperity and wellbeing.

DRAFT

List of abbreviations and acronyms

DfE – Department for Education

ECE – early childhood education

EECC – Early Education Childcare Coalition

EYA – Early Years Alliance

EYP – early years practitioner

EYT – early years teacher

EYTS – early years teacher status

NDNA – National Day Nursery Association

OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development

QTS – qualified teacher status

SEFDEY – Sector Endorsed Foundation Degrees in Early Years

DRAFT

Bibliography

Archer, N., 2024. Uncovering the discursive 'borders' of professional identities in English early childhood workforce reform policy. *Policy Futures in Education*, 22(2), pp. 187-206.

<https://www.webofscience.com/wos/woscc/full-record/WOS:000879112600001>

Crown, H., 2019. Childcare's Dirty Secret [Online]. *Nursery World*.

<https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/content/news/exclusive-working-poverty-childcare-practitioners-childcare-s-dirty-secret>

Department for Education, 2024. *Childcare and early years provider survey - reporting year 2024*, London: DfE.

<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-provider-survey/2024>

Department for Education, 2025. *Pupil premium: overview*. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pupil-premium/pupil-premium> [Accessed 07 11 2025].

Department for Education, 2025. *Statutory guidance: Early years foundation stage (EYFS) statutory framework*, London: DfE.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2>

Early Education and Childcare Coalition, 2025. *Pulse Check 2025: Public Attitudes Towards Early Education and Childcare*, s.l.: Early Education and Childcare Coalition.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/646ca30371a2ef6a657e9309/t/6876cc1733690d111b65347c/1752615959995/EECC+Pulse+Check+Final+2025.pdf>

Early Years Alliance, 2018. *Minds Matter: The impact of working in the early years sector on practitioners' mental health and wellbeing*, s.l.: Pre-school Learning Alliance.

https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/sites/default/files/minds_matter_report_pre-school_learning_alliance.pdf

Early Years Alliance, 2021. *Breaking Point - The impact of recruitment and retention challenges on the early years sector in England*, s.l.: Early Years Alliance.

https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/sites/default/files/breaking_point_early_years_alliance_2_december_2021.pdf

Early Years Alliance, 2024. *Turning Point? - An updated analysis of the impact of recruitment and retention challenges*, s.l.: Early Years Alliance.

<https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Turning-point-report.pdf>

Flemons, L. & Worth, J., 2025. *The Early Years Workforce in England 2025*, Slough: National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER).

https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/4uwi4cs5/the_early_years_workforce_in_england_2025.pdf

GMCA, 2025. *Early Years Workforce Census Report 2025*, Manchester: GMCA.

Gov.uk, 2025. *Get extra funding for your early years provider*. [Online]

<https://www.gov.uk/get-extra-early-years-funding> [Accessed 07 11 2025].

Hardy, K. et al., 2023. *Retention and Return: Delivering the expansion of early years entitlement in England*, s.l.: Early Education and Childcare Coalition.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/646ca30371a2ef6a657e9309/t/65482050ded6710668b8b62a/1699225681784/Retention+and+Return.pdf>

Haux, T. et al., 2022. *Early years recruitment, retention and business planning during the Coronavirus pandemic*, London: Department for Education.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/62695faae90e0746cd3f0f9c/Early_years_recruitment_retention_and_business_planning_during_the_Coronavirus_pandemic.pdf

Hudson, R., Brammer, H. & Witton, A., 2022. Early years teacher status: constraints, implications and reforms required for a twenty-first-century early years workforce. *Education 3-13*, 51(8), pp. 1267-1280.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2022.2062022>

IFF Research; London Economics, 2025. *Early years financial incentives evaluation - Final report*, s.l.: Department for Education.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6902261e71b575684c3cf813/Early_years_financial_incentives_evaluation_final_report_October_2025.pdf

IFS, 2025. *Early Years*, s.l.: IFS.

<https://ifs.org.uk/education-spending/early-years>

La Valle, I. et al., 2022. *Implications of COVID for Early Childhood Education and Care in England*, s.l.: Centre for Evidence and Implementation.

<https://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/sites/default/files/Resource%20Library/Implic>

[ations%20of%20Covid%20for%20ECEC%20in%20England%20-%20June%202022_0.pdf](#)

McDonald, P., Thorpe, K. & Irvine, S., 2018. Low Pay but Still We Stay: Retention in Early Childhood Education and Care. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 60(5), pp. 647-668.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022185618800351> .

National Day Nurseries Association, 2023. *Written Evidence Submitted by the National Day Nurseries Association (NADA)*, s.l.: s.n.

<https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/116766/pdf/>

National Day Nurseries Association, 2025. *Early years workforce crisis demands urgent action before further childcare expansion*, s.l.: NDNA.

<https://ndna.org.uk/early-years-workforce-crisis-demands-urgent-action-before-further-childcare-expansion/>

OECD, 2025. *Starting Strong: Reducing Inequalities by Investing in Early Childhood Education and Care*, Paris: OECD Publishing.

[new-starting-strong-brochure-final-web.pdf](#)

Ofsted, 2023. *International Perspectives on Early Years*, London: Ofsted.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/international-perspectives-on-early-years/international-perspectives-on-early-years>

PACEY and Voice, 2018. *Improving Early Years Graduates' Prospects, Career Progression and Reward*, London: PACEY.

Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood, 2021. *Big Change Starts Small*, London: The Royal Foundation.

https://centreforearlychildhood.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/RFCEC_BCCS_Report_and_Appendices.pdf

Sakr, M., Halls, K. & Cooper, K., 2023. Early Years leadership development during workforce crisis: perspectives of 24 UK training providers. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 32(1), pp. 101-113.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2023.2234108>

Save the Children, 2025. *Closing the Gaps: Funding, Inclusion and Quality in Childcare*, s.l.: Save the Children.

<https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/blogs/2025/closing-the-gaps-in-childcare>

Social Mobility Commission, 2020. *The stability of the early years workforce in England - An examination of national, regional and organisational barriers*, s.l.: Social

Mobility Commission.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68f78243f038caddfad11a80/The_stability_of_the_early_years_workforce_in_England_updated_Oct2025.pdf

Solvason, C., Sutton-Tsang, S. & Stobbs, N., 2025. Heading for burnout: The early years workforce in England post COVID-19. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 23(2), pp. 137-149.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/1476718X241308402>

Swain, R., 2024. *How much do teachers get paid?*, s.l.: Prospects.

[https://www.prospects.ac.uk/jobs-and-work-experience/job-sectors/teacher-training-and-education/how-much-do-teachers-get-](https://www.prospects.ac.uk/jobs-and-work-experience/job-sectors/teacher-training-and-education/how-much-do-teachers-get-paid/#:~:text=a%20teaching%20assistant,-,Early%20years%20teacher%20(EYT)%20salary,teaching%20is%20a%20rewarding%20profession.)

[paid/#:~:text=a%20teaching%20assistant.-](https://www.prospects.ac.uk/jobs-and-work-experience/job-sectors/teacher-training-and-education/how-much-do-teachers-get-paid/#:~:text=a%20teaching%20assistant,-,Early%20years%20teacher%20(EYT)%20salary,teaching%20is%20a%20rewarding%20profession.)

[,Early%20years%20teacher%20\(EYT\)%20salary,teaching%20is%20a%20rewarding%20profession.](https://www.prospects.ac.uk/jobs-and-work-experience/job-sectors/teacher-training-and-education/how-much-do-teachers-get-paid/#:~:text=a%20teaching%20assistant,-,Early%20years%20teacher%20(EYT)%20salary,teaching%20is%20a%20rewarding%20profession.)

The Sutton Trust, 2023. *World Class: Global learnings for England on early years policy*, London: The Sutton Trust.

<https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/a-fair-start-world-class/>

The Sutton Trust, 2024. *Inequality in early years education*, London: The Sutton Trust.

<https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/inequality-in-early-years-education/>

Vardy, A., 2022. Early years foundation degrees: improving social mobility and promoting children's outcomes through the professionalism of the workforce or a tokenistic substitute for proper education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 46(4), pp. 427-440.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1965557>