

Interim Report of the
**Comparative analysis of early years
workforce policy in the four UK nations**
(EYW4N) project

August 2025

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ISBN-978-0-904187-84-7

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Citation format:

Early Education (2025) *Interim Report of the Comparative analysis of early years workforce policy in the four UK nations (EYW4N) project*. St Albans: Early Education.

Available to download at: www.early-education.org.uk/early-years-workforce-policy-in-the-four-uk-nations-a-comparative-analysis/

Published by



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Charity registered in England and Wales no. 313082
Charity registered in Scotland no. SC039472
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Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Project Team	4
Project Advisory Group.....	5
Executive Summary	6
Key issues	6
Successful policies and strategies	7
Conclusion	8
1. Introduction, aims and objectives	10
1.1 Introduction	10
1.1.2 Scope and definitions	11
1.2 Aims and objectives of the research	14
1.2.1 Aims	14
1.2.2 Objectives	14
1.2.3 Intended outcomes	14
2. Methodology	15
2.1 Overall design	15
2.1.1 Research Questions	15
2.2 Data included in the interim report	16
2.3 Ethical Approval and Research Integrity	16
3. Initial findings from the literature review	17
3.1 Profiles of the Early Years Workforce across the UK	17
3.1.1 The Early Years Workforce in England	17
3.1.2 The Early Years Workforce in Northern Ireland.....	23
3.1.3 The Early Years Workforce in Scotland.....	26
3.1.4 The Early Years Workforce in Wales.....	28
3.2 Key themes from the literature review across the UK	34

4.	Initial findings from stakeholder interviews	36
4.1	Direct impacts of policy	37
4.1.1	Workforce strategies and long-term, joined up policies	37
4.1.2	Qualification requirements and the quality of initial and continuing professional learning	39
4.1.3	Funding and financial sustainability	47
4.1.4	Remuneration and conditions of service	50
4.1.5	Disparities between sectors	53
4.1.6	Workforce voice, representation and identity	55
4.1.7	Diversity and inclusion	56
4.2	Lived experiences of policy	57
5.	Next steps	59
6.	References.....	61
7	Glossaries	80
7.1	England - Acronyms/Glossary of Key Terms	80
7.2	Northern Ireland Acronyms/Glossary of Key Terms	81
7.3	Wales - Acronyms/Glossary of Key Terms	82
7.4	Scotland - Acronyms/Glossary of Key Terms	84

Acknowledgements

The interim report is the first output from a one-year project, *A comparative analysis of early years workforce policy in the four UK nations* (EYW4N), funded by the Nuffield Foundation and conducted by Early Education with the University of Plymouth, University of Sheffield, Stranmillis University College, Queen's University Belfast, University of Strathclyde, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, running from February 2025 to December 2025.

The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare and Justice. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. The Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation.

We are especially grateful to participants in this research to date. Thanks to Kayla Halls who contributed to the early stages of this work.

We also gratefully acknowledge the support of the Project Advisory Group with representation from all four nations and particular workforce expertise.

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Executive Summary

This interim report presents initial findings of the *Comparative analysis of early years workforce policy in the four UK nations* (EYW4N) project. It sets the contexts in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, prior to our final report later this year which will make policy recommendations reflecting the findings discussed here, and from international stakeholder interviews, focus groups and case studies which are currently underway.

It has been widely acknowledged that the early years workforce (EYW) across the UK is facing a sustained crisis, marked by challenges in recruitment, retention, remuneration, qualification disparities and professional recognition. Despite numerous reviews and policy initiatives, systemic issues persist, threatening the quality and sustainability of early years provision. In all four nations the need for strategic responses to EYW issues and/or for follow through has been highlighted, alongside full funding of existing effective strategies and related policies.

Key issues

Our review of the UK literature confirms that all four nations face common challenges: fragmented qualification systems, poor career progression, low professional status, and low pay. Each UK nation has its own distinct policy landscape, as well as some unifying factors. This report highlights commonalities and distinctions. For example: in England key concerns include: a fragmented approach to qualifications, low levels of graduate level qualification in PVI settings a lack of pedagogical leadership, inconsistent policy implementation and (until July 2025) a lack of comprehensive strategy. A longstanding lack of strategic policy is a key concern in Northern Ireland, but there have been positive recent developments towards sector cohesion and higher-level qualification support for some PVI settings. Scotland's EYW policies have strong policy aspirations but there are gaps in implementation, with pay, parity of status, and the loss of teachers from some types of setting, being concerns. The bilingual EYW workforce plans in Wales, have been welcomed, and these form part of a clear anti-poverty strategy, though there are distinct differences across care, education and playwork which present challenges in implementation.

UK stakeholder interviews have indicated concerns around policy impact to date, with participants highlighting some positive developments in parallel with fragmented, underfunded policies. In terms of qualifications, there are concerns about inconsistent standards, unclear (or lack of) progression routes, unqualified personnel, and in some cases, poor preparation for practitioner roles in early education and care settings.

Government funding is a cross-cutting issue, with disparities between sectors and qualifications raised as a concern and a view that insufficient investment undermines workforce stability. This is related to the issue of remuneration, with low pay being seen as a major barrier to recruitment and retention, particularly in PVI settings. However, it was noted that alongside remuneration and working conditions, work with babies, toddlers and young children is sometimes highly demanding and in some cases support and professional learning opportunities are lacking. This links with disparities across and between sectors with differences between schools and other settings including inequities in pay, professional recognition, and separate systems of governance, inspection and regulation.

The lack of progress in many EYW concerns was related by some to a lack of “voice”, with limited unionisation and variations and, in some nations, no professional registration system. These factors were connected by some participants to the low public value for work with young children, low status and limited policy influence compared to other types of workforce.

In terms of diversity and inclusion, participants discussed the underrepresentation of men, people from ethnic minorities, and low bilingual recruitment (especially in Wales) as issues requiring attention. There was a sense that, because the EYW remains almost wholly a female profession, issues of low pay and status persist. The dominance of a young and female workforce was felt to compound retention and recruitment challenges.

Successful policies and strategies

Whilst participants in all four nations spoke of some difficulties with policy, implementation or lack of policy direction, there was also acknowledgment of some positive policy moves and measures. Some participants suggested that targeted

policy interventions can have tangible positive effects. Many of our participants seemed optimistic that good policies, implemented well, can improve many aspects of the EYW. Examples include:

- In England, the Graduate Leaders Fund was cited as a very successful policy.
- In Scotland, initiatives to encourage practitioners to upgrade their qualifications, which have led to significant growth in graduate leaders with a BA in Childhood Practice.
- The introduction of the Early Years Specialist role in Northern Ireland during the Preschool Expansion Policy where settings led by less-qualified staff received mentorship, guidance on curriculum and pedagogy, and help preparing for inspections, thereby raising quality and building their capacity.
- The formation of inter-departmental groups to address early years workforce issues in Northern Ireland resulted in cross-sector collaboration and strategy development, resulting in a joined-up strategy.
- Collaborative approaches in Wales, such as the recent ECPLC document and also a plan to bridge the education and care split in the early years sector in Wales.
- Initiatives to promote early years careers to young people, those currently outside the sector, a diversity of communities, as well as policy developments linked to the Anti Racist Wales Action plan and the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act (ALNET).

Conclusion

It is becoming clear to us that the four nations have many issues in common, and there is a need to learn more from each other which we will further elaborate in our final report. As we embark on the next phase of our study, we shall ask how our nations might take examples of policies that are working successfully in one nation of the UK and consider why this is the case and what adjustments might be made to enable such a policy to be effective elsewhere in the UK where the situation is not so effective?

A picture is emerging of a workforce united in its commitment to providing quality group setting experiences of education and care for young children but fractured and burdened by some policies which have allowed division as a result of siloed systems.

We look forward to expanding on these themes in our final report.

1. Introduction, aims and objectives

1.1 Introduction

This report presents an interim progress update, preliminary findings and future plans for the project *A comparative analysis of early years workforce policy in the four UK nations* (EYW4N).

The Early Years Workforce (EYW) is experiencing crisis for different reasons and in different ways throughout the UK. Despite numerous reviews and reports identifying a range of strategies to improve recruitment, retention, status, pay, and qualifications in the EYW, the crisis has persisted. Since 2012, the EYW has been the subject of independent reviews for governments in England (Nutbrown, 2012), Wales (Siraj and Kingston 2014) and Scotland (Siraj and Kingston, 2015), and multiple studies of workforce issues (Bonetti, 2020; Pascal et al, 2020; Campbell- Barr et al, 2020). Concerns around qualifications, and challenges of retention, recruitment and remuneration, have endured across the UK, in a complex mixed-market of provision with statutory, voluntary and private provision, and variable qualification requirements, pay levels and status. These challenges jeopardise the quality of provision, limit capacity to fulfil current entitlements and planned extension, and weaken educators' capacity to engage in continuing professional development (Early Years Alliance, 2021). EYW wellbeing is generally low, with – in some areas – unsustainable loss of staff (Early Education and Childcare Coalition, 2023).

These and other unresolved EYW challenges provided the starting points for the EYW4N project and underpin the need to fully understand EYW policy across the UK – and depending on national policies – to identify any effective strategies and what needs to change in the urgent short-term and what can be developed in terms of future policy successes. Building on existing studies the project is seeking to develop a UK-wide informed response fitting to each of the four nations. Entrenched difficulties with achieving successful EYW reform makes the study urgent and timely. In engaging policy makers and stakeholders on EYW issues, the project is generating an understanding of the benefits and challenges of UK EYW strategy approaches. It is identifying successful stand-alone developments, thus identifying policies which are universally beneficial for the UK, and nation specific approaches.

Complex, longstanding EYW problems need radical, sustained, systematic approaches to planning and development to make the EYW fit for purpose, for the present and future. The recent publication of the Best Start in Life strategy (DfE, 2025) on July 7th set out a strategic approach for the EYW in England. The interviews reported in this Interim Report were completed before the strategy was announced, but they nevertheless shed light on the need for a strategic approach and will help to consider the potential impact of this new development to what may be needed to bring it from conception to a practical reality of change in the EYW in England.

The Nuffield Foundation's identified priority of addressing the EYW crisis through a whole system review lies at the heart of this study. The project seeks to identify potential ways forward in UK policy, across all four nations, to adopt policies which offer immediate and long-term improvements in EYW conditions and qualifications. Our comparison of EYW issues across the variety of early childhood group settings in the four nations, is designed to identify how policies can prepare those women and men who form the EYW, for work with young children. We seek to draw on the best and most successful lessons from this study (as relevant to each nation) to grow and sustain a high-quality early years profession for our four nations.

1.1.2 Scope and definitions

We use the term the Early Years Workforce (EYW) to apply generically to the people, across the UK, who work with young children from birth to 8 years in group settings which are state maintained (state primary and nursery schools) or private, voluntary or independent (PVI) provision¹. In doing so we are conscious of the inadequacy of the term “workforce” and of how to refer to individuals within it. One of our hopes is that we might contribute to more fitting nomenclature for those working to provide early education and care for the UK's young children (see Section 3.1 for further

¹ In drawing parameters for the project, we excluded home settings, primarily childminders, because this important element of provision has its multiple and unique issues across the UK and thus, we deemed it out of scope for the scale of the project. Similarly, Playwork lies outside the scope of the project.

discussion of this). Within this report we use the terms “workforce” and “early years educator” as an interim measure.

Defining the EYW is also complicated due to the mixed-market of provision, with “childcare” often offered by the non-maintained voluntary or private sector and “early education” or “nursery education” for 3- to 4-year-olds offered in both sectors, but with different terminology and scope in each of the four nations. Most children aged 4 to 7 years attend the early years of primary school.

In Wales, provision for children from birth to 5 has recently been referred to as Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (Welsh Government, 2024a, 2024b) and includes childcare settings, play settings and nursery education in a school (Welsh Government, 2024b)

According to the same document “early years” in Wales includes all provision from birth to 7 years (up to year 2 in school). Therefore, there is a diversity of professionals making up this workforce,

including but not limited to: childcare practitioners and managers, childminders and their assistants, leaders and assistants of playgroups, playworkers, Flying Start practitioners, teaching assistants, teachers, Early Years Advisory Teachers, Foundation Learning leads, regional consortia and local authorities. (Welsh Government, 2024a:20)

This complexity in terms of preschool/school/education/care is also reflected in the terminology used in documents relating to early education and care, so that: “early years” refers to birth to 7 years old; “early childhood, play, learning and care” refers to birth to 5 years old; “foundation learning/2” refers to 3 to 7 years old; “registered childcare” refers to birth to 12-year-olds (Welsh Government, 2024b; 2023b). In Wales “practitioners” is the generic term given to the EYW across the early years sectors and including childcare workers, teachers and classroom assistants (Welsh Government, 2024b). Indeed, reference is not made in Welsh policy to the ECLPC workforce, and some might identify not one workforce but separate childcare, playwork and nursery education workforces.

“Early Learning and Childcare” (ELC) is the preferred policy term in Scotland for provision before Primary 1, which demonstrates the importance of the roots of both types of provision, (Burns, 2022).

In England, the Early Years Foundation Stage covers children from birth to 5 in all forms of early years provision, including: the reception class (4-5-year-olds) in schools, maintained nursery schools, maintained nursery classes in primary schools, private, voluntary and independent (PVI) group settings. Government statistics for England, however, increasingly exclude reception-age children (4-5-year-olds), as they are considered to be in the early years when it comes to curriculum, but not in terms of funding.

Continued use of the term “childcare” remains a challenge in Northern Ireland’s early years policy because it reinforces the policy division between early years education (statutory nurseries) and childcare (private and voluntary settings) (Early Years, 2022). This distinction has significant implications for workforce recognition, funding, and policy focus.

Across the UK, shifting terminology and policy distinctions have implications for:

- **perceptions of the workforce** - the term “childcare” is often associated with caregiving rather than education, and with lower levels of qualifications, often attributing a lower professional recognition to these members of the EYW
- **funding allocations** – in many cases early years education in schools receives more funding than in private and voluntary childcare settings, reinforcing sectoral disparities
- **consistency across a split system** – in addition to funding disparities, all four nations apply different workforce requirements, inspections models and sometimes different curricula to state sector provision and PVIs
- **government priorities** - early years has been a lower policy priority compared to primary and post-primary education, limiting long-term investment in workforce development and professionalisation. Making early years long-term strategic policy a priority is essential to address the current issues in the UK.

1.2 Aims and objectives of the research

1.2.1 Aims

This project aims to inform EYW policy development across the UK, by:

1. developing an understanding of the operational success of EYW strategies in the four UK nations by: generating a UK-wide understanding of strengths and weaknesses of EYW policies
2. informing policy makers about how known and entrenched EYW difficulties might be addressed with reference to identified successful approaches internationally.

1.2.2 Objectives

The project will:

1. create a shared evidence-base of the four UK nations on the operational success or failure of recent EYW policy approaches in the UK, learning from countries outside the UK where appropriate
2. identify policy options with a strong likelihood of operational success for short and long-term actions and policy frameworks
3. engage policy makers in discussion with one another and the sector about EYW challenges and priorities.

1.2.3 Intended outcomes

1. EYW policy in the four UK nations has greater operational success through being informed by experiences across and beyond the UK.
2. Improved understanding of the shared challenges and contextual differences for the four UK nations has opened up an appreciation of possibilities and implications for adaptation and transferability of approaches.
3. Dialogue between stakeholders has created channels for ongoing sharing of issues and solutions.

2. Methodology

2.1 Overall design

This study is seeking to build an overview of existing workforce strategies and policy interventions across the UK, and informed internationally, to consider the potential for long-term EYW strategies across all four UK national contexts, remaining sensitive to regional differences within nations and attuned to their unique characteristics.

We began the project with a review of relevant national and international scholarship and grey policy-related literature to develop an overview of existing workforce strategies and policy interventions across the UK in the past 15 years. This has informed the potential for long-term, EYW strategies to benefit and address the four distinct national contexts of the UK, whilst remaining sensitive to regional differences within nations.

The literature review has also informed the focus of expert interviews with participants from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and internationally.

2.1.1 Research Questions

The project is asking:

1. What are the major EYW challenges in each of the four UK nations?
2. What government-level interventions have had a positive impact on EYW recruitment, retention, status, remuneration, and qualification levels across the UK in recent years?
3. What have been the characteristics of operationally successful international EYW policy interventions?
4. What short-, medium- and long-term actions would drive positive change, and how might these best be embedded in EYW policymaking?

The project will inform EYW policy development across the UK, through an analysis of recent EYW policy in the four UK nations. Interviews with key stakeholders, focus groups and a small number of original exemplar case studies will:

1. consider the approaches of each nation, including enacted EYW strategies and instances where no overarching strategy has been established
2. identify examples of government policy or action which have supported increased EYW capacity and/or qualification levels and
3. examine EYW strategies or interventions outside the UK that have successfully increased workforce capacity and/or qualification levels.

2.2 Data included in the interim report

Thus far we have:

1. reviewed relevant scholarship and grey literature in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and internationally
2. conducted interviews with policy stakeholders from the four UK nations
3. carried out preliminary analysis of the UK interviews.

These form the main basis of this interim report.

2.3 Ethical Approval and Research Integrity

Ethical approval has been obtained from the Research Ethics and Integrity Board at the University of Sheffield. Due attention is being paid throughout to issues of informed participant consent, confidentiality and anonymity throughout the project. We have negotiated with participants their preferences in terms of identification or anonymity.

Ethical approaches set out by the British Educational Research Association are being adhered to throughout the life course of the project and research integrity is scrutinised and maintained across the study.

3. Initial findings from the literature review

This section draws on peer reviewed literature and policy relevant documentation to provide brief profiles of the EYW in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales over the past 15 years.

We first include nation-specific profiles (3.1), followed by an indication of some key themes identified in our UK-wide review of the literature (3.2). These will be linked (in our final report) with related understandings from our review of international literature, thus locating our study internationally.

3.1 Profiles of the Early Years Workforce across the UK

This selective summary of the literature on EYW focuses on: policy developments, policy terms and terminology for those who work in the early years, workforce inequality, including issues of professionalisation, funding and remuneration; and issues of recruitment and retention. The four nations have many themes and issues in common, some of which differ in scale and complexity. Therefore, the nation-specific overviews present four different, and necessarily brief, accounts of EYW policy contexts and landscapes. Together they demonstrate the distinctive nature of our four nations, and characteristics they share.

3.1.1 The Early Years Workforce in England

With a population of 57.5 million, England is the largest nation in the UK (which as a total population of 68.2 million). English EYW policy developments since 2010 have been many and varied, with fluctuating policy commitments, shaped by varying levels of political will and economic climate. The period 2010 to 2020 has been described as a workforce policy crisis (Pascal et al, 2020; Nutbrown 2021; Early Years Alliance (EYA), 2021), with inadequate investment and a reduced political commitment to professionalise a high-quality workforce (Cameron and Moss, 2020). A mixed market model for the provision of services in England, has long been criticised for the resultant fragmented system and implications for the quality of provision for children (Moss 2014; Lloyd and Penn 2014).

England's policy patchwork has placed increasing demands on the EYW, without equivalent investment in remunerating and growing that workforce in parallel with a main emphasis on expanding numbers of places and hours of government-funded provision. However, there has been little attention to expanding the pool of well-qualified early years professionals known to make a difference to children's outcomes.

In July 2025, the government announced its Best Start in Life strategy, outlining how it will improve child development and ensure that all children have the chance to achieve and thrive, with funding of £1.5bn for early years services in England. A clear objective is that 75% of children are "ready for school" by 2028, to be achieved through improved services for families and provision for children, which is more accessible and affordable (DfE, 2025). The data reported here were collected and analysed before the announcement of the Best Start in Life strategy for England, and we shall consider its possible implications further in our final report. Given the timeliness of this strategy announcement and its pertinence to our project we quote its summary at length:

... for too long government decisions have made that harder, not easier. Funding for integrated, holistic early parenting and family support has been radically reduced since 2010. Many children's centres remain, thanks to the great age of expansion some twenty years ago, but the service offer is much diminished. Early education and childcare is unaffordable for many families and, in some cases, not available at all and we have seen ever decreasing numbers of childminders in recent years.

The range of early education and childcare offers is complex for parents to navigate, with different schemes that are confusing and difficult to access. England's amazing unsung heroes, our early years educators, feel overstretched and undervalued. The attention of leaders, nationally and locally, has for too long been elsewhere – and services that support families with babies and young children are not joined up enough.

...

We must listen to and work closely with professionals who work with families, babies and young children... And we must learn lessons from what has come before, to thoughtfully design and deliver comprehensive reform to the early education and childcare system. (DfE, 2025:7)

It is crucial to understand what has come before so that the effects of England's EYW failures over the past 15 years are not repeated. The EYW in England is experiencing many inequalities, which the Best Start in Life strategy seems to be seeking to address.

A key aim of the Best Start in Life strategy is to “improve the quality of education that children receive in early years settings, childminders and reception classes” (DfE, 2025:10). Seeking to improve children's outcomes through investment in “training and qualifications to raise the skill levels of the workforce, and increasing understanding of high-quality practice” (p10), Specifically Best Start in Life seeks to: raise the status and professionalism of early years educators, including: the introduction of a register of practitioners; increasing the level of qualifications and number of qualified early years teachers and educators through high-quality training; addressing retention issues in disadvantaged communities; strengthening links across settings, to help more children's transitions into reception classes; enhance inclusion; improve the quality of teaching in reception. (DfE, 2025:10-11). The implications for EYW development and expansion are clear.

In terms of qualifications and professionalism, a skilled and knowledgeable workforce is vital for the promotion of quality early years education and care for young children (Nutbrown, 2012; Mathers et al, 2012; DfE, 2025). The development of over 200 qualifications and multiple training providers has led to an extensive list of qualifications such as NVQs, BTECs, T-Levels, diplomas, apprenticeships, experienced-based degrees, Early Years Professional Status, Early Years Teacher Status, Qualified Teacher Status. The market allows all awarding organisations to develop their own qualification to meet the requirements of each set of standards. For example, there are currently 55 qualifications listed on the DfE Early Years qualifications checklist (DfE, 2022) which qualify people to be counted in ratio of staff to children at Level 3. These qualification routes are then offered by multiple training

providers with varying quality. This has contributed to the creation of an EYW which is fragmented by the range of qualifications, training routes, job titles and roles.

Resultant confusion around the most relevant pathway to take within the early years sector (Department for Education, 2022) is problematic for individuals and sector providers. Currently, in England, an individual does not need a qualification to start a career in early years and childcare, (DfE 2024a), however, the EYFS Statutory Framework sets out minimum qualification levels for particular roles (such as setting managers) and which must be held by a set proportion of staff within the setting. Therefore, settings must consider relevant qualifications to determine suitability for at least some roles which require an early years qualification. Lack of clarity around whether qualifications are needed for particular roles, and which ones, is a devaluing factor, belittling the knowledge, skill, professionalism and status required of the workforce to provide high-quality education and care.

Presently, in England, different qualification and staffing requirements apply to schools and other group-based settings, resulting in very different qualification profiles. In 2024 a reported 86% of all school-based early years staff (in nursery classes and maintained nursery schools) held a Level 3 or above and 42% of early years school-based staff held Level 6 or higher (DfE, 2024). In PVI group settings, a reported 80% of all staff held a Level 3 or above and 11% held Level 6 or higher.

In addition to leadership and management roles maintained by experienced educators, a focus upon creating a graduate workforce with degree-qualified staff is also thought to enhance professionalism (Hoskins and Smedley, 2020; Wood et al. 2023). Earlier efforts to increase the proportion of graduates in group-based settings stalled after the Graduate Leader Fund was abolished in 2011 (Bonetti, 2020), and Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) saw a rapid decline in recruitment to Early Years Initial Teacher Training courses from 2,327 in 2013, to 314 in 2019 (Archer and Merrick, 2020). The main reasons for this are limited career progression and pay in comparison with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). A commitment to increasing the number of graduates within the 2017 workforce strategy (DfE, 2017) was scrapped before being implemented. This was despite strong evidence of the positive impact of graduates on young children's experiences and outcomes (Kay et al, 2025; Mathers et al, 2012; Mathers and Smees, 2014; Sylva et al, 2004). A review of

developments in the EYW from 2012 to 2020 concluded that “...there is no longer any doubt that a highly skilled, graduate led early education and childcare sector can have a positive long-term impact on children’s learning, development and future outcomes” (Pascal et al, 2020). Until recently there was no clear published plan to act on this evidence. However, the Best Start in Life strategy for England, has acknowledged the importance of qualifications to children’s outcomes:

Having a trained early years teacher leading practice in a setting leads to better inspection results and better long-term outcomes for children. But there are not enough early years teachers working in the sector. Post-16 qualifications at level 3 are being reformed so they are better quality and deliver improved outcomes. We want there to be a clear pathway and training routes for early years educators to progress their careers and achieve higher level qualifications. (DfE, 2025:39)

This is much needed because the level of qualifications held by the EYW in England seems to be declining as fewer educators upskill their knowledge, skills and expertise. The English qualifications system presently seems to offer limited opportunities to progress within the sector (Nutbrown 2021; SMC, 2020) thus inhibiting motivation to attain further qualifications (Kay et al, 2021). One reason for this is that some early years educators feel undervalued and underpaid, seeing no personal benefits from enhancing their level of qualification (Pascal et al, 2020; Payler and Locke, 2013). The success of England’s future strategic development in the early years will need sustained funding to realise the practical reality of an enhanced EYW which sees working in early education and care as a long-term career choice.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is closely aligned with developing or maintaining professionalism within the early years sector, increasing the motivation and retention of staff (Sakr and Bonetti, 2023). The Early Years Workforce Commission (EYWC, 2021) noted the need for urgent exploration of flexible CPD in England, as a requirement for all staff.

The vast range of qualifications available in England has arguably led to confusion around professionalism, leadership and management within the EYW. Definitions of

professionalism are not universal and a multiplicity of nomenclature for professional identities exists within the EYW and wider society, (for example practitioner, educator, teacher and childcare worker), exacerbating existing confusion about what it means to be a professional within the sector (Chalke, 2013). Inconsistent leadership pathways also potentially limit career progression for educators. Sustainable leadership models in the EYW could assist the development of knowledge and professionalism, leading to better outcomes for children and their families (Carroll-Meehan et al, 2019).

Whilst governmental focus in England has sought to develop and restructure higher qualification levels (first with Early Years Professional Status then Early Years Teacher Status), this has not equated with changes in the roles available or an associated pay structure, suggesting further focus is needed (Simpson, 2010).. Low remuneration and pay disparity across equivalent qualifications, roles and responsibilities and types of provision needs to be addressed (Kay et al, 2021; Basford, 2019). Thus, the range of qualifications available means there is no unified overview of the knowledge and skills required to be sufficiently qualified to join the EYW in England, (DfE, 2022). Associated low pay and poor progression routes remain, whilst the demands on the EYW increase and calls for clear and consistent pathways into the sector and adequate funded pay scales remain unaddressed (Vardy, 2022; EYA, 2024). This presents further challenge to the Best Start in Life strategy.

Low pay has long affected the women, who make up around 97% of the EYW. Whilst some have speculated that low pay is a factor in the very low representation of men in the English EYW, Davies (2019) points out that men are employed in many other low paid jobs, arguing that pay is not the only factor. Consistently, the EYW in England has attracted around 2-3% of men (Payler and Davis, 2017; Wilkinson et al, 2024, DfE, 2024) highlighting persistent issues of inequality and inclusion, and adding to gender stereotypes as many children do not experience the beneficial qualities many men can bring to the work (Davies, 2019; Moorhouse, 2024).

There are increasing concerns relating to the challenge of recruiting and retaining skilled and knowledgeable educators in England with full and relevant qualifications. In some settings this has resulted in restricted or reduced opening hours, limited

intake of new children and permanent closure (EYA, 2021). Low pay is forcing many in the EYW to take second jobs or become reliant on Universal Credit and food banks to meet basic needs (Early Years Workforce Commission (EYWC), 2021). In 2018, 44.5% of employees working within the early years in England were claiming state benefits or tax credits (Bonetti, 2019). The early years sector is often losing educators to more highly paid and flexible employment, who take with them valuable expertise (Ofsted, 2022).

High-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) provided by experienced and well-qualified educators (Ofsted 2022:23) also requires consistency and continuity, to support children within the EYFS (Department for Education, 2024c). Current barriers to recruitment and retention of staff need to be urgently addressed to ensure high-quality provision remains accessible throughout the EYFS (EYWC, 2021). The Government in England has begun to acknowledge this impact, vowing to invest £180 million to develop training, qualifications and support for the workforce, along with an increase in funding and a focus upon developing career opportunities within the sector (DfE, 2024a). Further, funding announced in the Best Start strategy (DfE, 2025) is also aimed to enhance future qualifications of the EYW and improve recruitment and retention.

Good staff relations, training opportunities and job satisfaction all contribute towards recruiting and retaining educators within the early years sector, and it has long been understood that recruitment and retention could be further increased through higher pay, reduced hours, improved career structures and improving the status of the profession (Rolfe et al, 2003:12). Unresolved issues with the qualification system, limited opportunities for career progression, lack of CPD, low status and lack of parity between Early Years Teachers and teachers with Qualified Teacher Status, contribute to the current recruitment and retention crisis in the early years sector in England, leading many to the decision not to pursue such work with young children as a viable or attractive long-term career choice (Kay et al, 2021).

3.1.2 The Early Years Workforce in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland is the smallest of the four devolved nations in the UK, with a population of approximately 1.92 million (Statista, 2025). Despite being part of the

UK, its policy landscape, particularly in ECEC, has been shaped by unique historical, political and economic factors. The legacy of sectarian conflict, prolonged political instability and underinvestment has impacted the development of early years education and workforce policies (Social Mobility Commission, 2021), with a fragmented approach creating disparities in workforce qualifications, pay, and service provision.

A split system persists in Northern Ireland, where state-funded nursery schools and nursery units (both Controlled and Maintained – see glossary) require degree-qualified teachers with recognised teaching qualifications (such as BEd with QTS), while PVI settings operate with lower staff qualification requirements (McMillan and McConnell, 2015). This structural divide, coupled with limited government investment, has resulted in workforce shortages, low retention rates, and pay inequalities, making early years education an unstable and undervalued sector (Curristan et al, 2023).

While early childhood education has long been recognised as a critical factor in addressing social and educational inequalities, Northern Ireland has historically progressed differently to the rest of the UK in expanding preschool provision and professionalising the early years workforce (Independent Review of Education, 2023). A review of Northern Ireland's preschools by RSM in 2023, reported that 26% of all early years (preschool) staff in Northern Ireland hold degree-level qualifications (Level 6+)—this includes staff in both PVI and statutory settings.

Northern Ireland's early years policy has evolved spasmodically, notably without a sustained, strategic policy for early childhood care and education for decades. The last fully published strategy was *Children First: The Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy* (DHSS, 1999), launched under direct rule ministers (Early Years, 2022). Since then, several initiatives were proposed but not fully realised. For example, *Bright Start* (NIE, 2013), the Northern Ireland Executive's programme for affordable childcare, outlined key actions but achievement was limited. A promised comprehensive Early Years Strategy never materialised, leaving Northern Ireland without an Executive-led childcare/early years strategy for over 20 years.

Policy documents in Northern Ireland reveal shifting terminology that reflects evolving priorities. The 1999 *Children First* strategy initially embraced the idea of integrating education and care within a “wider supportive framework” for children and parents (McMillan and McConnell, 2015). However, DENI (Department of Education Northern Ireland) published its *Learning to Learn Framework* in 2013 which shifted focus heavily toward educational outcomes, employing pragmatic language around “collaboration” and “multi-agency working” rather than full integration. Analysts have also highlighted a “deafening silence” on workforce qualifications within the framework, which merely referred providers to minimum regulatory standards rather than establishing new workforce goals (McMillan and McConnell, 2015; Fitzpatrick et al, 2024). The limited focus on workforce development in major policy frameworks contributed to a lack of coherent direction for the EYW in Northern Ireland. Shifting terminology and policy distinctions have implications for workforce perceptions, funding allocations and government priorities, whereby EYW remains a lower policy priority compared to primary and post-primary education, limiting long-term investment in workforce development and professionalisation.

The governance of early years in Northern Ireland is divided across multiple departments, complicating strategy development and creating a fragmented regulatory environment which is overly complex and lacks coordination (Employers for Childcare and Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2023). The result is inconsistent workforce requirements and support mechanisms across education, care and health sectors, with policy only recently beginning to acknowledge these disparities.

Recent years have seen renewed impetus to address early years provision and workforce development in Northern Ireland. The *New Decade, New Approach* agreement (NIO, 2020) committed to the creation of a childcare strategy, and an *Early Learning and Childcare Strategy* is now in development by DENI (RSM, 2023; Curristan et al, 2023). To support this, DENI commissioned an *Independent Review of Childcare Services in NI* (RSM, 2023), a comprehensive study that includes an analysis of workforce challenges. Additionally, the *Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement* report, *A Fair Start* (Purdy et al, 2021), underscored the importance of early years in tackling disadvantage, providing “renewed impetus” to childcare strategy work (Curristan et al, 2023). In parallel, the *Independent Review of*

Education (2023) prioritised early years by dedicating its first chapter to the sector and explicitly recognising workforce quality as central to improving outcomes (Independent Review of Education, 2023).

By late 2023, Northern Ireland's Education Minister publicly acknowledged the need for greater investment in the EYW, a significant shift following years of limited official focus (Fitzpatrick et al, 2024). These developments suggest growing policy recognition that a well-supported early years workforce is essential, prompting long-overdue strategic planning. However, as of 2024, Northern Ireland remains without an operational EYW strategy, and the longstanding policy gaps continue to impact the sector.

Critical insights from the literature highlight that enhancing the EYW in Northern Ireland requires more than incremental adjustments; instead, a comprehensive strategy is necessary to address longstanding structural issues, spanning policy, funding, professional identity, and workforce development. There is little doubt that investing in the EYW has multifaceted benefits, improving outcomes for children, increasing economic opportunities for families (through more accessible childcare), and strengthening the early education system overall. The challenge and opportunity now lie in applying this body of knowledge to drive meaningful change for Northern Ireland's EYW in the coming years.

3.1.3 The Early Years Workforce in Scotland

Scotland has a population of 5.4 million people. Various policy initiatives in Scotland, such as the *Early Years Framework* (2009) and the *Children and Young People* (Scotland) Act 2014, have aimed to improve qualifications and to professionalise the EYW, with the principal degree-level qualification being the BA in Childhood Practice. Persistent issues remain regarding workforce status, role ambiguity, pay disparities, training accessibility, leadership quality, recruitment and retention. Without sufficient investment in training, pay and working conditions, Scotland may struggle to retain a high-quality EYW, ultimately impacting children's learning experiences and development. Scotland has seen local authority employment of General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS)-registered teachers in ELC fall year on year, often

being transferred to primary education or to peripatetic early years teaching teams (Summary Statistics for Schools in Scotland, 2024 Bulletin).

The move towards a fully qualified workforce in Scotland started in 2004 with a requirement to register with the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC). The BA Childhood Studies Degree was updated in 2008 to a BA Childhood Practice Degree, allowing graduates to register as Lead Practitioners with SSSC, shifting Scottish policy through such qualifications for early years leaders and reinforcing a professional identity for the workforce. Despite progressive policy intentions, there are implementation challenges, particularly in ensuring consistent training, development opportunities, support and recognition for early years educators. There are also challenges in retaining staff due to pay disparities, workload pressures and limited career progression opportunities (BERA/TACTYC, 2017).

A policy focus on expanding access to early learning led to the rescinding, in 2002, of the requirement for a qualified teacher for every 20 children in education settings, and the number of qualified teachers in ELC in Scotland has consequently declined (Dunlop, 2020). Debate continues as to whether other degree qualified early years educators such as those with who hold the BA Childhood Practice can fully replace the role of teachers in providing pedagogical leadership (Dunlop, 2020). Moves to increase the numbers of graduates with relevant degrees working in the EYW have resulted in an overall increase of 44% since 2017 showing the success of this policy over time in achieving graduate-level qualifications. However, recent Scottish Government statistics report a 26% decrease in teachers with QTS and increase of 72% of graduates other than teachers working in funded Early Learning and Childcare (Scottish Government, 2024). One fifth of those graduates are currently registered as Lead Practitioners (SSSC, 2025). Whilst the increase in the numbers of graduates working in the sector can be interpreted as a positive development, the loss of teachers with QTS in early years settings is cause for concern because of potential reduction in strong pedagogical leadership.

Issues facing the primary school workforce including the first years in school, are similar to those identified in ELC and include job security, retention, an ageing workforce, recruitment challenges, urban and rural disparities, the impact of local

authority funding issues and teacher supply and demand in the context of falling school rolls (Scottish Teachers for Permanence, 2023).

The Scottish Government is committed to increasing the levels of qualifications of early years educators and ensuring they meet high professional standards. Better alignment is still required between initial training, induction and ongoing professional learning and development (Donaldson, 2010).

Nationwide implementation in Scotland of several initiatives have had an impact. These include: the recent expansion of hours entitlement (West Partnership, 2024); specific issues such as annual professional reviews; the implications of nomenclature (Joyce et al, 2025) and capacity to implement play pedagogy in early primary school (Burns, 2022). The expansion of free childcare hours under the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 has resulted in the need for rapid recruitment of qualified staff, placing pressure on recruitment and retention.

Leadership challenges within the early years sector can significantly impact staff morale, training opportunities and retention (Mills, 2025). Mentorship and professional support have been impacted by a reduction in the number of teachers in ELC settings (Dunlop, 2020) and inconsistent quality across settings means that many educators lack meaningful development opportunities (Mills, 2025).

In Scotland, policy is aspirational, though there is a gap between aspiration and implementation (Dunlop, 2025). Scotland's EYW faces significant challenges in professional recognition, pay, training access, workforce expansion, and collaboration with the early years phase in schools. Government policies have aimed to professionalise the sector, however persistent issues in pay disparities, inconsistent development processes, and limited career progression opportunities continue to undermine workforce stability.

3.1.4 The Early Years Workforce in Wales

Wales is a country of approximately 3 million people. It has been devolved since 1999 with a Labour Government in power or sharing power since then, having statutory responsibility for childcare, playwork and nursery education. Flying Start (Welsh Government, 2024d) and the Childcare Offer for Wales (Welsh Government

2023) have supported families access to childcare to support employment and improved finances. However, difficulties in recruitment and retention of staff can inhibit the expansion of these programmes (Welsh Government, 2023a). The Welsh Government's (2024c) *Child Poverty Strategy for Wales* acknowledges the complexities of socio-economic pressures impacting children. There are significant demands on the EYW who support children and families in poverty when they are themselves earning a low wage, in a profession perceived to be undervalued in some contexts (Alma Economics, 2024a, 2024b; Social Care Wales, 2024; Welsh Parliament Equality and Social Justice Committee, 2022, 2024; Steadman and Lewis, 2022). The early years sector and EYW face challenges and complexities in practice. These include recruitment and retention pressures generally and in relation to specific gaps such as bilingual professionals (Alma Economics, 2024a, 2024b).

Wales is a multilingual nation, where two languages, Welsh and English have equal legal status under the provisions of the Welsh Language Act (1993) and the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure (2011). Approximately 18% (538,000) of the population identify as Welsh speakers (Welsh Government, 2021). However, there are significant disparities across Wales, with areas of North and West Wales being traditional strong holds (over 50% identify as Welsh speakers), and other areas now seeing rises in the use and recognition of Welsh, following a significant decline in the early 20th century (Welsh Government, 2021; Thomas and Mueller Gathercole, 2005). A target of achieving one million Welsh speakers by 2050 has been set by the Welsh Government, with childcare, and nursery education being identified as among the tools for supporting children's rights to use and develop their Welsh language, and for children from non-Welsh speaking backgrounds to have access to gaining Welsh language skills (Welsh Government, 2017a, b; Hodges, 2024).

This is also a key workforce issue in Wales in terms of recruitment, with the challenges of supporting a minority language alongside a mega language (Siencyn, 2019; Social Care Wales, 2024). Thus, recruiting a bilingual EYW may be challenging in some areas and settings (Welsh Government, 2021; Alma Economics, 2024a; 2024b, Social Care Wales, 2024; Arad Research, 2022), however such recruitment will be required to implement the recent Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Bill 2025 which is awaiting imminent royal assent. Government commitment

to roll out Flying Start to all 2-year-olds in Wales also suggests a focus on promoting the growth of Welsh medium provision, furthering the need for bilingual educators (Welsh Government, 2023a, b).

In 1999, Wales's devolved powers included specific policy areas for education, health and care. Initially, *The Learning Country* (National Assembly for Wales, 2001) outlined the aspiration that education policy for Wales included the Foundation Phase, a play-based framework for early years education (3-7 years), in maintained schools, with early education (nursery) provision for 3–4-year-olds also in non-maintained settings, who registered to deliver the early education component. The Foundation Phase formed the basis of the Curriculum for Wales 2022, and implementation is expected to require significant professional development for educators to confidently implement it (Evans, 2023). Siraj (2014) recommended high-quality CPD linking theory and practice in the context of the then Foundation Phase to support professionals in their implementation of quality early years provision. The Welsh Government provides training resources to support early years education, and Social Care Wales provides training/CPD for the non-maintained childcare sector (Social Care Wales, 2024).

The literature highlights an acknowledgement within policy of an aspiration to develop an “integrated early education and care system in Wales, including the workforce” (Welsh Government (2017a:1). There is also an acknowledgement of the need to develop a “skilled childcare and play workforce, which is highly regarded as a profession and a career of choice and recognised for the vital role the sector plays in supporting our children’s development” (Welsh Government, 2017a:1). The Early Childhood, Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC) Plan focuses on three areas of action: quality of provision, access to provision and supporting and developing the workforce. The actions set out in the plan focus on developing a thriving and valued workforce (Welsh Government, 2024b). The Welsh Government (2024a) has reinstated its commitment (made in the 2017 10-year workforce policy) to support recruitment of high-quality workforce, rising skills and standards and building capacity to ensure “all children can reach their full potential and lead a healthy, prosperous, and fulfilling life” (Welsh Government, 2024a:3).

There is an acknowledgement that high-quality early years education and care is linked with higher levels of workforce qualifications (Waters and Macdonald, 2020). For example, the Government's flagship Flying Start sessional childcare provision to support children in areas of disadvantage, required educators and managers with qualifications which are above the minimum qualifications set out for those working in non-Flying Start daycare, and sessional childcare (Social Care Wales, 2025). Flying Start's funded high-quality, part-time (12.5 hours a week) childcare for 2- to 3-year-olds (Research Service, 2014; Welsh Government, 2024e) is likely to drive future workforce demands (Welsh Government, 2024a).

The early education approach noted in the Curriculum for Wales 2022, supported by the ECPLC vision promotes a consistent approach to nurturing, learning and development, through high-quality, play-based childcare and nursery education, from birth to 5. Wales has promoted a rights-based approach since 2004, with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) underpinning the policy context in Wales for children and young people. This is outlined in the seven core aims to have a flying start in life; education and learning opportunities; health and protection; play and culture; respect, race and cultural identity; home, community and well-being, and addressing poverty (Welsh Government, 2015s:14). In 2024, guidance on the rights of children aged birth to 5 was published for those working in childcare and nursery education (Welsh Government 2024f).

Socio-economic deprivation remains a significant challenge for Wales. The Welsh Government (2024c) has identified the need to address child poverty, through its Child Poverty Strategy. In 2024, 29% of children in Wales were deemed to be living in poverty (Loughborough University, 2024) with 84% of constituencies where at least 25% of children were experiencing poverty. Early years education and care is seen as a key factor in eradicating or alleviating the effects of poverty in Wales (Welsh Government, 2015b; 2024c). Yet the early years landscape can be seen as fragmented and complex and difficult for parents and professionals to navigate (Stewart, Macdonald and Waters-Davies, 2024; Welsh Parliament Equality and Social Justice Committee, 2022, 2024; Welsh Government, 2024a).

A review of the divide between education and care within Wales highlights the dichotomy that has been established since devolution and the policy divide which

splits education from early childhood and care (Stewart, Macdonald and Waters-Davies, 2024). The maintained and the non-maintained sectors are “governed by a separate suite of policies, overseen by separate ministerial responsibility and hold separate regulation and accountability structures.” (Stewart, Macdonald and Waters-Davies, 2024:130). More recently in Wales, ECPLC has become a joint ministerial responsibility. Education is seen to be provided within schools as maintained provision and is the responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary for Education, while early childhood and care sits within the non-maintained provision and is the responsibility of the Minister for Children and Social Care. Both Ministers work jointly on delivering the ECPLC vision for Wales (Welsh Government, 2024b) and nursery education for 3- to 4-year-olds may be delivered in school or funded non-maintained settings (Dallimore, 2019; Welsh Government, 2024a).

The Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) are responsible for registration and inspection of non-maintained early childhood and care settings in line with statutory National Minimum Standards (NMS) (Welsh Government, 2023b), with Social Care Wales having developed the list of recognised qualifications to work in the non-maintained sector alongside other training and education organisations, including vocational qualifications, apprenticeships and EYPS graduate degrees (Social Care Wales, 2025). The NMS and the Social Care Wales Qualifications Framework set out the qualification requirements to work in the early years – from unqualified to graduate level, depending on type of provision.

To illustrate the complexity of the divide within sector, the maintained sector (ie schools) is under the control of the relevant local authority and is informed by Welsh Government policy, and schools are inspected by ESTYN, who inspect education and training in Wales (ESTYN, 2025; Stewart, Macdonald and Waters-Davies, 2024). Therefore, school based early education (nursery) is exempt from the National Minimum Standards (Welsh Government, 2023) and the Social Care Wales qualification requirements. However, 3- to 4-year-olds can also receive early education in the funded non-maintained sector, which is inspected jointly by Care Inspector Wales and ESTYN (2024). The NMS (Welsh Government, 2023b) also state that other non-funded settings will be encouraged to also incorporate this

curriculum into their work, which could have implications for wider workforce skills and knowledge.

Furthermore, Wales does not have a specialist early years teaching qualification (such as BEd/PGCE), thus those working as teachers in this early education context in schools are graduates, but usually in general primary provision rather than specialising in the early years. In terms of workforce, the development of the higher teaching and learning assistant (HTLA) qualification means that non-graduates fulfil many of the roles of a teacher within the classroom but are not paid the equivalent to qualified teachers (Kilbride, Phillips and Miller Research, 2009). HTLA recognition is delivered by the local authority consortia (Kilbride, Phillips and Miller Research (2009). It is not a qualification, rather consolidating evidence to support the professional standards for HTLA status, which is not a transferable form of certification outside the school sector. A survey of 6,000 teaching assistants in England and Wales found that they were replacing class teachers within the classroom on a regular basis (Webster, 2024). This practice is noted across all age groups; however anecdotal evidence is that in nursery classes in some local authorities it may be regular practice for a HTLA to lead the class – replacing the teacher on a regular basis. Siraj and Kingston (2014) recommended that all Foundation Phase classes including nursery should be led by qualified teachers, although this was not always observed in practice.

For some nursery-aged children (3- to 4-year-olds) in Wales, it is not uncommon to have nursery provision in both non-maintained and maintained settings within one day or across the week (Dallimore, 2019; Stewart, Macdonald and Waters-Davies, 2024). However, education in school is the most common for this age group. This has implications for workforce as well as children, where those working in a school setting as teachers or teaching assistants/HTLAs are registered professionally with the Education Workforce Council, (2025), and those in the early years and play setting workforce are not (Bonetti and Cooper, 2022). Those working in school settings are not necessarily specifically trained in early childhood, nor do they hold an early childhood qualification, while those in registered non-maintained settings, and counted in staffing ratios do (Welsh Government, 2023b). Furthermore, nursery education (3- to 4-year-olds) in school may be led by HTLAs who, unlike

other primary school age groups, are not graduate teachers and also may not have early childhood specialist training.

The complex systems in Wales remain a challenge, especially in relation to remuneration, pay and valuing the EYW (Alma Economics, 2024a, 2024b; Social Care Wales, 2024; Welsh Parliament Equality and Social Justice Committee, 2022; Steadman and Lewis, 2022).

3.2 Key themes from the literature review across the UK

The literature on the EYW across the UK tells a story of disparity and confusion. Whilst there are key themes in common, the recent historical policy precedents for their dominance in individual nations is sometimes different. In this section we briefly identify some complexities, which we plan to discuss more fully in our final report.

The requirements for, and types of, qualifications to work in early education and care vary across the four nations of the UK. Funded opportunities to gain qualifications and take up of continuing professional learning also differ. Professionalism suffers due to many factors which policies could address. A lack of an understood and appreciated nomenclature is an issue affecting professionalism, status and clarity of roles.

From the literature on the EYW across the UK we have thus far identified that in all four nations there is a need for strategic responses to EYW issues and/or for follow through and thorough funding of existing strategies and related policies.

Across the four nations of the UK, we have identified themes of inequality which both drive and hinder progress. Data is variable across the UK on the representation of people with Black and Minority Ethnic heritages and percentages of men are low at between 2% and 4%.

Recruitment and retention are common concerns across the UK, though some reasons for this differ. Low pay and poor terms of service affects recruitment and retention of staff, particularly in unqualified and lower-qualified roles. We need a better understanding of the impacts of policy to enhance pay and in what way this might address the exodus from the EYW in some nations. Many experienced early

years educators are leaving work in some early years settings where providers struggle to attract skilled staff on minimum wage, to work in schools where they are better-paid, or leaving to take up less stressful roles in retail (RSM, 2023). Retention of staff is impacted by limited scope for career progression for certain qualifications.

The low status of the early years profession generally, discourages talented people from entering and staying in the early years sector (BERA-TACTYC, 2017) and leaves many feeling undervalued and unsupported (DfE, 2025), and experiencing lower morale and efficacy (Mills, 2025). Across all four nations of the UK there are reports of workforce instability and retention difficulties. This is often because of poor pay, however, stress, burnout and a feeling of being undervalued also contribute to people turning their backs on their potential career in early education and care. Retention of staff is also impacted by limited scope for career progression.

Further additional nation-specific issues have emerged from the literature which are also important and will feature in our full report.

4. Initial findings from stakeholder interviews

To date we have completed 40 interviews with stakeholders across the UK, and interviews with 10 international stakeholders are underway. Participants have readily accepted our invitations to participate, which we take as an indicator of a broadly held view that EYW issues must be addressed by positive, long-term policy shifts. Across all four nations, and internationally, we are pleased to note a willingness to contribute to our project aims. Our data across the UK are rich and insightful and we have used the opportunity of this interim report to indicate this and the range of issues they raised.

The roles and organisations of participants across the UK nations include advisory teacher, daycare nursery owner, qualifications body, registration bodies, inspectorates, CEOs of service provision, university early childhood course leaders, training providers, local government, umbrella and sector organisations, research and advocacy organisations.

Analysis of UK interviews is complete, though we may later conduct further interrogation of our data. Our analysis is indicating that the project has obtained rich data which can be characterised as:

- **Direct impacts of policy initiatives** to address EYW issues and improve outcomes for young children.
- **Lived experiences of policy**, some of which derive from unintended consequences of policy.

In the interests of the space available extracts from interviews here are indicative rather than comprehensive. Our final report will contain further discussion of our interview data, including those from our international participants.

Building on our review of the literature in Section 3, this section includes extracts from interview data to give an indication of some emerging issues as discussed with us in a series of stakeholder interviews across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

4.1 Direct impacts of policy

Interviewees discussed broader policy issues that affect the early years workforce in the four nations of the UK. These include: EYW strategies, qualifications and professional recognition, funding reform, remuneration and conditions of service, workforce representation and identity. Across the UK degrees of emphasis varied.

4.1.1 Workforce strategies and long-term, joined up policies

For Northern Ireland, a prominent topic was the need for greater government attention and strategic action on workforce issues. Northern Ireland has lacked a comprehensive workforce policy, and participants noted that development has been piecemeal. In England this was mentioned as an issue too:

the way in which the early years policies have developed. I think they have developed in a very piecemeal way ... And that makes it, operationally, very difficult. [E6]

Whilst participants in all four nations spoke of some difficulties with policy or lack of policy direction, there was also acknowledgment of some positive policy moves and measures which may indicate what has been, or is, showing some effectiveness, thus providing lessons for the future. Some participants suggested that targeted policy interventions can have tangible positive effects. EYW strategies that build on past successes – or successes achieved in another nation of the UK (such as specialist support roles and affordability schemes) – can actively address identified gaps and greatly improve the landscapes summarised in Section 3.

Many of our participants seemed optimistic that good policies implemented well - can improve many aspects of the EYW. For example, in Wales:

the actual workforce plan, so the early years playing workforce plan. The plan itself has some real strengths within it, ... It's just the implementation of those due to things like funding. [W5]

A participant working for a sector organisation also noted how positive policy can support the direction of travel:

And I think that the Welsh Government's 10-year workforce plan in terms of the direction of travel on the whole... I think it, you know, we've got the whole journey from the pathways to childcare. Then we've got the qualifications. Yeah. And just the vision in terms of the sort of workforce that that we want to/need to have in Wales. [W4]

As one interviewee said of past efforts in Northern Ireland, "if we had to pick out something we did that was a good thing... it's that [idea] that quality can be developed... a collective effort" (NI5), supported by smart policy.

Another highlighted the introduction of the Early Years Specialist role in Northern Ireland during the Preschool Expansion Policy (introduced in 1999) as a notable success. At that time, many playgroup leaders lacked formal qualifications beyond Level 3. In response, the government provided each voluntary pre-school with support from an early years specialist holding a DENI specified qualification of NVQ4 or above (DENI, n.d.). This policy ensured that settings led by less-qualified staff received mentorship, guidance on curriculum and pedagogy, and help preparing for inspections, thereby raising quality. The participant felt "it got off to an excellent start" (NI5) and suggested this an example that other regions of the UK might emulate, showing that a collective effort with external support can raise quality. The success of this scheme lies in bringing expert knowledge into community settings without displacing the existing staff, instead building their capacity. It stands out as a long-running policy success that is considered to have improved practice, and outcomes for children in those settings.

The formation of inter-departmental groups to address early years workforce issues in Northern Ireland resulted in cross-sector collaboration and strategy development, which was felt to be an implicit success, resulting in a joined-up strategy, a marked achievement for Northern Ireland, especially given its history of fragmentation. Outcomes of the new strategy are not yet sufficiently apparent, but for this participant, the fact that EYW is "on [the] radar" [NI4] of multiple government agencies in Northern Ireland is positive.

The *Curriculum for Wales 2022*, and in a non-maintained early years context the *Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Settings*, and the recent *Early Childhood*

Play Learning and Care in Wales plan were highlighted by several participants as positive developments within the early years sector. Initiatives to promote early years careers to young people, those currently outside the sector, a diversity of communities, as well as policy developments linked to the Anti Racist Wales Action plan and the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act (ALNET) were also welcomed by some interviewees. Specific initiatives in terms of supporting workforce bilingual skills and Welsh medium provision were noted.

Of Welsh policy, another noted:

The Welsh Government policy most recently is the collaborative approach that they've had, so that members of the Early Years Workforce have been part of that policy development, so they're seeing that real link, then, between that theory and research and practice as well. [W5]

In particular, the more recent ECPLC document was highlighted as a strength by several participants, and also a plan to bridge the education and care split in the early years sector in Wales.

Participants across the UK highlighted a range of recent policy developments and other initiatives, including moves to improve many aspects of work with young children and specific workforce policies which were considered to offer some benefits. However, some participants indicated that the sheer quantity of policy and guidance made it difficult to keep track of or implement changes.

4.1.2 Qualification requirements and the quality of initial and continuing professional learning

Preliminary data indicate ongoing debates and concerns about qualification requirements, and the quality of initial and ongoing professional learning and development opportunities for the EYW. Inequities around these issues were a matter of concern for some. Variation from teacher qualifications and statuses to apprenticeship training and qualifications were identified as in need of policy change and clarification. An English respondent said:

I welcome the development of EYTS now developing on from, and also the apprentice route to it the teacher degree apprentice {but} I think it's still

appalling you don't get QTS as a result of it, but that was ruled out as soon as the conversation came about. [E5]

It will be important to follow progress in England's new Best Start in Life (DfE, 2025) strategy to see how the issue of QTS and graduate pedagogical leadership is taken forward and whether QTS is “ruled in” for the future. A manager of a nursery chain in England spoke of the effectiveness of apprenticeship schemes in enhancing recruitment and career development:

I really appreciated being able to take apprenticeships up to up to degree level... So, I really like being able to take the Level 1 people and try and get them ready for work because they're coming to us from school not ready to work. ... I think apprenticeships in general really successful... [E2]

In Wales, there is a duality in terms of qualifications between maintained and non-maintained settings. Social Care Wales developed a suite of vocational qualification from Level 2 to Level 5 recognised to practice in the non-maintained sector and to be included in staff ratios. Social Care Wales also worked with Higher Education settings in Wales to develop an Early Years Practitioner Status Degree recognised within the sector, though, to date these are not recognised in terms of practice as any higher than Level 3 or 4 qualifications. However, some Welsh participants noted that these qualifications are valued and one highlighted aspiration towards recognition of a “graduate practitioner”.

“One of the things that I'd like to see, is the recognition of a graduate practitioner. And... and seeing it as, as that career progression, and that there is some remuneration or reward for working at that level. [W4]

Apprenticeships were also noted by some participants in Wales as strong qualifications and training models suggesting that the college or apprenticeship routes that students take to begin their roles in the early years workforce vary, and this has significant implications for practice:

For a practitioner, who's done an apprenticeship by the time they get their Level 2 and then Level 3 their full. You know they likely to be fully trained. Fully competent members of staff that you know, knows the complete running of this setting. [W8]

There was also an acknowledgement in Wales that the 10-year workforce plan led to the development of a range of vocational qualifications from Level 2 to 5. However, there was some criticism of these qualifications in terms of confidence and competence to practice and the balance between theory and practice.

If we employ maybe Level 2 or Level 3, that's come from a college, there's, there's definitely a big difference... You have to retrain them even though they've done placements and things like that. You have to put a lot of training into those members of staff with those qualifications then... They might not be ready to be employed as a Level 3, you know, to be left alone. [W8]

There was also a consideration of a noted duality in terms of qualification requirements and inconsistency across the sector, regarding qualification and specialist training. One participant in Wales noted that:

So, I think what we're still missing is that opportunity for practitioners to progress their career through qualifications quite seamlessly. So, there are things that are available. But I think the progression isn't as smooth as it could be. [W4]

In primary schools in Wales, Graduate Teachers lead classes, supported by Teaching Assistants who do not have mandatory qualification requirements as in non-maintained settings. As noted below, QTS qualifications will not necessarily allow people to work in some non-maintained early years sector settings and they will need to also have a recognised Social Care Wales Level 2 or 3 qualification. Therefore, moving into the school sector may be easier than moving into the non-maintained sector, thus possibly supporting the migration out of the non-state early years sector.

The two education sectors kind of don't match... I've also got inconsistent qualifications, ... in nursery settings (non-maintained) you have to have your Level 3 qualification. Yet as a Teaching Assistant you don't... We've got teaching assistants just walking in off the street, who've had no experience of children, no experience of childcare and expected, not even just to look after the children, but to educate them. So that's something that I really struggle with. [W3]

A similar issue was raised by a participant in Northern Ireland, who said:

... 50% of our workforce can be completely unqualified in in the day care and play group sector. You don't have to have any qualifications..... We're targeting those who have left school, sadly without their basic literacy and numeracy qualifications, and we're targeting them to come into the traineeships and then obviously to stay on to do the apprenticeships. But I can recruit someone off the street who has no qualifications at all in the early years. But no qualifications. Full stop ... English, maths, anything. Exactly. So, to me, you know, we're always going to be on the back foot. This is why they're complaining about the lack of leadership qualifications, people to fulfil the leadership qualification [N15].

Basic entry qualifications in English and Maths also remains an issue for England. There is also a growing precedent in some Welsh Local Authorities for Higher Level Teaching Assistants to be responsible for nursery classes in state schools.

*to save on budget a significant amount of schools in **** ... possibly 50 out of the 70 [schools employ HTLA in nursery class] ... There's not many that have got a teacher, a teacher in post. The way they try and do it is that they say to me, oh we've got nursery and reception working together. So, then you've got a teacher overseeing it. [W3]*

One interviewee noted the lack of public value of those working with young children, which undervalued early years teachers in schools in comparison to their colleagues teaching older children:

Education. I think that sometimes childcare is looked at as something you might do if you can't think what else to do, so it's not a valued profession.....And I think sometimes in schools, particularly, the early years, are not seen necessarily as the most important role that a teacher can have.....A lot of the schools now.....they put in HLTAs in nursery....And I think it's because it's undervalued. [W2]

Furthermore, in Wales there is need for Welsh medium and bilingual skills and/or qualifications at all levels, and these are noted by most participants and will be explored in more depth when all interviews are analysed. However, the availability of

Welsh medium qualifications to support entry to the sector is acknowledged as a key point to develop Welsh language targets and education expansion. Recruitment of staff with Welsh medium skills is also seen as a challenge which will limit recruitment. Social Care Wales, Mudiad Meithrin and other providers of childcare qualifications have valued initiatives such as Cam wrth Gam (funded Welsh medium vocational qualifications), as well as initiatives to support students gain confidence in any Welsh skills they may already have.

Various policy initiatives, such as Scotland's Early Years Framework (2008) and the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, have aimed to improve qualifications and to professionalise the Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) workforce in Scotland. A participant in a lead local authority role commented:

It became mandatory to hold qualifications and the numbers of people now doing higher level qualifications, because once people get a taste for it, they keep going. So, we've got people going way beyond the BA, doing the Masters. I've got people doing doctorates now in early years, which is fabulous. [S2]

There has been a positive shift over time in Northern Ireland towards higher qualifications, but gaps persist. An academic interviewee recounted that in the late 1990s, "many of the leaders in playgroups at that time might not even have had a qualification. And if they did, the highest... was Level 3." (NI5). In fact, "the first graduates [in Early Childhood] didn't come until 2000." (NI5). This historical context shows that the professionalisation of the workforce is relatively recent in Northern Ireland. Since then, new degree programmes such as the Early Childhood Studies Degree have begun to produce graduates, and there is now "absolutely [a] passion... to produce quality practitioners" (NI5) and the number of graduates in the sector, has increased. Several stakeholders see raising the baseline qualifications of staff as essential for improving practice and to elevate the status of the profession. There is a "real commitment" (NI5), in policy to ensure every setting has access to staff with higher qualifications or specialist expertise (for example, the Early Years Specialists Programme). Some reflected on the strong professional ethos that emerged during the preschool expansion period, particularly through initiatives like the Early Years Specialists Programme introduced in 1999. Yet despite these

advances, many expressed frustration at the lack of sustained policy leadership to embed qualification improvements consistently and strategically across the sector in Northern Ireland.

The interviews also indicated a view from some that qualifications alone are not enough with the content and relevance of some training being a concern. A leader in the field argued that current training courses “definitely do not prepare people... for work with children” (NI3), especially in some of the more challenging contexts. New practitioners may leave college without the practical skills or understanding needed for working in disadvantaged communities or with children with complex needs. Several interviewees felt that training had become too focused on theory and administration, rather than the realities of frontline work. One Northern Ireland interviewee remarked that it was “not sophisticated enough to meet the needs on the ground,” and it tends “to veer towards the auditing function... as opposed to the relational function” (NI3) of the job. As one participant put it, “It’s a tick box exercise. It [Level 4] doesn’t give you the tools to deliver a high-quality provision.” [S5] This perceived misalignment left many feeling that staff were underprepared and that this gap could lead to frustration, low confidence, or even early burnout.

Qualification levels in Northern Ireland’s EYW are improving, with more staff now holding Level 5 or degree-level qualifications than in previous decades, a key challenge now is ensuring these qualifications translate into competence and confidence in practice. Participants highlighted the need to strengthen the practical components of training and to ensure course content reflects real-world issues, such as managing complex family dynamics, promoting inclusion, and safeguarding children. Additionally, some felt that qualification requirements should be paired with improved remuneration and career progression opportunities. Without this, it was felt that staff with higher qualifications may choose to leave the sector for better-paid roles in education or social work, where their credentials are more fully recognised.

In Scotland, policy towards a fully qualified workforce remains strong and is supported by registration, which ensures practitioners hold specified qualifications or achieve them within a set timescale. However, one Local Authority participant expressed some concern about the length of some courses and their quality:

Some qualification pathways are very short and have questionable levels of quality. [S1]

In England a manager of a nursery chain focussed on progression through levels of training:

And what we need is for the Level 7 as well the proper full degree level undergraduate course to be fully funded ... we can then progress our entry ones [apprentices] right the way through to being managers with support, you know from the education system and the one-to-one support that they actually need because of the gaps in their education. [E2]

On the issue of graduate leaders in settings one participant in England recalled the Graduate Leaders Fund as:

one of the most successful piece of investment into the sector that possibly could, it raised the standard and you could see the quality. [E8]

The important contribution of the Graduate Leadership Fund which, from 2007, provided financial incentives to PVI settings to recruit graduates, and was successful in attracting more degree qualified professionals in early years settings until discontinued in 2011. The GLF was distinctive in that it was evidence-based, set within long term workforce strategy, and properly funded (Bonetti, 2020).

The multiplicity of qualifications available was also a matter for comment in England:

I also think there's clarity around the qualification structure. There was a plethora of some faulty Level 3s etc., I think there's been good work done ... to give clarity what is full and relevant to clear out those which weren't. [E5]

The NESTA report found that "...the early years qualifications market is an unregulated wild west. There is an overwhelming number of qualifications on the DfE's approved list delivered by a fragmented and unregulated market, leading to inconsistent quality and availability" (Yates et al, 2024:7). One participant in England reiterated such concerns around the complexity of training available, not meeting needs:

Notice around training and professional development ...there seems to be lots, but not anything that's really coordinated a real challenge around quality.
[E3]

Another interview participant in England commented that:

They are coming out [of initial training] not able to cope ...because they don't understand how young children learn and some of their training is not as quality. I mean, what was wrong with the nursery nurse qualification (NNEB)? What was wrong with BTEC Early Years in Childcare, those two were high quality qualifications that enabled the workforce that came into it to actually know about young children and the stages of development for young children. When you ask people now, they look floored when you ask them about the stages of development, whether it be in any of the prime areas, let alone going into anything specific. [E7]

The decline in students pursuing early years qualifications in Northern Ireland was identified by interviewed stakeholders as a worrying trend, with limited new entrants and training gaps. Experienced interviewees observed that colleges are sending fewer trainees to settings, and the “link isn’t as strong as what it was” (NI1), between training programmes and employment. Consequently, the sector is not replenishing its workforce at the needed rate leading to the current problems with recruitment. Some felt current training for entrants is inadequate, leaving new staff underprepared and more likely to leave. Without a pipeline of well-trained new educators, the age profile of the EYW in Northern Ireland and vacancy rates will continue to be problematic.

There has been previous experience in England of beginning to address a recruitment crisis, as one manager commented:

So, I personally love apprenticeships. I think they work really, really well for early years and that's how we've survived basically. [E2]

A PVI interviewee in Scotland expressed concerns:

“So, if you are desperate for staff, you are taking on apprentices to cover your numbers ... a lot of nurseries, are running with a lot of very young,

inexperienced apprentices to cover the numbers. And therefore, that would have an impact on the provision. [S5]

In England, an experienced-based route (EBR) for early years staff was introduced in 2025 as mechanism for suitable and experienced staff who do not hold a relevant qualification to be included in ratios at Level 3 (DfE, 2025). The impact and implications of the EBR are yet to be seen, it being unclear as to how this policy development will broaden the recruitment pool or contribute to workforce retention as it does not lead to a qualification and is not transferable between settings. One participant in England commented:

But what I have concerns about is the experience-based route that's currently being discussed and rolled out... And I think in principle it's a good idea. ...but what this new policy relies on is settings doing things properly and going through and adhering to all the regulations because it's complicated when you read the guidance it's so complex and I think if you've got a provision that's diligent and they're committed, and they go through the process then that will work really well. But what I have concerns about are nurseries that are just so desperate because of the recruitment and retention problem we've got. [E4]

Some interviews pointed to the capacity of the workforce to offer the curriculum and the role of various curricula policies in defining the workforce in different types of settings. Other issues of concern were a lack of public value and professional status, stress and burn-out. Space does not allow us to address this theme at length here, but this is an important issue which we will expand on in our final report.

4.1.3 Funding and financial sustainability

Funding and financial sustainability were major cross-cutting issues raised in the interviews. Participants described a fundamental mismatch in the childcare funding model that leaves both parents and providers struggling. On the one hand, “parents are saying they can’t afford childcare at the rate that it is currently charged.” (NI2). Yet on the other hand, “settings are saying, yes, but even that rate doesn’t let us pay people at a level that would attract and retain them.” (NI2). This essentially represents a market failure: without state intervention, fees high enough to properly reward staff would be “intolerable” (NI2) for families. As one interviewee observed,

keeping fees “affordable” (NI4) means low wages and recruitment and retention difficulty. The result in Northern Ireland, seems to be a downward spiral of underfunding, where the workforce remains low-paid and many providers operate on the brink of financial jeopardy. This tension was mentioned by some participants in each nation.

Several stakeholders pointed out funding disparities between different parts of the sector. In particular, nursery schools in the state sector in Northern Ireland (which are government-funded and often have qualified teachers) receive substantially more support than voluntary and community playgroups and private day-care settings. One consequence is that families have tended to gravitate towards the “free” or heavily subsidised nursery places, leaving other providers with lower enrolment and income. As a leader in a voluntary setting noted, “lots of the groups that we’re with... are closing because they can’t continue. Sustainability isn’t there for them anymore” (NI1) since “a lot of families are choosing to go to nursery or to the standardised groups” (NI1) that have better funding. This inequity in funding and status between statutory and non-statutory provision was a recurrent theme. Interviewees called for levelling up support – “push more for the standardisation to bring the playgroups in the same level as the nursery school” (NI1), which ultimately “has to do with the amount of funding” (NI1) they receive. In practice, efforts have been made recently to narrow this gap (for example, one official mentioned using special funding to ensure non-statutory pre-schools are not completely out of step with schools), but challenges remain.

In Scotland the non-statutory and PVI sector participants expressed concerns with funding issues. A local authority lead commented:

The guidance says that local authority has to fund the partner providers to pay the real living wage and also a bit extra to allow for investment. So that would cover things like your National Insurance contributions, you know, quality and resources, stuff like that. But then it also says that the sum paid to the partner providers must be affordable for the local authority within the budget ... Well, it's not affordable for us to give you that. [S2]

The head of a private-partner setting responded that:

So, you know, funding is a huge a huge issue for us now and ...we still managed to deliver high quality, but I think we may be in a bit of a minority. It varies between the public and the private sector, the pay differential being the biggest issue. There are funding gaps. There's a difference between the cost for me to deliver and the cost that they give us, which makes everything else difficult. [S5]

Another funding-related issue was the reliance on short-term initiatives and the uncertainty of continued support. A practitioner spoke of trying to meet targets “before the money runs out” (NI1) on a particular programme, arguing “money shouldn’t run out for early years simply because... we have children” (NI1) who will always need services.

Experiences from England echoed this sentiment:

But the problem with policy development and ... in such a short window nothing gets time to embed or develop and then you'll get [...] so far then the government will change and then there'll be something else. [E1]

This reflects frustration with time-limited grants or projects in early years. Consistent, long-term funding is needed to maintain quality and staffing, rather than one-off injections that may vanish. Overall, the interviews suggest that without a significant restructuring of funding (for example, increased government subsidy or a new model), the EYW will remain caught in a financial bind. Some services will struggle to pay wages while parents struggle to pay fees.

There were also concerns in Wales in terms of the tension between parents being able to afford to pay for provision and the funding within the sector.

You know, it's about the value placed on the sector. That it's our most vulnerable, our children, but actually as a parent myself, you know, having to pay, that is a huge cost each month. [W4]

There was also a concern that government policy such as Flying Start or the Childcare Offer were delivered inconsistently across the 22 local authorities, leading to disparity and worry within the sector, and a confusing and complex situation for

parents, especially when comparing the delivery of Welsh Government childcare and workforce policy in different areas of the country.

A number of Scottish Government-led workforce policy initiatives have guaranteed implementation. For example, the Scotland-wide the expansion of children's funded entitlement to 1140 hours of Early Learning and Childcare for all 3-to 5-year-olds and some eligible 2-year-olds arguably ensures equity of access. One interviewee saw benefits and concerns:

I think 1140 [hours] has had positive impacts, particularly for families, less so potentially for the workforce, but the manner in which it has been implemented has broken the system. [S1]

Across the UK interview respondents included the perspective of private and voluntary partner providers, who felt marginalised by different funding protocols; a local authority lead in Scotland reflected:

Since the implementation of 1140 hours, this has become even more pressing, but there's inadequate levels of public and private funding. Which affects the wages and professional development opportunities for the workforce and is that huge divide between whether you're an early years practitioner working in a private, voluntary or independent setting, or whether you're working in a local authority setting. [S1]

It seems in some cases that expansion has brought further challenges:

I don't know if this has been exacerbated by the expansion or not, but there's a very low mood within the workforce and I would say in the last 20 years is at the lowest it's ever been. I would say that is teachers as well as local government staff. My LA still has teachers in all its nurseries, although that is becoming more and more of a challenge because I don't think early years staff feel valued. [S7]

4.1.4 Remuneration and conditions of service

Low pay was repeatedly described as a workforce weakness and a policy failure. Many interviewees felt that governments must address early years pay scales to

improve recruitment and retention. A manager of a private nursery chain in England commented that:

The main one is a disrespect despite the fact that everyone acknowledges now that the first five years are the most important, that's not reflected in pay scales or respect for people that work in the early years. [E2]

One respondent in Northern Ireland linked the issue directly to policy, saying “retention is a major issue, and we know that that is linked to salary levels. It's also linked... to public perception of the role.” (NI3). In short, better funding to help providers to pay better salaries and efforts to raise the status of early childhood work (through public campaigns or professional recognition) are policy levers that could help address staffing issues. Higher qualification standards and pay grades were seen as something which could help address the low status of the EYW, as with teaching and other professions.

Respondents in Scotland raised issues of low pay relative to the responsibility and the qualifications needed for entry into the EYW, and a growing gap between pay scales for primary school teachers and early years practitioners. Multiple layers of pay disparity existed between LA and partner providers and between early years and school sectors.

And the government rhetoric is still very much about you must pay the real living wage [for early years staff]. So, it's setting a minimum, you know, minimum standard as opposed to an aspirational standard.... For a huge number of people, they're not just undervalued professionally, they're underpaid. My staff [early years] are paid significantly less than teachers, yet many of them have degrees. [S2]

A voluntary sector CEO in Scotland commented on pay disparities between voluntary and partnership sectors:

[It] has been made very difficult with the fact that the Scottish Government has stated that they are excited and delighted to pay the real living wage for early years practitioners. And I think that actually has resulted in a lot of people leaving the early years profession because they know that they can get a real

living wage whilst working in a supermarket or somewhere else where they don't have that level of responsibility. [S1]]

Although in policy terms there is recognition of the importance of the early years, this is not reflected in pay and conditions in much of the PVI sector in England and whilst pay is an important contributory factor in enhancing the status of the EYW, one participant remarked that “status is much more than pay alone”, career progression also mattered:

...even with the low pay commission where early education often ends up right down the bottom with very low wages. It's still quite different in that you know it sits alongside some of the catering and entertainment industries where you'll see a chunk of people on low wages but then actually as people go further in their careers they can move up into quite significant, whereas early years is almost universally - even those in the most senior levels - are still on pretty low pay. [E3]

Furthermore, the disparity between the state education sector and non-state sector wages were seen in different roles including those linked to advice and development:

Technically it was the same job as I'm doing (linked to schools) but for childcare and on about £20-30,000 less. So, there's a significant difference there and you can see why they don't hang around. I can see potentially why I'm not in that sector (non-maintained) to a certain extent. [W3]

There was also an acknowledgement that the maintained sector in Wales may be attracting staff from the non-maintained sector, where working hours, remuneration, qualifications and status, were seen to be more attractive, for example.

A Welsh language participant suggested that the lack of acknowledgement of the non-maintained setting, low wages and the hours offered in non-maintained settings leads to the migration of staff into schools. Staff may not be able to access enough hours in sessional provision like a *Cylch Meithrin* – a Welsh medium play group - or in full time day care with very long hours and without school holidays. The status of school professionals is also higher than that of staff in non-maintained settings in Wales.

All participants in Wales referred to pay and the value given to the early years sector as key aspects relating to retention, recruitment and workforce feeling undervalued. There was a concern that the low pay for the responsibility held by the workforce has impacted retention and recruitment.

A dan ni hefyd wedi gweld enghreifftiau o bobl sydd yn mynd i weithio yn Tesco neu yn Costa achos mae 'na fwy o gyflog am llai o gyfrifoldeb. [W7]

We have also seen examples of people going to work in Tesco or Costas because they get more pay for less responsibility. [W7 Translation]

Another suggested that:

And to be honest with you... it is no doubt about it, for the skills they've got to have, for the knowledge they've got to have for the jobs that they have to do, it is a low pay sector and there's no doubt about that...It's a lot that they have to do they are not just coming in and counting and playing with the children, doing their observations... There's a lot more to this job and I'm not sure they recognise who they pay. [W8]

4.1.5 Disparities between sectors

The divide between PVI and state provision, and their staffing, was an issue identified by interviewees in each of the four nations in terms of parity of status, conditions of service and remuneration. There is also acknowledgement in the England interviews of divides within sectors – for example, the private sector varies from large chains to small single settings. There was extensive discussion from Northern Ireland participants of these divides, with parity in standards and funding being a major policy goal for many. One educator in Northern Ireland argued for “standardisation to bring the playgroups to the same level as the nursery school” (NI1), implying that policies should ensure community providers receive equivalent support and recognition as nursery schools and school-based nursery classes. Issues include harmonising staff qualifications and pay (for example, introducing graduate leaders and teacher pay scales in all settings) and providing equal resources. The Northern Ireland’s Executive’s Preschool Expansion Programme from the late 1990s was one policy attempt to integrate and uplift the quality of all providers, for example by deploying early years specialists (graduate mentors) to

non-statutory settings. Current Northern Ireland officials have spoken of continuing work on this front, such as cross-departmental efforts in the new Early Years Strategy to address gaps between statutory and voluntary provision.

Scotland operates a system of registration of the EYW via two Scottish registration bodies (Scottish Social Services Council and General Teaching Council for Scotland) which affects the EYW for children aged from birth to 8 years of age. Interviewees discussed the impact on professional identities with in the EYW:

I felt that triple SSSC regulatory body you know... it kind of elevates the profession. But I think that's only in the baseline for us at the minute. I think there's room to be more than that within that professional body. [S5]

GTCS do not register early years practitioners, who register instead with the SSSC.

They have a very, I would say, care orientated focus and there is that tension between what is their main professional identity? [S3]

Such overlapping systems leave educators calling for change to the differences that exist between sectors. Divides such as the extra toll on the EYW in Scotland and Wales caused by accommodating two different inspection models need attention.

The Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education report from Professor Ken Muir recommended that the two inspection bodies (SSSC and Education Scotland) should collaborate on a joint inspection framework with the intention of reducing the burden on the workforce. To date a new *Quality Improvement Framework* has been drafted, presented to the workforce and continues to attempt to represent the two bodies who will each retain their right to inspect separately using dedicated parts of the new framework – with some joint inspections.

The duality of the non-maintained and maintained sector also links to inspection in Wales, with ESTYN inspecting schools across the whole age provision (3 to 16 years). Registered non-maintained settings are inspected by Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW). However, settings in the non-maintained sector offering 3–4-year funded nursery education are inspected by both ESTYN and Care Inspectorate

Wales. One participant commented on the complexity of such joint working and felt that it may be a tokenistic arrangement.

In England, where there is currently no registration of members of the EYW, but some form register is planned in its new Better Start in Life strategy (DfE, 2025), one participant noted:

There is no consistency there is no registration and ... therefore you can't be stripped off for practice and we've set the bar too low at Level 3. [E8]

They went on to link the level of quality in provision to graduate pedagogical leadership, as previously supported by the Graduate Leadership Fund, across all types of setting:

We haven't got what a graduate, what a level six looks like in a private setting compared to a school setting where it's a teacher. [E8].

The implication here is that the re-introduction of pedagogical leadership through supporting the recruitment of teachers across all early years and childcare settings is to be welcomed.

4.1.6 Workforce voice, representation and identity

The lack of unionisation or collective voice for the early years workforce emerged as an issue in interviews from Northern Ireland and Wales. Unlike many teachers, early years staff do not tend to be union members. As one educator observed, “nobody’s encouraging us to be part of unions, and nobody’s... giving us that support to be part of unions.” (NI1). They had been visited by a union representative but found “it was really expensive to join” (NI1), which deterred membership. They suggested that policy could play a role in facilitating access to professional associations or unions (perhaps through subsidised fees or by encouraging recognition of a representative body). Without a strong voice, the workforce’s concerns (pay, conditions, training) may not be heard at policy-making level. Thus, empowering the sector to organise itself as a professional body could be an important policy consideration. The need for a coordinated strategy – bringing together Education, Health, Economy and other departments – was noted by a Northern Ireland official who described a “task and finish group... for the development of the [workforce] strategy”, [NI1], involving

multiple departments including Health and Communities. Stakeholders interviewed in Northern Ireland seemed to agree that high-level political commitment is required to resolve the long-standing issues facing the early years workforce. Professional organisations were also suggested by participants in England, as one way to represent workforce voice and issues.

In Wales umbrella organisations were also suggested as key in supporting the workforce:

... you know, a representation of a large amount of the workforce, but there's lots of other organizations as well. And they are the ones that kind of go above and beyond... They're the ones that respond to government, you know, into manifestos. They're the ones that do all of that work, so I think just highlighting the importance of governments engaging with those umbrella organisations whenever they're developing policy, because they do represent the workforce. [W5]

With some policy implementation in Scotland there was a real sense of not being listened to. Interviewees recognised the wealth of knowledge held by those working in varied roles across early childhood, but that nominal consultation was happening, and those representing early childhood were not being listened to.

4.1.7 Diversity and inclusion

Several participants highlighted the need for a more diverse EYW in Northern Ireland. This includes increasing the number of male educators as well as staff from minority ethnic communities. One manager stressed, “We need to see more men involved in these roles, but we also need to see all of the newcomer communities reflected, because children need to... see their own culture” (NI3). Currently, the EYW across the UK, is predominantly female and does not fully reflect the increasing cultural diversity of the population. Attracting more men to the EYW was seen as beneficial for children and as a way to challenge gender stereotypes. Similarly, recruiting educators who share the linguistic or cultural background of newcomer families would help children “feel a sense of belonging” (NI3) and ease communication with children and their families. This theme of diversity also connects to training needs of staff who should be equipped to work inclusively with children

from all cultures, those experiencing disability, and promoting respectful awareness of all aspects of inclusion, difference and diversity. This interviewee also noted it “concern[ed] me now” that current training did not adequately prepare educators for the realities of disadvantaged areas, where there may be “complex family issues” or “a high percentage of looked after children” (NI3) in a setting. Improving diversity and cultural awareness and knowledge in the workforce requires attention.

Similarly, in Wales the need to develop a workforce that reflects the diversity of Wales was noted, with practical challenges in terms of supporting cultural and ethnic diversity and in particular Welsh medium provision. Initiatives to diversify the workforce were highlighted across the UK. The dominance of a young and female workforce was discussed as a possible challenge compounding retention and recruitment challenges.

For some time, the presence of men in the early childhood workforce in Scotland has remained at 4% (slightly higher than the rest of the UK, but still very low), and this, despite initiatives to encourage a more gender diverse workforce.

4.2 Lived experiences of policy

Some lived experiences of policy seem to derive from unintended consequences of policy implementation, such as: qualifications and professionalism; funding and remuneration; EYW roles; leadership; recruitment and retention; public perception and status; relationships/continuity; diversity and inclusion in the workforce; morale and wellbeing and the impact of COVID.

Here we give a glimpse of what is emerging, which we intend to discuss in our final report.

Interview participants generally expressed a strong feeling that the EYW has low status in all four nations. Educators – especially those in community or private settings – often feel they are not given the professional recognition afforded to teachers in nursery or primary schools. A “lack of parity with [the] statutory sector” (NI3) in terms of salary scales was identified as a concern. Some early years workers see peers with similar qualifications taking roles as classroom assistants or becoming nursery or Foundation Stage teachers in statutory sector schools, earning

higher pay and with a clearer career structure. As a participant in Scotland put it: “It's not valued enough. It's about how can we do this on a shoestring.” [S2]

One interviewee in Northern Ireland suggested that when society does not fully recognise or respect the importance of the role, the result is low pay and limited interest in the profession, which creates a vicious cycle that undermines workforce sustainability.

Low wages contribute to increased stress and low morale, and many workers shoulder heavy workloads including high child–staff ratios and administrative duties for modest pay. One participant expressed a common sentiment of being undervalued reporting that the young women in their setting “don't think the pay does reflect their work...[it's] the fall down of early years” (NI1) - a structural weakness where educators' important work is not financially or professionally rewarded. This was felt to be the case across the UK.

Several interviewees raised concerns about recruiting and retaining staff. They described a shrinking workforce pipeline where fewer young people are entering the profession. The picture is one of low pay, poor conditions, in a workforce with a high prevalence of young women who were becoming less attracted to such work.

In addition to structural and policy-related challenges, several participants highlighted the inherently demanding nature of the work itself, which irrespective of wider issues such as pay, status or staffing levels, the day-to-day reality of early years work can be emotionally and physically taxing. One participant reflected on the strain of “spending all day with a crying baby” [NI1], noting that even the most dedicated educators may find the intensity of care work overwhelming at times. The constant need to attend to young children's emotional and physical needs – often without a break – was described as draining, particularly in under-resourced settings. This reminder of the intrinsic demands of work with young children adds further weight to calls for better support, recognition and workforce wellbeing measures, as the work itself is challenging even under optimal conditions. In Wales, staff wellbeing has been seen as a significant issue and placing support mechanisms in place to share the load seen as important.

Despite challenges, participants from Northern Ireland highlighted several strengths of the workforce, chiefly the dedication and passion of early years educators. Many staff are deeply committed to the field, often remaining in post for long periods out of love for the work and the children.

It is becoming clear to us that the four nations have many issues in common, and there is a need to learn more from each other which we will further elaborate in our final report. As we embark on the next phase of our study, we shall ask how our nations might take examples of policies that are working successfully in one nation of the UK and consider why this is the case and what adjustments might be made to enable such a policy to be effective elsewhere in the UK where the situation is not so effective?

A picture is emerging of a workforce united in its commitment to providing quality group setting experiences of education and care for young children but fractured and burdened by some policies which have allowed division as a result of siloed systems.

We look forward to thinking further on this in our final report.

5. Next steps

This interim report is based on achievements thus far:

- i. a review of relevant scholarship and “grey” literature from the UK
- ii. 40 stakeholder interviews from across the UK
- iii. Analysis of UK stakeholder interviews.

We shall complete and analyse 10 international stakeholder interviews, continue to add to our appraisal of the national and international literature and further refine the EYW profiles of the four nations presented in this report. We shall develop areas for policy recommendations which we plan to test out in 12 focus groups (n=72, three in each nation, approximately six participants in each) by mid-September 2025. Policy issues will be exemplified in a small number of cases studies in our final report which we aim to publish towards the end of the year.

Key outputs will include a final project report on our comparative analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of systems in all four nations, and examples of successful

EYW policy internationally. This will provide evidence of operationally successful EYW policy and a map of possibilities for future EYW policies. Findings will be disseminated to policy makers, officials and sector bodies in all UK nations to support discussions about future EYW policies and their role in effective early learning and raising children's outcomes. Dissemination events (beginning with this interim report) will encourage public policy debate on the EYW to build support for improved EYW.

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7 Glossaries

7.1 England - Acronyms/Glossary of Key Terms

CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DfE	Department for Education
EBR	Experienced-based Route
ECE	Early childhood education
ECEC	Early childhood education and care
EYFS	Early Years Foundation Stage
EYT	Early Years Teachers
MNS	Maintained Nursery School
NNEB	Nursery Nurse Examination Board
Ofsted	Office for standards in education
PGCE	Post Graduate Certificate in Education
PVI	private, voluntary, and independent group provision
QTS	Qualified Teacher Status

7.2 Northern Ireland Acronyms/Glossary of Key Terms

Cluster Group	Network of settings for training, support, collaboration
Cluster Training	Joint professional development for groups of settings
Controlled schools	State-funded schools managed and funded through the Education Authority
Daycare	Full-day childcare provision
Deputy Manager	Second in command in an early year setting
EYS (Early Years Specialist)	Degree-qualified professional providing support to settings
Frontline Practitioner	Staff working directly with children
Graduate Leader	Staff member with a degree, usually in a leadership position
Key Worker	Main practitioner for a particular child
Level 3	Practitioner qualification level
Level 5	Higher qualification level for leaders/managers
Looked After Children	Children in the care of the local authority
Maintained schools	Stated funded schools under the management, ownership and governance of the Catholic Church
Manager	Person responsible for the overall running of a setting
Mentoring	Support for less experienced staff
NICC (Northern Ireland Childcare Credit)	Childcare subsidy scheme for parents (as used in interviews)
Non-Statutory Sector	Voluntary, community, or private settings
Playgroup Leader	Manager/leader of a playgroup
Statutory Sector	Controlled or Maintained, government-funded settings (eg nursery schools)
Sure Start	Government-funded programme supporting families in disadvantaged areas

7.3 Wales - Acronyms/Glossary of Key Terms

ALN	Additional Learning Needs - a child or young person aged 0-25 years is considered to have additional learning needs if their learning difficulty or disability calls for additional learning provision.
ALNET	Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act: Legislation governing support for children with ALN in Wales.
Cam wrth Gam	Welsh medium funded childcare qualifications delivered through the medium of Welsh.
CIW	Care Inspectorate Wales - Independent regulator of Social Care and Childcare Services in Wales. CIW registers, inspects, and takes action to improve the quality and safety of childcare services, ensuring they meet the Regulations and National Minimum Standards.
Curriculum for Wales	Statutory curriculum framework introduced for all state-funded education in Wales, for learners aged three to sixteen
ECPLC	Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care
ECPLC plan	Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC) plan. Published in the Wales Plan (2024) which sets out the vision for ECPLC. It covers provision for babies and young children from birth to 5 years old
Estyn	The education and training inspectorate for Wales, responsible for inspecting quality and standards in education and training
Flying Start	A government programme aimed at supporting families with children under four years old in disadvantaged areas. The goal is to give young children the best possible beginning in life, particularly in communities where additional support is needed.
Flying Start Advisory Teachers	Qualified early years education professionals who work within the Welsh Government's Flying Start programme to support, advise and support high-quality practice by childcare professionals.
Foundation Learning	Part of Curriculum for Wales, focused on the pedagogical teaching and learning approaches for children age 3-8 years

HLTA	A Higher Level Teaching Assistant has additional responsibilities to complement the professional work of teachers.
Maintained sector	Maintained sector in Wales refers to schools and nurseries wholly or substantially funded and overseen by local authorities. They do not include independent schools or private, voluntary or independent nurseries.
National Minimum Standards (NMS)	Set out the legal and quality benchmarks that providers of regulated childcare and play services must meet to care for children up to the age of 12. These standards are enforced under the legislative framework established by the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010 and its associated regulations.
Non-maintained sector	The non-maintained sector in Wales primarily refers to early years and childcare settings that are not directly managed by local authorities or maintained schools. These include private, voluntary, and independent nurseries and childcare providers, some of which deliver nursery education funded by the Welsh Government.
SCW	Social Care Wales - a statutory regulatory body established by the National Assembly for Wales through the Regulation and Inspection of Social Care (Wales) Act 2016.
Social Care Wales qualification framework for social care and regulated childcare roles in Wales	This framework sets out the required and recommended qualifications for different job roles within social care and early years/childcare settings, ensuring workers have the necessary skills, knowledge, and competence for safe and effective practice.
The Childcare Offer for Wales	A Welsh government-funded scheme designed to support eligible parents of 3 and 4-year-olds by providing a combination of free nursery education and childcare. Working parents or those on specified further or higher education course, can access up to 30 hours per week of combined early education and childcare for up to 48 weeks per year.
Welsh medium setting	A maintained or non-maintained setting providing over 80 % of provision through the medium of Welsh.

7.4 Scotland - Acronyms/Glossary of Key Terms

ADES	Association of Directors of Education Scotland
AHDS	Association of Head Teachers and Deputes in Scotland
ASN	Additional Support Needs
BACP	BA Childhood Practice
BERA	British Educational Research Association
CfE	Curriculum for Excellence 3-18
CI	Care Inspectorate
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CLPL	Career Long Professional Learning
COSLA	Convention of Scottish Local Authorities
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EIS	Educational Institute of Scotland
ELC	Early Learning and Childcare
ES	Education Scotland
EYPs	Early Years Practitioners
EYS	Early Years Scotland
FOI	Freedom of Information
FTE	Full time equivalent
GIRFEC	Getting it Right for Every Child
GTT	Give Them Time - The campaign for a further year of nursery funding for ALL children legally deferring their primary one start in Scotland.
GTCS	General Teaching Council for Scotland
GUS	Growing up in Scotland longitudinal study

HMIE	His Majesty's inspectorate of Education (Inspects all education settings for 3–18-year-olds)
LA	Local Authority
PRD	Professional Review and Development
P1	Primary 1
QIF	Quality Improvement Framework (Inspection for 0–5-year-old settings)
RtA	Realising the Ambition - Being Me, National practice guidance
SCMA	Scottish Child-Minding Association
SG	Scottish Government
SSSC	Scottish Social Services Council
SERA	Scottish Educational Research Association
SVQ	Scottish Vocational Qualification
Upstart	Campaign for a kindergarten stage for 3-7-year-olds in Scotland
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – incorporated into Scots Law in 2024



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