

Make the First Five Years Count:

A manifesto for early
education and care



Time to make the first five years count:

Policy priorities for immediate action:

An early education and care system that's child-centric, delivering high-quality provision

- Launch a national commission into the future of early education and care
- Establish national data collection across education, health and social care for all children to support a holistic approach to the first five years
- Consult with the sector on any plans to use school premises for early years places to ensure provision is age appropriate, flexible to meet children's and families' needs and does not threaten the sustainability of existing provision.

A funding system that works for all children, families and providers

- There must be a universal aspect of early education and care for all children with targeted support for those with most to gain
- Conduct annual reviews of the cost of delivering high-quality early education and care
- Create a single online childcare account for families to reduce complexity, increase take-up and ensure funding follows the child
- Remove business rates and VAT for all early education and care settings
- The sector must be consulted on any conditions attached to funding to avoid unintended consequences.

A system that values and invests in the early years workforce

- Implement a sustainable workforce strategy for the sector
- Review and revise the content of early education and care qualifications
- Establish incentive schemes to attract people of all backgrounds into the sector.

A regulatory framework that is fit for purpose and proportionate

- Review the role of Ofsted to ensure focus on continuous improvement of quality
- Undertake a review of the value and challenges caused by single-word judgements
- Support providers who are downgraded to make improvements and ensure consistency across the country.



Why the first five years count

National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) is the national charity representing private, voluntary and independent (PVI) children's nurseries across the UK. We are the independent voice of the 24,000-strong nursery sector, an integral part of the lives of more than a million young children and their families.

Our vision is to see all children and families flourish through excellent early years education and care - so that providers and the early years workforce can deliver sustainable, high-quality places for our youngest children.

This manifesto sets out the sector's priorities for the next government. To make the first five years count we need to focus on:

- A child-centric approach, ensuring access to **high-quality** early education
- Funding that works for families and supports sustainability
- Investing in developing the early years workforce
- Effective, constructive and proportionate regulation.

Research consistently shows that high-quality early education and care improves outcomes for children in the long term.

Children's brains develop connections faster in their first five years than at any other time in their lives – up to 90% of a child's brain development occurs by age five.

Evidence, including the **EPPSE study**, shows that high-quality early education and care is effective at improving children's outcomes especially for the most disadvantaged children.

Early intervention works; **NDNA's Maths Champions programme** has been shown to improve children's progress by an additional three months in both maths and language development. For children from disadvantaged backgrounds this could be as much as six months' additional progress¹.

At the same time, failing children in the early years costs them and society. Data analysed by the **Education Policy Institute** showed that around 40% of the disadvantage gap at age 16 has already emerged by age five.

Inadequate support for early years care and education costs **more than £16 billion every year** in England alone, according to researchers at the London School of Economics. This principle is supported by **Nobel Economist James Heckman**.

¹Children eligible for Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) in the intervention nurseries made, on average, the equivalent of six months' additional progress in maths attainment compared to children eligible for EYPP in control nurseries. These results, while promising, should be treated with more caution than the analysis on all pupils as fewer children were included in this analysis.




Early education and care that works for families and the economy

The PVI sector represents **64%** of the early years sector, **71%** of the early years workforce and delivers **86%** of the total childcare places on the Early Years Register.

At their most recent inspection, 96% of childcare providers were judged good or outstanding.

Providers can run groups of settings and these range in size from two settings to groups of over 300 nurseries. Over half of PVI settings are operating as single sites and less than 10% are part of large groups with more than 20 sites.

Private and voluntary providers are essential in delivering the number of places that families need. They also provide the flexibility that allows parents to work, study or train.



Provider type	% open term time and holidays	Median operating weeks per year	Mean operating hours per day
Private	77%	51	10
Voluntary	26%	38	8
Maintained nursery school	18%	39	8
School based nursery class	6%	38	7

Data from [DfE Provider Survey 2023](#) on flexibility of provision.

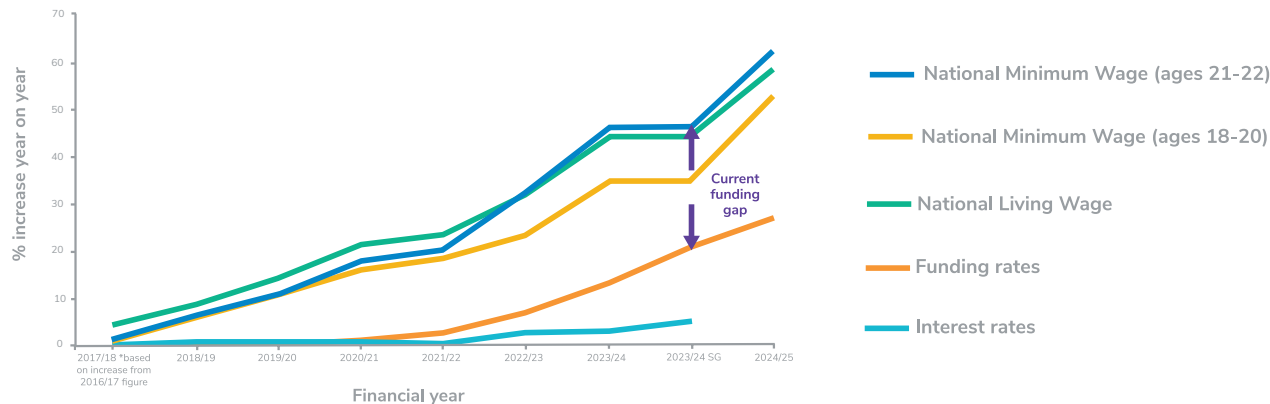
Challenges facing providers

Early years providers ranked their biggest challenges in delivering high-quality early education and care to children and the top five issues were:

1. Funding
2. Staffing
3. Supporting children with additional needs
4. Business rates and VAT
5. Ofsted.

As more funded childcare is offered to working parents with younger children, government-funded places will make up 80% of the work of early years providers **according to the IFS**. However, **83% of providers told NDNA** that current funding rates for three and four-year olds do not cover their costs. Funding for current funded places explicitly excludes meals, snacks, consumables and extra activities in settings.

Nursery Costs vs Funding



At current rates, funding does not allow settings to generate the income they need to invest in staff training, improving their learning environments or to cover costs like business rates. As a result 35% of providers expect to operate at a loss this year and 38% expect only to be able to break even. The position is worse in areas of deprivation which is why **NDNA has seen higher rates of closures in the most deprived parts** of the country.



From principles to policy:

In advance of developing this manifesto NDNA convened a range of focussed policy discussions, bringing together early years organisations, researchers, policy think tanks and providers. This led to the creation of the [Blueprint for Early Education and Care](#) published in October 2023. A key priority that emerged from the Blueprint discussions was how, as a society, we can better recognise the impact of the first five years on children's development, lifelong learning and life chances.

To get across the importance of a child-centred system to the public we believe the language should be formally adjusted to 'early education and care' in place of 'childcare'. This should be driven by any future government to help put early years on the same level as the wider system of statutory age education.

This change in language should be combined with greater knowledge of child development across society, including teaching the subject as part of the national curriculum. This approach would inspire future early years professionals at a time when they are thinking about career choices, while helping the next generation of parents to make informed decisions for their children.



Policy priorities for immediate action:

An early education and care system that's child-centric, delivering high-quality provision

When children have a secure, safe and joyful experience in their early years provision and where they are helped by skilled and committed practitioners, it is proven that they achieve better outcomes and gain the emotional well-being they need for their futures. [NDNA's Quality Statement](#) is built around the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which should be a guiding principle for early education and care policy.

The next government must:

1. In the first 100 days launch a national commission into the future of early education and care to ensure policy is child-centric, driven by evidence and best practice, and is valued on the same level as with mainstream education
2. Create a comprehensive national dataset, encompassing education, health and social care, for all children. This will enable an individualised, consistent and holistic approach to child development and support early years professionals to be more involved in identifying and referring children with additional needs to services that can offer support
3. Consult on any plans to use under-utilised school premises to support the delivery of early education and care places. Any provision developed on school sites must:
 - Be age appropriate to meet the needs of all children, drawing on expertise of local providers
 - Be carried out in consultation with the established settings and local community to ensure the flexibility to meet families' needs
 - Not duplicate, displace or undermine existing high-quality provision and their sustainability.



Policy priorities for immediate action:

A funding system that works for all children, families and providers

The current funding approach is complex and a burden on families, providers and local authorities. The result is lower take-up by parents and large budget underspends, which means funding is not reaching the frontline. The administrative burden also means early years settings waste time on administration that could be spent on supporting children.

The next government must:

1. Implement a progressive system with an element of universal, fully funded early education and care that supports all children and families. The system should also provide more targeted support to those who most need it including bringing the Early Years Pupil Premium in line with primary school rates. To reflect the reality of the current funding model the word "free" should be removed to confirm that the support to parents is a subsidy
2. Carry out an independent annual review into the cost of delivering high-quality early education and care. This must ensure that shortfalls in SEND funding are addressed to ensure inclusive access to places
3. Create a single online childcare account for families to reduce complexity, increase take-up and ensure funding follows the child. While this system is being designed and implemented the existing funding must be ringfenced to ensure any underspends in Tax-Free Childcare and early years budgets are reinvested in early years. The system should ensure funded payments to providers are made in advance and a more consistent approach to provider contracts
4. Remove business rates and VAT for all early education and care settings while delivering funded places, especially as around 80% of a setting's activity will be the delivery of government subsidised places
5. The sector must be consulted on any conditions attached to delivering funded places. This is to avoid any unintended consequences on sustainability, capacity, flexibility and quality within the sector.



Policy priorities for immediate action:

A system that values and invests in the early years workforce

The early years workforce is the most important element in ensuring children receive high-quality early education and care. Qualifications and continuing professional development is shown to be the best way to improve outcomes for children while high turnover is a burden on settings, disrupting continuity and quality of care. The recently established Institute of Early Years Education provides solutions to the workforce challenges.

The next government must:

1. Create a sustainable workforce strategy for the sector to provide professionals with a clear career path, status and the respect they deserve. The annual review of funding must cover investment in staff pay and conditions
2. Revise the curriculum for all early education and care qualifications to ensure that apprenticeships and qualifications are fit for purpose in line with the EYFS and address the specific needs of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
3. Introduce incentive schemes to attract people of all backgrounds to train in early years and encourage progression to higher qualification levels.



Policy priorities for immediate action:

A regulatory framework that is fit for purpose and proportionate

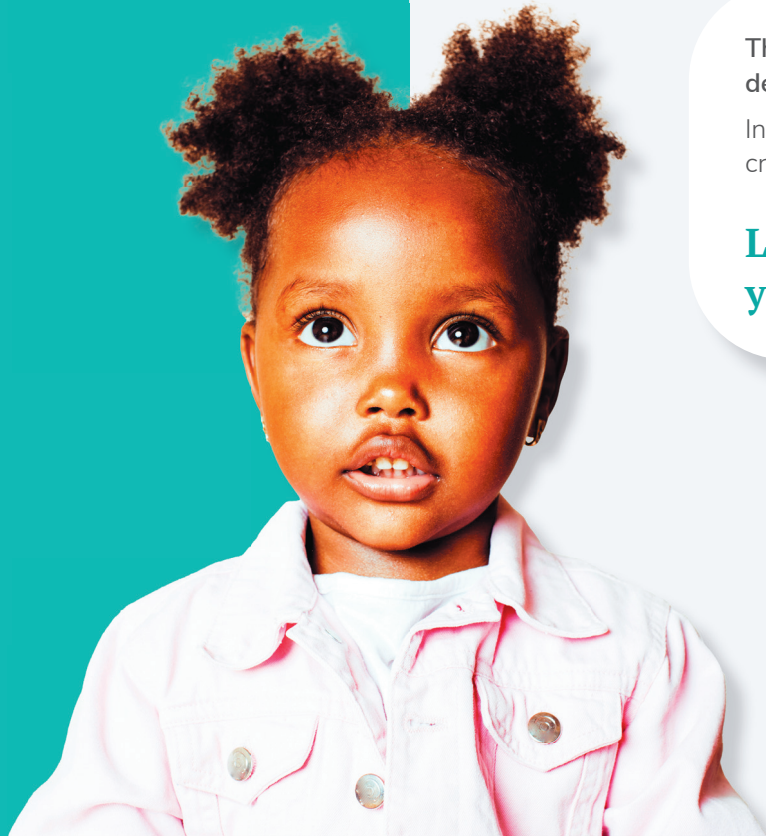
The next government must:

1. Review the role of Ofsted to ensure its activities are focussed on continuous improvement of quality, consistency of inspection activity and supporting the workforce
2. Undertake a review of the value and challenges caused by single-word judgements
3. Ensure that providers continue to receive funding for a minimum period of time in the event of any inspection downgrade to allow for improvement plans to be put in place. This approach must ensure consistency of approach across all local authorities.

This election offers all parties the chance to put in place strong foundations for Britain's future. Any policy development in early education and care must put children at its heart.

Investing in children's early education and care is vital for improving their life chances, supporting families and is crucial to our economy. This investment saves billions of pounds in the long-term.

Let's give all our children the best start in life by making the first five years count.





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National Day Nurseries Association is the national charity representing children's nurseries across the UK. At NDNA we don't just provide nursery membership, lobby government and offer training, we are dedicated to making a difference. Get involved:



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