



THE EARLY YEARS EDUCATION AND CHILDCARE SYSTEM IN WEST YORKSHIRE

Identifying West Yorkshire Combined
Authority's policy levers



The early years education and childcare system in West Yorkshire: Identifying West Yorkshire Combined Authority's policy levers
A report by the Yorkshire and Humber Policy Engagement and Research Network

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Executive summary

- 1 Early years education and care (EYEC) helps children get the best start in life. Access to quality provision positively contributes to equalising opportunities, with the positive benefits felt particularly by children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). EYEC is also key to reducing parental exclusion from economic participation, especially for marginalised groups.
- 2 West Yorkshire Combined Authority has been working closely with the Yorkshire and Humber Policy Engagement and Research Network (Y-PERN) to identify 'policy levers' which could be employed to realise the inclusive economic growth ambitions of the emerging West Yorkshire Local Growth Plan, as well as to deliver on the regional political mandate.
- 3 Y-PERN's six-month study was undertaken by a team of eight academic experts in EYEC, led by Dr Tom Haines-Doran, with additional funding from a Research England Policy Support Fund award at the University of Leeds.
- 4 It involved a systems mapping exercise, identifying the Combined Authority's key areas of influence, which could be employed on a

regional level to support the sector. Research involved a literature review, and three engagement roundtables with experts from the EYEC sector, academics and West Yorkshire local authorities.

- 5 It found that West Yorkshire's EYEC providers, and their workforce, are dedicated to ensuring children have the best start in life. The sector is supported with great dedication and care by the region's local authorities, who remain pivotal in ensuring that supply meets demand.
- 6 However, as is the case nationally, the sector is facing considerable challenges in meeting the needs of children and families.
- 7 Underpinning all of these challenges is a funding crisis. Government-funded 'entitlements,' which are distributed by local authorities to providers, have increased in recent years, but remain insufficient to meet the costs of the high quality and accessible provision that families need. This places a high financial burden on families, who are expected to meet funding shortfalls, which results in lower levels of availability in deprived areas, as well as straining the resources of EYEC providers.

- 8 Providers' lack of resources means that they face considerable challenges in recruiting sufficient numbers of qualified staff, retaining them in the sector, and encouraging those who have left the sector to return.
- 9 Funding shortfalls result in low pay, lack of opportunities for career progression, and inadequate training to cope with the increased demand for services from families with very young children and children with SEND. There are also issues around workforce diversity, with young women making up the majority of the workforce.
- 10 The West Yorkshire EYEC system, reflecting the national position, is extremely complex. There are a range of direct providers of EYEC, from private, voluntary and independent providers to school-based settings and childminders. In turn, providers rely on a complex chain of provision and finance. This includes an array of actors that operate at different scales, from regulators and local authorities, to EYEC workers and banks as well as parents.

- 11 Navigating the complexity of provision, and government support can be very difficult for parents, as well as for those who work in the sector, although local authorities, and networks of providers and EYEC workers, play a vital role in coordinating provision and sharing information.
- 12 While the Combined Authority does not have a formal role in this complex system of provision, it has considerable influence over many processes and actors involved. These influences constitute the Combined Authority's 'policy levers,' which, with further development, could contribute significantly to ensuring a successful EYEC system, upon which much of the success of the Local Growth Plan rests.

Policy level 1: Political leadership and advocacy

Many of the challenges facing the sector derive from a shortfall of funding. The Combined Authority could make the case that adequate funding for the sector is essential for the growth and regional development missions of the government. It could champion a sector that is arguably under-appreciated and undervalued by wider society. It could look to convene the major actors in the system – not least providers, local authorities, employers and sectoral experts – to work together to identify shared priorities and programmes, helping to overcome systemic complexity. In doing so, the Combined Authority could consider whether a unifying and motivating 'vision' or 'target' may be appropriate.

Policy level 2: Information, data sharing and systemic analysis

There is a lack of available regional scale data to make strategic, evidence-based policy decisions in West Yorkshire. Data come from various sources – local authorities, national institutions, and academic research. The Combined Authority could create a data hub for policy, practice and parental choice in West Yorkshire. It could work with local authority partners to establish where a West Yorkshire approach could add value to their vital work of sufficiency assessment, business support and ensuring that entitlements are taken up. The Combined Authority could work with partner institutions – including the university sector – on convening (and producing) West Yorkshire-scale policy relevant data, to be used in ongoing EYEC systems analysis.

Policy level 3: Creation of a West Yorkshire EYEC workforce strategy

The Combined Authority could play a significant role in addressing the EYEC workforce challenges in West Yorkshire. There is widespread support for a West Yorkshire approach to this, led by the Combined Authority. A West Yorkshire workforce strategy would require extensive consultation with the industry, public sector partners and EYEC workforce representatives. Specific interventions could include:

- A West Yorkshire recruitment campaign, highlighting the importance of EYEC work and career options, building on existing relationships between the Combined Authority and the Department for Work and Pensions. This work could address gender and ethnicity imbalances in the workforce.
- Exploring how the Combined Authority could tailor its adult skills offer to meet the problems of recruitment and retention in the sector, including focussing on key training challenges related to very young children and children with SEND, and exploring accelerated pathways to Level 3.
- Working with regional businesses to explore the potential for greater work flexibility, to enable greater access to EYEC for families, as part of its Fair Work Charter strategy.

Introduction

Early years education and childcare (EYEC) is becoming increasingly important for the development of the economies and social wellbeing of England's regions and local communities. The Mayor of West Yorkshire, Tracy Brabin, has put EYEC at the heart of her plans to reinvigorate the West Yorkshire economy through 'inclusive growth.' As she recently stated, 'The important role of childcare in our economy is becoming increasingly clear - supporting children's development and enabling mums and dads to retrain or get back into work' (Tracy Brabin, 2024).

This report is the result of policy engagement work, cohered by Dr Tom Haines-Doran a Policy Fellow at the Yorkshire and Humber Policy Engagement Network (Y-PERN), based at the University of Leeds. Y-PERN is a partnership between universities in Yorkshire and the Humber, and the region's combined and local authorities.¹ A key objective of Y-PERN is to connect and convene expertise across Yorkshire and the Humber's sub-regions to meet local policy demand.

Dr Haines-Doran has been collaborating with the West Yorkshire Combined Authority to identify new evidence needs, through which the issue of early years education and childcare (EYEC) came to the fore. Alongside colleagues from Y-PERN and Policy Leeds, Dr Haines-Doran secured funding from Research England's Policy Support Fund to investigate the policy levers that the Combined Authority can access to improve EYEC provision. This was used to engage seven academic researchers with expertise in EYEC policy and related disciplines: experts in work and employment relations, Dr Lilith Brouwers and Dr Jo

Burgess; experts in early years education, Dr Amiee Code, Dr Amy Creaser and Dr Erin Dysart; expert in civil engineering and infrastructure, Karen Arzate Quintanilla; and expert in political economy, Dr Jack Simpson. Throughout we have been supported by officers from the Combined Authority, and Dr Claire Smithson from Policy Leeds. We would like to thank all those who participated in this project, especially participants at our round tables.

The purpose of this report is to explore the 'policy levers' (areas of power or influence) that the Combined Authority has at its disposal to help realise the Mayor's vision. The Combined Authority does not have statutory responsibilities in this area, and the EYEC system is extraordinarily complex, which makes identifying such levers far from straightforward. We have employed a 'Systems of Provision' approach to this task, because it is able to capture and simplify such complexity, to provide a realistic picture of the sector, and to accurately articulate the (potential) role of peripheral agents. In other words, it helps us understand what needs to be improved, and where the Combined Authority could help. We describe our approach more fully in Chapters 2 and 3, which lead to a brief overview of the sector in West Yorkshire in Chapter 4.

As this report finds, the EYEC sector in West Yorkshire is in a state of considerable crisis, characterised by a significant unevenness in the quality and availability of provision, and by very high costs of access for families. As we explore in Chapter 5, this crisis is underpinned by the fragmented and privatised nature of the system itself - which promotes private wealth extraction and makes systemic cooperation difficult - and by

¹ See: <https://y-pern.org.uk/>

a lack of government funding relative to demand. This has led to the closure of settings where they are most needed, and an oversupply in areas where families can afford to pay more. Increased government funding, in the form of entitlements, is unlikely to lead to more, and more equitable provision, because EYEC providers are struggling to recruit and retain staff. Much of this workforce crisis is driven by low wages, but it is also attributable to a training system that does not give EYEC workers the tools they need.

However, there is some cause for optimism. As we explore in Chapter 6, despite significant challenges, the EYEC system in West Yorkshire is held together by dedicated individuals and organisations, who often provide excellent EYEC services, including

local authorities, who are often involved in innovative initiatives. Any attempt to reform the West Yorkshire EYEC system should recognise and build upon the good work already taking place in much of the system, to avoid duplication of efforts, and to learn from sector-specific experience and knowledge.

Finally, Chapter 7 discusses the policy levers the Combined Authority has at its disposal, and those that could come through further devolution. These are in the areas of:

- Political leadership and advocacy
- Information, data sharing and systemic analysis
- The creation of West Yorkshire EYEC workforce strategy



1. Childcare policy context

1.1 The Local Growth Plan - putting early years education and childcare at the heart of inclusive growth

The Combined Authority and five local authority partners² are working together to deliver on the Local Growth Plan for West Yorkshire to achieve their shared vision for 'A brighter West Yorkshire that works for all. An engine room of ideas and creativity, where anyone can make a home' (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, n.d.d). The Local Growth Plan is an evidence-led framework to unlock growth and prosperity and overcome key barriers around investment, skills and connectivity, that are holding back growth in West Yorkshire.

Taking a systems approach, the Combined Authority and partners have framed the Local Growth Plan around the core principles of sustainability, inclusion, and health and wellbeing – ensuring economic growth is pursued with a purpose. For West Yorkshire residents this means that everyone, especially those residents who are from disadvantaged and underrepresented groups, will benefit from the prosperity this growth delivers. Central to this approach is the identification of key 'provisioning systems', which drive economic growth and inclusivity, as illustrated in *Chart 1*, right.

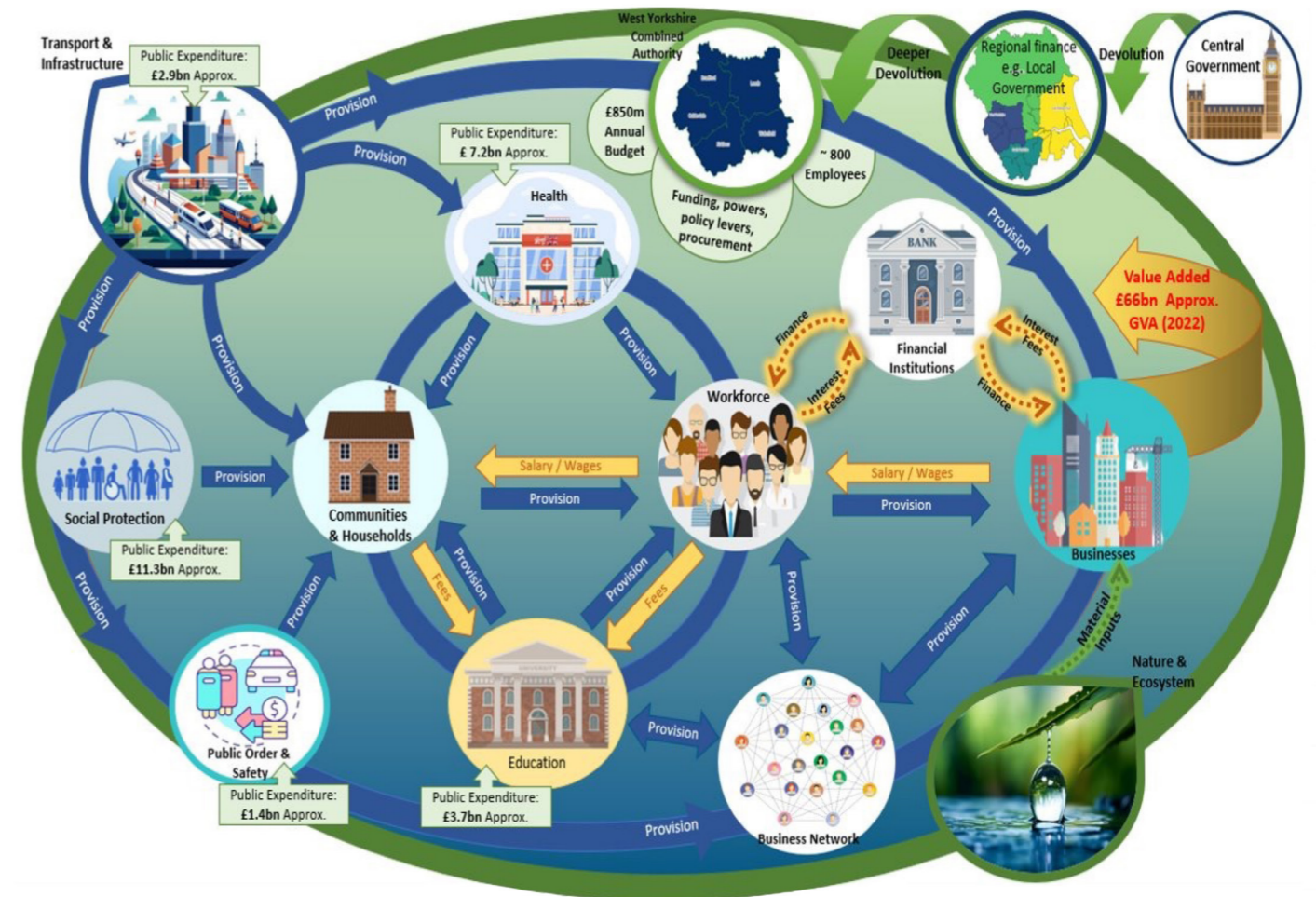
West Yorkshire is home to 2.4 million people, has a £66 billion economy (GVA), and a workforce of 1.2 million (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, n.d.-a). It is a polycentric and self-contained labour market with around 90% of workers living in the region, providing an ideal testbed to pilot innovative, place-based solutions (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2024a). The region has a diversified economy with historic strengths in manufacturing and financial services and more recently in the digital sector. High growth clusters across emerging tech, advanced manufacturing and the green economy, and transformational regional investment in mass transit and housing retrofit offer exciting opportunities for good jobs and economic growth within the region (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, n.d.-a, 2024a).

However, West Yorkshire has an £11bn output gap. This is underpinned by sluggish employment and productivity rates, which need addressing through investment and policy (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, n.d.-a). A comprehensive evidence review towards the development of the West Yorkshire Local Growth Plan identified key barriers to inclusive and sustained, widespread prosperity:

1. An insufficiently skilled workforce,
2. Low levels of innovation and investment by employers to grow productivity, and
3. Inadequate infrastructure in transport and housing.

² City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council; Calderdale Council, Kirklees Council, Leeds City Council and Wakefield Council

Chart 1 - West Yorkshire's key provisioning systems



Source: Analysis and presentation by Y-PERN

Lower productivity means West Yorkshire residents have fewer education, training and economic opportunities, and poorer connectivity. Poor health and wellbeing are already entrenched, and unacceptably high levels of poverty, often concentrated in certain communities and neighbourhoods, have not improved for decades (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2024a).

The Combined Authority see quality, affordable EYEC provision in the region as a critical enabler of inclusive growth, benefitting children, parents and carers, and the wider economy. Quality, affordable and available EYEC provision helps reduce inequalities

that exist from birth, and enables greater participation in the labour market, creating a route out of poverty by allowing parents more time to build skills and pursue careers (Hochlaf & Franklin, 2021). Indeed, a lack of affordable childcare is one of the principal barriers to entering employment, or increasing working hours and pay (Cabinet Office, 2024; Cebula, 2024). Women continue to take on the majority of childcare responsibilities, which disproportionately impacts on their career opportunities, earnings potential and overall economic participation (Millthorne et al., 2024). This amounts to what the Women's Budget Group refers to as a 'maternity penalty', reflecting the fact that women 'typically take

more time away from work to look after children, with career breaks affecting earning potential, development and progression opportunities' (Millthorne et al., 2024, p. 12). This is an important component of a number of overlapping barriers women face through economic exclusion and disadvantage in the labour market, including occupational segregation and stratification. Combined, these barriers not only promote overall gender inequalities in society, but also hold back economic growth. According to modelling by the Women's Budget Group, these barriers cost the West Yorkshire economy £3.6 billion per year, or 6.2% of total annual GVA (Millthorne et al., 2024, p. 13).

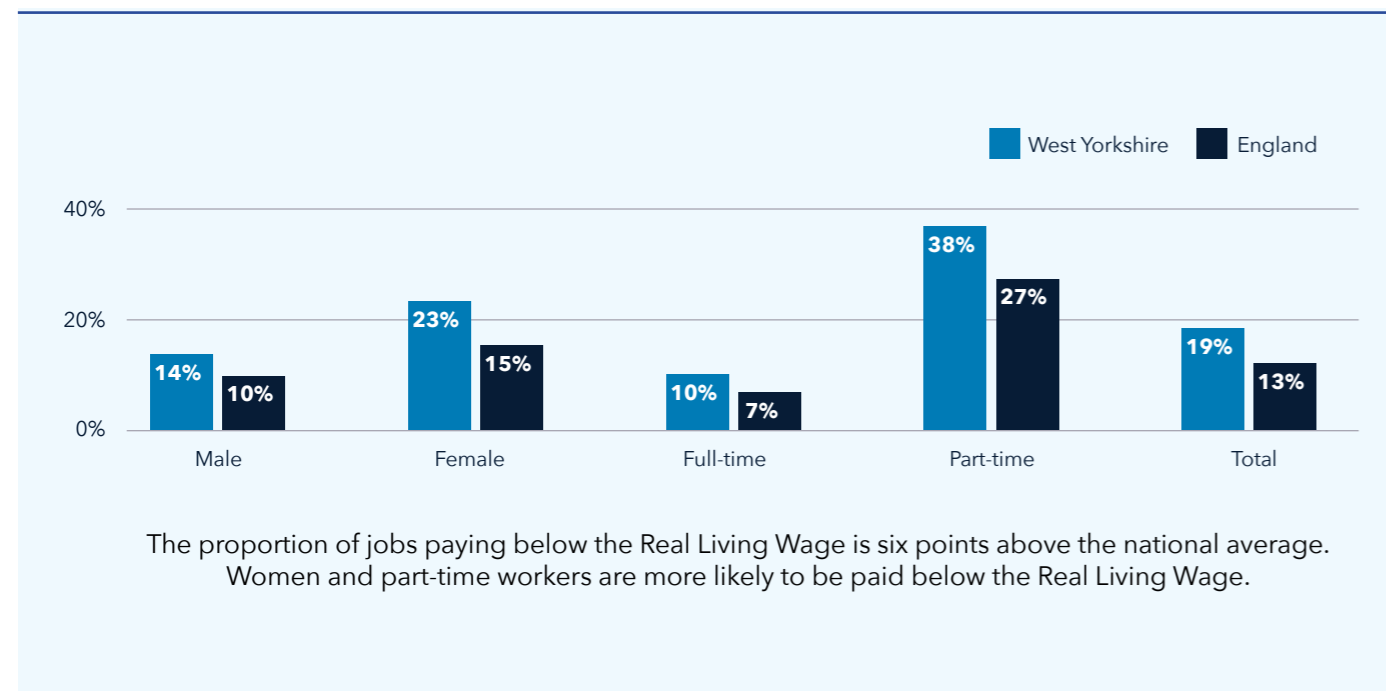
While this is a national policy challenge, it is particularly stark in West Yorkshire. The region has a gender pay gap of 16%, which is partly accounted for by women taking part time work, and career breaks, to raise children (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2024b). As can be seen in *Chart 2* below, West Yorkshire has more jobs below the Real Living Wage than the

average for England, including a particularly high rate of women in low paying jobs, as well as a high rate of part-time work.

Costly EYEC also adds pressure to household budgets, especially for low-income households, while cost-of-living pressures and low wages continue to affect West Yorkshire residents, especially for women and part-time workers (see *Chart 2*, left). Despite the recent further expansion of funded childcare hours, which started to roll out in phases from April 2024, the burden of childcare costs on families continues to be significant, reducing disposable income and economic resilience. In England, for families that have to pay for childcare expenses, this constitutes 7% of their household income, which increases to 17% for the lowest income quintile (Corfe, 2022).

EYEC is also a vital component of children's development. High-quality EYEC can transform life chances, reducing entrenched inequalities at the earliest opportunity, and creating long-lasting improvements in educational attainment

Chart 2 - Jobs in West Yorkshire below the Real Living Wage by gender and status



Source: WYCA (n.d.-c).

“High-quality EYEC can transform life chances, reducing entrenched inequalities at the earliest opportunity.”

and earnings (Magnuson & Duncan, 2016), increasing economic growth and reducing inequalities in the long term (Pollard et al., 2023;

The Sutton Trust, 2024). Many of the benefits of EYEC for children lie in the sector's ability to help children achieve 'school readiness'. School readiness is concerned with children's overall development, including 'physical wellbeing and motor skills, social and emotional growth, approach to learning, language development and general knowledge and understanding', in other words, a 'balance of both the academic and non-academic skills that help children thrive' (Wood, n.d.). Being school-ready is a strong predictor of future educational and economic attainment. To give some examples: children who are not school-ready are almost 2.5 times more likely than other children to be persistently absent from school; over half of children who are not school-ready perform below expectations in their Key Stage 1 reading assessment; and children who are not school-ready are around three times more likely to be not in employment, education and training by ages 16-17 than those children who are (Powell et al., 2024, p. 14).

Only 67% of pre-school children are considered school-ready in England, and underlying socioeconomic inequalities contribute to that rate not being higher. Only 52% of children eligible for free school meals are considered school-ready, compared to 72% who are not eligible. Having English as a second language or having special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are examples of factors also associated with lower chances of school readiness (Powell et al., 2024, p. 14).

Affordable and available EYEC provision helps reduce inequalities that exist from birth and enables greater participation in the labour market, especially for women (Hochlaf & Franklin, 2021, p. 12; Millthorne et al., 2024; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018). However, as well as being unaffordable to too many families, the EYEC sector in West Yorkshire, as elsewhere in England, is in a state of considerable crisis. It is failing to meet the needs of children and their families according to current levels of demand, and, without significant reform and additional funding, it will struggle further, as demand increases. To the extent that it functions adequately, it is held together by a dedicated and inspiring - but underpaid and often underappreciated - workforce, who daily struggle with inadequate staffing, training and wider institutional support, to provide for the educational and care needs of our youngest residents. It is a system which is costly to use, complex, fractured, and its delivery is uneven.

The Combined Authority does not have statutory responsibilities, and no direct financial powers, in this area of public policy, but is committed to doing what it can to improve the situation, in the short- and long-term. This report will identify the 'policy levers' the Combined Authority could seek to employ to achieve this.

2. Our approach: Cohering expertise and systems analysis

The Y-PERN initiative takes a network model approach to meeting the evidence needs of policymakers. This seeks to cohere and engage expertise from across the academic community to advise and assist policymaking, recognising that policy matters frequently transcend traditional academic discipline boundaries, and seeking to avoid the duplication of academic research while maximising its impact. Each of this study's researchers are attached to other relevant academic projects, whose insights are incorporated in, and have influenced, this study. These include:

- **ActEarly**
<https://actearly.org.uk>
- **Better Start Bradford Innovation Hub**
<https://bsbinnovationhub.uk>
- **Born in Bradford**
<https://borninbradford.nhs.uk>
- **Centre for Applied Education Research**
<https://caer.org.uk>
- **The Changing Face of Early Childhood in Britain**
www.nuffieldfoundation.org/publications/early-childhood-education-care-shaping-life-chances
- **The Childcare During COVID-19 research project**
<https://eyehub.leeds.ac.uk/childcare-during-covid>
- **The Early Years Employment Research Hub**
<https://business.leeds.ac.uk/research-ceric/dir-record/research-projects/2164/early-years-employment-research-hub>
- **The Impact of COVID-19 on Key Learning and Education**
<https://ickle.leeds.ac.uk>
- **The My First 1,000 days project**
<https://myfirst1000days.co.uk/>
- **The Pilot Study of the Communication Friendly Home-Based Settings Programme**
<https://essl.leeds.ac.uk/directories0/dir-record/research-projects/1266/pilot-study-of-the-communication-friendly-home-based-settings-programme>
- **Retention and Return: Delivering the Expansion of Early Years Entitlement in England**
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/646ca30371a2ef6a657e9309/t/65482050ded6710668b8b62a/1699225681784/Retention+and+Return.pdf>

More than simply being able to access the findings of these projects, these represent professional connections. This gave us considerable access to knowledgeable academics and practitioners in the early years policy space, who have provided us with valuable input and advice.

The principal method employed in this study was the 'systems of provision' (SoP) approach, which has become popular in political economy and policy research (Bayliss & Fine, 2020). The SoP approach was identified as useful for this study's purposes because it focuses on the whole 'chain of provision' – all of the activities, relationships, agents and material processes that go into providing a particular good or service. It recognises that each particular good or service is attached to a unique chain. In doing so, it rejects standard economic approaches, which tend to homogenise between provisioning systems, for example by assuming that market principles are equally applicable between banking and public sector provision, or

that the principles of regulation in one sector can be unproblematically transposed onto another. Instead, it suggests that our understanding of a particular form of provision must be based on the realities (and, often, complexities) of the processes and agents which together work to make it happen. It also recognises that provisioning systems are context-specific: the different characteristics of the legal system, funding, politics, demographics, and geography of a particular provisioning system will be different between, and often within, regions and nation-states. That understanding can only be gained holistically, including drawing upon

“The SoP approach focusses on the whole ‘chain of provision’ – all of the activities, relationships, agents and material processes.”

a much wider range of academic or professional knowledge than economics alone, including contextual (place-based) expertise.

SoP analysis can be particularly useful for guiding policy analysis, including understanding the powers and influence

a particular public body can have on the provision of a particular good or service, not least where that body's influence is relatively marginal or indirect.

A SoP analysis begins by seeking to identify the principal agents and processes involved in a chain of provision and understanding the relationships between them. This leads to the creation of a 'system map' (Haines-Doran, 2022). Having drawn the map, the researcher can begin to ask where the public body can help address systemic weaknesses in order to improve final outcomes. For example, central government has relatively little control over labour deployment – this is largely the domain of private sector employers – but its policy is to minimise economic inactivity, and it attempts to achieve this according to the limited powers and funding it has available. One of the ways it seeks to reduce unemployment is by liaising with public transport providers to encourage them to offer discounts to job seekers

as part of their corporate social responsibility efforts, with little cost to the Treasury, save for the administration of passes by the Department for Work and Pensions. This 'policy lever' (among others) could, therefore, be added to a national welfare-to-work system of provision.

The production of such a map is intensive. The research team's approach firstly relied on their background knowledge and conversations with other academics to draw an indicative system map. We supplemented this by organising three round tables: firstly, with EYEC academic experts situated in the fields of work and employment, early years education, and language development and psychology; secondly, with representatives from EYEC providers in West Yorkshire; and, finally, with officers responsible for children's services from West Yorkshire's local authorities. In each of these round tables, we asked participants to discuss the many types of agents and relationships that go into the provision of EYEC in West Yorkshire and to think about where the Combined Authority could help improve the system. At the events, the research team took notes, and audio recordings were made, which were transcribed in a way that anonymised the participants, to allow them to speak as freely as possible. After each event, the research team discussed our working system map, and made amendments to it as we went along, particularly regarding the Combined Authority's relations with other agents. It also provided an opportunity to discuss the quantity and quality of the relations between agents – which is crucial to the success or failure of provision: if some aspects of the system are working relatively well, then it would be preferable for the Combined Authority to support those that are not, if it can. We refer to discussions at these round tables throughout the document, according to these acronyms:

ART: Academic round table

LART: Local authority round table

PRT: Provider round table

In the next chapter, we introduce our map of the System of Provision of EYEC in West Yorkshire.

3. Presenting the early years education and childcare system map

Perhaps the most striking feature of the map is its complexity. SoP analysis needs to be selective in the range of processes and agents that it presents, choosing to abstract from those identified as the least important to determining final outcomes (Haines-Doran, 2022). Simplifying the map for analytical and presentational purposes becomes trickier when attempting to identify policy levers available to relatively marginal agents: the strongest aspects of their influence will often be found several steps removed from final provision. That is especially true of systems which are complex by their very nature. As we shall see, EYEC provision in West Yorkshire, alongside the rest of England, is very complex, not least because it is a mixture of public and private provision, and largely market-based. If EYEC were to emerge as a historically novel form of provision at its current scale, it is unlikely that it would purposefully be designed with the high levels of complexity we see today.

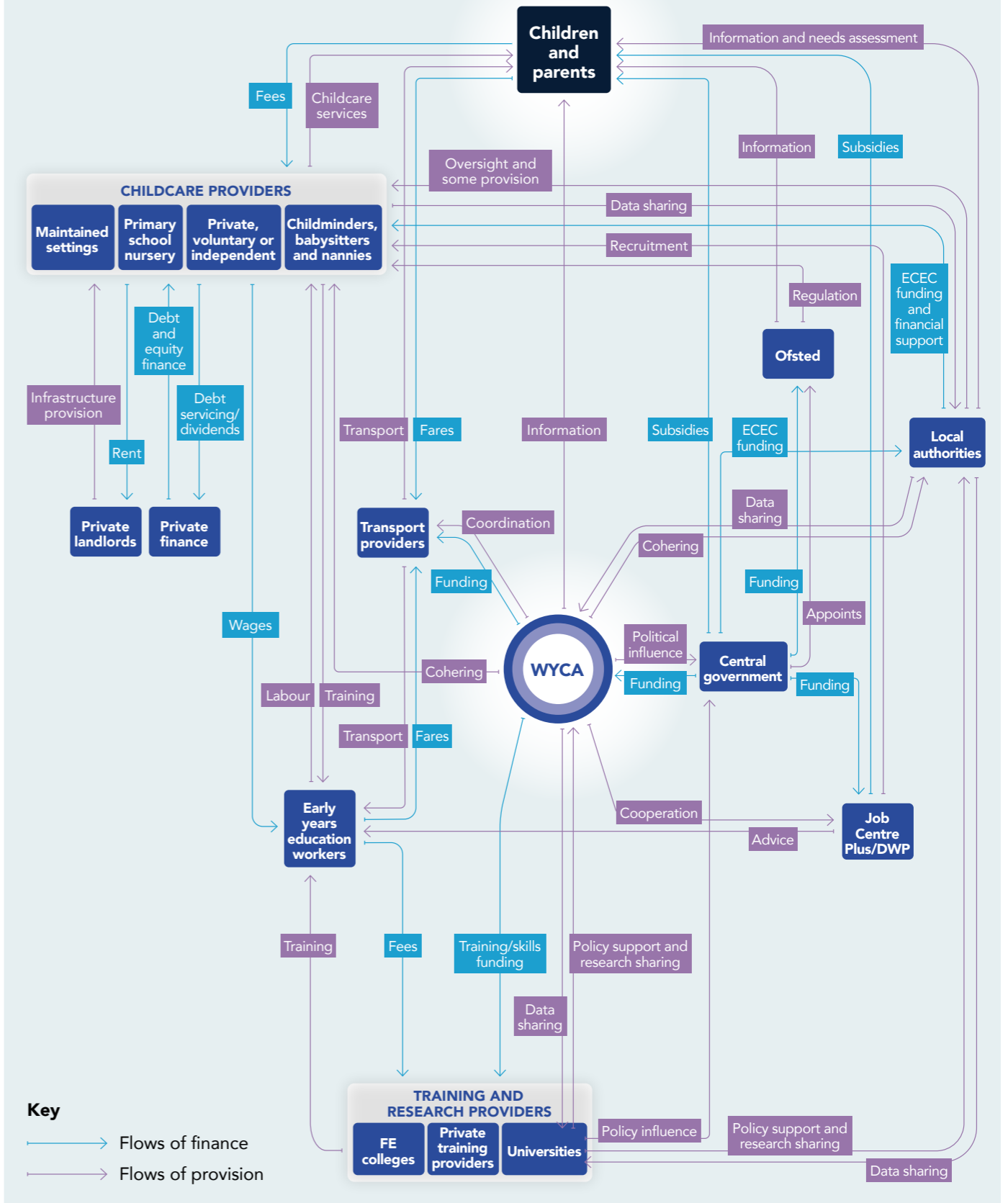


It should be noted that the map is highly abstract: while it charts flows of provision and finance, it says little about the nature of such flows, their quantity and quality. That will be expanded upon in the remainder of the report. The reader is encouraged to refer back to the system map during this extrapolation.

Furthermore, the map represents the EYEC system as it already is with one important exception: it includes policy levers the Combined Authority could theoretically employ to the benefit of final provision, alongside policy levers it already has in place (which could be used differently to improve final provision). So, for example, the Combined Authority does not currently run an information service for parents seeking EYEC services, and could usefully do so; it does provide a significant proportion of public funding for adult education in West Yorkshire, but there is potential to target this funding more towards the EYEC workforce.

Each box represents a key agent in the system, with directional flows of provision (red) or finance (blue) between them. At the top of the system is the 'children and their parents' agent - the ultimate consumers in a chain of intermediate provision and financial flows. As can be seen, parents pay fees to EYEC providers, in return for education and childcare services. Agents with similar roles in the system are grouped together for simplicity, for example the various kinds of professional EYEC providers.

West Yorkshire's system of provision: early years education and childcare



4. A brief overview of the early years education and childcare system in West Yorkshire

The provision of EYEC is undertaken by a range of agents who have emerged as a result of a complex historical process in which the public sector and private enterprise have sought to enable and incentivise EYEC provision for different groups of children, to meet different public policy objectives and demand from parents. As in the rest of England, the principal agents of direct EYEC provision in West Yorkshire are:

- Maintained settings - nurseries run and funded by local authorities, typically for ages three to five.
- Nursery classes in primary schools - nurseries run by, and attached to, primary schools, typically for ages three to four (before reception class), and typically term-time only.
- Private, voluntary or independent (PVI) settings - non-local authority maintained settings, which typically provide extended hours of care all year round.
- Childminders, babysitters and nannies. Childminders provide extended EYEC, regulated by Ofsted, on a work from home, self-employed basis, while babysitters and nannies represent the more informal part of the sector and are not typically regulated as education providers.

As will be explained in the next chapter, a lack of easily available data makes it difficult to paint an accurate picture of the extent to which each agent provides EYEC services in West Yorkshire. The Department for Education (DfE) does provide some regional statistics for Yorkshire and the Humber (Y&H), however (see *Table 1*, right). Note that their categories do not neatly map

onto the common categorisation of providers that we have used here. 46% of providers in Y&H are childminders, while 20% are private group-based providers. 10% are voluntary group-based providers (which, collectively would likely make up the majority of the PVI category) and 22% are nursery class childcare settings (typically those attached to schools). The statistics do not report a number for maintained nursery schools because of their low number (counts of less than 10 are not included, for statistical reasons, and are represented by the symbol u), and possibly because many maintained settings are associated or attached to schools, creating some taxonomic blurring between the categories, including with the school/college/LA/other unclassified category. Furthermore, number counts do not tell you how much EYEC is being provided by each type of provider, and the DfE does not report data on a regional scale. However, this is possible to estimate for Y&H using the average number of places for settings in each category at the England scale. This suggests that the majority of provision in Y&H (58%) is undertaken by the PVI sector, with public sector provision - mainly attached to schools - undertaking about half of that (29%), and childminders serving a considerable proportion (13%) of children in EYEC. Note that places data for the 'School/college/LA/other unclassified' category are not provided.

The direct provision of EYEC services is supported by a complex array of agents and processes. Already evident is the role of local authorities, who fund and manage maintained settings, but also retain statutory responsibility for overall provision. This includes the complex work of sufficiency

Table 1: EYEC provision per provider type in Yorkshire and the Humber

	Nursery class childcare settings	Maintained nursery schools	Private group-based providers	Voluntary group-based providers	School/college/LA/other unclassified	Childminders	Total
Number of providers in Y&H	1,160	[u]	1,080	520	100	2,480	5,360
Proportion of providers in Y&H	22%	[u]	20%	10%	2%	46%	100%
Number of places per provider in England	34	94	56	36		7	
Number of places per provider in Y&H	39440	[u]	60480	18720	[u]	17360	136000
Proportion of places per provider in Y&H	29%	[u]	44%	14%		13%	100%

Source: DfE Childcare and early years provider survey 2023, modified by authors' calculations.

assessment (ensuring that supply can meet demand), which requires extensive data gathering, including from providers themselves. They also provide information to parents, and liaise between social services, providers and other relevant public bodies. Local authorities also manage and distribute EYEC entitlement funding from central government, which is attached to each child in each setting.

Settings based in schools or council buildings typically do not have the additional costs of rent or mortgages, but that is far less common in the PVI sector, where mortgages, rent and lease payments are made to financial investors.

Settings employ a lot of staff. School-based and maintained settings typically employ teachers with qualified teacher status, who are able to switch between nurseries and schools without additional teacher training. PVIs employ early education professionals who are not typically qualified teachers, and usually earn far less than a qualified teacher, but nevertheless require qualifications to work in the setting. Training of nursery workers can be undertaken within settings, or by external organisations, such as private training providers or further education colleges. The PVI sector is typically far more reliant on external training providers than maintained or school-based settings.

The vast majority of providers - except more informal forms of provision, such as nannies - are regulated by Ofsted, who carry out inspections on behalf of the government, and have the power to close settings deemed to be failing children.

As previously indicated, the Combined Authority's role in the system is relatively marginal, with perhaps its strongest current influence being in the area of adult education. But, before discussing the Combined Authority's policy levers, the next two chapters will describe what is and is not working in the current system, to meet the needs of West Yorkshire's children and their families.

5. What requires improvement?

5.1 Lack of regional scale, policy-relevant data

Conceptualising EYEC in West Yorkshire as a whole system of provision, in order to identify the Combined Authority's policy levers requires identifying agents and processes which are often not incorporated into policy analysis. The system map shows relations between agents as flows of provision, but it does not identify the quantity of monetary flows, or the magnitude or quality of provision, relative to (present and future) need. For this to be properly understood, data are required. In other words, each relation poses a need for information.

This has presented considerable challenges for the research team as we have struggled to identify appropriate data sources. This difficulty is caused by a number of factors. The first is in the diversity of agents and processes in the system itself, their different reporting protocols, and how they are governed and regulated. This is partly due to the historical development of the system, not least through processes such as outsourcing and privatisation, which has created fragmentation and a multiplicity of agents. The privatised nature of much of the system also means that many actors hold proprietary information, for which there is an economic incentive not to disclose. Privatisation also contributes to an unstable system, with frequent openings and closings of settings, and even more frequent staff turnover rates, meaning that inspections of settings by Ofsted – conducted every six years – produce data that become quickly outdated (Penn, p. 100).

Even where data are available, they are often only held at a local authority or national scale (for example through sufficiency reporting by local authorities or surveys conducted by the DfE), and sometimes both, but seldom at the West Yorkshire scale. To an extent, this reflects the historic evolution of EYEC policy, which has taken place in the absence of a remit or mandate for policymaking by subregional political authorities in this area. But this is changing alongside political devolution.

Our engagement with academics, providers, and local authority officers revealed a desire not only for greater data availability but also, specifically, data at the West Yorkshire scale, to better coordinate across practice, research and policy. For example, local authorities collect a lot of data covering the availability of EYEC in their areas, but residents frequently move between local authority areas, or their nearest facilities may be across the border in another area (LART), and yet there is currently no centralised West Yorkshire information service to reflect these realities, as there is in, for example, transport. Yet, there is a willingness to coordinate and share information at the West Yorkshire level, not only between local authorities, but also between providers, policymakers, and academic partners, as our round tables found (ART, LART, PRT).

The data checklist in *Appendix 1* is the result of the research team's investigations into data availability. Each area of identified data need responds to one or more of the agents or processes in the system map above. Research to produce the table was conducted by the EYEC experts in our research team and checked with leading practitioners in the



field. This shows glaring gaps in data availability, especially at the West Yorkshire scale.

We argue that the availability of such data is crucial to policymaking at all levels of government. For example, the expected demand for places for two-year-olds in relation to staff-to-child ratios is available at a national scale, but it is not comprehensively collected at a local authority scale, and is unavailable at a West Yorkshire scale. Where data gaps exist at a West Yorkshire level we have presented national scale data in this report. But this can only be indicative: while many of the systemic problems of EYEC are common across England, for a genuinely West Yorkshire policy, which takes into account place-based specificities, many of these data gaps will need to be addressed.

5.2 Funding: The underlying problem

Despite the importance of EYEC to the economy and society, it is a sector which suffers from acute under-funding. As our research has found, this lack of financial resource produces a multitude of pernicious effects, which are captured in the remainder of this chapter. None of these problems can be adequately addressed without significantly increased funding, even if non-resource intensive interventions, or policy recalibration, can hope to make some improvements on the current situation.

The latest statistics – which do not reflect the latest increases in entitlements – show that funding for EYEC in England is mainly provided by parents' fees (52%), yet a significant proportion (33%) is provided by government subsidies, or 'entitlements', which make up the main bulk of a 'patchwork' of government funding programmes to the sector, which include tax relief and benefit payments (Farquharson, 2021). This differs between setting type, with a marked difference in

state funding as a proportion of providers' income between, for example, 'nursery class childcare settings' - meaning nurseries attached to schools - (83%), private nurseries (41%) and childminders (13%). Across all 'setting types', the proportion of the sector's income from entitlements has increased markedly since 2018, rising from 26% in 2018 to 33% in 2022 (Lee et al., 2023). This reflects the rollout of a series of entitlements across England, which have dramatically shaped the nature of the EYEC market and its provision.

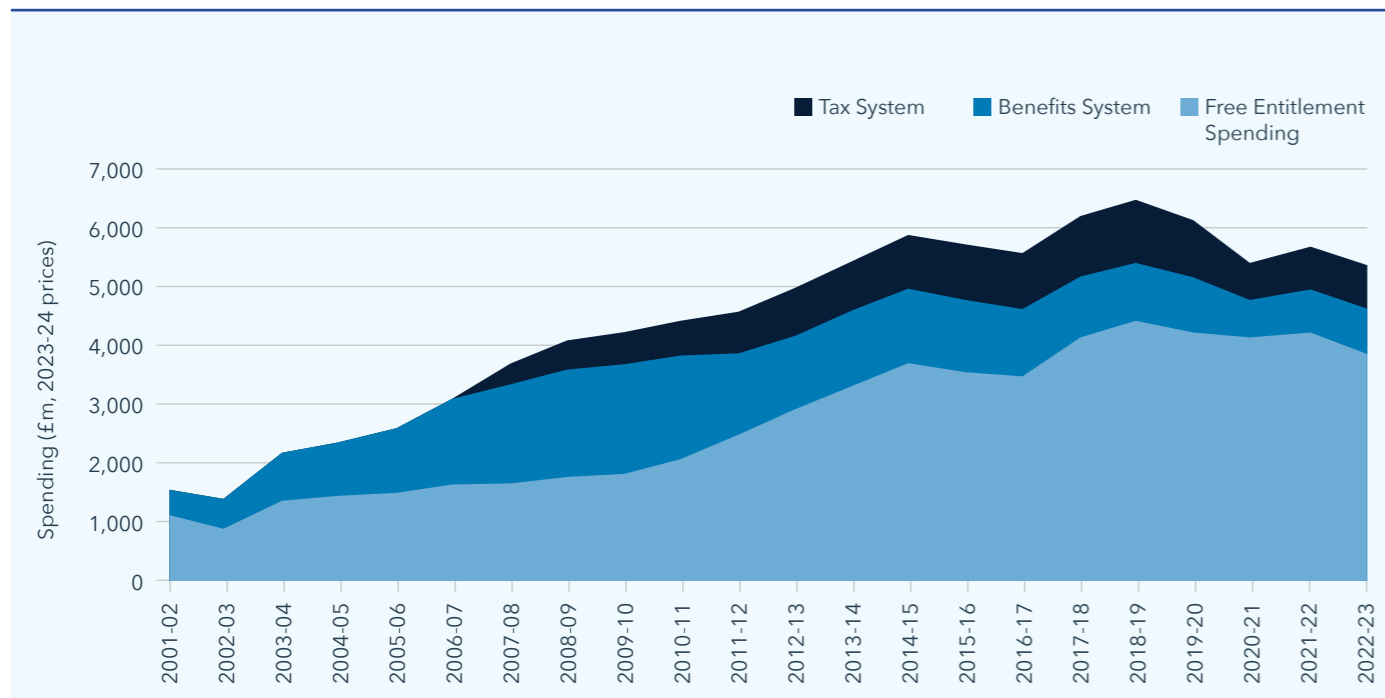
A timeline of entitlements expansion can be found in *Appendix 2*. As it shows, the range of children eligible to receive government support has broadened in recent years. The September 2024 extension of entitlements of 15 hours free childcare for children aged nine to 23 months whose parents work and earn less than £100,000 *per annum* represents just the latest of a series of major increases in state support. The sector now looks ahead to 30 hours funded childcare, for 38 weeks per year, for eligible working parents

of children aged nine months to primary school age, set to be introduced by September 2025.

Local authorities have a statutory duty to ensure that adequate EYEC provision is available in their areas. An important part of meeting that duty is their administration of government funding for EYEC, including entitlements and supplements, on a per child base rate. This is allocated by central government to local authorities according to local funding formulae, and according to operational guidance issued by the government's Education & Skills Funding Agency (Education & Skills & Funding Agency, 2024; National Audit Office, 2024).

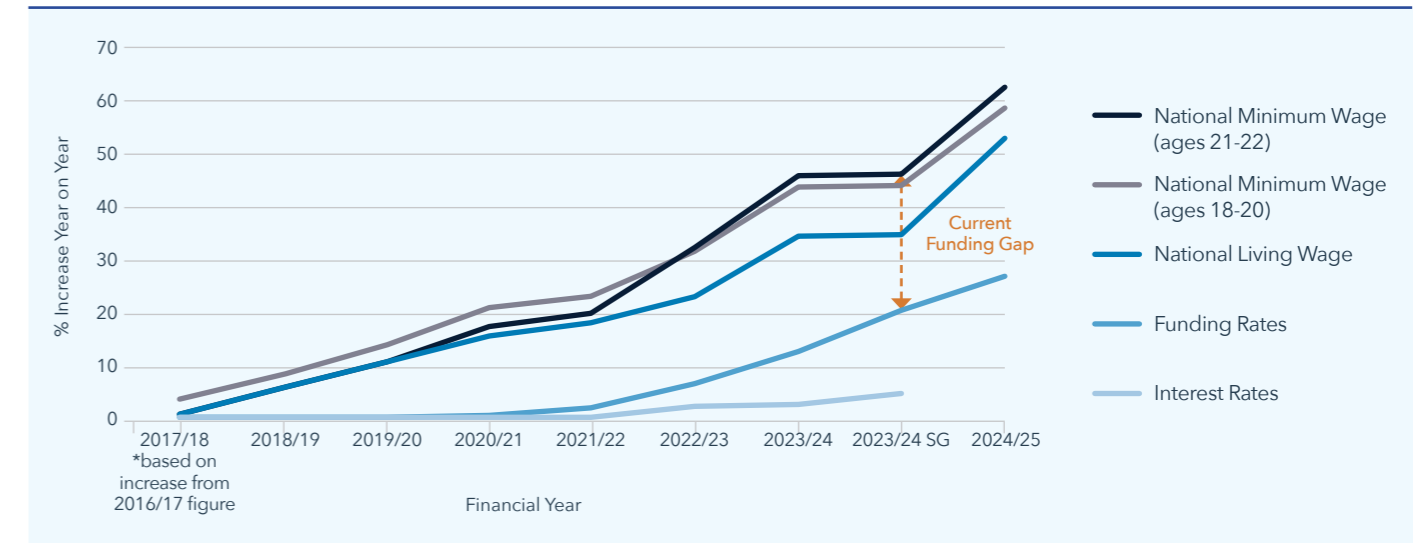
As a result of entitlement increases, government spending on early years education in England has risen dramatically since the early 2000s, although spending has decreased somewhat in recent years, as *Chart 3* below, makes clear. Our research found no comparable data on a smaller scale, but we assume that similar trends have also been present in West Yorkshire.

Chart 3 - Total spending on support for early education and childcare, £ millions (constant 2023-24 prices)



Source: Drayton and Farquharson (2023)

Chart 4 - Year-on-year increases in nursery costs and public funding, 2017/18 to 2024/25

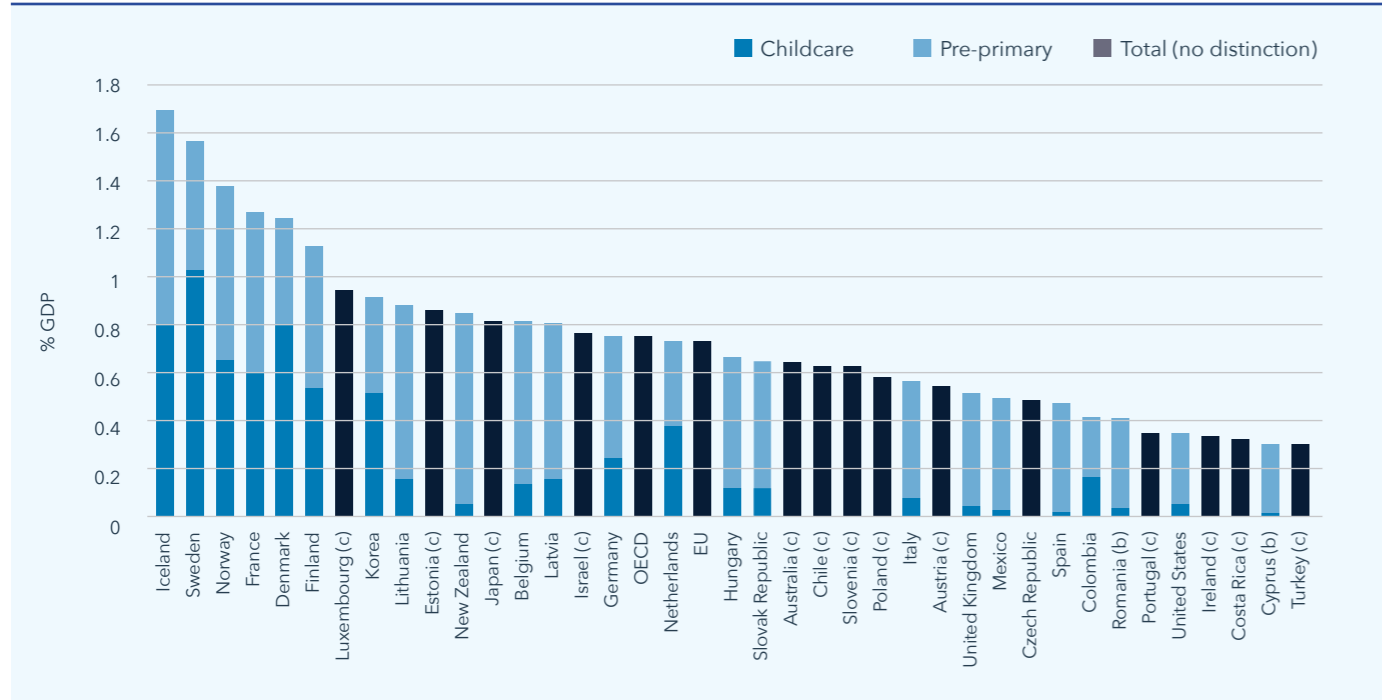


Source: Smith (2023)



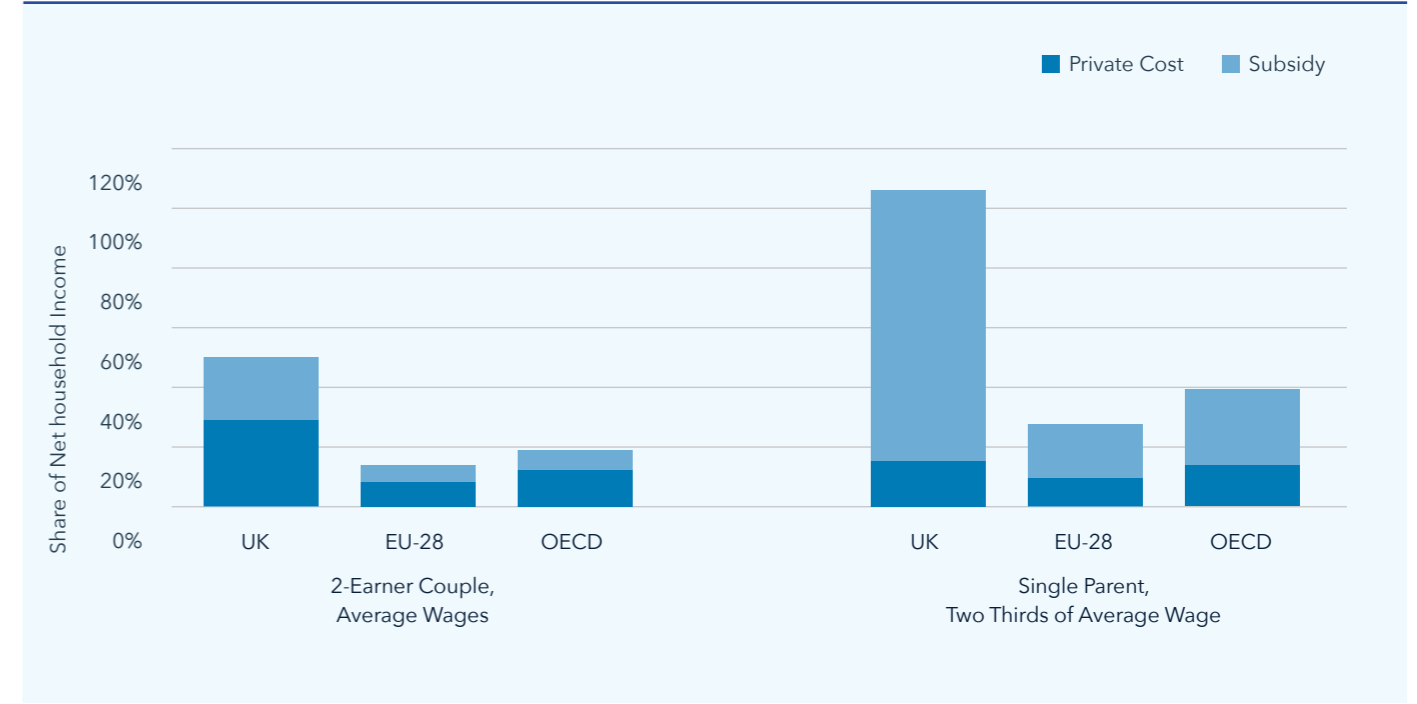
Despite increased public funding, observers and practitioners have argued that there is a significant national funding shortfall. For example, the Women's Budget Group (2024) estimates that, by 2025/2026, there will be an annual £4.2 billion gap between the costs to providers for delivering the expanded childcare places envisaged by the government's current expansion of free entitlements, and the funding that the government is proposing to support the expansion. In March 2024, the then government announced that it would provide an additional £500 million in funding to help meet the added costs of provision. However, the industry association, the Early Years Alliance (EYA), while welcoming the increased investment, claimed that the government was 'in denial' over the scale of the funding shortfall. The EYA identifies a £5 billion funding gap, which it claims it would need to be filled to end the immediate funding crisis. The EYA claims the crisis is driven by the increased disparity between government funding to the sector and wage rises created by uplifts in the National Living Wage (Early Years Alliance, n.d., 2024), as *Chart 4*, above illustrates. This is despite wages in EYEC being low compared to other sectors, as we will discuss in more detail in *Section 5.5*.

Chart 5 - Public expenditure on childcare and pre-primary education and total public expenditure on early education and care, as a percentage of GDP, 2019 or latest available



Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2023)

Chart 6 - Childcare spending as a share of net household income



Source: Farquharson (2021)



Likewise, the most up-to-date survey of local authorities has found that most were not confident that their area was ready for the expansion of provision that the September 2024 additional entitlements were supposed to facilitate (Coram Family and Childcare, 2024).

Although public funding to the sector has expanded considerably in recent years, it still lags far behind other European countries. According to OECD figures, as illustrated in Chart 5, above, as a percentage of GDP, the UK has one of the lowest childcare funding rates in Europe, far behind most other North European countries, and considerably behind the average for the EU.

Finally, a relative lack of central government funding also contributes to the considerable cost of provision that has to be met by parents. Despite the increases in entitlements, they typically only cover a fraction of the costs of placing children into EYEC. Funding usually only

covers 38 weeks of the year, which is insufficient for most working parents. Settings usually spread entitlements across the whole year, meaning the 15 hour entitlement realistically works out at around 11 hours spread over 52 weeks, leaving a significant number of hours to be covered directly by parents, depending on their working week. Parents are also often expected to pay for a series of 'optional' services which, while theoretically tangential to the core EYEC service, in reality form key functions of provision (examples include day trips, nappies, formula and meals) (Penn, 2024).

Indeed, the UK has one of the most expensive EYEC systems in the world as a share of net household income, both in terms of overall cost, and in terms of cost to parents. For two earner couples, fees are around three times the EU average, as Chart 6, above, illustrates.

Furthermore, there is significant evidence to suggest that increased funding is not achieving

its social and economic objectives of lifting families out of poverty, offering children from disadvantaged families the best start in life, and enabling greater opportunities for women from economically deprived backgrounds to pursue careers. Much of the most recent expansion of entitlements has targeted children of working parents, where both parents earn at least the equivalent of 16 hours per week at the National Minimum/Living Wage ("Free" Childcare and Early Education, 2024). In theory, this should have encouraged non-working parents, or parents on low hours, to take up paid employment or move towards full-time work. However, the evidence suggests that the principal effect has been to reduce already relatively well-off families' costs. For example, analysis by the New Economics Foundation suggests that, for the expansion to 30 hours per week free EYEC provision announced in the Spring 2023 budget, almost 80% of families with children in EYEC in the ninth highest income decile would stand to financially gain, compared to less than 5% in the first

income decile (see *Chart 7*, below). The Institute for Fiscal Studies similarly calculated that the bottom 30% poorest families would see 'almost no direct benefit' from the expansion (Drayton & Farquharson, 2023).

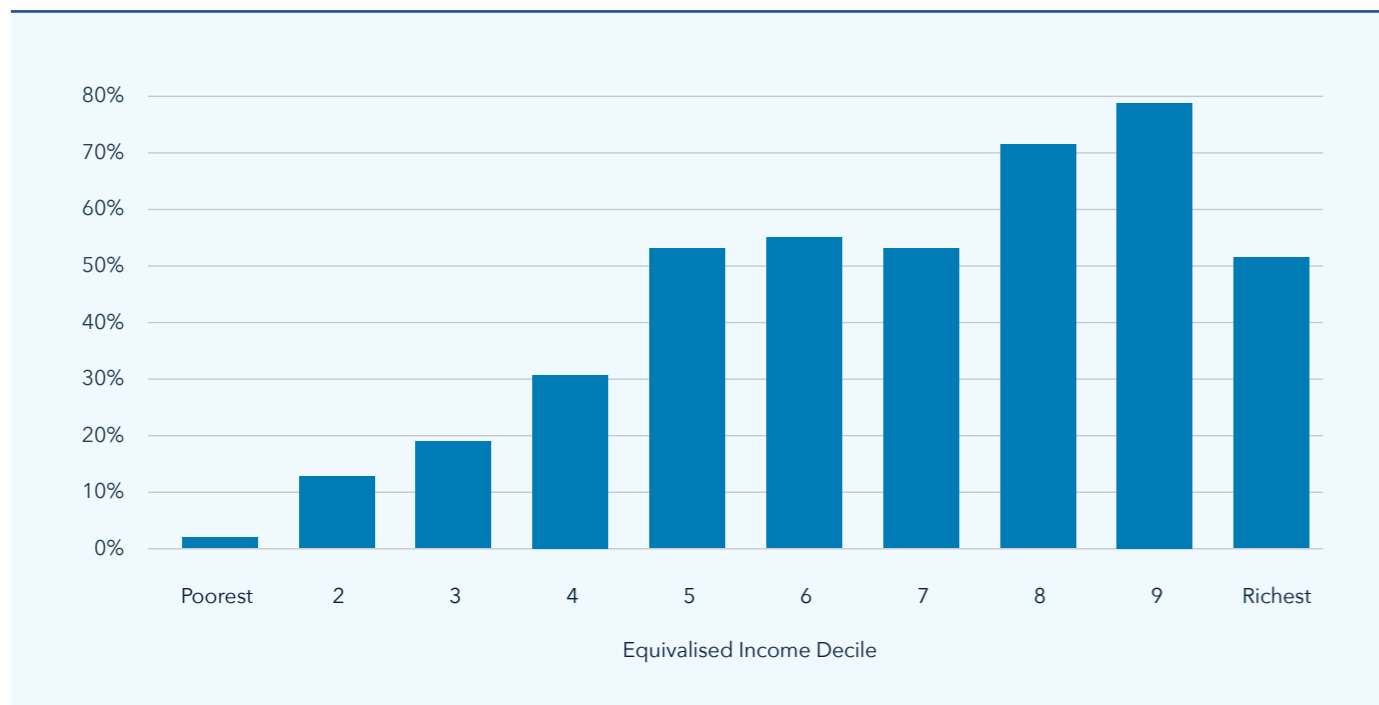
The reasons for increased entitlements not leading to greater income for poorer families are complex. They could include, for example: barriers to (well paid) employment for parents other than childcare responsibilities (for example, lack of suitable employment opportunities, discrimination) (Bashir et al., 2011); impacts on benefits that parents are already entitled to (Farquharson et al., 2023); and the fact that entitlements do not cover all aspects of provision, including holidays and essentials such as meals. Crucial barriers also include the accessibility and availability of EYEC (which we discuss in *Section 5.4*), and a lack of information for parents (*Section 5.7*).

5.3 The financialisation of the sector

In the remainder of this chapter, we will discuss how the crisis in early years education is playing out in West Yorkshire. But, before doing so, it is worth considering challenges that have been made to the straightforward 'funding gap' explanation for the EYEC crisis promoted by industry associations.

As EYEC expert Professor Helen Penn notes, no other major economy has such a privatised and deregulated system of childcare provision as England (Penn, 2024). There are some good private providers of EYEC, and the private sector has expanded massively to meet increasing demand in recent years, dwarfing the number of places that was traditionally offered by the public sector. Yet, such a reliance on the private sector poses considerable challenges to meeting the needs of children and parents. For example,

Chart 7 - Percentage of families eligible for 30 free hours of EYEC provision for children from nine months to four years old, under planned changes announced in the 2023 Spring Budget



Source: Pollard et al. (2023)

“Private providers often try to ‘cream skim’ the market by concentrating provision on areas with higher income families.”

the private sector is much more reliant on private financing for its buildings. Not only does this lead to an extraction of wealth from the system in finance repayments (which are usually considerably more expensive than interest rates on public sector borrowing), but it also creates a huge variety of quality of

buildings and other infrastructure, with many examples of poor-quality provision. For example Penn (2024) argues that many private nurseries are set in re-purposed buildings (for example, old churches and pubs) ill-suited for situating large numbers of young children, and in stark contrast with specially designed facilities often found in the public sector (although building quality, especially related to maintenance, is often an issue there too). Some settings completely lack outdoor or green space, and some are situated next to noisy and polluted roads.

The private system is also considerably fragmented, with providers competing for children and staff, leading to a loss of economies of scale. Private providers often try to ‘cream skim’ the market by concentrating provision on areas with higher income families (ART), often employing risky business models to do so (Local Government Association, 2023). As one local authority officer commented on the expansion tactics of such providers, ‘We [give] them very detailed sufficiency information ... to [help them] prepare their business case,’ but ‘they then open regardless of [existing oversupply in that area] (LART). Cream skimming ‘waters down the market’, leading to established providers with more sustainable models potentially ‘dropping out’ (LART).

The traditional private operator was a small business, responsible for running a small number of settings (usually one or two), but mergers and acquisitions by private equity firms are challenging this model. Large private nursery groups, defined

as companies that own 15 or more settings, rose from 10% of the UK market in 2021, to 19% in 2023, which is consistent with data which report that large groups double their market share every three years. Single settings companies reduced from 48% of the market to 38% in the same period. Defenders of these trends point to the benefits of consolidation, such as the ability to share resources, and the potential to cross-subsidise between profitable settings and those experiencing short-term losses (Jones, n.d.). However, as recent research into large groups has found, they are dominated by highly debt-leveraged financial models, which increase short-term profits at the expense of long-term security of provision (Farris et al., 2024; Penn, 2024, p. 42; Simon et al., 2022).

These trends have contributed to the instability of provision. Settings are passed from one owner to another, and tend to open and close according to short-term changes to demand or the ability of parents to meet costs. Sudden closures can leave parents scrambling to find provision, or having to adjust their working lives, at short notice. As Penn (2024) argues,

... the small operators [represented by the Early Years Alliance ... argue for more government money to prevent closures. But the problem is not money, or not only money. The problem is the financial structure of the industry itself, and without reforms, more money will only enhance the inequalities of childcare provision. (p. 49)

Finance-led provision has also been associated with lower spending on staff, as income has been redirected from labour to shareholders, bondholders, and to the remuneration packages of senior staff. This is a significant transfer of wealth from taxpayers and parents to the providers of private finance, which has increased the volatility and financial risk in the sector. An obvious comparator is the adult social care sector, where processes of financialisation and consolidation began much earlier than in EYEC. These trends led to the near collapse of provision, in some cases, and to great financial and political distress in local government (Penn, 2024).

5.4 Closure of settings and accessibility

There has been considerable concern among local government leaders that closures of settings have accelerated since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. A survey commissioned by the Local Government Association found that there had not been a dramatic drop in the overall number of places nationally (Reed & Parish, 2023), however the plurality of authorities were experiencing increasing closure rates. Of particular concern was the loss of single setting private nurseries, as well as sessional daycare and single-site voluntary settings.

On the positive side, the accompanying report found no clear trend between areas of deprivation and overall closure levels. However, there was already a lower quantity of provision in deprived areas (Reed & Parish, 2023), suggesting that there has been little progress in addressing inequalities of access related to material deprivation in recent years. Indeed, as a recent report by the New Economics Foundation has demonstrated, nearly half of all children live in local authority areas that they term early childhood education and care 'deserts', defined as more than three EYEC-aged children for every registered place (Pollard et al., 2023). This is starkly illustrated by *Chart 8*, below, which shows that the extent of accessibility strongly correlates with deprivation at the local authority scale.

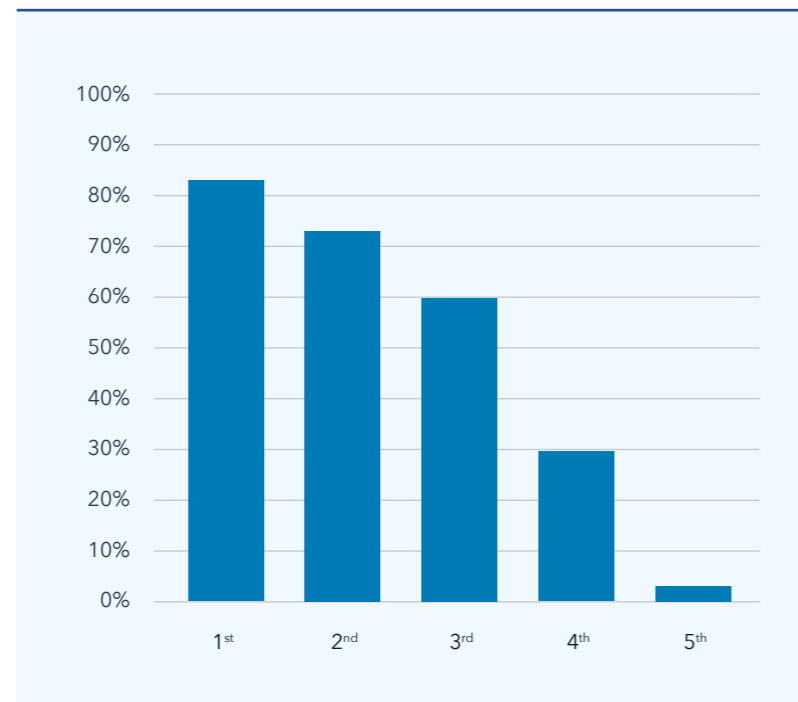
Closures are likely to have a considerable impact on the accessibility of settings to children and parents (Reed & Parish, 2023), especially in a context where those in more deprived areas already face shortages in provision, and where state funding does not meet the full costs of provision, and so does not encourage new settings

to open in these areas (Penn, 2024, p. 101). As one participant at our local authority round table commented:

... thinking about the new working parent two-year-old entitlement which came in April [2024], and the nine-month-old working parent entitlement in September [2024], so we're all kind of focusing on that, and at the moment our disadvantaged two-year-old places are falling off the cliff, because we're all going, oh, and providers are going, oh these parents have more disposable income to buy extra hours than these parents.

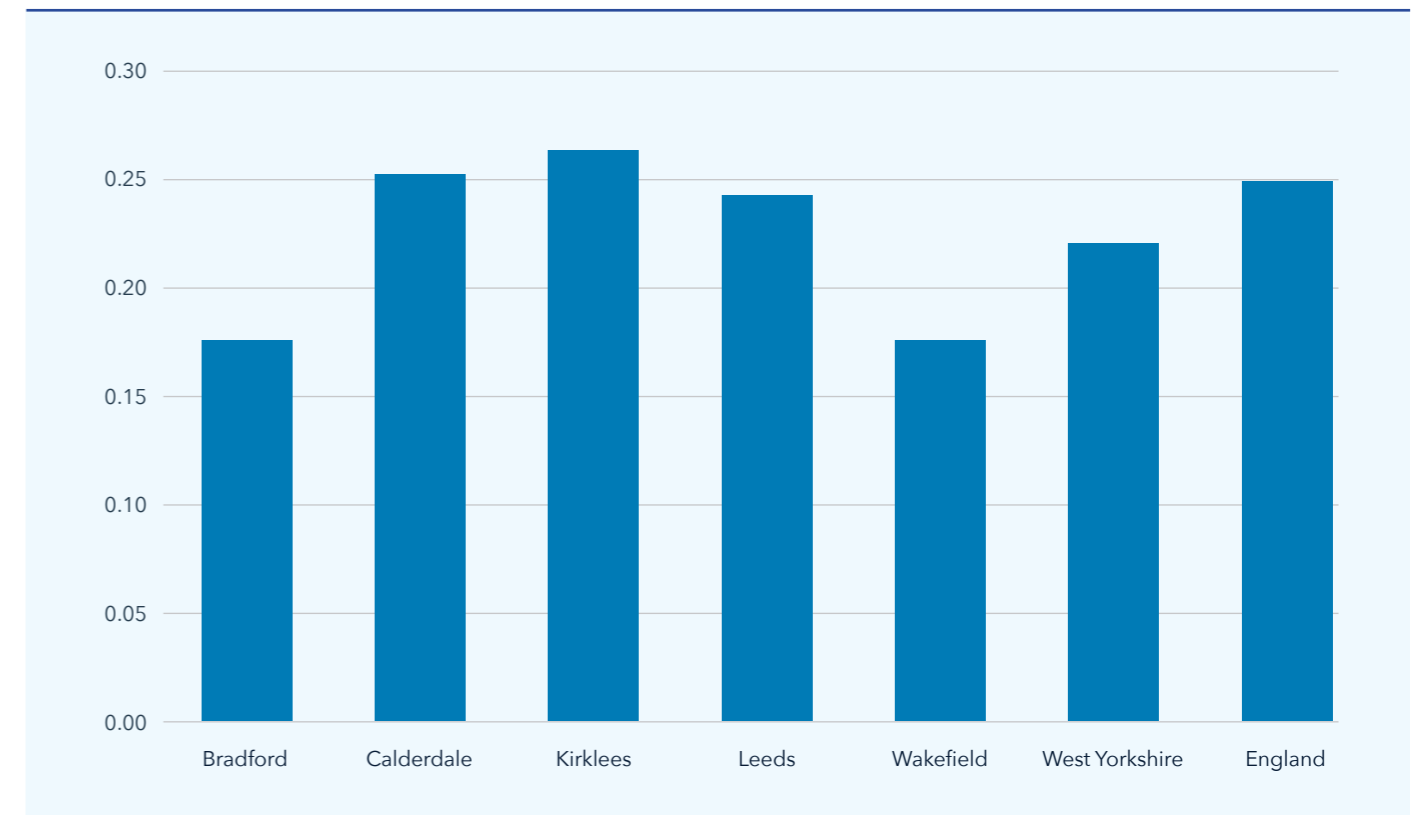
... And they're less likely to come with complex needs, so actually do you know what, my model's going to be working parent entitlement, because I can charge them from two, their entitlement's 15, 30 hours, but they're working, so they're going to need 40, 45 hours, that's the more valuable parent to me in terms of cash income. (LART)

Chart 8 - Proportion of English Local Authorities which are 'ECEC deserts' in each deprivation quintile (1st = most deprived 20% of local authorities; 5th = least deprived 20%)



Source: Pollard et al. (2023)

Chart 9 - Childcare accessibility scores for West Yorkshire local authorities, West Yorkshire and England, 2021



Source: WYCA analysis, using ONS data

Closure rates have been particularly acute among childminders. In England, there was a loss of 3,200 childminders between 2022 and 2023 alone, and this alarming trend is also present in West Yorkshire. As one participant at our provider round table told us,

I think over the last I don't know how many years, maybe since COVID, I think there was nine hundred and sixty childminders in Leeds and there's like four hundred and something now. (PRT)

Another advised us that childminder provision had 'Halved in Bradford too', in the same period (PRT). There is little academic research on the reasons for this trend, although media investigations cite a lack of income relative to costs, and a lack of appreciation more broadly (Clarke, 2023). Our providers' round table found

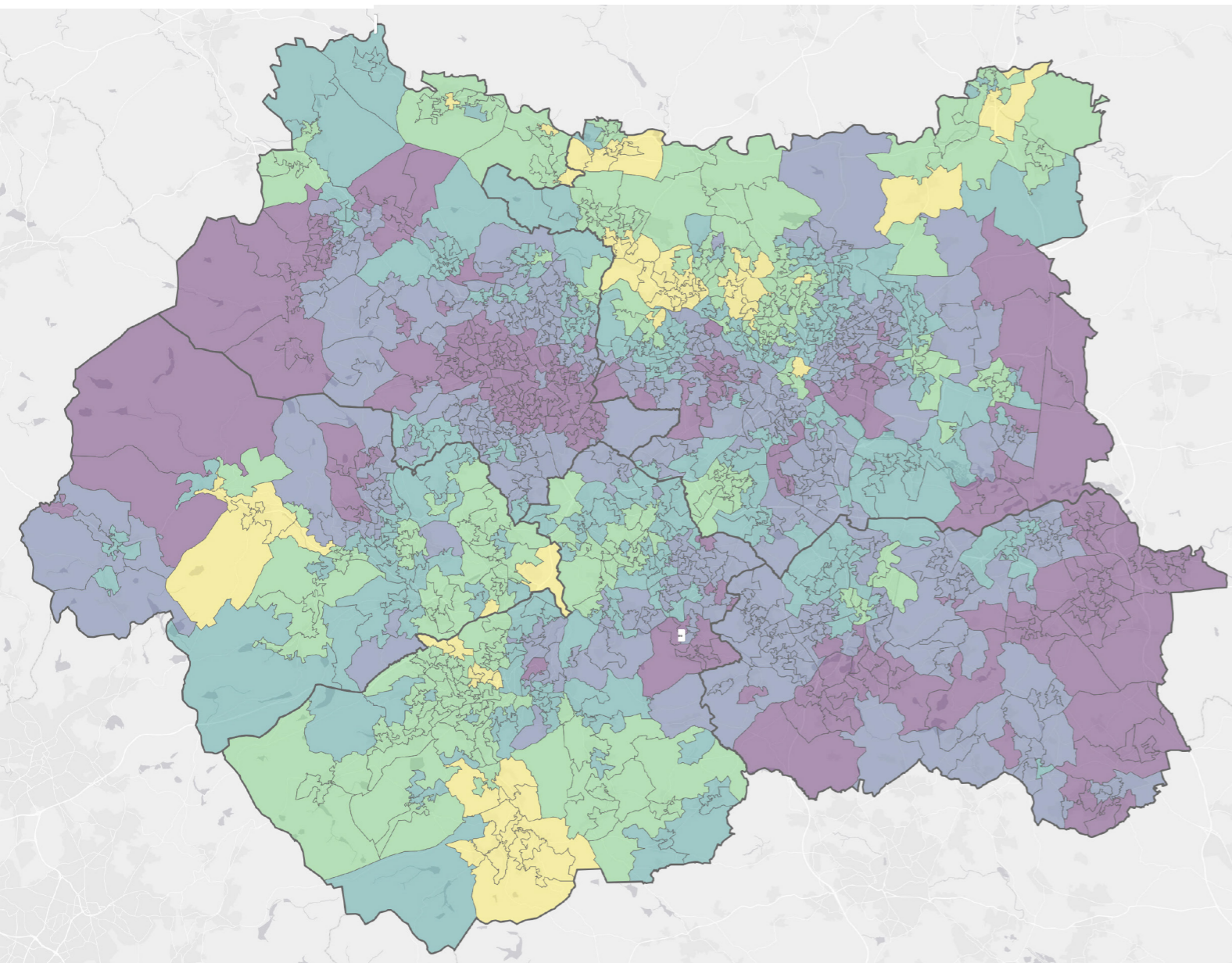
that childminders find it especially difficult to cope with the changing demands of the EYEC sector. Usually self-employed, and extremely busy with the immediate practical necessities of EYEC provision, they often feel isolated from developments in the wider EYEC community and struggle to find time to understand and master new administrative requirements (PRT).

Ofsted collects data on the 'accessibility' of childcare, defined as the 'ratio of childcare places to number of children aged 7 and under in each administrative boundary'. Using this data, we have found that West Yorkshire residents' access to childcare is lower than the average for England, albeit there is significant variance between local authorities within the sub-region, with, for example, Bradford significantly lower than the national average, and Kirklees slightly higher (see *Chart 9*, above).

We have further analysed this data on the scale of Lower Layer Super Output areas, which we have super-imposed on a heat map (a zoomable version available at: <http://bit.ly/3FM93SF>). As can be seen in *Chart 10*, below, an unevenness of accessibility is even more prominent *within* local authority areas than *between* them.

The reasons for such variability need to be further researched, and form part of the data requirement for creating West Yorkshire-level policy. However, they are likely to include, for example, the density of the built environment (in other words, whether rural or urban), and the demographic characteristics of children and their families in each area (not least income levels and the educational needs of children), among other factors.

Chart 10 - Childcare accessibility heatmap for West Yorkshire

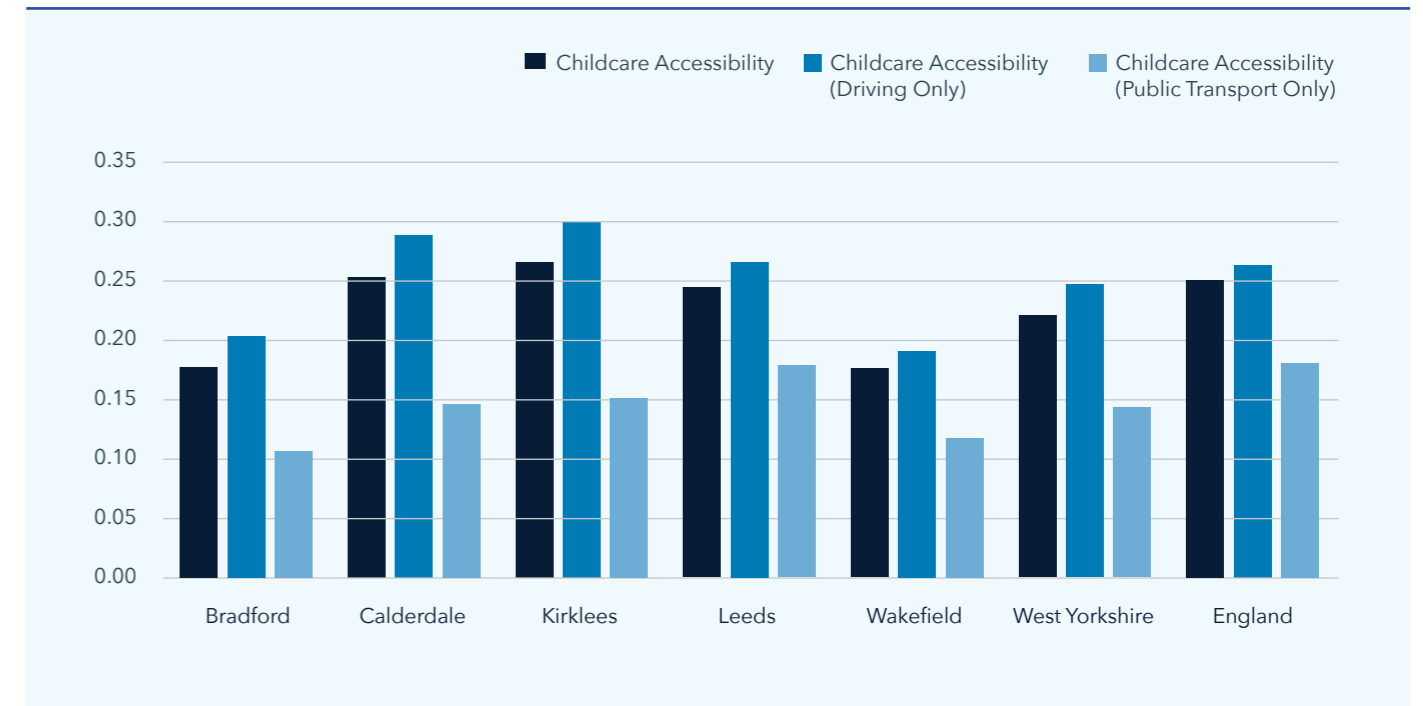


Source: Y-PERN analysis (Dan Olnier), using ONS data

Childcare accessibility

- 0.066 to 0.162
- 0.162 to 0.223
- 0.223 to 0.284
- 0.284 to 0.361
- 0.361 to 0.528

Chart 11 - Childcare accessibility score by transport mode, for West Yorkshire local authorities, West Yorkshire and England, 2021



Source: WYCA analysis, using ONS data

As well as the distribution of EYEC places geographically, the transport options available to parents and children also have a significant bearing on EYEC accessibility. ONS integrates Ofsted with travel time data, to indicate the 'spatial accessibility of childcare.' ONS deems a setting to be spatially accessible if parents can reach the EYEC provider by car in 15 minutes, or by public transport in 25 minutes (including a 15-minute walk) (Ofsted, 2024). As *Chart 11*, above, shows, taking England as a whole, the number of places 'spatially available' are much lower for public transport users than for car drivers. The difference is even more stark for West Yorkshire, where access to a private vehicle is a distinct advantage for accessing EYEC. Again, the reasons for this require further investigation, but they are likely to reflect the availability, and speed, of different transport modes in these areas, as well as the spatial distribution of settings.

These statistics have significant implications for equality of access to childcare services. Those on lower incomes are less likely to be able to afford a car and are thus more reliant on public transport and active travel. Even in households that do have access to a car, this is often not enough to cover the journey requirements of all family members. Although gender disparities in driving are diminishing, women are still less likely than men to be the primary driver in a household. Consequently, they tend to rely more on others for transportation when alternative options are unavailable (Lucas et al., 2019). This is a particular problem because women are more likely than men to make 'escorted journeys' to take their children to EYEC provision (Burns et al., 2022). These considerations raise questions surrounding the overall adequacy of transport provision, and also where such provision is targeted. Arguably, traditional transport planning has inadequately addressed gender issues, for

example prioritising provision for commuting between residential areas and male-dominated employment centres (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2016), which has contributed to gender-based social exclusion (Jarvis & Mace, 2024).

5.5 The recruitment and retention crisis

The most pressing and fundamental consequence of the funding and financing challenges highlighted above is the significant workforce crisis of EYEC (Foley, 2024). To summarise, EYEC is caught in a vicious cycle of under-staffing and insufficient training: low recruitment and retention rates mean that settings are operating at the bare minimum staffing capacity required by regulation; training is not always adequate for the demands of the role; staff shortages mean that training and continued professional development is difficult to facilitate; and poor training exacerbates difficult working conditions which, attached to low pay levels, creates low levels of retention and recruitment, leading to the sector losing staff to other occupations and industries. This is the context in which the government estimates a net addition of 70,000 practitioners in England. Around 1,500 practitioners will be required in West Yorkshire by September 2025 (National Audit Office, 2024),³ to cope with an expected increase of 3,569 places.⁴

EYEC is in an extremely labour-intensive sector, and staffing accounts for 72% of providers' direct costs (Blanden et al., 2020). In the absence of realistic opportunities for automation, the challenge of delivering EYEC services with limited funding results in providers reducing the costs of labour to absolute minimum levels, and to attempt to extract labour from EYEC professionals to maximum extents. This dynamic is evident in the extremely poor pay that EYEC professionals receive (with little opportunity to progress to higher paid roles within career pathways), the low levels of investment in training and recruitment relative to need, high staff-to-child ratios, and the long hours EYEC's professionals are often expected to work (Hardy et al., 2023; Penn, 2024).

Average pay in the sector in England is £11.79 for workers per hour in PVI settings, and £18.57 in school-based settings (where EYEC professionals are typically paid as teachers, according to national teachers' pay settlements), while 24% of the workforce earns at or below the National Minimum/Living Wage (Haux et al., 2022; Whittaker et al., 2023).

The work itself requires high levels of attention and interaction between staff and children. In theory, this is recognised by Ofsted's minimum regulatory requirements for staff-to-child ratios. These have recently been relaxed a little by central government, in order to allow for the expansion of places in the face of recruitment and retention problems, to the opposition of many experts and practitioners (Morton, 2023).

EYEC work can be extremely challenging, especially in the context of staff shortages, insufficient provision of training, and, in many cases, inappropriate facilities and infrastructure (Penn, 2024). Despite this, it is often undervalued by society. The theme of recognition and value was reflected in our round table discussions. For example, a participant at our providers' round table stated that many people see EYEC work as 'easy and cosy' (PRT), and a repeated theme emerging from our local authority round table was that EYEC is much more pivotal to the success of local areas and their economies than is widely understood (LART). Indeed, Hardy et al. (2023) find that a lack of perceived 'status' of EYEC work contributes to motivations for professionals to leave the workforce.

Our round tables revealed that staff in West Yorkshire are leaving to work in supermarkets or other educational settings, which often offer higher rates of pay and better working conditions, including more flexible hours, and work that entails less responsibility. This recruitment and retention crisis has worsened as inflation has taken its toll on

“You come in with all the goodwill ... but we train our colleagues badly and then they leave the sector.”

³ Author's calculations, based upon West Yorkshire's share of the English population, based on population census data from www.ons.gov.uk/census

⁴ Broken down by: Bradford 846 places; Calderdale 313; Kirklees 566; Leeds 1164; and Wakefield 680. Amalgamed West Yorkshire figure rounded to the nearest 100. Data from www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-places-and-workforce-need

household finances (ART; PRT). As one participant at our provider round table commented,

You come in with all the goodwill, you know, you're wanting to be caring and do the best job but we train our colleagues badly and then they leave the sector so ... 15% of our colleagues [are] leaving every year because ... they've not been trained well and they don't stay in the profession ... (PRT).

Compared to similar industries, such as primary and secondary education, the EYEC sector, with the notable exception of settings attached to schools, is extremely under-unionised, meaning that EYEC workers do not benefit from the higher wages that trade union members are able to achieve (Bryson, 2014), and are excluded from forms of collective representation. So, while key agents outlined in our system of provision map, such as further education colleges, nurseries and local authorities, are represented by associations, EYEC workers lack such a collective voice (Penn, 2024, p. 78).

Although staff shortages have been building, as increased entitlements have placed ever greater demand on the sector, COVID-19 really brought these problems to a head, increasing workforce overload and stress, further reducing recruitment rates, and encouraging EYEC professionals to leave the sector. A recent study by University of Leeds researchers found that, since COVID-19, many EYEC professionals have been looking for or have found retail work (Hardy et al., 2022). Fortunately, most that have recently left the sector would happily return, if conditions were better. Indeed, such is the dedication to children by EYEC workers, many had found themselves working in other educational settings, such as schools (Hardy et al., 2023). Those workers who choose to pursue careers in EYEC do so despite the sector's pay and working conditions. It is work that is intrinsically rewarding (McDonald et al., 2018; Whittaker et al., 2023). It allows EYEC workers the opportunity to positively influence and support children at a crucial stage of their development and socialisation, as well as supporting parents and the wider community. Of course, such dedication has its limits.

Partly because of social expectations surrounding work and gender (Penn, 2024), EYEC workers are disproportionately women - 97% of nursery workers, and 99% of childminders in England identify as such (Kulakiewicz et al., 2022). Nursery workers are also characterised by their youth, with 40% of them being under the age of 30, and a younger workforce is found especially among private providers (Social Mobility Commission, 2020). This is likely a result of poor pay, as pay tends to increase with age (Bukata & Murphy, 2023; Penn, 2024). On the other hand, childminders are on average older than workers in other sectors (Hardy et al., 2023, p. 17). This could be related to home ownership, as childminders usually work from their own homes, and the propensity for home ownership increases with age. Furthermore, black and minority ethnic (BAME) people are under-represented in the sector, according to national scale data (Hardy et al., 2023, p. 26).

Under-representation presents particular challenges surrounding recruitment. It means that men either seem to not consider or are not sufficiently supported in taking up a career in EYEC. When facing a recruitment crisis, this is a particular problem, because it significantly narrows down the possible talent pool to work in the sector. As one local authority officer at our round table commented,

[It's] still seen as women's work isn't it? So you know, we want more male role models in our early years and childcare sector, and [it is] challenging ... recruiting those into something that is still very much a predominantly female, young workforce. (ART)

This has broader implications for perceptions of what constitutes suitable work for men and women: the current situation tends to reinforce and reproduce outdated and limiting gender stereotypes. The combination of a lack of representation of men and BAME people also means that the workforce lacks diversity, which can be harmful to the education and socialisation of children. Diversity allows 'children to experience different cultures and beliefs' and 'increases their sense of inclusion and belonging' (Nursery Story, n.d.).



All of these issues speak to a lack of a coherent, long-term and comprehensive national workforce strategy. The latest national strategy was published in 2017. Since then, however, the recruitment and retention crisis has become much worse. National leadership on the issue has, at best, taken the form of 'piecemeal interventions that may bring short-term impact but fail to address the wider issues that the early years workforce is facing' (Hardy et al., 2023, p. 60). Local authorities have tried their best to fill this long-term strategic gap, but are often stymied by limited funding. As one officer described in our local authority round table, commented:

We don't have the resource to constantly keep driving the workforce strategy, unfortunately they end up being quite small bursts of pieces of work, because we've [only temporarily] got the capacity, or we've been given a bit of grace to be able to spend a bit of left over money somewhere. And that's not a long-term strategy around sustaining the sector. (LART)

The lack of strategic thinking about the workforce by higher levels of government, and the need for local and regional strategy, was a consistent theme at all of our round tables (ART; LART; PRT).

5.5.1 Overarching training issues

As we have seen, the lack of suitable training for EYEC workers is one of the key drivers of poor workforce retention. It does not give them confidence that their careers are progressing and that they are being supported by the sector, and it creates daily frustrations and stresses that severely impact morale. It also has clear and negative implications for the quality of service provided for children and their families (ART, LART, PRT).

To pursue a career in EYEC, workers must be suitably qualified. This means holding a qualification that is deemed by the DfE to be 'full and relevant' for work in the sector. The DfE maintains a list of the many such qualifications that meet this criteria, which is updated frequently.⁵ Nursery assistants are required to hold Level 2 qualifications, while more senior staff (often referred to as 'early years practitioners' and 'early years educators') require Level 3 qualifications, and managers of best practice settings often hold Level 5s. It is possible to achieve these qualifications through a number of routes, including courses provided by further

⁵ See: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6644ab93ae748c43d3793bdf/Early_Years_Qualifications_achieved_in_the_United_Kingdom_16_May.xlsx

education colleges, private training providers, and through apprenticeships (Kelly, 2016).

The positive side of the wide range of 'full and relevant' qualifications is that allows a wider range of candidates a 'pathway' into the sector.⁶ This is especially important, as Ofsted mandates minimum staff-to-child ratios that depend on the qualification levels of the staff present. For example, managers must have at least a Level 3 qualification, and at least half of all other staff must have a Level 2 (Department for Education, 2023).

On the other hand, there have been criticisms that such qualifications are too generic and do not prepare recruits for the realities of EYEC work. This is exacerbated by a lack of training for EYEC workers once they start employment. Only 17% of staff surveyed in 2020 reported receiving such training, and evidence suggests that a lack of training encourages EYEC to leave the sector (Hardy et al., 2023; Social Mobility Commission, 2020).

The providers, academics, and local authority round table participants indicated that the range of qualifications in the sector were overly complex, and frequent changes to the DfE's qualification validity list added to provider pressures (ART; LART; PRT). Often, this leads to mistaken notions of what counts as a suitable qualification by potential applicants, creating negative impacts on recruitment rates (LART). As one participant at our local authority round table commented:

We've had people applying for jobs, that believe they've got either a [relevant] Level 2 or a Level 3, but actually it was in health and social care. So, they've undertaken that study, and the whole time they've been doing it, they believe that that will take them into early years with a qualification, but it won't. (LART)

Some EYEC providers have taken to becoming registered training providers in their own right – an option only currently available to the few that have sufficient resources to do so.

Furthermore, staff shortages, and the need to maintain minimum staff-to-child ratios, mean that settings often struggle to release staff

from their duties to undertake training outside of the workplace (Early Years Alliance, 2021). As one provider testified at our round table, 'we can't release ... PVLs can't release the staff for the training' (PRT). A similar situation faces childminders, whose usual working day is often devoted to the immediate educational and care needs of their children, often without support from another EYEC worker. As one childminder told us, they work a 'full day' from early in the morning until early evening, and they are often unable to carve out time for professional development:

... in a position where 'oh I've got this training that they've given me six hours to do'. It becomes so overwhelming ... People they say 'oh maybe these childminders would like to go on this course on a so-and-so afternoon or they'd like to do this in the morning' ... How do you do it? ... I have seventeen kids.

We also heard testimony that a lack of training opportunities in nurseries often leads EYEC professionals to pay for their own training, or take unpaid leave to attend training particularly for courses that aid continuous professional development (ART). While this is clearly unsustainable, this is another example of EYEC workers' dedication to the children they serve.

The quality of training and apprenticeships was a key concern in our round tables (ART; PRT). Provider participants argued that the training of new entrants should be sector-led. For example, one participant commented:

I'm being harsh here, [training] delivered by people in FE colleges who've not worked in the sector ever, you know, professional trainers. You don't need professional trainers. You need practitioners. (PRT)

Evidence that private training companies provide poor quality training is not comprehensive (although see Penn, 2024). Yet, many providers feel that trainers lack the kind of sectoral experience necessary to provide education and instruction that is practically useful for EYEC work (PRT).

⁶ For more details on the pathway, see: www.gov.uk

5.5.2 Insufficient training and provision to meet children's changing needs

Participants at all three of our round tables argued that the increased complexity of child and family needs necessitates improved access to quality and specialised forms of training for practitioners (ART; LART; PRT). The difficulties the sector is facing in providing for children with SEND provides the starkest example of such insufficiency, but it also extends to the challenge of catering for an increasingly younger demographic of children.

5.5.2.1 Children with special educational needs and disabilities

There has been a significant rise of children with SEND in EYEC settings over recent years. Children with SEND make up 8% of three and four-year-olds with 15 hours per week entitlements (*Children with SEN Accessing Early Years Rises to All Time High*, 2023). A 2023 survey conducted by SEND organisation Dingley's Promise found that 95% of settings had experienced an increase in intake of children with SEND, with 79% experiencing a 'significant' increase (Dingley's Promise, 2023). Likewise, Hardy et al. (2023) found that, since the onset of COVID-19, 87% of nursery respondents, and 63% of childminder respondents, were working with children with SEND (Hardy et al., 2023). This comes at a time of ever greater pressure on the EYEC system. The latest Coram Annual Childcare Survey finds that only 6% of local authorities believe that there is enough provision for all children with SEND, down from 18% the previous year (Gonzalez-Matthews, 2024).

Families with SEND children are particularly affected by the constant upheaval of provision. Even where settings closures are compensated for by openings within a given local area, this can cause enormous distress for children and their families. Local authorities report that, in practice, parents struggle to find suitable alternative provision for children with SEND when settings close, leading them often to make the choice to keep children at home (Reed & Parish, 2023, pp. 32-33).

The above statistics relate to England as a whole. As the data checklist in *Appendix 1* makes clear, data on the proportion of children with SEND are not currently collected at the West Yorkshire level, although local authorities may hold some. However, any such data rely on diagnosis and assessment, the capacity for which is often limited (Warnock, 2023). As Penn (2024) comments,

In principle, if a child has an identifiable special need under an education health and care needs assessment, the local authority has a duty to fund placements and support. But not only is there a waiting list for assessment, and a shortage of supported places, there is also a gross shortage of specialists who are able to make the diagnosis deemed necessary to support young children. (p. 133)

The effect is that nurseries must cater for high levels of children with SEND, both diagnosed and undiagnosed. Providers do not always receive the necessary funding required to support children with SEND, and settings frequently have to meet (where they can) the extra costs from their already stretched core budget. Providers argue that the legal statutory minimum staff-to-child ratios upon which public funding of EYEC is based are woefully insufficient considering the additional educational and care needs presented by children with SEND (Early Years Alliance, 2022). As a local authority officer commented at our round table:

... the number of children that have very complex needs, in settings ... [is] really high. And the fact that we're able to meet some of those children's needs is amazing actually. I go around some of our settings and I'm amazed at the complexities that they're dealing with, and I think that's under-represented or appreciated. (LART)

A lack of appropriate training, and multi-agency support for SEND provision is making difficulties in retaining staff worse (Hardy et al., 2023). As one EYEC professional commented, in a recent study:

Where the support falls down is for specialist placements, so a lot of children that come to us may not be best suited to us at the nursery and we're doing our best. Staff find it extremely difficult. They're not specialists, and let's face it, they're only getting a minimum wage and they're expected to deal with children who spit, bite, throw something at them that could be sharp. They don't really like it. You know, it takes a special someone to be very patient and not everybody's like that. So that's [a] really huge, huge issue. (Anon., cited in Hardy et al., 2023, p. 25)

Indeed, as a local authority officer at our round table observed, 'those people who had left the sector, would have gone back into it, had this issue around kind of the complexity of children ... had they felt better supported' (LART).

The EYEC system will not be significantly improved without addressing the shortcomings of SEND provision, both within the sector itself, and among the various agencies responsible for SEND, not least health services and local government.

5.5.2.2 Very young children

Nurseries can take babies as young as six weeks old, and the prevalence of children under the age of two in EYEC is increasing. This trend is anticipated to gain considerable momentum following the September 2024 expansion of 15 free hours to children with working parents aged nine to 23 months (Morton, 2024). Because very young children need more attentive care, staff-to-child minimum regulatory ratios are lower, requiring one qualified adult for three children. They also require more specialised care than older children. As one participant at our provider round table commented:

I had to write my own baby training because the only [available] one was the NDNA [National Day Nurseries Association]. We couldn't afford it, but, with the offer being brought down to nine months, suddenly a lot of consultants are focusing on the younger offer. But, obviously, early years consultants

aren't regulated in any way, so people can sell training, which is watered down school [training], or they can sell training that actually helps you understand how babies learn, and there's no regulation of that. (PRT)

Indeed, very young children's learning needs are 'pedagogically entirely different' to those of older children (PRT), and this is often a considerable blind spot in training provision.

5.5.3 Apprenticeship challenges

Apprenticeships are an increasingly popular training route into the sector and, where they work well, they can provide opportunities for learning and career development for those lacking relevant formal qualifications. They can also help providers meet their recruitment needs, especially as apprentices can be counted in staff-to-child ratios (Parenta, 2024). They are also supported by government funding (except for the largest providers, who are mandated to spend money on apprenticeships through the apprenticeship levy) (*Employing an Early Years Apprentice for Your Setting*, 2022). However, overall staff shortages often produce an over-reliance on apprentices to fill immediate staffing requirements (*Ofsted Report Highlights Impact of Staffing Crisis*, 2022), in a situation analogous to the use of medical students to plug gaps in the NHS. In England, the proportion of apprentices in settings is rising as more experienced and qualified staff leave the sector (Argile, 2023), to the extent that 61% of private group-based settings employ apprentices, although this is much lower in school-based settings, at 12%.⁷ So, while they can be very useful for attracting staff, they do not address the problems associated with staff retention on their own.

During our provider round table, participants identified significant variations in the quality of apprenticeships delivered in the sector (PRT). Apprenticeships are supposed to provide the necessary vocational skills to work in the sector, but Ofsted (2023) reports that apprentices may miss out on training and development opportunities in circumstances where they

⁷ Childcare and early years provider survey, table scep23.

Chart 12 - Apprenticeships starts by age and level in England, 2015/16 to 2021/22

	Academic Year							
	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Total Starts	509,400	494,900	375,800	393,400	322,500	321,400	349,200	337,100
By Level								
Intermediate Apprenticeship	291,300	260,700	161,400	143,600	99,200	84,200	91,500	76,300
Advanced Apprenticeship	190,900	197,700	166,200	174,700	140,800	138,500	151,300	147,900
Higher Apprenticeship	27,200	36,600	48,200	75,100	82,500	98,800	106,400	112,900
By Age								
Under 19	131,400	122,800	106,600	97,700	76,300	65,200	77,500	77,700
19-24	153,900	142,200	113,700	116,000	95,300	94,600	106,300	98,800
25+	224,100	229,900	155,500	179,700	151,000	161,700	165,300	160,600

Source: Foley (2021)

are required to remain in settings to maintain staff-to-child ratios. As a local authority officer commented: 'they can't afford to give them the 20% of time to go and do the training, because they've got to backfill that' (LART). Another stated: 'it's not that they don't want to train people or give them the opportunities, but taking the apprentice out of [a setting] is just not feasible' (LART).

The Combined Authority's Labour Market Report (WYCA, 2024) indicates that in 2022/23 there were over 1, 000 starts on the intermediate and advanced early years apprenticeships in West Yorkshire. However, there remain significant challenges in attracting the number of apprentices needed to deal with shortages. As one participant at our local authority round table commented:

Our apprenticeship programme was amazing, and we were oversubscribed for a few years. Now - and we've got a recruitment out for [our] own nurseries at the moment - we'll be lucky if we fill half of those places... nobody's applying anymore. (LART)

As Chart 12, above, indicates, the decline in apprenticeships in the EYEC sector reflects a broader contraction in apprenticeships in England, particularly among younger applicants (Foley, 2021; A. Powell, 2023).

Low uptake of apprenticeships is adding to the staffing problems in the sector - a situation which the government has sought to acknowledge by slightly increasing the funding for the level 3 Early Years Educator apprenticeship (Camden, 2024). Yet apprenticeships are likely to remain key to recruitment in the near future, despite their shortcomings, because they remain a relatively quick and cheap way to fill vacancies.

5.6 Accessibility of settings for staff

To complete the picture on workforce issues, and returning to our earlier discussion of gendered transport and accessibility, given that EYEC workers are overwhelmingly young and female, they, like the mothers of children in EYEC, also suffer from the limitations of 'gendered transport' (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2016). Because they are on low pay, they are also more likely than other workers not to have access to a car and are thus more reliant on public transport and active travel. As one local authority officer commented about a former nursery manager, 'by the time she got there and back on a daily basis, she just couldn't afford to stay. She loved the work, but that was a real barrier' (LART).

However, there is next to no research on the travel needs and patterns of EYEC workers specifically, suggesting a further data gap which could be usefully filled at a West Yorkshire level.

5.7 Information deficit for parental choice (including lack of uptake of entitlements)

Ironically, given that the privatisation of provision is justified by increased parental choice, parents' ability to choose is constrained by a lack of information with which to tackle what is often a bewilderingly complex system (House of Commons Education Committee, 2023; Penn, 2024). Parents need to know, among other things, where EYEC provision is available in their area, the timetables offered by each provider, how much it costs to access, and what financial support is available to them. They also need to know what kinds of education and care their children could receive, the knowledge and skills of the staff, the suitability and availability of materials and food, and the condition of the buildings and other infrastructure. Yet information regarding these concerns (and others) is often not available, or, where it is, it is limited and cannot be found in one easy-to-access place.

An important source of help is local authorities, who retain statutory duties over information provision to parents (National Audit Office, 2024, p. 13). Their embeddedness in communities, as local coordinators of public and social services makes them particularly well-placed to undertake this role. At the core of their information provision are their 'family information services'. This usually includes information hubs hosted on their websites, and often takes other, more direct forms. A recent survey in England found that local authorities can be quite proactive in reaching parents to provide useful information on local EYEC services and available funding, with popular methods of communication including letters and postcards, emails, and face-to-face outreach work (Centre for Evidence and Implementation et al., n.d.).

However, there is great unevenness across local authorities in the quantity and quality of this provision. Furthermore, resource constraints mean they are struggling to maintain support for families (Local Government Association, 2023). Participants at our provider round table noted a significant scaling-back of this work by West Yorkshire local authorities, due to budget cuts (PRT). As a participant at our academic round table commented, 'parents are reduced to having to ring up settings in order to find out whether they're suitable or not for their child' (ART).

Much of local authorities' work concerns the local uptake of entitlements. While welcome, the continued expansion of entitlements is putting even more pressure on local authorities, as they struggle to help match demand with increased (financial) supply, as the sector is set to expand. For example, only 74% of eligible two-year-olds in England took their funded childcare place (DfE, 2023, cited in Outhwaite et al., 2023, p. 2). One participant at our academic round table recalled their experience of using a West Yorkshire local authority's family information service website:

... [It] has the inventory of all childcare settings and the school-based providers. Although [school-based nurseries] had websites, only 11% of those are actually accessible to children under three. [As] for the [other] settings ... like PVI and voluntary settings, 70% of those had a website but only 11% had anything about costing information. So that means that, as a parent, you have to ring up every single childcare or early years education provider to find out their opening hours, their 15 to 30 hour entitlement policy and their costing information. (ART)

Recent research, based on surveys of local authorities and other data, suggests that 'barriers' to uptake exist at different levels. These are: 'system-level' barriers, such as those posed by the complexity of entitlements and of applying for them, a lack of awareness of what is available, and stigmas attached to 'means-tested' provision; 'service-level' barriers, such as lack of available funded places in the local area; and 'family-level' barriers, where families have



not been adequately informed about provision (for example, information is only available in English, and English is not their first language), or where family circumstances (such as living in temporary accommodation) can inhibit a long-term commitment by families to seeking provision and maintaining attendance (Outhwaite et al., 2023). Local authorities are doing their best to overcome these barriers, but they are held back by the fragmented nature of the EYEC system, and by lack of funding.

As a participant at our academic round table commented, take up of entitlements only happens according to 'parent's awareness, and the process of claiming ... is arduous and many parents don't know that it exists or aren't able to access it' (ART). The low take up of entitlements is especially prevalent among disadvantaged families (Outhwaite et al., 2023, p. 2), despite the considerable evidence of the benefits of high-quality EYEC for disadvantaged children (Outhwaite & Crawford, 2023). As one local authority officer commented at our round table, '[the] majority of families think their children are too young, or it's their last baby and there's no way they're going to put them into any kind of daycare' (LART).

Families can also access Ofsted inspection reports, which they are encouraged to use to 'shop around' for the most suitable setting for their child.⁸ However, national scale data show that 82% of registered providers inspected are found to be good, meaning that, for most parents, the reports do not provide much of a basis for choosing one setting over another, unless they are lucky enough to live near the 14% of providers judged 'outstanding', or unluckily in the position where nearby providers include the 3% who are judged to 'require improvement' or are 'inadequate' (Ofsted, 2023). Furthermore, Ofsted reports do not include much of the essential information parents need. This includes information relating to staffing and pedagogy, except at the most general or anecdotal levels. It also completely excludes environmental concerns, including transport options, levels of air pollution, or whether children have access to outdoor play space. Such information that exists becomes quickly out of date, as inspections fail to keep pace with the ongoing upheaval of provision, especially in staffing (Penn, 2024). One participant summed up a conversation held at our academics' round table around the need for holistic information to inform parental choice:

⁸ See: <https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk>

It's about reframing but it's also about instilling trust that parents can feel like where they're putting the child is somewhere that is going to teach them something and is going to be valuable ... [not] just a space to put your child while you do something more important, instead of really focusing on: no - this is a quality space that children get a lot out of, it sets them up for school and just to be rounded humans. (ART)

In lieu of such data, parents do their best to fill the gaps, using whatever information is provided on settings' websites, or by seeking word-of-mouth recommendations from other parents (Penn, 2024).

5.8 Information deficit for providers

The complexity and fragmentation of the EYEC system also presents particular challenges to providers, in terms of information collection and management. For example, while the EYEC providers we spoke to are understandably focussed on the day-to-day activities of education and care, we found that they often do not have a sense of the wider system. They do not feel integrated into discussions about how it could be improved, and they also feel that there could be more cooperation between different agents in the system in general (PRT). For all kinds of providers, constant changes in the way funding is provided and regulatory compliance protocols, and (for those that employ staff) high levels of staff turnover, create significant problems and costs associated with administration and information management. Central government and local authorities offer online 'provider portals', which aim to streamline some of this work, but they remain cumbersome and labour-intensive to use, at a time when human resources in the sector are stretched to breaking point (Fox, 2024; Peacock & Peate, 2018). As one provider, running a small group of two settings has commented,

The government and the local authority think they have done well to set up a provider portal, but all they have done is move the expense and the burden onto providers. There is a lot more we have to input and work out and maintain records. It is not great. (Peacock & Peate, 2018, p. 20).

Small business providers may be particularly susceptible to these pressures, as they do not enjoy the same economies of scale as operators that are part of a larger group (Johnson et al., 2023), and so complexity in information gathering and handling may be accelerating the consolidation and financialisation trends we identified in Section 5.3.

Childminders find it especially difficult to cope. Usually self-employed, and extremely busy with the immediate practical necessities of EYEC provision, they often feel isolated from developments in the wider EYEC community and struggle to find time to understand and master new administrative requirements. With little assistance from the wider system, childminders at our round table reported that they use WhatsApp channels, and other forms of informal communication, to support each other in meeting their requirements.

We have our own setting... We do a lot together and share a lot of information... Do a lot of planning together.

When one of us would find out this [policy] is coming in, we would kind of like update everybody but we would do that off our own bats as a group. (PRT)

Childminders are often reliant on third-sector and community organisations that provide services such as access to books, and educational visits to farms and wildlife centres (ART). This kind of activity represents an informal sectoral leadership, suggesting that, to a significant extent, although in crisis, the EYEC system has been prevented from complete failure by unrecognised and unofficial forms of labour and sectoral cooperation. But this is a fragile, relying on voluntary, cooperative labour which is not institutionally nor economically supported, and so is vulnerable when key figures exit the system (PRT).

6. What already works

So far in this report, we have highlighted some of the key systemic weaknesses of the EYEC system in West Yorkshire. One of these is the fragmentation of provision, thanks to its largely privatised form. Yet, fragmentation does not imply suboptimal quality in every case. Indeed, there are many examples of inspiring practice in West Yorkshire, some of which have been uncovered by our research. Moreover, there are some *systemic* strengths that are worthy of appreciation. EYEC settings are often staffed by professionals who are very committed and passionate about their work and improving the lives of children and their families, and the public sector, in particular local authorities (despite challenges such as funding), plays a vital role in lending the system a degree of coherence and insisting that the specific needs of West Yorkshire's diverse communities do not stray far from consideration.

6.1 Commitment to the sector by local authorities, practitioners, and many providers

Admiration and pride for West Yorkshire's EYEC workforce, and their commitment to the sector, was a common theme at our three round tables (ART, LART, PRT). For example, contributors to our provider round table mentioned that there is a 'real thirst' for professional training and development (PRT), to the extent that optional training sessions were often oversubscribed (PRT). Despite many EYEC staff leaving the sector over issues such as low pay and insufficient training, academic researchers have found that many would return if such problems could begin to be addressed.

As one participant at our academic round table commented:

We went and spoke to people who'd left and went and found them, and most of them said they would come back if the conditions were different. So, none of them were like out of love with early years and a lot of them were doing adjacent things. (ART)

To the extent that the EYEC system functions in West Yorkshire, it is being held together by the sheer dedication and sacrifice of staff, often in the absence of more formal forms of support, by informal mutual cooperation between staff themselves. Childminders, for example, struggle to combat their own structural isolation by sharing 'a lot of information' and 'planning together' (PRT), all of which is unremunerated work that is little recognised in, for example, Ofsted reporting.

A further strength of the system relates to the role of local authorities. Local authorities' capacity to support EYEC has been greatly diminished by past legislative changes, which reduced the role of local public provision (especially the Nursery Education and Grant Maintained Schools Act (1996), and, more recently, the significant reduction in local authority capacity thanks to austerity (Penn, 2024; Wadsworth & George, 2009). Despite this, local authorities retain a vital role in coordinating the system, based on the remaining statutory duties they retain, and the dedication of local authority officers to do their best to provide for their communities with the resources they have available. Furthermore, they are often the only organisations that combine public duties for provision with a detailed understanding of supply

and demand. This makes them well placed to work with public and private partners to innovate in leading examples of provision, where (often bespoke and time-limited) funding has allowed.

Local authorities tend to take on multiple roles to help facilitate provision, beyond basic statutory sufficiency reporting. This includes, for example, business advice to providers. As one local authority officer commented:

We can help them [providers] with things like delivery models that are likely to be sustainable, I think we can help them with marketing and advertising, because frequently I'd help them with getting the message right for their local communities. We can help them with demographic data, so how many children are being born in their area, what's the likely number of ... disadvantaged two-year-olds who are coming through - we can help with all of that sort of stuff. We can help with IT, all of those types of things. But at the end of the day, you know, sustainability is the elephant in the room isn't it for the early years ... sector, and again we need to have grown-up conversations about sustainability, and we need to sometimes say to our providers, 'you are not sustainable on that delivery model. You have created a delivery model that's got you into a good year bad year cycle, and whilst you be able to ... sustain that for a year or two, because you've got some reserves, after a while your reserves have gone and you can't build them back up again'. And so we have to have quite challenging conversations sometimes with providers and say 'that's not

a sustainable delivery model, but we can help you with one that is'. (LART)

Sectoral instability does not just emanate from the market characteristics of the sector, but also from vicissitude and vacillation in government policy. Local authorities do their best to smooth out the impacts on providers:

And it does feel as though we do ask a lot of our early years and childcare market, we ask them to pivot quite quickly, to deliver in a very different way, to a very different group of children, with a very different funding rate. And the way that they respond to that and bounce back I think is amazing, because it often ... appears that we have a policy announcement, and the whole sector goes, 'we can't do that, what does this mean?' And then we've waited quite some time for some guidance, and the guidance comes and it's a little bit vague, and we're kind of like, 'we think that means that, so maybe you want to do your model like that'. And then we ... get the real meaty stuff, and then we're like, oh okay, 'no don't do your model like that, this is what they meant in the guidance'. So there's a fair amount of that, I think at a national level, but we have to kind of pivot very quickly. (LART)

Local authorities are 'anchor institutions', struggling to stabilise a system that is inherently unstable, and in ways that are often not fully appreciated. In an attempt to redress this, although not intended to be exhaustive, the below examples give a flavour of the excellent EYEC work undertaken in West Yorkshire's local authority areas.

6.2 Local authority examples

Kirklees

Kirklees offer support for the EYEC sector through their Kirklees Business Solutions programme.⁹ Their early years offer helps EYEC providers through targeted support, for example by helping settings regain their 'good' or 'outstanding' Ofsted ratings, or helping new settings become established. It offers universal and targeted improvement visits by a multidisciplinary team with sectoral experience. An important part of this is its training and continued professional development offer, supported by council officers, and offering mutual networking and support opportunities for providers, for example through its social media channels.¹⁰

Kirklees is also at the forefront of local authority coordination around services for children with SEND. Among other activities, their SEND Big Plan brings partners together from education, health, and voluntary organisations to assess the demand for SEND services, the sufficiency of provision, and the quality and compliance of provision within a jointly owned system.¹¹ Central to this initiative is a commitment to improve outcomes for children in mainstream settings, which, as we have seen, is one of the great challenges in EYEC provision.¹²

Leeds

Leeds City Council's work to improve EYEC is framed by their Leeds Children and Young People's Plan 2023 to 2028.¹³ The plan is a commitment to ensure that children in all areas of the city have the best start in life, and that they have the skills needed to realise their potential. The council have also produced a 'one minute guide' for parents and practitioners, aimed at improving information for parents on the opportunities presented by expanded entitlement.¹⁴

Leeds City Council also provides a business rate alleviation scheme to nurseries in the city. Successful applicants can receive up to £15,000 off their annual business rate bills, allowing providers to better meet their operational costs (*Council Extends Business Rate Relief Scheme to Nurseries in Leeds*, n.d.). This scheme was introduced in 2023 and follows the closure of the national statutory Nursery Discount on business rates, which had been designed to help EYEC providers deal with the financial consequences of COVID-19 for the sector (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2021). It is a great example of a local authority using their discretionary fiscal powers to support the EYEC sector.

Wakefield

Over and above the local authority's statutory duties, Wakefield's EYEC offer centres upon their Families Together initiative. Families Together includes a website, which signposts to a range of family services, alongside nine local Family Hubs across six 'cluster areas' in the city.¹⁵ These are 'one stop shops' that bring together a range of family and early years services. The early years offer includes a 'Team Around' approach, which coordinates support for families with young children around, for example speech and language development, family routines and housing support. Parents facing EYEC choices are offered an accessible 'single conversation', where their needs are assessed holistically and relevant support is provided.¹⁶

Wakefield also supports the sector by coordinating training for PVI and childminders, in addition to offering guidance and support to providers. It takes a network approach to this work, by convening a training session every half term for providers and EYEC workers. Feedback to the local authority by providers suggests that they feel 'valued within the system (LART).

⁹ See: <https://kirkleesbusinessolutions.uk/Page/14500>

¹⁰ See, for example: www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100066337253601

¹¹ See: www.kirkleeslocaloffer.org.uk/information-and-advice/how-we-plan-for-send/sendthe-big-plan

¹² See: www.kirkleeslocaloffer.org.uk/media/sdgdbonx/final-the-big-plan-refresh-of-sendstrategy-oct23.pdf

¹³ See: www.leeds.gov.uk/childfriendlyleeds/Documents/Leeds%20Children%20and%20Young%20People%27s%20Plan%202023-2028.pdf

¹⁴ See: www.leeds.gov.uk/one-minute-guides/free-early-years-education-take-up

¹⁵ See: www.wakefieldfamilies.together.co.uk/about-us

¹⁶ See: www.wakefieldfamilies.together.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/275007-TAEY-Leaflet.pdf and <https://youtu.be/OkwgSphK4SQ?feature=shared>

Bradford

Bradford have launched a campaign called Terrific Twos, which provides parents with information about how their children (aged two) might be eligible for 15 hours of free childcare (*Campaign Launched to Help Families Access Free Childcare*, 2022; City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council, n.d.-a). This campaign has been presenting animations which explain what kind of things a two-year-old can do, or what they start to discover at that age, such as being messy and playful, exploring and imagining. These animations can be found on YouTube and other social media platforms.¹⁷ This is supported by council staff, in partnership with EYEC providers, working to show parents and carers how children develop very fast during their early years, and how early education is therefore vital to their wellbeing (City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council, n.d.-b).

Bradford is also home to West Yorkshire's only Stronger Practice Hub (SPH) – St Edmund's Nursery School.¹⁸ Stronger practice hubs help support other nurseries and childminders to support evidence-based practice improvements through establishing local and regional networks of providers, sharing information and advice, acting as a point of contact for the sector, and establishing funded programmes to support nurseries and childminders. St Edmund's SPH provides a central organising point for the disparate childminder sector, organising joint days out with children, among other activities (PRT). As things stand, it is the closest thing to a West Yorkshire regional network that aims to improve provision across the entire sector. As a SPH representative advised us,

We work with a thousand colleagues across West and South Yorkshire and we work with four hundred settings and ... gathered that group together over the last year and a half. (PRT)

Closely aligned to the St Edmund's SPH is the Better Start Bradford project, which works with families from pregnancy stages until the child turns four years old (www.betterstartbradford.org.uk).

Their main focus is on nutrition, socio-emotional development, and language. The SPH is also associated with the 50 Things to Do Before You're Five project, which helps parents access a range of activities which aim to support young children's educational and social development.¹⁹

Bradford also provides Family Hubs.

Calderdale

Calderdale is a small local authority, with a very diverse EYEC sector, dominated by PVI providers. Calderdale's EYEC work is bound together with other areas of policy through their Starting Well strategy (Calderdale Council, 2023). At the heart of the Starting Well strategy is the school readiness of Calderdale's youngest residents, ensuring that children can demonstrate their preparedness for school education, and that schools are ready to receive the next cohort of learners. As well as their work with EYEC providers, they also help parents develop suitable learning practices within the home, with a particular focus on children who are less likely to reach key development milestones in a timely manner.

Calderdale have had considerable success in encouraging take up of the EYEC entitlements for two-year-olds, particularly for disadvantaged children, at a take-up rate of around 90%. They also have a strong collaborative relationship with local providers, which has been achieved in part by their retention of early years improvement officers. Many local authorities no longer employ these staff on an extensive basis, but they can be an important determinant of quality, as they are able to inspect and advise providers beyond the capabilities of Ofsted (PRT).

Like Wakefield and Bradford, Calderdale also provides Family Hubs.

¹⁷ See, for example: www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbktLroyuo8

¹⁸ See: <https://stedmundsbradford.org.uk/early-years-stronger-practice-hub>

¹⁹ See: <https://50thingstodo.org/>

7. What difference can West Yorkshire Combined Authority make?

In this chapter, we evaluate the policy levers the Combined Authority could usefully engage to help increase the quality and availability of EYEC in West Yorkshire. The previous chapters demonstrated that the sector faces significant challenges, caused by the fragmentation and complexity of provision, and insufficient funding, both of which have contributed significantly to a workforce crisis. This crisis means that providers struggle to maintain current levels of provision, and it threatens to prevent the expansion of the sector, despite such expansion lying at the heart of national, regional and local government policy. The Combined Authority's finances and powers in EYEC are limited, and any assessment of the potential effectiveness of EYEC policy and impact is speculative at the moment. Furthermore, in such a fragile context, it is also important that, in seeking to change to make improvements, any new policy efforts must build on what is already working well, to avoid duplications and unintended consequences, and to continually learn from sectoral knowledge and research.

7.1 Improving work and employment in the sector, through a regional workforce strategy

The clearest policy request from our round tables was for the Combined Authority to lead in the creation of a regional workforce strategy. Participants blamed much of the current workforce crisis on the lack of a coherent workforce strategy at the national level. There was both uncertainty over whether such a strategy will emerge, and

also a recognition that, regardless of national policy, there would be considerable benefits from the creation of a workforce strategy at a West Yorkshire scale specifically (AGT, LART, PRT). As one participant at our local authority round table commented.

I've not seen any impact from the national recruitment campaign ...because I don't think those messages hit the right [target audience]. Who's watching ITV to watch that, you know? So but regionally I think, you know, there could be some more local messages...

A regional workforce strategy could provide economies of scale, uniting local authorities' existing work in helping coordinate recruitment and training of the EYEC workforce, and recognising that work and employment patterns range over local authority boundaries - something acknowledged decades ago in terms of local transport policy, with the creation of city region passenger transport executives. As one local authority officer commented,

I think having some sort of workforce strategy ...something [like] that could be done at Combined Authority level in terms of how everything links together, so people who are coming into the sector ... working with colleges to make sure that they're getting the right training, or [reaching people] who are interested in coming into the childcare sector, and that there's clear career progression as well for people. (LART)

To avoid the pitfalls of previous national initiatives, a West Yorkshire early years workforce strategy would need to address recruitment and retention, as well as enabling those that have recently left the sector to return. Our research team found that the Retention and Return report provides the clearest roadmap to building such a strategy, because it addresses the EYEC crisis both in the short and longer terms. It proposes both urgent 'rescue' measures, and long-term 'reform' measures, which will help halt the immediate loss of experienced staff, and build a sector which is attractive to potential recruits and can sustain and support staff as they develop their careers (Hardy et al., 2023). In summary, the report proposals are:

1. Pay and benefits measures

- Rescue: Improve pay so that all staff achieve the Real Living Wage.
- Reform: Create a national pay structure, align pay with the wider education workforce, and provide measures to ensure increased public funding leads to increased staff pay.

2. Work-life balance

- Rescue: A comprehensive package of measures by central government to support recent legislative changes that increase employees' flexible working rights (for example Flex from Day One).
- Reform: Invest in different models of ownership that build a stronger voice for workers.

3. Job design

- Rescue: Create a national and coherent early educator career framework; resource 'on-site' training; increase requirements for SEND awareness and training; adjust apprenticeship levy so that it is targeted at regions with the most staffing need; and commit to a graduate-led workforce.
- Reform: review inspection to favour graduate-led settings; develop a national programme for SEND training.

4. Employee voice and representation

- Rescue: A national recruitment programme that targets minoritised people and men; and develop collective bargaining.

- Reform: Grow the number of settings with employee representation; and enhanced sick pay for staff.

However, there is considerable work to be done to understand how the recommendations can operate at a regional level, the extent to which a body with limited powers such as the Combined Authority can help create it, and how much progress can be made without greater financial and institutional support from central government.

7.1.1 Raising the profile of EYEC in West Yorkshire

Many of the above proposals would increase sectoral costs significantly, either directly (for example, through increased pay, or the direct costs of enhanced training for greater staffing levels) or indirectly (increasing trade union organisation implies an increased capacity of workers to raise pay levels, or improve working conditions, which usually entails a cost to employers). Notwithstanding wealth extraction by big corporations, and, given that parents are already very financially stretched, this increased funding can only realistically come from central government. Also needing greater support from central government would be efforts to increase employee rights and representation (although the new Government has made commitments towards increasing workers' rights; Faragher, 2024).

So the success of any regional early years workforce strategy would rely on increased support from central government. Although there are several more direct policy levers that the Combined Authority has at its disposal to help support the EYEC sector in West Yorkshire, its efforts are likely to only have limited impacts without significant changes in national policy. Therefore, the Combined Authority's role as regional representative on a national level is very important here. To maximise its effectiveness, this representation could go beyond a request for more powers and more funding to address some of the systemic weaknesses of the sector, including private wealth extraction and the poor treatment of staff in too many cases.



Metro mayors have arguably contributed greatly to national policy by highlighting particular causes, and areas of concern. Examples include Andy Burnham's focus on homelessness and Tracy Brabin's campaigning on the safety of women and girls. By showing how policy failure on these issues has impacted their areas, they have contributed to raising the profile of these policy areas, with the aim of concentrating minds at all levels of government, including at a national level, where crucial issues such as the allocation of financial resources to public policy are still largely decided.

There has been little research in this area, but perhaps the abilities of metro mayors to influence national debates in this way is enhanced by being selective of the policy issues highlighted: too few issues campaigned upon and such campaigning may seem limited and 'hobby horse'; too many and the messages could be diluted in a crowded national public policy space.

One way to address this strategic dilemma is to think about the systemic positioning of the policy area in question. In the case of EYEC, the Combined Authority's overarching mission of

inclusive economic growth for West Yorkshire is especially relevant. It aligns with the Government's central economic growth mission, which it says will be achieved by fixing the 'foundations of our economy' and kickstarting economic growth (Crerar et al., 2024). The Government's immediate focus is on infrastructural issues, such as rail reform and water regulation. Yet the 'foundational economy' - the part of the economy that provides basic goods and services - is broader than concrete, steel and pipes: it is that part of the economy upon which society and the broader economy rests (Arcidiacono et al., 2022). EYEC is a great example of a provisioning system in the foundational economy. As one local authority round table participant commented:

Until we put childcare at the heart of our infrastructure, in this country, we just think we're never going to crack it. And I feel really passionate about this, because I go to [planning] meetings in my local authority... and I go, ooh, hang on a minute, how's that going to work, because we haven't got childcare ...who's looking after the children? (LART)

Similarly, a participant at our provider round table stated the wish for EYEC to be seen as an 'essential service', rather than just a policy 'tag on' (PRT).

A growth strategy for West Yorkshire that does not have a clear vision of how EYEC can be improved is a strategy without foundation. Without high-quality, easily accessible EYEC provision, supporting more citizens to pursue employment and education opportunities, the prospects of short-term growth are diminished; without high-quality EYEC provision, and the crucial role it plays in children's education, socialisation and development, the chances of long-term growth are slim.

Our round table participants were realistic about what the Combined Authority may be able to achieve in EYEC policy, but thought that national political influence by the Mayor and Combined Authority could be something that would usefully draw attention to the sector's workforce crisis and possible solutions (ART, LART, PRT). Participants also stressed that the sector feels like it is undervalued culturally as well as politically and economically, and the Combined Authority's messaging on this issue could help address this problem (ART, LART, PRT). One important contribution could be to highlight the importance of EYEC to wider society. As one participant at our local authority round table suggested:

Anything that we do going forward, that promotes early years, sends that message back to the sector, that you're valuable, and we're talking about you ... I think the pandemic made them feel that they weren't listened to, they were the sector that was left to keep operating. And I think anything that makes them sit and think, you are being listened to, you are being nurtured, you are being valued, has got to be high on the agenda. (LART)

As one participant at our provider round table put it, in 'West Yorkshire we can emphasise the importance of children's development between zero and five', and there was an agreement amongst participants that an information

campaign by the Combined Authority could help promote the educational benefits of EYEC, as well as its positive economic effects (PRT).

An information campaign led by the Combined Authority could also help challenge the myths surrounding the kinds of demographics of people deemed suitable for EYEC work, which reinforces an over-reliance on young white women. This could help increase the range of people that may consider a career in the sector, as well as challenge the lack of diversity present in the current workforce. As one participant at our provider round table commented:

I think there is a piece of work, again it's around messaging, it's around who this job is for. And so there is a thing about men, young men going into childcare ... and around an offer to the most disadvantaged sectors of the community as well ... We've got quite a lot of Roma men working in early years in our place, which is unusual. (PRT)

This information campaign could also consider that many people - though presently unqualified to work in the sector - may have significant life experience in childcare, but do not see such as amounting to transferrable employment skills:

Though people tend to look at economic inactivity in the kind of 16 to 25 age space, it's really important that you've got a really vibrant offer for women in their 30s, particularly women who might well have had their children in that sense already. A lot of the people that we bring through into the profession are age 35 who've already had three children, a number of them might be South Asian heritage families as well ... and they're some of the very best workers we can get because having three children helps, teaches you some things. (PRT)

In creating such a campaign, the Combined Authority could draw upon recent successes in promotional work to boost recruitment in specific sectors. One example has been the Route to Success programme to train and recruit over one hundred bus drivers in West Yorkshire,

in partnership with training providers and bus operators. This included the Mayor taking on a prominent promotional role, using a converted bus as a mobile recruitment centre (*Boost for West Yorkshire Buses as Adult Learners Get in the Driving Seat*, n.d.), and the creation of a dedicated West Yorkshire website for prospective applicants.²⁰

7.1.2 Cohering of the sector and knowledge sharing

The Combined Authority is uniquely positioned to act as a cohering body for the EYEC system in West Yorkshire. Discussion at all of our round tables suggested that the Combined Authority is widely seen as the only body that has the political legitimacy and capabilities to cohere public policy and service delivery in EYEC on the West Yorkshire scale, even though this has not been a traditional role.

A relatively simple action the Combined Authority could take is to bring together representatives from the sector – not limited to direct providers, but also including other key agents, such as local authorities, training providers, workforce representatives (including trade unions), and academics – on a regular basis, for information sharing and joint strategy making. Many participants at our round table events reflected that they rarely have the opportunity to meet and discuss policy and strategy, including where best to share and pool resources (although local authority officers often know their counterparts in other local authorities well) (LART, PRT). These activities could also contribute to the parental information service and sector leadership role that many would like the Combined Authority to provide, potentially in collaboration with academic partners. As one academic round table participant suggested:

I think what's also really powerful when I've seen it, and this is not something that often comes through local authorities, more from researchers, is those qualitative stories about how early education has impacted their family, or [how] the lack of [it] is affecting their family. (ART)

We found that local authorities would welcome the Combined Authority's leadership in helping them to share best practice, and helping them coordinate the work of sufficiency assessment and planning, especially where families seek to access services across local authority boundaries (LART). As one participant at our local authority round table suggested:

Combined we're going to be stronger aren't we? And there is that economy of scale ... I think there's some valuable learning from every local authority of where we are all different, and we are operating in different ways ... but there's some great stuff in there that I can kind of take that bit on, take that bit, that bit, that will definitely work here in [my local authority]. (LART)

In this, the Combined Authority could provide a central information hub, for the benefit of partners and parents, drawing upon and adding to local authorities' family information services, with the potential added benefit of cost savings from economies of scale. Yet, local authorities would retain current statutory duties in this area, and so any additional provision would need to add to services local authorities already provide, not abstract from them.

Providers also see the Combined Authority as potentially a central point for information, especially regarding recruitment and training in the sector (PRT). This provision could include an easy-to-access information hub for the more isolated providers, such as self-employed childminders and nannies, to help practitioners understand, for example, new Ofsted requirements (PRT). Similar sentiments were expressed at our local authority round table. One participant commented:

We just need to kind of back a West Yorkshire approach ... there's an economy of scale isn't there? Otherwise I'm developing a recruitment campaign and you're doing one. Well actually we all want the same thing at the end, which is more people to consider early years and childcare as a career. (LART)

²⁰ See: <https://westyorkshirebusjobs.com>

“The Combined Authority is uniquely positioned to act as a cohering body for the EYEC system in West Yorkshire.”

It would appear that West Yorkshire's local authorities would welcome the Combined Authority to lead this work (LART). Indeed, such partnership working has been central to the success of the Combined Authority's

approach to devolution, and will continue to be so as devolution progresses (Crump Raiswell, 2024).

The combined Authority's Employment and Skills Framework suggests that a strategic partnership with Jobcentre Plus could help West Yorkshire citizens access and progress in good work (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2021, p. 18). Such an approach could also be specifically targeted to encourage recruitment into the early years sector, and to support workers once they have entered the profession, especially in encouraging the recruitment of currently under-represented groups. The Combined Authority already works very closely with the Department for Work and Pensions, and this is set to be enhanced through the planned merger of Jobcentres and the National Careers Service, promoting a more person-centred and localised approach to employment support and careers advice (Department for Work and Pensions, 2024).

Liverpool City Region works with Jobcentre Plus branches in the region to promote the early years sector to jobseekers. This includes Liverpool City Region officers working closely with Jobcentre Plus's Work Coaches, and designing a 'talent template' (a standardised CV), to identify thousands of jobseekers who may be interested in EYEC work (Singh, n.d.). Liverpool City Region have also taken innovative approaches to raising application rates of men. For example, they have partnered with local football clubs' community outreach programmes to reach men and promote a EYEC career to them (Farrar, n.d.). Such partnership working could achieve a double benefit of improving diversity of the EYEC sector, while reducing unemployment or economic inactivity overall (ART).

7.1.3 Using the Combined Authority's existing adult skills functions

The Combined Authority's most direct policy levers to improve the EYEC sectors in West Yorkshire are associated with its adult skills functions and budget, which is one of its more advanced areas of devolved power, after transport. The Combined Authority's remit and influence here is considerable, as it controls around 60% of the adult skills funding (formally Adult Education Budget) for the region. However, it remains limited, totalling £66 million in 2022/23 (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2023), or around £37 per adult per year. That budget needs to meet a number of policy objectives, of which the desire to improve EYEC provision is but one.

Devolution of adult skills funding aims to enable localised approaches to workforce planning. However, the current propensity by central government to ringfence much of combined authorities' adult skills funding, according to strict criteria that are designed to meet national policy priorities, severely limits flexibility in using these funds. Nevertheless, within the current funding framework the Combined Authority has levers which may benefit the EYEC sector through the development of a regional workforce strategy.

7.1.3.1 Increasing EYEC apprenticeships uptake

As we discussed in *Section 5.5.3*, although the over-reliance on apprentices has potentially problematic consequences for the quality of EYEC services, it is likely that increasing apprenticeship numbers will be essential to meet the short and medium-term staffing needs of the sector.

Bringing more apprentices into the sector could be achieved by the promotional and partnership work already advocated for in this chapter. But perhaps one of the most effective policy levers in this area is the coordination role the Combined Authority has in apprenticeship levy transfers. The apprenticeship levy is paid by businesses with an

annual pay bill of over £3 million, and the levy is charged at 0.5% of total wages. Employers can opt to transfer up to 25% of their levy to other, smaller employers in the supply chain, to help with their apprenticeship costs. Combined authorities play an important coordinating role in this process, by encouraging levy transfers into sectors that it sees as strategically significant.

In thinking about how to focus levy transfer coordination on early years apprenticeships, a good starting place would be to examine the work already undertaken in this area by Liverpool City Region. The City Region aims to encourage levy transfers to the early years sector through its 'levy pledge' scheme, providing free information and guidance to employers. The approach promises EYEC providers a degree of funding certainty for their apprenticeship schemes, allowing for continual recruitment and an up-skilling of their existing workforce. It has resulted in £5.1 million being transferred to support EYEC employers in the region, from 21 levy payers to 140 receiving organisations, which has funded 1010 apprenticeship starters.²¹

Worthy of note are the arguments Liverpool City Region make to large employers to encourage them to choose EYEC providers as transfer recipients. Liverpool City Region claim that investing in the sector will support job creation and careers in the local community, both in the sector itself, and for parents who need EYEC services, and that supporting the sector in this way demonstrates excellent 'corporate social responsibility' ("Transfer Your Apprenticeship Levy Funding to LCR Employers in the Early Years Sector," 2024). It is such a placed-based vision, based on cohering diverse agents around shared economic and social objectives, which combined authorities are well placed to create.

Another example can be found in Greater Manchester, where the Removing Barriers to Apprenticeship initiative has allocated skills underspend and match funding to projects which aim to address inequalities in access to apprenticeships. Seven organisations were awarded funding in the period 2020-22. Projects focused on groups who are under-represented

in apprenticeships, and included a collaboration between a nursery provider and the Fatherhood Institute, to deliver apprenticeship placements for men in early years (Morris, 2022).

It remains to be seen how planned national reforms to apprenticeships and the introduction of the new growth and skills levy, replacing the existing apprenticeship levy, will affect the Combined Authority's ability to boost take up of apprenticeships and levy transfer into the EYEC sector (Department for Education, 2024a).

7.1.3.2 Skills Bootcamps

Another area of adult skills policy where the Combined Authority has considerable influence is Skills Bootcamps. Skills Bootcamps are a national initiative, launched in 2020, aimed at increasing the skills and qualification levels of adults 'close to the labour market' (so not long-term unemployed), with a particular focus on under-represented groups (Department for Education, 2024b). In relation to the training of the EYEC workforce, they can offer an accelerated pathway into the Early Years Level 3 Apprenticeship. Skills Bootcamps offer a minimum of 60 guided learning hours, over a maximum of 16 weeks, with some of them delivered over an intense two week period. In the case of an EYEC Skills Bootcamp, this is in lieu of having to take a Level 2 apprenticeship first, which can take over a year (System People, n.d.). This is especially important in the context of a lack of Level 3 qualified staff in the sector, and the regulatory demand that they be present within settings. While helping settings meet their staffing requirements quicker, the accelerated pathway also allows workers access to higher wages sooner.

Skills Bootcamps are government funded, although larger employers are expected to contribute.. Combined authorities play an important role in coordinating Skills Bootcamp funding and provision, according to their strategic priorities. The Combined Authority's priority streams for Wave 5 of Skills Bootcamps (April 2025-March 2026) include core sector areas set out by the DfE, including construction,

engineering and digital, with additional flexibilities introduced for EYEC, Creative and Design and People Management. If successful, a relatively easy adjustment to policy would be to make EYEC-specific skills and qualifications a strategic priority for future Skills Bootcamp funding.

7.1.3.3 Improving apprenticeship and training quality

In intervening to boost apprenticeships and Skills Bootcamps for the EYEC sector, the Combined Authority should be cognisant of the limitations of the current training offer, particularly the problems of generic training courses, and lack of specific training for SEND provision and very young children, as we discussed in *Section 5.5.2*. For example, Skills Bootcamps' short duration implies training that lacks breadth and depth, and so needs to be considered as one solution alongside others for ongoing continuous professional development, which is needed to help with staff retention and quality provision. National scale statistics suggest that Skills Bootcamps lead to new employment or positive outcomes for nearly half of the participants, so further exploration of how to ensure progression for the remaining participants is needed.²²

Like other forms of training, Skills Bootcamps are often led by independent training providers, whose educators can sometimes lack sectoral expertise. Attendees at our academic and provider round tables argued that the classroom-based nature of learning both removes staff from settings which are already under-staffed, and does not allow trainees to experience theory and practice working together (ART, PRT). Sector-led training, based in the settings themselves, was offered as a more optimal alternative. As one participant at our provider round table commented, a good model involves finding,

The thing that you're best at, which isn't everything but you've got one thing you're really good at and we'll use you to train them in that thing and use somebody else who's, you know, really good on neurodiversity or something like that to train that bit of that and actually bring them into a setting and to

see them, because it's really particular about early years. It's not like go along and listen to some guy drone on for six hours. (PRT)

There is, however, likely to be a great deal of distance between the ideal training system, and the one that could realistically be achieved in the short to medium term, especially in the absence of major policy reform at the national level, and there are many examples of initiatives such as Skills Bootcamps being successful in developing workforce skills. In addition to current skills investment, round table participants proposed that the Combined Authority could work with innovative providers to run pilot, or seed-funded exemplary projects, to understand how training could better equip EYEC workers for the new demands the sector is facing. This could help improve working conditions and encourage the retention of staff over the longer term (ART, PRT). The basis of such engagements would need to be developed further, but, as a permanent and public institution operating at the West Yorkshire scale, with its considerable powers and financing for adult skills, and its highly developed relationship with training and research institutions in the area, it is arguably best placed to lead this work.

7.2 Meeting West Yorkshire's EYEC system's data and information needs

As we made clear in *Section 5.1*, creating a coherent and effective West Yorkshire scale EYEC policy is made difficult without appropriate data. Not only is it difficult to understand the quantity and quality of provision across the region, but it also becomes difficult to develop evidence-led policy and confidently project outcomes and impact. As our data checklist in *Appendix 1* makes clear, the core data necessary for EYEC policy is only available at the West Yorkshire scale in very few cases. Our alternative approach has used whatever local scale data that is available, to resort in many cases to national-scale data, and to supplement these sources with regionally specific round tables of experts and practitioners.

²² See: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/skills-bootcamps-completions-and-outcomes>. Note that these preliminary data cover the emergence of COVID, and data for subsequent years are not readily available.

²¹ See: <https://lcrbmore.co.uk/levy-pledge>

More positively, participants at all three of our round tables could see the potential benefits of the Combined Authority cohering data collection, and, at all three, participants indicated that their institutions (local authorities, universities and providers) would be willing to share data with the Combined Authority, to help them in such an effort (ART, LART, PRT). In terms of data analysis, West Yorkshire is home to a world-leading university sector, which is increasingly focussed on policy impact at the local and regional levels, as evidenced by the Y-PERN initiative, among others. A partnership between the Combined Authority and the universities could help meet the data needs of West Yorkshire's EYEC policy in the years to come.

7.3 Thinking about early years transport needs and accessibility

Compared to some of the more fundamental problems facing the sector, such as funding and the staffing crisis, the issues surrounding transportation to EYEC settings are perhaps less pressing. On the other hand, this is an area where the Combined Authority has significant policy influence. It is the transport authority in the region, and has significant (and increasing) powers over public transport (not least in determining bus provision), active travel, and road projects. Moreover, as we discussed in *Section 5.4*, the accessibility of EYEC is uneven across West Yorkshire, and is strongly related to family income – those in poorer areas are less likely to have access to EYEC nearby. To some extent, such disparities can be smoothed over by transportation, yet those on lower incomes are less likely to have access to a car, and public transport can often be slow, and not serve routes associated with EYEC transport needs. Women on lower incomes – a demographic that is (at least implicitly) the target of expanded entitlements – are especially excluded from private car transport options. As one participant at our academic round table commented:

... transport essentially is set up to support men going into the centre of towns and things to go like that ... It's linked up really well for those big fast highways, but for those

little journeys it's... it's really trying to get to shops, trying to drop off at nursery, then ... the service doesn't work as it should. (ART)

Research suggests that considering the mobility needs of women at an early stage of public transport planning is often the best approach to ensure greater inclusivity. Women are more likely to 'trip chain' – for example by dropping their child off at nursery before continuing to work. Transport planning therefore needs to consider how to provide for these multi-stage journeys. By default, this is often achieved by catering for the private motor car, which can offer considerable flexibilities to users. However, as we have seen, women from lower income backgrounds have below average levels of car access, so thinking about how public transport and active travel journeys can cater for women's transport needs is key. However, multi-stage journeys are arguably often only necessary because of poor spatial planning. Placed-based approaches to provision, which allow parents access to EYEC facilities, for example, close to their place of work, would begin to address some of the inequalities of access to EYEC created by geography and transport (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2016). However, any such approaches would have to take into account changed working patterns, including hybrid and working-from-home, after the COVID-19 pandemic.

It may be sensible, then, to think about transport provision for EYEC users and staff primarily in terms of the drivers of transport demand *before* considering exploring how that demand can be met through transport planning. As one participant at our academic round table argued, 'I think focusing on the buses is like the wrong end, you need the provision to be in the right place first, and then the bus service' (ART). The thrust of national early years policy has been on making work more accessible. This requires a place-based approach at the local and regional scales, which recognises the problem of gendered transport. A strategic approach could use EYEC policy to strengthen other strategic, foundational sectors. As one participant at our provider round table commented, '[The Combined Authority is] responsible for economic development as well as transport'. At the same time, 'there is a massive

“Increased mayoral powers over education could allow for a West Yorkshire approach to EYEC funding, which prioritises areas that are currently underserved.”

demand for NHS workers', and building the workforce in that sector requires strategic thinking about where EYEC provision lies, in which the Combined Authority could play a central, convening role (PRT).

This discussion may need to boldly challenge employers. A repeated theme regarding the

accessibility of EYEC for parents at our round tables was the need for many West Yorkshire employers to consider much greater levels of flexible working than is currently being offered (ART, LART, PRT). This would allow parents to more easily 'get to nurseries for pick-up time' and be able to care for their child who is out of nursery or school because of illness (ART). As one participant at our academic round table commented, 'it's not just on the parents to make it work, there's definitely a role for their employers' (ART). The Combined Authority have already made a head start in this area, by launching a Fair Work Charter in 2023, in collaboration with businesses, trade unions and regional political leaders (*Dozens of Businesses Launch New West Yorkshire Fair Work Charter at Event with Mayor*, 2023). A further stage of development of the charter could be to discuss workers' access to flexible working, building upon upcoming legislative changes designed to make flexible working more widely available. Part of those efforts could be to extend the reach of the charter – which is currently focussed on small and medium sized enterprises. As well as the NHS, round table participants mentioned airlines and supermarket chains as large employers who could be encouraged to think about work flexibility around caring responsibilities (ART, PRT).

These findings imply that traditional transport planning would not be the most effective policy lever at the Combined Authority's disposal – especially in the absence of considering issues

such as flexible working. However, our round tables revealed that transport is often an important aspect of provision within the EYEC working day. Childminders, in particular, are grateful for the bus fare cap, and free bus travel for young children. This helps childminders overcome the isolated nature of their operations and allows them to plan affordable day trips to educational and recreational sites. Catching the bus can be a valuable life lesson in itself and is something children often enjoy. More novel forms of transportation can also provide a focus of interest, with the Leeds 'water taxi' ferry being mentioned more than once as a cheap activity that children enjoy and learn from (PRT). In terms of transport planning, then, it would be interesting to explore how transport provision can engage younger children – after all, these are the fare payers of the future, and will be a central part of a broader social effort to move towards more sustainable travel habits. Furthermore, the Combined Authority could explore using transport funding to offer free public transport and free bikes to apprentices, as already happens in Greater Manchester,²³ thus helping new workers in the EYEC sector.

7.4 Possibilities arising from future devolution

So far in this chapter, we have highlighted the policy levers that the Combined Authority currently has at its disposal which, if activated, could help improve outcomes in the EYEC sector (these levers are reflected on our system map). Further devolution would imply that existing levers could be strengthened, and new levers could be brought under the Combined Authority's remit. For example, increased mayoral powers over education could allow for a West Yorkshire approach to EYEC funding, which prioritises areas that are currently underserved, thus mitigating the unevenness of high-quality setting accessibility that is found between and within West Yorkshire's local authority areas. Increased powers in health and social care could also help better serve children with SEND within EYEC settings, taking a multi-agency approach which incorporates the NHS, social services and local authorities, schools and other family services.²⁴

²³ See: <http://gmlpn.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Apprentice-Travel-Offers-Guidance-and-Sign-Up.docx#:~:text=The%20Apprentice%20Free%20Ticket%20Scheme,most%20buses%20across%20Greater%20Manchester>

²⁴ See further examples of Greater Manchester's use of devolved health powers, and the partnership working that has resulted, in Sandford (n.d., pp. 27-28).



The Government's first budget in October 2024 confirmed the Combined Authority will receive a Single Settlement of funding from 2026. The Single Settlement will consolidate a diverse range of funding streams that have emerged from different government departments over the years. A Single Settlement decreases competitive bidding processes and reduces a multitude of regulations and reporting requirements to a single accountability framework while offering increased flexibility to invest in regional priorities and ambitions. As this report has demonstrated, the EYEC system is very complex, and public funding and public policy are relevant to a diverse range of agents and processes throughout the system. Highly specified and nationally dictated public funding does not allow adjustments to funding and policy in one part of the system to be made in order to produce positive outcomes in another. By contrast, the Single Settlement offers considerable coherence and flexibility to the Combined Authority's public investment strategies – especially in new areas, such as EYEC.

The English Devolution White Paper 2024 provides more detail on the Government's

devolution plans. This includes deepening the powers of existing combined authorities, including enhanced employment and skills functions. A fully devolved Adult Skills Fund, which will be part of the Single Settlement, will considerably increase the Combined Authority's flexibility over its use of skills funding (Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, 2024; Eakins & Andrews, 2024), better allowing it to target identified strategic sectors, not least EYEC, and create a more integrated, person-centred approach to employment, skills and careers support. In the first year of gaining responsibility for West Yorkshire's Adult Education Budget (2021-2022), the Combined Authority oversaw: a 6% increase in the number of adult learners that funding supports; a more strategic use of the budget, reducing the number of training providers involved; an increase in money assigned to learners by reducing subcontracting; an increase in the proportion of learners from deprived backgrounds, on lower existing qualifications, or out of work; and a 78% increase in enrolment on digital skills courses (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, n.d.-b).

Further devolution could build on these successes, taking a systems view of EYEC to guide investment and policy, allowing the creation of a regional EYEC workforce plan, that values and recognises the skills EYEC workers have and need (ART). In doing so, it could look at how to use funds to build provider-led training in the sector, to avoid some of the problems of generic training of EYEC workers this report has highlighted.

Further devolution could also include, for example, a statutory role in the West Yorkshire Local Skills Improvement Plan and any associated funding, working with bodies such as the Chambers of Commerce to prioritise investment into EYEC training (Policy Connect, 2024). The Combined Authority is also looking to work with Skills England, the new arms-length body of the DfE. Skills England is set to work with combined authorities, businesses, and education and training providers to close skills gaps through a new growth and skills levy (formally apprenticeship levy) (Department for Education, 2024c). The latest figures suggest that around £3.3 billion of collected apprenticeship levy funds were unspent and so returned to the Treasury (*Over £3 Billion in Unspent Apprenticeship Levy Lost to Treasury 'Black Hole' New Data Reveal*, 2022). In per capita terms, that is equivalent to £113 million leaving West Yorkshire every year, which could be spent on training EYEC apprentices – especially to Levels 3 and 5, where there are acute staff shortages – alongside apprenticeships in other strategic sectors. As well as making the case for further devolution and advocating for the EYEC sector more generally, the Combined Authority could make local management of unspent growth and skills levy transfers a key ask in further devolution negotiations.

Finally, Mayor Tracey Brabin has indicated her intention to explore the revitalisation of the Sure Start scheme in West Yorkshire through devolution. However, our round table and desktop research suggested that more is needed in terms of policy development. For example, experts in EYEC have mixed feelings about the original Sure Start programme – which brought EYEC provision together with other family welfare services in community hubs, especially

in deprived areas. Although it attracted a lot of attention, Helen Penn (2024) argues that it was a 'muddled and inconsistent programme', with long-term research suggesting that it 'made little difference to most of the women and children involved'. Furthermore, little mention of Sure Start was made at our round tables, suggesting that perhaps its long-lasting appeal is primarily in the public consciousness rather than in sectoral expertise. These arguments must be considered alongside empirical studies, such as the Institute for Fiscal Studies' recent report, which shows that the Sure Start programme, especially where it was well funded and attracted community input, helped children from the poorest backgrounds achieve greater educational success (Carneiro et al., 2024). Our research also suggests that local, community-led approaches could begin to overcome some of the inequalities in EYEC provision, and family support hubs, which include social and employment services with EYEC, could help overcome the EYEC system's internal fragmentation and poor correspondence with other services, not least on the issue of children with SEND. Yet, on their own, new Sure Start centres will unlikely overcome the crisis of EYEC, especially if the underlying issues of funding and staffing are not also addressed.

7.5 Framing ambition and backing the policy

In this report, we have tried to show what a better EYEC system in West Yorkshire could look like: it would be easily accessible and affordable to all families; it would support children at a crucial stage in their education and socialisation, as they prepare for school, including children with SEND; it would be equitable, reflecting West Yorkshire's diversity in its service users and its staff; and it would be a place where workers are well paid, respected, and given all the resources and training they need to build rewarding and sustainable careers. As we have argued, the Combined Authority's powers to enable such a transformation are limited, but we have made some suggestions where we think they can use current policy levers, and potential additional levers, to support the sector.

Clearly, one of the key elements in the Combined Authority's work will be its ability to cohere and lead. As one participant at our academic round table envisaged:

One of [the Combined Authority's] main roles might be to bring the ... local authorities together say with a vision around what we want for our young children, and then how we're going to achieve it. Because there is a lot of difference, and there's a lot of, you know, as far as I can make out, a lot of deficit and variability. (ART)

Indeed, as a participant at our local authority round table argued:

And all of these messages we have to try and communicate them to the sector ... Say we want you to offer disadvantaged two-year-old places, but [also] offer working parent places, but also keep some of those baby places, because there's a new bit coming from national government soon, and if you could do some out of school as well at the end of the day when you're all exhausted, that would be fabulous too. It's just a mixed message, and I don't think anyone's really quite clear. (LART)

This begs the question of what the ultimate objective of the Combined Authority's work on EYEC is, and how it relates to its other ambitions for West Yorkshire.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that having a realistic target, shared by key stakeholders, can lead to new determination and action in the sphere of policy application (Boswell, 2015; Lester & Neuhoff, 2009). However, questions remain about how specific targets should be. For example, the Liverpool City Region Mayor's election manifesto included a 'childcare guarantee', which promised to 'break down the barriers to opportunity' and 'ensure that all of our children have the chance to reach their full potential' (Rotherham, n.d., p. 9). On the one hand, this commitment is so banal that it would be difficult to argue that the Mayor has not achieved what was promised. On the other, Liverpool City

Region's, like all combined authorities', power is very limited, and so there is a risk to committing to change without the requisite influence to ensure it happens. There is also a question of the timescales needed to achieve success. One participant at our academic round table suggested:

I wonder if there is an argument about what could be done long term, the West Yorkshire Plan's until 2040, so it's not just short-term measures that you can think of ... If we're looking forward to 2040 then you need to think what is the long-term vision. (ART)

The Combined Authority could also reflect on the way it uses targets in other areas of policy. For example, The Combined Authority's 'ambitious target' is for net zero carbon emissions by 2038.²⁵ Yet, although it has significant transport powers, much is determined by national government, commercial organisations' policy, and individual behaviour. Getting the 'target', 'ambition' or 'commitment' right could be an important task for the Combined Authority.

In doing so, perhaps the strongest sign of commitment by the Combined Authority would be to think about how to bring sectoral expertise into its own organisation on a permanent basis. It has significant expertise in a number of areas - some of them highly relevant to early years policy, not least in skills. But it currently has little resource in the area of EYEC. As the process of devolution evolves, and the Combined Authority's policy purview widens, creating EYEC-specific roles within the team would help with policy design and implementation, as well as signal its own commitment to the sector.

²⁵ See: <https://www.yourvoice.westyorks-ca.gov.uk/hub-page/climatehub>



8. Conclusions

Our research team was asked to identify the 'policy levers' West Yorkshire Combined Authority may have at its disposal to improve outcomes in the EYEC sector. We have taken a 'Systems of Provision' approach to answering this question, as it is a particularly appropriate method to identify policy levers for institutions that do not have direct control over outcomes. By investigating the state of the whole EYEC 'chain of provision' – how it functions, and how it leads to the outcomes that it does, we can then understand where the Combined Authority can most appropriately and effectively intervene, given its powers, influence, and financial resources, to improve the quantity and quality of EYEC services in West Yorkshire.

Any such assessment first needs to recognise that the EYEC is in crisis, and that its crisis has profound implications for the health of the economy and society in West Yorkshire for years to come. This is not to imply that there are not some very good examples of EYEC practice, but instead that the quantity and quality of provision is uneven and unstable, particularly in areas of high deprivation, and particularly for children that have SEND. To a significant extent, this unevenness and instability derives from the fragmented nature of the system itself, which is a function of the high degree of privatisation in the sector, and the financial constraints on local authorities on their work to ensure the sufficiency of provision in their areas. The system rests upon a workforce who are central to the economic, educational and social success of West Yorkshire, but are under-appreciated, under-paid, and are not supported by adequate staffing levels or appropriate training. The current and expected forthcoming expansion of the sector is

supported by all levels of government, but, without serious reform, expansion will only compound existing sectoral weaknesses and tensions.

Although the Combined Authority does not have a formal role in this complex system of provision, it has considerable influence over many processes and actors involved, and can use these policy levers to positively influence the accessibility of quality provision in the region. In developing these levers, any new policy efforts must build on what is already working well, to avoid duplications and unintended consequences, and to continually learn from sectoral knowledge and research. This will require continual dialogue and consultation with the key agents identified in the system map.

Policy Lever 1 – Political leadership and advocacy

Many of these problems stem from a lack of funding for the sector, made worse by the wealth extraction and fragmentation that comes with privatised social services. Improvement requires reform at the national level, as well as new spending commitments by the Treasury. The Combined Authority and Mayor could play a key role by championing the sector and making the argument to central government that our shared goal of sustainable, long-term growth rests upon high quality and available EYEC provision. Unless and until major reform to the EYEC system is enacted on a national level, the Combined Authority could regularly convene major actors including providers, EYEC workers, local authorities and those with a professional interest in

the sector, such as academics, to work together to identify shared priorities and programmes helping to overcome systemic complexity. All key groups of agents in the system recognise the need for a strategy at a West Yorkshire level, and see the Combined Authority as the most appropriate body to lead it. In doing so, the Combined Authority could consider whether a unifying and motivating 'vision' or 'target' may be appropriate.

Policy Lever 2 – Information, data sharing and systemic analysis

It will be difficult to make strategic, evidence-based policy decisions with and for West Yorkshire without access to appropriate data. Yet much of the data that are needed are either not available, or do not map easily onto a West Yorkshire scale. Some data are collected by local authorities, some by institutions of national government, and academic researchers produce data at different scales of applicability. We recommend that the Combined Authority seeks to develop a data hub for policy, practice and parental choice in West Yorkshire.

Data sharing could also include:

- A service that helps the small business and self-employed providers meet the challenge of frequently changing regulatory requirements.
- A West Yorkshire family information service, which combines and builds upon local authorities' existing activities.

- An EYEC careers hub, which promotes the value of EYEC work, and helps West Yorkshire residents understand how to build a career in the sector. In this, the Combined Authority could target under-represented groups among the workforce including men and BAME people.

Policy Lever 3 – Creation of a West Yorkshire EYEC workforce strategy

There has been significant support through the round tables for a West Yorkshire approach to developing a regional EYEC workforce strategy, led by the Combined Authority.

A West Yorkshire workforce strategy would require extensive consultation with the industry, public sector partners and EYEC workforce representatives. Specific interventions could include:

- A West Yorkshire recruitment campaign, highlighting the importance of EYEC work and career options, and building on existing relationships between the Combined Authority and the Department for Work and Pensions. This work could address gender and ethnicity imbalances in the workforce.
- Exploring how the Combined Authority could tailor its adult skills offer to meet the problems of recruitment and retention in the sector, including focussing on key training challenges related to very young children and children with SEND, and exploring accelerated pathways to Level 3.

- Working with regional businesses to explore the potential for greater work flexibility, to enable greater access to EYEC for families, as part of its Fair Work Charter strategy.

The Combined Authority should also consider targeting their existing and possible future devolved adult skills and employment functions to support the EYEC sector, led by the EYEC workforce strategy:

- The Combined Authority could seek to greatly increase the quantity of apprentices entering the EYEC workforce, through targeted use of employment and skills programmes and levy transfer. Following Liverpool City Region's lead, given the foundational importance of EYEC to inclusive economic growth, the Combined Authority should consider encouraging all levy transfer funds into the EYEC sector.
- It should also consider lobbying the government for devolved powers that allow West Yorkshire to keep, and recycle, any unspent funds. It should also continue to make the case for a single, devolved adult skills fund to develop regional workforce strategies in foundational sectors to enable inclusive economic growth.
- The Combined Authority has considerable control over the Skills Bootcamps initiative. The Combined Authority should consider making EYEC a permanent 'priority theme' for its Bootcamp commissioning, and to focus on accelerated pathways to Level 3 early years qualifications.

- Yet the Combined Authority should also recognise the limitations of apprenticeships and Skills Bootcamps for workforce morale, staff retention, and the quality of provision. It could explore how to help develop sector-led training that focusses on, for example, SEND and very young children provision, through pilot and seed-funded initiatives.

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Appendix 1

Data checklist

Data requirement	LA scale	WY scale	National scale	Notes	How to achieve WY scale data
Settings Ofsted ratings	Yes - sufficiency assessments	Only for Y&H scale	Yes	National scale data via Ofsted and Table 16 here: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childcare-providers-and-inspections-as-at-31-august-2023	Data sharing via local authorities and/or Ofsted and/or central government.
Practitioner qualifications: Within each setting, how many staff are qualified and to what level?	Not known	No	Yes	National scale data via The Annual Report of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills.	LAs to provide any data they collect with WYCA, or a coordinated WY approach to collecting such data.
Qualification types within each setting	Not known	No	No		LAs to provide any data they collect with WYCA, or a coordinated WY approach to collecting such data.
Practitioner qualifications by settings type: The proportion of qualified staff with each qualification type, within each type of setting (eg childminder, private provider, maintained setting)	Not known	No	Yes	National scale data by Childcare Provider Survey.	LAs and/or providers to report data to WYCA.
Practitioner SEND qualifications: The number of staff with specific SEND training in each setting (and the number of SEND children within each setting)	Not known	No	Yes	National scale data available in the Childcare and Early Years provider survey.	LAs to provide any data they collect with WYCA, or a coordinated WY approach to collecting such data.
Practitioner pay: Pay rates for childcare workers, according to role	Not known	Not known	Yes	National scale data by ONS (as reported here, for example: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f298b478fa8f57ac683d87d/The_stability_of_the_early_years_workforce_in_England.pdf)	LAs and/or providers to report data to WYCA, or exploration into whether ONS can disambiguate data.
Setting environment ratings: A set of standardised tools for measuring and improving the quality of early years provision	Not known	No	Not known	This covers professional ratings scales of provision quality, including the ECERS and ITERS scales. Some LAs and providers use them for assessment of the quality of provision, although such assessment is not shared systematically. Some data may be available via the UKdataservice for the EPPSE study and the SEED longitudinal study may have some data here.	Perhaps worth exploring whether WY LAs collect these data. More likely that a national programme would be required to collect these data more systematically, which WYCA could potentially push for.
Child-staff ratio	Not known	No	Yes	National scale data via Ofsted.	LAs and/or providers to report data to WYCA, or exploration into whether Ofsted can provide data. It is assumed most settings are operating a maximum ratios allowed by regulation.

Data requirement	LA scale	WY scale	National scale	Notes	How to achieve WY scale data
Geographical maps of settings locations (including by settings type)	Not known	No	No	Could be captured in the DfE Survey of Childcare and EY providers (although not presented as a map there). www.locrating.com allows users to generate maps from Ofsted data, but its functionality is limited, and doesn't meaningfully operate at the WY scale. A simple map of provision for WY would surely be a cornerstone of the information offer to parents. If this exists at the local authority scale, then it is not published.	WYCA could work with LAs to produce a real time map of providers in the region, potentially with the use of Ofsted data feeds.
Number and type of provider within local areas	Yes	No	Yes	Local scale data collected in LA sufficiency reports. Reported nationally via the DfE Survey of Childcare and EY providers.	WYCA could work with LAs to produce a real time list of providers in the region.
Map showing relationship between deprivation and availability of childcare places by local (eg ward) area (including by settings type)	Not known	No	No		The Y-PERN study is exploring whether it is possible to make such a map, using recent ONS data.
How each setting is funded and financed	No	No	Yes	The IFS has collated some data on how each setting type is funded, on a national scale, using national government data www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/235063/1/R175.pdf	WYCA could consult with LAs and providers about how to collect and report these data at the WY scale, and potentially lobby central government to collect it.
Childcare fees (including by setting type)	Yes	No	Yes	LA level via sufficiency reports. National scale via DfE Survey of Childcare and EY providers.	Explore with LAs and providers how to collate these data at the WY level.
Opening hours	Yes	No	Yes	Local scale data collected in LA sufficiency reports. National scale data via www.gov.uk/government/publications/providers-finances-survey-of-childcare-and-ey-providers-2021	Explore with LAs and providers how to collate these data at the WY level.
Expected demand for two-year-old spaces V places available/ staff ratio	No	No	Yes	LA data measure expected demand, but not in relation to settings' staff ratios. There is some national scale data in Childcare Survey 2024 (coram.org.uk).	WYCA could explore greater data access via LAs and providers, and/or lobby national government to collect such data for local and regional scales.
Demand for SEND provision V childcare SEND provision (including by setting type)	Not known	No	Yes	National scale via DfE Survey of Childcare and EY providers.	WYCA could explore greater data access via LAs and providers, and/or lobby national government to collect such data for local and regional scales.
Training and development opportunities for practitioners	Not known	Not known	Not known	No useful data appear to be available at any level.	WYCA could explore greater data access via LAs and providers, and/or lobby national government to collect such data for local and regional scales.
Take up of training and development (including by setting type)	Not known	No	Yes	National scale via DfE Survey of Childcare and EY providers.	Explore with LAs and providers how to collate these data at the WY level.
Staff turnover (including by setting type and geographical location)	Not known	No	Yes	National scale via DfE Survey of Childcare and EY providers.	WYCA could explore greater data access via LAs and providers, and/or lobby national government to collect such data for local and regional scales.
Main factors for leaving EY by years of experience and level of qualification	Not known	No	Yes	https://www.earlyeducationchildcare.org/early-years-workforce-report and https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/35052/1/Understanding-the-Early-Years-Workforce.pdf	WYCA could explore greater data access via LAs and providers, and/or lobby national government to collect such data for local and regional scales.
Growth/reduction in EY practitioners by setting type	Not known	No	Yes	National scale via DfE Survey of Childcare and EY providers.	WYCA could explore greater data access via LAs and providers, and/or lobby national government to collect such data for local and regional scales.

Data requirement	LA scale	WY scale	National scale	Notes	How to achieve WY scale data
Setting space available for expected sectoral expansion	Not known	No	Yes	National scale data via Breaking point - staffing shortages Nov/Dec 2021 (eyalliance.org.uk) and www.nesta.org.uk/report/how-many-early-years-professionals-do-we-need/and-why and www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/childcare-survey-2024	WYCA could explore greater data access via LAs and providers, and/or lobby national government to collect such data for local and regional scales.
Number of families entitled to free childcare	Not known	No	Yes	National scale via DfE Survey of Childcare and EY providers. LAs have birth data, but such doesn't fully predict expected demand.	WYCA could explore greater data access via LAs and providers, and/or lobby national government to collect such data for local and regional scales.
Number of families entitled to free childcare (three-year-olds) but do not take up the offer	Not known	No	Not known	LAs may have access to entitlement take up, and they do a lot of work in this area.	WYCA could explore greater data access via LAs.
How families choose which setting their child attends	Not known	Only available at Y&H scale	Not known	Y&H scale data via Ofsted. May be available via DfE Survey of Childcare and EY providers (although further investigation needed).	WYCA could explore greater data access via LAs, providers, Ofsted or national government.
Understanding barriers to provision availability information for parents	Not known	No	Not known	There is likely some data at the national scale (further investigation required). LAs may have done their own research here.	WYCA could explore greater data access via LAs and investigate any national scale data.
Provision of information to parents of the benefits of early years education to children	Not known	No	Yes	At a national scale there is an ongoing Nuffield/Coram/UCL project on this (www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/sites/default/files/Resource%20Library/Briefing%20note%20UCL%20CEC%202024_0.pdf). LAs may have done research here (eg overcoming language barriers in comms).	WYCA could explore greater data access via LAs and to investigate learnings from national scale research projects.
How parents and practitioners travel to settings (including how such travel fits within daily routines)	Not known	Yes	Yes	At a national scale via LA district and accessibility by neighbourhood - Office of National Statistics (ONS) Childcare. Recent work within WYCA (including via the Y-PERN project) has sought to map this at a WY scale.	WYCA to collect any data from LAs, as well as potential internal policy development.
Closure of settings	Yes - at constituency level	No	Yes	Constituency scale data via www.eyalliance.org.uk/localEYdata/58 . National data via NEF (https://neweconomics.org/2023/11/nearly-half-of-children-under-five-now-live-in-childcare-deserts) (although this is not updated) and EYA (using Ofsted data): www.eyalliance.org.uk/news/2022/11/ofsted-data-reveals-closure-5400-early-years-settings-last-year#:~:text=New%20Ofsted%20sector%20statistics%20show%20that%205%2C400%20early%20providers%20registered%20-%20down%205%2C400%20since%20August%202021	WYCA to collect any data from LAs, as well as exploring whether Ofsted data can map onto the WY scale.

Appendix 2

Entitlement expansion timeline

	Ages	Hours/Week	Weeks/Year	Targeting
September 1997	4	12.5	33	
April 2004	3 & 4	12.5	33	
April 2006	3 & 4	12.5	38	
September 2009	3 & 4	12.5 or 15	38	15 hours for 25% most disadvantaged
September 2010	3 & 4	15	38	
September 2014	2	15	38	For the ~20% most disadvantaged
September 2015	2	15	38	For the ~40% most disadvantaged
September 2017	3 & 4	15 or 30	38	30 hours for children whose parents work and earn <£100k each
April 2024	2	15	38	15 hours for 40% most disadvantaged 15 hours for children whose parents work and earn <£100k each
September 2024	9-23 months	15	38	15 hours for children whose parents work and earn <£100k each
September 2025	9 months -2 years	15 or 30	38	15 hours for 40% most disadvantaged 2-year-olds 30 hours for children whose parents work and earn <£100k each

Source: Drayton and Farquharson (2023)





Keep updated and explore future opportunities

For regular updates about Y-PERN's activities, opportunities and events visit: <https://y-pern.org.uk/>. You can also sign up to our newsletter to ensure you don't miss anything Y-PERN-related by scanning the QR code.



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