

The Early Years Pledge

Early year pledge is [Early Education's](#) campaign group, which has been formed to promote the importance of early years provision throughout the 2014 local election campaigns in England. It was launched through a [letter to the Guardian](#) published on Saturday 22nd February and signed by more than thirty of the UK's top early years experts.

We are calling on candidates in the forthcoming local elections in England and Northern Ireland to stop cutting early years provision and pledge their support for the high-quality provision that will benefit young children and their families now, and for years to come.

Local politicians must take action to protect provision of quality for young children. We are profoundly concerned about the widespread loss of local early years' provision of quality and the resulting harm to children and their families.

We understand that the resources available to local government are being reduced, and therefore difficult decisions must be taken. But we urge local politicians to protect early years provision, which can have a lifelong, positive impact on young children and their families. Otherwise, we will all pay in the long-term for cuts being made in the short-term.

The Early Years Pledge

1. Protect Children's Centres, with services for all families and extra support for those in greatest need
2. Protect Maintained Nursery Schools
3. Keep specialist local authority early years teams and a role for the local authority in ensuring quality
4. Protect specialist services for young children with disabilities and special educational needs, together with support for their families
5. Promote the best interests of summer-born children

1. Protect Children's Centres, with services for all families and extra support for those in greatest need

Since 2010, the number of Children's Centres in England has reduced from 3,631 to 3,116; and some of these centres are information hubs open in name only – “half a person and a bunch of leaflets” as Naomi Eisenstadt, the first national director of the Sure Start Unit, has summarised the situation. We are urging local authorities to keep Children's Centres as a vital provision for all families.

Children's Centre research finding: an effective Children's Centre generates £4.60 of social value for every £1 spent (Action for Children, 2009 [\[PDF\]](#)).

2. Protect Maintained Nursery Schools

The House of Commons select committee reports that “many maintained nursery schools have closed in the last decade” (over a hundred in England) despite robust evidence to show that they offer the best outcomes to disadvantaged young children. Their closure represents the worst sort of short-term thinking. The youngest and most vulnerable children are being harmed by these irresponsible actions. We are urging local authorities to support maintained nursery schools as stand-alone schools and to use them innovatively as hubs for good practice and training centres for nursery nurses and teachers.

Maintained Nursery School research finding: nursery schools provide the highest-quality early education; high-quality early education continues to benefit children for the next ten years of their schooling, especially those children with a poorer home learning environment (Institute of Education, 2012 [\[PDF\]](#))

3. Keep specialist local authority Early Years teams and a role for the local authority in ensuring quality

The number of free places for two-year olds is expanding rapidly, but we are concerned about the lack of quality assurance. Local government has a vital role to play in the successful delivery of the national programme to provide free nursery places for disadvantaged two-year-olds. We know children will only benefit if they attend a good-quality early years setting with appropriately qualified staff. We are urging councils to maintain a programme of high-quality training courses which can be easily accessed by all local early years practitioners, including childminders. We are also urging councils to protect their specialist teams of early years advisers, including those staff with expertise in supporting children with disabilities and special needs, and their families.

Without training and ongoing support, quality cannot be sustained, the poorest settings will not improve, and children with special educational needs will not be successfully included.

We urge councils to provide funded places for two-year olds only in those settings with a good or better Ofsted rating.

Local authority early years research finding: local authorities have a key role to play in ensuring and improving quality in the early years; this cannot be left just to Ofsted (Oxford University and Daycare Trust, 2012 [\[PDF\]](#)). Children will only benefit from a free nursery place at two-years old if their early years setting is rated as “good” or “outstanding” by Ofsted. “Satisfactory” early years provision offers no benefit to the child's development (Oxford University and Sutton Trust, 2014 [\[PDF\]](#)).

4. Protect specialist services for young children with disabilities and special educational needs, and for their families

Local authorities need to continue to provide specialist support and advice for early years settings which include children with special education needs and disabilities. The introduction of Education, Health and Care assessments and plans under the Children & Families Bill (2014) will raise a number of challenges for local authorities including how children who are yet to reach school age will have their developmental needs (including education, health and social care needs) assessed and how this can be done as part of an integrated service for families. Local authorities will need to ensure that Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans provide for children in both the maintained sector and private and voluntary sector early years settings so that there is equality of access to services for young children.

Local authority support for children with SEND research findings: research published by the Department for Children, Schools and Families in 2010 states that it appears that “support for early years settings to enable them to meet the needs of disabled children and those with SEN may be insufficient” and that “funding for early years settings, particularly for support and advice, falls short of that available in schools.” [\[PDF\]](#)

5. Promote the best interests of summer-born children

Many families with summer-born children find themselves pressured into taking up a primary school place when their child has only just turned four. Some of those children born in the summer months are not ready for the type of schooling they encounter in some reception classes, and they are more likely to face social, emotional and academic challenges which can affect them throughout their time in school.

But the legal position, and government guidance, are clear: families are entitled to defer school admission until the term after their child's fifth birthday. We are urging councils to ensure that all families are fully informed about the available choices, and that flexible arrangements are made to suit children's needs, including for children delaying the start of school to enter reception rather than Year 1, as set out in the [Summer Born Report 2014](#).

Summer-born children: research findings

Under the current admissions system, summer-born children as a whole achieve poorer GCSE grades and are less likely to go to university relative to children born in September. They are also more likely to be labelled as having a mild special educational need, have lower self-confidence and are more likely to engage in risky behaviour when young (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2013 [\[PDF\]](#))

Our values

We believe that every child deserves the best possible start in life to support their wellbeing, learning and development. A child's experience in the early years has a major impact on her or his future life chances. A secure, safe and happy childhood is important in its own right, and provides the foundation for children to make the most of their own abilities and talents as they grow up. All children are entitled to participate in society and to access suitable early years provision and play. All children are entitled to protection. These are requirements in the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).

Features of high-quality early education include:

- Highly qualified, specialist early years teachers and practitioners who have opportunities for continuing professional development, as recommended in the government-sponsored report [Foundations for Quality](#);
- A curriculum which is individualised for each child, and in which play is understood to be a prime context for development;
- Warm and supportive adult-child relationships which support the emotional needs of young children;
- Ongoing consultation and engagement of children and their parents (mothers and fathers);
- Continuous review and quality improvement with a focus on the learning, development and well-being of the children;
- A positive stance towards diversity, with a commitment to identifying and breaking down barriers to participation and belonging
- A commitment to enabling all children from all communities to participate in appropriate early education, with a strong focus on enhancing the life-chances of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children.

Early Education (The British Association for Early Childhood Education) is the leading independent national charity for early years practitioners and parents, campaigning for the right of all children to education of the highest quality. Founded in 1923, it has members in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and provides a national voice on matters that relate to effective early childhood education and care of young children from birth to eight. The organisation supports the professional development of practitioners through publications, training, conferences, seminars and access to a national and regional branch network. For more information on the work of Early Education visit www.early-education.org.uk