

Have influence, have a voice...

At a time when morale in the sector is low, membership of a union which seeks to promote the cause of early years and its professionals can be a route to support and empowerment.

Recent surveys have highlighted that many early years professionals are being forced to make a stark choice between the professional rewards of working in early education or childcare and the lure of more money for less responsibility and better work-life balance, in the retail sector.

The Education Policy Institute (EPI)'s report, *The early years workforce: A comparison with retail workers*, found more workers switching to the retail sector for more favourable working conditions, with 'serious implications for access to, and quality of, childcare'.

'More attractive retail jobs with improving pay and fewer responsibilities are luring qualified nursery practitioners away from working with young children' was also the conclusion of the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA)'s sixth *Early Years Workforce Survey for England*.

So, faced with issues like that, how is the voice of the early years workforce heard? Providers have their own organisations, like the NDNA, but early years staff are as passionate about where they work and what they do as those who own or run early years settings. There are a number of stakeholder groups who represent views from the sector, and collectively they can effectively lobby for change, but it is by belonging to a trade union that the workforce can have agency – influence, a voice.

The core purpose of unions in a modern society is not only to

protect their members and negotiate improvements in their pay and conditions, but also to promote professional standards and engage constructively with all stakeholders and employers.

Education and training

Our sector is changing and there are more demands on those who work in it than ever before. As professionals, we cannot stand still, but change should be led by those who know and understand what is needed and how it should be delivered because they work in the field. Unfortunately, politicians remain wedded to the idea that they are the experts, and so change continues to be determined by them.

Unions, however, can and do work with ministers and their officials to influence and inform policy development. Unions meet regularly with ministers and officials in all of the home countries of the UK to raise and discuss those issues which are of concern to members, including changes to the Ofsted Inspection Framework, the Early Years Foundation Stage, childcare expansion, workload, early years funding, SEND, and pay and conditions.

With the recent NDNA survey revealing that more than half of nurseries say they will spend less on staff training in the next year, provision of training and CPD will inevitably become an issue for early years professions. A lesser known role of unions is the provision of training and staff development – again,

something of mutual benefit to both employees and employers.

Voice's 'Choices for Change' scheme, for example, aims to help members to identify and address their skill gaps through learning, promoting choice, enhancing skills, strengthening and developing subject knowledge and increasing career options.

Moving forwards

Teaching and childcare are great professions, although the erosion they have endured from external and political sources has taken a toll on their position in society, at a time when (early) education is seen as the silver bullet which will improve social mobility and a multitude of social welfare issues.

Public perception of education and the teaching and childcare professions are in the doldrums. It is therefore essential to make the case to regain the public's respect.

As a union general secretary, my aim is to eliminate negative perceptions about trade unions and promote the benefits of positive engagement to ensure harmonious working relations and that the collective voice of the childcare workforce can be heard. **eye**



Deborah Lawson
general Secretary, Voice:
The Union for Education
Professionals

Useful resources

- NDNA Workforce Survey for England 2019 https://www.ndna.org.uk/NDNA/News/Reports_and_surveys/Workforce_survey/nursery_workforce_survey_2019.aspx
- www.voicetheunion.org.uk

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