

'Benchmark for terms and conditions is long overdue'

The crisis in early years recruitment has come at a time when the sector needs to expand capacity to meet demand for 30 hours. In this Q&A, Deborah Lawson, general secretary at Voice, addresses the challenges.

Q: With the GCSE requirements for L3 qualifications having been dropped, will the sector soon see more candidates coming forward?

We will see more candidates coming forward eventually, but how long it will take for recruitment to recover, remains to be seen. We are pleased that the Government listened to the sector and has taken action to limit any further damage.

We still support the idea of a minimum qualification



at entry level, but the previous over-reliance on academic qualifications, at the expense of functional skills, and the introduction of a blanket requirement as a panacea for quality assurance and improvement, demonstrated a failure to understand the profession, its needs and the sector.

Q: With the workforce shrinking, what appear to be the main factors which are currently deterring people from pursuing early years as a career?

The financial rewards do not keep pace with the

increased responsibilities that accompany promotion. Despite the increasing levels of qualifications held by staff, which are essential for quality, this is not reflected in salaries. This is a consequence of inadequate Government funding.

Q: Is the increase in the minimum wage, and the new national living wage, having a positive impact for early years workers?

Any increase in salary is positive. However, increasing costs without increasing funding makes it difficult for employers to have pay structures that reflect pay differentials between

experienced and newly qualified staff.

We know from our members and research that qualified and unqualified childcare staff are among the lowest paid workers in the country. Qualified childcare professionals who have trained and undertaken academic and practical assessment are likely to earn the minimum wage, or a little above it for most of their career. Promotion opportunities are limited and often provide greater responsibilities that are not matched or reflected by the accompanying salary increase.

Q: In an ideal world, what pay scales and conditions should practitioners receive?

In our 2015 Election statement, we called for: 'research to be undertaken by an appropriate government agency into the terms and conditions of employment of private sector childcare employees'. There is no benchmark for terms and conditions of employment and salary against which private and voluntary sector childcare providers can compare or aspire to. Without such a benchmark, backed by investment from government, this is a difficult task for employers.

I don't think we can be too prescriptive, but a system that includes ranges for particular



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roles in a variety of settings would be a starting point.

Q: Do you think enough is being done to promote childcare as a rewarding career for those at school and college?

There is no doubt that a career in early years and childcare is rewarding and provides high levels of job satisfaction. However, job satisfaction does not pay the rent or mortgage. It is difficult to promote a career which has no career pathway or development or salary structures.

The funding and recruitment/retention crises cause great stress for both employees and employers.

We would advise members to seek advice from us as a union. Those in the school-based system can also contact Education Support Partnership.

Q: How can the sector succeed in retaining early years workers?

Only a comprehensive national career and salary structure can ultimately make the sector more attractive. It is hard for



Campaign seeks to raise profile of childcare as a career

Inspiring a Future in Childcare is a new campaign led by the childcare recruitment company, Tinies, and supported by organisations including the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA), the Department for Education, the Careers Development Institute and the Education and Employers Charity. Its aim is to raise awareness of the benefits of joining the childcare profession – particularly among those at school.

The campaign has set up a free online service that connects thousands of schools with volunteers, from apprentices to CEOs. Volunteers from all regions of the UK have pledged to give just one hour each year to speak to young people about their job, or career. Volunteers and schools are connected securely online, with volunteers receiving invites from local schools and colleges to see if they can support activities during the academic year.

At NDNA, Stella Ziolkowski, director of Quality and Workforce Development (pictured), says: 'The quality of early years education is the single biggest factor in supporting all children to reach their potential and reduce the attainment gap between peers. This quality results from the qualifications, knowledge and experience of its dedicated workforce. Practitioners with Level 3 and above have invaluable insight into how best to support children's development. We are happy to support this campaign which will raise the profile of early years practitioners, highlight opportunities and vacancies within the industry and support childcare providers to recruit the right people.'

To find out more, including volunteering opportunities, visit: <https://www.tinies.com/inspiring-a-future-in-childcare>

the sector to compete when there are better wages and terms and conditions in other, less demanding jobs that require fewer or no qualifications.

We do not want to see a situation where childcare becomes a career option only for those who can afford to work out of a sense of vocation, or for those who have no other choice because the hours fit in with family life, for example.

The lack of career structure and low wages have a negative impact on the image of the profession, so society doesn't

tend to value childcare as it does with professions such as teaching or medicine.

Those who work in childcare play a key role in society, both in terms of developing and nurturing our children and, economically, in enabling parental employment. As a society, we must recognise that.

Q: Do you think that those with Early Years Teacher Status should be awarded QTS?

Yes. We were pleased by the commitment in the DfE's *Early Years Workforce Strategy* to

examine the 'status and parity of early years teachers', who do not currently have Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) and therefore lack the status and career opportunities of school teachers with QTS. However, we recognise that there may be limitations to the scope and range of age groups that can be included, and so look forward to working with the DfE on this.

Again, the lack of a career and salary structure for the early years means that, even with QTS, those working in an early years setting will earn much less than a primary or secondary school teacher.

We do not want to see a mass exodus from the PVI sector to schools as an unintended consequence of QTS for EYTs.

Voice – the union for educational professionals

Voice supports its members on employment issues, both individually and collectively, and provides regular information and advice as well as resources, such as free training workshops. www.voicetheunion.org.uk

Careers advice – useful signposting

- The National Careers Service can provide confidential and impartial information and guidance on career paths and training available <https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk/>
- If you live in Scotland you will find the following Scottish government site useful for guidance on qualifications and careers in Early Year Education <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2002/04/14534/2764Education><http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2002/04/14534/2764>
- Wales – Care Council for Wales <https://socialcare.wales/>
- Northern Ireland – NI Direct Government Services careers <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/>
- Guidance on work experience is available through Fair Train, the national expert on work experience and which owns the national work experience quality standard accreditation www.fairtrain.org
- CACHE is the leading sector specialist in qualifications for the care and education industry and can provide advice on what careers might suit www.cache.org.uk
- Careers Maps is a leading website for 15-19 year olds looking for a pathway into apprenticeships. Review the health and childcare apprenticeships that are available www.careemap.co.uk
- Interserve Learning & Employment can also assist with getting into childcare through apprenticeship schemes <https://learning-employment.com/career-pathways-childcare/>