

Lever those assets!



Linda Baston-Pitt affirms the need for the sector to pull together and calls for more brainstorming events like the recent Early Years Workforce Roundtable, hosted by CEEDA

As professionals in the early years sector, we know that the most valuable resource is a motivated and highly skilled workforce. We also understand the tensions and difficulties not only in recruiting but also in retaining the best people.

As far back as 2007, the Children's Workforce development council said: "High quality early years provision can have a significant impact on children's development, performance at school and their future life chances. If children are to benefit from a high-quality early years foundation stage, the early years workforce must be professional, well qualified and dedicated."

Continuing challenge

You would expect this to be a given, but sadly 12 years on, we appear to be grappling with the same issues and an increasingly fragmented sector. This was highlighted in The Education Policy Institute (EPI) 2018 report, *The early years workforce: a fragmented picture*, which indicated a downward trend in the proportion of qualified staff.

Similarly, the *NDNA 2017/18 Workforce Survey* confirms employers' passion and commitment to providing excellent childcare, but they also confirm that they continue to face increasing difficulties in recruiting and retaining practitioners, especially those qualified to Level 3. Employers then – and now – are concerned about the impact of 30

hours, the minimum wage and the squeeze that this is having on the recruitment of high quality qualified staff.

This was echoed by early years researcher, Dr Jo Verrill, the managing director of Ceeda, who says of her report, *About Early Years*:

"Our latest research with the sector shows no let-up in workforce challenges with 55% of providers reporting gaps in the skills sets of their team and 77% of providers recruiting, finding it tough to fill their vacancies."

The first roundtable

And this was the catalyst for Ceeda's inaugural Early Years Workforce Roundtable, a conference that brought together senior colleagues from across the sector who have responsibility for strategy and decision making, including nursery owners, chief executives, local authority early years leads, early years advisors and consultants, universities, training providers, researchers and policy-makers.

It was an energising afternoon with wide-ranging discussions, the sharing of ideas and exploration of new approaches to what can be done about the longstanding workforce

challenges. While there is no silver bullet, it was wonderful to see a mixed team of advocates pulling together. Despite their different agendas, we all have a common purpose in building a strong and sustainable sector.

The event included thought-provoking presentations from June O'Sullivan MBE, chief executive of LEYF, Julie Hyde, director at CACHE and Guy Browning, the *Sunday Times* cartoonist and *Guardian* columnist.

Come together!

What was clear at the end of the day is that we collectively hold the future of the sector in our hands and, together, we need to move from fixing problems to linking and leveraging the huge assets we have in the early years. Our sector is an incredibly dynamic body of people who are creative and passionate change-makers who continue to influence the early years landscape.

But we need to find ways to connect with one voice as a profession so that we genuinely inspire and enthuse the next generation of potential educators, teachers and leaders. We need to be bold and brave and switch on a new sense of purpose and in the words of June O'Sullivan, "We need to own what we do!" ■

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