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for Education

Early Years Special Educational Needs Coordinator Training Programme Evaluation

Research report

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Ecorys UK



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Glossary of terms

Abbreviation	Term
BPN	Best Practice Network
DfE	Department for Education
CPD	Continued professional development
EAL	English as an Additional Language
EHC	Education, Health and Care
EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan
EYER	Early Years Education Recovery
IDACI	Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index
LA	Local authority
NPD	National Pupil Database
PVIs	Private, voluntary and independent sector
SALT	Speech and language therapists
SEN	Special educational needs
SEND	Special educational needs and disabilities
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator

Key findings

The mixed method evaluation of the Early Years Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) Training Programme comprised a theory-based assessment of outcomes and a process evaluation. The training programme was delivered by the Best Practice Network (BPN) and funded by the Department for Education (DfE). The evaluation found:

- **Training reach:** 7064 places on the training programme were taken up over two years (2022-2024). Trainees valued achieving an accreditation from the professional development opportunity. However, 22 per cent of trainees that registered went on to drop out, with a third citing capacity or time challenges as the reason.
- **Training design and content:** There was positive feedback from trainees on the amount of pre-course information, the registration process, the online delivery and combination of taught modules and self-directed tasks. Trainees liked the networking elements and hearing new ideas shared by other SENCOs. The main challenge was the amount of work to complete in four months, which some trainees found demanding, particularly those that were unable to complete it during working hours.
- **Training implementation:** There was good collaboration between BPN and DfE for the contract management, which supported an adaptive approach to programme delivery. However, there was mixed engagement from local authorities (LAs), which may have affected take up in different regions and the extent to which trainees were supported by the LA with follow-on training opportunities or tailored support after the training programme.
- **Trainee outcomes:** There was significant positive change on self-reported measures of knowledge, skills and confidence in the SENCO role, from before to after the training programme. Trainees attributed these changes to the training programme. There was also positive evidence after the training programme that trainees had a good understanding of the value of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) and most trainees wanted to stay in the early years sector. However, it was less clear if any change in these areas was due to the training programme.
- **Setting outcomes:** Trainees reported feeling motivated and equipped after the training programme to improve Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) monitoring processes, cascade learning to and improve capacity of staff in the setting. Trainees who made the most change in their setting were supported by management, worked in settings with high staff-to-child ratios, and could be released from the room, and had good existing relationships with external agencies. Low levels of SEND or good existing practice were reasons trainees made less changes in the setting.
- **Child outcomes:** There was promising evidence to suggest good outcomes for children with SEND as a result of the training programme. However, evidence in this area was limited in the evaluation due to no direct engagement with children, and a small sample size of parents and LA stakeholders reporting on children outcomes.

Executive Summary

The Early Years Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO) Training Programme

In June 2021, the Department for Education (DfE) announced the Early Years Education Recovery (EYER) funding, a £180m package of support to help the early years sector recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. It comprised training programmes, qualifications, guidance and targeted whole setting support, delivered through a series of complimentary work programmes.

The Early Years Special Education Needs Coordinator training programme (hence forth, training programme)¹ was one of the training programmes funded by DfE through EYER. The training programme was delivered by Best Practice Network (BPN)² from August 2022 to August 2024. The overall objectives of the training programme were to:

- Increase the number of Level 3 qualified SENCOs, available to children in private, voluntary and independent (PVI) group-based early years settings (nurseries, playgroups and pre-schools), and childminder settings (including sole trader and childminder agencies).
- Increase the number of SENCOs who have the knowledge and skills to fulfil the role of a SENCO, as described in the SEND code of practice³. This statutory code sets out the legal and statutory requirements of the early years SENCO role.

The training programme was available nationally (in England) and fully funded. BPN had specific delivery targets for local authorities (LA) with higher levels of deprivation related to the impacts of the pandemic.

The training programme comprised a four-month online course, delivered through a mix of group sessions, mentoring, self-guided study, online enrichment, and an assessment. There were also four in-person regional conferences organised by BPN and DfE.

Evaluation aims and design

Ecorys UK were commissioned to evaluate the training programme. The evaluation (August 2022 – March 2025) comprised a process and outcome assessment of the training programme, underpinned by a programme theory of change (ToC). The evaluation specifically aimed to:

- Understand what worked in the implementation of the training programme.

¹ [Early Years SENCO - Level 3 | Best Practice Network](#)

² <https://www.bestpracticenetwork.co.uk/>

³ [SEND code of practice: 0 to 25 years - GOV.UK](#)

- Show if and how the intervention contributed to change and in what ways, including for children and the early years workforce.
- Demonstrate what the underpinning mechanisms of change were, and
- provide rich information and useful transferable lessons for similar policies and contexts.

The evaluation was a mixed methods design, comprising: ToC workshops, strategic interviews with national and partner stakeholders; a pre and post-training online survey with early years SENCOs that had taken part in the training programme (trainees); a diary study with trainees and early years SENCOs that had not taken part in the training (non-trainees), and 12 in-depth regional case studies including interviews with trainees, managers, parents, non-trainees and a LA representative. It also included secondary data analysis of the Early Years Census dataset through the National Pupil Database (NPD).

In addition to reporting on overall experiences of trainees the evaluation compared views from the survey and interviews by setting type (childminders and trainees in group-based settings), SENCO status (aspiring SENCOs, trainees new to or due to take up the role, and designated SENCOs, those already in the role), amount of early years experience; and setting level social deprivation.

Programme design

Strategic stakeholders from DfE outlined two main drivers for the training programme. Firstly, to invest in the early years workforce, to raise the workforce knowledge base and upskill practitioners to be able to identify and respond to SEND appropriately. Secondly, to provide SENCOs with an opportunity to share their knowledge with others and to move towards coordinating a whole setting response to support children with their needs.

Furthermore, to make sure the funded training places were prioritised for the early years practitioners and settings most in need, DfE set eligibility criteria for the training programme. Whilst DfE and BPN reported that there was good rationale for these, there was learning from delivery:

- LA stakeholders suggested that early years SENCOs from state-maintained nurseries, who were excluded from the current training programme, would benefit from a similar in-depth training programme on SEND in the early years.
- The entry requirement in the final training cohort was changed from needing to have a full and relevant Level 3 qualification, to requiring at least some Level 3 training. Whilst this helped with improved access, LA feedback was that this may have affected some trainees' capabilities in the final cohort to complete the written assignments.

- Restricting training places to one trainee per setting may have limited the sustainability of outcomes (for settings), if a trained SENCO left the setting. Trainees that took part with a peer from their setting, reported benefits to their learning and practice, as they were able to discuss content relevant to their setting and changes to take forward.

Reach

BPN met all their performance targets for the training programme and reported a high level of enquiries from settings about participation in the course. In practice though, BPN reported challenges in achieving both the scale of delivery, which was increased during the two-year contract, and prioritising the target LAs, defined by DfE based on a series of deprivation and COVID-19⁴ related indicators.

There was variation in take-up of the training programme nationally, with the least take-up from LAs in the north-east⁵ and East of England. Reasons for this related to LAs preferring their SENCOs to complete the local training offer, only a small number of eligible settings in the area, and practitioner capacity issues meaning trainees were unable to be released for the training programme.

Engagement

Almost all trainees that completed the training programme reported that it was engaging, interesting and time well spent. Aspiring SENCOs rated these aspects of the training programme higher than those that were already the designated SENCO.

There were high levels of positive feedback on the pre-course information and registration process. Trainees explained that receiving a good level of information about the course content and requirements before starting, was helpful in making their decision to register. Trainees thought that having comprehensive information suggested the training programme was in-depth, which trainees liked and expected, given it was a Level 3 qualification.

Trainees liked that the delivery was online and that there were flexibilities offered in how they engaged, with a mix of taught and self-directed tasks. BPN also offered adjustments

⁴ LAs were categorised for the training programme based on the following metrics: the absolute number of children in each LA known to be eligible for Free School Meals (FSM); the overall% of children in each local authority known to be eligible for FSM; % of children known to be eligible for FSM achieving a good level of development (GLD); % point gap between children known to be eligible for FSM in the LA and all other children in the LA achieving GLD; % of children known to be eligible for FSM achieving at least the expected level of development for communication and language (CL) in the ELGs; % point gap between children known to be eligible for FSM in the LA and all other children in the LA achieving at least expected level for CL; % of 3-4 YOs eligible for Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP gives providers of early years education extra funding to support disadvantaged 3- and 4-year-olds); % of under 5s in receipt of an EHC plan (EHC plans identify educational, health and social needs and set out the additional support to meet those needs; Covid-19 cases rate per 100,000 resident population across the length of the pandemic i.e. the number of people per 100,000 with at least one positive COVID-19 test result, either lab-reported or lateral flow device since the start of the pandemic in each LA. This is to account for the fact that some LAs may have been hit worse by the pandemic and therefore may have had to close early years settings for long period of time.

⁵ Regions were based on the Former Government Offices for the Regions, which was the basis for organising LA data.

where they could, to meet additional needs or exceptional circumstances of trainees, whilst meeting the requirements of the formal accreditation.

The main challenging element to engagement was the amount work involved within the short period of the four-month course. Trainees thought the information upfront could have been clearer about the time involved in completing the assignments. More trainees than BPN anticipated took the additional two-months to complete the training programme. Trainees that were most challenged, were those unable to take part during the working day, worked full time, had additional responsibilities in the setting (including managerial or responsibilities in the room), or caring responsibilities at home.

Just over a fifth (22 per cent) of trainees that registered for the training programme dropped out. In the programme monitoring information the most common reason given by trainees for dropping out related to capacity issues and limited time (30 per cent). BPN reported that a small number of trainees dropped out because of dissatisfaction with the training programme content. There was no direct feedback from trainees that dropped out in the evaluation, which limited the extent of any independent assessment of their experiences.

Delivery

Most trainees rated the training programme content and different components highly, with over 80 percent rating the individual activities, the online webinars and mentoring as either good or excellent. Aspiring SENCOs rated the programme delivery higher than those already in the role. Childminders rated delivery slightly lower than trainees working in group-based settings.

There were minor suggestions for improvements in programme delivery, including: shorter webinars and improved management of breakout room discussions, to avoid people dominating the feedback. Aspiring SENCOs wanted more time to revisit new ideas, whereas more experienced SENCOs reported that they were aware of most of the ideas in the training programme already. Some trainees wanted more time with the mentor. Finally, trainees wanted more timely feedback on their assignments.

Trainees valued the opportunity to network with national SENCO cohorts through the training programme. Trainees reported that hearing new ideas shared from SENCOs across the country was different from the feedback that they heard from their local SENCO networks. It helped them to reflect and think differently about their Local Offer⁶. Some realised it was a strong offer compared to other LAs, whereas others realised there were gaps in their offer and sought to understand why.

⁶ A local offer is a wide range of information about all the support and facilities which families can expect to find in their area for children and young people who have SEN and disabilities. The information should cover education, health and social care support and services for children and young people aged between 0 and 25. From 1 September 2014 the Children and Families Act requires all local authorities to publish and maintain a 'local offer'.

BPN and DfE reported positive feedback from trainees and the sector about the four in-person programme conferences. The conferences successfully brought together trainees and others from the early years sector to learn from the training programme. However, there was no independent feedback on these events, as trainees interviewed for this evaluation did not mention attending them.

There was good collaboration and partnership working between BPN and DfE on the contract management for the training programme, which meant their decision making could respond to learning from delivery. However, there was mixed engagement from LAs in the training programme; some LA stakeholders were closely involved as trainers, mentors and assessors, whereas others were less aware it was happening or preferred for their SENCOs to complete an equivalent local training offer. The drawback of LAs being unaware of trainees that had completed the training programme meant LAs were unable to offer follow-on training to SENCOs or monitor whether the training programme made any difference to how settings engaged with the LA for support.

Outcomes

This evaluation explored the outcomes from the training programme for the SENCO, setting, children with SEND and parents.

Overall, there was good evidence that the training programme positively influenced the immediate expected outcomes for SENCOs. The strongest evidence related to changes in trainee knowledge, with self-reported positive change from before to after the training programme relating to child development, the Local Offer, and all aspects of the SENCO role. There were more gains in knowledge amongst groups of trainees with a lower level of knowledge prior to the training programme (aspiring SENCOs, childminders and trainees with less early years experience). In terms of confidence and skills, there was significant positive change in all areas and with few differences between groups of trainees. The areas of most change related to confidence in leading appropriate activities for children with developmental or language delays and skills in recognising when a child would benefit from formal SEND diagnosis.

There was mixed evidence on the extent to which the training programme influenced SENCOs engagement in further Continuous Professional Development (CPD). Whilst some trainees were interested in other training opportunities; others were choosing instead to focusing on their setting management responsibilities, having recently completed CPD, or wanted a break from training, because they had found the recent training programme intensive.

Similarly, most trainees wanted to stay in the early years sector and those that engaged best with the training programme (aspiring SENCOs and early years practitioners in group-based settings) were more likely to say the training programme influenced this decision. However, there was evidence of trainees thinking about other roles, including

working in state-maintained schools or in a SEND advisory role. This is relevant to the outcomes from the training programme, as movement between early years roles after the training programme would limit the benefits for the settings (particularly if the replacement SENCO was unqualified but unable to access the training).

In terms of setting outcomes, trainees reported feeling motivated and equipped after the training programme to make changes in their setting and share their learning with others. Those that made the most change, were those that were supported by management, worked in settings with high staff-to-child ratios and had good existing relationships with external agencies, including LA teams. Those that made fewer changes had competing priorities because they were the manager of the setting or were limited in how they could be released from the setting. There were also wider challenges related to the cost of new resources and involving temporary staff in whole setting SEND practices. Furthermore, some settings had made few changes after the training programme because there were low levels of SEND in their setting or trainees reported that their current practice aligned with the best practice recommendations shared in the training.

Evidence on outcomes for children with SEND was positive but limited in the evaluation due to indirect reporting and feedback from only a small number of parents. However, comparing views between parents and trainees, there was promising evidence that children with a range of SEND were well supported and making progress in the setting, as a result of strategies learnt through the training programme. There was also evidence that improving the skills and capacity amongst SENCOs contributed to settings being able to include children with SEND in the setting, where previously they may have not felt able to. For children, attending the setting and engaging in early years learning was associated with improvements in terms of their confidence, self-esteem and coping behaviours.

In terms of parent outcomes, parents reported that their experience of the trainee in the setting contributed to them being satisfied that their child's needs were met in the early years provision. In turn this improved family dynamics, reduced their anxiety because they trusted someone else to look after their child and, now that there was alternative childcare in place, could open up employment opportunities.

Recommendations

The below recommendations for policy and practice, are based on learning and evidence gathering in this evaluation:

- **Eligibility for the training programme** could be broadened to include state-maintained settings to make sure there is equitable access to an early years SENCO qualification and high-quality SEND practice in all early years settings.

- Any **targeting of LAs** for the training programme should focus on level of SEND, or demand for statutory and non-statutory SEND funding, rather than social deprivation.
- Any training programme should have a **clear strategy to join up with LAs or other local early years networks** (e.g. Stronger Practice Hubs) to make sure settings have good access to support and LA training afterwards.
- Future training opportunities should **continue to be online** and offer flexibility.
- **Tailored support packages** as part of the training programme could be offered to early years practitioners that may need more help to complete the course than others, such as those new to the SENCO role or with lower-level digital skills.
- **Childminders could benefit from having dedicated SENCO training opportunities**, rather than joint with group-based providers, to better reflect the differences between the settings.
- Independent **feedback from early years practitioners that dropped out** of the training programme is needed to understand fully the reasons for doing so.
- **Revising the SEND code of practice** would provide greater clarity on the SENCO role for childminders, particularly if no SENCO is identified in the setting.
- **Further research around parental experience of having children identified with SEND in the early years** is important. The evidence could help inform strategies for early years SENCOs related to common challenges, including having sensitive conversations and parental resistance to making referrals to external agencies, for example.
- **Further research into childminder experiences accessing SEND funding and LA support** is important to understanding differences in experiences from group-based settings.

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Introduction

In August 2022, the Department for Education (DfE) commissioned Ecorys UK (Ecorys), with Dr Helen Curran (expert in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, SEND) to evaluate the Early Years Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) Training Programme (henceforth, the training programme) from August 2022 – August 2024.

This is the final report for the evaluation, comprised of a summative assessment of the process learning (i.e. what worked in its delivery) and an outcome assessment for the training programme. The evaluation implemented a theory-based approach to the outcome assessment, drawing on mixed methods data sources, underpinned by a co-produced theory of change (ToC).

Policy background

The training programme was one strand of the Early Years Education Recovery (EYER) programme⁷, a £180 million investment by DfE into early years professional development support as part of the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic (henceforth, pandemic). It also aligned with DfE's wider priorities around strengthening provision for the early years workforce and improving the identification and monitoring of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in general⁸.

During the pandemic, young children, particularly those living in deprived areas, lost crucial time in early education and childcare settings which potentially resulted in adverse implications for their development and learning. There were concerns that without early identification of SEND and appropriate support for children with SEND including speech and language delay, and/or personal, social and emotional related issues, they were at high risk of falling behind their expected level of development by the time they start primary school education⁹.

In this context, DfE commissioned a training programme to increase the number of early years SENCOs with a Level 3 qualification. The training programme aimed to raise the quality of early years SENCO practice, help practitioners identify needs earlier and improve SEND provision in the early years overall. DfE targeted the training programme in areas of high levels of disadvantage to ensure that workforces supporting the children and families worst affected by the pandemic, had access to the professional development opportunity.

⁷ Early Years Education Recovery (EYER) programme: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-education-recovery-programme#full-publication-update-history>

⁸ SEND Review (2022) Right support, right place, right time. HM Government. Accessed here: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/624178c68fa8f5277c0168e7/SEND_review_right_support_right_place_right_time_accessible.pdf

⁹ <https://post.parliament.uk/impact-of-covid-19-on-early-childhood-education-care/>

About the Early Years SENCO Training Programme

The training programme¹⁰ was delivered by Best Practice Network (BPN)¹¹ and sub-contracted partners, with funding from DfE, from August 2022 to August 2024. The overall objective of the training programme was to:

- Increase the number of Level 3 qualified SENCOs, available to children in private, voluntary and independent (PVI) *group-based* early years settings (nurseries, playgroups and pre-schools), and *childminder* settings (including sole trader and childminder agencies).
- Increase the number of SENCOs who have the knowledge and skills to fulfil the role of a SENCO, as described in the SEND code of practice¹². This statutory code sets out the legal and statutory requirements of the early years SENCO role.

The training programme was a four month online course, with six months offered to those who needed it. The course comprised of two core units, delivered through a mix of group sessions, mentoring, self-guided study, online enrichment, and an assessment. BPN also hosted four programme conferences during the programme delivery. These were in-person events that brought together BPN, DfE, trainees and others from the early years sector to network and learn from the training programme.

The training programme was available nationally (in England) and fully funded for everyone offered a place. BPN had specific delivery targets for local authorities (LAs) with higher levels of deprivation related to the impacts of the pandemic. Further details of the programme delivery can be found in Annex 1.

Evaluation aim

The overall aim was to undertake a process evaluation and outcomes assessment of the training programme. The specific evaluation aims were to:

- understand what worked in the implementation of the training programme
- show if and how the intervention contributed to change and in what ways, including changes for children and the early years workforce
- demonstrate what the underpinning mechanisms of change were; and,
- provide rich information and useful lessons for similar policies and contexts.

The evaluation design was underpinned by a programme ToC. The first ToC was produced at the start of the evaluation and then subsequently updated based on DfE

¹⁰ [Early Years SENCO - Level 3 | Best Practice Network](#)

¹¹ <https://www.bestpracticenet.co.uk/>

¹² [SEND code of practice: 0 to 25 years - GOV.UK](#)

and BPN feedback at two time points, mid-way through and at the end of the evaluation. The ToC defined all key parts of the training programme to then be used as a basis to explore test and explore potential relationships and causal mechanisms between them. The key parts in the ToC included:

- DfE and BPN's inputs (including, funding, staff, materials and resources, delivery partnerships and wider partnerships).
- Programme activities (including activities related to set-up, application management, delivery requirements and course components, workforce management and quality assurance).
- Programme outputs (based on the Key Performance Indicators agreed between DfE and BPN, including 7000 registered early years SENCOs and three per cent drop out).
- Short and long-term outcomes for early years SENCOs (including improved knowledge, skills and confidence in the SENCO role), early years settings, children with SEND, their parents and external agencies.
- Assumptions for the programme.
- Areas of risks to delivery and to achieving the intended outcomes.

Full details of the training programme theory of change is in Annex 2.

Evaluation methodology

The evaluation (October 2022 – March 2025) was a mixed methods design, comprising: **ToC** workshops, **strategic interviews** with national and partner stakeholders; an **online survey with trainees** (before and after the training programme); **diary case studies** with trainees and early years SENCOs that had not taken part in the training (non-trainees); and **12 in-depth regional case studies** including interviews with SENCO trainees, managers, parents, a local authority representative, and non-trainees.

It also included secondary data analysis of Early Years Census dataset through the National Pupil Database. Whilst the NPD is publicly available, DfE aggregated the datasets by setting type for the evaluation and shared with the evaluation team.

In addition to reporting on overall experiences of trainees, the report compares views from the survey and interviews by setting type (childminders and trainees in group-based setting), SENCO status (aspiring SENCOs - trainees new to, or due to take up the role – and designated SENCOs, trainees already in the role), years of experience in early years (trainees with 10+ years and trainees with less than 10 years), and setting level social deprivation (based on the postcode data and the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index, IDACI, score of deprivation).

Full details of the evaluation methodology and data sources can be found in Annex 3.

Report structure

The report is structured as follows:

- The **Early Years Context** – provides an overview of the level of SEND in the early years, key processes to identify and support SEND, the role and responsibilities of the early years SENCO and challenges faced by SENCOs in different settings.
- **Programme design and set-up** – sets out the rationale for the training programme and learning from implementing the eligibility criteria for settings and trainees.
- **Reach and engagement** – outlines trainee motivations for signing up to the training programme and total sign-ups. It also reports the number that dropped out and completed the training programme, reflections on engaging in the programme, including its online delivery, flexibility in taking part and length of the course.
- **Delivery in practice** – presents trainee experiences of the training content, the online learning, self-guided activities, mentoring and the assignment. This section summarises the aspects that worked well, least well, and areas for improvement.
- **SENCO outcomes** – presents the evidence for the outcomes for trainees having completed the training programme. This includes analysis of 15 self-reported outcome statements included in the pre- and post-training survey. It also draws on evidence from the case study research, diary study and non-trainee interviews to describe mechanisms of change for the training programme.
- **Setting outcomes** – presents the qualitative evidence related to the changes trainees made in their settings having completed the training programme
- **Wider outcomes** – presents the wider evidence of outcomes related to children with SEND and their parents. The evidence in this chapter is based on qualitative evidence and smaller samples.
- **Conclusion and recommendations** – summarises the evidence relating to programme engagement, delivery and outcomes. It also provides key recommendations from the evaluation.

The Early Years Context

This chapter draws on qualitative and quantitative data sources to provide an overview of SEND prevalence within early years in England during 2022 to 2024 (the years of the training programme). This contextual information is important to understand the findings in the evaluation. It highlights issues and gaps that the training programme may help to address, as well as wider challenges affecting early years settings that may limit the results and the sustainability of any change from the training programme.

The qualitative data sources in this chapter includes:

- the strategic interviews with DfE and early years sector stakeholders conducted by the evaluation team at the start and end of the evaluation.
- interviews with early years practitioners, which includes trainee interviews conducted as part of the regional case study research, and interviews with non-trainees, who were similar early years practitioners that had not engaged in the training programme.
- interviews with LA stakeholders and parents, conducted as part of the case study research. However, these views from LAs and parents were limited by a small sample and therefore are only indicative of trends from these perspectives.

The quantitative data sources in this chapter includes:

- analysis of a survey conducted as part of the evaluation with trainees as they started the training programme (pre-survey).
- secondary data analysis of the Early Years Census through the NPD.

SEND in the early years

The Children and Families Act (2014)¹³ defines Special Educational Needs (SEN) in the early years as:

A child who is under compulsory school age has a special educational need if they are likely to have a learning difficulty or disability that calls for special educational provision¹⁴ when they reach compulsory school age or they would do if special educational provision were not made for them.

The SEND code of practice, which refers to the Children and Families Act, includes four broad areas of SEN: cognition and learning difficulties; social, emotional and mental health needs; communication and interactive needs; sensory and/or physical needs,

¹³ Section 20 of Children and Families Act 2014. Accessed at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/6/part/3/enacted> (May 2024)

¹⁴ For children aged two or more, special educational provision is educational or training provision that is additional to or different from that made generally for other children or young people of the same age by mainstream schools, maintained nursery schools, mainstream post-16 institutions or by relevant early years providers. For a child under two years of age, special educational provision means educational provision of any kind.

whilst also recognising that individual children have needs that cut across these areas and needs may change over time. The SEND code of practice also notes that:

Many children and young people who have SEN may have a disability under the Equality Act 2010 – that is ‘...a physical or mental impairment which has a long-term and substantial adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities’.

This report uses the term SEND, rather than SEN, in reference to children requiring specialist educational provision in the early years, to be inclusive of all types of children’s needs and disabilities.

In reference to the early years, the SEND code of practice (specifically chapter 5) makes a distinction between children who require specialist educational provision, from those who have a delay in learning or development, or those displaying difficult or withdrawn behaviours that may be related to environmental factors – such as housing, family or domestic issues. Children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) is another key group highlighted in the guidance who require more careful assessment, noting that difficulties related solely to learning English as an additional language are not SEND.

Trainees reflected in the interviews on the levels of SEND and additional needs in their early years settings. Some reported there was a high level of need that necessitated additional monitoring and support, whereas other settings had very low levels of SEND or no children with SEND at the time of the interview. Broadly, trainees working in areas of higher deprivation described settings with higher levels of SEND (e.g. autism spectrum disorders) and additional needs (e.g. speech delays, challenging behaviour, low levels of emotional regulation), as well as having more children with complex home lives and areas of specific vulnerabilities (e.g. Looked After Children, EAL).

Whilst early years practitioners reported there was a trend related to socio-economic status, early years practitioners thought that relatively low levels of SEND in the early years may also reflect the children’s ages. For example, a setting that only had children up to age two and half was unlikely to report that they supported a child with SEND. At these young ages, early years practitioners said that they might notice differences in development without necessarily needing to begin the process of SEND monitoring or to liaise with external agencies to conduct a formal SEND assessment¹⁵.

Rising level of needs

Following the pandemic, strategic stakeholders, including from DfE and those working in the early years, described a rising level of SEND amongst pre-school aged children¹⁶. This was due to missed opportunities to identify SEND with children not attending childcare during lockdowns. There was also a cohort of children born in this period, who

¹⁵ Curran, H (2020) *Identifying SEN in the early years: perspectives from SENCOS*. Nasen. Accessed here: [Identifying-special-educational-needs-in-the-early-years.pdf](#)

¹⁶ [Childcare and early years provider survey, Reporting year 2024 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

entered childcare for the first time with developmental delays, limited skills and challenging behaviour, possibly due to limited learning and social opportunities during the pandemic. Strategic stakeholders suggested that in households with wider challenges, such as poor parental mental health, children could experience greater adverse effects from this period.

In the case study interviews, most of the early years practitioners and LA stakeholders confirmed there had been an increase in the level of SEND and additional needs in early years settings since the pandemic. Early years practitioners noticed more children joining the setting that required additional support and LA stakeholders reported receiving more referrals for SEND funding. The most common areas of increasing need related to autism spectrum disorders and speech and language delays, but stakeholders also noted issues in social and emotional development and behaviour. Specific needs included difficulties making certain speech sounds and pronunciation, children having difficulties sharing, less imaginative play, and an increase in hitting, biting, kicking and not following instructions. Some of these behaviours were thought to be related to children being frustrated and, in particular, being unable to communicate their primary needs.

Impacts of the pandemic

Early years practitioners varied in the extent to which they thought the rising needs related to the pandemic: Where they attributed a link, they cited a lack of opportunities for children to socialise, difficulties learning language due to people wearing face masks, parents working from home with limited time to play and engage their children, as well as children generally spending too much time on screens and watching TV due to limited alternative activities available during the pandemic.

Those that were less sure the pandemic had a negative impact on child development, reflected that some children had benefited from the lockdown periods¹⁷, and that many early years settings were open for most of the time (except for the first national lockdown in March - June 2020) and had kept in touch with parents throughout this period. Some practitioners thought the delays they had seen were short-term, and by the time the children went to school it had been reversed.

Other factors influencing child development

Early years practitioners and LA stakeholders acknowledged that social deprivation, adverse childhood experiences and trauma influenced child development and the chance of developmental delays. As a result, there may be a higher incidence of developmental delays amongst children living in more deprived areas. Some thought that, even outside of deprived areas, changes to elements of parenting and lifestyles were negatively impacting on child development, particularly affecting levels of school readiness and

¹⁷ As part of the government response to the pandemic, there were national lockdowns between late March 2020 - June 2020 and January 2021 - July 2021). There were also local lockdowns between September 2020 - November 2020. During this period there were restricted gatherings and movements of all but essential workers, closure of all hospitality venues and non-essential shops, closed schools and encouraged working from home

children being independent in key areas by the age of five. However, LA stakeholders were less specific on the main causes of the trends they were seeing and often pointed out that it was unlikely to be one singular environmental factor influencing the trend, just that it was a trend persisting even in the years after the pandemic:

It would be really difficult to say what exactly, but....there's a number of things, families... living very differently ...living in poverty that has increased, that has undoubtedly got an impact as well. **LA stakeholder**

EAL (English as an Additional Language) was a separate issue that early years practitioners and LA stakeholders raised in relation to appropriately identifying SEND needs. In some settings there were more children than previously with EAL, and staff struggled with strategies to support children, particularly those where it was unclear if the delay in development was due to SEND. Early years practitioners also reported having difficulties explaining their concerns about the child’s needs and development with parents who spoke limited English.

Identifying needs and providing support

This section provides an overview of the roles and responsibilities of early years settings, LAs, specialist services and parents to identify needs and provide appropriate support to children with SEND in the early years. It also describes learning from the case study research about common strengths and challenges within the system.

Early Years settings

The Early Years Census dataset (accessed through the NPD) includes data on children aged two to four in receipt of funding in three types of early years settings, including PVI settings, childminders, and state-maintained nurseries. Comparing annual data from the start of the training programme (2022) to the end (2024), most two-to-four-year-olds (90 per cent) that received funding attended group-based settings, but there were small decreases in the number of children attending all setting types (Table 1).

Table 1 Number of children in receipt of funding attending early years settings in 2022 and 2024

Setting type	2022 (n)	2024 (n)	Change %
PVI	615,588	573,809	-6.8%
Childminders	26,997	26,793	-0.8%
State-funded nursery schools	35,586	33,899	-4.7%

Source: Early Years Census 2022, 2024. Datasets only includes 2–4-year-olds in receipt of funding

In the interviews, early years practitioners working in group-based settings and as childminders described processes and common challenges related to identifying needs and supporting children with SEND.

For **identifying and monitoring SEND needs**, early years practitioners referred to the graduated approach¹⁸, specific forms they used (e.g. My Plan¹⁹, Independent Education Plans²⁰) and SMART²¹ targets to understand the child's progress and inform decision making about potential referrals to outside agencies or the LA.

As well as paperwork, early years practitioners noted that **staff working together in the setting** was important. This included having key communication lines between the child's keyworker and the SENCO through monitoring forms and meetings, as well as the early years SENCO spending time observing children and then talking with keyworkers about the child's development. As one explained:

I try and make sure I spend time in each room...talking to the staff...asking if they've got any concerns...if I notice things about children that other staff maybe haven't picked up, I will point them out...and kind of support them that way. -

Practitioner in group-based setting, 10+ years' experience, aspiring SENCO

For **SEND support**, early years practitioners described different strategies they implemented. This included adapting the setting, such as creating calming and sensory areas, as well as structuring individual support with specific activities and resources (visual aids, sensory toys). Early years practitioners emphasised the importance of tailoring support, particularly for children with complex needs.

To plan SEND support, early years practitioners **received advice from LAs, other SENCOs and settings**. Some thought there was a good level of external advice available; others thought that the support had reduced since the pandemic, with fewer people to speak to and long wait times after making a request. As one childminder explained:

Before COVID, we could just ring up the SEN team or...our key contact and get information and support...and we can get somebody come out. After COVID a lot of that stopped and it's now literally like make an appointment, fill in a form, somebody will call. ***Childminder, 10+ years' experience***

Transition to primary schools was a further priority area where early years practitioners planned appropriate support for children with SEND. Early years

¹⁸ If a setting identifies that a child may have SEN, the first recommended practice is the graduated approach, a four-step process (Assess, Plan, Do, Review) that starts with a minimal amount of support for the child and builds to more if it is needed.

¹⁹ My Plan is a simple process and tool that sets out the needs of the child and family and what support can be provided. My Plan can be used by a practitioner working with that child / young person / family where they have a good understanding of the underlying needs (usually informed by individual agency assessments / tools). [Source](#)

²⁰ Individual Education Plan is a document that helps children with SEN access education. It's created collaboratively by a team of professionals, including parents, educators and SENCOs.

²¹ Early years settings are recommended to set SMART targets (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) to define appropriate goals for the child to work towards.

practitioners explained that ahead of the child leaving the setting, the SENCO would typically contact or arrange meetings with the school to make sure the school had a good understanding of the child's needs.

LA stakeholders reported their view that parents often worried about the transition to school. Either they were waiting on the outcome of an Education, Health and Care (EHC) needs assessment²², which would mean that the child could start school with a clear overview of the specialist educational provision they required as part of their Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP)²³ or they were anxious about the extent to which mainstream schools could support their child's needs. As one LA stakeholder explained:

Where the challenges are still coming is parental confidence in mainstream schools... in being able to meet SEN.... there tends to be a preference for specialist provision....for children who could really be supported well within mainstream. **LA stakeholder**

In the interviews with parents, some reported that their children were in receipt of an EHCP, which meant there was additional funding and support in place for when their child started school. Other parents had kept their child in early years provision for an extra year, or chosen a private school with fewer children in the classrooms, which they thought would suit their child's needs better than mainstream provision:

I have put him in private school because they will meet his needs.... there are only five children in the classroom, and they spend lots of time outside and he's not expected to sit... That is why I chose them... in mainstream school he would be majorly affected. **Parent**

Local authorities (LAs)

LA stakeholders described in the interviews a range of ways they worked with children with SEND and early years settings to make sure settings were able to support children to achieve the best possible educational and other outcomes. This included LA teams reviewing applications for SEND funding, providing SEND advice and specialist support, and local professional development opportunities, including training for their SENCOs.

Mostly LAs had **consistent practices across the different types of early years settings**, although some LAs had no state-maintained nurseries and others had different processes between group-based settings and childminders. For example, one LA visited group-based settings as part of the application process for SEND funding but engaged with childminders via a helpline or their local network. Although childminders would be

²² The EHC is a legal process, resulting in statutory funding at a higher level than the non-statutory support.

²³ An EHCP is a legal document that outlines a young person's needs and how they should be supported. It can be used for children and young people up to age 25.

able to access funding if they needed it, LAs acknowledged that they could do more to make sure there was parity across settings.

For **additional SEND funding**, LA stakeholders described their routes to apply for SEND support (which ceases once the child leaves the setting)²⁴, and their advice for the EHC needs assessment process (a statutory assessment, to decide whether special educational provision is needed over and above that which can be provided at SEND support, which would move with the child when they start school). Data from the Early Years Census shows small numbers of children in early years accessing SEND support and EHC funding (Table 2). However, there was an increase in the percentage of children receiving support in all settings between 2022 and 2024, suggesting increasing demand for both types of SEND support.

Table 2 Number of children receiving SEND support or EHCP funding, in 2022 and 2024 and the percentage change over the two years

Type of support	Setting type	2022 (n)	2022 (%)	2024 (n)	2024 (%)	Change %
SEN support	PVI nurseries	17,548	2.9%	21,366	3.8%	21.8%
SEN support	Childminders	364	1.3%	509	1.9%	39.8%
SEN support	State-funded nursery schools	5,338	15%	6,162	18.2%	15.4%
EHCP	PVI nurseries	3,552	0.6%	4,905	0.9%	38.1%
EHCP	Childminders	110	0.4%	178	0.7%	61.8%
EHCP	State-funded nursery schools	457	1.3%	705	2.1%	54.3%
Total	PVI nurseries	21,100	3.5%	26,271	4.7%	24.5%
Total	Childminders	474	1.8%	687	2.6%	44.9%
Total	State-funded nursery schools	5,795	16.3%	6,867	20.3%	18.5%

Source: Early Years Census 2022, 2024. Datasets only includes 2–4-year-olds in receipt of funding

LA stakeholders reflected that **perceptions of SEND funding and different access**

²⁴ All LAs have SEND support available to them through the Special educational needs inclusion fund (SENIF). Accessed at: [Early years entitlements: local authority funding operational guide 2025 to 2026 - GOV.UK](#)

routes influenced the number of EHC assessments. One LA thought that offering a two-tiered SEND funding approach worked well, and reduced applications for an EHC. Parents and early years settings could apply for either the inclusion fund or a grants process for exceptional needs. The latter had the same funding as the EHCP, but the application process was shorter, and the family could decide later whether an EHCP was still needed. In comparison, another LA with only one route - the Inclusion Fund, wanted to improve how SEND support was accessed. The LA stakeholder reflected that there was a perception that EHCP was the main approach, rather than realising how SEN funding could be used to support SEND appropriately too:

There needs to be more emphasis and...more confidence in SEN support as a level of support, not just a stepping stone to EHC... lots of children's needs can be met with SEN support with the right support in place...it's about being able to give the settings what they need....without them having to jump to EHCP because...that's where you're going to get the funding from. **LA stakeholder**

For **SEND support**, LA stakeholders who were interviewed described how different teams worked with early years settings and children to provide SEND support, advice and training. This included support from an Area SENCO, educational psychologists, a portage service²⁵, or a series of visits from a specialist inclusion or early years team after the setting had applied for SEND funding.

LA stakeholders described **good relationships with early years settings, as well as recognising challenges in the LA's capacity**, which delayed their involvement or limited how joined up they were with the other agencies (including speech and language, education, psychologist, and health teams). LA stakeholders reported that from their perspective, their capacity had worsened since the pandemic. In the context of increasing SEND, LAs received more applications for statutory and non-statutory funding and more children required their specialist support.

LA stakeholders reflected too on the **differences between the SEND support they provided in PVI settings (group-based and childminders) compared to state-maintained settings**. In their view, there was more variation in staff experience and skills within PVIs, requiring different levels of support from the LA team, rather than the consistent approach that was possible in state-maintained nurseries. This was due, in part, to the staffing recruitment and retention issues that affected PVIs (discussed on page 37), but also because children with SEND were more likely to attend state-maintained settings, which limited staff in PVIs' exposure to SEND.

Amongst early years practitioners there were mixed views in the support available to settings from LAs and other service. Some early years practitioners, including those working in childminder and group-based settings, thought they received a good or

²⁵ A portage service is a home-visiting educational support program designed for pre-school children with SEN and developmental delays

sufficient level of support from the LA. Positive examples included teams from LAs visiting the setting regularly, or being on hand to take phone calls to discuss any concerns the setting had. However, another group thought there was limited help available to them. If there had been support available previously, it had reduced since the pandemic and there were now fewer visits by the LA team to the setting. Childminders specifically wanted more guidance from the LA because they were unfamiliar with the processes to apply for additional support for a child with SEND and felt a greater level of responsibility because they were working with children with SEND on their own. As one explained:

If I have concerns about a child, I can contact [advisor from the LA] and [advisor from the LA] will come and visit. But that is pretty much it... in some ways you do feel quite limited in the support because of being the only adult in my setting.

Childminder, less than 10 years' experience

Specialist support

For children with specific needs, **parents applied for support from clinical or specialist services outside the LA**. Early years settings may be aware of this involvement, recommend the additional service to the parent, support the parent in accessing the additional service or the external service would visit the setting. However, typically parents would be responsible for engaging with these services themselves. For children requiring a diagnosis or clinical support, parents engaged health providers in specific developmental pathways for children such as for autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), global developmental delay, Down's syndrome and deafness. For non-clinical specialist support, parents made a referral to a commissioned provider, such as speech and language therapists, physiotherapists, and occupational therapists.

LA stakeholders described **different levels of partnership working with health agencies**. Where there was good join up or full integration, this was due to a well-functioning 0-19 family service, which provided a forum to share information about the child's support between the LA and health teams. However, there were also LAs where health and LA support ran in parallel, with separate referral points and little data sharing across the two. This meant there was some disconnect between the LA involvement with the early years settings and the diagnostic pathways which parents and children with SEND were navigating.

Long wait times to receive support from specialist services was a widely reported challenge, particularly for children wanting to access speech and language therapy services, due to large increases in demand since the pandemic. Some LAs and early years practitioners had **invested in upskilling early years staff in specialist communication interventions** (e.g. Talk Boost²⁶) to help early years practitioners offer

²⁶ [Talk Boost - Speech and Language UK: Changing young lives](#)

appropriate support whilst waiting for a referral outcome from a specialist service. Where it has worked well, it has meant that children's development can be supported ahead of receiving advice from the specialist service. However, early years practitioners were clear that the support offered in the setting was at a lower level and therefore not a replacement for any specialist agency. As one trainee explained:

We will work with the children to do interventions... but we're not trained SALT [speech and language therapists] so we can't do what a SALT might have done, or what an ed psych might have put in as interventions in that time....none of us are experts in those very specific fields. ***Practitioner in group-based setting, designated SENCO, 10+ years' experience***

Parents

In terms of identifying SEND, parents reported in interviews that they **became aware of their child's needs at different points**: Some had engaged with services before the child joined the early years setting, often at the two year health visitor check²⁷, but sometimes before. While others were unaware until an early years practitioner discussed it with them. Parents could be unaware of any difference in the child's development if it was their first child, or their siblings' development had been similar. Some parents had suspected possible needs but were unsure what it was related to or thought the difference may resolve over time, particularly as during the years of pandemic there had been restrictions on the family socialising and meeting others.

In terms of choosing an early years setting, parents had considered the extent to which the setting would be able to **appropriately meet their child's need**, as well as proximity to home and local availability. For some the priority was for the child to have varied learning opportunities, including being outside and alongside children their own age. Other parents had chosen childminders specifically because they thought the smaller setting would better suit their child's SEND. There were examples where the parent had removed their child from a setting that they felt had been unable to meet the child's needs or support with their behaviour.

LA stakeholders shared that in their view some parents saw early years settings **primarily providing childcare rather than a learning environment**. As a result, LAs thought that parents engaged less in interventions the LA or setting suggested, and there was little effort to offer consistent SEND support strategies in the home. There was less evidence from the parent interviews, as generally parents valued the support from the settings and followed the recommendations from early years practitioners at home too. One parent though expressed their view that ultimately children will develop in their own time and should have the space for free play at home:

²⁷ A "two-year health visitor check" is a routine developmental assessment delivered by a health visitor, for all children at the age of two, where they evaluate the child's overall growth, physical abilities, speech, language, social skills, and behaviour to ensure they are developing appropriately for their age.

There are so many hours in the day for school and nursery school for them [children], then they are just children, let them play. **Parent**

Early Years SENCO

In the SENCO code of practice²⁸, group-based settings are expected to identify an early years SENCO and childminders are encouraged to identify a person as a SENCO. It is also recommended that the chosen early years practitioner has an appropriate level of training and knowledge regarding supporting children with SEND. The guidance further stipulates four key areas of the role:

- 1) ensuring all practitioners in the setting understand their responsibilities to children with SEND and the setting's approach to identifying and meeting SEND,
- 2) advising and supporting colleagues,
- 3) ensuring parents are closely involved throughout and that their insights inform action taken by the setting, and
- 4) liaising with professionals or agencies beyond the setting (full detail of key responsibilities and skills described in Annex 3).

In practice though, there is variation in the qualification background and demands of the early years SENCO working in the PVI sector (group-based and childminders). There is not one qualification required for the role, whereas in the state-maintained setting the SENCO would require qualified teacher status. There are also differences in how the early years SENCO operates within the setting, reflecting the size of the setting in terms of number of staff and children, and the level of SEND. The early years SENCOs interviewed in this evaluation confirmed these differences. There were also differences in perceived challenges in the role, varying by setting type, early years experience, SENCO status, and setting deprivation. Overall, the range of backgrounds and experiences amongst early years SENCOs suggests a high level of heterogeneity within the group eligible for the training programme; both in terms of key gaps in knowledge and skills that they may need help with, as well as their capacity to engage in the training programme.

Past qualifications

Differences in backgrounds amongst early years SENCOs interviewed for the evaluation (trainees and non-trainees), were as follows:

- There was a group that had completed a course in the early years SENCO role previously, although amongst trainees this was at a lower level and less in-depth than the current training programme (e.g. Level 2 or introduction to SENCO).

²⁸ DfE (2022) The role of the Early Years Special Educational Needs Coordinator. Accessed at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/622894808fa8f526d8531647/The_Role_of_the_Early_Years_SENCO.pdf

- Another group had experience of courses related to SEN²⁹. This included a specific SEND course (e.g. Level 2 SEN), a SEND module within another course (e.g. Level 4 early years or inclusion leads), focused on a specific area (e.g. understanding autism, Down's syndrome, cleft palates, sensory processing) or to develop skills to support SEND (e.g. PEG feeding³⁰, Makaton³¹, Elklan³², Talk Boost, Wellcomm training³³, baby signing³⁴).
- There were also early years practitioners that only held credentials from courses in other aspects of the role³⁵, with nothing directly related to the SENCO role or SEND.

Overall, early years practitioners – in group based and childminder settings - **without a qualification in the SENCO role, or with limited or no training related to SEND, felt they lacked a base knowledge to do their role or felt underqualified to give advice.**

Others thought it would be **easier if all the learning for the role was provided in one place, rather than being scattered across different courses.** There were also differences in how recently early years practitioners had completed the training. Some kept their knowledge up to date through different courses on specific areas of SEND, whereas others had completed courses a number of years ago and were unsure if the knowledge was still relevant.

A drawback in settings (group-based and childminders) with low – or infrequent – SEND was that there was **little 'on the job' opportunity for learning.** Even if early years practitioners had completed training related to the SENCO role or SEND previously, for some there had been little opportunity to apply it in the setting.

Demands of the role

In **group-based settings**, the demands of the early years SENCOs reflected the setting size and level of SEND, which varied considerably as settings were set-up very differently:

- There were early years practitioners who thought the **demands of the SENCO role in their group-based setting were reasonable**, with little additional time or paperwork involved due to a low number of children with SEND that they monitor

²⁹ SEN course included part of a general courses (e.g. Level 2 SEN), a module within another course (e.g. Level 4 early years or inclusion leads), focused on a specific area (e.g. understanding autism, downs syndrome, cleft palates, sensor processing) or to develop skills to support SEN (e.g. peg feeding, Makaton, ELKlan training, Early Talk Boost/Welcome training signing).

³⁰ A percutaneous endoscopic gastrostomy (PEG) feeding tube is a way to give food, fluids and medicines directly into the stomach by passing a thin tube through the skin and into the stomach.

³¹ Makaton uses signs and symbols to help people communicate. It is designed to support the development of spoken language. Makaton signs are based on the gestures used in British Sign Language (the language of the Deaf community). However, unlike British Sign Language, Makaton signs are used in conjunction with speech at all times and in English grammatical word order.

³² <https://www.elklan.co.uk/>

³³ <https://www.gl-assessment.co.uk/assessments/products/wellcomm/>

³⁴ Baby signing utilises simple, visual signs, often borrowed or adapted from British Sign Language) or other sign language systems, to represent words and concepts.

³⁵ These included a credentials higher than Level 3 (i.e. bachelors and masters level).

and support.

- Another group had **combined the SENCO role with other responsibilities for the group-based setting**, including managerial roles (either manager or deputy manager) or related to inclusion (e.g. supporting children with EAL). These early years practitioners were busy in their role, but the SENCO responsibilities were only part of the reason for that.
- There were also early years practitioners working in group-based settings where **multiple staff members were trained as the SENCO**, including having a main SENCO and deputy SENCO. For some, this was to make sure there was sufficient capacity to appropriately manage and support the high level of SEND in the setting. In other settings multiple staff were trained to make sure there was always a SENCO available, when one of the practitioners was absent due to sickness or planned annual leave.

Childminder settings varied less in how the SENCO role was set up, although there were differences between childminders who worked alone and those who worked within a small team:

- **Childminders who worked as a sole trader childminder were the SENCO for the setting**. Although from the interviews, not all had assumed the role prior to the training programme.
- There were **childminder assistants who were training to be the SENCO** in the current training programme, but previously there had been no qualified SENCO in the setting.
- Generally, **childminders had lower levels of SEND due to the size of the setting**, with most childminders saying they only needed to support the occasional child and few needing to support more than one child in the setting at a time.

Challenges of the early years SENCO role

In the pre-survey trainees were asked about the challenges they faced in the role of early years SENCO. The trainees were consistent about the main areas that were challenges, as well as those that were less challenging. However, there were also differences by setting type, amount of early years experience, SENCO status, and setting deprivation, suggesting that some of the challenges were experienced more in some groups compared to others.

The challenges reported by trainees more often included:

- a **lack of sufficient funding to provide appropriate support** (70 per cent agreed or strongly agreed),
- **lack of special needs training opportunities** (60 per cent agreed or strongly agreed),

- **lack of resources** (60 per cent agreed or strongly agreed),
- **insufficient time to do the role effectively** (55 per cent) and
- **dealing with a large variety of children's SEND** (53 per cent).

In the interviews, early years practitioners explained that the limitations related to funding to provide appropriate support were challenging for two main reasons:

- Firstly, due to tight child-to-staff ratios, settings **needed to wait for an outcome of an application for funding** before they could offer a child one to one support.
- Secondly because any additional funding was typically less than what is required to fund a full-time role and would finish when the child went to school. Settings therefore **looked internally to increase the hours of an existing staff member**, rather than increasing overall headcount. This would increase the support available but placed pressure on existing staff to work more hours. Settings were then sometimes unable to fill the additional hours, meaning that 1:1 support could not be offered.

There were **consistent views amongst trainees that there were few challenges related to parents**: Only a minority (17 per cent and 15 per cent of trainees) agreed that **poor communication and difficult relationships with parents** were issues.

Similarly, **lack of understanding amongst leadership and colleagues** was less of a concern (15 per cent and 31 per cent agreed, respectively).

Early years practitioners confirmed in the interviews that, in their view, partnership working with parents was a strength for the setting. They described how regular contact was key to the setting having a holistic understanding of the child's needs, as well as an opportunity for the setting to suggest strategies or resources for the parent to use at home and encouraged consistent SEND support. All early years practitioners, and particularly childminders, thought they had a central role in helping parents navigate different services and the referral process.

The main challenge early years practitioners reflected on relating to parents, was if the setting identified a need, but there were difficulties communicating this or the parent was hesitant to take the next steps in involving other services. This was either because the parent was reluctant to acknowledge their child had SEND or the parent had EAL and therefore limited understanding themselves. Whilst good relationships helped early years practitioners have these sensitive conversations, some were frustrated by parental resistance to make referrals.

Challenges in the role by different groups of trainees

Exploring the pre-survey findings on challenges in the role by different groups of trainees, key findings from statistical testing were as follows:

Childminders reported significantly higher agreement compared to those in group-based settings for three of the eight challenges - related to insufficient time to do their role, dealing with a large variety of children's SEND, and lack of special needs training opportunities. However, childminders were significantly less likely than those working in group-based settings to agree that their role was misunderstood by the senior leadership team. This likely reflects childminders working as sole traders or in a small team without the same layers of management as in a group-based setting.

Highly experienced trainees (10+ years' experience in early years) reported significantly higher agreement compared to those with less experience (less than 10 years' experience) in six out of the eight challenges, including insufficient time to do my role effectively, role is misunderstood/undervalued by colleagues, lack of sufficient funding to provide appropriate levels of support, dealing with a large variety of children's SEND and handling difficult and emotional situations, role is misunderstood by senior leadership team. A possible reason for this is highly experienced trainees have gained a greater awareness of the types of challenges in their role over time.

Trainees who were aspiring to be a SENCO reported significantly stronger agreement, compared to designated SENCOs, in all except two of the challenges in the role. There was no significant difference for SENCO status related to relationships with parents or poor communication with parents. This finding was unsurprising given these trainees were new to the responsibilities and working with parents was an area of fewer challenges for trainees overall.

Finally, **there was a correlation between deprivation and challenges in four of the eight challenges of the SENCO role.** Trainees working in settings in areas of higher deprivation reported stronger agreement for challenges in four of the eight challenges. These were insufficient time to do the role effectively, insufficient funding support, lack of resources, and dealing with a large variety of children's SEND. Given the trend between social deprivation and higher levels of SEND in the early years, it was likely trainees in these areas were faced with supporting more children in their settings compared to others.

Wider early years challenges

In the strategic interviews in year one of the evaluation, DfE and early years sector stakeholders reflected on the wider challenges facing the early years workforce in 2022. These largely focused on the long-standing issues related to recruitment and retention of the early years workforce. With long hours and limited pay, strategic stakeholders reported that early years managers had little to incentivise staff to stay and, as a result, often struggled with high turnover and the impacts of this on their setting.

While recruitment and retention issues were long-standing challenges, the strategic stakeholders noted that the years of pandemic, and the cost-of-living crisis that then followed, had worsened the issues considerably. Some pointed to the frustrations

amongst the early years workforce during the pandemic, when schools had closed during the second national lockdown (November 2020), but their settings had remained mostly open. Others highlighted that with rising living costs, it was even harder for staff to remain working in the early years if they could find high paid work elsewhere. In 2024, stakeholders confirmed that issues were ongoing, with retention a priority area for PVIs.

Programme design and set-up

This chapter explores the rationale for the training programme as well as learning from key strategic decisions related to the programme design, from DfE and BPN. The chapter draws on qualitative data sources, including the strategic interviews with DfE and early years sector stakeholders conducted at the start and end of the evaluation, plus the interviews with a small number of LA stakeholders conducted as part of the case study research.

Rationale for the programme

Strategic stakeholders from DfE explained that the main driver for the training programme was **to invest in the early years workforce, to raise the knowledge base and upskill staff to be able to identify and respond to SEND appropriately.**

With the rise in needs since the pandemic, DfE stakeholders were clear that qualified early years SENCOs were important to make sure developmental needs were identified correctly – and to avoid misdiagnosis or over assessment – such as mistaking autism spectrum conditions in children with speech, language and communication issues linked to trauma or lack of socialisation. However, in practice, many early years SENCOs had no formal training in SEND, due to limited training opportunities in this subject area. This was the case in group-based settings in the PVI sector, but more pronounced amongst childminders, who had comparably fewer SEND qualifications, despite having the similar level of responsibilities in the SEND code of practice.

A second driver of the training programme was to **provide SENCOs with an opportunity to share their knowledge with others and to move towards coordinating a whole setting response to support children with their needs.**

Strategic stakeholders from DfE and the early years sector described how SENCOs took on the burden of SEND responsibility and often felt isolated and under pressure in the role. The training programme was therefore a chance to offer SENCOs reassurance about their practice, to meet professional peers and access a supportive network to reflect on their work.

Programme fundamentals

Based on the key drivers, DfE developed a series of fundamentals for the training programme, which informed an eligibility criteria for trainees who could take part, as well key performance indicators that BPN needed to fulfil. This section describes the programme fundamentals and the learning from implementing them shared by DfE, BPN and LAs in their interviews.

Eligible settings

The first fundamental was that the training programme **should focus on the PVI sector (group-based settings and childminders), excluding state-maintained nurseries.**

The rationale for this that **state-maintained settings were more likely to already have access to qualified SENCO**, following the guidance of the SEND code of conduct³⁶.

LA and BPN stakeholders agreed that prioritising the PVI sector was the correct approach, however, they had received feedback from state-maintained settings of training needs amongst their early years SENCOs too. LAs and BPN were concerned that without wider training to all early years SENCOs across these state-maintained settings, SEND needs may still be missed or identified late. Specifically:

- For **state-maintained nurseries attached to a primary school**, the designated SENCO had responsibilities for all year groups, and all children up to the age of 11. This breadth of responsibility limited the SENCO's dedicated time and specialist knowledge for the early years. As a result, SENCOs in these settings lacked confidence identifying and supporting SEND in the early years, despite their overall higher levels of experience with SEND and qualification levels.
- For **state-maintained nurseries separate to primary schools**, LA stakeholders reported there were similarities in needs to the PVI sector, as there was a variation in the extent to which the SENCO was experienced and limited opportunities to skill up their staff.

Eligible SENCOs

Minimum qualification

The second fundamental was that all trainees were **required to have a Level 3 accreditation prior to completing the training programme.** This requirement was consistent with the specification for an existing level three accreditation developed by DfE and National Association for Special Educational Needs (NASEN)³⁷. This existing qualification was linked to the SEND code of practice and included details of the requirements of group-based settings and childminders. As other training providers (NCFE³⁸ and Gateway³⁹) were already offering this accreditation, the current training programme would increase the number of places for a SENCO qualification available to the sector overall, rather than create a different pathway for early years SENCOs. This was also to ensure that existing SENCO training places did not just become government funded.

³⁶ A maintained nursery school must ensure that there is a qualified teacher designated as the SENCO in order to ensure the detailed implementation of support for children with SEND. This individual should also have the prescribed qualification for SEN Co-ordination or relevant experience

³⁷ A charitable membership organisation that exists to support and champion those working with, and for, children and young people with SEND and learning differences. Website accessed at: <https://naSEND.org.uk/>

³⁸ an educational charity and leader in vocational and technical learning <https://www.ncfe.org.uk/>

³⁹ <https://www.gatewayqualifications.org.uk/about-us/>

BPN and DfE reflected trainees needed to have capacity to complete a training programme that was relatively intense, as it was delivered over a short period (four to six months), and in-depth compared to initial SENCO related training opportunities. Having a level three qualification was one way of demonstrating prior experience of completing the requirements of qualification at that level.

In practice, BPN reported that childminders were facing barriers to taking part because they lacked a 'full and relevant' level 3 qualification. Reflecting on this, DfE relaxed the eligibility criteria for childminders in the final cohort, which then required trainees to have some level three training, rather than a full and relevant qualification. All registered childminders would therefore be eligible, as there was a level 3 component as part of their mandatory training. Following the change, BPN and DfE stakeholders noticed an increase in engagement from childminders. However, LA stakeholders involved in delivery of the training programme also reflected challenges in the final cohort with the assessment:

It [lowering the qualification requirements for the training programme] enabled some more childminders to access it. But that made it quite hard to assess, sometimes because they [trainees] weren't at that working at Level three. **LA stakeholder**

One trainee per setting

The third fundamental was that each setting could only train one early years practitioner. This was an aspiration of DfE to make sure there was equal participation offered to settings. However, in practice there was a degree of negotiation and flexibility in this, responding to the needs of the setting and turnover of staff. Where settings trained more than one practitioner, this was signed off on a case-by-case basis by DfE to maintain oversight and ensure equality of access to the programme for all eligible participants.

BPN reported that there were cases where they had requested to train an additional early years practitioner in the setting and provided DfE with supportive evidence of why this was necessary. This was to train a new SENCO after the trained SENCO had left the setting; or because the setting was large with several practitioners working in the SENCO role. From the monitoring information, seven per cent of settings (n = 496) registered multiple early years practitioners (ranging from one to three more trainees).

Where trainees had taken part in the training programme with a colleague, in the interviews they reported benefits from doing the training programme together. This included being able to share ideas on changes to make in the setting as well as supporting each other to complete the course. Conversely, there were trainees that took part in the training programme alone, but in their view, there were other early years practitioners in the setting that would have benefited from the knowledge and skills. Allowing more than one SENCO per setting to take part would have also reduced the burden on them to cascade the information to others.

Reach and engagement

This chapter explores trainees' motivations for registering onto the early years SENCO training programme and what they hoped to gain from taking part. It also reports on total registrations, trainee feedback on the registration and onboarding processes and overall reflections on engagement.

The quantitative data sources in the chapter includes:

- the pre-survey and post-survey conducted as part of the evaluation with trainees at the start and end of their engagement with the training programme,
- secondary data analysis of the disaggregated Early Years Census dataset as part of the NPD, shared with the evaluation team by DfE, and
- monitoring information about the training programme, including total numbers of early years practitioners to register, complete and drop out during the delivery period, shared with the evaluation team by BPN.

The qualitative data sources in this chapter includes:

- the regional case study research, mainly comprising views from trainees and LA stakeholders, and
- the strategic interviews with BPN, the delivery provider for the training programme, at the start and end of the evaluation .

Trainee motivations

Trainees were asked in the pre-survey and in the case study research interviews about their motivations for signing up to the training programme (see Table 53, Annex 8 for pre-survey findings). Most trainees reported more than one motivation for taking part in the training programme. There were small differences between the groups of trainees likely reflecting experience and level of existing qualification prior to the training programme. There was no difference in motivations based on setting deprivation levels.

Professional development and to enhance career prospects

The most common motivation reported in the pre-survey by trainees was to **further their own professional development and enhance their career prospects** (84 per cent). A higher proportion of trainees with less than 10 years' early years experience, childminders and aspiring SENCOs reported professional development was a motivation to complete the training programme, compared to those with more (10+ years) early years experience, in group-based settings, and designated SENCOs respectively.

In the interviews, trainees reflected that the benefits of **receiving an externally verified qualification** was an objective way to formalise and promote the SENCO role within the

setting, evidence their competence related to SEND to parents, and potentially to strengthen their career prospects if they wanted to move into a different role in a setting or put themselves forward for a promotion. As one trainee explained:

It's something else for my CV... I was keen to grow in the SENCO role and prepare for the future. ***Practitioner in group-based setting, designated SENCO, less than 10 years' experience***

Skills in identification and SEND support

The training programme was seen as a way to **contribute to more appropriate and coordinated support for children with SEND** (80 per cent of trainees reported this was a motivation) and to **identify SEND among early years children more accurately** (75 per cent of trainees reported this was a motivation). More childminders than those in group-based settings were motivated by the opportunity to learn how to identify SEND. There were no other differences based on amount of early years experience, SENCO status (designated-SENCO or aspiring-SENCO), or setting deprivation levels.

In the interviews, trainees described how **the course was appealing** as it was relevant to their role and with a focus on supporting children with SEND. Additionally, it covered key topics of interest (such as supporting children with EAL) and trainees expected the course content would be more in-depth than previous training they had received.

Trainees said that they were motivated to take part because they had noticed more children with SEND joining the setting or that they wanted to have the skills to support them if they did. Childminders specifically said that they had gaps in their understanding about the SENCO role and processes that they wanted to improve:

It was the paperwork that always got to me. That's the thing that's always been in my mind. How do I do the paperwork? How do I put things down so that somebody else would be able to..., so it would be worth something. ***Childminder, 10+ years' experience***

However, less than half of trainees wanted to **gain a new perspective and fresh ideas from the training** (43 per cent). More often it was trainees with over 10 years' experience or designated SENCOs, who reported that this was a motivation for them, compared to those with less early years experience or aspiring SENCOs respectively. In the interviews, experienced trainees explained that the training programme was a reliable way to be sure that their knowledge and skills were up to date:

[I've been a SENCO] for 10 years. I thought it would be nice to refresh things, see if anything had changed out there... and just consolidate what I already knew really. ***Practitioner in group-based setting, designated SENCO, 10+ years' experience***

Other motivations

In the survey, very few trainees reported that the training programme was a way to develop networks with other early years SENCOs (7 per cent). This was an interesting finding, given stakeholders had raised concerns that the SENCO role could be isolating, as well as the evidence from the training programme that networking with other SENCOs, particularly from different LAs was a greatly valued aspect of the training programme (see page 68).

A small number of trainees were motivated because the training programme would help them be better prepared for Ofsted inspections (6 per cent) or to help the setting recover from the pandemic (3 per cent). More trainees in group-based setting and aspiring SENCOs cited Ofsted as one of their motivations.

Finally, trainees shared additional motivations in interviews which were not included in the survey. These included:

- The online format and flexible participation contributed to the trainee feeling motivated, as well as able, to take part.
- Strategically, trainees thought the training programme may become mandated for early years SENCOs in the future and were therefore keen to complete the training programme while it was being funded by the government.
- Some trainees reflected they were personally interested in SEND or loved learning and wanted to further their knowledge through a formal training programme.

Sign ups

All 7000 places on the training programme were fully funded by DfE over two years (2022 – 2024). This was welcomed by the sector, as financial challenges meant settings were unable to fund equivalent opportunities for staff.

By December 2024, BPN had successfully met all the targets for the training programme, achieving a total of **7,064 registrations (target 7,000)** and **5,530 completers (minimum 3,000, target 5,000)**. There was a similar proportion of registrations and completers from childminder (16 per cent and 15 per cent respectively) and group-based settings (84 per cent and 85 per cent respectively).

DfE reported that soon after the training programme started, the demand far exceeded their expectations. Responding to this, and to avoid potential challenges with long-waiting lists and frustrated early years practitioners, DfE asked BPN to scale up their operations to offer 7,000 places (i.e. registrations to the training programme), rather than 5,000 places. Additional resource was provided for this, although the two-year timescales of the contract were the same. The minimum requirement for delivering the contract was 3000 qualified SENCOs (i.e. completers of the training programme).

However, there was an ambition target of 5000 completers, which BPN achieved within the scaled-up programme.

BPN had anticipated a high demand for the training programme, based on learning from previous training programmes, however the reality still exceeded BPN's expectations. To meet the new requirements for larger programme, BPN scaled up their operations, invested in additional staff within their management team and automated parts of the application and registration process (e.g. grouping applicants into cohorts). The fixed two-year timescales meant there was increased pressure on BPN to achieve the higher targets, without any detriment to the programme experience for trainees. Overall, BPN thought that this was achieved along with meeting the targets.

Regional engagement

Exploring regional trends in SEND rates in the Early Years Census, there was a trend in all areas that the proportion of children requiring SEND support had increased in all areas (Table 3). In 2024, the level of SEND was the highest in the North-east, increasing a third since 2022 (33 per cent). The largest increase from two years ago was in the east of England, almost doubling (46 per cent). However, the proportion of children with SEND was the lowest compared to all the other regions.

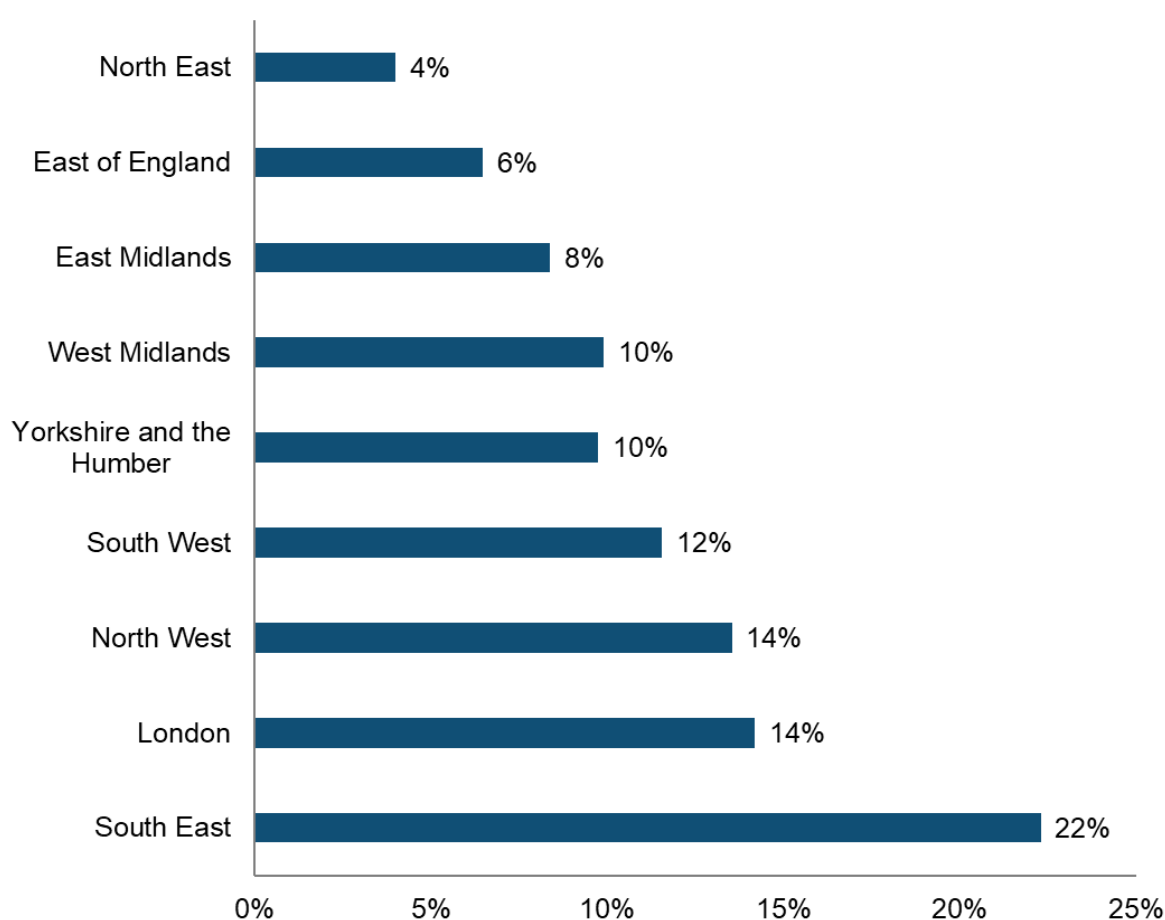
Table 3 Proportion children with SEND in receipt of funding SEND support (statutory or EHCP funding) in 2022, 2024 and the percentage change over the two years

Region	2022	2024	Change
North-east	4.50%	6.60%	33.00%
West Midlands	4.50%	5.80%	18.80%
South-east	4.00%	5.10%	20.60%
Outer London	3.90%	5.10%	24.50%
North-west	3.10%	4.40%	31.90%
Yorkshire and the Humber	3.20%	4.30%	24.50%
East Midlands	2.90%	4.00%	32.30%
Inner London	2.90%	3.80%	22.80%
South-west	2.90%	3.60%	12.50%
East of England	1.90%	3.00%	46.10%

Source: Early Years Census. Datasets only includes 2–4-year-olds in receipt of funding. Includes only children in PVI group-based and childminder settings.

For the training programme, the spread of registrations from the nine regions in England confirmed national engagement in the training programme. However, there was an 18 per cent difference between the regions: the most registrations were in the Southeast (22 per cent, n = 1575) and the least in the Northeast (4 per cent, n = 281) (Figure 1). BPN acknowledged that they were oversubscribed in the Southeast and there was limited take up in the Northeast. BPN had spoken with LAs, who gave feedback that staff shortages were a barrier, as settings were unable to release the staff. BPN also learnt that some LAs in the under-represented regions had very few eligible settings (e.g. Hartlepool) and that they had saturated engagement early on, with little scope to increase numbers. In the LA interviews, stakeholders from the Northeast gave feedback that they preferred their SENCOs to take part in their local training programme because this was tailored to local processes. Whereas LAs in the south-east said reductions in their in-house training meant they could train fewer SENCOs via that route and therefore the BPN offer was valued as an option.

Figure 1 Percentage of total registrations by regions in England



Source: BPN's training programme management information 2022-2024 (N = 7064)

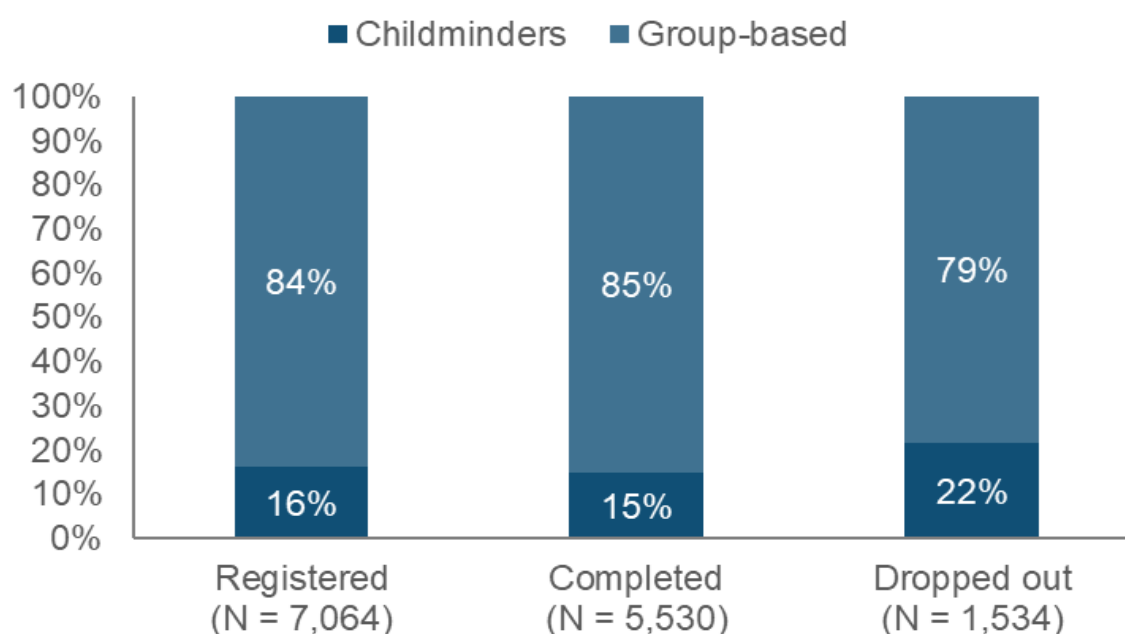
Dropout rates

Just over one fifth (22 per cent, n = 1534) of trainees registered on the training programme dropped out before completing the final written assignment.

In the interviews BPN explained the dropout rate was higher than they expected. However, very few had dropped out because they were dissatisfied with quality of the training programme (which was the criteria attached to the three per cent drop out performance target). Instead, BPN thought that the level of drop out reflected the wider pressures that trainees were facing in the early years sector, which may have affected their mental health and capacity to complete the training programme. BPN also thought that trainees may have dropped out if they were unable to be released from settings to complete the sessions.

Where possible, BPN offered additional flexibility to trainees to minimise drop out. Some trainees completed the final assignment as a verbal assessment via a phone call rather than a written assignment. BPN also allowed trainees to 'defer' their place and trainees could re-engage with the training programme if their situation improved. Despite the flexibility, most trainees that deferred eventually dropped out. Comparing dropout rates by setting type, a higher proportion of childminders dropped out compared to group-based settings (Figure 2)⁴⁰.

Figure 2 Proportion of trainees that registered, completed and dropped out of the training programme by setting type

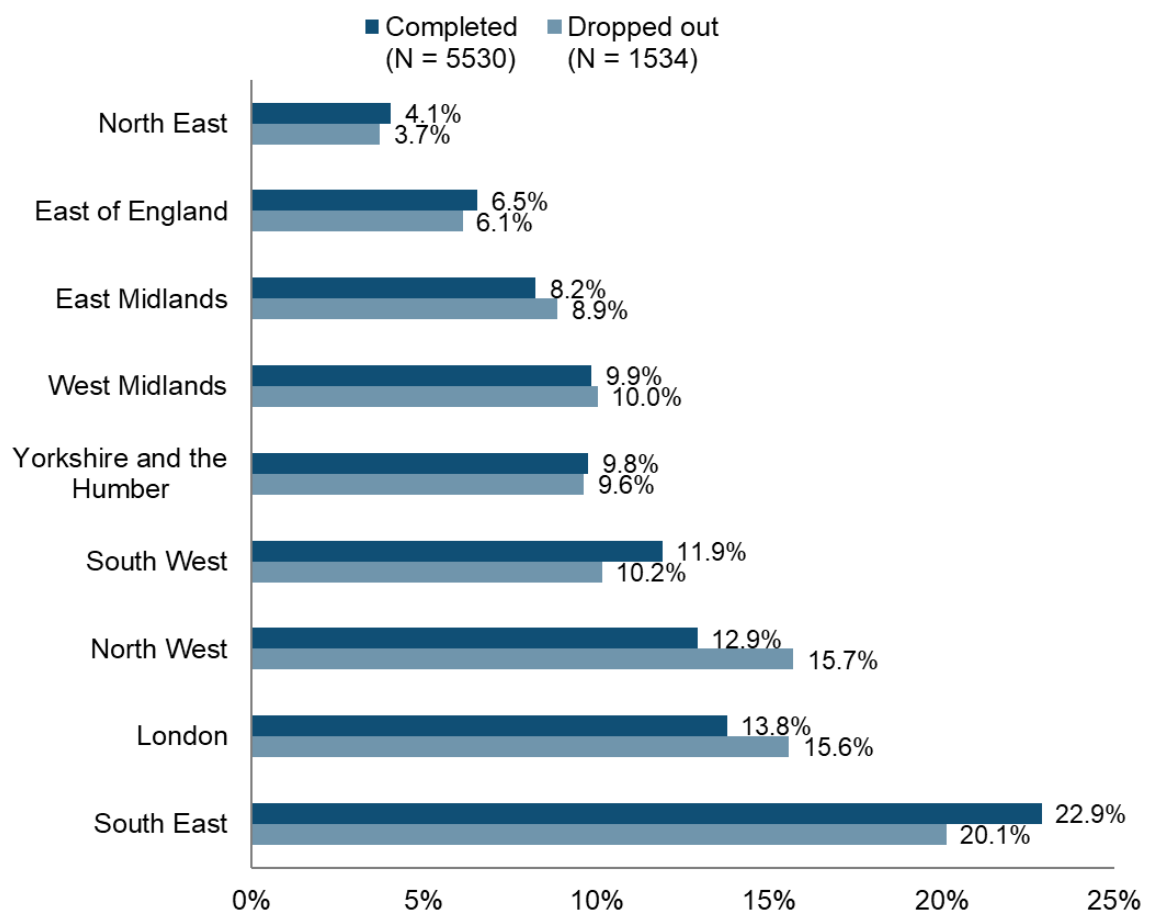


Source: BPN's training programme management information 2022-2024

⁴⁰ Comparisons by trainee background or statistical testing was not possible because programme monitoring data due to availability within the timescales of the evaluation to individual level programme monitoring information.

Most regions generally had lower dropout rates than completion rates, nearly similar in the proportions of trainees who completed and those who dropped out (less than 1 per cent difference) (Figure 3). However, the South-west and Southeast regions recorded the biggest proportional difference between dropouts and completers. Among the four regions where dropout rates were higher than completions, London and the north-west are two regions where the proportions of those dropping out were substantially higher than those completing.

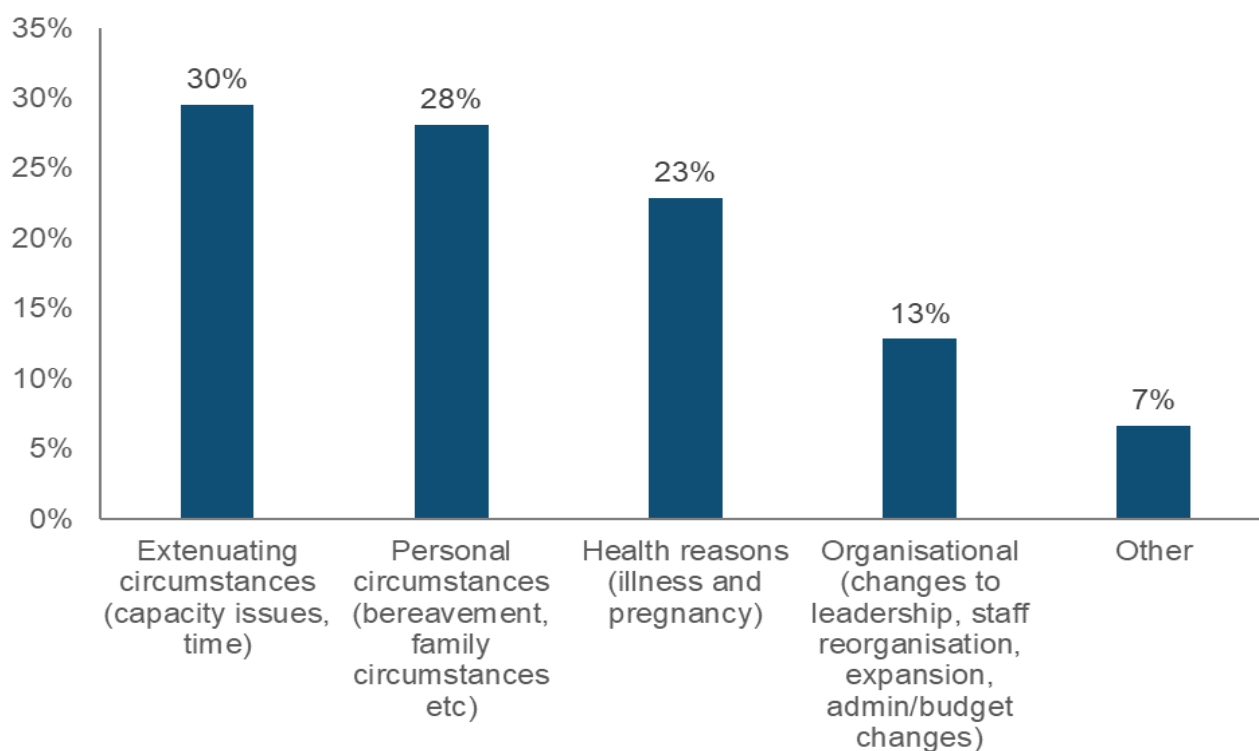
Figure 3 Percentage of trainees that completed and dropped out of the training programme, by setting type and region



Source: BPN's training programme management information 2022-2024 (N = 7064)

The most common reason for dropping out of the training programme, reported by almost a third of trainees (30 per cent), related to time and capacity. Around a quarter of trainees reported personal circumstances changing due to bereavement or family situation (28 per cent) or health reasons (including illness and pregnancy) (23 per cent) and one in 10 said it was due to changes in their setting (13 per cent) (Figure 4).

Figure 4 Reasons for dropping out of the training programme



Source: BPN's training programme management information 2022-2024 (N = 1534)

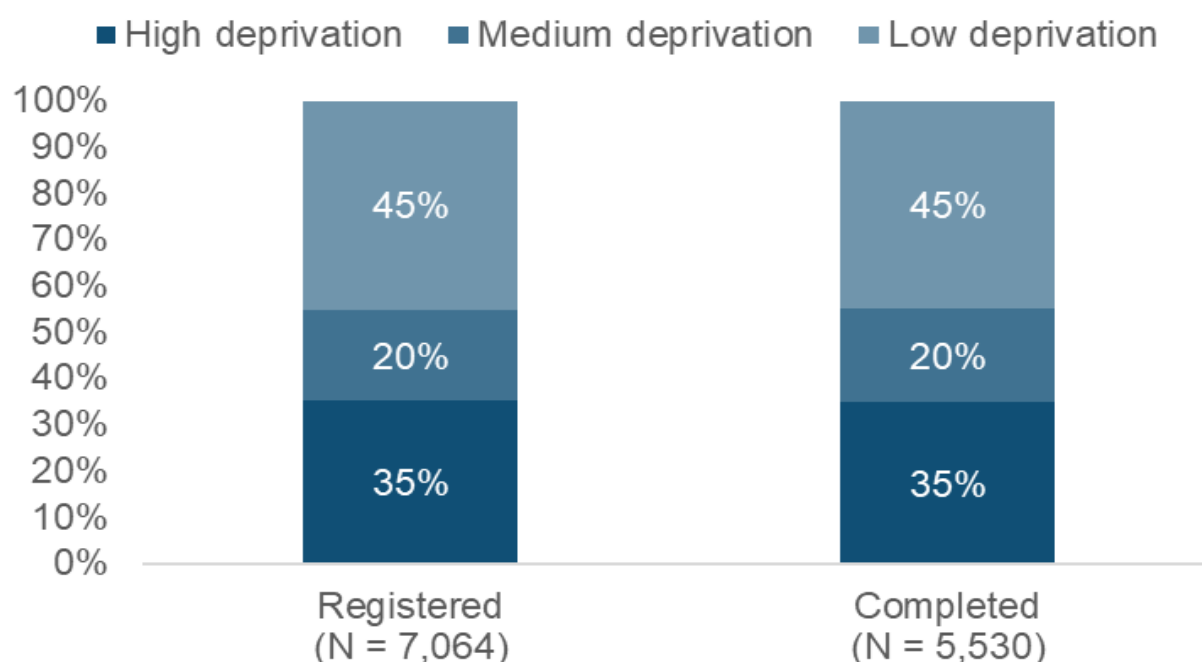
Priority local authorities (LAs)

A programme requirement from DfE was that delivery should be prioritised in LAs with high levels of disadvantage, which combined measures of deprivation with COVID-19 rates⁴¹. DfE ranked LAs high, medium and low deprivation, and then stipulated that the training programme should target the 70 most disadvantaged LAs (medium and high deprivation levels), with 50 per cent of delivery focused in those areas. This requirement was embedded within the key performance indicators for BPN.

Overall, 55 per cent of registrations (n = 3878) and completers (n = 3046) were trainees working in settings from priority LAs (LAs with high or medium deprivation). A third (35 per cent) of the registrations and completers were trainees working in settings from LAs with high levels of deprivation (Figure 5).

⁴¹ LAs were ranged based on the following metrics: the absolute number of children in each LA known to be eligible for Free School Meals (FSM); the overall % of children in each local authority known to be eligible for FSM; % of children known to be eligible for FSM achieving a good level of development (GLD); % point gap between children known to be eligible for FSM in the LA and all other children in the LA achieving GLD; % of children known to be eligible for FSM achieving at least the expected level of development for communication and language (CL) in the ELGs; % point gap between children known to be eligible for FSM in the LA and all other children in the LA achieving at least expected level for CL; % of 3-4 YOs eligible for Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP gives providers of early years education extra funding to support disadvantaged 3- and 4-year-olds); % of under 5s in receipt of an EHC plan (EHC plans identify educational, health and social needs and set out the additional support to meet those needs; Covid-19 cases rate per 100,000 resident population across the length of the pandemic i.e. the number of people per 100,000 with at least one positive COVID-19 test result, either lab-reported or lateral flow device since the start of the pandemic in each LA. This is to account for the fact that some LAs may have been hit worse by the pandemic and therefore may have had to close EY settings for long period of time.

Figure 5 Proportion of trainees from LAs with high, medium and low deprivation



Source: BPN's training programme management information 2022-2024 (N = 7064)

Although BPN achieved the programme targets in the priority LAs, they reflected on challenges of implementing a deprivation metric defined by multiple criteria. There were LAs outside of the target areas that thought they should be a priority but were not. BPN reported that LAs were able to provide 'local intelligence' evidence to support their level of SEND need, to justify being a priority, however for the purpose of meeting the key performance indicators, DfE's deprivation categorisation remained the main basis for targeting LAs.

Data from the Early Years Census for group-based settings and childminders illustrated a changing picture between the target LAs and low deprivation LAs between 2022 and 2024, potentially corroborating the feedback from BPN that the level of SEND need was changing nationally (Table 4). Key trends included:

- Target LAs (high and medium deprivation) had a higher proportion of children receiving additional support in total (statutory and non-statutory), in 2022 and 2024; but there was a more mixed picture when comparing the proportion of children that received non-statutory SEND support, with more children in low deprivation LAs compared to the target LAs.
- There was an increase in the proportion of children requiring all types of SEND support over the two years. Again though, the LAs with most change was different across statutory and non-statutory support. There was a notable increase in the proportion of children requiring statutory support in low (+56 per cent) and medium (+31 percent) deprivation LAs. However, the most change for non-statutory support was in areas of high deprivation (+31 per cent).

Table 4 Number of children in group-based settings and childminders with SEND by DfE deprivation score

Type of support	DfE deprivation score	2022 (n)	2022 (%)	2024 (n)	2024 (%)	2022 - 2024 % increase
SEN support	Low	8,038	2.80%	9,398	3.40%	16.90%
SEN support	Target LAs	9,874	2.79%	12,477	3.82%	16.70%
SEN support	Medium	3,267	2.40%	3,811	3.00%	16.70%
SEN support	High	6,607	3.10%	8,666	4.40%	31.20%
EHCPs	Low	1,488	0.50%	2,328	0.90%	56.50%
EHCPs	Target LAs	2,174	0.61%	2,755	0.84%	16.70%
EHCPs	Medium	915	0.70%	1,259	1.00%	37.60%
EHCPs	High	1,259	0.60%	1,496	0.80%	18.80%
Total (SEN support & EHCP)	Low	9,526	3.30%	11,726	4.30%	23.10%
Total (SEN support & EHCP)	Target LAs	12,048	3.40%	15,232	4.66%	16.70%
Total (SEN support & EHCP)	Medium	4,182	3.00%	5,070	4.00%	21.20%
Total (SEN support & EHCP)	High	7,866	3.60%	10,162	5.10%	29.20%

Source: Early years census and DfE's LA characteristics data. Datasets only includes 2–4-year-olds in receipt of funding

Finding out about the training programme

In the training programme's monitoring information (August 2023), email campaigns, social media posts and advertising were the main ways of marketing the programme. BPN reported that it was standard for them to use a combination of marketing approaches to raise awareness of a training programme. They had used social media, including targeted advertisements on Facebook, more for this training programme than they had used previously. This had helped them to target specific LAs to meet their key performance indicators. The results from the post-training survey with trainees reflected these different marketing approaches:

- The most common way that trainees found out about the training programme was through their setting, either from a manager or from an official email (43 per cent).

- Almost one in five trainees (19 per cent) found out via media such as social media posts and articles, whereas 18 per cent knew it through the local authority.
- A smaller proportion found out by DfE directly (8 per cent), word of mouth (6 per cent), or from Foundation Years⁴² (3 per cent).
- Very few (1 per cent respectively) found out directly from BPN, the early years professional network or via an online search.

In the interviews, trainees reported that they found out about the training programme via formal and informal routes. Most reported that their setting had received an email about the training programme, including from their LA, from BPN, or an early years bulletin. Trainees also reported that someone else had received it (e.g. setting owner, setting director) and forwarded it to them with a recommendation that they sign-up. Most trainees reflected that these were standard ways to become aware of training programmes.

Other ways included hearing from another colleague who was doing a BPN training course; hearing from another setting, researching continuous professional development opportunities online; or via social media (for example, Facebook), specifically online childminding networks they were part of. Trainees who heard through these routes reflected that they had been looking in several places to find out about training opportunities or that it was a combination of recommendations and online advertising that led to them seek more information about the training programme. Others said that they raised that they wanted more training, and their manager then made enquiries in several places about what was available.

Pre course information and preparation

Overwhelmingly (90 per cent) trainees in the survey reported that the pre-course information had been 'good' (46 per cent) or excellent (44 per cent). Comparing these views as mean scores on a Likert scale (1 – 5), trainees from group-based settings rated the experience of the pre-course process significantly higher than childminders ($p = 0.001$), although a fairly high proportion still rated this aspect of the training programme good or excellent (Table 5). There was no difference in experience of the pre-course information by amount of early years experience, SENCO status or setting deprivation ($p > 0.05$).

⁴² The DfE funded EY digital resource

Table 5 Trainee views on pre course information and preparation by setting type

Setting type	Childminders reporting good or excellent (%)	Group-based settings reporting good or excellent (%)	Childminders Mean Likert Rating (Max 5)	Group-based settings Mean Likert Rating (Max 5)
Pre-course information and preparation	86%	91%	4.11	4.39

Source: post-training survey (N = 1156). Survey question Likert rating = 1, very poor – 5, excellent. Trainees that reported don't know and n/a removed from the analysis.

Trainees reported in the interviews that they had received a high volume of information on signing up to the course, including online information, a handbook, a webinar and one mentioned a call with a mentor. Some trainees thought this was helpful, as they were then able to prepare for the amount of work involved. These trainees explained that having in-depth introductory information meant there were clear expectations around the course requirements, the time commitment and its online format. For some trainees the amount of pre-course information suggested the course was comprehensive, which was viewed as a positive. As one trainee explained:

I thought it [the training programme] was gonna be useful because... where we are in our county, there's not a huge amount out there [training opportunities wise]. So, it's quite nice to be able to delve into things a bit deeper. ***Practitioner in group-based setting, less than 10 years' experience, designated SENCO***

Whereas other trainees were concerned that the high volume of pre-course information suggested the training programme would be intensive. They were concerned about how feasible it was to complete it alongside their day-to-day role. Others said that it was helpful to have the information, but in hindsight it could have been more explicit about the time involved in completing the assignments. As one explained:

I completely underestimated how much time...each of the assignments would take ... my goodness... each assignment took between 6 – 10 hours... to be honest... I don't think at any point that wasn't made ... quite clear enough. ***Practitioner in group-based setting, 10+ years' experience, designated SENCO.***

Registration process

Almost all the trainees (92 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that the registration process was straightforward. Comparing responses to this question as mean ratings on a five-point Likert scale (1 – 5), trainees in group-based settings rated the process significantly higher compared to childminders ($p = 0.001$), but both groups reported moderately good experiences overall (Table 6). There was no difference based on years of experience, SENCO status or social deprivation ($p > 0.05$).

Table 6 Trainee views on registration process by setting type

Setting type	Childminders agreeing or strongly agreeing (%)	Group-based settings agreeing or strongly agreeing (%)	Childminders Mean Likert Rating (Max 5)	Group-based settings Mean Likert Rating (Max 5)
The sign-up process was straightforward	86%	96%	4.14	4.44

Source: post-training survey (N = 1156). Survey question Likert rating = 1, strongly disagree – 5, strongly agree. Trainees that reported don't know and n/a removed from the analysis.

In the interviews, trainees reported they were able to complete the application form easily and had no issues starting the course. Trainees described the registration process as 'simple', 'smooth' and 'straightforward'. The only minor issue was the communication regarding when the training would start. This ranged from having to start the course at short notice (e.g. one month) after the application, or a lack of clarity around the start date after a place was confirmed. This seemed to be more of an issue for the earlier cohorts, whereas towards the end of the training programme, trainees reported starting the training within a week of applying.

Engaging in the programme

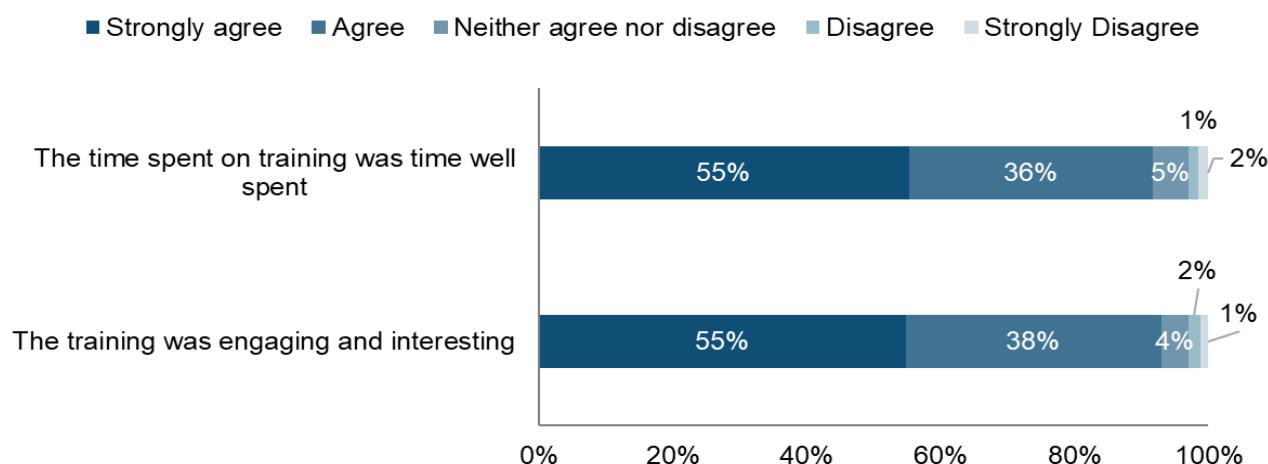
This section describes the feedback from trainees related to engagement in the training programme. It includes ratings on overall engagement as well as feedback on key parts of the training programme intended by BPN to maximise engagement, including online delivery, flexibility in attending taught elements, and short length of the training.

Overall views on engagement

Overall, trainees greatly enjoyed taking part in the training programme. Over **90 per cent of trainees agreed that taking part in the training programme was time well spent, and it was engaging and interesting (Figure 6)**. However, this feedback is only from trainees who successfully completed the training programme. One in five eligible trainees were unable to complete the training programme (reason and reflections on this on p.

46).

Figure 6 Trainee views on engagement



Source: post-training survey (N = 1156). Trainees that reported don't know and n/a removed from the analysis.

Comparing views on the engagement statements as mean ratings on a five-point Likert scale for different groups of trainees, aspiring SENCOS reported significantly higher ratings compared to designated SENCOS, suggesting stronger positive views amongst those due to take up the SENCO ($p = 0.04$) (Table 7). There was no significant difference between other groups (based on years of experience in early years, setting type or social deprivation, $p > 0.05$).

Table 7 Trainee views on engaging with the training programme by SENCO status

SENCO status	Aspiring SENCO agreeing or strongly agreeing (%)	Designated SENCO agreeing or strongly agreeing	Aspiring SENCO Mean Likert Rating (Max 5)	Designated SENCO Mean Likert Rating (Max 5)
Time well spent	94%	90%	4.50	4.39
Engaging and interesting training	95%	92%	4.51	4.41

Source: post-training survey (N = 1156). Survey question Likert rating strongly disagree – 5 strongly agree). Trainees that reported don't know and n/a removed from the analysis

Online delivery

BPN designed the training programme to be completed online, and all modules were accessible via mobile phones and tablets. It was assumed that trainees may not have access to laptops, and that some trainees may have lower levels of digital literacy. Therefore trouble-shooting support was available to trainees to help with any digital related issues, through direct contact with the BPN team and through messaging on the virtual learning platform.

Reflecting in the final interviews, BPN confirmed that the online delivery had been the

right approach for this training programme. In their view, different learning styles and varying digital skills could be supported as part of the training programme, whereas there was greater value in being able to bring together SENCOs across the country, at scale, and within a short time frame, which could only be done through online delivery.

In post-training survey, **92 per cent of trainees agreed (53 per cent strongly agreed, 38 per cent agreed) that the online model worked well for them.** Comparing these views as five-point Likert scale, there was no significant difference between different groups of trainees ($p>0.05$), suggesting similar experiences overall.

In the interviews, trainees mostly liked that it was online. Trainees liked the convenience of being able to meet with other people without having to travel and valued that they could easily attend sessions around their working day. For some, the ease of engagement contributed to taking up the training. Had it been an in-person course, it was unlikely that they would have taken up the training programme, as one explained:

The fact that you can do these courses online is so much better because I couldn't have committed to like going to somewhere every week to do it. ***Practitioner in group-based setting, 10+ years' experience, designated SENCO***

Trainees that were less positive about the online format gave examples of technical and digital challenges that had limited their training experience. These included navigating a 'clunky', 'complicated' or 'confusing' digital platform; internet connection issues in their area, which meant several webinars were missed; as well as some challenges hearing the discussion on the video conferencing software. Other trainees had minor frustrations, such as trainees who had completed the online modules at the setting and had distractions from children and staff in the setting asking for their attention.

Whilst trainees were frustrated at the digital issues, most conceded the issues were out of the control of BPN and improved once they were more familiar with the platform. Many who shared these views acknowledged they had less experience with online training and lower levels of digital skills. As one explained:

The only thing for me and people like me, of my age group, was the technology side. But I don't have any grand plan of how you could make that better. I shouldn't personally need someone to navigate the site with me, to press on the buttons and show me. ***Practitioner in group-based setting, 10+ years' experience, designated SENCO***

Overall, trainees engaged better with the online delivery when they knew there was someone they could ask for help, either from BPN or a mentor, felt comfortable to take part in group discussions, and able to ask questions to the trainer. Trainees who had challenges were those that were unsure about who they could go to or who reached out

for help and then had delays receiving a response. Trainees were asked to wait 10 days for a response from the assessor, which they thought was a long time when trying to complete a piece of work and within short timescales of the training programme.

Flexible engagement

BPN designed the training programme so that engagement for trainees was flexible, where possible, aware that early years settings were tightly resourced. In their view it was important that trainees could take part at a time that fitted with their schedule, but also for the managers who had given permission for them to take part.

To support flexible engagement, BPN offered a mix of four taught modules and around 12 additional hours of self-directed components of the training programme. The taught components were offered at different times of the day, including morning, afternoon and evening, plus Saturday sessions for childminders. Trainees could take part in any four sessions that worked for them over a certain period, rather than having to choose a set slot to attend. The self-directed components in the training programme added to the flexibility because they could be completed whenever was convenient for the trainee.

In practice though, views varied amongst trainees in the interviews depending on the extent to which trainees could complete the requirements around their working day. Trainees who worked part time, were able to fit the sessions into their existing schedule. These trainees were able to complete the training programme during non-working time, during the day rather than using their evenings.

For other trainees, being actively supported by a manager, who either released them from a setting for the taught sessions or allowed them to work flexibly throughout the day on course work, made a difference to their experience. These trainees felt supported in taking part in the course, had less course work to complete in their own time and kept on track with deadlines. As one trainee explained:

My manager supported me to make sure I had enough time to complete all of the work...if I was falling behind, they [the manager] just said... you can have an extra hour here or there to sit and focus on it, which is quite nice. ***Practitioner in group-based setting, less than 10 years' experience, designated SENCO***

Childminders were also positive about the Saturday sessions, which for many had been a key factor in being able to take up the opportunity. As one explained:

I really like the fact that they offered on a Saturday... that was really well appreciated...even evening sessions, sometimes I don't finish work until 6:00pm... they were really good in that they prioritise childminders onto the Saturday sessions. ***Childminder, 10 years' experience***

Trainees that found engaging in the training programme challenging generally took part in taught sessions in the evening (5 – 8 pm), reporting that it was tiring and hard to concentrate after a full day at work. Some chose this time because they thought it was appropriate to do it out of work hours, given the training programme was for their own personal development. Most, however, chose evenings because they were unable to be released from the setting during the day, either due to staff-child ratios, staffing shortages or other responsibilities that limited their flexibility at work.

Even amongst trainees that completed the taught modules during work time, trainees working full time with multiple commitments – at work or home – reported challenges completing the self-directed tasks, plus an assignment in their own time. Trainees described working evenings, over weekends and sometimes late into the night, which meant the period of the training programme was intensive, with very little free time outside of work. Again, trainees attributed their limited flexibility in completing the training programme to wider resourcing restraints in the setting. As one trainee explained:

I was given some time to attend the webinars that was fine...my assignments I had to complete in my own time...I think it was down to staffing constraints, we were struggling to recruit, and I was deputy manager so a lot of the time I was working in rooms so it was hard to get out and then write assignments. ***Practitioner in group-based setting, 10+ years' experience, designated SENCO***

Trainees who described challenges engaging in the training programme still ultimately valued the experience and were pleased to have completed it. However, some reflected they would caution others from taking part because of the level of commitment involved:

I would worry if another member of my staff team was to do it. They may not be able to find as much time (to complete it). ***Practitioner in group-based setting, 10+ years' experience, aspiring SENCO***

Short duration

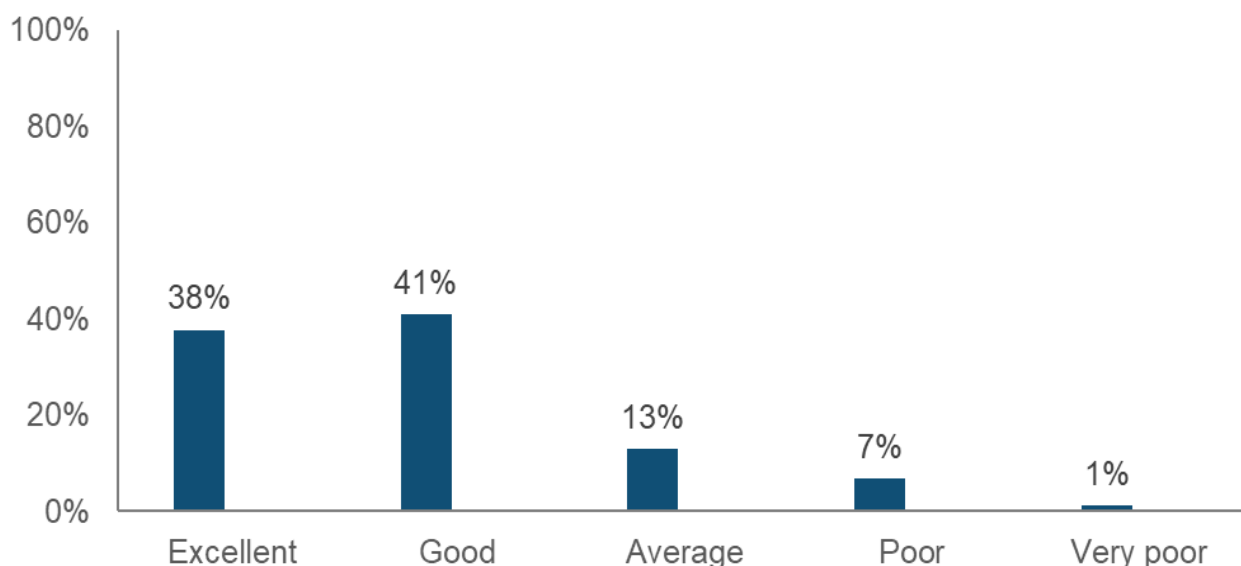
BPN designed the training programme to be short, expecting that 80 per cent would complete it in four months, and 20 per cent would need six months. The rationale for the course length was that trainees may be less likely to maintain engagement to a longer-term commitment. As BPN explained:

We know that we can get higher engagement rates...sort of making it short, sharp and focused within that four-month period. ***BPN***

In practice, the length of the training programme was an area trainees found challenging. Although over three quarters of trainees reported in the post-training survey that the length of course was good (41 per cent) or excellent (38 per cent), almost one in 10

thought the length of course was poor (7 per cent) or very poor (1 percent) (Figure 7). There was also no significant difference when comparing the mean ratings for the length of the course views between the different groups of trainees (setting type, amount of early years experience, SENCO status, and setting deprivation) ($p > 0.05$), suggesting similar views in this area amongst all trainees.

Figure 7 Trainee views on the length of the course



Source: post-training survey (N = 1156). Trainees that reported don't know and n/a removed from the analysis.

In the interviews, there were trainees from both group-based and childminder settings who liked the short length of the training programme. They would have engaged in the programme regardless of its length, in terms of when they completed the coursework. Trainees also reported that having any more sessions would have made it hard to attend. As one explained:

[It was] a really good amount of time, four months made it feel really doable, didn't drag... it was hard work and a lot of hours...(but) it didn't become onerous because it was only four months. ***Practitioner in group-based setting, designated SENCO, 10+ years' experience***

However, a more widely held view was that, for the volume of work and depth of the content involved, four months was too short. Trainees with this view said that to complete the work in the time, required a lot of work in their free time. Some reported working all night to meet deadlines. Some speculated that other trainees had dropped out because of the time pressures of the course. Trainees frequently mentioned that the training would have been manageable if it was delivered over a slightly longer period – either doubled or over six months. As one trainee expressed:

For what they put in [training content] ...[it] was a lot... I think they should have doubled the amount of time. ***Practitioner in group-based***

setting, designated SENCO, 10+ years' experience

The challenges related to the length of the training programme were also reflected in the trainees' suggestions for improvements in the post-training survey. From a wide range of responses, the suggestion for a longer course and more time to complete the coursework was the most suggested (see p 64). Where trainees gave a reason for their suggestion, those working full-time or who were new to the SENCO role reported struggling with the intensity of the workload and the fast pace of the course.

BPN, DfE and LA stakeholders had also received feedback from trainees that the length of the course may have been too demanding for some. BPN reported that in practice, around half of all trainees completed the course in the four-month period, while the other half required flexibility to complete over six months. BPN thought if they ran the programme again, they would extend the programme length. However, the extension may only be needed for the assignment, as there was still value in completing the taught element in a short period of time, to keep momentum in the learning for trainees.

Delivery in practice

This chapter describes trainees' experiences of how the programme was delivered. This includes experiences of the training programme content and its different components (online learning, self-guided activities, mentoring and the assignment). It also summarises reflections on wider aspects of the programme, including the training programme as an opportunity for networking, contract management between DfE and BPN and partnership working with LAs.

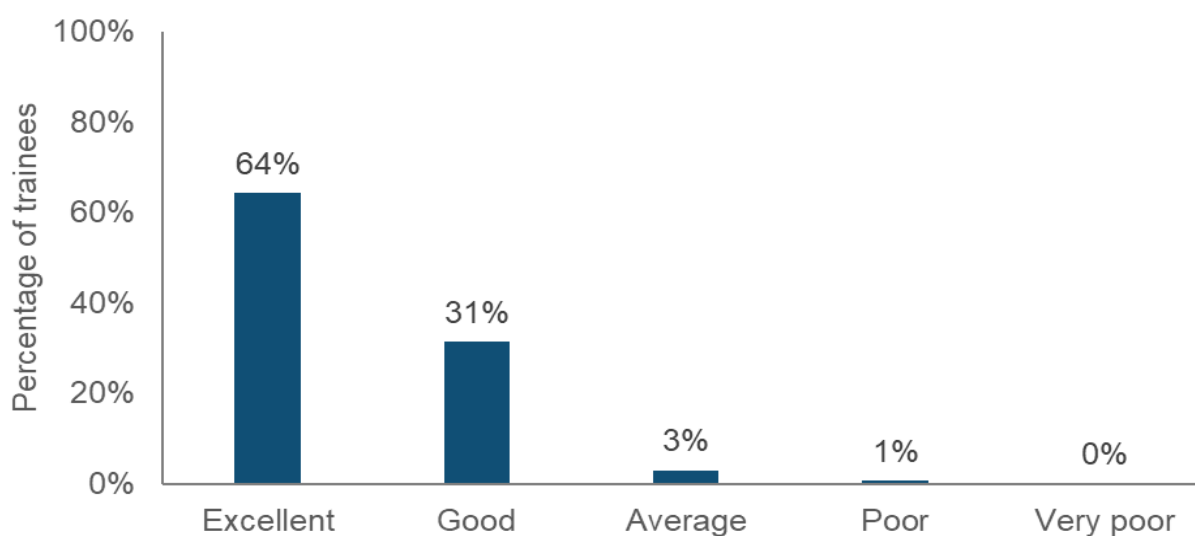
The quantitative data sources in the chapter includes the post-survey conducted as part of the evaluation with trainees at the end of the training programme. The qualitative data sources in this chapter includes: the regional case study research, mainly comprising views from trainees and LA stakeholders, and the strategic interviews with BPN, the delivery provider for the training programme.

Programme content

BPN designed the training content based on their experience delivering similar accredited programmes in SEND and the early years, including the National Award for SEND Coordination⁴³ and Early Years Initial Teacher Training⁴⁴.

In the post-training survey, almost all (95 per cent) practitioners stated that the course content was either 'excellent' (64 per cent) or 'good' (31 per cent) (Figure 8). The majority (95 per cent) also thought the content was appropriate to their needs (41 per cent agreed, 54 per cent strongly agreed) (Figure 9).

Figure 8 Trainee views on the quality of the course content

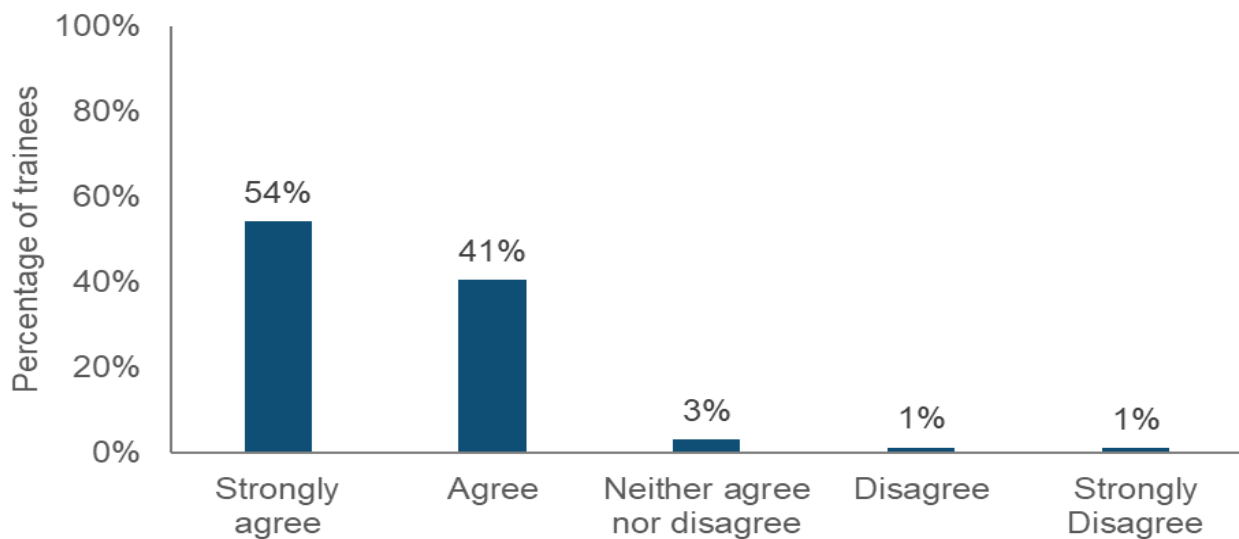


Source: post-training survey (N = 1,156). Trainees that reported don't know and n/a removed from the analysis.

⁴³ [National Award for SEN Coordination | Best Practice Network](#)

⁴⁴ [Early Years Initial Teacher Training | Best Practice Network](#)

Figure 9 Trainee views on the appropriateness of course content to their needs



Source: post-training survey (N = 1156). Trainees that reported don't know and n/a removed from the analysis.

Comparing responses to these statements, as mean ratings on a five-point Likert scale (1 – 5), trainees in group-based settings rated the content overall and the appropriateness of the content to their needs significantly higher than childminders ($p = 0.02$ and $p < 0.01$ respectively) suggesting a more positive experience for trainees in group-based settings (Table 8). Similarly, for quality of course content, aspiring SENCOs reported significantly higher than designated SENCOs ($p = 0.05$). There was no significant difference in views by amount of early years experience or setting level deprivation ($p > 0.05$).

Table 8 Trainee views on the quality and appropriateness of the course content by setting type and SENCO status

Setting type	Childminders reporting 4 or 5 on Likert rating (%)	Group based settings reporting 4 or 5 on Likert rating (%)	Childminders Mean Likert Rating (Max 5)	Group based settings Mean Likert Rating (Max 5)
Overall quality of the course content ¹	95%	96%	4.50	4.64
Appropriateness of content to needs ²	92%	95%	4.31	4.51
SENCO status	Aspiring SENCO reporting 4 or 5 on Likert rating (%)	Designated SENCO reporting 4 or 5 on Likert rating (%)	Aspiring SENCO Mean Likert Rating (Max 5)	Designated SENCO Mean Likert Rating (Max 5)
Overall quality of the course content ¹	97%	96%	4.66	4.59

Source: post-training survey (N = 1156). ¹Survey question Likert rating = 1, very poor – 5, excellent. ²rated 1, Survey question Likert rating strongly disagree – 5 strongly agree. Trainees that reported don't know and n/a removed from the analysis

Overall, views from trainees in the case study research interviews consistently echoed a positive view of the programme content. Trainees reported that the content was:

- High-quality, detailed and covered relevant topics applicable to their work.
- Helpful because it covered both knowledge around SEND, statutory legislation and practical skills for the SENCO role.
- Interesting and thought provoking, encouraging them to think differently.
- More in-depth than previous training programmes related to the SENCO role.

Although aspiring SENCOs rated the content higher than designated SENCOs, in the interviews these trainees noted that a lot of the content was new to them. For some it was the first time they had looked at the Local Offer⁴⁵ or the statutory documents related to the SENCO role. As one explained:

It opened my eyes...to teach me the legislation. I didn't know any of that.

Practitioner, aspiring SENCO, 10+ years' experience.

Explaining their lower ratings for the course content, childminders mentioned in the interviews that elements of the training programme were less relevant to them. They wanted more information to appropriately identify developmental disorders, as well as language to use in initial discussions with parents. Others thought the content was good but wanted more time to assimilate new information, either by having the PowerPoints ahead of the session or time to revisit topics. As one childminder explained:

They could have gone over the statutory requirements either a bit more or again at the end when it all made sense because they ... said it at the start, this is why these are the requirements, but then when we went through the course you think hold on this is why it was helpful and I think a summing up at the end would have been helpful. ***Childminder, 10+ years' experience***

Other gaps in the content mentioned by trainees in the interviews related to covering topics too quickly or in insufficient detail. Examples of where trainees wanted more-depth information included, how to complete paperwork (e.g. IEPs), the role of Ofsted, the complexities of SEND, or key areas that their setting struggled with, such as supporting children with EAL. These gaps may reflect the level of detail that was possible to cover within the time frame of the course.

However, some omissions (e.g. detailed coverage of paperwork) may reflect the tension of including content relevant to a national training programme comprised of cohorts made

⁴⁵ From 1 September 2014 the Children and Families Act requires all local authorities to publish and maintain a 'local offer'. A local offer is a wide range of information about all the support and facilities which families can expect to find in their area for children and young people who have SEN and disabilities. The information should cover education, health and social care support and services for children and young people aged between 0 and 25.

up from different LAs, who will interpret the statutory requirements differently and apply their own processes. This challenges of covering local processes in depth was raised by LA stakeholders. Some LA stakeholders preferred that their early years SENCOs completed their equivalent in-house course, rather than the BPN training programme. They explained that in-house courses were similarly comprehensive, and covered in-depth specific skills needed for settings in their LA.

Other LA stakeholders acknowledged that the BPN training programme was a good in-depth training on the national picture but thought there were shortcomings in the extent it covered the specifics for their area. To bridge the gap between the content covered in BPN's training programme to their SENCO practice, one LA explained they had re-designed their local training as a follow-on course to the BPN training programme:

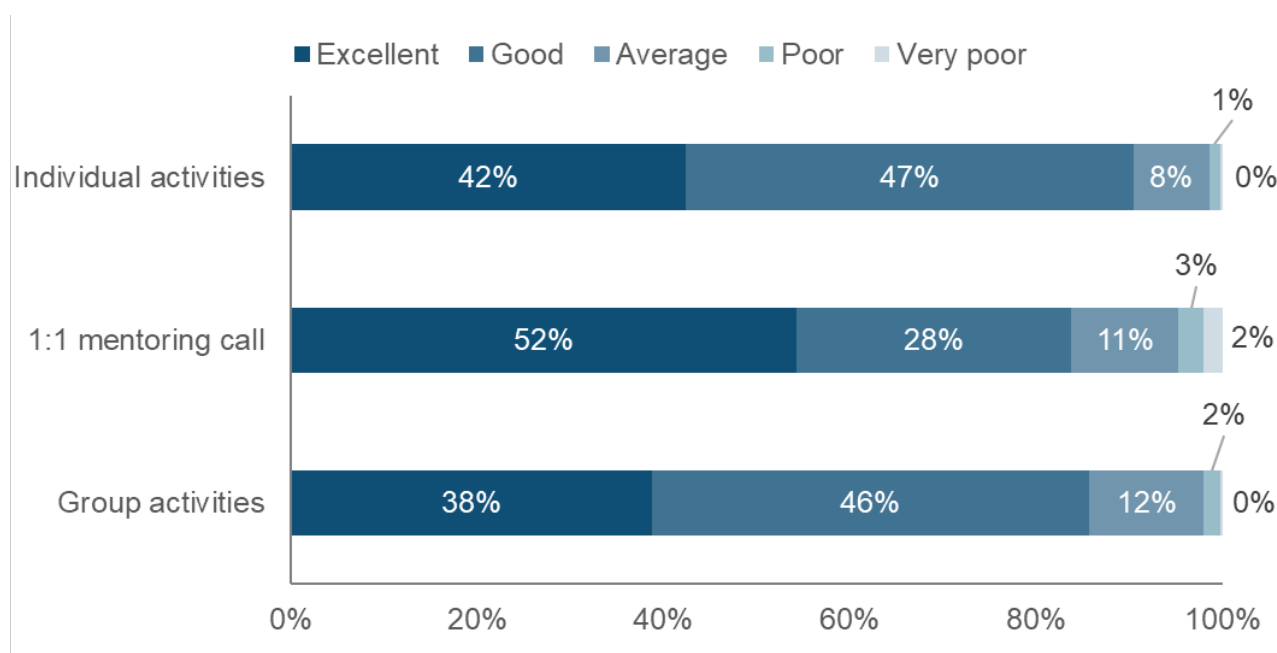
We actually delivered some training just last term...where we tried to target those settings [that completed the training programme]...to sort of top it up with local systems and process stuff ...if you have been and got all of the national stuff and the broader principles and theory, which is all really, really beneficial, we then would go in more with who our local people are, systems, processes.... we run that really successfully this term. We're going to do another one next term. **LA stakeholder**

Programme components

To maximise learning outcomes, BPN included a mix of taught and self-guided modules in the training programme, as well as a range of ways for the trainees to network with other SENCOs. Mentoring sessions were included to offer trainees pastoral, one-to-one support with any issues and to reduce any feeling of burden of taking part in the training programme. This was a standard approach in BPN training programmes, to reflect different approaches to learning and to offer additional support for those who needed it.

In the post-training survey, almost all trainees rated the different components very highly – with over 80 per cent rating each area either good or excellent (Figure 10). In the interviews, trainees reported that they liked that the format included a mix of webinars, interactive discussion and self-study. They felt there was synergy between these different components, the learning from each part complemented another, and having a combination of approaches was helpful.

Figure 10 Trainee views on the programme components



Source: post-training survey (N = 1156). Trainees that reported don't know and n/a removed from the analysis.

Comparing responses to these questions as mean scores from a Likert rating (1 – 5), there was a statistical significance in the difference by setting type for all components of the training programme ($p < 0.001$). The largest difference between the groups related to the experience of mentoring (Table 9). There were no significant differences by setting type, early years experience, SENCO experience or social deprivation ($p > 0.05$).

Table 9 Trainee views on the programme component by setting type

Setting type	Childminders reporting good or excellent (%)	Group based settings reporting good or excellent (%)	Childminders Mean Likert Rating (Max 5)	Group based settings Mean Likert Rating (Max 5)
Individual activities	88%	92%	4.17	4.37
1:1 mentoring call	75%	83%	4.09	4.34
Group activities	81%	87%	4.06	4.27

Source: post-training survey (N = 1156). Survey question Likert rating = 1, very poor – 5, excellent. Trainees that reported don't know and n/a removed from the analysis.

In the interviews, there was no specific feedback from childminders related to issues with the programme components. The main point raised was the relevance of the content, which was more applicable to group-based settings than childminders.

Taught group activities (online webinars)

In the interviews, trainees gave positive feedback about the online group activities, although there were some aspects that they thought could be improved as well.

Trainees reported **that trainers were knowledgeable and well informed**. This gave the trainees confidence that the content was accurate and comprehensive. Trainees also thought trainers were well equipped to answer their questions and made time to provide further information or clarify any queries before the session finished. This helped to personalise the online experience and build a rapport between the trainees and trainers. Some thought there was variation between the trainers, with some better than others, but the feedback was that the online delivery was good.

It was useful to receive the presentation slides after the training. Trainees used these to return to during the assignment and as part of further learning. Some would have liked to receive the slides before the training programme. BPN had received this feedback too but chose to make the handouts available immediately after the session. BPN explained that this was to encourage trainees to attend the session and benefit from the wider discussion and information shared by the trainer.

A minor area of feedback from trainees was that **three hours for the sessions was too long**. Trainees reported challenges paying attention, particularly after a full day at work. These comments reflect some of the issues related to the demands of the training programme, particularly for those taking part in evening sessions (discussed p 54).

There was more **mixed feedback on the value of the breakout rooms** used as part of the group activities. For some trainees, the sessions were an opportunity to talk in detail about a topic and share ideas with others on the course. This helped to embed their learning and to learn collaboratively with their peers. Switching into smaller groups was also useful to break up the format and keep engaged for the three-hour sessions. As one explained:

They did break out rooms, which I feel really works...I'm on the waiting list to be diagnosed for ADHD and if I was to sit and watch something and not get involved, I would have lost interest. ***Practitioner in group-based setting, designated SENCO, 10+ years' experience***

Trainees explained that challenges in the breakout sessions arose when there were **differing levels of SENCO experience in the group**, as those with less experience felt unable to contribute or those with more experience lost interest because time was taken to cover basic concepts. Trainees with less experience reported that elements of the online format were awkward, with people either feeling unable to share their experiences or not wanting to. Some thought it would have been better use of time to hear from the trainers, who were more experienced and knowledgeable, rather than have the discussion amongst their peers. As one explained:

I like to learn from people that have more experience, who have that knowledge, and I'd have liked more from them ([trainers] rather than go off into breakout rooms so often. A lot of time was spending feeding back opinions about one little subject when that could have been condensed.

Practitioner in group-based setting, aspiring SENCO, 10+ years' experience

Others thought the breakout rooms could be better managed, if the expectations of the discussions were set out for the group or structured in a way to encourage different people to speak and to help the group manage themselves. As one explained:

You didn't know how long you had really to discuss different points...we're all talking about something and suddenly it said, oh, you're coming out of the room in like 10 seconds.... we haven't even chosen the spokesperson... you just had to volunteer yourself to discuss what we said. ***Practitioner in group-based setting, designated SENCO, 10+ years' experience***

Self-guided individual activities

Trainees valued the self-guided units, with several reflecting that this was the most valued element of the course for them. Trainees thought the individual assignments were relevant and the virtual platform was easy to access with clear instructions. Trainees appreciated that they could go into detail on the areas that were of interest or 'dip in and out' of resources as they needed. The quizzes were also mentioned as a feature that worked well to test one's knowledge as they went along.

A self-guided learning approach was new to some trainees. For instance, one trainee commented in the interviews that due to the newness of this approach, they needed help from the mentor to navigate and work through the exercises, but after a while they adapted, and their experience was positive:

So initially I had never used that [self-guided learning] before, so obviously that was all new to me. It was a bit of trial and error to begin with, but I got the hang of it. I just spoke to my mentor she was so good and gave me a step-by-step guide. I didn't have to wait long for feedback either it was done quickly. ***Practitioner in group-based setting, designated SENCO, 10+ years' experience***

There were trainees that said it took longer to complete the self-directed work than anticipated and those that fell behind, found it hard to catch up. Some had support from the tutor or mentor, who offered a phone call to discuss, although the timeframes meant that there was limited flexibility in what they could offer if the trainee had a lot of course work to catch up on.

1:1 mentoring

The mentoring was a popular element of the training programme. Most trainees had taken up the offer, only a few had chosen not to.

Trainees that valued the offer described the mentors as being enthusiastic, nice, knowledgeable, responsive and supportive. Trainees said that mentoring sessions complemented the learning in the training units. Support from mentors included reminders to complete work, answers to queries, feedback on their outputs, and help to resolve issues. Trainees reported that this support was integral to them completing the training programme. There were trainees that valued their sessions with the mentor but thought having a session earlier in the training programme would have been helpful.

Trainees that had issues, reported that their mentors were rushed, seemed busy and work was left unmarked between sessions, which was frustrating. Trainees that required additional help from the mentor – such as those who were new to being a SENCO - said there seemed to be limited time for the mentor to offer. Others had issues on the training programme and struggled to contact the mentor, instead having to speak with leads (persons in leadership roles) for the training programme. Amongst childminders, there was feedback that they were unable to receive any support from a mentor as there were no sessions on a Saturday.

Assessment

The experience of the assessment process varied amongst the trainees. One group of trainees stated that the instructions for the assignments were clear, and the criteria were fair. These trainees thought the assignment was a good opportunity to use the national resources and apply the learning to their local context. As one explained:

Every single one of those assignments, you had to keep referring back to the same documents ... you could end up quoting some it by the end you had heard it so many times. But it was really useful... ***Practitioner in group-based setting, designated SENCO, 10+ years' experience***

Another group of trainees found the process stressful or unfamiliar initially, but once they were underway thought the process worked adequately. As one trainee explained, often the strengths within the early years workforce reflected practical rather than academic skills:

When you're in early years, it's very practical training, not academic. I found doing the essays tricky at the time, and I thought... 'this is really stressful.' But looking back, I don't see it as a barrier. ***Practitioner in group-based setting, aspiring SENCO, less than 10 years' experience***

Common challenges trainees experienced included difficulties understanding what the task entailed. This meant trainees had to ask for help to complete the task, spent longer on the task or needed to re-work it. There were also minor mistakes in the description for some tasks, although trainees reflected these would be resolved for future cohorts. Other trainees reported challenges with submitting the assignments online, some trainees found the virtual learning platform complex and hard to navigate.

Feedback was also highly appreciated by trainees during the training programme, particularly from the assessor about the assignment, but also from mentors and trainers too. Trainees viewed the feedback as part of the learning process, even if it meant they needed to update their work and re-submit. Trainees had worse experiences when they thought the feedback was poorly timed, either because it was shared a long time after they had submitted their work, or they had missed notifications about it on the portal.

Networking with SENCOs

A widely valued element of the training programme was the opportunity to network with other SENCOs through the national cohorts on the training programme. Some trainees attended a local SENCO network, where they met with their peers locally, but the training programme had been a useful and new opportunity to learn different perspectives from SENCOs working in other LAs.

Early years practitioners explained that participating in discussions through training programme, as part of the breakout room discussions, had positive benefits in terms of knowledge exchange and support opportunities (Table 10).

Table 10 Examples of knowledge exchange and support opportunities

Knowledge exchange

Being able to share ideas with professionals in similar roles to them and learn new ways to support children with SEND. This increased trainee awareness about the range of interventions available, as well as possible solutions suggested by those that had limited resources or similar restrictions within the setting. For some it was also about reassurance that their support was the right approach. As one explained:

Talking to other SENCOs gave me fresh ideas and reinforced that we were on the right track. Practitioner

Understand the variation in different Local Offers, as well as identifying strengths and limitations in their own area. Where trainees learnt there was a gap, this was beneficial because it prompted them to investigate it further and understand why there were differences. As one explained:

It was quite interesting... to hear how different counties work because...I've only ever known [LA]... I was talking to [trainees] that were in the North or down South and they're like, oh, no, we can do this and can do this, but this works differently. Practitioner

Supportive network

Opportunity to share and hear experiences from other SENCOs. Childminders and trainees in group-based settings both reported feeling isolated with limited opportunities to discuss with others in a similar role. As one explained:

It was nice to discuss with somebody else, cause the SENCO role is really demanding and time consuming, but [previously] failed to discuss with somebody who actually understood what was involved. Practitioner

Offered reassurance that challenges they faced were shared nationally, rather than specific to their setting. As one explained:

Struggles...which I thought was just an 'us' thing wasn't, it was a national thing. Practitioner

Confident to share views with more anonymity compared to local networks.

It gives you the confidence to speak out... if you were doing it through the [local] authority you would know them, whereas with this you don't know the people. Practitioner

Source: Qualitative interviews with trainees

In addition to the discussions in the training programme, trainees used WhatsApp as a platform for networking and peer support in between sessions. These groups were suggested by the trainer but were not a required part of the training programme. For some, the WhatsApp group remained active after course had finished, with the potential for it to continue as a source of help going forwards.

BPN and DfE also reported that the **four in-person programme conferences during the training programme had a been a success**. They received positive feedback from attendees and learnt themselves from the keynote speaker and trainees at the event. DfE and BPN agreed that meeting in person was an important way to celebrate the successes of the training programme. It also created new ways for the early years practitioners to network with one another, which was important given some settings work relatively independently and early years SENCOs can feel isolated in their role.

BPN thought it worked well to have four regional events (London, Birmingham, Bristol and Leeds), rather than having one event in London. The geographical spread meant that trainees could attend the one that was convenient for them and reflected the national approach to the training programme.

None of the trainees interviewed for the evaluation had attended one of the conferences. However, many reported that they would value an opportunity to network with trainees again and thought meeting in person would complement the online learning.

Contract management between DfE and BPN

Both BPN and DfE stakeholders described the collaborative and pragmatic approach to managing the training programme's contract. BPN responded to DfE's request to provide additional places, scaling their operations to meet higher targets within the same timeframe. BPN adapted data reports to meet changing metrics of interest from the Department, (i.e. focusing first on applications, then on priority LAs, then on completers).

DfE were flexible from their position too. They discussed the eligibility criteria with BPN for specific cases and agreed exceptional circumstances where an alternative approach was needed. For example, settings where it was appropriate to train an additional early years practitioner. DfE also updated monitoring targets to reflect the true number of eligible settings in the LA, following feedback from BPN.

DfE and BPN agreed that establishing a good understanding between the two organisations meant the training programme could be delivered pragmatically within the context of the early years sector. This included discussions about offering trainees the option to re-engage in the training programme, if they had deferred a place or chosen to drop out. Working together on these decisions meant that trainees were well supported and had full opportunity to take part, without affecting BPN's progress achieving their targets.

Partnership working with LAs

There was good partnership working between BPN and the LAs involved in the delivery of the training programme. LA stakeholders worked for BPN as mentors, assessor and trainers on the training programme. They shared feedback with BPN on the training content, based on their experience of working with SENCOs, to make sure it was up to date and relevant to the early years context. They also monitored early years practitioners that completed the training programme to be able to offer follow on support. As well as reporting a good experience being part of the training programme, these LAs reflected on the positive difference the training programme had on trained early years SENCOs within their LA (described page 85).

However, between BPN and wider LAs there was more variation in partnership working. BPN were clear that their training programme aimed to complement – rather than replace – any existing training for SENCOs. BPN had engaged with LAs to explain this, but thought their efforts to raise understanding about the training programme in some LAs were short-lived due to turnover of staff. Instead BPN had more success with local Stronger Practice Hubs⁴⁶, set up as part of DfE's EYER programme. Partnership working between these agencies meant BPN was able to raise awareness of the training programme with local settings and meet their delivery targets.

There were LAs interviewed for this evaluation that had no awareness of the training programme (despite there being a trainee from their LA). Amongst those that were aware, there was mixed knowledge about who had completed the training programme. LAs who had this information talked about promoting it further, whereas those without it felt frustrated. As stakeholders explained these different experiences:

I knew what settings had had training ... it wasn't so tight on numbers. So, we'd keep promoting it again....send out bulletins about it and things like that. **LA stakeholder**

We were never informed who had successfully completed it...if there were no Level 3 SENCO that had done the course we wouldn't know, if there was one hundred (that had done the course) we wouldn't know. **LA stakeholder**

Furthermore, views amongst LA stakeholders on the role and value of local training for SENCOs influenced how LAs engaged with BPN. Some LAs found it worked well to offer a local course as a follow-on training to the national programme. Whereas others had chosen not to promote the national training programme because they wanted their early years practitioners to exclusively attend their local training. There were also LAs that had

⁴⁶ Stronger Practice Hubs are a network of hubs that support early years settings to improve outcomes for children. The early years stronger practice hubs programme launched in November 2022 as part of the early years education recovery support package. It is funded until late March 2025. [What are the Early Years Stronger Practice Hubs? | Stronger Practice Hubs](#)

been less interested in the national programme when they had a local training for SENCOs; but when that finished, the LAs approached BPN to make sure there was still a training option for their early years SENCOs. Others thought the national programme had freed up time within their LA, as the internal team could now focus on SEND support rather than the training element. Whatever the perspective, LAs explained that a national training programme for SENCOs was helpful to a point, but SENCO needed to be trained in local SEND processes, given that terminology and availability of support varied a lot across the country.

Areas for improvement in programme delivery

In the post-training survey, trainees were asked to give feedback on how the training programme could be improved. The **main areas for improving the training programme** included⁴⁷: increasing the time involved in the training (22 per cent), adding topics to the course content (13 per cent), improving processes to complete and submit the assignment (5 per cent), improving usability of the digital interface (4 per cent), better management or less use of breakout room discussions (4 per cent), shorter webinars (2 per cent), and more tailoring of content to trainees backgrounds (i.e. group-based verses childminder settings) and level of existing knowledge and experience in the SENCO role (2 per cent). Other suggestions made by less than 2 per cent of trainees are not reported here. However, over a quarter (26 per cent) also said no improvement was needed.

Trainees that experienced challenges in delivery

From the interviews, there were several groups of trainees that experienced challenges related to programme delivery, either based on the trainee's own experience or their reflections on how they perceived others to engage in the sessions:

- **Limited experience in the SENCO role** - Given the fast pace of the course, aspiring SENCOs, who were new to, or due to take up the SENCO role, struggled to assimilate all the concepts as they were introduced and discussed. As a result, these trainees needed help from the mentor to complete the task or had reached out to the assessor to clarify what was needed on the assignment. However, findings from the post-training survey found that aspiring SENCOs reported higher ratings related to the content of the training programme, suggesting that any challenges they experienced during delivery were well supported on the course.
- **Childminders** - Findings from the post-training survey suggested that childminders had a slightly less positive experience than early years practitioners in group-based settings, rating most aspects of the training programme lower than their counterparts. In their suggestions for improvements, childminders said in the

⁴⁷ The percentages below are indicative of how widespread suggestions were amongst trainees. They were based on coding feedback to an open text question survey, rather than a question with set responses. Percentages may add up to more than 100 per cent due to potential multiple responses per person.

survey and interview that the training programme was too focused on experiences in group-based settings, and they wanted more tailored information for their settings and advice on how to apply the skills to their settings (i.e. identifying SEND, having initial conversations with parents).

- **Low level of digital skills** - Trainees with limited digital skills liked the online delivery less and it took them longer to be familiar with the digital platform. These trainees wanted to have paper copies of the training resources in advance and thought some in-person element of the training programme would have been valuable.

SENCO outcomes

This chapter describes the outcomes for the early years SENCOs that completed the training programme (i.e. the trainees). It describes the evidence for each of the outcomes in the theory of change in turn, including knowledge, skills, confidence, interest in further Continuous Professional Development, and likelihood to remain in the early years sector.

The quantitative data sources in this chapter include the pre- and post-survey. The main analysis focuses on the 15-outcome statement asked as five-point Likert scales in both surveys, to compare the change related to outcomes from the theory of change from before to after the training programme. There were also additional snapshot questions on outcomes from the post-survey. The qualitative data sources in this chapter include the case study research interviews with trainees, in-depth interviews with non-trainees and the 12 month-feedback from the trainees in the diary studies.

Overall, there was positive evidence related to SENCO outcomes, which was consistent between the pre-post analysis of outcomes statements and additional outcome questions in post-training survey questions. It was also supported by the qualitative feedback in the case study research, non-trainee interviews and the diary study.

Knowledge in child development and SENCO role responsibilities

Trainees were asked in both the pre- and post-survey to rate on a Likert scale (1, strongly disagree – 5, strongly agree) the extent to which they had a good understanding in seven areas of knowledge (Table 11). The key findings from the pre-post survey analysis of these ratings are as follows:

- **There was a significant increase in the ratings for all knowledge statements supporting positive change in the different areas of the theory of change,** including understanding related to child development, the Local Offer, and different aspects of the SENCO role and responsibilities (paired samples t-test, $p < 0.001$).
- **After the training programme, a high proportion of trainees agreed (i.e. either agreed or strongly agreed) that they had a good understanding in all areas,** with 90 per cent or more trainees agreeing (or strongly agreeing) for each statement. Prior to the training programme, it was more varied in how many trainees self-reported good understanding in the seven areas (range 39 – 97 per cent of trainees agreed or strongly agreed).
- **The knowledge area with the most positive change from before to after the training programme (+1.3) was related to having a good understanding of the Local Offer.** This was also the knowledge area that the fewest trainees agreed they had a good understanding before the training programme (39 per

cent). After the training programme, 97 per cent of trainees agreed they had a good understanding in this area (Likert mean = 4.47).

Table 11 Trainee self-reported ratings for seven knowledge statements related to child development and SENCO role (before and after training programme)

Question response options	Trainees report agree or strongly agree (%) - Before	Trainees report agree or strongly agree (%) - After	Mean Likert Rating (Max 5) - Before	Mean Likert Rating (Max 5) - After
I have a good understanding of the Local Offer, including the provision that the Local Authority expects to be available from providers	39%	97%	3.17	4.47
I have a good understanding of how to liaise with support beyond my setting	56%	95%	3.37	4.47
I have a good understanding of how to support my colleagues and improve staff practice in my setting	56%	95%	3.64	4.52
I have a good understanding of how to support children with SEND who do not have a formal diagnosis	62%	98%	3.65	4.60
I have a good understanding of how to support children with SEND and a formal diagnosis	65%	98%	3.70	4.59
I have a good understanding of how to support parents/carers when a child has been identified with potential SEND needs	64%	97%	3.63	4.55
I have a good understanding of how babies and children learn and develop	93%	97%	4.31	4.71

Source: Matched pre and post training survey (N = 737)

Sub-group analysis of trainees

Multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) tests analysed differences between background characteristics of trainees and level of change for the seven knowledge statements from before to after the training programme⁴⁸. A significant effect was found for several of the knowledge outcome based on setting type, SENCO status and amount of early years experience (Table 12), with childminders, aspiring SENCOs, those with fewer years' experience gaining more than their counterparts. There was no effect of setting deprivation for any of the knowledge statements.

⁴⁸ This method allowed for the simultaneous analysis of multiple knowledge statements, helping to identify patterns of change across the different groups of trainees.

Table 12 Significant effects of sub-groups of trainees on knowledge outcomes

Group	Knowledge area (statements in the pre-and-post survey)	Direction of change
Setting type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to support children with SEND and a formal diagnosis • How to support parents/carers when a child has been identified with potential SEND needs <p>NB. marginal significant effect for how to support children with SEND who do not have a formal diagnosis (p = 0.05)</p>	Childminders gained more knowledge in these areas compared to trainees in group-based settings
SENCO experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to liaise with support beyond my setting • How to support parents/carers when a child has been identified with potential SEND needs • The Local Offer, including the provision that the LA expects to be available from providers 	Aspiring SENCOs gained more knowledge in these areas compared to designated SENCOs
Early years experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How babies and children learn and develop • How to liaise with support beyond my setting 	Trainees with less experience gained more knowledge in these areas compared to trainees with more years of experience

Source: Pre and post survey

In the interviews, aspiring SENCOs reported that the training programme was the first opportunity they had to read key documents, such as the SEND code of practice, and gaining fundamental information for the role. Trainees new to the SENCO role were aware of existing guidance and legislation, yet the training programme had been an opportunity to understand how such documents related to what they were required to do in practice. As they explained:

It (the training programme) was really good because I've never read the SEND Code of Practice before...because you have to (as part of the training programme) read the legislation...that was really good because it made me realise exactly what we're meant to do. ***Practitioner in group-based setting, aspiring SENCO, 10+ years' experience***

Childminders reflected that the training programme had furthered their knowledge related to SEND, particularly identifying early signs. Where previously, accessing this information

had felt intimidating to childminders, or they had thought these were less relevant to their setting. Now childminders understood how they could be used, the rationale for it and what they were required to do. As some childminders explained:

I'm more aware of what I'm looking for, I'm definitely more aware of the graduated approach of assessing, planning...and implementing that and using the development materials to refer back to. It's definitely made me know things I didn't know and explained why other things are in place.

Childminder, 10+ years' experience

I think it gave me a better understanding of relevant legislation as well and what's actually out there and what I'm asked to adhere to and what the settings have to adhere to as well. ***Childminder, less than 10 years' experience***

Trainees with less than 10 years of early years experience had improved their knowledge since the training programme across a range of topics, including expanding and deepening their understanding of SEND, using the graduated approach as part of their internal monitoring process, and understanding the statutory legislation. In contrast, trainees with over 10 years' experience, and who had worked in the SENCO role for a long time, gave feedback that they had already known what was covered in the training programme. Refreshing their knowledge was reassuring for them, as they were now confident their knowledge was up to date. However, in their view it made less of a difference to their level of knowledge of SEND or their understanding of the SENCO role. As experienced trainees explained:

For myself it hasn't made a difference...I've done it [the SENCO role] for 10 years... it was just good to see that what I was doing was what I should be doing really. ***Practitioner in group-based setting, designated SENCO, 10+ years' experience***

Confidence in the SENCO role

Trainees were asked in the pre and post-survey to rate on a Likert scale (1, not at all confident to 5, very confident) their level of confidence in four areas (Table 13). The key finding from the pre-post survey analysis of confidence outcome statements, are as follows:

- **There was significant positive change in all areas of confidence** (paired samples t-test, $p < 0.05$), including leading appropriate activities for children with developmental delays, supporting children with their personal, social and emotional development, and leading appropriate activities for typically developing 2–4-year-olds.

- Similar to the knowledge statements, **the vast majority of trainees agreed to have confidence in all areas after the training programme (range 88 – 97 per cent)**. Prior to the training programme levels of confidence were varied across the different areas (range 62 - 82 per cent of trainees agreed for each statement).
- Of the confidence statements, **the most positive change (+0.88) related to leading appropriate activities for children with developmental delays**, with 95 per cent of trainees agreeing they had good understanding in this area after the training programme. Prior to the training programme only 62 per cent of trainees agreed they had a good understanding in this area.

Table 13 Trainee self-reported ratings for four confidence statements (before and after training programme)

Question response options	Trainees reporting quite or very confident (%) - Before	Trainees reporting quite or very confident - (%) - After	Mean Likert Rating (Max 5) - Before	Mean Likert Rating (Max 5) - After
I am confident leading appropriate activities for children with developmental or language delays	62%	95%	3.71	4.59
I am confident leading appropriate activities for typically developing 0–2-year-olds	67%	88%	3.99	4.54
I am confident in supporting children with their personal, social and emotional development	79%	97%	4.13	4.66
I am confident leading appropriate activities for typically developing 2–4-year-olds	82%	97%	4.26	4.70

Source: Matched pre-post survey (N = 737)

Sub-group analysis of trainees

MANCOVA tests **found there was a difference by setting type for the confidence statement** related to leading appropriate activities for children with developmental or language delays (Table 14). There was no effect of SENCO status, amount of early years experience or setting deprivation for any of the other confidence statements. The lack of any difference may be due to limited sensitivity in the Likert self-reported data.

Table 14 Significant effects of sub-groups of trainees on confidence outcomes

Group	Confidence area (statements in the pre-and-post survey)	Direction of change
Setting type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confident leading appropriate activities for children with developmental or language delays 	Childminders gained more confidence in this area compared to trainees in group-based settings

In the interviews, trainees widely reported that they felt more confident in the SENCO role after the training programme. They strongly attributed the change in confidence to the knowledge and skills gained from the training programme, as well as to their positive experience of taking part. Trainees also directly linked feeling more confident with their ability to implement changes after the training programme. This included changing their individual practice, as well as how effectively they engaged with parents, external agencies and with colleagues within their setting. As trainees explained:

(Completing the training programme) really helped me in my practice...when you start from a sound base of knowledge that really helps you hone your skills...when you know that what you're doing is absolutely right, then that makes a huge difference in terms of your confidence in your job and how well you execute it **Practitioner in group-based setting, designated SENCO, 10+ years' experience**

It's (the training programme) probably given me more confidence... now I know I can speak to parents with more authority. **Practitioner in group-based setting, designated SENCO, 10+ years' experience**

It's made me more confident ...to actually contact all the professionals and actually say I want some information...or you haven't contacted me in this time... What's going on? **Practitioner in group-based setting, designated SENCO, 10+ years' experience**

I would never have gone to a SENCO meeting [before the training programme]...I thought I haven't done any training for it... I don't feel that I've got an opinion...or any of that knowledge. But now I feel like I can go in and contribute to network meetings that we have at the Council **Practitioner in group-based setting, designated SENCO, 10+ years' experience**

Skills in earlier identification and support for children with SEND

In the post-training survey, a very high proportion of trainees thought the training programme had improved their skills and confidence related to identifying SEND needs and providing SEND support:

- **93 per cent agreed** (of which 65 per cent strongly agreed) that the training programme had improved their knowledge and understanding of early years children with SEND to be able to accurately identify SEND.
- **95 percent agreed** (of which 64 per cent strongly agreed) that the training programme improved confidence in supporting children with SEND in the setting.
- **91 per cent agreed** (of which 54 per cent strongly agreed) that the training programme had improved SEND support in the setting.

These snapshot findings were supported by the pre-post survey analysis of trainees' Likert ratings on three skill outcome statements (1, strongly disagree to 5, strongly agree) before and after the training programme (Table 15). The key findings from this analysis are as follows:

- **Significant change for the Likert ratings for the three skill outcome statements**, including recognising when a child would benefit from a formal diagnosis, when a child requires additional support, when a child is showing signs of development delay (paired sample t-test, $p < 0.001$).
- **Almost all trainees agreed (or strongly agreed) that they had the three skills after the training programme (98 – 99 per cent)**, although a high proportion of trainees also reported that they had the skills before the training programme (range 81 – 94 per cent) suggesting a good existing skill level in these areas.
- **The skill area with the most change (+0.57) related to recognising when a child would benefit from a formal SEND diagnosis.** Prior to the training programme, this was the area that the smallest proportion of trainees agreed they had this skill (81 per cent), compared to the other areas (92 and 94 per cent respectively).
- **Sub-group analysis found no effect of setting type, SENCO status and amount of early years experience**, for any of the skill statements (MANCOVA tests)⁴⁹. Similar to the limited difference by subgroups on the confidence outcomes, the lack of any difference, where it may be expected between trainees with more experience in the role or in early years generally, may be due to limited sensitivity in the Likert self-reported data.

⁴⁹ Significant multivariate effect was found for setting deprivation ($p = 0.003$), suggesting that deprivation levels influenced the overall pattern of responses for the combined variables. However, independent tests did not show a significant effect on any single dependent variable. This suggested the effect is spread across multiple outcomes rather than concentrated in one specific area. See Annex 7 for further information.

Table 15 Trainee self-reported ratings for three skill statements (before and after training programme)

Question response options	Trainees report agree or strongly agree (%) - Before	Trainees report agree or strongly agree (%) - After	Mean Likert Rating (Max 5) - Before	Mean Likert Rating (Max 5) - After
I can recognise when a child requires additional support	92%	99%	4.20	4.68
I can recognise when a child is showing signs of developmental delay	94%	99%	4.23	4.69
I can recognise when a child would benefit from formal SEND diagnosis	81%	98%	4.05	4.62

Source: Matched post-training survey (N = 737)

Trainees shared practice examples in the interviews and diary study to demonstrate how knowledge, skills and confidence gained from the training programme meant they were able to identify children with additional needs in a timely manner (i.e. soon after joining the setting). Trainees described monitoring children's needs earlier than they would have done previously, monitoring more children in the setting, and monitoring children more closely and with targets better linked to their developmental needs. Overall, trainees thought their improved skills in identification and monitoring SEND put them and the setting in a better position to offer the right support than before. As one trainee explained:

It was just following one of our staff discussions on SEND after one of the webinars, where I thought there is possibly something here. We're now doing a developmental review, working with [the child's] keyworker and looking to get a nurse in to properly assess. So, it [the course] has helped me to look back on things and think, lets consolidate.

Practitioner in group-based setting, designated SENCO, 10+ years' experience

Trainees also gave examples of how they were better placed and more confident to tailor their own support for children with SEND. Trainees cited learning a range of new ideas from the training programme, from the course content and the discussions with other trainees. Trainees, particularly childminders, that lacked confidence previously, now thought they were proactive in providing SEND support to children. Whereas previously they may have been unsure of what they could do, they were now aware that for some areas of SEND, they could tailor their support within the setting, whilst they collected evidence for external assessment. As one explained:

When I realised that I can put things into place and how I can put things into place, I changed my perception of how I was going to do something and I think that had an impact on [child]. **Childminder, 10+ years' experience**

For parents interviewed, there were several common factors that they associated with feeling satisfied and confident in the SEND support in the setting. This included the level of experience and consistency of staff, as well as the extent to which staff made sure activities were tailored to, and inclusive of, their child's needs.

Parents associated **staff experience with skills in being empathetic and proactive in their support for their child**, this included the trainee but also others in the setting more generally. Parents thought having the same staff working with their child was important as it helped their child to develop key attachments to the new adults. Parents also noticed, and were reassured, when staff were knowledgeable about SEND and undaunted by specific needs or any related challenging behaviour. As one parent explained:

The staff seem very experienced in working with children with a whole range of disabilities which has proven to be a very useful resource for me as a first-time parent trying to navigate this new world. **Parent**

Parents reported that tailoring support for their child with SEND was important. Parents valued when staff in the setting took time to get to know their child and then made reasonable adjustments or adapted activities to suit their needs and interests. Parents reflected that the staff responded to their child's development needs over time as well, changing and updating how they approached activities, when needed. Parents also valued when the staff noticed the child's strengths, in terms of skills the child had, as well as the areas of their development they needed help. As one parent explained:

They [staff at the setting] were absolutely amazing... when they are organising activities, they always took into account what [child] could and couldn't do and then were supporting him accordingly. **Parent**

More generally too, parents valued that their child engaged in varied activities throughout the structured day, indoors and outdoors, including one-to-one and group activities. Being able to take part in this way was different to what was available at home. Parents thought it was important that their child with SEND had these opportunities alongside their peers.

Skills related to working with parents and external agencies

Beyond skills to improve their individual practice, trainees reflected they had gained necessary skills through the training programme to advocate and coordinate the right support for the child involving their parents and external agencies (LA staff, health partners, speech and language teams). This included trainees feeling more skilled in their communication and equipped to organise and advocate key SEND, monitoring and transition meetings with relevant people.

Whilst these skills were not directly measured in the survey, there was evidence from the interviews and the diary study to illustrate the extent to which trainees had changed their practice in these areas. Furthermore, the similarity in key messages and examples between the trainees taking part in diary study showed consistency in how they used knowledge and skills from the training programme, as well as sustainability of the new practice over time.

Working with parents

Trainees suggested in the interviews that the training programme had influenced their engagement with parents to different extents. For some this was a key area that their practice had changed, whereas others suggested that strategies from the training programme had only strengthened, rather than transformed their ways of working. Another group of trainees reported no change in how they worked with parents, as they followed the recommended strategies and had good existing relationships with parents.

Trainees that thought the training programme had made a difference in how they engaged with parents, reported having the skills and confidence to engage in conversations that were likely to be sensitive or challenging, rather than avoid or hold back in their views. Trainees had also increased the frequency of updates to parents and described the engagement as collaborative now rather than 'reeling off' information. Effectively sharing information on both sides supported understanding of the child's needs from both sides and contributed to the relationship between the parent and the setting. As one explained:

It's...just sharing that information. They (parents) have got resources as well...they've got a better understanding of their child... building that relationship...was quite key in the discussions... (staff) keeping them informed and them keeping us informed. **Practitioner in group-based setting, designated SENCO, less than 10 years' experience**

The findings from the interviews were supported through evidence from the diary study. Trainees gave examples of using the Local Offer to signpost parents and applying recommended strategies to set expectations and voice concerns with parents. Trainees also consistently referred to key messages from the training programme, which

suggested similarity in the main take aways from the training programme that informed their practice. This included the need to maintain open and respectful communication with parents; encourage consistency between home and the setting, involve parents early in the process, recognise parents as the 'first educators', and provide regular updates on the child's progress.

Corroborating these findings from trainees, parents described in the interviews as part of the case study research, how daily updates from the early years setting, regular meetings and written reports were both informative about their child's needs and a form of support, particularly if the parent was navigating other services for the child as well.

The nursery was my lifeline. Without the daily communication, I don't think I would have coped... It wasn't just the strategies, it was the understanding and reassurance that made all the difference. **Parent**

For some parents, the lack of transparency and honesty in communication about their child's development, in previous settings, had contributed to the parent's decision to move the child to a new setting:

I had suspicions whether they [the previous early years setting] were telling me the truth because they would say, oh, he said orange. But I never, ever, ever heard him saying orange... this is a difficult sound or word to say...he's struggling with things like dog or cat, I was very suspicious of that, you know. **Parent**

Parents also reported that receiving guidance from the setting had also promoted consistency in support between home and the setting. This included the setting sharing ideas for the parent to use at home or asking for insight into homelife so the setting could adapt too. Most parents valued this feedback and followed what was suggested. As one explained:

I tend to follow their recommendations...They [SENCO and setting manager] continuously tried everything... there was a lot of detail to it and generally I was quite happy with they were suggesting or recommending. **Parent**

Furthermore, parents described how trainees had helped them to directly engage with other agencies. This included the setting proactively seeking updates, attending meetings alongside the parent, working with the LA team within the setting, attending sessions with the child (e.g. physiotherapy). The trainee had also signposted the parent to helpful resources and processes, including encouraging them to make a referral, identify websites with additional information and support groups. Parents commented that they felt able to follow-up with key people because of the support from the setting:

[Member of staff at the setting] told me about everything and gave me the courage to contact people I wouldn't have reached out to otherwise.

Parent

However, there were differences in the extent to which parents took forward any advice shared by the setting. Some explained that whilst their child had a diagnosis, they did not identify as a family with SEND and therefore were not interested in attending any support groups that the setting suggested. There were also parents that were highly motivated to find what was needed and would have likely engaged the services regardless of the support available from the setting.

Working with external agencies

Trainees reported in the interviews that having completed the training programme they had the skills and confidence to be persistent in their engagement with external professionals and agencies. This included knowing what information was needed and the right questions to ask. As a result, trainees thought they were effectively navigating the SENCO role and more likely to make sure that the right level of support was in place for the child, whilst they were in the setting and for transition to schools. In addition to evidencing needs and applying for funding, trainees linked how confident they felt in meetings and speaking with external agencies to their improved level of confidence since the training programme. As one explained:

Since I've done the training, I feel more confident now to host those meetings... I would always be invited to other meetings, whereas now I feel confident like to chair them. **Practitioner in group-based setting, designated SENCO, 10+ years' experience**

Where examples were shared in the diary study, there was similar evidence of trainees being confident and persistent in their engagement with external agencies, such as repeatedly engaging with speech and language therapists or continually encouraging a parent to make a referral to an agency. However, there were fewer mentions of direct skills and strategies from the training programme for working with external agencies, compared to the examples related to working with parents. Quite often trainees noted in their monthly entry that they had either not worked with an external agency or not used any specific skills from the training programme.

Corroborating the feedback from trainees, a small number of LA stakeholders included in the evaluation were aware of trainees that had completed the training programme and shared views on differences in the quality of the referrals the LA had received. Where there was awareness of the training programme, LA stakeholders reported improvements in how the setting engaged with their LA, as one explained:

The settings that have somebody that has...got the...Level 3 qualification, they're a lot more confident and persistent (with the LA) and supporting the parents more confidently and competently. **LA stakeholder**

Some LAs had noticed recent improvements in the referrals coming through, but could not definitely link this to the training programme:

I can see the improvement in the quality of [SEND funding] requests that come through ... if we track back...who put that request in, did they attend our training or BPN's? ...If I had the time, I would be interested to do that. **LA stakeholder**

The referrals we get in are generally quite well completed now. But that's probably because we'd send them back if they weren't. **LA stakeholder**

Increased interest and engagement in continuing professional development

There was one knowledge outcome statement (rated 1, strongly disagree to 5, strongly agree) in the pre- and post-survey related to understanding the benefit of CPD before and after the training programme (Table 16). As with the other outcome statements, there was positive evidence for this outcome. This included a significant change in the mean ratings from before to after the training programme (paired samples t-test, $p < 0.001$) and in the proportion of trainees that agreed they had a good understanding in this area. After the training programme 98 per cent agreed they had good understanding in this area.

Table 16 Trainee self-reported ratings for understanding value of CPD statement (before and after training programme)

Question response options	Trainees report agree or strongly agree (%) - Before	Trainees report agree or strongly agree (%) - After	Mean Likert Rating (Max 5) - Before	Mean Likert Rating (Max 5) - After
I have a good understanding of how to assess my own skills and competencies, identify any gaps and next steps in professional development	67%	98%	3.71	4.55

Source: Matched post- survey (N = 737)

In the interviews, though, there was **mixed evidence about whether the trainee's level of engagement in further CPD had changed because of the training programme.**

Whilst there were trainees interested in further CPD related to SEND or the SENCO role, either for themselves or for others in the setting; there were trainees with no plans because the current training programme had been demanding alongside their paid work.

Amongst the trainees that were **pursuing further CPD related to either SEND and the SENCO role for themselves**, there was interest in completing courses in autism, Makaton, sensory needs, speech and language delays and EAL. One motivation was to cover areas of SEND in more detail, to either fill gaps or take knowledge from the training programme further. Another motivation was to make sure that the knowledge gained from the training programme remained up to date. For trainees without any children with SEND in their setting, this was important because there was little opportunity to apply their knowledge in practice. There was also evidence that those who were pursuing other opportunities enjoyed learning and therefore possibly would have pursued the CPD training anyway. As one explained:

I'm always up for learning [something] new, that's been a continuous thing for me through my career. So, I'm always up for learning new stuff.

Practitioner in group-based setting, 10+ years' experience, designated SENCO

Where trainees were **focused on upskilling others in the setting**, there was closer links to the training programme. The main motivation was to make sure the SEND knowledge and support strategies the trainee gained from the training programme were shared more widely and implemented consistently within the setting. Some trainees had organised external training opportunities for the setting, including specific courses that were shared by other SENCOs on the training programme (e.g. Emotional Literacy Support Assistant⁵⁰ and bucket time training⁵¹). Others had mainly upskilled staff by cascading resources from training programme (as mentioned on pp 85). The main reason for not upskilling staff related to limited time in the role and high levels of temporary staff (discussed on pp 88).

Reasons also varied amongst the trainees with **no current plans to take part in CPD related to SEND**. Some trainees had too much workload. Often these were managers who were focusing on other priorities in the setting for now, or those already engaged in CPD in other areas (i.e. completing a bachelors, masters, management training). Another group of trainees thought that since the training programme, there were few major gaps in their current skills and therefore no need to do any more training. Some trainees said they were interested in further CPD in principle, but unaware of anything that was relevant or accessible. There were also trainees that had decided to pause before doing

⁵⁰ [What is ELSA Intervention? - Elsa Support](#).

⁵¹ Bucket time is part of the Attention Autism approach created by Gina Davies, with the aim of developing children's shared attention skills in a group setting.

any further training programmes. Their experience of the training programme was intense, and they wanted a break to focus on their day-to-day responsibilities.

Increased retention of SENCOs

For DfE, an ambition of the training programme was to help support retention of early years SENCOs within the sector. Overall, there was evidence that **trainees wanted to stay in the early years sector, and that for those in group-based settings and aspiring SENCOs, new to the role, the training programme had influenced this**, which was a positive outcome. However, in the interviews, there were also trainees who were interested in staying in the early years sector, but moving into other roles, which would limit the sustainability of outcomes of the training programme at the setting level.

From the post-training survey, most trainees (89 per cent) wanted to stay working in the early years sector (Table 71, Annex 8) and very few (8 per cent) were likely to leave in the next 12 months (Table 73, Annex 8). Although there was less evidence that the desire to stay was strongly related to the training programme: 45 per cent thought the training programme had influenced their view, 42 per cent said it had not, 13 per cent did not know (Table 72, Annex 8).

A binary logistic regression⁵² examined to what extent the training programme influenced trainees' desire to remain in the early years sector (Table 75, Annex 8)⁵³. Those who already intended to stay in the sector were significantly more likely to report that the training influenced their decision ($p = 0.005$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 3.015$), suggesting the training reinforced their commitment. There was a difference by setting type and SENCO status:

- Trainees working in group-based settings said that the training programme was a factor in them remaining in the early years sector ($p = 0.011$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.572$).
- Designated SENCOs were also less likely to indicate that the training influenced their decision to stay ($p = 0.020$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.672$).
- There was no difference in likelihood of leaving by early years experience or setting deprivation ($p = 0.05$).

In the interviews, trainees reported that the training programme had contributed to an increased level of job satisfaction and motivated them to stay in the setting. Others felt upskilled and wanted time to implement what they learnt. The evidence of the positive association with the training programme was shared by trainees from group-based settings and childminders with over 10 years' experience:

I wasn't going to carry on with childminding, but...because of all these

⁵² Binary logistic regression is used to predict a dependent variable with only two outcomes (dichotomous variable). In this case, choosing to leave or remain working in the early years sector.

⁵³ This analysis assessed whether certain trainee characteristics were associated with a greater likelihood of the training reinforcing their decision to stay in the sector.

courses...I feel like I need to carry on...it's just given me a different perspective of my role. ***Childminder, 10+ years' experience***

It [the training programme] was so much better than the training I've...previously done...I felt a lot more equipped to... do the job, as such, afterwards. ***Practitioner in group-based setting, 10+ years' experience***

However, there were also trainees staying in their current role because they were taking up management responsibilities, they were close to retirement, or simply the role was a good fit for their current personal circumstances.

A linear regression analysis then examined factors influencing the likelihood of leaving the early years sector within the next 12 months (Table 76 Annex 7). However, the model only accounted for 23.6% (= 0.236) of the variance in the likelihood to leave the EY sector, suggesting that while these factors contribute to practitioners wanting to leave, other unknown factors outside the model also play a major role (76.4%).

Amongst the trainees in the interviews that reported plans, or were likely, to leave their current role, this included moves into managerial or setting owner roles at another early years setting, interest in being a SENCO in a state-maintained school, or as SEND or early years advisor. There was no evidence from the interviews that trainees were likely to leave the early years sector completely.

In the diary study, one trainee had decided to leave the sector, but this was unrelated to their experience of the training programme, which had been positive. In an exit-interview the trainee explained that they had left because the rising needs in their setting had affected their relationships with staff and parents. The level of pressure was too much for them:

[The level of additional needs] not what I'm used to, and I had one child in particular that was very aggressive towards me to the point like I was coming home crying everyday...the stress began going on all of us [colleagues]... and just everything. I think it was just the pressure.
Practitioner in group-based setting, less than 5 years' experience

Comparison between trainees and non-trainees

This section describes views from the non-trainee interviews related to the key outcome areas in the theory of change: knowledge, skills, confidence, interest in CPD and retention in the early years. Comparing experiences between trainees and non-trainees strengthens the evidence that any observed change for these outcomes amongst trainees were a result of the training programme, rather than what would have happened anyway.

Non-trainees mainly **linked their levels of confidence in the role to how long they had worked in the early years or their experience supporting specific areas of SEND** (either through work or from personal experience). However, non-trainees felt less confident in areas where they had little or no experience of an area of SEND and related to processes, that were constantly changing (such as, referrals and applying for funding). There was no mention amongst non-trainees of accessing the Local Offer or other national guidance to fill gaps in their knowledge as part of their day-to-day role. This contrasted with the feedback from trainees, who were consistent in their positive feedback related to improved knowledge in these areas, since completing the qualification.

Other areas of **lower confidence amongst non-trainees related to skills in aspects of the SENCO role that were challenging**, including upskilling other setting staff who had had more early years experience, making sure that external agencies respected their role and opinions, and issues engaging parents where there was resistance to additional support, or denial about their child's additional need(s). Varying confidence in these aspects were expressed by non-trainees both childminders and SENCOs in group-based settings.

I wanna be as respected [as other professionals] ... because I think, they think, I'm just a childminder, but I do have a lot of knowledge. ***Non-trainee childminder, 10+ years' experience***

A lot of that [updating setting processes] is down to me to feedback to colleagues and that could be quite difficult...I'm trying to explain to colleagues who are 20 years older than me and have been...working in early years for 30 years. ***Non-trainee in group-based setting, 10+ years' experience***

I think the most challenging part for me is having those difficult conversations when you have to talk to a parent and the parents are not really on board. ***Non-trainee in group-based setting, 10+ years' experience***

Amongst non-trainees, there was a good level of interest in CPD, similar to trainees, with most looking at options or completing courses, either related to the SENCO role or to further their early years career generally (i.e. management training, bachelor's degree in child development). The main barrier amongst those looking for a course was finding one that was suitable, and they were able to access (i.e. funded and online). Some non-trainees had no formal training in the SENCO role. These non-trainees acknowledged that having a limited base-level of knowledge affected their confidence in the role. The non-trainees who had engaged in a locally available SENCO training programme, thought the local course was good and would improve their knowledge of the LA processes, more so than a national training programme would have

done.

Like trainees, **plans to stay in the SENCO role and early years sector were varied amongst non-trainees**. Some were enjoying the role and thought this would continue regardless of future training opportunities, as they were motivated to do it for their learning rather than any specific career aspirations. Another group of non-trainees aspired to move into a new role, including at a different type of early years setting or as part of a different profession but still using their skills (e.g. a teacher, psychologist, Ofsted inspector). There were also non-trainees that wanted a complete career change, giving reasons related to pay and other challenges, which meant they wanted to leave soon:

I'm at the point now where I'm looking for my way out. ***Non-trainee in group-based setting, 6 – 9 years' experience***

Programme mechanism related to SENCO outcomes

This section provides a summary of the aspects of the training programme design that were linked to the outcomes where change was associated with the training programme – trainees' knowledge, skill and confidence in the SENCO role.

Firstly, trainees were explicit in the interviews that it was the **combination of the content of the four online webinars, the discussions with other SENCOs on the course, the self-directed study activities and the assignment process**, that were helpful in developing their knowledge from the training programme. Trainees also reported they had reviewed and used the resources and reading lists from the training programme to build on their knowledge further since taking part. As one trainee explained:

It [the training programme] also gave us lots of reading materials as well...there were lots of case studies from other settings... nice to be able to see how these disabilities was managed in different settings... if you haven't dealt with that disability. ***Practitioner in group-based setting, designated SENCO, 10+ years' experience***

Secondly, trainees reported that having completed the training programme there was value in **knowing their understanding of SEND and related processes in the SENCO role were up to date and aligned with current practice guidelines**. This contributed to the trainees feeling confident and being effective in the role. Even amongst trainees who were comfortable with their level of knowledge and skills prior to the training programme, refreshing this through the training programme and hearing from SENCOs in other LAs had provided reassurance about their practice. This was important particularly in the context of changing terminology and key processes. As one explained:

[The training programme has helped in] knowing what you actually want to say so that you're clear and precise in getting that information

across...sometimes I think things can be muddled ... some of the terminology changes and you know the acronyms change quite frequently ***Practitioner in group-based setting, designated SENCO, 10+ years' experience.***

Furthermore, **trainees felt 'qualified' in the role having completed an accredited qualification with a certificate as evidence that they held a certain level of knowledge and skills in the role.** This was important particularly amongst trainees with less experience, who previously lacked confidence engaging with more experienced staff or parents as they felt they had to justify their views. As one childminder explained:

I really like the fact that it gave me a title. I like the fact that I can say I'm a SENCO now...when I speak to parents that gives me a bit more authority. ***Childminder, 10+ years' experience***

In terms of changing their practice, **trainees valued that the training programme was clear in its guidance**, highlighting the statutory documents to use and providing checklists to follow; as well **hearing recommended strategies from trusted sector professionals or others in a similar role**, which trainees could then introduce in their setting. Furthermore, the training programme was clear on the benefits in acting early for children and the responsibilities trainees had in the SENCO role. As a result, trainees now had the confidence to act when needed, including advocating for child or sharing their view with others. As one explained:

I might have shied away from a bit in the past... but there were a few quite clear and obvious signs of things that were of concern. I'm now actually working with the Area SENCO, we have the graduated approach in place... It was quite daunting for me as it was the first time...that I've had a child with additional needs where I have identified before the parents have said anything. ***Childminder, less than 10 years' experience***

Finally, trainees, as a result of the training programme, had **a detailed working knowledge of their Local Offer**, which meant they knew where to go for more information themselves, could use the information in their advice, and could also signpost parents if needed. Trainees explained that the training programme required them to engage with the Local Offer fully as it was part of the webinar and the assignments:

Part of the course was for us...to go to our local authority website... which I wouldn't thought about doing or I would have been overwhelmed...but because of the webinar and what we were expected to put in our assignment, that really helped me. It made me realise there's so much more out there. ***Childminder, 10+ years' experience***

Early years setting outcomes

This chapter describes the practice examples related to improving to whole setting practices shared by trainees in the case study research. This includes changes trainees made to update individual SEND monitoring and whole setting processes, as well as time spent with their colleagues to share knowledge and skills of best practice. The section also describes the programme mechanisms related to changes at a setting level and key factors related to implementation.

Updating SEND monitoring and setting wide processes

Following the training programme, trainees improved both individual SEND monitoring processes and wider approaches in the setting to promote inclusivity and better developmental outcomes for all children. These actions ultimately aimed to make sure internal approaches reflected best practice and were inclusive. As well as aligning processes with current guidance, trainees were aware these changes would help the setting fulfil Ofsted requirements.

Trainees felt motivated and equipped to update SEND monitoring processes in the setting following the training programme. Their learning from the training programme had underlined the importance of high-quality evidence to support SEND referrals and applications for funding. Hearing advice from the trainer and other trainees, as well as having relevant toolkits and resources, facilitated trainees in implementing changes. Examples of changes that trainees made to improve SEND monitoring process included:

- Introducing an individual folder to contain evidence for each child, to make tracking developmental progress and collecting evidence for a potential referral easier.
- Simplifying internal forms, to reflect better practice seen in other LAs.
- Changing the focus of the targets in Individual Education Plans to be better aligned with development.
- Including details in monitoring about what individual children can do as well as areas of delays, to support constructive conversations with parents about the child's needs.
- A form for the keyworker to complete, which then notifies the SENCO of a specific area they would like help with.

Similarly, **trainees were motivated to review practices in the whole setting.** The training programme had promoted recommendations for best practice and the principle that all children can benefit from the setting promoting inclusive approaches. The trainees had also heard a range of ideas from other SENCOs working in settings like their own, which meant they had new ideas to test out after the training programme. Examples of whole setting improvements trainees made after the training programme included:

- Conducting a sensory audit for the room and then implementing changes, such as redecorating the room in colours better suited to those with visual impairments or in calming colours to reduce overstimulation.
- Reorganising the setting to include breakout areas to allow for different areas to support children.
- Creating a SEND resource area.
- Updating inclusion policies.
- Promoting reflective practice in the setting.

Trainees also **engaged strategic staff, managers and owners of settings in the value of SEND resources and frameworks**. This included sharing links from the training programme so the manager could access further information (e.g. Dingley's Promise) or making a business case to encourage management to invest in new resources as part of strategies used in the setting. Trainees needed management to understand why they suggested further training for the team, so it was important that trainees involved management in their planning and decision making for whole setting changes.

Overall, trainees reflected that improving monitoring process and whole setting practices was important in the context of more children having additional needs in the setting than previously, as well as inclusive group-activities and whole setting improvements having wider benefits on all children. Trainees and managers also reflected these changes meant that the setting was better placed to meet Ofsted requirements. Trainees reported that they had received specific feedback from Ofsted related to this. As one explained:

They [Ofsted] found that we were knowledgeable and knew how to get all of the required services involved and were pleased with how we were supporting our children and families... to let them know that we've now got this qualification, and they were really impressed.... they could tell we were confident in what we were doing and how to support the children. So that was a really big thing for us as a setting. ***Practitioner in group-based setting, 6-9 years' experience, aspiring SENCO***

Dedicated time with other staff sharing knowledge and upskilling

For trainees working in settings with colleagues (i.e., not sole trader childminders) a key takeaway was that the training programme promoted the value in involving others in SEND monitoring and support, rather than these processes needing to be the responsibility of the SENCO. Trainees viewed this message as a strength of the training programme and motivated the trainee to share learning with others and take time to build capacity amongst other staff.

Dedicated time with other staff helped to raise the profile and support understanding of

the SENCO role amongst staff in the setting. The focused time upskilling others increased capacity within the team to complete key processes and also contributed to increased staff confidence to support children with SEND and families. With an increased number of children with additional needs joining the setting, trainees acknowledged that increasing capacity was a priority to make sure all processes were followed correctly and in a timely way for children with SEND.

Examples of ways that trainees had improved SEND understanding and capacity in the setting, included:

- **Presenting on, or sharing training programme resources, at weekly staff meetings.** Some shared the resources from the online webinar in the weekly meeting after it happened. This meant others in the setting were learning alongside the trainee, which then helped the trainee discuss the ideas they had from the training programme and plan collaboratively other ways the setting could make changes. Other trainees selected specific ideas from the training programme, such as the graduated approach and then presented it at a staff meeting, along with planned changes for the setting.
- **Training children's keyworkers to complete SEND processes.** This included training on what was needed once the setting had identified the child had a need, i.e. the internal process the setting followed to set SMART targets for the child, and collect evidence related to their development and learning. Some trainees also trained other staff to complete external processes, including referrals to LAs or speech and language services. Trainees also shared advice with keyworkers on how to involve parents in these processes and strategies to use when approaching sensitive discussions.
- **Training an assistant SENCO to formally support in all aspects of the SENCO role.** Trainees took this approach when they realised that the volume of work was now greater than the time they had available. This could be because more children with SEND had joined the setting or because the trainee had an improved monitoring process since the training programme and there were now systems in place that could be delegated.

Benefits to the SENCO from improving the capacity amongst setting staff included:

- The wider staff **understood the basis for any further changes** the trainee proposed as there were similar levels of knowledge related to SEND and the SEND processes across the team.
- Trainees had **shared the increased workload related to SEND planning**, which meant the SENCO role remained manageable and effective.

Benefits to other staff from increasing their role in SEND processes, included:

- **Promoted the importance of the SENCO role and best practice in the setting and increased understanding of the SENCO responsibilities.** As a result, trainees thought that staff were now more likely to approach them with questions

or ask for help with a child if the staff had noticed a possible need.

- **Encouraged other staff to work as a team to support SEND.**
- **Increased confidence and morale among staff.** Trainees that had skilled up staff since the training programme noticed staff were empowered as they took on more responsibility in completing observations or engaging with parents. They also thought the staff had increased confidence in the SENCO, who they now perceived to be listening to needs they were raising about their key children and acting more on their behalf.

Trainees also thought that ultimately involving the child's keyworker in SEND monitoring was a **better process for the child**. The keyworker had a greater knowledge of the child's developmental needs, which would help them set appropriate targets as part of the monitoring. The keyworker also had an existing relationship with the parent, which meant they were well placed to support the parent throughout and could navigate sensitivities in the engagement.

Programme mechanisms related to setting outcomes

Trainees explained that the following programme mechanisms helped to make changes and improvements in their setting since the training programme:

Trainees reported that having **ongoing use of training programme resources meant they faced few barriers integrating ideas into processes and sharing with others**. Where links were shared on the training programme, trainees continued to have access for six months afterwards. This meant trainees continued to use them as reliable references in their day-to-day decision-making or as further inspiration for ideas. As one explained:

I found the study packs really useful as well in terms of how to support practitioners, you know things I've never really heard of before...like 'high and low incidents needs' and the four broad areas within SEND. I'm starting to use that more... it's been really useful for implementing new initiatives into the setting. ***Practitioner in group-based setting, aspiring SENCO, less than 10 years' experience***

Furthermore, trainees reported that the **displaying the certificate was useful to raise awareness about their new accreditation and to promote the inclusion practice within the setting**. Displaying the certificate in the setting prompted questions or discussion with parents and was useful evidence as part of an Ofsted inspection. Trainees thought it was good parents were aware of the qualification as it gave them assurances about how the setting approached support for children with SEND. As one explained:

It's (the training programme certificate) up and displayed and...two

parents have actually commented on it. So, we've made it more the visual certificate to say that we've got a trained SENCO person in the setting... we are an inclusive setting... we do have children with additional needs and that we are trained to look after children with additional needs. ***Practitioner in a group-based SENCO, aspiring SENCO, 10+ years' experience***

Factors related to implementing setting-level change

This section describes the main enablers and barriers related to implementing setting changes. Although there was good evidence that trainees used learning from the training programme to improve setting outcomes, there was variation in how much change was implemented amongst the trainees. In the post-survey, trainees reported that they expected the training programme to make a difference, but that it was too soon to say. In the follow up interviews, there was evidence that trainees had implemented some of the changes they had planned as time went on. However, in a second interview, up to six months after the training programme, there were still trainees who had implemented very little.

Enabling factors

Trainees that were able to implement a lot of changes in the setting after the training programme were helped by the following enabling factors:

Supportive management. Trainees that had good relationships with the manager or the owner of the setting faced fewer barriers explaining the rationale for prioritising investment in new resources or suggesting different strategies for the setting. Managers who were supportive were also more likely to protect the trainee's time outside of their room responsibilities, which enabled the SENCO to review, plan and implement setting changes.

Positive setting structures. Trainees were more likely to have time to implement changes in settings where there were high staff-to-child ratios. This meant that the trainee was able to take time out to do the strategic planning in the SENCO role. Where there were multiple SENCOs in a setting, trainees also found it helpful to discuss ideas from the training programme and plan what would work for the setting, together. Trainees who had taken part in the training programme with a colleague reflected that this made sharing ideas on next steps easier because both had similar levels of understanding. Finally, in settings where there was a manageable level of children with SEND, SENCOs had time to plan wider changes. here there were higher levels, the SENCO role was too busy to do much beyond the day-to-day monitoring and meetings.

Familiarity and positive relationships with key agencies. Trainees who had good existing engagement with key agencies, including speech and language services,

portage services, primary schools and other specialist health agencies, felt confident to put in place updated ways of working for their setting and able to be assertive in their viewpoints when needed.

External barriers to implementation

There were trainees that wanted to make changes following the training programme but had faced challenges in doing so. Key barriers related to implementing change, included:

Being a SENCO with competing priorities and limited time to implement change.

Trainees implemented much less change after the training programme if they had insufficient time in their role. This included:

- **Trainees with managerial responsibilities**, who had to prioritise other issues, most often resolving recruitment and retention challenges or handling complex family situations that required additional meetings. These trainees were typically experienced early years professionals who thought their settings followed the practices recommended in the training programme. Therefore, it would have only been small changes they would have made, which meant they were a lower priority.
- **Trainees with room responsibilities.** Trainees who were restrained by the time in the room, often due to staff shortages or tight room-ratios, meant that any changes the trainee wanted to make after the training programme were constrained to their individual practice or the room they worked in. Without sharing the benefits to other staff or the whole setting.

Limited access to new SEND resources. Trainees reported that buying new SEND resources was expensive and that budgets in settings were tight. This limited the extent to which the setting could implement new strategies before they had heard from the LA about the outcome from a funding application. This meant that trainees were restricted in what they could try out, although the training programme had been useful to hear from others that faced similar resources issues.

Inexperienced and temporary workforce limited whole setting improvements.

Settings with a high level of staff turnover often relied on agency staff. This meant that any improvements to setting processes or new support strategies were the responsibilities of the few permanent staff. They were the ones that the trainee could engage in capacity building or had participated in other training opportunities. However, this meant that it was only a small number of people involved in the processes. Trainees had to be reasonable about what additional processes they asked of others.

Trained SENCO left the setting. Finally, the longevity of outcomes from the training programme was limited if the trainee moved to another setting, taking their learning with them. The restrictions on training only one individual per setting, except in specific circumstances, meant that any replacement in the SENCO role would be unable to access the training programme. This was frustrating for managers who had seen the

benefits of having a trained SENCO.

Other reasons for limited change within the setting

There was also evidence of limited change in some settings because there was a lack of opportunity due to a low level of children with SEND or existing good practice.

Lack of opportunity due to low level of SEND in the setting. There were trainees that by the time of the second interview (six months after the end of the training) reported an increase in SEND since the first interview (immediately after the training), which have been due to an improvement in their skills identifying SEND, or a reflection of rising number of SEND generally. However, other trainees reflected that their experience in the setting remained the same and their main concern was they may need to do further training to maintain their level of knowledge whilst not using them day-to-day.

Good existing practice. These trainees reflected that most of what was covered in the training programme was in place in their setting already, prior to the training programme, and therefore few internal changes were needed to align internal processes with the recommendations. Trainees explained that either they or the setting manager had a strong interest in SEND, and it was already a priority.

Wider outcomes

The evaluation explored the benefits of the training programme beyond the trainee and their setting, including for children with SEND and their parents.

The qualitative data sources in this chapter include the feedback from the open text response in the post-survey, interviews with trainees and interviews with parents. However, given the small sample of parents in the evaluation, and all were recruited to the evaluation via the trainees, this evidence may reflect a limited range of views and mean there is positive bias in the feedback (full information page 112). Furthermore, there was no direct measurement of child outcomes in the evaluation. As such, these findings are indicative, and caution should be exerted in how directly or strongly they are associated with the training programme.

Children with SEND outcomes

This section describes the evidence related to outcomes for children with SEND. First it describes views from parents related to the short- and medium-term outcomes for their child, as stated in theory of change, and how this was related to the support from the setting. Second it describes views from trainees on the links between changes to their individual practice and setting processes, as a result of the training programme mechanism, with progress they had observed amongst children with SEND.

Overall, the triangulated evidence from the diary study, the post-training survey and qualitative research with the trainees, strengthens the likelihood that knowledge and skills from the training programme was successfully implemented to improve the quality of support for children with SEND.

Short-term child outcomes

The following were key areas parents noticed change for their child as a result of the support the child received from the trainee and the setting:

Child settled and engaged in early years learning. After a settling in period, parents described their child as happy and keen to attend the setting and with good attachment to the SENCO and the keyworker (if different roles):

[Child] really loves the nursery ...very often he doesn't even look at me when [child] goes inside the room, or sometimes...[child] waves me goodbye, you know, 'go away'. I want to play. **Parent**

[Child] has amazing relationships with a number of staff across the nursery which is really very special to see and hear about. **Parent**

[Child] was very comfortable, and I think the bonding is between [Childminder] is giving [child] the right support, and [child] feels very like safe and confident with [childminder]. **Parent**

Improved confidence and reduced frustration. Parents noticed change in their child's self-esteem, confidence and coping behaviour from when the child first joined the setting, which contributed to improvements at home too. Parents thought this was positive because the child was open to other learning activities, as well as reducing the parent's stress related to managing the child's challenging behaviour. As parents explained:

[Child] has grown in confidence enormously whilst he was at nursery.
Parent

[Child] kind of got to point that he will repeat something six times if he has to, but [child] is not ashamed of it... it's like oh well, I can't speak clearly, I'll to repeat it till someone gets it, so [child] doesn't get frustrated about it anymore. That was the biggest help. **Parent**

Accessing support from external agencies appropriately. Settings had also helped parents to engage with specialist services, including leading meetings with the service or supporting the parent to communicate with the service. Some children were too young for a diagnosis and other parents were on waiting lists. In the meantime, though parents were appreciative of what the setting was able to do to support their child:

There's not much more they [the setting] can do. The delays in external services are frustrating, but the nursery is doing everything they can.
Parent

Medium-term child outcomes

The following were areas parents noticed changes they had observed in their child over time, once the child was settled in the setting and had received support from the SENCO:

Progress in key SEND areas. Parents observed some progress in their child's development related to communication, social skills, and behaviour, as the child settled and engaged well in the setting activities. Parents acknowledged though that progress was slow, or that the child was still behind their peers. Parents reflected this was expected given the child's additional needs, and that supportive strategies in the setting, as well as being in a social environment with other children, were key to making sure that children continued to make this progress.

[Child]'s language has definitely come along... a lot more likely now to sit down and read a book. I wouldn't have thought a year ago that they'd be where they are now. **Parent**

When it started, [child] was 18 months behind (in his speech), and now [child] is six months behind. So, [child] is... starting to catch up. **Parent**

[Child]'s saying more words and starting to join in group activities. It's slow progress, but it's there. **Parent**

[Child]'s speech is still not clear when [child] says the words, but at least [child]'s doing so much from singing nursery rhymes or telling what [child] wants from making little sentences...It's a huge, huge improvement. **Parent**

Successful education transitions. Children who had started school had settled well and continued to progress in their social and communication skills. Where needed, parents reported that their child had an EHCP in place or were in the process of applying for one with support of the setting, ahead of the child starting school. Parents attributed the success of the change for the child to the support provided by the early years SENCO and the setting in preparing the child, as well as the dedicated time between the setting and the child's school as part of the supported transition phase. As one explained:

The school came to the nursery and the nursery went to the school... they did a definite handover period between the respective teachers and SENCOs.... everybody made a tremendous effort with [child]. I can't imagine anything more that they could have done. **Parent**

Programme mechanisms related to child outcomes

Trainees were asked in an open text question in the post-survey about the benefits of the training programme for children with SEND. Responses reflected the range of ways trainees felt better equipped to make sure children with SEND accessed appropriate support within the setting and from other agencies⁵⁴. In the interviews, trainees also gave examples of children they had worked with, who had benefited from the changes in knowledge, skills and confidence since the training programme. Examples of children making progress in their social skills, communication, wellbeing were shared by trainees in group-based settings and childminders:

[Child] is definitely now making more interaction with me... I think that's...because of this training ...it's giving me a bit more confidence.

Childminder, 10+ years' experience

⁵⁴ Responses included: having skills to identify additional needs earlier, across a whole range of SEN, and to be able to distinguish SEN from EAL needs; being better equipped to offer tailored or individualised support in the setting, increased awareness of available resources to find out additional information, better understanding of the processes involved in accessing support from an external agency, when needed; empowering other staff in the setting to support their key child, feeling confident to engage parents and others as part of the process, and the value in robust process for monitoring individual needs (i.e. setting SMART targets and implementing the Graduated Approach).

We had a little [child] with severe anxiety... through consistent support, [the child is] now engaging more and transitioning to school confidently.

Practitioner in group-based setting, 6-9 years' experience, designated SENCO

We have a little [child] with autism who's learning to handle sensory stimuli better—small steps, but they've made a big difference.

Practitioner in group-based setting, 10+ years' experience, designated SENCO

We have...incorporated changes to the environment and room space ...children with additional needs...they're settling, not necessarily quicker, but you know, the settling process is smooth, smoother than what it used to be. ***Practitioner in group-based setting, 10+ years' experience, designated SENCO***

In the diary study, there was evidence that trainees in group-based settings and childminders **continued to apply the knowledge and skills over the 12 months**, following the end of the training, suggesting sustainability to the changing practices described in the post-training survey and the interviews. Trainees gave examples of continuing to use specific ideas they had learnt in the training programme (e.g. sensory bag, visual aid box) to tailor their support for children and appropriately respond to their individual needs. Trainees also described in the diary study, **feeling more assured in different aspects of their SENCO role**. This included being in control of their decision making and the paperwork, confident in their ability to support children with additional needs, able to speak up and share views with others (including parents, setting staff and external agencies) and proactive in collecting evidence for an assessment or referral.

There were trainees in the interviews that were unable to share specific examples of children with SEND making progress. Either because there were no children with additional needs in the setting currently, or the trainee said that they had identified a need, but the child was either waiting for a diagnosis or for specialist support. Another reason trainees struggled to make progress with children in the setting was if there were more children with additional needs or more complex needs than they were used to. In these settings, trainees emphasised the importance of involving others in the monitoring processes as well as the steps to involve the LA to support the setting.

Parent outcomes

This section describes the evidence from the evaluation related to wider benefits to parents. Whilst these changes were linked to experiences related to the setting, these changes may be influenced by other factors too, and therefore not directly attributable to the training programme.

Improved parental understanding and support for the child's needs. Parents explained how signposting, practical guidance and emotional support from the early years setting improved their knowledge about their child's SEND and helped them cope with the child's needs. Advice from the setting also influenced parental support at home and encouraged some parents to offer consistent routines for the child.

Reduced parental anxiety. Parents reported that since the child had settled, they now felt comfortable to leave the child with others, where previously they felt unable to, due to the child's additional needs. This was important to the parent and continued to improve over time, as the parent became familiar with the setting. As one parent explained:

I was more anxious about starting than [child]...we had not been separated for two and half years ... they [staff at setting] were very good ...at alleviating anxiety...The nursery really helped me to trust others to look after [child] and build my confidence. **Parent**

Improved family dynamics and balance in their personal life. Parents described how since the child was settled in the setting there were wider benefits from having respite from caring responsibilities – including feeling 'recharged', able to spend time with other children or fulfil other caring roles with relatives. As one parent explained:

It's no exaggeration to say that their support kept us going as a family this year. **Parent**

Increased engagement in employment. Parents were able to pursue training and employment opportunities since the child was now attending the setting. This had financial and wellbeing benefits for the household. As one parent explained:

It's very hard to be in a meetings at home, over teams, when you have a kid sort of nagging you to do something and you are trying to concentrate on complicated discussion about something technical. So certainly, having her out of the way so I could just work, was a major advantage. You can't do a technical job and look after a child at the same time. **Parent**

Conclusions and recommendations

This final section provides a concluding summary of the evidence from the evaluation relating to engagement, delivery and outcomes of the training programme. It outlines key recommendations for DfE and BPN for future policy, training delivery and practice.

Overall, the Early Years SENCO Training Programme met DfE's objective to increase the number of qualified SENCOs working in the early years. The training programme supported improvements in trainees' knowledge, skills and confidence in the SENCO role. Trainees valued gaining a qualification and enjoyed the opportunity to network with other SENCOs nationally. Therefore, achieving DfE's main drivers for the training programme as well.

Reach

This was a popular training programme amongst early years SENCO practitioners. The demand exceeded DfE's expectations and BPN achieved all their performance targets. A widely shared view from LA and early years stakeholders was that rising needs amongst pre-school aged children, meant there was a need for a knowledgeable and skilled SENCO workforce. As such, early years SENCOs need access to high quality, in-depth and relevant training to equip them for the role; and to avoid practitioners solely relying on gaining experience through 'on the job' learning.

Although the training programme was only open to early years practitioners in PVI settings (including childminders), BPN and LA stakeholders confirmed there was interest from SENCOs working in state-maintained early years settings, who were excluded from this training programme. LA stakeholders suggested, that for there to be consistent, high-quality practice across all early years settings, state-maintained nurseries would benefit from completing the same in-depth course on the early years SENCO role.

DfE's aspiration that this training programme focused on LAs most in need after the pandemic was met. Half the delivery happened in the 70 target LAs, with a third in the areas most in need. However, there was mixed evidence on whether DfE's deprivation rating established at the start of programme delivery, was still relevant. In the context of increasing demand for SEND support nationally, there was evidence of more change in areas of low deprivation, particularly related to statutory support applications (EHCPs). Equally, whilst setting deprivation was associated with certain challenges in the SENCO role, trainees working in settings with higher deprivation engaged the same in the training programme and achieved similar levels of knowledge, skills and confidence as trainees working elsewhere.

- Recommendation for DfE - **Eligibility for the current training programme could be broadened** to include state-maintained settings to make sure there is a consistent qualification and high-quality practice in all early years settings.

- Recommendation for DfE - **Any targeting of LAs should focus on level of SEND or demand for statutory and non-statutory SEND funding**, rather than social deprivation.

Engagement

The opportunity to gain an accredited qualification was a key driver in early years SENCOs completing this training programme. This was especially true for aspiring SENCOs (those new to or due to take up the SENCO role), childminders and those with less than 10 years' experience in the early years. In practice, trainees explained that having the qualification changed how assertively they engaged with other staff, parents and external agencies. Trainees also thought having a qualification improved how parents responded to their advice and how Ofsted appraised the setting's approach to SEND, both of which they thought were important.

However, there was a mixed picture in how well early years practitioners engaged in the training programme. Whilst trainees valued the convenience of taking part online and liked that parts of the course could be completed in their own time, others thought four months was too short to complete the work and that there was little time to catch up if they fell behind. Trainees working fulltime, often in group-based settings with additional responsibilities, were the most challenged. Given the differences in how the early years SENCO role is operationalised and past qualifications, it was perhaps expected that some trainees would struggle to complete the course more than others. Although BPN was able to offer some accommodations to maximise the chance of all trainees achieving the qualification, this was limited by requirements of the accreditation and the extent to which trainees could be released from their setting to complete the qualification.

Furthermore, a fifth of eligible practitioners that registered for the training programme dropped out, with a third citing capacity and a lack of time as the reason. The evaluation had no direct feedback from this group and was therefore unable to reflect fully on reasons for dropping out beyond the information shared by BPN for monitoring purposes. All feedback about the training programme, gathered by this evaluation, was from trainees that had successfully completed the course. Understanding reasons for leaving is key to making sure any future training programme is suitable and accessible for all.

- Recommendation for DfE - **Future training opportunities should continue to be online and as flexible as possible.** Additional flexibilities beyond what was offered to date could include the option to complete the qualification part time or a longer period to complete the self-directed or final assignment components.
- Recommendation for delivery partner - **Tailored support packages could be offered to early years practitioners that may need more help to complete the course than others, such as those new to the role or with lower levels of digital skills.** This could include an optional recap session with the trainer for

aspiring SENCOs, who may need more time to assimilate new information. For those that may have difficulties completing the work independently or the assignment, could be offered a higher level of contact time with a mentor or assessor.

- Recommendation for DfE - **Independent feedback with early years practitioners that dropped out of the training programme is needed to fully understand the reasons for doing so.** This would help to highlight if there was any major issue with the course or if specific support packages could be offered to help with engagement.

Delivery

Overall, the delivery of this training programme went as planned with only minor suggestions from trainees on ways it could be improved. Some of these may be feasible in the next iteration of the training programme, such as better management of breakout room discussions, slightly shorter taught modules, more responsive support from mentors and more timely feedback from assessors. However, as an accredited qualification, aligned with the SEND code of practice, much of the content of the modules is likely to remain fixed.

The national cohorts within the training programme proved a key successful way for trainees to network. Trainees heard ideas from SENCOs working in others LA, which inspired their SEND support practice and meant trainees reflected differently about their own Local Offer. There was a supportive element to the national cohorts too, as SENCOs learnt challenges they experienced were shared nationally rather than a specific issue for their setting or LA. This was important for trainees who reflected that the demands of the role or isolated ways of working - in group-based settings and as childminders - meant there was little opportunity to discuss their experiences with others. The four regional programme conferences also seemed to work well, as an optional way to bring together trainees and sector stakeholders in-person (although none of the trainees interviewed in the evaluation mentioned that they had attended one).

There were, however, trade-offs in having a national training programme. Whilst able to cover local SEND processes to some extent, the current approach relied on SENCOs applying understanding of local process through course assignments or further independent research and background reading. There was also reservation towards the training programme amongst LA stakeholders. Some had chosen not to promote the BPN training programme, preferring SENCOs to train locally. Whereas others, recognising the limitations of a national approach, had adapted their training offer to follow on from the national programme and thought this was a good adaptation to make. There were also early years practitioners that engaged with the training programme independently, and their LA stakeholder representative was unaware it was even on offer locally. This may be related to the use of social media in engaging trainees in the training

programme. Whatever their involvement, LA stakeholders were clear that SENCOs need an understanding of local SEND support processes and pathways to write effective funding applications and engage local services, alongside understanding the national guidance.

- Recommendation for DfE - **Any training programme should have clear strategy to join up with LAs or other local early years networks (e.g. Stronger Practice Hubs).** This is to support effective promotion of the training programme in all areas, as well as making sure settings have access to any follow-on training or support. LAs in particular have a key role in working with early years settings, they commonly share information about training opportunities and should have direct links with all settings.

Outcomes

This was a theory-based evaluation that used mixed methods evidence to explore the extent to which outcomes were attributable to the training programme.

The strongest evidence was at the trainee level, with improvements in knowledge, skills and confidence. These outcomes were likely due to the training programme based on feedback from the trainees on key programme mechanisms and compared to a qualitative comparison of experiences of non-trainees. There was also supportive promising evidence that trainees were implementing improved whole setting practices, although this depended, in part, on how much support the SENCO had in the setting and how much change was needed, in terms of quality of existing practice and level of SEND.

The strength of evidence for wider outcomes (children with SEND and their parents) was lower in this evaluation compared to outcomes for the trainees and settings. Whilst there was evidence of positive change for children and parents, these should be treated as indicative of the benefits that a qualified SENCO can bring to a setting, rather than definitive of any longer-term change brought about by the training programme.

One addition to the ToC, based on the evaluation evidence, was to include an outcome related to children with SEND attending an early years setting. The first version of the ToC reflected only outcomes as a result of support offered within the setting (i.e. reduced frustration, improved confidence, progress in development); whereas the updated version reflected the role of the SENCO in helping the child to settle into the nursery as well, meaning the child was engaged in early years learning. Parents reflected on this settling in stage in the interviews, as well some reported that they had disengaged from settings previously, where the parent felt their child's needs were not properly supported. Therefore recognising the child's attendance, as well developmental outcomes, in the ToC, highlights the link between improving the knowledge and skills amongst early years SENCOs and inclusion within PVI settings for children with SEND, as well as just the potential for improving behavioural and developmental outcomes.

- Recommendation for DfE – **Further research around parental experience of children identified with SEND in the early years.** In particular understanding parent views on common issues for them, which is then important to inform strategies for early years SENCOs communicating with and supporting parents.

Aspiring SENCOs and childminders

Although, there was a high level of satisfaction amongst trainees that completed the training programme, there were small but significant differences in ratings, suggesting that some trainees may have enjoyed the training programme or benefited more from it, than others.

Aspiring SENCOs gave higher ratings for engagement and content. They were more likely to attribute the training programme as a factor influencing their decision to stay in the sector and also gained more in certain areas of knowledge than those already in the role. Having accessed the qualification aspiring SENCOs felt confident in all aspects of the role, including identifying SEND correctly, being appropriately assertive with parents and external agencies and able to raise awareness of SEND and train other staff in the setting.

Given the feedback from trainees and LA stakeholders, that without training early years SENCOs would likely only gain skills over time from 'on the job' exposure, accessing an accreditation that provides robust foundational knowledge seems key to supporting a SENCO work effectively soon into their appointment. Furthermore, in the context of increasing rates of SEND, evidenced in the evaluation and corroborated by the Early Years Census data, it is paramount that all early years SENCOs are confident and effective in the role. Going forwards there may be more incidences to respond to, including in settings that historically have had only a few children with SEND.

Childminders as a group rated their experiences of the training programme less favourably than trainees working in group-based settings. Whilst childminders valued the opportunity to engage in the training programme, and gained knowledge, skills and confidence as a result; they wanted content more relevant to their setting. Typically, childminders have few or no colleagues and therefore have the responsibility to identify SEN before involving any other professional. Childminders also have the potential for closer relationships with parents than the early years SENCO in a group-based setting, who may be working with the parent through a child's keyworker.

More generally, the evaluation found indicative evidence that childminders may experience different levels of access to LA advice and support. However, this was based on feedback from only a small number of LA stakeholders and therefore warrants further exploration. Furthermore, not all childminder settings had a SENCO before taking part in the training programme. This may be due to the SEND code of practice as childminders are encouraged, rather than expected to identify a SENCO, as group-based settings are.

Again, this warrants further exploration, as there could be ambiguity in the childminder responsibilities related to SEND if they have not formally identified a SENCO.

- Recommendation for DfE - **Childminders could benefit from having dedicated SENCO training opportunities, rather than joint with group-based settings.** This would better acknowledge the differences between the setting types, in identifying and support SEND, and the responsibilities related to the national guidance.
- Recommendation for DfE – **Further research into childminder engagement and experiences accessing SEND funding and LA support** is needed to confirm any differences from group-based settings and whether there are any gaps in what is available to help identify and support SEND.

Annex 1. Training programme delivery and content

DfE contracted BPN to deliver the training programme along with their delivery partners Elklan, Kid's Planet, Snapdragons and London Early Years Foundation Nursery Chains, Bristol Local Authority, Derbyshire Local Authority, Durham County Council and Telford and Wrekin Local Authority and National Day Nurseries Association.

Each month a new cohort started the training programme comprised of several learner groups (average 25 trainees per learner group). Each learner group was supported by a lead tutor, a support tutor, a mentor and an e-portfolio assessor.

Trainees completed the programme over a four-month period⁵⁵, with the option of six months offered to allow for flexibility around self-employment or part-time working arrangements. 100 per cent attendance was a requirement of the training programme. In the early phase of implementation programme delivery.

The training programme content was delivered online through a combination of:

- **Facilitated group sessions** – this included four three-hour sessions comprising expert facilitation of whole and small group practice activities, discussions, and case study analyses.
- **Mentoring** – this included two sessions of one-to-one calls between the trainee and a mentor to focus on progress and impact on self and setting.
- **Self-guided study** – this included core content for the training programme, plus optional activities determined by individual/setting need.
- **Wider enrichment** – this included a group discussion forum, communities of good practice, expert-led recorded presentations.

Core training units included:

- **the role and responsibilities of the SENCO in early years.** This covered the principles, statutory guidance and legislation underpinning practice for children with SEND in an early years setting; the role of the early years SENCO, partnership working for the early years SENCO, and early identification and action for children with SEND.
- **strategies and techniques for supporting children and families.** This covered the graduated approach in an early years settings, English as an Additional Language, EHCPs and reflective practice as an early years practitioner.

⁵⁵ During the first year of deliver, BPN extended the training programme to six months for all trainees and eligibility was restricted to only one practitioner per setting.

Annex 2. Early Years SENCO Training Programme Theory of change

Situation	<p>The COVID-19 pandemic reduced early years settings' capacity to identify and support children with SEND, with children and families in disadvantaged areas most affected. Early action to address these needs was critical to prepare children for school, support their progress and future outcomes, and transition to adult life. In 2022, there were not enough qualified early years SENCOs to build capacity in settings to respond to this need.</p> <p>The early years sector also faced retention and recruitment changes. The early years sector's capacity challenges were expected to be further stretched with the expansion to free early education entitlements, adding further pressure to early years practitioners and SENCOs. The early years SENCO training programme aimed to address these workforce challenges and build capacity within settings to better support children with SEND and their families.</p>
Aims	<p>Increase the number of qualified SENCOs available to children in group-based early years settings and in the care of childminders.</p> <p>Contribute to accurate SEND identification and contribute to appropriate and coordinated support for children with SEND.</p> <p>Qualified SENCOs will be more confident, competent and capable to support children with SEND, their families and the workforce within their settings.</p>

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes	Impacts
<p>Three-year COVID recovery period</p> <p>DfE programme funding</p> <p>DfE staff</p> <p>BPN management team, the candidate and partner support tutors, mentors and assessors</p> <p>BPN delivery partners (including Kids planet, Elklan, select LAs)</p> <p>BPN materials and resources</p> <p>Partnerships with LAs and sector specialists</p>	<p>DfE setup: Set funding parameters (e.g., to target areas of disadvantage), promote training via LAs and early years providers, align delivery with SEND Green Paper.</p> <p>DfE management: including management of supplier contract and ongoing management and engagement with programme stakeholders.</p> <p>BPN Programme set-up: recruit staff, gather evidence to inform design and content of materials and resources, create materials and resources (including the virtual learning environment), establish relationships with LAs and wider sector, advertise programme to early years sector, establish funding criteria.</p>	<p>7,000 Early Years SENCOs trained and accredited</p> <p>Minimal dropout (rate 3 per cent)</p> <p>50 per cent of training delivered to Early Years SENCOs in disadvantaged settings.</p> <p>Minimum delivery targets per LA met.</p> <p>90 per cent of trainees report strong positive impacts on their practice.</p> <p>80 per cent of early years setting managers report a positive impact on SEND practice in their setting.</p>	<p>Early Years SENCOs</p> <p>Increased knowledge of child development, SEND and SENCO responsibilities</p> <p>Improved professional confidence in SENCO role</p> <p>Increased understanding of the benefit of CPD</p> <p>Increased job satisfaction</p> <p>Settings</p> <p>Individual SEND monitoring aligned with best practice</p> <p>Inclusive setting-wide strategies</p>	<p>Early Years SENCOs</p> <p>Improved skills in early SEND identification and support, resourcing additional information, involving external agencies and communicating with parents</p> <p>Motivated to engage in future CPD opportunities</p> <p>Motivated to stay in SENCO role and in the EY sector</p> <p>Settings</p> <p>Increased SEND knowledge and confidence in SENCO amongst early years practitioners</p> <p>Increased support and investment in SEND from setting management</p>

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes	Impacts
	<p>BPN Application Management: manage applications and employer statement, complete SENCO eligibility checks, manage application waitlist.</p> <p>BPN Training: deliver Level 3 accredited training over two years consisting of 24 guided learning hours, 36 hours total qualification time. Training delivered flexibly over 4 months (including at evenings and weekends with extension periods granted if necessary). Training comprised: online facilitated modules (4 x 3hours), mentoring calls (2 x 1-2-1 calls), online training (core + optional activities), online enrichment activities (e.g., group forums), e-portfolio assessment, networking forums and conferences.</p> <p>BPN Workforce Management: training / ongoing support of training</p>	<p>Accredited training materials and resources available to Early Years SENCOs in the long term and Intellectual Property Rights to sit with the DfE.</p> <p>Discussion forums remain active for trainees to maintain networks.</p> <p>Five annual EY networking and best practice conferences open to trainees and wider EY sector.</p>	<p>Raised profile of SENCO and SEND support in the setting</p> <p>Children Settled and engaged in early years learning</p> <p>Accessing external agencies appropriately</p> <p>Increased confidence and self-esteem, less frustration, and better emotional coping mechanisms</p> <p>Parents Increased confidence in early years setting's support for children with SEND</p>	<p>Improved setting capacity to support children with SEND and better use of available funding</p> <p>Improved partnerships with parents, educational settings and other agencies</p> <p>Better placed to meet Ofsted requirements</p> <p>Children Progress in key SEND areas (including communication and interaction, cognition and health, social, emotional and mental health, and sensory or physical needs)</p> <p>Successful education transitions</p>

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes	Impacts
	<p>workforce and partner, develop sector partnerships.</p> <p>External quality assurance: compliance with NCFE assessment moderation standards.</p> <p>Internal quality assurance: BPN-run board meetings with partners and experts to reflect on delivery each term; obtain Direct Claim Status approval.</p>		<p>Improved partnership working between setting and parents of children with SEND</p> <p>External agencies Receive appropriate applications for SEND funding & EHCPs</p> <p>Receive appropriate referrals for specialist support</p>	<p>Parents Improved knowledge of SEND, reduced anxiety, consistent home/setting SEND support, improved family dynamics, improved access to employment</p>

Assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Settings have an interest in and engage with the programme. • Settings able to release staff to complete the training and/or flexible provision where release is not possible • SENCOs able to complete the work on the programme. • Training content is relevant to all eligible early years practitioners • Trainee shares learning amongst non-SENCO setting staff and builds setting's capacity to better identify /support children with SEND • Improved SENCO/staff practice and whole-setting approach to SEND translates into families being better able to access the wider services that they need to, when they need to • Staff remain at their setting/ in the early years sector after completing the programme
Risks to delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Settings have an interest in and engage with the programme. • Settings able to release staff to complete the training and/or flexible provision where release is not possible • SENCOs able to complete the work on the programme. • Training content is relevant to all eligible early years practitioners • Trainee shares learning amongst non-SENCO setting staff and builds setting's capacity to better identify /support children with SEND • Improved SENCO/staff practice and whole-setting approach to SEND translates into families being better able to access the wider services that they need to, when they need to • Staff remain at their setting/ in the early years sector after completing the programme
External risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job satisfaction for early years practitioners is linked to wider contextual factors outside of the impacts of this programme. • Better qualified early years practitioners leave their setting/ early years sector. • Families face long waiting times for external services despite early identification and referrals

Annex 3. Methodology and data sources

The mixed method evaluation of the Early Years SENCO Training Programme took place between August 2022 and March 2025. This section provides a full description of the data sources and main study limitations.

Overview data sources

The findings in this report are based on mixed methods data sources (summarised in Table 17).

Table 17 Evaluation data sources and samples

Data source	Sample and notes
Strategic interviews	Start and end of evaluation <ul style="list-style-type: none">two interviews with BPN, two with DFEone with NASEN⁵⁶
Trainee survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Pre survey response rate = 3214 (45 per cent of those that registered for the training programme.Post survey response rate = 1,156 (21 per cent of those that completed the training programme.Matched pre and post (those that completed both surveys) = 737 (13 per cent of those that completed the training programme.
Qualitative case studies	12 regional case studies, comprising: <ul style="list-style-type: none">49 trainee interviews18 non-trainee interviews6 setting manager interviews11 parent interviews13 local authority stakeholder interviews
SENCO diary study	Monthly diary over a 12-month period monitoring of the early years SENCO role (four trainees and four non-trainees)
Monitoring information (MI)	Descriptive analysis of programme MI (data provided by BPN)
Secondary data analysis of the Early Years Census NPD⁵⁷	Analysis of trends in early years SEND context in 2022 and 2024 (prior to and since the training)

⁵⁶ [Home page | Nasen](#)

⁵⁷ Early years census data: An administrative dataset with information on children attending any private, voluntary and independent sector nursery with one or more children receiving funding from the DfE.

Qualitative data collection and samples

The main data collection methods and samples sources are summarised in Table 18, with details on each summarised afterwards.

Table 18 Methods and achieved sample

Participant group	Achieved sample	Method
Strategic stakeholders	5	Qualitative interviews
Trainee (pre-training)	3,214	Online survey
Trainee (post-training)	1,156	Online survey
Trainee (post-training)	35	Case study research
Trainee (follow-up)	14	
Additional staff	6	
Parent	11	
Local authority	13	
Non-trainee	18	Qualitative interviews
Trainee (12 months)	4	Diary study
Non-trainee (12 months)	4	

Theory of change and logic model

Ecorys conducted three online theory of change workshops attended by DfE and BPN and developed a visual logic model after each workshop.

- First workshop (October 2022) confirmed the key components of the programme, including inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes, as well as the context, assumptions and risks affecting delivery. The evaluation team used this first theory of change to inform research tool development and to shape the outcomes explored in the survey and qualitative research.
- Second workshop (December 2023) refined all aspects of the model based on learning from the first year of training programme delivery.
- Third workshop (January 2025) focused on the outcomes in the theory of change and the extent there was evidence to support them and potential programme mechanisms.

Strategic interviews

Five strategic interviews were conducted in this evaluation. This included:

- Three in the first year of the evaluation in October 2022, with DfE, BPN and NASEND. The interviews focused on the rationale for the training programme, its design and, main challenges related to the SENCO role and the early years sector generally.
- Two in November 2024, with DfE and BPN were conducted. These interviews focused on learning from programme delivery, achieving its targets and programme results.

Online survey

Table 19 includes the descriptive statistics for the pre- and post- survey samples by trainee experience, region, setting type, rural-urban classification and DfE's definition of deprivation. 3,214 trainees completed the pre-training survey at the first sessions of the training programme (45 per cent response rate, based on total trainee registrations). 1,156 trainees completed the post-training survey the final sessions before the trainee had completed the assignment (21 per cent response rate, based on total completers). There were 737 matched pairs between the pre and post survey, with similar proportions of trainees from the different setting types, regions, level of experience or deprivation.

Table 19 Descriptive statistics for pre- and post- surveys

Demographic categories	Pre-survey	Pre-survey	Matched pairs	Matched pairs
Setting type	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)
PVI	2477	77%	561	76%
Childminder	513	16%	126	17%
Other	224	7%	50	7%
EY experience (Pre-survey)				
Less than a year	34	1%	8	1%
1 to 2 years	113	4%	21	3%
3 to 5 years	411	13%	70	9%
6 to 9 years	603	19%	123	17%
10 years or more	2053	64%	515	70%
EY experience (subgroup)				
Less than 10 years	1161	36%	222	30%

Demographic categories	Pre-survey	Pre-survey	Matched pairs	Matched pairs
10 or more years	2053	64%	515	70%
SENCO status (BPN MI)				
Designated SENCO	1843	63%	478	65%
Due to take up the role	941	32%	219	30%
Aspiring SENCO	149	5%	38	5%
SENCO status (subgroup)				
Aspiring SENCO	1090	37%	352	34%
Current designated SENCO	1843	63%	672	66%
Region				
South East	685	21%	153	21%
North West	431	13%	94	13%
South West	388	12%	103	14%
London	359	11%	82	11%
Yorkshire and the Humber	353	11%	76	10%
West Midlands	330	10%	78	11%
East of England	277	9%	68	9%
East Midlands	260	8%	55	7%
North East	131	4%	28	4%
Rural urban classification				
Predominantly Urban	1744	54%	408	55%
Urban with Significant Rural	937	29%	194	26%
Predominantly Rural	533	17%	134	18%
Setting level Deprivation Decile (IDACI Score)	MI Data N = 2915	MI Data %	MI Data N=1019	MI Data %
1	222	8%	65	6%
2	255	9%	82	8%
3	264	9%	86	8%
4	297	10%	101	10%

Demographic categories	Pre-survey	Pre-survey	Matched pairs	Matched pairs
5	280	10%	113	11%
6	292	10%	108	11%
7	323	11%	113	11%
8	340	12%	131	13%
9	336	12%	127	12%
10	306	10%	93	9%
LA Deprivation				
Low	1374	43%	307	42%
Medium	693	22%	167	23%
High	1147	36%	263	35%

Source: Ecorys pre and post surveys

Case study research with early years settings

49 in-depth interviews with trainees were completed, including 35 interviews after the training programme and 14 follow up interviews around six months later. Trainees worked across 35 early years settings, group-based settings (n = 28) and childminders (n = 7), based in 28 local authorities across the nine regions in England (Southwest, Northwest, West Midlands, Southeast, East Midlands, East of England and Yorkshire and Humber, London, Northeast). Trainees had between five and 20+ years' experience. Most of those working in group-based setting were the designated SENCO role, but some were new to the role. Others worked as the deputy SENCO, were due to take up the role or planned to support SENCOs after they completed the training programme. Most trainees in group-based settings also held additional responsibilities in the setting including, managers, deputy managers, designated safeguarding lead and inclusion officers. Of the childminders, four were a sole trader. The other three were childminder assistants working in supporting role in the setting.

Six additional roles were included from the early years settings, including managers and other staff working in the setting who not taken part in the training. This aspect of the research of the research was more challenging, for sole-trader childminders there was no other perspective from the setting, in other cases, the trainees were able to find another person who had the time to take part in the research.

11 parents were included in the evaluation. These parents had children aged three and four in PVI settings, including nurseries and pre-schools (n = 9) and childminders (n = 2). The parent's children SEND included, autism spectrum disorders, suspected ADHD,

deafness, speech delay, cerebral palsy and chromosomal differences. Some children had started school with an EHCP, others had an EHCP whilst they were in the early year settings. There were also parents that had no EHCP in place.

13 Local authority stakeholders were included in the evaluation, with at least one LA from each of the nine England regions (two from the Southeast and two from the Southwest).

In-depth qualitative interviews with non-trainees

18 in depth interview with non-trainees were completed, including interviews with early years practitioners in group-based settings (n = 11) and childminders (n = 7). All were working in the SENCO role and held at least a Level 3 qualification. Some of the participants had higher qualification including level 4, qualified teacher status and bachelor's degrees.

Non-trainees were recruited via BPN, who advertised the research opportunity with a network of EY practitioners that had engaged in EY SENCO training programme but had not taken up the course. Ecorys screened potential non-trainee contacts to make sure all those included in the study were: 1) currently working as a SENCO in an eligible setting – e.g. group-based setting or as a childminder, 2) had a Level 3 childcare qualification, and 3) neither themselves nor another EY practitioner in their setting had completed the EY SENCO Training programme.

Diary study

The purpose of the diary study was to collect qualitative data on practice examples from the EY SENCO role over the course of a year, across different types of Early Years settings (PVI, childminders and pre-schools). The diary study included trainees and non-trainees. The aim was to explore using qualitative evidence the difference the EY SENCO training programme made to SENCO practice over the course of a year, above what would have happened anyway.

10 participants were recruited to the study, including six trainees working in PVI settings and 4 working as childminders, although two participants (one trainee and one non-trainee) dropped out before completing a submission. There was representation from seven regions in England (no representation for the Northeast or East Midlands).

Trainees were recruited to the study via the post-survey in the evaluation. Non trainees were recruited via the delivery partner (Best Practice Network) and Ecorys screened potential non-trainee contacts to make sure all those included in the study were similar to trainees in their background. Participants received a total of £240 in vouchers, as a thank you for their continued involvement in the study, paid at three months, six months and 12 months.

Trainees and non-trainees were asked to submit one online diary entry per month for 12 months (September 2023 to August 2024). The questions in each month were the same. There was consistency in the format between trainees and non-trainees. Most questions were asked to both groups. A small number of additional questions were asked to trainees only: *Did you use the skills or knowledge gained from the EY SENCO training programme in these examples? If yes, please add details on what you did and what difference it made*

86 diary submissions (71 per cent response rate) were submitted in total. One further trainee left the early years sector during the study, completing only four of the 12 submissions. Another non-trainee only completed 10 of the 12 submissions - one month missed completely and another combined two months due to capacity issues during that period. A quarter of submissions (n = 22) were classified by participants as “not typical” months for the setting. Across trainees and non-trainees, not-typical months related to difficulties in managing higher numbers of children with SEND and additional needs, additional transition work, sickness and holidays, and fluctuations in child/staff attendance.

Study limitations

All studies have their limitations. The key limitations of this study are:

Fewer parents than hoped engaged in this evaluation. In part this was due to low numbers of SEND in the setting and settings therefore unable to suggest multiple parents as part of the case study. Capacity reasons may also have limited the extent trainees were able to engage parents in the research. The small sample of parents limited the extent to which this perspective is reflected the evaluation. However, the achieved sample of parents is comprised of those with children with a range of SEND needs and experiences of different types of early years settings (group based and childminders), and from different LAs in England.

Furthermore, as the recruitment route was via the trainees will likely have contributed to positive bias in the findings, due to trainees being unlikely to suggest parents where there were challenging relationships with the setting. The parents that engaged in the evaluation all reported a high level of satisfaction with support from the setting and the SENCO, suggesting there was bias in experience towards positive feedback on the settings.

Given these limitations, caution should be applied in interpreting these findings are outcomes from the training programme. Instead, the value in the data is illustrating the difference high quality SEND support in early years setting can have on parents rather than any direct impact of the training programme.

Low number of LA stakeholders participated in an interview. Although there was representation from at least one LA per each of the nine regions in England, fewer LAs

agreed to take part in an interview than were contacted by the research team. This low response may limit the generalisability of findings to all LAs in England. Despite this, the final LA sample was varied in their feedback, including a range of different priorities and processes related to working with early years setting and on the training programme. Importantly there was evidence of high and low awareness and involvement with the training programme and diverse experiences working with BPN. This suggests some breadth in the findings related to LA engagement, which was important to the evaluation.

All findings about child outcomes reflect trainee and parent perceptions, rather than direct and objective observation or measurement of changes in children. This was due to the ages of children receiving support in early years settings (under 5).

Missing perspective from trainees that dropped out. The report includes total number of those that registered, completed and withdrew from the training programme, but there is limited further information about this group. This is important particularly when considering both the experiences of the training programme format and delivery, as the feedback only includes those that successfully completed the course and may miss key feedback on elements that were challenging from those that dropped out. However, anecdotal feedback was that most dropouts from the training programme were due to external factors, such as illness, maternity leave and leaving the early years sector. Where BPN were able to offer flexibility in the training programme, such as offering extensions, they did so to encourage completion.

Lower than anticipated response to the post-training survey, despite additional effort by the evaluation team and BPN in the final year to boost response rates. Although this has potential to limit the generalisability of the findings to all the trainees that completed the training programme, the size of the sample was sufficient to conduct sub-group analysis using the post-training data. There was also reasonable representative split between the different types of trainees and no differences in the proportion of background characteristics between the pre and post survey samples. This suggests that similar people took part in the survey at both time point, which again strengthens the evidence.

Study adaptations

The general election in July 2024 meant minor changes were required to the fieldwork phases, as the evaluation team were permitted to collect both survey or interview data during the pre-purdah period. When fieldwork resumed the evaluation team agreed with DfE to focus only on the post-training interviews within the remaining time, rather than the follow up, due to limited time before the fieldwork finished in September 2025.

Most trainees were recruited to the research via the post-training survey. However, two trainees were recruited via BPN, due to low numbers in the Northeast consenting to follow up research in the survey.

Eight of the LAs were recruited through the case study research, based on details shared by BPN or DfE. However, five were recruited via BPN, who shared contact details for LAs that had been involved in the training programme delivery as assessor, mentors and trainers. In part this was to make sure there was representation of the range of roles LAs held in the training programme and also to supplement the LA sample.

Analysis

Survey analysis

The evaluation team systemically analysed the data from the interviews and the surveys. For the online survey data, the data was cleaned and analysed using SPSS. The evaluation team ran descriptive statistics (frequencies and crosstabulations) to explore results and statistical tests where appropriate. In addition, the evaluation tested differences between four key groups of trainees (Table 20) (full details of in Annex 7)

Table 20 Descriptions of four sub-groups of trainees

Trainee groups	Comparisons between	Data notes
Setting type	Group-based settings compared with childminders	BPN MI. Pre-schools, playgroups and nurseries were combined into the group base category.
SENCO status	Aspiring SENCOs compared with Designated SENCO	BPN MI. Aspiring SENCOs combined trainees that were due to take up the role and those new to the role. Designated SENCOs was a separate category.
Early years experience	10 or more years' experience in the early years compared to less than 10 years' experience in early years	Ecorys pre-training survey. Trainees were asked their number of years' experience. The upper limit was 10+ years.
Setting deprivation	Setting deprivation based on the setting postcode and its corresponding Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) Decile ⁵⁸	Office of National Statistics data (score 1-10) combined with BPN MI for the setting postcode.

Qualitative analysis

All qualitative interviews were carried out via Microsoft Teams or telephone and were

⁵⁸ Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) measures the proportion of all children aged 0 to 15 living in income deprived families.

audio-recorded with participant permission. The evaluation team used the recordings and auto-generated transcripts to write detailed interview notes. The interview data was managed and analysed thematically using a mix of inductive and deductive coding in NVIVO and then supported with a framework analysis in Microsoft Excel. Data was triangulated across the data collection methods and participant groups.

Annex 4. Key skills and responsibilities of early years SENCO

Table 21 Early Years SENCO key responsibilities and skills

Area of SENCO role	Key skills and responsibilities
Ensuring all practitioners in the setting understand their responsibilities to children with SEN and the setting's approach to identifying and meeting SEN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess own skills and competencies, identify any gaps and next steps in professional development. • Reflect on own practice. • Identify and use professional development opportunities, including training and other sources of support, to address own development needs. • Understand the principles underpinning Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plans. • Explain what and how records should be maintained and used to track progress and achieve the best possible educational and other outcomes for children.
Advising and supporting colleagues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and support practitioners to develop their expertise in relation to SEN to ensure practitioners have the relevant skills and knowledge, e.g. induction of new staff, their responsibilities to children with SEN, the setting's approach to identifying and meeting SEN. • How the setting works in partnership with parents/carers to identify a child as having SEN. • How the practitioner and the SENCO agree, in consultation with the child and the child's parents/carers. • The outcomes they are seeking for the child, assessing their skills, competencies, and next steps in professional development in relation to particular impairments. • Identifying and using training and other sources of

Area of SENCO role	Key skills and responsibilities
	support available locally help them in explaining the duties to colleagues.
Ensuring parents are closely involved throughout and that their insights inform action taken by the setting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing information. • Advice and support for parents to participate in the SEN decision-making. • Involve parents throughout process and ensure that their insights inform action taken by the setting. • Involve parents in the discussion of any early concerns in identifying any SEN, and agreeing the outcomes being sought for the child, the interventions and support to be put in place, the expected impact on progress, development. Behaviour. • Date for review.
Liaising with professionals or agencies beyond the setting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sign posting families to services. • Linking with LA over individual children, engaging with LA over wider strategic issues e.g. securing sufficient expertise on SEN and disability. • Understanding how funding can contribute to whole setting. • Planning transition to another setting / school. • Involving parents in the process.

Annex 5. Signs ups

Table 22 Number of trainees (registered completed and withdrawn) by setting type

Setting type	Registered	Completed	Withdrawn
Childminders (childminders and childminder agencies)	1163	835	328
Group based setting (day nurseries, play groups etc)	5901	4695	1206
Total	7064	5530	1534

Table 23 Number of trainees (registered completed and withdrawn) by DfE definition of deprivation

DfE definition of deprivation	Registered	Completed	Withdrawn
Low	3186	2484	702
Medium	1397	1118	279
High	2481	1928	553

Table 24 Number of trainees (registered completed and withdrawn) by region and LA

Region and LA	Registered	Completed	Withdrawn
Eastern	456	362	94
Bedford	8	8	0
Cambridgeshire	61	50	11
Central Bedfordshire	39	32	7
Essex	202	156	46
Hertfordshire	135	96	39
Luton	18	15	3
Norfolk	58	50	8
Peterborough	22	17	5
Southend-on-Sea	30	23	7
Suffolk	63	53	10
Thurrock	22	18	4

Region and LA	Registered	Completed	Withdrawn
East Midlands	592	456	136
Derby	31	28	3
Derbyshire	124	100	24
East Riding of Yorkshire	11	8	3
Leicester	12	8	4
Leicestershire	87	67	20
Lincolnshire	50	38	12
Northamptonshire	168	134	34
Nottingham	32	19	13
Nottinghamshire	74	51	23
Rutland	3	3	0
London	1002	763	239
Barking and Dagenham	14	11	3
Barnet	35	26	9
Bexley	37	30	7
Brent	37	26	11
Bromley	74	62	12
Camden	11	8	3
City of London	0	0	0
Croydon	105	77	28
Ealing	22	13	9
Enfield	24	19	5
Greenwich	53	44	9
Hackney	36	29	7
Hammersmith and Fulham	16	12	4
Haringey	11	8	3
Harrow	21	15	6
Havering	33	28	5
Hillingdon	24	19	5
Hounslow	31	24	7
Islington	13	11	2
Kensington and Chelsea	7	4	3
Kingston upon Thames	30	23	7

Region & LA	Registered	Completed	Withdrawn
Lambeth	30	24	6
Lewisham	21	12	9
Merton	36	26	10
Newham	12	10	2
Redbridge	38	30	8
Richmond upon Thames	48	38	10
Southwark	14	12	2
Sutton	22	17	5
Tower Hamlets	49	36	13
Waltham Forest	47	31	16
Wandsworth	38	29	9
Westminster	13	9	4
North East	281	224	57
Darlington	20	19	1
Durham	51	40	11
Gateshead	35	27	8
Hartlepool	8	7	1
Middlesbrough	14	13	1
Newcastle upon Tyne	12	10	2
North Tyneside	28	22	6
Northumberland	55	46	9
Redcar and Cleveland	16	9	7
South Tyneside	23	17	6
Stockton-on-Tees	13	8	5
Sunderland	6	6	0
North West	956	715	241
Blackburn with Darwen	5	3	2
Blackpool	19	13	6
Bolton	38	31	7
Bury	19	17	2
Cheshire East	57	41	16
Cheshire West and Chester	80	60	20
Cumbria	27	20	7

Region & LA	Registered	Completed	Withdrawn
Halton	33	28	5
Knowsley	10	4	6
Lancashire	167	127	40
Liverpool	54	42	12
Manchester	32	26	6
Oldham	47	40	7
Rochdale	31	21	10
Salford	42	30	12
Sefton	33	20	13
St. Helens	32	26	6
Stockport	46	29	17
Tameside	26	16	10
Trafford	37	29	8
Warrington	54	39	15
Wigan	37	29	8
Wirral	30	24	6
Southeast	1575	1266	309
Bracknell Forest	25	19	6
Brighton and Hove	57	41	16
Buckinghamshire	39	31	8
East Sussex	69	56	13
Hampshire	264	206	58
Isle of Wight	16	13	3
Kent	206	165	41
Medway	49	38	11
Milton Keynes	49	39	10
Oxfordshire	111	91	20
Portsmouth	22	20	2
Reading	15	12	3
Slough	19	16	3
Southampton	27	25	2
Surrey	169	140	29
West Berkshire	25	19	6

Region & LA	Registered	Completed	Withdrawn
West Sussex	143	123	20
Windsor and Maidenhead	34	25	9
Wokingham	34	31	3
South West	815	659	156
Bath and North East Somerset	32	29	3
Bournemouth Christchurch and Poole	33	26	7
Bristol, City of	84	63	21
Cornwall	39	33	6
Devon	115	95	20
Dorset	85	68	17
Gloucestershire	93	75	18
Isles of Scilly	0	0	0
North Somerset	32	27	5
Plymouth	38	26	12
Somerset	62	56	6
South Gloucestershire	73	56	17
Swindon	13	12	1
Torbay	18	14	4
Wiltshire	98	79	19
West Midlands	699	545	154
Birmingham	97	73	24
Coventry	24	16	8
Dudley	43	38	5
Herefordshire	21	18	3
Sandwell	30	21	9
Shropshire	41	33	8
Solihull	29	22	7
Staffordshire	124	87	37
Stoke-on-Trent	27	21	6
Telford and Wrekin	25	20	5
Walsall	37	31	6
Warwickshire	91	72	19
Wolverhampton	24	19	5

Region & LA	Registered	Completed	Withdrawn
Worcestershire	86	74	12
Yorkshire and The Humber	688	540	148
Barnsley	21	20	1
Bradford	62	52	10
Calderdale	34	29	5
Doncaster	67	49	18
Kingston upon Hull, City of	11	7	4
Kirklees	50	39	11
Leeds	112	86	26
North East Lincolnshire	23	16	7
North Lincolnshire	36	26	10
North Yorkshire	113	95	18
Rotherham	26	18	8
Sheffield	55	47	8
Wakefield	41	25	16
York	37	31	6

Annex 6. Data tables

Pre survey tables

Table 25 How did you find out about the training?

Question response options	n	%
From my setting (from a manager, an official email)	1368	43%
Via the media (e.g. social media, articles)	625	19%
From my Local Authority	571	18%
From DfE directly (e.g. via email or gov.uk)	259	8%
Word of mouth (e.g. from a peer or colleague)	199	6%
From the Foundation Years website/email/newsletter	98	3%
Online search	41	1%
Early Years Professional Network	31	1%
BPN	22	1%

Source: Ecorys pre-training survey (N = 3214)

Table 26 What are the main reasons why you want to take part in the training?

Question response options	n	%
To further my own professional development/enhance my career prospects	2696	84%
To contribute to more appropriate and coordinated support for children with SEND	2581	80%
To more accurately identify SEND among early years children	2400	75%
To gain new a perspective and fresh ideas from the training	1394	43%
To develop networks with other Early Years SENCOs	239	7%
To be better prepared for Ofsted inspections	192	6%
To help my setting recover from the COVID-19 pandemic	88	3%
Other	48	1%

Source: Ecorys pre-training survey (N = 3214) - Respondents could select more than one response.

Table 27 Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements about the main challenges and barriers to performing your role as a SENCO?

Question response options	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Not applicable
Insufficient time to do my role effectively	582 (18%)	1188 (37%)	798 (25%)	415 (13%)	104 (3%)	43 (1%)	84 (3%)
Role is misunderstood/ misunderstood by senior leadership team	111 (3%)	356 (11%)	803 (25%)	1133 (35%)	564 (18%)	39 (1%)	208 (6%)

Question response options	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Not applicable
Role is misunderstood/undervalued by colleagues	234 (7%)	753 (23%)	728 (23%)	922 (29%)	387 (12%)	43 (1%)	147 (5%)
Lack of sufficient funding to provide appropriate levels of support	1138 (35%)	1133 (35%)	490 (15%)	217 (7%)	94 (3%)	80 (2%)	62 (2%)
Difficult relationship with parents/carers	59 (2%)	492 (15%)	910 (28%)	1265 (39%)	418 (13%)	25 (1%)	45 (1%)
Poor communication with parents/carers	35 (1%)	439 (14%)	732 (23%)	1490 (46%)	451 (14%)	21 (1%)	46 (1%)
Dealing with a large variety of children's special educational needs and disabilities	463 (14%)	1250 (39%)	766 (24%)	485 (15%)	128 (4%)	39 (1%)	128 (4%)
Handling difficult and emotional situations	229 (7%)	1270 (40%)	885 (28%)	600 (19%)	140 (4%)	43 (1%)	47 (1%)
Lack of resources	693 (22%)	1223 (38%)	702 (22%)	377 (12%)	114 (4%)	56 (2%)	49 (2%)
Lack of special needs training opportunities	749 (23%)	1182 (37%)	658 (20%)	419 (13%)	106 (3%)	58 (2%)	42 (1%)

Source: Ecorys pre-training survey (N = 3214). Respondents could select more than one response.

Table 28 How confident do you feel about the following statements in relation to your role as a SENCO?

Question response options	Not at all confident	Slightly confident	Somewhat confident	Quite confident	Very Confident	Don't know	Not applicable
I am confident leading appropriate activities for typically developing 0-2 year olds	66 (2%)	305 (9%)	542 (17%)	1021 (32%)	1111 (35%)	13 (<1%)	156 (5%)
I am confident leading appropriate activities for typically developing 2-4-year-olds	18 (1%)	176 (5%)	410 (47%)	1081 (34%)	1503 (47%)	7 (<1%)	18 (1%)
I am confident in supporting children with their personal, social and emotional development	16 (<1%)	169 (5%)	484 (15%)	1336 (42%)	1184 (37%)	10 <1%)	15 (<1%)
I am confident leading appropriate activities for children with developmental or language delays	68 (2%)	349 (11%)	862 (27%)	1253 (39%)	650 (20%)	15 (<1%)	17 (1%)

Source: Ecorys pre-training survey (N = 3214)

Table 29 How much do you agree with the following statements in relation to your knowledge and skills as a SENCO?

Question response options	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Not applicable
I can recognise when a child requires additional support	808 (25%)	2137 (66%)	215 (7%)	21 (1%)	14 (<1%)	10 (<1%)	9 (<1%)
I can recognise when a child is showing signs of developmental delay	820 (26%)	2151 (67%)	186 (6%)	22 (1%)	14 (<1%)	12 (1%)	9 (<1%)
I can recognise when a child would benefit from formal SEND diagnosis	639 (20%)	1913 (60%)	482 (15%)	102 (3%)	17 (1%)	50 (2%)	11 (<1%)
I have a good understanding of how babies and children learn and develop	1180 (37%)	1817 (57%)	150 (5%)	25 (1%)	12 (<1%)	11 (<1%)	19 (1%)
I have a good understanding of how to support children with SEND and a formal diagnosis	368 (11%)	1616 (50%)	838 (26%)	297 (9%)	38 (<1%)	43 (1%)	38 (<1%)
I have a good understanding of how to support children with SEND who do not have a formal diagnosis	341 (11%)	1603 (50%)	886 (28%)	301 (9%)	32 (1%)	40 (<1%)	11 (<1%)

Source: Ecorys pre-training survey (N = 3214)

Table 30 How much do you agree with the following statements in relation to your knowledge and skills as a SENCO?

Question response options	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Not applicable
I have a good understanding of how to support my colleagues and improve staff practice in my setting	231 (7%)	1610 (50%)	887 (28%)	252 (8%)	20 (1%)	42 (1%)	172 (5%)
I have a good understanding of the Local Offer, including the provision that the Local Authority expects to be available from providers	131 (4%)	1046 (33%)	1081 (34%)	794 (25%)	77 (2%)	68 (2%)	17 (1%)
I have a good understanding of how to liaise with support beyond my setting	278 (9%)	1419 (44%)	830 (26%)	580 (18%)	49 (2%)	40 (1%)	18 (1%)
I have a good understanding of how to support parents/carers when a child has been identified with potential SEND needs	279 (9%)	1740 (54%)	780 (24%)	334 (10%)	31 (1%)	34 (1%)	16 (<1%)
I have a good understanding of how to assess my own skills and competencies, identify any gaps and next steps in professional development	313 (10%)	1781 (55%)	815 (25%)	230 (7%)	20 (<1%)	42 (<1%)	20 (1%)

Source: Ecorys pre-training survey (N = 3214)

Post survey tables

Table 31 Please rate the quality of the course delivery for the following aspects

Question response options	Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	Excellent	Don't know	Not applicable
Pre-course information and preparation	2 (<1%)	17 (1%)	99 (9%)	531 (46%)	504 (44%)	1 (<1%)	2 (<1%)
Content of course	1 (<1%)	8 (1%)	35 (3%)	364 (32%)	744 (64%)	2 (<1%)	2 (<1%)
Length of course	13 (1%)	78 (7%)	151 (13%)	472 (41%)	436 (38%)	3 (<1%)	3 (<1%)
Group activities	3 (<1%)	20 (2%)	141 (12%)	538 (47%)	444 (38%)	4 (<1%)	7 (<1%)
1:1 mentoring call	22 (2%)	30 (3%)	129 (11%)	326 (28%)	603 (52%)	18 (2%)	28 (2%)
Individual activities	3 (<1%)	13 (1%)	93 (8%)	546 (47%)	483 (42%)	5 (<1%)	13 (1%)

Source: Ecorys post-training survey (N = 1156)

Table 32 How much do you agree with the following statements about the training?

Question response options	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't know	Not applicable
The sign-up process was straightforward	546 (47%)	524 (45%)	48 (4%)	23 (2%)	12 (1%)	1 (<1%)	2 (<1%)
The training content was appropriate for my needs	626 (54%)	469 (41%)	35 (3%)	13 (1%)	11 (1%)	-	2 (<1%)

Question response options	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't know	Not applicable
The blended / online mode worked well for me	622 (54%)	439 (38%)	53 (5%)	22 (2%)	17 (1%)	-	3 (<1%)
The training improved my knowledge and understanding of early years children with SEND so I feel more able to accurately identify SEND	750 (65%)	349 (30%)	26 (2%)	12 (1%)	11 (1%)	4 (<1%)	4 (<1%)
The training improved my confidence in supporting children with SEND in my setting	735 (64%)	364 (31%)	31 (3%)	7 (1%)	15 (1%)	2 (<1%)	2 (<1%)
The training has improved SEND support in my setting	630 (54%)	422 (37%)	72 (6%)	7 (1%)	15 (1%)	5 (<1%)	5 (<1%)
The training was engaging and interesting	632 (55%)	440 (38%)	47 (4%)	21 (2%)	14 (1%)	-	2 (<1%)
The time spent on training was time well spent	637 (55%)	421 (36%)	61 (5%)	16 (1%)	18 (2%)	1 (<1%)	2 (<1%)
I would recommend the training to a colleague(s)	685 (59%)	361 (31%)	60 (5%)	22 (2%)	22 (22%)	4 (<1%)	2 (<1%)

Source: Ecorys post-training survey (N = 1156)

Table 33 Are you part of a local authority forum group for SENCOs, established by the training provider?

Question response options	n	%
Yes	188	16%
No	800	69%
Don't know	168	15%

Source: Ecorys post-training survey (N = 1156)

Table 34 Has the local authority forum group been beneficial to creating a network of SENCOs in your Local Authority?

Question response options	n	%
Strongly agree	56	5%
Agree	142	12%
Neither agree nor disagree	144	12%
Disagree	17	1%
Strongly Disagree	13	1%
Don't know	244	21%
Not applicable	540	47%

Source: Ecorys post-training survey (N = 1156)

Table 35 Having taken part in the training, how confident do you feel about the following statements in relation to your role as a SENCO?

Question response options	Not at all confident	Slightly confident	Somewhat confident	Quite confident	Very Confident	Don't know	Not applicable
I am confident leading appropriate activities for typically developing 0-2 year olds	1 (<1%)	16 (1%)	71 (6%)	368 (32%)	649 (56%)	3 (<1%)	48 (4%)

Question response options	Not at all confident	Slightly confident	Somewhat confident	Quite confident	Very Confident	Don't know	Not applicable
I am confident leading appropriate activities for typically developing 2-4 year olds	1 (<1%)	5 (<1%)	32 (3%)	299 (26%)	811 (70%)	2 (<1%)	6 (<1%)
I am confident in supporting children with their personal, social and emotional development	1 (<1%)	6 (1%)	34 (3%)	330 (29%)	778 (67%)	2 (<1%)	5 (<1%)
I am confident leading appropriate activities for children with developmental or language delays	1 (<1%)	7 (1%)	50 (4%)	391 (34%)	701 (61%)	2 (<1%)	4 (<1%)

Source: Ecorys post-training survey (n = 1156)

Table 36 Having taken part in the training, how much do you agree with the following statements in relation to your knowledge and skills as a SENCO?

Question response options	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Not applicable
I can recognise when a child requires additional support	773 (67%)	369 (32%)	5 (<1%)	1 (<1%)	4 (<1%)	-	4 (<1%)
I can recognise when a child is showing signs of developmental delay	781 (68%)	362 (31%)	5 (<1%)	1 (<1%)	3 (<1%)	-	4 (<1%)
I can recognise when a child would benefit from formal SEND diagnosis	701 (61%)	429 (37%)	17 (1%)	1 (<1%)	3 (<1%)	-	7 (1%)
I have a good understanding of how babies and children learn and develop	793 (69%)	339 (29%)	11 (1%)	1 (<1%)	4 <1%)	-	7 (<1%)
I have a good understanding of how to support children with SEND and a formal diagnosis	679 (59%)	453 (39%)	14 (1%)	2 (<1%)	4 (<1%)	-	4 (<1%)

Question response options	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Not applicable
I have a good understanding of how to support children with SEND who do not have a formal diagnosis	685 (59%)	445 (38%)	15 (1%)	3 (<1%)	7 (1%)	- (<1%)	4 (<1%)
I have a good understanding of how to support my colleagues and improve staff practice in my setting	592 (51%)	505 (44%)	18 (2%)	2 (<1%)	7 (<1%)	1 (<1%)	31 (3%)
I have a good understanding of the Local Offer, including the provision that the Local Authority expects to be available from providers	560 (52%)	475 (44%)	26 (2%)	2 (1%)	7 (<1%)	1 (<1%)	5 (<1%)
I have a good understanding of how to liaise with support beyond my setting	592 (51%)	505 (44%)	34 (3%)	9 (<1%)	8 (1%)	3 (<1%)	5 (<1%)

Question response options	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Not applicable
I have a good understanding of how to support parents/carers when a child has been identified with potential SEND needs	640 (55%)	487 (42%)	15 (1%)	1 (<1%)	8 (1%)	2 (<1%)	5 (<1%)
I have a good understanding of how to assess my own skills and competencies , identify any gaps and next steps in professional development	658 (57%)	465 (40%)	15 (1%)	3 (<1%)	8 (<1%)	2 (<1%)	5 (<1%)

Source: Ecorys post-training survey (n=1156)

Table 37 To what extent do you agree the following statements that the EY SENCO training has impacted on child outcomes?

Question response options	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't know	Not applicable
The EY SENCO training has supported positive changes to the communication and language development of the children in my setting	458 (40%)	535 (46%)	119 (10%)	11 (1%)	19 (2%)	14 (1%)

Question response options	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't know	Not applicable
The EY SENCO training has supported positive changes to the personal and social development (PSED) of the children in my setting	458 (40%)	550 (47%)	109 (9%)	10 (1%)	18 (2%)	11 (1%)
The EY SENCO training has supported positive changes to school readiness of the children in my setting	445 (39%)	510 (44%)	149 (13%)	10 (1%)	24 (2%)	18 (2%)

Source: Ecorys post-training survey (n=1156)

Table 38 How likely is it that you'll use the skills gained from the EY SENCO training programme in your current and/or future jobs?]

Question response options	n	%
Very likely	1007	87%
Somewhat likely	108	9%
Neither likely nor unlikely	9	1%
Somewhat unlikely	1	0%
Very unlikely	25	2%
Don't know	6	1%

Source: Ecorys post-training survey (N = 1156)

Table 39 Has the EY SENCO training given you the support needed to build these changes into your practice?

Question response options	n	%
Yes, definitely	793	69%
Yes, to some extent	305	26%
No	19	2%
Don't know	39	3%

Source: Ecorys post-training survey (N =1156)

Table 40 Do you want to stay working in the early years sector?

Question response options	n	%
Yes	1032	89%
No	23	2%
Don't know	101	9%

Source: Ecorys post-training survey (n=1156)

Table 41 How likely are you to leave the early years sector in the next 12 months?

Question response options	n	%
I'm not at all likely to leave	636	55%
I'm not very likely to leave	375	32%
I'm fairly likely to leave	49	4%
I'm very likely to leave	19	2%
I already have a job offer for a new role	11	1%
Prefer not to say	66	6%

Source: Ecorys post-training survey (N = 1156)

Table 42 Has the EY SENCO training influenced your decision to remain in early years sector?

Question response options	n	%
Yes	507	44%
No	500	43%
Don't know	149	13%

Source: Ecorys post-training survey (N = 1156)

Monitoring Information Data

Table 43 Experienced SENCO / Years experience (three groups)

Question response options	n	%
Yes, I am a dedicated SENCO	2037	63%
I am due to take up the role of SENCO	1021	32%
No, I am an aspiring SENCO	164	5%

Source: Monitoring Information (N = 3222)

Table 44 Experienced SENCO / Years experience (two groups)

Question response options	n	%
Experienced SENCO	2037	63%
Less experienced SENCO	1185	37%

Source: Monitoring Information (N = 3222)

Table 45 Experienced SENCO / Years experience (two groups)

Question response options	n	%
Private Nurseries	1827	57%
Childminders	505	16%
Preschools / play groups	890	28%

Source: Monitoring Information (N = 3222)

Table 46 Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index

Question response options	n	%
1 (most deprived 10%)	238	7%
2	276	7%
3	282	9%
4	330	9%
5	317	9%
6	327	9%
7	352	10%
8	374	10%
9	371	10%
10 (least deprived 10%)	337	9%

Source: Monitoring Information (N = 3204)

Table 47 Region

Region	n	%	n	%	change
North East	936	4.5	1,245	6.6	33.0
North West	2,562	3.1	3,380	4.4	31.9
Yorkshire and the Humber	1,846	3.2	2,299	4.3	24.5
East Midlands	1,583	2.9	2,094	4	32.3
West Midlands	3,057	4.5	3,632	5.8	18.8
East of England	1,490	1.9	2,177	3	46.1
South East	4,843	4	5,840	5.1	20.6
South West	1,987	2.9	2,236	3.6	12.5
Inner London	892	2.9	1,095	3.8	22.8

Region	n	%	n	%	change
Outer London	2,378	3.9	2,960	5.1	24.5

Source: Early years census

Annex 7. Pre-post analysis

The pre- and post- training survey included 15 outcome statements related to the SENCO role, including eight knowledge statements⁵⁹, three skill statements⁶⁰ and four confidence statements⁶¹. Most of the statements were about key areas to the SENCO role, such as understanding the Local Offer, liaising with external agencies, supporting colleagues, parents, children with developmental delays or SEND (with and without a diagnosis). The outcome statements were rated in the survey on a five points scale: either Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree or Very confident to Not at all confident. These ratings were then converted into numerical values (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 Strongly Agree or 1 Not at all Confident to 5 Very Confident). None of the statements needed to be reversed scored. All responses with 'don't know' or 'not applicable' were removed for the comparison. Only trainees that had a valid response and a pre and post survey score were included in this analysis (Table 48).

Table 48 Paired- sample t-test: pre and post analysis (737 matched pairs)

Variable	Mean (Pre)	Mean (Post)	Difference
CONFIDENCE			
I am confident leading appropriate activities for typically developing 0-2 year olds	3.99	4.54	0.55***
I am confident leading appropriate activities for typically developing 2-4 year olds	4.26	4.7	0.44***
I am confident in supporting children with their personal, social and emotional development	4.13	4.66	0.53***
I am confident leading appropriate activities for children with developmental or language delays	3.71	4.59	0.88***
SKILLS			

⁵⁹ Knowledge statements included: I have a good understanding of how babies and children learn and develop, I have a good understanding of how to support children with SEND and a formal diagnosis, I have a good understanding of how to support children with SEND who do not have a formal diagnosis, I have a good understanding of how to support my colleagues and improve staff practice in my setting, I have a good understanding of the local offer, including the provision that the Local Authority expects to be available from providers, I have a good understanding of how to liaise with support beyond my setting, I have a good understanding of how to support parents/carers when a child has been identified with potential SEND needs, I have a good understanding of how to assess my own skills and competencies, identify any gaps and next steps in professional development

⁶⁰ Skills statements included: I can recognise when a child requires additional support, I can recognise when a child is showing signs of developmental delay, I can recognise when a child would benefit from formal SEND diagnosis

⁶¹ Confidence statements included: I am confident leading appropriate activities for typically developing 0-2 year olds, I am confident leading appropriate activities for typically developing 2-4 year olds, I am confident in supporting children with their personal, social and emotional development, I am confident leading appropriate activities for children with developmental or language delays

I can recognise when a child requires additional support	4.20	4.68	0.48***
I can recognise when a child is showing signs of developmental delay	4.23	4.69	0.46***
I can recognise when a child would benefit from formal SEND diagnosis	4.05	4.62	0.57***
KNOWLEDGE & UNDERSTANDING			
I have a good understanding of how babies and children learn and develop	4.31	4.71	0.40***
I have a good understanding of how to support children with SEND and a formal diagnosis	3.70	4.59	0.89***
I have a good understanding of how to support children with SEND who do not have a formal diagnosis	3.65	4.60	0.95***
I have a good understanding of how to support my colleagues and improve staff practice in my setting	3.64	4.52	0.88***
I have a good understanding of the Local Offer, including the provision that the Local Authority expects to be available from providers	3.17	4.47	1.30***
I have a good understanding of how to liaise with support beyond my setting	3.37	4.47	1.10***
I have a good understanding of how to support parents/carers when a child has been identified with potential SEND needs	3.63	4.55	0.91***
I have a good understanding of how to assess my own skills and competencies, identify any gaps and next steps in professional development	3.71	4.55	0.84***

Annex 8. Subgroup analysis

Main challenges and barriers in the SENCO role

Independent t-test assessed differences in mean scores for challenges and barriers in the SENCO role by setting type (Table 49), early years experience (Table 50) and SENCO status (Table 51). Multiple linear regression analysis examined the relationship between setting deprivation and mean scores for challenges (Table 52)

Table 49 Independent t-Test: challenges in early years SENCO role by setting type (childminders and group-based settings)

Variable	Child-minders		Group-based		Significance testing		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean Diff	t-value	Two-Tailed p-value
Insufficient time to do my role effectively	2.83	.981	2.37	1.043	0.456	8.734	0.001
Role is misunderstood by senior leadership team	3.17	.891	3.62	1.052	-0.447	-7.699	0.001
Role is misunderstood/undervalued by colleagues	3.07	.996	3.17	1.185	-0.101	-1.594	0.111
Lack of sufficient funding to provide appropriate levels of support	2.04	1.019	2.02	1.047	0.015	0.286	0.775
Lack of resources	2.32	1.009	2.36	1.077	-0.045	-0.848	0.397
Lack of special needs training opportunities	2.21	1.053	2.37	1.091	-0.158	-2.942	0.003
Difficult relationship with parents	3.41	1.029	3.49	.959	-0.072	-1.517	0.129
Poor communication with parents	3.56	.993	3.61	.923	-0.05	-1.093	0.274
Dealing with a large variety of children's special educational needs and disabilities	2.89	1.003	2.47	1.051	0.416	7.87	0.001
Handling difficult and emotional situations	2.67	.986	2.74	1.001	-0.07	-1.417	0.157

EY SENCO Pre survey = 3214 (Excludes 'Don't Know' and 'Not Applicable' responses.)

Table 50 Independent t-Test: challenges in early years SENCO role by early years experience (highly experienced, less experienced)

Variable	Highly Experienced		Less experienced		Significance testing		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean Diff	t-value	Two-Tailed p-value
Insufficient time to do my role effectively	2.46	1.046	2.43	1.048	0.028	0.71	0.478
Role is misunderstood by senior leadership team	3.66	1.064	3.51	1.004	0.144	3.637	0.001
Role is misunderstood/undervalued by colleagues	3.22	1.169	3.12	1.148	0.091	2.084	0.037
Lack of sufficient funding to provide appropriate levels of support	2.16	1.009	1.95	1.088	0.213	5.459	0.001
Lack of resources	2.39	1.072	2.34	1.057	0.05	1.255	0.209
Lack of special needs training opportunities	2.39	1.084	2.32	1.089	0.073	1.789	0.074
Difficult relationship with parents	3.5	.967	3.46	.976	0.044	1.211	0.226
Poor communication with parents	3.62	.926	3.59	.949	0.026	0.758	0.448
Dealing with a large variety of children's special educational needs and disabilities	2.62	1.042	2.49	1.069	0.132	3.343	0.001
Handling difficult and emotional situations	2.82	.998	2.68	.994	0.139	3.743	0.001

Table 51 Independent t-Test: challenges in early years SENCO role by SENCO status (Designated SENCO and Aspiring SENCO)

	Designated SENCO		Aspiring SENCO		Significance testing		
Dependent Variable	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean Diff	t-value	Two-Tailed p-value
Insufficient time to do my role effectively	2.32	1.039	2.61	1.029	-0.283	-6.975	0.001
Role is misunderstood by senior leadership	3.52	1.89	3.66	.985	-0.137	-3.291	0.001
Role is misunderstood/undervalued	3.06	1.191	3.31	1.114	-0.251	-5.475	0.001
Lack of sufficient funding to provide appropriate levels of support	1.91	1.001	2.19	1.088	-0.288	-7.124	0.001
Lack of resources	2.31	1.062	2.39	1.070	-0.084	-2.031	0.042
Lack of special needs training opportunities	2.28	1.088	2.41	1.088	-0.134	-3.152	0.002
Difficult relationship with parents	3.49	9.71	3.49	.958	-0.007	-0.196	0.844
Poor communication with parents	3.64	.923	3.58	.945	0.058	1.601	0.109
Dealing with a large variety of children's special educational needs and disabilities	2.49	1.063	2.61	1.041	-0.117	-2.828	0.005
Handling difficult and emotional situations	2.69	1.00	2.8	.994	-0.115	-2.959	0.003

Table 52 Multiple Linear Regression results of challenges and barriers in SENCO role by setting deprivation (IDACI deprivation)

Dependent Variable	F-value	p-value	R² (Adjusted)	Significant Predictor	Result
Insufficient time to do role effectively	5.849	0.016	0.002	IDACI Decile	Trainees in more deprived areas reported having less time to do their role effectively.
Role misunderstood by leadership	0.001	0.979	0.0	None	No significant effect
Role misunderstood by colleagues	0.019	0.889	0.0	None	No significant effect
Insufficient funding support	9.408	0.002	0.004	IDACI Decile	Trainees in more deprived areas were more likely to report insufficient funding support.
Lack of resources	6.894	0.009	0.003	IDACI Decile	Trainees in more deprived areas were more likely to report insufficient resources.
Lack of special needs training opportunities	0.144	0.705	0.0	None	No significant effect
Difficult relationship with parents/carers	0.062	0.804	0.0	None	No significant effect
Communication with parents	0.813	0.367	0.0	None	No significant effect
Dealing with diverse SEND needs	16.008	0.001	0.006	IDACI Decile	Trainees in more deprived areas faced greater challenges managing diverse SEND needs.
Handling emotional situations	0.004	0.949	0.0	None	No significant effect

EY SENCO Pre survey = 3214 (Excludes 'Don't Know' and 'Not Applicable' responses)

Motivations

Table 53 Motivations to take part in the training programme by early years experience, setting type and SENCO experience

Group	All	10+ years'	<10 years	Child-minders	Group-based setting	Designated SENCO	Aspiring SENCO
N	3214	2053	1161	513	2701	1842	1090
To further my own professional development/ enhance my career prospects	84%	81%	89%	86%	83%	81%	89%
To provide better support and coordination for children with SEND	80%	80%	81%	80%	80%	81%	81%
To more accurately identify SEND among early years children	75%	75%	74%	79%	74%	75%	75%
To gain fresh ideas from training	43%	47%	37%	40%	44%	48%	36%
To develop networks with other EY SENCOs	7%	7%	8%	7%	8%	7%	7%
Preparation for Ofsted inspections	6%	6%	6%	3%	7%	5%	7%
Recovery from COVID-19 pandemic	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%

Source: Pre-training survey (N = 3214). Samples dependent on availability of background characteristics data

Finding out about the training programme

Table 54 How trainees found out about the training programme by early years experience, setting type and SENCO experience

	All	10+ years' experience	<10 years' experience	Child-minder	Group-based	Designated SENCO	Aspiring SENCO
N =	3214	2053	1161	513	2701	1842	1090
Best Practice Network	22 (<1%)	19 (<1%)	3 (<1%)	2 (<1%)	20 (<1%)	12 (<1%)	8 (<1%)
Early Years Professional Networks	31 (1%)	23 (<1%)	8 (<1%)	14 (<1%)	17 (<1%)	20 (1%)	9 (<1%)
From DfE directly	259 (8%)	189 (6%)	70 (2%)	75 (2%)	184 (6%)	181 (6%)	54 (2%)
From my Local Authority	571 (18%)	433 (14%)	138 (4%)	157 (5%)	414 (13%)	429 (15%)	108 (3%)
From my setting	1368 (43%)	722 (23%)	646 (20%)	13 (<1%)	1355 (42%)	600 (21%)	629 (21%)
From the Foundation Years	98 (3%)	77 (2%)	14 (1%)	28 (1%)	70 (2%)	73 (2%)	19 (1%)
Online Search	41 (1%)	27 (<1%)	14 (<1%)	4 (<1%)	37 (1%)	23 (<1%)	17 (<1%)
Via the media (e.g. social media)	625 (20%)	422 (13%)	203 (7%)	153 (5%)	472 (15%)	387 (13%)	187 (6%)
Word of mouth	199 (6%)	141 (4%)	58 (2%)	64 (2%)	135 (4%)	117 (4%)	59 (2%)

EY SENCO Pre survey = 3214 (Excludes 'Don't Know' and 'Not Applicable' response). Samples dependent on availability of background characteristics data

Programme delivery

Programme delivery ratings for pre-course information and preparation, course content, group activities, and mentoring were based on a Likert scale from 1 (very poor) to 5 (excellent) (Mean scores Table 55). Then a series of independent samples t-tests then assessed the differences in mean ratings on different aspects of programme delivery by setting type (Table 52), early years experience (Table 53) and SENCO status (Table 54). Multiple linear regression analysis examined the relationship between setting deprivation and mean scores for programme delivery (Table 55)

Table 55 Descriptive statistics: Programme delivery statements, all trainees

Question response options	N	Mean	SD
Pre-course information and preparation	1153	4.32	.706
Content of course	1152	4.60	.594
Length of course	1150	4.08	.937
Group activities	1145	4.22	.745
1:1 mentoring call	1110	4.31	.921
Individual activities	1138	4.31	.692

EY SENCO Post survey = 1156 (Excludes 'Don't Know' and 'Not Applicable' responses)

Table 56 Independent t-Tests: programme delivery statements, by setting type (childminders / group-based settings)

Variable	Mean (Childminders)	Mean (Group-based)	Mean Difference	t-value	Two-Tailed p-value	Interpretation
Pre-course information and preparation	4.11	4.39	-0.276	-4.070	.001	Statistically significant difference: trainee childminders rated this lower than other setting types.
Content of course	4.50	4.63	-0.136	-2.379	0.018	Statistically significant difference: childminders

Variable	Mean (Childminders)	Mean (Group-based)	Mean Difference	t-value	Two-Tailed p-value	Interpretation
						rated the content slightly lower than others.
Length of course	4.01	4.13	-0.124	-1.326	0.185	No significant difference
Group activities	4.06	4.27	-0.203	-2.766	0.006	Statistically significant difference: childminders rated group activities lower than others.
1:1 mentoring call	4.09	4.34	-0.248	-2.650	0.008	Statistically significant difference: childminders rated mentoring calls lower than others.
Individual activities	4.17	4.37	-0.208	-3.114	0.002	Statistically significant difference: childminders rated individual activities lower than others.

EY SENCO Post survey = 1156 (Excludes 'Don't Know' and 'Not Applicable' responses)

Table 57 Independent t-Test: programme delivery statements, by early years experience (Highly experienced and Less experienced)

Variable	Mean (Highly)	Mean (Less)	Mean Difference	t-value	Two-Tailed p-value	Interpretation
Pre-course information and preparation	4.35	4.31	0.046	0.822	0.411	No significant difference

Variable	Mean (Highly)	Mean (Less)	Mean Difference	t-value	Two-Tailed p-value	Interpretation
Content of course	4.62	4.59	0.030	0.631	0.528	No significant difference
Length of course	4.12	4.09	0.029	0.379	0.705	No significant difference
Group activities	4.24	4.22	0.020	0.331	0.741	No significant difference
1:1 mentoring call	4.29	4.31	-0.020	-0.265	0.791	No significant difference.
Individual activities	4.36	4.30	0.058	1.064	0.288	No significant difference

Post survey = 1156 (Excludes 'Don't Know' and 'Not Applicable' responses)

Table 58 Independent t-Test: programme delivery, by SENCO status (Designated SENCO, Aspiring SENCO)

Variable	Mean (Designated)	Mean (Aspiring)	Mean Difference	t-value	Two-Tailed p-value	Interpretation
Pre-course information and preparation	4.33	4.32	0.011	0.240	0.810	No significant difference
Content of course	4.59	4.66	-0.076	-1.984	0.048	Significant difference: aspiring SENCOs rated course content higher than designated SENCOs.

Variable	Mean (Designated)	Mean (Aspiring)	Mean Difference	t-value	Two- Tailed p- value	Interpretation
Length of course	4.07	4.10	-0.029	-0.458	0.647	No significant difference
Group activities	4.21	4.28	-0.072	-1.447	0.148	No significant difference
1:1 mentoring call	4.27	4.35	-0.075	-1.195	0.232	No significant difference
Individual activities	4.30	4.38	-0.082	-1.807	0.071	No significant difference

EY SENCO Post survey = 1156 (Excludes 'Don't Know' and 'Not Applicable' responses)

Table 59 Multiple linear regression: relationship between setting deprivation and programme delivery

Dependent Variable	F-value	B	p-value	R	R ² (Adjusted)	Significant Predictor	Result
Pre-course information and preparation	2.715	-0.013	.100	0.52	.002	None	No significant difference.
Content of course	0.58	.002	.810	.008	.000	None	No significant difference
Length of course	.850	-.010	.357	0.29	.000	None	No significant difference.
Group activities	0.43	-.002	.836	.007	-.001	None	No significant difference
1:1 mentoring call	.002	-.001	.962	.002	-.001	None	No significant difference

Dependent Variable	F-value	B	p-value	R	R² (Adjusted)	Significant Predictor	Result
Individual activities	.002	.000	.962	.002	-.001	None	No significant difference.

EY SENCO Post survey = 1156 (Excludes 'Don't Know' and 'Not Applicable' responses)

Programme engagement

Programme engagement statements were rated on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) for statements relating to views on whether the sign-up process was straightforward, the training content was appropriate for needs, the blended/online mode well, the training was engaging and interesting, time well spent and recommending the training to others (Table 60). A series of independent samples t-tests compared the differences in mean ratings on programme engagement between two groups, by setting type (Table 61), early years experience (Table 62), SENCO status (Table 63). Multiple linear regression analysis examined the relationship between setting deprivation and mean scores for programme engagement (Table 63)

Table 60 Mean ratings for programme engagement, all trainees

Question response options	N	Mean	SD
The sign-up process was straightforward	1153	4.36	.748
The training content was appropriate for needs	1154	4.66	.701
The blended / online mode worked well	1153	4.41	.791
The training was engaging and interesting	1154	4.43	.763
The time spent on training was time well spent	1153	4.42	.788
Would recommend the training to a colleague(s)	1150	4.44	.834

Post survey = 1156 (Excludes 'Don't Know' and 'Not Applicable' responses)

**Table 61 Independent t-test: programme engagement, by setting type
(childminders and group-based settings)**

Variable	Mean (Childminders)	Mean (Group based)	Mean Diff	t- value	Two- Tailed p-value	Interpretation
Sign-up process straightforward	4.14	4.44	-0.30	-4.14	0.001	Significant difference: non- childminders rated the sign- up process higher.
Training content appropriate to needs	4.31	4.51	-0.20	-3.06	0.002	Significant difference: non- childminders found the content more appropriate.
Blended/online mode worked well	4.40	4.44	-0.04	-0.40	0.692	No significant difference
Engaging and interesting training	4.41	4.46	-0.05	-0.62	0.537	No significant difference
Time spent on training was well spent	4.40	4.45	-0.05	-0.73	0.467	No significant difference
Would recommend training to colleagues	4.30	4.48	-0.18	-2.14	0.033	Significant difference: non- childminders were more likely to recommend the training.

EY SENCO Post survey = 1156 (Excludes 'Don't Know' and 'Not Applicable' responses)

**Table 62 Independent t-Tests: programme engagement, by early years experience
(highly experienced and less experienced)**

Variable	Mean (Highly)	Mean (Less)	Mean Difference	t- value	Two- Tailed p- value	Interpretation
Sign-up process straightforward	4.36	4.45	-0.09	-1.57	0.117	No significant difference
Training content appropriate to needs	4.48	4.47	+0.01	0.19	0.853	No significant difference
Blended/online mode worked well	4.42	4.45	-0.03	-0.50	0.618	No significant difference
Engaging and interesting training	4.46	4.42	+0.04	0.73	0.467	No significant difference
Time spent on training was well spent	4.44	4.46	-0.02	-0.31	0.755	No significant difference
Would recommend training to colleagues	4.43	4.50	-0.08	-1.14	0.255	No significant difference

EY SENCO Post survey = 1156 (Excludes 'Don't Know' and 'Not Applicable' responses)

**Table 63 Independent t-Test results: programme engagement, by SENCO status
(Designated SENCO and Aspiring SENCO)**

Variable	Mean (Desig.)	Mean (Aspiring)	Mean Diff	t- value	Two- Tailed p-value	Interpretation
Sign-up process straightforward	4.37	4.38	-0.01	-0.03	0.978	No significant difference

Training content appropriate to needs	4.46	4.51	-0.05	-1.05	0.295	No significant difference
Blended/online mode worked well	4.40	4.44	-0.04	-0.75	0.451	No significant difference
Engaging and interesting training	4.41	4.51	-0.10	-2.07	0.039	Significant difference: aspiring SENCOs found the training more engaging.
Time spent on training was well spent	4.39	4.50	-0.11	-2.05	0.040	Significant difference: aspiring SENCOs valued the time spent on training more.
Would recommend training to colleagues	4.42	4.52	-0.10	-1.83	0.067	No significant difference

Post survey = 1156 (Excludes 'Don't Know' and 'Not Applicable' responses)

Table 64 Linear regression: relationship between setting deprivation and programme engagement

Dependent Variable	F-value	B	p-value	R	R² (Adjusted)	Significant Predictor	Result
Sign-up process straightforward	.431	-.006	.512	.021	.000	None	No significant difference
Training content appropriate to needs	1.009	.008	.315	0.32	.000	None	No significant difference

Blended/online mode worked well	1.484	.011	.223	.001	.000	None	No significant difference
Engaging and interesting training	2.554	.014	.110	.050	.002	None	No significant difference
Time spent on training was well spent	.904	.009	.342	.030	.000	None	No significant difference
Would recommend training to colleagues	.040	-.002	.841	.006	.000	None	No significant difference

EY SENCO Post survey = 1156 (Excludes 'Don't Know' and 'Not Applicable' responses)

Programme skills

Programme skill statements included:

- Ratings on whether the training improved **1) knowledge and understanding of early years children with SEND and skills to accurately identify SEND; 2) confidence in supporting SEND in the setting, 3) SEND support in the setting**, all rated on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).
- Views on **likelihood of using the skills in current or future role**, which was rated on a Likert scale from 1 (not at all likely) to 5 (completely likely).

Mean scores for all trainees for all programme skill statements in Table 65. A series of independent samples t-tests assessed the differences in mean ratings on programme skills between two groups, setting type (Table 66), early years experience (Table 67), SENCO status (Table 68). Multiple linear regression analysis examined the relationship between setting deprivation and ratings on programme skills (Table 69)

Table 65 Mean rating for programme skills, all trainees

Question response options	N	Mean	SD
The training improved knowledge and understanding of early years children with SEND and able to accurately identify SEND	1148	4.58	.683

The training improved confidence in supporting children with SEND in the setting	1152	4.56	.702
The training has improved SEND support in the setting	1146	4.44	.752
How likely is it that you'll use the skills gained from the EY SENCO training programme in your current and/or future jobs	1150	4.80	.665

EY SENCO Post survey = 1156 (Excludes 'Don't Know' and 'Not Applicable' responses)

Table 66 Independent samples t-tests results on programme skills, by setting type (childminder and group-based settings)

Variable	Mean (Childminders)	Mean (Group-based)	Mean Difference	t-value	Two-Tailed p-value	Interpretation
Improved knowledge and understanding of SEND	4.59	4.60	-0.01	-0.18	0.857	No significant difference
Variable	Mean (childminders)	Mean (Group-Based)	Mean Difference	t-value	Two-Tailed p-value	Interpretation
Boosted confidence in supporting SEND	4.51	4.59	-0.08	-1.20	0.231	No significant difference
Improved SEND support in the setting	4.42	4.45	-0.03	-0.47	0.641	No significant difference
Likelihood will use the skills	4.83	4.80	0.025	0.373	0.709	No significant difference

current and/or future jobs						
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Table 67 Independent samples t-Tests results on programme skills by early years experience (highly experienced and less experienced)

Variable	Mean (Highly)	Mean (Less)	Mean Difference	t- value	Two- Tailed p-value	Interpretation
Improved knowledge & understanding of SEND	4.58	4.63	-0.05	-0.96	0.340	No significant difference
Boosted confidence in supporting SEND	4.57	4.59	-0.02	-0.33	0.741	No significant difference
Improved SEND support in the setting	4.45	4.43	+0.02	0.31	0.760	No significant difference
Likelihood will use the skills current and/or future jobs	4.80	4.81	-0.010	-0.190	0.849	No significant difference

Table 68 Independent samples t-Tests results for programme skills by SENCO status (Designated SENCO and aspiring SENCO)

Variable	Mean (Designated)	Mean (Aspiring)	Mean Diff	t-value	Two-Tailed p-value	Interpretation
Improved knowledge & understanding of SEND	4.57	4.65	-0.08	-1.77	0.077	No significant difference
Boosted confidence in supporting SEND	4.55	4.62	-0.07	-1.69	0.091	No significant difference
Improved SEND support in the setting	4.44	4.47	-0.03	-0.61	0.542	No significant difference
Likelihood will use the skills current and/or future jobs	4.79	4.84	-0.052	-1.169	0.243	No significant difference

Table 69 Linear regression: relationship between setting deprivation and programme skills

Dependent Variable	F-value	B	p-value	R	R ² (Adjusted)	Significant Predictor	Result
Improved knowledge and understanding of SEND	.302	.004	.582	0.17	.000	None	No significant difference

Dependent Variable	F-value	B	p-Value	R	R-squared (Adjusted)	Significant Predictor	Result
Boosted confidence in supporting SEND	1.090	.008	.297	.033	.001	None	No significant difference
Improved SEND support in the setting	.785	.008	.376	.028	.000	None	No significant difference
Likelihood will use the skills current and/or future jobs	.043	.002	.835	.007	.000	No	No significant difference

EY SENCO Post survey = 1156 (Excludes 'Don't Know' and 'Not Applicable' responses)

Setting deprivation

The binary logistic regression shows that IDACI Decile is not a significant predictor of whether the EY SENCO training provided the necessary support ($p = 0.600$) (Table 70). The model explains very little variation (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.001$) and has limited predictive ability. The constant indicates a strong likelihood of participants reporting support from the training, irrespective of deprivation.

Table 70 Binary logistic regression of setting deprivation (IDACI decile) and training programme and support for practice changes

Variable	B	S.E.	Wald	p-value	Exp (B)	Interpretation
IDACI Decile	-0.029	0.054	0.275	0.600	0.972	No significant effect of deprivation on whether the training provided the necessary support.
Constant	3.157	0.363	75.737	<0.001	23.496	Participants are highly likely to report support from the training regardless of deprivation.

EY SENCO Post survey = 1156 (Excludes 'Don't Know' and 'Not Applicable' responses)

SENCO retention

SENCO retention was explored through three statements in the post-training survey:

‘Do you want to stay working in the early years sector?’, which was answered either yes, no or don’t know. For the sub-group analysis, the responses were combined into a dichotomous variable, yes and other (no/don’t know) (Table 71).

‘Has the EY SENCO training influenced your decision to remain in early years sector?’ was also answered either yes, no or don’t know. For the sub-group analysis, these scores were again combined into a dichotomous variable, yes and other (no/don’t know) (Table 72).

How likely are you to leave the early years sector in the next 12 months? was answered on a Likert scale 1 (not at all) to 5 (I already have a job offer). For the sub-group analysis, mean scores were calculated for these ratings (Table 73 and 74)

Logistic regressions were used to examine differences in the SENCO retention statements, by setting type, SENCO status, early years experience and setting deprivation (Table 75, 76 and 77.)

Table 71 Descriptives: Do you want to stay working in the early years sector?

	Question response options	n	%
Survey responses	Yes	1032	89%
	No	23	2%
	Don't know	101	9%
Dichotomous responses	Yes	1032	89%
	No/ Don't know	124	11%

Post survey = 1156 (Excludes 'Don't Know' and 'Not Applicable' responses)

Table 72 Descriptives: Has the training programme influenced your decision to remain in early years sector?

	Question response options	n	%
Survey responses	Yes	507	44%
	No	500	43%
	Don't know	149	13%
Dichotomous	Yes	507	44%

	Question response options	n	%
responses	No / Don't know	649	56%

Post survey = 1156 (Excludes 'Don't Know' and 'Not Applicable' responses)

Table 73 Descriptives: How likely are you to leave the early years sector in the next 12 months? (Likert scale 1-5)

Question response option	N	%
I'm not at all likely to leave - 1	636	58%
I'm not very likely to leave - 2	375	34%
I'm fairly likely to leave -3	49	5%
I'm very likely to leave - 4	19	2%
I already have a job offer for a new role -5	11	1%

Post survey = 1156 (Excludes 'Don't Know' and 'Not Applicable' responses)

Table 74 How likely are you to leave the early years sector in the next 12 months?

Question response option	Mean	SD
Likelihood to leave the early years in next 12 months	1.53	.752

Table 75 Binary Logistic Regression results for factors influencing workforce retention in the early years sector

Variable	B	S.E.	Wald	p-value	Exp(B)	Interpretation
Training influenced decision	1.324	0.424	9.755	0.002	3.76	Significant: those influenced by training are 3.76 times more likely to stay working in EY.
Likelihood to leave early years next 12 months	-1.517	0.181	70.141	<0.001	0.219	Significant: those more likely to leave are significantly less likely to stay working in EY.

EY Setting Type	0.156	0.458	0.116	0.733	1.169	Not significant: being a childminder does not impact retention.
Years experience in EY	-0.037	0.377	0.01	0.921	0.963	Not significant: years of experience does not predict retention.
SENCO role	-0.511	0.399	1.64	0.2	0.6	Not significant: being in the designated SENCO role does not impact retention.
Deprivation (IDACI Decile)	0.029	0.063	0.204	0.652	1.029	Not significant: deprivation level does not predict retention.
Constant	5.161	0.68	57.527	<0.001	174.343	Baseline odds: significant but not meaningful for interpretation.

Table 76 Binary Logistic Regression results on factors influencing whether the EY SENCO training affected the decision to remain in the early years sector

Variable	B	S.E.	Wald	p-value	Exp(B)	Interpretation
Do you want to stay working in the early years sector	1.104	0.394	7.836	0.005	3.015	Significant: those who want to stay in the EY sector are 3 times more likely to report the training influenced their decision.
Likelihood to leave early years next 12 months	-0.21	0.122	2.956	0.086	0.81	Not significant: likelihood of leaving the sector does not strongly predict whether
EY Setting Type	-0.559	0.219	6.516	0.011	0.572	Significant: childminders less likely to report that training influenced
Years experience in EY	-0.245	0.177	1.904	0.168	0.783	Not significant: years of experience does not predict
SENCO role	-0.398	0.172	5.39	0.02	0.672	Significant: Designated SENCOs were less likely to
Deprivation (IDACI Decile)	-0.053	0.029	3.265	0.071	0.948	Not significant: deprivation level does not strongly predict whether
Constant	-0.103	0.533	0.038	0.846	0.902	Not significant: baseline odds when all predictors are zero.

Table 77 Linear Regression results for factors influencing likelihood to leave the sector within the next 12 months (1-5 Likert Scale)

Model summary	Value	
R	0.486	Moderate correlation between predictors and likelihood to leave.
R Square	0.236	23.6% of the variance in likelihood to leave is explained by the model.

Variable	B	S.E.	Beta	t	p-value	Interpretation
Training influenced decision	-0.093	0.054	-0.059	-1.719	0.086	Not significant: training influence does not predict likelihood to leave.
Stay working in EY sector	-1.333	0.097	-0.467	-13.711	0.001	Significant: those who want to stay are much less likely to leave.
EY Setting Type)	-0.073	0.07	-0.036	-1.039	0.299	Not significant; being a childminder does not impact likelihood
Years experience in EY	-0.099	0.059	-0.059	-1.682	0.093	Not significant; years of experience does not predict likelihood
SENCO role	0.009	0.058	0.005	0.152	0.879	Not significant; designated SENCO role does not predict
Deprivation (IDACI Decile)	0.005	0.01	0.018	0.546	0.585	Not significant; deprivation level does not predict
Constant	2.845	0.121	-	23.537	0.001	Significant constant: even when controlling for all included predictors, there are still other factors outside the model contribute to likelihood to leave.

Change in knowledge, confidence and skills (pre-post outcome statements)

Multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) assessed the effects of early years experience, setting type, SENCO status, and setting deprivation (IDACI Decile) on the change scores (i.e. amount of change in mean ratings) from the pre and post analysis for 15 outcome statement. This included:

- **eight knowledge statements**, related to child development, SENCO responsibilities and awareness of CPD (Table 78),
- **four confidence statements**, related to confidence leading activities with 0-2 years, leading activities with 2-4 years, support for PSE development, leading activities for children with language delays (Table 79) .
- **three skill statements**, related to recognising child's need for additional support, recognising signs of developmental delay, recognising need for SEND diagnosis (Table 80).

Wilks' Lambda, F-values, degrees of freedom, and p-values assess significance. Partial shows the effect size for significant results.

Table 78 MANCOVA test - Effects of early years experience, setting type, SENCO status and setting deprivation on change in knowledge pre-post: combined and individual outcomes

Dependent Variable	Effect	Wilks' Lambda	F	df	p-value	Partial	Interpretation
All combined dependent variables	Early years experience	0.975	1.803	8, 556	0.074	0.025	No significant effect of years of experience on combined dependent variables.
All combined dependent variables	Setting Type	0.951	3.557	8, 556	<0.001	0.049	Significant effect of setting type on combined dependent variables.
All combined dependent variables	SENCO status	0.972	2.029	8, 556	0.041	0.028	Significant effect of setting type on combined variables.

Dependent Variable	Effect	Wilks' Lambda	F	df	p-value	Partial	Interpretation
All combined dependent variables	Setting deprivation	0.893	0.884	72,4504	0.749	0.111	No significant effect
Understanding how babies/ children develop	Early years experience	-	5.012	1,563	0.026	-	Significant effect of early years experience: Trainees with less years of experience showed a greater increase in scores on to understanding how babies and children develop.
Understanding how babies/ children develop	Setting Type	-	0.051	1,563	0.822	-	No significant effect
Understanding how babies/ children develop	SENCO status	-	0.509	1,563	0.782	-	No significant effect
Understanding how babies/ children develop	Setting deprivation	-	0.418	9,563	0.926	-	No significant effect
Understanding SEND support (formal diagnosis)	Early years experience	-	1.573	1,563	0.21	-	No significant effect

Dependent Variable	Effect	Wilks' Lambda	F	df	p-value	Partial	Interpretation
Understanding SEND support (formal diagnosis)	Setting Type	-	4.833	1, 563	0.028	0.008	Significant effect of setting type: Childminders demonstrated a greater increase in change scores related to understanding SEND support (including formal diagnoses).
Understanding SEND support (formal diagnosis)	SENCO status	-	3.567	1, 563	0.059	-	No significant effect (approaching significance)
Understanding SEND support (formal diagnosis)	Setting deprivation	-	0.866	9, 563	0.555	-	No significant effect
Understanding SEND support (no formal diagnosis)	Early years experience	-	1.441	1, 563	0.231	-	No significant effect
Understanding SEND support (no formal diagnosis)	Setting Type	-	3.751	1, 563	0.053	-	No significant effect (approaching significance)
Understanding SEND support (no formal diagnosis)	SENCO status	-	1.84	1, 563	0.176	-	No significant effect

Dependent Variable	Effect	Wilks' Lambda	F	df	p-value	Partial	Interpretation
Understanding SEND support (no formal diagnosis)	Setting deprivation	-	1.031	9, 563	0.555	-	No significant effect
Understanding liaison and support beyond	Early years experience	-	1.186	1, 563	0.277	-	No significant effect.
Understanding liaison and support beyond	Setting Type	-	0.066	1, 563	0.797	-	No significant effect.
Understanding liaison and support beyond	SENCO status	-	5.298	1, 563	0.022	-	Significant effect: aspiring SENCOs reported greater increase in scores related to understanding liaison and support beyond the setting.
Understanding liaison and support beyond	Setting deprivation	-	0.313	9, 563	0.971	-	No significant effect
Understanding parent support for potential SEND	Early years experience	-	0.255	1, 563	0.614	-	No significant effect

Dependent Variable	Effect	Wilks' Lambda	F	df	p-value	Partial	Interpretation
Understanding parent support for potential SEND	Setting Type	-	8.356	1, 563	0.004	-	Significant effect: childminders had greater improvement on understanding parent support for potential SEND.
Understanding parent support for potential SEND	SENCO status	-	4.19	1, 563	0.041	-	Significant effect: aspiring SENCOs demonstrated a greater improvement on understanding parent support for potential SEND.
Understanding parent support for potential SEND	Setting deprivation	-	0.966	9, 563	0.467	-	No significant effect
Understanding skills for assessment and gaps	Early years experience	-	0.353	1, 563	0.553	-	No significant effect
Understanding skills for assessment and gaps	Setting Type	-	0.539	1, 563	0.463	-	No significant effect
Understanding skills for assessment and gaps	SENCO status	-	1.133	1, 563	0.288	-	No significant effect

Dependent Variable	Effect	Wilks' Lambda	F	df	p-value	Partial	Interpretation
Understanding skills for assessment and gaps	Setting deprivation	-	1.396	9, 563	0.186	-	No significant effect
Understanding Local Offer and local authority expectations	Early years experience	-	0.576	1, 563	0.448	-	No significant effect (approaching significance)
Understanding Local Offer and local authority expectations	Setting Type	-	0.762	1, 563	0.383	-	No significant effect
Understanding Local Offer and local authority expectations	SENCO status	-	2.523	1, 563	0.113	-	No significant effect
Understanding Local Offer and local authority expectations	Setting deprivation	-	0.787	9, 563	0.628	-	No significant effect
Understanding of support for colleagues to improve staff practice	Early years experience	-	.0255	1, 563	0.553	-	No significant effect.
Understanding of support for colleagues to improve staff practice	Setting Type	-	0.603	1, 563	0.463	-	No significant effect
Understanding of support for colleagues to	SENCO status	-	0.577	1, 563	0.288	-	No significant effect

Dependent Variable	Effect	Wilks' Lambda	F	df	p-value	Partial	Interpretation
improve staff practice							
Understanding of support for colleagues to improve staff practice	Setting deprivation	-	0.276	1, 563	0.186	-	No significant effect

Table 79 MANCOVA test - Effects of early years experience, setting type, SENCO status and setting deprivation on confidence: combined and individual outcomes

Dependent Variable	Effect	Wilks' Lambda	F	df	p-value	Partial	Interpretation
All combined dependent variables	Early years experience	0.999	0.201	4,593	0.938	0.001	No significant effect
All combined dependent variables	Setting Type	0.978	3.336	4,593	0.01	0.022	Significant effect: Childminders had higher confidence levels
All combined dependent variables	SENCO status	0.992	1.219	4,593	0.302	0.008	No significant effect
All combined dependent variables	Setting deprivation	0.95	0.848	36,2384	0.726	0.051	No significant effect
Confident leading activities (0-2 years)	Early years experience	-	0.002	4,593	0.967	0	No significant effect
Confident leading activities (0-2 years)	Setting Type	-	0.723	4,593	0.395	0.001	No significant effect
Confident leading activities (0-2 years)	SENCO status	-	0.217	4,593	0.641	0	No significant effect

Dependent Variable	Effect	Wilks' Lambda	F	df	p-value	Partial	Interpretation
Confident leading activities (0-2 years)	Setting deprivation	-	0.509	4,593	0.869	0.008	No significant effect
Confident leading activities (2-4 years)	Early years experience	-		4,593	0.681	0	No significant effect
Confident leading activities (2-4 years)	Setting Type	-		4,593	0.493	0.001	No significant effect
Confident leading activities (2-4 years)	SENCO status	-		4,593	0.67	0	No significant effect
Confident leading activities (2-4 years)	Setting deprivation	-		4,593	0.608	0.007	No significant effect
Confident support for PSE developme	Early years experience	-		4,593	0.659	0	No significant effect
Confident support for PSE developme	Setting Type	-		4,593	0.732	0	No significant effect
Confident support for PSE developme	SENCO status	-		4,593	0.267	0.002	No significant effect
Confident support for PSE developme	Setting deprivation	-		4,593	0.747	0.006	No significant effect
Confident leading activities (children	Early years experience	-		4,593	0.441	0.001	No significant effect

Dependent Variable	Effect	Wilks' Lambda	F	df	p-value	Partial	Interpretation
with language delays)	Setting Type	-		4,593	0.011	0.01	Significant effect: Childminders had higher confidence in leading activities (children with language delays)
Confident leading activities (children with language delays)	SENCO status	-		4,593	0.452	0.001	No significant effect
Confident leading activities (children with language delays)	Setting deprivation	-		4,593	0.391	0.009	No significant effect

Table 80 MANCOVA test - Effects of early years experience, setting type, SENCO status and setting deprivation on skills: combined and individual outcomes

Dependent Variable	Effect	Wilks' Lambda	F	df	p-value	Partial	Interpretation
All combined dependent variables	Early years experience	0.996	0.931	3,639	0.425	0.004	No significant effect
All combined dependent variables	Setting Type	0.993	1.496	3,639	0.215	0.013	No significant effect
All combined dependent variables	SENCO status	0.99	2.096	3,639	0.099	0.01	No significant effect (approaching significance)

Dependent Variable	Effect	Wilks' Lambda	F	df	p-value	Partial	Interpretation
All combined dependent variables	Setting deprivation	0.923	1.906	27, 1917	0.003	0.078	Significant effect
Recognising child needs additional support	Early years experience	-	0.426	1, 639	0.001	No significant effect	No significant effect
Recognising child needs additional support	Setting Type	-	0.022	1, 639	0	No significant effect	No significant effect
Recognising child needs additional support	SENCO status	-	2.566	1, 639	0.004	Approaching significance	No significant effect
Recognising child needs additional support	Setting deprivation	-	0.89	9, 639	0.005	No significant effect	No significant effect
Recognising developmental delay signs	Early years experience	-	2.14	1, 639	0.003	No significant effect	No significant effect
Recognising developmental delay signs	Setting Type	-	0.713	1, 639	0.001	No significant effect	No significant effect
Recognising developmental delay signs	SENCO status	-	1.813	1, 639	0.003	No significant effect	No significant effect
Recognising developmental delay signs	Setting deprivation	-	1.214	9, 639	0.005	No significant effect	No significant effect

Dependent Variable	Effect	Wilks' Lambda	F	df	p-value	Partial	Interpretation
Recognising need for SEND diagnosis	Early years experience	-	1.159	1, 639	0.002	No significant effect	No significant effect
Recognising need for SEND diagnosis	Setting Type	-	0.84	1, 639	0.001	No significant effect	No significant effect
Recognising need for SEND diagnosis	SENCO status	-	0.236	1, 639	0	No significant effect	No significant effect
Recognising need for SEND diagnosis	Setting deprivation	-	1.305	9, 639	0.006	No significant effect	No significant effect



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