

Maintaining excellence

Linda Baston-Pitt congratulates the sector for its enthusiasm and dedication despite the challenges, and urges the government to support this excellence in real terms



Like weddings or double-decker buses, those conferences you just can't afford to miss inevitably all come at once. This was the case in June when two great conferences happened to take place one after the other - and at different ends of the country.

The NDNA conference was in Manchester on a Thursday, followed by the Cambridge Festival of Education on the Friday. Determined not to miss either, I dashed up and down the M6 with a short power nap stop in a layby somewhere in between.

I'm so pleased I did. It was great to see, listen and talk with practitioners again to remind myself of the importance of connecting not only with early years colleagues but also across all educational sectors.

Responding to crisis

Discussion naturally focused on the major sector issues of 30-hours funding, workforce development and the growing recruitment crisis. Today's news headline (at the time of writing) focused on 40,000 teachers leaving the profession, while NDNA's recent survey highlighted that the number of staff leaving the early years workforce has increased, with turnover now at 18 per cent.

This did, not, however dampen the levels of optimism that oozed from both venues - the main reason why everyone had come together was to

celebrate, share and recognise the best in teaching across all sectors.

The two days really made me realise that if we want others to join our incredibly rewarding profession we must be brave and bold. We need to find ways to connect and band together as a profession so that we genuinely inspire and enthuse the next generation of potential educators and teachers. In the words of D'reen Struthers at UCL Institute of Education, we have to take control of our professional position.

'Professional agency - we should be aspiring to a situation where teachers are encouraged to take ownership of their professional position and wellbeing to thrive in rather than simply survive the profession' (D'reen Struthers (flipthesystem.uk)).

End short-termism

This is paramount if we want to promote individually meaningful careers in childcare. We cannot be dictated to by the short-termist view of government. We need to use and highlight the commissioned research such as the *Nutbrown Review* from 2012 (*Foundations for Quality: the independent review of early education and childcare qualifications*, Cathy Nutbrown), which called on the government to present a 'long-term vision' for the early years workforce.

Consider too the policy briefings from sector organisations including PACEY's *Towards an Early Years Workforce Development Strategy for England* of 2016, which reviewed the need for a coherent workforce development strategy that seizes on the increasing professionalism of the sector.

Our sector is an incredibly dynamic body of people who are creative and energetic and able to think independently about what really matters to, and for, children. We are the change makers who continue to influence the early years landscape. We know that early experiences can influence learning, and that quality childcare can bring about perceptible immediate benefits as well as long-term ones.

We want an answer

The crucial question that we need government and policy makers to answer in these post-election days is how they can support the early years sector so it can continue to do the best job it possible can. ■

For a link to the *Nutbrown Review* and *Towards an Early Years Workforce Development Strategy for England*, go to www.nmt-magazine.co.uk and click on the Links page.

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