

New Local Authority Trainee Program Strengthens Early Years Workforce

In 2023, Dumfries & Galloway Council recognised a growing concern from their funded provider partners regarding staff recruitment and retention. Some providers reported a declining quality of applicants and ongoing challenges in retaining trained staff.

Despite investing time and resources into training unqualified new hires, providers found that these staff members often transitioned to local authority roles as soon as they became qualified. This created an unsustainable recruitment cycle and growing dissatisfaction among providers.

To address these challenges, the council set a goal to strengthen the Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) workforce while also alleviating the training burden on partner providers. Their aim was to establish a pathway that would enhance workforce stability across the entire sector, ensuring that nurseries—regardless of their funding model—had access to well-trained, committed staff.

The solution was the introduction of the Early Years Support Assistant (EYSA) Trainee posts—an initiative designed to build a pipeline of skilled early years practitioners while improving staff retention across all settings.

The EYSA Trainee posts are two-year fixed-term contracts, during which participants work in local authority nursery settings while studying toward an SVQ Level 7 qualification in Social Services for Children and Young People. The program combines:

- ✓ **Workplace Learning** – Trainees are fully embedded within nursery teams, working hands-on with children and learning from experienced practitioners.
- ✓ **Blended Learning** – Coursework is completed remotely through Dumfries & Galloway College, supported by regular check-ins with tutors.
- ✓ **Practical Assessment** – Trainees are observed in the workplace to assess their competency and ability to apply their knowledge in real-world settings.



Upon completing their contracts, trainees are qualified and well-positioned to apply for roles in private nurseries, local authority settings, or even become childminders—helping to stabilise and strengthen the local ELC workforce. The program reduces the training burden previously shouldered by partner providers, with the council taking on a more active role in developing a steady supply of qualified staff.

A key consideration in the program's design was the strategic placement of trainees to maximise impact. EYSA Trainee roles were introduced in larger nursery settings (those with 40+ registered children), where they could gain experience in high-capacity environments while also addressing concerns raised by nursery managers. Feedback from these managers highlighted that in larger settings, managing both high children and staff numbers often limited their ability to focus on leadership and administrative responsibilities.



In response, the local authority structured the trainee posts to provide additional support, freeing up valuable management time. By including EYSA trainees in staff ratios, nurseries benefited from this extra support, enabling senior staff to focus more on leadership and strategic tasks. This resulted in a win-win scenario, with both trainees and existing staff benefiting from the initiative.

For trainees like Harley Ramage Amos from Castle Douglas Primary Nursery and Zoe Gilligan from Georgetown Primary Nursery, the EYSA Trainee post has provided an accessible and supportive route into a rewarding career in early learning and childcare.

Harley, who previously worked in elderly care, was drawn to the role for its stability and qualification opportunities. She completed her coursework ahead of schedule while balancing full-time work and family life, gaining valuable experience. She credits the program for giving her the skills and confidence to work and learn while still making time for her family.

Zoe entered the program after working in supply roles in primary schools. Without prior nursery experience, she appreciated the on-the-job learning and the structured support from colleagues and managers.

Both trainees highlighted the practical experience, mentorship, and career development opportunities as major strengths of the program. Their journeys demonstrate how this initiative not only builds skills but also supports career changers entering the sector.

One of the main successes of the programme is the structured, hands-on learning experience, which allows individuals to gain practical nursery experience while working toward a professional qualification. Rosemary Smith, a Quality Improvement Officer at Dumfries & Galloway Council, describes this as a “Learn While You Earn” approach. Trainees are employed, earning a salary while simultaneously gaining practical experience and a formal qualification.

Since its launch in August 2023, the program has successfully recruited 23 trainees, with exceptionally high retention and early course completion rates, demonstrating strong engagement and commitment from participants. By investing in workforce development, Dumfries & Galloway Council has not only strengthened its own ELC provision but also reinforced its partnership with funded providers.

Kerry Hyslop, a representative from partner provider Jaybees (Childcare) Ltd in Lochmaben, strongly supports the EYSA Trainee Scheme, stating, “The EYSA Trainee Scheme is a fantastic programme to get people working in our sector. Providing them with an experience to see first-hand what a career in childcare would be like and to see what work ready looks like. A great opportunity to work alongside experienced staff and being able to tap into their knowledge.”

The success of the EYSA Trainee program has already shown its potential to strengthen and stabilise the ELC workforce in Dumfries & Galloway. As the first cohort approaches the end of their contracts, the council is actively reviewing the program’s impact and exploring ways to enhance future iterations