

Learning That Lasts: East Dunbartonshire's Approach to ELC Professional Development



In early 2021, our Snack Time Chat featured Leona Stewart, Quality Improvement Officer for Early Years at East Dunbartonshire Council. During that conversation, she shared how the COVID-19 pandemic had forced the Council to urgently rethink its approach to professional learning. With staff furloughed and redeployed to care for children of key workers, face-to-face training was no longer possible. Leona explained how the team swiftly launched a fully online programme via Microsoft Teams sessions, offered to local authority staff, private and voluntary providers, and funded childminders. This was vital to ensure that the profession could remain in contact with each other and enabled the early years team to highlight important factors within the early years at this time. All presentations and resources were hosted on Glow to ensure flexible access during that time. They referred to this initiative as their Professional Learning Calendar.

We caught up with Leona again this year to revisit that conversation and hear how the calendar has evolved into a strategic, sustainable, and data-informed model of continuous professional development.

While the early programme was coordinated by a small core team, it now benefits from a broader range of contributors, including educational psychologists, external partners, and experienced peer practitioners.

The Professional Learning Calendar operates as a year-long cycle, beginning with a review of settings' self-evaluation reports and improvement plans to identify key priorities. This ensures that session topics are tailored to national and local sector priorities and the specific goals identified

by individual centres. As a result, training is highly relevant and rooted in local needs rather than generic themes.

The calendar retains several core topics year after year, such as inclusive practice, play pedagogy, outdoor learning, and trauma-informed nurture principles. These are supplemented by new and emerging themes identified through ongoing consultation and data analysis. For example, recent additions include the Up, Up and Away framework and the Early Level Play Pedagogy, which are helping to develop a consistent approach across early level.

Session delivery remains a collaborative endeavour. While the central early years team continues to curate and coordinate the calendar, session content is co-designed and facilitated by a wide network of contributors. These include Education Scotland advisors, educational psychologists, external subject-matter experts, and experienced ELC practitioners. Guest speakers have included specialists in nurture pedagogy and contributors to the Up, Up and Away framework, which is now being piloted as a core module within the calendar.

This model of combining virtual learning, practical workshops, and on-demand access, strikes an effective balance. It accommodates busy schedules while maintaining high levels of engagement and practical relevance. Practitioners and managers also take part in an annual review cycle, which gathers feedback to shape and refine future offerings.

What began as a temporary response to the pandemic has matured into a resilient and evidence-informed professional development programme. The Professional Learning Calendar has significantly improved engagement across the workforce, enhanced alignment between training and setting-level priorities, and fostered a strong culture of collaborative learning. This, in turn, has contributed to better outcomes for children through more confident and capable staff.

Leona Stewart reflected on this journey, noting, “I was a nursery manager for years, so staff development is the one key aspect that makes the difference. If you develop your staff teams, they’re going to be enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and committed to improving outcomes for children.” She added, “It’s one of those things I’m really proud of.”

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Participation levels reflect this impact. Around 65 percent of centres actively engage with the training calendar each year, with another 25 percent engaging on an ad hoc basis. Among the training topics, inclusive practice has consistently been the most popular, underscoring the sector’s growing need for strategies to support children with additional needs. Outdoor learning, transitions, and nurture-informed practice also remain strong, recurring themes across the calendar.

Despite its successes, the programme does face some ongoing challenges. Staff absences and the need to provide emergency cover make it difficult for some practitioners to attend. A high demand for community venues has also made it harder to secure suitable spaces for in-person sessions.

Glow remains the primary platform for sign-ups and access to the training, which can be a barrier for childminders and private providers who have group access to Glow only. Budgetary demands present challenges and therefore all training provided is carefully considered for best value.

However, these challenges are not viewed as setbacks. Instead, they are being actively addressed through ongoing problem-solving, collaborative planning, and flexible adaptations to delivery methods, ensuring that access and quality remain central to the programme's continued success.

Looking ahead, East Dunbartonshire Council has identified several strategic priorities to continue building momentum. A key development is the embedding of the Up, Up and Away leadership accelerator as a core, year-long module. The Council also plans to deepen collaboration with Educational Psychology Services, particularly around nurture principles and support for children with additional needs.

For other local authorities considering a similar approach, East Dunbartonshire's experience highlights several key lessons. One of the most important takeaways, in Leona's words, is: "Once you start, don't stop. Keep pushing. Keep pushing and encourage participation."

Embedding feedback cycles driven by centre-level data ensures relevance and continuous improvement. Balancing flexibility with structure through hybrid delivery broadens access while maintaining engagement. Establishing a strong, multi-disciplinary team is crucial, this work cannot rest on the shoulders of one person. Dedicated coordination is essential to prevent fragmentation and maintain coherence and quality across training activities.

East Dunbartonshire's Professional Learning Calendar has evolved from a short-term pandemic response into a long-term, structured development strategy for the early years profession. By aligning core training themes with emerging needs, adopting a flexible hybrid delivery model, and fostering collaborative learning networks, the initiative has become a cornerstone of high-quality early years provision.

Crucially, the programme places equal value on practitioner voice and strategic planning. It does not presume to know what professionals need. It asks, listens, and evolves in response. This iterative, collaborative approach ensures that training remains meaningful and impactful.

When practitioners are offered meaningful opportunities to grow and lead, they feel invested in and recognised as essential to the education system. This sense of value directly contributes to their professional wellbeing, increasing motivation, confidence, and overall job satisfaction.

The programme continues to grow and adapt, ensuring that staff feel supported, skilled, and empowered to deliver the best possible outcomes for children in their care. With sustained innovation, collaboration, and continuous improvement, East Dunbartonshire's learning calendar offers a compelling model for professional development in early years education, one that nurtures both quality practice and the wellbeing of those who deliver it.