

## Case Study: Structuring Early Years Teams in Southampton

This case study provides insights into how Southampton City Council structures its early years team. This is what they told us.

### Where does the early years team sit?

Our Early Years and Childcare Service sits within the council's **Education and Learning Department**. However, we work extensively across council directorates and with external organisations. Our daily collaboration with the NHS, social care, schools, and PVI providers ensure a comprehensive and integrated approach to delivering services.

### What does the structure and roles of the team look like?

Over the years, we have streamlined our service from 70 staff across 10 departments, to a leaner structure of 50 staff within five core teams. Many of our team work across multiple areas, and work part-time, offering both flexibility and specialist expertise.

Our key teams include:

- **Funding Team:** Managing funding allocations, financial monitoring, compliance and audits for early years providers.
- **Development Team:** Our Early Years Development workers offer tailored support and strategic advice directly to providers, including nurseries, preschools, childminders and prospective providers.
- **Advisory Team:** This team includes Early Years Advisory Teachers and Area SENCOs, qualified teachers with extensive knowledge and experience in early education and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). They provide expert support to settings including strategies and tools to differentiate the curriculum to meet children's needs. Through referrals, the team visit settings to observe children and liaise with staff, professionals, and agencies involved.
- **Property Management Team:** We invest strategically to sustain high-quality provision in disadvantaged areas. The team oversees nine council-owned properties, leased to providers in areas where private investment may be less viable, offering subsidised rents, refurbished facilities, and equipment loans.
- **Directly Managed Provision Team:** We manage two maintained nurseries, ensuring high-quality care and acting as benchmarks for other providers.

In addition to our core teams, we are also supported by our **Family Information Service** that offers free, tailored, impartial advice for families caring for children or young people aged 0–19 (up to 25 for those with SEND). This includes a Brokerage service to help parents find childcare. We also have a **Language Intervention team** that supports children with speech, language, and communication needs through specialist assessment, interventions, and staff training.

### **What makes this approach a success?**

We are a versatile team, with staff often taking on cross-disciplinary roles. This flexibility allows us to cover a wide range of responsibilities, from data analysis to hands-on provider support.

Our team is a blend of long-standing and new staff. Many members bring over 20 years' of experience, providing deep institutional knowledge, while newer team members introduce fresh perspectives. High retention rates reflect a shared passion for our work and the empowerment of team members to think creatively and focus on impactful outcomes.

Our service also acts as a market facilitator, supporting both actual and expected increases in the number and quality of early years places. We offer a range of services, many of which are provided at no charge, alongside enhanced support options that can be purchased. These include tailored support packages, training opportunities, and access to specialised teams.

Recognition and support are also key elements. The importance of early years is acknowledged at all levels of the council, from strategic plans to chief executives. This translates into tangible support for the team and the wider sector, including awards, celebrations, and direct acknowledgment of contributions. This culture of appreciation helps to retain and motivate both staff and providers.

In sum, the team's emphasis on partnerships, tailored support and staff recognition creates an effective model of integrated service delivery. The balance between institutional expertise and innovation helps foster continuous improvement in our early years outcomes.