life.org.ky

From Play to Progress: One Year On

LIFE Discussion Paper

November 2026

Literacy is for everyone

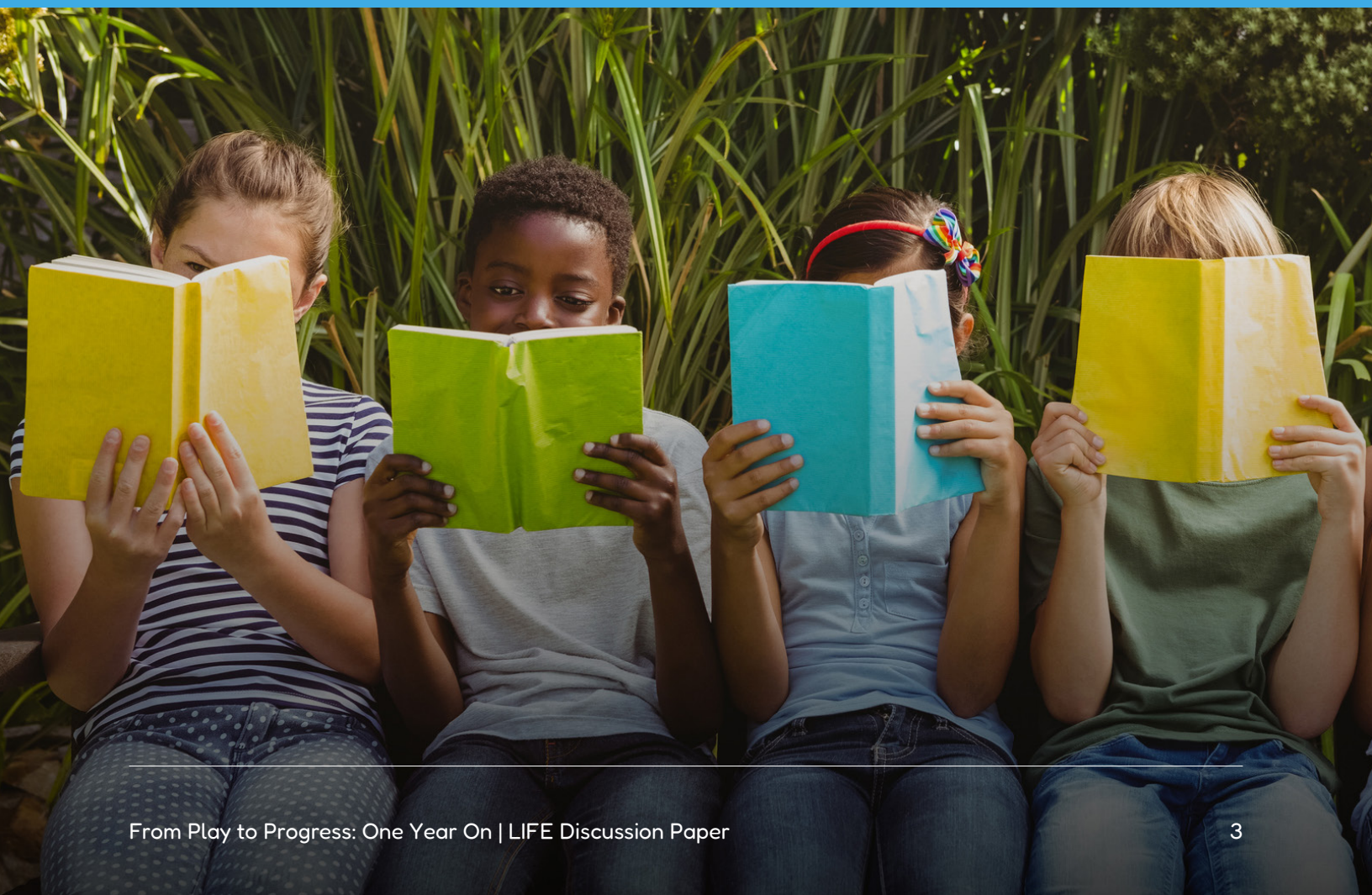
Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction and Methodology	5
Reported Developments Since 2025	7
Availability and Access	8
Affordability and Participation	9
Curriculum and Pedagogy	10
Professional Development	12
Curriculum and Quality	13
Special Education Needs and Early Intervention	14
Coordination and Information	15
Priorities for the Next Two to Three Years	17
Conclusion	18
Appendix A - Participant List	19
Appendix B - Glossary of Terms	20

Executive Summary

Commissioned by LIFE and prepared by KPMG, the 2025 report, *From Play to Progress: Strengthening Early Childhood Education in the Cayman Islands*, established an evidence base for early childhood education (ECE) in the Cayman Islands.

This follow-up discussion paper draws on stakeholder feedback to consider developments since its publication and priorities for the next two to three years.



Progress since 2025

Stakeholders reported improvements in training and the quality of practice in some centres. LIFE's training programmes and support from the Early Intervention Programme (EIP) were reported to be encouraging more nurturing interactions with children. The University College of the Cayman Islands (UCCI) early childhood programme had produced its first graduates, with students progressing through training and gaining practical experience through visits to the EIP. Centres were sharing expertise through workshops, while some, including lower-fee settings, had reportedly improved their inspection outcomes.

Affordability, workforce and access

Participants reported increases in Early Childhood Assistance Programme (ECAP) support, including full funding for some families assessed through the Department of Financial Assistance and a financial hardship category. Although welcomed, eligibility and access were not always clear. Private centres continued to lose trained staff to better-paid government school roles. Grants for standalone ECE centres were proposed to help retain practitioners and support children with additional needs. East End and North Side remained underserved.

Early identification and intervention

Some children were reportedly being identified at younger ages, although late referrals continued. Screening partnerships through LIFE's Thrive by Five programme were viewed positively. Community partnerships enabled screenings to extend to children outside of ECE settings from North Side, East End and Bodden Town who were enrolled in the Cayman Islands Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Unit's Smart Start programme. Stakeholders called for better access to professionals who can assess children with developmental delays or additional needs and provide appropriate support, including speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and early intervention specialists. Clearer referral and follow-up processes were also considered necessary to ensure children identified through screening received the support they needed. Finding suitable placements and supporting children through their transition into school remained challenging in some cases.

Parent and caregiver support

Support for parents and caregivers remained a priority. LIFE had recently launched its Ready Set GROW parent programme, but participants called for wider efforts to help families understand play-based learning, social and emotional development and screen use. Families facing financial pressures and demanding working arrangements needed practical support alongside information. Proposals included national parent and caregiver education and support beginning during pregnancy.

Coordination across services

Examples of collaboration included joint safeguarding workshops and some improvements in information sharing. However, participants did not report consistent progress in coordination between education, health and family or social services. They described gaps and duplication, with families still navigating several systems independently. Clearer roles, information sharing and regular multi-agency meetings were proposed to improve communication across all services.

Introduction and Methodology

Purpose

LIFE's 2025 report, From Play to Progress: Strengthening Early Childhood Education in the Cayman Islands, established a comprehensive evidence base for Early Childhood Education in the Cayman Islands. One year on, this discussion paper builds on that work by bringing together stakeholder perspectives on progress made, challenges that remain and priorities for future action.

The paper has four principal objectives:

1. Review progress since publication of the 2025 report, including areas where improvements have been observed.
2. Highlight initiatives, developments and examples of good practice that have emerged over the past year.
3. Identify continuing and emerging challenges affecting Early Childhood Education.
4. Identify practical priorities for the next two to three years, informed by the experiences of those working within and supporting the sector.



The intention is to provide an updated perspective on the sector, support continued dialogue among stakeholders and help identify areas for practical action. The paper also supports LIFE's continuing role in bringing together stakeholders to address issues affecting early childhood development and education.

How we gathered our insights

In August 2026, LIFE convened a stakeholder discussion forum. The discussion guide was structured around the principal sections of the 2025 report, covering availability and access, workforce, professional development, curriculum, quality, Special Education Needs (SEN) and early intervention.

The forum brought together representatives from education, early childhood provision, specialist services, practitioner training, LIFE and parents. Participants were encouraged to share their experiences and perspectives, including differing views on progress and continuing challenges. Consensus was not required, and contributions were recorded without attribution to individuals or their organisations.

Information was gathered through the stakeholder discussion forum and a follow-up survey completed by participants. The paper draws on the transcript and notes from the forum, together with the written survey responses. These contributions have been considered collectively and incorporated under the relevant themes throughout the paper.

Scope and limitations

The paper captures stakeholder experiences and proposals. It is not a new research study or a repeat of the original international benchmarking, nor does it independently evaluate government or sector performance or measure the implementation of all 2025 recommendations.

Reported changes in financial assistance, staffing, inspection outcomes and work permit experience have not been independently verified. These accounts should not be interpreted as an assessment of sector-wide change.

Where perspectives differed, the paper retains those differences. The inclusion of a view or proposal does not imply agreement among participants or endorsement by their organisations.







Reported Developments Since 2025

The following positive developments were noted in stakeholder feedback.

Area	Developments reported by stakeholders
Practitioner training	LIFE training and EIP support were reported to be helping practitioners adopt more nurturing approaches in their interactions with children.
Local qualifications	Participants noted UCCI's first early childhood graduates and a larger group in training. Visits to EIP also offered students practical experience.
Quality of provision	Some centres, including lower-fee settings, were reported to have improved their inspection outcomes.
Sharing good practice	Centres were sharing their particular strengths through workshops and practical collaboration.
Screening and identification	Some children were reportedly identified at younger ages. The extension of screening through Smart Start was reaching children outside ECE settings.
Financial assistance	Participants reported increased ECAP support, including full funding for some families assessed through DFA, and noted a financial hardship category.
Parent education	LIFE had recently launched its Ready Set GROW initiative.
Collaboration	Joint safeguarding workshops and some improvements in information sharing were noted, although views on wider coordination differed.

Availability and Access

Capacity and availability

The need for additional ECE places was considered alongside support for children cared for at home. Expanding centres alone was not regarded as sufficient to address every child's needs. A national parenting awareness initiative was suggested to reach families and caregivers outside formal provision.

Participants discussed current and planned provision, but some developments remained at the planning or implementation stage. The forum did not establish an overall change in available places or identify reliable tracking of capacity and waitlists.

Procurement and administrative processes were reported to delay the introduction of provision. Participants acknowledged the need for checks on public spending but expressed frustration at the pace of implementation. Clearer reporting of plans and progress was suggested to explain what families and centres could access. Closer cooperation with non-profit organisations was also encouraged, recognising their ability to act more quickly in some circumstances and the expertise available within the community.

Staffing also affected capacity. Providers highlighted difficulties recruiting and retaining practitioners with the skills required for quality provision. Access to assessment and intervention through the Early Intervention Programme (EIP) was a related concern, recognising the programme's high demand and capacity constraints.

Geographic access

East End and North Side continued to be identified as underserved districts. The nursery in East End was acknowledged as providing access for North Side families, while the smaller population of North Side was noted as a consideration in the financial feasibility of separate provision.

The Sister Islands were considered well served. Smaller communities were viewed as helping services to reach and support families.

In West Bay and Bodden Town, further provision remained an area of interest. Participants sought clearer information about plans and funding, and the steps needed to make additional places available in areas where options were limited.

Children needing additional support

Placement difficulties were reported for children requiring additional assistance, particularly one-to-one support. Centres faced the practical problem of providing that support within their existing funding and staffing. An available place was therefore not always a suitable place for a child's needs.

Equipping a setting and training its staff to support particular physical needs was one approach discussed. Funding placements for children with SEN was also proposed to help centres provide the necessary support.

Affordability and Participation

Financial assistance

Increases in Early Childhood Assistance Programme (ECAP) support were reported, including access to full funding for some families assessed through the Department of Financial Assistance (DFA). A financial hardship category was also noted. These developments were viewed as helping families who required assistance.

Experience of access was not uniform. Some participants reported families being refused assistance and raised concerns about age cut-offs. Eligibility and the application of reported changes remained unclear, and these differences were not resolved during the forum.

Clearer information about assistance was considered necessary for families and the professionals supporting them. This included eligibility, available support and the application process. Financial assistance was recognised as a positive example of collaboration, although awareness among families was considered limited.

Affordability for providers

Family income was considered a significant influence on the range and quality of provision available to children. For centres, rising costs and competition from better-paid government school roles added pressure. Providers described the difficulty of retaining qualified staff while keeping provision affordable.

Grants for standalone ECE centres were proposed to assist with retention. Participants distinguished these centres from provision attached to schools when discussing funding. Additional resources could also allow SEN coordinators more time to work with children and specialist services.

Participation and support at home

Limited understanding of early development was identified as a barrier to children benefiting from quality care. Families' circumstances were also relevant. Accounts of parents working several jobs and coping with poverty and exhaustion illustrated the difficulty of putting guidance into practice without additional support.

Education and support were considered important for everyone involved in a child's daily care, including grandparents, nannies and other childminders. EIP's inclusion of caregivers in groups and training was cited positively, as was feedback about Smart Start. LIFE's recently launched Ready Set GROW parent programme was also noted, with community support sought for its development.

Suggested approaches included free child development sessions, short videos and information in public waiting areas. Simple examples, such as involving a child in preparing food or counting household objects, were favoured as ways to explain learning through everyday activities.

Participants emphasised brain development before formal schooling and proposed support during pregnancy and infancy. A pilot Cooperative Nurturing Care programme initiative run through the Cayman Islands Early Childhood Association had reportedly begun and then stopped. Renewing this type of provision, with links to health, education and family services, was suggested as a way to support mothers earlier.

Curriculum and Pedagogy

Workforce

Retaining qualified practitioners remained a significant concern. Private early childhood centres were reported to be losing trained staff to better-paid government school roles, often involving older children. Although these moves benefited individual practitioners, they reduced the skills and experience available within early childhood settings.

Staff departures also meant that centres had to repeat their investment in training. Providers linked this turnover to the cost of living and the difficulty of sustaining a career in early childhood education. Children's relationships with practitioners and continuity of practice were affected.

Movement between ECE centres was viewed differently, as it could spread knowledge within the sector. The greater concern was the loss of practitioners from early childhood provision altogether. Pay and public recognition of early years work were considered important to retention.

Developing the local workforce

Growing interest in UCCI's early childhood programme was viewed positively. The forum noted its first graduates and a larger group progressing through the programme.

Local training opportunities were considered important in attracting Caymanians into ECE. The recruitment of a Caymanian with a postgraduate early childhood qualification was also cited as a positive example. However, pay remained a concern in whether qualified practitioners would stay in the sector.

Suggestions included recognising qualifications through higher pay and giving greater recognition to the specialist knowledge involved in early childhood work. Both were considered important to making it a more attractive career.

Work permit experience

Providers reported greater difficulty obtaining work permits, shorter approval periods and uncertainty around applications. These experiences were said to affect recruitment and continuity. The forum did not establish whether they reflected a formal policy change or how widely they were occurring.

Information on workforce numbers and qualifications was another area raised for attention. A survey of centres was suggested to gather evidence on staffing, turnover, permit duration and processing experience. Reporting the results in aggregate would help explain the pressures on provision without identifying individual practitioners.

Continuity was a particular concern because practitioners need time to build relationships with children and understand expectations within a setting. Frequent replacement increased the demand for induction and training.







Professional Development

Training within settings

Training within ECE settings was viewed as a useful way to improve practice. LIFE's programmes and EIP's support enabled practitioners to apply learning directly in their work with children.

More nurturing interactions and changes in how practitioners used their voices were among the improvements noted. These observations were particularly encouraging in settings where staff had previously had limited access to training.

Retention remained a difficulty. Further training could make practitioners eligible for better-paid roles elsewhere, leaving centres to replace and train staff again. LIFE's training was described as continuing because of its benefits to children and practitioners. Financial support for retention was proposed alongside investment in professional development.

Qualifications and practical experience

Visits to EIP provided UCCI students with opportunities to observe early intervention practice. Arrangements were being developed to make access more consistent, allowing students to gain practical experience of working with children and families.

A proposed teaching hub at or near UCCI had not progressed because of space constraints. Existing institutions were suggested as alternative locations for demonstrating practice while a dedicated space remained unavailable.

Cost, eligibility and literacy needs were identified as barriers to further education for some practitioners. Shorter sessions and workplace learning were suggested as more accessible forms of professional development.

Sharing knowledge across the sector

The Cayman Islands Early Childhood Association's regular meetings provided training with presenters from the community. Increasing attendance was suggested as a way to make greater use of this provision.

Closer coordination between government, UCCI, professional bodies and providers was also encouraged. A clearer understanding of available training could help organisations complement each other's work and reduce duplication.

Participants also proposed extending training to parents, nannies and other caregivers to help them understand approaches used within ECE settings.

Curriculum and Quality

Play-based learning

Play-based learning and social and emotional development were recognised as part of the curriculum framework. The principal concern was how consistently these approaches were understood by practitioners and families.

Expectations of early learning continued to focus on letters, numbers and direct teaching. Some practitioners were reported to feel that they were not teaching unless they were leading a class. Further training was considered necessary to explain how children learn through play, including exploration and activities such as measuring water.

A better understanding of social and emotional development was also considered necessary among parents. Participants saw limited progress in this area and suggested practical examples to explain how these foundations contribute to readiness for learning.

Consistency and individual strengths

Common minimum standards were supported, alongside flexibility for centres to develop particular strengths. Examples included a focus on Caymanian culture and heritage and expertise in supporting children with specific needs.

Centres were reported to be sharing these strengths through workshops and practical collaboration. This offered opportunities to improve practice while retaining differences in provision.

Quality and safeguarding

Improvements in inspection judgements were noted in some centres, including lower-fee settings. Sustaining a judgement at a subsequent inspection was regarded as an important indication of progress.

Safeguarding concerns had contributed to some setbacks. Staff turnover was also linked to inconsistent practice, particularly while new practitioners learned the expectations of a setting. Retention and continuing training were therefore considered important to maintaining quality.

Joint workshops involving education and health-related agencies were cited as a positive response to safeguarding concerns. More regular collaboration was encouraged so that engagement would continue beyond a particular incident. Providers also raised the need for health and safety requirements to take account of educational practice.

Screen use

Screen use was identified as a subject for parent and caregiver education. Accounts included screens being used to occupy children and assumptions about the educational value of some content. Guidance on alternatives through play and shared activities was proposed.

Special Education Needs and Early Intervention

Identification and follow-up

Experience of early identification varied. Some children were reportedly being identified younger, but late referrals continued, including children approaching reception age. Hearing and vision were highlighted as areas where difficulties could go unidentified or follow-up could be delayed.

Screening results were understood to indicate the need for further investigation, rather than establish a diagnosis. Some hearing difficulties were described as temporary. Continued monitoring and communication between educators, screening providers and other health professionals were considered important.

Screening partnerships through Thrive by Five were viewed positively. A recent extension of screening through Smart Start was also noted, reaching children outside ECE settings. This illustrated how collaboration could extend access to support.

Follow-up remained a concern. Difficulties were reported in connecting screening with assessment, treatment and intervention. Families were described as still having to navigate several systems independently. Clearer communication and accountability were proposed to reduce reliance on families finding their own way through services.







Specialist capacity

EIP was reported to be supporting a substantial caseload with a small team, some of whom worked part-time. Assessment and intervention competed with demands for documentation, visits to homes and centres, and training for others involved in a child's care.

Collaboration and training helped extend support, but staffing was considered insufficient. Additional full-time capacity was proposed, including speech and language therapy and occupational therapy. Concerns were also raised about specialist shortages and the need for clearer professional roles.

Placements and transition

Earlier identification did not necessarily lead to a suitable placement. Centres reported difficulty providing one-to-one assistance without additional funding. Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) also had limited time for this work when required to cover classroom duties.

Transitions to reception raised concerns about toileting, developmental readiness and reasonable accommodation. Accounts differed on what schools could or should require. Closer cooperation between parents, practitioners and services was considered necessary to address these difficulties. Children entering school without the necessary developmental foundations were reported to require additional intervention and support, placing further demands on resources and available learning time.

Suggestions included a national early childhood screening tool, stronger SENCO support and funded placements. A more coordinated model of specialist provision was also proposed, with clearer reporting and follow-up when professionals identify a developmental concern.

Coordination and Information

Collaboration across the early childhood system

Examples of collaboration were noted between centres, non-profit organisations, specialist providers and government services. Experience of improvement varied. Some participants had seen progress in coordination, while others reported little change or did not have enough information to comment.

Coordination between education, health and family or social services remained a concern. Positive working relationships were described, but clear improvement across these agencies was not generally apparent to participants. A more integrated approach to early childhood development was supported.

Roles and working arrangements

Feedback identified continuing gaps and duplication in the system. There was limited evidence in the contributions of agency roles becoming clearer. Cooperation was described as depending on individuals requesting reports or arranging meetings, with limited visibility of coordination across services. Wider involvement in information sharing was encouraged.

Regular multi-agency meetings were proposed to improve understanding of services and address gaps or overlap. Clearer arrangements for sharing information were important to the follow-up of children's needs.

Data and accountability

Some improvements in information sharing were reported. However, formal structures or agreements and newly available data were not identified as clear examples of progress. These observations reflected participants' knowledge and experience of the system.

Knowledge of the sector had increased for some participants, while others reported little or no change. Concerns remained about access to the information needed to coordinate services and make decisions.

A database with appropriate privacy protections was proposed to support communication about children's needs. Clearer reporting of planned initiatives and progress was also encouraged. Alongside workforce and service information, this could help providers explain operational needs and discuss resources with those responsible for policy.

Priorities for the Next Two to Three Years

The concerns and proposals below were raised by stakeholders. They are not ranked and do not constitute an agreed implementation plan.

Area	Continuing concern	Stakeholder proposals
Workforce retention	Qualified practitioners were leaving private ECE centres for better-paid roles, adding to recruitment and training costs.	Grants for standalone centres, better recognition of qualifications through pay and more attractive early childhood careers for Caymanians.
Affordability and access	Families reported uneven access to financial assistance. East End and North Side remained underserved, with questions about provision elsewhere.	Clearer ECAP eligibility and application guidance, together with better information about planned places and available funding.
Assessment and intervention	Late referrals and limited EIP staffing affected assessment, specialist support and follow-up.	More full-time EIP capacity, including speech and language and occupational therapy; a national screening tool and clearer referral pathways.
Inclusion and school transition	Centres faced difficulty funding one-to-one support and suitable placements. SENCO time and transition arrangements were also limited.	Funded placements, greater SENCO capacity and closer cooperation between families, centres, schools and specialist services.
Parents and caregivers	Some families lacked accessible guidance about play, social and emotional development and screen use, while others faced financial and work pressures.	National parent education through practical sessions, videos and public information; stronger family-centre links and Cooperative Nurturing Care hubs from pregnancy onwards, drawing on UCCI and community expertise.
Coordination and accountability	Families continued to navigate multiple services. Gaps, duplication and inconsistent information sharing remained concerns..	Regular multi-agency meetings, clearer responsibilities, accountable follow-up and improved information sharing with appropriate privacy protections.

Conclusion

The discussion identified examples of progress since 2025, particularly in practitioner training, local qualifications and developmental screening. It also highlighted continuing pressures on affordability, workforce retention, specialist capacity and coordination between services. These accounts suggest that progress has been uneven and that improvements in one area do not necessarily resolve difficulties elsewhere.

The practical priorities raised by stakeholders provide a basis for further discussion and action over the next two to three years. Clearer information about available support, greater capacity to meet children's needs and closer cooperation across services were recurring themes. Continued attention to these areas could help more children and families benefit from improvements in early childhood provision.

Appendix A – List of Participants

- Althea Edwards Boothe – Director, Office of Education Standards:
- Aysha Munroe – Owner, Rite Start Preschool
- Dioni Britton – Parent Representative
- Dr. Pearlyn Henry Burrell – Senior Policy Advisor, Early Childhood Care and Education Unit:
- Dr. Rock – Early Intervention Programme Coordinator
- Dr. Silva Kuschke – Clinical Audiologist, Cayman Hearing Center
- Erica Dell'Oglio – Director, LIFE Cayman
- Juliet Austin – Education and Outreach Coordinator, LIFE Cayman
- Laura Kelly – Speech and Language Therapist, HSA and Vice President of The Cayman Islands Early Childhood Association
- Lesley Maddock – Manager, Little Trotters Farm & Nursery School
- Linda Brown – Specialist Teacher for the Hearing Impaired, Department of Education
- Mark Ray – Director, Department of Education Services
- Nia Prendergast – Development and Fundraising Manager, LIFE Cayman
- Terese Parker – Director, School of Teacher Education, UCCI

Appendix B – Glossary of Terms

The following terms and abbreviations are used in this paper.

Term	Explanation
DFA	Department of Financial Assistance. Referenced in relation to assessment of applications for early childhood financial support.
Developmental screening	Checks intended to identify possible developmental concerns that may need further assessment. Screening is not a diagnosis.
ECAP	Early Childhood Assistance Programme. Financial support for eligible families to help with early childhood education costs.
ECE	Early Childhood Education. Education and care in the early years before primary schooling.
Early intervention	Assessment and support in the early years for children with identified or suspected developmental needs.
EIP	Early Intervention Programme. Provides developmental assessment, intervention and support to young children, families and early childhood settings.
LIFE	Literacy Is For Everyone. The Cayman Islands literacy charity that commissioned the 2025 report and convened the 2026 stakeholder forum.
One-to-one support	Individual assistance provided to a child who needs additional support in an early childhood setting.
Play-based learning	An approach in which children develop knowledge and skills through play, exploration and everyday activities.
Ready Set GROW	LIFE parent education programme thatbrings parents and young children together for interactive sessions that build language skills, reading enjoyment, and learning readiness, noted by participants as a recently launched initiative.
SEN	Special Education Needs. Additional needs that may require changes to teaching, resources or support within an education setting.

Term	Explanation
SENCO	Special Education Needs Coordinator. A practitioner who helps coordinate support for children with SEN within an education setting.
Smart Start	An early childhood stimulation programme led by the Cayman Islands Ministry of Education's Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Unit, designed to strengthen school readiness among young children aged 3–4 through play-based learning, early literacy activities and support for parents and caregivers in creating nurturing home learning environments.
Thrive by Five	A LIFE programme that supports early childhood centres by providing books, educator training, developmental screenings and parent workshops. The programme aims to create language-rich learning environments that strengthen children's early literacy, communication skills and foundations for lifelong learning
UCCI	University College of the Cayman Islands. Offers early childhood education training and practical learning opportunities.