

Essential but undervalued: early years care & education during COVID-19



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Executive summary

This project was funded by the ESRC as part of the UK Research & Innovation's rapid response to COVID-19. The aims of the study were to:

- Explore how the pandemic has disrupted the early years education and childcare sector across England and Wales
- Understand how providers and parents are managing these disruptions and what this might mean for the safety and sustainability of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

The project was made up of four work packages: nursery managers and childcare practitioners; childminders and nannies; parents and grandparents; comparative policy framework case studies across two waves. The data were generated through survey responses (3033 iW wave 1 and 2509 in Wave 2) and interviews (187 in Wave 1 and 134 in Wave 2).

Key findings are divided into those relating to 1) workforce and 2) parents, children and families.



ECEC workforce and sector:

- The financial impacts on nurseries during COVID-19 may lead to the closure of some settings, but even for those that stay open there is evidence that it is negatively affecting the quality of provision
- COVID-19 has exacerbated many of pre-existing challenges for nursery practitioners and data collected reveal a workforce overworked, neglected in policy terms and increasingly likely to leave the profession
- Morale is extremely low and there has been a net loss of workers in the sector during the pandemic, leading to an intensified recruitment and retention crisis
- Lack of sick pay was a serious occupational hazard during COVID-19 and a major cause of lost income for workers across the sector
- For childminders COVID-19 resulted in reduced child numbers and hours of paid work, and loss of income
- Despite some recovery by July 2021, most childminders now have a lower income than before the pandemic
- Income loss during COVID-19 is likely to have placed a substantial proportion of childminders below the poverty line; 32% of childminders earned less than £10,000 in 2020/21
- Childminders resorted to measures including using personal savings (38.5%), selling personal belongings (21.6%) and relying on partners' income (33%)
- Older childminders are more likely to be considering leaving the sector, taking with them substantial experience and knowledge
- Experiences of nannies were split during the pandemic in terms of job stability (working hours) and job security
- Shared experiences of nannies included work intensification and a lack of recognition by both employers and the Government
- Use of Universal Credit amongst nannies peaked during 2020 and then reduced in 2021, but remained almost three times higher than before the pandemic
- Those nannies with reduced income and reduced hours tended to be more experienced and older. This suggests a significant care- and brain-drain from the sector

Parents, children and families:

- Inequalities and disadvantage have been exacerbated through the pandemic – those families and children from more disadvantaged backgrounds who are most likely to benefit from ECEC support were least likely to be able to access or use formal ECEC
- Uneven spatial impacts on attendance and the sustainability of settings suggests that ‘levelling up’ will require urgent and sustained investment in ECEC
- COVID-19 has intensified long-term issues around affordability of ECEC for parents
- Working mothers were more likely than working fathers to say that access to childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on their ability to work ‘as usual’ in both 2020 (Wave 1) and 2021 (Wave 2)
- Twice as many women than men (Wave 2) said that the difficulty accessing childcare was affecting their career progression (31.8% compared to 15.2%)
- Parents (and particularly mothers) report substantial, sustained and ongoing negative impact on their wellbeing and mental health throughout the pandemic
- Parents reported substantial, sustained and ongoing negative impacts on their children’s development and wellbeing due to lockdowns, restrictions on households mixing and the pandemic more broadly
- ECEC will play an essential role in the catch-up and recovery for children under 5

Recommendations

1. Bring existing ‘Free Entitlement’ (15/30 hours) in line with the actual cost of delivery by government and review annually (to reduce financial precarity, maintain settings, cover increases in costs, including increases in National Living Wage and improve pay beyond NLW)¹
2. Expand 30-hour provision to all 3-year-olds, regardless of parents’ income or employment status, to enable labour market entry and changeable patterns of work and allow catch-up for children’s school-readiness (England)
3. Extend 30 free hours a week offer in England to 52 weeks a year, to further address school-readiness and to reflect the realities of parents’ working lives²
4. Creation of sustainable and progressive career paths in early years, with pay progression reflecting skills and experience, backed up by government sector-wide pay framework and supported by sufficient funding³
5. Recruitment campaign to attract staff into ECEC, based on the above
6. Delinking a proportion of funding from child numbers, to be replaced with core ‘infrastructure’ or ‘capacity’ funding for early years, in order to protect settings from volatility, stabilise provision and enable future-focused investment⁴
7. Investment in community-based provision (playgroups, children’s centres) for those who do not use ECEC settings

8. Recognition of all early year workers (nursery workers, childminders and nannies) as critical workers, triggering priority access to PPE, testing and vaccines during COVID-19 and in any future pandemic
9. Home-based early years providers in England and Wales to be recognised as both occupying an important niche and as a skilled workforce contributing to the delivery of government early childhood education objectives
10. Future roll outs of employment schemes such as the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (“furlough”) to ensure that employees that are new starters are not exempted
11. Employment schemes targeting the self-employed to better reflect women’s patterns of fluctuating income and labour market exit and entry
12. Statutory sick pay from day 1 of work, in line with the living wage. Extend SSP to include periods of legally mandated isolation and necessary care of dependents⁵
13. Government support for the home-based early years sector, including both bridging funding⁶ that would enable them to remain in the profession and long-term funded training opportunities
14. Better integration of home-based early years professions into government guidance during pandemics and other crises, and as a matter of course that this reflects the specificities and unique nature of work offered in a home setting



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- 1 See Work Package 4 (WP4) Scotland – Scottish Government’s guidance on setting sustainable rates for supporting a Living Wage
 - 2 Wales already offer funded places for 48 weeks a year
 - 3 See also WP4 – Ireland – Ireland has an ambitious plan to develop a career framework & career pathway in ECEC and establish a Joint Labour Committee to set mandatory rate of pay and terms and conditions
 - 4 See WP4 – Scotland – Scottish Government funding additional graduates to work in ECEC in the 20% most deprived areas
 - 5 See WP4 – Ireland is extending right to paid sick leave to seven days by 2024
 - 6 See WP4 – See for example, Australia’s ‘Business Continuity Payments’

The pandemic has pushed an already fragile ECEC sector into crisis. Between March 2020 and June 2020, much of the early years sector (nurseries, childminders and nannies) closed to all but vulnerable children and those of key workers. Since then, intermittent closures or retraction of provision of nurseries and other settings has caused extensive disruption to parents who depend on ECEC. This disruption has also been felt by those who staff the sector, who have experienced financial hardship and sometimes unsafe working conditions. The sector will play a key role in post-Covid recovery, as it is foundational to the economy, yet it is facing a recruitment and retention crisis after years of underfunding, exacerbated by the pandemic.

Introduction and methods

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- Explore how the pandemic has disrupted the early years education & childcare sector across England and Wales
- Understand how providers and parents are managing these disruptions and what this might mean for the safety and sustainability of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

The project was made up of four work packages: nursery managers and childcare practitioners; childminders and nannies; parents and grandparents; comparative policy framework case studies. Two waves of longitudinal data collection took place.

Surveys were collected between January-March 2021 (Wave 1) and August-October 2021 (Wave 2). Participants were asked about 'a typical week in December 2020' (in Wave 1) and 'a typical week in July 2021' (in Wave 2). For the qualitative data, interviews took place between November 2020 and February 2021 (Wave 1) and July and October 2021 (Wave 2). In the first wave, discussions focused on the first 9-12 months of the pandemic, and the second wave, which was approximately 6 months later, focused on the time that had elapsed since the first interview, capturing long-term or enduring trends.

Table 1.0: Data set: Surveys and interviews				
	Wave 1 surveys	Wave 2 surveys	Wave 1 interviews	Wave 2 interviews
Nursery managers	821	521	38	22
Parents	1013	1111	42	27
Nannies	527	336	25	26
Childminders	672	541	27	25
Childcare practitioners	N/A	N/A	44	27
Grandparents	N/A	N/A	11	7
TOTAL	3033	2509	187	134

Chapter one: Nurseries, nursery managers and childcare practitioners

Nurseries make up the majority of provision in the early years sector and 88% of the early years workforce are employed in group-based (72%) or school based (16%) settings.⁷ The sustainability of the sector, particularly for nurseries, has been a key concern for many policy-makers, sector representatives and practitioners for a number of years pre-COVID-19.⁸

Financial sustainability

Overall, very few nurseries (6.3% in Wave 1 and 8.5% in Wave 2) reported that they were 'not at all confident' that they would be open in 6 months' time. However, the loss of income through reduced attendance (see below) meant that settings took a wide range of actions to ensure they remained open during the pandemic, and two thirds took some sort of action to stay open. For example, 40% of nurseries used financial reserves in Wave 1 and 43.3% of settings reduced their spending on resources in Wave 2.

During the first national lockdown (March to June 2020), most nurseries (73%) in Wave 1 continued to receive full funding from their Local Authority (LA). However, 12% of

nurseries said that their LA paid for funded places at the same level only for children eligible for a place prior to lockdown (i.e., they did not fund children who became eligible for a place during lockdown). A minority of nurseries (1.8%) said that their LA reduced funding to reflect the capacity of the setting and 1.1% of settings said that their funding ceased.

Forty percent of nurseries went into deficit during the period June to December 2020 and just under a third (31%) of nurseries went into deficit during the period January to July 2021. During both periods, amongst those in deficit, about a third had a deficit of greater than 20%. This suggests significant indebtedness across the sector, which if not caused directly by the pandemic, was likely worsened by it.



Our early setting is in crisis in terms of funding. COVID is probably pushing a lot of settings over the edge, I know quite a few closed at the end of last year and probably in this situation now it's probably going to be the same...

Jane, Manager - Private Pre-School, London

7 Department for Education (2021) Survey of childcare and early years providers: main summary, England.

8 Archer, N. et al. (2020). [Getting the Balance Right. Quality and quantity in early education & childcare](#). The Sutton Trust. Pascal, C. et al. (2021). [A Fair Start? Equalising access to early education](#). The Sutton Trust. All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Childcare and Early Education (2019). [Steps to Sustainability. Steps to sustainability report \(connectpa.co.uk\)](#)

In the first part of the pandemic (wave 1) nurseries took a wide number of actions in order to stay financially viable (Table 1.1), with the most common being using reserves (40.4%), changing staff contract conditions (19.2%) and taking on debt (16.6%), although it should be noted that almost a third of nurseries took no action.

Impact on intra-household inequalities, quality and safeguarding

Attending early years settings is well known to have a positive impact on child development, particularly for the most disadvantaged children.⁹ Overall, there was a reduction in attendance across all setting types. The effects of this were, however, uneven. Higher proportions of settings in more deprived areas experienced

decreased child attendance. Although reports of reduced attendance were broadly similar across settings in December 2020 (Wave 1) (reported by 70% of private nurseries, 68% of Local Authority nurseries and 67% of voluntary/community-run nurseries), the differences in reduced attendance according to setting type was much starker in July 2021 (Wave 2). For example, over half (51.8%) of Local Authority nurseries and 47.4% of voluntary/community-run nurseries, both of which typically serve the most disadvantaged children, reported decreased attendance compared to the 38% of private nurseries that reported this in Wave 2.

The statutory 15-hour entitlement for two-year-olds can be taken as a proxy indicator of deprivation for individual children.

Table 1.1: Actions taken by nurseries to remain financially viable in Wave 1

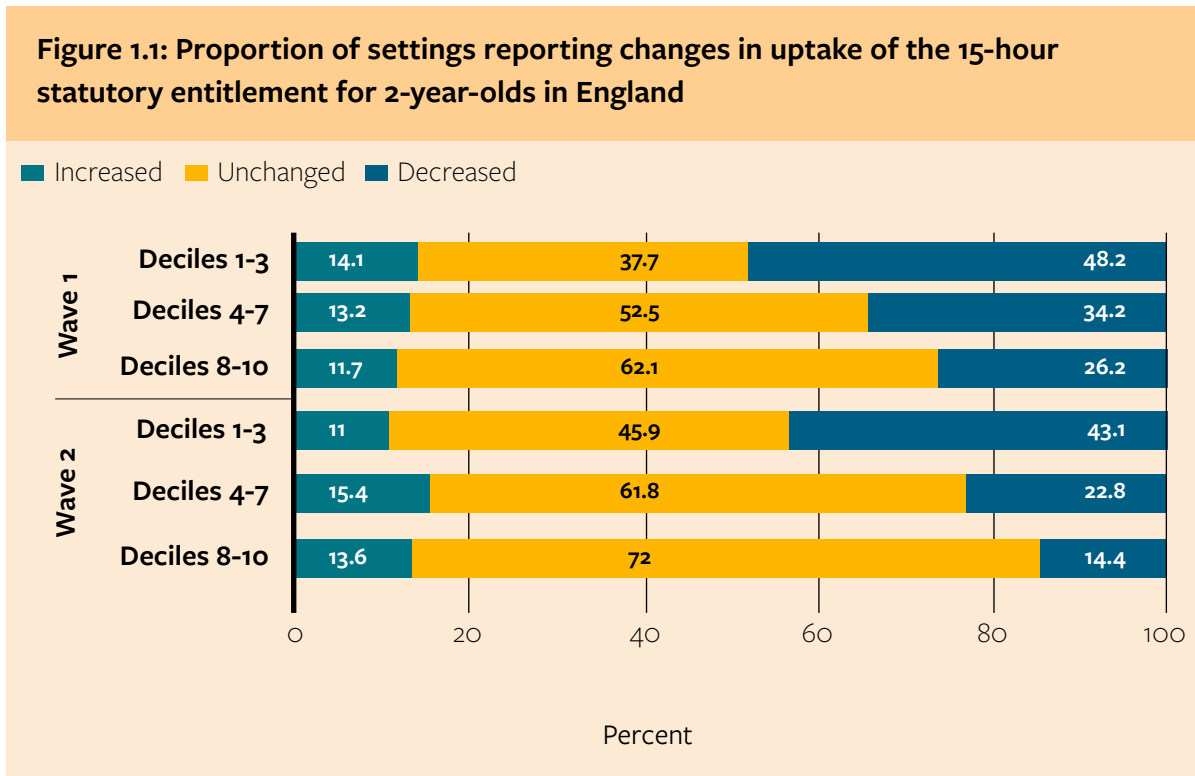
Action taken	Number (Overall total = 821)	Percentage
Used reserves	332	40.4
None	250	30.5
Changed staff contract conditions	158	19.2
Took on debt	136	16.6
Permanently cut staff	117	14.3
Sourced additional grant funding	112	13.6
Non-renewal of temporary staff	110	13.4
Other	79	9.6
Reduced the number of state-funded places available	23	2.8

9 Nores, M and W. Steven Barnett, S.W. 2010. 'Benefits of early childhood interventions across the world: (Under) Investing in the very young' *Economics of Education Review* 29(2): 271-282.

Using stratification by the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) score¹⁰ revealed disproportionate uptake of the entitlement across areas with different levels of deprivation. In areas of greater relative deprivation, high proportions of settings across all categories experienced a reduction in the take-up of two-year old entitlement (55% and 57% within most deprived areas, compared with 24% and 21% in least deprived) (Wave 1) (see Figure 1.1).

Overall, 48.2% (Wave 1) and 43.1% (Wave 2) of settings in the most deprived areas (Deciles 1-3) reported decreased numbers of two-year-olds taking up the statutory 15-hour entitlement compared to 26.2% of settings

in Wave 1, and just 14.4% of settings in Wave 2 reported decreased take-up in the least deprived areas (Deciles 8-10). There were significant differences in uptake according to setting type in both waves, with over half (55%) of LA nurseries in Wave 1 reporting decreased take-up of the 15-hour entitlement in comparison to 38% of private day nurseries, and 35.7% of LA nurseries in Wave 2 reporting decreased take-up of the 15-hour entitlement in comparison to a fifth (21%) of private nurseries.¹¹ As such, it is clear that inequalities between households have been intensified through the pandemic. The most vulnerable children are more likely to be under threat of losing access to high-quality ECEC,



¹⁰ The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) is the official measure of relative deprivation for small areas (neighbourhoods) in England. Wales uses the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD). Given the sample of Wales is small (39 and 21 Welsh nurseries responded to the wave 1 and 2 survey respectively), we just refer to IMD deciles in this report.

¹¹ Welsh settings had 3 and 8 children on average taking up Flying Start for zero- to three- year olds in Wave 1 and 2 respectively; however it is not possible to explore variations in uptake according to IMD decile due to the small number of Welsh respondents.

exacerbating inequalities (including health and socio-economic ones). ‘Levelling up’ will require urgent and sustained investment in ECEC.

In addition, decreased attendance of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) occurred in higher proportions at lower relative deprivation deciles (Wave 1). Attendance of children with SEN (England) remained unchanged across 59% of settings in both waves. However, just over a fifth (20.6%) of settings in Wave 1 reported decreased attendance of SEN children compared to just 7% of settings reporting this in Wave 2. In Wave 1, decreased attendance of SEN children occurred in higher proportions at lower relative deprivation deciles. In contrast, settings that reported increased attendance of children with SEN rose from just 11.1% in Wave 1 to 28% in Wave 2. Roughly half of settings in Wales also reported unchanged attendance of children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) although numbers were too small to disaggregate by deprivation deciles.

During the first lockdown in particular (March to June 2020), nursery managers and childcare practitioners took on significant additional responsibilities to try and support some of the most vulnerable children. While vulnerable children were offered places, many parents chose to keep them at home. Some of the nursery staff described this expansion of responsibilities as akin to social work:



We ran the Felix Project in our school during lockdown because there was quite a lot of real, worrying poverty. Companies donate their surplus food. And we would then receive that and put it into packages for families. And we phoned every family that we had in the centre, there must be about... 150 children so, I dunno, 120 families, because obviously there's some overlap. So, we phoned every

family every week and found out if they had any needs for the Felix Project or if they needed food bank vouchers or nappies.

Selena, London, Local Authority (LA) nursery, working 11 years

Local Authority and School-based nurseries were better able to pivot to providing these services and resources as they were much less likely to have furloughed staff. Instead, staff were able to reorientate and continue to provide some services, albeit in a socially-distanced manner.

Managers and practitioners did sometimes note an improvement by the second year of the pandemic; ‘[L]anguage skills have improved from the first lockdown and I think that’s been common in a lot of places, because they’ve had a lot more one-to-one interaction at home, but the social skills have taken a proper nosedive’ (Nursery Manager, PVI, Leeds). Worryingly, however, even enduring into Wave 2, the majority of managers (60.5%) reported an increase in the number of children in their care who had suspected but undiagnosed additional needs during the pandemic. Many nursery managers and practitioners reported ruptures in the networks of agencies who would normally provide support:



The other thing that I feel is a real problem at the moment is that there's no outside agency support at all. We're referring to Speech and Language and they're just being sent back to us. And I think it's because there's just no resources. We know children who need the extra support.

Candice, Nursery Practitioner, London

This was having a serious impact on ‘school readiness’ particularly for children with SEN. As a Nursery Manager of a Leeds Local Authority nursery explained, “there’s such a

backlog some of those children are now going to go to school next September without the right assessments in place”. By Wave 2, 68.7% of nursery managers said that their concern for children in their care had increased through the course of the pandemic (since January 2021). Amongst those whose concern had increased, 82.8% said they were concerned about a greater number of children and over half (51.4%) said that the degree to which they were concerned had increased. Practitioners and managers stated that there were still significant hidden concerns which needed to be addressed:



You’ve got a lot of people referring to us, professionals referring to us, because they’re not sure. Because of the last, you know, 18 months, everyone is very uncertain about what they’re seeing, and we’re getting a lot more referrals where there’s uncertainty. My team are finding it hard to identify, particularly through remote delivery, what is actually going on with that family.

Hannah, Early Years charity manager, London

As such, there is an urgent need for children who have been absent so far – particularly those who are vulnerable, disadvantaged or have SEN – to be able to catch up through engaging in early years settings.

This requires significant investment to ensure early and high-quality intervention at the beginning of the lives of young children who have been living through and disrupted by the pandemic in their first months and years (see Recommendations 2, 3 and 7).

Staffing and practitioners’ experiences

The most frequent measure used by nursery managers to stay open and viable were to change staffing levels or employment conditions (Table 1.1). Almost half (48.9%) of the settings that took actions to remain operational either “changed staff contract conditions”, “permanently cut staff” or did not renew temporary staff contracts. Despite this, there were few reported redundancies and only 11.4% of managers in Wave 1 reported having made staff redundant. This dropped further in Wave 2 as most (94.3%) nursery managers said that they did not make any of their staff redundant. Given recruitment difficulties, this evidence suggests staff leaving the sector are not being replaced, rather than being actively made redundant. Across every setting type, where there was a change in staffing there were a higher proportion of settings with decreased staffing, representing a net loss of ECEC workers in the sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the overall sample, changes to staffing as a result of COVID-19 occurred in the highest proportions in decreased numbers of apprentices, which is indicative of a problem for the pipeline of workers coming in to the sector.

Pay, risk and work intensification

The average wage in the early childhood education and care workforce is £7.42 an hour, compared to £11.37 an hour across the female workforce.¹² The financial situation for early educators is dire, with previous research finding that 44.5% of childcare workers were claiming state benefits or tax credits.¹³ Pay levels in the sector remained extremely

¹² Social Mobility Commission (2020) Stability of the early years workforce in England report <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-stability-of-the-early-years-workforce-in-england>

¹³ Bonetti, S. (2019). The early years workforce in England: a comparative analysis using the Labour Force Survey. London: Education Policy Institute (EPI)

low throughout the pandemic, despite high demand for labour in the sector.

Social distancing is impossible to implement in a job which requires handling and comforting small children. Consistent mask use with young children also posed difficulties for staff and thus many were exposed to shared air and the bodily fluids of the children in their care with no protective barriers. As such, the virus itself has heightened risk:

“

I feel like there are quite a few people who don't feel safe, but they're also scared of rocking the boat. They don't wanna take a stand because they don't want to get fired.

Katy, Childcare practitioner, South West

“

I think there's a lot of childcare practitioners have decided that they don't feel safe and that they can't continue. I've heard a few that have basically decided that it's not somewhere they feel they want to be right now.

Lora, Childcare Practitioner, London

A Practitioner with 10 years' experience working in a private nursery in Wales said “[Y]ou feel responsible for not bringing COVID home to your own family. It feels like a lot of responsibility now. Whereas before it was just joyous.”

In addition, while state-funded educational environments, including early years, which were located in schools were provided with PPE and testing facilities, private sector settings were not:

“

There's not even a whisper of early years private nurseries and things being given testing kits. I mean I'm reading online that mainstream preschool settings in schools

and schools are being given access to testing... I find it very infuriating.

Daisy, Childcare Practitioner – Private Nursery, Bristol

In addition to increasing risk, COVID-related factors have widened the responsibilities of early years workers and intensified their work. Staff were asked to do additional cleaning and some (particularly in school or LA nurseries) also had to switch to delivering remote and hybrid learning:

“

After COVID, we have the home learning. So now, every morning at 9 o'clock, we join in Google classroom... Obviously not all of them are there. I think it's just a brief like, 30% of them joining every single day. We are responsible also for preparing the lessons and the activities that they are going to do after the meeting...When I have to go to the hub, the thing is that I have to take care of the children that are there, make sure that they're joining in Google classrooms, and make sure that they're doing the activities.

Megan, Childcare Practitioner - LA Nursery, Wales

The absence or reduced contact with outside agencies, alongside increasing concern for children, also meant that practitioners were asked to take on additional safeguarding roles:

In addition to increasing risk, COVID-related factors have widened the responsibilities of early years workers and intensified their work

“[G]oing through lockdown I’ve had to attend meetings with vulnerable children over Zoom with social workers and psychologists and things like that” (Angela, Childcare practitioner - LA Nursery, London). Angela, who had 20 years’ experience added that these increasing levels of responsibility were not reflected in increasing pay: “[E]verything a teacher does, I do, but just don’t get paid the same thing”.

Morale, mental health and well-being

As a result of these conditions, widespread low morale and disillusionment was a key feature of childcare practitioners’ reflections on their experiences during the pandemic. Even well into the second year of the pandemic (December 2021), 82% of managers reported that their concern for the mental health and well-being of their staff had increased. Overall, participants felt not only devalued, but invisibilised and ignored. Many reflected on the lack of reference to early years in government announcements and initial guidance and a general feeling the schools received attention and resources when early years settings did not. There was widespread feeling of being undervalued and unrecognized, both in government policy, but also by managers and even parents:



So the Department of Education very much talked about schools and ‘we need to get children back to school’ and ‘schools are really important’, and there was this little sub-category of there’s Early Years over here and actually do you know what, we’re really important, and some of us stayed open

through lockdown. And I think we very much felt forgotten by the DfE.

Linda, Nursery Manager – Private Nursery, West Yorkshire

Recruitment and retention crisis

The pandemic has highlighted and intensified a number of pre-existing challenges in the early childhood workforce, including high levels of turnover. Turnover of the workforce has been increasing for a number of years, rising from 13% in England in 2013¹⁴ to 24% in 2018.¹⁵ Our data shows that this situation appears to have intensified during the start of the pandemic. By July 2021 (Wave 2), over half (55.6%) of nurseries said that it has been harder to recruit new childcare workers and a quarter (25.6%) reported staff turnover to be higher compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic.



We don’t have enough people...We haven’t actually had a manager since August when our manager left... we haven’t had anyone apply for that or anything either.

Zoe, Childcare Practitioner – Private Nursery, Bristol



Why are people always recruiting for practitioners? And I think one of those reasons are it’s quite a low-paid job and I would say that for the amount we get paid, we do a hell of a lot of work. It’s long hours, it’s tiring, we are putting ourselves at risk, but we are still quite low-paid.

Daisy, Childcare Practitioner – Private Nursery, Bristol

14 NDNA (2019). Workforce Survey for England. Huddersfield: NDNA.

15 Department for Education (DfE) (2014). Childcare and early years providers survey 2013. London: DfE.

55.6%

By July 2021 (Wave 2), over half of nurseries said that it has been harder to recruit new childcare workers.

Several childcare practitioners shared experiences of colleagues who were disillusioned and leaving the early years sector for alternative opportunities. Many were looking for higher-paid retail work:

“

I personally am looking for another job. I don't really want to work in early years at the moment...Oh, I've applied for anything. Whether it's a school cleaner, dinner lady, Tesco's, I'm willing to go anywhere now.

Sally, Childcare Practitioner – Private Nursery, London

Or if not higher pay, workers were seeking similar levels of pay, but with significantly less responsibility:

“

Two [practitioners] went to work ... serving on the train, on the railways, yeah, serving, just being a trolley dolly type thing on, and they were earning more money, set hours that didn't impact on them in the same way ours does and getting a lot more money for doing it with no responsibility for the safeguarding and understanding of children.

Nancy, Nursery manager – LA Nursery, Leeds

All of the features outlined above have therefore combined to exacerbate a recruitment and retention crisis that pre-dates the pandemic. In addition to the generalised low pay, ECEC remains an unattractive option due to the lack of pay or career progression:

“

I qualified when I was 18, and I'm 53. So how many years is that? ...Thirty-four years. Yeah, a long time... I still love it but wish I'd made some money along the way... I mean, I'm working as a practitioner, and I'm earning... I'm on minimum wage with 34 years' experience... I think I'm on £8.72 an hour.

Candice, Childcare practitioner – Private Nursery, London

Practitioners even talked about avoiding opportunities for promotion, because for “managing two or three members of staff... it's just not worth the hassle of 20p an hour extra” (Childcare Practitioner, nursery, Leeds).

There is a clear and urgent need to address the recruitment and retention crisis and improve the pay, working conditions and career paths of all ECEC workers (see Recommendations 1, 4 5, 8 and 10).

Chapter two: Childminders and nannies

Childminders and nannies are a vital but often overlooked set of providers in sector, in part because the ECEC they provide is delivered in the private space of the home. Childminders provide 12% of places and constitute 12% of the workforce.¹⁶ It is hard to approximate the size of the nanning workforce, but one estimate puts it around 30,000-36,000.¹⁷ Accounting for and understanding what is happening with the home-based providers is essential in understanding the full picture of ECEC.

The childminder workforce

Childminders care for children in their homes, usually on a self-employed basis. Prior to COVID-19, average childminder incomes were low and frequently below National Minimum Wage.¹⁸ Our research showed childminders to be an older, highly experienced workforce, with an average age of 46.7 in Wave 1 and 55% with 10 or more years' experience.

High levels of job satisfaction and years of childminding experience have historically retained workers in what is otherwise a low-paid, low status job. Even after the challenges of COVID-19, childminders have very high job satisfaction. In Wave 2, nearly all childminders were satisfied with their work (86.3%) and

the sense of achievement they got from their work (90%).

Childminders faced unique vulnerabilities due to COVID-19 infection. First, as home-based providers bringing children, often from several families, into their homes, which many share with partners, their own children and sometimes other (elderly) family members. Second, as older workers they are more likely to be clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) (or have family members who are CEV) and more susceptible to severe illness.

Attendance and occupancy

Between March and June 2020, childminders, like nurseries, provided care only for key worker and vulnerable children, sometimes caring for just one child at a time. Others closed because they provided care to no critical worker children or because it was not financially viable to stay open. Some childminders limited child numbers to manage the COVID-19 risk – to keep bubbles small. These decisions extended beyond the initial lockdown period and were often made together with parents.

16 Department for Education (2021) 'Survey of Childcare and Early Year Providers: Main Summary, England, 2021'. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1039675/Main_summary_survey_of_childcare_and_early_years_providers_2021.pdf

17 Goshorn, G. 2007. 'Analysis: a closer look at the nanny sector' NurseryWorld <https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/news/article/analysis-a-closer-look-at-nanny-workforce>

18 Social Mobility Commission (2020).

Prior to March 2020, childminders provided care for an average of six children under five years old. By December 2020, 65.3% of childminders said that this number had reduced so that the average occupancy rate was 66% (Table CM1). For a small subsection of childminders (7.3%) child numbers had increased (possibly taking up children from other ECEC settings which had closed).

By July 2021, some childminders reported that child numbers had returned to pre-COVID levels (32.6%) or higher (13.9%), but for the majority they remained lower than before the pandemic (53.1%). The mean occupancy rate in Wave 2 was 71.4%. Childminders attributed reduced occupancy to reduced demand from parents due to changes in their work (90%) or safety concerns (28%), or to restrictions limiting children to one setting (28%). Childminders whose child numbers had increased or stabilised often attributed this to increased demand as a result of childminder closures in their local area. Some also thought that parents increasingly favoured smaller settings.

Older childminders were more likely to report fewer children in their care, with 51.1% of childminders over 60 reporting decreased occupancy, compared with 39.3% of childminders aged 30 to 39, and 16.7% of under 30s.

Pay and income

In line with a reduction in child numbers, most childminders (63.9%) reported reductions in income. Childminding was already low-paid, but average pay has dropped during the pandemic. Between the pre-pandemic financial year (2018/19) to 2020/2021, the increase in the proportion of respondents reporting incomes of less than £10,000 rose almost 2.5-fold (13.4% in 2018/19 to 32.5% in 2020/21). In the same timeframe, mean income decreased from £17,532 in 2018/19 to £14,340 in 2020/21.

Childminders depend on fees from parents and during the first lockdown, six out of every ten childminders received no fees from parents and just over 14% were paid at a reduced rate. David (Bristol, eight years' experience) recalls: “[W]e were entirely dependent on the goodwill of the parents to pay when they didn’t have to, if any of them said ‘no’, we wouldn’t have a leg to stand [on]”.

63.9%

Of childminders reported reductions in income

Table 2.1: Childminder occupancy rates compared with pre-pandemic

No of children cared for had:	Wave 1 (Dec 2020)	Wave 2 (July 2021)
Increased	7.3%	13.9%
Decreased	65.3%	53.1%
Stayed the same	27.4%	32.6%
Total	100% (n=654)	100% (n=527)

Childminders have been particularly vulnerable when faced with loss of income, due to already-low salaries, and few have financial reserves. The main way childminders can increase their income is by taking on more children, and COVID-19 significantly curtailed this option:



We get paid four pound[s] an hour to wipe bums and things, it's fine if you manage to have three children, obviously that bumps your hourly wage up and that's fantastic, but when the children are getting taken away or having to stay at home with whatever's going on with COVID-19, and you do have the one child in the afternoon, not only does that really impact time that you kind of think for four pounds an hour, is it worth it?

Sophie, Childminder, Wales

There was widespread take-up of the Self Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS). The scheme was an important source of income replacement and enabled childminders to remain open to critical workers, even when a reduction in parent demand threatened the financial viability of providing care. Three-quarters of childminders (75.6%, n=507) used the SEISS in England and Wales. Among the 25% who did not access the scheme, the majority (57.3% & 74.8% in Wave 1/2) stated they were ineligible or did not think they were eligible. In Wales, 85% (Wave 1) and 21.6% (Wave 2) of the Welsh respondents used the Childcare Providers' Grant. In Wales, 50% of 37 childminders in Wave 1 used the Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme. Half used the Coronavirus Child Assistance Scheme for an average of 2.3 places.

Despite good take-up by childminders, three quarters (74.4%) said the grant was not sufficient to replace their usual income and many childminders were pushed into poverty. To address shortfalls, childminders resorted to measures including using personal savings (38.5%), selling personal belongings (21.6%) and relying on partners' income (33%) (Wave 1).

Lack of sick pay was an issue for childminders prior to COVID-19,¹⁹ and during COVID-19 it became a serious occupational hazard and a major cause of lost income. Childminders who isolated were unlikely to receive pay, with about three quarters (73.6%) receiving no pay if they isolated due to non-work-related exposure to COVID-19 and two-thirds (63%) reporting they received no pay at all if they isolated due to work-related exposure. Childminders described having to put financial considerations ahead of the health of themselves and their families: “[F]or those weeks that I was ill or out of action, I wouldn't have an income. I'd just have to bite that bullet” (Alex, London, Childminder).

Essential but not deemed ‘critical’

‘Key’, or ‘critical’, worker status was not extended to childminders and when the list of ‘key workers’ was published by the Government, ‘nursery and teaching staff’ were included but there was no mention of childminders. Not being explicitly classed as ‘key workers’ interfered with childminders’ ability to carry out some of their responsibilities as childminders. For other childminders, it prevented them from working, for example, childminders’ own children were not routinely accepted at schools as children of critical workers and for some, this meant they were unable to work: “[T]he Headteacher,



68.6%

Of childminders disagreed that society values their skills

in the end, she came around and she said there are people who are more important than me - she used those words - that really do need the childcare” (Emma, London, Childminder).

The changed conditions and circumstances of working during COVID-19 have meant childminders feel increasingly undervalued. While most (84.3%) were satisfied they are valued by the families they provide care for, most disagreed (68.6%) that society values their skills – a perception that remained consistent between the two survey points – and 71.9% do not think their pay reflects the skills involved in their job. As a result, morale among the workforce is extremely low.

Sustainability and confidence in remaining as a childminder

COVID-19 has changed work in ways that are likely to prompt childminders to consider leaving the sector. Just over a fifth (20.9%) of childminders in Wave 1 were not confident they would be childminding in six months, with some recovery of confidence by Summer 2021 when 16.7% were not confident. The majority (57.5%) of those ‘not confident’ said they would be seeking work in a different sector. Childminders who were caring for fewer children, working fewer hours or earning lower incomes than pre-COVID were significantly more likely to say they were not at all confident about continuing to work as a childminder.

The loss of childminders from the sector will represent a substantial loss of experience and knowledge; of those who were not confident they would be childminding in six months, 52% had 10 or more years’ experience. Exits from childminders will also constitute the loss of more flexible forms of care, including wraparound care (**see Recommendations 1, 4, 5, 6, 9, 11 & 12**).

The nanny workforce

Nannying is a somewhat polarised sector with high levels of training and formal employment status for one set of nannies, in sharp contrast to nannies with poorer and more informal working conditions on the other. There, is however, an overall neglect of the sector in terms of regulation, guidance and recognition. While the experiences of nannies were split during the pandemic in terms of job stability (working hours) and job security, shared experiences included work intensification, and a lack of recognition by both employers and the Government.

Our survey data demonstrated that the average income reported was around £26,000. Most nannies are employees, and this employment relationship remained stable through the pandemic (82.5% in Wave 1, 79.8% in Wave 2). Most nannies continued to work through the pandemic. Just less than a third (31.1%) of nannies were furloughed during 2020 (Wave 1) and 5% claimed from the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) scheme. While some employers negotiated with nannies about work during the pandemic, other nannies had little influence and felt forced to work or risk losing their job:



I had a friend at the beginning of the first lockdown who asked to be furloughed and the employer said no and just said; “we’ll just fire you if you don’t come in

Josephine, Nanny, London

There was an increase in the proportion of unemployed nannies seeking work, rising from 1.1% before the pandemic to 6.3% during 2020. Nannies who were unemployed and seeking work in 2020 had a mean age that was slightly older than that of the overall sample (37.6 years old) and most (78%) were also experienced nannies who had been working for five years or more.

Job satisfaction and confidence about remaining in the sector

In general, nannies expressed high levels of job satisfaction in the study. At least 80%+ of nannies were very satisfied or satisfied with the sense of achievement, scope for using initiative, and control over their job. Despite this, there was still a significant minority of nannies that said they were very dissatisfied or dissatisfied with the opportunity to develop skills (17.9%), the amount of pay received (20.5%) and job security (27.4%).

Most nannies were confident about staying in the sector (55.1% in Wave 1 and 58.3% in Wave 2). However, by 2021 a significant minority (40%) of nannies were only ‘Somewhat or ‘Not at all’ confident about continuing to work. Perhaps unsurprisingly, nannies who said they were not at all confident about operating in 6 months’ time were significantly more likely to report reduced income during the pandemic. Interestingly, those nannies with reduced income and reduced hours tended to be more experienced and older. This suggests a significant care- and brain- drain from the sector.

Experiences of work during the pandemic: Job insecurity, hours and income, health and safety

Overall, 37% (Wave 1) of nannies said that their hours were unaffected, although most said their hours had returned to pre-pandemic levels (53%) by Wave 2. Across both waves, there was signs of disruption to many nannies’ hours: around 20% said hours had increased (Wave 1 and 2), while between 25% and 20% reported a decrease in hours in Wave 1 and 2 respectively. The figures show some bifurcation, with approximately the same proportions experiencing increased hours on the one hand and decreased hours on the other. For those whose hours increased, some reported having

Table 2.2: How had the number of hours worked by nannies been impacted by COVID?

	Wave 1 (%) (n=527)	Wave 2 (%) (n=336)
Increased	22.6	19.4
Stayed the same	37	53
Decreased	25.8	20.5
Don’t know/Prefer not to say/Other/Missing	14.6	7.1
Total	100	100

to work multiple jobs in order to generate sufficient income: “I had to work for three different companies on zero-hour contracts and work 70+ hours” (Survey Open Text).

In contrast to the negative impact on incomes faced by childminders, nannies experienced relatively stable incomes between the financial year preceding the pandemic through to 2021. In 2018/2019, nannies reported a mean of £25,801 annual income, even rising slightly to £26,967 by 2020/21.

By 2021, 38.4% of nannies said that the income they received from nannying was insufficient to maintain their standard of living. Those nannies tended to be older and more experienced (65.1% had been working for 8+ years as a nanny compared to 13.2% who had been working for less than 3 years). Several nannies expressed dismay about the rate of pay offered, and felt the rate undervalued the importance of their job:

“

A lot of people who have nannies do have fairly good jobs and I just find it incredible that they are happy to work upstairs in their home, they haven't had to pay for petrol to go to work and they're earning maybe their

£20 or £30 per hour and they're happy to have you in their home paying you that £9 or something like £8 an hour and you've had to drive there and... you know, bring your own lunch or whatever and part of me kind of chuckles on the inside because I find that quite farcical to be honest, it's quite ridiculous.

Nova, Nanny, Bristol

Some nannies had to take measures to increase their income during the pandemic (Table 2.3). Nannies were most likely to have sold some personal belongings or borrowed money from friends or family.

38.4%

Of nannies said that the income they received from nannying was insufficient to maintain their standard of living by 2021.

Table 2.3: Actions taken by nannies to mitigate lost income

Action	Pre-pandemic (Wave 1)	2020 (Wave 1)	2021 (Wave 2)
Taking out loans from friends or family	1.3%	8.7%	7.1%
Selling personal belongings	<1%	10%	11.3%
Changing living arrangements	<1%	6.6%	-
Taking a mortgage holiday	<1%	5%	5.1%
Applying for universal credit	1%	9%	3.6%

Use of Universal Credit peaked in 2020 and although it reduced in 2021, it remained significantly higher than before the pandemic. Other measures to meet living costs remained high in 2021. Sarah from Leeds, who had 18 years' experience as a nanny said:



We also applied for Universal Credit for the first time ever. We were... I mean, obviously we weren't entitled to a lot because we didn't have a lot of outgoings. But that did mean we could keep our vehicle on the road, and it did mean we could contribute something towards his parents' expenses. So that helped.

Sarah, Nanny, Leeds

Like with other early years work, COVID-19 posed new risks within nannying work as it was generally not possible to wear PPE or to socially distance from the children they cared for. In 2020, half of nannies (49.7%) agreed that they felt safe in their role delivering childcare and this went up to (62.2%) in 2021. In addition, however, working in other people's homes posed particular difficulties. Many nannies felt that their health and safety was put in danger by their employers not respecting the rules on social contact or isolation:



I had some COVID symptoms and had a COVID test. But it took four days for the results to come back. But my employers expected me to come in in that middle period when they shouldn't have, I should have been isolating.

Josephine, Nanny, London



I think nannies are at the mercy, and also nursery workers and everybody else in childcare are very much at the mercy of other people following rules and taking care, so it is a gamble.

Gina, Nanny, Bristol

Nannies also reported concerns about the low rate of sick pay, and lack of clarity from their employer about the rate of pay for required isolation: "I personally find [statutory sick pay] very irritating, if you got sick doing essential work, I think you should be on full pay" (Rose, Nanny, London).

Work intensification:

Work intensified for nannies during 2020 and 2021. About a fifth of nannies in both waves said that the number of children they cared for had increased (see Table 2.4 below).

Table 2.4: How COVID affected number of children cared for by nannies in a typical week in December 2020 (wave 1) and a typical week in July 2021 (wave 2) (%)

How had COVID affected the number of children cared for...	By Dec 2020 Wave 1 (%) (n=492)	By July 2021 Wave 2 (%) (n=298)
Increased	20.3	19.8
Stayed the same	64	62.8
Decreased	15.7	17.4
Total	100	100
Don't know/NA	n=35	n=37

In addition to intensification in the form of increased hours and higher numbers of children to care for, nannies spoke repeatedly about what they referred to ‘job creep’:



It’s not part of my job really to do cleaning but part of my job is to kind of make sure the children’s things are all clean. So I was doing like their washing, I was making sure their rooms were clean and tidy. But at that point their cleaner wasn’t coming in because she had to get the tube from somewhere far away.

Becky, Nanny, London

Multiple respondents referred to employers’ expectations of home schooling (often multiple) children, stating “home schooling obviously changed the dynamics within the house in terms of like, thinking about what I needed to achieve every day” (Lisa, Nanny, London).

In addition, increased surveillance of nannies’ work and interference from parents was frequently cited as increasing the difficulty of their work:



The main thing I’m finding difficult is that at work having parents working from home, so we’ve got reduced space, they’re not very well-trained, the parents I mean. So they interrupt us and disrupt our day.

Gina, Nanny, Bristol

Moreover, several nannies cited the impact of undertaking additional emotional labour, not only relating to the children, but even between adults: “I try to do as much in the home as I can, even things that are none childcare related, just to keep the peace and keep my bosses from killing each other” (Katia, Nanny, London).

Home-based workers: guidance, recognition and support

Both nannies and childminders felt undervalued and lacked recognition in government guidance. 50% of nannies disagreed that their skills are valued by society. There was a majority opinion from both childminders (55.3%) and nannies (55%) that government guidance about how to operate during the pandemic had not been clear: “[A]s a nanny I do not feel that we have been mentioned and been forgotten by the Government” (Survey open text).

Over a year into the pandemic, in July 2021, 42.9% childminders felt that the Government guidance on what to do if a child is in contact with someone who tests positive for COVID-19 was not clear and more than a third (37.3%) felt guidance was not clear on what to do if a child tests positive for COVID-19. Childminders often commented that the advice provided to the ECEC sector as a whole was developed for care and working conditions in nurseries and that parts of the advice were not relevant or not appropriate for care provided in the childminders’ own home.

42.9%

Of childminders felt that the Government guidance on what to do if a child is in contact with someone who tests positive for COVID-19 was not clear.

To prevent an exodus and to keep childminding financially viable, childminders indicated they needed increased funding.

Advice also differed from that given to schools, which created specific problems for nursery classes situated within school:



We seem to get forgotten as childminders... the Government don't recognise we work in our own homes with our families so the COVID impact is far greater. The support always seems to be directed to schools or nurseries. This is why so many won't open or have decided to leave the industry which is a big concern.

Survey open text

Instead, many drew on guidance from professional associations including PACEY, PACEY Cymru and Childminding UK.

It is vital that home-based workers are better recognised in pandemic recovery support and future guidance (see Recommendations 8, 9, 13 & 14).



* Welsh respondents

** English respondents

To prevent an exodus and to keep childminding financially viable, childminders indicated they needed: increased funding per head for Childcare Offer for Wales (62.2%)*; increased funding per head for 30-hour childcare entitlement (53.2%)*; Additional funding in times of heightened COVID-19 restrictions (50.1%); Grants to support running costs of childcare (to replace free

hours) (34%). The core forms of support that nannies felt would enable them to continue to deliver high-quality childcare included: access to funded training for childcare (41.6% of nannies); additional funding during periods of heightened COVID-19 restrictions (40.6% of nannies); and grants to support the running costs of childcare (22.8% of nannies).



WP3. Parents' experiences of work, care and family life through the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing gender and socio-economic inequalities in paid and unpaid work and in family life. In some respects, the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic have been similar, but they have also been strikingly diverse and unequal and shaped by gender, social class and geography.

Employment, care and inequalities

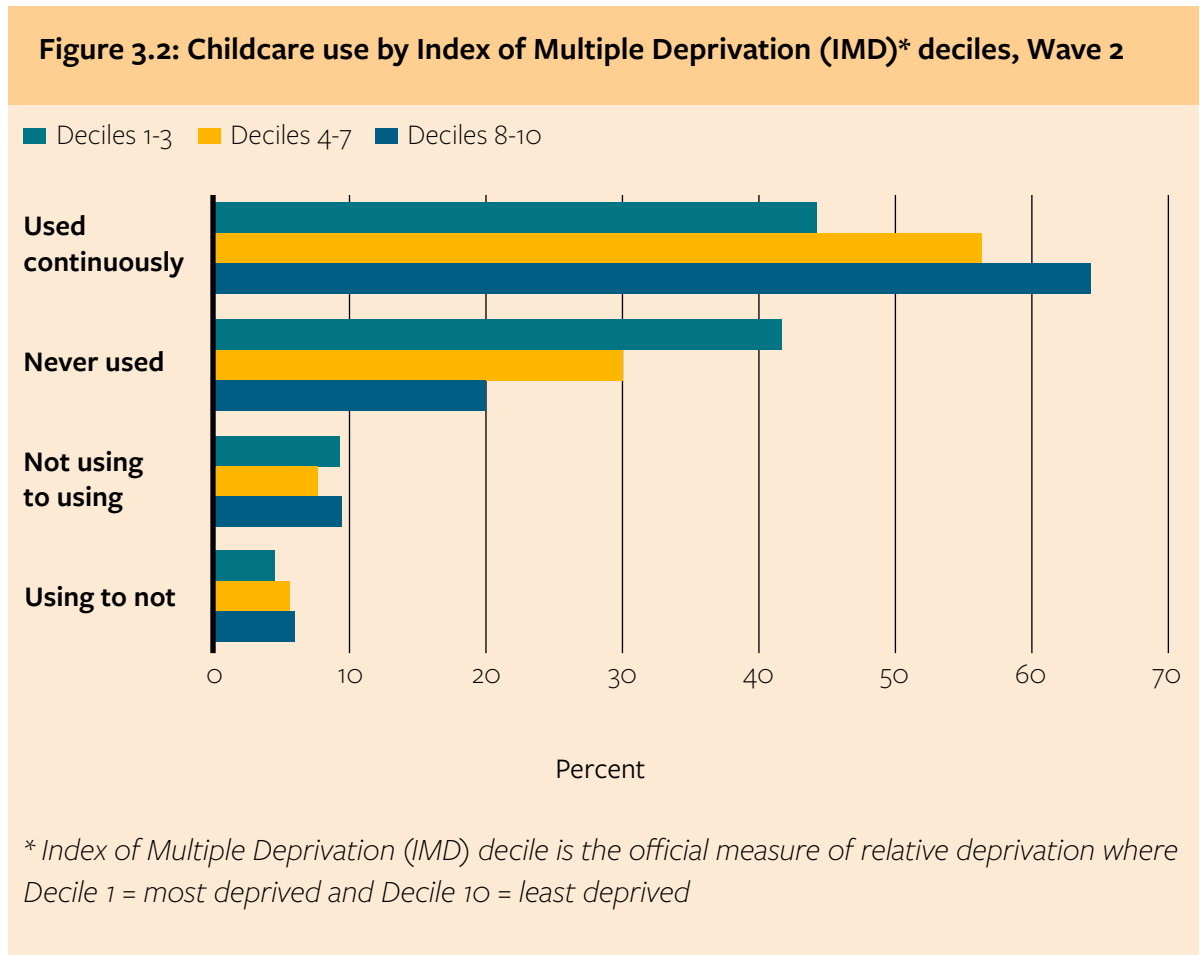
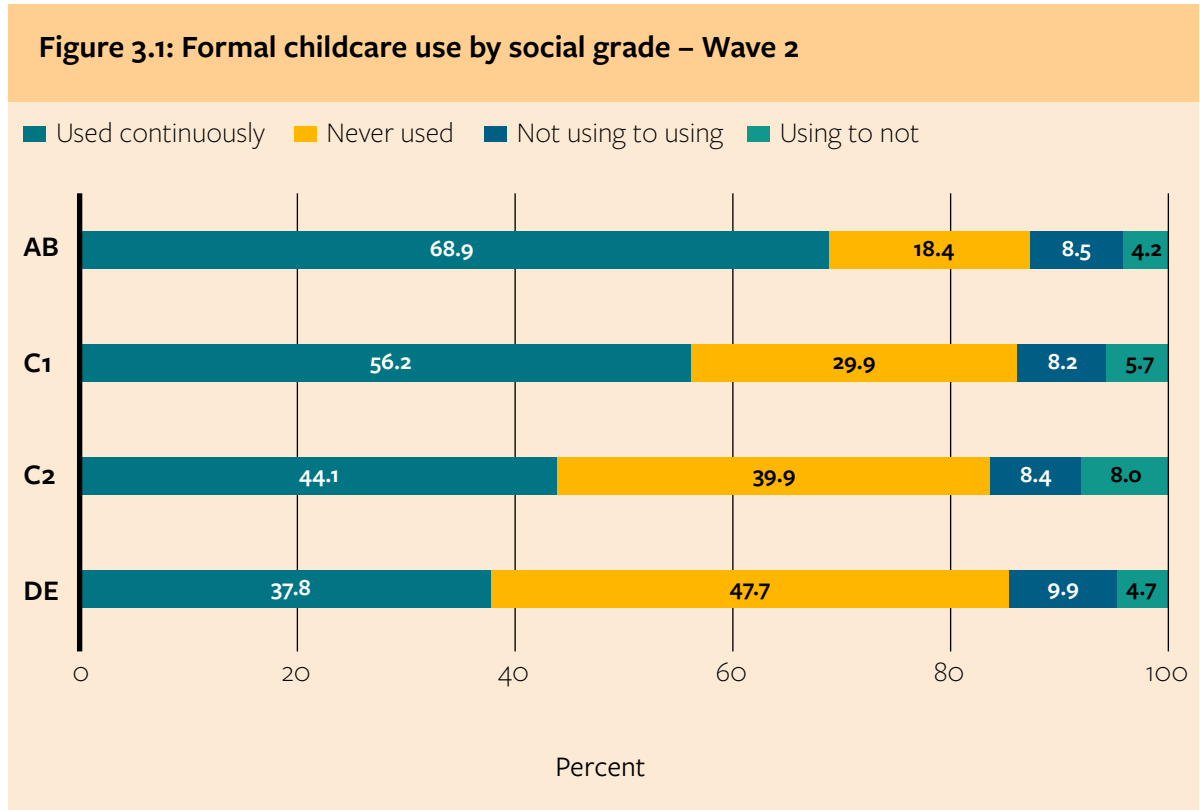
Both parents with lower household incomes, and also parents who were located in the most deprived areas were significantly more likely to have never used formal ECEC. There were significant differences in the use of formal childcare amongst parents from different social classes and income groups. In Wave 2, 44.1% of working-class parents (social grade C2-DE) had never used formal childcare compared to a quarter (23.9%) of middle-class parents (social grade AB-C1).

There were statistically significant differences between parents according to their Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) decile. Parents who had never used formal childcare were more likely to be in the poorest IMD deciles (1-3), as shown by Figure 3.2, whereas continuous childcare users were most likely to be in the middle (4-7) or affluent (8-10) deciles.

Affordability also affected decisions about returning to paid work following a period of parental leave. Of the 106 parents who said childcare had impacted on decisions about returning to work following parental leave, over half (55% in Wave 2), mostly women, said that it was because they could not afford to pay for childcare.

As well as enabling parents to work, ECEC is vital for levelling inequalities and is important for children in terms of socialisation and wider cognitive development. Many parents were aware of these benefits and other studies show that ECEC boosted language and thinking skills throughout the pandemic, particularly in children from less-advantaged backgrounds.²⁰

20 Davies, C. et al. 2021. 'Early childhood education and care (ECEC) during COVID-19 boosts growth in language and executive function' 30(4). Online First - <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/icd.2241>



Low-income families in the qualitative sample seemed acutely aware that funded hours often incurred additional costs both for two- and three-year-old funding, and that the hours were only provided in term-time rather than throughout the year, restricting job opportunities and affordability. Given the absence of community-based provision and ability to draw on family and social networks in the absence of formal ECEC, some parents, often without much indoor and outdoor space at home or resources to help with child development, worried about their children's wellbeing and the lack of socialisation they experienced.

One single mother on Universal Credit reported being unable to access her entitlement to 15 free hours from the age of two, designed to support low-income and disadvantaged families, because the nursery closest to her, which was within walking distance and would not have charged any additional fees, was not taking on new children. Her concerns were intensified as she was a

first-time mother and there were no other adults or children to interact with her boy:

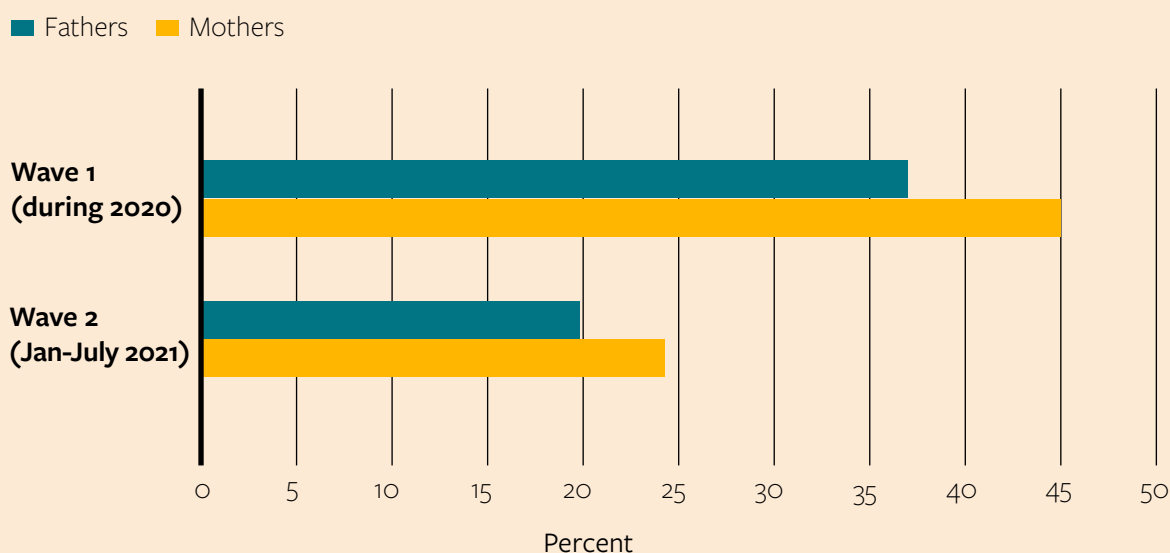
“

The nursery doesn't have any places now, which is a bit heartbreaking... I want his development, I want him to interact with other children, I want him to build them social skills, and I think as a parent, there's only so much that I can provide... I think he needs to interact to learn social skills for people his own age, and as awful as it sounds, I think lockdown has had a big, like, development issue with it, you know, like I mean I play with him and things like that, but I just don't think it's the same as if it was someone his own age.

Bryony, Counter Assistant, Leeds.

There were also gendered effects, as working mothers were more likely than working fathers to say that access to childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on their ability to work as usual across both waves (see Figure 3.3).

Figure 3.3: Proportion of working parents that reported access to childcare had impacted on their ability to work as usual (Waves 1 and 2)



Note: Wave 1: n=724; Wave 2: n883

The proportion of working mothers who said that access to childcare impacted on their ability to work reduced between wave 1 and 2 (from 45.2% to 24.5%), which suggested that either difficulties in accessing childcare were easing in the second year of the pandemic, or that parents were adapting their work. However, there are likely to be labour market scarring effects for parents with young children who struggled to access childcare at these times. For example, over double the proportion of women than men in Wave 2 said that the difficulty accessing childcare was affecting their career progression (31.8% compared to 15.2%).

When asked directly about how COVID-19 impacted on paid work hours during 2020 (in wave 1), there were significant gender differences. Figure 2 shows that although most parents (62%) reported no impacts to work hours, there was a significantly higher proportion of mothers who reported increased work hours (11.3% compared to 7.1% of fathers). In contrast, fathers were significantly more likely to report reduced work hours (19.6% compared to 14.2% of mothers). This may be explained through analysis which shows that women were more likely to be keyworkers and frontline workers than men.²¹ Mothers were also more than twice as likely to report 'other' impacts to work hours (5.8% compared to 2.6%) and slightly more likely to report unpredictable work hours (8.1% compared to 7.3% of fathers).

These adjustments were also described in more depth by parents in qualitative interviews. For example, many working parents, particularly mothers, spoke about intense pressures of work when ECEC and schools were closed in Wave 1. While ECEC settings

did remain open in the second major lockdown of 2021, these settings were highly disrupted, subject to temporary closures with both staff and children being required to isolate. A strong sense of fatigue and exhaustion was documented.

“

I found that really, it just, you start to feel kind of buried under it. And that was, in a way, for me, especially as time went on, the more difficult, like, you know, kind of, mental and emotional impact.

Steven, Publisher, London

“

I got shortlisted [for a job and promotion] – I ended up withdrawing because of COVID basically – because of recent isolation. My husband was ill as well so I just didn't have the time to prepare for it. You just can't turn up for an interview not having not prepared for it. I just – I don't really love my job anymore because I'm just so stressed... it's just become such a crush like and you never know what you're doing from week to week with childcare and just don't feel like you can really plan anything ahead or really invest in stuff that like you're really excited about because of COVID basically and childcare issues.

Sian, University Lecturer, London

“

I changed my job because I couldn't cope with doing full-time anymore. It's affecting my mental health actually, so I went down to four days and I've had to do a role I'm not as satisfied in because I don't really find it that challenging, it's not really what I want to be doing. But I just couldn't juggle full-time work and everything with the kids.

Eva, Social Worker, London

21 Warren, T. and Lyonette, C. 2021. 'Carrying the burden of the COVID-19 pandemic: working class women in the UK' <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/business/documents/research/carrying-the-work-burden-of-covid-19/final-report-working-class-women-and-covid.pdf>

Of the parents who took maternity, paternity or parental leave during the pandemic over half said that childcare had impacted on decisions about returning to work.

This intensity of pressure was keenly felt by single parents:



As a single parent, nobody else takes that responsibility for childcare. And it's absolutely, being a full-time parent is absolutely exhausting, it's a full-time job. But then you put that in the conditions of the pandemic and being completely isolated. And it was really... there was no respite... it very negatively impacted on my mental health.

Jan, Development Officer, Wales

Childcare also impacted on decisions to return to work for those parents who had taken a period of maternity, paternity or parental leave during the pandemic. Of the 218 parents in Wave 1 and the 182 parents in Wave 2 who were on parental leave between March to December 2020 (Wave 1) or January to July 2021 (wave 2), over half (53.7% and 58.2% respectively) said that childcare had impacted on decisions about returning to work. More than double the proportion of women compared to men said this in both waves.

Of parents that had taken leave, 18.4% and 15.4% in Wave 1 and 2 respectively said they had

not returned to work because they chose not to or were not able to. Interviews gave insight into the complex mix of factors informing decisions, including challenges. Using a new and unknown setting mid-pandemic, after lockdown, was daunting, as was paying for a very disrupted and costly childcare service.



The nursery wasn't going to have any kind of settling in, going back. So it was like, we were just going to have to hand her off at the door to strangers... Essentially she's spent probably about a year in the house with just us. So she was afraid of anyone else.

Yasmin, Epidemiologist, London

After delaying a return to work, parents described starting a new job or returning to a previous one with a huge amount of disruption to care:



She was sent home in the first week after having a temperature. And then we all had to get a COVID test... the nursery wouldn't let her back before she had a negative COVID test. She was teething and she had a cold and so she got a temperature. We've had a tough run. Yeah, we haven't had a full month of [uninterrupted childcare], no, we haven't, that's insane, even thinking about it.

Anna, Floating Support Leader, Bristol

Covid and the wellbeing of parents, children and families

Many factors impacted on the mental health and wellbeing of parents and children. These related to pressures of work, finances, access to paid/formal childcare, family and household dynamics, access to informal or familial care (especially if this was a core component in pre-pandemic childcare arrangements) and wider community and friendship networks.

Wellbeing and parental mental health appear to be in decline between the two waves. In Wave 1, 23 references to wellbeing and mental health were coded, by Wave 2 there were 60 references documenting declining mental health and wellbeing.

The absence of regular support from grandparents and other family members was frequently referred to by both parents and grandparents. The negative impact of the removal of grandparent care on wellbeing and mental health was particularly pronounced for those who had recently had babies or young infants (effectively preventing new family bonds and relationships forming), and those who relied heavily on grandparents for care to enable them to work.

“
I was saying to my husband, looking back at last autumn, it's almost like you're looking back to, like, darkness... It was such a depressing time, wasn't it? And also, I think for us and for her, it was sad, because she turned one literally just a week after we went back into restrictions. So her grandparents came to see her... So we were planning to have at least my parents over for her birthday. And then I think they announced we were gonna go into, like, Tier 3 or 4. So they suddenly just came round, just to deliver her present and said Happy Birthday to her, and then left.... His parents were supposed to come to stay with us for Christmas. And obviously all that got iced. That was heartbreaking actually, I think, for everyone.

Helen, Publisher, London

Responses from new parents were highly emotive and emphasised the fact that long period of time without contact could change the course of relationships between grandparents and grandchildren long term:

“
Friends and family missed out on those very early stages for [my daughter], and I certainly think that because of that lack of support... definitely had a contribution towards, both mine and [my partner's], you know, mental health.
 Iain, Solicitor, Leeds

Single parents faced an incredibly hard experience, with the absence of wider family, friendship and community-based support particularly in the early days before bubbles were introduced. One single mother commented that it could be ‘days and days before I saw another adult’ (Nicole, Leeds, Unemployed).

Another area of concern related to the impact on relationships within extended families – between children, parents, grandparents and also siblings – for example, the really difficult decisions made around grandparents needing (later in the pandemic) to choose who they could bubble with and support.

“
I mean there is a kind of pain and sadness, isn't there? ... I mean his third birthday, I did try and have a party for him, but we had Covid so we had to spend it isolating as well. We found out that the baby had Covid on the morning of his birthday... I didn't tell him that that was planned in case it got cancelled, so he never knows when we are going to see people.
 Claire, Teacher, London

One grandparent, who was bubbled with her daughter's young family, which meant she could not provide care for her son's children, spoke of a range of issues, including worry about her bond with her other son's baby, and impact she saw the pandemic having on her grandchildren:



I think from the children's point-of-view, [the baby], we don't know him in the same way that we would have known the children. He doesn't know us in the same way. Because obviously, we haven't had that contact. He's a very sunny baby. He is a sweetie-pie, but I feel, "Oh, I hope he will love us eventually." It's just one of those things, isn't it? But he will, and it will be okay... But little [girl], I think she found shutdown harder than any of the other children because she was two. And they were saying, when we're out for a walk... she was always saying, "Can I go and hold that grandad's hand?"

Maya, Bristol, Grandparent

Families of young children have been under intense pressure throughout the pandemic as they have attempted to maintain jobs and look after pre-school and school age children.

The impact of the pandemic has been unequal, both within and between households. The negative effects appear to be long-term and are social, economic and personal. It is critical that parents, children and families have access to a range of supports and services to recover and to ensure that the effects do not embed or widen inequalities (Recommendations 2, 3 and 7).

Government support – response to the crisis and looking to the future

Table 3.1. shows that in both waves, roughly half of parents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the Government had done enough to support them to access the childcare that they need or done enough to support childcare providers. Only around a fifth of parents agreed or strongly agreed that the Government had done enough to support them to access childcare in both waves and an even smaller

Table 3.1: Proportion of parents agreeing or disagreeing that the Government had done enough to (i) support parents to access the childcare they need, and (ii) childcare providers

	The Government has done enough to support parents to access the childcare they need		The Government has done enough to support providers	
	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 1	Wave 2
Strongly agree/agree	23.4	19.5	16.9	16.7
Neither agree nor disagree	31.7	29.2	32.5	33.8
Strongly disagree/disagree	45	51.4	50.7	49.5
<i>n</i> =1,013 (wave 1); 1,111 (wave 2)				

proportion of parents (17%) agreed or strongly agreed that the Government had done enough to support childcare providers.

In Wave 2, parents were asked about what key change they would like to see in the childcare sector. Just under half (47.4%) of parents who provided an open text response to this referred to the need for greater government investment and funding for early years.

In the comments provided, many parents suggested extending the free hour entitlements (in England). Many parents return to the issue of whether the 30 hours entitlement is really free or more akin to 'discounts per hour', which in practice, translates into high fees for parents. Others also raised accessibility alongside cost: "Make it cheaper, make it easier to access, make it so it is in within walking distance". Beyond these responses, some also highlighted the importance of out of setting services and supports, one asking the Government to "Provide access to home learning resources and encourage baby groups, get start right centres going again."

Parents referred to the negative psychological effects of 'mixed messaging' from government sources. Much like workers in the sector, parents also thought that early years was treated "almost like an afterthought", as "when they made the announcements about closures, they didn't really talk about nurseries really".

As well as criticism, which was fairly pronounced across both waves, in Wave 2 we asked a more future focused and evaluative question about what more could have been done to support parents, families and children, and how parents and children could be better supported post-pandemic. While the vast majority of comments related to

funding early years, other comments spanned issues like employment protection, greater investment in services for new parents, babies and toddlers, vaccines and income support for the self-employed. Additionally, parents discussed the importance of community-based provision and support for young children and their parents:

“

I think the collapse of things like SureStart it's really frustrating and ... the latest evaluation of SureStart showed that they were positive, you know, investing in those early years... it's an investment isn't it? In the future of children, children become adults, children become economic bodies in a government perspective, so even from a cold-hearted point of view and a money-driven and future prosperity point of view, an investment at that point just makes sense, you know? Never mind that it makes sense from a social and emotional point of view to for the development of the next generation of adults.

Ellie, Applied Health Researcher, Leeds

Many parents return to the issue of whether the 30 hours entitlement is really free or more akin to 'discounts per hour', which in practice, translates into high fees for parents. Others also raised accessibility alongside cost.



WP4 comparative policy framework

This chapter draws on data gathered from desk research to form four comparative policy framework case studies. These case studies detail what measures have been taken by authorities in Scotland, Wales, Ireland, and Australia to deal with the COVID-19 crisis during the pandemic in order to ensure the continuation of ECEC for children and families. This policy analysis affords policy makers the information to consider what might be learned for future plans for the provision of quality, flexible and sustainable early childhood education and care.

A summary of strategic initiatives and policy responses connected to workforce COVID-related challenges are detailed in the table below. These responses inform some of our own recommendations for future sustainability of the ECEC in England and Wales.

Scotland

Workforce strategy and innovation

A [Skills Investment plan](#) for the Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) sector was developed in 2017.

In [addressing the pay and conditions](#) of the sector the Scottish Government stated: ‘Public sector staff working in ELC already receive the Living Wage, and we want to see all childcare workers delivering the funded entitlement across all sectors paid at least this from 2020. To support this, we will provide local authorities with sufficient funding to allow them to agree sustainable rates with funded providers in the private and third sectors.’ In order to do this, [guidance](#), published in April 2019, sets out the principles for setting sustainable rates by local authorities through reviewing costs of delivery.

The Scottish Government also committed to ensure that, by August 2018, nurseries in Scotland’s 20% most deprived areas will benefit from an [additional graduate](#), which means that there will be 435 additional graduates working directly with children across all local authorities.

COVID-19 responses

Several initiatives have been developed during the COVID-19 pandemic to support the provision, safety and sustainability of early learning and childcare provision:

Financial support

- A commitment to a [Transitional Support Fund](#), part of £11.2 million support announced for the childcare sector, will help pay for things like increased cleaning, new or additional equipment, better outdoor spaces or adaptations to buildings.
- The extension of [nursery business rate relief extended until 2023](#)
- [Financial Sustainability Health Check](#) to better understand the financial viability of daycare and childminding services.
- A programme of targeted business, financial management, marketing and human resources (HR) support specific to the childcare sector.
- ‘[Our commitment to childminding](#)’ report including £1m to support childminder sustainability

Wellbeing support

The development of sector specific resources via the [ELC Wellbeing Hub](#)

Safety and Learning

Expansion of outdoor play including funding to support this [Scotland’s Coalition for Outdoor Play and Learning Position Statement - Inspiring Scotland](#)

Ireland

Workforce strategy and innovation

[Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare, 2022-2028](#) commits to:

- Achieving a graduate-led workforce in ELC by 2028, with new financial supports to assist Early Years Educators to study while continuing to work in the sector;
- Development of a career framework and strengthening career pathways, including new supports for leadership development;
- a career pathway from Early Years Educator to graduate level Lead Educator through a funded degree programme (see above)
- A target that all Lead Educators should have a level 7 (degree level) qualification by 2028
- Training in management skills specific to ELC settings
- Developing a single national ‘gateway’ to access quality-assured CPD resources (both online and face-to-face) via online portal
- Development of a central hub or ‘one-stop-shop’ approach for career development in the sector

COVID-19 responses

Financial Support

- **Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme (TWSCS)** – Funding was made available to providers to top-up the wage subsidy provided for childcare staff. TWSCS funding was also made available to cover any ongoing or non-deferrable operational costs for the period of the scheme, as well as consumables such as Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). This was a tapered subsidy of 70-85% of income ensuring the subsidy did not exceed €350 per week and compares to the flat rate 80% subsidy of the UK Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme or ‘furlough’ scheme.
- **Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS)** – the EWSS was introduced on 1st August 2020 and replaced the TWSS, which ceased on 31st August 2020. EWSS is an economy-wide enterprise support for eligible businesses in respect of eligible employees. It provides a flat-rate subsidy to qualifying employers based on the numbers of paid and eligible employees on the employer’s payroll. This differed from the UK Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme or ‘furlough’ which offered an 80% grant toward employees’ usual wages.

Workforce strategy and innovation

Pay

Government has undertaken a number of measures to support service providers to pay higher wages, including:

- Higher capitation payments for graduate ‘room leaders’ and for qualified Inclusion Coordinators
- Programme Support Payments to service providers to support ‘non-contact time’ activities.
- In June 2021, the Government announced plans to introduce legislation to give all workers the right to paid sick leave: three days per year in 2022, rising to five days payable in 2023 and seven days in 2024.

Following a review, it was concluded that a Joint Labour Committee (JLC) is the most appropriate mechanism to improve wages in the sector. A JLC for the sector was established later in 2021. The JLC will now have the capacity to recommend mandatory minimum rates of pay and terms and conditions of employment for certain workers employed in the sector.

COVID-19 responses

Financial Support

- **Reopening Support Grant** – a one-off reopening support grant (€18m) was offered to registered, centre-based services who reopened between June and September 2020. This was to assist childcare providers with operational costs incurred during reopening, including those related to staff resourcing and training, learning resources, or cleaning/hygiene consumables.
- **Capital Grant** – the COVID-19 Capital Grant was introduced to facilitate the reopening of childcare services. €14.2m was allocated to contribute to the capital costs associated with reopening, and enable registered providers to modify facilities, equipment and outdoor areas
- **Childminding Grant** – a one-off childminding grant (€375k) was made available to childminders in June 2020 to assist them with additional reopening costs. A payment of €500 was offered per childminder.

Australia

Workforce strategy and innovation

[Shaping our Future: A ten-year strategy to ensure a sustainable, high-quality children’s education and care workforce 2022–2031](#) The strategy outlines short-, medium- and long-term actions across focus areas including:

Professional recognition

- Commission research to explore and identify the structural barriers to, and strategies for, improving pay and conditions in the sector
- Review jurisdiction-specific requirements to enable the registration of all early childhood teachers
- Consider the appropriateness of national early career teacher mentoring and induction support
- Coordinate a multi-channel, multi-year communications programme initially promoting the societal value of children’s ECEC

Attraction and attention

- Based on a review of existing and previous targeted programmes, engage in strategic partnerships to support target students to enrol in and complete children’s education and care qualifications
- Review existing migration processes and opportunities for overseas trained entrants to the sector
- Develop dedicated resources regarding employment and career opportunities in ECEC

COVID-19 responses

Financial support

Families whose employment was affected by COVID-19 had access to extra Child Care Subsidy (CCS) hours between July 2020 and April 2021.

Relief Package (April 2020 – July 2020)

The Australian Government responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020 with the ECEC Relief Package. A [review](#) found the Relief Package helped keep services open and viable, with 99% of 13,400 services operational as of 27 May 2020.

Transition Package (July 2020 – September 2020)

The sector returned to CCS with support from a Transition Package on 13 July 2020. In addition to CCS payments, approved providers received a 25% Transition Payment instead of [JobKeeper Payments](#).

Business continuity payments (from Aug 2022)

From 23 August 2021, eligible childcare services received [business continuity payments](#) during extended COVID-19 lockdowns. Services received 25–40% of their pre-lockdown revenue.

Workforce strategy and innovation

Leadership qualifications and career pathways capability

- Develop an evolving suite of eLearning modules, including an ‘Induction to the National Quality Framework’ training package
- Undertake a review of early childhood teaching programme requirements
- Ensure that intergovernmental, education and training provider, and sector stakeholder representatives provide ongoing advice and feedback regarding vocational education and training reform

Wellbeing

- Consider the viability of a range of potential wellbeing supports, notably a base-level employee assistance programme for educators and teachers that currently do not have access to one

COVID-19 responses

Safety and Learning

[National Framework for Managing COVID-19 in Schools and Early Childhood Education and Care](#)

The objectives of this Framework are to:

- Protect vulnerable children and staff at higher risk of severe disease within ECEC and schools, including those with disability or severe chronic health conditions.
- Minimise disruption to face-to-face learning from COVID-19 transmission in ECEC and schools, because of the mental and physical health and social development advantages from ECEC and school participation.
- Minimise broader community transmission and keep it within the capacity of the health system.
- Minimise the broader workforce disruptions for parents and carers.

Wales

Workforce strategy and innovation

[Taking Wales Forward](#) the Programme for Government 2016 to 2021 included the objective of increasing the offer of funded early years education and childcare. This offer was to increase from 10 to 30 hours per week, and from 38 to 48 weeks of the year for working parents of three- and four-year-olds. The increased hours were first piloted in 14 of Wales' 22 local authorities (LAs), and all LAs began to offer the increased hours by September 2020. [Taking Wales Forward](#) also sets out plans for a new model of 'Community Learning Centres' providing extended services such as childcare, parenting support, family learning, and community access to facilities built around the school day.

[Prosperity for All: the national strategy \(2017\)](#) takes forward the Programme for Government commitments. It highlights the early years as one of five cross-cutting priorities for the Welsh Government, recognising that these play a crucial part in shaping a child's future and their chances of leading a healthy, prosperous and fulfilling life.

[Childcare, Play and Early Years Workforce Plan \(2018\)](#)

This plan sets out the direction of travel for the Childcare, Play and Early Years workforce over the next 10 years. However, its focus is on actions taking place within the first 3 years and aligned to the Welsh Government's National Strategy - Prosperity for All.

COVID-19 responses

Financial Support

- **Childcare Provider Grant** The scheme was available to those settings which have been unable to access the other business support schemes offered by the UK and Welsh Governments and most providers were eligible for a grant of £5,000.
- **Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme**, to fund childcare for the pre-school children of critical workers and vulnerable children for a period of three months from 1 April.
- **Childcare Premises Business Rates Relief**. The extension of the rates relief, until 31 March 2025, will provide £9.7m of additional support for registered childcare premises. This will help those who are facing financial difficulties as a result of the pandemic and secure the level of provision that children and parents need and rely on.

Safety and Learning

Guidance from the Welsh Government on health and safety in early years environments was issued:

[Guidance for childcare and playwork: coronavirus](#)

[Early learning support fund](#)

£13m will be for additional support for early years learners, in both schools and non-maintained settings. The funding will go towards increased practitioner-to-learner ratios in schools and educational support for non-maintained settings to help deliver supported, active play and experiential learning. An extra £6 million will be allocated to schools to support teaching staff, promote wellbeing and progression and expand on the positive changes already made to ways of working.



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