



Policy Brief: COVID-19 and the early years childcare and education workforce in England and Wales (PIs: Hardy and Tomlinson)

This brief, based on data from a UKRI/ESRC research project, addresses the challenges brought about by the impact of COVID-19 on the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector. It details policy recommendations and interventions to ensure a more resilient future for this vital sector and its workforce:

- Formal designation of the ECEC workforce as ‘critical workers’
- Priority access to (funded) PPE, testing and vaccines for ECEC workers
- Enhanced access to sick pay for employed and self-employed ECEC workers
- Improvements to employment support schemes which enable them to be rolled out immediately and which reflect the complexities of the workforce in ECEC
- Business continuity payments through a viability support fund to address short term income loss for ECEC providers and potential risk of market failure
- Recruitment campaign and actions on low pay, low morale and recognition to address the loss of experienced workers from the sector

Summary of problem/challenge/opportunity

Early childhood education and care is foundational to the UK economy and society. Without the provision of formal and informal childcare, parents are not able to work during and after the COVID-19 crisis, exacerbating intra and interhousehold inequalities. This project addresses the urgent challenges of:

- Disruption to and sustainability of provision on the ECEC workforce
- Ensuring safe environments for workers, children, and families

Policy recommendations

1. Formal designation of the ECEC workforce as ‘critical workers’

All sectors of the economy rely on ECEC to enable parents to work. Early years (EY) staff should have been considered critical workers, but they were not recognised as such throughout the pandemic. The consequences were that the sector could not access a variety of vital resources which would have helped to reduce staff absences, improve safety, and assist the sector to function through the pandemic. This included:

- Places in educational settings (largely schools) for their own children
- Priority queueing places for supermarket
- Testing and vaccination priority (see below in Section 2)

Workers’ inability to access these resources compromised the sector’s ability to deliver ECEC, either by not having care available for their own dependents, not being able to be released from isolation or not being able to work relatively more safely in a high-risk environment. Government and policymakers should implement formal designation of ECEC staff as critical workers.



2. Priority access to (funded) PPE testing and vaccines for ECEC staff

Close physical contact is a daily part of ECEC work, meaning infection control measures such as distancing as well as reduced contact, are not possible or appropriate. This places greater emphasis on the need for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for minimising risk of infection among staff and children in ECEC settings. During the COVID-19 pandemic, ECEC settings required PPE including gloves, cleaning products, hand sanitizer, aprons, fogging machines, face masks, and signage in order to provide a safe working and caring environment. These were not publicly funded (as they were for schools). A policy is required to prioritise ECEC setting access to PPE and testing.

3. Enhanced access to sick pay for employed and self-employed critical workers

Full sick pay is essential during a pandemic. The majority of ECEC settings offer Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) only. Employers must ensure staff working in the ECEC sector are testing for asymptomatic disease, taking sick leave from work, and isolating to prevent the spread of disease. Policymakers should ensure that a policy of adequate sick pay enables workers to do this without financial detriment.

4. Improvements to employment support schemes which enable them to be rolled out immediately and which reflect the complexities of the workforce in ECEC, particularly amongst self-employed providers.

In 2020, the government introduced a package of support for employers and workers, which were available to providers in the ECEC sector. This included the 'Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme' and the Self-employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS). These schemes were vital in enabling settings to switch into 'crisis mode' and provide continuity of care for critical workers. Any future system needs to take into account specific nature of the self-employed workforce amongst childminders, generating a system of self-employment support which is sensitive to the particularities of this labour market.

5. Business continuity payments through a viability support fund to address short term income loss for ECEC providers

It is recommended that policy makers initiate a Business Continuity Fund akin to the Australian business continuity payments whereby eligible childcare services received business continuity payments during extended lockdowns. Services received 25–40% of their pre-lockdown revenue (depending on service type). Such payments would ensure providers are not vulnerable to the sudden withdrawal of children and loss of income (either publicly funded entitlement hours or privately paid for hours), with implications across the economy and society for staff attendance and absences in other essential services. This would address the potential risk of market failure disproportionately affecting women's workforce participation (particularly in more deprived areas).

6. Recruitment campaign and action on low pay, low morale, lack of recognition

This policy recommendation would support and promote ECEC as an attractive career and a targeted program for the recruitment of apprentices, while paying particular attention to recruitment and retention in areas of deprivation. In addition, the



development of a Core Infrastructure Fund would enable supply side funding paid to early years settings. This could also be used as a lever by local or national authorities to implement a national pay scale for early educators.

Summary of evidence

Evidence presented in this briefing draws on data from a UKRI/ESRC-funded, large-scale study of the effect of COVID-19 on Early Childhood Education and Care collected between Dec 2020 and Oct 2021 with surveys and interviews. In total, we surveyed 3090 parents and practitioners in the sector, including Nursery Managers (871), Parents (1020) Childminders (672) and Nannies (527). We undertook in-depth 300 interviews with childcare practitioners, nursery managers, childminders, nannies and parents and carers.

It was widely felt in the research that assigning critical worker status to early educators would enable prioritisation for school places and supermarkets. Participants articulated how priority access (as critical workers) to testing and vaccinations would reduce infections and associated absences and would reduce the heightened anxiety about lack of protections experienced whilst working with children and families.

Priority access to PPE, testing and vaccines for ECEC staff

The work of ECEC requires direct contact with bodily fluids, including saliva, urine, faeces and ECEC staff are unable to distance from young children under their supervision. For 71.6% of the childminders we surveyed, their principal concern was their personal safety, or the safety of families or children.

ECEC settings required PPE in order to provide a safe working environment. Many ECEC practitioners reported difficulty accessing PPE and nursery staff in some settings were instructed by their employer to provide their own masks. Further, the costs of PPE and cleaning were a burden on the budgets of many providers who are operating on tight margins, especially as the price of PPE became inflated.

Testing was important in facilitating ECEC staff to continue working safely and reducing contact-related absences. There was inequity in the sector as school settings and maintained nursery schools (MNS) were provided with lateral flow tests for staff, whereas private, voluntary, and independent (PVI) settings and childminders had to source them independently.

Enhanced access to sick pay

Sick pay policies vary across the sector, between staff in the same setting, and is often dependent upon contractual terms and length of service. Overall, the proportion of the workforce with access to contractual sick pay improved in nurseries during the pandemic from 32.9% to 44.8%, likely reflecting a recognition of the need for sick pay to contain the spread of the virus. While sickness was generally covered by some level of sick pay, periods of isolation or caring for dependents with Covid were less likely to be paid. This suggests a misunderstanding of the law by ECEC employers as periods of isolation - whether due to contact or co-habiting with a case- should be compensated by SSP.



Improvements to employment support schemes and business continuity payments

The provision of the SEISS scheme enabled childminders (mostly self-employed) to remain open to critical workers, when a reduction in parent demand threatened their ability to continue. 74.9% used the SEISS. In Wales, 85% (wave 1) and 21.6% (wave 2) used the Childcare Providers Grant. Despite good take-up, three quarters (74.4% wave1) of childminders who accessed the SEISS said income received from it was not sufficient to cover their usual income. As such, while the SEISS scheme was necessary in maintaining provision, future preparedness must ensure that payments are sufficient to sustain those working in it.

During March – June 2020, many nursery settings which remained open to the children of critical worker parents experienced significant financial difficulties due to a reduction in fee income. Settings took a number of remedial action actions to remain viable in the short-term including using financial reserves, ‘Changed staff contract conditions’, ‘Permanently cut staff’, and ‘Non-renewal of temporary staff’. These measures have produced a sector which has significantly less agility and flexibility to respond to the ongoing pandemic and future crises.

Absence of ECEC provision impacts on parents’ ability to work, with greater effects on women’s work and workforce participation; 40% of parents in paid work reported their ability to work as usual was impacted by their access to childcare. For EY settings to remain open (as a minimum for the children of critical workers) and resilient during periods of heightened restrictions and future pandemics, there is a pressing need for rapid financial support.

Recruitment campaign and actions on low pay, low morale and lack of recognition

- A combination of health concerns, changes to provision and financial strain has accelerated the loss of experienced workers from the sector
- Covid-related factors have widened the responsibilities of EY workers and intensified their work. Morale among the workforce is very low and worsening conditions of work in the sector indicate that workforce attrition will continue
- Overall, these conditions are not sustainable for many working in sector and threaten the long-term stability of its workforce. These conditions diminish quality of care and education and the undermine the ability of the EY workforce to deliver on the government’s key priorities in education for pre-school children.
- Patterns of workforce change indicate it is children and parents in areas of greatest deprivation and, arguably those who need it the most

Sources and further reading

[Briefing Paper #1: Sustainability of Early Years Education and Care in England – Evidence through COVID-19](#)

[Briefing Paper #2: Workforce stability and working conditions in the Early Years sector. Evidence through Covid19.](#)

<https://childcare-during-covid.org/>



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About ReWAGE

- ReWAGE is an independent expert advisory group modelled on SAGE, which supports government's strategic response to the recovery and renewal of work and employment in the UK as it tackles the impact of Covid-19.
- Its recommendations cover: the maintenance and creation of jobs, improving the quality of jobs, ensuring that the workforce has the right skills to access those jobs, and access to training and jobs is available to all. Its scope covers employers, employees and the self-employed.
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