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## **SR21 Briefing: Workforce stability and working conditions in the Early Years sector: Evidence through Covid19**

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### **Summary**

- A stable, well-qualified early years (EY) workforce is essential for high-quality education and childcare and to the delivery of the government's Covid recovery catch-up plans to education, including the priority area of speech and language development for under-fives, and to ensure that no child is left behind as a result of the pandemic.
- **A combination of health concerns, changes to provision and financial strain has accelerated the loss of experienced workers from the sector** – including nursery workers and managers and childminders.
- Covid-related factors have widened the responsibilities of early years 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, with a potential recruitment and retention crisis on the horizon.**
- Overall, these **conditions are not sustainable for many working in sector and threaten the long-term stability of its workforce.** These conditions also **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, who will lose access to high-quality early childhood support due to workforce changes.

### **Recommendations**

- In order to address a retention crisis, **a national early years workforce strategy** is needed. Such a strategy would detail and resource a simplified but robust qualifications framework and be coupled with increased investment in continuing professional development and pay progression. This would support recruitment and retention of educators and the ongoing professionalisation of the workforce.
- The Government must **revise funding of entitlement hours.** Funding must cover the full cost of provision and stop the current subsidisation of free childcare through EY workers' suppressed wages. Annual reviews of early years funding should account for statutory increases in National Living Wage/National Minimum Wage.



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- The development of a Core Infrastructure Fund (see Sustainability paper) would enable supply side funding to early years settings. Such a fund could also be used a lever by local or national authorities to **implement a national pay scale for early educators**.
- Recruitment could be boosted through a **national communications campaign and should focus on the critical importance of early childhood education** on a child's development and life chances. This would also convey the crucial role early years professionals play in supporting this. Such a campaign would emphasise how early education involves skills equivalent to those teaching in other phases of education. It would also serve to attract more childminders and nannies to the profession.

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This briefing is based on a UKRI/ESRC funded study 'Childcare during Covid-19' at Universities of Leeds and Bristol on the effects of COVID-19 on early years education and care and its workforce, including nurseries, childminders, nannies and parents. The study is constituted by over **3090 survey respondents and 193 in-depth interviews**.

## **LOSS OF STAFF FROM SECTOR**

Staff working in the early years sector combine a unique mix of care skills and educational knowledge which is critical for child development and for narrowing attainment gaps in order to level life chances (Karemaker [et al. 2011](#); [Mathers and Smees 2014](#)). Disruptions to the sector as a result of Covid have intensified existing challenges for staff and staffing, in addition to creating new pressures which mean experienced staff are leaving or [being pushed] from the sector and apprentices are not entering.

### Nursery settings

Across every setting type<sup>1</sup> there was a net loss of working hours in the sector as a result of COVID, indicating an overall contraction in this largest part of the EY workforce.

- Private day nurseries had the highest proportion of settings reporting **decreased staffing (32.8%)**. This setting type also had the highest proportion of increased staffing as well (14.5%) indicating they were the most responsive to local demand changes. 27% of Local Authority nurseries decreased the number of staff on contract.
- As a result of COVID, the number of apprentices decreased in many nurseries. Apprentices were also more likely to be furloughed and lose hours of work. Loss of junior staff at this level represents **a threat to the pipeline of staff into the sector** in now and in the longer-term.

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<sup>1</sup> Private, volunteer and independent (PVI) nurseries; maintained nurseries and nursery classes, and play groups



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- **There has been reduced attendance (and possibly capacity) in areas of deprivation.** Almost half (48.2) % of settings in most deprived areas saw decreased numbers of 2 year olds taking up 15 hours entitlement versus 26% seeing decreases in less deprived areas. Our data revealed a clear visual trend (which we are investigating) of nursery settings documenting decreased capacity in areas of greater deprivation compared to less deprived areas.
- Nursery Managers reported **significant problems with recruiting staff**, both qualified and otherwise, due to covid. This is reinforced in research concerning recruitment and retention of EY workers during covid ([EYA 2020](#)).
- **POLICY RECOMMENDATION: to support and promote early years education and care 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.**

#### Childminders

- During Covid, childminders experienced a net decrease in working hours and income; **over 57% of childminders declared an overall decrease in weekly working hours.**
- Childminders who reported a decrease in the number of children they cared for or a decrease in the number of hours worked during Covid were less confident they would remain childminders. Just over **a fifth (20.9%) of childminders were not at all confident that they would be working as a childminder in six months.** The majority (57.5%) of those 'not confident' said they would be seeking work in a different sector.
- Childminders in **more deprived areas are less confident** about staying open, meaning that **loss of provision will be greatest for the poorest children.**
- The loss of childminders from the sector will represent a substantial loss of experience and knowledge from the sector; **52% of childminders who were not at all confident they would be working as a childminder in six months had 10 or more years' experience.** Exits from childminders will also constitute the **loss of more flexible forms of care, including wrap around care in the early morning and late evening.**
- **POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Childminders need to be recognised as both occupying an important niche in the early years education and care sector and as a skilled workforce contributing to the delivery of government early childhood education objectives.**

#### **WORKING CONDITIONS DURING COVID**



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Long hours, low pay and work demands have been long term sources of dissatisfaction in the Early Year sector (Social Mobility Commission, 2019). Workers all report work intensification, new duties and high levels of stress caused by working through Covid-19.

### *Work intensification*

- In response to financial losses during 2020, **many nurseries have taken mitigating actions which undermine staff conditions and job quality**: 19.2% made changes to staff contract conditions, 14.3% permanently cut staff, 13.4% cut temporary staff. Other actions included reducing staff hours (reduced contracted hours and cut overtime); not replacing staff who left; reducing staffing to child ratio to statutory minimum; reducing staff wages or delaying staff pay rises.
- In almost all nursery settings where there was change to the staff to child ratios the proportion of settings where **workers were responsible for more children was higher** than the proportion where workers were responsible for fewer children.
- Nursery workers, childminders and nannies identified additional Covid-19 health and safety measures, including cleaning, as either intensifying hours at work or extending working hours.

### *New duties*

- Nursery workers are undertaking **additional duties in place of furloughed colleagues**. Childminders and nannies are more likely to be **caring for and home-schooling** school-aged children. Nannies are being called upon to **perform household chores** outside of their usual obligations, such as cleaning, cooking and managing the household.
- Early years staff were the only face-to-face contact for many children and families during lockdown periods when other services and agencies, such as social workers and educational psychologists, moved their work online. As a result, they have reported taking on duties usually undertaken by other health and professional agencies:
  - increasingly identifying cases of vulnerability, including neglect and exposure to domestic violence.
  - They have also been more involved in identifying possible SEND in children and have provided primary support for parents and carers to understand and cope with diagnoses in the absence of access to other social services. *Stress and mental health*



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- Workers across the sector say the stress of working with the risk of Covid has had a damaging effect on their mental health. Many head teachers and nursery managers reported concern about the wellbeing of their staff.
- **Stress and poor mental health were caused by the risk of Covid-19 infection and changed working conditions**, including caring for a greater number of children and more responsibilities, including home-schooling, and heightened fear of job loss. For nannies, stress was connected to greater surveillance when families worked from home. Childminders found it stressful working in isolation with no access to the networks of childminders they would usually draw on for support and resources.
- Workers across the different EY settings described having to make decisions about what constituted an acceptable health risk in a context of economic uncertainty and fear of job loss.

#### *Job satisfaction and morale*

High levels of job satisfaction have historically retained workers in what is otherwise a low-paid, low status job. There continues to be a very high level of job satisfaction from these workers. At the same time, the changed conditions and circumstances of working during Covid-19 has meant that these workers feel increasingly undervalued. Morale among the workforce is very low.

- **90% of childminders and 87% of nannies** are satisfied or very satisfied with the sense of achievement they get from their job. Nursery managers and childcare practitioners also reported high levels of job satisfaction in interviews.
- Workers feel that their work is **rendered invisible** in government and societal discourse about covid. **69% of childminders and 50% of nannies** disagreed or strongly disagreed that their skills are valued by society.
- Workers across all EY settings also felt that the important educational work they do is unacknowledged and undervalued.

#### *Pay*

- Nursery Managers report the underfunding of free entitlement hours and the practice of cross-subsidising these hours with 'paid for hours'. It was widely felt that this underfunding suppressed wages in the sector. Additionally, childcare practitioners and childminders believed that the annual increases in National Living Wage/National Minimum Wage were not matched with comparable increases in funding.



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- The responses of many nurseries to these financial challenges highlight the direct link between underfunding and low wages and poor quality of work in the sector. These include increasing the number of children cared for per staff member, lowering overall staffing, including apprentices, and eroding the conditions of employment for staff.
- The majority of the workforce relies on Statutory Sick Pay and there is a complete absence of contractual sick pay. Many workers felt compelled to work during the pandemic, despite concerns about their health.
- Many workers earn just the National Minimum Wage with little or no scope for pay progression. **47% of childminders** are either dissatisfied or strongly dissatisfied with the amount of pay they receive. Many childcare practitioners and childminders are not confident of their future in the EY sector and are considering jobs outside of the sector, including higher paid retail work.
- **POLICY RECOMMENDATION: A strategy that details and resources a simplified but robust qualifications framework that is coupled with increased investment in continuing professional development and pay progression. This would support recruitment and retention of educators and the ongoing professionalisation of the workforce.**

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### Methodology

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 interviews with 193 people, including Childcare Practitioners (44), Nursery managers (38), Childminders (27) and Nannies (42).



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