
TURNING POINT?

An updated analysis of the impact of recruitment and retention challenges on the early years sector in England



“While I am hopeful that the change in government will bring positive changes, unless there is an investment in practitioners and an increase in funding, no one wants to work in the sector.

“I came to my setting to prevent it closing last year. I had left the industry altogether as the local supermarket was paying significantly more, but I felt that my village needed the pre-school so I applied for the management position ... I have a BA (Hons) in Early Childhood Studies and an MSc in Developmental Psychology, and yet I am treated worse than a 15-year-old with a babysitting job.

“The role of the early years sector has been grossly de-professionalised to meet the agenda of the previous government, and fellow educators have zero regard for the early years workforce who are underpaid, undervalued and overworked.

“It is currently 21:14 as I complete this [survey]. I am still working.”

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KEY FINDINGS

- **78%** of respondents were finding it difficult to recruit suitable new early years staff, with nearly half (**48%**) finding it 'very difficult'. The most common reasons for this were: a lack of applicants for roles (**69%**); applicants lacking full and relevant early years qualifications (**65%**); and being unable to meet the salary demands of applicants (**50%**).
- **61%** said they were aware of staff who had left their setting in the six months prior to the survey who had left the early years sector completely.
- **47%** said they had had to use bank or agency staff over the previous six months.
- **17%** had had to reduce or otherwise restrict opening hours as a result of lack of adequate staff over the previous six months.
- **50%** had had to limit or stop taking on new children due to a lack of sufficient staff over the previous six months.
- **51%** of those who had experienced staffing shortages over the previous six months said that it had had a negative impact on quality.
- **42%** felt pessimistic about having sufficient staff in 12 months' time.
- **26%** thought that it was likely that a lack of adequate staff would result in their setting or rooms in their setting being forced to close temporarily over the next 12 months.
- **12%** thought that it was likely that a lack of adequate staff would result in their setting being forced to close permanently over the next 12 months.
- **37%** were actively considering leaving the early years sector, with **4%** having already confirmed that they are leaving and **2%** having already left. The most commonly cited reasons were: feeling undervalued by government (**75%**); job-related stress (**68%**); and poor pay (**63%**).
- When asked about the Department for Education's early years recruitment campaign 'Do Something Big', around half (**52%**) of respondents said they had heard of the campaign. Of

those who had advertised at least one role since the campaign's launch, more than eight in 10 (**81%**) said there had been no change in the number of applications for roles in their setting since its launch, with just **4%** noting an increase in the period, and **10%** seeing a decrease.

BACKGROUND

In December 2021, the Early Years Alliance published its landmark staffing report [*Breaking Point*](#), which explored early years recruitment and retention challenges, and the impact these were having on nurseries, pre-schools and childminding settings across the country. While many of the issues highlighted in that report are still prevalent today – particularly concerns around pay, workload, and a strong and consistent feeling of being undervalued by government – in the three years since the report's publication, the sector has also faced a multitude of new challenges.

Chief among these is, of course, the ongoing rollout of the early entitlement expansion. In April 2024, two-year-olds from certain working families became eligible to access 15 hours a week of government-funded care and education (for 38 weeks of the year), an offer that was extended to eligible children aged nine months and above in September 2024. While the policy was implemented by the previous Conservative government, the current Labour government has confirmed its commitment to rolling out this policy in full. As such, as it stands, this entitlement is due to be extended to 30 hours per week for 38 weeks of the year for all eligible children aged nine months and above from September 2025.

There remain, however, significant funding and capacity challenges which call into question the ability of early years settings to meet increased demand: accordingly to data from the Department for Education, a total 35,000 additional educators are needed to deliver the places needed by next year. And while the new government has confirmed plans to set up an additional 3,000 school-based nurseries, using spare primary school spaces, this policy in and of itself does nothing to address the issue of inadequate staffing levels.

The Department for Education has, it is important to note, taken a number of steps to attempt to address the sector's staffing challenges.

In February, the Department launched 'Do Something Big', a multi-million pound early years recruitment campaign which saw adverts encouraging people to consider a career in the early years launched across print and broadcast media – alongside with the launch of a £1,000 incentive pilot scheme to encourage people to join the sector. While the ongoing rollout of the campaign was impacted by the recent general election, the government has confirmed that it intends to do continue with this work going forward.

In addition, the Department for Education has also implemented or consulted on a number of changes to the staffing requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage – including changes to staff:child ratios, the relaxing of qualification requirements and the introduction of an experienced-based route to counting in statutory ratios, in a bid to address capacity concerns. However, while such changes may help to reduce pressure in the short term, there is a real risk that these policies will have a negative impact on working conditions in early years settings in the longer term, as well as a detrimental impact on the quality of provision more generally.

Now, just months into the tenure of new government – and amid the biggest sector expansion in years – it has never been more important to take the temperature of the early years workforce, explore what challenges they are facing in the short and long term, and consider how the workforce can be supported into the future.

METHODOLOGY

The survey was conducted online from 10 to 19 July 2024 and received 889 responses.

Respondents mainly comprised of pre-schools (**43%**), nurseries (**38%**) and childminders (**10%**). The remaining respondents were comprised of maintained nursery schools (**1%**), primary school nursery classes (**1%**), children's centres (**1%**), out-of-hours clubs (**1%**), specialist early years provision (**1%**) and other settings (**5%**) which include baby and toddler groups and stay and play sessions.

Overall, responses came from managers (**30%**), owners and managers (**21%**) and owners (**5%**), deputy/assistant managers (**8%**), Level 3 educators (**8%**), Level 6 educators (**7%**), with a small number of responses from administrators (**4%**), trustee/committee members (**3%**), Level 4 or 5 educators (**2%**) and room leaders (**2%**). Other respondents (**8%**) included trainers and volunteers.

Around **27%** of respondents operate more than one setting. In relevant questions, such providers were asked to base their responses on all of their settings, where appropriate. Where needed (for example, when asked how often settings had temporarily closed over the previous six months), those respondents were asked to base their responses on the average number of occurrences across their settings.

For ease and clarity, the word 'setting' has been used throughout this report to refer to both individual settings for single-site providers (including childminders) and multiple settings for multi-site providers.

SURVEY RESULTS

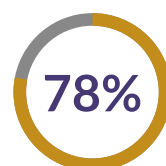
Recruitment

The survey results clearly demonstrate the severity of the current early years staffing crisis, with **78%** of respondents saying that they are struggling to recruit staff, and almost half (**48%**) finding it 'very difficult'.

Of those struggling to recruit, nearly seven in 10 (**69%**) cited a lack of applicants as a key barrier. One respondent said: "The lack of applicants is by far our biggest obstacle. We used to be able to choose from a shortlist of candidates, but now [we] either have no applicants at all, or one or two [that are] often unsuitable." Another commented that recent job adverts have been met with no response: "We have advertised twice in the last year and had no response at all. We are a popular, outstanding setting and we flagged our advertisement in the local primary school newsletter."

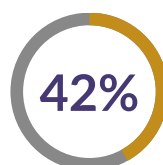


"Due to the length of advertising and very little interest in the post, I will be reducing the number of children I take in come September."



of respondents said that they were struggling to recruit early years staff

A significant proportion of respondents also cited challenges relating to the skills and experience of applicants, with around two-thirds (**65%**) noting candidates lack 'full and relevant' qualifications (those that fall within the Department for Education's prescribed list of qualifications enabling a staff member to count in adult-child ratios at the relevant level). Respondents explained that applicants often apply with qualifications from similar sectors that cannot be transferred to an early years setting. One said: "[We've found there have been] lots of people with health and care qualifications that apply for nursery jobs but they are not full and relevant qualifications".



cited candidates' insufficient practical experience as a barrier to recruitment

Some providers also highlighted that while applicants may hold suitable qualifications, they often struggle to match this with practical experience, with four in ten (**42%**)

citing this as a challenge to recruitment. While some noted that this meant vacancies were often left unfilled, others said they had to put additional resources into training new recruits. One respondent said: “They just do not have the same level of skills and experience as previously, so we’re having to employ a lower calibre of staff and put a lot of work into training them.”

Providers working in full-time settings also cited difficulties in attracting staff to work full-time hours, with many requesting part-time, flexible or term time-only hours which, due to ongoing staffing shortages, can often be difficult to accommodate.



“A lot of people want [to work] term-time school hours, which isn’t suitable for a day nursery.”

One said: “Most people seem to now want part-time, or only to do certain days which don't fit with our needs. And there just aren't enough Level 3s, so we're aware the only option is to recruit people from other settings, which makes the problem worse elsewhere.”

Respondents also noted that applicants are often looking for higher pay than settings are able to provide. One said: “[We’ve found there have been] high expectations of salaries from candidates [...which] does

not match their experience and qualifications.”

Even those providers who are able to attract enough candidates to put forward to the interview stage are often met with obstacles, with two in five (**40%**) of those struggling to recruit noting that candidates often fail to turn up for job interviews.

One respondent said: “We have been continually advertising for 12 months but the few applicants that we have received have been very poor [and] we have then been let down by candidates that we have put forward for interview by them not showing for interview or pulling out of our on-boarding process at the last minute.”



of those struggling to recruit cited candidates failing to turn for job interviews

Providers also cited candidates performing poorly during the application process as a recruitment challenge.

One respondent explained: “I have had many people apply without the willingness to want to work.” Another described a “real lack of interest and enthusiasm from many applying for roles” pointing to “very negative views about the industry and values within it from applicants”.

A number of respondents also cited the long-running impact of previous government policy as a key factor in current recruitment challenges: specifically, the decision to introduce a requirement

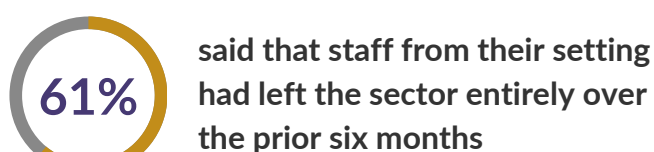
for staff working at Level 3 in early years settings to hold GCSEs in maths and English in 2014 (a policy that was reversed in 2017).

One said: “Over the last 10 years, applicants have gradually dried up completely. The problem was the maths and English requirement in 2014; it put off so many excellent students like myself and my colleagues who don't have English or maths. We have had 10 years now of students being put off commencing the course and as all the staff have slowly retired or left the industry, there just have not been sufficient replacement numbers coming through! It's crunch time now; this is all too late!”

Retention

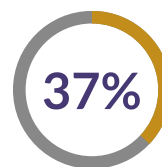
While the majority of recent government activity has focused on recruiting new staff into the early years sector, the survey findings make it clear that the retention of existing educators is an equally significant, if not even more pressing, challenge.

More than six in 10 respondents (**61%**) reported that staff from their setting had left the sector entirely over the six months prior to the survey, with eight in ten (**82%**) noticing an increase in the number of staff members leaving the sector compared to two years ago.



“Every time I fill a vacancy, we fill more spaces or a member of staff is off sick or leaves, so then I have to advertise again ... It is a vicious circle.”

Meanwhile, more than a third of respondents (**37%**) said they themselves are actively considering leaving the sector, while a further **4%** confirmed they are leaving and **2%** had already left at the time of responding to the survey.



of respondents said that they themselves are actively considering leaving the sector

When asked why they were considering leaving the early years, feeling undervalued by government was the most common reason given by respondents, cited by **75%** of those actively considering leaving.



“I have no confidence in the direction government policy on early years is going.”

While many respondents made reference to ‘the government’ in general, without specifying whether or not they were

referring to the previous Conservative government or the newly-elected Labour government, a number did make specific reference to their concerns over the latter's plans to deliver additional early years places through school-based nursery provision.

"Very concerned about Labour changes which could end the PVI sector in England," commented one respondent. "I have absolutely no confidence that the new government will do anything positive to help early years; we have been mentioned along with schools but then everything else is all about schools, that's all they are interested in," said another. Similarly, another respondent called on the government to "value early years instead of talk of opening nurseries in schools which makes PVI early years providers feel inadequate to fulfil their role".



"We have always been less respected than teachers. The Labour policies to open all those extra school 'childcare' settings is heartbreaking!"

In addition to specific policy changes, many respondents referenced what they perceived as a general lack of understanding of the importance of the early years sector as a key driver of discontent.

One provider commented that they would like "to be respected as a highly-educated

professional with a relevant master's degree, and not just someone who makes playdough". Another called on the government to "treat the sector with respect, see it as the vital service it is, and really and truly value the specialist skills and knowledge early years staff have" adding: "For too long we have been seen as the 'babysitters' looking after people's children so the more important people can go to work."

Job-related stress was the next most commonly-cited factor, with over two-thirds (**68%**) of those considering leaving the profession citing this as a reason.



of those considering leaving the sector cited job-related stress as a reason

Many highlighted unmanageable workloads which have made it difficult to strike a work-life balance, as one respondent explained: "I have worked in the early years for 40 years and I feel the stress and pressure I am currently under is creating a recipe for disaster in regard to my own mental health and wellbeing. I have prided myself on being able to offer the best childcare and education during the 20 years I have been a manager, but this is becoming very difficult to provide with staff shortages and new staff's ability and understanding of child development, even though they hold a Level 3 qualification."

Another said: "It's so stressful looking after the staff's needs and demanding parents and then balancing my own mental health. I

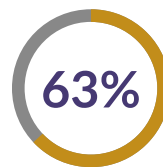
sometimes wonder if it's worth it. I get very tired; I go into work when I'm sick and I even came back from an operation early because we were short-staffed."



"No work/life balance. Due to lack of staff, I am now in ratio with the children every day. I am also SENCo [and] DSL as no staff [are] willing to take these roles for limited pay. I therefore have to do all the paperwork, staff wages, everything for running a business in the evenings and weekends. I am overwhelmed and stressed with my workload."

NB: The topic of the impact of working in the early years on the mental health and wellbeing of the sector is explored in greater depth in our 2023 report, [Minds Still Matter](#).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that the early years is repeatedly cited by the Low Pay Commission as one of the lowest-paying sectors of any industry, poor wages also remains a common reason for educators considering leaving the sector, cited by nearly two-thirds (**63%**) of respondents. While there have been significant increases to the national minimum and living wages in recent years, these have not been matched with the funding needed to sustainably implement any wage increases beyond statutory minimums nor, crucially, to maintain differentials between staff levels.



of those considering leaving the sector cited poor pay as a reason

"[It's] difficult to keep up my staff's morale when I can only afford to pay the minimum wage!" commented one respondent. Another said: "It is not a minimum wage job but due to the lack of financial support, some of my staff are on four pence an hour above minimum wage. People earn more at supermarkets. No one wants to train in this sector due to low wages."



"We are health visitors, paediatricians, social workers, parents, counsellors all within our roles, so why do we get paid the minimum wage?"

Many also highlighted the discrepancy between the responsibility and skills needed to work in the early years and the salaries paid. One respondent explained that, despite working at a senior level, it is impossible for her to rely on her role as a source of meaningful income: "Most of us do this on minimum wage. Me? I do this as a hobby. I work seven days a week and take home nothing so I can make sure my team is paid, my children are cared for and educated and I can keep my doors open. In the meantime, my husband and my own children make huge sacrifices and play

second fiddle to a very mentally and physically exhausted dedicated educator who is wondering: 'Why I am still doing this?'"

As a result of the persistently-low levels of pay across the sector, a number of respondents said that staff are leaving for sectors such as retail and hospitality, with more than half (**54%**) of those who were aware of staff leaving the early years entirely saying that this was due to opportunities in other sectors.

One respondent said: "It is ridiculous to expect people that have years of training to work for minimum wage, when they can earn more in a retail setting. Staff are desperately undervalued, so the 'good' workers are leaving what was their vocation, and new staff have no incentive to train to higher levels as there is literally no reward for doing so."



"Teenagers earn more working at a shop than we do as qualified professionals."

Impact of staffing shortages

Reliance on temporary staff: Unsurprisingly, the recruitment and retention challenges facing settings have had a significant impact on their ability to provide consistent staffing, with respondents pointing to a

growing reliance on temporary staff: nearly half (**47%**) of respondents said they have used bank or agency staff due to a lack of permanent staff. Of these, seven in ten (**69%**) stated this had had a negative impact on setting finances.



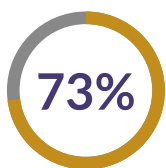
"It is costing more to have agency staff in every day. We currently have three long-term agency staff that cost significantly more than having nursery staff."

"The average cost of bank staff is 50% more per hour than what we pay our practitioners [and] the bank staff are often only Level 2 or unqualified," said one respondent. "We have also had to use a recruitment agency to employ a staff member which added an extra £2,500 on recruitment costs."

Others noted that the high costs of temporary staff can negatively impact their ability to increase the pay of permanent staff or cover other key costs. "[Using an] agency costs so much more than employing our own staff," one respondent said. "This means [we have had to] make cuts in other areas [such as] equipment, replacing breakages and wage increases." Another said: "[Temporary staff] cost more than having our own bank or permanent staff. It is having an impact as we cannot pay our team higher wages whilst using agencies."

Others also said they have had to be selective with the type of temporary staff they are able to bring in and how often they can use them: “We have a couple of bank staff that we can call on, but we cannot afford to use an agency. We’ve looked into this and [when considering] the number of times we would have to call on them, we would no longer be in business.”

Despite the high associated costs, however, the sector’s use of temporary staff has continued to increase in recent years. Of the 47% of respondents who had used bank or agency staff of the past six months, three-quarters (**73%**) said their reliance on them was higher than two years ago. When asked to estimate the highest proportion of temporary staff they had had working at their setting at any one time over the past six months as a proportion of total staff numbers, the average response given was **17%** – though responses ranged to as high as 50%.



of those using bank or agency staff said their reliance on them was higher than two years ago

That said, despite the sector’s growing reliance on temporary staff, their ability to access this support is not always guaranteed. In the six months prior to the survey, two-thirds (**64%**) of those using bank or agency staff had tried to use an agency but been unable to due to a lack of availability. One respondent recounted: “We have stopped using agency staff due both to the very high costs and their complete lack of availability. We can book

occasional days during school holidays but nothing in term time and never for the next day when staff are ill. We have to rely on our own staff working as bank staff.”

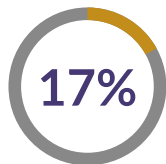
A number of respondents also raised concerns about the impact of their reliance on temporary staff on the quality of interactions with the children in their care. One commented: “Non-regular staff do not know the children. This can impact the needs of the children negatively, emotionally and socially, and can negatively impact regular staff as the children will only want them. At one point [I had] a whole room full of children only wanting me as they didn’t know the other staff.”

Another noted that using temporary staff “reduces the ability to provide consistency and continuity for the children and other team members” adding that the staff don’t have “the same knowledge and understanding of the children and ability to meet individual needs as effectively as regular/consistent staff”.



“My own staff have to work twice as hard as supply staff don’t change nappies, administer medical attention, plan for child’s development, know how to comfort all children; they can’t answer phones, talk to parents, fill in documentation etc.”

Reduction in service: Longstanding staffing challenges have, unsurprisingly, had a significant impact on the ability of settings to deliver provision, with nearly two in five (**17%**) respondents saying that they have had to reduce or restrict their opening hours due to lack of staff over the six months prior to the survey.



had been forced to reduce or restrict their opening hours due to a lack of sufficient staff

A number of providers noted that staffing shortages have given them less leeway to deal with short-notice absences, negatively impacting their ability to offer flexible, reliable provision. One respondent said: “We had two regular staff fall sick at once and agency staff were too expensive and therefore unavailable, so we had to close early.” Another recalled having to “ask for children to be collected two hours early due to lack of staff”.

Others explained that they have had to permanently change opening hours due to a lack of staff. One said: “We are not offering 8am starts [for families/children] as staff are taking their own children to school.”



“We have had to change our operating hours and reduce our opening times – due to [a] lack of staff.”

Another commented: “The setting has not been able to operate its normal nine-and-a-half hours since January; we have had to [cut down] to eight-hours-a-day.”

Perhaps most notably, given the ongoing rollout of the early entitlement expansion, staffing shortages are having a significant impact on the number of children settings are able to offer places to, with half of respondents (**50%**) stating that they have had to limit or stop taking on new children.

One provider said: “We have had to limit our intake of new starters at a time when there is a high demand.” Another said: “We have taken on new staff and then offered spaces to children. We then find that staff do not stay in the job and we have to then postpone a child's place because of the ratios.”



had been forced to limit or stop taking on children due to a lack of sufficient staff

One respondent explained that they have had to cut places of existing children at their setting to manage shortages: “We have had to terminate the places of 30 children a day due to a lack of staffing. We are now having to look at reducing this even further due to more staff leaving which makes our financial viability very precarious.”

One setting also spoke of being left with no option but to temporarily prioritise places to working families, and in some cases, limit them completely: “To keep the children

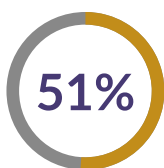
safe, non-working parents have been requested to keep children at home or to attend different hours. This has been extended to all parents if there is a really short supply of trained, confident staff."



"We used to run two halls from our setting but due to staff leaving [and being] unable to recruit, we have had to close one hall down ... If we had the staff we would be able to take an extra 20 children a day."

Impact on quality

Concerningly, the survey highlighted the effect of ongoing shortages on the quality of care and education being delivered at setting, with half of respondents (51%) stating that staffing challenges had had a negative impact.



51% said that staffing challenges had had a negative impact on the quality of provision

Providers spoke of having to combine rooms and amending activities at late notice to manage shortages. One described working in their setting when short-staffed as "crowd control", while another said managing recruitment and retention challenges while delivering high-quality provision was often "three steps forward,

four steps back". One respondent explained that they had noticed a drop in quality due to the stress educators are under: "Staff are feeling under pressure and more stressed. I'm not seeing as many quality interactions because the staff coming through have lack of skills and knowledge."

Many also spoke of having to prioritise safety over development, as one respondent explained: "Quality of provision is directly impacted by staff shortages because there are not enough practitioners to help us engage the children in their play or teach them often due to the high levels of additional needs. So, safety takes priority over learning in these situations. Less staff always directly impacts the quality of provision to children because there simply aren't enough hands on deck to provide for all the needs in the room."



"Staff are stretched to the max and working extremely long hours. I work 49 hours a week with a 30-minute break daily. [You are] on your feet all day and with QTs [qualified teachers], the numbers are ridiculous and I feel they are unsafe."

Others, however, raised concerns that staffing shortages are indeed compromising overall safety. "Not having consistent staff who know what they are doing causes so many problems – such as accidents, children with allergies being given food

they shouldn't, and procedures not being followed properly," said one respondent. "As a result, the team has a low morale, and parents do not like staff who do not know their children properly."

Others said they have had to adjust, limit or cut out certain activities and projects which would have supported a child's learning and development. One respondent said: "[We have] less educational activities, less focused speech and language activities; we have stopped arranging trips; there is no extra support for SEN children and less support for SEN and all parents."

Indeed, a number of respondents also spoke of the fact that shortages have had a particular impact on children with special educational needs or disabilities, explaining that they are often left with what they feel is no option but to limit the number of places on offer for children with SEND due to concerns of not being able to provide the level of individualised provision they need.

One said: "We cannot provide the service without the correct number of staff. Quality of care and education is compromised. Children's learning and development is impacted and SEND children do not get the support they need." Another commented: "We have several SEN children that require 1-1. While there is limited funding available to support these children, we do not have the staff to deliver the support."

Others explained that they heavily rely on the goodwill of staff to make up for staffing shortages, but warned this is unsustainable in the long term given the impact it is

having on the wellbeing of existing staff members. "Our other staff have had to work on their days off and generally work harder when staff with little or no experience were unable to pull their weight," one respondent commented. "The goodwill and dedication of existing staff has been immense. But this has made them very tired and pushed them to their limits."



"Staff are stretched to their limits, which is dramatically affecting their wellbeing and enthusiasm."

A note on the Department for Education's recruitment campaign

In February 2024, the Department for Education launched 'Do Something Big', a campaign aimed to encouraging more people to establish a career the early years sector. This included a set of high-profile adverts centred working in the early years with the tagline 'Do something big. Work with small children', a new, government-funded, sector-specific job site, and the launch of a £1,000 incentive pilot scheme.

However, when asked, only around half of respondents (**52%**) had heard of the campaign and seen adverts, while three in 10 (**30%**) had heard of the campaign but not see any promotional material. The rest (**20%**) were unaware of campaign's existence.

The survey's findings suggest that, so far, the campaign – the rollout of which was impacted by the general election – has had a limited impact. Of those respondents who have advertised a role in the period since the launch of the campaign, **81%** reported no change in the number of applicants for early years roles since the campaign began, and **10%** reported a decline, while just **4%** reported a slight increase in applications.

While respondents agreed with the importance of attracting more people to the early years sector, many also felt frustrated by the fact that the campaign does little to address the sector's long-standing challenges, which play a key role in preventing people from joining the sector, as one respondent explained:

"This crisis is not going away. We need better funding rates, we need to be able to reclaim VAT etc. so that staff can be paid at a higher rate. The government need to stop wasting money on campaigns that do not work and actually give all settings an annual bonus to pass onto staff as a retention bonus for staying at the setting, which would increase each year."



"We have been underpaid, undervalued, under supported and not listened to as a sector for such a long time that it's going to take more than a few adverts to salvage the sector."

Another warned the campaign could actually risk discouraging people from joining: "Advertising is a huge investment that would be better invested in retention before recruitment. The adverts I saw online were full of comments from people already working in early years telling other people not to bother as it's not worth it, so it ended up doing more harm than good."

Others felt the adverts were misleading, and could result in attracting new recruits into the sector, only for them to leave once exposed to the reality of working in the early years. "Be realistic about what the job entails," said one respondent. "It's very rewarding but hard work. If new recruits are not aware they will not stay in the post. I saw an advert for early years staff showing someone sitting playing Duplo. The advert is misleading we are more than babysitters and should be advertised as such. More respect in general needs to be given to early years staff so people can be proud of the career."

A number of respondents argued that money set aside for the £1,000 incentive pilot scheme would be better spend funding the sector:

"I think the incentive is a waste of time!" said one. "The only thing that would help employers pay more is for the government to pay a better hourly rate for the funded children."

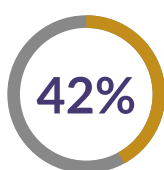
Another said: "Morale has been very badly hit and these cockamamie schemes of bootcamp training and paying those who are new to the sector £1,000 which is insulting to those of us staying the course."

"These short-sighted and disrespectful measures are serving to speed up the process of dedicated skilled professionals with years of experience and knowledge leaving the profession in droves."

Looking ahead

There's no doubt that the next 12 months, and likely beyond, will be a period of significant challenges for the sector.

Around two in five respondents (**42%**) said they felt pessimistic about the prospect of having sufficient staff in a year's time, while around a quarter (**26%**) said it was likely a lack of staff would prompt them to temporarily close a room or their setting during the same period.



of respondents felt pessimistic about the prospect of having sufficient staff in 12 months

"I am struggling to see how to provide more childcare spaces with the new funding, due to qualified staff shortages," one respondent said.

Many also highlighted that settings are likely to continue with temporary fixes to plug the gap in educators: "I am leaving at the end of July and we have no manager to take my place," commented one provider. "As a result, deputies are stepping up on a temporary basis."

Other noted that while they are on far from an even footing, the kindness of staff and volunteers has supported their setting to

weather the shortages: "We have only got through this past year by relying on staff to come in on their days off – we are a tight-knit team," one provider commented. "We've also had ex-staff members and volunteers helping out." However, as others pointed out, for many, this is far from sustainable in the long term: "It's me that works additional hours during staff shortages, so the setting can open until 6pm. I'm exhausted and I can't continue to work long hours. We may have to stop providing after-school care for 16 local children."

The impact of staffing shortages on the quality of provision also remains a key concern for providers. One respondent explained that while they have staff to meet demand, the quality of educators is a real concern: "I think we will have enough staff but not the staff I would like to be able to choose. It feels like early years is losing its skills and professionalism which is sad."

Another said the ongoing early entitlement expansion has placed additional pressure on their setting: "We shall have to see how we go. With the new government funding that has been offered to parents, although this is a great way to support working families, the demand for settings is much greater and we are already beginning to turn families away due to places being full. I cannot find staff to take on to then be able to offer more places to children."

Most concerningly, more than one in ten (**12%**) said ongoing staffing shortages within the next 12 months is likely to

prompt the permanent closure of their setting.



warned that only staffing shortages was likely to prompt the closure of their setting

One setting manager said: “My nursery is up for sale; the owners have had enough. The nursery will close when they get a buyer for the building and 12 staff will lose their jobs after being open for 18 years. Around 32 children will have to find another day nursery that opens 7.30am until 6pm.”

Many highlighted that while staffing challenges play a significant role in whether or not a setting can remain open, consistently low levels of government funded have created a perfect storm for providers: “Government funding does not cover our running costs,” said one provider. “We already lose money on three-and-four-year-olds, now we will lose money on the younger pupils too which is putting us at risk of closure.” Another commented: “The funding we receive only goes up by pennies. We are trying to balance our outgoings and this is almost a full-time job to ensure we do not have to close permanently.”

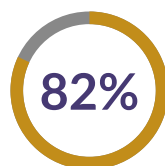


“My bosses have had enough of lack of government funding and are selling the building, and the nursery will close this year.”

Next steps

It’s important to note that while the survey findings clearly demonstrated that severity of the staffing challenges currently facing the early years, it also highlighted several changes that could be made to attract more people to the sector and to encourage and support existing educators to remain in the workforce.

When asked what changes would need to be made to encourage them to remain in the sector, eight in ten (**82%**) called to be more valued by the government, as one respondent explained: “I just want to feel valued. I just want to feel less stress. It’s affecting my health, and I deserve better.”



said being more valued by government would encourage them to remain in the sector

Increased pay was also a common ask among educators, called for by 80% of respondents. One respondent said: “It’s not rocket science – better pay would [make] a huge difference [by] reducing stress and demands.” Another said: “I feel that unless there are major government changes, staff will continue to leave the job due to the amount they have to do for the little they are paid. The goodwill of staff members has kept us open over the last few years.”



said that increased pay would encourage them to remain in the sector

Another respondent commented:
“Practitioners have to live on their wage, so make their wages livable.”

Many also spoke about the importance of early years funding – both when looking at how the government demonstrates that it values the sector and the ability of settings to pay their staff a fair wage.

“Increased funding would enable us to [employ] further staff and increase the quality of provision,” said one respondent. Another commented: “Provide nurseries with the correct amount of funding ... then nurseries would be able to pay staff more instead of struggling to keep them open.”

Several respondents also called for Ofsted reform to improve the stress and wellbeing of the workforce, with many stating that the stress of inspections is driving educators away from the sector and discouraging people from joining. One said: “The way that Ofsted inspections are conducted should be improved, particularly when some inspectors are ‘old school’ and

don’t want to hear staff’s explanations, perspectives or ideas.”



“Sort Ofsted out so they aren’t terrifying and ruining everyone’s mental health.”

Some also called for changes to ratio requirements following a move to 1:5 ratios for two-year-olds in September 2023, with many noting the impact this had on the quality of provision and staff morale.

One respondent said: “The ratios have created ‘cheap’ childcare and [offers an] excuse for government to underfund, leaving settings unable to have enough paid staff to cover sickness. We all work at the maximum ratios and this puts stress on being able to operate when staff need to visit the doctor etc.”



“None of us have ever done this job for the money, but if the potential future early years workforce can earn more in a supermarket, then there will not be an early years in the future.”

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is no doubt that the results of this survey paint a deeply concerning picture of staffing in the early years sector. Many of the issues highlighted in *Breaking Point* continue to impact the sector today, with a combination of severe recruitment challenges alongside a well-established trend of highly-skilled and experienced educators exiting the sector, leaving settings struggling to operate at a time when the need for early years provision has never been greater.

It is important to remember that the expansion of the early entitlement scheme is being rolled out against a backdrop of historic underfunding, the impact of which has been heightened further by rising costs and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. In addition, while providers want to be able to pay their employees a fair wage, successive sharp increases to the minimum wage, which have not been adequately matched by rises in early years funding rates, have tightened finances further, making salary increases – beyond the statutory minimum – difficult, if not impossible, for many settings.

Through the survey, respondents emphasised the long-term effect staffing challenges have had on provision, with settings forced to limit opening hours and the number of places they are able to offer. It is no surprise, therefore, that many settings continue to rely on the use of temporary staff as a necessary short-term solution to the ongoing recruitment and retention crisis. However, as the survey findings make clear, this is not without its risks.

In addition to the significant impact on setting finances, respondents spoke of concerns about the skills and experience of temporary staff, difficulties with building relationships with both children and parents and concerningly, worries about the inability of temporary staff to meet the individual needs of children in their setting. Indeed, concerns about the impact of staffing shortages on the quality and consistency of provision and in turn, children's learning and development, was a consistent theme through the survey responses.

Following the results of our 2021 staffing survey, the Alliance warned that if staffing shortages continued, the sector's ability to offer accessible, sustainable, quality provision were likely to be severely compromised. Now, three years on, it's clear that these predictions have come to fruition.

While the Department for Education has taken steps to address insufficient educator numbers, most notably via the 'Do Something Big' campaign, it's clear that further action is needed, not only to encourage new professionals to join the sector but crucially, to retain the existing workforce.

To this end, many of the recommendations made in our *Breaking Point* report remains as pertinent today as they were in 2021. These include calls on government to:

- Determine and publish a set of pay ambitions for the early years sector in England, setting out what it considers to be suitable salary ranges for each role level in the sector – and to ensure that early entitlement funding is set and maintained at an adequate level to enable early years settings to meet those salary expectations. As part of this, funding must consistently reflect any increases in the wider elements of staffing costs – including, for example, changes or rises in employer National Insurance contributions, sick pay or pensions contributions.
- Ensure that the early years is consistently recognised and valued as an education profession, including the early years as part of all education announcements, debates and discussions, and making sure that any support schemes or initiatives rolled out to the schools and further education sectors are also rolled out to the early years sector, wherever it is appropriate and relevant.
- Ensure there are clear and consistent routes into – and pathways through – the sector, alongside funded training and CPD opportunities, to ensure that the workforce has a clear understanding of the career routes available within the early years. This should include undertaking further work on early years qualifications with a particular focus the roles of Early Years Professional and Early Years Teacher to ensure greater parity between early educators and teachers working in the primary and secondary sectors in terms of pay, conditions and status.

Additional recommendations

An increased focus on quality: Following the confirmation of plans to extend the early entitlement offers, the Department for Education has taken a number of policy decisions aimed at boosting capacity in early years settings and making it easier to attract and hire new staff. This includes the decision to relax adult:child ratios for two-year-olds in group settings and to reduce the qualifications needed to count in ratios.

We recognise the arguments in favour of some of these changes – particularly the changes to qualification requirements, which some in the sector feel is positive recognition of the fact that there are a number of educators working in the sector who are of high quality despite a lack of formal qualifications. That said, we remain concerned that when taken collectively, there is a real risk that the combination of these policies could have a detrimental impact on overall quality of provision in the sector. As such, as the new government grapples with the challenge of delivering the early entitlement policy inherited from its predecessor, we urge ministers to ensure that their efforts to meet the predetermined timescales set for this policy do not compromise the quality of care and education delivered by early years settings.

Clarity on the role of PVI nurseries, pre-schools and childminders: The new government has confirmed plans to address early years capacity concerns by creating 3,000 new school-based nurseries. While the Department for Education has confirmed that these settings can be running either directly by schools or in partnership with private, voluntary and independent (PVI) settings, there are real concerns from many of those working in the PVI sector that this policy is an early indication of a planned shift towards a wholly state-run early years sector (despite the fact that the vast majority of early years places are delivered by PVI providers). Should such concerns go unaddressed, there is a danger that they could result in the current retention challenges becoming even more acute, due to staff working in PVI settings feeling that their place in the sector may be at risk in the long term.

It is critical, therefore, that the government makes clear its commitment to a mixed-market early years model and is clear in all future communications what it sees as the role of PVI provision in its long-term vision of the early years sector in England. This must include confirmation of the government's commitment to support the childminding sector in the long term, especially in light of plans to boost school wraparound provision.

At the Alliance, we know that working in the early years has the potential to be an incredibly rewarding, attractive and fulfilling career choice – but for far too long, those working in the sector have been overworked, underpaid and undervalued. This simply must change if we are to build and maintain a thriving early years system: one that delivers the reliable, accessible and affordable care that parents need and the consistent, high-quality education that young children deserve.

The new government has made positive first steps in recognising the importance of the early years as part of the wider education sector (the significance of the first-ever minister for 'early education' should not be underestimated), and we hope that the early rhetoric coming from ministers marks a turning point in how the sector is viewed and valued. What is needed now, however, are concrete policies that lead to tangible change for those working in the sector – better pay and conditions (made possible by adequate funding), better training and CPD opportunities and greater recognition to name just a few – underpinned by a clear and comprehensive long-term vision for the future of the early years as a whole, and the role of the early years workforce within this.



“Listen and value us more, see the importance in early years, increase funding to allow us to pay for good quality staff. We are teaching the future generation: allow us to meet the needs of these young children so we can build the foundations for life.”

FULL SURVEY FINDINGS

How would you best describe where you work in the early years?

Nursery: **38%**
Pre-school: **43%**
Childminding setting: **10%**
Maintained nursery school: **1%**
Primary school nursery class: **1%**
Children's centre: **1%**
Out-of-hours club: **1%**
Specialist early years provision: **1%**
Other: **5%**

How would you best describe your role within your setting?

Both owner and manager: **21%**
Owner only: **5%**
Manager only: **30%**
Deputy / assistant manager: **8%**
Early years teacher or professional / Level 6 educator: **7%**
Room leader: **2%**
Level 4 or 5 educator: **2%**
Level 3 educator: **8%**
Level 2 educator: **0%**
Level 2 assistant: **0%**
Unqualified educator: **0%**
Apprentice: **0%**
Administrator: **4%**
Trustee/Committee member: **3%**
Other: **8%**

How long have you worked in the early years sector?

Less than a year: **1%**
1 – 5 years: **7%**
6 – 10 years: **11%**
11 – 15 years: **18%**
16 – 20 years: **19%**
More than 20 years: **44%**

How many sites do you / does your organisation currently operate?

1: **73%**
2 – 5: **15%**
6 – 10: **4%**
11 – 25: **2%**
26 – 50: **2%**
More than 50: **4%**

The following three questions were only asked to respondents based in local authority areas who are taking part in the £1,000 recruitment incentive scheme and received limited responses.

Were you aware that your local authority is taking part in a trial recruitment incentive scheme where new early years recruits and those returning to the sector are eligible for a £1,000 tax-free cash payment?

Yes: **71%**
No: **29%**

As far as you are aware: have you received any information from your local authority about this scheme?

Yes: **69%**
No: **31%**

Has this £1,000 incentive payment been awarded to any new starters at your setting?

Yes: **8%**
No: **83%**
Unsure: **8%**

How easy or difficult is your setting / are your settings finding it to hire suitable new early years staff at the moment?

Very difficult: **48%**
Quite difficult: **30%**
Neither easy nor difficult: **20%**
Quite easy: **2%**
Very easy: **0%**

What challenges, if any, are you facing? Please select all that apply.

Lack of applicants for roles: **69%**
Applicants lacking full and relevant early years qualifications: **65%**
Unable to meet the salary demands of applicants: **50%**
Applicants lacking suitable practical experience: **42%**

Applicants not showing up for interview: **40%**

Unable to offer pattern of working hours applicants want: **30%**

Applicants not performing well at interview: **22%**

N/A - not facing any challenges: **9%**

Other: **5%**

Is your setting currently recruiting for any roles?

Yes: **50%**

No: **50%**

How many roles are you currently recruiting for?

Average: **2**

As far as you are aware: have any staff who have left your setting(s) in the past six months left the early years sector entirely?

Yes: **61%**

No: **27%**

Unsure: **12%**

As far as you are aware: what were the most common reasons for former staff at your setting(s) leaving the sector? Please select all that apply.

Poor pay: **73%**

Better opportunities in another sector: **54%**

Job-related stress: **49%**

Feeling undervalued by government: **46%**

Poor benefits (e.g. sick pay): **36%**

Feeling that staffing shortages are compromising ability to deliver quality care and education: **34%**

Difficulty balancing work and their own childcare needs: **29%**

Long working hours: **28%**

Feeling undervalued within the setting: **17%**

Lack of career progression: **16%**

Unsure: **2%**

Other: **10%**

Are you seeing a change in the number of staff members choosing to leave the early years sector compared to this time two years ago?

Yes: a significant increase: **50%**

Yes: a moderate increase: **22%**

Yes: a slight increase: **10%**

No: it's about the same: **13%**

No: a slight decrease: **1%**

No: a moderate decrease: **0%**

No: a significant decrease: **0%**

N/A - was not operating / working in the sector two years ago: **1%**

Unsure: **2%**

Over the past six months: has your setting / have your settings ever had to use bank/agency staff due to a lack of permanent staff?

Yes: all the time: **13%**

Yes: often: **17%**

Yes: sometimes: **13%**

Yes: rarely: **4%**

No: never: **53%**

How does your setting's or settings' current reliance on bank/agency staff compare to this time two years ago?

Significantly higher: **35%**

Somewhat higher: **38%**

About the same: **20%**

Somewhat lower: **2%**

Significantly lower: **2%**

N/A - was not operating / working in the sector two years ago: **2%**

What kind of impact is your setting's or settings' increased reliance on bank/agency staff having on setting finances?

Significantly negative impact on finances: **38%**

Somewhat negative impact on finances: **31%**

Somewhat positive impact on finances: **2%**

Significant positive impact on finances: **1%**

No impact on finances: **13%**

Unsure: **15%**

Looking back over the past six months: what is the highest proportion of bank/agency staff you have had working at your setting at any one time?

Average: **17**

Over the past six months: has your setting / have your settings ever tried to use bank/agency staff, but been unable to due to lack of bank/agency staff availability?

Yes: all the time: **6%**

Yes: often: **24%**

Yes: sometimes: **34%**

Yes: rarely: **14%**

No: never: **22%**

Over the past six months: how many times has your setting had to do any of the following due to a lack of adequate staff?

- Temporarily limit the number of children able to attend the setting on a particular day or days: **average = 4**
- Temporarily close a room or multiple rooms: **average = 2**
- Temporarily close the entire setting: **average = 0**
- Reduce or otherwise restrict opening hours: **average = 2**

Over the past six months, has your setting / have any of your settings ever had to reduce or otherwise restrict opening hours as a result of lack of adequate staff?

Yes: **17%**

No: **83%**

Over the past six months, has your setting / have your settings ever had to limit or stop taking on new children due to lack of sufficient staff?

Yes: **50%**

No: **50%**

Do you think that any staff shortages you have experienced over the last six months have had a negative impact on the quality of provision at your setting(s)?

Yes: **51%**

No: **25%**

N/A – I / we have not experienced any staff shortages: **24%**

Looking ahead, how optimistic do you feel that your setting(s) will have sufficient staff in 12 months' time?

Very optimistic: **7%**

Somewhat optimistic: **25%**

Neither optimistic nor pessimistic: **27%**

Somewhat pessimistic: **30%**

Very pessimistic: **12%**

In your opinion: how likely is it that a lack of adequate staff will result in your setting(s), or any rooms in your setting(s), being forced to close temporarily over the next 12 months?

Very likely: **7%**

Somewhat likely: **19%**

Neither likely nor unlikely: **28%**

Somewhat unlikely: **20%**

Very unlikely: **26%**

In your opinion, how likely is it that a lack of adequate staff will result in your setting / any of your settings being forced to close permanently over the next 12 months?

Very likely: **3%**

Somewhat likely: **9%**

Neither likely nor unlikely: **27%**

Somewhat unlikely: **23%**

Very unlikely: **39%**

Are you currently considering leaving the early years sector?

I have already left: **2%**

Yes: I have already confirmed that I will be leaving: **4%**

Yes: I am actively considering leaving: **37%**

No: I have considered it but I don't think I will leave: **42%**

No: I have never considered leaving: **16%**

Why are you considering leaving the sector? Please select all that apply.

Feeling undervalued by government: **75%**

Job-related stress: **68%**

Poor pay: **63%**

Feeling that staffing shortages are compromising ability to deliver quality care and education: **47%**

Poor benefits (e.g. sick pay): **43%**

Long working hours: **42%**

Better opportunities in another sector: **31%**

Feeling undervalued within the setting: **28%**

Difficulty balancing work and own childcare needs: **13%**

Lack of career progression: **12%**

Unsure: **0%**

Other: **22%**

What changes, if any, would make you more likely to remain in the early years sector?

Feeling more valued by government: **82%**

Better pay: **80%**

Better benefits: **53%**

Better work/life balance: **47%**

Fewer administrative tasks: **40%**

More mental health and wellbeing support: **33%**

Feel more valued within the setting: **32%**

Better career progression: **19%**

More support to meet own childcare needs: **12%**

Other: **17%**

Were you aware that earlier this year: the Department for Education launched a new early years recruitment campaign ('Do Something Big: Work With Small Children')?

Yes: and I have seen or heard one or more adverts/posters for the campaign: **52%**

Yes: but I haven't seen or heard any adverts/posters for the campaign: **28%**

No: **20%**

Since February 2024 (when the campaign launched), have you noticed an increase in the number of applications for early years roles at your setting or settings?

Yes: a significant increase: **0%**

Yes: a moderate increase: **0%**

Yes: a slight increase: **4%**

No: no change: **68%**

No: a decrease: **9%**

Unsure: **3%**

We have not advertised any early years roles since February: **16%**