### Early years workforce crisis could hinder government plans to expand ‘free childcare’ as 57% of nursery staff consider quitting the sector

**Just 17% of nursery managers say they can offer the extended ‘free hours’ entitlement announced in the Spring Budget due to current recruitment challenges.**

**6th November 2023**: New research published today by the Early Education and Childcare Coalition and the University of Leeds reveals the scale of the workforce crisis in early years with 57% of nursery staff and 38% of childminders considering quitting the sector in the next year.

The study, *Retention and return: delivering the expansion of early years entitlement in England,* comes as the Government prepares to roll out the first phase of the ‘biggest expansion of childcare in history’ which will offer 30 hours of ‘free childcare’ to eligible parents of nine month olds by 2025. Researchers found that even using conservative estimates the number of childcare places in England would need to grow by 6% in order to meet the demand created by the Government’s planned expansion.

However, many nursery settings say they are unlikely to offer the new entitlement because of an inability to recruit and retain suitably qualified staff. The recent changes to staff:child ratios were found to increase the likelihood of early years professionals wanting to leave the sector.

Just 17% of nursery managers said it was likely they would increase the number of places they offered, while 35% said they would limit the number of places they offered unless there was more government support to enable them to recruit and retain staff. Two-thirds (67%) of nurseries were already reporting average waiting times of almost six months for a place.

When turnover intention rates are combined with new demand, it is estimated that almost 50,000 additional staff could be needed in 2024 and again in 2025 to maintain existing provision and provide the expanded entitlement.

Sarah Ronan, Director of the Early Education and Childcare Coalition, comments: “Promising more free childcare without the infrastructure to deliver it is raising false hope among already struggling families. If the Government is to have any chance of delivering this expansion, it must listen to the people on the ground educating and caring for our children.Years of underfunding have left them underpaid, overworked and feeling disrespected. It doesn’t matter if it's more free hours from this Government or wholesale reform from Labour, the fact is nothing will change for parents or children unless we have a well-paid and valued workforce.”

Pay in the sector is tied to the Government’s ‘free hours’ funding model and with a large proportion of a setting’s income coming via this route, low funding rates lead to low rates of pay, particularly among childminders. The research found that 70% of nursery managers think it is time for a new funding model.

Abby Jitendra, Principal Policy Adviser for Care, Family and Relationships at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation said: “There is no quality childcare expansion without a new workforce strategy for the early years workforce. Government needs to value workers to attract them to the sector – this means development opportunities and ultimately, higher pay. We need to rethink how we fund providers, moving beyond funding a race to the bottom in quality to investing in driving up standards.”

In addition to low pay, staff were four times more likely to quit their jobs if there was a lack of training opportunities. Half of staff reported that they do not have regular access to paid leave to undertake training and 66% said that funding or costs were a major barrier to accessing training.

Professor Kate Hardy, from the Centre for Employment Relations, Innovation and Change (CERIC) at the University of Leeds, comments: “Early years educators have a real thirst for training and continuing to improve their practice. But they desperately need paid time out from their working day, high quality training and their pay to rise in line with their growing capabilities. Investing in staff in the sector in this way is absolutely vital for stemming the tide of people exiting the sector and also for delivering the highest quality early education possible”.

The research also found a notable increase in the number of children with special education needs and disabilities (SEND) in early years settings with 87% of nursery respondents and 63% of childminders reporting that they were working with or assessing more children with SEND, often without the necessary specialist support that the child needs.

Hardy continues: “Whether as a result of the pandemic or a longer term trend, there appears to be a significant rising need in the sector amongst children with SEND. Educators want to be able to support these children, this is why they do this job. They are deeply committed to giving children the best start in life possible. But they urgently need more staff around them, support from other agencies and investment in specialist training to do so. This must be an urgent priority for this government and needs urgent intervention”.

Ronan adds: “The Government must intervene now to prevent any further hemorrhaging of professionals from the sector. A new workforce strategy is required, but in the short term there are interventions that can be made now around pay and training that could help to stem the exodus of staff and keep the Government’s plans on track.”

The report sets out a number of recommendations that could help tackle the staffing crisis in the short term, alongside longer term reforms to improve sustainability. These short-term ‘rescue’ measures include:

* Increasing early years funding rates with the expectation that providers will use this to boost pay
* Reestablish a career development hub at the Department for Education
* Provide more on-site training to reduce the need to spend time away from a setting
* Ensure access to funded, universal, high-quality SEND training
* Develop a system for bank staff at Local Authority level which enables staff to take time out for training, with no negative implications for their setting
* Ensure the ‘Experts and Mentoring Scheme’ for childminders becomes a permanent programme
* Restart the Graduate-led Grant Scheme. Set a target to achieve a graduate led workforce by 2028

**Notes to editors**

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**About the Early Education and Childcare Coalition:**The Early Education and Childcare Coalition is an independent group that unites the voices of parents, children, providers, those working in the sector and the wider business community. Our vision is of an early education and childcare sector that provides high-quality, affordable provision for all families in all communities, and with it, good pay, conditions, and funding for those providing that education and care. We use our collective voice and research to build public and political support for early education and childcare. To learn more about the Coalition, its members and its aims, please visit[www.earlyeducationchildcare.org](http://www.earlyeducationchildcare.org)

**About CERIC at the University of Leeds**  
The Centre for Employment Relations, Innovation and Change’s (CERIC) is based at the University of Leeds. Its central objective is to contribute to contemporary, national and international debates surrounding the changing dynamic and the future of work, employment and labour markets, through high-quality research, teaching and knowledge transfer.

**About the Women’s Budget Group**The UK Women’s Budget Group (WBG) is the UK’s leading feminist economics think tank, providing evidence and analysis on women’s economic position and proposing policy alternatives for a gender-equal economy. We act as a link between academia, the women’s voluntary sector and progressive economic think tanks.

**About the research:**

The project used a mixed methods approach, using quantitative surveys and two qualitative methods (interviews and focus groups). The former were designed to measure the degree to which particular phenomena were occurring and the latter to understand the complexity and reasons for the quantitative findings. In all cases, the surveys and interviews were run concurrently, rather than sequentially. The participants included educators in both early years nursery-based group settings and childminders in domestic settings, and managers of nursery settings of all kinds. We included both those currently working as well as those who have exited the sector, who were purposefully sampled.

Our qualitative data is made up of interviews and focus groups with 60 participants. This includes 44 one-to-one interviews and five focus groups with a total of 16 participants. The quantitative data is made up of three bespoke surveys totalling 994 responses: Nursery staff (396 responses), Nursery managers (294 responses), Childminders (322 responses).

Workforce modelling was developed by the Women’s Budget Group using available data from the Department of Education, including the Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents (CEYSP) and the Survey of Childcare and Early Years Providers (SCEYP). It also considers past reports from the Department of Education and other reliable sources in the sector and academia. By combining these sources, the model aims to estimate the workforce requirements for the next years.

The research was co-funded by the Early Education and Childcare Coalition, Kiawah Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and led by the University of Leeds and the EECC with modelling provided by the Women’s Budget Group.