



Education Committee Inquiry: Support for childcare and the early years, Community union

About Community

Community is a general trade union. Our education and early years section includes a significant number of workers in the early years sector, working in nurseries, pre-schools, and as private nannies.

It is important to recognise that anybody who is working in early years does so because they love what they do. With low pay and often challenging conditions, the sector disappointingly does not offer an attractive employment package.

All our members working in the sector are doing their best to deliver quality education to young children. They work hard to give the children the support they need and help them to get the best start in life and be ready for school. However, our members in the sector are not getting the recognition that they deserve for the importance of the job they are doing.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to this call for evidence.

Childcare entitlements

Childcare costs in England are the highest in the OECD. Families in the UK spend an average of 29% of their earnings on childcare costs, the highest of 40 countries included in the data¹.

Affordability remains the main issue with accessing childcare, particularly in the most deprived areas. Even with the subsidies currently provided childcare costs are too high for many families.

Families will have two options for receiving additional support with childcare costs: if they receive Universal Credit they can claim back 85% of the costs, or if they aren't eligible for this they may be able to get tax free childcare.

Families often aren't sure which support they are eligible for, nor which form is better for the; although generally most people will be better off claiming universal credit, than they would have been using tax free childcare. Understanding the differences between different free entitlements remains confusing.

Some families receiving tax free childcare are pushed into poverty because the level of support is not adequate.

For families receiving Universal Credit, a major issue is that in order to access support, families are required to pay the first month's nursery fees upfront. A significant proportion of our members cannot afford to pay their first months' fees out of pocket, so many are going into debt or choosing not to return to work. The government should offer a grant to offset the upfront costs which families must pay.

Early Years provision

¹ <https://data.oecd.org/benwage/net-childcare-costs.htm>

We are seeing a substantial number of early years settings being shut down. The main reasons cited are staff shortages, and not being able to afford the rising cost of supplies and increases to the national minimum wage. Whilst some of these cost pressures are driven by the current high inflation rates, the situation is exacerbated because the government has not provided any additional funding for nurseries to cope with the increased costs.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that total spending on early years will fall by 9% in real terms between 2021 and 2024, with spending per hour to fall by 3%².

And, in deprived areas, many children are entitled to free hours open brackets at 30 hours age 3 or 15 hours at age 2, but the entitlement from the government doesn't meet the costs of the provision. This puts nurseries into financially difficult positions, and they are forced to raise the costs for parents.

Recruitment and retention

The early years sector is facing problems with recruitment and retention, especially of more highly qualified staff. Our members tell us this is because of low pay a demanding role. The status of the profession is also a problem; working in early years is not seen as the professional role it is and is sometimes treated by the public as akin to babysitting. Many of our members tell us that they could earn more working in a supermarket. Some apprentices in the sector are on as little as £4.81 an hour.

Due to the recruitment and retention crisis, settings are struggling to recruit Level 3 and higher qualified nursery workers. Settings require a Level 3 worker in each room in order to operate safely. Because of the retention and recruitment crisis nurseries are having to **close** because they are unable to recruit or retain Level 3 staff. In effect this is making childcare less accessible. This is happening across the board in both wealthy and more deprived areas.

Another barrier to staff development is recruiting apprentices into the sector, and, once they are in place, finding the time for settings to release their apprentices to their studies. Many settings are short-staffed, and others can only afford to employ the minimum number of staff required to meet their ratios. This makes it increasingly difficult for apprentices to find the time to attend the training and education that they need to do to complete their studies.

The government has provided additional funding for professional development. Whilst we welcome this additional funding it has limitations. This funding does not address the core issues that early years are facing. As noted above providers are struggling to release staff to undertake their apprenticeships this makes it incredibly difficult for them to release staff for more demanding and leadership courses. As such it is difficult for settings to use the funding that they have from in provided by the government. We believe that streamlined professional development opportunities for staff are critical, in conjunction with adequate funding to support cover.

² <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-12/2022-annual-report-on-education-spending-in-England-Institute-for-Fiscal-Studies.pdf>

Case study: “Jill” recently contacted us to tell us that they were worried about the risk of redundancy because the nursery they worked at was expected to close. This was not because there was no demand for their services. Indeed, demand had never been higher. However, because the setting could not recruit the staff it needed to meet legal ratios, it was unable to remain open. In this case the setting was at risk because they were unable to employ a deputy manager.

The impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the problems with staffing. It significantly affected the mental health of staff and children. Numerous members contacted Community during the pandemic concerned about their safety at work. Many members were suffering their own childcare issues.

Nothing has changed in the sector since the pandemic and many of the issues are getting worse.

Needs assessment

The system which allows children to access special needs support including the assessment of their needs is not fit for purpose. The application is long winded and requires families and staff to jump through many hoops.

At a local level resource have been decreased. This means there is a lack of support staff who would be otherwise there to help the children with additional needs for example SENCOs, or speech and language therapists, have been stripped back. This means that many children are waiting a long time for the support that they need.

Many services report a significant rise in referrals and the number of children with speech and language difficulties has increased over recent years because of the pandemic. In some there are more cases and less staff there to deal with them.

Sure Start Children’s centres

Sure Start centres provided a free place for anyone to access support with parenting including advice and education. With the cutbacks to this valuable public service children have less support than they did previously. We would be fully supportive of a move to increase the number of Sure Start centres. We will be closely following the roll out of the family hubs programme which promises to provide support akin to that which was provided by the Sure Start Centres, albeit only in about half of local authorities, creating a patchy landscape of services across the UK.

Community, January 2023

Please direct any questions to research@community-tu.org