

Stability of the early years workforce in England report

Low pay, a high workload and a lack of career development for early years workers risk having a serious impact on the provision of care and education services for the under-fives, says the Social Mobility Commission in its report, [The stability of the early years workforce](#).

The report reveals that as many as one in 8 of the early years workforce is paid under £5.00 an hour. The average wage is only £7.42 an hour, less than the minimum wage and much lower than for the average female workforce (£11.37). The research finds that staff turnover is high, at 15%, mainly due to low pay, a lack of training and career structure and excessive overtime.

Childcare professionals work longer hours than people in comparable occupations: 11% of full-time early years workers reported working more than 42 hours per week, compared to 3% of retail workers and 6% of female workers in general. There are few training opportunities once people enter the workforce. Only 17 % of early years workers receive job-related training. While a high proportion of workers are passionate about what they do, 37% leave their employer within 2 years.

There are signs that the workforce – which includes childminders, nursery assistants and early years teachers – is becoming increasingly unstable with too few new entrants replacing those leaving the sector.

High turnover can affect both the quality of service and children's outcomes, and a stable workforce is even more important in disadvantaged communities. By the time children are aged 5, those from disadvantaged families are already significantly behind their wealthier peers in a variety of development measures.

The coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak has caused considerable disruption to childcare providers since lockdown started in mid-March, generating financial instability for many workers. As parents start returning to the workplace, the early years workforce will become even more vital for child development and cannot be overlooked. There is now a real risk that persistent disruption and lack of support for workers could affect the quality of early years provision.

The 280,000 strong early years workforce – mainly young and female – provide education and care to children from birth to aged 5. They can be self-employed, such as childminders, or work in a formal nursery. Nurseries may be part of a school or children's centre or be independent of either. But most are run by organisations in the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sectors.

The research, carried out for the Commission by the [Education Policy Institute](#) (EPI), and based on analysis and qualitative work, found that the

main barriers to a stable workforce are:

- low income
- high workload and responsibilities
- over-reliance on female practitioners
- insufficient training and career opportunities
- low status and reputation
- a negative culture and climate within the organisation

Steven Cooper, Interim co-chair of the Social Mobility Commission said:

The early years workforce is vital in helping to narrow the development gaps between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those from more privileged backgrounds.

We must do everything we can to ensure that childminders and nursery workers are valued more by ensuring we pay them a decent wage, give them a proper career structure and ensure their workload is reasonable.

The Commission will be pressing the government and employers to take urgent steps to improve the stability of childcare provision in these critical years.

The Commission proposes a comprehensive career strategy for the early years workforce including attracting older workers into the profession. It also calls on the government to match the operational costs of providing childcare to take account of increases in inflation and the national minimum wage.

Key findings

- In England, the average wage across the early years workforce is £7.42 an hour. This compares to £11.37 for the female workforce and £12.57 for the total population.
- 13% of the workforce earn less than £5.00 an hour.
- Many childcare workers take on second jobs to make ends meet.
- 11% of full time early years staff work more than 42 hours per week, compared with 3% of retail workers and 6% of the female workforce.
- One in 6 workers (15%) leave their jobs within a year.
- The workforce is mainly young and female: 40% are below 30 and 96% are female.
- Workers at private day care nurseries said their duties involved heavy cleaning including washing windows and mopping floors.
- Stability varies across regions: 31% of early years workers in the North of England stay with their current employer for less than 2 years, compared to 37% in the Midlands and 40% in the south of England.
- Employers say they lack the funds to provide training for their workforce. A 2019 survey found only 8% of early years providers planned to spend more money on training and 55% planned to spend less.

Dr Sara Bonetti, report author and Director of Early Years at the Education

Policy Institute (EPI) said:

This research highlights the multiple barriers that early years workers face on a daily basis, with low pay, lack of career options and negative perceptions of their profession holding them back. The pandemic now threatens to exacerbate many of these problems.

We must do far more to support workers, otherwise we risk compromising the quality of provision and widening the disadvantaged gap.

Lydia Pryor, Pre-school leader in Aldborough, Norfolk said:

My deputy recently handed in her notice because she found another job that pays more, and I had nothing that could entice her to stay. She's had enough of just making do and worrying about money when her car breaks down.

Notes to editors

The Social Mobility Commission is an independent advisory non-departmental public body established under the Life Chances Act 2010 as modified by the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016. It has a duty to assess progress in improving social mobility in the UK and to promote social mobility in England.

The commission board comprises of:

- Sandra Wallace, Interim Co-Chair, Joint Managing Director Europe at DLA Piper
- Steven Cooper, Interim Co-Chair, Chief Executive Officer C.Hoare & Co
- Alastair da Costa, Chair of Capital City College Group
- Farrah Storr, Editor-in-chief, Elle
- Harvey Matthewson, Aviation Activity Officer at Aerobility
- Jessica Oghenegweke, Presenter, BBC Earth Kids
- Jody Walker, Senior Vice President at TJX Europe (TK Maxx and Home Sense in the UK)
- Liz Williams, Chief Executive Officer of Futuredotnow
- Pippa Dunn, Founder of Broody, helping entrepreneurs and start-ups
- Saeed Atcha, Chief Executive Officer of Youth Leads UK
- Sam Friedman, Associate Professor in Sociology at London School of Economics
- Sammy Wright, Vice Principal of Southmoor Academy, Sunderland

The EPI carried out this research for the Commission. EPI is an independent, impartial, and evidence-based research institute that promotes high quality education outcomes regardless of social background.