

Staff exodus could hinder expansion of free childcare in England, providers say ^[1]

Exclusive: recruitment and retention crisis means only 17% of nurseries say they could offer extra entitlement

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Excerpts

A mass exodus of childminders and nursery staff risks scuppering the government's flagship new funding for parents of young children in England, according to a new coalition of early years providers and campaigners.

More than half of all nursery workers surveyed by the Early Education and Childcare Coalition (EECC) said they were considering or planning on leaving the sector in the next 12 months.

In the spring budget, the chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, announced plans to massively extend the government's offer of 30 hours of "free childcare" to children aged between nine months and two years by 2025, billing it as "the single biggest investment in childcare in England". But the EECC said there are likely to be a "lot of disappointed parents" if staffing means places are undeliverable.

The report – Retention and return: delivering the expansion of early years entitlement in England – estimates that about 180,000 extra children will enter childcare settings by 2025, at the same time as large numbers of staff say they are planning to leave because of low pay, lack of career progression and increased workload.

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The report found that only 17% of nursery managers said they could offer the extended "free hours" entitlement because of the recruitment crisis, while 35% said they would limit the number of places they offered unless the government helped with recruitment.

The situation is more acute for nurseries offering provision for children with special education needs and disabilities (Send), said the EECC, with 87% of nursery respondents and 63% of childminders saying they were working with more children with Send, often without the right support for the child. Other workers reported an increase in workload, which they said was exacerbated by the recent relaxation of staffing ratios for two-year-olds from 1:4 to 1:5.

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From September 2023, funding rates per child will increase from an average of £5.29 to £5.62 for three- to four-year-olds, and from an average of £6 to £7.95 for two-year-olds. The Women's Budget Group argues that a rate of £9.03 an hour for three- to four-year-olds is required to cover costs.

A spokesperson for the Department for Education said its data indicated a stable workforce. "[B]ut we know there is more to do, which is why we are launching a new national recruitment campaign in the new year, and an accelerated apprenticeship route into the sector to help recruit new staff," they said. "To support existing staff we are investing hundreds of millions of pounds to increase rates paid for government-funded hours and are providing a package of training, qualifications, and expert guidance worth up to £180m."

The EECC – a body of more than 30 organisations including charities, parent campaign groups, early years providers, trade unions and business groups – surveyed 1,000 early years educators and interviewed 60 in focus groups.

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Even if the sector retains workers, its more conservative scenario estimates that 22,000 workers will have to be employed to service an additional 180,000 children expected to take up "free hours" by the end of 2025.

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The survey found that 17% of nursery workers were intending to leave the sector in the next 12 months, and 40% said they may leave, while almost 40% of childminders were considering leaving.

The organisation has urged the government to urgently implement a rescue plan, including increasing hourly funding rates, funding more training and ensuring all staff are paid at least the real living wage.

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