

Armies of parents eager to take all 30 free childcare hours - but could nurseries struggle to get the staff? ^[1]

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Source: Huffington Post UK

Format: Article

Publication Date: 11 Jun 2015

AVAILABILITY

Read online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Many thousands of pre-school parents in England are ready and waiting for the Government's 30 hours' per week free childcare.

Our NDNA Free Childcare Survey 2015, carried out on the UK's biggest parenting site, Netmums, found that four in five families plan to take up extended free hours for three and four-year-olds in full.

The survey is the first time that anyone has canvassed parents' views on free childcare expansion. The majority told us they are already planning how they could work more hours without a heavy financial burden of childcare.

But the nursery sector will need thousands of extra staff members - and fast - to create the large-scale extra capacity needed. Pilots are planned from next year with full roll-out in 2017.

That brings me to NDNA's other big, current study, the NDNA Workforce Survey 2015, which revealed that half of nurseries are already struggling to find good candidates for their vacancies.

That's without the forthcoming challenge of double the number of free hours for some families in the mix.

I'm presenting the findings of both our surveys at the NDNA Conference at the Ricoh Arena in Coventry this week.

Coupled with retention trouble - staff turnover has increased to 14% - the sector is seeing widespread and wide-ranging problems with recruitment.

Childcare is a difficult, demanding job. In nurseries that must open from at least 8am to 6pm, to cover parents' working days and commuting time, the hours are long and the pay is often low, given staff qualifications and experience.

I'm sorry to say we're seeing situations in which lower-grade employees, who always wanted to work in childcare and picked it as their career of choice, are leaving because they can earn more at a supermarket, offering family-friendly hours and less pressure.

Early Years Teachers are sometimes moving to school nursery settings for better pay and shorter hours.

Nurseries would love to pay their staff more but funding shortfalls constrain what they can afford.

School-leavers who are keen to make a rewarding career in the sector are now facing a different stumbling block.

Recent stipulation that new apprentices and level three childcare students must have GCSE English and maths at grade C is causing a barrier. A total of 43% of nurseries are reporting being unable to find apprentices as a result.

NDNA has long campaigned for better levels of funding for free hours, which nurseries currently have no choice but to treat as loss leaders.

An uplift is desperately needed, as a Government funding review and promised increase prepares to get under way before Parliament's summer break.

But it's clear that the area of workforce recruitment and retention - hand in hand with free hours funding - also needs the Government's full attention.

Nurseries are keen to meet the new challenge and make the necessary space but we need the right support to be able to do it.

We are calling for the Government to work with the childcare sector to overcome workforce problems with a long-term strategy.

Our recommendations include more flexible GCSE requirements for childcare training, greater investment to workforce development and better career progression pathways to attract candidates to the sector.

So, families are ready and eager. The nurseries want to make sure every child can get a high-quality place of their parents' choosing. Now the Government must work closely with the sector to make it happen.

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