



National Day Nurseries Association

EDUCATION  
POLICY  
INSTITUTE



# The COVID-19 pandemic and the early years workforce

February 2021 - May 2021  
Staffing decisions in an uncertain environment





National Day Nurseries Association



## Method

This report describes the results of the fourth and last quarterly survey of early education and childcare providers in Great Britain. The survey was conducted with settings across England, Scotland, and Wales between 10-28 May 2021 and was open to all private, voluntary and independently run providers. The survey asked providers about the period covering the three months since our last survey was conducted in February.

Questions were worded so that they were relevant and specific to the context of each country. In presenting the results, the England and Wales qualification levels have been used. Respondents in Scotland answered equivalent qualification levels: Level 2 or SVQ2/NC; Level 3 or SVQ3/HNC; Level 4/5 or SVQ4/PDA8; Level 6 or PDA9/graduate. When discussing children with additional needs the wording was changed to Additional Support Needs for Scotland and Additional Learning Needs for Wales.

Where one response represented more than one setting (e.g., where we received a response on behalf of a chain of settings) we weighted the response accordingly. This ensures that each setting within a chain counts for the same as any other setting. It also means that some responses on behalf of relatively large chains of settings have a significant impact on the results of our analysis. We have only included the responses of chains to questions for which we can expect information to accurately apply to all settings in their chain. In addition, and differently from the previous three reports, in the main text we report results only for single site nurseries or small chains (chains with 10 or fewer settings). Figures for chains with more than 10 settings are presented separately at the end of the report.

To calculate the proportion of staff who had been furloughed, made redundant etc., we divided the number of staff to whom the relevant action (e.g. being furloughed) applied at the time the survey was answered (May) by the total number of staff employed in March (taking 1 March as point of reference). Where settings reported that the number of staff that they had furloughed or made redundant since March was more than 120% of the number of staff they had employed in March, we did not include their responses in averages, on the assumption that this response was a typo or misunderstanding of the question. This applied to fewer than 1% of responses.

Due to differences in which settings responded to our earlier surveys, the time periods covered and the methods used to analyse their responses, comparisons between the results of this survey and previous ones are not advised.

*We are grateful to the British Educational Research Association (BERA) which is supporting this research as part of the Association's response to the ongoing COVID-19 situation.*



## Characteristics of settings

We received 487 responses, of which 268 included responses to most or all questions. Previous surveys have shown that the experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic of single site nurseries and small chains (i.e. chains with 10 or fewer settings) are very different from those of larger chains. In this report we decided to highlight the experiences of the first group; therefore, in the main text below we focus on 263 full responses that represent 344 early years settings.



Of these 344 settings, 66% are based in England, 26% in Wales and 8% in Scotland. Most responses (64% or 221) were from single sites, with 36% (123) from settings that were part of a small chain.

In total, the responses reflect the experiences of early years providers representing over 5,000 staff. On average, settings employed around 15 staff. Of these staff (clockwise on left): 9% had no qualifications, 7% were apprentices, 8% held a Level 2 qualification (or Scottish equivalent), 57% a Level 3 qualification, 10% a Level 4 or 5 qualification, and 9% a Level 6 qualification.

## Introduction

This is the fourth and last report summarising the findings of a survey of early education and childcare providers in Great Britain. We are seeking to understand the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic is having on the staffing decisions of early years providers in the private, voluntary and independent sector. Since our last report in March, rates of infection from Covid-19 have decreased significantly thanks to the quick rollout of the vaccination programme.

Some key forms of financial support for early years providers, such as the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, have remained in place but others have changed. In England, funding for government-funded places has become less generous than it was last year, moving from 'block booking' childcare places, which ensured providers were funded whether children were able to attend or not, to a headcount based approach from January 2021, when a national lockdown was in place. In Scotland, beginning in January 2021, settings were only allowed to provide care to vulnerable children and the children of key workers, but full reopening was allowed in mid-February, potentially impacting some the results of this fourth survey (for examples the total number of staff members employed on 1 March). In Wales and England, settings have been operating without additional restrictions during this period.

While the long-term effects of these developments remain to be seen, this survey of nurseries in England, Scotland and Wales aims to give an indication of the short-term effects they are having on the staff employed in the sector.



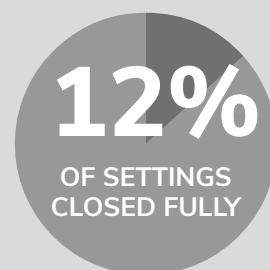
## Setting closures

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The spread of Covid-19 and the efforts to control its spread have impacted the operation of many nurseries in a variety of ways. While during the time considered in this survey settings were allowed to be open in all three countries, local rates of infections have been varied. Therefore, we asked nurseries whether they have had to close their setting fully or partially, which includes when one or more rooms at their setting had to be closed temporarily while others continued to operate.

We found that only 12% (40 out of the 343 that answered this question) of settings had to fully close at least once since 1 March, with just over half of these settings having to fully close more than once.

We also found that 25% (86 out of the 343 that answered this question) of settings had to partially close at least once since 1 March, again with just over half of these settings having to partially close more than once.



**Of those settings that have had to close, the most common reason for doing so was because of staff members or children self-isolating (53% or 51 out of the 96 settings which answered the question), followed by insufficient demand for places (15% or 14 settings).**

## Staff

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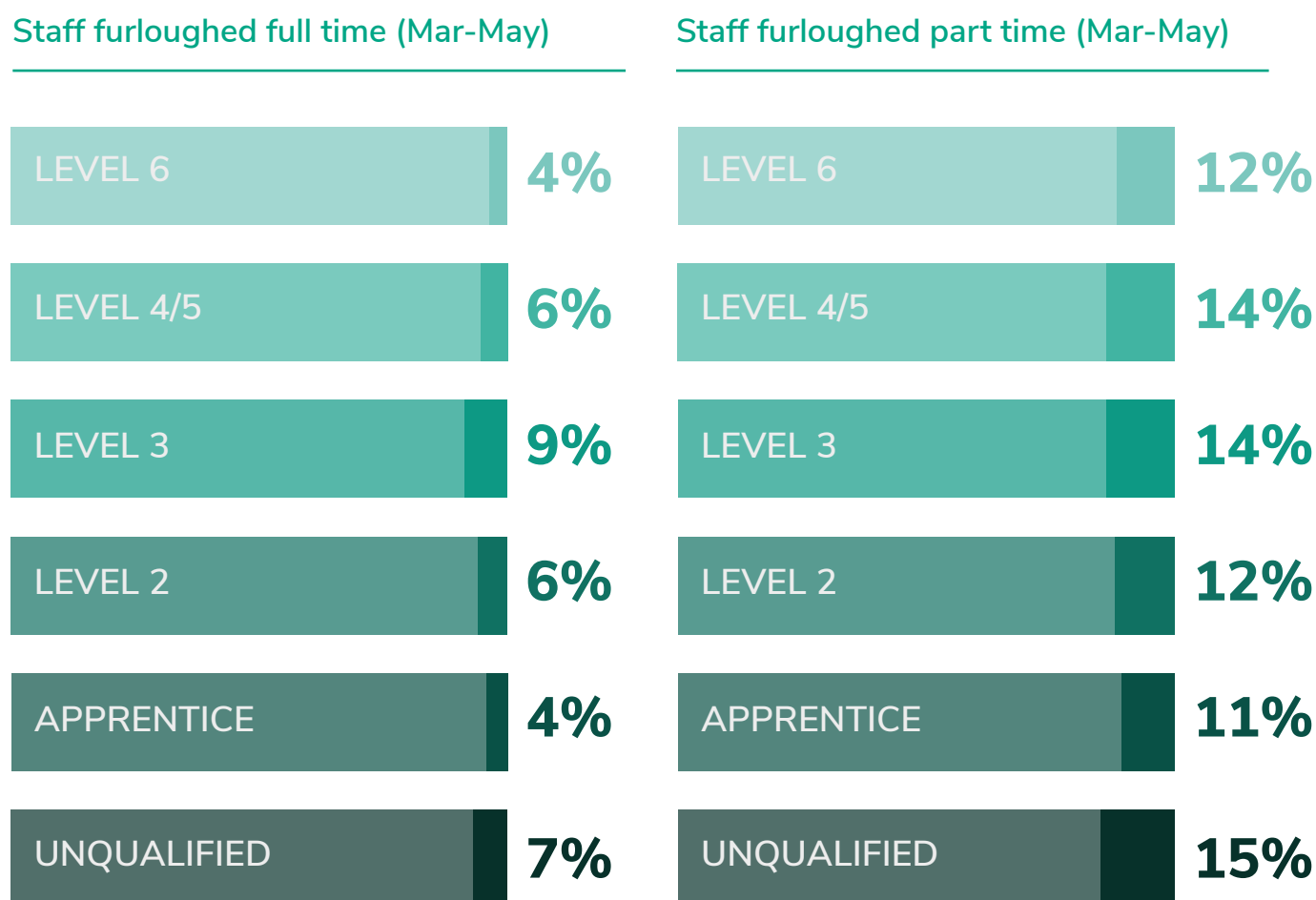
Looking at the size of the workforce, we asked settings a range of questions about how the composition of staff they employed had changed between 1 March 2021 and May 2021. Responses from single site nurseries and small chains are included here for a minimum of 4,880 staff members represented by responses to these questions.

**On average, settings reported employing 2% fewer staff in May than they had in March.<sup>1</sup>** This equates to around 330 fewer staff members employed at the settings that answered this question. However, this overall figure obscures some notable variation between those settings that have seen the number of staff they employed during this time period rise and those who have seen it fall. While 51% (166) of settings had seen no change in the total number of staff they employed between March and May, 28% (92) had seen a rise and 20% (65) had seen a fall

**On average, employers placed 8% of their staff on full-time furlough between March and May.** This equates to around 350 staff placed on full-time furlough among the settings that answered this question. Since 1 March staff with Level 3 qualifications and with no qualifications were the most likely to be placed on full-time furlough (respectively 9% and 7%), while 6% of staff with Level 4/5 qualifications, and only 4% of apprentices and staff with Level 6 qualifications were placed on full-time furlough.

<sup>1</sup> We have excluded for all calculations in this section those settings which reported employing more than twice as many staff in May as they had employed in March. This applied to 9 settings.

**On average, employers placed 15% of their staff on part-time furlough between March and May.** This equates to almost 700 staff who have been placed on part-time furlough among the settings who responded to this question. Staff with no qualifications, and with Level 3 and Level 4/5 qualifications were the groups most likely to be placed on part-time furlough (15%, 14% and 14% respectively).



When we asked settings in our previous survey in February how many staff they expected to place on furlough between February and April 2021, they answered they expected on average to place 6% of staff on full-time furlough and 11% of staff on part-time furlough. As described above, settings responding to this survey have instead placed 8% of staff on full-time furlough and 15% on part-time furlough, suggesting that a higher proportion of staff have been furloughed than expected.<sup>2</sup>

**On average, employers made 1% (47 staff) of their staff redundant in the period between March and May.** This is a slight increase over the no redundancies we had observed in the sample of settings that responded to our previous survey in February, but the figure is in line with the proportion of staff they said they expected to make redundant over this period.

<sup>2</sup> Settings responding to the two surveys are not necessarily the same. Therefore, these figures should not be directly compared but only taken as an indication of trends.

## Staff made redundant



**Between March and May around 6% of staff voluntarily terminated their contract.** This equates to over 260 staff among the settings who responded to our survey, which in turn means that over 1,500 children could have lost their key worker (assuming an average staff to child ratio of 1:6).

## Voluntary terminations



*“They found early years low pay and very stressful”*

*“Care sector currently pays more”*

*“Want a change of career and feel disillusioned by the way they have been treated by the government and not seen as key service. Want to earn a higher wage which they can in other jobs e.g. Tesco, receptionist at a hotel etc.”*

*“The stress of the last year has impacted on their well-being and the uncertainty of a job”*

Among those settings where staff had voluntarily terminated their contract, the most common reasons that respondents say were given by staff for terminating their contract were personal reasons unrelated to Covid-19 (41%), personal or family health concerns related to Covid-19 (14%) and unknown (14% of settings reported this).

Employers had reduced the contracted hours of 5% of staff on average. Among the settings who responded, this equates to almost 150 staff who have had their contracted hours reduced in this period.

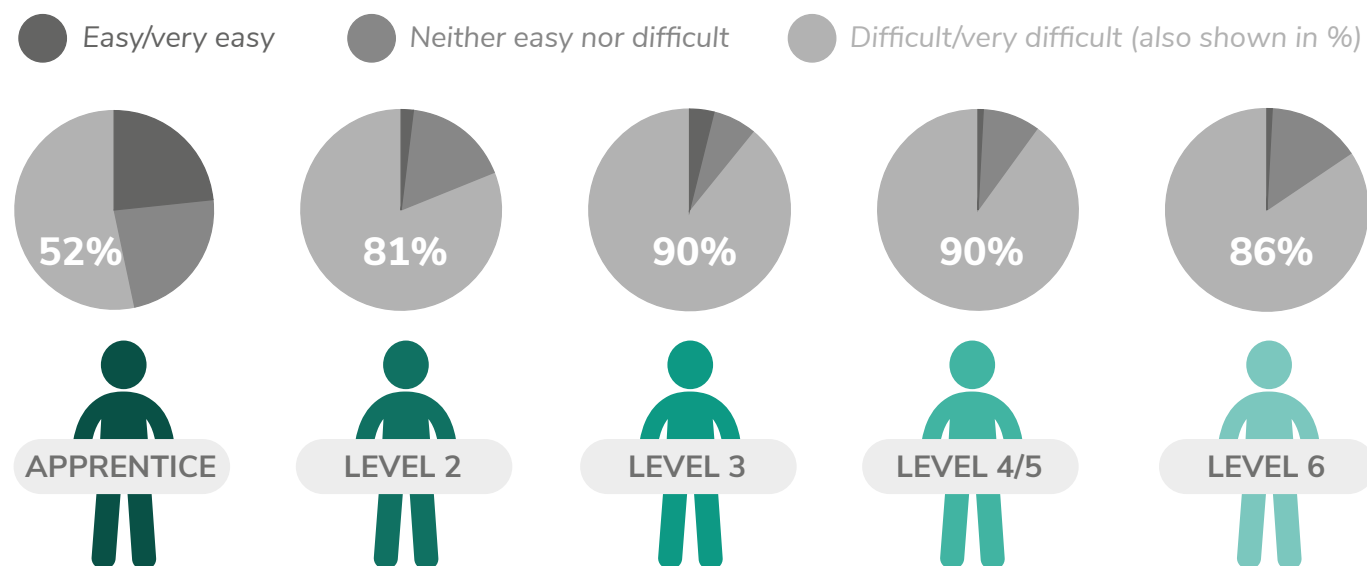
**150**

STAFF HAD THEIR  
CONTRACTED  
HOURS REDUCED

## Recruitment difficulties

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic the sector struggled with recruitment and retention but these challenges appear to have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Mixed levels of government support and the accompanying sense of lack of recognition for the hard work of early years settings and professionals during the pandemic have left the sector even more strained. But the high turnover rates that plague the sector and the slow recovery from the pandemic mean that providers are still trying to recruit. Therefore, we wanted to gauge if, and how, difficult recruitment efforts have been since 1 March. We received around 200 valid responses to this question, depending on the level of qualification of the staff settings were trying to recruit.

### Difficulties recruiting by qualification level



### Respondents that tried to recruit by qualification level

**76%**  
(155)

**75%**  
(154)

**96%**  
(197)

**74%**  
(151)

**70%**  
(143)

## Expectations about the future

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We asked settings how many staff they expected to place on furlough, to reduce their contracted hours, or to make redundant over the months between May and the end of September, when the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme is due to end. Responses from all single site settings and small chains are included here, for a minimum of 308 settings represented by responses.

**On average, settings expected to place 1% of their staff on full-time furlough and 7% of staff on part-time furlough, to reduce the hours of 6% of their staff and to make 1% of their staff redundant in the coming months.**

## What informs settings' decisions about staffing

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We asked settings whether they took the qualifications or experience of their staff into account when making staff redundant or reducing their contracted hours. Responses from single site settings and chains of up to 10 settings are included here, for a minimum of 291 settings represented by responses to these questions.

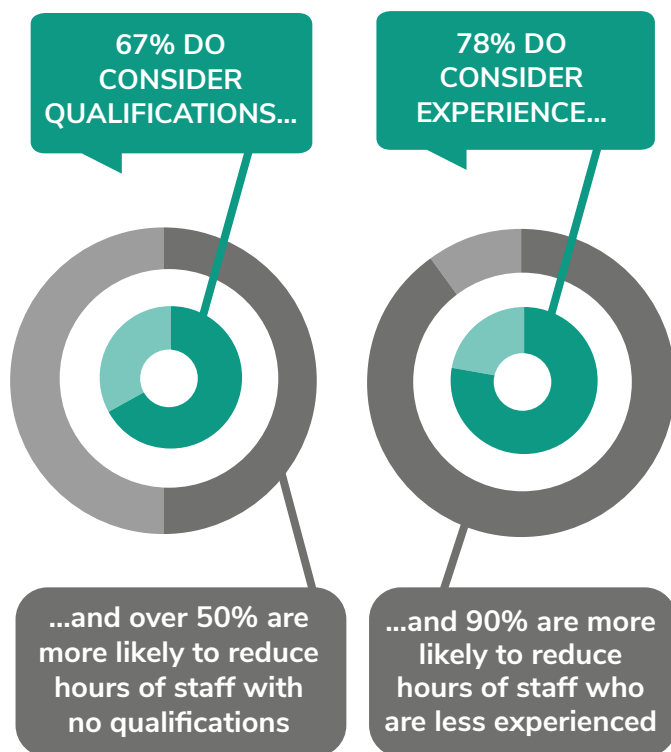
**When asked about making staff redundant or reducing their contracted hours, settings overwhelmingly told us that they were more likely to do so to staff with lower qualifications and less experience. These findings are in line with the findings of our previous surveys.**

When considering making staff redundant, 76% of respondents take the experience of staff into account while 63% take their level of qualifications into account. A considerably greater proportion of settings said that they are more likely to make staff with less experience redundant (92%) than those with more experience (8%). Similarly, settings tended to say they would choose staff with lower or no qualifications to make redundant rather than those with more. 64% of settings said they were most likely to choose staff with no qualifications to make redundant, followed by those with low qualification levels (24%), apprentices (7%) and those with higher qualification levels (6%).

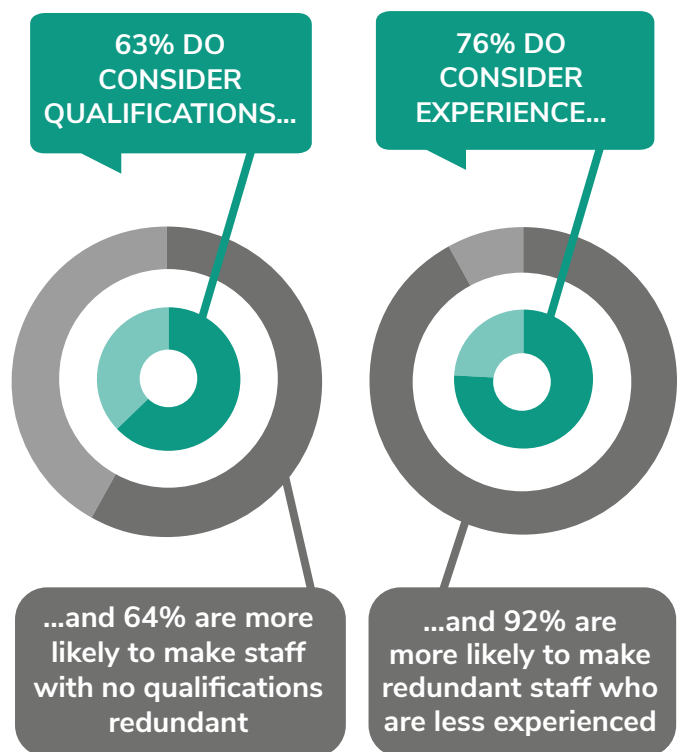
When considering reducing the contracted hours of staff, 78% of respondents said they take the experiences of staff into account while 67% take their level of qualifications into account. A considerably greater proportion of settings said that they are more likely to reduce the contracted hours of staff with less experience (90%) than those with more (10%). Similarly, settings tended to say they would choose to reduce the contracted hours of staff with lower or no qualifications rather than those with more. Over 50% of settings say they were most likely to reduce the contracted hours of staff who had no qualifications, followed by those with low qualification levels (33%), those with high qualification levels (7%) and apprentices (4%).



## Staff hours considerations for employers



## Redundancy considerations for employers



## CPD opportunities

We asked settings about the training that they offer to their staff and about the CPD opportunities that are available. For these questions we received 304 responses on behalf of 328 settings.

Most settings (98%) report that they are continuing to offer CPD to their staff. Of these, 15% report offering mandatory training only, with the remaining 85% offering training over and above what is required.

When asked whether there were enough training opportunities available, 92% of settings said there were enough opportunities for food hygiene training, 85% said there were enough for Paediatric First Aid, and 82% said there were enough for safeguarding and child protection, and for infection prevention and control.

Meanwhile, fewer than half (48%) of respondents said that there were enough opportunities for training on trauma and bereavement, 55% said there were enough for training on supporting children with autism, and 58% for training on taking a whole setting approach to supporting children with special educational needs, and for speech and language. The crucial role of language and communication skills development in future school attainment is well evidenced. In the face of a stalling in the closing of the achievement gap and of the additional concerns caused by the pandemic for the development of children who have missed out on several months of early years provision and/or social interactions with their peers, the lack of availability of speech and language training is especially concerning.

# Children in attendance

We asked settings how many children attended the week before they answered the survey in May and how many had attended in a typical week at the same time of year before the pandemic. This reflects the fact that from March to May 2020 settings were in their first lockdown and comparisons would not be appropriate. We also asked how many children were taking up government-funded places compared to pre-pandemic levels. Responses from single site nurseries and small chains are included in calculations of average numbers of children attending, for a minimum of 205 settings represented in England, 74 in Wales and 21 in Scotland.

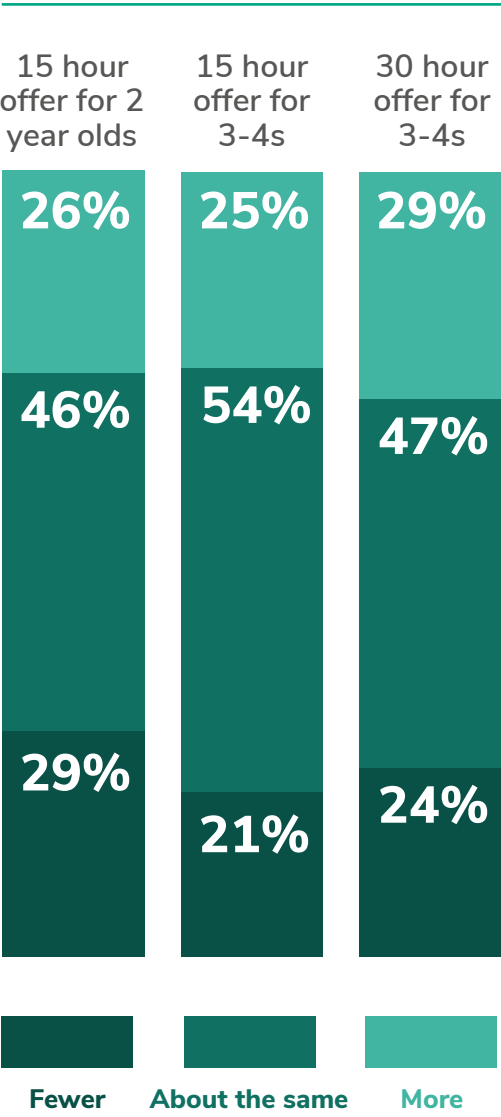
The average number of children attending settings in May compared to the number attending in a typical week in May before the pandemic was 8% lower in England and 6% in Wales. Scotland's figures report an increase of 7% in the number of children attending compared to pre-pandemic levels, which could be due to the positive impact of policy changes that happened before the outbreak of Covid-19.

We asked settings in England whether the number of children taking up government-funded places at their setting was smaller, about the same as, or bigger than last year. Only responses from single site settings and chains of up to 10 settings are included in calculations of take-up of government-funded places, for a minimum of 200 settings represented. In the case of the two-year-olds entitlement, 46% of settings said that about the same number of children were attending this year as last year, with 29% reporting that fewer children were attending and 26% reporting that more children were attending. The respective figures for the 15 hour entitlement for three- and four-year-olds are 54% (about the same), 21% (fewer children attending) and 25% (more children attending). The figures for the 30 hours entitlement for three- and four-year-olds are respectively 47% (about the same), 24% (fewer children attending) and 29% (more children attending).

In Wales, 45% of settings reported the same number of children attending childcare offer places, 21% reported fewer children and 34% more children. The figures were similar for the Foundation Phase places, at 47%, 19% and 34% respectively. On the other hand, 61% of settings reported more children attending Flying Start provision, compared to 28% reporting fewer children and 11% reporting about the same number of children.

In Scotland, 45% of settings reported about the same number or more children attending while only 9% of settings reported fewer children attending government-funded entitlement provision.

Proportion of settings reporting changes to the number of children taking up government-funded childcare entitlements at their setting (England)



## Focus on larger chains

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The previous surveys in this series have shown that the way early years settings experienced and reacted to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic are different depending on whether they are single site nurseries/part of a small chain or they are part of a larger chain.

Therefore, for this final report we decided to observe the two groups separately. A small number of larger chains responded to the last survey. Those responses represent 427 private settings, all in England. **These results should not be taken as representative of the experiences of all large chains. However, they tell a very different story of challenges and opportunities compared to what emerges from the data about single site settings and small chains.**

Of the 427 settings represented by these responses, 84% responded to say they had sites which had needed to fully close, and 93% responded that they had sites partially close during the period. From the data provided it was not possible to report on how many sites in each chain had closed, or how many times. The reason for closure was related to staff members or children self-isolating and not to low demand as in some cases for single site settings and small chains.

Valid responses on staff were provided by chains representing 147 settings and more than 1,700 staff members. Of these staff, 8% had no qualifications, 9% were apprentices, 18% were qualified at Level 2, 63% were qualified at Level 3, and 1% were qualified at either Level 4/5 or Level 6. Large chains seem to have relied much more heavily on full-time furlough compared to single site settings/small chains, with 36% of staff placed on full-time furlough compared to 8% of staff working in single site nurseries/small chains. On the other hand, they have relied much less on part-time furlough (6% versus 25%). There were no redundancies or reductions in working hours in the settings which were part of the large chains that answered our survey. Finally, only 4% of the staff voluntarily left, with personal reasons unrelated to Covid-19 given as the key reason for leaving.

On the other hand, our data shows that recruitment is not any easier for larger chains. Almost all have attempted recruiting since 1 March and found it difficult or very difficult, particularly for Level 2 and Level 3 qualified staff. The only exception was in the case of apprentices recruitment, which most respondents reported finding neither easy nor difficult.

We have seen in our previous surveys in this series that access and availability of CPD is also very different in the case of large chains. The fourth survey confirmed this. Larger chains reported that they are continuing to offer CPD to their staff. Of these, just 8% reported offering mandatory training only, with the remaining 92% saying they are offering training over and above what is required. When asked whether there were enough training opportunities available, respondents representing large chains were more likely than those responding on behalf of single sites/small chains to say that there were enough opportunities for all types of training. All large chains said that there were enough opportunities available for training on supporting children with autism, taking a whole setting approach to supporting children with special educational needs, safeguarding and child protection, food hygiene, infection prevention and control, supporting children through transitions, supporting children's personal, social and emotional development, and supporting children's behaviour management.

The biggest gaps in training opportunities in the case of large chains include speech and language, supporting staff well-being, and trauma and bereavement, still with 92% of settings reporting enough training opportunities.

## Conclusion

This is the fourth and last of a series of surveys that were carried out over the past year to understand the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the early years sector and on the staffing decisions that settings have had to make throughout the year. The pandemic has brought significant disruption to children's education and will have long lasting effects on society and the economy. But while the importance of high quality early education on children's future education attainment is well evidenced, the early years sector has not received nearly as much attention as the rest of the education system during the pandemic.

This last survey was carried out in May 2021, 14 months after the Covid-19 pandemic hit England, Scotland and Wales, and shows that while there are some signs that part of the sector is doing better, the path to full recovery is still long. Nurseries in England, Scotland and Wales were all allowed to be open in the period considered in this survey. Yet, 12% of single site nurseries and small chains had to fully close at least once and 25% had to partially close at least once since 1 March with the most common reasons for closure being staff members or children self-isolating and insufficient demand for places. Government data shows that the Covid-19 cases in early years settings in England have doubled within week span, from 135 reported in the week beginning May 31 to 269 in the week beginning June 7. It is worth noting that higher case rates in communities that it is likely that nurseries will have been further impacted by positive cases, self-isolations and closures. For example, we have heard from a variety of settings that the notification of cases of positive Covid-19 tests has doubled just within the span of a week (from the last week of May to the first of June). This shows that settings operate under on-going uncertainty in terms of both children's attendance and staff availability.

The single site settings and small chains that responded to this survey told us that they were employing 2% fewer staff in May than in March, and had placed 8% of staff on full-time furlough and 15% on part-time furlough between March and May. They had also made 1% of their staff redundant and reduced the working hours of 5%. Finally, 6% of the staff had voluntarily left between March and May.

These figures reflect a variety of elements at play, such as the lower demand for places that settings have faced during the pandemic, the low status of the workforce and the insufficient level of support provided to the sector, which compounded with pre-pandemic problems make it a very underfunded, undervalued and unstable sector.







## Looking ahead and recommendations

The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) will come to an end on September 30 and settings told us that they plan to rely less on the furlough schemes in the next five months, expecting to place 1% of staff on full-time furlough and 7% on part-time furlough. While these figures show signs of optimism, they also demonstrate that the sector is not back to full or pre-pandemic levels of capacity. For example, settings told us that the average number of children attending in May compared to the number attending in a typical week pre-pandemic was still 8% lower in England and 6% in Wales.

Our survey shows that settings still intend to use the CJRS scheme in the next few months while attendance rates are still not back to pre-pandemic levels. This puts the sector in a very uncertain situation as we approach the autumn term 2021. To help providers cope with the financial uncertainty caused by fluctuating attendance levels and to ensure settings are sustainable in the short term to be able to offer more places as demand returns, the government should reset funding rates to be based on pre-pandemic attendance levels.

In line with the findings from the other surveys in the series, settings reported that they are considerably more likely to reduce the contracted hours or make redundant staff members with fewer qualifications and less experience, if presented with the choice. This suggests that such staff are continuing to experience some of the most negative effects of the pandemic, such as reduced job security and income, while further jeopardising the pipeline of staffing development for the future.

Meanwhile, the vast majority of early years setting report continuing to offer CPD to their staff and that they are offering more than just mandatory training. However, gaps in the training opportunities that settings are able to secure persist in the same areas as we have seen in our previous surveys: training on trauma and bereavement, on taking a whole-setting approach to supporting children with special educational needs and on supporting children with autism. Training needs to be available to settings if they are to offer it to staff, and particularly new staff members. Of particular concern is the fact that more than 40% of settings reported that training for speech and language is insufficient at a time when the closing of the achievement gap is stalling and many children have missed out on several months of early years provision and/or social interactions of their peers due to the pandemic.

The results of these four surveys have shown that the pandemic has hit the early years sector hard, not only creating new challenges but also compounding on previously existing problems that have made many settings very vulnerable during the pandemic. The results also show that the uncertainty for the sector will not just finish at the end of September, when the CJRS Scheme will end, or at any point in the near future. The sector is very much linked to other sectors of the economy. Among other things, settings' ability to survive and thrive depends on parental demand for places, which in turn is very dependent on local economies and rates of infections, and on the availability of new workers to join the sector as many have left. These factors won't be clear and stable all of a sudden at the end of September. The sector needs extra support in terms of additional funding but also of an extended timeline, that reflects the fact that there will likely be a period of adjustment that lasts longer than for other sectors of the economy.






National Day Nurseries Association

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