

Eight in 10 Britons think early years workers' pay is too low | 12 March 2023

People don't realise how low wages are for people working in the early years sector, overestimating hourly pay by an average of 47% (£10.90 compared to £7.42)

Two in three are concerned about the costs of early years (nursery / childcare) provision, but people underestimate how expensive it is in the UK versus other countries

People think workers should be paid more fairly and that this would benefit everyone; 79% think that wages in the early years sector are too low and only 10% disagree

This view unites parents, grandparents and non-parents, men and women, and voters across party lines, including parents who are struggling with childcare costs

Setting the scene

We know that the early years sector in Britain isn't working. Just ask ChatGPT.

There's no shortage of reports (a few are [listed here](#)) telling us about the wide-ranging and deep-seated problems related to early years childcare and education, which are contributing to poverty and inequality, denying some children the best start in life, and preventing many parents from working as much as they would like, which holds back productivity and growth.

And we know that parents with young children are desperate for change, so that they spend less money on childcare, can work as and when they want and need to, and can be confident that their children are receiving the best quality care and opportunities for development.

But there's a gap in what we know about public attitudes to one key issue: the fact that workers in

the early years sector are severely underpaid (with many paid less than the national minimum wage).



What do people think about this? Is there a zero-sum battle between parents worried about costs and workers focused on wages? Or is there solidarity and a recognition that paying people a decent wage is in everyone's best interests?

We set out to find out. Read on to see what we discovered from our national polling with Opinium.

Is there a perception gap?

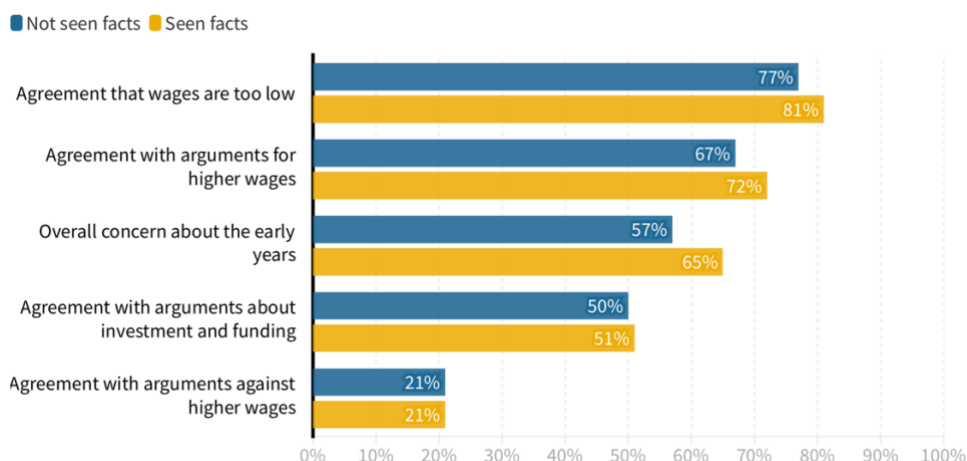
We asked respondents to guess average hourly wages in the early years sector in Britain, and found that people don't realise how low they are. The average guess was £10.90; in reality, average hourly wages in England are £7.42 ([2020 figures](#)).

What is the average hourly wage in the early years sector?	Difference from reality	Average guess	Reality
All respondents	+47%	£10.90	£7.42
2019 Conservative voters	+39%	£10.30	£7.42
2019 Labour voters	+39%	£10.30	£7.42
Parents of young children	+40%	£10.40	£7.42
Grandparents of young children	+36%	£10.10	£7.42
Men	+52%	£11.30	£7.42
Women	+42%	£10.50	£7.42

We also asked them to guess where the UK ranks among OECD countries in terms of childcare costs. The average guess was 14th most expensive out of 38 countries; in reality, the UK is the joint most expensive country for childcare in the OECD.

Where does the UK rank for childcare costs in the OECD?	Difference from reality	Average guess	Reality
All respondents	13 too low	14.4	1=
2019 Conservative voters	14 too low	15.1	1=
2019 Labour voters	12 too low	13.1	1=
Parents of young children	14 too low	14.8	1=
Grandparents of young children	14 too low	14.6	1=
Men	14 too low	14.6	1=
Women	13 too low	14.1	1=

To test whether exposure to these facts had an impact on attitudes, we only asked these questions of (and showed the answers to) half of our sample; the other half didn't see them. Comparing attitudes to the questions below between the two groups, we found that presenting people with the facts generally strengthened their support for arguments in favour of increasing pay, although they did not change attitudes to issues such as how much should be invested in the sector and who should pay for it.

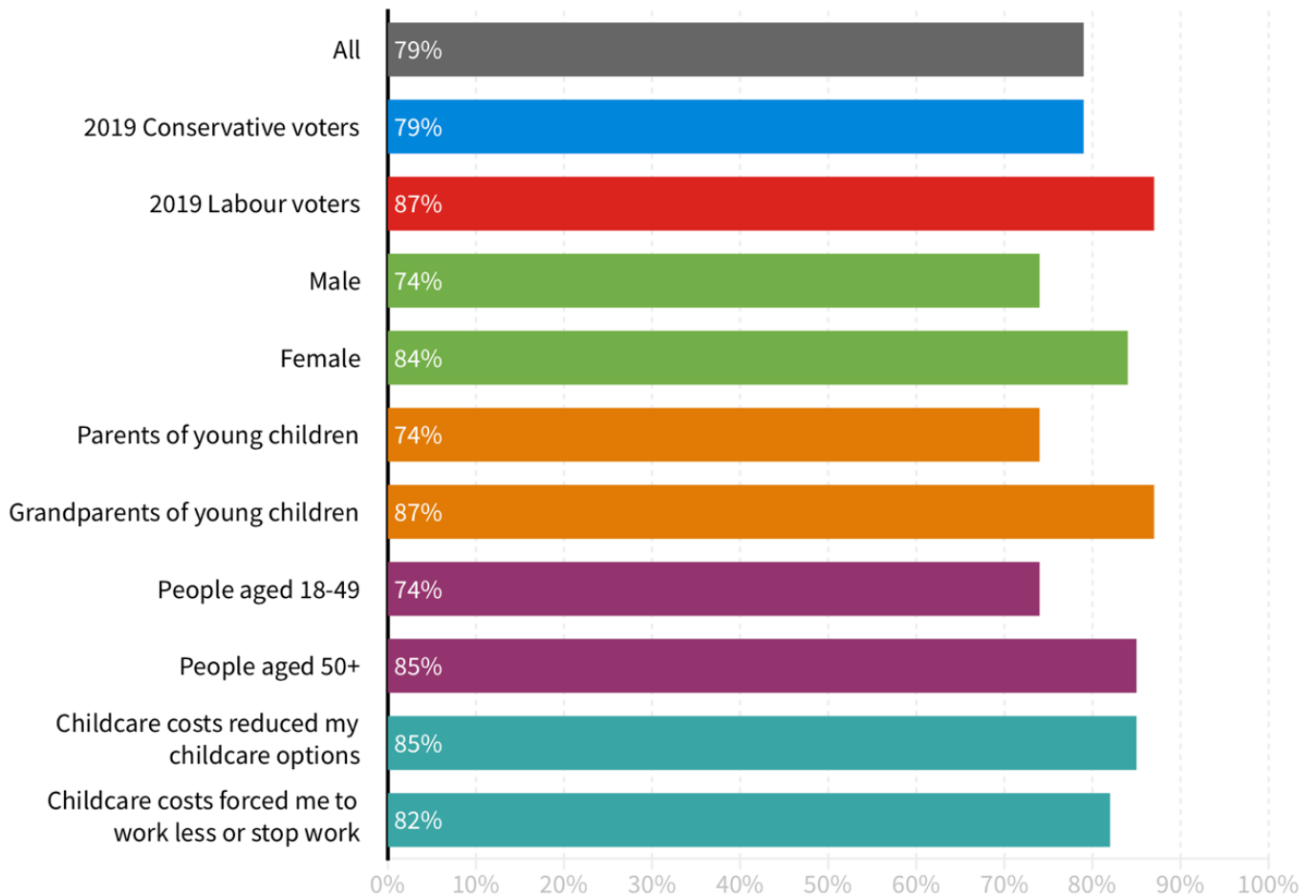


Views about pay in the early years sector

Eight in ten people think that pay in the early years sector is too low, with only one in ten saying that it is about right or too high. This consensus holds across party lines, with the same proportion of 2019 Conservative voters agreeing (and a still higher proportion of Labour voters). We found very high levels of agreement about pay being too low among grandparents of young children, people aged 50+, and people who said that the cost of childcare reduces their childcare options or has forced them to leave work or reduce their hours.

Proportion of respondents who think that early years pay is too low

After being told the average hourly wage (£7.48)

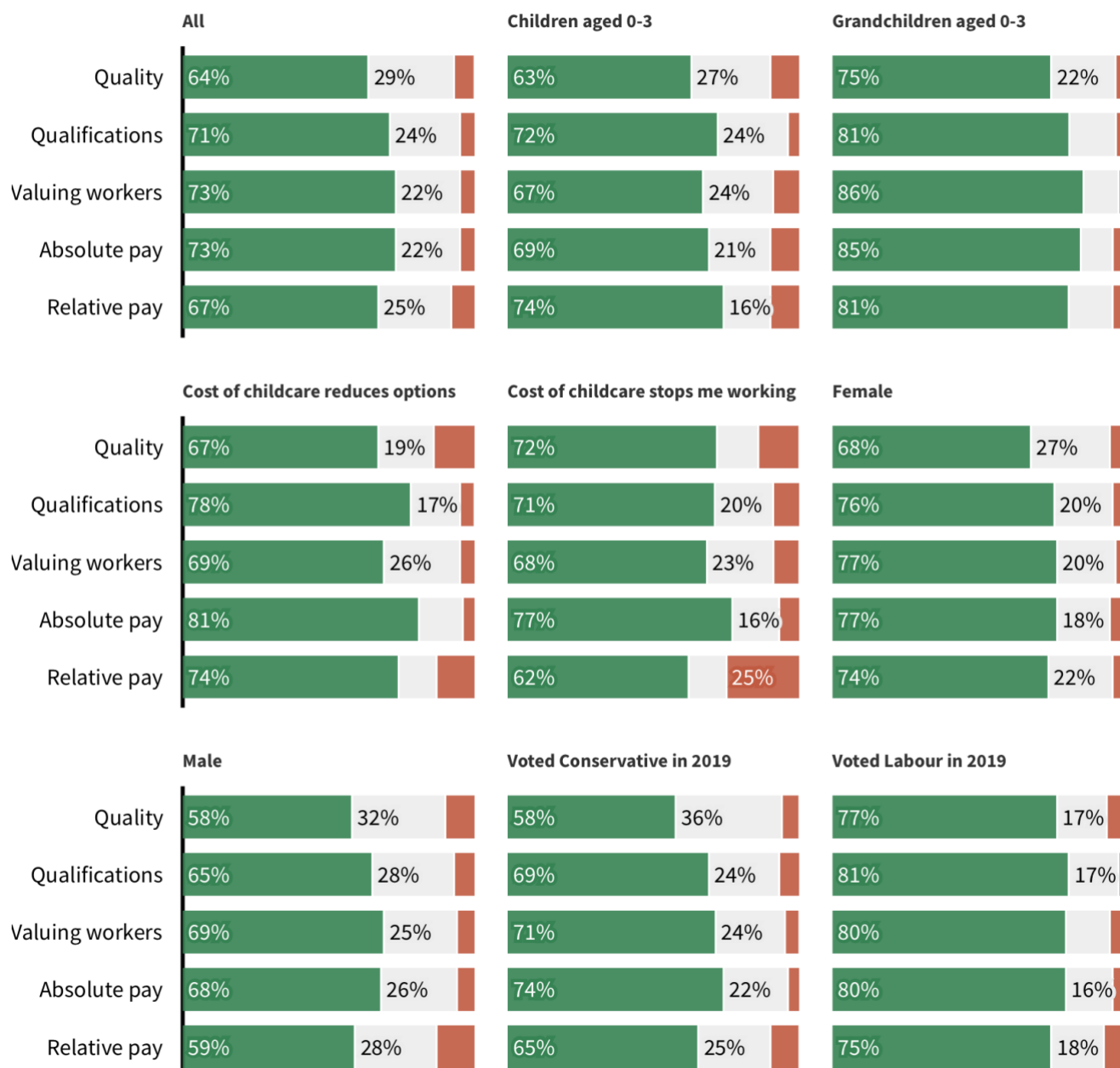


What people think about arguments for increasing pay...

Solid majorities of the British public support the full range of arguments for increasing pay for workers in the early years sector. We saw particularly high agreement with the arguments that we should value early years workers as much as others in the education sector, and that we should pay them enough to get by. There was especially strong agreement among grandparents of young children and people struggling with childcare costs.

How much do you agree or disagree with the following arguments in favour of increasing wages for people working in early years settings?

■ Agree ■ Not sure / don't know ■ Disagree



Quality: Increasing wages is important to ensure that children are given the best quality care and education |

Qualifications: Increasing wages will attract and retain more qualified staff to provide better care and education | **Valuing**

workers: We should value members of the early years workforce as much as other staff in the education sector (e.g.

teaching assistants) | **Absolute pay:** We should pay all members of the early years workforce, who provide an essential

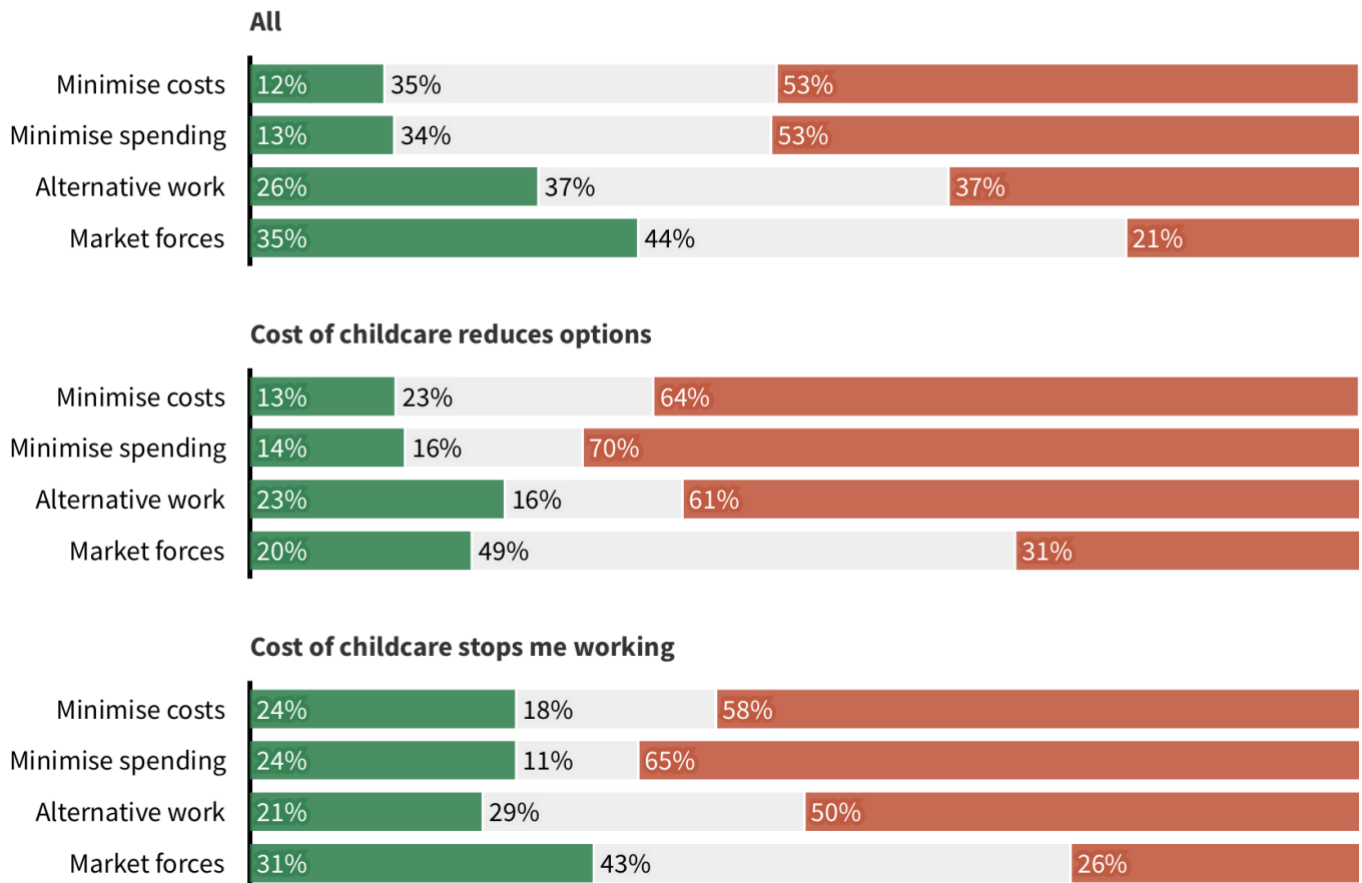
service to society, enough to get by | **Relative pay:** It's not fair to pay members of the early years workforce the minimum wage (or less) while roles such as bankers or large company chief executives earn millions

...And about arguments *against* increasing pay

There is much less support for some of the more commonly cited arguments for keeping wages as they are (such as minimising costs for parents or taxpayers, or arguments about market forces). Parents struggling with childcare costs were among the groups that disagreed most strongly with these arguments.

How much do you agree or disagree with the following arguments against increasing wages for people working in early years settings?

■ Agree
 ■ Not sure / don't know
 ■ Disagree



Minimise costs: Keeping staff wages low is a good way to minimise the costs of early years provision for parents

Minimise spending: Keeping staff wages low is a good way to keep public sector spending and taxes as low as possible

Alternative work: If people don't like the wages that are on offer in the early years sector they can find work elsewhere

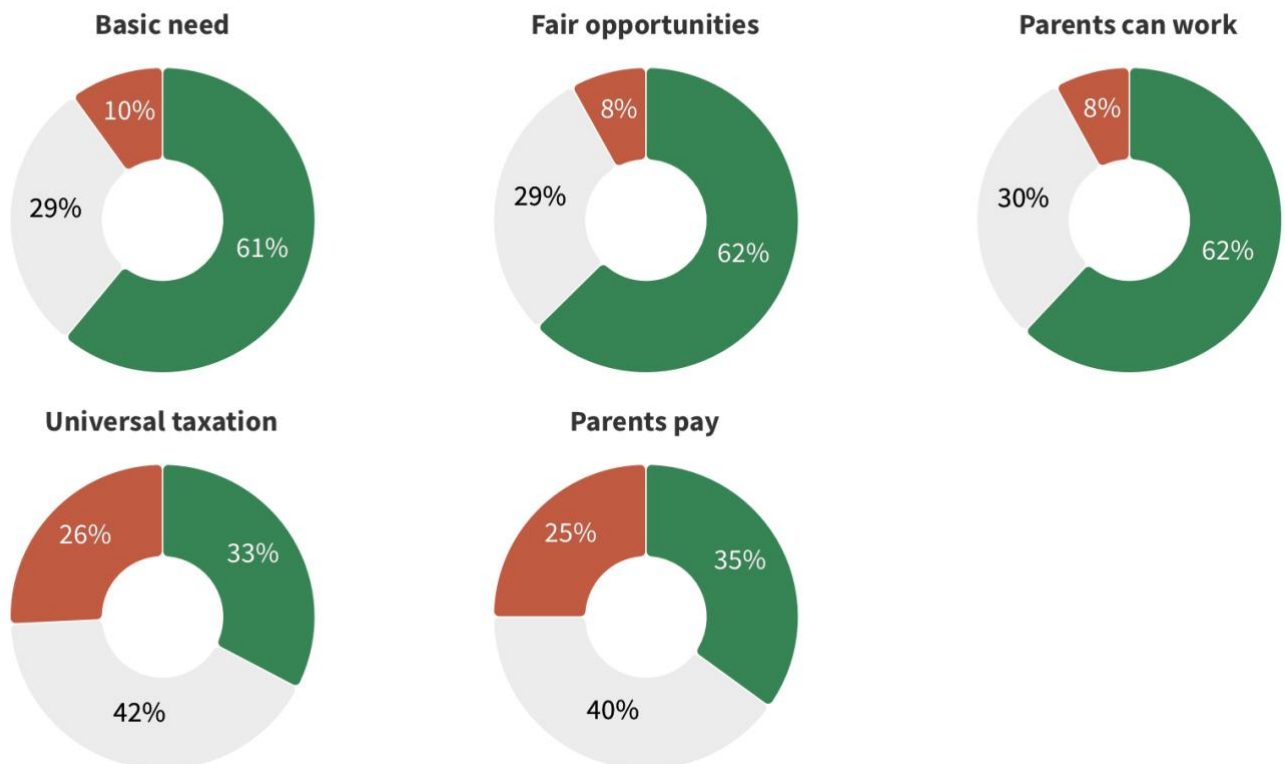
Market forces: Wages should be set by market forces and should not be artificially inflated by the government

Attitudes to investing in and funding early years provision

People feel strongly about investing in early years provision, reflecting a growing consensus that current levels of funding are unsustainable. More than six in ten respondents agree with arguments in favour of increased government investment in the early years, with Labour voters particularly focused on the importance of early years provision in meeting basic needs (71%) and giving all children fair opportunities (75%), while Tory voters are slightly more focused on ensuring that parents can get back into work (59%). The public are split on whether costs should be borne by taxpayers or by parents.

How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about early years care and education?

■ Agree ■ Not sure / don't know ■ Disagree



Basic need: The government should invest in making high-quality early years provision affordable for all parents because it is a basic need, just like primary and secondary education

Fair opportunities: The government should invest in making high-quality early years provision affordable for all parents because it will help to ensure that all children have fair opportunities

Parents can work: The government should invest in making high-quality early years provision affordable for all parents so that more parents can get back into work

Universal taxation: It would be better for everyone to contribute to universal early years provision through universal taxation than for most of the costs to be loaded onto parents

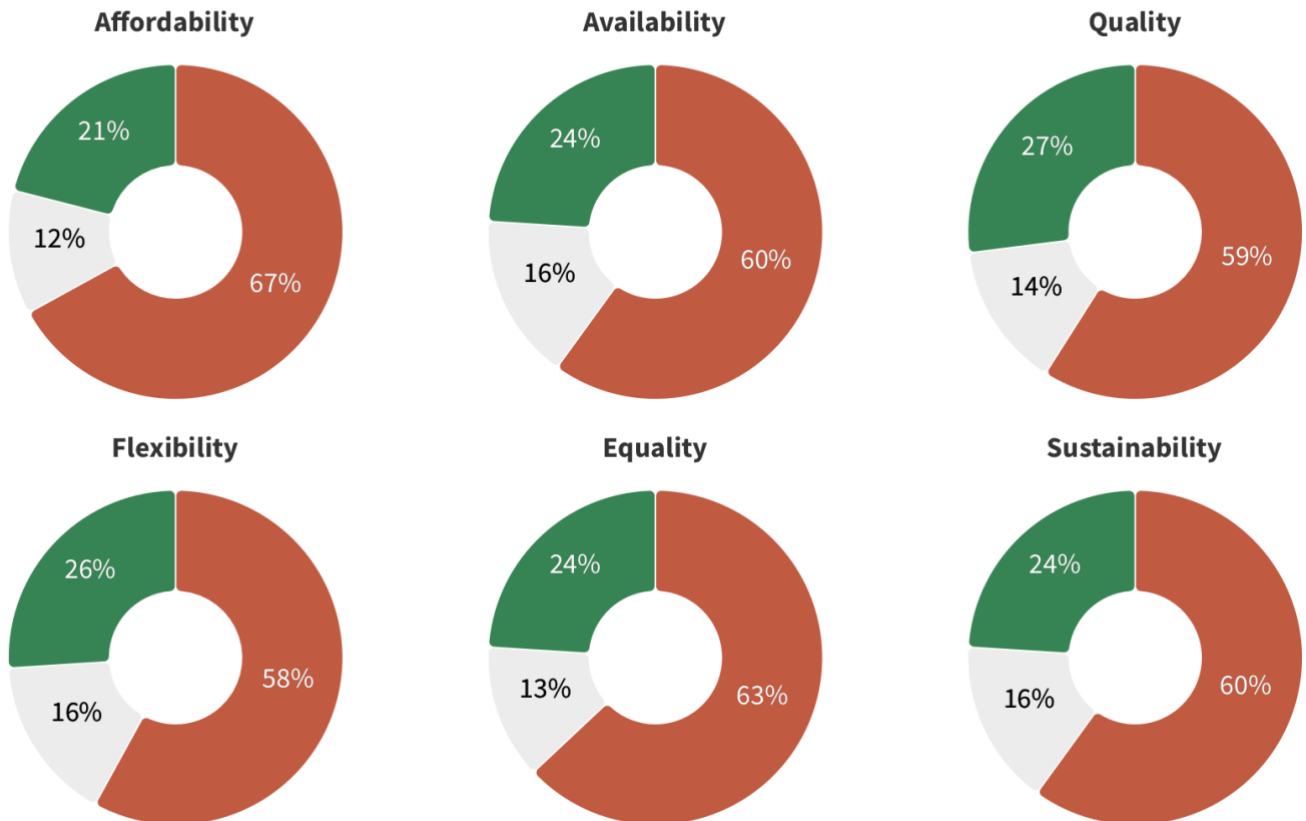
Parents pay: Parents should cover most of the costs of early years provision because they and their children are the direct beneficiaries

Concern about the state of the early years sector

There is a striking consensus of concern with the state of the early years sector. Most people are concerned about most aspects (affordability, availability, quality, flexibility, equality and sustainability). This is shared by a majority across party lines, genders and age groups. Affordability tops the list, but equality is not far behind, and there is a telling degree of worry about the sustainability of the sector. Parents and grandparents of young children are, unsurprisingly, particularly concerned about the state of the sector.

How concerned are you about the following aspects of early years care in Britain today?

Concerned Not sure Not concerned



Affordability: Parents being able to afford the early years provision that they need, including the impacts of expensive provision on making working worthwhile, gender equality, family budgets etc

Availability: Parents being able to access the early years provision that they need in the local area

Quality: Early years provision that provides both nurturing care and educational development

Flexibility: Parents being able to access early years provision that meets their changing needs

Equality: All children reaching a good level of development by age five, regardless of background

Sustainability: The ability of early years providers such as nurseries to stay in business

Expert commentary

Carey Oppenheim, Early Childhood Project Lead at the Nuffield Foundation, Advisor to the Royal Foundation (writing in a personal capacity)

There is growing momentum behind the call for a step change in the provision of early childhood education and care from parents, the workforce, providers, [Parliament](#) and a wide range of other voices. The public attitudes report published by the Fairness Foundation today is further illustration of this. It reveals a striking consensus between women and men, old and young, across political parties and regions on pay for the early years workforce – eight in 10 think that it is too low. The polling shows strong support for a range of arguments to increase pay, including valuing the early years workforce as much as others in the education sector, the role of pay in improving qualifications and quality, and why we should raise both absolute and relative levels of pay.

It is perhaps not surprising that there is strong support for addressing the shockingly low rates of average pay, given that it stands at £7.42 an hour, [forcing 45% of the early years workforce to rely on benefits to top up their wages](#). Early years professionals are paid far less than teachers in primary and secondary schools. This is part of a longstanding and broader issue of undervaluing 'care' work, which is seen as part of the domestic sphere – 'women's work' – and is often invisible. There are few opportunities for progression and limited resources for training, and as a result it is very hard for those providing early years childcare to retain staff, with knock-on effects for quality and sustainability. Why stay in a job that is so poorly paid and doesn't get the recognition it deserves, even if you love it?

And yet, it is hard to think of a more important job than the task of helping to bring up the next generation. We know from a large body of research that early childhood is a foundational stage, when children's brains are developing at great speed and the building blocks of their physical, cognitive, social and emotional skills are laid. This is a period when gaps between disadvantaged and advantaged children open up. Differences in language and communication skills are evident from 11 months; by the age of three, inequalities in

cognitive and social and emotional development are apparent. These wide inequalities are tough to shift and can go on to influence children's later life chances.

The Covid pandemic has compounded those inequalities; lockdown measures, social isolation and temporary and permanent nursery closures have impacted on young children's development, with children falling behind at age two and at age five across all measures of development. It has also put even greater pressure on the already fragile early years sector. At its best, early years provision can be transformative for both children and their parents. Skilled professionals can create warm interactive relationships with children, caring for their regular needs – toileting, food, rests - as well as having strong knowledge of the curriculum and how children learn and encouraging high levels of parent engagement. If you want a glimpse of nurseries in action and the amazing skills of early years professionals, just listen to this [podcast](#) recorded in Sheringham Nursery in London, as well as the [voices](#) represented on the Fairness Foundation website. The workforce is a central component of achieving quality early years provision; addressing status, qualifications and pay are pressing issues.

The Fairness Foundation's polling also shows that the public are well aware of the range of challenges facing services for families with young children: between 57% and 67% are concerned about the affordability, availability, quality, flexibility, sustainability and equality of the early years and childcare sector. In the Nuffield Foundation's [Changing Face of Early Childhood series](#) we looked at how these different issues are closely connected, and came to the conclusion that a whole system review of early years and childcare is needed. At the moment it is not meeting the needs of parents, children, the workforce or providers.

There is support for greater investment in early years and childcare – in this survey over 60% supported this either on the grounds of meeting

basic needs, or providing fair opportunities, or to enable parents to work. And while there were differences of emphasis between Labour and Conservative voters – with the former more likely to favour the argument of meeting basic needs and the latter more focused on enabling parents to work – it is important to recognise that this consensus marks a significant shift from where the public were 25 years ago, when there were sharp ideological differences. It is also interesting to see that there is little difference between women’s and men’s attitudes to fair pay for the early years workforce and the importance of childcare-related issues. Again, a marked shift, a generation on.

When it comes to how to pay for greater investment, the public is less clear, with a split between whether the costs should be borne by the taxpayer or parents. While spending on early years

and childcare has risen substantially over the last two decades, the balance of spending has shifted away from the youngest children (0-3), as a result of sharp reductions in spending on Sure Start Children’s Centres, and away from lower income families due to tax credits changes and the extra 15 hours of free provision being confined to those in paid work. And if we compare spending in this area with other [OECD countries](#), UK spending on early education and childcare as a proportion of GDP falls well below the average.

I take solace from these polling results. There is strong public support for fair pay for the early years workforce and for greater investment in this vital sector. Alongside powerful evidence on why the early years matters, this is a powerful platform to build on as the political parties begin to put together their manifestos.

Methodology and data sources

The questions were designed in consultation with a range of organisations working on early years education and care, and with input from polling experts. Many of the questions link to our five [Fair Necessities](#) (essentials, opportunities, rewards, exchange and treatment). All charts were produced using [Flourish](#).

Fieldwork was carried out by Opinium between 1 and 3 March, with a nationally representative sample of 2,000 adults across Great Britain, weighted to nationally representative criteria and various political criteria. The order of options presented in each question was randomised. [The full data tables can be downloaded here.](#)

Read more online

Visit fairnessfoundation.com/critical-days to read this report online. The online version includes:

- Visualised breakdowns by a wide range of demographic groupings for every question
- Videos of respondents’ views about the issues around fair pay for early years workers
- Analysis of polling by other organisations on public attitudes to early years education and care
- Links to related statistics from the Fairness Index and relevant third-party reports

