



SIPTU Big Start
Campaign

**Early Years
Professionals
Survey 2021/2022**

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December 2021 to January 2022





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Foreword



Deborah Reynolds

SIPTU members have a shared vision for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC).

Every day we campaign for a sector that is high quality for children, affordable for parents and where our contribution as Early Years Professionals is recognised and rewarded with decent pay and conditions.

We have made real progress. In recent years thousands of SIPTU members have taken action to make ECEC a political priority. This paid off in Budget 2022, but there is still a way to go.

This year's Early Years Professionals' Survey tells an all too familiar story of qualified educators forced out of their profession by low pay. Most Early Years Professionals are earning below the Living Wage of €12.90 per hour. Few have standard benefits such as maternity leave sick pay or a pension.

We simply cannot afford to work in the job we love.

Such conditions have consequences. Staff turnover has reached an average of 40% per year in full day services, undermining quality for children.

The survey also shows that services are acutely affected by a recruitment and retention crisis that is severely undermining sustainability.

These issues predated Covid-19, but the pandemic has exacerbated these issues. The necessary restrictions for close contacts, self-isolation and play pods have increased stress for all staff, particularly managers.

However, there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Together with other progressive organisations, SIPTU members intensified their campaign in the run up to Budget 2022 by calling for 'A New Deal for Early Years'.

Government heard us loud and clear.

In Budget 2022, we achieved an historic breakthrough with investment increasing by €207 million a year. This funding will "first and foremost" improve the pay and conditions of Early Years educators, room leaders and managers.

Thousands of SIPTU members can claim credit for this incredible achievement. We protested, met Ministers and TDs, sent thousands of letters, emails and protest postcards, held virtual meetings, and built a union that gave us a voice. Together we made early childhood education and care a big political issue in Budget 2022

There is power in a union.

With the introduction of a new funding model and the Workforce Development Plan, the foundations are now in place to realise our vision.

The future is looking brighter. We can now realistically see a future in our profession.

Deborah Reynolds

SIPTU Big Start National Committee

February 2022

Introduction

This is the third year we have surveyed Early Years Professionals and reported on their perspectives of pay, working conditions and the future of the sector. This work is part of the SIPTU Big Start campaign aimed at highlighting pay and conditions for professionals in the Early Years sector and the impact they are having on their living standards, quality for children and the sustainability of services. Each year we have demonstrated that for professionals, the sector is in crisis, with issues around low pay, poor conditions and a lack of recognition of their principal concerns.

Early Years Professionals are nearing the end of their second year working with Covid-19 restrictions, they have made huge sacrifices and operated in constrained contexts to keep settings open in spite of high infection rates across the country, keeping children safe and happy while their parents work. Last year's survey really illustrated the dedication and perseverance of professionals during the Covid-19 pandemic and their fears for the future of the sector.

The sector has seen a lot of positive developments in 2021/2022 – a breakthrough budget allocation of €207 million, the establishment of the Early Years Joint Labour Committee to negotiate pay and conditions, the publication of the Workforce Plan and a new funding model 'Partnership for the Public Good', as well as a review of the Operating Model for ELC¹.

These advances lay the foundation for fundamental change within the sector. However, there is still a long way to go. Educators continue to struggle with low pay, managers continue to find it difficult to retain and recruit staff, and settings still struggle to operate with high costs and staff stretched to the point of burnout.

It is becoming increasingly clear that we need to improve the pay and conditions for those in the sector, tackle the cause of high staff turnover and manage the conditions leading to rising levels of workplace stress – highlighting the experiences of those working in the sector is central to this.

This year we received enthusiastic responses from 2,442 professionals, around 10% of the total



employees in the sector. 89% of professionals reported that having a positive influence on children's development as the best part of their job, but with only 17% earning over €15 per hour, there is a real risk that this important work by dedicated professionals cannot carry on to its current standard, as high turnover rates really impact children's ability to learn and thrive.

The frustration and burnout felt by so many came through in the responses, with many managers emphasising how hard it is to recruit and retain educators. 67.5% of managers reported finding it very difficult to recruit new staff. Professionals also increasingly reference workplace stress and fear for their place in the sector in the coming years.

Professionals are clear – they are struggling with low pay and poor working conditions. Their work is causing a huge amount of stress. 68% cite stress and burnout as a major issue. They feel undervalued by society, in spite of their hard work during the Covid-19 pandemic. Only 17% were sure they would remain in the sector 12 months from now if pay and conditions don't improve.

Each week across Ireland, educators continue to show up for the children in their care, to improve their own knowledge and expertise, adapt to new public health guidance and keep settings open. It is beyond time that they receive fairer pay and conditions, a workplace free from stress, and that the sector gets the higher level of funding it sorely needs to bring us in line with the OECD average².

Conditions in the Sector – A Gender Equality Issue

There has been sustained debate around issues of gender equality in Ireland in recent years, with extensive reporting and research being carried out to highlight factors influencing inequities³. Equitable provision of Early Years services can positively contribute to gender equality. The lack of access to affordable care of their children harms women's

ability to engage with the workplace in a meaningful way. Research from Pobal and the ESRI⁴ linked the high cost and low availability of quality ECEC services with lower rates of maternal employment.

Secondly, 98% of those employed in the sector are women⁵. The issue of low pay is not only a question of worker's rights, but also of gender equity. The gender pay gap, lower rates of pay and precarious contracts harm more women than men⁶. This is a gender equality issue in essence.

The Citizen's Assembly on Gender Equality published its report on June 2021⁷. Its recommendations were clear – in the coming decade, Ireland should move towards a 'publicly funded, accessible and regulated model of quality, affordable early years and out of hours childcare', with funding to the sector increasing to 1% of GDP from 0.37%.

To foster gender equality in Ireland we need to recognise the value of ECEC. We need to compensate workers in the sector fairly and the Government needs to provide quality and affordable ECEC so women can fully participate in public life, including the workplace.

Main Findings

Findings this year, as with our 2019 and 2020 surveys, indicated that professionals are still struggling with low pay and insecure working conditions, feel under-valued by society and experience work-related stress. This year, issues around recruitment and retention came to the fore, with managers of settings emphasising in particular how they were struggling to maintain appropriate child/adult ratios, recruit relief staff and educators, and deal with Covid-19 related absences.

Last year, educators expressed concern and uncertainty around sick pay entitlements related to Covid-19. This year, the focus was on keeping settings open as Covid-19 cases rise, and ultimately the viability of settings and services into the future. Low pay was cited by managers as

being the biggest obstacle to recruiting staff. If they are unable to pay workers more fairly, the quality of ECEC for children may be impacted and the future of ECEC in Ireland might be at risk.

Key findings -

- **Low Pay and Poor Working Conditions**

Pay that is well below the Living Wage is the norm for too many working in the sector. A lack of a safety net – sick pay, maternity leave, ability to save for unexpected expenses, is common for too many workers, particularly Educators.

- **Lack of Recognition and Work-related Stress**

Despite the focus on Essential Workers during the Covid-19 response, Early Years professionals still feel society doesn't adequately recognise their work. A career in ECEC is not something Educators would recommend to friends or family. Due to low pay, poor conditions, a lack of pay increase linked to qualifications, a lack of recognition by society, ECEC professionals report feeling work-related stress, with some indicating they are close to burnout. Educators and carers exhibiting signs of stress is not good for children's emotional regulation.

- **Recruitment and retention issues**

A well-educated, professional workforce is crucial to maintaining quality in the sector. It is clear that managers are finding it incredibly difficult to retain staff, and unless pay and conditions are improved, this issue will get worse in the future as those with ECEC qualifications will choose to work in other sectors.



³<https://www.esri.ie/taxonomy/term/1226>

⁴<https://www.esri.ie/system/files?file=media/file-uploads/2018-08/InfographicRS73.pdf>

⁵<https://www.pobal.ie/app/uploads/2018/11/Early-Years-Sector-Profile-Report-2017-2018.pdf>

⁶https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/tasc_low_pay_commission_women_final.pdf

⁷<https://www.citizensassembly.ie/en/news-publications/press-releases/recommendations-of-the-citizens-assembly-on-gender-equality.html>

Pay and Conditions

Low pay and poor conditions continue to dominate our findings as the issue that affects most professionals in the sector.

- 66% of Early Years Educators surveyed earn less than the Living Wage of €12.90 per hour. 42% of managers stated they earned less than €15 per hour, rising to 83% of all respondents – just 17% of all respondents stated they earned more.
- Low pay was the biggest or a significant obstacle for managers recruiting new staff in 83% of responses.
- Poor working conditions were also a huge part of the everyday working experiences of working in ECEC. 65% stated they regularly did unpaid work. 63% did not get sick pay (not Covid-19 related), 90.66% didn't have a work pension, 63% didn't get paid maternity leave.
- 81% were unable to cope with unexpected expenses.
- 1 in 5 respondents work a second job.

It is clear based on these findings that workers are struggling – pay well below their education and skill level, poor working conditions and 1 in 5 workers having a second job to make ends meet. This picture is far from the hopes those in the sector have for their professional lives, and that parents have for the educators caring for their young children.



Lack of Recognition and Work-Related Stress

During Covid, Educators kept settings open and managed a considerably increased workload, covering colleagues' absences and keeping up with increased cleaning and administration. Those who choose to work in ECEC are clear – they do it because they value having a positive impact on children's development. However, the low pay, lack of recognition and insecure contracts are leading to increasing levels of stress.

- 75% of respondents said a lack of recognition was a major issue for them.
- In spite of being deemed 'essential workers', 61.85% of educators did not feel their position in society was more valued since Covid began.
- 63% of respondents found stress and burnout a major issue in their work.

A lack of recognition leads to feeling undervalued and this, coupled with low pay and poor conditions, can cause professionals to feel high levels of stress. The health consequences of work-related stress are well documented, and it is long overdue that the Government provide a high level of investment in the sector, increase pay and support settings to do their best for children.

Recruitment and Retention

A high-quality ECEC sector relies heavily on a well-educated and a competent workforce. Early Years Professionals will not remain in a sector that continues to compensate their work so poorly. Low pay is overwhelmingly the biggest issue in recruiting new staff to the sector.

- 64% of professionals felt pressure from staff shortages due to Covid, and for those recruiting and retaining staff, this was a particularly big issue.
- Over 50% of respondents stated that if they left the sector, it would be directly due to low pay.
- Recruitment and retention present a real risk to the quality and future health of the ECEC sector in Ireland.
- 40% of respondents stated they were looking for a job in another sector at the time of the survey.

For their well being and cognitive, social and emotional development, children need consistency in their care givers and consistency in their educational settings. High staff turnover, as well as stressed and worried staff is a major obstacle for achieving quality and excellence in the sector.



Conclusion

The Government has called for increased professionalisation of the ECEC sector, linking this to measurements of quality and excellence. We recognise that a quality sector is important for children's development. What we have demonstrated consistently in our surveys, this year in particular, is that low pay and poor working conditions for professionals undermine this drive for quality. They represent a real barrier, driving many out of working in Early Years altogether.

This year our findings indicated that the main issues facing professionals in the sector relate to low pay and poor conditions, a lack of recognition and work-related stress, recruitment and retention issues.

To ensure quality in the sector, those staffing it need to be treated fairly. Educators are passionate about working with children. They cover the cost of their own training and CPD, managed their settings safely during Covid and adapted to new challenges. They responded to the government's call to professionalise but haven't seen their pay increase.

SIPTU's ongoing Big Start campaign clearly illustrates the level of commitment professionals have to transform their sector. Services will not be able to operate at an optimal level if they cannot recruit and retain staff.

At a time when questions of fairness and gender equality in society have never been so prominent, it is increasingly clear that how we treat our Early Years Professionals is a key part of that discussion. Doing our best for educators and for the sector means we also do our best for children and families who access these services every day. This fairness will benefit everyone.

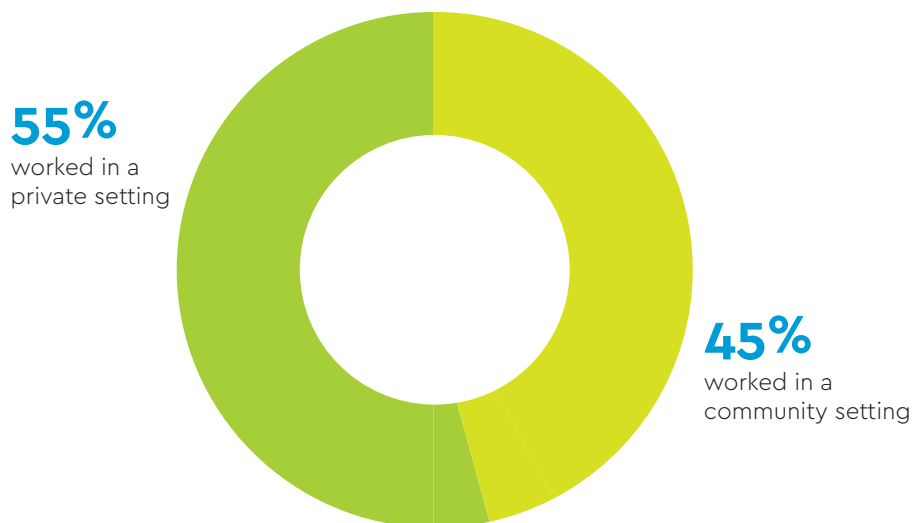
Appendix

Demographics of respondents

This survey captured the experiences of 2,442 early years professionals.

That amounts to just under 10% of the total employed in the sector.

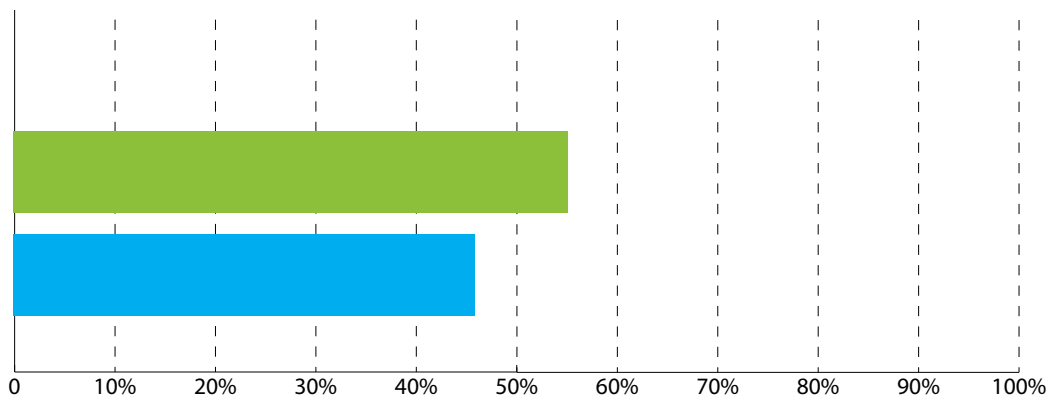
Most respondents who answered the survey (31%) are educators/practitioners, 28% are room leaders while deputy managers make up 6%. Managers comprised 19% of the total amount, with owner-managers a further 9%. 55% worked in a private setting with 45% in a community setting. 19% of respondents were based in Dublin, followed by Cork at 12% and the rest spread across the remaining counties. This survey therefore illustrates the experiences of a wide variety of employees, owners, managers and others working in the ECEC sector living all over the country and employed in both private and community settings.



Survey Results

Q1: Do you work in a private or community setting?

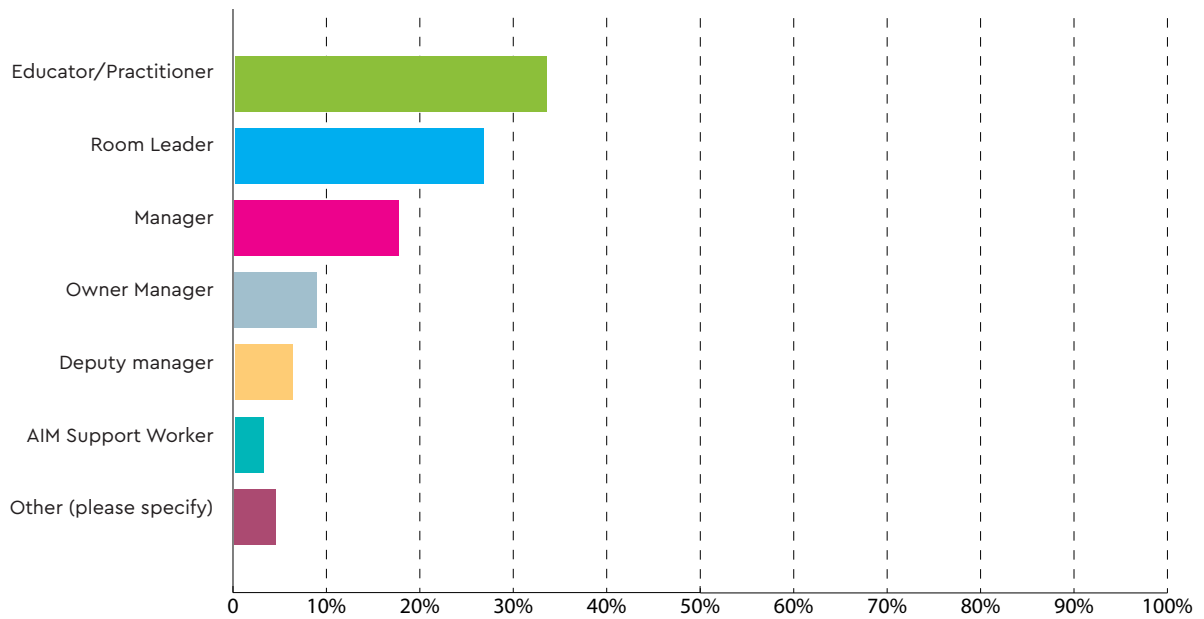
Answered: 2,442/Skipped: 0



Answer Choices	Responses
Private	54.71%
Community	45.29%

Q2: What is your job role?

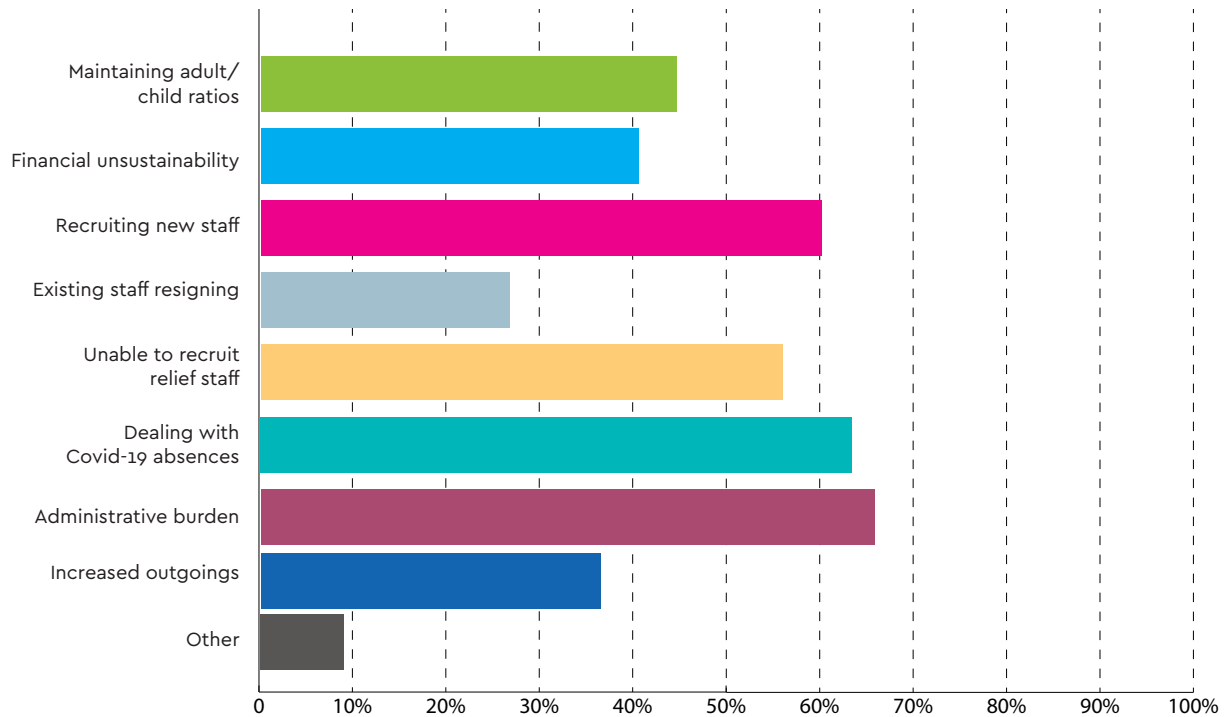
Answered: 2,442/Skipped: 0



Answer Choices	Responses	
Educator/Practitioner	32.68%	798
Room Leader	27.52%	672
Manager	16.58%	405
Owner Manager	9.21%	225
Deputy manager	5.90%	144
AIM Support Worker	3.32%	81
Other (please specify)	4.79%	117
Total		2,442

Q3: As a manager/owner manager, what are the biggest issues facing your service right now?

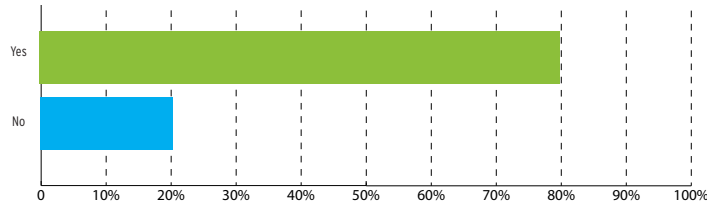
Answered: 576/Skipped: 1,866



Answer Choices	Responses	
Maintaining adult/child ratios	45.31%	261
Financial unsustainability	39.76%	229
Recruiting new staff	60.42%	348
Existing staff resigning	26.22%	151
Unable to recruit relief staff	57.12%	329
Dealing with Covid-19 related absences (self isolation)	63.72%	367
Administrative burden	64.76%	373
Increased outgoings (rent, utilities, insurance etc)	37.50%	216
Other (please specify)	9.72%	56
Total		576

Q4: Did you have to recruit staff in the last 12 months?

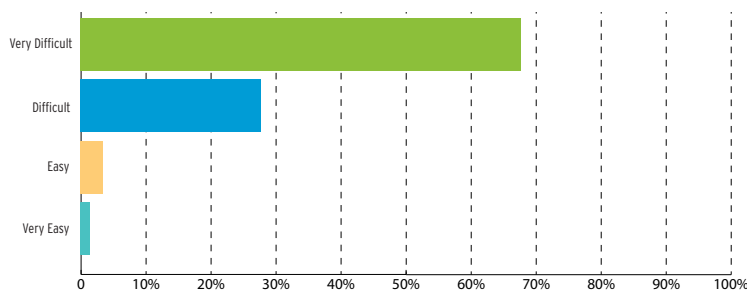
Answered: 575/Skipped: 1,867



Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	80.87%	465
No	19.13	110
Total		575

Q5: If yes, what was your experience of recruiting new staff?

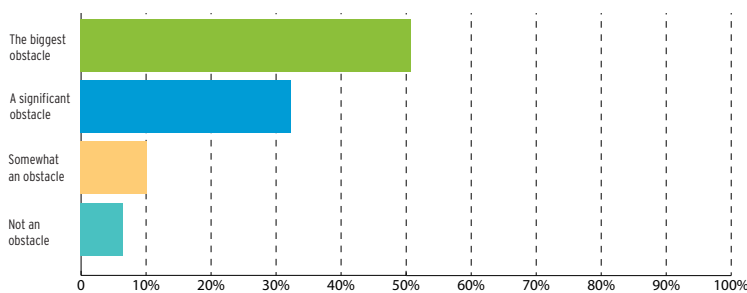
Answered: 496/Skipped: 1,946



Answer Choices	Responses	
Very Difficult	67.54%	335
Difficult	26.61%	132
Easy	4.44%	22
Very Easy	1.41%	7
Total		496

Q6: To what extent is low pay an obstacle to recruiting new staff?

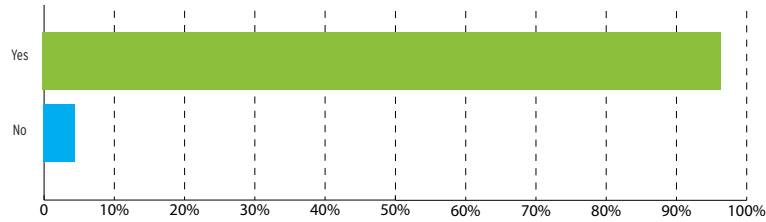
Answered: 570/Skipped: 1,872



Answer Choices	Responses	
The biggest obstacle	51.23%	292
A significant obstacle	32.28%	184
Somewhat an obstacle	10.00%	57
Not an obstacle	6.49%	37
Total		570

Q7: Are you concerned that problems recruiting and retaining staff will negatively impact service provision?

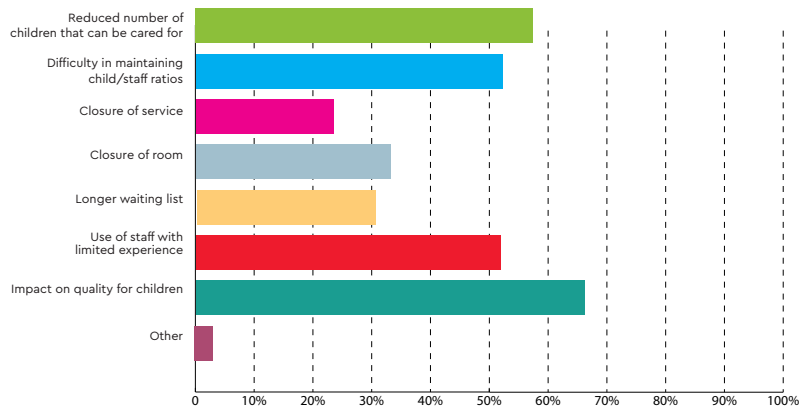
Answered: 571/Skipped: 1,871



Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	95.62%	546
No	4.38%	25
Total		571

Q8: If yes, what will the impact be?

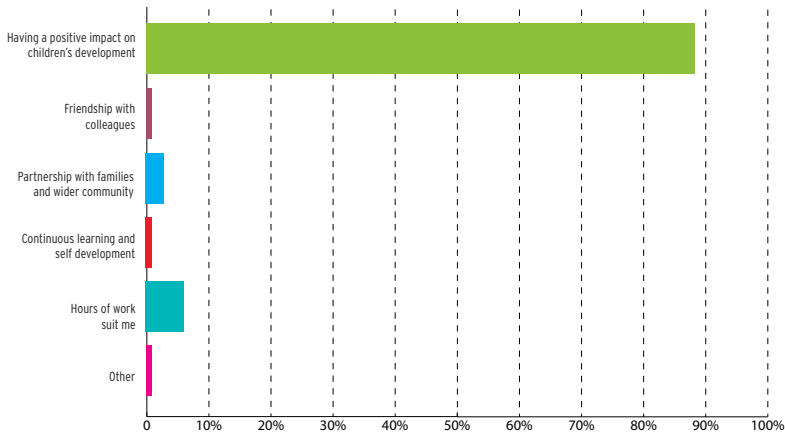
Answered: 571/Skipped: 1,871



Answer Choices	Responses	
Reduced number of children that can be cared for	57.73%	321
Difficulty in maintaining child/staff ratios	53.78%	299
Closure of service	23.92%	133
Closure of room (e.g. baby room)	33.27%	185
Longer waiting list	30.22%	168
Use of staff with limited experience	52.70%	293
Impact on quality for children	67.09%	373
Other (please specify)	4.32%	24
Total		556

Q10: what is the best thing about working in Early Years?

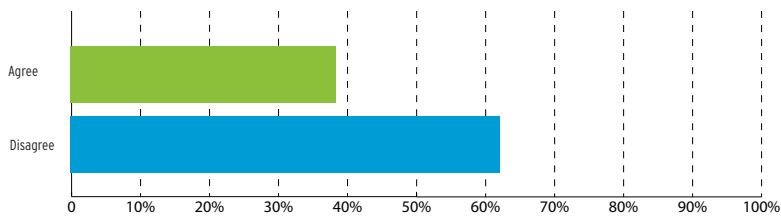
Answered: 2,176/Skipped: 266



Answer Choices	Responses
Having a positive impact on children's development	88.74% 1,931
Friendship with colleagues	1.47% 32
Partnership with families and wider community	3.31 72
Continuous learning and self development	1.70 37
Hours of work suit me	3.54% 77
Other (please specify)	1.24% 27
Total	2,176

Q11: There is a greater recognition of Early Years Professionals since Covid began

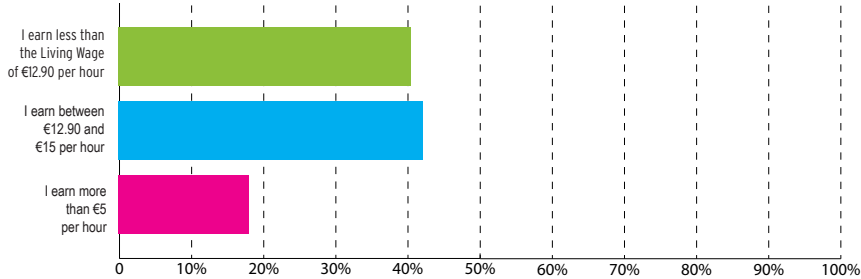
Answered: 2,178/Skipped: 264



Answer Choices	Responses
Agree	38.15% 831
Disagree	61.85% 1,347
Total	2,178

Q12: Pay

Answered: 2,176/Skipped: 266



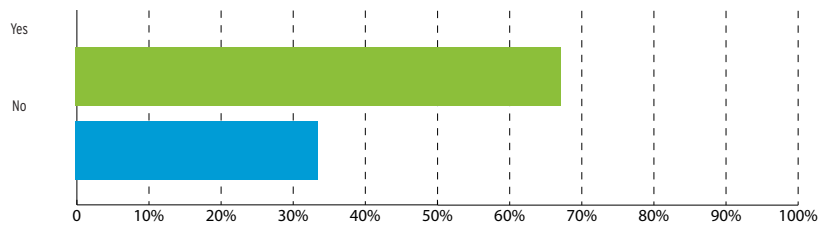
Answer Choices

Responses

I earn less than the Living Wage of €12.90 per hour	40.99%	892
I earn between €12.90 and €15 per hour	41.87%	911
I earn more than €15 per hour	17.14%	373
Total		2,176

Q13: I regularly do unpaid work

Answered: 2,182/Skipped: 260



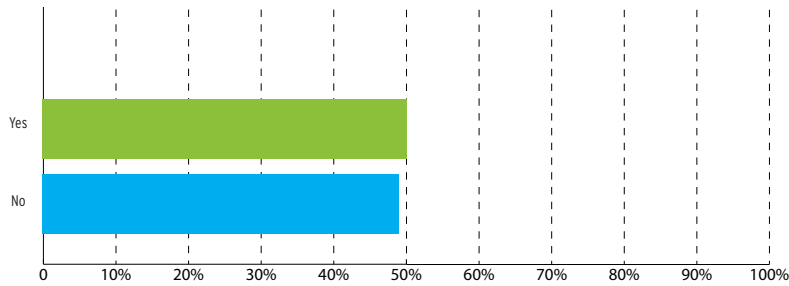
Answer Choices

Responses

Yes	65.81%	1,436
No	34.19%	746
Total		2,182

Q14: I have enough time to take my breaks

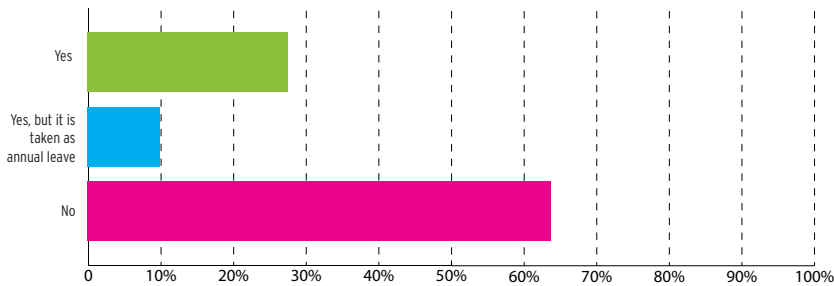
Answered: 2,182/Skipped: 260



Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	50.60%	1,104
No	49.40%	1,078
Total		2,182

Q15: I get paid from work when I'm out sick (not Covid related)

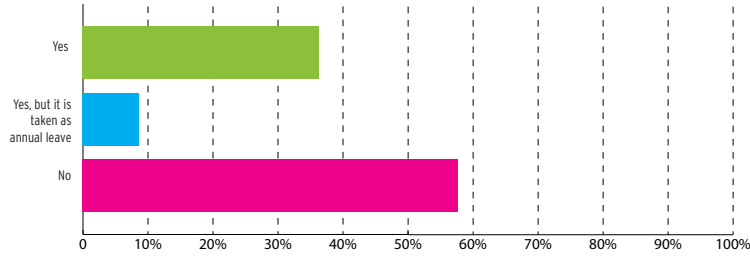
Answered: 2,182/Skipped: 260



Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	26.67%	582
Yes, but it is taken as annual leave	10.22%	223
No	63.11%	1,377
Total		2,182

Q16: I get paid from work when I have to self isolate due to Covid-19/close contact

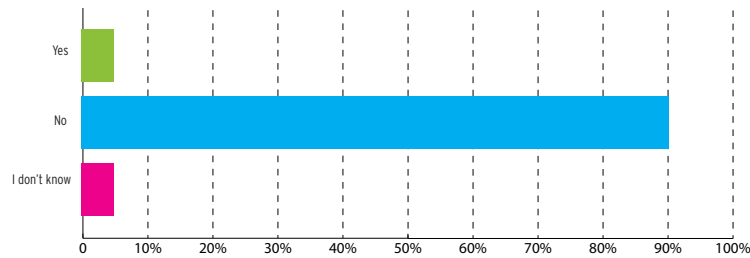
Answered: 2,164/Skipped: 278



Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	35.58%	770
Yes, but it is taken as annual leave	7.49%	162
No	56.93%	1,232
Total		2,164

Q17: I have a work pension

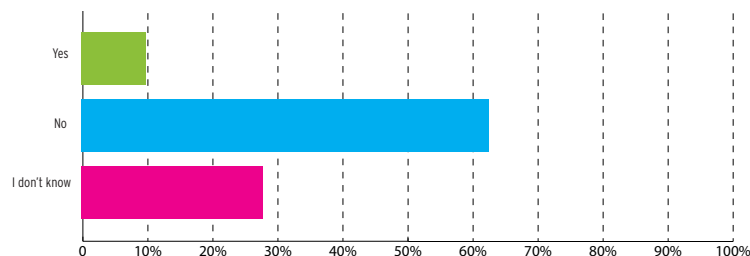
Answered: 2,185/Skipped: 257



Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	4.85%	106
No	90.66%	1,981
I don't know	4.49%	98
Total		2,185

Q18: I get paid maternity leave from work

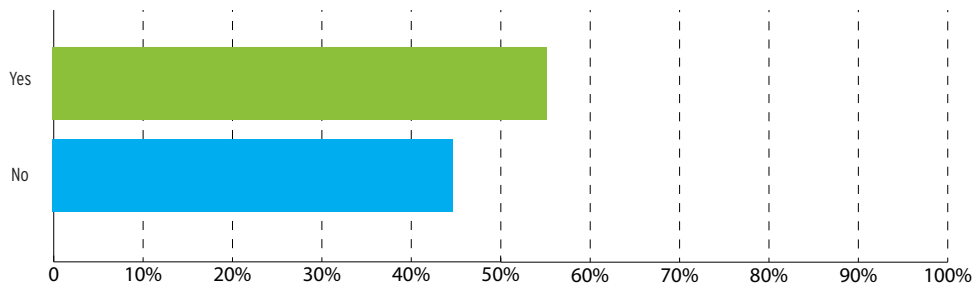
Answered: 2,180/Skipped: 262



Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	9.68%	211
No	63.12%	1,376
I don't know	27.20%	593
Total		2,180

Q19: I pay for educational materials out of my own pocket

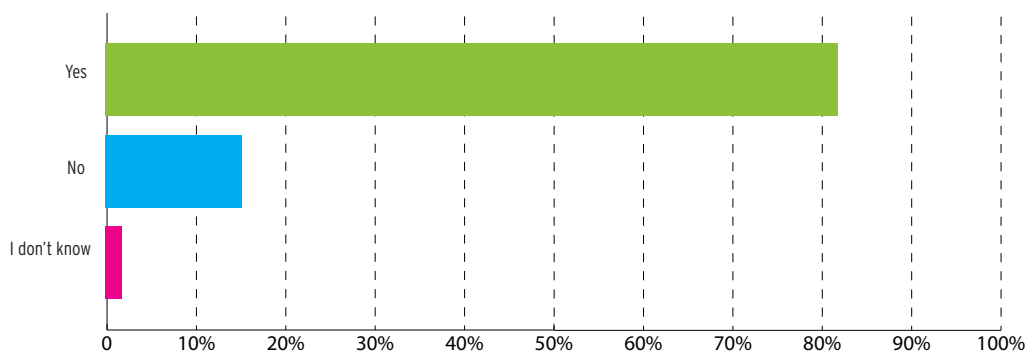
Answered: 2,183/Skipped: 259



Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	55.06%	1,202
No	44.94%	981
Total		2,183

Q20: I do work training in my own time

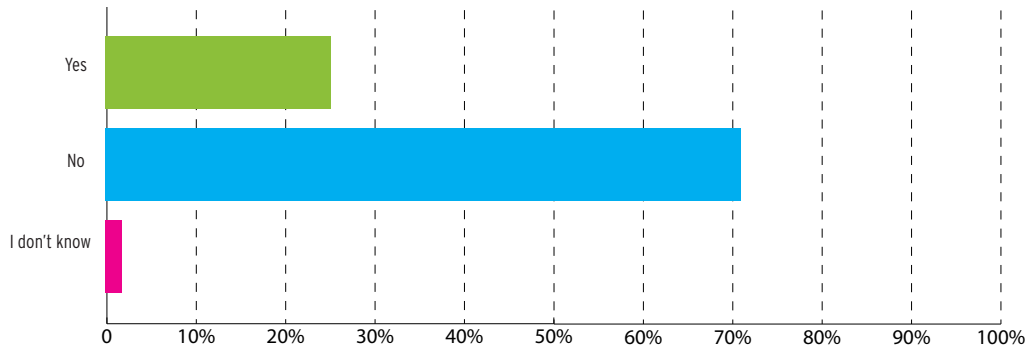
Answered: 2,184/Skipped: 258



Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	81.64%	1,763
No	15.84%	346
I don't know	2.52%	55
Total		2,184

Q21: I pay for my own training (e.g. First Aid)

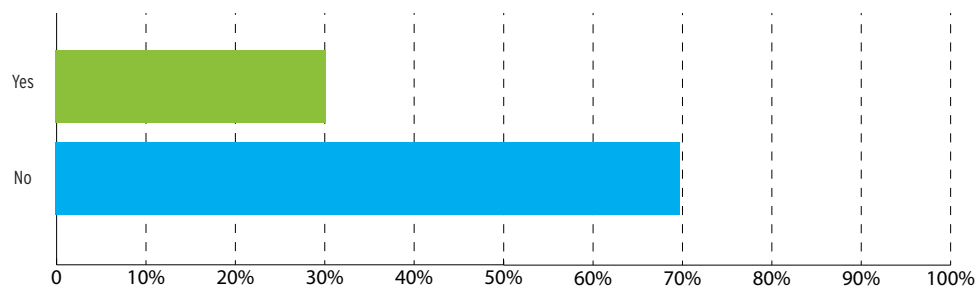
Answered: 2,185/Skipped: 257



Answer Choices	Responses
Yes	25.17% 550
No	71.62% 1,565
I don't know	3.20% 70
Total	2,185

Q22: I have received a pay increase during the Covid-19 pandemic?

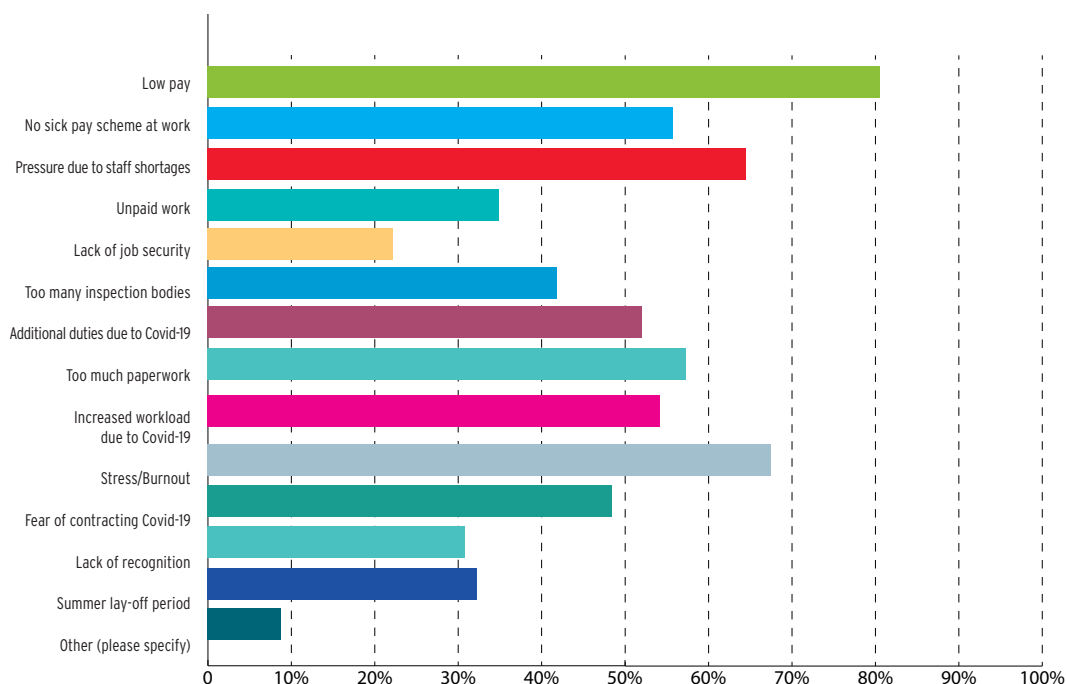
Answered: 2,183/Skipped: 259



Answer Choices	Responses
Yes	30.46% 665
No	69.54% 1,518
Total	2,183

Q23: What are the biggest work issues for you?

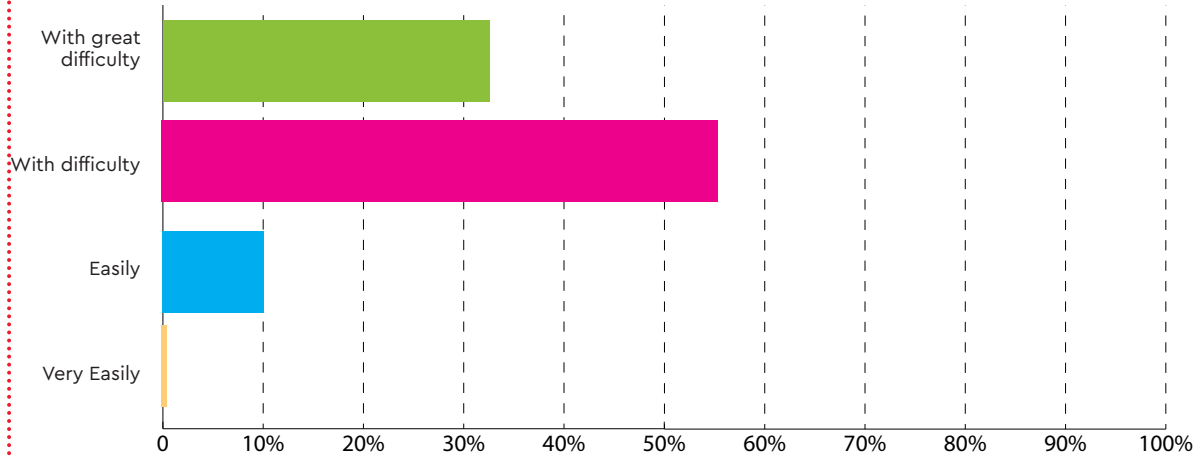
Answered: 2,442/Skipped: 0



Answer Choices	Responses	Count
Low pay	80.52%	1,761
No sick pay scheme at work	55.92%	1,223
Pressure due to staff shortages	64.11%	1,402
Unpaid work	36.26%	793
Lack of job security	21.26%	465
Too many inspection bodies	42.52%	930
Additional duties due to Covid-19	52.22%	1,142
Too much paperwork	57.80%	1,264
Increased workload due to Covid-19	53.64%	1,173
Stress/Burbout	67.63%	1,479
Fear of contracting Covid-19	48.29%	1,056
Lack of recognition	75.35%	1,648
Summer lay-off period	30.27%	662
Other (please specify)	7.77%	170
Total		2,187

Q24: I am able to make ends meet with my current income

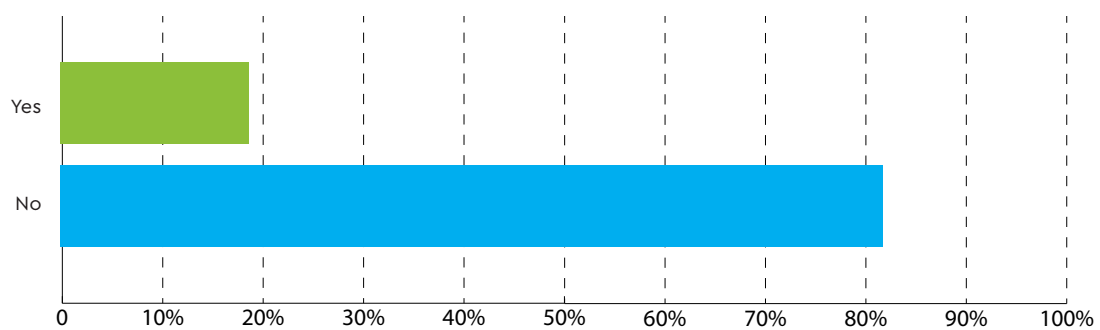
Answered: 2,183/Skipped: 259



Answer Choices	Responses	
With great difficulty	34.40%	751
With difficulty	55.34%	1,208
Easily	9.85%	215
Very Easily	0.41%	9
Total		2,183

Q25: I am able to cope with unexpected expenses (e.g. replacing a washing machine or boiler).

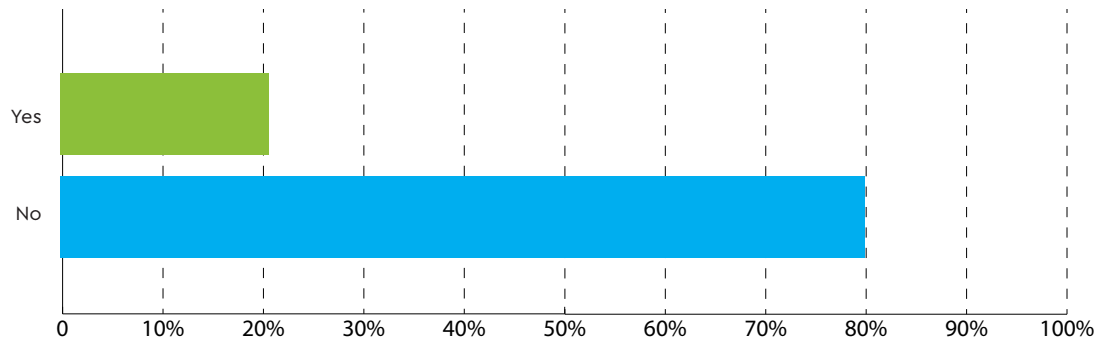
Answered: 2,187/Skipped: 255



Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	18.52%	405
No	81.48%	1,782
Total		2,187

Q26: I work a second job

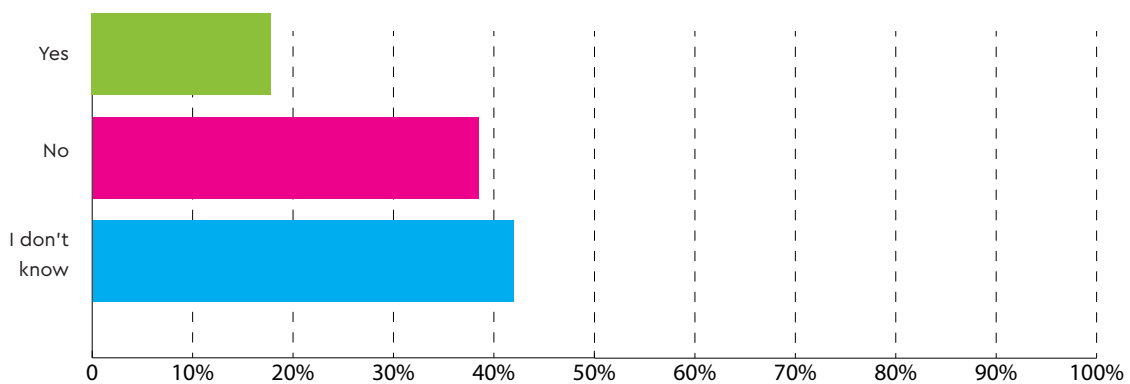
Answered: 2,186/Skipped: 256



Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	20.86%	456
No	79.14%	1,730
Total		2,186

Q27: If things stay the same, I will still be working in the Early Years sector in 12 months

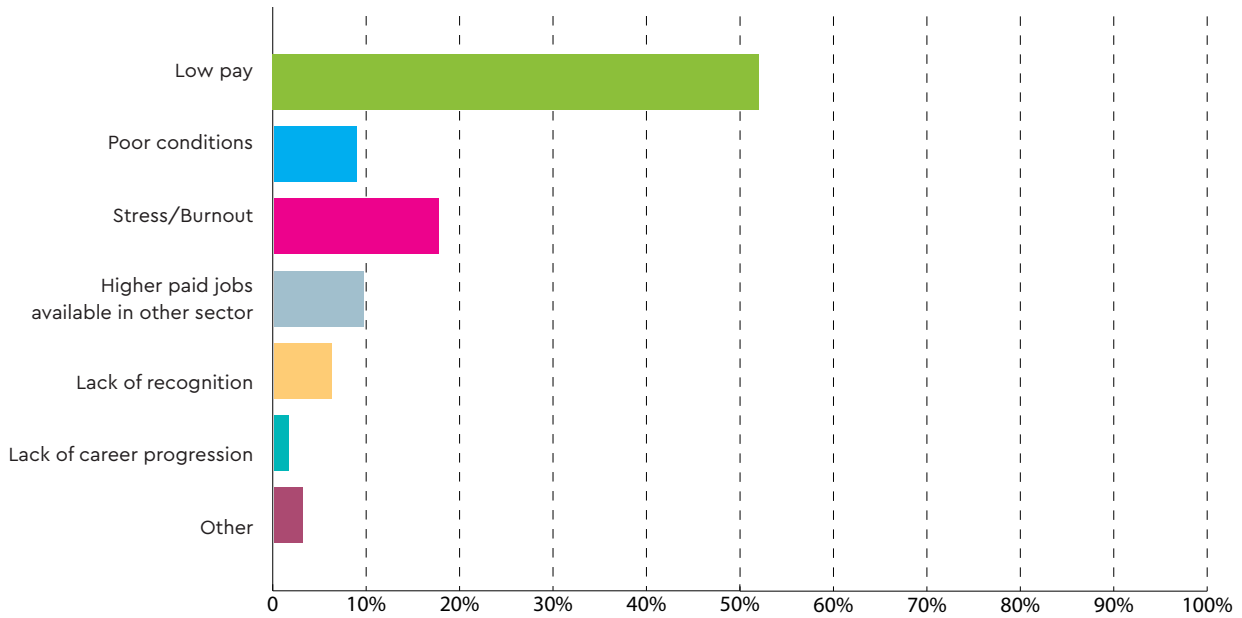
Answered: 2,185/Skipped: 257



Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	17.16%	375
No	38.40%	839
I don't know	44.44%	971
Total		2,185

Q28: If you intend to leave the sector, what would be the main reason?

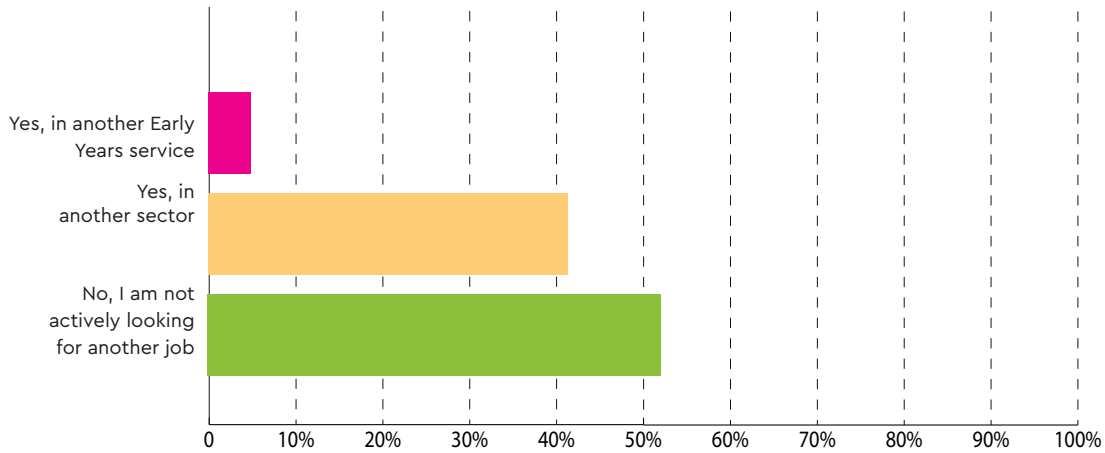
Answered: 2,135/Skipped: 307



Answer Choices	Responses	
Low pay	51.52%	1,100
Poor conditions (e.g. sick pay, maternity pay)	7.31%	156
Stress/Burnout	18.08%	386
Higher paid jobs available in other sectors	10.63%	227
Lack of recognition	6.18%	132
Lack of career progression	1.59%	34
Other (please specify)	4.68%	100
Total		2,135

Q29: I am actively looking for another job

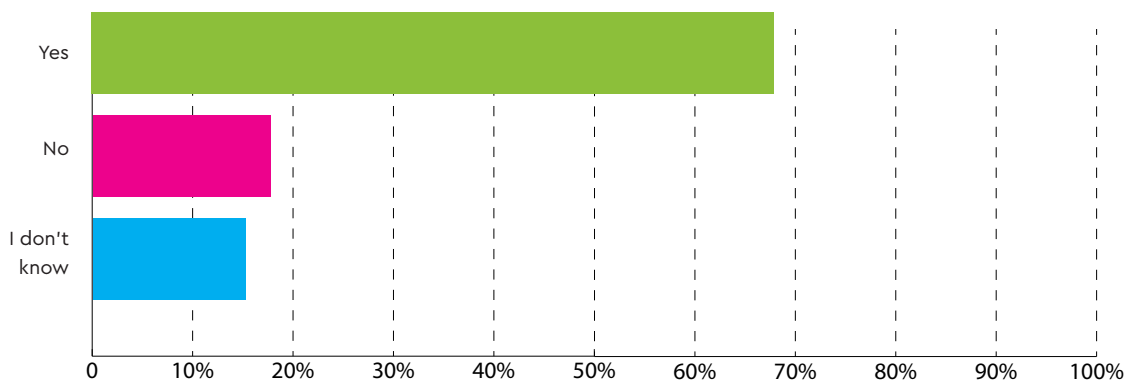
Answered: 2,183/Skipped: 259



Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes, in another Early Years service	4.40%	96
Yes, in another sector	40.68%	888
No, I am not actively looking for another job	54.92%	1,199
Total		2,183

Q30: There is Covid-19 Leader Worker Representative for my service

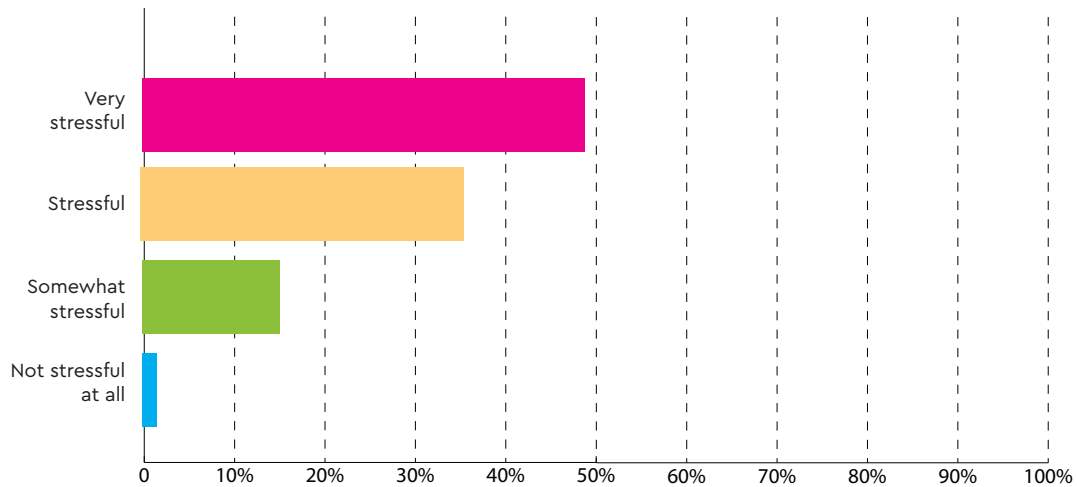
Answered: 2,184/Skipped: 258



Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	69.18%	1,511
No	16.30%	356
I don't know	14.51%	317

Q31: What is your experience of working during Covid-19 pandemic?

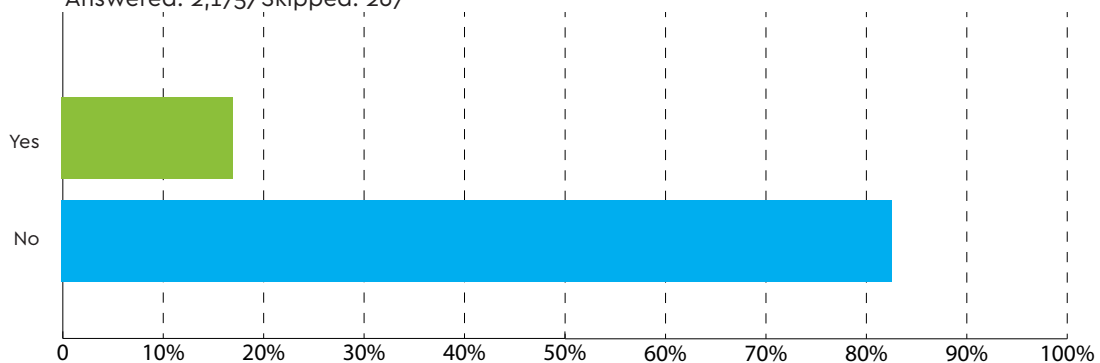
Answered: 2,186/Skipped: 256



Answer Choices	Responses
Very stressful	48.86%
Stressful	34.13%
Somewhat stressful	15.55%
Not stressful at all	1.46%

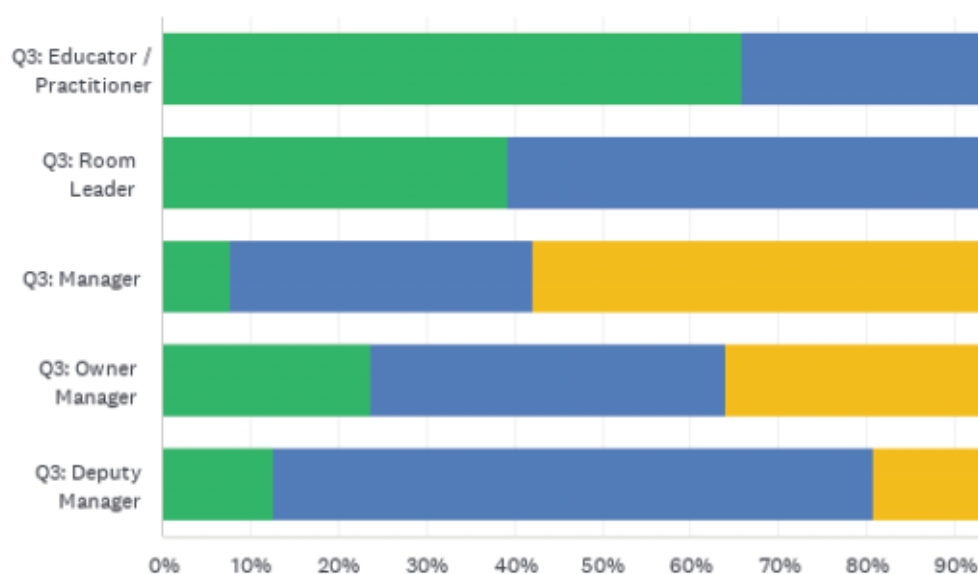
Q32: Would you recommend a career in Early Years to a friend or family member?

Answered: 2,175/Skipped: 267



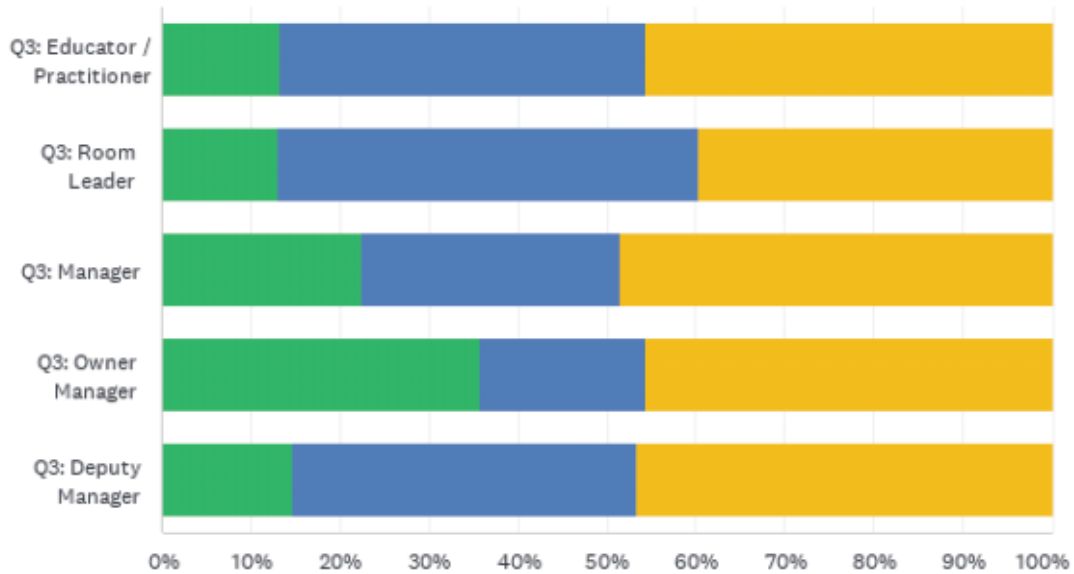
Answer Choices	Responses
Yes	17.79%
No	82.21%

Q12a: Pay



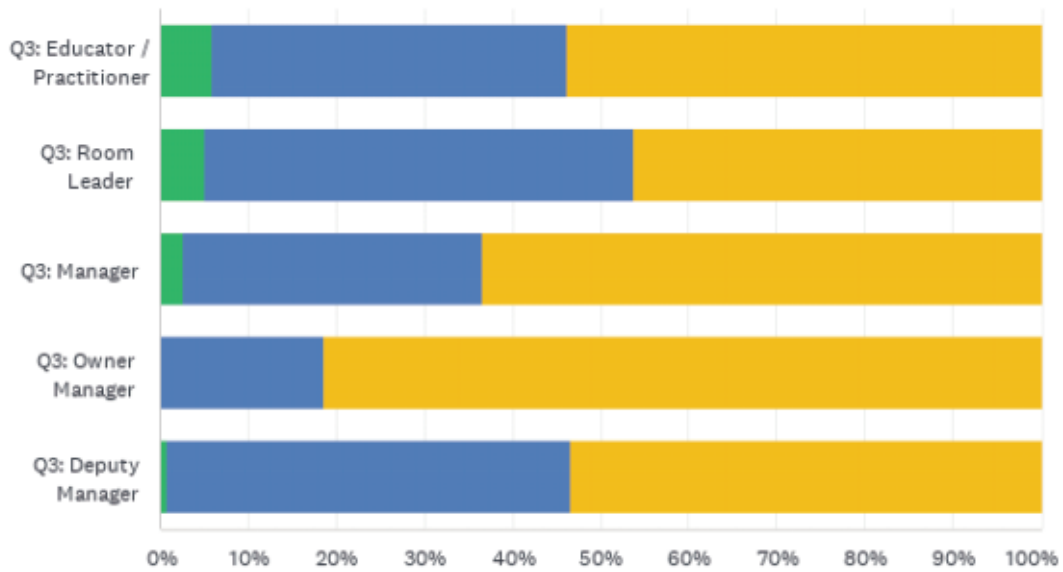
	I EARN LESS THAN THE LIVING WAGE OF €12.90 PER HOUR	I EARN BETWEEN €12.90 AND €15 PER HOUR	I EARN MORE THAN €15 PER HOUR	TOTAL
Q3: Educator / Practitioner	65.89% 479	30.67% 223	3.44% 25	36.28% 727
Q3: Room Leader	39.28% 240	54.83% 335	5.89% 36	30.49% 611
Q3: Manager	7.72% 26	34.42% 116	57.86% 195	16.82% 337
Q3: Owner Manager	23.71% 46	40.21% 78	36.08% 70	9.68% 194
Q3: Deputy Manager	12.59% 17	68.15% 92	19.26% 26	6.74% 135
Total Respondents	808	844	352	2,004

Q27a: If things stay the same, I will still be working in the Early Years Sector in 12 months time



	YES	NO	I DON'T KNOW	TOTAL
Q3: Educator / Practitioner	13.25% 97	41.12% 301	45.63% 334	36.36% 732
Q3: Room Leader	13.01% 80	47.32% 291	39.67% 244	30.55% 615
Q3: Manager	22.49% 76	28.99% 98	48.52% 164	16.79% 338
Q3: Owner Manager	35.75% 69	18.65% 36	45.60% 88	9.59% 193
Q3: Deputy Manager	14.81% 20	38.52% 52	46.67% 63	6.71% 135
Total Respondents	342	778	893	2,013

Q29a: I am actively looking for another job



	YES, IN ANOTHER EARLY YEARS SERVICE	YES, IN ANOTHER SECTOR	NO, I AM NOT ACTIVELY LOOKING FOR ANOTHER JOB	TOTAL
Q3: Educator / Practitioner	5.88% 43	40.36% 295	53.76% 393	36.35% 731
Q3: Room Leader	5.21% 32	48.53% 298	46.25% 284	30.53% 614
Q3: Manager	2.66% 9	34.02% 115	63.31% 214	16.81% 338
Q3: Owner Manager	0.00% 0	18.65% 36	81.35% 157	9.60% 193
Q3: Deputy Manager	0.74% 1	45.93% 62	53.33% 72	6.71% 135
Total Respondents	85	806	1,120	2,011





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