



EARLY EDUCATION AND CHILDCARE COALITION

For children, for parents, for the economy

PULSE CHECK: PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS EARLY EDUCATION AND CHILDCARE



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The early education and childcare sector is at a pivotal moment. The expansion of government support announced in the Spring Budget 2023 brought national attention and tacit acknowledgement of the critical social infrastructure that the sector provides. The last year has also seen the Royal Foundation launch its 'Shaping Us' campaign, aimed at raising awareness of how important the first five years of life are for shaping the adults that we become.

Yet key stakeholders in the system are experiencing multiple challenges. Parents are struggling to meet the cost of early years education and childcare amidst a protracted cost-of-living crisis; record numbers of early years practitioners are opting to leave the sector due to low pay and lack of progression, while providers are struggling to meet their operational costs, often facing closure.

It was within this context that the Early Education and Childcare Coalition was formed – an independent group of organisations who share a commitment to creating an early years education and childcare system that works for children, parents, and the economy.

We commissioned the communications and behavioural change agency Claremont, in collaboration with More in Common, to assess the public discourse – to gain insights into the current mood and attitudes towards early education and childcare.

Our research shows that people care and want the Government to play a role in addressing the challenges the sector is facing. The primary challenge is seen to be one of cost. People are supportive of reform but want to know how it will be paid for, and expect that it be targeted at those in work and in need. They are clear that the main purpose of early years education and childcare is to enable parents to work and for children, the benefits are seen in the here and now – socialising, getting over separation anxiety and preparing for school. The valuable role of the early years professional is recognised, along with the challenges they are currently facing.

We have an opportunity to build on public support for reform to ensure that there is a realistic yet transformative commitment to early education and childcare at the next general election and in the next parliament. We must show that access and cost can be addressed, but not at the expense of safety and quality; that early years education and childcare must work for parents *and* children, alike. Success lies in having a shared voice on key issues and creating a universal story about the value of the sector in all our lives – a story that the general public can connect with.

But before we do that, we need to meet people where they are. This report is the first stage of that work. It is designed to be an insight into the public mood post-Budget, and a platform from which to move the conversation forward. It is the first in a series of reports that look at how we increase public support for investment in early education and how together we can broaden understanding of the invaluable contribution the sector makes to our society and economy.



METHODOLOGY

More in Common and Claremont developed a research programme combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Three consultation sessions took place with Coalition members to gain insights and direction for both the research design and the messaging outputs.

QUANTITATIVE

Nationally representative survey of adults in Great Britain fielded by More in Common. Conducted online with 2,046 participants.

Fieldwork dates: 6th – 11th April 2023.

More in Common is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.

QUALITATIVE

More in Common conducted two focus groups – one focus group with socially liberal voters in Chichester (from Established Liberals and Civic Pragmatists segments) and one focus group with socially Conservative voters in South Sunderland (from the Loyal National and Backbone Conservative segments).

The segments in both the quantitative and qualitative analysis come from More in Common's Common British Seven segments values and core beliefs model – www.moreincommon.org.uk

Participants in the focus groups were recruited by independent recruiters and groups moderated by More in Common researchers.

The Early Education and Childcare Coalition is an independent advocacy organisation that unites the voices of parents, children, providers, those working in the sector and the wider business community. Our vision is of an early education and childcare sector that provides high-quality, affordable provision for all families in all communities, and with it, good pay, conditions, and funding for those providing that education and care. We use our collective voice and research to build public and political support for early education and childcare.

The Coalition was developed by the Women's Budget Group, the UK's leading feminist economics think tank, and is funded by the Kiawah Trust, a charitable foundation that supports initiatives to tackle educational and gender inequality. To learn more about the Coalition, its membership and aims, please visit www.earlyeducationchildcare.org

KEY THEMES AND IMPLICATIONS

Following the research analysis and synthesis, we found that there are **five headline findings** with clear implications for communicating with the public about early education and childcare.

1. Awareness of government's plans for reform to the sector is high but detailed understanding is low. Support for the plans is high but dwindles if the public hears criticisms from the sector.

Our research shows that there are very few opponents to early education and childcare reform or investment.

59 per cent had heard of the Government's plans, 68 per cent think investing in the sector is good but a lower proportion (18 per cent) of the public could explain the detail of recent proposals.

Only 16 per cent think early education and childcare today is worse than before. This was echoed in the qualitative research where people told us there had been big improvements in early education and childcare. Older participants talked about having nursery available for only a few mornings a week. This makes it harder to land the 'crisis' argument.

Ongoing public support for the Government's plans will be influenced by how the sector reacts to it. When the sector's criticisms of the proposals were tested, the number of people saying the investment is a good idea halved (from 68 per cent to 32 per cent). Development of a 'failure' narrative is a risk that the sector should consider in its messaging.

2. The public sees and understand the terms 'childcare' and 'early years education' as two distinct, separate terms, each with their own associations.

'Childcare' is a more familiar, understood and widely used term than 'early years education'. 80 per cent know and could explain what 'childcare' means, while only 23 per cent could do the same for 'early years education'.

When talking about the two terms there are clear distinctions in the way people attach sentiment to them. For 'childcare', people are more likely to attach words such as '*cost and expensive*', while words most associated with 'early years education' are '*education and learning*'.

There are also some associations with each term relating to the child's age. 'Childcare' is more associated with 1-2 year olds and 'early years education' is more associated with pre-school, 3-4 year olds.



3. The public currently views early years education and childcare as a parental issue, with a particular emphasis on their ability to work. They do connect work to wider economic benefits for the country as a whole.

Rather than seeing this as a child-centred issue (as sector professionals do), the public typically links the issue of early years education and childcare to parents and make strong connections between a functioning early years education and childcare sector and a parent's ability to work or not.

54 per cent of the public sees one of the top benefits of the Government's pledge to extend early years education and childcare as enabling parents to get back to work. Other benefits include being able to have a break and have greater flexibility. 29 per cent of the public believes that supporting parents to get back to work should be a key focus for the Government.

The public can see the benefit of early years education and childcare from an economic perspective – but it is in the short term, e.g. connected to work. 45 per cent said they think the Government's plans to expand early years education and childcare will help the economy by getting more parents back to work. The key economic benefits are seen as having more people in work (43 per cent), reducing the Government's benefits bill (36 per cent), and helping businesses to get people working more hours (34 per cent).

4. People acknowledge that cost is one of the biggest barriers in accessing early years education and childcare and there is strong support for targeted funding, but people want clarity on how it will be paid for.

69 per cent of the public selected 'cost' as the biggest challenge parents face when trying to access early years education and childcare. There is an overwhelming tendency amongst the public to consider cost more of an issue than things such as being able to trust someone else to look after their child or availability of spaces.

The public believes that the Government's role is to address how it plans to alleviate some of those costs and make it more affordable for parents, but they also believe parents should still pay their own way to some extent and that any support from government should be targeted.

Research shows that targeted support is welcomed. 56 per cent of people think parents who would otherwise struggle with the cost of early years education and childcare should get help and 55 per cent people think the expansion of funded early years education and childcare should be targeted at those in employment or those needing support to get back to work.

The majority of the public (73 per cent) thinks parents should pay for some proportion of the cost of early years education and childcare. This was strongly backed up in our qualitative groups. A common theme was value for money and an acknowledgement that government money is tight. Participants wanted to know how much government plans were likely to cost and how they would be funded.

5. The public sees the benefits for early years education and childcare in the immediate and short term.

We can see above how the public is making strong connections between expanded early years education and childcare benefits such as increased options for parents returning to work and generally getting more flexibility.

However, 59 per cent of people think good early years education and childcare is good for the whole country, and not just parents. It is seen as a sensible investment in future generations.

We also saw through our research that people make the link between early years education and childcare and the tangible benefits this brings to **children and the economy**. However, they do tend to operate in the short term, focusing on the immediate benefits rather than long term outcomes.

GOOD FOR CHILDREN...

49 per cent of the public thinks an expanded provision of early years education and childcare will help children be more sociable and 45 per cent think it will make them more ready for school.

This was corroborated in the qualitative research which showed that most people think about the benefits of early years education and childcare in **very practical, immediate terms** – things such as making friends, socialising, having fun and dealing with separation anxiety ahead of going to school resonate amongst the public.

The long-term benefits of early education for children are well-evidenced by sector professionals and researchers. However, we found that, when pushed on these benefits, people felt that the outcomes were too far away or too abstract to engage with.

THE SNAPSHOT

What does the public understand about early education and childcare and those working in the sector?

The public is more familiar with the term 'childcare'.

Almost all people surveyed (95%) had heard the term 'childcare' compared with just 59% of people having previously heard the term 'early years education'. More than a third of people (36%) had never heard of 'early years education'.

Four-fifths (80 %) could explain what 'childcare' meant. Just over a third (36%) could explain what 'early years education' meant.

The public has a positive opinion of those working in early education and childcare, but thinks they are underpaid and undervalued

- ▶ 41% describe the workforce as 'qualified'
- ▶ 38% say they are 'dedicated'
- ▶ 34% say they are 'professional'
- ▶ 31% say they are undervalued
- ▶ 44% say they are underpaid, just 24% of the public think they are paid the right amount

Most people think that good early education and childcare benefits the whole country, not just parents

- ▶ 59% think that it benefits the whole country, just over a quarter (27%) believe it only benefits parents and carers.
- ▶ More than half (51%) think early years education and childcare is mainly about supporting a child's development and wellbeing, compared to 39% who think it is mainly about providing a safe place for children.

Most people think the right time for a child to start early education and childcare is between one- and three-years-old

▶ At any age	12%	▶ After age 3	13%
▶ After 9 months	14%	▶ After age 4	4%
▶ After age 1	21%	▶ Not before school	4%
▶ After age 2	21%	▶ Don't know	11%



What does the public think of the expansion announced in the Budget?

Support for the expansion halves when the public hears criticisms of the plans

- ▶ 68% think that its a good idea for the Government to expand the current offer and provide 30 funded hours from nine months when paid maternity leave ends.
- ▶ This drops to 32% when the public is presented with criticisms about funding rates, workforce strategy and lack of floor space.

The public supports increased investment and thinks the Government should spend more of taxpayers' money on the sector even if it means higher taxes for all

- ▶ 57% support the increased investment announced in the Budget, just 27% think the money could be better spent elsewhere.
- ▶ 47% think increased investment is a good idea only if the economic benefits outweigh the costs, 34% think its a good idea regardless of the economic benefits.
- ▶ 40% support investing more taxpayers' money in early education and childcare, even if it means higher taxes for everyone. 31% disagreed.

Most people think parents should pay towards the cost of childcare and government support should be targeted

- ▶ 56% think government support for early education and childcare should be targeted at parents who would otherwise struggle to afford it.
- ▶ But a third of people (33%) said everyone should receive help with the cost of early education and childcare regardless of their financial situation.
- ▶ 55% said the expansion of the 30 funded hours for one and two year olds should be targeted at parents who need access to early education and childcare to work.
- ▶ Almost a third of people (32%) think all one and two-year-olds should be able to access early education and childcare regardless of whether their parents are working.
- ▶ 71% of the public thinks parents should pay something towards the cost of early education and childcare.
- ▶ The public is divided on whether their should be a universal right for all children to access early education and childcare; 43% were in favour, 37% against.

The public thinks that government support should only be used at Ofsted-registered settings

- ▶ 46% think that the money provided by the Government for early education and childcare should only be spent at Ofsted-registered providers.
- ▶ 34% think parents should be able to spend the money the Government provides for informal childcare such as grandparents or relatives.

The public thinks parents are the primary beneficiary of the expansion of the 30 funded hours

▶ Young children	9%	▶ Early education & childcare workforce	6%
▶ Parents	42%	▶ Providers	6%
▶ Employers and businesses	5%	▶ The Conservative Party	4%
▶ The country as a whole	17%	▶ None of the above	7%
▶ The Government	4%		

What does the public think are the benefits of the planned expansion?

More than half (54%) of the public thinks the main benefit of the Government's plans is that it gives parents the freedom to return to work or increase their hours of work. Additionally, 41% said it also helped parents that are in the most need, and 36% said it also provided parents with flexibility in arranging childcare.

It will help to make children more sociable by allowing them to play with children their own age (49%), help them prepare for school (45%) and help them adjust to being away from their parents (42%).

The public thinks the main benefits for the country are economic with 43% believing the expansion will help boost the economy by getting more parents back to work and 36% thinking it will reduce the Government's spend on benefits.

There is also an understanding that the expansion will improve gender equality in workplaces and the economy; 31% believe it will make workplaces more diverse as mothers can return to work while 26% believe it will help to close the gender pay gap.

More than a quarter (28%) think the expansion will lead to long-term economic benefits as it will improve outcomes for children, helping them to do better at school and ultimately secure better jobs.

What does the public think about the role of parents?

The public thinks the biggest challenges facing parents and future parents are cost-related

- ▶ More than half (56%) list the cost of raising children as one of the biggest issues facing parents, and 47% list the cost and availability of childcare.
- ▶ By far the biggest challenge with childcare today identified by the public was the cost, with 69% selecting it as one of the biggest challenges.

People think that the best person to look after a child during the working week is either a stay-at-home parent or nursery

- ▶ The public is split on the best person to look after a child during the Monday-Friday working week with 21% saying 'nursery' and 19% saying it should be a stay-at-home parent.
- ▶ A further 20% favoured more flexible working so that both parents can work and look after the child.
- ▶ 42% of the public think that the Government's focus on early education and childcare penalises stay-at-home parents.

The future of early education and childcare?

Early education and childcare policies will determine voting intentions

- ▶ 42% of the public say that a party's plans for early education and childcare will be important in choosing who to vote for at the next general election.
- ▶ The public thinks the biggest priority for future policymaking in early education and childcare should be to support more parents to work.
- ▶ 19% think it should prioritise support for poorer families.
- ▶ 19% think it should prioritise training opportunities for the sector.
- ▶ 16% think future policymaking should prioritise support for families with children who have disabilities or special needs.
- ▶ Only 5% thought that encouraging competition among providers should be a priority.

The workforce is key to improving availability and quality of early education and childcare

- ▶ One third (33%) said that better pay for the workforce would help improve the availability of childcare and early education in the UK, while 36% said properly paid staff would help improve the quality of childcare and early education.
- ▶ 49% said that high standards of training were key to good quality provision.
- ▶ 55% of the public list providing a safe environment for children as a key factor in good childcare, making it the most important of the options asked.

Note: Respondents were asked 40 questions in total. The data provided here is intended to be a snapshot of the key findings. It is not the full dataset.



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