



# EARLY EDUCATION AND CHILDCARE COALITION

For children, for parents, for the economy

## PULSE CHECK 2024: PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS EARLY EDUCATION AND CHILDCARE



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Pulse Check 2024* was conducted in the midst of the largest expansion of early education and childcare in history, and just weeks ahead of a General Election announcement.

While last year's report captured the public reaction to the seismic Spring Budget announcement on childcare, this year's Pulse Check reflects the initial impact of that expansion as well as the wider financial pressures on both the sector and households.

The expansion of childcare support began in April this year with a new offer of 15 so-called 'free' hours available to eligible working parents of two-year-olds. Eventually, and over a phased period, certain eligible working parents of children aged between nine-months-old and four-years-old will be entitled to claim 30 hours of government support.

A programme of this scale is not without its teething problems. Many of those implementation issues have driven the extensive media coverage of early education and childcare in recent months. This has led to an increased awareness of the challenges facing the sector, in particular the impact of low funding on availability of places and the shortage of qualified and experienced staff required to meet the increased demand.

However, the renewed focus on the sector has also provided a welcome opportunity to connect with new audiences about the value of early education and childcare, the way in which it supports the whole of society to function and the savings available to the taxpayer when children get a fair start in life.

This growing recognition of the importance of early education and childcare has occurred against the backdrop of a general election. That election is being fought on the performance of the economy, a cost-of-living crisis and the state of our public services, all of which connect to early education and childcare in the immediate and longer term.

Voters recognise that 'childcare' has a role to play in driving employment and therefore economic output, while young families impacted by inflation view it as one of their largest bills. Meanwhile, the fragile state of our public services, in particular the NHS, has led to greater focus on how we fund and value social infrastructure, and how a dysfunctional public sector can create wider problems for the economy. It is within this wider context that voters are viewing early education and childcare.

Our research shows that early education and childcare remains a key priority for voters heading into this election. They recognise the challenges facing the sector in delivering the planned expansion of support, but they are also aware of the benefits available to all of us when the sector functions well. Whether voters have young children or not, they are in favour of greater investment and remain concerned about the availability and affordability of early education, including the impact this has on children.



The quantitative research in this report is supported by the qualitative findings in *Shifting the Conversation* where participants told us that the priority of government should be to support parents in having choice about how they raise their children and balance work.<sup>1</sup> Parents want work to pay, and affordable childcare provision is important for that reason. However, of more importance to them is knowing that their child is in a high-quality, safe and nurturing environment while they are at work. This translates into high support among all types of voters for policies that promote affordability and fair access to government schemes as well as strong support for policies that enhance quality and safety, such as more training for early years professionals.

This year's Pulse Check is a green light from voters; they will support efforts by the next government to build a fair, equitable and high-quality early education and childcare system, but they want that reformed system to be rooted primarily in the needs of children. They want to see progressive policies that support families during the early years and are comfortable with investing to achieve that. In this General Election year, voters are clear that this is an issue that matters to them and they want to see that it matters to politicians too.

## **About the Pulse Check**

The Early Education and Childcare Coalition aims to shift public opinion as well as government policy. As part of our work to do this, each year we publish an annual Pulse Check that surveys how voters view early education and childcare. Our previous Pulse Check is available on our website.

## **Methodology**

Quantitative research in this report was carried out by More in Common.

Fieldwork dates: 1st – 3rd May 2024

Sample: 2,032 English adults

The data is weighted on age/gender interlocked, education, ethnicity, region, and 2019 General Election vote to be representative of the English population.

<sup>1</sup> Early Education and Childcare Coalition, 2024, *Shifting the Conversation*, (<https://bit.ly/3wjALvu>)

## **About More in Common**

More in Common is a research agency working to bridge the gap between policy makers and the public, helping people in Westminster to understand those voters who feel ignored or overlooked by those in power. More in Common's *British Seven* segmentation provides a unique lens at understanding what the public think and why. More in Common is a full-service research agency offering polling and focus group research and are members of the British Polling Council.

## **About the Early Education and Childcare Coalition**

The Early Education and Childcare Coalition (EECC) unites the voices of all those with a stake in the future of early education and childcare – children, parents, providers, the early years workforce and the business community. Founded by more than 30 organisations, our members are parent campaign groups, child advocacy organisations, early childhood experts, antipoverty campaigners, provider membership bodies, trade unions and business lobbying groups. As childcare is devolved, our work focuses on England, but we partner with other organisations across the UK to share our learning.





## KEY THEMES AND IMPLICATIONS

The research found five key themes that are supported by findings from our previous work.

- 1. There is growing recognition of the importance of early education and childcare to the whole country, not just parents. The majority of voters view early education and childcare as a way to improve the life chances of children, rather than it being primarily about enabling parental employment.**
- 2. Voters remain concerned about the affordability and availability of places. This concern is particularly high among parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities, single parents, and Black and Asian families.**
- 3. Affordability and access should not come at the expense of quality and safety. Voters support policies that will enhance the quality of a child's experiences in any settings. This includes more training opportunities for early years professionals as well as increased vetting.**
- 4. People support policies that promote fairness and equality. In principle, they think all children should be able to access high-quality early education and childcare in order to support their development. They also like policies that give parents choice and the opportunity to provide for their families.**
- 5. The public continues to think highly of early education and childcare professionals but they are aware of the staffing challenges facing the sector. There are concerns about the lack of qualified staff in the sector. Voters are supportive of increasing funding to providers to enable them to recruit experienced staff so they can offer more places.**

# THE SNAPSHOT

## What does the public think are the benefits of early education and childcare?

There has been a significant shift in how the public views and values early education and childcare

- ▶ 67% think that early education and childcare benefits the whole country, up from 60% last year.<sup>2</sup> The number who think it only benefits parents has fallen from 27% last year to 21% this year.
- ▶ 89% say early education and childcare professionals are important, which is on a par with how they view teachers (91%).
- ▶ Half of voters (49%) think the first five years shape the rest of our lives.

The public sees a clear link between early education and outcomes for children, with parental employment now viewed as a secondary benefit

- ▶ 45% think that the most important reason for affordable early education and childcare is that it helps to give children a good start in life. Only 32% of voters think it's important to help parents work.
- ▶ 67% think that increasing government funding for early education and childcare would improve the life chances of children. Just 18% thought it would make no difference.
- ▶ Currently only children of certain eligible working parents can access the 30 hour entitlement. However, 71% of voters think that all children should have a right to access early education and childcare regardless of their parents' employment status. Just 18% think that access to early education and childcare should depend on parents' employment.
- ▶ Similarly, under current eligibility criteria, children of parents with no recourse to public funds are not entitled to the 30 hour offer. Our polling found that 59% of voters think all children should have a right to access childcare and early education regardless of their parents' immigration status, with 25% opposed.
- ▶ 80% of voters think that all children should have a right to access early education and childcare no matter where they live, despite widespread inequalities in the availability of places across the country.<sup>3</sup>

### Grandparents feel as strongly as parents about the benefits of early education and childcare

47% of grandparents think that early education and childcare is important because it gives children a good start in life, on a par with parents (46%). They also feel more strongly than parents about the importance of the first five years of life with 58% saying those years shape the rest of our lives, compared to 54% of parents.

### Among 2019 voters, there is strong support across all party lines for the right of children to access early education and childcare regardless of their parents' employment status

Conservatives	68%
Labour	77%
Liberal Democrats	62%
Green Party	76%
Brexit Party	57%

Based on how respondents voted in the 2019 General Election

<sup>2</sup> Pulse Check 2023 found that this support was 59% for the whole of the UK and 60% in England.

<sup>3</sup> New Economics Foundation, 2023, A Fair Start For All, (<https://bit.ly/3wLz1AB>)

## How does the public view the early education and childcare sector today?

### The public thinks the biggest challenges facing both parents and providers are financial

- ▶ Cost is still the biggest challenge facing parents who want to use formal childcare with 62% citing it as the number one obstacle, followed by availability of places (27%) and the need to trust someone to look after their children (25%). Over a fifth of parents (22%) said finding childcare for the hours they needed was a challenge.
- ▶ 53% of voters are concerned about the availability of early education and childcare, while almost half (49%) think it's unaffordable.
- ▶ Similarly, the biggest challenges for providers are also seen to be financial, with low government funding (74%) and high running costs (78%) cited by voters as the main problems facing the sector.

### Who is most concerned about availability of places?

#### Parents of children with SEND

Over three-quarters (77%) of parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) were concerned about the availability of early education and childcare, compared to 59% of all parents. Similarly, 50% of parents of children with SEND say that it's difficult to find a place, compared to 44% of all parents. This reflects research by Coram Family and Childcare which finds that just 6% of local authorities have enough places for children with SEND.<sup>4</sup>

#### Black and Asian families

78% of Black voters and 64% of Asian voters say they are concerned about the availability of early education and childcare, compared to 52% of White voters. According to census data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), Black and Asian ethnic groups are far more likely than White ethnic groups to live in the 10% of neighbourhoods most deprived in relation to education.<sup>5</sup> Analysis by the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) found that 14.5% of nursery closures in 2023 occurred in these areas.<sup>6</sup>

#### Single parent families

63% of single parents are concerned about availability of childcare while 67% of single parents say it is too expensive. There are high levels of support among single parents for greater flexible working rights in order to manage work and parenting – 81% of single parents would support such a policy, compared to 71% of all voters. Support for greater flexible working rights was highest among parents of children with SEND with 94% in favour and no one opposed.

#### Parents of children under five

81% of parents with children under the age of five are concerned about the availability of childcare places, compared to 59% of all parents. Among this group, 80% think extending parental leave rights would give them more flexibility to care for their children.

<sup>4</sup> Coram Family and Childcare, 2024, Childcare Survey, (<https://bit.ly/4bt43Nj>)

<sup>5</sup> ONS, 2020, Census: People living in deprived neighbourhoods, (<https://bit.ly/3Vmaexy>)

<sup>6</sup> NDNA, 2023, Nursery closure rates up fifty per cent on previous academic year, (<https://bit.ly/3yFtOfn>)



## Public support for the early years workforce remains high and they are seen as the most important factor in delivering high-quality early education and childcare

- ▶ A plurality of voters (44%) said that those working in the sector do not get the respect they deserve while a third (33%) said their respect for those working in early education and childcare had increased in recent years.
- ▶ When asked what the most important factor is when choosing provision, 61% said the experience of staff, followed by the facilities and environment (59%). Over half (53%) said child-staff ratios were important in choosing the right setting while 48% said the qualifications of the staff were key.

## Opinion on the type of provision that people prefer varies depending on the age of the child

- ▶ Over half of voters (51%) think children should be in group settings such as nurseries, while a third (33%) prefer domestic environments such as the child's home, a family member's home or a childminder's home.
- ▶ Parents, in particular, have a stronger preference for group settings when their children reach three or four-years-old. Among parents of one-year-olds, 49% prefer group settings while 15% prefer childminders and 36% think a child should be cared for by a parent at home or by extended family.<sup>7</sup>
- ▶ By the time children reach three- and four-years-old, this changes significantly. Almost two-thirds (65%) prefer group settings for children at this age, while 26% think a child should be cared for in their own home by a parent or nanny or by extended family. A further 8% think the best provision for three- and four-year-olds should be with a childminder.
- ▶ The preference for nurseries and pre-schools at this age echoes last year's Pulse Check which found that 45% of the public thought that early education was about supporting children to become ready for school.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The sample size for this group was small (33) but the results are aligned with focus groups carried out earlier this year for *Shifting the Conversation*.

<sup>8</sup> Early Education and Childcare Coalition, 2023, Pulse Check, (<https://bit.ly/3sDaMDx>)





## **What does the public think the next government should do?**

### **There is significant support for increasing government funding for early education and childcare with a growing recognition that this funding would support good outcomes for children**

- ▶ An equal number (72%) agreed that increased government funding would support more parents to work and deliver better outcomes for children, while 68% agreed that more funding would benefit the country in the long-term.
- ▶ There is growing awareness of long-term return on investment in early years with the majority of voters (44%) saying that increased funding for early education and childcare would save the Government money in the long-term. More than two-thirds (67%) said increased funding would improve the life chances of children.
- ▶ A plurality of people (37%) support spending more of taxpayers' money on early education even if it results in higher taxes for all - 29% were opposed.
- ▶ A significant majority (64%) believe that parents should pay towards the cost of early education and childcare for their children.

### **The public recognises the challenges around recruiting and retaining the workforce but does not support a watering down of qualifications**

- ▶ More than half of the public (53%) thinks there are not enough qualified professionals in the sector today, but just 25% supports making it easier to become qualified in order to address staffing shortages.
- ▶ 24% think the current qualification levels are about right while an even higher number (28%) thinks it should be harder to become qualified in order to ensure the safety of children.

### **Increased government funding and boosting staff numbers are seen as the solution to increasing the availability of places**

- ▶ Voters think the most important factor in increasing the availability of places is ensuring that providers receive enough government funding (27%).
- ▶ Recruiting experienced staff was seen as the second most important factor (21%) in boosting places, followed by having enough staff (19%).



## What policies should the next government prioritise for families with children under the age of five?

**Voters recognise the importance of this time in a child's life and want the next government to prioritise policies that support a child's development:**

- ▶ 22% think the next government should prioritise policies that support children to socialise and develop outside the home.
- ▶ 14% said the next government should prioritise getting children ready for school.
- ▶ 13% said they should support parents to help their child develop and learn at home.
- ▶ 66% of voters think children of parents with no recourse to public funds should be allowed to access the 30 hour entitlement with just 6% opposed.
- ▶ 77% support extending free school meals to disadvantaged children in early years settings with just 5% opposed.

**Voters also recognise the challenge of modern parenting, particularly during a cost-of-living crisis:**

- ▶ A fifth (21%) said the next government should prioritise policies that give parents choice in how they manage work and caring responsibilities in the early years. This was echoed in our *Shifting the Conversation* work, where parents talked about feeling they lacked choice and were struggling to keep up financially and as a parent.
- ▶ 60% support extending statutory paternity and maternity leave to give parents more choice in how they care for their children in the early years with just 12% were opposed.
- ▶ 71% support extending flexible working rights for the same reason, with just 5% opposed.
- ▶ 66% support extending the current 30 hour entitlement to parents in training.
- ▶ 71% support incentivising employers to offer more on-site childcare facilities.
- ▶ Just over half of voters (53%) think early education and childcare should be completely free for all.
- ▶ The public is split on whether government should give parents money to pay family members to provide childcare with 34% in support of this and 34% opposed.



## What policies should the next government prioritise for the early education and childcare sector?

**Voters make the link between lack of funding for the sector and the crisis in affordability and availability of places. They want policies that enable providers to deliver for children and their parents:**

- ▶ 73% want the next government to prioritise funding for providers so they can offer more places.
- ▶ 68% of voters think that early education should receive the same level of support as primary education, with just 18% opposed.
- ▶ 63% of voters think government funding should cover all provider costs while 69% think that providers should have to pay better wages in return for that funding.
- ▶ The public is divided on whether primary schools should be supported to offer more early education and childcare from the age of nine months, with 36% in support of such a policy and 32% opposed.

**Policies that enhance quality and safety remain popular among voters:**

- ▶ 78% of voters support better training opportunities for early education and childcare professionals.
- ▶ 75% support stronger vetting practices for people working in early education and childcare.



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