

# Early Years Care, Education and Play Employers Forum Workforce Survey 2024

The NI Executive's Programme for Government lists 'Deliver More Affordable Childcare' as one of its key outcomes. To achieve this, it is essential that our childcare sector is stable and sustainable. To engage with this strategy, the Early Years Care, Education and Play Employers Forum issued a survey in October 2024 to gather detailed information about workforce issues within the sector.

## Key Findings

### Overview

- In total we received 122 responses to the survey (35% response rate).
- Almost 50% of responding settings have members of staff holding a degree level qualification - underpinning the dedication of childcare staff to engage in CPD and highlighting childcare as a significant career.
- 20% of responding settings have 2 current or imminent vacancies, while an additional 14% of settings have 3 or more.
- Almost half of all responders feel that the situation with the childcare workforce will deteriorate significantly, with only 8% of settings hopeful that things will improve.
- 73% of settings are worried about the future of their setting. Just under 4% of settings are at risk of immediate closure. While in addition to the settings who have already closed playrooms, a further 7% of settings feel they may need to close playrooms.

### Staff Recruitment

- 15% of responding settings need to recruit for a management position, with the Southern Trust area having the highest need. Verbal feedback from settings indicate that management positions are difficult to fill for 2 main reasons; salary does not reflect responsibility level, and management posts tend to be full time hours.
- When recruiting, using social media and placing vacancies on recruitment sites are the 2 most popular strategies employer's use. The majority of settings use a combination of both strategies. In addition, 38% of settings have agreed to take on apprenticeship students to fill vacancies.
- Almost 56% of job applicants have been poor quality while a further 10% of advertised posts did not receive any applications at all.
- When candidates were invited for interview, 8% of settings reported that NONE of the invited candidates arrived. Where candidates arrived for interview, 9% then did a poor interview.
- When employers offered the post to candidates: only 59% accepted the post as it was advertised. In 25% of cases, employers had to amend aspects of the job role to enable candidates to accept the post (mainly reducing the job hours). 26% candidates who were offered a post with a setting rejected it.
- 72% of settings feel that the recruitment of new staff is significantly more difficult than it was before Covid.

## Staff Retention

- The majority of settings use multiple strategies to retain staff. Employers stated that they are having to offer individual strategies to each member of staff – a difficult strategy for employers to maintain.
- Due to rising costs, less than 1% of settings have offered additional pay as an incentive to retain staff, while 27% have offered non-financial benefits.
- 55% of employers have offered reduced hours but although helping to retain existing staff, this option has a negative impact on the workforce, as settings need to recruit additional staff to cover the operational hours.
- 72% of settings have offered staff additional training - mainly SEN courses to help staff cope better with the increasing number of SEN children joining settings. Current estimates from the Programme for Government suggest that 1 in 5 children are now presenting with SEN conditions.
- Almost half of all settings who replied to the survey find that retaining staff is more difficult now than it was before Covid (48%).
- Overall, 23% of settings feel that staff retention is having a slight or major impact on their setting remaining open. 16% of settings in the Western Trust find it easier to retain staff following covid.

## Maintaining Settings

- While settings are trying to recruit new staff, they have had to develop strategies to keep open and operational. 38% of settings have used more than one strategy to maintain their setting.
- The main strategy used across all Trust settings has been to use the increased ratios of adults to children (52% of settings).
- 30% of settings have closed playrooms so that they did not need as many staff.

## Support for Settings

- 38% of settings feel that we could use support to cover wages costs. This is to take the pressure off settings and prevent parents having to pay high cost fees.
- A further 14% of settings feel they need more financial support, but did not specify what the support would cover.
- 6% of settings would like to see more students placements being allowed to encourage new staff coming through to the sector.
- 6% of settings feel that if we were viewed as a professional sector, more people would apply and stay working in the sector.
- 6% of settings would like to use the review of the Minimum Standards to make changes to help staff eg. ratios, health declarations.

### *Statistics Comparison Table by Trust*

<b>Subset data</b>	<b>Belfast</b>	<b>Northern</b>	<b>South Eastern</b>	<b>Southern</b>	<b>Western</b>
Responses to survey	24.6%	18.9%	25.4%	15.6%	15.6%
Degree level practice	60%	22%	45%	63%	47%
Vacancies for 3 or more staff	47%	12%	17.5%	6%	17.5%
Management vacancy	22%	17%	22%	34%	5%
Recruit: All interviews poor or no show	13%	20%	40%	13%	13%
Recruit: Applicant rejected post offer	35%	15%	27%	12%	12%
Recruit: More difficult after covid	83%	48%	71%	76%	74%
Retain: Offer reduced hours to retain staff	26.5%	17%	26.5%	10.5%	18.5%
Retain: More difficult after covid	39.5%	14%	21%	12%	15%
Maintain setting strategy: Closed rooms	40.5%	16%	19%	13.5%	11%
Maintain setting strategy: Increased ratio	46%	61%	55%	47%	53%
Outlook: deteriorate significantly	19%	16%	21%	24%	18%
Outlook: deteriorate significantly or slightly	53%	61%	71%	82%	74%