

**BUILDING THE  
EARLY EDUCATION  
AND CHILDCARE  
WORKFORCE OF  
THE FUTURE**



How to attract and retain talent through  
enhanced flexibility for the workforce

SUPPORTED BY: JPMORGANCHASE AND TRUST FOR LONDON





## FOREWORD

At a time when demand for early years provision is expanding, it is critical that early education and care providers are able to attract and retain experienced, skilled and motivated people. That's why we were delighted to partner with Timewise on the Childcare Pioneers programme. We recognise the role that positive flexible working cultures can play in supporting staff wellbeing and ensuring that they can balance work with their wider social and family life.

Our organisations have both already sought to introduce improved policies and advice to support good practice across our settings. Yet we are also acutely aware that, for our managers and leaders, supporting the preferences of their teams can be challenging in the context of the major staff shortages facing the sector. Childcare Pioneers provided practical support to enable a more proactive and consistent approach to flexible working requests, while maintaining our commitment to high quality provision that provides consistent care and education for children and meets parents' needs for flexible provision.

The project lays the groundwork for further progress. It makes a strong case that the Government's new rights to flexible working should be accompanied by the support, resources and evidence to enable

innovation in the early years sector. Improvements to flexible working can play an important role in tackling the current recruitment and retention crisis facing the sector, and in so doing support government ambitions to extend access to early education and care for more families over the coming years.

Neil Leitch,  
Chief Executive, Early Years Alliance

June O'Sullivan,  
Chief Executive, London Early Years Foundation

Executive summary	03
1. Introduction	06
2. The case for change	07
3. Our approach	12
4. Flexibility in the childcare sector: Findings of our diagnostic	14
5. Designing and testing new approaches	16
6. Evaluation: The Impact of the programme	18
7. Conclusions and recommendations for policy and practice	20

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

High quality early childhood education and care is vital for giving children the best start in life, plays a crucial role in enabling parents to work and is essential for wider economic growth.

Despite its national importance, the early childhood education and care sector is experiencing significant difficulties in recruiting staff. A recent survey of providers from the Early Years Alliance found that 78 per cent were struggling to recruit. More qualified staff are particularly hard to appoint, with separate analysis showing that the number of NVQ Level 3 vacancies has increased in the average setting from 1.9 to 2.2 vacancies over the past year.

The sector also struggles to retain staff. The Early Education and Childcare Coalition finds that around half (48 percent) of nursery survey respondents were considering quitting their job in the next 12 months. Reasons typically cited for leaving include feeling undervalued and exhausted. These reasons often come ahead of low pay. The hours and demands of working in early education and childcare have increased over time, with childcare workers working longer hours than people in comparable occupations like retail and hospitality, which offer higher pay and less physically and emotionally demanding work.

It is clear that the status quo is not sustainable and that action must be taken to improve staff satisfaction and to make those working in early education feel more valued and supported. The sector will come under even more pressure as the government rolls out the funded childcare entitlement expansion over the next year, raising higher expectations for the scale and quality of childcare provision.

The Timewise Childcare Pioneers project sought to tackle these challenges head on. The two-year action research project with two major early childhood education and care providers explored the role that more positive flexible working cultures could play in improving staff wellbeing and engagement and attracting a more diverse pool of candidates – such as older workers and those with caring and health responsibilities.

Our research with childcare leaders, managers and staff offers insights into the current state of flexible working in the sector and what is needed to build positive flexible working cultures that enable greater staff input into working patterns.

We examined the operational barriers nurseries face in enabling flexible working. These include the perceived difficulties of balancing staff preferences with children's needs, parental expectations and the need to meet legal staff-child ratios. Limited capacity, knowledge and confidence to trial new approaches can also result in a reactive, case-by-case approach to meeting flexible working requests, which, in some cases, may be rationed and discouraged.

The Timewise Childcare Pioneers project supported nursery managers from different settings to come together to explore the potential benefits of improvements to flexible working and how they could overcome the barriers to change. The project included an audit of recruitment practices to support greater transparency, fairness and openness to flexible working for new roles; tools to support nurseries to better understand demand for flexible working among existing staff; and a set of bite-sized videos and written guides to support good practice when responding to flexible working requests, managing more flexible teams and adapting jobs so that they can be worked flexibly.

An evaluation conducted alongside the project found improved confidence among head office staff and nursery managers to respond positively and consistently to flexible working requests. The project showed that it is possible to improve flexible working in the childcare sector, and that this can be one part of a solution to current workforce challenges. However, it also highlighted the need for practical support to help employers implement changes in a sector where funding constraints and acute staff shortages are limiting the capacity for innovation.

The report comes as the government plans to deliver the first phase of its expansion of 30 hours of 'free childcare' to eligible parents of nine-month-olds by September



2025. The Department for Education recently stated that 35,000 extra staff will need to be recruited just to deliver the first phase of this expansion. We call for a recruitment drive based around part-time and flexible working to help attract new talent to sector – as well as stemming the existing talent drain. Our analysis of official data finds that even returning to levels of part-time work that existed in the childcare sector in group settings five years ago (in 2018-19) would fill the equivalent of 17,850 of the 35,000 FTE vacancies needed. This would help deliver the new entitlement and help meet high unmet demand for part-time work in the population.

These findings also come as the Labour Government is set to introduce a new ‘default’ right to flexible working as part of a New Deal for Working People. This aims to provide further support for family-friendly working alongside childcare reforms. We are arguing for a greater focus on business support, sector-specific guidance and training to achieve the goals of the employment law reforms to ensure they drive meaningful change.

We set out recommendations to help tackle the staffing crisis in the short term, alongside longer-term reforms for a more valued and satisfied workforce.



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROVIDERS:

- » Drawing on the models developed in the Childcare Pioneers programme, providers should seek to move from a reactive to an open, proactive, whole-setting approach to flexible working. This starts by engaging with employees to better understand their preferences and enable them to input into the scheduling process, with shared responsibility for ensuring organisational needs are met.
- » Providers should seek to better understand and increase the scope for flexible working patterns by analysing the impact of childcare demand in their setting on employee needs. This should provide understanding of quiet times over a day and a week, and in doing so open up scope for staggered start and finish times, term-time only and part-time hours, among others.
- » Providers should explore models that maintain high quality and continuity of care while facilitating more flexible working – such as deputy key person models (where there is a second named key person for each child), with time allocated for staff handovers and communication across the whole setting and models of practice that ensure strong communication with parents outside of handovers. Larger nursery groups should seek to role model good practice by developing progressive organisational policies and sharing their findings to enable other smaller providers to replicate and learn from their example.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

- » Local authorities should make flexible working a focus of their continuous professional development (CPD) offer for local early childhood education and care providers. Many councils seek to promote quality by providing CPD for local providers. Councils should promote approaches that improve access to flexible working for all staff, rather than increase the use of casualised staff, by disseminating evidence, guidance and case studies. Our project also suggests the value of bringing managers from different settings together to explore the benefits of flexible working and how to overcome barriers to change.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO NATIONAL GOVERNMENT:

- » Timewise is calling for a recruitment drive based around part-time and flexible working to help attract new talent to the early years sector – as well as stemming the existing talent drain. The Government's planned review of the early childhood education and care provision and workforce and resulting plan should include improving access to flexible working as a key strategic pillar and consult extensively with the sector on how to achieve this. In doing so, the Department for Education should draw on the example of the NHS Long-term Workforce Plan and the NHS People Promise which sets out a commitment to flexible working, stating: 'We do not have to sacrifice our family, our friends or our interests for work'.
- » The DfE must help ensure the early education and childcare sector has a comprehensive package of support (training, funding and guidance materials) to ensure it is prepared to implement new employment law reforms, including 'flexible working by default'. Innovation funding could help to enable providers to pilot models of practice that support improvements in flexible working for staff while maintaining high levels of quality for parents and children.
- » The Department for Education should develop more consistent evidence and resources to support providers to enable improvements in flexible working without compromising children's wellbeing – by establishing a new survey of the childcare workforce and investing in research on children's attachments at different ages and for children with SEN.
- » Future funding reforms should consider the need for some 'slack' in staffing levels to be built into provider rates to facilitate innovation and create more space for staff training and development – and do so without reducing staff-child ratios.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The early childhood education and care sector is critically important to the UK's economy and society. It is not only a significant employer in many areas of the country; it enables parents to make choices about how they balance work and care, and plays a key role in the development, wellbeing and learning of young children. Around 70 percent of families with a child under school starting age depend on formal childcare and early education – and this is set to grow.

Successive governments have expanded their focus on and investment in childcare and early education in pursuit of these goals over the last three decades. New Labour put in place new childcare subsidies paid direct to parents and harnessed capacity across state, private and voluntary provision to establish the first ever government-funded universal entitlements to part-time places for three- and four-year-olds and piloted a national entitlement for disadvantaged two-year-olds which came into force in 2013. Recognising new evidence on the importance of “quality” provision for child development outcomes<sup>1</sup>, they also sought to raise standards through the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum. This included regulations on minimum staff-child ratios for different age groups, and a drive to raise workforce skills and qualification rates.

The expansion continued under the Coalition and Conservative administrations, with a strong focus on increasing parental employment rates. Funded entitlements were extended to 30 hours a week, 38 weeks per year for three- to four-year-olds with working parents in 2017 (where both parents were working at least part time or one parent in a single parent household was working). In 2023 the Chancellor announced that this working families offer would be extended to all children from the end of paid parental leave (nine months) by September 2025. These changes were predicted to support 60,000 additional people to enter employment and 1.5 million working mothers to increase the hours they work by 2027-28.<sup>2</sup>

The current Labour Government has committed to implementing this offer, but faces a number of delivery challenges. One of the main ones is the state of the childcare workforce. A growing, skilled, stable and engaged workforce is vital to supporting an expanded,

high quality childcare offer for families and children. But the sector is facing well-documented skills gaps and challenges securing well-qualified staff.

Improvements in flexible working are seen by government and providers as one way to attract and retain staff in this context, opening up the recruitment pool to a wider range of people and supporting and retaining people who have caring responsibilities or other flexible working needs. The Labour administration is introducing new rights to work flexibly to encourage change across the economy, and improvements to flexible working have been cited by Labour as part of the solution to public sector recruitment and retention challenges.<sup>3</sup>

Many early childhood education and care providers and managers agree that positive flexible working cultures could improve staff wellbeing and stability in the context of evidence that they feel overstretched and undervalued. Yet they are also worried about the difficulties of implementing this in a frontline sector with acute staff shortages that has to meet legal staff ratios and other quality requirements.

This report outlines the approach and findings from a Timewise action-research initiative to help childcare providers, policymakers and other sector stakeholders to understand and promote improvements in flexible working in the sector. The Childcare Pioneers project worked with three nursery settings operating as part of the London Early Years Foundation (LEYF) and Early Years Alliance groups to better understand and tackle the barriers to supporting greater staff control over working patterns. We created resources and tools to build the confidence of managers to improve their approach to flexible working, evaluated the impact and explored how to promote and enable change across the sector.

Our aim is to provide insights for policymakers, employers and the sector about how providers could improve how they consider, manage and facilitate flexible working, while still supporting high quality childcare provision for families. We recognise that a lack of access to flexible working is only one aspect driving current workforce shortages in childcare, and our findings also highlight the importance of wider action on funding, pay and progression.

## 2. THE CASE FOR CHANGE

The early childhood education and care sector provides a critical service for families, and is an important source of female employment in diverse communities and places across the UK. The 2023 Department for Education provider survey<sup>4</sup> identified more than 30,000 childcare providers (excluding childminders) supporting over 1.3m children in England. Based on this data, there are well over 300,000 paid childcare staff, of which 98 percent are female. The largest proportion of staff (45 percent in private and voluntary nurseries) are aged 25 to 39, suggesting many are likely to be parents of young children themselves. The ethnic composition of staff broadly mirrors the population at national and regional levels.<sup>5</sup> The majority of childcare workers are employed in the private and voluntary sectors. Private, voluntary and independent group-based settings account for 259,300 staff, compared to 55,800 in school-based provision. Only one third of group-based providers are part of a larger chain, with the rest made up of single nursery settings.<sup>6</sup>

Yet despite being a sector of national importance, early education and childcare is characterised by low pay and limited prospects for training and progression. Salaries have increased faster than average in recent years, but the sector still pays below the average generally<sup>7</sup> and the average for women.<sup>8</sup> Two-thirds (62 percent) of the workforce earn less than the real Living Wage, which reflects the basic cost of living, according to a 2023 Labour Force Survey study.<sup>9</sup> This has been exacerbated by low funding rates for free entitlements by government.<sup>10</sup> Low pay is a particularly pronounced feature of private and voluntary sector provision, where qualifications tend to be lower and wages are not protected by public sector terms and conditions. There is, as a consequence, a significant pay gap between nursery and school teaching staff.<sup>11</sup> Childcare pay rates are similar to or lower than roles in retail and hospitality that are arguably less physically and emotionally demanding.<sup>12</sup> Scope for staff training or professional development once in work is also often limited due to the nature of the market. Many settings are small and operate on tight margins and fixed ratios, meaning that releasing staff for training can be hard. Studies suggest that very small proportions train for a qualification once in work.<sup>13</sup>

“I think the biggest challenge is that it's not a particularly well-paid sector to be in, and it doesn't really matter what area you're in, whether you're in management. It's not good money and even progressing doesn't guarantee you better money and it is hard work.”

**NURSERY MANAGER**

The hours and the demands on staff have increased over time. Previous Labour Force Survey analysis has found that early years workers in England work longer hours than people in comparable occupations: 11 percent of full-time early years workers reported working more than 42 hours per week, compared with 3 percent of retail workers, 6 percent of female workers and 13 percent of the total working population.<sup>14</sup> This can at least partly be attributed to the growth in settings offering full, flexible wrap-around daycare over longer hours. Qualitative research has also highlighted the pressures from increased scrutiny from Ofsted and others that has come with professionalisation, including an increase in paperwork, and the strenuous nature of work ‘on the floor’ with children, with staff often feeling relatively unsupported on long shifts.<sup>15</sup>

“Qualified staff are leaving the sector because of pay, because pay is less than they can get in unqualified jobs and equally probably there are other sectors that offer more flexibility.”

**DIRECTOR, NURSERY GROUP**

The intensification of work for childcare staff has increased further since the COVID pandemic, with evidence that this is affecting staff wellbeing. Children and their families have been presenting with greater needs, with little sign of this abating over time. In particular, the number of children with emerging special educational needs (SEN) or reported development delay in the early years is growing. In 2023, 25 percent of new Education and Health Care Plans (EHCPs) made in England were for children aged five and below.<sup>16</sup> The funding system for SEN often fails to provide timely or sufficient support to settings. Coupled with staff shortages, this has increased the burden on existing staff, many of whom are on low wages. This is reported



to be negatively affecting staff wellbeing and resilience and leading to increased absences. Senior managers are often left picking up the pieces with parents and on behalf of stressed or absent staff.<sup>17</sup> While many people are attracted to the sector because they want to work with children and find aspects of the job deeply rewarding, there is a widespread perception among providers that increased demands and intensity are making it a less worthwhile trade-off for many. It is telling that, although the government has sought to ease workforce shortages by increasing the maximum allowable staff-child ratios from one:four staff to children to one:five for two year-olds, many providers have rejected this due to safety concerns and staff workload.<sup>18</sup>

In this context, the sector is experiencing significant difficulty recruiting and retaining staff, and particularly qualified staff with strong skills and experience.<sup>19</sup> Official survey data shows that total workforce numbers (excluding childminders) are on an upward trajectory. However, this includes a strong reliance on temporary staff, volunteers and apprentices, with staff turnover rates particularly high in private nurseries (19 percent versus eight percent in school-based settings) and growing rapidly in voluntary sector settings. Nearly 40 percent of those leaving group-based settings leave for jobs outside the sector.<sup>20</sup> In 2024, in a survey of nearly 900 members by the Early Years Alliance, 78 percent reported that they were struggling to recruit. More than six in 10 respondents (61 percent) reported that staff from their setting had left the sector entirely over the previous six months, while eight in 10 (82 percent) had seen an increase in the number of staff members leaving the sector compared to two years ago.<sup>21</sup> There are also reported concerns about the skills of new entrants<sup>22</sup> - with evidence of a growing gap between younger, newer entrants and older staff who are more likely to hold qualifications.<sup>23</sup>

The workforce crisis poses particular challenges as the funded childcare entitlement expansion rolls out, as it raises expectations for the scale and quality of childcare provision. The Labour Government's aspirations to deliver a quality offer that narrows attainment gaps also puts a premium on achieving a skilled and stable workforce, staffed by people with the mental and emotional capacity to provide responsive care. Evidence is clear that younger children in particular (i.e. the planned beneficiaries of the expansion) can face increased risk of behavioural problems if they are in poor quality childcare for long hours.<sup>24</sup>

“There's no denying that there is difficulty recruiting to the early years sector. The pandemic, the government, the cuts in funding - all that has impacted and people, particularly the qualified people, are leaving the sector in droves. There are not many people coming into the sector.”

**DIRECTOR, NURSERY GROUP**

In the 2024 annual childcare survey by Coram, 87 percent of local authorities in England reported problems with the childcare workforce as being a barrier to the expansion of free childcare. The government has forecast a need for 85,000 new places for zero to two-year-olds to be delivered by September 2025. The Department for Education estimates that this will require an additional 35,000 full-time equivalent workers to be recruited into the childcare workforce, with some studies putting the figure as high as 50,000.<sup>27</sup>

Levels of part-time work across the early education and childcare sector have fallen across the majority of settings since 2018-19<sup>28</sup>, making it harder for childcare educators who have caring responsibilities of their own to combine work and care. Latest available estimates suggest that 93 per cent<sup>29</sup> of non-workers would prefer to get a part-time or flexible job than a full-time role. Our analysis of official data finds that even returning to levels of part-time work that existed in the childcare sector in group settings five years ago (in 2018-19) would fill the equivalent of 17,850 of the 35,000 FTE vacancies needed.<sup>30</sup> This would help deliver the new entitlement and help meet high unmet demand for part-time work in the population.

Action is essential to improve staff satisfaction and make jobs in early childhood education and care feel more valued, supported and manageable. Addressing problems with pay and progression will be vital for shifting the long-term prospects of the sector. But just as important is a more comprehensive approach to making staff feel more valued and restoring the manageability of their roles. Respondents to the Early Years Alliance survey were slightly more likely to cite “feeling more valued” as a factor that would encourage them to stay in the sector than they were to cite “better pay” (82 percent versus 80 percent). Failure to deliver on this is not only likely to continue to compromise the wellbeing of the existing childcare workforce, but could also jeopardise the capacity of the sector to grow quality provision and



support more families to make positive choices. Without action, there is a risk that ongoing workforce issues will damage government's plans for the realisation of a comprehensive, quality, funded childcare entitlement from the end of parental leave.

Improving flexible working across the sector has significant potential to contribute to improved staff satisfaction and wellbeing. Nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of staff in group-based settings have previously said they do not have good work-life balance.<sup>31</sup> Faced with long hours and intensifying demands, and with a very large proportion of the childcare workforce likely to have caring responsibilities outside work, greater flexibility stands to significantly increase the attractiveness and viability of the role for many. More generally, flexibility in work is becoming more important to people and the sector needs to adapt to growing expectations. Research by Timewise suggests that nine out of ten people in the UK would like some form of flexible working.<sup>32</sup> Flexibility is particularly important for those with caring responsibilities, disabilities and health conditions, but people are also increasingly seeking to be better able to fit leisure, study and other commitments around work, and to have more control over their work-life balance. New legislation to strengthen flexible working rights is expected to increase the pressure on employers to meet these expectations. Employees already have a right to request flexible working from day one in a new job and the Labour

government has committed to go further, giving all workers a 'default' right to work flexibly.

However, making a reality of flexible working in childcare poses some challenges, and the sector needs support and experimentation to make it happen. As in other frontline service sectors, employers face additional operational constraints to meeting the flexible working needs of staff when compared to office-based sectors and occupations. Remote working is generally not an option, and employers need a balance of skills and roles to cover each shift. Within childcare, the requirement to meet strict staff-child ratios and the fact that many services are small and operate on tight financial margins create additional challenges. It is important for providers to ensure a good degree of continuity of relationships, especially with the youngest children. From the age of nine months children typically start to be able to form multiple attachments, but this can still be fragile.<sup>33</sup> With reference to managing high turnover, Ofsted highlights the importance of consistency in the key person responsible for recognising and meeting a child's individual needs, and especially when it comes to managing communication around periods of transition.<sup>34</sup> Consistency in care and communication is also likely to be a concern for parents. Managing all these factors together to improve the approach to flexible working requires strong leadership and systems – and a degree of experimentation and reflection to get there.

## THE CASE FOR FLEXIBILITY IN THE WORDS OF NURSERY WORKERS

The following case studies provided by Storkway Nursery in London – an Early Years Alliance nursery – showcase the benefits of agreeing flexible working arrangements for staff.

### RUTH – NURSERY EDUCATOR

When my nursery announced that they were looking for someone to be there at the start and the finish of each day I very quickly offered to switch up my hours. Instead of one 8.5 hour shift, I swapped to a split shift, doing 7.45am to 1.45pm then coming back again for 4pm to 6.15pm. This worked well for the nursery because it meant there was always someone to open up in the morning and shut up at night.

At that time, it worked very well for me on a personal level. I was in the process of getting guardianship of my baby granddaughter – which came with very complex and demanding schedules. Having two hours off in the middle of my day meant I had the time to focus on getting her to the contact centre and then bring her back to the nursery with me. It brought a certain peace of mind.

Like many babies, my granddaughter didn't always sleep well and, as someone in her late 50s, this took its toll! Occasionally, I managed to grab a restorative nap in between shifts, which meant I'd return to my second shift with a renewed sense of energy and enthusiasm – really important given the nature of my job.

Having that kind of flex also helps you get on top of your life a bit more. With the split shift arrangement I never had to book time off work to get a health appointment, to go to the hairdressers, deal with pets or all the other little bits of life that just add up and become tricky when they're ignored.

It worked well for a specific moment in time [five years], but there did come a point where it became less helpful to the nursery. New team members and other people's patterns meant they had the early and late sections covered, so we changed it up again. Right now, I'm back on one shift a day, but I'll soon be exploring the option of doing compressed hours. I'm happy to be flexible to suit the nursery's needs as well. It has to work for everyone.

I do think one of the issues in this sector is that there's not enough knowledge about the availability of different shifts. We need to talk more to each other about it. If we don't know, we don't ask.

### LUKE – ASSISTANT MANAGER

Working 40 hours across five full days started to become challenging for me when I needed eye surgery. Often, I was using up half a day of annual leave each time I had a hospital appointment, and I started thinking 'is this really the best way?'

It prompted a conversation with my manager who, at the time, was also looking for someone to cover longer hours. We chatted and began to explore other working pattern options. We arrived at a trial of compressed hours – whereby I'd still do my 40 hours (getting my usual pay), but I'd spread it across four longer days (ten hours a day), leaving me with a full day to myself each week.

It worked well for me, immediately giving me windows in which I could have my hospital appointments and get on with all the other bits of life admin that are hard to do when you're in a nursery setting (unlike some jobs it's not OK for us to have our phones on us). I also significantly reduced my outgoings on travel and spent way less time on trains. It's not a well-paid job. That's not why people do it. You've got to want to do it and we don't get loads of thanks so to be offered this kind of flexibility feels very rewarding, like a little something in return.

Importantly, it also works well for the nursery's staffing needs, which is great. It means there's always a qualified person, which helps with ratios. However, I'm open to discussing things again should their needs change and, with a baby on the way, my working patterns may also need to shift again.

I think, even more crucially, it's beneficial for the parents and children I work with. For me and my colleagues, making sure children get the best care they can is the main driver behind our work. Me being there from start to finish means children are getting good continuity of care, I'm able to observe them in their learning environment throughout the day and I'm able to build stronger bonds with parents – which is useful in certain scenarios eg new parents who might feel uneasy at first. It can be helpful for them to have a familiar face each day.

In this sector, I think people often think, 'oh flexible working, that wouldn't work', but, if you can, I'd say sit down, discuss it, try something out, it might work, and it could even be more beneficial for everyone involved. Don't overcomplicate it. Just make sure that you at least ask and try something because you don't know what might come of it.

### ELLIE, NURSERY WORKER

When my manager recently proposed the flexible working pattern of compressed hours – four long days instead of five – I jumped at the chance. With this new arrangement I get to spend an extra day with my son before he starts at school next September. It's a very precious time. When I worked five days a week I barely saw him. Even with an 'early' early finish it was 5.30pm by the time I was home and in winter this meant you could forget about having any sort of outdoors fun.

I have to think about my team too and the potential repercussions it has on them. This needs to be an arrangement that works for all parties. My room is the busiest room, so it's just a case of being mindful of scheduling my day off when the least children are in. I don't want to be at home leaving my team under immense pressure with loads of children. I would rather come in and be there to support with that.

It works well for building relationships with parents. I get to see them at drop off and home time most days which gives us time for a decent handover. I hear how their children's evenings were, and I fill them in on the events of the day. All of this helps to build rapport and trust between us.

Me being here all day is great for the children too. Seeing the same people regularly, and having stability and consistency helps children settle, improves their emotional well-being and overall development. The way I see it, it's positive all round. If we can find a working pattern that suits our needs, we're more likely to want to stay in our setting which in the long run is really beneficial for the children. If we leave, the nursery becomes more reliant on bank staff which means lots of different people and the children can become very distressed.



### 3. OUR APPROACH

Timewise Childcare Pioneers was a two-year action-research programme (2022-2024), funded by JPMorganChase and Trust for London and delivered in partnership with two independent groups of early childhood education and care providers. The programme sought to:

- » Test how to improve the availability of high-quality flexible jobs that meet the needs and preferences of the largely female, low-income early years workforce, as well as those of childcare providers, parents and children
- » Explore the role improved flexible working could play in tackling the current workforce crisis facing the sector – for example, by opening up the recruitment pool to a wider range of candidates, retaining people who have other flexible working needs and supporting their progression to better paid roles through more part-time management roles
- » Understand how the sector can enable improvements within the current operational constraints and, crucially, without compromising high quality early childhood education and care that meets the needs of parents and children.

It was delivered across four stages:

**1. Initial provider engagement:** Timewise engaged two large early childhood education and care providers to help test and develop new approaches to flexible working: the Early Years Alliance (EYA) and London Early Years Foundation (LEYF). EYA is the membership organisation for the sector (with 14,000 members, mostly from the private and voluntary sectors) as well as a provider of nurseries nationally, mainly in deprived areas. LEYF is a charitable social enterprise with 42 London-based nurseries. This phase informed the goals and focus of the action research.

**2. Diagnostic stage:** The diagnostic stage sought to help providers to evaluate their current approach against the Timewise Maturity Curve (see figure 1), which promotes a culture and environment that proactively encourages and supports staff to balance work and wider family and social commitments, rather than simply responding reactively to requests. The diagnostic

stage aimed to enable senior leaders and operational managers to explore the operational constraints and possible solutions to moving up the maturity curve and better meeting the flexible working needs of staff. It was based on interviews with 11 central team members/managers; six managers/deputies; and 16 staff across three nurseries.

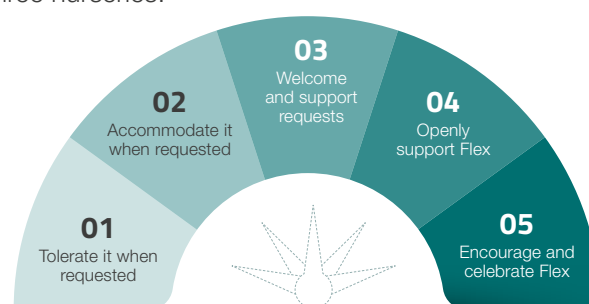


Figure 1. Timewise Maturity Curve: What is your approach to flexible working?

**3. Interventions to drive change:** Based on the diagnostic findings, we designed and delivered a set of activities and tools to support nurseries to be more consistent in their approach to flexible working, and to help them to consider and trial new approaches to increase the availability of quality flexible work. These included:

- » **Flexible working guides:** Timewise designed and disseminated short, written booklets with guidance on how to support and manage a positive flexible working culture for nursery managers and staff, including information on how to manage flexible teams and respond fairly and consistently to flexible working requests.
- » **Support for organisational change:** engagement with central teams to leverage change management to enhance flexibility, good work, and progression.
- » **Flexible Recruitment Review:** Assessment of recruitment policy and practice at EYA and LEYF with reports and recommendations on how to embed flexible working into the recruitment process
- » **Flexible Job Design Workshop for EYA Senior Management:** Development Workshop for Children's Services Managers, HR leads and Director of People & Technology to equip them with skills for flexible job design

» **Developmental Workshops for 44 Nursery**

**Managers:** Nursery Managers from LEYF came together to consider the barriers and enablers for flexibility. This was an opportunity for peer-to-peer learning and to articulate the benefits of widening access to flexible working.

» **Further tool and survey development:** A flexible recruitment guide and flexible job design tools have been designed for nursery managers. A staff survey has also been designed ready for use, to identify where there may be opportunities for flexible working based on staff working patterns and attitudes to flexible working and progression.

» **Bite-sized Learning Resources** – short video learning resources were produced to support a more consistent approach to flexibility across the sector – creating a simple overview of what flexibility is, how it can be managed and the overarching benefits.

**4. Evaluation and dissemination:** The final stage of the programme is the dissemination and support to use the guidance and materials to drive change. This includes understanding the impact these have through evaluation, and sharing effective practice more widely, building a national case developed for investing in better models to support the childcare sector to operate more sustainably, driving up the quality of jobs. The evaluation framework and methods are outlined in Appendix 1.

This approach drew on Timewise's wider experience of supporting improvements in 'Shift-Life Balance' for staff in frontline sectors delivering critical services, including nursing, social care and teaching. As well as a consistent and positive approach to flexible working requests, the Timewise concept of Shift-Life Balance highlights the importance of enabling workers to plan, providing predictable working patterns and sufficient advance notice of the schedule. Critically, it promotes the importance of enabling frontline workers to have greater control over their working patterns through input into the schedule.<sup>35</sup>

Examples of good practice from these sectors include:

» **'Whole-setting' approaches to flexible working:**

Timewise has supported some schools to move away from a case-by-case approach to flexible working requests to a proactive, 'whole-setting'

approach. Like early childhood education and care providers, schools have to manage staff-student ratios, high workload and a need for consistency of staff. A whole-setting approach starts by working to understand staff preferences. These considerations are then built into the timetabling process for the following school year. This allows time for any negotiations and compromises required to ensure organisational needs are met.

» **Changes to job design and work organisation:**

Schools involved in the Timewise pilots explored whether alternative approaches to job design and work organisation for teaching roles could open up more opportunities for flexible working. This included considering whether non-student-facing time could be allocated in blocks and done remotely, facilitating staggered start and finish times to enable staff to manage their own school runs, and organising staffing and the curriculum to enable work to be shared across different people without disrupting the learning experience.<sup>36</sup>

» **Staff-led approaches to scheduling:** In health and social care, where rosters are often variable from week-to-week and month-to-month, Timewise has piloted different ways to support staff input into rosters – from informal shift swaps and self-rostering technology to participatory team-based rostering, where staff collectively set the rota, taking responsibility for ensuring safe levels of staffing.

The Timewise pilots have demonstrated that forward-thinking employers in frontline sectors can establish positive flexible working cultures, even with considerable structural and cultural barriers. In all of these examples transparency and good communication were important so that staff understood any obstacles and were part of discussions and decisions to ensure organisational needs are balanced with staff preferences. Cross-training to support a more skilled workforce was key to enabling more flexible deployment of staff, supporting people in specialist and management roles in particular to work more flexibly. The driver for change was often recruitment and retention issues, but the findings also demonstrate the wider benefits associated with these approaches, including greater collective accountability for meeting organisational staffing needs and improved staff engagement and manager-employee relations.<sup>37</sup>

## 4. FLEXIBLE WORKING IN CHILDCARE: FINDINGS OF OUR DIAGNOSTIC

Part-time and flexible working patterns are part of existing established practice in early childhood education and care settings. Previous analysis by the government's childcare provider surveys suggests that part-time work is relatively common, particularly in the smaller, single-setting providers that make up the majority of childcare provision.<sup>38</sup> Based on this analysis and a brief audit of childcare jobs being advertised currently on major vacancy platforms, we estimate just under a third (29-32 percent) of childcare jobs are offered on a part-time basis across all providers (those that are part of group and single settings).

Our diagnostics with two nursery providers suggested that leaders, managers and staff in nursery settings recognise the potential benefits of flexible working in supporting retention among existing staff. Openness to flexible and part-time working was being advertised in most recruitment processes. Permanent staff shift patterns appeared to be relatively stable, with managers making use of directly employed 'bank' staff, agency workers and/or overtime to manage staff shortages. Staff and managers said that these casualised staff were provided with choice over their shift patterns, with the potential to create opportunities for those seeking flexible working options.

At an organisational level, both providers had taken steps to improve the information and support available to nursery managers to help them to respond to flexible working requests fairly and consistently. Organisational policies and training had been developed to include details on legal flexible working rights, and one-to-one support and forms had been introduced for staff and managers considering flexible working options.

However, the diagnostic found that schedules were being set by managers without always having input from staff, with working patterns dictated primarily by organisational needs. Requests for flexible working were being dealt with reactively on a case-by-case basis, and most settings assessed themselves as being between two and three on the Timewise maturity curve.

Among nursery staff interviewed for the project, there was a perception that flexible working agreements were sometimes rationed and that reasons other than childcare for flexible working were not always seen as significant by managers. In practice, the use of casualised staff to plug gaps risked further limiting flexible working options for the permanent workforce, who were not able to choose their shift patterns. Overall, interviewees felt that a more positive flexible working culture would support staff to feel more valued, enable their professional development and help them to better balance work and wider family and social commitments.



*"What's the word I want? Ironic. It's ironic that we cannot see our own families because we are looking after other people's all the time."*

*"Flexible working is the most important thing we could offer. People who need it feel guilty and can work flexibly elsewhere without feeling bad."*

*"It would make more people consider joining, if they offered more flexible roles upfront."*

### NURSERY STAFF

Head office staff and nursery managers highlighted the challenges they faced when trying to balance staff preferences with wider organisational requirements. The primary concern was a desire to maintain the continuity of care they provide: ensuring children's routines and relationships are not confused by unfamiliar or changing permanent or agency staff members, and enabling effective communication with parents during handovers. These concerns reflect the evidence (cited above) about the importance of attachment for younger children in particular, as well as a strong commitment to providing high quality childcare. But they were limiting the development of practical strategies to balance staff needs or enable flexibility while minimising risks to children.



“I believe it's vital that children know who we are, that they form strong bonds. Not only for the children, but for their families as well. They need to be able to feel that we know them and they know us. To help them through what is a difficult, challenging time at the minute.”

**NURSERY MANAGER**

“If you have too many people working too flexible hours, you could end up with each child having different people, different days of the week, different times of the day, and that's a lot for the children, which actually I think is one of the challenges in terms of flexibility.”

**HEAD OFFICE STAFF**

“If you've got somebody that is only in the middle of the sessions and doesn't do any handovers, the parents are not really going to get used to the fact that there's an extra person in the room.”

**NURSERY MANAGER**

Nursery leaders and managers were concerned that flexible working would make it harder to meet legal staff-child ratios and recommended training standards. They also needed to accommodate parents' needs for flexible patterns of care, which could include some term-time hours, some full-time hours, some all-day care and some school hours only. This was described as a 'jigsaw' and was the main focus for managers when setting schedules. One nursery leader acknowledged that the type of demand for childcare could facilitate as well as restrict flexible working patterns for staff, but settings do not always have the capacity to understand or plan in advance in a way that takes advantage of this.

“It's really difficult because everything that we do is planned around ratios. And if you've already got a certain number of children and you've hit your maximum number of children with the staff that you've got, being flexible isn't always possible.”

**NURSERY MANAGER**

“Flexible work works better in some types of settings than others. It depends very much on types of funding and types of hours parents need... More affluent areas means less availability of the 15-hour entitlement for two-year-olds, with an increasing focus on parents working three long days a week and wanting Monday and Friday off. Staff say Tuesday to Thursday are very mixed days and then Friday is half empty and Monday mixed. This has particular implications [for nurseries] as often the parents who want this have babies, and baby care needs high ratios and consistent care. Nannies and grandparents are also in the mix in different proportions in different settings.

**DIRECTOR, NURSERY GROUP**

Finally, in the context of staff shortages and workload pressures, managers were concerned that having more part-time staff could increase workload for them and other staff, and that enabling flexible working arrangements for some individuals could lead to tensions across the wider team. Managers expressed a reluctance about talking to staff about their preferences or enabling input into schedules due to fears about 'opening the floodgates' and creating expectations that they may not be able to meet. Some felt that they lacked the knowledge and confidence to discuss and agree flexible working options consistently with their teams.

“We try to accommodate people's requests, but when settings are already struggling with staffing numbers, it gets harder to be as flexible because at the end of the day we have X amount of children and we need X amount of staff for the hours that the provision is open.”

**HEAD OFFICE STAFF**

“In being flexible for one, you need to consider the impact on the other.”

**NURSERY MANAGER**

## 5. DESIGNING AND TESTING NEW APPROACHES

Following the diagnostic phase of the programme, Timewise held a set of workshops and meetings to create space for senior leaders and managers to discuss the findings, understand the case for change, and develop their awareness and ideas about how they might address some of the operational constraints identified. The workshops brought together managers from different nurseries, enabling them to learn from each other as well as from relevant examples from comparable sectors in order to better balance organisational needs with those of staff.

The discussions and wider interviews revealed that, faced with similar challenges, some managers were doing more to ensure staff preferences were being taken into account when setting the rota than others. Managers and senior leaders also explored potential changes to existing practices, including questions about whether and how they could open up the scope for more flexible working patterns through:

- » Better analysis of and planning based on parents' different flexible childcare needs, and how this could enable a wider range of working patterns for staff;
- » Sharing of key person responsibilities across more than one member of staff, using effective rostering, communication and collaboration across staff to avoid compromising children's attachments and wellbeing;
- » Use of casual or 'bank' staff to enable staff shift preferences, as well as to meet staff shortages, and exploring how to ensure fairness across permanent and casualised staff;
- » Trialling alternative ways of communicating with parents that do not rely so heavily on a daily handover with a single member of staff – such as better online and email information, regular parental access to the settings, and timely meetings to discuss child wellbeing and development.



“Are there changes in practice which can help with making flexibility work in the context of parental expectations? For example, are parents happier with a different keyworker reporting at the end of the day if they can come into the nursery to see what their child has been doing all day?”

**DIRECTOR, NURSERY GROUP**

This engagement with providers indicated that there was appetite and scope for improvements to flexible working, with options for overcoming operational challenges. The initial ambition was to pilot new approaches that could improve understanding of staff preferences for flexibility and enable greater staff input into scheduling – drawing on the ideas that emerged from these sessions and the examples of good practice successfully trialled in education, health and social care. The goal was to provide evidence to inform wider engagement and organisational change across the sector.

However, high workloads and workforce shortages meant that the nursery managers felt they had limited capacity to implement changes to existing practices. Participants also felt that they needed more evidence and guidance to support them to balance staff preferences with wider considerations about children's wellbeing and development. These findings have implications for policy and practice that are explored further below.

As a result, the project focused instead on improving the confidence, skills and knowledge gaps identified during the diagnostic by co-designing and testing a set of resources and tools to support nursery managers to better understand staff preferences and implement a more consistent approach to flexible working requests. This included:

- » Designing a staff survey to help managers to better understand demand for flexible working among their staff;
- » Conducting an audit of the approach to recruitment in each participating organisation, with recommendations for how to attract a wider pool of staff by improving the transparency and approach to flexible working, based on a review of different providers and wider good practice – including a willingness to offer and trial new approaches to flexible working; better data collection to understand how this affects recruitment; and an approach that encourages candidates to discuss their flexible working needs during the recruitment process;
- » Developing detailed job design guidance for HR teams to support their understanding of how to enable improvements in flexible working in different roles, including managers and nursery staff – helping to promote understanding of a wider range of flexible working options alongside part-time work including job shares, compressed hours and staggered hours and improvements in staff input into working schedules, such as through self-rostering, team-based rostering and informal shift-swap arrangements.

Timewise also produced a set of bite-sized resources to provide a simple overview of good practice in the sector and answer key questions that had come up during the diagnostic process. This included two short guides for managers on how to deal with flexible working requests consistently and manage a flexible workforce effectively, and one for staff members about how they could work flexibly in the early years context. The guides encouraged staff to ask themselves questions about the impact on colleagues and children, and to be open-minded to find a solution that works for the organisation as well as for themselves. All the guides were designed to be read in five to 10 minutes, in recognition of the limited time staff and managers have to read or process information during the working day.

## **EXAMPLES OF FLEXIBLE WORKING PATTERNS IN NURSERY SETTINGS:**

### **Part-time Level 3 Practitioner, term-time only contract**

#### **Two days per week (choice of Monday and Tuesday or Thursday and Friday), 9am - 4.30pm**

Following the review of recruitment and during the course of the programme, one provider began experimenting with alternative shift patterns to attract new practitioners. They placed advertisements for part-time shift patterns of 15 hours per week, term-time only. This is a great example of matching organisational and childrens' needs with those of employees and taking a service-design approach to flexibility. This working pattern aligns with the government-funded early education provision of 15 hours per week for children over nine months old. Recruiting specifically to these hours will enable the nursery to provide additional places for children who qualify under this scheme. This working pattern is also attractive to practitioners who have care-giving responsibilities themselves, enabling part-time and term-time working, which is likely to suit parents of school aged children.

### **PART-TIME LUNCHTIME ASSISTANT**

One provider introduced a Lunchtime Assistant role, working part-time Monday to Friday 11.30am to 2.30pm. This role was a result of rethinking and redesigning roles to enable a shorter, part-time working pattern. The provider recognised that there was an opportunity to create a part-time role which would support the children during the lunchtime period, supervising meals, soothing children to sleep and supporting activities for children who are not sleeping. The role was created following a review of responsibilities and levels of staff needed during this important time of the day. Having a specific role for these hours enables other members of staff to have a break and ensures supervision ratios are achieved. It is anticipated that this role will be attractive to people who are able to work a few hours each day, such as those with caring responsibilities. It is also an entry-level role for those considering a career in early years.



## 6. EVALUATION: THE IMPACT OF THE PROGRAMME

The evaluation was conducted in parallel with the programme. This allowed the programme to explore the challenges to implementing new approaches in real time and informed the development of the interventions.

Managers and senior leaders said that participating in the Childcare Pioneers programme increased their understanding, knowledge and confidence when seeking to improve approaches to flexible working cultures within early years settings. The workshops facilitated by Timewise enabled nursery managers and head office staff to discuss flexible working in an open and constructive environment. Participants noted that this improved organisational support for change and helped nursery managers to see how the potential benefits of improvements to flexible working could outweigh the operational challenges of implementation.

*“I think, from some of the managers that I worked with, they think very much of their business needs and their nurseries being open 7:30 to 6:30 and ‘I need people in all those hours’. So the Timewise work has helped challenge some of this thinking and got them to open up a little bit and be a bit more receptive to what this means and what [flexible working] could actually mean and the benefits of it.”*

**HEAD OFFICE STAFF**

The guidance is viewed as having increased understanding among nursery managers of how to support a consistent approach to flexible working requests and what good practice can look like in nursery settings. Managers reported feeling better equipped to discuss flexible working options with staff, both in terms of presenting and discussing options for flexibility, and also in being better able to explain their decisions. Head office staff thought managers were better able to make fair and consistent decisions without their central support. It was hoped that this would help to strengthen manager-staff relationships, create a better mutual understanding around flexible working, and support staff to feel more empowered to make flexible working requests within a safe environment.

*“I think that [flexible working] is something that we're showing that we're willing and able to accommodate and that we're willing to look at it and to work out a way that works for everybody, I think that's the most important thing. Rather than it just being taboo.”*

**NURSERY MANAGER**

*“I've had a few requests and some of them I've been able to accommodate and some of them I have not been able to accommodate. Now I think we are a lot more ‘Let's consider this, let's consider the pros and cons, how we can make this work? What are the challenges?’...So I think it's made us a lot better at considering the requests.”*

**HEAD OFFICE STAFF**

Overall, setting managers and head office staff reported feeling more confident to trial more flexible ways of working, and were more aware of flexible working options that could apply across a range of role-types and levels of seniority. The programme was seen to have provided the tools to improve their approach to flexible working, with the hope that managers become more willing and able to try new approaches over time. Impact on organisational HR policy and practices such as recruitment was more difficult to determine where this was being developed concurrently with the Childcare Pioneers programme.

*“For managers in particular, it's a mindset change and that mindset change doesn't happen overnight. So for managers being able to see the flexible working needs of their staff, but also for us to consider flexible working for the managers does need a shift in our understanding of what work looks like and shifting mindsets always takes time.”*

**HEAD OFFICE STAFF**

“It will make it easier and more accessible when you're recruiting to be able to think about 'well, I know I need a full-time person, but do I need that as long as I've got somebody that covers these hours? Does it need to be one person? Can we split the role?'.... It gives lots of options for you to be able to increase your numbers.”

**NURSERY MANAGER**

## FUTURE IMPROVEMENTS AND SUPPORT

The Head Office of both nursery groups participating in the research committed to continue to promote the guidance documents more widely across their settings, and nursery managers and leaders were asked to identify areas for how to increase the impact of the activities and materials developed by Timewise through the Childcare Pioneers programme.

During the evaluation, leaders and managers highlighted the importance of ongoing advice and workshops to encourage discussion, enable flexible working options to remain at the front of managers' minds when considering staffing, and ensure both managers and staff have up-to-date examples and information about using flexible working in practice.

Recommendations for further evidence to support change included research to better understand:

- » The potential impact (positive and negative) that increased flexible working may have on the children in a setting;
- » How providers can continue to operate in a child-centred way while meeting staff preferences;
- » How these messages and approaches could be incorporated into best practice models, and how best to communicate with parents to address their potential concerns;

Setting managers and head office staff also emphasised the importance of engaging and conducting research with different types and sizes of settings so that knowledge can be shared and expanded, and different managers are able to understand what may be effective in their particular workplace.

“I think organisations should be open to working with Timewise, particularly organisations who need to become more flexible, who've not really embraced that as a way of life in terms of employment. Because I think they can certainly make the transition into being open to flexible working far easier, far less stressful.”

**HEAD OFFICE STAFF**

## 7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The new right to flexible working by default proposed in the Employment Rights Bill - alongside the recent introduction of a day one right to request flexible working - will mean employers across all sectors have to engage with the rising desire for a better work-life balance in the UK. The Childcare Pioneers programme has demonstrated the importance of providing hands-on support to ensure this leads to a proactive, positive approach to flexible working in the early childhood education and care sector: by helping leaders and managers to understand the case for change; giving them the tools to better understand staff preferences; and providing practical guidance, inspiration and evidence to support greater consistency, fairness and openness to new approaches, while ensuring best practice for children.

Timewise was able to work with settings within two relatively large nursery groups with an appetite to invest time and central management capacity in developing their approaches to flexible working. Even in these settings, however, the everyday pressures made it difficult to create the space to trial new approaches. Given that most (two thirds) of private and voluntary nurseries are not part of a larger group, and that not all providers will be convinced of the merits of flexible working, the capacity for change is arguably likely to be more constrained across the wider sector.

If flexible working is to be adopted more widely across the sector, it is clear that concerted action is needed at both local and national level. To this end, this last section sets out recommendations for providers and local and national government.

Interventions should aim to improve access to flexible working for the workforce as a whole, as part of a strategy to improve staff wellbeing and engagement, tackle high staff shortages, and meet new demand for staff created by the expansion of childcare entitlements. In doing so, they must also support continued commitment to quality and continuity of care, and improve the knowledge and capacity of managers and

staff to innovate and try new approaches. A key potential benefit is the ability to respond to Ofsted's concerns that high staff turnover is contributing toward less than ideal environments for young children to thrive in.<sup>39</sup>

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROVIDERS:

- » Drawing on the models developed in the Childcare Pioneers programme, providers should seek to move from a reactive to an open, proactive, whole-setting approach to flexible working. Rather than dealing with requests to work flexibly on a case-by-case basis, this requires nursery managers to engage with their staff to better understand their preferences and enable them to input into the scheduling process. Managers should be transparent with staff about what forms of flexibility are available and seek to create a culture of shared responsibility for ensuring organisational needs are met, recognising and drawing on staff knowledge about the needs of different children.
- » Providers should seek to better understand and increase the scope for flexible working patterns by analysing the impact of childcare demand in their setting on staffing needs. This should seek to provide a clear understanding of quiet times over a day and a week, and in doing so open up more flexible working options, including staggered start and finish times, term-time only and part-time hours.
- » Providers should explore models that maintain high quality and continuity of care while facilitating more flexible working. They should consider whether deputy key person models (where there is a second named key person for each child) could enable more flexibility while also providing consistency for children, with time allocated for staff handovers and communication across the whole setting. Alongside this, providers should build models of practice that ensure strong communication with parents outside of handovers, such as scheduled parent-staff meetings to discuss development.



- » Larger nursery groups should seek to role model good practice by developing progressive organisational policies, working with nursery managers to pilot approaches that enable greater staff input into schedules (e.g. enabling informal shift swaps and/or supporting self-rostering or team-based approaches), and sharing the findings to enable others to replicate and learn from their example. The material developed in the course of this action-research is a starting point.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

- » Local authorities should recognise the potential value of flexible working for improving recruitment and retention and make flexible working a focus of their continuous professional development (CPD) offer for local early childhood education and care providers. Many councils seek to promote quality by providing CPD for local providers, but the offer rarely promotes positive approaches to flexible working. Our project suggests the value of bringing managers from different settings together to explore the benefits of flexible working and how to overcome barriers to change. Councils should promote approaches that seek to improve access to flexible working for all staff, rather than increase the use of casualised staff, by disseminating evidence, guidance and case studies.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

- » Timewise is calling for a recruitment drive based around part-time and flexible working to help attract new talent to early years sector – as well as stemming the existing talent drain. The Government's planned review of the early childhood education and care provision and workforce and its resulting plan should include improving access to flexible working as a key strategic pillar, in extensive consultation with the sector on how to achieve this. The demand for and availability of flexible work in early education and childcare should be incorporated into the planned review. In doing so the Department for Education should draw on the example of the NHS Long-term Workforce Plan and the NHS People Promise, which sets out a commitment to flexible working, stating: 'We do not have to sacrifice our family, our friends or our interests for work'.<sup>40</sup>

- » The DfE must help ensure the early childhood education and care sector has a comprehensive package of support (training, funding and guidance materials) to ensure it is prepared to implement new employment law reforms, including 'flexible working by default'. Innovation funding could help to enable providers to pilot models of practice that support improvements in flexible working for staff while maintaining high levels of quality for parents and children.
- » The Department for Education should develop more consistent evidence and resources to support providers to enable improvements in flexible working without compromising children's wellbeing. In particular more evidence is needed to:
  - » Provide clearer guidance to providers on how they can support children's attachments at different ages and children with special educational needs, including to inform judgements of where it might be more/less appropriate to move from a single key person model to a model where there might be a team of 2-3 named key people, and how this situation can be best managed.
  - » Better understand the needs and expectations of staff working in the early years sector, including issues affecting retention through supplementing the current provider surveys with a parallel survey of the childcare workforce.
  - » Support the development of knowledge and good practice in the sector by providing innovation funding and practical support to help childcare providers to pilot models of practice that support improvements in flexible working for staff while maintaining high levels of quality for parents and children.
  - » Future funding reforms should consider the need for some 'slack' in staffing levels to be built into provider rates to facilitate more space for staff training and development. Historically, rates appear to be predicated on maximised staff-child ratios. More time is needed for settings to develop and implement new workforce practices without compromising staff-child ratios (this would not only enable improvements in flexible working, but also help providers to upskill in other critical areas, such as supporting children with additional needs).

## APPENDIX 1. EVALUATION FRAMEWORK AND METHODS

A project evaluation ran in parallel to the Childcare Pioneers programme in order to explore its impact against the aims and objectives and identify how to support further change in the sector.

The evaluation comprised three main stages:

### STAGE 1: LOGIC MODEL VERIFICATION AND EVALUATION APPROACH SIGN-OFF

A programme logic model was developed in consultation with the programme leads and steering group to understand the intended outcomes and impacts as a result of the programme inputs, activities and outputs.

The full logic model for the programme is provided in Appendix 1. It recognises that it will take longer for some project outcomes to be realised than others. It expects, for example, significant changes in flexible working practice and associated staff recruitment, wellbeing and retention to take up to five years to materialise. Shorter term (one- to two-year) objectives focus on improving the understanding of nursery managers and senior leaders of the benefits of flexible working and their capabilities and knowledge of how to implement good flexible working practices, and changes to policies or practice to support this.

The evaluation focused on the impact of the programme after one year of delivery, while establishing what may be considered for future evaluations.

### STAGE 2: OBSERVATIONS AND DATA ANALYSIS

The evaluation was based on observation of and feedback from workshop sessions to understand how participants engaged with the activities and issues gather their immediate feedback and responses. Data was provided by Timewise and project partners to understand traffic to the materials developed, tracking website use and download volumes where possible.

### STAGE 3: QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

In-depth interviews were conducted to gather feedback from both head office staff and nursery setting managers. The interviews were conducted confidentially to ensure participants felt comfortable sharing their views on the impact of the programme and the challenges they faced. In total, 12 interviews were conducted with six representatives from each partner organisation. For each partner organisation we interviewed three representatives from central teams involved in the Childcare Pioneers Programme and three nursery setting managers.

The following indicative logic model for the Childcare Pioneers programme was designed to understand the types of outcomes and impacts it may have for participants and to guide the key themes explored in the evaluation. This was based on a review of programme materials and discussions with the project programme leads and steering group.

INPUTS	ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	OUTCOMES-IMPACT		
			SHORT-TERM	MEDIUM-TERM	LONG-TERM
<p>Financial resources (JPMorganChase funding for the programme).</p> <p>Timewise resources (skills and expertise of Timewise and its partners).</p> <p>Early Years provider resources (staff time and input into the design of the programme and implementing resources).</p>	<p>Employer engagement activities.</p> <p>Diagnostic activities.</p> <p>Development of flexible working guidance for managers and staff.</p> <p>Development of further tools, including staff survey, job design guide, and flexible recruitment tool.</p> <p>x2 workshops with Early Years providers and webinars to disseminate tools and share feedback.</p>	<p><b>EARLY OUTPUTS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Two employers engaged in the pilots.</li> <li>» Recommendations refined and made for pilot activities.</li> <li>» Flexible working guidance and tools are developed.</li> </ul> <p><b>IN PROGRAMME-OUTPUTS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» 50 managers and senior leaders across 2-3 providers (average 15-20 per provider across several sites) engage with flexible working guidance, workshops, and tools.</li> <li>» 10 senior leaders engage with job design guide and flexible recruitment tool.</li> <li>» New flexible training models developed.</li> <li>» Evaluation report sharing what worked, what didn't, and why.</li> </ul> <p><b>LONG-TERM OUTPUTS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Commitment of 5 nursery groups to adopt principles and new approaches to flexibility within 3 months of launch.</li> <li>» Dissemination of materials to 20 of the largest nursery groups directly through events, and over 10,000 providers through wider dissemination with strategic partners.</li> <li>» National case developed for investing in better models to support the childcare sector to operate more sustainably, driving up the quality of jobs.</li> </ul>	<p>Managers and senior leaders feel supported to trial more flexible ways of working.</p> <p>Senior leaders feel supported to build new capabilities across head office and sites.</p> <p>Increased understanding among managers and senior leaders about the need for and benefits of flexibility.</p> <p>Increased understanding of best practice approaches and how to implement these.</p> <p>Changes are made to recruitment processes to reflect best practice.</p> <p>Changes are made to HR processes to reflect best practice.</p> <p>Changes are made to training models to reflect best practice.</p> <p>Managers feel better equipped to discuss flexible working options with existing staff.</p> <p>Employees feel more empowered to ask for flexibility.</p> <p>Employees gain access to flexible working arrangements across different type of roles and seniority.</p> <p>Employees have improved perception of more opportunities for flexible working within the organisation.</p>	<p>Increased applications from qualified candidates.</p> <p>Increased retention of candidates during the recruitment process.</p> <p>New/improved shift patterns available at point of hire.</p> <p>Managers feel better equipped to discuss flexible working options with potential candidates.</p> <p>Reduction in staffing challenges e.g. increased proportion of people available to cover different types of shifts during a working day.</p> <p>Increased staff retention</p> <p>Employee's perceptions of opportunities for progression improve.</p> <p>Employees understand what training and flexible working options they can access to support progression.</p>	<p>Increased awareness among women of potential for progression in the Early Years sector.</p> <p>Women feel supported to progress into management roles.</p> <p>Access to flexible working in management positions is improved.</p>

## REFERENCES

1. Melhuish, E. (2016). 'Longitudinal research and early years policy development in the UK'. *Int. Child Care Edu. Policy* 10:3. doi: 10.1186/s40723-40016-40019-40721.
2. See Muir D (2023) 'The Budget and the childcare sector', Institute for Employment Studies. Available at: <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/news/budget-and-childcare-sector>
3. See for example: Bancroft H, 'Teachers will be allowed to work from home in Labour plan to boost recruitment', *The Independent*, 18 September 2024. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/teachers-work-from-home-school-labour-women-recruitment-b2614794.html>
4. Department for Education (2024) Childcare and Early Years Provider Survey: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-provider-survey>
5. bid. See also: Haux T et al (2022) The early years workforce: recruitment, retention, and business planning, Department for Education. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/626a7b1a8fa8f57a39974184/SCEYP\\_thematic\\_report\\_-\\_April\\_2022.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/626a7b1a8fa8f57a39974184/SCEYP_thematic_report_-_April_2022.pdf)
6. Department for Education (2024)
7. See Muir D (2023)
8. TUC (2023) A strategy for the care workforce, <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/a-strategy-for-the-care-workforce-23.pdf>
9. Bonetti S (2019) The Early Years Workforce in England, Education Policy Institute. Available at: [https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/The-early-years-workforce-in-England\\_EPI.pdf](https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/The-early-years-workforce-in-England_EPI.pdf)
10. The core rate paid by government to providers for the free entitlement for three- and four-year-olds saw an average real terms cut of nine per cent in the decade to 2023-24, or 16 per cent lower based on an inflation measure that focuses on the specific expenses faced by nurseries (IFS, 2024). The 2023 expansion announcement was accompanied by an inflationary increase and significantly above market-rate new funding levels for children aged two and under, but rates for three- and four-year-olds in 2024-25 remain more than 10 per cent lower than they were in 2012-13. See IFS (2024) Early Years. Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/education-spending/early-years#:~:text=From%20September%202024%2C%20the%2015,9%20months%20to%202%20years.&text=Finally%2C%20in%20September%202025%2C%20the,38%20weeks%20of%20the%20year.>
11. House of Commons Education Committee (2023)
12. Pascal C, Bertram T and Cole-Albäck A (2020) Early Years Workforce Review, The Sutton Trust. Available at: [https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Early\\_Years\\_Workforce\\_Review\\_.pdf](https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Early_Years_Workforce_Review_.pdf)
13. PACEY (2018) Building Blocks 2018: A report on the state of the childcare and early years sector in England – focus on the workforce. Available at: <https://www.pacey.org.uk/Pacey/media/Website-files/building%20blocks/Workforce-report-FINAL.pdf>
14. Social Mobility Commission (2020) The Stability of the Early Years Workforce in England. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/906906/The\\_stability\\_of\\_the\\_early\\_years\\_workforce\\_in\\_England.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/906906/The_stability_of_the_early_years_workforce_in_England.pdf)
15. Ibid. See also Haux T et al (2022)
16. Department for Education (2024)
17. Reed and Parish (2023) Nursery Closures Research on the nature, impact and drivers of nursery closures in England, Local Government Association and Isos Partnership, [https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/15.122%20Nursery%20Closures%20LGA-Isos%20July%202023%20FINAL%20AA\\_0.pdf](https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/15.122%20Nursery%20Closures%20LGA-Isos%20July%202023%20FINAL%20AA_0.pdf)
18. Butt S, Ratti V, Bennett M and Paull G (2022) Findings from the early years staff-child ratio consultation survey. Department for Education.
19. There are minimum qualifications that staff must meet for the purpose of working within allowed regulations on staff ratios. These are laid out in the Early Years Statutory Framework: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65844707ed3c34000d3bfd40/Early\\_years\\_qualification\\_requirements\\_and\\_standards\\_-\\_Jan\\_24.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65844707ed3c34000d3bfd40/Early_years_qualification_requirements_and_standards_-_Jan_24.pdf)
20. Department for Education (2024)
21. Early Years Alliance (2024) 'Nurseries, pre-schools and childminders call for better pay and value from government as 78% of settings struggle to recruit ahead of the rollout of phase two of the extended offer, new survey reveals'. Available at: <https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/nurseries-pre-schools-and-childminders-call-better-pay-and-value-government-78-settings-struggle>
22. O'Sullivan, J (2024) 'Is the Quality of New Staff Flashing Red?' Available at: <https://www.leyf.org.uk/news/is-the-quality-of-new-staff-flashing-red/>
23. Bonetti (2019). See also: PACEY (2018)
24. Sylva K, Melhuish E, Sammon P, Siraj-Blatchford I and Taggart B (2004) The Final Report: Effective pre-school education – Technical Paper 12, Institute of Education and Department for Education and Skills.
25. Coram (2024) Childcare Survey 2024. Available at: [https://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/sites/default/files/Childcare%20Survey%202024\\_1.pdf](https://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/sites/default/files/Childcare%20Survey%202024_1.pdf)
26. DfE estimates that: '...around 35,000 additional staff (headcount) are needed above the 31 December 2023 baseline for autumn 2025. 'Early years places and workforce need' <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-places-and-workforce-need/early-years-places-and-workforce-need>
27. Hardy K, Stephens L, Tomlinson J, Valizade D, Whittaker X, Norman H and Moffat R (2023) Retention and Return: Delivering the expansion of early years entitlement in England, Early Education and Childcare Coalition. Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/646ca30371a2ef6a657e9309/t/65482050ded6710668b8b62a/1699225681784/Retention+and+Return.pdf>
28. Recruitment, retention and business planning (Frontier Economics 2022) [https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/39212/1/Early\\_years\\_recruitment\\_\\_retention\\_and\\_business\\_planning\\_during\\_the\\_Coronavirus\\_pandemic.pdf](https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/39212/1/Early_years_recruitment__retention_and_business_planning_during_the_Coronavirus_pandemic.pdf)
29. Timewise, A Talent Imperative, 2017. ComRes interviewed 3,001 UK adults online between 13th and 26th June 2017. Within these sub-samples: 1,250 full-time employees; 750 part-time employees; 500 self-employed people; 501 people who were not working but wanted to work. All participants were aged 18+. The data for full-time employees and for part time employees was weighted to be representative of the UK working population for those employment types; other data were unweighted.
30. Analysis is based on DfE estimates of 35,000 additional staff to enable the expansion of the childcare offer to September 2025. The calculations assume that the DfE latest estimate continues to be based on a full-time equivalent calculation of 35 hours per week. This need could be met by people working a range of hours per week. The ranges of hours per week used have been based on the 2022 Survey of Childcare and Early Years Providers, which includes a table of working hours and proportions working part-time by type of provider, for several dates. The latest survey (2023) does not include this table.
31. Preschool Learning Alliance (2018), Minds Matter: the impact of working in the early years sector on practitioners' mental health and wellbeing.
32. Timewise (2023) Flexible Jobs Index 2023. Available at: <https://timewise.co.uk/article/flexible-jobs-index/>
33. Schaffer HR, Emerson PE (1964) 'The Development of Social Attachments in Infancy', *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, Vol. 29, no. 3:1-77. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1165727?origin=crossref>
34. Ofsted (2024) 'Maintaining quality early years provision in the face of workforce challenges', Ofsted Blog: Early Years. Available at: <https://earlyyears.blog.gov.uk/2024/05/13/maintaining-quality-early-years-provision-in-the-face-of-workforce-challenges/>
35. See Timewise (2019) 'Improving work-life balance for shift workers'. Available at: <https://timewise.co.uk/article/work-life-balance-for-shift-workers-model-for-change/>
36. Timewise (2019) Building Flexibility into Secondary Schools: How to create part-time and flexible roles that work for teachers and schools. Available at: <https://timewise.co.uk/article/building-flexibility-secondary-schools/>. See also: <https://timewise.co.uk/article/what-works-insights-from-flex-focused-schools/>
37. See, for example Timewise (2018) Caring by Design; Timewise (2019) Improving Nurses Work-Life Balance; and Timewise (2022) Making Construction a Great Place to Work: Can Flexible Working Help? A view one year on. All available at: <https://timewise.co.uk/>
38. Haux T et al (2022)
39. Ofsted (2024)
40. NHS England (2023) 'NHS People Promise'. Available at: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/our-nhs-people/online-version/ifaop/our-nhs-people-promise/the-promise/>



This report was supported by JPMorganChase. The views expressed in this report should not be taken to reflect the official position of JPMorganChase or any of its affiliates



Timewise are the UK's leading experts in flexible working and job design, and have been at the forefront of calls for improvements in policy and practice. We provide sector-specific guidance and support to help employers to implement positive flexible working cultures. Timewise have pioneered 'Shift-Life Balance' in frontline sectors associated with high levels of insecurity for workers, giving them greater input, control and predictability over their working patterns.