



ALL OUR CHILDREN

MANIFESTO FOR A UNIVERSAL EARLY YEARS FUTURE

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FOREWORD – ALL OUR CHILDREN

This document sets out the case for a future with universal childcare, provided free at the point of use, for every child and parent.

We have put it together with the aim of starting a wider public conversation about society's vision and goals in this neglected area of policy. It is a manifesto for change, with key facts and clear proposals, and with ideas and individual case studies from parents, childcare workers and early years education providers.

We are responding to an urgent crisis, and recognise the efforts made by other politicians, parents' groups and campaigners to raise awareness of the harm being done by the current situation and its causes. These include inadequately resourced childcare, as well as the complex systems that add extra burdens to the load already being carried by families – on all our behalf – as they navigate work and family life through difficult times filled with many other challenges.

We also recognise recent changes by the Government to help parents in an incremental way and promises made in the recent new strategy for early years.¹ But our more radical vision of the end goal demands bigger steps, and our immediate recommendations highlight serious gaps that remain in the policy landscape to make sure early years providers can fulfil demand under these new policies.

The people staffing these services will underpin every step towards universal free childcare, and this is the basis of our recommendations on page 11. So far, the childcare workforce has been neglected in the progress made. All the changes parents have won could mean little if the workers dwindle away.



Working together, we represent different parties and people with and without children of our own. Our approach emphasises that universal free childcare will be something all of society benefits from and has a clear duty to consider and support.

If it takes a village to raise a child, then the welfare and ability to thrive of all our children is the responsibility of all of us to get right.

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A BRIGHTER FUTURE BEGINS WITH THE EARLY YEARS

Imagine a country where every child, no matter their postcode or their parents' payslip, is given a truly great start in life. Where top quality early years care and education is available and accessible to all.

Imagine every child nurtured in a joyful environment that sparks their curiosity, builds confidence, and lays the foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing.

Imagine a country where parents no longer have to choose between earning a living and giving their children the care they deserve. Where work, study and rest are possible for all parents because childcare is recognised as vital public infrastructure.

Imagine a country where early years educators, the unsung architects of our future, are respected, appreciated, and fairly paid for the skilled, human work they do.

This is not a fantasy. It is within reach. And it starts with a bold choice: to decide to create universal early years provision as a cornerstone of our society.

Care is not a private problem to be solved behind closed doors. It is the infrastructure that holds up everything else. As the International Labour Organisation puts it: care is a precondition for economic activity.

When we invest in the early years, we all benefit. A society built on care is a society that thrives.



THE REALITY FOR FAMILIES AND WORKERS TODAY

Too many parents in the UK worry about childcare costs making rents or mortgages unaffordable, or forcing them into debt.²

National polling shows 53 per cent of parents find childcare in England unaffordable, rising to 71 per cent among single-parent families.³

One in four mothers has had to unwillingly give up work, and one in four women without children say they are not planning on having children in the future for financial reasons.⁴

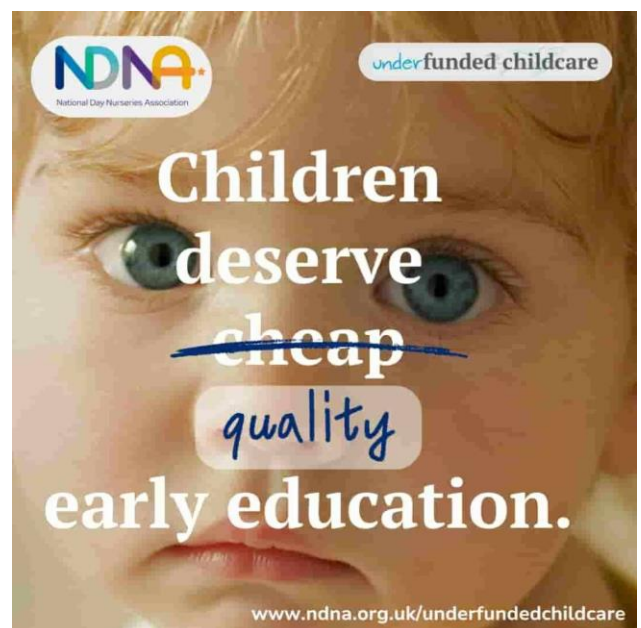
The latest polling from the Early Education and Childcare Coalition, released this month, shows disappointment and scepticism about Government policy changes so far, and that availability of childcare remains a concern for a huge majority of parents of under-fives. This research also suggests it is even more of a worry for parents from Black, Asian and other ethnic

minorities, and parents of children under five with a special educational need or disability (SEND).⁵

Meanwhile, early years professionals, who shape minds, support families, and hold enormous responsibility are still among the most undervalued and underpaid workers in our economy. Nearly six in ten nursery staff are considering leaving the sector altogether.⁶

Early years providers like nurseries and childminders are stretched, fees are rising, and parents are noticing the cracks: shabbier environments, extra charges, and high staff turnover that disrupts consistency.

This is not just inefficient, it is unjust and unfit for the future. We are wasting human potential on all sides. But other countries have shown there is another way.



Our case study Sophie struggles with the lack of hours available at accessible childcare services:

“It isn't the childcare that we wanted, especially when the funded hours came, because we're not even using the full allowance that we can get.”

“I just feel like him being in the nursery more than two days a week would just have benefited all of us!”

“The government wants me to work, I want to work. But the system isn't allowing me to.”



“This threatens our local workforce and economy – if nurseries like ours can't afford to keep operating, families will struggle to access quality childcare, impacting parents' ability to work and putting even more strain on the local economy.”

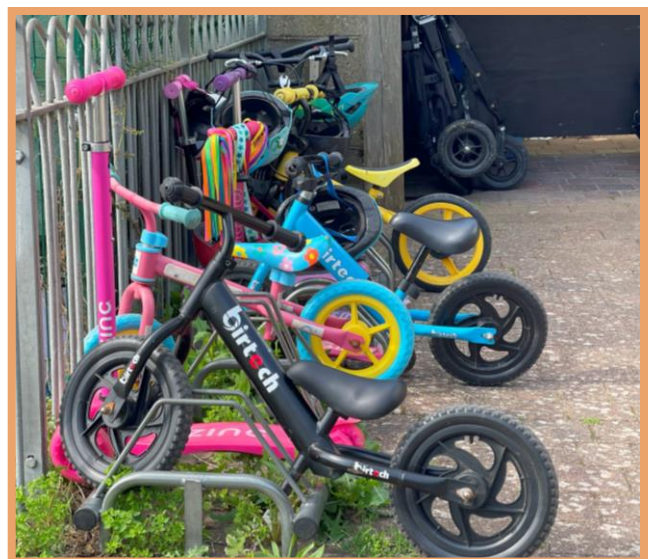
“We are being forced into making drastic, panicked and far-reaching decisions that will have profound and lasting consequences for the entire community.”

Childcare providers in Brighton and Hove,
speaking to Sian Berry MP

Our case study Olumide felt the impact of stretched budgets on her work as an early years professional:

“When I first started, we were much better staffed. There was a much better morale”

“They weren't spending money on resources. So, you're regurgitating the same activities or people were bringing in stuff from home. One member of staff would buy ingredients to do cooking with the children. She shouldn't have to do that.”



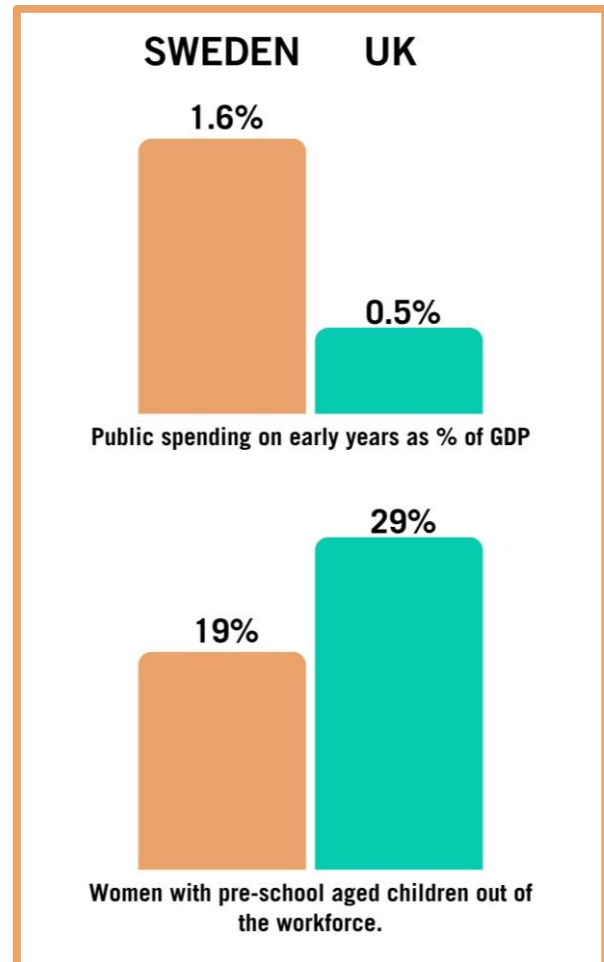
WHAT ANOTHER COUNTRY GETS RIGHT

In Sweden, where childcare is affordable and widely available, public spending on early years is about 1.6 per cent of GDP and only 19 per cent of women with children under six are outside the workforce.⁷

In the UK, we spend less than a third of that, around 0.5 per cent, and over 29 per cent of women with children between three and four years old are out of the workforce.⁸ That is millions held back not by choice, but by a broken system.

Swedish society sees the benefits: higher maternal employment and better outcomes for children.

The UK is falling behind. But we don't have to. We can choose to lead.



THE VILLAGE

The vision of universal free childcare should be something that can unite people from all parties and across the political spectrum in the UK.

A broad base, standing side by side, recognising that children are not raised through sheer individual willpower. When we raise them well, we do it together.

The adage "it takes a village to raise a child", resonates for parents everywhere. In our country today, nurseries, childminders, and early years workers are a vital part of that village.

And the pandemic lockdowns proved just how interdependent we all are. Nurseries and childminders enabled millions of key workers to do their jobs, keeping supermarkets, the NHS, and essential services going through the worst of the crisis.

WHAT WOULD A UNIVERSAL EARLY YEARS FUTURE BE LIKE?

All children would have a place and be welcomed into safe, joyful spaces that nurture curiosity and confidence.

All parents would be able to work or study and find some much-needed respite from the daily strain of holding everything together - knowing their children are thriving. Early years workers would be respected, empowered, and fairly paid.

Universal early years provision would transform lives and boost our economy. When parents, especially mothers, can work if they choose to, productivity rises. Investment in care would create jobs in every region.

The Women's Budget Group has found that investing two per cent of GDP in care would create twice as many jobs as the same investment in construction, and these are greener jobs too.⁹

In an age of rapid technological change, remember: care cannot be automated. No AI can change a nappy, comfort a child, teach them to share, or celebrate their first steps. Care is high-value human work. It is high time we treated it that way.

By investing in the foundations, we will reap rewards for generations, and everyone – whether they have children or not – will feel the benefits.

Our case study Sarah is an early years provider in London who fears for the 28 staff and 67 children in her two early years settings if she can't keep them going:

“You don't know what you've got till it's gone.” Early years providers are the foundation of children's educational journeys, and without proper recognition and support, the sector is at risk of becoming unsustainable and unable to provide high-quality care.

“They won't realise the impact early years have on children and families, on the whole economy,... how we enable families to work and get parents back to work... And how we support [parents who are just coming into the world of parenting] with our resources, our own education and life experience.”



A PUBLIC GOOD, NOT A PRIVATE PROBLEM

Every one of us was once a baby. We all needed feeding, soothing, and showing the world. No one gets through childhood alone. And no one, no matter how successful, starts from nothing.

That's why universal early years provision is not a niche idea. It's a shared investment in the country we want to be. A society that cares for its youngest, cares for everyone.

We fund the NHS, state schools, and public transport because they benefit us all. Early years care and education belong in that category.

It supports healthy development, future employment prospects, and a fairer society. Research shows stellar ratios of benefits to costs for childcare investment, and every £1 spent on

high-quality early years provision can return over £7 in lifetime benefits.¹⁰ One major US study estimated an annual return of 13.7% on such investment.¹¹

When we treat early years as a public good, by fully funding it like we do with state schools or hospitals, we move beyond postcode lotteries. We build a system where quality is consistent, professionals are supported, and parents no longer drown in stress and invoices.

Let's fully recognise early years care and education as national infrastructure that we have a stake in. Funding it properly is not just common sense, it is very sound economics.

Our case study with Eleanor and Aisha shows that single parents can face unique challenges in accessing and affording childcare, despite having a greater and more urgent need

This epitomises the need for childcare to be seen as a vital social service and provided universally and free at the point of need, following the values and principles that led to the founding of the NHS.

Aisha told us:

"The cost is killing"

"It's a struggle to make ends meet"

"You have no extra helping hands"

Eleanor said:

"If you're a single parent, you're already juggling so much."

"And if you're on Universal Credit, the childcare system is complete chaos."



THE OPPORTUNITY WE CANNOT AFFORD TO MISS

We know what works. We know what is needed. And we know the cost of doing nothing is too high.

We can keep muddling through with inadequately funded, overstretched services, exhausted parents, and undervalued care workers. Or we can build a system that reflects the best of who we are and nurtures the citizens of tomorrow.

Let's recognise early years care and education as essential infrastructure by funding it properly and unlocking its true power, for families, for children, for society.

Let's reduce the impossible load that keeps too many parents, especially mothers, out of the workforce.

Let's reward the early years professionals who are the backbone of our economy and society, by lifting their pay and improving their conditions.

Let's build the future of our country on care.



STEPPING STONES TO UNIVERSALISM

MORE INVESTMENT NOW

In recent years, determined campaigning has opened up political space for more childcare reforms that help parents, particularly those in work, by increasing support and entitlements.

But these risk being only theoretical gains for too many parents without more efforts from policymakers to support an increase in the amount and quality of childcare available to take up in every local area.

This ‘supply side’ has been neglected, and that is where we believe the system is now most fragile.

Recommendation 1

Above all, we want to see significant additional Government investment in supporting childcare providers to offer parents good, affordable options throughout the year.

Polling shows this has very broad and increasing public support: currently 69 per cent of the general public believe that investment in early education and childcare is good for the whole country, not just parents.¹²

CARE FOR THE CARERS

Our further, immediate policy ideas below are:

- intended to stabilise and strengthen the early years workforce, the linchpin of the system, by improving recruitment, retention, and morale and supporting providers’ sustainability
- able to be rolled out quickly
- designed to help parents indirectly, by protecting staff and capacity.



Training and progression guarantee

“Care work should be a career, not a stopgap.”

Recommendation 2

Commit to fully funding access to Level 3-5 qualifications as part of the Best Start in Life Strategy.

Recommendation 3

Introduce a right to paid time for training (a minimum CPD entitlement per year).

Recommendation 4

Commit to invest in SEND-specialist training to upskill and empower the workforce in the upcoming Schools White Paper.

Rationale: Professionalising the sector raises quality and morale without raising costs to parents.

Pay floor and pay transparency measures

"No one working in early years should be struggling to get by on poverty wages."

Recommendation 5

Introduce a sector-specific minimum pay rate for qualified staff, and aim to cover costs at provider level by reduced National Insurance burdens.

Recommendation 6

Require all settings in receipt of public funds to publish pay bands.

Rationale: Names and numbers matter - this shifts the debate on value.

Early years work shouldn't make you sick

"We ask them to care for our children. But who is caring for them?"

Recommendation 7

Introduced a guaranteed improved sick pay floor for all early years workers.

Recommendation 8

Invest in new wellbeing grants for early years settings for staff to access mental health support, supervision, and breaks.

Rationale: Low morale is a silent killer - this builds resilience and retention.



FACT SHEET AND CASE STUDIES:

COST OF CHILDCARE

Impact of funding on childcare costs for under threes: Costs for children under three have reportedly halved in 2024 compared with 2023 in England, largely due to the increase in funded hours.¹³

Cost of full-time care: The 35 additional hours to get full-time care costs on average £238.95 per week for under-tuos and £225.70 per week for two-year-olds.¹⁴

Costs for parents who are ineligible: The cost of a part-time childcare place for a child under two for parents who are ineligible to access funding has increased by £105 in England.¹⁵

Rising costs for older children and all ages in Scotland and Wales: Costs for three- to four-year-olds in England have increased (by 4.7 per cent for a full-time place), and childcare costs have risen across all age groups in Wales and Scotland (by ten per cent and seven per cent for a part-time place, respectively).¹⁶

CHILDCARE AVAILABILITY

Childcare sufficiency: eight in ten local authorities report having sufficiently funded places for at least 75 per cent of children.¹⁷

Full-time childcare: Only 58 per cent of local authorities say they can provide sufficient childcare coverage for children of parents working full time.¹⁸

Regional variations: Only 44 per cent of local authorities in rural areas say they can provide sufficient childcare.¹⁹



SINGLE-PARENT HOUSEHOLDS

Single-parent households in the UK: In 2023, one in four families with dependent children was a single-parent household, representing approximately two million households and 3.3 million dependent children.²⁰

Poverty in single-parent households: Children from single-parent households are more likely to experience poverty (44 per cent) compared with those from couple families (26 per cent).²¹

Single parents and employment: Single-parent households face lower employment rates (65 per cent vs 83 per cent), higher economic inactivity (30 per cent vs 15 per cent), and greater under-employment (14 per cent vs eight per cent) compared with couple parents.²²

Universal Credit: In 2022, single-parent households made up 37 per cent of those receiving Universal Credit in Great Britain.²³

FINANCIAL PRESSURES ON PROVIDERS

Increased operating costs: Increases in employer National Insurance Contributions in April 2025 were expected to result in an average annual cost increase of £42,000 per nursery, which is not accounted for in Government funding changes.²⁴

Impact of funding gap: 92 per cent of private nursery providers report making a loss on three- to four-year-old funded places, with funding rates for this age group now 15 per cent lower in real terms compared with 2012-13.^{25,26}

Consequences: As a consequence of the rising costs, 95 per cent of providers are likely to be forced to increase fees for unfunded hours, 52 per cent might need to reduce the number of funded places, 39 per cent might completely withdraw from offering funded places, and 40 per cent are likely to close their service.²⁷

EARLY YEARS WORKERS

High turnover intentions: 57 per cent of nursery and pre-school staff and 38 per cent of childminders are considering leaving the early years sector.²⁸

Recruitment crisis: 78 per cent of early years settings found it difficult to recruit staff in 2023-2024, and almost half (48 per cent) found it very difficult.²⁹

Increasing demand for childcare workers: An increase in early years job vacancies of 146 per cent observed in January 2024, compared with pre-pandemic levels, demonstrates rising concerns about staff shortages and the sector's ability to recruit the additional workers needed to support the expansion of early years entitlement.³⁰



Now read our real-life case studies (all names have been substituted for privacy)

FALLING THROUGH THE GAPS: NAVIGATING FUNDING ELIGIBILITY

Jess' memories from last summer are a blur of numbers, forms, job applications, and frustration. With her husband at home due to mental health reasons, Jess desperately searching for a full-time job, and their two young children needing childcare, every decision felt like a balancing act between the cost of childcare and family needs.

Hours were spent navigating government websites, trying to piece together what childcare support her now three-and-a-half-year-old son, Matthew, might be entitled to.

Each search led to conflicting answers, leaving her more confused than before. "Matthew has epilepsy and there's lots of information that is mixed about whether he gets more funded hours or whether he doesn't... It's very challenging to understand what the entitlement is and how to make it work for us." Jess sighs. "I think the conclusion is he just has the standard 15 hours", she says. "I've just given up now... but it's just something else to worry about and think about on top of financial house bills."

While average childcare costs for children under three in England have more than halved due to the increase in funded hours, costs for three and four-year-olds and unfunded hours have risen, with families ineligible or unable to access funded hours facing additional financial barriers to accessing childcare.^{31,32}

Jess has now secured a full-time position, while John is a stay-at-home dad for their two children. Matthew started nursery using the 15 hours of funded entitlement when he turned three, but the family cannot afford additional hours. Despite the limited hours, they have helped to provide essential respite for John.

Case study: Jess

Location: Somerset

Role: Working parent

Key themes: Cost of childcare, ineligibility for funded hours and difficulties navigating eligibility criteria, negative impacts on children's development/school readiness and parental wellbeing.

"Matthew requires constant watching... We can't take our eyes off of him because he has seizures regularly throughout the day. It's... not realistic that my husband could be a full-time parent at home because of his mental health."

Jess is grateful for the developmental progress she has seen in her son since he started nursery. Over the past year, she has watched his confidence and social skills flourish. The nursery has provided him with opportunities to engage with peers, participate in structured learning, foster his interest in reading, and build independence.

"When he first started nursery, he was very reserved, very sensitive, very quiet. And he slowly came out of his shell. And I think that's a lot down to going to nursery and being pushed into development activities and socialising with people his own age."

However, Jess is worried that Matthew has missed out on experiencing full-time nursery and what this means for his school readiness. He will only turn four in the summer just before starting school in September, and making the leap from 15 hours of nursery to full-time school is daunting. "That's a big jump", she worries.

Key Takeaway

Jess wishes there was fully-funded full-time childcare, especially from age three onwards, regardless of their parents' employment status or financial situation. "It's important for [children's] development, especially when they are working towards school age.... It's better for everyone, better for the economy, better for society, better for schools. I think it's better for families on the whole."

UNDERPAID AND OVERLOOKED: WHEN THOSE WHO CARE ARE NOT CARED FOR

"Change your job," a doctor told Olumide when she asked how she could break the cycle of infections and antibiotics. After 16 years in early years education, she eventually did.

"I had such a passion for it. I loved being around the children," she recalls. But the rewards were not proportionate to the physical and emotional demands and lack of basic provisions in the job.

Financial, physical and emotional costs of working in early years

"It's not paying off," says Aneta, an NVQ Level 3 qualified early years worker. Returning to work after maternity leave had little financial incentive. "It's not like you're losing a lot financially." Olumide, despite working 40 to 50 hours a week, found her situation increasingly unsustainable with her eldest starting university.

"It was just not sustainable to earn what I was earning." Colleagues in the public sector sometimes took on additional part-time work to get by, "but when you're already working 40 or 50 hours, that's just not possible."

Case study: Olumide and Aneta

Location: London

Role: Early years workers

Key themes: Financial, physical and emotional costs of working in early years, staff recruitment and retention crisis, impact of underfunding on staff's ability to delivery high quality care

Working long hours also strained her family life. "The challenge was being away from my own children and missing my child's sports day so I could be there for another child's sports day... I was struggling at home because I was so tired that I wasn't giving. I didn't feel like a good mum or wife... [But] if you drop the hours, you drop the pay."

The physical and emotional demands of teaching young children and keeping them safe and happy are often underestimated. "It's exhausting," says Olumide. "It's very difficult to be teaching children 11 hours a day, coming up with activities and keeping them entertained, making sure you're covering all the areas of development... You end up taking your work back home, which is not paid for. You do lots of extra things... because there are not enough people and support," says Aneta.

Without full sick pay and knowing the impact of staff absence on their team and the children, many workers choose to work through illness, further compromising their well-being. “You feel guilty thinking about who is going to be looking after those children today. And then you drag yourself in not fully recovered, and it becomes a bit of a cycle.”

Staff recruitment and retention crisis

Despite demand increasing for childcare, early years settings observe an increase in the number of staff leaving the sector with 78 per cent saying they find it difficult to recruit staff.³³ “People left, but they were struggling to replace them,” Olumide recalls.

Months after her resignation, her role remains unfilled. “People talk about it being like a family, but it didn't really feel that way. The whole time I was there, ... I had one person who was there the whole time,” says Olumide.

Impact of underfunding on staff's ability to deliver high-quality care

With nurseries facing rising costs, budget cuts have impacted staff's ability to deliver quality care. “When I first started, we were much better staffed. There was a much better morale,” Olumide says. However, reduced resources led to fewer staff and greater workloads. “It came to the point that we had to say: Can a manager come into the room so we can go to the toilet?” Basic supplies were also scarce. “They weren't spending money on resources. So, you're regurgitating the same activities or people were bringing in stuff from home. One member of staff would buy ingredients to do cooking with the children. She shouldn't have to do that.”

Key Takeaway

“Children are the future. We cannot give them a substandard early years experience, and the people who care for them need to be treated as such”, concludes Olumide. “It makes zero sense that I could earn more working at a supermarket.”

SINGLE PARENTS SINGLED OUT: IMPACTS ON FAMILIES MOST IN NEED

Single parents often face unique challenges in accessing and affording childcare despite having a greater and more urgent need.

Inaccessibility of childcare

“It was a nightmare!” says Eleanor, a single mother of three, as she describes her struggles with getting childcare for her youngest. Despite being on nursery waiting lists, no places were available when she returned from maternity leave.

Case study: Eleanor and Aisha

Location: London and Birmingham

Role: Single parents

Key themes: Inaccessibility of childcare, financial burden of childcare, barriers to access funding

She was forced to bridge the gap with unpaid parental and annual leave, and short-term childcare arrangements, including a nursery in a different part of the city. The mornings were characterised by exhausted children and tearful commutes to get everyone to different parts of

town. “I was having to drag [the older two] with me on the bikes. So, they were basically doing an hour round trip before school to drop their little brother... The whole thing was really stressful.”

Financial burden of childcare

There are approximately two million single-parent households in the UK, raising 3.3 million dependent children.³⁴ Single-parent households are more likely to experience poverty compared to couple families and frequently have to rely on Universal Credit to cover their costs, with single-parent households making up 37 per cent of those receiving Universal Credit in Great Britain in 2022.^{35,36}

“The cost is killing”, Aisha says, a full-time working single mother of a two-year-old in Birmingham. When faced with childcare bills she couldn’t afford, she had to borrow money from a friend. “I am still paying her back... but you can’t owe childcare.”

Her son attends nursery in the mornings, and a neighbour looks after him in the afternoons until Aisha finishes work. “It’s a struggle to make ends meet”

Eleanor, balancing part-time employment, freelance writing, and voluntary campaigning, is entitled to claim 85 per cent of her childcare expenses through Universal Credit. However, the high up-front costs and the remaining portion she must cover pose significant challenges. To cope, she restricts her childcare use to the funded hours and works flexibly, with some occasional additional hours at nursery. “There’s no real give. I already have way less childcare than I have hours of work.”

Barriers to access funding

Under Universal Credit, parents can claim back up to 85 per cent of their childcare costs, but the process is filled with challenges. Claims are often rejected due to changing and unfeasible guidelines on required evidence for expenses, causing reimbursement delays and financial strain.

“It’s so stressful because you feel so out of control. You rely on this money. And so, if you’re not going to get this amount back, then how are you going to pay next month’s childcare?” Eleanor explains. Additionally, not all childcare costs are covered. Essential expenses like meals or extracurricular activities, which are often part of a nursery’s standard service, are excluded from reimbursement. For families already stretched thin, these gaps add to the financial burden, making it even harder to manage childcare expenses.

The confusing nature of childcare policies also leaves many parents unaware of their entitlements. For example, someone who earns a bit too much to qualify for Universal Credit before might become eligible when childcare costs are considered. “I think loads of people who are struggling just don’t realise that.” Others, like Aisha, avoid applying altogether due to prior negative experiences.

Key takeaway

“You have no extra helping hands”, Aisha says. Both women emphasise single parents’ greater need for childcare and support. “But I don’t think that’s ever really acknowledged”, concludes Eleanor. “If you’re a single parent, you’re already juggling so much... And if you’re on Universal Credit, the childcare system is complete chaos.”

THE IMPACT OF UNSUSTAINABLE FUNDING ON EARLY YEARS PROVISION

When Sarah has a sleepless night, her thoughts are with the 28 staff and 67 children in the two early years settings she runs. “When do I send that e-mail to say we can't financially afford to do this anymore?” she wonders.

“I've got a business that probably isn't going to last the next year.” For the past nine years, Sarah has passionately run two nurseries focussing on providing nurturing, technology-free, outdoor, and nature-based learning experiences. Many families have returned to her settings with multiple children, with one parent now enrolling their fourth child. She takes pride in the reputation she has built, with local schools often remarking that they can tell a child is well-prepared for school if they come from her setting.

A major challenge for Sarah is the insufficient government funding. “The uplift [in government funding] that we get year on year doesn't quite match the uplift in national minimum wage. And it's awful to have to use this as the metric because, actually, we want to be able to pay our practitioners way more than national minimum wage.”

This financial strain left her uncertain about her setting's sustainability. And this is a common problem: 92 per cent of private nursery providers report making a loss on three- to four-year-old funded places, with the funding rate now worth 15 per cent less in real terms than in 2012-13.^{37,38}

Staff retention is another major concern, exacerbated by the funding crisis.

Case study: Sarah

Location: London

Role: Early years provider

Key themes: Unsustainability of funding, lack of recognition of the value of early years, staff retention crisis

“I've got a staff member who's asked for a pay rise. I don't even know if I can fit that into what we're doing here and what I might have to take away to accommodate that, because I don't want to risk losing that staff member.”

Sarah also highlights the difficulty in pushing back against the current system. “You know, [in other professions], they can strike and then negotiate their terms, but actually we can't afford to strike because if we were to close the nurseries for a day, that would finish some nurseries. They wouldn't be able to pay the staff without parents paying the fees for that day. So we're really stuck.”

Key Takeaway

“You don't know what you've got till it's gone.” Early years providers are the foundation of children's educational journeys, and without proper recognition and support, the sector is at risk of becoming unsustainable and unable to provide high-quality care. “They won't realise the impact early years have on children and families, on the whole economy... how we enable families to work and get parents back to work... And how we support [parents who are just coming into the world of parenting] with our resources, our own education and life experience.”

WHEN CARE FALLS APART: THE HUMAN COST OF CHILDCARE INACCESSIBILITY

Every Sunday evening, Sophie anxiously worries about Monday morning. Who will look after her son? Being unable to secure more than two days of formal childcare for her three-and-a-half-year-old son Adrian, Sophie relies on her parents for help. She works compressed hours to be with her son on Fridays. “It isn't the childcare that we wanted, especially when the funded hours came, because we're not even using the full allowance that we can get.”

Since her father fell ill two years ago, requiring multiple surgeries, his health has limited their ability to provide the consistent care their grandson needs. “It's a lot for them, especially as they're over 70.”

The inconsistency in Adrian's routine is taking a toll. “[His routine] changes so much throughout the week that by Friday, it's almost too much for him.”

Adrian doesn't eat and sleep as well as he should, and Sophie often has to negotiate with her parents to ensure he gets enough outdoor play. “We find on the days that they do take him out, he's just so much better”, she says as she admits concerns about the hours he spends inside and in front of the TV. Relying on her parents for childcare has caused difficult conversations and strained relationships. “It can get really heated and stressful”.

“I just feel like him being in the nursery more than two days a week would just have benefited all of us!” Sophie values the developmental engagement Adrian gets at nursery. “They send books home with him, and they do a lot of arts and crafts and all of those things that I really wanted for him.”

Case study: Sophie

Location: South Staffordshire

Role: Working parent

Key themes: Inaccessibility of childcare, negative impacts on informal carers, family, family relationships, children's routines and wellbeing, parental wellbeing and careers.

Sophie's challenges are not uncommon.

Childcare demands are rising with the expanded funded offer for working parents in England.

However, with the sector struggling to meet these demands, 69 per cent of parents of under-fives are concerned about the availability of places.³⁹

With her second child due soon, Sophie applied for a nursery place when she was just eight weeks pregnant, but was told no spots were available until September 2026. “And obviously, that's a bit of an issue because I'm planning to go back to work in April 2026,” she explains.

Left with no other option, she placed a deposit for a place at a nursery 40 minutes away and in the opposite direction to Adrian. “I don't even know how that's going to work.”

Commuting further for childcare and work while ensuring both children get enough rest, food, and family time feels impossible.

The emotional rollercoaster of navigating each week — the changing logistics, the anxiety over Adrian's well-being, and the tensions with her parents — has left Sophie exhausted. “I feel burnt out,” she confesses. “My mental health has really suffered”.

Both she and her husband work in demanding jobs. Sophie has built a career she values, but the flexibility that she so badly needs to work around the childcare arrangements has stalled her progression.

"The Government wants me to work, I want to work. But the system isn't allowing me to."

Key Takeaway

Families like Sophie's need more options, she feels it's unrealistic for families to be expected to just "get up earlier" and "commute further" for childcare. "Children, like adults, need a certain amount of sleep. They need to have time with their family. They need to have time sat at the table eating food."

All those things are so vital for their development, especially in these early years." She says she is grateful for the funding for working families, "but it's not working."

LISTENING TO CHILDCARE PROVIDERS IN BRIGHTON PAVILION

In April 2025, Siân Berry met with several childcare providers and local parents who are deeply concerned about the funding crisis facing Early Years settings.

A key issue raised was that Government funding for three and four-year-olds is now significantly below the cost of delivery:

"With rises in NI and wages this April (and no support to the Early Years sector for these rises!), the cost of our service is £10.70 per hour, per child. The funding is £5.35 per hour, per child."

A local childminder said: "My ratios are 1:3 therefore if I have three three-four-year-olds and taking account of resources I need to buy, I'm actually working for below the minimum wage."

And the pressures mean some settings are facing closure or dramatic cuts in services:

"We are a well-established and very popular Early Years nursery and preschool based in Brighton, providing high quality education and care for over 200 children under five. Alongside countless

other Early Years providers, we are facing an unprecedented crisis, due to the unexpected release of newly published guidance on Early Entitlement funding by the DfE. The scale of these changes, combined with an extremely short time frame for implementation, puts the ongoing viability of many Early Years settings including ours, at serious risk."

"The current rate of funding does not reflect the actual cost! ... The offer 'free childcare' is not actually paid for. How do they expect us to survive?"

"We are being forced into making drastic, panicked, and far-reaching decisions that will have profound and lasting consequences for the entire community, directly impacting children and families, staff, and nursery owners alike."

"This threatens our local workforce and economy – If nurseries like ours can't afford to keep operating, families will struggle to access quality childcare, impacting parents' ability to work and putting even more strain on the local economy."

HOW DOES THIS AFFECT YOU?

GET IN TOUCH

If you are a constituent or campaigner and these issues affect you, I would like to hear your views about these proposals. Please get in touch at sian.berry.mp@parliament.uk and tell me what you think.



Siân Berry MP

Siân has been MP for Brighton Pavilion since July 2024. Previously she represented people in Camden as a borough councillor and was a London-wide Assembly Member for eight years, challenging the Mayor of London on issues from policing to youth services. From 2018 to 2021 she was co-leader of the Green Party of England and Wales. In Parliament, Siân's work focuses on justice issues, welfare, council housing, clean air, transport and culture, and she is currently co-chair of the APPG on Poverty and Inequality.



Mandu Reid

In addition to being a solo mum to a rambunctious 20 month old, Mandu is a strategist, facilitator, and leader working at the intersection of politics, movement-building, and social impact. In 2019, she became leader of the Women's Equality Party, the first person of colour to lead a national political party in British history. Prior to that she spent 12 years at the Greater London Authority, where she helped deliver the London 2012 Games and later oversaw the Mayor of London's £60+ million Sports Legacy Programme, which she evolved into Sport Unites, a strategy to harness the power of sport to build stronger communities. She now advises leaders and organisations on designing strategies that deliver systemic impact across politics, public services, and civil society

Picture credits

Page 4, March of the Mummies banner, credit Angela Christofilou
Page 5, child with placard at March of the Mummies, credit Farrah K
Page 5, social media image, National Day Nurseries Association
Page 6, childcare worker with placard, credit Farrah K
Page 9, placard in crowd, credit Angela Christofilou
Page 11, March of the Mummies demonstrators at Parliament, credit Donna Ford

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