

Half of UK Early Years learning workers paid less than minimum wage for 25-year-olds

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17 August 2020

The stability of the early years workforce in England, a report by the Social Mobility Commission, has exposed extreme levels of exploitation across the sector.

Half of England's 280,900 Early Years (EY) workers are paid less than the minimum wage of £8.72 an hour for those over 25 years old. Thirteen percent were paid under £5 an hour; 29 percent between £5 and £7 an hour; and 31 percent between £7 and £9 an hour.

Low pay is one of the main reasons given for leaving the job, alongside increasing work demands and a lack of training and continuous professional development (CPD). More than one third (37 percent) of EY workers stay in their job less than two years. This compares to a 47 percent turnover rate in retail and a national average of 29 percent.

Of the 280,900 EY professionals in England, 58 percent are nursery nurses and assistants, 33 percent are childminders and 9 percent are playworkers. The workforce is predominantly young, with 40 percent below the age of 30, and 96 percent female.

There is a pronounced pay gap between those who work in public versus private and voluntary settings (PVI). Of public sector employees, 47 percent earn above £9 per hour compared with 20 percent in PVI. At the lower end of the pay scale, 26 percent in public settings are paid lower than £7 an hour, compared to 47 percent in the private sector.

The report says this situation is compounded by "unintended effects of government policies such as the minimum wage and the 15 and 30 hours of funded childcare". EY providers rely on Local Authority funding for 30 hours of funded payments, which amounts to just £1,000 per child each year, if the setting has a qualified EY teacher. This is paid on an hourly basis, equating to an average of £4.38 per child,

which barely covers costs and guarantees downward pressure on wages.

Many EY staff are poorly qualified for tasks they are asked to carry out. Apprenticeships are a common route into the EY profession, especially for young people unable to shoulder the burden of university and college fees. But the apprenticeships on offer deny young people an in-depth theoretical or pedagogical training and are a form of cheap labour. Those under 19 years of age or in their first year of apprenticeship get £4.15 an hour. This equates to £8,632 a year for a 40-hour week. Average living costs for a single person excluding rent are £9,072 in London and £7,152 in Manchester.

Some EY workers told researchers they had to take second jobs, while others described themselves as living on the edge of financial survival.

The report found excessive work demands are leading to burnout and low morale. Staff cited "long hours of physically tiring work", poor child-to-staff ratios, excessive paperwork, high levels of responsibility and a lack of resources to help children, including those with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND).

Staff in privately run settings reported they had to pay for their own training and attend sessions outside of paid hours. Managers said they plan to spend 55 percent less on training in the coming years. But staff in PVI settings described their managers as being disengaged and controlling, with little understanding of what the job entailed.

A lack of adequate skills, including literacy, is cited as a problem. One manager explained, "We don't need somebody that can come in and just babysit children and look after them. They have to be literate, they have to be able to read and write effectively, to do the required reports and observations and things that we require." But without a massive training programme

and value placed on young workers to develop their skills, they are treated as babysitters.

Cuts to local authority budgets are endangering the most vulnerable children. A nursery teaching assistant whose family outreach centre had closed described the pressures on remaining staff, “We’ve got so much going on with safeguarding...We (are) trying to do the role that our outreach colleagues used to do.”

Safeguarding work includes engaging hard to reach families, protection from maltreatment, and ensuring that children suffering abuse or neglect are reported, which are statutory responsibilities.

Quality EY provision is vital to a child’s cognitive, social, and emotional development, especially in more deprived areas where parents struggle at home. In the last 10 years more than 1,000 Sure Start centres that provided a variety of services to support children’s learning, health, and well-being, have closed. Tory austerity cuts imposed by Labour controlled councils have forced the poorest families to rely on volunteer provision run by charities and the church.

The Social Mobility Commission’s research was concluded before the COVID-19 pandemic that has plunged the sector into crisis. The report’s authors note that many EY workers have been furloughed, but that even before the pandemic around 45 percent of childcare workers claimed state benefits or tax credits—well above the average among the wider female workforce. They warn this proportion will increase throughout the second half of 2020 and beyond.

A recent survey by the Sutton Trust into the impact of COVID-19 on the EY sector found a staggering one quarter of providers said they were unlikely to still be operating next year, rising to one third of providers in deprived areas.

Research by the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) shows that 71 percent of nurseries expect to operate at a loss over the coming months, putting thousands of childcare places at risk. The charity Pregnant Then Screwed found 81 percent of employed mothers need childcare to work and that 51 percent of these do not have childcare in place to return to the workforce.

The pandemic has revealed an existential crisis for early years education that has been long in the making. Mass closures and job losses are the product of a decades-long assault by the ruling class on public

education. Capitalism is incapable of providing the care, nurture, and stimulation that young children need from the earliest ages. Billions must be seized from the financial oligarchy to build nurseries, creches and pre-schools in every neighbourhood, and to fund well-paid jobs and training for all who work in the sector.



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