

COVID-19 infections among UK nursery workers deepens funding crisis

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The situation in early years education settings across the country is deteriorating day by day from the spread of COVID-19.

Nurseries and early years settings were not included in the government's limited national lockdown announced on January 4.

Nurseries along with special educational needs providers were informed they would remain open despite a deadly increase in the pandemic—exacerbated by a newer more transmissible strain of the virus—because according to the official government rationale the under-fives were “unlikely to be playing a driving role in transmission.”

These lies are refuted by the experience of nursery staff. Infections and hospitalizations are sweeping through nurseries and early years settings, particularly in the capital and the south-east of the country.

On January 18, *Nursery World* reported that four staff members had been hospitalised with COVID-19 from the London Early Years Foundation (London's largest group of “social enterprise nurseries”) and over a third of its settings had been forced to close.

There have been 48 positive cases at the London Early Years Foundation (LEYF) since the start of the year. In that time, 14 out of 39 LEYF nurseries have closed due to staff having to self-isolate. LEYF warned that many more nurseries are set to follow CEO June O'Sullivan described the new variant of the virus as “spreading like wildfire” among staff at LEYF's nurseries, with 22 positive cases in one week at one nursery and 16 positive cases across eight sites in one weekend alone. Following the nursery closures, O'Sullivan tweeted: “16 cases of Covid19 across 8 @LEYFonline sites in one weekend—48 cases this year (and counting), including four staff in hospital. What was the DfE @educationgovuk saying about nurseries being low risk???”

On January 21, ITV news ran a piece that contains video interviews with nursery staff on the dangerous and impossible conditions they now face.

Jo Godbold, the owner of Sunny Kids Pre-School Nursery in Kent—where COVID-19 outbreaks among staff have

forced the setting to close three times—said: “We've been told its safe. But that's a lie. Because categorically, people are getting ill. And people are going to hospital. We feel like we've been forgotten and lied to.”

At the same setting, Caroline White—who has two sons who are potentially at higher risk of contracting the virus—described the intolerable situation: “Most of us are scared. I've definitely had my moments where I've sat in bed and cried... You've got to be a motivator as well for the children. You've got to motivate the parents. To show them that they're safe and we're happy to have them back. But at the same time, you feel conflicted to be here yourself.”

As Sunny Kids Pre-School Nursery is privately run, it received no help from the government despite being instructed to stay open. Staff have had to purchase their own COVID-19 rapid flow tests.

An online survey, which was conducted jointly by the Early Years Alliance (EYA) and independent sector analysts Ceeda between January 15 and January 19, received 3,555 responses from those working in the early years and childcare sector. Data on positive test results is derived from survey responses from 2,675 nurseries and pre-schools and 673 childminders.

If the findings are even close to a representative snapshot across the sector then it paints a devastating picture.

The key findings were:

- Nearly 1 in 10 of nursery and pre-school staff and one in 12 childminders have tested positive for COVID-19 since December 1 (during a period of just 7 weeks)
- Around half of early years practitioners (48 percent of nursery and pre-school staff and 54 percent of childminders) say they don't feel safe in their current workplaces.
- Around 94 percent of nursery and pre-school staff and 87 percent of childminders believe that the early years workforce should be prioritised in the second phase of the COVID-19 vaccination programme.
- Based on these findings, the authors of the survey estimate that around 31,000 staff working in nurseries and pre-schools and almost 3,000 childminders have tested

positive for the virus since the beginning of December.

- An estimated 63 percent of nursery and pre-school respondents said there was “a moderate to high risk” that their whole setting may need to close in the next few weeks due to staff shortages as a consequence of the impact of COVID-19.

As many staff point out, in nurseries it is doubly impossible to socially distance as toddlers and babies need constant close care from nappy changing to the contact and affection that supports their development and learning.

There are currently no confirmed plans for lateral-flow testing in nurseries and pre-schools. Neil Leitch, chief executive of the Early Years Alliance, which seeks to “raise awareness of the early education sector amongst MPs, Peers, decision-makers and influencers” said the safety worries were “a cause for serious concern.” He called on government to implement rapid coronavirus testing among early years staff “as a matter of urgency.”

The government does not publish data on the number of COVID-19 cases among early years staff. Ofsted, the governments’ school inspectorate, publishes a list of the number of settings that have reported incidences of the virus but it does not include the number of individual cases, or provide a breakdown showing how many staff and/or children are affected.

This means that each outbreak in a setting reported to Ofsted is only counted as one in the statistics, even if there are multiple cases involved.

Prior to the pandemic, there was a serious funding and staff crisis in early years but now many settings are teetering on the brink and face closure.

The *World Socialist Web Site* reported in August on the dire situation in the early years sector, pointing out that 50 percent of England’s 280,900 Early Years (EY) workforce is paid less than the minimum wage. Low pay is one of the main reasons given for leaving the job, alongside increasing work demands and a lack of training. More than one third of EY workers stay in their job less than two years.

The article noted, “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.”

This was in August before the full reopening of schools in September.

As the pandemic worsens, nurseries and early years settings across the country are describing their workplaces as deadly environments, having to operate within a financial crisis.

The EYA/Ceeda survey found that:

- Early years occupancy levels are currently 58 percent in nursery and pre-schools compared to 86 percent in January 2020, and 54 percent in childminding settings compared to 92 percent in January 2020.

- 51 percent of nurseries and pre-schools and 35 percent of childminders expect to be operating at a loss at the end of the spring term based on current levels of government support.

During the autumn term, the Department for Education funded the early years sector based on pre-Covid levels of child attendance. During the current term, funding is based on the number of children currently registered at early years settings. This decision was made despite the fact that many providers have seen a huge fall in new registrations over recent months.

Despite nurseries remaining open, many parents have decided not to send their children due to fear of the virus. A recent Opinion poll for the *Observer* newspaper found a majority (61 percent) saying it is time for nurseries to shut. Some parents, because they are adhering to stay-at-home rules, are self-isolating. Many have lost their jobs and are struggling to pay bills or are on furlough.

High quality early years provision is vital to a child’s cognitive, social and emotional development, especially in more deprived areas where parents struggle at home. For those key workers who rely on nurseries, additional fully funded support must be available to enhance the cleaning and safety of all preschool and nursery facilities. Staff must receive full personal protective equipment and regular testing, with a fully qualified nurse on site at all times.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, is organising the fight—independent of the trade unions—to close schools and campuses, until they are deemed safe by staff. We call on all educators, parents, students and pupils to sign up to the Educators Newsletter and participate in upcoming meetings of the Committee.



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