

Views on the ground from parents, providers and teachers

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Key Findings

Parents

- 64% of parents said they have been worried about their child's development or wellbeing during the pandemic.
- 18% of parents in working class occupations were worried about affording general costs for their child, compared to only 11% of middle-class parents.
- Parents' views on the impact of the pandemic are mixed. 20% of parents felt that their child's physical development had been impacted negatively, and 25% felt similarly about their language development. Over half (52%) said their child's social and emotional development had been harmed.
- 69% of parents reported that their child being unable to play with other children had negatively impacted them, with 67% saying that the closure of facilities such as play areas has had an impact, and 63% said the same about being unable to see other close relatives had an impact.
- Over half (51%) of parents felt that the government had not done enough to support the development of all pre-school age children during the pandemic.

Teachers

- Over half (54%) of primary senior leaders said fewer pupils were "school ready" when they started reception this year than they would have expected before the pandemic.
- Senior leaders in schools with more deprived intakes were much more likely to say the proportion of students not school ready was higher this year (67% vs 47% in schools with better-off intakes).

- 75% of early years teachers said a higher proportion of children did not know how to listen or respond to instructions than usual, 73% said more children were struggling to play or share with other children and 69% that more children were struggling to hold a pen.
- Almost three quarters (73%) of senior leaders said more pupils needed additional support with their personal, social and professional development this year. 71% said more needed support with their language and development, 41% for literacy and 34% with physical development.
- Senior leaders were worried about the impact this reduction in school readiness would have on their schools, with 59% worried about increased strain on teachers, 51% about the long-term impact on children's attainment, and 42% worried about increased staffing costs.
- The clear majority (93%) of senior leaders in primaries said more time spent in early years provision before children start in reception helps to support school readiness.

Early Years Providers

Impact of the pandemic

- 88% of providers thought it likely they would still be open by this time next year, with 6% saying it was unlikely. This is a much smaller proportion than April 2020, when a quarter of providers said they were likely to close. However, this may be because many settings have already been forced to close during the pandemic.

The 30 hour entitlement

- 75% of the providers surveyed said funding provided for the 30 hour entitlement did not meet their costs. Just 24% said it met or exceeded their costs.
 - Most settings surveyed (73%) said they felt offering the 30 hour entitlement had no impact on quality, with 13% feeling it had caused a reduction in quality and 15% an increase in quality provision.
 - Just over half of providers, 52%, said the entitlement was helping families to work much or slightly more. Those working in the most deprived parts of the country were 13 percentage points less likely to say parents were able to work more, at 45%, compared to 58% of providers working in affluent areas.
 - 37% of providers said the families using the entitlement in their setting were better-off than the local community overall, with 30% saying it was representative of the community. In the most deprived parts of the country, providers were 10 percentage points more likely to say families using the entitlement were better-off than the general community (48% compared to 38% of providers working in the least deprived areas).
- disadvantaged three- and four-year-olds with an upper earnings cap for eligibility, or for the same extension with no change to the upper limit. Just 10% did not want to see any changes to the policy.
 - Those working in the most deprived parts of the country were more likely to favour making the 30 hours policy universal (38% compared to 24% of those working in the least deprived areas).
 - If the 30 hour entitlement were made universal by government tomorrow, many providers said they would offer it to all three- and four-year-olds, but only if the hourly rate was increased to meet their costs. At current funding levels, only 52% of providers said they would offer it, compared to 88% if funding was increased to meet their costs.
 - Many of these providers would be able to offer an expanded entitlement quickly, with 39% able to do so immediately, 13% within a month and 28% in 1-3 months.
 - The most common barrier, cited by 48% of providers unable to offer the extension, was not having enough physical space, followed by not being able to recruit enough staff (31%). Only 6% of this group of providers thought they would not have enough demand.

Views on reforms

- A large proportion of providers, 87%, said more families would take up more hours if they became eligible for the 30 hour entitlement, with two thirds (66%) saying many more would do so.
- If funding was provided at a level per hour high enough to meet their costs, the majority of providers would favour either making the 30 hour entitlement universal (40%), and a further 40% would be in favour either of expanding eligibility for

1 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a considerable impact across society. Disruption to the education system has been considerable, with many children missing out on normal experiences most of us take for granted. The aftershocks of the pandemic will be felt for today's children for years to come, with potential impacts to their future attainment, development, and wellbeing.

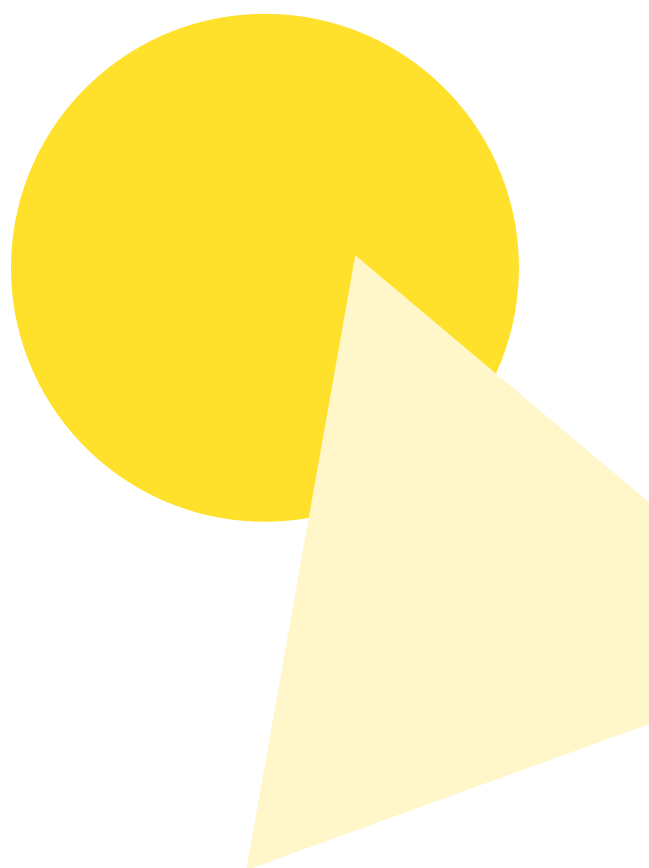
Pre-school aged children have been no exception, but their experiences have been given relatively less attention during the pandemic, and in discussions on subsequent efforts for recovery. Young children have missed out on vital experiences, with many having less time in early years education, as well as missing out on the normal day to day experiences so important for their development, like visiting relatives, making friends with other children, or even just a trip to the shops. Their parents have also faced considerable challenges, caring for them while also facing isolation and the removal of many of their usual support networks, while also perhaps losing work or even loved ones.

As outlined in the introduction to this report, we already know teachers are seeing the impact on young children, with 96% of schools concerned about communication and language development in children who first started school last September.¹

This section, building on previous research, uses surveys of parents and teachers and early years providers to better understand the impact of the pandemic on very young children, including unequal impacts by children's socio-economic background. Getting a better view from the

ground through this work will help give a clearer picture of the level of support these children will need in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Views of those at the coalface are also needed to better understand the opportunities and challenges of any extension to the 30 hours policy, which, as discussed, could be a vital intervention to help the poorest children recover from the pandemic. The qualitative work with providers in the first section of this report gives important detail and context to these challenges. In this section, with the advice and support of the Early Years Alliance, we have been able to survey 1242 early years providers, to get a broader picture of the practicalities of any expansion to the 30 hour entitlement.



1 Education Endowment Foundation, "Impact of Covid-19 on School Starters". Available at: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/the-impact-of-Covid-19-on-school-starters/?utm_source=site&utm_medium=search&utm_campaign=site_search&search_term=impact%20of%20school%20clo

2 Methodology

Parents: Out of an overall sample of 10,878 adults, YouGov surveyed 570 parents of 2–4-year-olds online between the 6th and 12th of May 2021. Results have been weighted to be representative of adults in Great Britain over the age of 18.

Teachers: To look at the impact of the pandemic on very young children who entered school during the pandemic (starting in the academic year 2020/21), 702 Primary School Leaders and 109 reception and early years teachers were surveyed via Teacher Tapp in June 2021. Teacher Tapp is a daily survey app that asks over 8,000 teachers questions each day and reweights the results to make them representative of the national teaching population, according to school funding, phase and region, along with teacher age, gender and level of seniority.

Early Years Providers: The Early Years Alliance is a membership organisation representing nurseries, pre-schools and childminders, with over 14,000 members. The Alliance surveyed 1,242 of their members, early years providers predominantly in the Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) sector.

The survey was carried out online between the 20th of May and the 9th of June 2021, with questions written by the Sutton Trust in partnership with the EYA. Respondents were asked for the local authority of their provision (provided by 1,201), which was used to match to the English Indices of Deprivation (IMD), to split providers into 5 groups by level of deprivation of the local area.

The make-up of the sample is outlined in table 1 below:

Table 1: Provider types within sample

Pre-school	53%
Nursery	30%
Childminder	12%
Primary School nursery class	2%
Maintained nursery school	1%
Specialist provision	0.2%
Out-of-hours club	0.2%
Other	2%

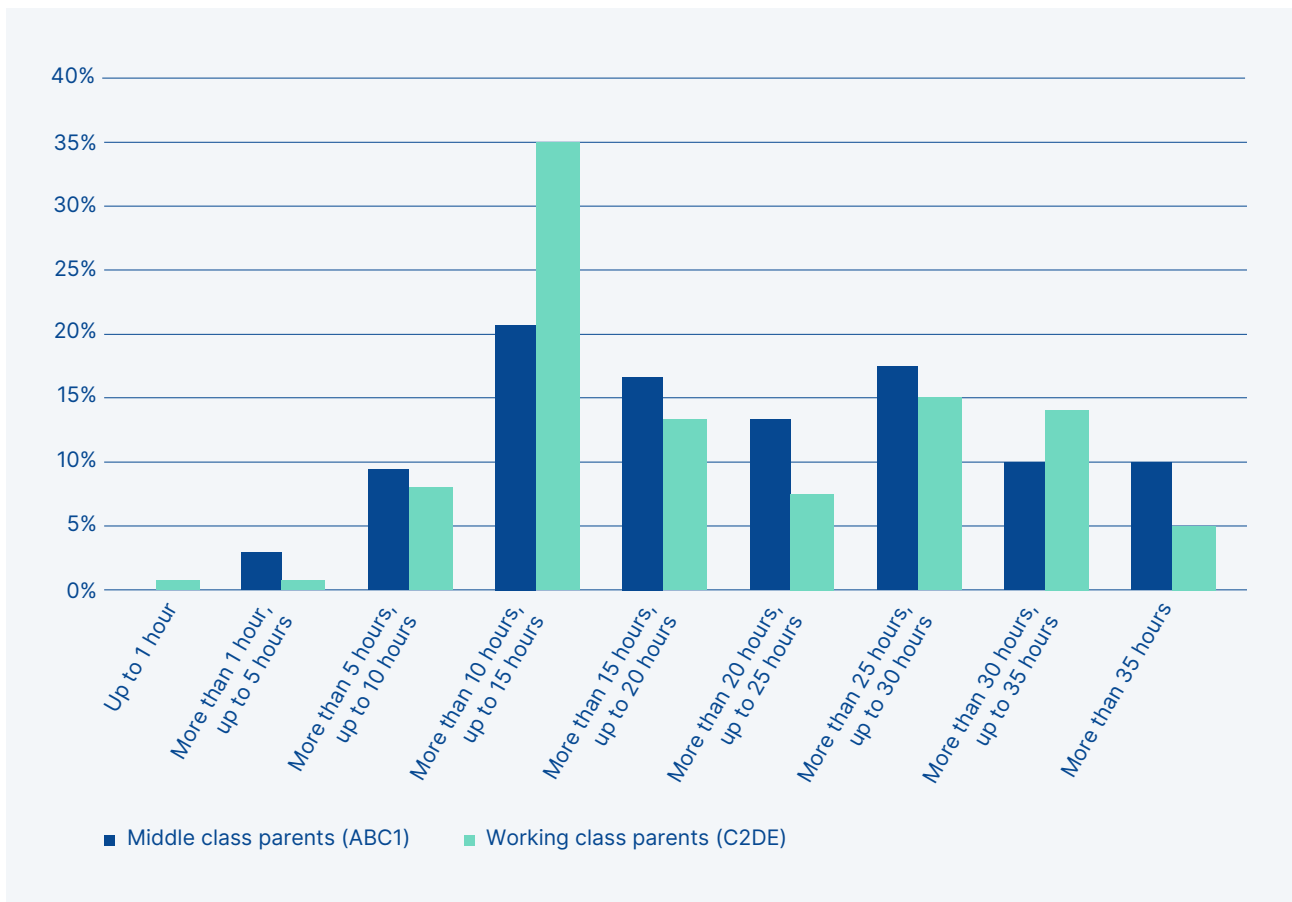
Parents

Attendance in early years settings

Of the parents surveyed, 35% reported their child to be attending an early years setting for over 15 hours a week, while 26% had their child in nursery or preschool for less than 15 hours a week.

There were differences in attendance by parental occupation, with 39% in middle class homes attending for more than 15 hours, compared to just 30% for those in working class families.

Figure 1: Hours of attendance in early years settings by parental occupation

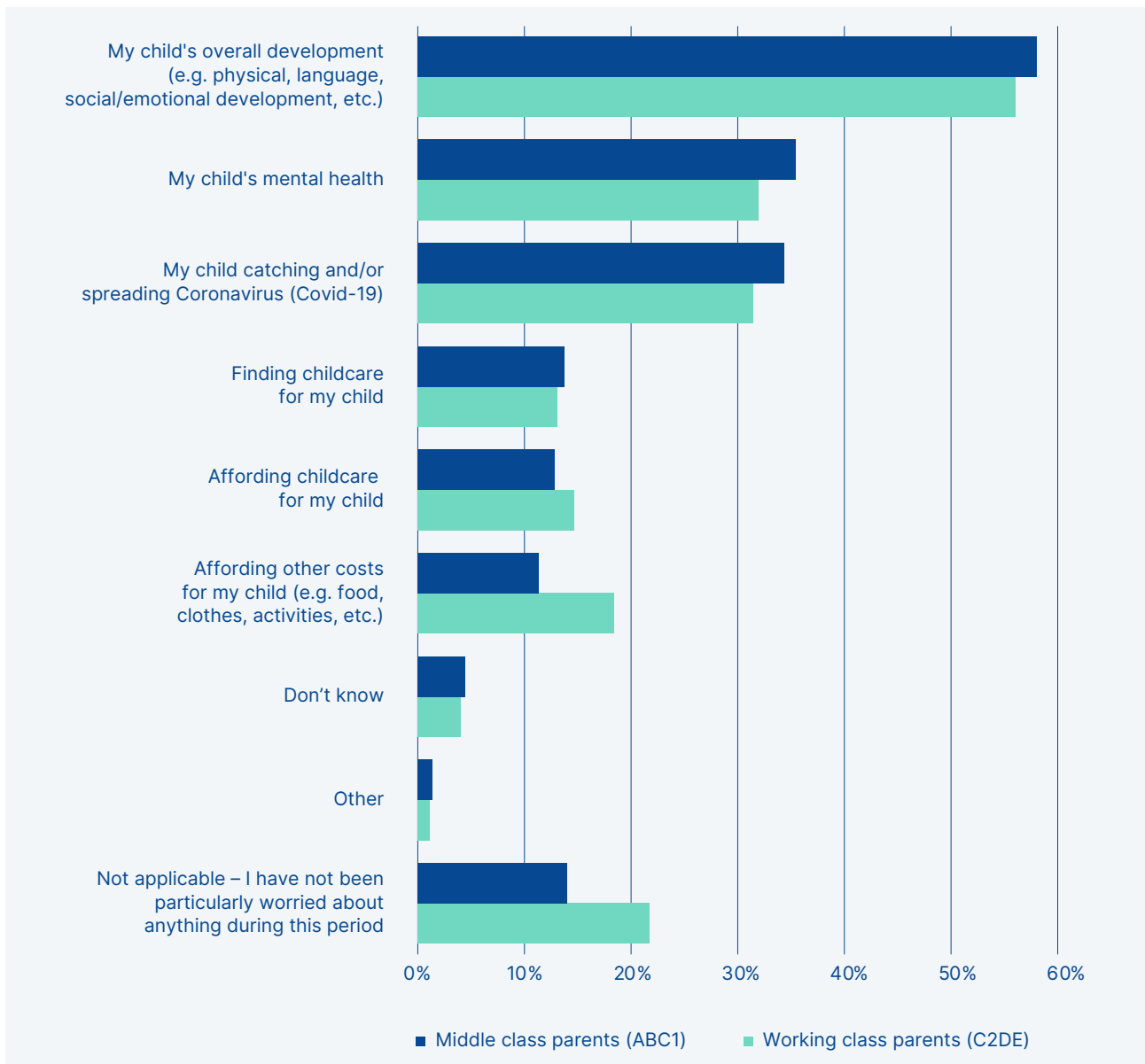


Impacts of the pandemic

Parents were asked any concerns they had for their pre-school aged child due to the pandemic, such as developmental issues or being able to afford childcare. A sizeable proportion, 64%, said they have been worried about their child’s development or wellbeing during the crisis, while 33% were worried about their child contracting Covid.

Looking at concerns by socio-economic group, 18% of parents in working class occupations said they were worried about affording general costs for their child, compared to only 11% of middle-class parents. However, similar proportions (13% for middle class and 14% for working class) of parents were worried about affording childcare.

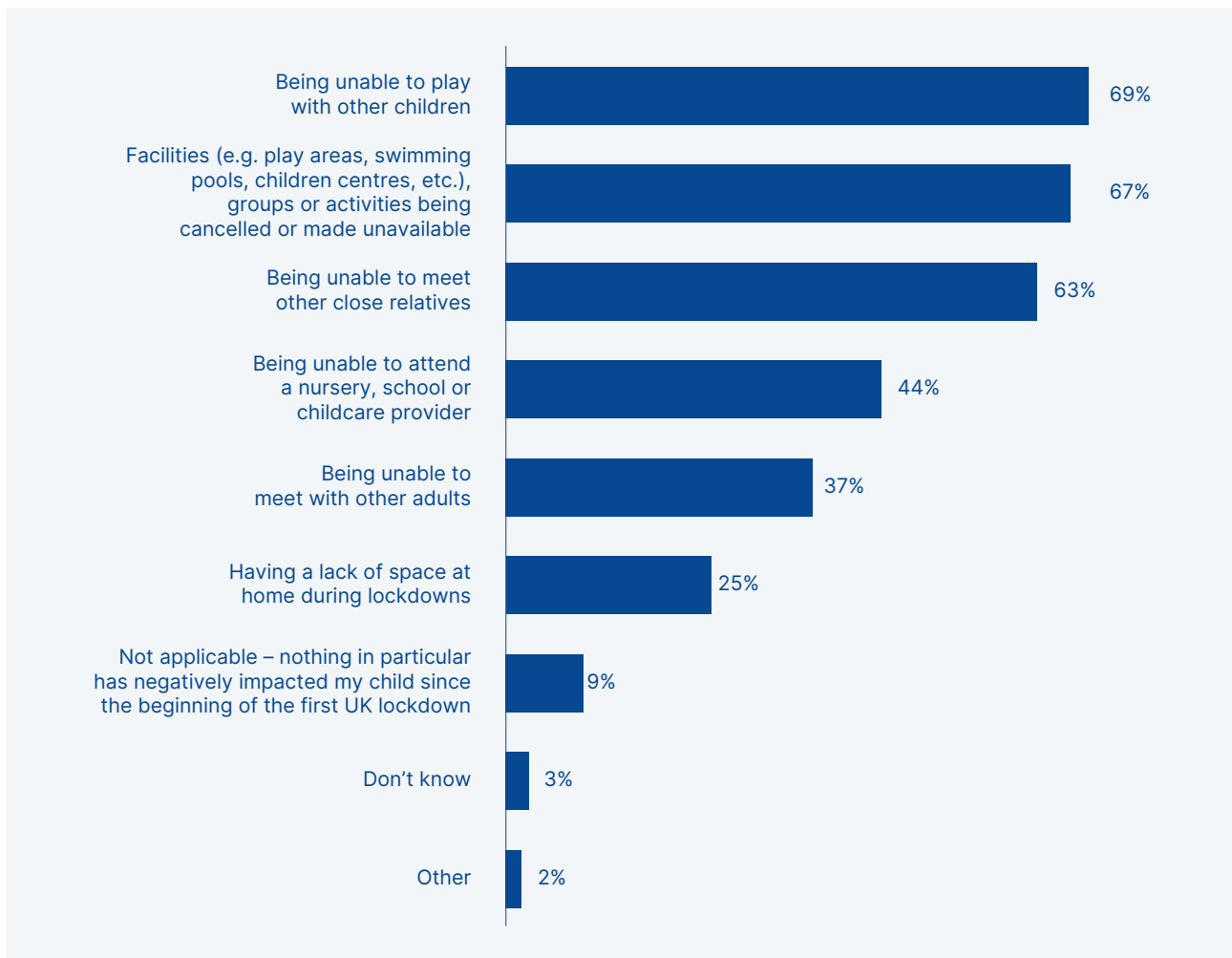
Figure 2: Worries of parents during the pandemic, by parental occupation



Parents were also asked whether aspects of their child’s development has been positively or negatively affected by the pandemic. Over half (52%) of parents said their child’s social and emotional development had been harmed during the pandemic, while 25% of parents felt their child’s language development had been impacted negatively, and 20% felt similarly about their child’s physical development.

Many of the normal activities parents would do with their very young children, for example visiting relatives or simply spending time with them outdoors, were not possible or severely limited during long periods of the crisis. Many parents (69%) reported that their child being unable to play with other children had negatively impacted them, with 67% saying the same about the closure of facilities, such as play areas, and 63% reporting that being unable to see other close relatives had a negative impact.

Figure 3: Proportion of parents reported children had been negatively impacted



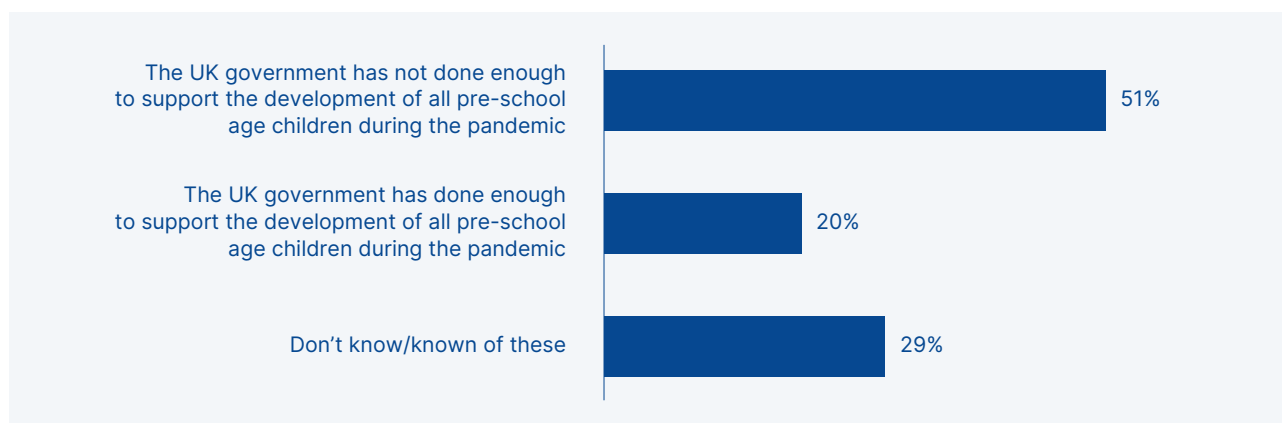
Government action

The pandemic has seen government intervention and spending across many areas of policy, from school catch up efforts to the furlough scheme. While government spending throughout the pandemic has been historically high, pre-school aged children have received very little to support them through the pandemic, especially when compared to other age groups, an issue the Sutton Trust has highlighted previously.²

Given that, it is perhaps unsurprising that over half (51%) of parents of pre-school aged children felt that the government had not done enough to support the development of children in this age group, as shown in Figure 4.

² Sutton Trust (2021). "Fairness First: Social Mobility, Covid and education recovery". Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/social-mobility-covid-education-recovery-plan-catch-up/>

Figure 4: Views of parents on the UK’s government support for pre-school aged children during the pandemic



Teachers

In September 2020, the first group of children started school after having their early childhood disrupted by the pandemic, and teachers are now able to give their assessments of the impact those experiences have had on them. This information will be vital in planning for future cohorts, as today’s one-, two-, three- and four-year-olds pass through their earliest experiences of education and into full time schooling in the shadow of the pandemic.

Here, teachers in early years settings give their views on children about to start school, and reception teachers and senior leaders in primaries report on the experiences they have had as this first cohort has entered their schools.

Impact of the pandemic on school readiness

School readiness is defined within the government’s Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) as children having the broad knowledge and skills to provide the right foundation for good future progress through school and life.³ However, concerns have been raised that due to the disruption of the pandemic and associated lockdowns,

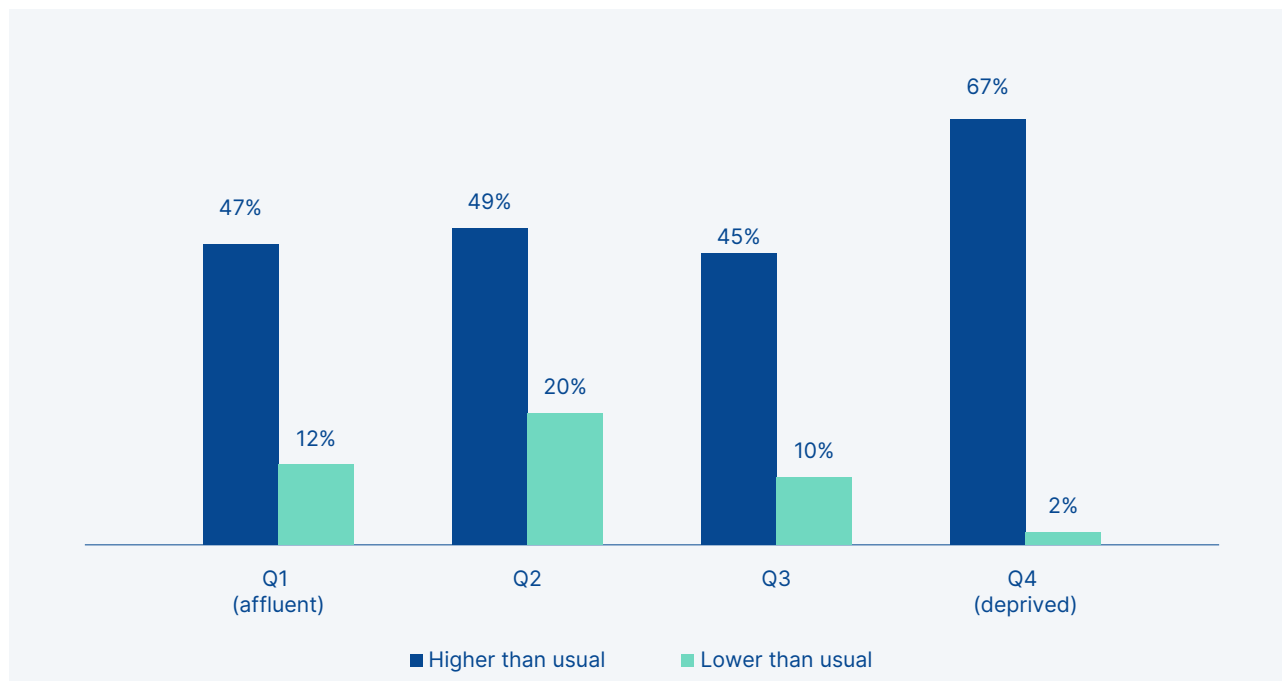
fewer children who entered school this year will have reached this level of development.

To examine this issue, primary senior leaders were asked about the level of students’ readiness of pupils who started in their school in the last academic year. Over half (54%) of those surveyed said a higher proportion of pupils were not “school ready” when they started reception at their school this year than what they would have expected before the pandemic, compared to just 11% saying it was lower than usual.

Senior leaders in schools with more deprived intakes were much more likely to say the proportion of students not school ready was higher this year (67% vs 47% in schools with better-off intakes), and much less likely to say it was lower than usual (2% in more deprived schools compared to 12% in schools with better-off students), as shown in Figure 5 below.

3 Department for Education – Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage (2017). “Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five”. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/596629/EYFS_STATUTORY_FRAMEWORK_2017.pdf

Figure 5: How the proportion of students not school ready in primary senior leader's schools has compared to pre-pandemic



The same question was also asked to early years teachers, including in early years settings and reception teachers in schools. These teachers interact with children more closely day to day, and together have a view of both sides of the transition to school, with those in early years settings seeing them just before they left for reception, and reception teachers seeing them once they had arrived in their schools.

Of this group of early years teachers, 59% said the proportion of children who would not be school ready has been higher this academic year than what they would usually expect, with 21% saying more students would be ready compared to usual. Looking just at reception teachers in schools (81 of the 109 respondents), 65% said that more students were not school ready, with 17% saying fewer were not school ready this

year. While 21% of headteachers were unable to answer this question, this was just 1% for the group of teachers, who interact with such children more closely.

Early years teachers were also asked about more specific aspects of school readiness. This work builds on questions asked in previous research.⁴ However, while previous work has asked generally about levels of school readiness this year, with high numbers of students reported not to be school ready, it has not asked teachers to compare current levels of school readiness to what they would expect in a 'normal' year pre pandemic, an issue which is addressed here.

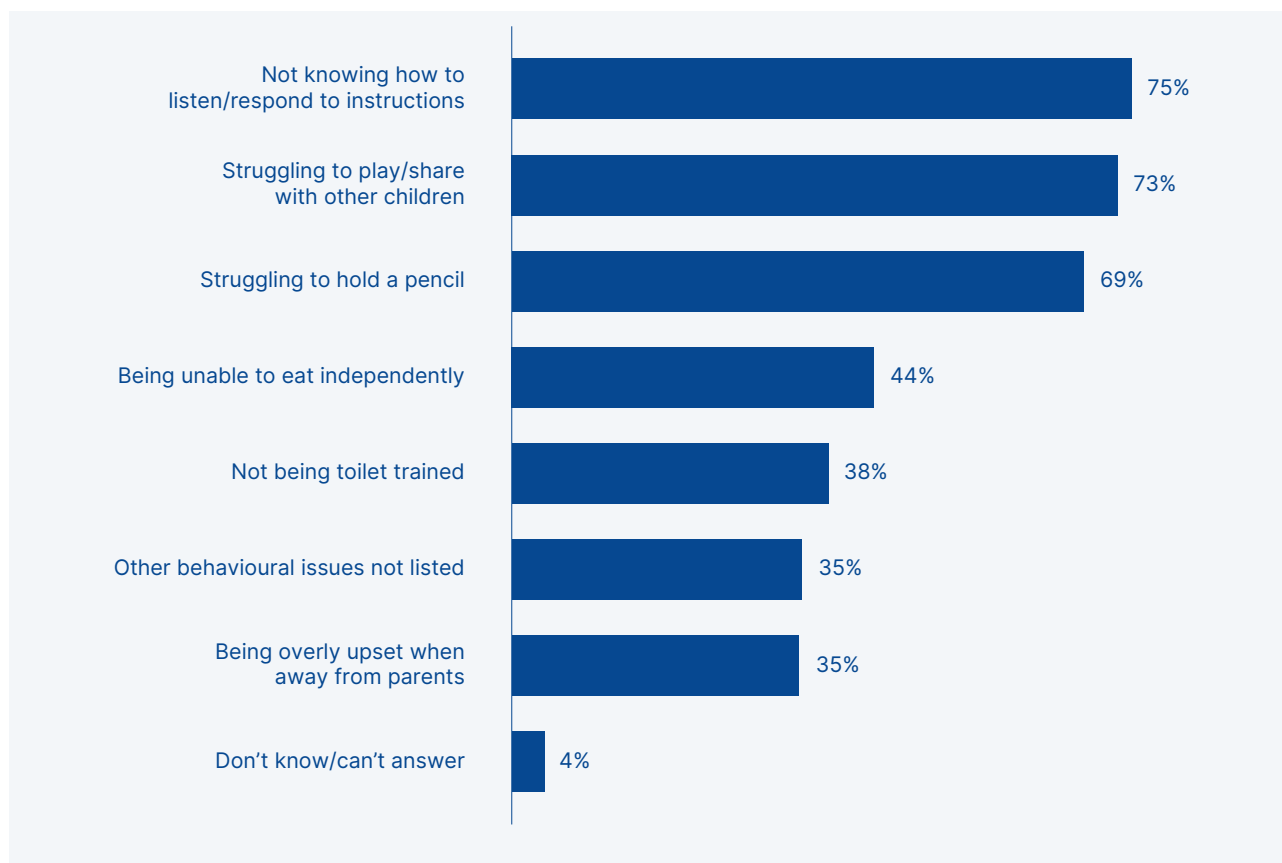
The majority, 75%, of early years teachers said a higher proportion did not know how to listen or respond to instructions than usual, 73% said

⁴ Kindred2 – "School Readiness". Available at: <https://kindredsquared.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Kindred2-YouGov-School-Readiness.pdf> and the Education Endowment Foundation (2021), "Impact of Covid-19 school closures and subsequent support strategies on attainment and socioemotional wellbeing in Key Stage 1". Available at: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/nfer-impact-of-school-closures-and-subsequent-support-strategies-on-attainment/?utm_source=site&utm_medium=search&utm_campaign=site_search&search_term=impact%20of%20school%20clos

more children were struggling to play or share with other children and 69% that more children were struggling to hold a pen. Some other issues were less common, but still with considerable proportions of schools seeing an increase.

For example, 44% of early years teachers said they had seen a rise in pupils being unable to eat independently, and 38% said there had been an increase in children not being toilet trained.

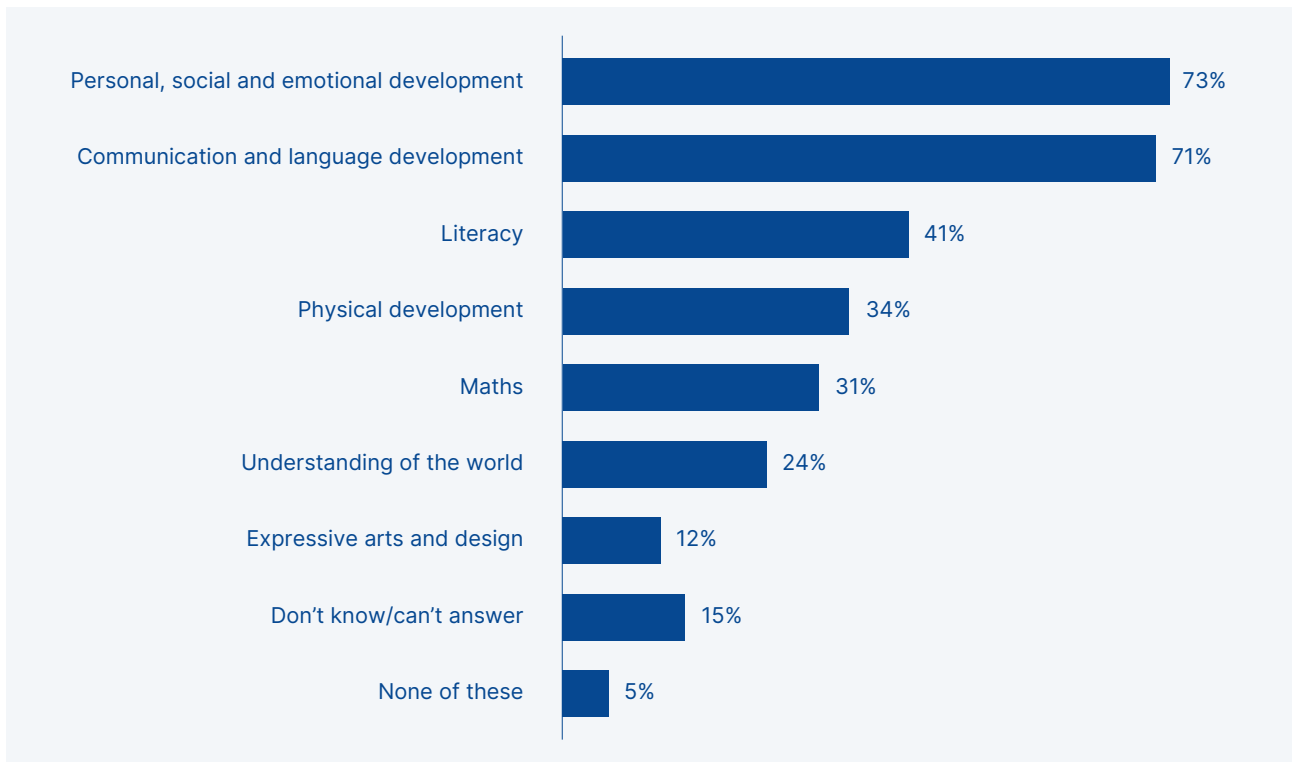
Figure 6: The proportion of early years teachers seeing higher than usual incidences of development issues in children starting at school



Senior leaders were asked whether pupils starting this year had needed more support in areas of the Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum than what they would expect in a normal year pre-pandemic. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the isolation experienced by much of the population during the pandemic, almost

three quarters (73%) of senior leaders said more pupils needed additional support with their personal, social and physical development. 71% said more needed support with their language and development, 41% for literacy and 34% for physical development.

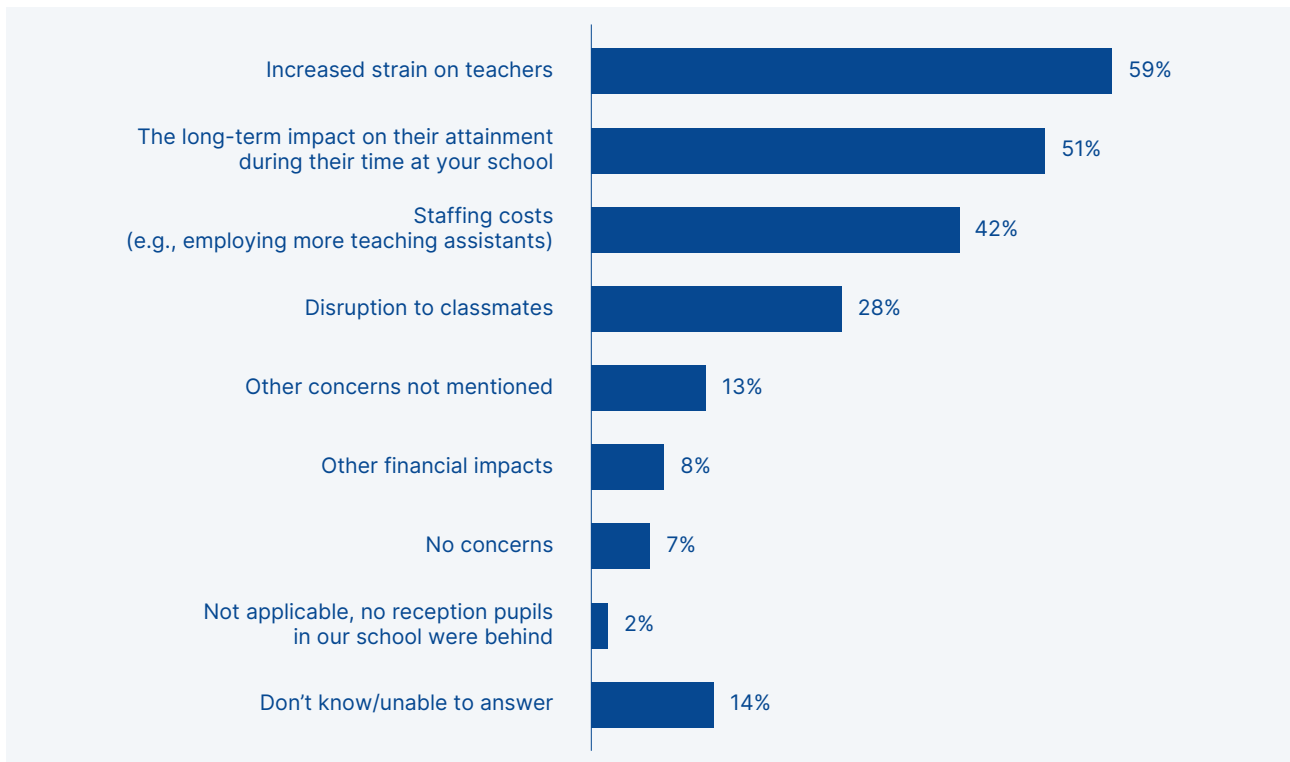
Figure 7: Senior leaders' views on whether pupils have needed additional support with areas of the Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum this year



Students not being school ready can have serious impacts on a school, with issues including disruption to other children and a need for more staff to deal with children's additional needs. Senior leaders were asked whether they were concerned about a range of issues due to more reception pupils being behind compared to before the pandemic. 59% were worried about

increased strain on teachers, while about half (51%) were worried about the long-term impact on children's attainment during their time at the school. 42% were worried about increased staffing costs, for example funding being needed to employ more teaching assistance to support pupils, and just under a third (28%), were worried about disruption to classmates.

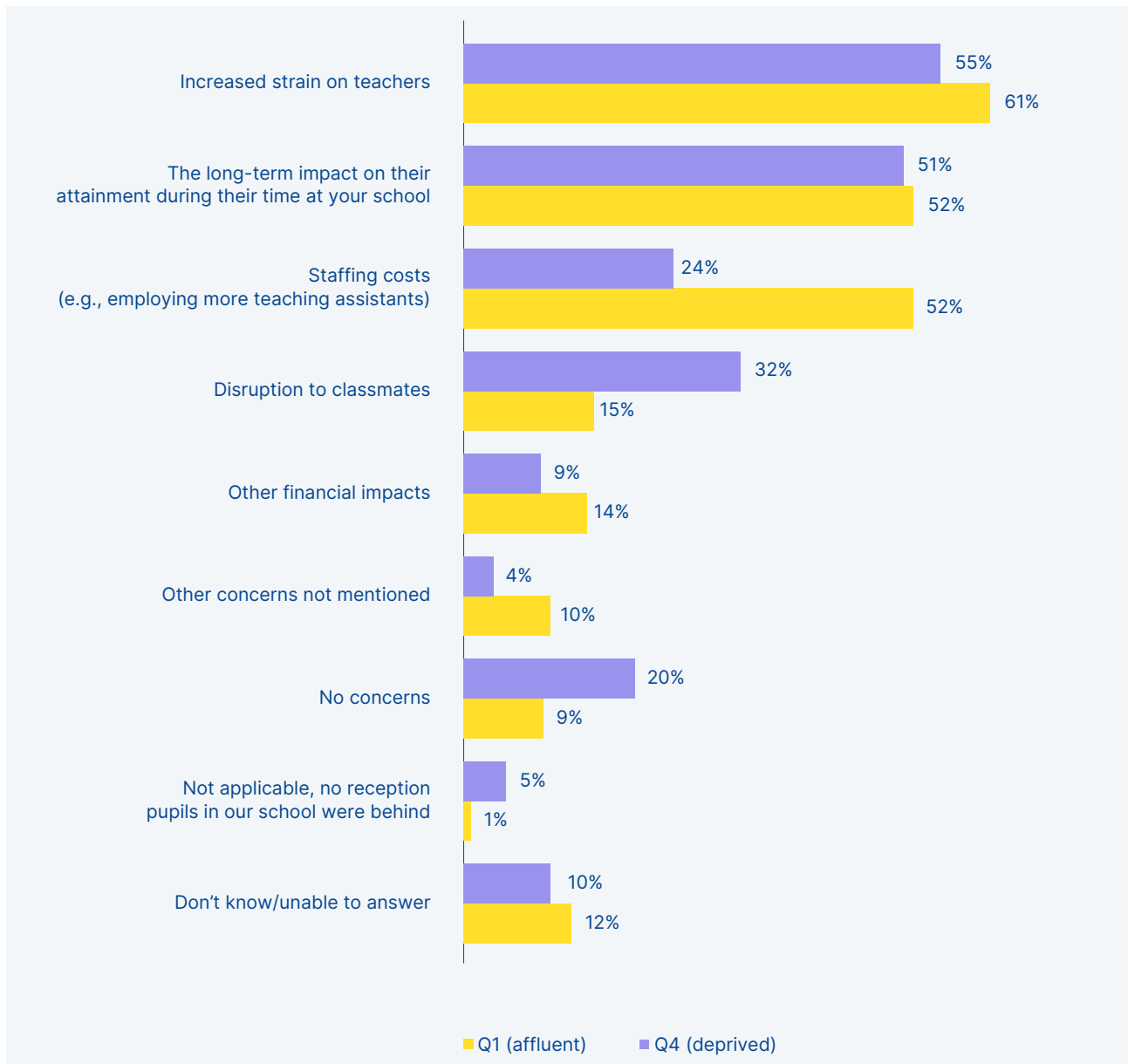
Figure 8: Concerns of primary school senior leaders due to reception pupils being behind



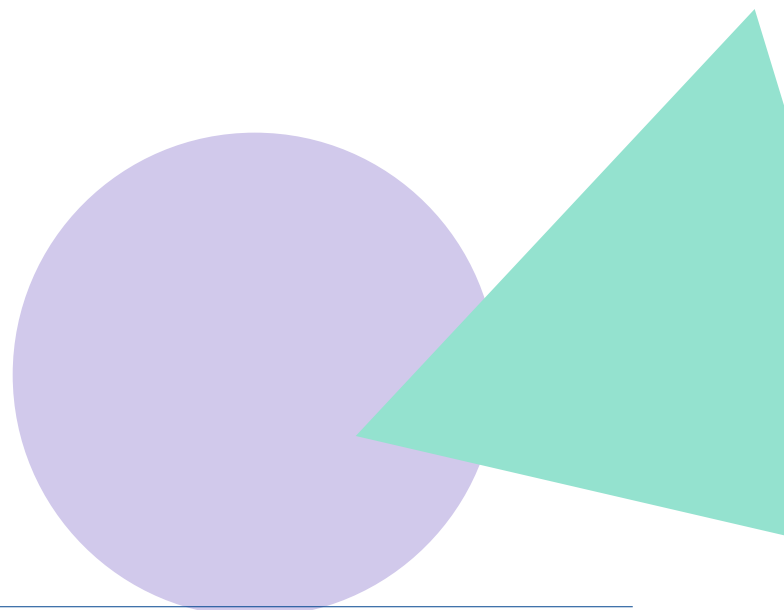
Interestingly, senior leaders in schools with more advantaged intakes were more likely to cite many of these concerns, perhaps because those with more disadvantaged intakes are more used to dealing with lower levels of school readiness in a normal year. 61% of leaders in more advantaged schools were worried about increased strain on teachers, compared to 55% in more disadvantaged schools.

A similar proportion were worried about the long-term impact on attainment for students (52% and 51%), but those with more advantaged intakes were much more likely to be concerned about staff costs (52% vs just 24% in less advantaged schools). Those in schools with less advantaged intakes were twice as likely to be concerned about disruption to classmates (32% vs 15%).

Figure 9: Concerns of primary school senior leaders due to reception pupils being behind, by deprivation level of school



Senior leaders were also asked whether, in their view, more time spent in early years provision before children start in reception helps to support school readiness. The overwhelming majority (93%) said that it did, with 71% saying it helped considerably.



3

Early Years Providers

Impacts of the pandemic

It is clear that young children have been impacted considerably by the pandemic, with consequences for their development, wellbeing and school readiness. Without action we risk primary schools suffering negative consequences for years to come. And most importantly, if children are not given the support they need to catch up, there is a risk it will impact them for the rest of their lives.

Early years providers, and the support they give to children, will be a vital part of the efforts to help young children to catch up and ensure the next cohort are school ready. But, as previous Sutton Trust research has shown, many have suffered considerable financial impacts during the pandemic.⁵

In April 2020, a quarter of providers said they were very or somewhat likely to close by this time next year.⁶ This has now reduced, to just 6%, with most providers (88%) saying it is likely they will remain open. However, many early years providers have already closed, with analysis of government data by the Early Years Alliance in May this year finding over 6,000 settings have already had to close in 2021, with a net loss of 2,000 settings.⁷ It looks likely that those in the worst financial situations have already been shut. Ensuring the survival of remaining providers will be vital to avoid gaps in provision, as demand recovers.

Although only 5% of providers in the most deprived parts of England thought it was unlikely they would be operating next year, compared to a similar proportion (3%) of those in the least deprived areas, they were more likely to be unsure (13% reported this compared to 6% of those in the least deprived areas), perhaps reflecting greater financial uncertainty for providers in these areas.

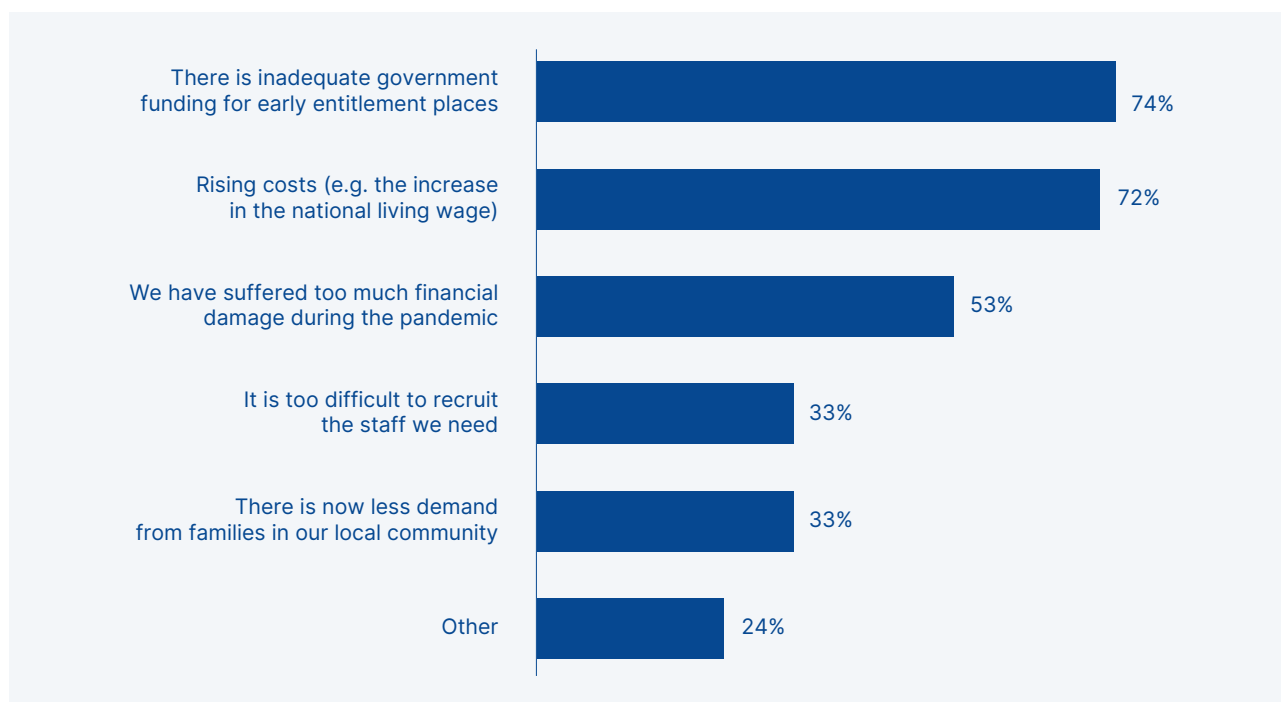
Providers who were concerned about being able to operate this time next year were asked why they had this concern. The most common concern was a lack of government funding for early entitlement places (74%), followed by rising costs such as the national minimum wage (72%). Just over half (53%) had already suffered too much financial damage during the pandemic, while a third (33%) said it was too difficult to recruit staff, or (33%) there was less demand in the local community. Of those who gave another reason (24%), issues included still having parents on furlough and the costs of PPE and Covid cleaning measures. One respondent simply said “it’s too exhausting”.

5 C. Pascal, T. Bertram, C. Cullinane & E. Holt-White (2020), “Covid-19 and Social Mobility Impact Brief #4: Early Years”. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Early-Years-Impact-Brief.pdf> and Early Years Alliance (2020), “A quarter of childcare providers fear closure within a year”. Available at: <https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/news/2020/05/quarter-childcare-providers-fear-closure-within-year>

6 Ibid.

7 Early Years Alliance (2021). “2,000 early years providers have closed since start of the year”. Available at: <https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/news/2021/05/2000-early-years-providers-have-closed-start-year>

Figure 10: Issues for providers who said it was unlikely they would be operating this time next year. Responses = 58



Only 12% of providers thought it was very or somewhat likely they would need to make redundancies in the next year, again a lower figure than during the first lockdown in 2020, when 47% said they may need to, but again, this may be because settings have already had to make redundancies earlier on in the crisis.⁸ There were no significant differences in responses by the deprivation level of the area providers were working in.

The 30 hours entitlement

We know from the first section of this report that currently, the government’s flagship early years policy (the 30 hour entitlement) risks widening rather than closing the attainment gap.

As we come out of the pandemic, and look to support children who have missed out on vital life experiences and development throughout

the crisis, it is vital that this is rectified. The poorest three- and four-year-olds, who stand to gain the most from more hours of high quality, adequately funded early years education, must be able to access it.

But what are the views of providers on the ground on any changes to the 30 hour policy? What challenges have they faced under the existing 30 hour entitlement, and what are the opportunities and challenges for them that would come with any expansion?

The current 30 hour policy

Of the providers surveyed, the vast majority (94%) currently offered the 30 hour entitlement, while 1% did not currently but had done so in the past.

An issue highlighted in the qualitative work with

⁸ Education Policy Institute and the National Day Nurseries Association (2020). “The Covid-19 pandemic and the early years workforce”. Available at: <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/the-Covid-19-pandemic-and-the-early-years-december-2020/>

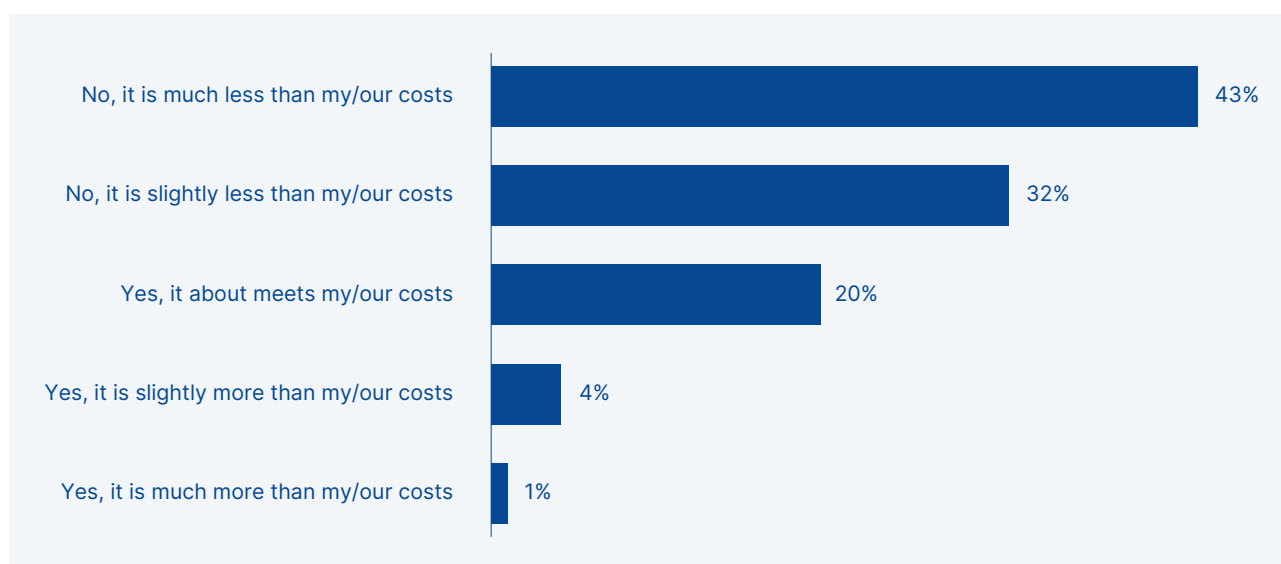
settings, as well as in data from a recent freedom of information request from the Early Years Alliance,⁹ is whether the amount of funding the government gives providers per hour for the 30 hour entitlement is enough to meet their costs.

slightly more and 1% that it was much more than they needed. From these figures, it is clear that for most settings, funding is not currently meeting costs, and that there is very little surplus funding in the early years system.

Providers were asked whether, in their setting, funding they receive per hour for the entitlement meets their cost for providing those hours. A considerable proportion (75%) said it did not meet their costs, with 43% saying it was much less, and 32% slightly less than they needed. Just 20% said it met their costs, 4% that it was

Interestingly, 78% of providers working in the least deprived parts of England said that the funding they received did not meet their costs – 13 percentage points more than those working in the most deprived areas (65% reported this), perhaps reflective of higher running costs in wealthier areas.

Figure 11: Whether current levels of funding per hour for the 30 hour entitlement meet providers costs. Responses: 1,054



While most providers allowed parents to use the 30 hour entitlement how they wish, without any requirements (72%), 28% had at least one requirement, with 12% requiring a minimum number of hours were used a day, 7% requiring all hours to be taken on set days, and 12% having another requirement (1,054 respondents).¹⁰

Another issue raised by the qualitative work with providers earlier in this report was that, as the 30 hour offer was more sustainable financially than the 15 hour for disadvantaged two-year-olds, there was a potential risk that delivery of the 30 hour policy could risk the 15 hour entitlement.

9 Early Years Alliance (2021). "Private government documents show ministers knew that underfunding early years would mean higher childcare costs for parents". Available at: <https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/private-government-documents-show-ministers-knew-underfunding-early-years-would-mean-higher>

10 For example, requiring all sessions be taken either across mornings or afternoons; requiring a minimum number of days; that children stay in the setting for both the morning and the afternoon; only allowing the entitlement to be used at set times of day; only allowing those using the entitlement to use hours not taken up by paying parents and only allowing the hours to be used during term time.

Here, providers were asked whether in their setting, offering the 30 hour entitlement had impacted on their ability to offer the 15 hour entitlement for disadvantaged two-year-olds. The majority (65%) said it had not had any impact. However, 13% said it had resulted in a reduction of these places for two-year-olds, with 4% saying there had been a significant reduction (1,056 respondents).

Another concern, related to the issue of funding, is the quality of provision early years settings can offer. Settings were asked whether they felt offering the 30 hour entitlement had changed the quality of provision available within their setting. Most settings surveyed (73%) said they felt it had no impact on quality, while 15% felt it allowed them to offer a higher quality of provision, presumably by giving a secure funding stream to settings. However, 13% felt it had caused a reduction in quality (1,052 respondents).

One of the aims of the 30 hour policy has been

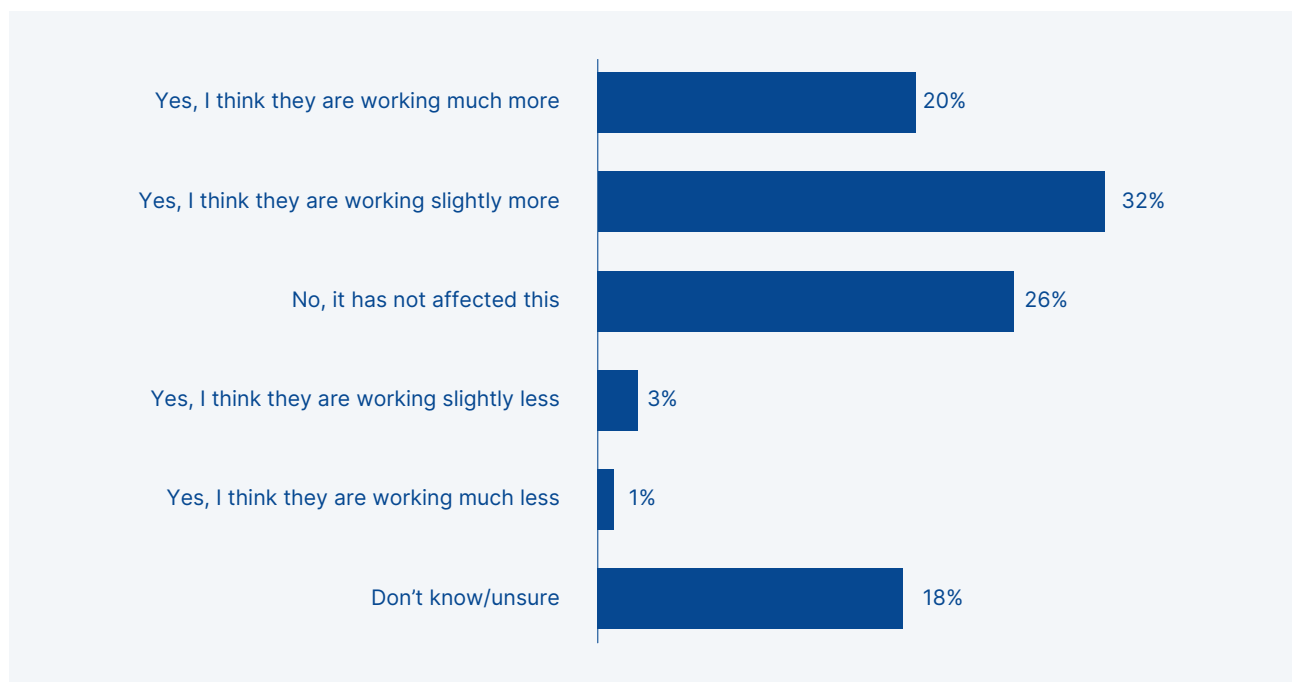
to help more parents to work, or to work more hours. Here, providers were asked whether they felt the current 30 hour offer was helping to change the number of hours families are able to work.

Just over half, 52%, said they felt it was helping families to work much or slightly more, with 26% saying it had no effect.

Those working in the most deprived parts of the country were 13 percentage points less likely to say parents were able to work more, at 45%, compared to 58% of providers working in affluent areas (although, 35% of the providers in deprived areas said the offer had not affected parents work, compared to 23% of those in the least deprived areas).

There are also limitations to asking this question to providers, as it may be difficult to know how much the policy has impacted the decision of families, perhaps reflecting why 18% of those surveyed said they did not know or were unsure.

Figure 12: Providers views on whether the 30 hour entitlement has helped parents in their settings to work. Responses: 1,021



37% of providers said the families using the entitlement in their setting were better-off than the local community overall, reflecting the working parent target group of the 30 hour policy. Only 30% said it was representative of the community, and just 5% said the families using it were worse-off than the community generally.

Those working in the most deprived parts of the country were 10 percentage points more likely to say families using the entitlement were better-off

than the general community (48% compared to 38% of providers working in the least deprived areas, see Figure 14).

However, again this was a question many settings found difficult to answer, with 28% of respondents saying they were unsure or did not give an answer to this question, and again a slightly lower number of providers choosing to answer this question.

Figure 13: How reflective of setting's communities are families accessing the 30 hour entitlement?
Respondents: 1,201

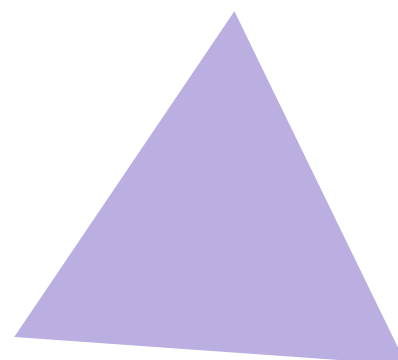
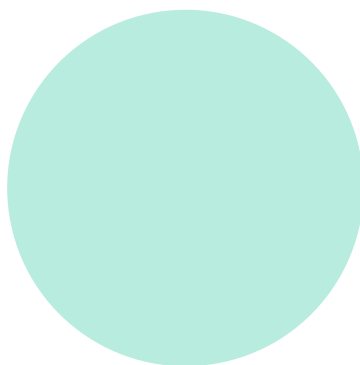
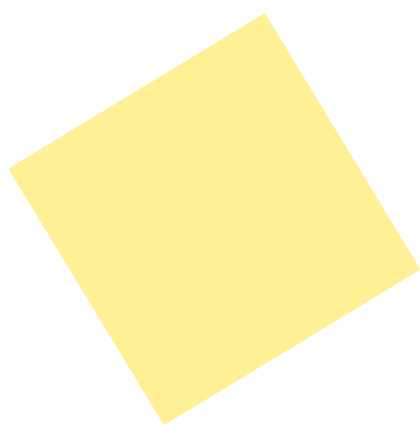
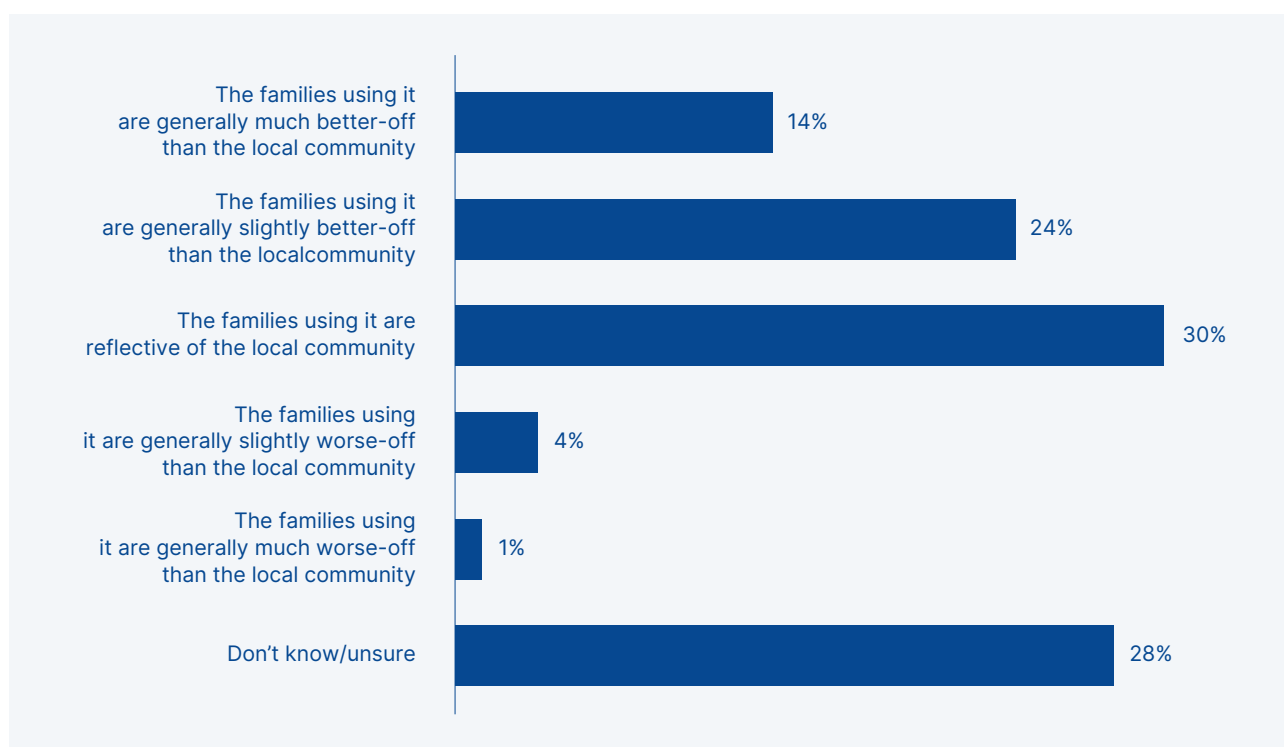
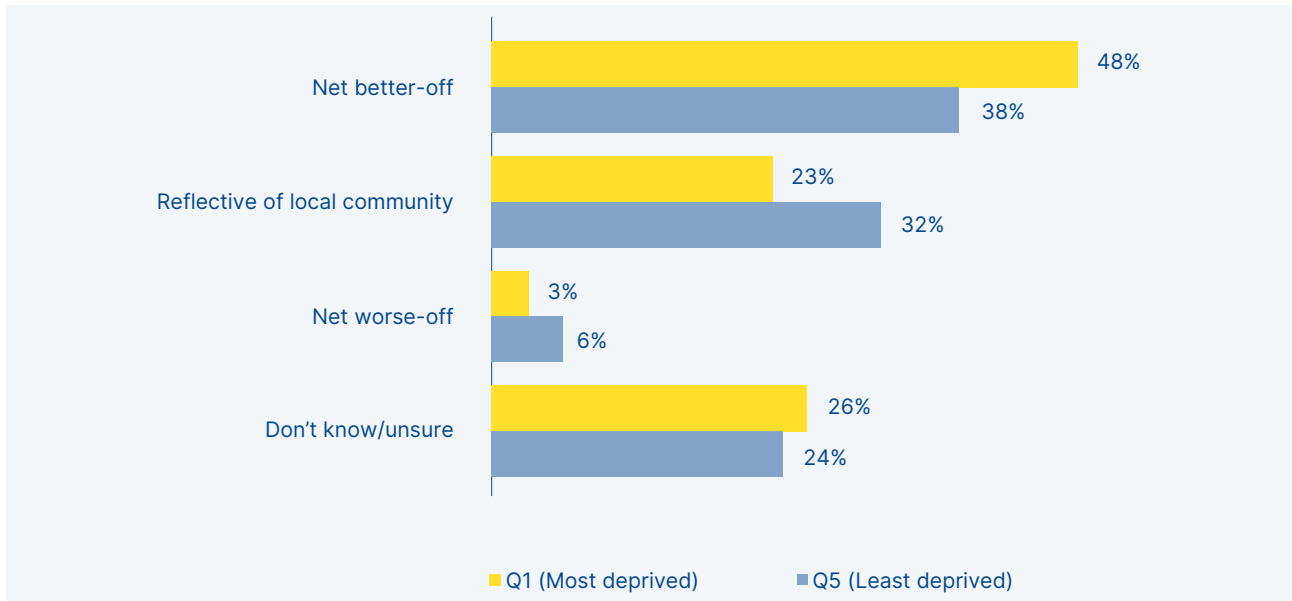


Figure 14: How reflective of setting's communities are families accessing the 30 hour entitlement? By deprivation level. Respondents: 1,020

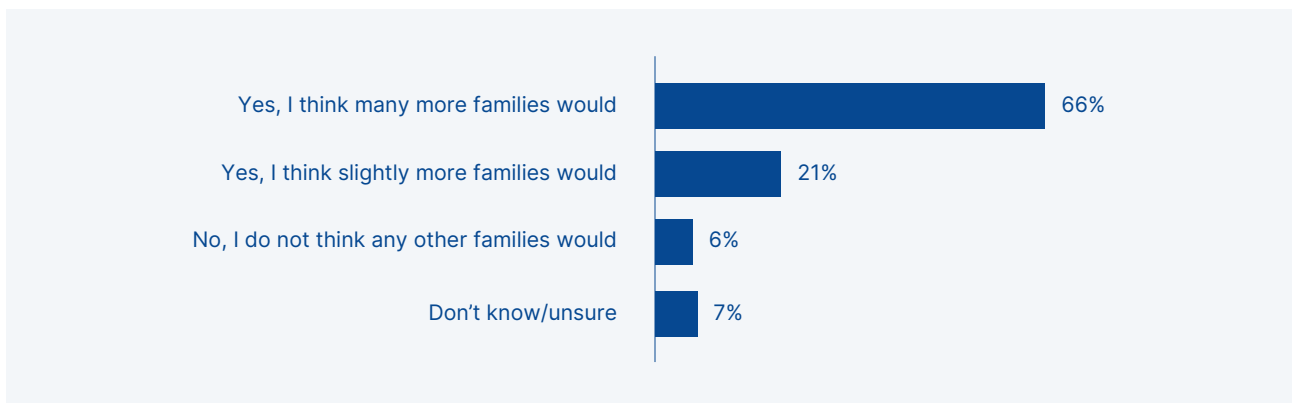


Another important question discussed in previous sections is whether families would use any extension to the 30 hour entitlement. Providers were asked whether any families in their area who are not currently eligible for 30 hours would take up more hours in the setting if they became eligible. A large proportion (87%), said more families would take up more hours, with two thirds (66%) saying many more would do so. Only a small proportion (6%), thought that no other families would take-up more hours. However, some providers were unsure (although a lower

proportion, 7%, than in previous questions), with again a similar number of respondents to the others here looking at parents and their behaviour.

Although those working in the most deprived parts of the country were equally as likely to say families would take up more hours if eligible at 85%, 69% said that many more would do so, compared to 62% working in the most affluent parts of England.

Figure 15: Whether there are families in a setting's local area, who aren't currently eligible for the 30 hour entitlement, who would take up more hours at the setting if they were eligible. Respondents: 1,021



Settings' views on potential reforms to the 30 hour policy

The next section looks at the views of providers to potential reforms to the 30 hour entitlement which would bring children from lower income backgrounds into eligibility, looking at whether they would want and be able to offer any extension.

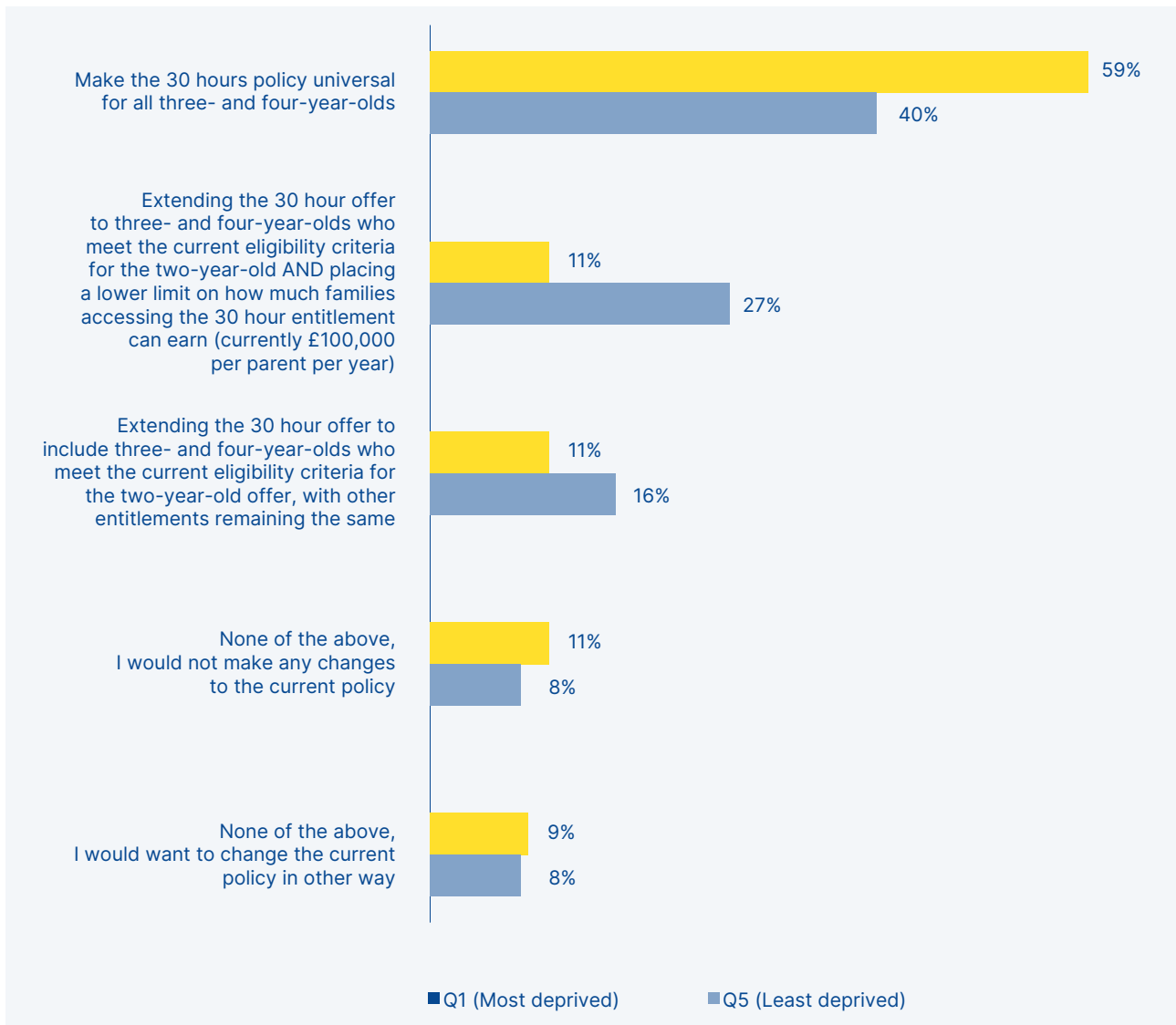
Providers were given a range of different options, and asked which they would prefer if funding provided per hour was enough to cover their costs, to ensure providers were able to give their true preference, rather than a compromise given concerns with the current funding rate.

In that scenario, the most popular change for providers was to universalise the 30 hour policy for all three- and four-year-olds, with 40% of providers favouring this option. The second most popular reform for settings was to extend the 30 hour entitlement to three- and four-year-olds who qualified for the two-year-old offer, while lowering the upper limit on access to the 30 hour offer. 16% of providers wanted to see this extension to disadvantaged three- and four-year-olds, but without changing any other aspect of eligibility. 10% preferred to see a different reform than the ones listed, with suggestions from providers including making working parents eligible for the 30 hour offer as soon as they started work (rather than having to wait until the next term); allowing parents to temporarily keep funding even if they lost a job; extending provision to more two-year-olds rather than three and four year olds, extending the entitlement to parents who are in training and providing support for parents from the end of maternity/shared parental leave. Providers also took the opportunity here to again raise the issue of the level of funding being provided per hour. Only 10% of providers did not want to see any change to the current policy.

Providers working in the most deprived parts of the country were more likely to favour making the 30 hours policy universal, with 59% reporting this compared to 40% of the providers working in the least deprived areas . They were also less likely to favour extending the offer with a lower limit on earnings, at 11% compared to 27% working in the most affluent parts of the country, perhaps as they are less likely to have parents that this would apply to, so would be less able to benefit from charging these parents full fees for provision.



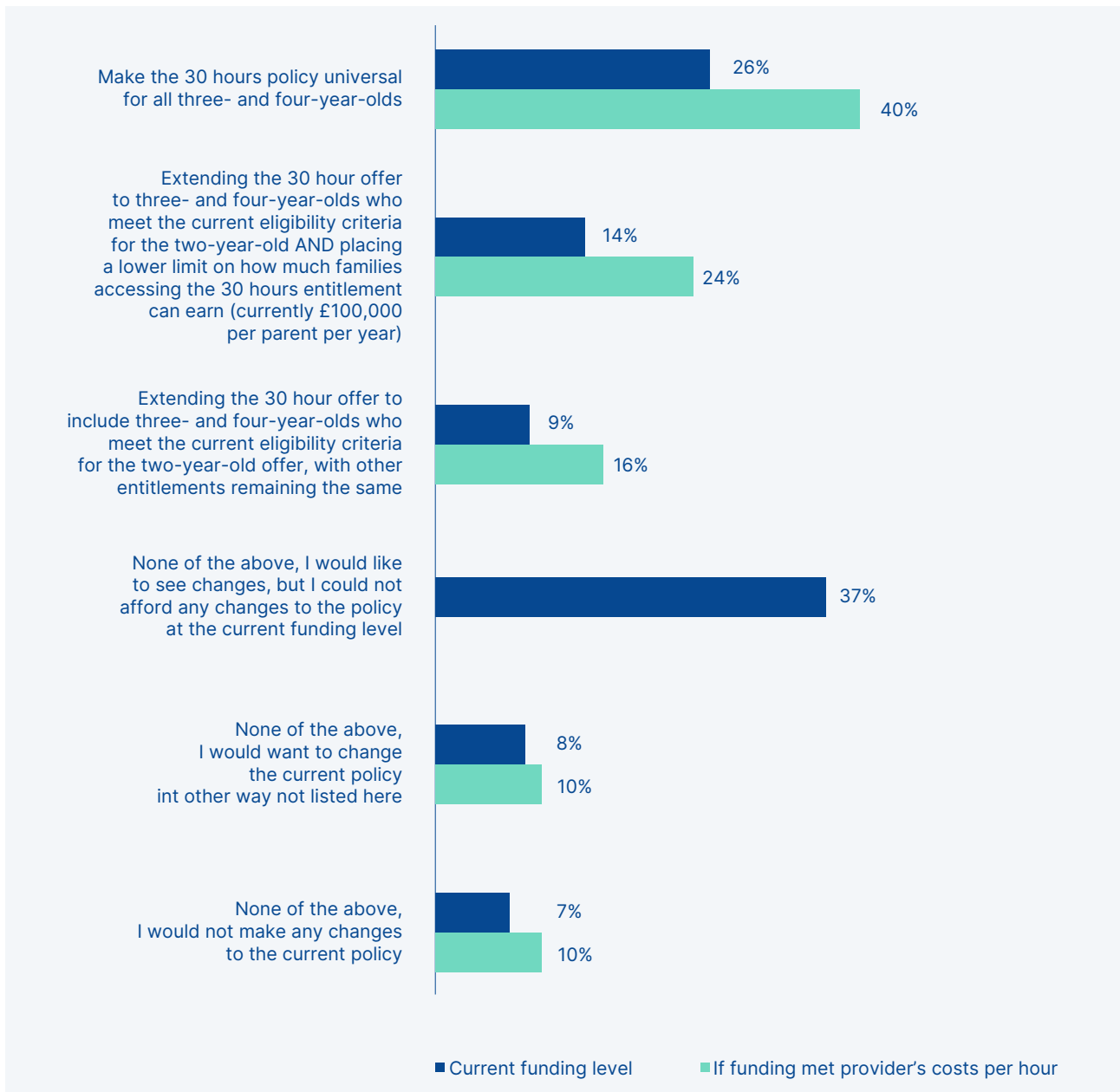
Figure 16: How providers would reform the 30 hour policy if funding per hour met their costs by level of deprivation. Respondents = 956



Providers were also asked what their preferred policy reform would be if funding remained at the current level per hour. A considerable proportion (37%) then wanted to see none of the reforms listed, because they could not afford changes at the current funding level. Support for universalising the offer for all three- and four-year-olds dropped from 40% to 26%; for extending to disadvantaged children but lowering the upper limit fell from 24% to 14%; and only extending to disadvantaged children fell from

16% to just 9%. Providers wanting to see a different policy not listed was similar, 8% vs 10%, with many suggesting at the current funding level allowing them to charge a top up on all hours to help meet costs. The proportion who said they wanted to see none of the above changes was similar, falling only slightly from 10% to 7%.

Figure 17: How providers would reform the 30 hour policy if funding per hour met their costs. Responses = 948 (current funding level), 957 (if funding met provider’s costs per hour)



Again, those working in the most deprived parts of the country were more likely to favour making the 30 hours policy universal (38% compared to 24% of those working in the least deprived areas).

Another option for increasing the funding available to providers is to target it at disadvantaged children: those who most need additional support, and whose families are the least likely to be able to afford any additional charges. Providers were asked which reforms they would prefer where additional funding were provided

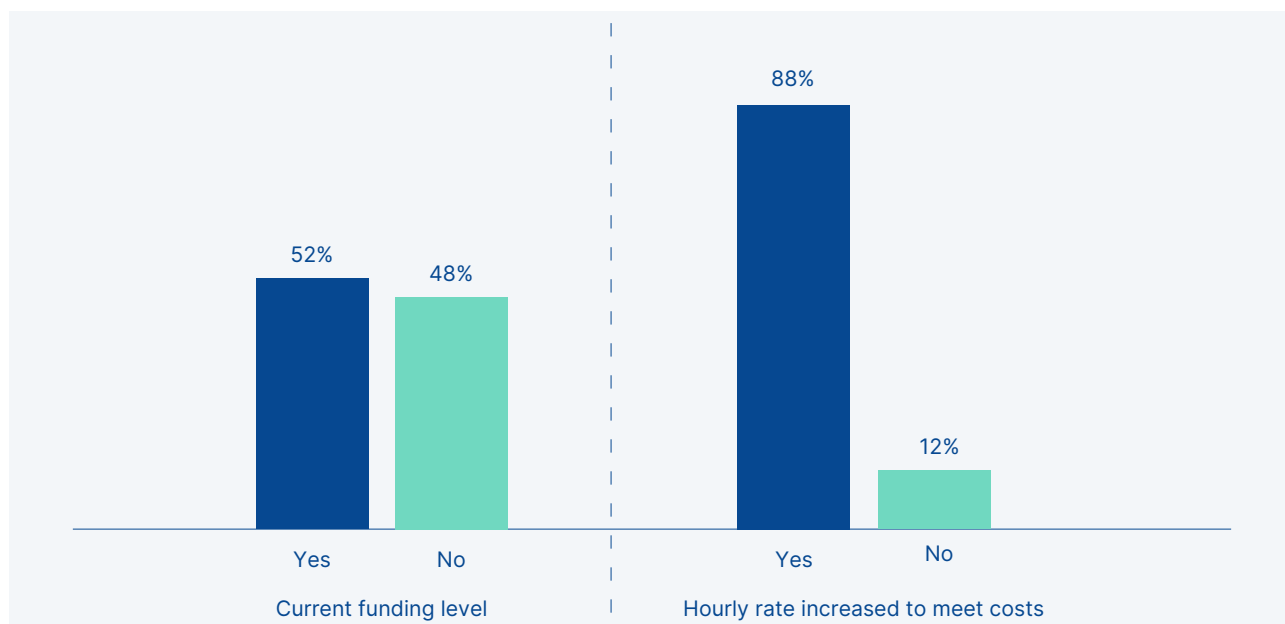
(to meet their costs for those hours) only for disadvantaged children. In that scenario, support for expanding to disadvantaged three- and four-year-olds was back up to levels seen with overall increased funding (16%), but support for universal provision for all three- and four-year-olds was slightly lower, at 21%.

If the 30 hour entitlement were made universal by government tomorrow, many providers said they would offer it to all three- and four-year-olds, but only if the hourly rate was increased

to meet their costs. At the current funding level, only just over half (52%) of providers said they would offer an expanded entitlement, compared

to 88% if funding was increased to at least meet their costs.

Figure 18: Whether providers would offer an extension of the 30 hour entitlement for all three- and four-year-olds. Responses = 1,024 (current funding level), 1030 (if funding met provider’s costs per hour)

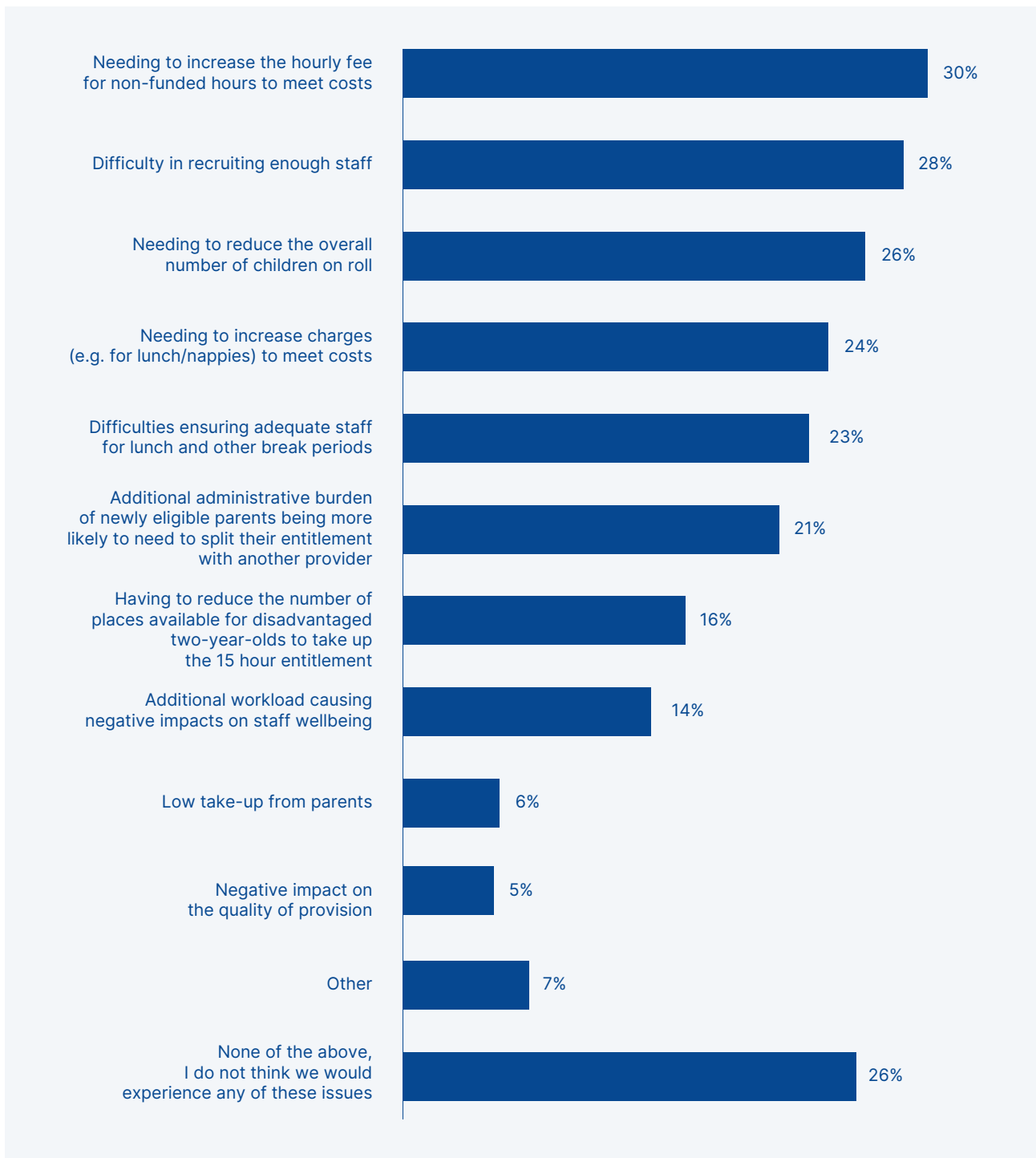


There is also capacity within the sector to be able to offer a universal entitlement in a short time frame. Providers who said they would offer the universal entitlement if funding at least matched their costs (906 respondents), were also asked how quickly they would be able to do so. Many providers (39%) would be able to do so immediately, 13% could not immediately but could within a month, 28% in 1–3 months, 12% in 4–6 months, 3% in 7–12 months and 4% would need more than 12 months.

Providers who would not offer the universal entitlement were asked about the barriers stopping them from doing so. The most common barrier, cited by 48% of providers unable to offer the extension, was not having enough physical space, followed by not being able to recruit enough staff (31%), being unable to afford to even if costs per hour were met (25%), and needing to lower the quality of provision (19%). Only 6% of this group of providers thought they would not have enough demand.

Providers who said they would offer the entitlement universally were asked about the challenges they may face while doing so. 26% of respondents to this question did not think they would experience any issues doing so. The most common concern, given by 30% of this group of providers, was needing to increase the hourly fee for non-funded hours to meet costs, followed by difficulty in recruiting enough staff (28%); needing to reduce the overall number of children on roll (26%); needing to make extra charges to meet costs (24%); difficulty ensuring there were enough staff for break periods (23%) and administrative issues if parents wanted to split their entitlement between more than one provider (21%). Concerningly, a small proportion (16%) were worried they may need to reduce the number of places available for disadvantaged two-year-olds. If adequately funded, just 5% were worried about a negative impact on the quality of provision.

Figure 19: Challenges faced by providers who would offer the 30 hour entitlement universally



4 Summary

The pandemic has had a considerable impact on very young children, with findings here from both parents and teachers showing the scale of that impact.

Parents are worried about their children's development and wellbeing after they have missed out on vital early experiences, and early years teachers are seeing the consequences, as more children are starting school without the skills needed to provide the right foundation for their future progress. Parents also do not think that government has done enough to support these children over this period.

This lack of school readiness risks causing serious issues for schools going forward, as the strain on teachers increases, staffing costs go up, and other children face increased disruption. Going forward, there is a risk that if children impacted by the pandemic do not receive the necessary level of support, there will be negative consequences throughout the rest of their education, with knock on effects for their productivity and ability to contribute economically when they enter the world of work.

There is no excuse not to act, we have already seen how the pandemic is impacting the country's youngest children. Without support now, we risk further cohorts of children starting in primary with reduced levels of school readiness. For children from the poorest families, who have suffered some of the worst impacts of the pandemic, this help is vital.

But the government's flagship early years policy, the 30 hour entitlement, currently locks out the very families likely to benefit from it the most, and research in the first section of this report shows it risks actually widening the attainment gap. In the aftermath of the pandemic, reforms to the 30 hour policy to increase access for the poorest children could play a vital role in the recovery.

As this report has demonstrated, as long as adequate levels of funding are provided, most providers want and are able to offer an increased entitlement, with the majority supporting the 30 hour policy being made universal (particularly those working in the most deprived parts of the country), or increased as a targeted extension to disadvantaged three- and four-year-olds.

There is a real opportunity for government to change the futures of today's pre-schoolers, with action clearly supported by those on the ground.