



SIPTU Big Start  
Campaign

## Early Years Professionals Survey 2020

Dr. Amy Greer Murphy  
December 2020 to January 2021





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## Foreword



In February 2020, 30,000 Early Years professionals and parents marched through the streets of Dublin to demand radical change in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services. They called for decent pay, affordability, recognition and quality of care for children. It was a moment of hope, courage and unity.

Then Covid-19 hit. Just weeks later, the 30,000 staff in 4,500 ECEC services were locked down. The closure of this vital public service resulted in thousands of parents struggling to balance the demands of work and family life and left Early Years professionals uncertain about their future.

The response of the State was innovative. To retain the workforce within the sector it assumed responsibility for funding the wages of workers. The policy worked. It also offered a vision of how ECEC could be radically transformed to reduce fees, improve pay and support quality.

What was impossible months earlier was now a reality. SIPTU, the National Women's Council, the Children's Rights Alliance and Early Childhood Ireland were among many voices calling on the Government to use this 'wage subsidy scheme' as the basis for a new funding model.

However, the immediate issue of poor pay and conditions continues to keep workers in poverty and undermine the professionalisation of the sector.

Over 2,000 professionals took part in this survey and the results are stark; Just 22% of Early Years Educators earn more than the Living Wage of €12.30 per hour and 90% of all professionals struggle to make ends meet with difficulty or great difficulty.

The pandemic has compounded this situation. Only 11% feel valued as front-line workers by the Government and 74% find work during Covid-19 stressful or very stressful.

These conditions have consequences; 38% of all professionals are actively looking for a job in a different profession. This rises to 44% for Room Leaders where most graduates are employed. Poor pay was by far the biggest issue driving people out of their profession: 80% of respondents cited it as their top concern.

Hundreds of millions of euros are spent each year by the State to improve quality and drive professionalisation, including the education of graduates and continuous professional development. However, until pay and conditions are addressed the State is simply trying to fill a bucket with many holes.

The protest in February 2020, did have an impact. This year will see publication of proposals for new funding model and the Workforce Development Plan. Pay scales could also be agreed under a Joint Labour Committee. Taken together, these three initiatives can address the serious problems within ECEC, ensure that increased government funding is effectively spent and offer a path to professional pay.

**Darragh O'Connor**  
**Head of Strategic Organising and Campaigns,**  
**SIPTU**

January 2021

## Introduction

Over the past 10 months the early years sector has had to adapt to the changes the Covid-19 pandemic has brought. This has meant time spent out of work for most, then returning to work with a host of new challenges, and a future with many uncertainties.

The sector has experienced one of its toughest years – denied adequate funding, deemed 'essential' work by the government but without the commitments to lasting support. It has been tough for workers and providers alike. Service providers have had to deal with the uncertainty, mixed-messaging from government and managing the need to adapt and adhere to Covid-19 restrictions to keep workers, children and families safe.

With this updated Early Years Professionals Survey (2020), we have attempted to communicate the experiences and struggles of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) professionals during this most challenging time. We asked them about issues relating to pay, working conditions, their future in the sector and have focused on issues arising from the pandemic.

Although the sector is experiencing a crisis due to Covid-19, many of the issues workers face are not new. In 2019, we called on the government to commit to introducing a Living Wage as a minimum standard for all workers. This was not granted, and neither was the additional funding allocated in 2020.

If early years care is essential work, when will the Government move beyond simply naming it as such, and provide the adequate funding necessary to invest in settings and workers so professionals can feel valued and do their best for the children in their care.

### *Update from 2019 survey*

Following the 2019 Early Years Professionals Survey, the SIPTU Big Start Campaign carried out further research in late 2020. This was in order to understand how the experiences of workers in the sector had shifted over the previous year and to understand the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on them. We had a very engaged response from 2,196 early years professionals, just under 10% of all those employed in the sector.

This survey has highlighted key issues for early years professionals in their day-to-day experiences in the sector. Low pay, lack of maternity payments, lack of savings to meet unexpected expenses and difficulty in affording a decent standard of living have all led to a situation where over half of those surveyed are currently looking for another job. The majority do not envisage themselves remaining in the sector within five years if conditions do not improve. It illustrates that now, more than ever, the Government must introduce progressive policies that help professionals in the sector.



## Main Findings

The main findings mirrored those from the earlier 2019 survey – key issues centred around low pay and financial insecurity, lack of safety net, feeling undervalued by government and society, workplace-related stress and the unavoidable need to leave the sector if conditions do not improve.

This year, we also found that many professionals were particularly concerned about entitlements relating to Covid-19 – concerns around a lack of sick pay entitlements were a concern for many.

### *Financial insecurity*

Based on survey responses, financial insecurity was a core concern. The majority, over 80%, cited it as their main concern in relation to their work. The issue of low pay was also prominent – 76% of Educators/Practitioners earned below the Living Wage, while the rate for Room Leaders earning below the Living Wage of €12.30 per hour was 44%.

Respondents felt there was an endemic issue around low pay resulting in them being unable to cope with unexpected expenses, unable to save money and unable to get by with their salaries.

### **Financial insecurity –**

low pay, professionals unable to make ends meet, unable to cope with unexpected expenses.

### **Lack of safety net –**

no sick pay scheme, pension, paid maternity leave.

### **Feeling undervalued by government and society –**

don't feel recognised as professionals by society, higher qualifications don't lead to higher wages. Seen as 'essential' worker but not valued as such.

### **Stress –**

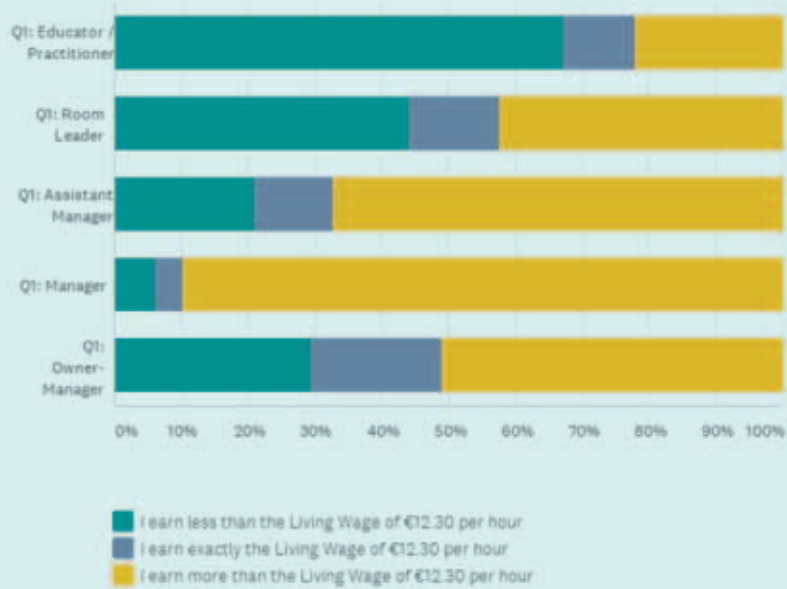
all of the above compounding factors, with Covid-19 leading to stress. Chronic workplace stress is linked to long-term health conditions, particularly for those who feel disempowered in their roles.

### **Leaving the sector –**

professionals, room leaders in particular, are actively seeking employment in other sectors.

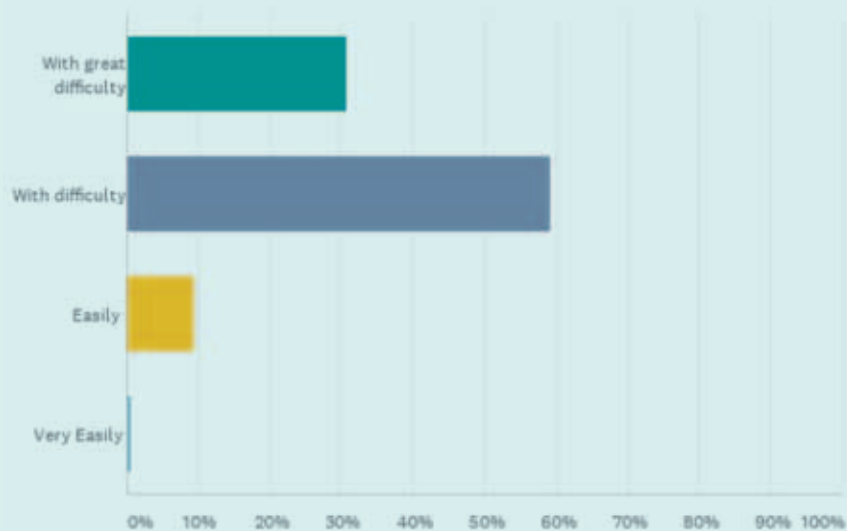
## Question 7: The Living Wage

Answered: 2,092 — Skipped: 9



## Question 18: I am able to make ends meet with my current income

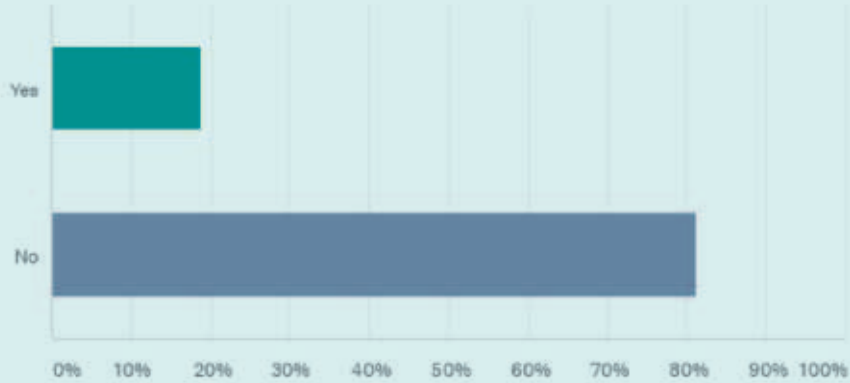
Answered: 2,186 — Skipped: 10





### Question 19: I am able to cope with unexpected expenses (e.g. replacement washing machine or boiler)

Answered: 2,187 — Skipped: 9

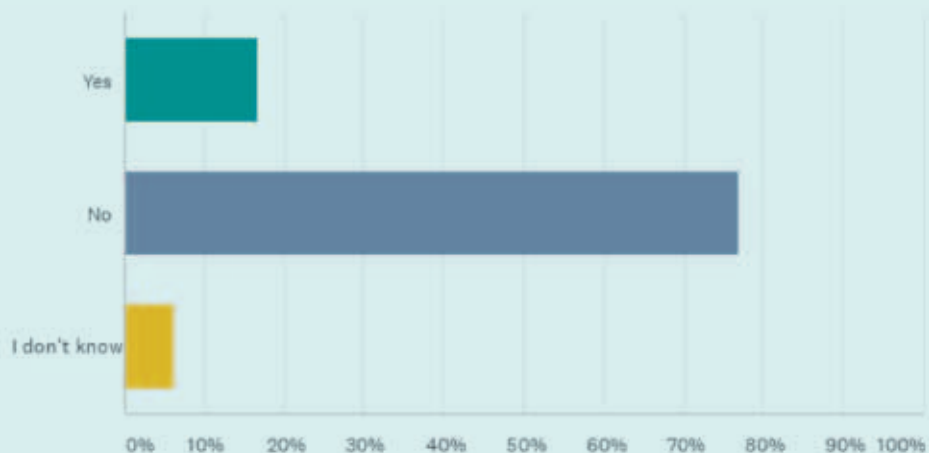


#### Lack of Safety Net

Compounding the financial insecurity, was the lack of benefits respondents were able to draw on if needed. 77% of respondents had no sick pay scheme. 91% had no pension beyond the State Pension and just 10% were able to avail of paid maternity leave from work.

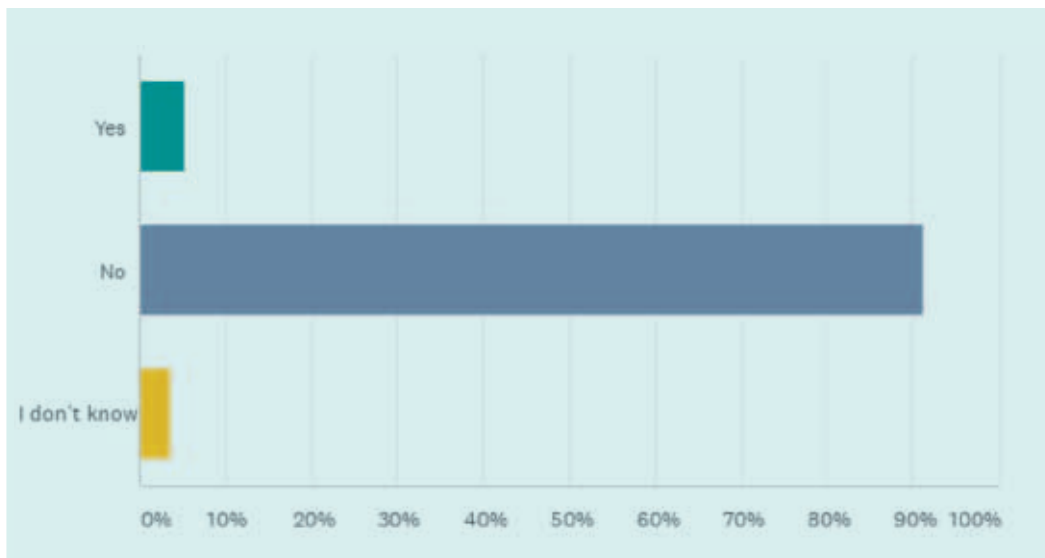
### Question 10: I have a sick pay scheme in work

Answered: 2,1876 — Skipped: 10



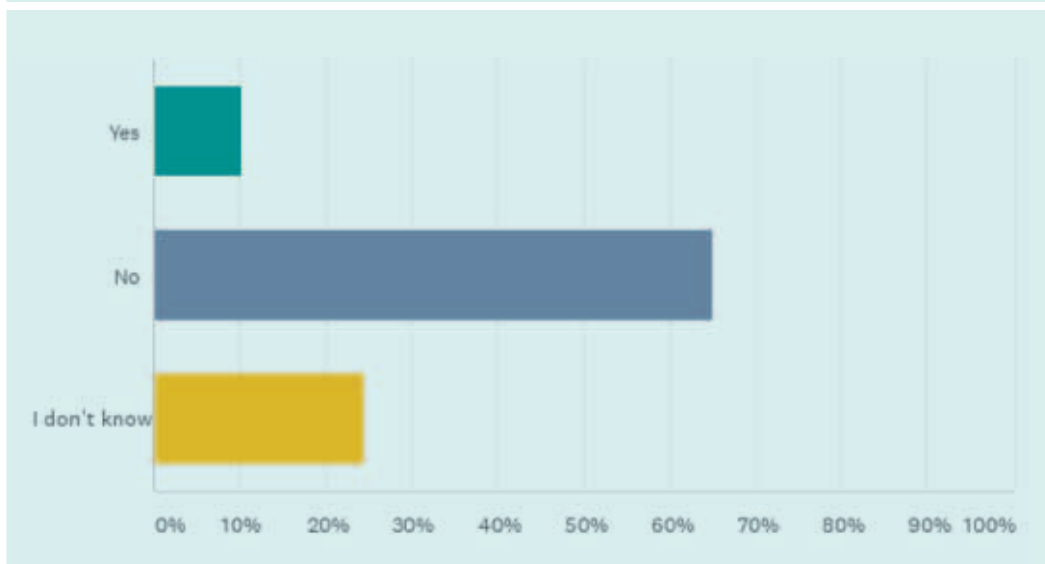
## Question 12: I have a work pension

Answered: 2,188 — Skipped: 8



## Question 13: I get paid maternity leave from work

Answered: 2,185 — Skipped: 11



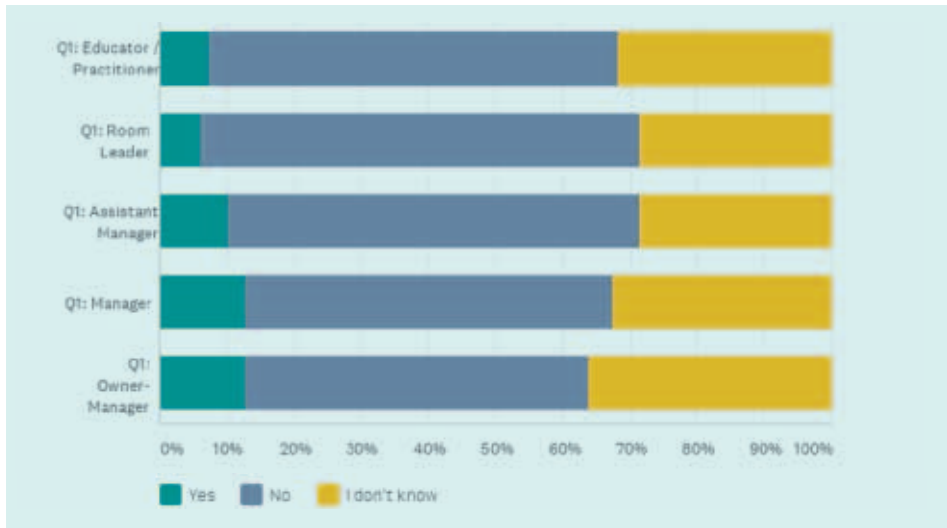
### Leaving the Sector

High staff turnover undermines quality for children and the sustainability of services. The finding shows that only 7% of respondents intend to remain working in the sector in 5 years' time, if things stay the same.

Of deep concern for the future professionalisation of the sector is that 38% of all respondents are actively seeking different employment. This rises to 44% for Room Leaders, where the majority of graduates are employed.

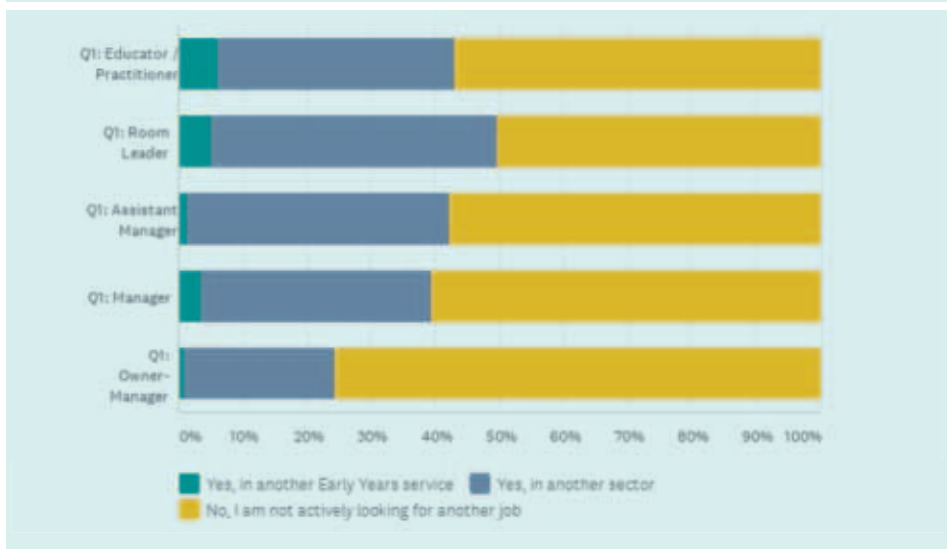
## Question 20: If things stay the same, I will still be working in the Early Years in 5 years' time

Answered: 2,093 — Skipped: 8



## Question 22: I am actively looking for another job

Answered: 2,086 — Skipped: 15



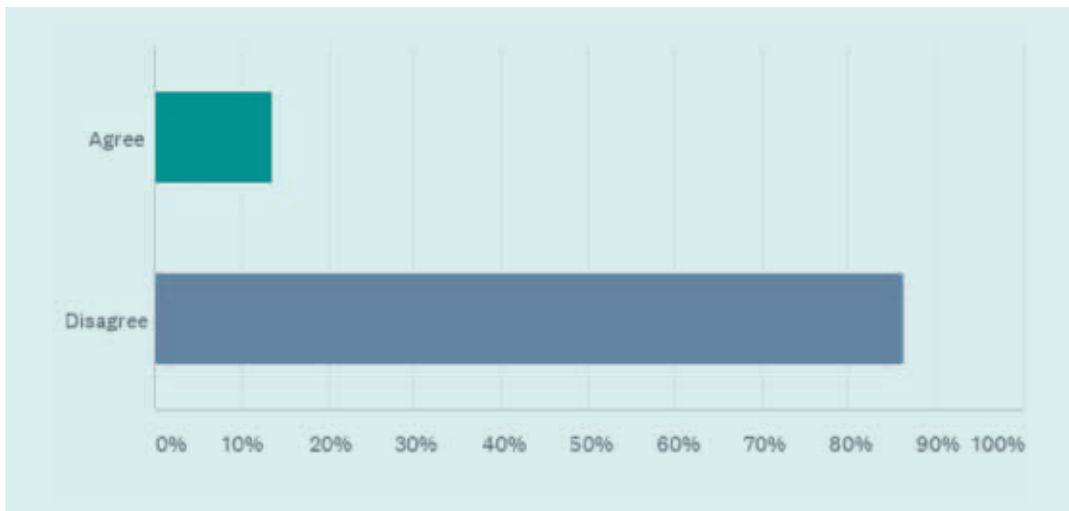
### Feeling Undervalued

- Do not feel recognised as professionals by society
- Higher qualifications don't lead to higher wages.
- Deemed as 'essential' workers but not valued as such.

Furthermore, respondents felt undervalued by government and society – they did not feel recognised as professionals by society. They felt that higher qualifications do not lead to higher wages. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, respondents felt that, while they were deemed 'essential' workers, this did not extend to a marked improvement in the conditions of their work.

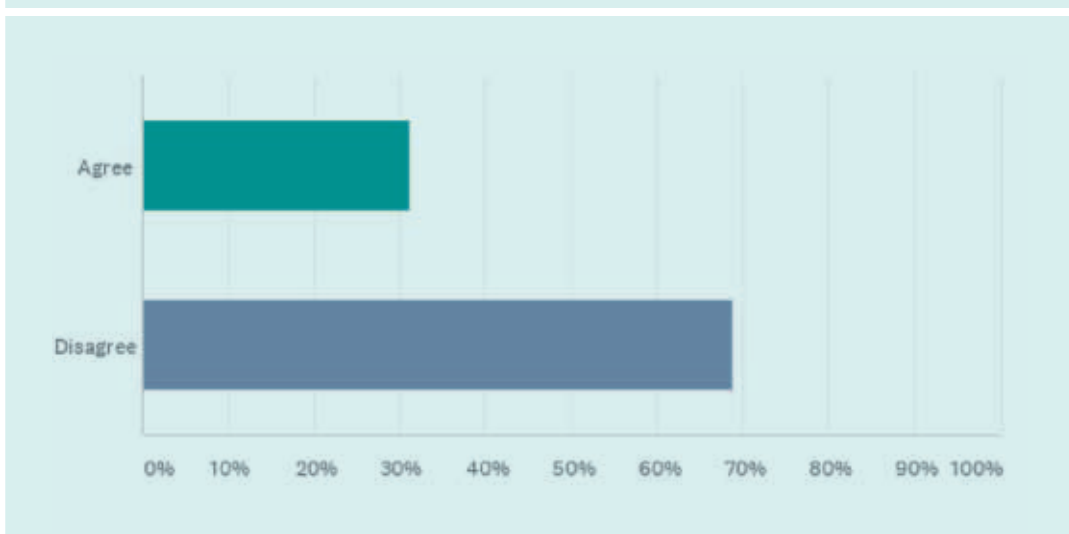
### Question 4: I am recognised as a professional by society

Answered: 2,185 — Skipped: 11



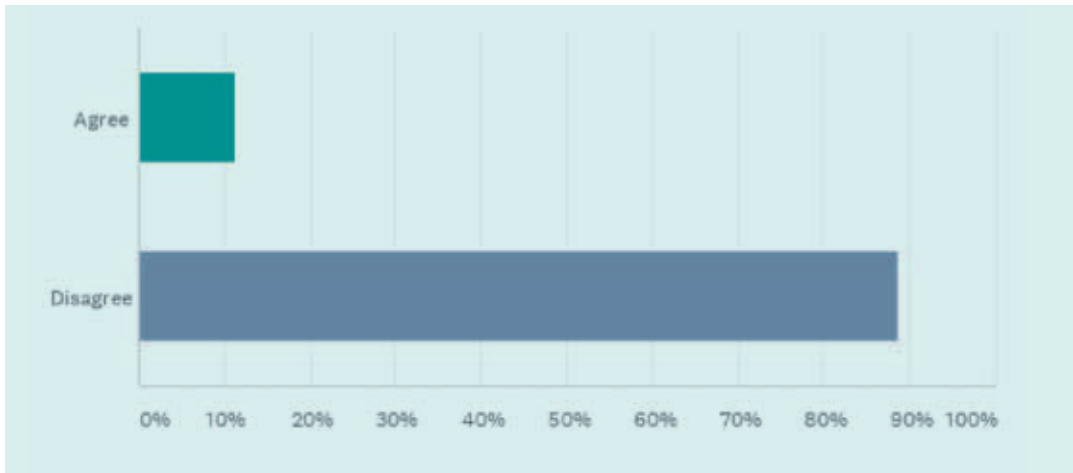
### Question 6: I believe higher qualifications currently result in higher wages

Answered: 2,186 — Skipped: 10



## Question 26: Early Years Professionals have been valued as frontline workers by government during the Covid-19 pandemic

Answered: 2,182 — Skipped: 14

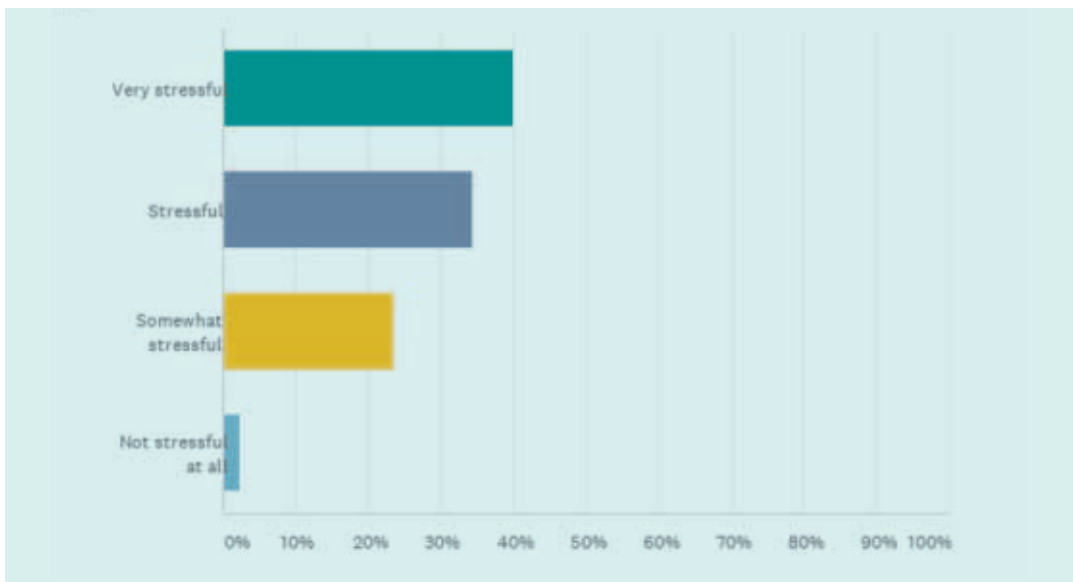


### Stress

The compounding nature of all the factors listed above – low pay, lack of benefits, feeling undervalued and wanting to leave the sector resulted in stress for respondents. The feeling of being out of control, with high responsibility and low pay, as well as the stress of dealing with Covid-19, had a marked impact on respondents. As is well documented, chronic workplace stress is linked to long-term health effects.

## Question 24: What is your experience of working during the Covid-19 pandemic?

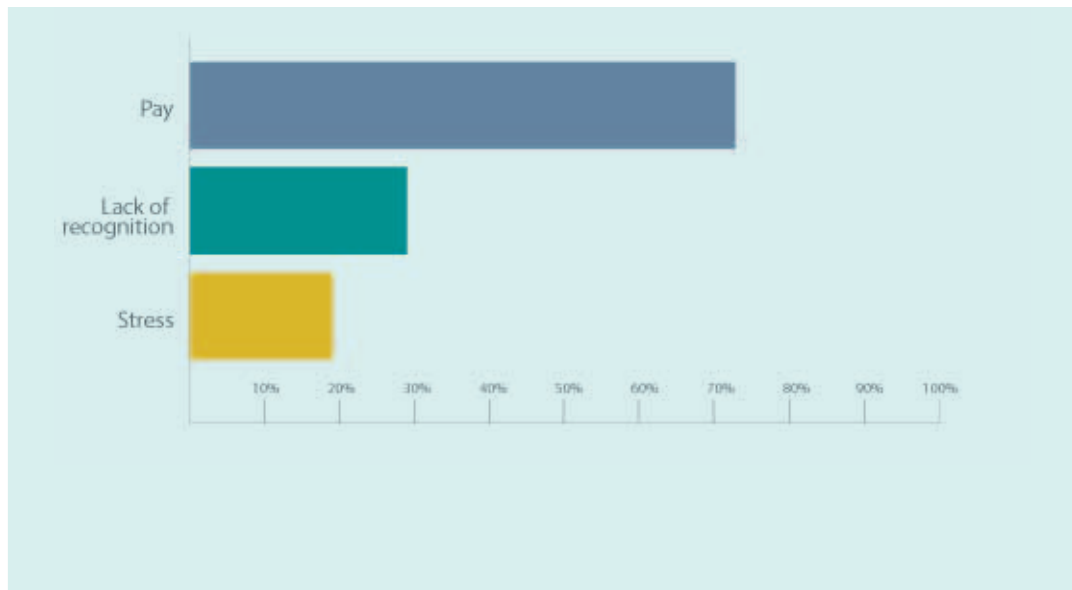
Answered: 2,184 — Skipped: 12





## Question 21: If you intend to leave what would be the main reason?

Answered: 2,159\*



(\*The responses were collected via an open field. All issues with over a 5% response rate are presented)

### Essential Work in ECEC during Covid-19

Working in the ECEC sector during the Covid-19 pandemic has presented a series of challenges to the professionals that staff it. These resulted from closures of services in March 2020 to the uncertainties around re-opening from June 2020, managing with new requirements around hygiene, controlling the spread of the virus and keeping staff and children safe through social distancing and grouping into play pods.

While subsidies helped service providers and staff during lockdowns, respondents to the survey noted numerous difficulties. Real cuts to income have affected many. As the survey showed, 88.6% of respondents received no additional payments from their employers during the pandemic, relying on the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) to subsidise up to 85% of their normal salaries. Most significantly, the stress workers have experienced has been enormous – 74% found work during Covid-19 stressful or very stressful.

## Conclusion

The ECEC professionals who responded to the survey were clear – without much needed reforms they will not remain working in the sector over the coming years.

Workers have responded to calls for professionalisation but still feel that higher qualifications do not lead to higher wages. They do not have enough time for breaks, are doing unpaid work, carrying out training in their own time and are coping with the ongoing consequences of low pay – no savings, no rainy-day fund.

Most are looking for another job, and most are not certain they will be in the sector in five years.

Issues reported in this and previous surveys need to be resolved or the sector will continue to face crisis – difficulties retaining staff, providing quality services and a sense of wellbeing for professionals who wish to be valued and respected for their work.



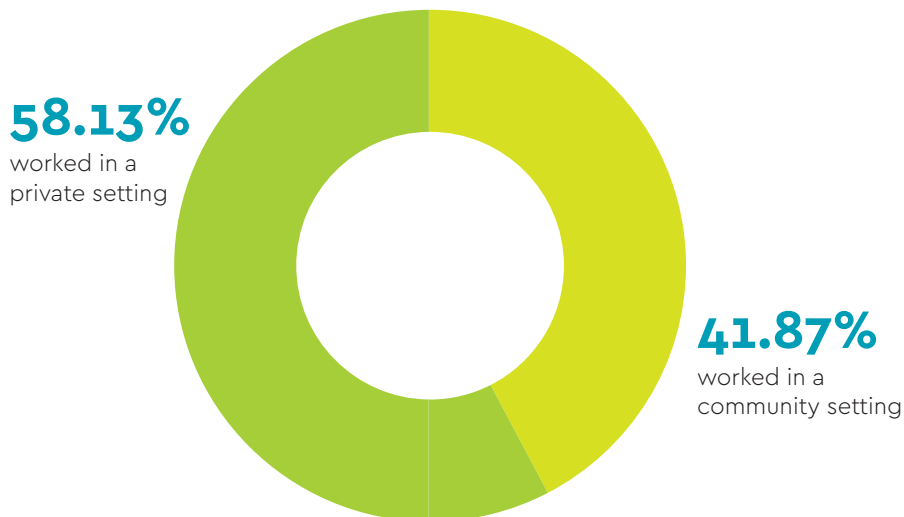
# Appendix

## *Demographics of respondents*

This survey captured the experiences of 2,196 early years professionals. That amounts to just under 10% of the total employed in the sector. Most respondents who answered the survey (40.15%) are educators/practitioners, 28.85% are room leaders while assistant managers make up 6.7%. Managers comprised 11.12% of the total amount, with owner-managers a further 8.93%.

58.13% worked in a private setting with 41.87% in a community setting. 17.42% of respondents were based in Dublin, followed by Cork at 12.9% and the rest spread across the remaining counties.

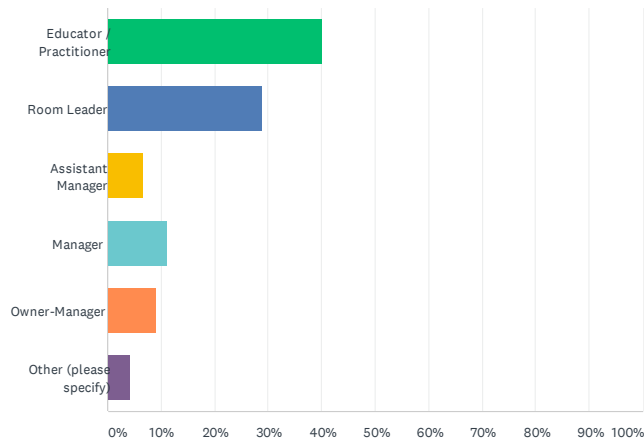
This survey therefore illustrates the experiences of a wide variety of employees, owners, managers and others working in the ECEC sector living all over the country and employed in both private and community settings.



# Survey responses

## Q1 What is your job role?

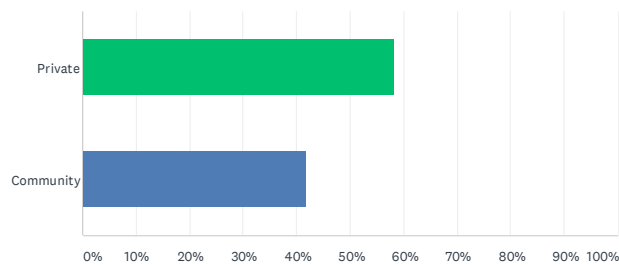
Answered: 2,194 Skipped: 2



| ANSWER CHOICES          | RESPONSES |       |
|-------------------------|-----------|-------|
| Educator / Practitioner | 40.15%    | 881   |
| Room Leader             | 28.85%    | 633   |
| Assistant Manager       | 6.70%     | 147   |
| Manager                 | 11.12%    | 244   |
| Owner-Manager           | 8.93%     | 196   |
| Other (please specify)  | 4.24%     | 93    |
| TOTAL                   |           | 2,194 |

## Q2 Do you work in a private or community setting?

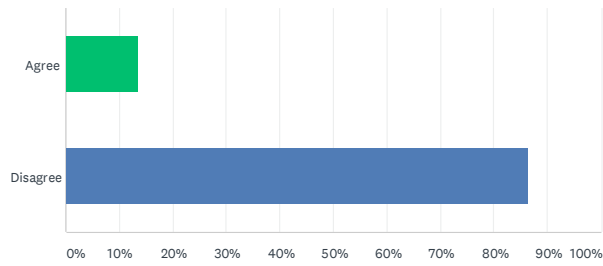
Answered: 2,190 Skipped: 6



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES |       |
|----------------|-----------|-------|
| Private        | 58.13%    | 1,273 |
| Community      | 41.87%    | 917   |
| TOTAL          |           | 2,190 |

### Q4 I am recognised as a professional by society

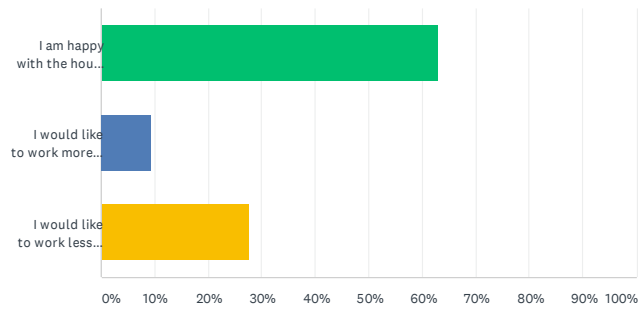
Answered: 2,185 Skipped: 11



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES    |
|----------------|--------------|
| Agree          | 13.59% 297   |
| Disagree       | 86.41% 1,888 |
| TOTAL          | 2,185        |

### Q5 Working hours

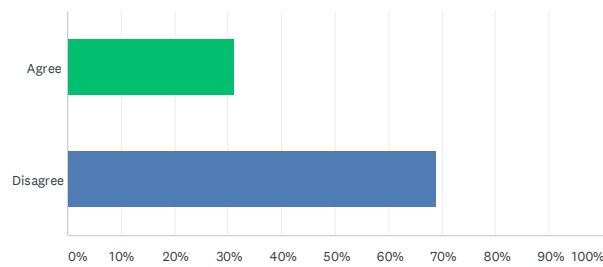
Answered: 2,186 Skipped: 10



| ANSWER CHOICES                   | RESPONSES    |
|----------------------------------|--------------|
| I am happy with the hours I work | 63.04% 1,378 |
| I would like to work more hours  | 9.33% 204    |
| I would like to work less hours  | 27.63% 604   |
| TOTAL                            | 2,186        |

### Q6 I believe higher qualifications currently result in higher wages

Answered: 2,186 Skipped: 10

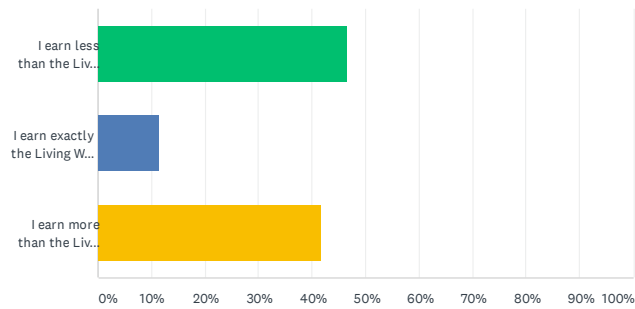


| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES    |
|----------------|--------------|
| Agree          | 31.15% 681   |
| Disagree       | 68.85% 1,505 |
| TOTAL          | 2,186        |



### Q7 The Living Wage

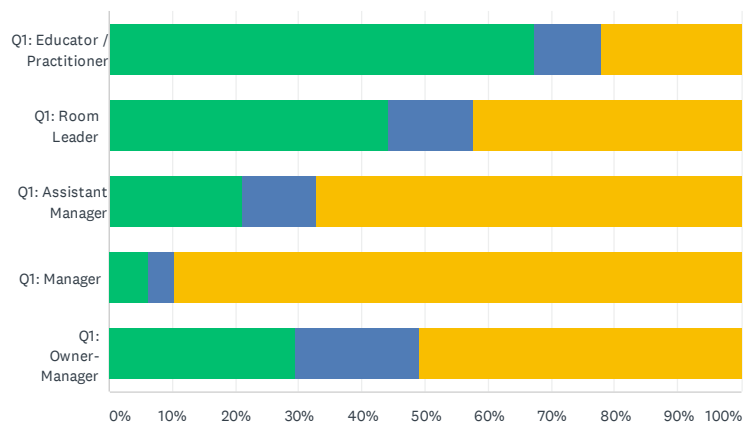
Answered: 2,185 Skipped: 11



| ANSWER CHOICES                                      | RESPONSES |              |
|---|-----------|--------------|
| I earn less than the Living Wage of €12.30 per hour | 46.73%    | 1,021        |
| I earn exactly the Living Wage of €12.30 per hour   | 11.49%    | 251          |
| I earn more than the Living Wage of €12.30 per hour | 41.78%    | 913          |
| <b>TOTAL</b>  |           | <b>2,185</b> |

### Q7a The Living Wage

Answered: 2,092 Skipped: 9

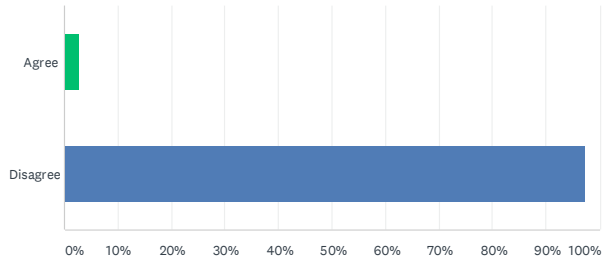


■ I earn less than the Living Wage of €12.30 per hour  
■ I earn exactly the Living Wage of €12.30 per hour  
■ I earn more than the Living Wage of €12.30 per hour

|                             | I EARN LESS THAN THE LIVING WAGE OF €12.30 PER HOUR | I EARN EXACTLY THE LIVING WAGE OF €12.30 PER HOUR | I EARN MORE THAN THE LIVING WAGE OF €12.30 PER HOUR | TOTAL         |
|-----------------------------|---|---|---|---------------|
| Q1: Educator / Practitioner | 67.24%<br>587                                       | 10.65%<br>93                                      | 22.11%<br>193                                       | 41.73%<br>873 |
| Q1: Room Leader             | 44.15%<br>279                                       | 13.45%<br>85                                      | 42.41%<br>268                                       | 30.21%<br>632 |
| Q1: Assistant Manager       | 21.09%<br>31  | 11.56%<br>17                                      | 67.35%<br>99  | 7.03%<br>147  |
| Q1: Manager                 | 6.15%<br>15   | 4.10%<br>10                                       | 89.75%<br>219                                       | 11.66%<br>244 |
| Q1: Owner-Manager           | 29.59%<br>58  | 19.39%<br>38                                      | 51.02%<br>100                                       | 9.37%<br>196  |
| Total Respondents           | 970   | 243   | 879   | 2,092         |

### Q8 I believe Early Years professionals are paid a fair wage

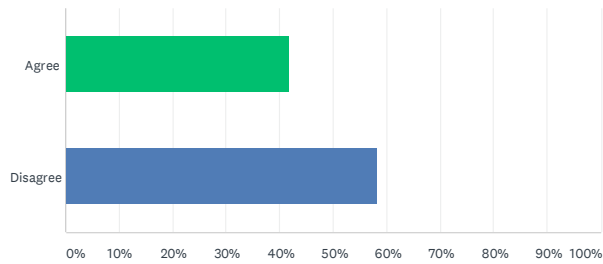
Answered: 2,184 Skipped: 12



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES |       |
|----------------|-----------|-------|
| Agree          | 2.70%     | 59    |
| Disagree       | 97.30%    | 2,125 |
| TOTAL          |           | 2,184 |

### Q9 I have enough time to take my breaks

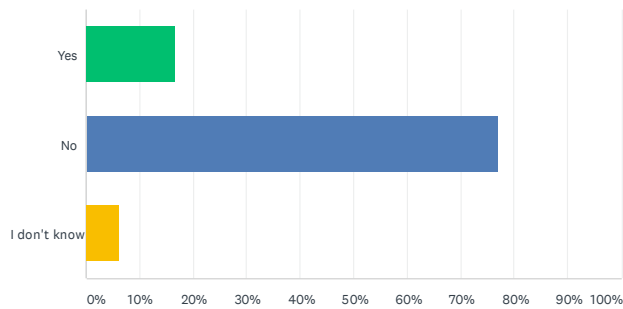
Answered: 2,185 Skipped: 11



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES |       |
|----------------|-----------|-------|
| Agree          | 41.83%    | 914   |
| Disagree       | 58.17%    | 1,271 |
| TOTAL          |           | 2,185 |

### Q10 I have a sick pay scheme in work

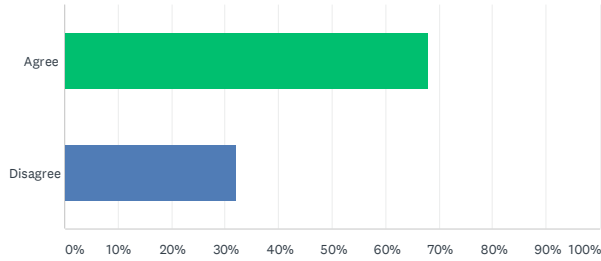
Answered: 2,186 Skipped: 10



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES |       |
|----------------|-----------|-------|
| Yes            | 16.74%    | 366   |
| No             | 76.90%    | 1,681 |
| I don't know   | 6.36%     | 139   |
| TOTAL          |           | 2,186 |

### Q11 I regularly do unpaid work

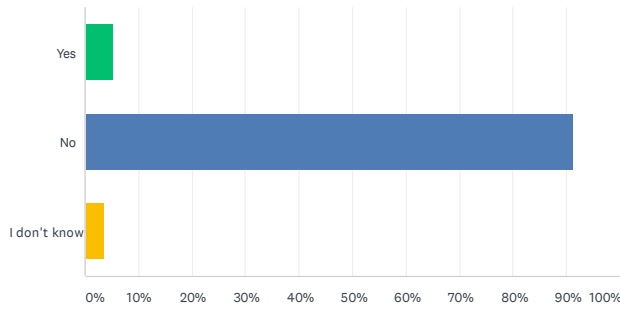
Answered: 2,188 Skipped: 8



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES |       |
|----------------|-----------|-------|
| Agree          | 68.05%    | 1,489 |
| Disagree       | 31.95%    | 699   |
| TOTAL          |           | 2,188 |

### Q12 I have a work pension

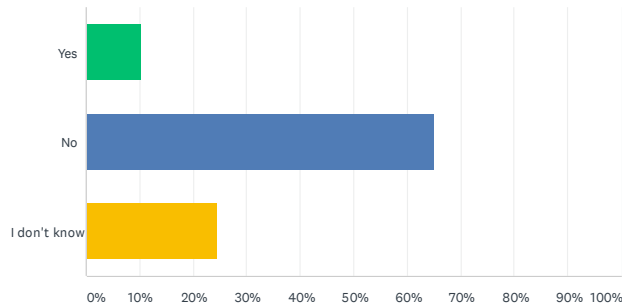
Answered: 2,188 Skipped: 8



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES |       |
|----------------|-----------|-------|
| Yes            | 5.21%     | 114   |
| No             | 91.27%    | 1,997 |
| I don't know   | 3.52%     | 77    |
| TOTAL          |           | 2,188 |

### Q13 I get paid maternity leave from work

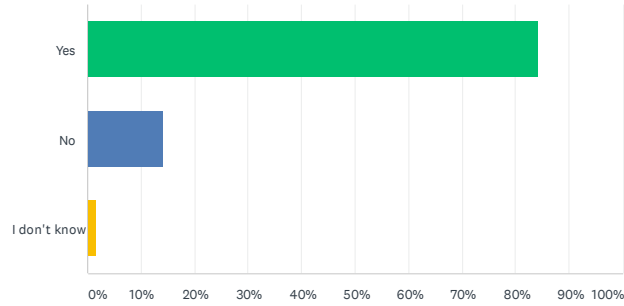
Answered: 2,185 Skipped: 11



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES |       |
|----------------|-----------|-------|
| Yes            | 10.34%    | 226   |
| No             | 65.08%    | 1,422 |
| I don't know   | 24.58%    | 537   |
| TOTAL          |           | 2,185 |

### Q14 I do work training in my own time

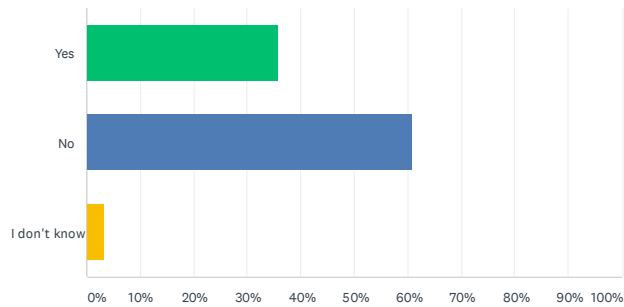
Answered: 2,186 Skipped: 10



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES |       |
|----------------|-----------|-------|
| Yes            | 84.26%    | 1,842 |
| No             | 14.14%    | 309   |
| I don't know   | 1.60%     | 35    |
| TOTAL          |           | 2,186 |

### Q15 I pay for my own training (e.g. First Aid )

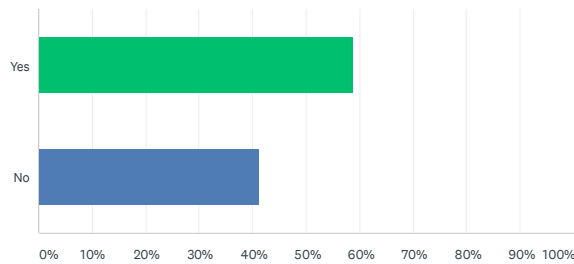
Answered: 2,184 Skipped: 12



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES |       |
|----------------|-----------|-------|
| Yes            | 35.76%    | 781   |
| No             | 60.94%    | 1,331 |
| I don't know   | 3.30%     | 72    |
| TOTAL          |           | 2,184 |

### Q16 I pay for educational materials out of my own pocket

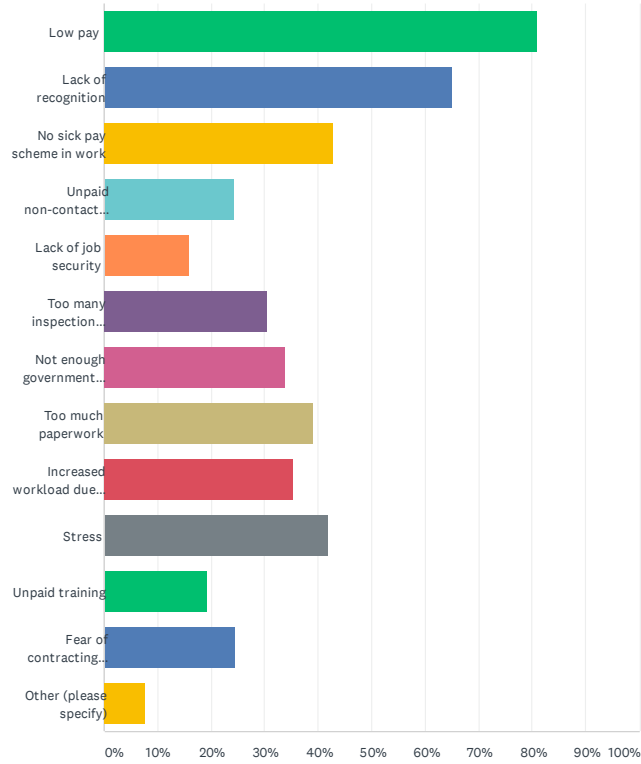
Answered: 2,185 Skipped: 11



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES |       |
|----------------|-----------|-------|
| Yes            | 58.76%    | 1,284 |
| No             | 41.24%    | 901   |
| TOTAL          |           | 2,185 |

**Q17 What are biggest issues for you (please choose up to 3)**

Answered: 2,189 Skipped: 7

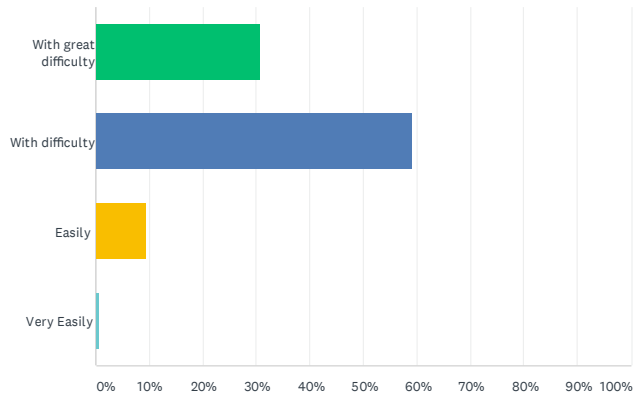


| ANSWER CHOICES                    | RESPONSES |       |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|-------|
| Low pay                           | 81.04%    | 1,774 |
| Lack of recognition               | 65.14%    | 1,426 |
| No sick pay scheme in work        | 42.80%    | 937   |
| Unpaid non-contact time           | 24.21%    | 530   |
| Lack of job security              | 15.90%    | 348   |
| Too many inspection bodies        | 30.61%    | 670   |
| Not enough government funding     | 33.99%    | 744   |
| Too much paperwork                | 39.10%    | 856   |
| Increased workload due to COVID19 | 35.36%    | 774   |
| Stress                            | 41.94%    | 918   |
| Unpaid training                   | 19.23%    | 421   |
| Fear of contracting COVID19       | 24.39%    | 534   |
| Other (please specify)            | 7.72%     | 169   |
| Total Respondents: 2,189          |           |       |



### Q18 I am able to make ends meet with my current income

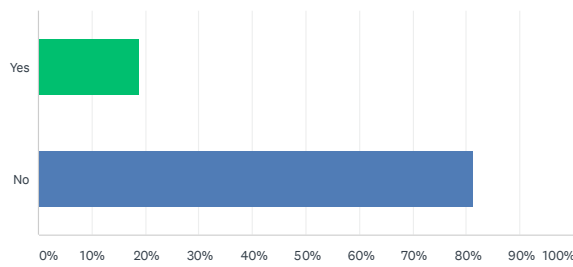
Answered: 2,186 Skipped: 10



| ANSWER CHOICES        | RESPONSES |       |
|-----------------------|-----------|-------|
| With great difficulty | 30.70%    | 671   |
| With difficulty       | 59.24%    | 1,295 |
| Easily                | 9.38%     | 205   |
| Very Easily           | 0.69%     | 15    |
| TOTAL                 |           | 2,186 |

### Q19 I am able to cope with unexpected expenses (e.g. replacement washing machine or boiler).

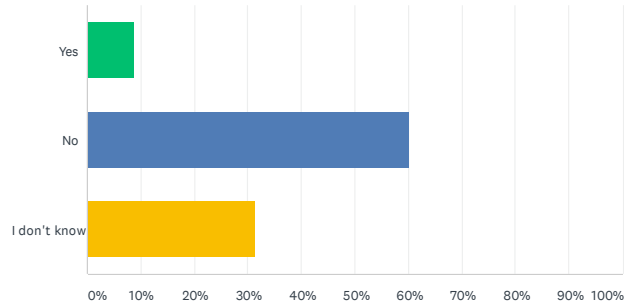
Answered: 2,187 Skipped: 9



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES |       |
|----------------|-----------|-------|
| Yes            | 18.75%    | 410   |
| No             | 81.25%    | 1,777 |
| TOTAL          |           | 2,187 |

**Q20 If things stay the same, I will still be working in the Early Years Sector in 5 years' time.**

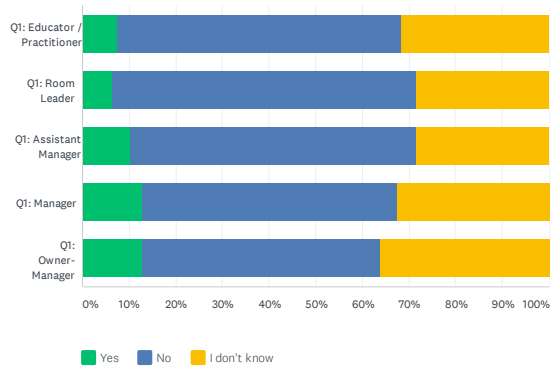
Answered: 2,187 Skipped: 9



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES    |
|----------------|--------------|
| Yes            | 8.69% 190    |
| No             | 59.99% 1,312 |
| I don't know   | 31.32% 685   |
| TOTAL          | 2,187        |

**Q20a If things stay the same, I will still be working in the Early Years Sector in 5 years' time.**

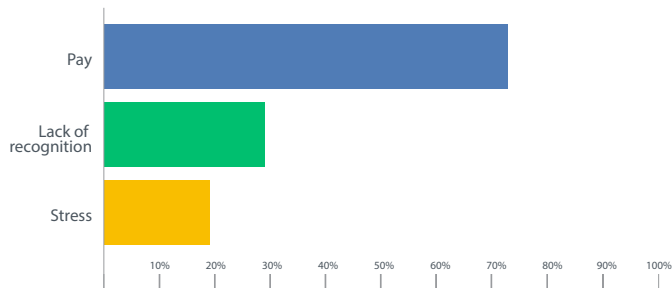
Answered: 2,093 Skipped: 8



|                             | YES          | NO            | I DON'T KNOW  | TOTAL         |
|-----------------------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Q1: Educator / Practitioner | 7.43%<br>65  | 60.80%<br>532 | 31.77%<br>278 | 41.81%<br>875 |
| Q1: Room Leader             | 6.17%<br>39  | 65.35%<br>413 | 28.48%<br>180 | 30.20%<br>632 |
| Q1: Assistant Manager       | 10.20%<br>15 | 61.22%<br>90  | 28.57%<br>42  | 7.02%<br>147  |
| Q1: Manager                 | 12.76%<br>31 | 54.73%<br>133 | 32.51%<br>79  | 11.61%<br>243 |
| Q1: Owner-Manager           | 12.76%<br>25 | 51.02%<br>100 | 36.22%<br>71  | 9.36%<br>196  |
| Total Respondents           | 175          | 1,268         | 650           | 2,093         |

### Q21a If you intend to leave what would be the main reason?

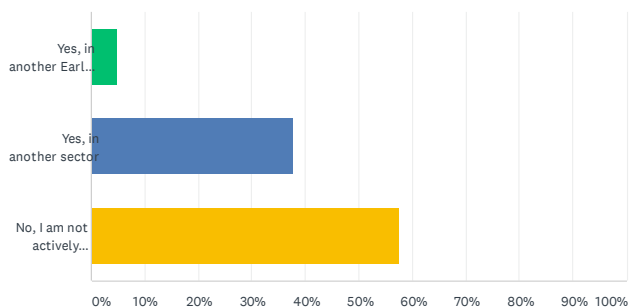
Answered: 1,939 Skipped: 162



|                             | IF YOU INTEND TO LEAVE WHAT WOULD BE THE MAIN REASON? | TOTAL         |
|-----------------------------|---|---------------|
| Q1: Educator / Practitioner | 100.00%<br>817  | 42.14%<br>817 |
| Q1: Room Leader             | 100.00%<br>596  | 30.74%<br>596 |
| Q1: Assistant Manager       | 100.00%<br>133  | 6.86%<br>133  |
| Q1: Manager                 | 100.00%<br>222  | 11.45%<br>222 |
| Q1: Owner-Manager           | 100.00%<br>171  | 8.82%<br>171  |
| Total Respondents           | 1,939   | 1,939         |

### Q22 I am actively looking for another job

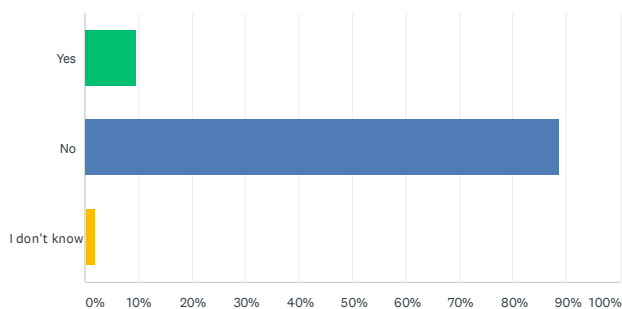
Answered: 2,180 Skipped: 16



| ANSWER CHOICES                                | RESPONSES    |
|---|--------------|
| Yes, in another Early Years service           | 4.82% 105    |
| Yes, in another sector                        | 37.71% 822   |
| No, I am not actively looking for another job | 57.48% 1,253 |
| TOTAL   | 2,180        |

### Q25 Have you received a bonus or additional pay from your employer during the COVID19 pandemic

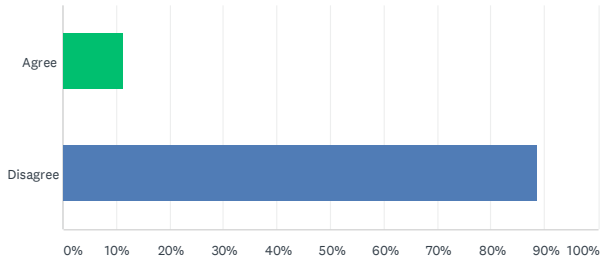
Answered: 2,178 Skipped: 18



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES    |
|----------------|--------------|
| Yes            | 9.55% 208    |
| No             | 88.61% 1,930 |
| I don't know   | 1.84% 40     |
| TOTAL          | 2,178        |

**Q26 Early Years professionals have been valued as frontline workers by government during the Covid-19 pandemic**

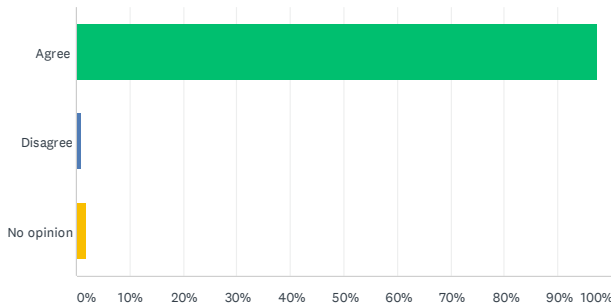
Answered: 2,182 Skipped: 14



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES |       |
|----------------|-----------|-------|
| Agree          | 11.32%    | 247   |
| Disagree       | 88.68%    | 1,935 |
| TOTAL          |           | 2,182 |

**Q23 Wages for early years professionals should be funded by government, as they do for primary and secondary school teachers**

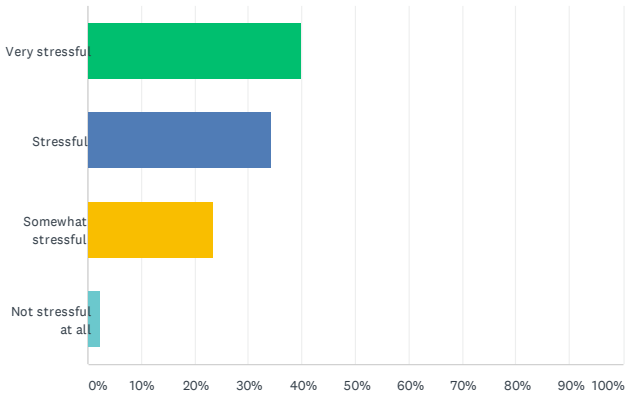
Answered: 2,182 Skipped: 14



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES |       |
|----------------|-----------|-------|
| Agree          | 97.34%    | 2,124 |
| Disagree       | 0.78%     | 17    |
| No opinion     | 1.88%     | 41    |
| TOTAL          |           | 2,182 |

**Q24 What is your experience of working during the COVID19 pandemic?**

Answered: 2,184 Skipped: 12



| ANSWER CHOICES       | RESPONSES |       |
|----------------------|-----------|-------|
| Very stressful       | 40.02%    | 874   |
| Stressful            | 34.34%    | 750   |
| Somewhat stressful   | 23.40%    | 511   |
| Not stressful at all | 2.24%     | 49    |
| TOTAL                |           | 2,184 |



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