



Early Years  
Professionals  
Survey 2024





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## Foreword



Avril  
Greene

In April 2024 hundreds of SIPTU members met in Liberty Hall at our inaugural Early Years Union national conference. Together we celebrated our progress to date, set out our vision for our profession and the evolution of the Big Start campaign into the Early Years Union – SIPTU.

We have much to be proud of. Since we started to unionise with SIPTU's 'Big Start Campaign', we have organised, campaigned, and protested for our vision of Early Childhood Education and Care. As union members, we stand for a sector that is high quality for children, affordable and accessible for parents and where our contribution as Early Years Professionals is recognised and rewarded with decent pay and conditions.

We have made real progress. An historic first pay deal in 2022, negotiated by our union SIPTU, was a first big step towards recognising and valuing the work of educators and managers. Together with the introduction of Core Funding, we now have a mechanism to improve pay and conditions year after year.

However, significant challenges remain. As this year's Early Years Professionals Survey shows, staff recruitment and retention is having a major impact on the ability of services to meet the needs of parents and children. Staff shortages are increasing the workload on existing staff, leading to increased stress and burnout. Recruitment challenges are also impacting on the sector to meet the increased demand for services.

This has resulted in a staff turnover rate of 25% per year. Not only does this undermine quality for children, but it is also undermining the viability of services who simply cannot recruit or retain staff.

We are caught in a vicious cycle of low pay, a staffing crisis and increased stress and burnout which is undermining our profession and the viability of services to children and families.

Low pay is the biggest cause of this staffing crisis. Despite recent pay increases, the minimum rate of pay for an Early Years Educator is €13.65 per hour, €1.15 below the Living Wage of €14.80. Simply put, we cannot afford to stay in our profession.

Government and employers must accept their responsibility and tackle the low pay crisis in a meaningful way. Interminable delays to pay agreements may benefit employers in the short term, but ultimately undermine the sustainability and viability of the sector.

Early Years Professionals need decent pay and conditions that recognise and value their contribution to children, families and wider society.

**Avril Green,  
Chairperson,  
Early Years Union – SIPTU**

## Introduction

Over the past two years, ECEC has seen significant developments in relation to affordability, state investment and pay. The introduction of Core Funding in 2022 saw Government investment in ECEC reach over €1 billion per year. This funding supported an initial pay deal and, together with the National Childcare Scheme, reduced fees for parents.

However, during this time the cost of living has significantly increased, eroding many of the gains that Early Years Professionals have made.

This latest edition of the Early Years Professionals Survey is an insight into how these developments have impacted frontline staff, and the key challenges they continue to face.

Despite the recent progress, the profession remains plagued by low pay, poor conditions and high levels of stress and burnout, all of which are contributing to a recruitment and retention crisis.

Of the 1,315 respondents, 85% reported that having a positive influence on children's development as the best part of their job. However, there is a real risk that this important work by dedicated professionals cannot be maintained to a high standard, as high staff turnover rates impact children's ability to learn and thrive. The frustration and burnout felt by so many came through in the responses, with many managers emphasising how hard it is to recruit and retain staff.

Professionals are clear – they are struggling with low pay and poor working conditions. The resulting staffing crisis is also causing a huge amount of stress, with 70% citing stress and burnout as a major issue. They feel undervalued by society, in spite of their hard work delivering a vital public service.

The challenge is clear. If ECEC services are to provide high quality services to children, meet parent's needs, and services are to remain viable, the staffing crisis must be addressed.

## Overview of Main Findings

### Pay and Conditions

The survey underscores the pressing issue of pay and conditions within ECEC.

Focusing on Early Years Educators, who make up almost half of those employed in the sector, a staggering **86% identified low pay as their biggest work issue**. The next two biggest issues were 'pressure due to staff shortages' (68%) and 'stress and burnout' at 65%.

The consequences of low pay have a material impact on staff, with 95% of Early Years Educators only able to 'make ends meet' with 'difficulty' or 'great difficulty'.

For all grades of staff, including managers, 78% were unable to cope with an unexpected expense, such as replacing a washing machine.

### Stress and Burnout

Working in ECEC is a rewarding but demanding job. Stress and Burnout has become a major issue for educators and managers as they deal with the challenges of staff shortages, low pay and administrative burden.

For those Early Years Educators experiencing stress and burnout, staff shortages were identified as the biggest cause (29%) followed by 'financial pressures due to pay' (27%).

For managers, stress and burnout was identified as their biggest work issue (73%). The biggest causal factor was identified as 'staff shortages' (42%), followed by 'the intensity of the job' (35%).

Conditions of employment are compounding factors, with 36% of all grades reporting that they don't have enough time to take their legal entitlement to breaks.



## Recruitment and Retention

Recruitment and retention emerge as the most critical challenges facing the sector, with implications for service provision, sustainability and quality,

The vast majority of services reported having to recruit staff over the past 12 months, a process that was reported as 'difficult' or 'very difficult' for 95% managers.

Unsurprisingly the challenges of recruiting and retaining staff are having stark consequences.

30% of managers reported that problems recruiting and retaining staff will result in service closure, an increase of 6% since the last Early Years Professionals Survey in 2022. The threat of 'Room Closures' was reported by 42% of managers, an increase of 9% from 2022.

The overall recruitment and retention cost to employers is significant due to loss of income and the financial and resource costs associated with filling roles. However, it is the impact on quality that is of greatest concern.

Once again, the impact of the staffing crisis on quality for children was identified as the greatest concern by managers, followed by additional work for remaining staff (66%), and difficulty in maintaining staff ratios (49%).

Only 9% of Early Years Educators agreed that "if things stay the same, I will still be working in the Early Years Sector in 12 months time".

Without significant intervention, there is little prospect of the staffing crisis abating, with 39% of all respondents are actively looking for a job in another sector. This result is consistent for all grades, with 38% of managers actively looking for work outside of their profession.

## Capacity Constraints

An overwhelming number of managers are concerned that "problems recruiting and retaining staff will negatively impact service provision" (95%).

Focusing on the supply, a majority of managers (53%) reported that staffing challenges would result in the reduction of services for parents and children. Other consequences of the staff crisis were 'room closures' at 42% and an inability to meet parental demand for places (50%).

30% of managers reported that their service is at risk of closure due to the staffing crisis.



*"It is not a career I would ever recommend and I have worked in it for over 16 years. Although I personally enjoy the interaction with children and watching their development with the hope that I have had an impact on the children that need it most, I feel it is an area that is so undervalued and underpaid that we will find ourselves in a situation where young people will not choose this as a career."*

**Room Leader, Sligo.**

*“It is one of the most rewarding jobs but is also one of the most difficult due to the fact that the shortage of staff puts an awful amount of stress on us all in our service.”*

**Manager, Kildare.**





# Survey Results

## Demographics of Respondents

This survey captured the experiences of 1,315 Early Years Professionals.

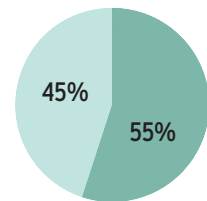
The largest respondent group was Early Years Educators/School Age Childcare practitioners at 30.5%. This was followed by Room Leaders and Graduate Room Leaders (28.9%), Deputy Managers (6%), Managers and Graduate Managers (18%), and Owner Managers (9.97%), with 'Other' accounting for 7%.

55% worked in a private setting with 45% in a community setting. 14% of respondents were based in Dublin, followed by Cork at 11% 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.

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

Private: **55%**

Community: **45%**

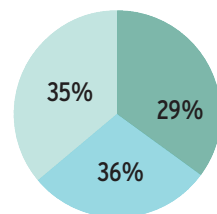


### How long have you worked in your current service?

Less than 5 years: **35%**

Between 5 and 10 years: **29%**

More than 10 years: **36%**



### What is your job role?

Educator (Early Years, School Age, AIM): **30%**

Lead Educator: **16%**

Graduate Lead Educator: **13%**

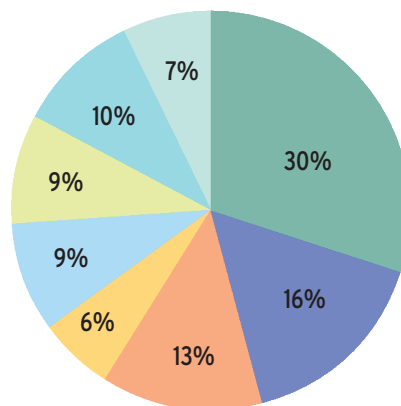
Deputy Manager: **6%**

Manager: **9%**

Graduate Manager: **9%**

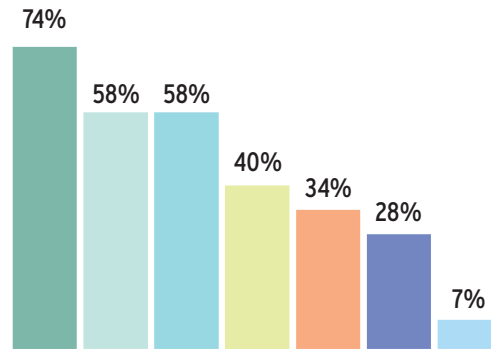
Owner Manager: **10%**

Other: **7%**



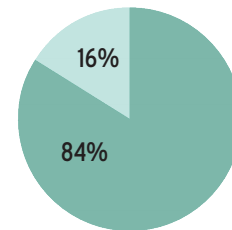
### As a manager, what are the biggest issues facing your service right now?

- Administrative burden: **74%**
- Financial sustainability: **58%**
- Recruiting new staff: **58%**
- Unable to recruit relief staff: **40%**
- Retaining existing staff: **34%**
- Maintaining adult/child ratios: **28%**
- Other: **7%**

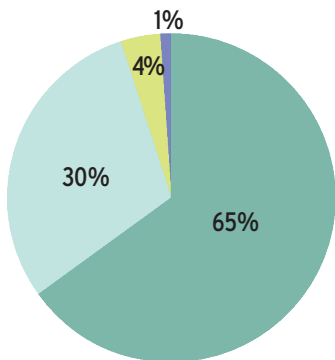


### Did you have to recruit staff in the last 12 months?

- Yes: **84%**
- No: **16%**



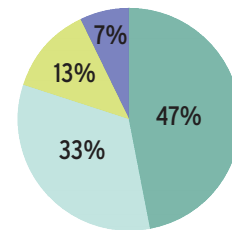
### If yes, what was your experience of recruiting new staff?



- Very difficult: **65%**
- Difficult: **30%**
- Easy: **4%**
- Very easy: **1%**

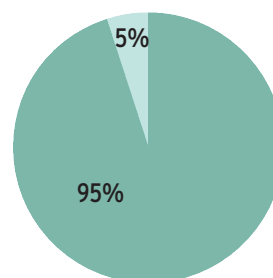
### To what extent is low pay an obstacle to recruiting new staff?

- The biggest obstacle: **47%**
- A significant obstacle: **33%**
- Somewhat an obstacle: **13%**
- Not an obstacle: **7%**



### Are you concerned that problems recruiting and retaining staff will negatively impact service provision?

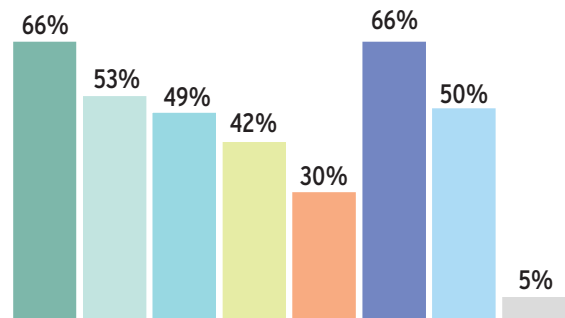
- Yes: **95%**
- No: **5%**





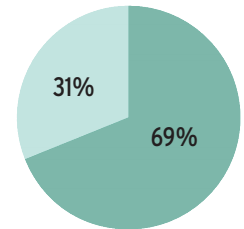
### If yes, what will the be impact be?

- Impact on quality for children: **66%**
- Reduction in service provision: **53%**
- Difficulty in maintaining child/staff ratios: **49%**
- Closure of room: **42%**
- Closure of service: **30%**
- Additional workload on existing staff: **66%**
- Unable to meet the demand for spaces: **50%**
- Other: **5%**



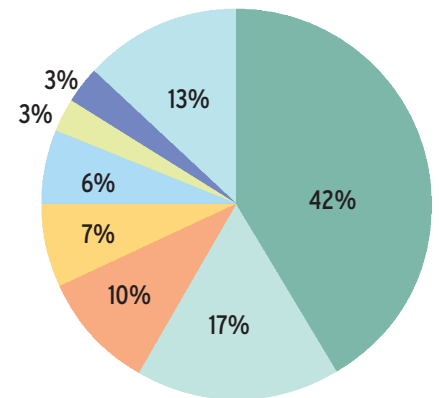
### Have any staff left your service in the past 12 months?

- Yes: **69%**
- No: **31%**



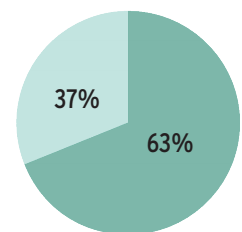
### If yes, why did they leave?

- To improve pay/conditions in another Sector: **42%**
- Stress/Burnout: **17%**
- To improve pay/conditions in another Early Years Service: **10%**
- Emigrated to another country: **7%**
- Don't know: **6%**
- Return to education/training: **3%**
- Retired/No longer working: **3%**
- Other: **13%**



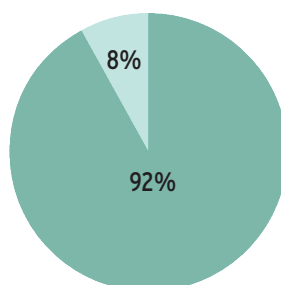
### I have enough time to take my breaks

- Yes: **63%**
- No: **37%**



### I have a work pension

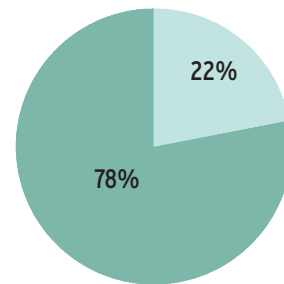
- Yes: **8%**
- No: **92%**



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

Yes: **22%**

No: **78%**

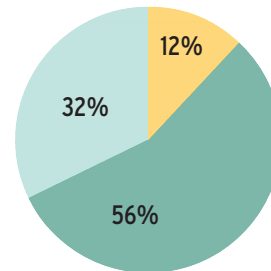


### I get paid maternity leave from work

Yes: **12%**

No: **56%**

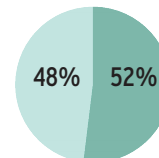
I don't know: **32%**



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

Yes: **52%**

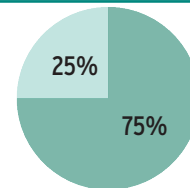
No: **48%**



### I do work training on my own time

Yes: **75%**

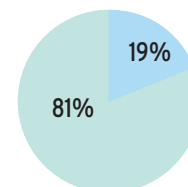
No: **25%**



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

Yes: **19%**

No: **81%**



### What are your biggest work issues?

Low pay: **74%**

Lack of recognition: **70%**

Stress/Burnout: **70%**

Pressure due to staff shortages: **65%**

Too much paperwork: **56%**

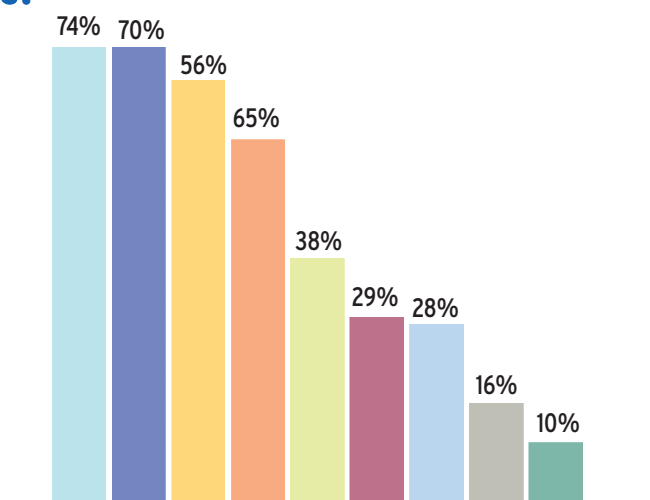
Too many inspection bodies: **38%**

Unpaid work: **29%**

Summer lay-off period: **28%**

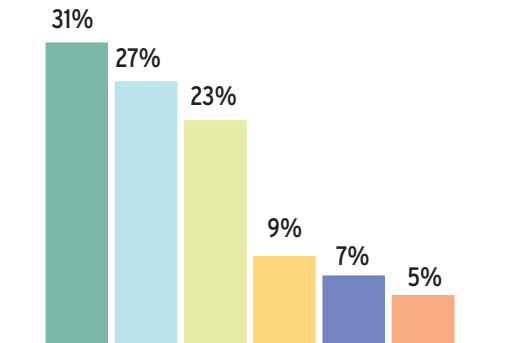
Lack of job security: **16%**

Other: **10%**



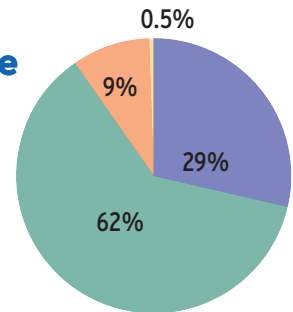
### If you experience stress and burnout at work, what is the main cause?

- Staff shortages: **31%**
- Intensity of the job: **27%**
- Financial pressures due to pay: **23%**
- Other (please specify): **9%**
- No planned non-contact time: **7%**
- Lack of support or mentoring: **5%**



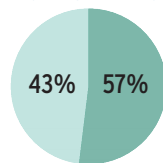
### I am able to make ends meet with my current income

- With great difficulty: **29%**
- With difficulty: **62%**
- Easily: **9%**
- Very easily: **0.5%**



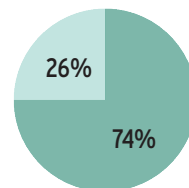
### Do you get paid for all hours worked (contact and non-contact work)

- Yes: **57%**
- No: **43%**



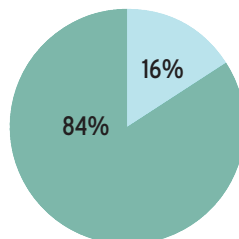
### I get more than 5 paid sick days per year

- Yes: **26%**
- No: **74%**



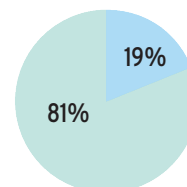
### I work a second job

- Yes: **16%**
- No: **84%**



### Is there is an appointed Lead Educator in every room in your service?

- Yes: **81%**
- No: **19%**

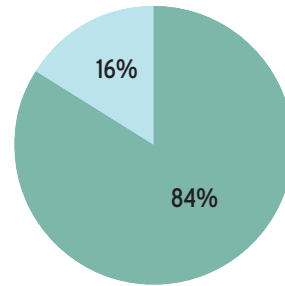




### Would you like to see the introduction of new lead roles offering career progression for Educators (e.g. A Lead Family & Community Partnership Role)

Yes: **84%**

No: **16%**

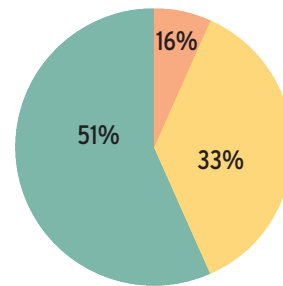


### If things stay the same, I will still be working in the Early Years Sector in 12 months time

Yes: **16%**

No: **33%**

I don't know: **51%**



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

Low pay: **36%**

Stress/burnout: **25%**

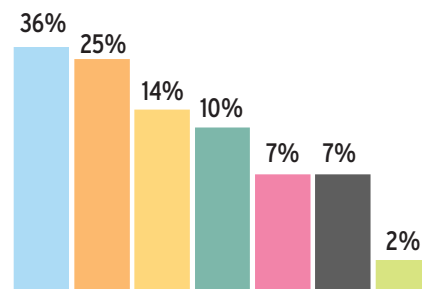
Higher paid jobs available in other sectors: **14%**

Other: **10%**

Lack of recognition: **7%**

Poor conditions (e.g. pension, maternity pay): **7%**

Lack of career progression: **2%**

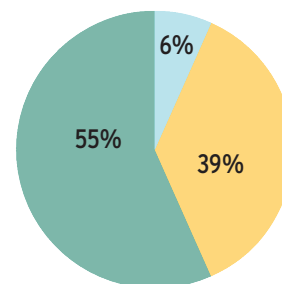


### I am actively looking for another job

Yes, in another Early Years service: **6%**

Yes, in another sector: **39%**

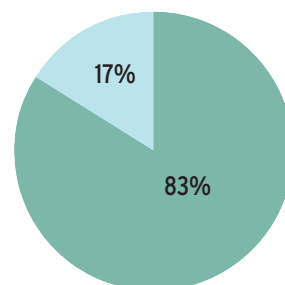
No, I am not actively looking for another job: **55%**



### Would you recommend a career in Early Years to a friend or family member?

Yes: **17%**

No: **83%**



## Conclusion

The findings of this year's Early Years Professionals' Survey are stark.

For many Early Years Professionals, the joy of working with children is overshadowed by financial struggles. Their wages barely cover basic needs, leaving them feeling undervalued and burnt out.

The resulting staff shortages have become a chronic problem. Qualified professionals are leaving the sector in droves, seeking better pay and working conditions elsewhere. This revolving door creates instability, making it difficult to maintain quality care for children and to deliver the services needed by parents.

Both the government and employer representatives have a crucial role to play in resolving this crisis. The coming months will see a government budget and a new round of pay talks at the Early Years Joint Labour Committee. All stakeholders must recognise that the solution to the staffing crisis is to recognise and reward Early Years Professionals with decent pay and conditions and increase pay above the Living Wage in the short term. Inaction will have severe consequences for staff, services, parents and children.

*“The lack of recognition and the work that is expected from me is definitely not reflected in wages.”*

**Educator, Tipperary.**

*“It is a very rewarding job but I think people still look at us as babysitters. The Government does not respect the role we play in society. We are an essential part of society and should be provided with proper pay and working conditions.”*

**Early Years Educator, Galway.**

*“I have just accepted a new job working in insurance, leaving the sector in four weeks time for good, after getting my degree and working for the last 10 years in it. So heartbroken to leave something I'm so passionate about but have no choice now because of staff shortages, stress, low pay affecting my personal life and wellbeing. Shouldn't be this way!!!”*

**Preschool Educator, Dublin.**

*“I think the minimum pay for early years is way below what it should be even with the new rates of pay, it should start at €15 at least and go up. The stress/burnout and work commitments such as paper work, observations, etc on top of planning and activities is a big workload, and this needs to be recognised.”*

**Lead Educator, Cork.**



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