

Written evidence submitted by the Petitions Committee (GRC0014)

Petitions Committee: online engagement on childcare and returning to work after maternity leave

Activity

As part of its ongoing inquiry into the Government's response to Coronavirus, the Petitions Committee held an online evidence session on Thursday 7 May, to examine issues relating to maternity leave during the pandemic, prompted by a petition calling on the Government to "[Extend maternity leave by 3 months with pay in light of COVID-19](#)".

Following this the Committee decided to hold a follow-up session, in order to examine in more detail several themes that had been prominent in the feedback the Committee had received. One of these was childcare, and how this would affect parents' ability to return to work after maternity leave.

To hear more about how the coronavirus outbreak had affected options for childcare, we sent out two surveys. One was focused on parents, how their options had changed due to the pandemic, what their concerns were about sending their children to different settings, and what arrangements their employers could offer if they had difficulties returning to work as expected as a result.

The second survey asked childcare providers, both business operators and employees, to tell us how the sector had been affected, and how they viewed their ability to offer childcare options in both the short and longer term. We also asked them about the UK Government plans and guidance for early years settings to reopen to children on 1 June, and how these would affect their ability to operate. A separate petition that had also gathered over 100,000 signatures calling for the Government to "[Give UK nurseries emergency funding if they have to close down amid COVID-19](#)" had already indicated

that those within the sector had significant concerns for the future.

We have summarised the key themes below and illustrated them with quotes from respondents.

Responses

Over 12,000 responses to the survey for parents and families

Over 3,900 responses to the survey for childcare providers

Key themes:

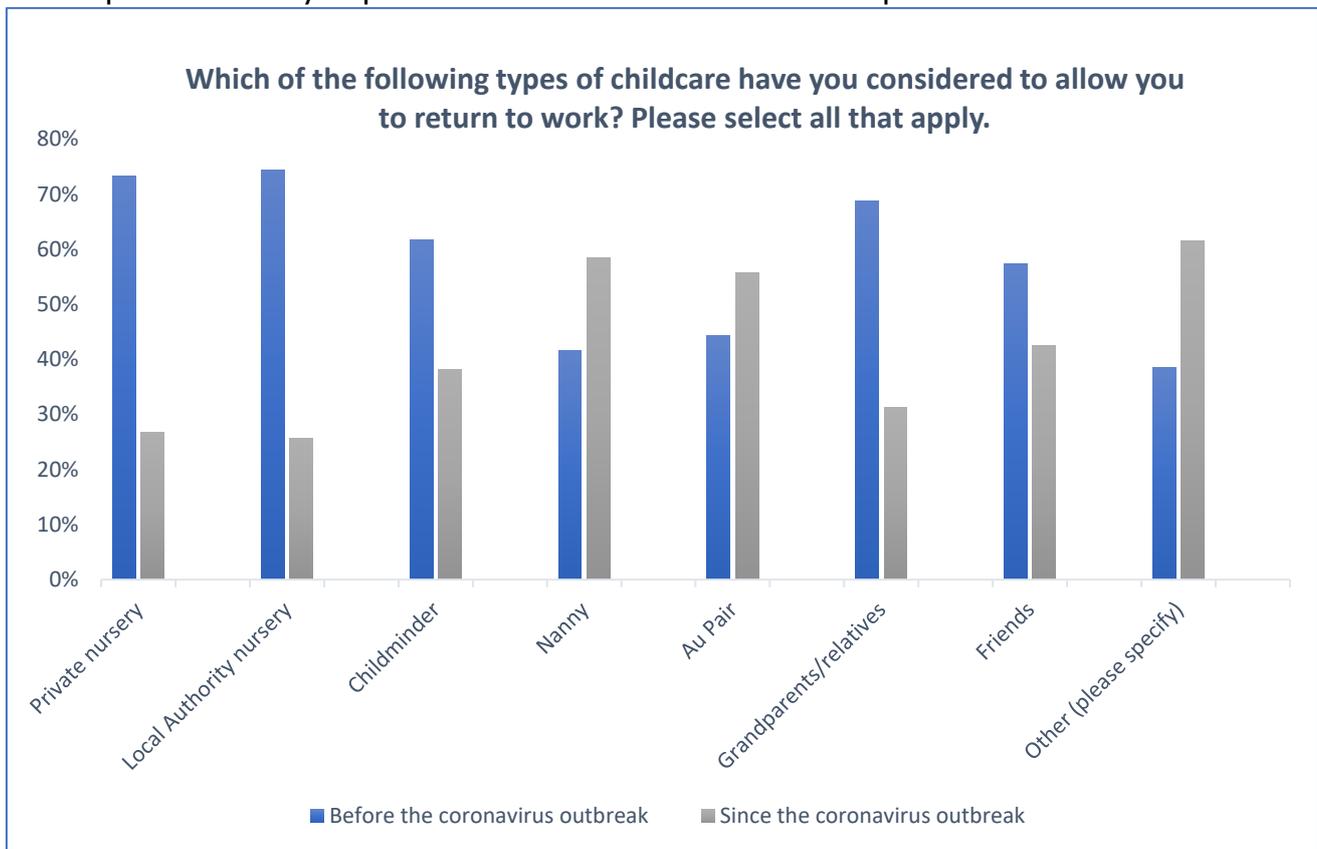
Options for childcare

Nurseries

- In the survey for childcare providers, we asked about the extent to which they felt they would be able to reopen. Less than **3%** felt they would be able to reopen to the same capacity as before, and nearly **7%** said they would be unable to reopen at all. Most felt they would have a reduced capacity.
 - We heard from both surveys that most providers had been closed, leaving parents unable to visit. Whilst many nurseries were able to continue talking to prospective parents, nearly **30%** reported being unable to do this at all. Not being able to physically see the childcare environment was a major concern for parents, and over **90%** of
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childcare workers felt physical visits and settling in days were either important or very important.

about transmission of the virus were prominent to both childcare providers and parents.



- Providers also noted that policies such as “drop at the door” to reduce contact would further compound the anxiety of both parents and children.
- The view of the importance of settling-in periods was also shared by parents, and this was a common response as to why they would be uncomfortable placing their child into a nursery in order to return to work, especially those who had reported few opportunities for their baby to get used to other adults. Many felt separation anxiety would be worse due to the experience of lockdown.
- As well as the availability of nursery places, we heard from respondents to both surveys that safety and concerns
- When asked “Do you agree with UK Government that early years settings should be prepared to reopen from 1 June?”, over **70%** of providers said they either disagreed or strongly disagreed, with many expressing their feeling that it was too early to return safely.
- The difficulty of social distancing with young children was noted widely, and some providers disagreed with the guidance which did not recommend they used PPE.
- Nurseries also noted that operating at a reduced capacity to try follow safety guidelines would make their businesses inviable.

- The number of parents planning to use nurseries showed a larger fall than other options – only a quarter since the outbreak, compared to three quarters before.

Quotes

"I will not be wanting my child to be attending nursery for two reasons, he will be mixing with other children who could be carriers, but also I will be working for the nhs and potentially be a carrier myself and would not want him to be taking it to the nursery either"

"I am worried that a nursery carer or another baby/child could pass the virus on to my baby."

"I am afraid of my baby and my family's health. Babies put everything in their mouths! It's impossible to avoid risks of infection of coronavirus in this scenario."

"I worry I will be limited to nurseries that are open rather than where I would want to send my child."

"The first visits and settling sessions are crucial to the child-setting-parent relationship. Parents will naturally be more cautious about going to a new setting. Mine is a home from home childminding setting, so I don't think I am likely to have any new starters for a long time, due to the restrictions of social distancing."

"Our biggest concern is not the settling in for the babies, as babies in particular are often the easiest to settle, it's the parents who tend to benefit from the settling in sessions. Whereas for toddlers over 1 years of age, as the child is more aware of their surroundings, yet have the added difficulty of communicating, the settling in sessions tend to benefit both the child and parent equally."

"She has had no opportunity to socialise with other people and has never met another baby. I worry very much about her wellbeing thrust into this unfamiliar and busy environment being used to only being in our home with me. It would be noisy and terrifying for her. How could I leave her there. I won't be using childcare until I know she is confident."

"I disagree about PPE. It says that childcare workers do not need it. We need it, we change nappies, help with feeding toilet training, cuddles etc."

"Babies and toddlers put everything in their mouths and that is a natural part of their development. Everyday I come home from nursery covered in saliva and snot from the babies I care for in my room and that is usually fine but not when that saliva and snot could be carrying coronavirus that could kill me or my family when I walk it through my front door."

"On paper it seems like it [the guidance] will be effective but when you think about putting it into practice with children so young that you realise it's all a shambles - the people who wrote it have clearly never worked in a nursery, or they would know that babies and toddlers cannot social distance."

"Small groups is the safest way, space will only allow 50% of our children to return but we will need the same staff which we simply can't afford with current financial support."

Grandparents and other relatives

- Prior to the outbreak, **68%** of respondents were relying on grandparents or other relatives for some or all of their childcare. This dropped to **31%** after the outbreak, and the most common reason cited was health concerns and grandparents shielding for health or age-related reasons.
- As well as older grandparents being unable to see their families, some were also still working themselves and there were concerns about infection passing around the family via children.
- There was also a sense of confusion about future guidance for over 70s and whether they would be an option for care when further restrictions were lifted.
- Uncertainty over the extent to which grandparents would be able to help had a knock-on effect for many, as they could not make plans or approach their employers.

Quotes:

"Grandparents would have had our child once a week however as a midwife and my husband a police officer we are key workers and would be putting them at risk. My sister was going to have our baby one day a week but her daughter has had a heart transplant, she is extremely high risk, due to the nature of both our jobs we could not risk passing covid on to their family household via our child."

"I now do not feel comfortable asking my nan to look after my son 3 days a week when he is at childminders 2 days with other children and not socially distancing, putting her at risk when she is in the vulnerable category"

"My mother who was supposed to look after my daughter is a key worker for the NHS and hasn't been near my daughter for 8 weeks for fear of passing on the virus therefore I cannot leave her in her care to enable me to return to work"

"grandparents were to be main source of childcare with potentially 1 or 2 days a week at a private nursery. if baby is unable to go to grandparents, and currently baby does not know grandparents as she has not spent any time with them for 7+ weeks, this will obviously change my plans. Also i am not sure how easy it will be to find a nursery in the current situation. if this is still ongoing when i am due back at work i will consider requesting additional unpaid leave."

"Grandparents over 70, uncertain if they will still be isolating"

Other childcare options

- Whilst many who were originally looking to use nurseries reported they either no longer could (due to opening or availability) or no longer wished to, there was an increase in those looking at nannies and au pairs.
- Where respondents were looking at these options instead, the main reasons stated were concerns about leaving children in settings with large numbers of children, changes to availability of nurseries, and family members now being unable to care for children.
- Parents were also considering nannies and childminders as potentially being more cost effective, as well as caring for fewer children than nurseries.

- Some others simply did not have any other options and had to return to work.

Quotes:

“Unable to use grandparents because of shielding. May not be able to afford private nursery now. So we are looking into a nanny type option for both children because it will be cheaper.”

“Childminders are cheaper and have less children, may suit my working hours better”

“Family and friends make up all of my child care. As we can no longer see these i have no options available to me. Private nurseys in my area which would not work as i have a 9 month and a 10 year old are not taking on new children”

“Considering nanny/au pair so only my child is being cared for as opposed to multiple children”

“Fear of picking up the virus at nursery and spreading it to grandparents who are all vulnerable. Mother is also asthmatic and considered in a danger group. Finding an au pair or nanny may minimise some of this risk”

“Concerned about impact of social distancing in nurseries and potential for increased costs. Am thinking more about alternative options such as childminder or au pair than I was before.”



Returning to work

- **81%** of respondents to our survey to parents told us they were now considering delaying their return to work. Of these, **15%** had been offered the option to take further unpaid leave, and just over **4%** could be furloughed. Nearly **80%** had been offered no options at all to extend their leave by their employer.
- While some had chosen to take the unpaid 13 weeks of their maternity leave entitlement to extend their leave, we regularly heard that this was either never an option, or no longer an option due to financial pressures.
- Many reported using their annual leave allowance to delay their return, but noted this would prevent them taking any further holiday once lockdown conditions had been lifted.
- There was a variance in the levels of communication and helpfulness of employers. Some reported difficulty in contacting them, whilst others said their employer refused to discuss alternative arrangements until closer to the date they were due to return.
- Key workers, including teachers, NHS workers and those working for the police reported being unable to extend leave or be furloughed as they were needed at work.

"I am a key worker, so work are keen to have me back asap. Financially I cannot afford not to work, we have used a lot of savings already"

"I am a teacher and work in a Reception class I am expected to be back as planned with no chance/ choice to extend my leave. The nursery I had chosen is closed and my parents have not seen my daughter since the start of lock down so are basically strangers to her."

"My only option is to take full maternity leave and be unpaid for the last 12 weeks. My partner has lost his job as a result of coronavirus so this might not be financially feasible for us."

"Delayed returning to work (with absolutely no pay!) I need to find a suitable nursery for my little one before I return to work, i cannot do this due to lockdown. Leaving me extremely financially worse off and struggling to pay my mortgage and bills"

"My line manager is furloughed so I've heard nothing"

"I have tried to contact my employer several times regarding my maternity leave and have had no response. I have not heard from them since I started my maternity leave."

"If I choose to extend my maternity, there is a strong possibility that my role will no longer be available for me to return into as it will exceed 12 months. I would see no option but to return to work, and my husband and I having to use a mixture of holiday and unpaid leave to care for our child until we can find a suitable alternative"

Quotes:

"I was an NHS employee so could not be furloughed but my local nursery is closed and grandparents who were due to look after my daughter are currently unable to do so due to lockdown rules, so I had to resign."

Challenges for early years settings

Reopening – timing and guidance

- In our survey to childcare providers we asked about the UK Government's plans to reopen early years settings to all children from 1 June, and the guidance issued on doing this safely.
- Over **70%** did not agree with the plans to reopen on 1 June, but the response to the guidance itself was more mixed, with roughly equal numbers feeling it was useful or not useful.
- Many noted that the guidance was predominantly focussed on schools, and not enough consideration had been given to the unique challenges presented by caring for very young children who could not understand even basic social distancing requirements, and needed direct physical assistance with feeding and toileting.
- Some expressed disagreement with statements in the guidance that staff did not need PPE, and noted they were unable to source it. Some felt the safety of the staff was not being given enough consideration.
- Several respondents disagreed with the Government's assertion that demand would be low enough to allow some elements of distancing, and indicated that their own surveys to parents showed higher demand than they could safely manage, even if some parents kept their children at home as expected.
- Some providers accepted the idea of keeping children in small groups/bubbles was more workable than attempted social distancing, but

the staff numbers required to make it work would make it financially unsustainable for them, and may not suit the physical layouts of some settings, especially for childminders.

Quotes

"There has been little to no sufficient guidance for supporting staff and children classed as "clinically vulnerable" even though they can return to work and settings. They will be the most at risk going back but at these settings it is impossible to protect and distance them safely, why are they required to return to education settings where it cannot feasibly happen?"

Overall, it is apparent to Nursery settings that it is going to be a struggle, nigh on impossible, to offer full protection to the children and staff according to government guidelines."

"I work in a preschool with 5 members of staff and 18 children no bigger than my living room! We can not social distance in there. My manager won't allow us to wear face masks due to scaring the children. It's a confined space so I think ppe is required at all times. I get that children are of low risk to covid but that doesn't include the staff and their families!"

"95% of our families have requested care from June rather than delaying start so I disagree when they say demand will be lower. Small groups with no cross over goes against everything I believe in. I feel that this will have negative impacts on children's well-being."

"In principle some of it makes sense, but implementing sufficient changes just does not seem possible to me."

Financial impact

- In addition to the practical challenges of reopening fully, many respondents expressed concern about the financial impact and how they would be able to survive longer term.
- Those that had stayed open for key workers children reported significant financial pressure, as they were unable to save costs or access support to the same extent as those who closed.
- Several respondents noted that their insurance did not pay out for business interruption when they were forced to close.
- Many mentioned that funding was already insufficient prior to the outbreak and that they were making up for deficits from private income.
- Staffing costs were a big concern. Many had furloughed staff, and were now having to consider bringing some or all back, with little idea on expected demand. It was also noted that while mandatory ratios had not been changed by the guidance, if the 'small groups/bubbles' were to be followed it would require more staff than usual to facilitate changing, feeding etc. as well as enhanced levels of cleaning.
- Longer term there was some feeling that demand would be lower, due to parents permanently changing their working arrangements, or being unable to afford nursery fees due to pay cuts or redundancies.
- Some expressed anxiety about the furlough scheme and how long it would remain funded, with many not expecting to return to full capacities for some time.

"We tried to stay open for key workers but lost £1k per week and had to close. Our furlough costs aren't being met and our fixed costs are accruing debt with little income. We may struggle to reopen with the costs of preparing and reduced attendance"

"It is safer to have less children and I am sure many of my parents won't want or need their children to return. We will have to see the response from our parents. However, this will mean more overheads and less fees. We may have to make staff redundant or they will have to live on less furlough money as we can't afford to pay them the full salary any longer"

"Schools are given extra funding to manage cleaning etc however nurseries are overlooked for such support."

"Early years providers are on their knees, listen to the sector / NDNA!!! We are underfunded yet expected just to get on with it. The sector continues to not get the support or recognition it deserves and needs to remain sustainable"

"The funding rate does not cover the costs of delivering the early education and the shortfall has to be made up from somewhere, so the private fees will have to be increased as a result. If the policy were changed so funded hours could be offered as subsidised hours, then the shortfall could be met by a top up from the parents of funded children, rather than the whole burden being placed on the private fee payers."

"Opening up and paying all bills with limited children will probably bankrupt us"

"Our demand hasn't been lower but we've had to drop our spaces from 42 a day to 28 a day and because of the priority for 3 & 4 year olds this means we are losing a huge amount

of income daily because it's my fee paying children I will have to turn away."

"A lot of parents have or are being made redundant so I think there will be less people returning or looking for childcare."

"Staff are nervous, parents are nervous. The new normal is very scary and we aren't 100% sure how this is going to work- if we even survive this financially."

"If necessary to reduce room numbers then economy of scale is lost. Additional costs due to PPE, the usual protective childcare materials increased in cost and more difficult to access. Additional cost (staff & material) to implement the necessary cleaning protocol. Additional staff to receive children and restrict carers entering the building. Additional 7% wages bill to recover due to revision of minimum wage in April."

"There are increased costs associated with operating safely, including the deep cleaning of nurseries and the provision of PPE to workers who need it. Schools can claim back money for these costs, but childcare providers can't. Indications are that occupancy will be much reduced and there are associated costs with cancelling contracts and redundancies. Some cost such as Insurance premiums will rise. We have fallen through the gaps on many of the schemes to support businesses. Therefore we need to consider all options for business viability"

"We were closed by the government with no notice. We had no LA support to stay open, there were no 'hubs' there was no PPE. Our insurance did not pay out. Our furlough was affected by early years funding (still fees, because childcare was never free.)

Our funding was then taken from us. We received less than a third of what was due to us, despite the whole figure used against our furlough claim. I had to get a loan to survive. I may have to let staff go, and the business may not survive."

"The virus should not be used as a means of covering up the gross under-funding of nurseries. The virus has only exacerbated an already difficult situation. The Government needs to look seriously at how it fund nurseries and listen to what nursery experts are telling them just like they are listening to the scientists now! They say they believe in competition and then they stifle it in the nursery sector by them deciding how much they will pay per hour, what the children to staff ratios (these are arbitrary numbers and have no scientific basis) are and then pay the rate for 39 of the 52 weeks. Moving forward to help nurseries, there needs to be a big increase in the hourly rate, this should be paid for 52 weeks and the 3-year funding should begin in the start of the school year in which the child is 3 and not wait until the child is actually 3."

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