

Institute for Public Policy Research



AN ELECTORAL STRATEGY FOR CHILDCARE

**Rachel Statham and
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CONTENTS

Foreword	5
Summary	6
What do voters want from childcare reforms?.....	6
1. Introduction	7
2. Which voters are prioritising childcare?	8
Finding a compelling framing for childcare	11
3. A system that is letting families down	13
Parental employment.....	13
Quality.....	13
Access and availability	14
Affordability	14
4. Priorities for childcare	15
5. Meeting childcare costs	18
6. Conclusions	19
References	20

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FOREWORD

WHO VOTES FOR NURSERIES? UNDERSTANDING THE ELECTORAL POLITICS OF CHILDCARE

Alongside an imminent general election, this year will see the greatest expansion in funded childcare on record for families in England. But despite significant financial and political investment before the public go to the polls, the story the UK government has to tell on childcare feels less than rosy. Back at 2023's spring budget, when measures to plug the gap between the end of parental leave and the start of 'free' (or government-funded) hours were announced, childcare looked to be a key electoral battleground. Since then, the rollout of new funded hours has proved chaotic for providers and parents accessing the scheme and has been plagued by implementation challenges that the next government – whoever forms it – will be forced to grapple with.

While the government might have expected to be reaping the electoral rewards of their investment in childcare this July, parents remain worried about the impacts of long-term under-investment: among parents and grandparents we surveyed for this work, extra funding to prevent nurseries closing and invest in staff training polled as their top concern - over and above extending free hours further. This speaks to an appetite to stabilise the childcare market and drive up quality, not just expand the retail offer made to voters.

Will childcare prove to be the election issue it was trailed to be? This research explores electoral support for action on childcare – identifying key voter groups, priorities, and how to frame the issue of early years education and care for electoral success. We find that swing voters and 'disengaged commuters' are more likely than average to rank affordable, available childcare as a top priority issue – suggesting an electoral advantage for a party deemed to be making a credible offer on childcare.

This research also sheds some light on what the public want from that offer: framing childcare as a means to give every child the best start to their education, rather than an economic issue, motivates voters. Parents are most likely to view 'improving young children's learning and development in preparation for school' as the primary purpose of childcare, and we find real appetite to tackle inequality through early years. More than half of respondents surveyed say they would be more likely to back a political party with an expanded childcare offer for disadvantaged children, while four in 10 parents would be willing to pay more to make this happen. Parents and grandparents are also keen to fix the unfairness of the current system by extending free hours to parents who are studying – another top priority for government action, with a smaller price tag attached.

Who votes for childcare? This research provides insights beyond the obvious constituencies of parents, and a growing constituency of grandparents who are relied on to piece together the support families need. It points to a coalition of disengaged commuters, Black and Asian voters, and swing voters whose votes could be won by a credible offer to improve access to high quality early education, and tackle early inequalities.

SUMMARY

The public are ambitious about the potential role of childcare and early education. With a UK general election now announced, political parties should consider how they can meet this motivation with an improved early years offer.

Our analysis makes clear that childcare and early education matter hugely to voters. This extends beyond just parents themselves, with grandparents in particular expressing acute concerns about current levels of provision.

IPPR conducted two surveys of adults in England to learn about perceptions of our childcare system, including:

- A survey of a nationally representative sample of more than 4,000 adults
- A survey of more than 2,000 parents and grandparents

Crucially, both surveys exposed that swing voters are more likely than others to identify childcare as a priority, and to report dissatisfaction with wraparound, nursery and childminder provision where they live. This suggests that a strong early years proposition could play a crucial role in influencing outcomes in marginal seats.

This early analysis forms part of a two-stage programme from IPPR, with further work to come in summer 2024 focussed on funding and delivery models to unlock a childcare guarantee.

WHAT DO VOTERS WANT FROM CHILDCARE REFORMS?

- Swing voters are more likely (2.3 times for those who are parents, 1.3 times for swing voters as a whole) to prioritise improving childcare availability and costs than the average voter. 13 per cent of them considered this among their top three priorities.
- Experiences of the current system vary widely, with parents of children with special educational needs more likely to struggle to find suitable childcare for their children, and parents on low incomes more likely to report low levels of satisfaction and confidence in nursery staff.
- Voters value the role childcare and early education can play in tackling disadvantage.
- There is strong support for **expanding provision**, with an extension of eligibility for two-year-olds particularly popular.
- However, with growing press coverage of providers' concerns about delivering an expanded offer, awareness of the fragility of the system was reflected by **parents prioritising reinforcing support in the short term over a rapid expansion of free childcare places**.
- Among the ways eligibility might be expanded, extending free hours to parents undertaking training is particularly popular.
- Despite acute continued cost of living pressures, 44 per cent of parents would be willing to personally pay more for childcare in order to subsidise costs to low income families.

1. INTRODUCTION

IPPR has been calling for a childcare guarantee – a universal offer of high-quality support extending from the end of parental leave through to the end of primary school (Statham et al 2022).

Childcare has been rising up the political agendas of progressive parties across developed economies. We set out to explore the case for prioritising a major offer on childcare at the upcoming general election for the two largest UK parties.

We developed two surveys to build an understanding of the salience of childcare among other policy priorities; to gauge appetite for universal and means-tested models, and to test specific policy proposals.

BOX 1.1: METHODOLOGY

This project involved two surveys of adults in England delivered by Focal Data.

- **Survey 1:** A nationally representative survey of 4,082 adults in England in September 2023. This involved a voter segmentation exercise to situate respondents' views within wider attitudinal categories.
- **Survey 2:** A survey of 2,016 parents and grandparents conducted between December 2023 and January 2024, concentrated in seats in the South East and South West of England, which saw the sharpest fall in average age between the latest census periods to learn about voter priorities in areas seeing growth in residents starting families.

This involved a survey method in which respondents are asked to repeatedly identify their most and least preferred among a series of policy options (termed a 'MaxDiff' exercise). This is more rigorous than a one-off ranking exercise and provides a more reliable indication of respondents' preferences across a large number of options.

We look at four key themes which are shaping voters' attitudes to childcare

1. **Which voters are prioritising childcare:** An overview of the groups more likely to prioritise childcare above other topics, and the types of framing which resonated with survey respondents.
2. **A system that is letting families down:** A summary of experiences of the current system, exposing fundamental flaws related to parental employment, quality, access and availability, and affordability. It highlights distinct challenges experienced by parents of children with special educational needs and low income families.
3. **Priorities for childcare:** The distilled results of an exercise where parents and grandparents ranked childcare policy measures.
4. **Meeting childcare costs:** This section considers the extent to which parents and grandparents would be willing to pay more to improve childcare provision.

We conclude by outlining the short-term priorities for our childcare system that have emerged through both surveys.

2. WHICH VOTERS ARE PRIORITISING CHILDCARE?

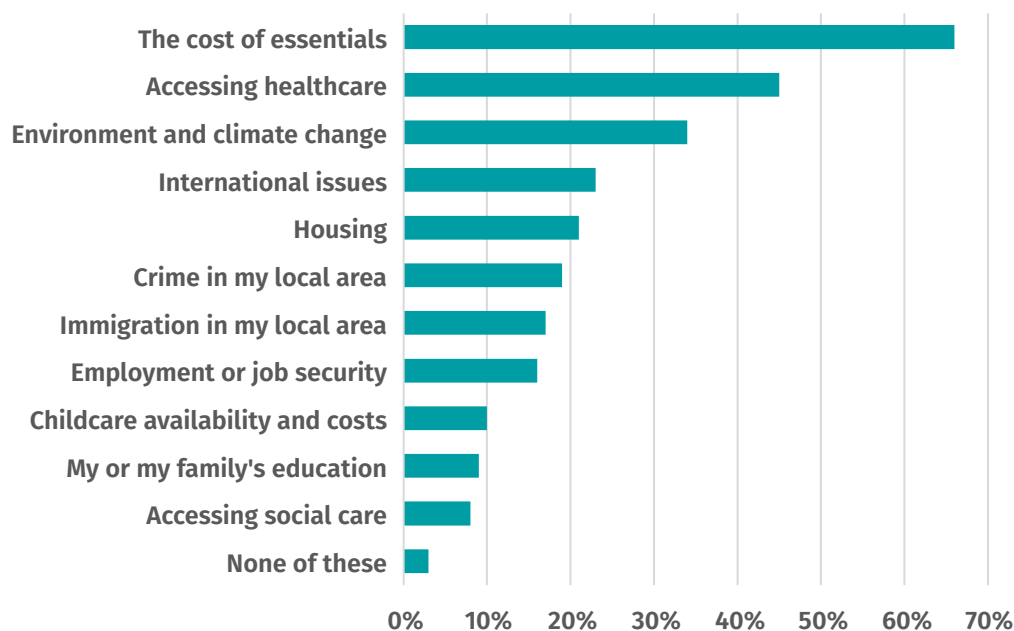
It is often assumed that childcare and early years policy is a relatively niche issue, and not a priority to voters who are not parents themselves. This research undertook to test that assumption, working to identify which cohorts of voters are more likely to consider early education important to them.

Respondents were asked to identify their top three policy priorities from a list. The graph below indicates groups of respondents that identified childcare as being within their top three priorities.

FIGURE 2.1

One in 10 adults report childcare availability and costs among their top priorities

Share of respondents who identify the cost and availability of childcare in their top three priority issues

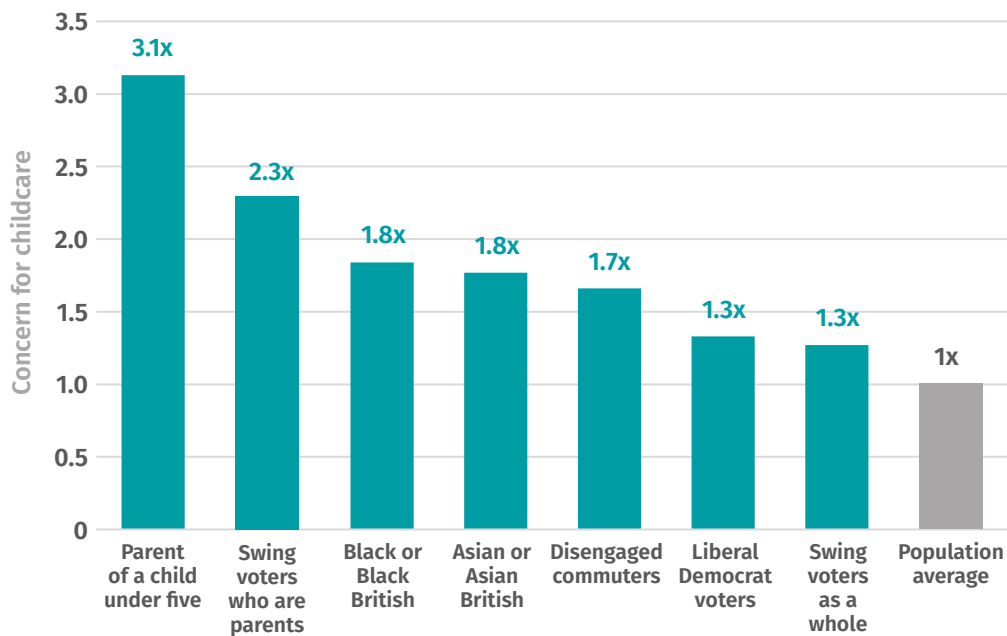


Source: Authors' analysis of survey 1 results

FIGURE 2.2

Swing voters, Black and Asian voters and carers are more likely to identify childcare within their top three priorities than the general population

Concern for childcare, indexed



Source: Authors' analysis of survey 1 results

Note 'Liberal Democrat voters' describes respondents with a current intention to vote Liberal Democrat

Crucially, the analysis found that childcare is a priority for swing voters.¹ Parents who are swing voters are two and a half times more likely to prioritise childcare than other voters, and swing voters overall are 2.3 times more likely to prioritise childcare than voters on average.

Our analysis also involved segmenting voters into similar attitudinal segments, according to a standard set of questions derived from the British Election Study. This type of methodology is widely used by researchers and polling agencies to analyse groups that share similar values.²

- **Progressive activists:** Economically and socially liberal younger voters who generally hold a degree level qualification. Consistent Labour party voters.
- **Moderate liberals:** More socially liberal this group is most likely to support the Liberal Democrats.
- **Disengaged commuters:** The largest voter group in most constituencies, living in suburbs and towns. They tend to be socially conservative, typically less politically engaged than some groups, and often a swing voter.

1 Swing voters are defined using a question which asks respondents whether they would ever vote a particular party in the future, on a scale from 0 to 10. Respondents were asked about the Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrats, Green and Reform UK. Voters are defined as swing if their difference in warmth scores for the Labour and Conservative parties is less than 3, and they have a score below 7 for all other parties. This is a standard Focldata measure that is designed to capture swing between the two main parties as well as likelihood to turn out in elections

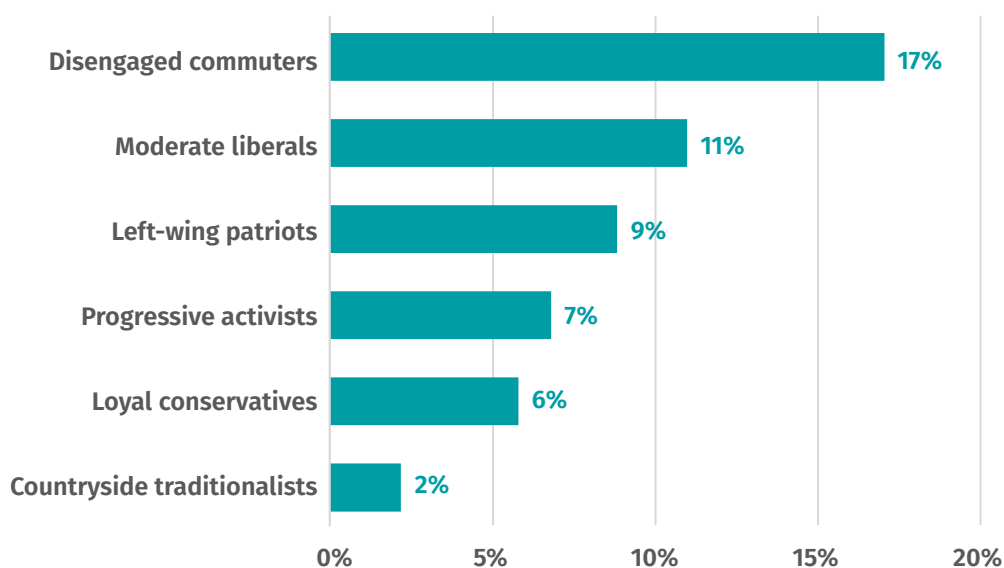
2 To generate the segments, respondents are asked a series of 'golden' questions to gauge their attitudes towards economic redistribution, economic growth, nationalisation of key industries, access to public services, the British empire, gender identity, climate change, crime and individual agency. This segmentation was based on an unsupervised machine learning clustering algorithm called 'k-means'. The number of segments identified is consistent with other segmentations of public attitudes in the UK, including Labour Together's *Red Shift* segmentation and More in Common's 7 segments.

- **Loyal conservatives:** Conservative on both social and economic issues, this group are more likely to live in rural areas and strongly supported Brexit. They are most likely to vote for the Conservative party, but the Reform party are also gaining ground with them.
- **Left wing patriots:** Socially conservative, slightly older voters, on lower incomes and generally living in red wall seats. Having backed Brexit, they are likely to have voted for the Conservative party at the last election.
- **Countryside traditionalists:** More likely to be retired and financially secure, owning their own home. This group consistently vote for the Conservative party.

FIGURE 2.3

Disengaged commuters are most likely to prioritise the costs and availability of childcare over other policy topics

Proportion of voter segments who identify concerns about costs and availability of childcare in their top three priority issues



Source: Authors' analysis of survey 1 results

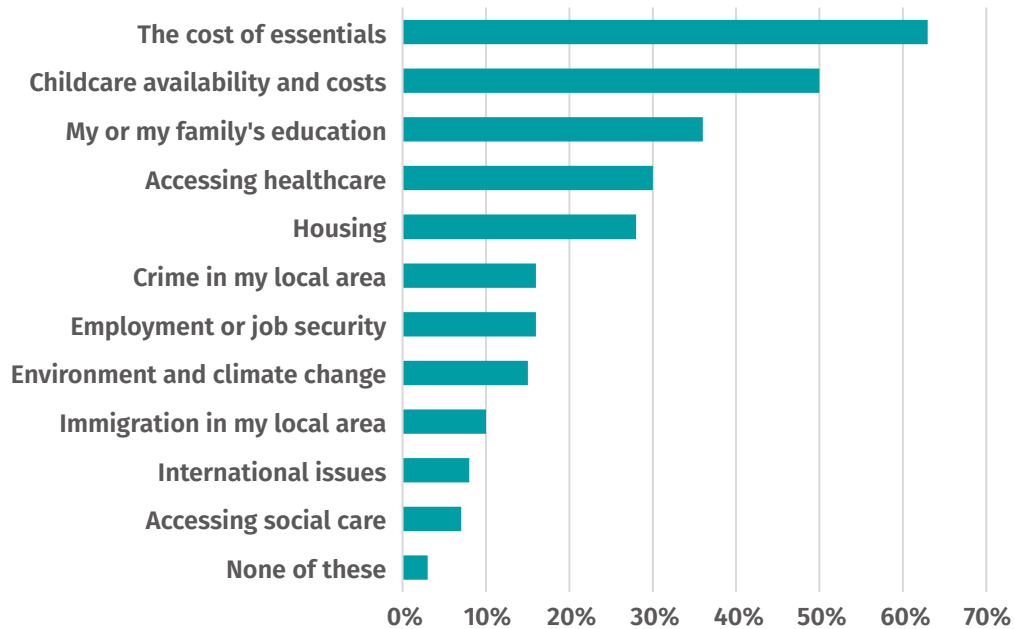
Among these voter segments, disengaged commuters are the group most likely to identify childcare availability and costs as a core priority. They are 1.6 times more likely to prioritise childcare than average voters. This group overlaps with swing voters, and will be a target for political parties ahead of the next election.

Our survey also asked respondents to identify the top three priorities for families with young children, and half identified childcare costs and availability as a top priority.

FIGURE 2.4

Respondents identified the costs and availability of childcare as the second most important policy area for families with children

Share of respondents that identify each issue as a top concern for families with children



Source: Authors' analysis of survey 1 results.

Note: Respondents were asked the following question: "Now put yourself in the mind of a parent with children at home, or other parents if you are one. Which of the following issues do you think they will be worrying the most about at the moment? Please select up three".

FINDING A COMPELLING FRAMING FOR CHILDCARE

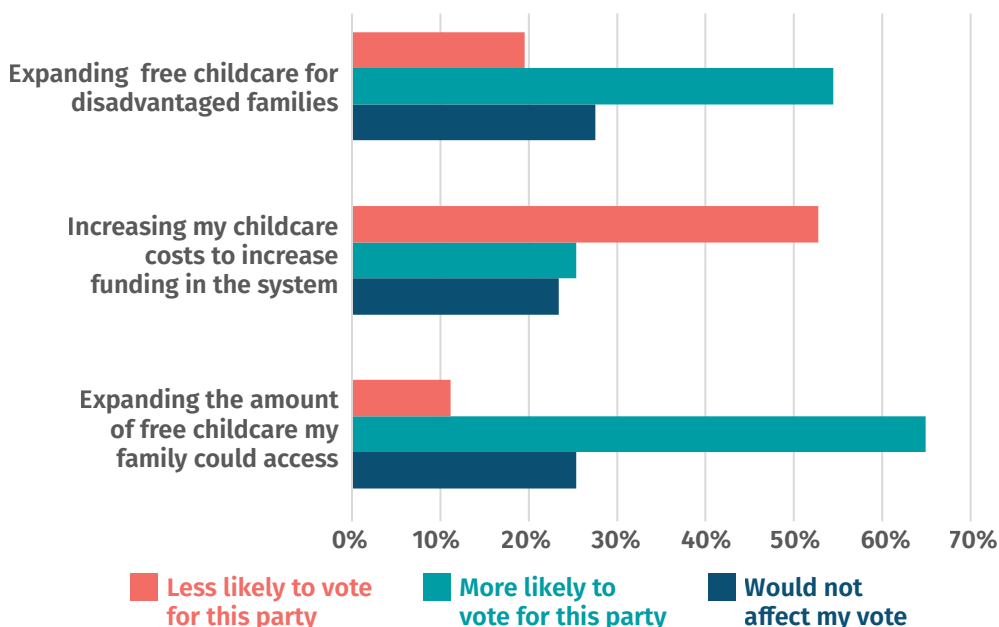
The surveys were used to test alternative ways of describing the purpose of childcare. The themes which resonated most with respondents included the following.

- **An entitlement to early education:** The most popular description of the purpose of early education and childcare was 'improving young children's learning and development in preparation for school'. 43 per cent of respondents chose this option.
- **Tackling disadvantage:** There was also broad support for the role of early education in 'tackling economic or social inequalities by funding early years education to make sure all children have the best possible start in life', and this was notably high among non-parents. This was reinforced through our second survey, which found that more than half of respondents would be more likely to support a party that developed an offer for disadvantaged children.

FIGURE 2.5

More than half of respondents would back a political party planning to expand childcare for disadvantaged families could access

Share of respondents who would be more or less likely to vote for a political party proposing various childcare reforms



Source: Authors' analysis of survey 2 results

Note: Respondents were asked the following question: "To what extent would you be more or less likely to vote for a party who proposes the following, or would it not affect your vote?"

- **Supporting work and tackling underemployment:** Parents and people involved in childcare beyond their household are more likely to see 'increasing parents' earnings by increasing their rates of employment and ability to work full-time' as a priority (40 per cent of parents prioritise this compared to 28 per cent of non-parents).
- **Security and opportunity:** Amongst the general public, we found that people who consider childcare to be among their top three policy priorities were also more likely than other respondents to identify education, job security and good quality housing as top priorities.
- **What doesn't work:** Abstract economic framing was less appealing to respondents. Despite strong support for frames connected to individual employment, and substantial evidence that childcare supports women's labour market participation, just 20 per cent of voters felt that 'improving productivity by increasing the pool of potential employees available to work' was a core purpose of childcare.

3.

A SYSTEM THAT IS LETTING FAMILIES DOWN

The survey findings reinforced an established body of evidence that our current system isn't working for children, parents or providers (Statham et al 2022).

PARENTAL EMPLOYMENT

An incompatibility between childcare and working patterns is holding parents, and particularly mothers, back from working as much as they want to.

Mothers are **significantly less likely** than fathers to be satisfied that they are 'able to work as much as I would like to, because I know childcare is taken care of' and to feel they 'have enough money to cover leisure and recreational activities'.

71 per cent of parents working part time said childcare factors were driving their working pattern. This rose to 87 per cent of part-time working parents of under 5s.

- Full-time workers were more likely to report being satisfied with the availability of nurseries than part time workers (55 per cent compared to 44 per cent), suggesting a lack of flexible provision.
- Of 382 part-time working parents, 37 percent reported that childcare factors are entirely responsible for their decision to work part-time, and 34 per cent reported childcare factors are partly responsible for their decision to work part-time. Around a quarter (26 per cent) said childcare factors were not at all responsible for their working pattern, and 3 per cent didn't know.

84 per cent of respondents who reported childcare factors were shaping their working pattern **would be likely to increase their working hours if they had access to more free childcare hours**. This rose to 93 per cent among parents of under-fives.

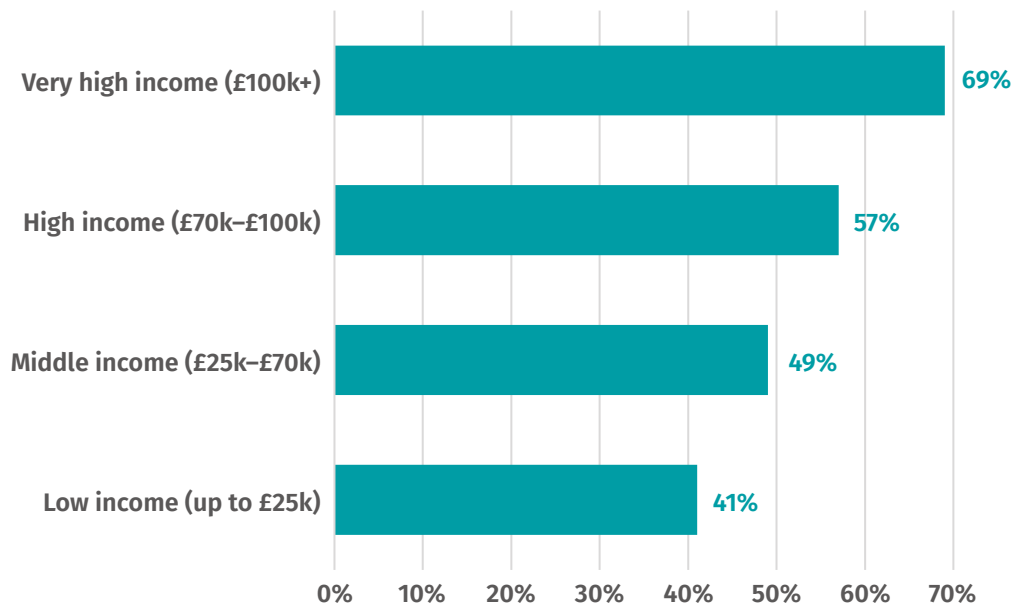
QUALITY

- 60 per cent of parents of under-fives are satisfied that they have access to nursery staff that enjoy their work and appear well-supported by the nursery. This was markedly lower for low-income parents (44 per cent) compared to 50 per cent of mid-income and two-thirds (66 per cent) of high-income parents.
- The same proportion (60 per cent) of parents of under-fives are satisfied that they have access to nursery staff with whom they and their can build up a strong relationship with over time.
- There are significant differences in satisfaction in both areas by household income (figure 3.1): just 41 per cent of low-income parents are satisfied they have access to nursery staff with whom they and their child can build up a strong relationship with over time, compared with 57 per cent of those on a high income. This points to a concerning gap in the quality of nursery provision.

FIGURE 3.1

Parent and grandparents on high incomes are substantially more likely than those on a low income to feel satisfied that they and their child can build strong relationships with nursery staff

Proportion of respondents who are 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' that they have access to nursery staff with whom they and their child can build up a strong relationship with over time, by household income



Source: Authors' analysis of survey 2 results

ACCESS AND AVAILABILITY

Another core flaw in our childcare system is that many families are struggling to access childcare they need close to home.

- Fewer than half (46 per cent) of parents with a child under five consider that childcare for one- to three-year-olds is easy to access, while three in 10 feel it is difficult. Parents of children under five are 25 per cent more likely to say it is 'very difficult'.
- Parents of a child with a special educational need are more likely to report it has been difficult to find childcare (43 per cent compared with 38 per cent of parents of non-disabled children).

AFFORDABILITY

- Fewer than three in 10 (27 per cent) respondents feel England's offer on childcare is affordable for the average family's income. Parents of children under 5 feel the pinch particularly strongly: they are over twice as likely to agree with the fact childcare is unaffordable.
- Parents with children between the ages of 0 and two are 20 per cent more likely to say they will struggle with the cost of essentials compared to non-parents.

4. PRIORITIES FOR CHILDCARE

Through our second survey, we sought to understand more about different groups' priorities for childcare through inviting respondents to rank policy options. Table 4.1 summarises the overall results for the whole sample of parents and grandparents.

TABLE 4.1

Parents' and grandparents' top priority is greater investment in nurseries

MaxDiff results ranking childcare priorities among overall sample

Overall results	
Top three priorities	Bottom three priorities
Provide more money to nurseries to prevent nursery closures, and spend more on staff training, instead of increasing the number of children offered free hours at a nursery or childminder.	Give parents of young children a weekly allowance to spend on any form of childcare they want, instead of providing free hours in nurseries.
Extend the offer of 30 free hours at nursery a week to children whose parents are studying, as well as those who are working.	Make it easier for people to become a childminder by simplifying government requirements and reducing the cost burden.
Make after-school clubs free for all primary school-age children.	Allow nurseries to increase the number of children each nursery worker can look after to reduce staffing costs.

Source: Authors' analysis of survey results

This indicates strong support for reviewing childcare funding, reflecting concern about the deliverability of the expanded childcare offer proposed to roll out from April 2024. This expanded offer is focussed on providing childcare to parents in work, but our analysis found strong support for extending free childcare to parents who are not in work but are studying too.

Respondents were also consistently likely to prioritise wraparound provision, with free after school clubs for primary school aged children the third most popular choice.

The less popular choices reveal caution among parents about the possibility of managing childcare costs through reducing regulation. Both the idea of changing staff to child ratios in childcare settings, and reducing requirements faced by childminders are among the least popular choices.

The idea of providing parents with a personal budget to allocate directly to childcare was the least popular option among respondents. However, beneath these headline findings, there was considerable variation among the preferences of different groups, as indicated by table 4.2.

TABLE 4.2**Parents of children under 11 prioritise fully-funded childcare places and after school clubs, while grandparents' top priority is greater investment in nurseries***Childcare priorities among parents of children aged under five, aged five to 11, and grandparents*

Parents of under fives	
Top three priorities	Bottom three priorities
Offer 30 hours of free childcare per week to working parents of children aged nine months to two years.	Require nursery workers to have a childcare-related higher qualification.
Provide more money to nurseries to prevent nursery closures, and spend more on staff training, instead of increasing the number of children offered free hours at a nursery or childminder.	Make it easier for people to become a childminder by simplifying government requirements and reducing the cost burden.
Extend the offer of 30 free hours at nursery a week to children whose parents are studying (for example as student nurses), as well as those who are working.	Allow nurseries to increase the number of children each nursery worker can look after to reduce staffing costs.

Parents of children aged five-11	
Top three priorities	Bottom three priorities
Make after-school clubs free for all primary school-age children.	Require nursery workers to have a childcare-related higher qualification.
Provide more money to nurseries to prevent nursery closures, and spend more on staff training, instead of increasing the number of children offered free hours at a nursery or childminder.	Make it easier for people to become a childminder by simplifying government requirements and reducing the cost burden.
Make breakfast clubs free for all primary school-age children.	Allow nurseries to increase the number of children each nursery worker can look after to reduce staffing costs.

Grandparents	
Top three priorities	Bottom three priorities
Provide more money to nurseries to prevent nursery closures, and spend more on staff training, instead of increasing the number of children offered free hours at a nursery or childminder.	Make it easier for people to become a childminder by simplifying government requirements and reducing the cost burden.
Extend the offer of 30 free hours at nursery a week to children whose parents are studying, as well as those who are working.	Give parents of young children a weekly allowance to spend on any form of childcare they want, instead of providing free hours in nurseries.
Target more government funding to expand and improve nurseries, after-school clubs and wrap-around care in deprived communities.	Allow nurseries to increase the number of children each nursery worker can look after to reduce staffing costs.

Source: Authors' analysis of survey results

TABLE 4.3**Swing voters' top priority is extending free childcare hours to parents who are studying**
Childcare priorities among swing voters (including parents and grandparents)

Swing voters	
Top three priorities	Bottom three priorities
Extend the offer of 30 free hours at nursery a week to children whose parents are studying (for example as student nurses), as well as those who are working.	Require nursery workers to have a childcare-related higher qualification.
Make after-school clubs free for all primary school-age children.	Make it easier for people to become a childminder by simplifying government requirements and reducing the cost burden
Increase support for families on average incomes (about £35,000 per household) to meet childcare costs.	Allow nurseries to increase the number of children each nursery worker can look after to reduce staffing costs.

Source: Authors' analysis of survey results

Perhaps unsurprisingly, particularly given ongoing cost-of living pressures, parents appear to prioritise measures that would meet their present childcare needs. This presents an acute challenge to politicians and policymakers, given that that parents' priorities and the cohort likely to benefit from any given policy decision are both constantly evolving.

Parents of babies and toddlers consistently prioritise measures related to early years funding, with their greatest priority being backing the planned expansion of free childcare hours to children aged under two. However, the fourth and sixth core priorities for parents of under-fives were after school and breakfast clubs, suggesting these parents are looking ahead to childcare provision they are likely to need over the years ahead.

Parents of primary school age children are focussing on the wraparound care their children might access before and after school, with breakfast and after school clubs a priority, alongside investing in nursery provision.

While grandparents and swing voters express similar priorities to other respondents, we can observe some interesting variation for these groups. Grandparents identified investment targeted to supporting children in deprived communities as a priority. Swing voters wanted to see support for parents who are studying as well as free wraparound provision, and prioritised increase support for average earner families.

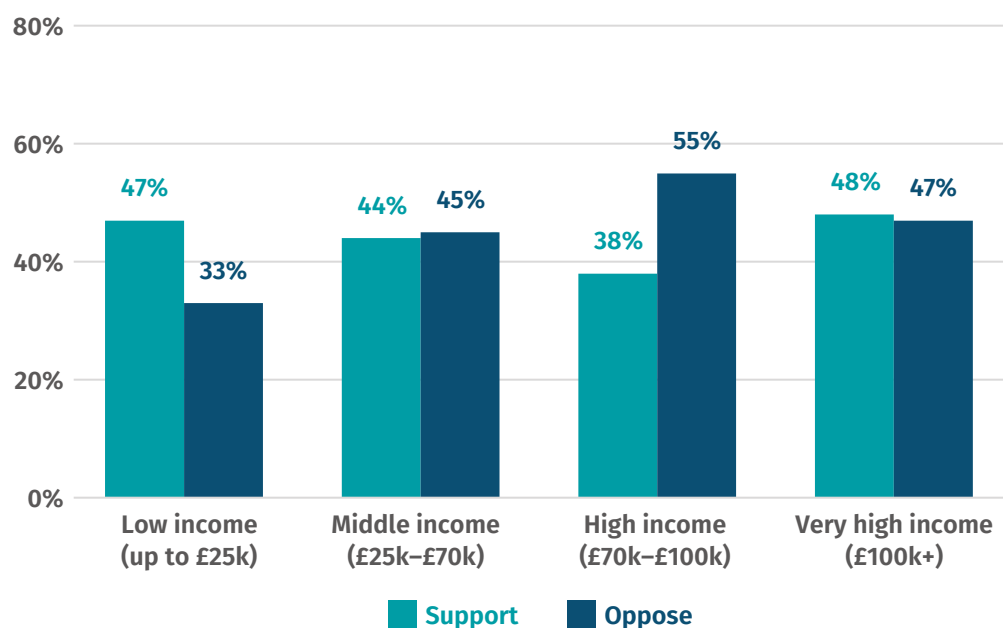
5. MEETING CHILDCARE COSTS

Respondents were asked about the extent to which they might be willing to pay more for childcare in order to subsidise the cost of childcare for families on low income. Interestingly, despite childcare costs being widely reported to have reached prohibitive levels for many families, and ongoing pressures on living costs, a large minority would support such a move, as shown in figure 5.1.

FIGURE 5.1

A large minority of respondents would be willing to pay more for childcare to subsidise costs for low income families

Proportion of respondents who would be willing to pay more for childcare costs, by income



Source: Authors' analysis of survey results

While overall respondents were more inclined to choose models involving some form of means testing, a large minority preferred a universal offer of early education. 42 per cent of respondents feel that support for parents with costs of bringing up children aged 0 to four should be universal.

6. CONCLUSIONS

With a general election around the corner, our analysis suggests there is are votes to be won through an extended early years offer. We find that parents and grandparents are particularly aware of sharp inequalities in childcare quality and availability, which are particularly acute for low-income families and children with special educational needs. Voters strongly support investing in childcare to address these challenges and tackle disadvantage.

This work has identified three core priorities parents hold in the short term.

- Reinforcing and strengthening the existing system to improve availability of places (while reducing the risk of nursery closures) and improve quality.
- Extending eligibility for free hours to parents participating in training.
- Investing in a more comprehensive offer of wraparound care for primary school age children.

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