

Research into food and nutrition in Early Years settings

Conducted in October 2022



Executive summary

In October 2022, the Early Years Alliance (EYA) and the London Early Years Foundation (LEYF) conducted quantitative and qualitative research into food and nutrition with over 500 Early Years settings. The research found:

1 Settings are being negatively impacted by rising costs – affecting their ability to serve healthy food to children:

- **Almost all settings' food provision was impacted by rising costs** (94%), 35% said this was having a big impact
- Increasing costs mean that settings were struggling to serve healthy food. The biggest barriers to providing healthy food were **increasing food prices** (79%) and **insufficient government funding** (49%)

2 Settings do their best to cope with increasing food prices, but there is only so much they can do without passing on increases to parents – which will further lock out the most disadvantaged:

- They were **using cheaper ingredients** (62%) and **passing higher costs on to parents** (46%)
- They were **asking for more food to be brought from home** – even though **they know it might be of poorer quality** – and making **cuts to the quality of their service**
- **Two-thirds of settings were asking families of funded-only children to pay top-up fees to cover the cost of food (64%), with at least 10% using compulsory fees** (in apparent violation of DfE policy)

3 Settings need more funding to ensure children have access to high-quality food:

- Half of settings were seeing signs of food insecurity amongst their families (49%), and they are increasingly seeing **children come to settings hungry**
- **Settings overwhelmingly support the call for additional funding for meals** (82%), arguing these will allow them **to maintain or improve food quality, ensure access to meals** and avoid **charging families more fees**

Research aims and methods



Aims

EYA and LEYF jointly conducted qualitative and quantitative research with Early Years settings on food and nutrition, to better understand how the sector is coping with increasing food prices and how they can best be supported.

Methods

This research consisted of:

- **A survey for settings** (open from 04/10/22 to 25/10/22, reaching a total of ***500 settings**). The survey consisted of 22 questions, was asked anonymously and included a mix of multiple-choice questions, which have been analysed quantitatively and open-text questions, which have been analysed qualitatively to produce a set of key themes.
- **Qualitative focus groups** (conducted in five groups with volunteers via Zoom on 18/10/22 with a total of **~50 settings**) to add depth to the research areas. These were transcribed and analysed qualitatively to produce a set of key themes.

This research aimed to capture the experiences and opinions of a wide and representative cross-section of the Early Years sector. The research endeavoured to include a range of settings in focus groups, from big chains to standalone nurseries and childminders, from a range of geographies across England.

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* Details about these respondents can be found in the Appendix.

Findings





Finding 1

Settings are being negatively impacted by rising costs – affecting their ability to serve healthy food to children.

Almost all settings report that their food provision is being impacted by rising costs

To what extent are rising costs having an impact on food provision in your setting?

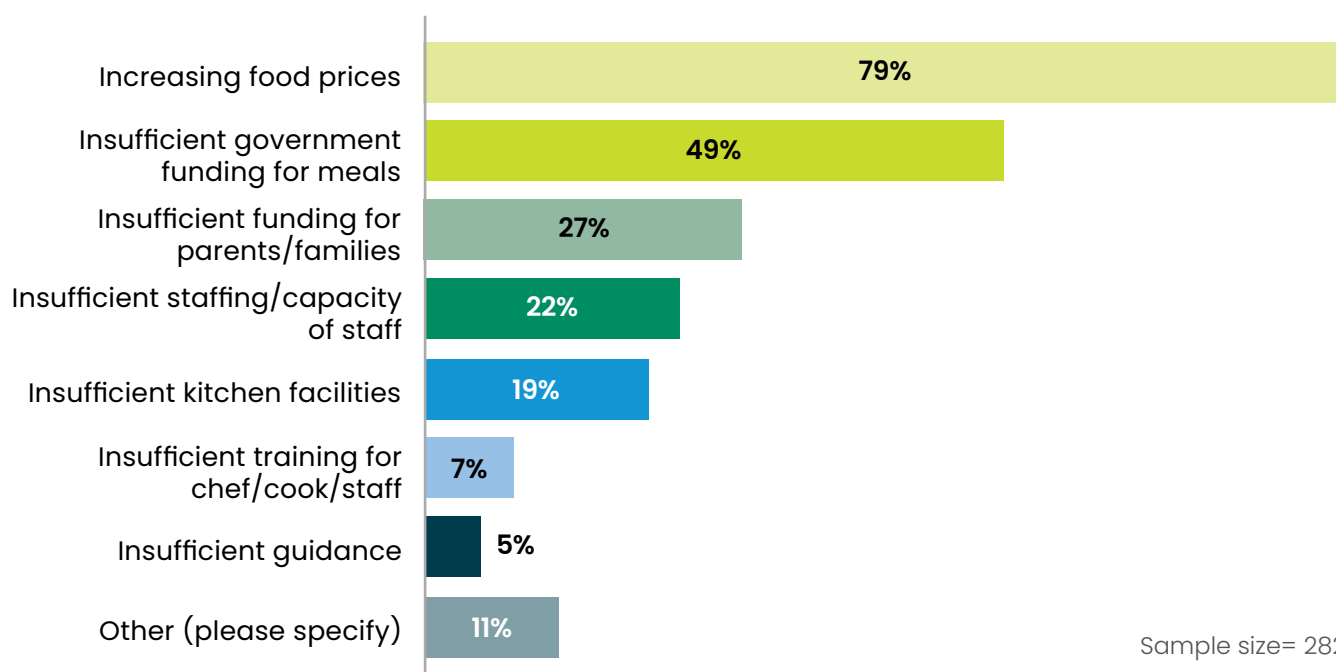


● A big impact ● Some impact ● A small impact ● No impact

Sample size: 283

Rising food prices and insufficient funding are the biggest barriers to providing healthy food

What are the biggest barriers or challenges to making and serving healthy, balanced and nutritious food in your setting/s? (Choose up to 3)



Sample size= 282

Rising food prices and insufficient funding are affecting the quality of food that settings can serve

Settings described the **challenges they were facing with increasing food costs**:

“The cost of food rising for the setting and families means **less chance of children eating five a day.**”

“As a setting, we are also **suffering with increased costs**. We are a good quality provider and with the level of funding in Early Years at the moment it may **only be the poor quality provision which survives.**”

“A lot of settings are **only providing a teatime snack, again, these are high salt/high fat**, but providers are finding it more and more difficult.”

Settings highlighted that the **lack of funding they received meant they sometimes struggled to offer healthy food** to all children:

“**Poor funding to provide good quality food... we currently run at a loss for food.**”

“[The biggest barrier is the lack of] funding provided to the setting to enable us to pay for staff to prepare food. At the moment, **the manager subsidises the cost of food and doesn't get paid to prepare, cook and serve food.**”

“[I want to ensure] children can access the appropriate and same food as other children, **being able to offer a better quality and variety of food, but we are unable to due to the low funding.**”

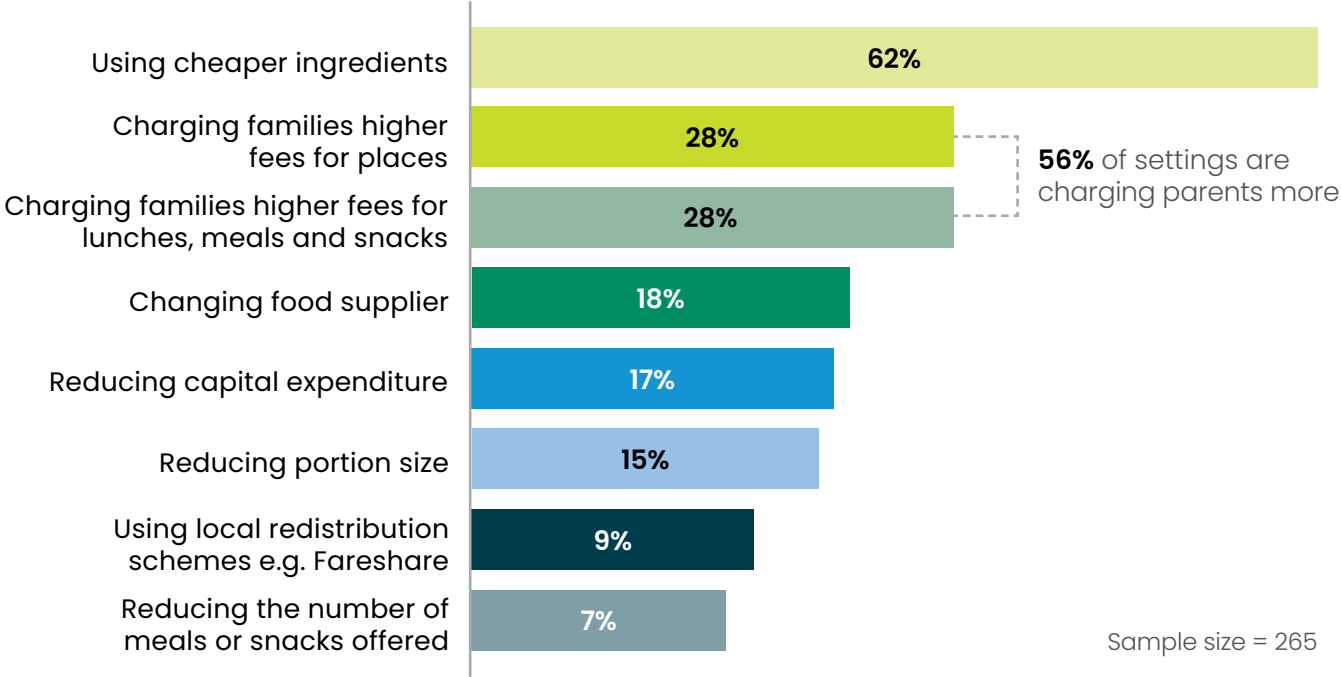


Finding 2

Settings do their best to cope with increasing food prices, but there is only so much they can do without passing on increases to parents – which will further lock out the most disadvantaged.

Settings are doing their best to cope with rising prices: using cheaper ingredients and passing higher costs onto families

How is your setting coping with rising food prices? (Choose all that apply)



Settings are creatively finding new ways to stretch their budgets further

Settings described how in the first instance they were **changing their purchasing or cooking habits to creatively make their budgets stretch further**. These strategies included making **better use of deals or offers** in supermarkets, **reducing meat** on menus, **using more seasonal foods**, and generally **replanning menus**:



"We are looking at what ingredients we could substitute without it affecting the nutritional content of our meals."

“...**looking for offers on fruit/bread etc in supermarkets to get the best price.** Looking at different supermarkets for buying snacks.”

“ Being a committee-run pre-school, we can only ask for a setting contribution, which most families won't pay, so it means we have to **get creative with the snack budget or eat into our funding money.**”

“ We are also **using more plant-based proteins such as chickpeas and lentils** in our menu planning, e.g., as a 'filler' when making a chicken curry.”

But some settings have been forced to reduce the quality of their service

Settings described how increasing food costs are driving them to make **cuts to the quality of their service**:

“ I am concerned that we will have to **decrease what we offer because it is becoming expensive.**”



“ Government funding does not adequately cover the cost of the childcare ... cuts have to happen somewhere ... **more will drop food standards because it's the only place you CAN make cuts.**”

“ I'm struggling to find a way to cut costs without dropping the standard of food I provide.”

Others described making cuts to other spending areas, such as **children's learning and development budgets**:

“ It's coming out of our craft and play budget, **affecting development opportunities.**”

“ ...**trying to cut back elsewhere, e.g. craft resources** to enable me to continue to provide healthy meals.”

Some settings said they might not be able to continue offering government-funded hours due to cost pressures:

“ My concerns are that we **might not be able to support the most vulnerable children (2 years old) in our setting much longer**, if the cost of living continues to rise.”

Settings are passing increasing costs on to families either through more top-up fees or requesting more food from home

Settings described **needing to pass on increasing food costs on to families**, either through **increased fees for meals or hours**:

“ We have always absorbed the cost of meals for grant-funded children. We now charge parents.”

“ [We are] charging for snacks, which as a charity we didn't before.”

Some settings highlighted how it was the **most vulnerable children who may need to be charged extras or were missing out on meals cooked in settings**, and were having **lower quality food as a result**:

“ **Fees will increase next April** and will take in account the rising costs. We have started asking for a small **fee per session for those children doing completely free hours.**”

“ Children using [2-year-old government funding offer] and universal funding **are not able to pay for the hot meal we provide** and their **packed lunches do not provide the same nutrition as our hot meals.**”

Settings report asking for more food from home. This raises the concern of **children being segregated at mealtimes based on their families' ability to pay**:

“ **We don't have the funding to provide midday meals, so our children bring packed lunches.**”

“ **Parents now provide the snack for their child rather than us.**”

Even though they know that food brought from home is often of poorer quality

Settings highlighted extensive **concerns about the poor quality of the food being brought from home**:

“ [There is] **poor nutritional variety** of food that parents put in their children's lunchboxes **as they look to save money.**”

“ I am going to have to review fees again and possibly make further increases. **I am reluctant to stop providing meals because, from past experiences, parents do not always send in healthy packed lunches.**”



I know more and **more settings are not providing food**, the packed lunches sent from home are often **unhealthy**."



Parents do not want to/**can't afford to pay for meals, but packed lunches provided by parents are poor quality** and not healthy options."

Some settings which offer families the option to pay for meals made onsite highlighted the **difference in nutritional quality between the meals**:



Children who can't afford hot lunches bring packed lunches which are often of extremely poor quality."



With potential money restrictions at home, **children are coming into the setting with more grab/packet food** than homemade foods. **We offer hot meals; however, parents/carers can't always afford to pay for them.**"

On the other hand, some settings recognised that the **relative affluence of their families meant that food quality was less of a concern**:



We are lucky that most of our **parents and carers can afford good food.**"



[we have no concerns] ... **we live in an affluent area.**"

Some settings are willing to absorb the rising costs

Some settings, particularly charities, emphasised that **they would continue to absorb the cost to feed children who couldn't afford optional fees**, even if it meant making cuts elsewhere:

“If families cannot afford to pay, we will feed them for free. **No child will be denied snacks or meals due to their parents' inability to pay for any extras.**”

“We provide a two-course hot, home-cooked lunch to ALL our children... It is a challenge to staff this time. **We do this as a charity to combat food poverty and to support our vulnerable families.**”

“As a charity, **we do not charge families for lunches or snacks.** This goes against our ethos, but it is getting harder to fundraise for this due to rising costs.”

“I have a lot of families on the [Government's] 2-year-old funding offer who can't afford to contribute financially for this, **so I provide it free of charge as I'm aware it's an important part of a healthy diet**, but it is very expensive for me to do it.”

Some settings are being forced to ask for donations or relying on food redistribution initiatives

Settings described having to resort to asking for **donations**, **growing their own food**, or **food-cycle** programmes to continue providing food to children:

“We **rely heavily on parent donations** to provide snacks.”

“We ask for **fruit/veg donations.**”

“**Parents supply snack items to share**; we buy toast for snacks each term.”

“ We are part of a **Sure Start food waste club** and **growing our own fruit and vegetables.**”

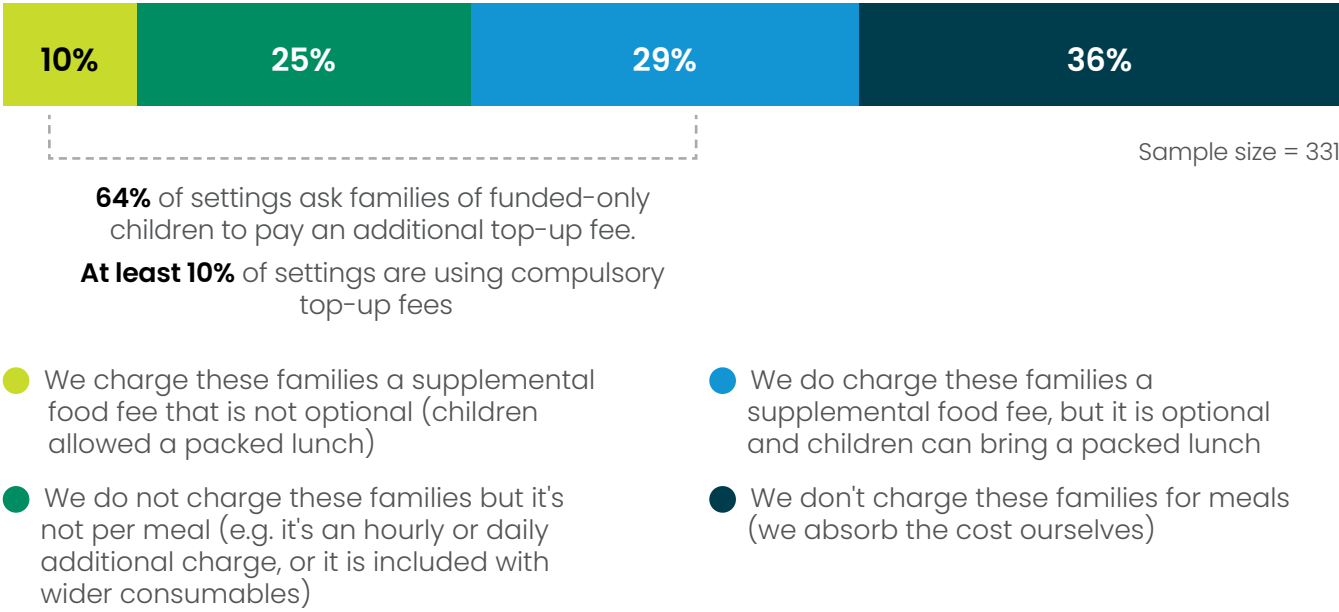
“ We are part of the **food share scheme** so get donations from local shops.”

In some settings, **staff were making donations** to cover the difference:

“ **Staff contribute food items** to ensure that we have enough food.”

Almost two-thirds of settings ask families of funded-only children to pay – which risks locking them out of provision

Does your setting/s charge families using government-only funded provision for food at your setting/s?



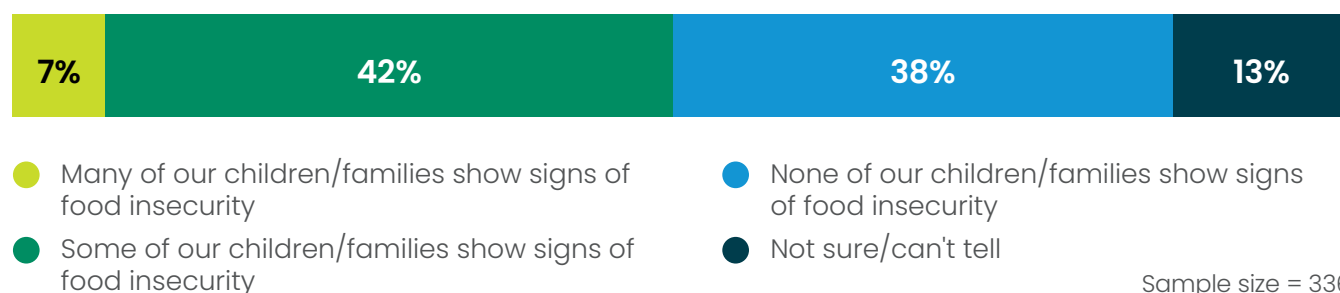


Finding 3

Settings need more funding to ensure children have access to high-quality food:

Half of settings are seeing signs of food insecurity amongst their families

To what extent has your setting/s seen signs of food insecurity amongst children or families?*



Families are struggling financially. Some highlighted the adverse effects on the children:

Settings described how **families were particularly struggling with poverty**:

“Many parents are already worrying about the increased cost of living and fuel poverty over winter.”

“Children have access to all food within our setting; we encourage everyone but there is still a concern that **families are not accessing food while at home.**”

“**Families are using foodbanks** to be able to provide their children with lunch; however, some of the families are **bringing out-of-date/out-of-use-by date food in.**”

*Food insecurity (sometimes referred to as food poverty) is the state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food.



Prices mean parents cannot always give their families proper cooked food made from scratch."



I provide a cooked meal, for some children this is the **only cooked meal they would get or the only place they actually eat vegetables!**"

Some settings highlighted the adverse effects families' financial struggles have on children:



It is more likely that **parents will neglect themselves before the children**, but that then introduces a different worry as parents will then **not be as resilient to face any problems** that they may face over winter and ultimately, **affect the children's own health and well-being.**"

Children are increasingly coming to settings hungry

Settings described how, **increasingly**, children were not eating enough at home and were **arriving hungry**:



Children are coming in hungry, which means we have to buy more to feed them."



We are aware a **vast number of children do not have access to a substantial meal at home.**"



Children are arriving at pre-school hungry ...children are having less food in their packed lunches."



Parents will come in and say, **we've not had time for breakfast**. We were up late. But it happens more and more ...or actually, **is it because they just haven't got the food in the cupboards anymore? And so they're relying on the nursery to feed the children.**"

Some settings highlight the **extra lengths they go to, to help these children:**

- “ We would love to provide a breakfast and/or lunch but cannot afford to do this for free. **We give extra portions of our snack** to those that we know may not have food of nutritional value at home.”
- “ The settings are **trying to give the children more filling/warming option** types of food.”
- “ We could cut our losses and say pack up, but it’s some families’ **only hot meal, so this has stopped us as children are our priority.**”

Settings overwhelmingly support a call for additional funding for meals

Government funding specifically does not include money for meals or snacks. Would you support a call to ask the Government to add an additional earmarked sum to cover the cost of snacks/meals in their funding?



● Yes ● No ● Not sure Sample size = 336

* Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding



Settings highlighted the systemic funding shortages in the Early Years

Settings highlighted how there were **systemic funding shortages in Early Years** that went beyond food:

“

The best way to improve the situation, as with everything in Early Years, would be **to completely overhaul the sector by paying fair wages to qualified staff, and to significantly increase Early Years funding** to allow this to happen and also to allow settings to afford to provide food to children.”

“

The Government should **increase the hourly rate paid to settings.**”

“

Government funding will never cover what we need to provide to our vulnerable families ... but an increase in Early Years entitlements generally could help to support this and mean we would not have to fundraise the 60% annual costs (and rising) that we currently do, and which is unsustainable.”

Some settings highlighted how charging families for consumables was one of the few means settings had to **make up for the shortfall in existing funding entitlements**:

“

There should not be a situation where **settings need to charge families extra for food to cover the shortfall from 30 hours funding.**”

Settings want Free School Meals in Early Years – or at very least the free fruit that schools get

Settings highlighted the **need for Free School Meals** in Early Years to combat food insecurity:

“

Families cannot always afford a nursery hot meal, and may not have a hot meal at home, **the Government needs to introduce free meals for nursery-age children, so they have at least one hot meal daily.**”

“

[We are concerned about the] affordability for parents of our vulnerable children to afford a hot school meal for their children. **Hot school meals should be free for Early Years settings as well as schools.**”

Settings felt it was **unfair that children would get Free School Meals in Reception but not in Early Years:**

“

It seems unfair for **Reception children to have access to free school dinners, but not Early Years children.**”

“

There needs to **be funding for food included in the 30 hours funding** so that children have a nutritious meal included daily...Good nutrition is important for learning and the current 30 hours funding nowhere near covers a meal.”

Some settings felt they **should be entitled to the same free fruit that schools were entitled to:**

“

We do not qualify for any free healthy foods such as fruit or vegetables to share with our children. **It would be nice for the Government to consider those under the ages of five in these schemes.**”

Settings want funding to provide better quality food and better access to food – or they might have to charge families

Settings argued that **more funding would allow them to maintain their food quality in the face of rising prices or offer higher quality food:**

“Funding to support the rising cost of produce to ensure that the quality of food prepared within the nursery is not compromised.”

“Extra funding would be really like a positive step towards **giving them a constant quality of the nutrition there**, because you can then rely on getting those things for those children regularly.

“I think if we had some extra funding, we would definitely utilise it to **give them a bit more varied balance**. I mean, it does cost to get those odd things that children haven't had before.”

Some settings highlight how more funding would allow them to offer a better service:

“If we had more funding, we would be able to offer a free snack to everyone.”

Settings reported that **either they needed more funding or they would have to charge families more:**

“[We need a] realistic uplift in government funding **so we don't have to resort to charging parents who cannot afford it.**”

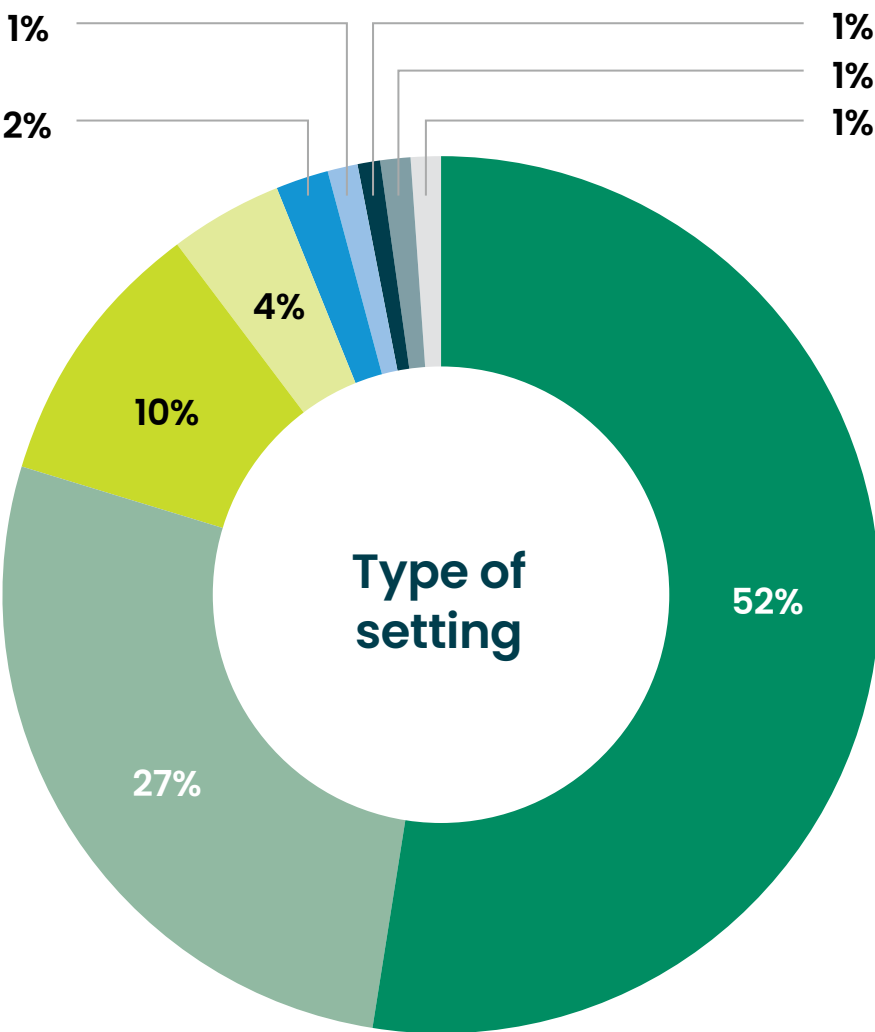
“Increased funding or allowing settings to charge additionally would result in a better quality of food for the children as a charity setting.”

Appendix:

Who responded?



Around half of respondents were from private day nurseries

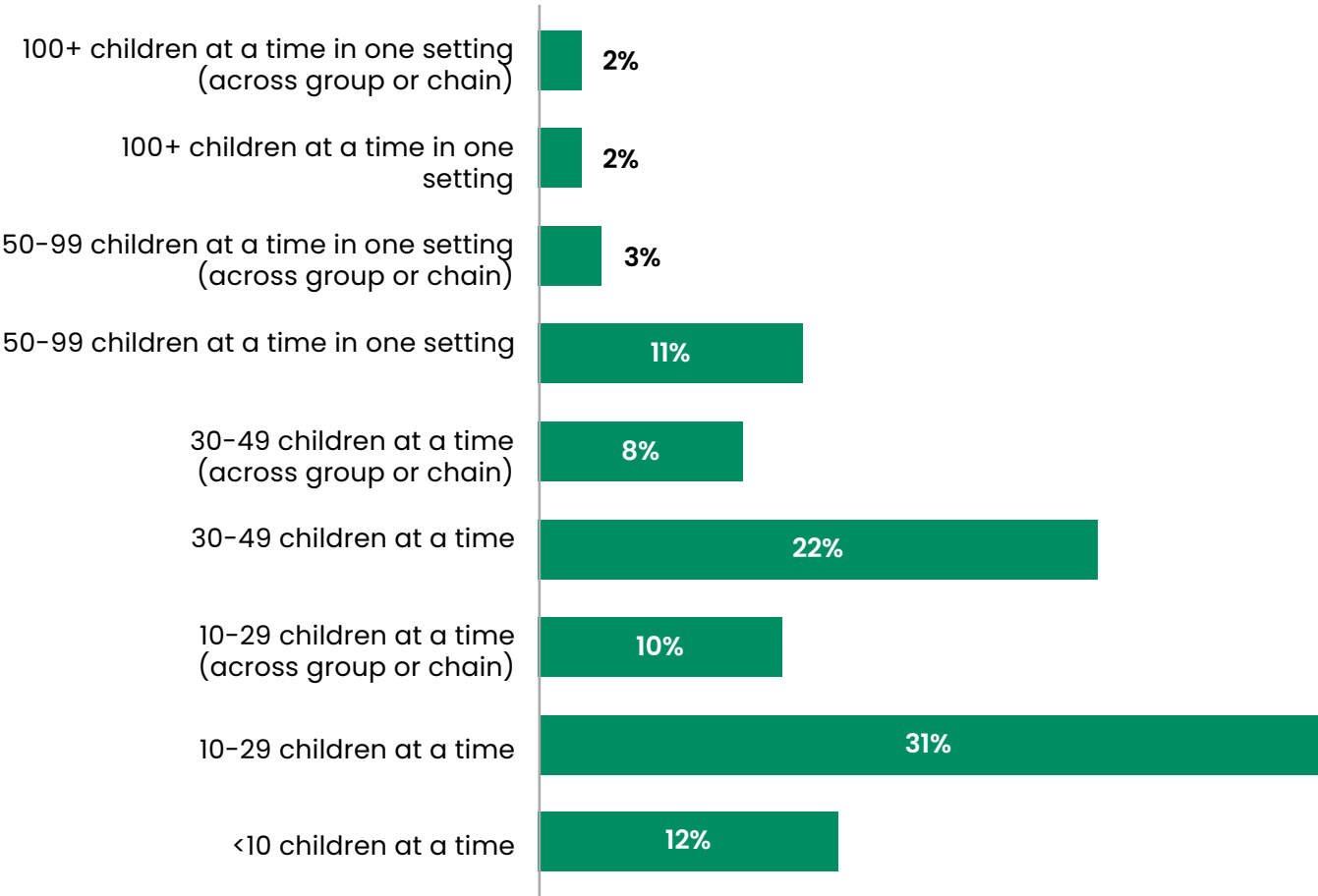


- Private day nursery or pre-school
- Voluntary sector day nursery or pre-school
- Childminder professional
- Other
- Maintained nursery school
- Local authority
- Primary school nursery class
- Baby and toddler group
- Out of hours club

Sample size = 500

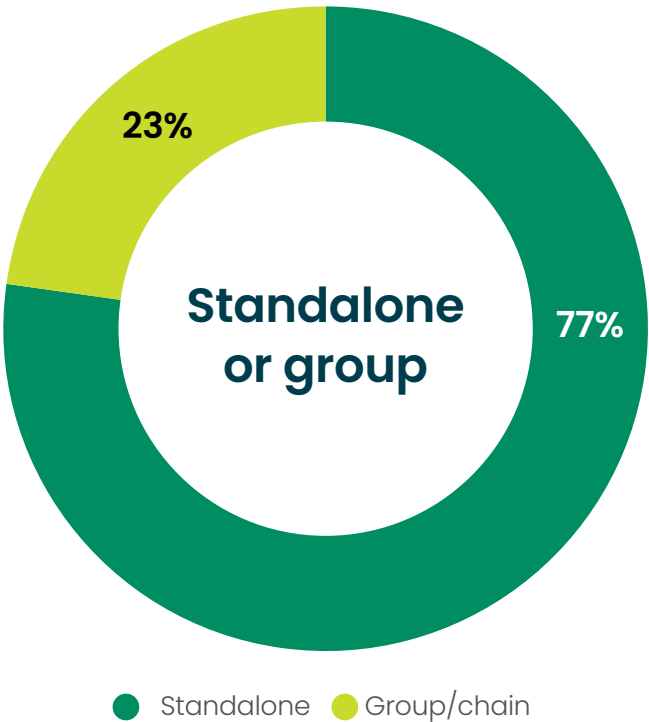
* Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding

Around three-quarters of respondents were from standalone settings (that weren't part of a group or chain)



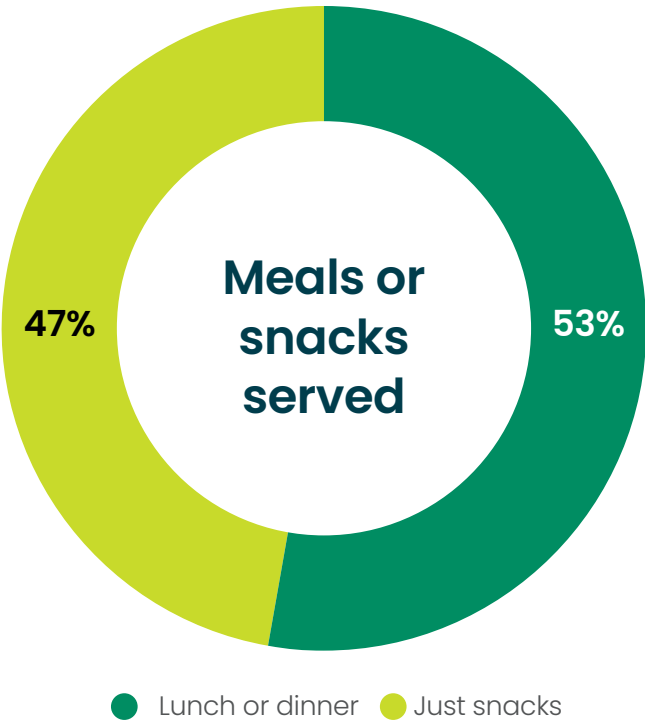
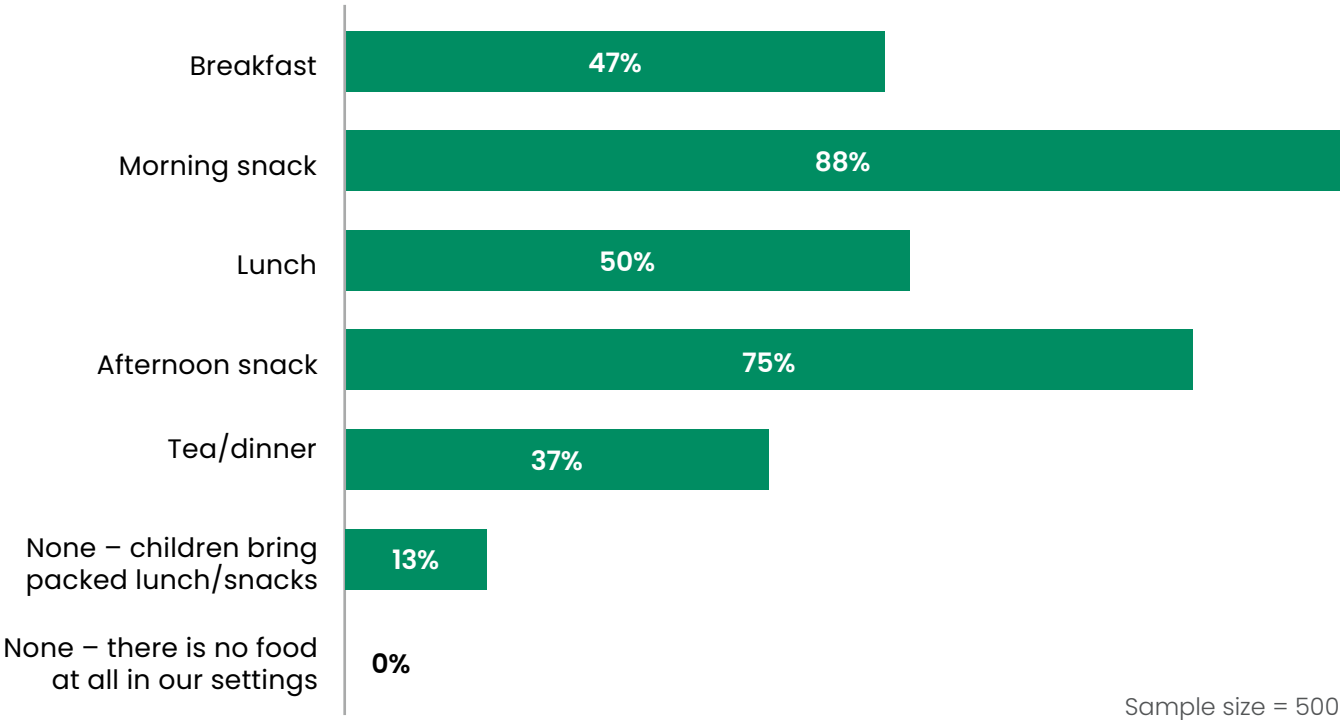
* Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding

Sample size = 500



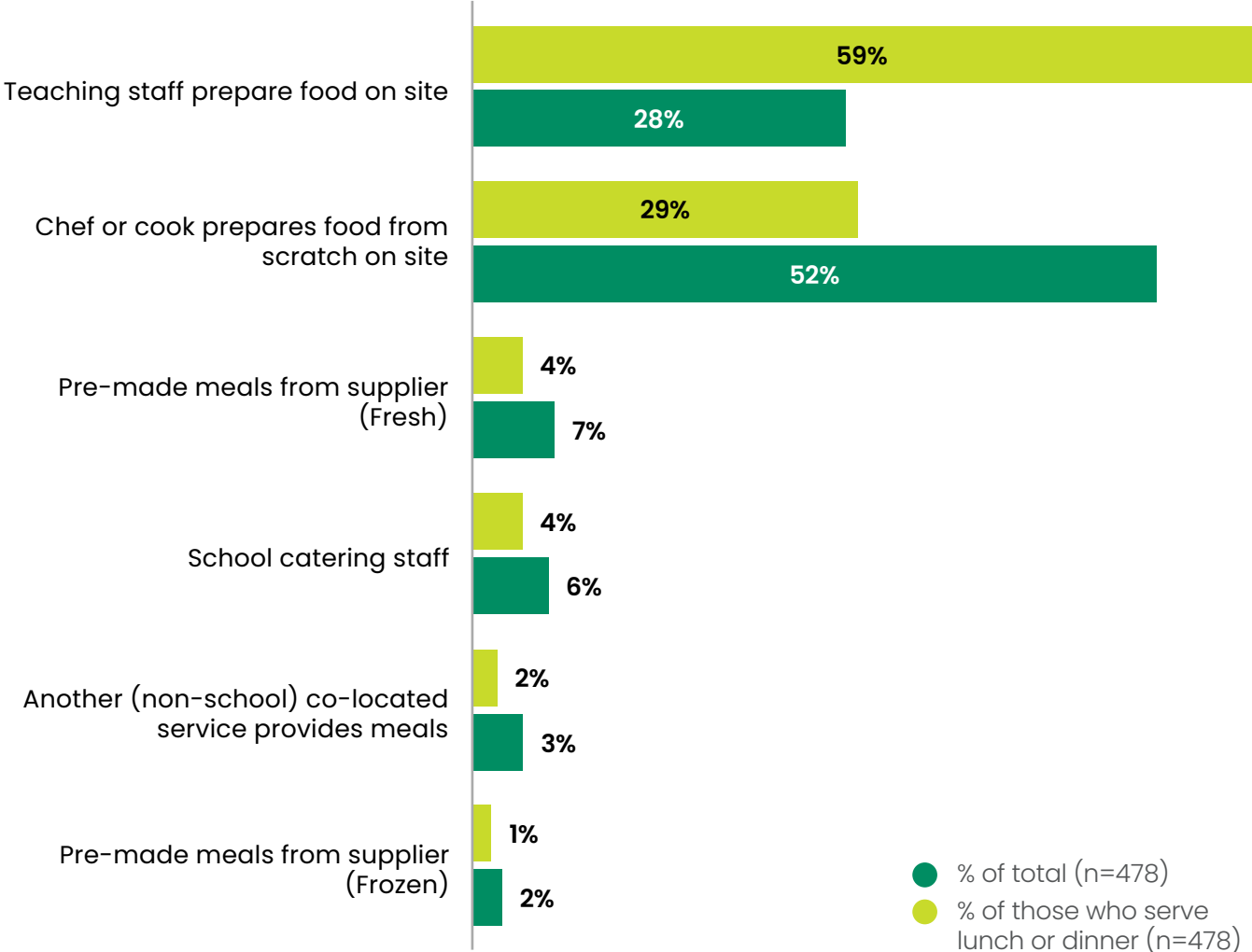
Around half of settings only provide snacks

What meals or snack does your setting/s provide? (Choose all that apply)



Typically, teachers prepare snacks and chefs prepare meals

Who is generally in charge of preparing meals/snacks in your setting/s?
(Choose one only)



* Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding

Sample size = 478

Nutritious, healthy food is vital to learning, and that this is even more true in the formative Early Years, birth to five years old, as it is in primary and secondary education.

That is why the Early Years Alliance and LEYF are jointly calling on the government to provide additional Early Years funding specifically to cover the cost of meals and snacks in Early Years settings, to ensure all of our youngest children have access to healthy and nutritious food, a proposal supported by 82% of survey respondents in this survey.

While all children in reception, year 1 and year 2 attending state-funded schools in England are eligible for a free school lunch, Government funding does not currently cover the provision of any food in nursery settings.

Please support for our campaign by posting on social media using the **#EarlyNutritionMatters** hashtag, tagging the Department for Education (@educationgovuk).

For more information or to collaborate, please contact:

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