

# Interim evaluation of Birth to 5 Matters

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## Executive Summary

### **Key points:**

- *The guidance is generally considered to be useful*
- *Staff report an increase of confidence as a result of using Birth to 5 Matters*
- *It is being used broadly across the sector in both practice and training*
- *Respondents have asked for further resources around supporting children with SEND, developing a curriculum, assessing children and support for leaders.*

Responses suggest *Birth to 5 Matters* is being used across the whole sector including childminders, private, voluntary, and independent providers (PVI) and maintained nursery, infant and primary schools. It is also being used to train early years practitioners from level 2 to degree level, as well as being used by leaders and managers for continuous professional development (CPD) for their staff.

The majority of respondents to the survey are finding the *Birth to 5 Matters* guidance useful and are reporting a number of positive changes to practice following the EYFS reforms. Practitioners who chose to use *Birth to 5 Matters* valued a range of its attributes, while those who chose not to most commonly said it was because *Development Matters* (2021) was shorter and/or simpler .

There was a high level of agreement that *Birth to 5 Matters* was impacting positively on areas of practice such as staff professional development, increasing staff confidence in their professional judgement, assessment, curriculum and learning and outcomes. It was also having some impact on diversity and inclusion and closing the “attainment gap”, but not to the same degree.

The impact of *Birth to 5 Matters* should be seen within the wider context of the EYFS reforms. *Birth to 5 Matters* was perceived by respondents as more helpful in improving children’s outcomes, especially in language and literacy (a key aim of the reforms), than the reforms to the EYFS Statutory Framework or *Development Matters* (2021). It also scored higher on helping to reduce workload and increase practitioner’s engagement with children.

The survey findings confirm that the sector would like more support with children who have SEND, more guidance about developing a curriculum, extra resources to help assess children and increased support for leaders.

The survey sample was small, but represented a wide range of geographical areas, practitioner roles and organisation types. It was weighted towards more experienced staff. While it is perhaps too soon to fully evaluate the impact of the guidance, the findings provide food for thought.

### **Rationale for survey**

The Early Years Coalition undertook survey of practitioners in November-December 2021. The aim was to explore the impact of *Birth to 5 Matters* nine months after it had been published and use the feedback to identify any further work which might be needed. Some questions were also asked about the impact of the EYFS reforms as

the purpose of *Birth to 5 Matters* was to support practitioners in implementing the reforms.

### ***Opportunities offered for completion of survey***

The survey was sent to the Early Years Coalition partners and the software companies who were licensed by *Birth to 5 Matters* along with every organisation or local authority who had partnered with *Birth to 5 Matters* to date, to send out to their members, contacts and users.

### ***Representation from across the sector***

The responses included representation from all types of early years provider, in all parts of England and in diverse practitioner roles (see appendix A). However, responses were disproportionately from more experienced and higher qualified staff. The majority of respondents had worked in the early years for 10 years or more and had a level 3 qualification or above. Those who worked in private, voluntary or independent (PVI) settings and childminders were among the majority of respondents, followed closely by those working in infant and primary schools.

### ***Limitations***

The number of responses to the survey was lower than hoped for, with 464 people completing it. This may have been for a number of reasons, including the time of year (very close to Christmas) and that it was only 4 months since the EYFS reforms had become statutory so the use of *Birth to 5 Matters* may not have been fully established in practice. It is likely that the ongoing impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the sector impacted on the response rate. Another possible factor, could be that when people are generally content, they are less likely to feel the need to respond. It may be prudent to re-run the survey when use of *Birth to 5 Matters* is more established and practitioners are less harried.

There was an element of self-selection in the responses which may have given a biased response because the majority of respondents (84%) were using *Birth to 5 Matters*, although we were seeking feedback also from those who chose not to.

## Survey findings

### ***Impact of the revised EYFS***

The impact of *Birth to 5 Matters* has to be considered in the broader context of the EYFS reforms, and we therefore asked about respondents' perceptions of their impact.

There was some positive evidence of how practice has changed since the introduction of the revised EYFS:

- Responses suggest practitioners have felt able to use their professional judgement more, they have reviewed the curriculum and there was a general moving away from tick lists.
- Many respondents felt leaders and managed understood that less data now needed to be collected, but 23% did not agree with this statement, so there is still work to be done here.
- The majority of respondents did not feel that any greater uncertainty over assessment had arisen as a result of the changes.

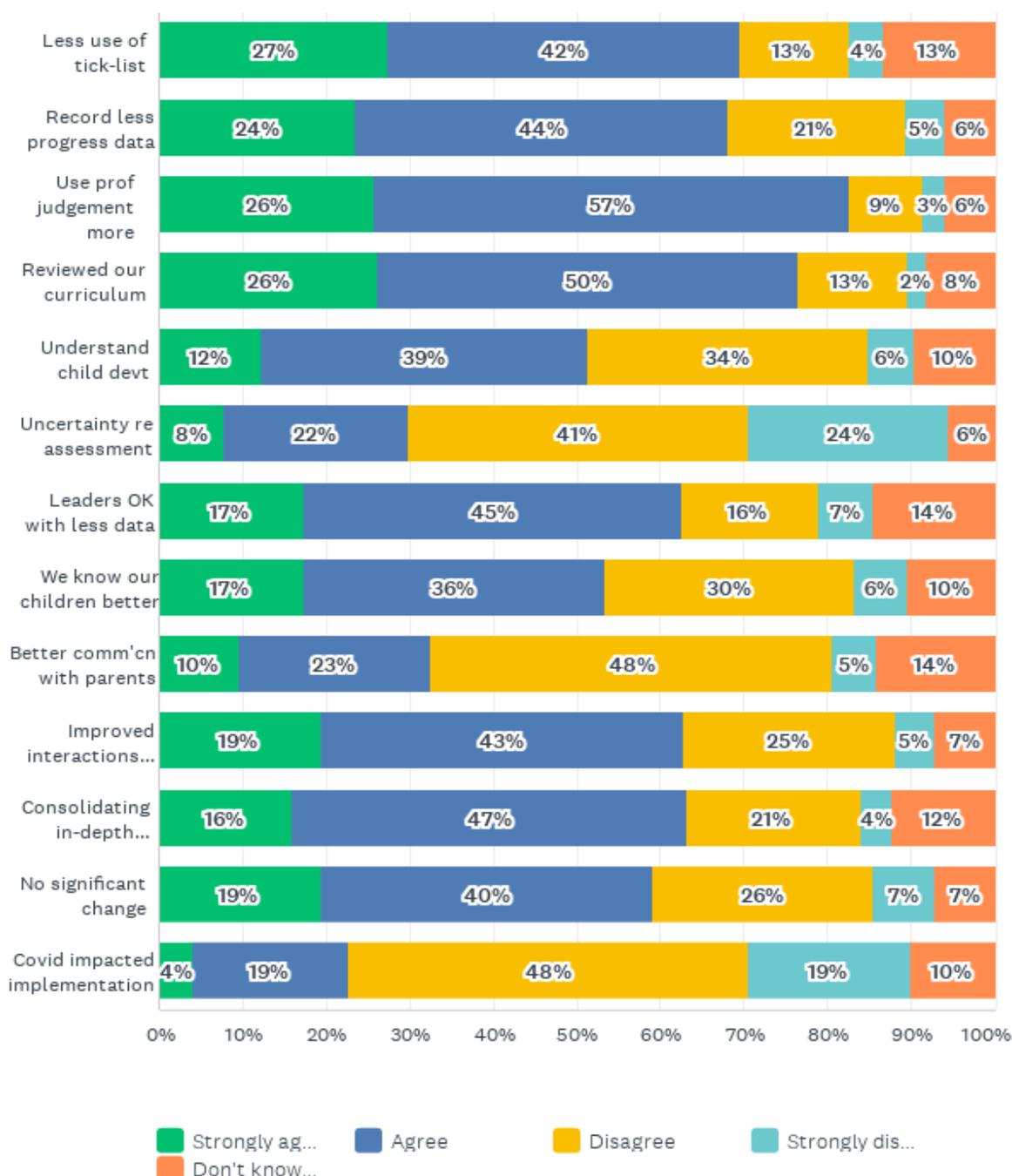
It is positive to see progress towards these key government aims.

Positively, the pandemic had not derailed progress with the reforms – only 23% indicated that Covid had impacted on their ability to implement the changes. Given the many challenges practitioners have faced over the last two years, the sector deserves recognition for having taken on this extra workload.

Perhaps more concerning was that 59% did not feel that their practice had changed as a result of the reforms. There was a mixed picture over whether an increase in understanding of child development had been achieved, whether the reforms meant that they knew their children any better and whether they were concentrating more on consolidating learning in-depth. These responses could reflect settings where provision was already high quality and there was little need for change, or could be signs that the reforms were less successful in these areas.

More than half of respondents did not feel that the reforms had improved communication with parents. Despite the government's focus on the home learning environment in other initiatives, there was a missed opportunity within the reforms to support better partnership with parents and carers.

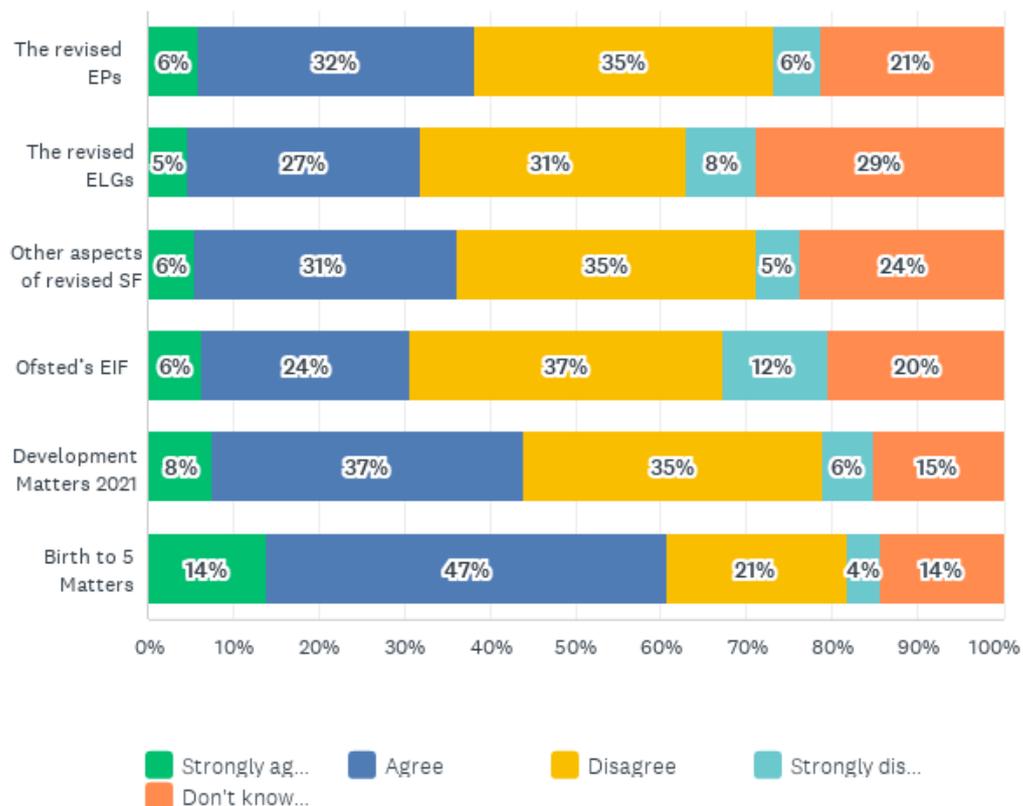
Fig 6: Do you agree that your practice changed in any of the ways listed below since the introduction of the revised EYFS (or the early adopter year if applicable)?



One of the main stated aims of the EYFS reforms was to improve children’s outcomes, especially in early language and literacy. However, responses were very divided as to whether the revised educational programmes, early learning goals and other aspects of the revised Statutory Framework had helped achieve this goal. Most practitioners were either uncertain or disagreed that the EYFS reforms had helped improve outcomes, with a similar response regarding the Ofsted Education Inspection Framework, which also focuses on language and literacy in the early years. By contrast 61% of respondents agreed that *Birth to 5 Matters* had been helpful. Although, as noted above the sample was limited, and perhaps biased

towards those who had made a positive decision to use *Birth to 5 Matters*, this does suggest government should at least consider whether there are aspects of the *Birth to 5 Matters* approach which it should take on board.

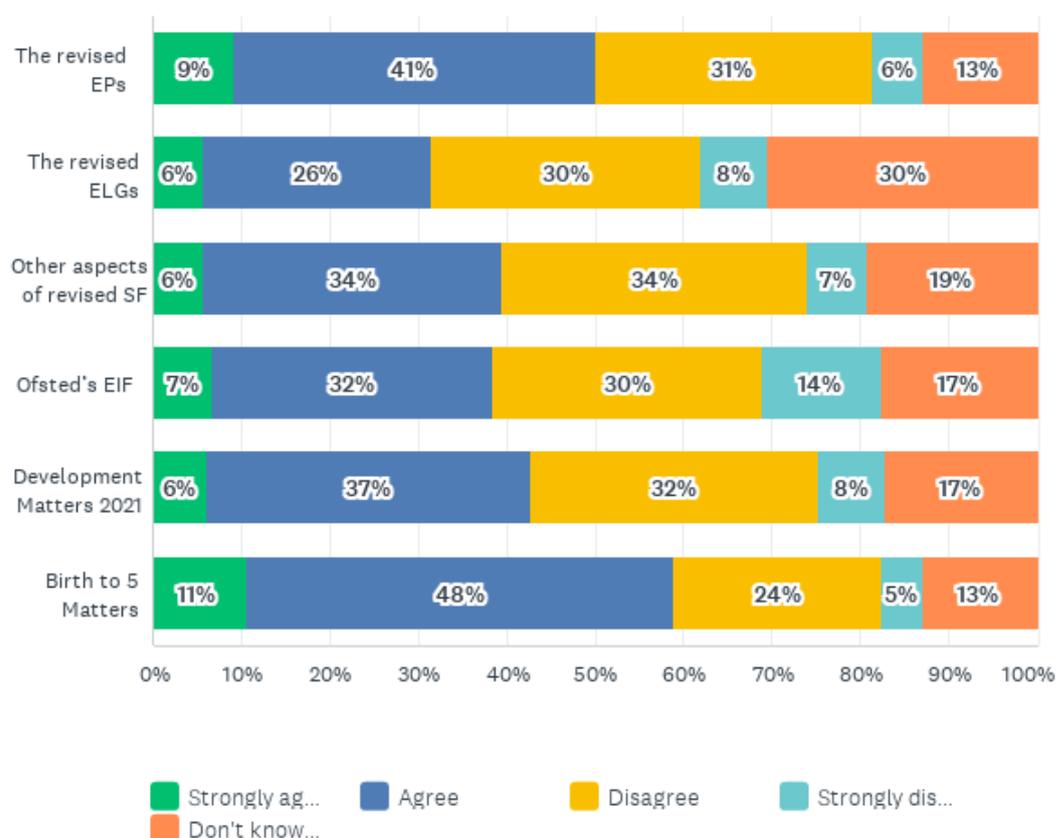
*Fig 7: Do you agree that any of the following have helped you improve outcomes, particularly in early language and literacy?*



Another stated aim of the reforms was to reduce practitioner workload and enable practitioners to spend less time on administration and more time interacting with children. Half of respondents felt that the revised educational programmes had positively impacted on their workload, but fewer than half felt that the other changes to the Statutory Framework, the revised Ofsted EIF or *Development Matters* (2021) had helped. A slightly higher percentage (59%) felt that *Birth to 5 Matters* had helped reduce workload.

It is also noteworthy that many staff and managers commented on having experienced an increase in their workload as they have had to spend time getting to grips with the new expectations around curriculum and assessment. Poor messaging from local authorities, DfE and Ofsted were mentioned as having added to this.

Fig 8: Do you agree that any of the following have helped you reduce workload and spend more time interacting with children?

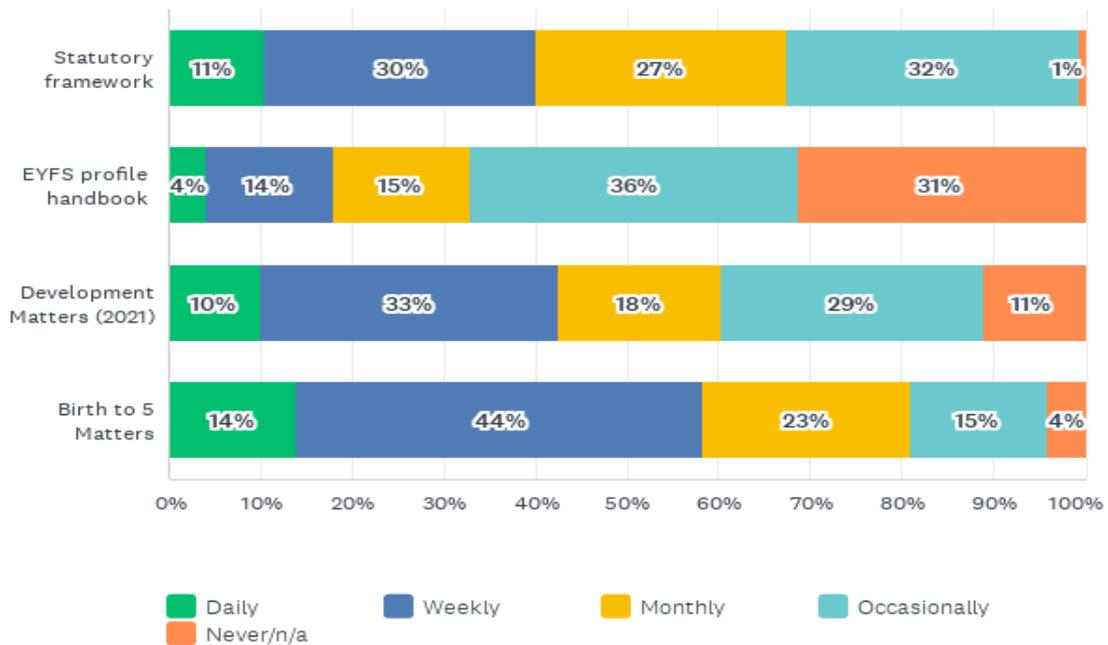


### Practitioners' use and understanding of the EYFS documentation

When we carried out a survey of practitioners prior to the EYFS reforms, responses showed some confusion between the statutory and non-statutory elements of the EYFS: for many *Development Matters* (2012) **was** the EYFS. By contrast, in our current survey, the vast majority of the respondents understood that both *Birth to 5 Matters* and *Development Matters* (2021) were non statutory guidance, and that only the Statutory Framework was a legal requirement. There was, however, less consistency or response in relation to the status of the EYFS Profile Handbook.

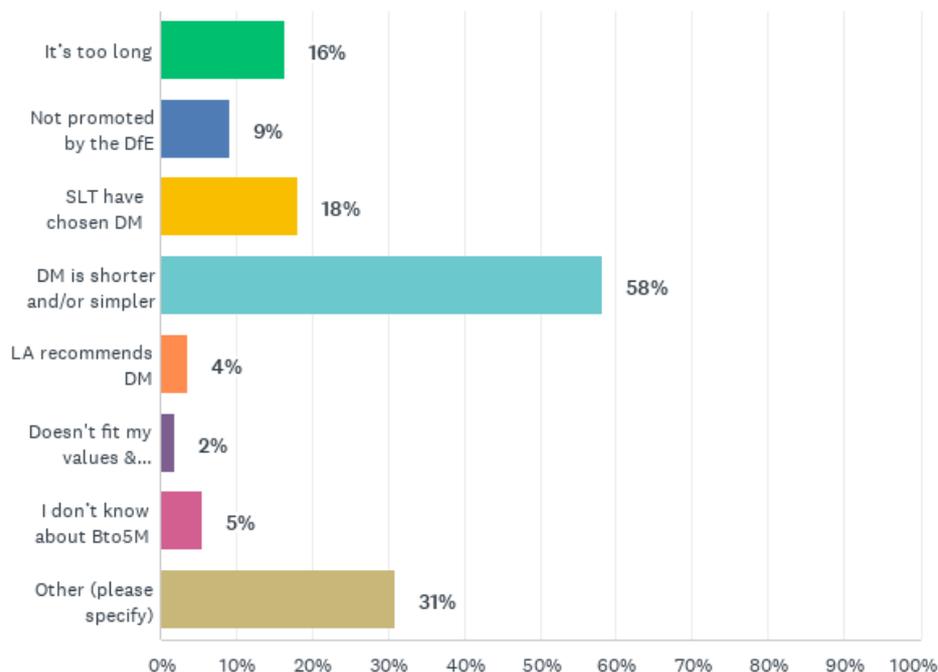
When asked how frequently they referred to the various documents, *Birth to 5 Matters* was referred to at least weekly by more people than *Development Matters* or the Statutory Framework.

Fig 1: How frequently do you refer to these documents to support your practice?



We wished to understand the reasons why practitioners opted for one form of non-statutory guidance rather than the other. 16% of the respondents stated that they did not use *Birth to 5 Matters*. The overwhelming majority gave as their reason for this that *Development Matters 2021* was shorter and/or simpler. There was some evidence that practitioners had changed from using *Development Matters 2021* to *Birth to 5 Matters*, that some were using a mixture of both non statutory guidance and some who were using *Development Matters* because it was the choice of their senior management

Fig 2: If you don't use *Birth to 5 Matters*, why not?



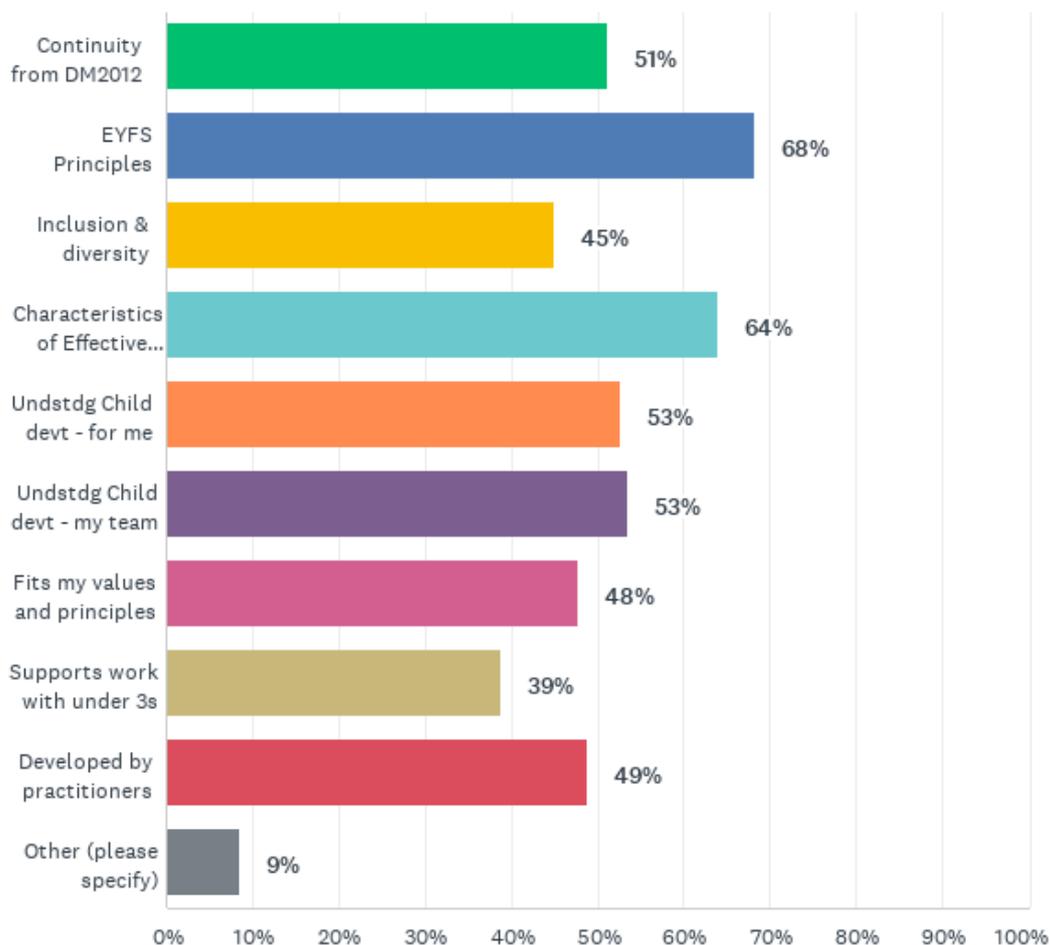
Reasons for using *Birth to 5 Matters* were fairly evenly spread, with 68% suggested that they chose it because of its coverage of the principles of the EYFS and 64% appreciated the emphasis on the characteristics of effective learning.

There were a number of interesting extra comments which included:

*“It was written by a diverse cross section of people with the child/family at the centre. Also including many other professionals and included wider research, theory and pedagogical principles”*

*“The staff find the range section more beneficial to their observation, assessment and planning”*

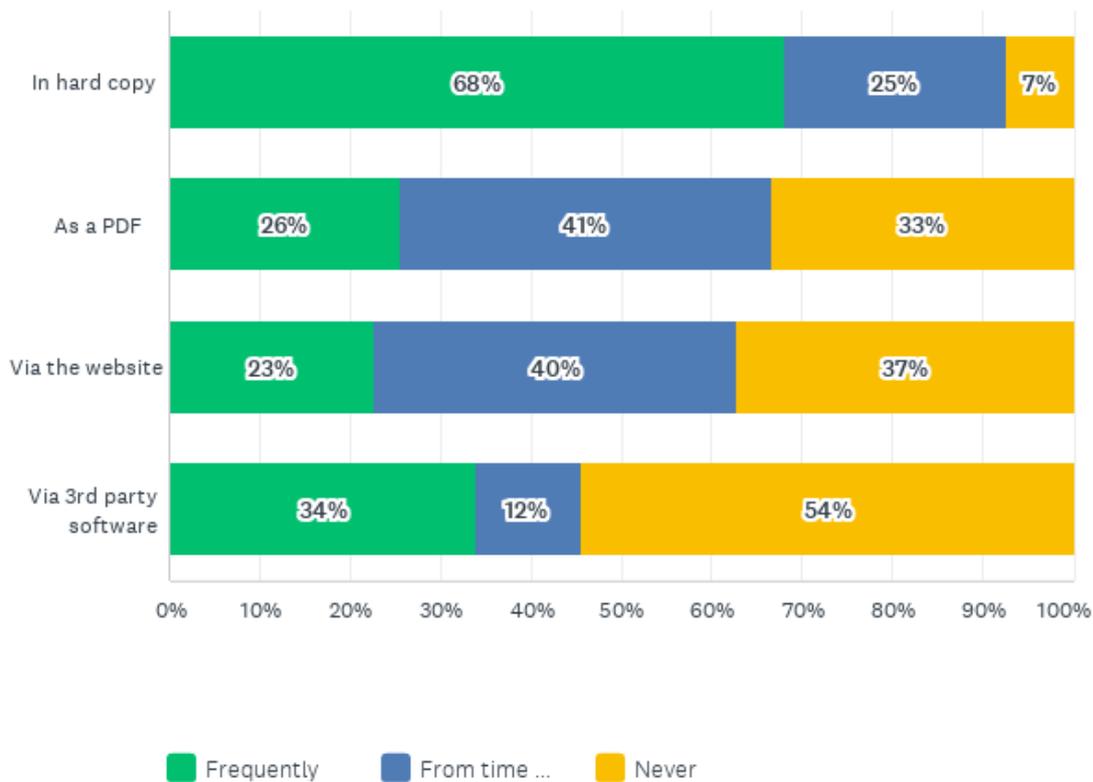
Fig 3: If you use *Birth to 5 Matters*, what are your reasons for choosing it? Tick all that apply.



Most of the respondents' accessed *Birth to 5 Matters* as a hard copy, although the PDF version and website were also used regularly. (The guidance has been downloaded over 147,000 times and more than 30,000 printed copies sold.) Many practitioners were accessing the guidance via one of the software companies who

have been licensed to include *Birth to 5 Matters* in their packages (with strict conditions to prevent it being used as a tick list).

Fig 4: In what format(s) do you access *Birth to 5 Matters*?

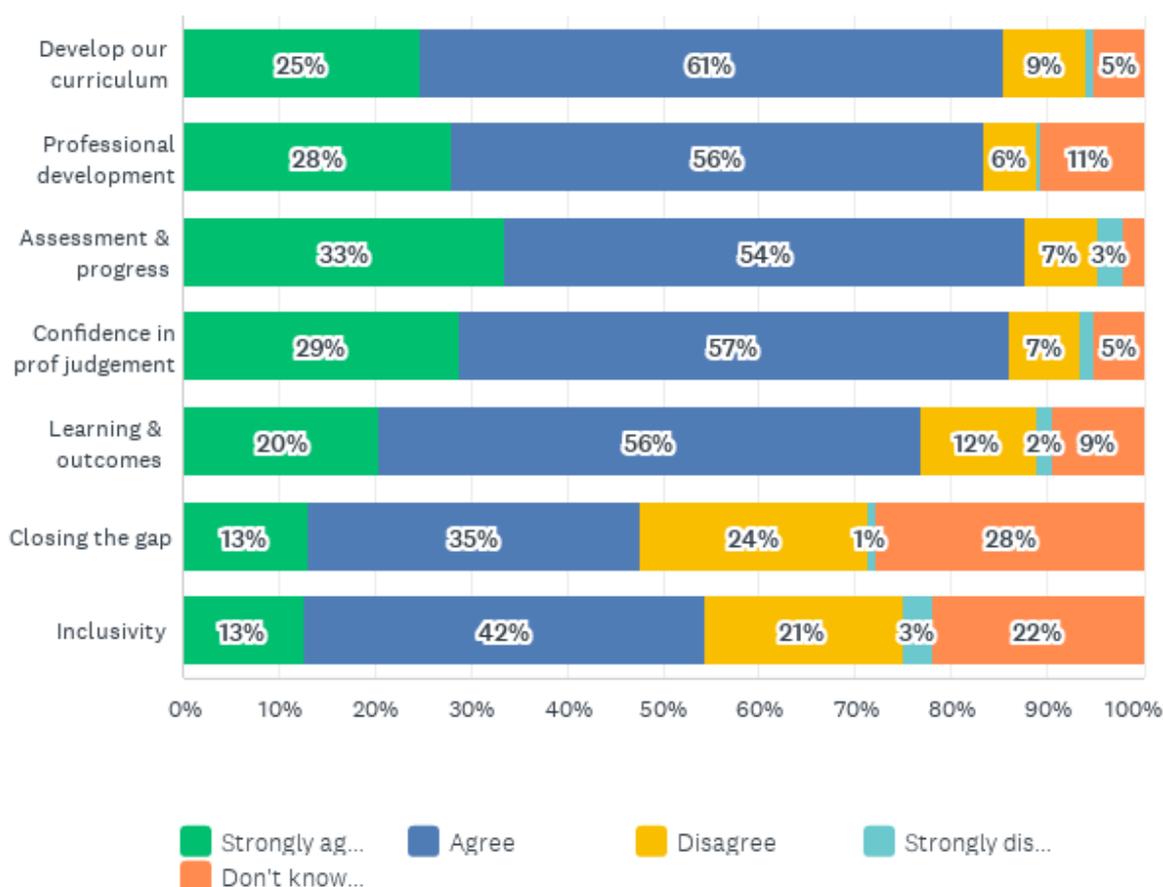


### Impact on practice

When asked about how *Birth to 5 Matters* impacted various aspects of practice, over 80% agreed that it had impacted on staff professional development, increasing staff confidence in their professional judgement, assessment, curriculum and learning and outcomes.

Despite the aspiration of the Early Years Coalition that the guidance should provide strong support for diversity and inclusion, fewer respondents (although still more than half) agreed that *Birth to 5 Matters* had impacted on narrowing the “attainment gap” or helping settings to become more inclusive. If future work is undertaken to revise *Birth to 5 Matters*, it might be worthwhile exploring in more detail the reasons for this and what else might be done to support these areas.

Fig 5: Do you agree that Birth to 5 Matters has impacted on any of the following?



Of those who chose to add additional comments about using *Birth to 5 Matters* with children who have SEND, the majority remark about the inclusive nature of *Birth to 5 Matters*.

*SEND practice and principles are much more prominent, informed and well researched. This has been developed by those who know and fully understand children's special needs and special rights. It is fully inclusive*

*Being able to use a range rather than a age band is more parent friendly - it also allows practitioners to be able to see the development gaps easier.*

*It has helped us to stop 'ticking boxes' slow down and think about what an observation is telling us about our children*

The survey also highlighted current tensions in the sector regarding supporting children with SEND, with some feeling that *Birth to 5 Matters* is holistically supportive, while others choose to use different assessments to ensure children's progress is being monitored.

### **Training providers' views of Birth to 5 Matters**

A separate set of questions was asked of respondents who were working in colleges, universities and other training provision. This was only a small subset of the total respondents (35 people).

More than half of these said they promoted both *Birth to 5 Matters* and *Development Matters* equally, although some chose to mainly use one or the other (mostly *Birth to 5 Matters*). One commented,

*“Students are encouraged to read both documents critically and consider their usefulness in supporting practice”*

Respondents also strongly agreed that the additional resources including resource lists and biographies and the videos, podcasts and blogs on the website were helpful.

*Birth to 5 Matters* seems to be being used in a variety of ways to support training and CPD of practitioners. It is reported to being used in staff meetings, with Level 2 and 3 trainee practitioners, on early years and teaching degrees. Students are being encouraged to use the guidance to analyse and critically reflect on policy, understand how theory informs practice and think about child development. It is being used to develop knowledge about the characteristics of effective learning, planning, assessment, and pedagogy. It is also being referenced by students in assignments.

### ***Other professional development needs***

The two main areas with which practitioners would like extra help and guidance were designing and implementing a curriculum and supporting children with SEND, followed closely by more support with understanding and assessing child development and increased support for leaders.

### ***Other comments***

There were a few comments across the survey raising concern that the ELGs in *Birth to 5 Matters* do not align with the statutory EYFS, stating that this can cause confusion for staff. This issue was debated during the development of the guidance and reflected a conscious decision to prioritise coherence of the areas of learning over consistency with the revised Statutory Framework.

There were a number of comments throughout the evaluation which suggested that it was too early to fully evaluate the impact of *Birth to 5 Matters*. We will consider running another evaluation at a later stage to see how practice and practitioners' needs are evolving over time.

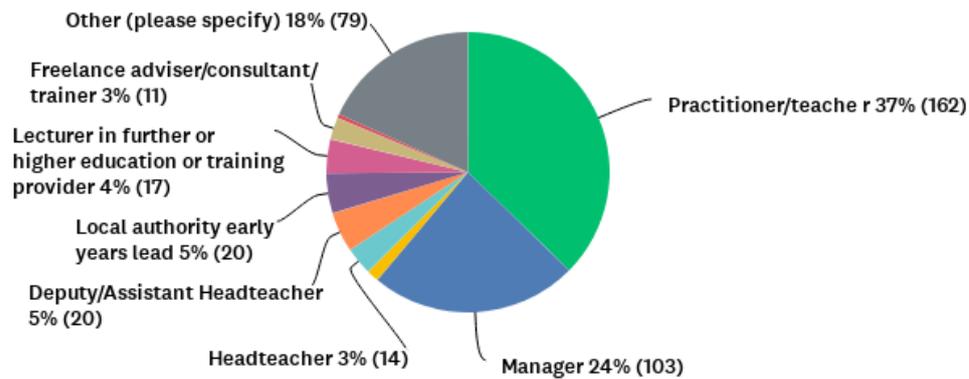
## Recommendations

As a result of the survey findings, the Early Years Coalition may wish to consider:

1. Conducting another evaluation of *Birth to 5 Matters* at a later date and trying to encourage a larger number of responses.
2. What further support would be helpful for practitioners working with children with SEND.
3. What further support would be helpful to support assessment
4. What further information would support developing curricula

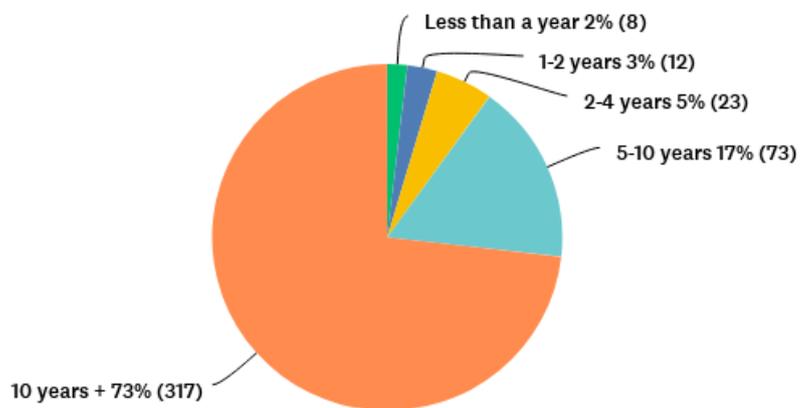
## Appendix A: Respondent profile

### Q2 What is your job role?

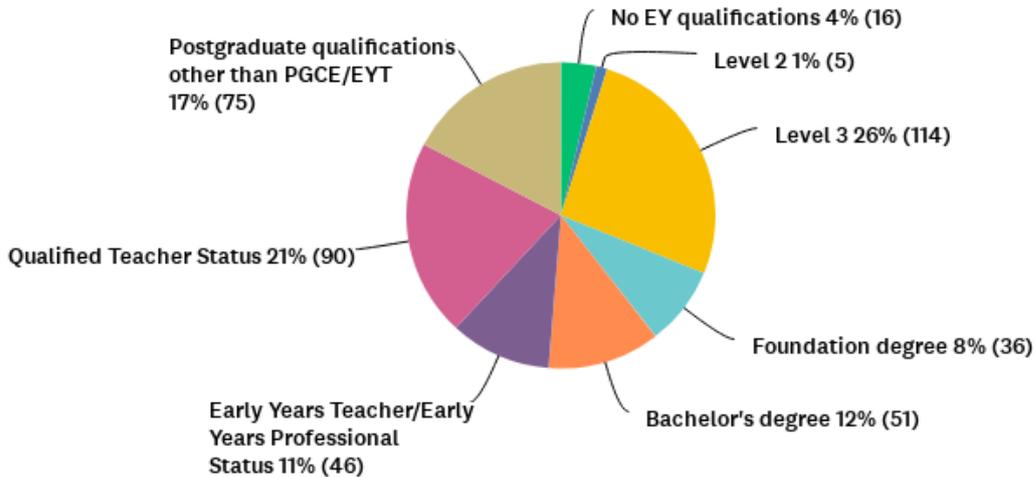


Other included childminders, students, owners/directors and EYFS leaders

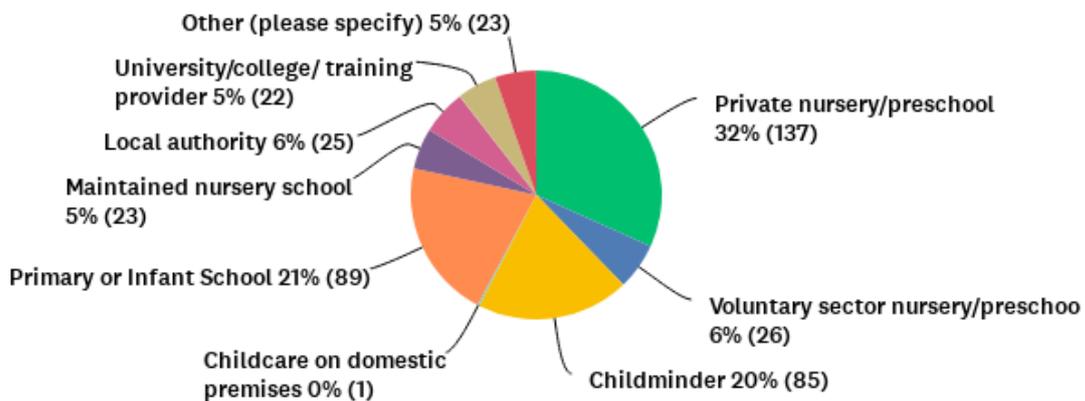
### Q3 How long have you worked in the early years?



## Q4 What is your highest early years qualification?



## Q6 What type of organisation do you work in?



24% of those working in an infant or primary school had been early adopters.