

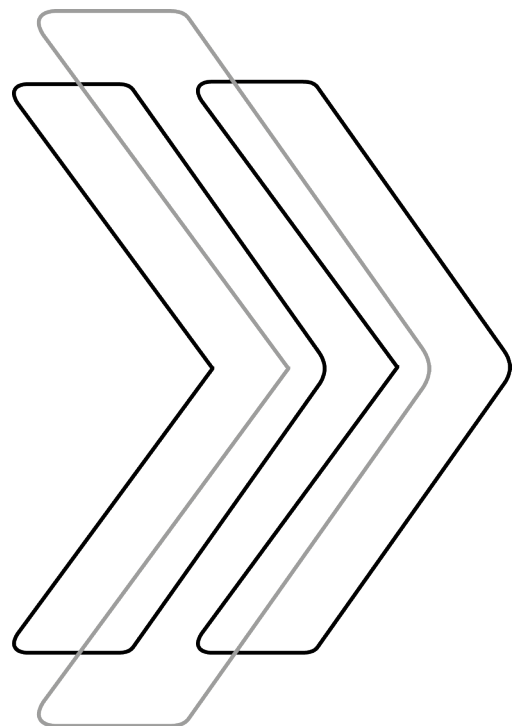
# **Childcare providers' experience of the Nursery Milk Scheme for England and Wales**

A qualitative study

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# 1 Introduction

The Nursery Milk Scheme (NMS) is a statutory government-funded scheme operating in England and Wales that allows childcare settings to reclaim the cost of providing one-third of a pint of milk each day to children under five who attend their childcare setting for at least two hours per day (Department of Health and Social Care undated). The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) is responsible for the scheme, which operates through a contracted provider.

In 2021, DHSC commissioned The King's Fund, acting as an independent research provider, to conduct a piece of qualitative user research with childcare settings to explore how they used and experienced the scheme.

## **Background**

The NMS has been running since the 1940s (Department of Health and Social Care undated). In England and Wales in 2019/20, the scheme cost more than £52 million (Department of Health and Social Care internal analysis provided to the author).

Milk reimbursements can be claimed by settings providing childcare to children under five years old, including childminders, day-care providers, local authorities that provide day care and those providing day care to children under five years old in schools. Eligible childcare settings can purchase milk themselves, for example, through a delivery service, shop or supermarket, and claim for their milk reimbursement directly from the Nursery Milk Reimbursement Unit (NMRU) or, alternatively, they can appoint a 'milk agent' who will take responsibility for sourcing the milk and then claim the reimbursement themselves. The scheme does not set a price limit for milk reimbursement claims, but beneficiaries are encouraged to 'purchase milk at the best possible price to meet their requirements' (Department of Health and Social Care undated).

In terms of the size of the childcare sector as a whole, the Department for Education estimated that in spring 2021 there were 62,000 registered childcare and early-years providers with at least one child aged 0-4 years in England, offering more than 1.5 million Ofsted registered childcare places. 50 per cent of these settings were childminders, 34 per cent were 'group-based'

(private and voluntary) and 15 per cent were school-based (Department for Education 2021). Figures published by the Welsh Government show that in March 2021 there were 3,882 childcare providers regulated by Care Inspectorate Wales, offering 84,508 childcare places. 50 per cent of settings were childminders, with the remaining childcare provision being full day-care settings (26 per cent), sessional day-care settings (13 per cent), out-of-school care settings (10 per cent), open-access play provision (1 per cent) and crèches (0.4 per cent) (Welsh Government 2021).

## **Research aims and scope**

The aim of this project was to explore how a range of childcare settings used and experienced the NMS. To do this, it investigated the following topics.

- How settings sourced their NMS milk and their reasons for sourcing it in this way.
- Alternative options available to settings for sourcing NMS milk, and the advantages and disadvantages of these options.
- How decision-making associated with the NMS worked.
- How the administration associated with the NMS was carried out.
- Satisfaction with the NMS in general.
- How other food and drink that settings provided for their children was sourced, and how the costs of this food and drink were covered.

The scope of the research included childminders and public, private and voluntary sector nurseries across England and Wales. It did not include childcare settings in Scotland or Northern Ireland, where separate nursery milk reimbursement arrangements are in operation. The research focused on childcare settings that were not attached to schools. These settings were of specific research interest because they could not access the wider catering arrangements available in schools.

This research was intended to help inform thinking about the NMS scheme, by giving an indication of how the scheme is currently experienced by some childcare settings and, as a result, helping to identify a set of key issues to be explored in considering any potential future changes to the scheme.

## **Methodology**

We conducted 20 semi-structured interviews by telephone or online web conferencing software (Microsoft Teams) between 1 December 2021 and 14 January 2022. Interviews lasted 20–40 minutes each and participants received payment in recognition of their time.

Interviewees were asked about their experience of using the NMS and sourcing other food provided to children, in line with the research aims outlined in the previous section.

Interviews were recorded and then transcribed by a third-party transcription service. Interviews were anonymised to encourage open discussion about the scheme.

We carried out a thematic analysis, with consideration of the project aims used to help guide the development of themes. One researcher developed the initial coding framework, and then worked in consultation with another researcher to review and refine the framework. Using this coding framework, two researchers both coded two interview transcripts and then reviewed the coding approach for quality assurance. One researcher then coded all the interview transcripts using MAXQDA analysis software. We then analysed the coded data to inform the findings presented in this report.

## **Sampling**

Interviewees were childcare-setting staff involved in administering or making decisions about the NMS scheme in their setting. A research recruitment provider recruited the interviewees.

To ensure we captured a diversity of experiences, interviewees were selected to ensure a mix of:

- geographical location across England and Wales – by region (Office for National Statistics 2021)
- urban and rural areas – based on the 2011 Census Wards Rural Urban Classification (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs 2021)
- setting types (childminders, independent nurseries and nurseries that were part of a chain, including those that were part of a franchise) – self-reported by interviewees

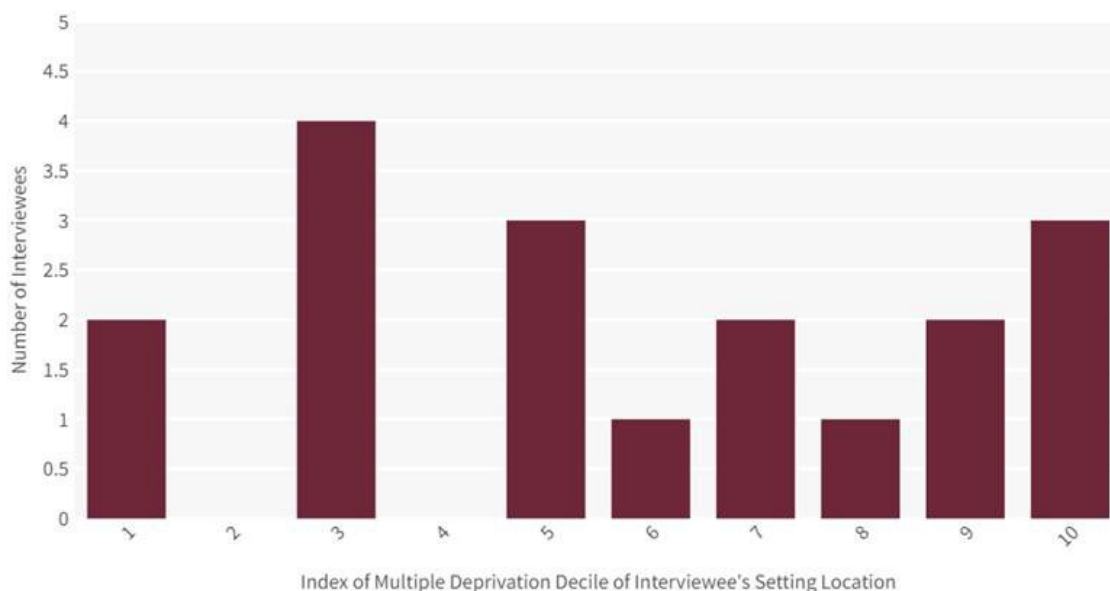
- sectors (childminders, private sector nurseries and third sector nurseries) – self-reported by interviewees
- childcare settings that do and do not use milk agents – self-reported by interviewees
- more-deprived and less-deprived areas – as measured by the 2019 Index of Multiple Deprivation decile ranking for England or Wales that the postcode of each childcare setting falls within (at the lower super output area level) (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government 2019; Welsh Government 2019).

The properties of the interview sample are shown in Table 1 and Figure 1.

**Table 1:** Breakdown of interviewees by region, rural urban classification, setting type, sector and whether they use a milk agent (n=20).

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Number of interviewees</b>
<b>Region</b>	
North West	4
Yorkshire and the Humber	3
East Midlands	3
East	4
London	3
South East	1
Wales	2
<b>Rural/urban classification</b>	
Urban	15
Rural	5
<b>Setting type</b>	
Childminder	5
Nursery – independent	10
Nursery – chain or franchise	5
<b>Sector</b>	
Childminder	5
Nursery – private sector	12
Nursery – third sector	3
<b>Source of NMS milk</b>	
Milk agent	12
Other	8

Figure 1: English Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019 decile ranking that the postcodes of interviewees' childcare settings fell within (at the Lower Super Output Area level)



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## Ethical considerations

This research project was approved by the Health Sciences Research Governance Committee at the Department of Health Sciences, University of York after an ethics review process (HSRGC/2021/475: Nursery Milk Scheme user research, approved on 17 November 2021).

## Patient and public involvement

We conducted patient and public involvement using the University of York's Involvement@York programme. A panel of three programme volunteers provided comments and feedback on the research protocol and associated materials and these were incorporated into project design and delivery. They included changes to the language used in the information sheet and consent form to make them more accessible and to ensure that interviewees were able to participate in an informed and effective manner. The panel were remunerated for their work.

## Caveats and limitations

The sample size for this project enabled us to gain insight into the perspectives of a diverse range of settings. It was not sufficiently large to



generate findings that are generalisable or representative either of the sector as a whole or of particular sections of it.

The research is intended to be illustrative rather than comprehensive – drawing out a set of insights from the practical experiences of settings. It should be considered alongside, and be seen as complementary to, other evidence on settings in the sector.

Participants were aware that this project was commissioned by the Department for Health and Social Care. There is a risk that this may have influenced their responses – for example, they may have felt that criticising the NMS could have affected their ability to access it in the future. However, this risk was mitigated through assurance provided to participants in the information sheet and consent form that they were given, as well as verbally at the beginning of interviews, about the researcher's independence from the Department of Health and Social Care and the anonymity of participants.

We conducted interviews amid the impact on interviewees and wider society of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. This should be taken into account when considering these findings. For example, some interviewees reported that the pandemic had had an impact on their experience of getting NMS milk, such as due to the introduction of limits on the amount of milk that could be ordered as part of an online supermarket delivery.

## 2 Findings

This chapter outlines findings from the 20 interviews with staff from a range of childcare settings about their experience of the NMS. It describes:

- how the childcare settings sourced their NMS milk
- the attributes of NMS milk sources that settings valued – both when choosing which supplier to use and when evaluating their experience of their current supplier
- other factors that influenced decision-making about how to source NMS milk
- how often settings revisited their decisions about how to source milk
- levels of satisfaction among participants about their current source of NMS milk and with the NMS claims process
- participants' views about the NMS in general, including ideas about how the scheme could be improved
- the other food and drink that settings provided for their children, how this was sourced and how costs were covered.

### **How settings sourced NMS milk**

Participants used five types of supplier to source NMS milk:

- milk agents
- home-delivery service 'milk rounds', sometimes referred to as 'milk men' (referred to in this report as 'milk rounds')
- wholesale food suppliers
- online supermarket deliveries
- local shops and supermarkets, visited in person (referred to in this report as 'local shops').

### ***Milk agents***

Participants from all three types of childcare setting interviewed (childminder, independent nursery and chain nursery) used milk agents. These settings

ordered their milk in advance, either using the milk agent's website or via email. Some settings ordered on a weekly basis, submitting their orders for the following week or for two weeks' time. Others ordered on a monthly or termly basis.

Settings using milk agents did not pay for the milk themselves. They reported that the milk agents would pay for the milk and then claim money back from the Nursery Milk Reimbursement Unit. Settings received deliveries between one and five times per week.

Each month, settings using milk agents submitted attendance data for that month to the NMS platform to 'validate' the claim made by the milk agent on their behalf, and, in some cases, also submitted attendance data to their milk agent.

*They email me each month and ask me to input how many children and then they deliver it, every Thursday they deliver it, and then I just have to submit my claim each month and they deal with all the other paperwork their end.*

Interviewee 20 (childminder)

*We get an email which asks us how much milk we need for the children for a couple of weeks' time, or just to reconfirm, and we do that. And then the milk arrives on a Monday, Wednesday and Friday... generally, we adjust every half-term... And then every month we have to confirm with the... NMRU... how much milk has been delivered and all the payments are sorted out with them.*

Interviewee 18 (independent nursery)

### **Other sources**

Childcare settings that did not use milk agents paid for their milk themselves, then claimed back the cost through the NMS website. This included settings using milk rounds, online supermarket deliveries, local shops and wholesale food suppliers.

Two respondents used a local milk round. Both had a 'rolling order' in place, and would contact the supplier by phone if they wanted to change the amount of milk to be delivered.

*I get one delivery on a Monday and another delivery on a Wednesday and then at the end of the month, [the milk round] emails me his bill. I*

*print it off for my records and then I submit my claim [to the NMS platform] going off what's on the bill... The order stays the same, week in, week out. The only time it changes, I'll just text him... I'll say, I don't need as much milk for those periods and he just alters it accordingly.*

Interviewee 10 (childminder)

One respondent used a wholesale food supplier. This was ordered weekly as part of a wider food shopping order.

*[The milk] comes with the food shopping weekly... It's not just milk, it's a whole-food provider as well... They just provide us for the receipt, they charge us as normal things and then I go on the milk scheme online and I provide the receipt and I claim the milk from there.*

Interviewee 6 (chain nursery)

Two respondents got their milk in person from local shops, one once per week and one twice per week.

*We buy from the local supermarket... in person... Once a month I will put in to our treasurer a list of the children, numbers of children that have been in all week and the amount of milk that we've bought all week and the receipts, and she then claims it back... We've got actually [three local supermarkets], so we're quite well-served and quite close by.*

Interviewee 19 (independent nursery)

Three settings got their NMS milk as part of their online supermarket deliveries, which also included other food and drink that they provided for their children.

*We have supermarket deliveries from [supermarket], 'cause that seems to be the most economical one for us, every week, and they deliver the milk... to do a milk claim I need to know... how many children over the course of each day therefore calculates up to x number of pints that I can claim for.*

Interviewee 1 (chain nursery)

### **Secondary sources**

Several respondents used a secondary source of supply for milk – either as a backup in cases where milk was not delivered or as a supplement, for

example, when they needed more milk than they had planned for. In all cases, the secondary source was an in-person trip to a local shop.

All three settings that used online shopping deliveries supplemented their online order with an in-person local shopping trip. In one case, this was done routinely each week due to maximum limits on the amount of milk they could order online; in the other cases it was done irregularly on occasions when the milk that they had did not match demand. The setting that used a wholesale supplier also used local shops in instances where milk deliveries were not available.

*We have a weekly shopping delivery via one of the big supermarkets so mostly it comes from there. Occasionally, if we're short or we've used extra for whatever reason, somebody might nip to the local shop.*

Interviewee 17 (independent nursery)

Finally, two settings that used milk agents also reported using local shops as a back-up option. In both cases, the setting would pay for this milk themselves and not claim the cost back through the NMS.

### **Attributes of milk sources that childcare settings valued**

This section sets out the factors shared by interviewees that influenced their choices about how to source their NMS milk, as well as the quality of their experience of the scheme.

Interviewees highlighted the following as important factors affecting how they decide to source their milk and how they experience the NMS.

- **Low administrative burden:** both in terms of getting the milk itself and paperwork associated with the NMS.
- **Reliability:** confidence they will have the milk they need when they need it.
- **Responsiveness:** being able to quickly and easily adjust the amount of milk they get to match changing levels of need, helping to **reduce waste** by minimising the amount of milk thrown away.
- **Issues around storage capacity:** ability to store the milk.
- **Value for money.**
- **Supporting local businesses.**

- **An opportunity to involve children** in sourcing the milk as a routine activity.

Each of these factors is discussed in detail below.

### **Administrative burden**

Among the interviewees, the most common factor reported to influence their choice of milk supplier was the amount of work involved for their staff associated with getting NMS milk. This included both getting the milk (for example, ordering it or going to a shop to get it) and carrying out administrative processes relating to the NMS (for example, in submitting attendance records or receipts onto the website).

Fifteen of the 20 interviewees, including interviewees from all setting types, stated that this factor was important to them. Among those 15, at least one interviewee said that having a low administrative burden was a reason to get NMS milk from four of the five supplier types (milk agents, online shopping deliveries, milk rounds and wholesale food suppliers). None of the interviewees said that this was a reason to source their NMS milk in person from a local shop, but several who sourced their milk in this way reported that their administrative burden was low or manageable.

For some interviewees, this factor was a major reason they chose to use milk agents, both because they delivered milk directly to those settings and because this involved less administrative work for settings when submitting claims to the NMS:

*It was just convenience really, you know... not having to worry about invoices and bills and claiming money and sending money; the agent does that.*

Interviewee 18 (independent nursery)

*If you do it yourself it's more paperwork, doing it by [milk agent], they email you, tell you it's time to do it at the end of the month and you do it and that's it, it's done, it takes you, like, a couple of minutes to do it really and then you haven't got to go out shopping for your milk, it's delivered, so you know you've always got fresh milk for the children... Sometimes, if it's a bank holiday or Christmas time, and things like that, then they'll email you and ask you if you're closed or anything... You don't have to remember anything to do yourself, they just prompt you with it all. So that's why it's good that you've not got to think about*

*it, they're thinking about it for you.*

Interviewee 20 (childminder)

One childminder interviewed stated that without the reduced administrative workload that came from using a milk agent, they would not use the NMS at all.

*[I'd] never done it, because I have to claim it back – oh no, with this [milk agent] you don't have to claim it back, they sort it all out for you... I'd [previously] heard about this scheme. But then when you look on your accounts and it was all claiming it back, and doing this, and that, and I thought, you know what, I can't be bothered, I'll just pay for the milk... But then, if [milk agent is] going to do it all for me, it makes life easier.*

Interviewee 15 (childminder)

However, some interviewees who did not use milk agents felt that using the NMS was not a significant administrative burden for them.

*We've always claimed our own... actually, it's not a great deal of work for our treasurer to do it, she just claims it once a month, so it's quite easy to do.*

Interviewee 19 (independent nursery)

*For a lot of us, who have used the scheme for a lot over the years, it is straightforward to do.*

Interviewee 16 (childminder)

Several interviewees sourced their NMS milk as part of a wider food and drink purchase, viewing this as a way of simplifying their workload. One of these interviewees stated that using a milk agent would increase their administrative burden by requiring them to engage with an additional organisation. This interviewee also said that because they got additional milk from the same source as their NMS milk, on top of the milk covered by the scheme, the price of the milk became a factor in choosing where to source it.

*We have a weekly shopping delivery via one of the big supermarkets so mostly it comes from there... I just feel like [a milk agent] would be another thing to cope with... We order more milk than we actually claim back because obviously we use some for cooking... If we used a milk agent, that wouldn't actually cover all the milk we actually needed on-site so then there's two things going on... We have looked at [a milk*

*round] before but they were more expensive [than the supermarket]*  
Interviewee 17 (independent nursery)

### **Reliability**

Ten interviewees, including interviewees from all three setting types, highlighted the importance of being able to have confidence that they would have their milk when they needed it.

*Consistency is probably the most important thing. You wouldn't want to have sporadic milk deliveries, you know, etc... ideally just to run as smoothly as possible.*

Interviewee 12 (independent nursery)

Interviewees expressed differing views about which type of milk suppliers were reliable. At least one interviewee identified reliability as a reason to use each of four milk supplier types (milk agents, milk rounds, wholesale food suppliers and local shops). For some interviewees, reliability was a reason to use milk agents.

*We did used to use a local milkman, but we found the milk wasn't coming on time. And sometimes when the milk was coming it's like it had been out of the fridge for a while, sometimes it was a bit sour... So, we stopped using them just for that reason... And then since we started using [milk agent] it's been, yeah, quite good.*

Interviewee 13 (independent nursery)

Others identified reliability as a reason to have milk delivered by a milk round.

*[The milk round is] extremely reliable... [previously used milk agents] weren't always prompt with the deliveries... Sometimes, like on a Monday morning, if they didn't arrive till 11 o'clock or sometimes later in the day, I'm not able to provide milk or I'm having to buy milk to provide for the children.*

Interviewee 10 (childminder)

None of the interviewees who got their milk in person from local shops or through online supermarket deliveries highlighted reliability as an important factor in deciding how to source their milk. However, an interviewee who used a milk agent stated that getting their milk from local shops would bring greater reliability than their current source, and that this would be a reason to switch from using a milk agent to a local shop.



*[Getting milk from a local shop] would be a disadvantage, generally. Other than the fact that you absolutely know that you're going to get it, because sometimes you're a bit doubtful whether you're going to get it or not [from the milk agent], I would have said, you know, other than that it's better to have it delivered.*

Interviewee 9 (chain nursery)

Several interviewees who had milk delivered also stated that they preferred it to be delivered early in the morning.

*A friend had said that [milk agent] had been unreliable and things like delivering the milk and leaving it on the doorstep in the day, in the sunshine and things like that... So, I thought, no I'll just stick with my milkman because he delivers early in the morning, I can bring the milk in, it's not sitting there.*

Interviewee 10 (childminder)

### **Responsiveness and reducing waste**

Eight interviewees, including interviewees from all three setting types, reported that it was important to them that they got the amount of milk that they needed. This meant being able to adjust the amount of milk that they received in response to changing levels of demand (for example, during holidays or due to absences in their group of children) – including to minimise the amount of milk wasted. At least one interviewee identified this factor as a reason to go with each of the five supplier types.

All three settings that routinely sourced their NMS milk through in-person trips to local shops cited flexibility around the amount of milk needed as an advantage of getting milk in this way.

*We do get the right amount of milk that we need and we don't have things like a lot of waste, because we're able to make sure we're getting exactly what we need. So, if numbers are fluctuating, then we can plan for that really well.*

*[When ordering through milk agents] you'd be predicting numbers, wouldn't you? So, we've got loads of children off this week, so you might potentially have waste. Whereas the way we do it, you can really control that really well.*

Interviewee 11 (independent nursery)

Several settings that ordered milk in advance and had it delivered, including interviewees who used a milk agent, a milk round, an online supermarket order and a wholesaler, also identified responsiveness to need as a positive aspect of how they got their milk.

*I prefer to use my milkman, he's a lot more accessible... and he can respond quickly with altering my deliveries because I just text him and he's quick and very efficient.*  
Interviewee 10 (childminder)

*I actually found [ordering on the wholesale supplier's website] very easy and straightforward and I do like it now because I'm more in control, in charge, so if I have more children or less children, I can always go and add it myself, and this is when I actually order the milk so I'm not wasting any milk and I'm not having any shortage of the milk.*  
Interviewee 6 (chain nursery)

One interviewee cited regular over-deliveries of milk relative to need and the resulting waste, alongside the administration involved in adjusting orders, as the primary reason that they switched from a milk agent to an online supermarket delivery.

*[The milk agent previously used] used to over-deliver milk, it was a huge amount of waste... They'd been given the numbers, but they were still providing more milk than we were requesting... it was ridiculous and so out of control we just canned it... [we] said we don't want any milk and they've said, oh no you've got to have the milk because we've got to deliver the milk. It became a bit of a battle towards the end...it was just so inefficient, wasteful and for what was involved at the time, a hugely overburdensome amount of administration for the settings versus doing it themselves.*  
Interviewee 1 (chain nursery)

### **Issues around storage capacity**

Three interviewees, all of whom routinely got their milk in person from a local shop, reported that their choice to do so was influenced by the fact that they found it easier to store their milk when sourced in this way.

*[I've considered] buying it from the supermarket with my [online supermarket] shop but again, for a week, I would need to buy too*

*much milk to keep in the fridge.*

Interviewee 16 (childminder)

*The issue is, it's storing the milk because [milk agent] provide the fridges, they provide the milk... [but] we don't have any capacity to have additional fridges... for the amount of milk that you have to store, that's the issue, we wouldn't be able to store it, that's why it works well, picking up [from a local shop] twice a week.*

Interviewee 11 (independent nursery)

### **Value for money**

Two interviewees identified the price of the milk that they got through the NMS as being a motivating factor in choosing a supplier. Despite the fact that settings were able to claim back whatever price they paid for milk from the scheme, some interviewees still wanted to use sources that were good value for money in order to reduce the costs for the scheme. One of these interviewees got their milk from a local shop, the other through an online supermarket order. In both cases, cost was a reason not to use a milk agent, and in one case it was also seen as a reason not to use a milk round.

*I have looked at having milk delivered by the milkman but it's... not far off double the price of buying it from the shop ...obviously it wouldn't cost me the money to pay that, it would come out of the milk scheme. But I don't think it's a good use of funds to spend that much extra on milk... Every now and again we get contacted by [milk] agents... But, again, when I've looked into it, the amount they often charge the scheme for the milk [was too high].*

Interviewee 16 (childminder)

### **Supporting local businesses**

Two interviewees mentioned an interest in supporting local businesses through the ways they sourced NMS milk, although in both cases it was not a direct motivation behind how they currently sourced their milk.

*This year we've sort of had a strategy meeting going forward and we did discuss about buying more locally... we're sort of looking into moving the nursery into more... save the planet, like economically correct, but also more just buying local as well, I mean, we don't live in a very affluent area of London, so if we could sort of help out the local*

*shops [by buying from them in person].*

Interviewee 5 (independent nursery)

### ***An opportunity to involve children***

One interviewee who sourced milk from a local shop reported that doing so enabled them to involve the children in sourcing the milk. This was seen as a positive activity to involve them in.

*I like the children enjoying going and collecting the milk, it's part of their day, part of their routine and I think it does encourage them to drink it. It's an activity, it's our daily routine rather than just, 'Oh, have a drink.'*

Interviewee 16 (childminder)

### **Other factors that influenced how childcare settings chose to source their Nursery Milk Scheme milk**

As well as the attributes of milk sources discussed in the previous section, several other factors played a role in how some interviewees chose to source their NMS milk. These included:

- recommendations from other childcare settings
- a lack of awareness of alternative options for sourcing their NMS milk
- having a personal connection to a supplier
- being part of a chain of nurseries that makes decisions about how to source NMS milk centrally.

These factors are discussed in turn below.

### ***Recommendations from other childcare settings***

Eight interviewees – including all five childminders that were interviewed – told us that their decisions about where to source milk from were informed by recommendations and reviews by other childcare settings. In some cases, information was received from colleagues or peers that interviewees had talked to in person. In five cases, the information was seen on social media.

*A few other childminders, they use [milk agent] and recommended them... It was through social media, it might have been on, like, a childminding group that I'm on, they just said that they got their milk and who they got it from and then sent me the link and then I got in*

*touch with them... I spoke to another childminder today actually, I told her about it, so she's going to go into getting her milk delivered from them.*

Interviewee 20 (childminder)

*[We] heard of them through another nursery... somebody mentioned it to my manager because we were having issues with the milkman, and that's how we heard about them. And then we looked into it and after seeing good [online] reviews, we gave them a go.*

Interviewee 13 (independent nursery)

### **Awareness of alternative options**

Six interviewees reported being unaware that there were ways to source their NMS milk other than the one they currently used. Five of these used milk agents, and the other one used an online supermarket delivery.

*I don't really know what the alternatives are or how other people do it... It's quite interesting to know that other people do it in slightly different ways because, I guess, I didn't really know that you could.*

Interviewee 12 (independent nursery)

*I didn't know there were any other options, I just thought that this is it and also it works really well, so we wouldn't think to.*

Interviewee 14 (independent nursery)

### **Having a personal connection to a supplier**

Two interviewees reported choosing their previous supplier because someone in their organisation's network had a personal connection to a milk round.

*[The reason we had a milk round] was because my deputy at the time, her husband was a milkman.*

Interviewee 19 (independent nursery)

### **Being part of a nursery chain that makes decisions about how to source NMS milk centrally**

One nursery reported being part of a chain in which decisions about how settings source their NMS milk were made from a central office. However, other nurseries that we spoke to that were part of a chain or franchise stated that they had the responsibility to choose their own source – in at least one

case, the central office provided information on some of the different options available.

*[The central office] give us options like they say, 'Oh, there is [wholesale food supplier], there are supermarkets near you, you can go or there is so-and-so provider', so you can choose what is best for you and you can go. So they're making [it]... a bit easier for us to see, okay, who is going to provide it, we can go and do our research and then sign up with them.*

Interviewee 6 (chain nursery)

### **How often childcare settings re-visited decisions about how they source their NMS milk**

There was variation in the group of interviewees around how often decisions about how to source their NMS milk were revisited. Six interviewees noted that, because they were happy with the service they were getting from their current supplier, they had either not recently or never explored other options.

*He's been our milkman for as long as I can remember, so... there's no reason, we've never had a reason to change him, he's always been good and reliable, so we've never had to think to change him.*

Interviewee 8 (independent nursery)

Conversely, three settings reported either recently or routinely going back to the decision to make sure that they were using the best available option for their needs.

*We will have a look sometimes just to make sure we've got the best thing going.*

Interviewee 13 (independent nursery)

### **Childcare-setting satisfaction with their current source of NMS milk**

Sixteen of the 20 interviewees were either mostly or entirely satisfied with their current source of NMS milk. The reasons for satisfaction were a varied combination of the factors highlighted above in the section 'Attributes of milk sources that childcare settings valued'.

Of the remaining four, two interviewees who used milk agents had experienced issues with deliveries either not coming or getting damaged.

*Sometimes delivery can be an issue... They'll just leave it in the middle of the car park, for example, and then somebody will drive in and go over it and not see it's there. Or they'll... just dump it over the gate and stuff, so we've had ones that have burst and things... [When this happens] we'd probably end up going and getting something off our own back... [the milk agent] just say they're sorry or they'll send out an extra four pints or whatever on the next order... Probably every week, it will happen at least once, so it's weekly. But it doesn't always end up being run over or whatever, it's just inconvenient for whoever's coming in to have to pick it up from the middle of the drive and walk it all the way to the building.*

Interviewee 7 (chain nursery)

*The thing that I struggle with is, today we haven't had our milk delivered. I've had to contact [milk agent], they contact the dairy then they come back to me... I didn't get any notification until about half past 11/12 o'clock, that it wasn't going to come at all... [This happens] probably about once a month... You don't get any [notice], it just doesn't come... When it doesn't come that's it, we don't get milk, we have to go out and buy it.*

Interviewee 9 (independent nursery)

One other supplier who used a milk agent experienced similar issues, but said that this was rare and overall they reported being satisfied with the service.

*There's been – well, more than a few times that I'll get an email, 'Oh, sorry, we couldn't deliver your milk today'... and that means that either one of us has to go run to the shop... most of the time it goes quite smoothly, I'd say over the past year maybe they haven't been able to deliver maybe six or seven times.*

Interviewee 5 (independent nursery)

Another interviewee had recently been forced to change the shop that they went to for their milk and was not satisfied with the bottle sizes available in the new shop.

*When we go to the [previous] shop, we buy individual pints ... It's easy to sort out rather than if I buy a four-pint carton, trying to measure out thirds of pints... I have used the supermarket since then but it's not, like I say, it's not as practical. Sometimes in the supermarket, I can't get the one-pint cartons... So, I'm hoping, maybe in the new year, the*

*[previous shop] will be open again.*

Interviewee 16 (childminder)

The final interviewee that was not largely satisfied with their current source had been using an online supermarket delivery, but had recently needed to supplement this with an in-person shop due to limits set by the supermarket on quantities of milk that could be ordered online.

*We do an [online supermarket] shop every week and we buy milk, but then that's limited now because of Covid so then we also have to go to [supermarket in person], so we have to get it twice now... it's not ideal, is it, because you have to go twice... it's a bit inconvenient, I suppose, having to actually go and pick it up, but it's just the way it is.*

Interviewee 11 (independent nursery)

It is also worth noting that three interviewees who used milk agents were unhappy with the delivery days that had been set by their supplier.

*They just told me, 'No, we're not doing Monday deliveries to you anymore we're only doing Tuesday and Thursday'. Which means it's, kind of, on a Monday the milk's been sat there all weekend, half the time it's a bit...because some of it's been opened and stuff.. [I would prefer] having the delivery on the days that we need it, not when it suits them.*

Interviewee 7 (chain nursery)

### **Childcare-setting satisfaction with the NMS claims process**

The administrative work relating to claims worked differently for settings that used milk agents and those that did not. Settings that used milk agents would submit their monthly attendance figures to the NMS website. Settings that did not use milk agents would submit their attendance figures, the price of the milk they purchased and the amount of milk used, as well as, on some occasions, being required to submit proof of purchase in the form of receipts.

Feedback about the claims process from interviewees who used milk agents was almost universally positive – that it was both easy and quick to do. Only one interviewee in this group raised an issue, which related to the additional time involved in having to enter attendance data on a separate page for each week, rather than a single page for the month as a whole.



*It could potentially be simpler... Like a whole month, instead of having to go in every week and input the data and then send it through you could just have, at the end of the month... this is how much we used on this day. Because going in and out, in and out, it is quite time consuming.*

Interviewee 7 (chain nursery)

Among interviewees who did not use milk agents, levels of satisfaction with the claims process were more varied. Some shared highly positive feedback about the NMS claims website's ease of use and the time commitment required.

*It works really well and very prompt with reimbursing me and everything, I've never had a problem with it... Occasionally, I have to provide proof of purchase, that happens when, for example, the price of the milk goes up... So, I just basically, take a photograph of my invoice and then upload it onto the website as proof of payment and that works every time... [it takes] three minutes, four minutes [per month], it doesn't take long at all because I log in, it's already got my name and my details... it's extremely quick and efficient.*

Interviewee 10 (childminder)

Others found that making claims was usually a quick and easy process, but that it could be difficult and time-consuming when the system required them to provide proof of payment. Some didn't understand what it was that prompted a request for proof of payment. Two interviewees in this group also mentioned that entering data on weekly rather than monthly pages added to the time burden involved. Finally, one interviewee said that, at times, the administrative work involved acted as a barrier to making their claims.

*It is a little bit time-consuming, the way that the milk scheme website is that you have to get your dates in and do it weekly. The most frustrating thing about it is sometimes it asks to provide receipts, sometimes it doesn't. There doesn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to it... Sometimes it's a bit time-consuming when you have to upload lots of receipts... Probably on a month, it's a couple of hours' work... The times where I don't have to send receipts through, it's a doddle, it doesn't take me two hours a month at all.*

Interviewee 17 (independent nursery)

*I have to open up [a window] for every week or part week that this month covers... So instead of having one screen with 31 days, for argument's sake, and I can put down the figures, it takes me about six times as long... The way the system is set up it's quite a manual and administrative task to do it, almost to the point where there are a number of months where we've actually not bothered.*

Interviewee 1 (chain nursery)

## **Views on the NMS in general and ideas for improvement**

Many interviewees shared positive comments about the NMS itself, including that it helped support their children's health and wellbeing, and that it helped them financially as childcare settings.

*It's invaluable. You know, I think if it wasn't provided, basically, on a free basis, I don't think we'd be able to give the children the milk every day.*

Interviewee 18 (independent nursery)

*The majority of our children come from low-income families, so it's mostly funded spaces that we offer. So the [Nursery Milk] Scheme is really vital for us, because it really helps to support families who may not always have enough access to food and drink.*

Interviewee 2 (independent nursery)

Interviewees shared a range of ideas about how various aspects of the system might be improved to better fit their needs or the needs of their children. These are described below.

### ***Extending the scheme to cover non-dairy options***

Seven interviewees suggested enabling childcare settings to claim back money for non-dairy alternatives to milk under the NMS. Several of these interviewees reported seeing a rising number of children who could not consume dairy.

*I've got four children with dairy allergies, so they don't drink milk... the only thing that could help, and probably a lot of groups, is if the money could also cover non-dairy products.*

Interviewee 19 (independent nursery)

### ***Improving communication about the scheme***

Several interviewees called for improvements to the way that information about the scheme was shared with childcare settings. In particular, these interviewees thought that clearer information on the different ways that milk could be sourced under the scheme would be helpful.

*It would be good for them to offer if you type in maybe a postcode on the website, just options... places that other people use, to help people out.*

Interviewee 13 (independent nursery)

*Maybe if the scheme made it clearer that we could buy it ourselves and then get reimbursed, because I didn't really know that was a thing... step by step how to do that, because then we could start buying locally... it wasn't really clear that I could do it another way.*

Interviewee 5 (independent nursery)

One interviewee felt that more could be done to promote the scheme to childminders specifically, and suggested that social media could be a good means of reaching people in this group.

*I'd like to see sometimes [the NMS] promoted more for childminders because, like I say, when you go on the forums and childminding groups and it's mentioned, a surprising number of people don't know about it... There are a lot [of childminders] on social media... [some childminder Facebook groups have got] well over 25,000 members... so, something on that... It would be nice to see something official.*

Interviewee 16 (childminder)

### ***Individual cartons***

A number of interviewees expressed a preference for getting individual cartons of milk for each of their children – either because they felt that children were more likely to drink the milk served in this way, it was a simpler task for them to serve it this way, or it enabled children to take the milk home with them if they didn't drink it all at the setting.

*We should also be offered the cartons that they are offered in schools. Because sometimes, for example, if a child doesn't want to drink it, we can always give an individual carton to them to take home.*

Interviewee 2 (independent nursery)

### **Separating payments for different months**

One interviewee shared the following suggestion about how payments work when settings submit claims for several months at the same time.

*[When] I do two months together, when the money comes through, it might be lumped together in one chunk so then I have to go back and work out, okay, was that October's and November's paid together. Yes, so that's just a bit of admin from an accounting point of view... If it came through separately as you claimed it, then you could tie it up a bit more easily.*

Interviewee 17 (independent nursery)

### **Food that settings provide for their children**

Interviewees were asked about the food and drink they provided for their children alongside the NMS milk, how they sourced it and how they covered the costs. We used this information to help understand how the NMS milk fitted in with the wider food and drink offer provided by childcare settings, as well as giving a more detailed sense of some of the alternative options that could be available for some settings to source NMS milk from.

All the interviewees but one provided food for their children, alongside the NMS milk. Fifteen, including all five childminders interviewed, provided both meals and snacks. Four provided only snacks, with children bringing in their own food for meals. One setting provided no food, with children bringing in both meals and snacks.

*We provide everything, so we do breakfast, mid-morning snack, which is just really fruit, lunch that we make on site, a mid-afternoon snack and then afternoon tea.*

Interviewee 14 (independent nursery)

Interviewees used three different types of supplier to source their food: wholesale food suppliers in four cases, and the rest either from local shops, online supermarket deliveries or a combination of the two. Three of the four who used a wholesale food supplier also supplemented this with either a local shop or online supermarket delivery.

Six interviewees sourced their NMS milk from the same supplier as the rest of the food and drink that they provided for their children. Of these, five used

online supermarket deliveries or local shops, and one used a wholesale food supplier.

*Probably 95 to 99 per cent of [our food and drink] is through the one [supermarket] order that we put in each week... Other than that, we would take the children out to a local supermarket or the local corner shop to get them used to going in and buying.*

Interviewee 1 (chain nursery)

Interviewees took a range of approaches to covering the costs of the food provided to their children. Some factored the costs into the overall fee they charged for their service. This was the case for four of the five childminders interviewed.

*[Food costs are covered by] parent fees and also the free education entitlement money that we get from the local authority... we don't charge extra.*

Interviewee 14 (independent nursery)

Others let their customers choose whether to have all or some of the food provided and charged an additional fee for those that did.

*Hot lunches and teas are an optional extra, so parents choose whether they wish their children to have that or not and if they do then we add those charges onto their monthly invoices with their fees. We provide a mid-morning and a mid-afternoon snack along with the milk, obviously, and that is included within our charges.*

Interviewee 17 (independent nursery)

Eight interviewees told us that they took a different approach for children on funded places compared to children paying fees privately. For those paying privately, food costs were factored into fees; for those on funded places, there was an additional charge, sometimes called a 'consumables charge', that covered food as well as a range of other items such as toilet paper and cleaning products. In some cases, this additional charge was operated as a voluntary donation that didn't affect whether the child received the items that the charge covered. In other cases, interviewees stated that only those that paid the charge would receive those items.

*[Costs for food are] included in our nursery fees. The only time where we would... charge a parent specifically for, say, a tea or a lunch, or*

*breakfast, would be if they're a funded-only child... It's up to the parent, they can choose to pay a fee, like, only small. Or they can provide their own. And then they just get invoiced like the other parents but it's invoiced specifically for that specific meal.*

Interviewee 11 (independent nursery)

## 3 Conclusion

The three positive attributes of NMS milk sources most commonly cited by interviewees (which influenced how people chose to source their milk and the quality of their experience of the scheme) were: having a low administrative burden (in terms of both sourcing milk and the administration associated with the NMS), reliability, and having a supplier that was flexible and responsive to changing levels of demand. Most of the participants were either largely or entirely happy with their current supplier of NMS milk.

The sample used in this study was too small to infer generalisable conclusions about the childcare setting sector as a whole, or to draw definitive links between the characteristics of interviewees (such as the provider type they belonged to or what region they were located in) or their suppliers, and their answers. However, it is notable that among the group, there was significant commonality around which features of a milk supplier were seen as important, but less commonality around which types of supplier were seen to possess these features. Interviewees identified two of the three most commonly cited features (administrative burden and reliability) as reasons to go with four of the five supplier types, while the third (flexibility) was identified as a reason to go with each of the five. In these cases, different interviewees saw the same factors as reasons to go with different types of supplier – for example, some interviewees felt that using milk agents involved a lower administrative burden than alternative options, partly due to this involving less administrative work on the NMS platform, but others saw combining their milk order with a wider food and drink order from a supermarket as the option that involved the least administrative work overall, as this meant dealing with a smaller number of external parties.

Interviewees who used milk agents and interviewees who used other sources of milk both gave positive feedback about the claims process. However, a higher proportion of interviewees who used milk agents shared positive

feedback about the process – with a more mixed set of responses from people who used other sources.

Interviewees placed a consistently high value on the NMS itself – for the support it gives both to their organisations and to their children, including children from more deprived backgrounds. Several interviewees reported being personally motivated to contribute to the positive impact of the scheme by raising awareness of it among peers and by choosing to get their milk from local, cost-effective or environmentally friendly sources.

Interviewees shared a range of ideas about how the scheme could be improved. This included extending the scheme to cover non-dairy options, in the context of a perceived rise in the numbers of children who could not consume dairy. A key theme that arose both in discussing ideas for improving the scheme, as well as in comments demonstrating interviewee's lack of awareness about alternative milk supplier options, was a need for improved communication about the scheme. In particular, interviewees discussed being unaware that other options for sourcing their milk were available, not knowing where they could go to find out about their options, and either themselves at earlier stages of their careers or significant numbers of their peers being unaware that the scheme existed at all – with many seeing social media and conversations with peers as the primary source for information about the scheme for childcare settings. Providing more information about the range of options available to childcare settings in their area was frequently mentioned as a positive potential step for improving the scheme.

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