

Ratio and Lone Working

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Contents

Intention.....	3
Legislative context	3
Legal guidelines and frameworks	3
Legal duties.....	3
Acronyms used in this policy	3
Definition of terms used in this policy	3
Approved qualification.....	3
Experience-based route.....	3
Lone working.....	3
Level “x” qualified.....	4
Staff:child ratios	4
Unqualified	4
Valid and current PFA qualification	4
Guiding principles.....	4
Updates to this policy.....	4
Requirements for recognising staff as qualified at a specific level for ratio purposes	5
Additional requirements for specific types of people, roles or qualifications	5
Manager.....	6
Deputy-Manager.....	6
Experience-based route status.....	6
Counting staff in ratio at the level below their level of study	6
Staff under the age of 17	6
Minimum qualification requirements across the setting.....	6
Minimum staffing requirements for each age group	6
Applying 1:13 ratios when a person with QTS, EYPS or EYTS is working with 3-5 year-olds.....	7
Guidance on when it is necessary to have more staff than the minimum requirements	7
How to calculate staffing requirements in mixed age groups	7
Acceptable reasons for temporarily being out-of-ratio	9
Short absences	9
Prioritising safety emergency situations.....	9
Requirements for staff when leaving a room where they are counted in ratio.....	10
Exceptional circumstances when it is acceptable to operate out-of-ratio	11

Managing unforeseen staffing shortages	11
Ratios and Safer Sleep	12
Guidance on when it is acceptable to lone work with children.....	12
Lone working with children for short periods.....	13
Lone working with children for prolonged periods	13
Expectations for staff who are lone working.....	13
Staff who are not permitted to lone work with children.....	13
Lone working in non-child-facing roles.....	14
Essential knowledge for staff from this policy	14
External training.....	15
Monitoring and review	15
Further Reading	15

Intention

The purpose of this policy is to ensure the safety and well-being of children, as well as the staff responsible for their care, by establishing clear guidelines for adult-to-child ratios and procedures for lone working situations. This policy seeks to mitigate risks associated with inadequate supervision, promote effective communication and response in emergencies, and maintain compliance with legal requirements and best practices in early years childcare.

Legislative context

Legal guidelines and frameworks

- Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework, 2024 (EYFS)

Legal duties

Nursery settings must comply with the legal requirements set out in the EYFS regarding staffing ratios and staff qualifications. These requirements are in place to ensure children's safety, support their well-being, and promote their learning and development within early years settings.

Acronyms used in this policy

- EBR: Experience-based route
- EYPS: Early Years Professional Status
- EYTS: Early Years Teacher Status
- QTS: Qualified Teacher Status
- PFA: Paediatric First Aid

Definition of terms used in this policy

Approved qualification

An approved qualification is one that meets the criteria set by the Department for Education within the Early Years Qualification Requirements and Standards. To support providers, services such as the "Check an early years qualification"¹ tool are available to confirm whether a qualification gained in England is recognised as full and relevant by the Department for Education.

Experience-based route

This route allows for suitable and experienced staff, who do not hold full and relevant qualifications, to be included in the staff:child ratios at level 3 following a period of supervised practice. For more information on how to obtain a Level 3 via the experience based, please refer to the [Appendix](#) and the [Further Reading](#).

Lone working

Lone working refers to situations where a staff member is carrying out their duties without direct supervision or the immediate presence of a colleague.

¹ Please refer to the [Further Reading](#) to access this tool

Level “x” qualified

It is important to note that simply holding an approved qualification does not mean a practitioner can automatically be counted within staff:child ratios at that qualification level. Any reference in the policy to a staff member being “qualified” means they must meet the criteria for that qualification level as set out in [Table 1](#).

Staff:child ratios

Refers to the number of staff required to care for and supervise a specific number of children at any one time. For a staff member to be counted within the staff:child ratio they must be available to work directly with children. This means children must usually be within sight and hearing of the staff member but they must **always** within sight **or** hearing. Staff:child ratios apply to the whole provision, not each room. It is up to the nursery manager how to deploy the nursery staff to ensure ratio requirements are met.²

Unqualified

Unqualified refers to a staff member who does not have an approved qualification but can still be counted in ratios after demonstrating sufficient competence and practical skills within the workplace.

Valid and current PFA qualification

A Paediatric First Aid qualification completed within the last 3 years that meets the requirements of the EYFS Statutory Framework (Annex A).

Guiding principles

We view statutory staffing ratios as the legal minimum, not the standard we aim for. Our goal is to provide the level of staffing needed to deliver high-quality education, strong relationships, and effective safeguarding in line with our expectations, while remaining mindful of commercial sustainability.

Our guiding principle is to maximise the time practitioners spend with children. We aim to reduce and simplify tasks that take staff out of the room, such as administrative or operational duties, so that children benefit from consistent care, supervision, and meaningful interactions.

Lone working is avoided wherever possible and is only used as a last resort. Where lone working occurs, it is carefully risk-assessed and kept to the minimum time required. If lone working becomes a regular or routine arrangement, we will actively seek alternative solutions to eliminate or reduce it.

Overall, our approach is rooted in ensuring children’s safety, well-being, and learning experience remain at the centre of all staffing decisions.

Updates to this policy

This policy may be unilaterally updated at any time with immediate effect to ensure clarity, reflect the nursery’s current operational practices, and maintain compliance with the latest government legislation and guidance. Please refer to the ‘More Information’ section on the website for the latest version.

² Please refer to the [Further Reading](#) for more details

Requirements for recognising staff as qualified at a specific level for ratio purposes

It is important to note that simply holding an approved qualification does not mean a practitioner can automatically be counted within staff:child ratios at that qualification level. The table below shows all the criteria that must be met to ensure a staff member can be considered qualified for ratio purposes.

Table 1	
Qualification level	Requirements that must be met to ensure an individual may be considered to hold this qualification level for ratio purposes
Level 2 qualified	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hold an approved Level 2 qualification or be studying towards an approved Level 3 qualification³• Hold a valid and current PFA qualification or obtain a valid PFA qualification within three months of starting work
Level 3 qualified	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hold an approved Level 3 qualification or be studying towards an approved Level 6 qualification (one that gives EYTS or QTS status)• Hold a Level 2 qualification in English• Hold a valid and current PFA qualification or obtain a PFA qualification within three months of starting work
Level 3 qualified via the experience-based route	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hold an approved Level 2 qualification or a Level 3 qualification in a subject that is relevant to the care or education of children, for example Health and Social Care• Hold a Level 2 qualification in English⁴• Hold a valid and current PFA qualification• Have worked with children (aged 0-5) for at least 1 year• The setting must be rated good or outstanding in their most recent Ofsted report
QTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hold an approved QTS qualification• Hold an undergraduate degree
EYTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hold an approved Early Years Teacher degree or an approved Early Years Initial Teacher Training qualification
EYPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hold a Bachelor's degree or an equivalent to a Bachelor's degree• Hold an approved Level 6 Early Years Teacher Apprenticeship• Hold an approved Level 6 Early Years Professional Status qualification

Additional requirements for specific types of people, roles or qualifications

³ Please refer to the see paragraph 3.56 of the EYFS statutory framework

⁴ Please refer to the [Further Reading](#) for what constitutes a Level 2 qualification in English

Manager⁵

To be eligible for a manager position, individuals must:

- Hold an approved Level 3 qualification (or above)
- Hold a Level 2 qualification in Maths, or obtain it within 2 years of starting the position⁶
- Have at least 2 years' experience in an Early Years setting or other relevant experience

Deputy-Manager⁷

The nursery must have a named deputy who can take charge in the manager's absence. If both the manager and deputy are unavailable, another individual who is suitably experienced and considered capable by the management team may take charge.

Experience-based route status

No more than 50% of staff included in the ratios at level 3 can be included on the basis of experience-based route status at any one time. The remaining 50% or more of those included in the staff:child ratios at level 3 must have an approved Level 3 qualification or higher.

Counting staff in ratio at the level below their level of study

Before a staff member can be counted in ratio at a level below their current level of study, the management team must be satisfied that they are suitable, competent, and responsible. They must also hold a current and valid Paediatric First Aid qualification. Final approval must be given by the Senior Manager.

Staff under the age of 17

Anyone under the age of 17 must not be included in staff:child ratios. The only exception is apprentices, who may be included in ratios from the age of 16. No one under 17 is permitted to care for children unsupervised at any time.

Minimum qualification requirements across the setting

At least half of all staff (excluding the manager) must hold at least an approved Level 2 qualification.

Minimum staffing requirements for each age group

Any reference in the table below to a staff member being "qualified" means they must meet the criteria for that qualification level as set out in [Table 1](#).

Any reference to a staff member being Level 3 qualified means they meet the requirements to be Level 3 qualified **or** Level 3 qualified via the experience-based route.

⁵ Sometimes referred to as Head Teachers

⁶ If appointed on or after 4 January 2024. Please refer to the [Further Reading](#) on what constitutes a Level 2 qualification in Maths

⁷ Sometimes referred to as Deputy Heads

Table 2		
Age group	Staff:child ratio	Minimum requirements
Under 2s	1:3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least 1 member of staff must be Level 3 qualified • At least half of all the remaining staff must be Level 2 qualified • Where there are only 2 staff members working with children; 1 staff member must be at least Level 3 qualified and the other staff member at least Level 2 qualified • The Room Leader must have suitable experience of working with under 2s • At least 1 of the Level 3 qualified staff must be suitably experienced in working with children under 2 • At least 50% of staff must have received training that addresses the care of babies
2-year-olds	1:5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least 1 member of staff must be Level 3 qualified • At least half of all staff must be Level 2 qualified • Where there are only 2 staff members working with children; 1 staff member must be at least Level 3 qualified and the other staff member at least Level 2 qualified
3-5 year-olds	1:8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least 1 member of staff must be Level 3 qualified • At least half of all staff must be Level 2 qualified • Where there are only 2 staff members working with children; 1 staff member must be at least Level 3 qualified and the other staff member at least Level 2 qualified

Applying 1:13 ratios when a person with QTS, EYPS or EYTS is working with 3-5 year-olds

We do not typically apply the 1:13 staffing ratio when a member of staff with QTS, EYPS, or EYTS is working with children aged 3–5. Although this ratio is permitted within EYFS guidance, our policy is to maintain higher staffing levels to ensure children receive closer supervision, stronger support, and a higher quality learning experience. In exceptional circumstances, a 1:13 ratio may be approved by a Senior Manager. Where a 1:13 ratio is applied, at least one other member of staff must be Level 3 qualified.

Guidance on when it is necessary to have more staff than the minimum requirements

Staffing arrangements must always be planned based on the needs of the children, ensuring they are adequately supervised at all times. This means there may be circumstances where it is necessary to exceed the minimum requirements to ensure the safety, supervision, and well-being of all children e.g., if a child requires additional support or during an outing.

How to calculate staffing requirements in mixed age groups

In a mixed-age group, the staff:child ratio is not worked out as a simple or weighted average of the staff:child ratios for all the children. Instead, children are grouped into “sets,” where the staff:child ratio for each set is determined by the youngest child in that set. See the table below

for a breakdown on how to calculate the staffing requirements for a mixed age group. For more examples, please refer to the [Appendix](#).

Table 3	
Step	Example
Note down the children in the mixed-age group by age, starting with the youngest and ending with the oldest. This step is only needed to make the remaining steps easier to follow	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mila: 1 year 6 months 2. Leo: 2 years 1 month 3. Arlo: 2 years 4 months 4. Tom: 2 years 7 months 5. Bob: 2 years 10 months 6. Joy: 2 years 11 months 7. Oliver: 3 years 2 months 8. Amira: 3 years 8 months 9. Jude: 4 years 1 month 10. Poppy: 4 years 4 months
Identify the youngest child (Child “A”) in the group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child “A” is Mila
Determine the staff:child ratio for the 1 st set of children. The age of Child “A” determines the ratio for the 1 st set, regardless of the ages of the other children in the group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child “A” (Mila) is aged 1 year 6 months • The staff:child ratio for the 1st set is 1:3
Form the 1 st set. Starting with Child “A,” add children into the 1 st set in ascending age order until you reach the maximum number of children allowed by the staff:child ratio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The staff:child ratio for the 1st set is 1:3 • There will be 3 children total in this set • The 3 children are: Mila, Leo and Arlo
Check if there are children in the group who have not been added to a set. Follow the next steps if there are more children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7 children have not been added to a set
Identify the next youngest child who has not already been added to a set (Child “B”). Child “B” is the youngest child not already included in the 1 st set	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mila, Leo and Arlo are already in the 1st set • The next youngest child is Tom • Child “B” is Tom
Determine the ratio for the 2 nd set of children. The age of Child “B” determines the staff:child ratio for the 2 nd set	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child “B” (Tom) is aged 2 years 7 months • The staff:child ratio for the 2nd set is 1:5
Form the 2 nd set. Starting with Child “B” and excluding all the children already added to the 1 st set, add children into the 2 nd set in ascending age order until you reach the maximum number of children allowed by the staff:child ratio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The staff:child ratio for the 2nd set is 1:5 • There will be 5 children total in this set • The 5 children are: Tom, Bob, Joy, Oliver and Amira

Table 3	
Step	Example
Check if there are children in the group who have not been added to a set. If there are no more children in the group, there is no need to complete any more of the steps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 children have not been added to a set
Identify the next youngest child who has not already been added to a set (Child “C”). Child “C” is the youngest child not already included in the 1 st set or 2 nd set	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mila, Leo, Arlo, Tom, Bob, Joy, Oliver and Amira are in the 1st and 2nd sets • The next youngest child is Jude • Child “C” is Jude
Determine the ratio for the 3 rd set of children. The age of Child “C” determines the staff:child ratio for the 3 rd set	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child “C” (Jude) is aged 4 years 1 month • The staff:child ratio for the 3rd set is 1:8
Form the 3 rd set. Starting with Child “C” and excluding all the children already added to the 1 st set and 2 nd sets, add children into the 3 rd in ascending age order until you reach the maximum number of children allowed by the staff:child ratio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The staff:child ratio for the 3rd set is 1:8 • There can be a maximum of 8 children in this set • There are only 2 children remaining in the group so the final set will be made up of Jude and Poppy
Check if there are children in the group who have not been added to a set. If there are more children in the group, keeping adding sets following the same logic until all the children have been added to a set	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are no more children who have not been added to a set • There are 3 sets total so this mixed age group requires a minimum of 3 members of staff

Acceptable reasons for temporarily being out-of-ratio

Short absences

For a staff member to be counted within the staff:child ratio they must be available to work directly with children. This means children must usually be within sight and hearing of the staff member but they must always be within sight or hearing. For short periods of time in the day, it is acceptable for a staff member to be out of sound and hearing, as long as the rest of the staff in ratio are able to continue supervision appropriately and children’s safety is maintained. These short absences may be for visits to the bathroom, or to fetch something from somewhere else in the building, such as the kitchen.

Prioritising safety emergency situations

In situations where a child or children need immediate or emergency assistance, it may mean the remaining children are supervised at a lower level than we would typically consider ideal. This is acceptable where, on the balance of probability, the temporary reduction in supervision does not create a significant risk to the other children. Staff must always:

- Use their judgment to decide the safest and most proportionate course of action

- Act quickly and calmly to meet the urgent need
- Restore correct ratios as soon as possible by calling for support or management help

Requirements for staff when leaving a room where they are counted in ratio

Any time a staff member leaves the room, the level of supervision, support, and oversight for the children is reduced. This can affect how quickly staff can respond to accidents, safeguarding concerns or emergency situations. Before stepping out of the room, staff must pause and assess whether it is safe to do so at that moment, ensuring all the questions in the below dynamic risk assessment are answered “yes”.

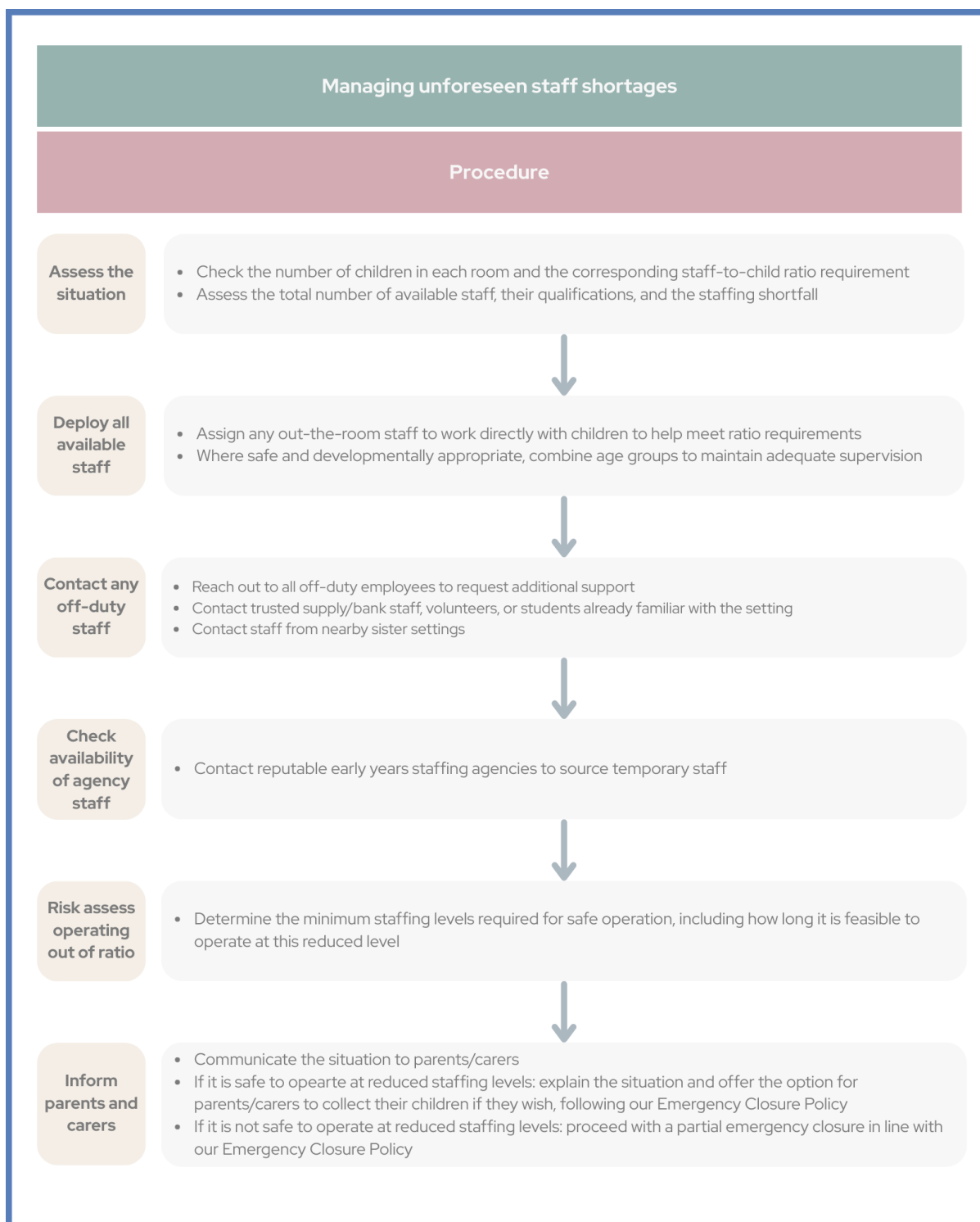
Leaving a room for short periods when counted in ratio		
Dynamic Risk Assessment		
If after completing this dynamic risk assessment it is determined that temporarily reducing the ratio would not be safe or appropriate, staff must remain in the room and maintain the current ratio until a more suitable time presents itself or additional staffing support becomes available		
Before leaving the room		
Timing and rationale	Am I leaving for an essential reason?	
	Can this task wait for a safer time or be delegated to someone else?	
	Can I complete the task quickly and return promptly?	
	Am I confident I will not be delayed or drawn into other tasks?	
Room safety	Is the room safe to leave in its current condition? (e.g., no spillages or blocked walkways)	
	Are risk-prone areas well supervised? (e.g., blind spots, toilets, access to exits)	
Needs of the children	Are all children calm and settled?	
	Are current activities in the room low risk?	
	Will the needs of the children be fully met in my absence? (e.g., SEND, medical, behavioural)	
Remaining staff members	Have I clearly informed the remaining staff why I am leaving?	
	Do the remaining staff members know how long I will be gone for?	
	Do the remaining staff members have immediate access to support if needed (e.g., walkie-talkie)?	
	Have the remaining staff members agreed it is safe for me to leave?	

Exceptional circumstances when it is acceptable to operate out-of-ratio

In exceptional circumstances, and where the quality of care and safety and security of children is maintained, temporary changes to the ratios may be made. If this is done, it must be with the approval of the Senior Manager and one of the Directors and there must be a written Risk Assessment in place.

Managing unforeseen staffing shortages

Unanticipated events such as illness, severe weather, or emergencies can sometimes lead to sudden drops in staffing while child attendance remains the same. Although these situations cannot always be prevented, we have well-defined procedures to ensure that children remain safe and their care and learning needs are met. In the event of a staffing shortfall, we will take the following steps:



Ratios and Safer Sleep

Please refer to the Safer Sleep Policy for more details.

Guidance on when it is acceptable to lone work with children

As a general principle, staff should not be left alone with children. This protects children and staff by ensuring strong supervision, enabling staff to seek immediate support when needed, and ensuring another adult is present to corroborate events if concerns or allegations occur.

However, we recognise that lone working may occasionally occur due to operational necessity. Where this happens, it must be carefully considered, kept to the minimum time required, and managed safely through appropriate risk assessment and controls.

Lone working with children for short periods

If lone working is only due to take place for short periods of time e.g., when a staff member goes to the bathroom or leaves to complete a hand over. A dynamic risk assessment should take place to determine whether it is safe to leave a staff member alone or if additional supports should be sourced prior to leaving the room. For more guidance refer to the [Leaving a room for short periods when counted in ratio dynamic risk assessment](#).

Lone working with children for prolonged periods

If staff members are required to lone work for prolonged periods, a written risk assessment must be completed in advance. This assessment must clearly identify potential risks and the control measures in place, and must take into account, as a minimum, the factors listed below:

- Number of children present and their ages
- Individual needs of the children (e.g., SEND, medical needs, behavioural needs)
- Layout of the room and visibility (including blind spots and access to exits)
- Ability of the staff member to effectively supervise all children alone
- Length of time lone working will take place and the potential for isolation
- Nature of the activities being undertaken and associated risks
- Proximity to other staff members and ease of access to support
- Communication methods available (e.g., walkie-talkie)
- Potential for accidents and ability to respond in an emergency
- Staff member's experience, competence, and confidence level
- Staffing levels across the setting and ability to provide support in an emergency

Where there is any reasonable doubt about the safety of the lone worker or the children, alternative arrangements must be made, such as providing a second member of staff.

The lone worker must read, understand, and sign the risk assessment to confirm their awareness of the risks and agreed control measures. All lone working that requires a written risk assessment must also be approved and signed off by the setting manager before it takes place.

Expectations for staff who are lone working

Employees engaging in lone working must adhere to the following procedures:

- Follow all relevant risk assessments and agreed control measures
- Maintain constant awareness of the children in their care and the environment
- Ensure communication methods are accessible and working
- Inform management if feeling unsafe or unable to manage the situation
- Report any accidents, incidents or near misses as soon as reasonably practicable
- Report any safeguarding concerns as soon as reasonably practicable
- Inform management of anything that may affect the ability to work safely alone

Staff who are not permitted to lone work with children

Certain staff members are not permitted to work alone, including those who:

- Are not Level 3 qualified or Level 3 qualified via the experience-based route⁸
- Do not have a DBS
- Do not have a valid and current Paediatric First Aid qualification
- Have a medical condition that could pose a risk to themselves or the children
- Are aged 17 or under
- Have not received prior approval from management to lone work

Lone working in non-child-facing roles

Lone working is permissible for non-child-facing staff (such as managers) during their regular work hours. However, when working outside of normal operating hours or in isolated areas for prolonged periods, a written risk assessment will be conducted to identify and mitigate any potential risks. Working alone within the building outside of normal operating hours and in the absence of children should only be done with approval from a Senior Manager or Director.

Essential knowledge for staff from this policy

Key learning	Level
Explain the minimum ratio requirements for each age group	L1
Explain what it means to be considered qualified at a certain level for ratio purposes	L1
Explain what must be done before leaving a room while being counted in staff:child ratios	L1
Explain when it may be necessary to have more staff than the minimum required ratio	L1
Explain the requirements for lone working for long periods of time	L1
Explain how to calculate the ratio requirements in a mixed age group	L1
Explain how sight and hearing affect whether a staff member can be counted within staff:child ratios	L1
Explain what happens when the manager and deputy manager are off-site	L2
Explain the acceptable reasons for temporarily being out-of-ratio	L2
Explain how staff:child ratios apply to the whole nursery rather than individual room	L2

⁸ Exceptions can be made when children sleeping, in which case a Level 2 qualified practitioner is able to lone work, provided all the criteria outlined in the Safer Sleep Policy are met. Unqualified staff are never permitted to lone work.

Key learning	Level
Explain the restrictions on under 17s being counted in staff:child ratios	L2

External training

None required.

Monitoring and review

- Review the last 3 times that mixed aged groups were in play and confirm that ratios were calculated correctly
- Confirm that when the manager and deputy were last offsite, leadership responsibility was clearly assigned and the individual was suitable for the role
- Observe a room and ensure that staff who leave the room when counted in ratio are following the correct steps

Further Reading

Name	Summary of content	Source	Link
Early Years qualification requirements and standards	Overview of the minimum qualification and experience requirements that settings must ensure their staff meet to be recognised as level 2, level 3 or level 6 staff.	GOV.UK	Link
Early years qualification list	Overview of some of the accepted qualification types which enable staff to be considered qualified within the Early years	GOV.UK	Link
Check an early years qualification	A service to check if an early years qualification achieved in England is approved as full and relevant by the Department for Education (DfE)	GOV.UK	Link
How staff-to-child ratios work	Guidance on how staff to child ratios work within the setting	GOV.UK	Link
Experience-based route for early years: non-statutory guidance	Guidance on how the experience-based route status applies to practitioners	GOV.UK	Link
Experience-based route: initial and final	Assessment and observation criteria a staff member must complete to be	GOV.UK	Link

Name	Summary of content	Source	Link
check form and record	<p>classed as having Experience-based route status. This must be used by Managers or the Lead Educator as evidence of the staff members progression and skill set.</p>		

Appendix

Contents

Examples of correct and incorrect mixed-age ratio calculations.....	18
Example 1	18
Example 2	19
Guidance on how to follow the Level 3 experience-based route.....	20

Examples of correct and incorrect mixed-age ratio calculations

Example 1

You have a group of 4 children:

- Tom is 4 months / 0.33 years
- Bob is 26 months / 2.16 years
- Jo is 28 months / 2.33 years
- Max is 30 months / 2.5 years

Correct					
Age range	Children in this age range	Staff-to-child ratio	Children in this staff-to-child ratio	Number of children in this staff-to-child ratio	Staff required
Under 2 years	Tom	1:3	Tom, Bob, Jo	3	1.00
2-3 years	Bob, Jo, Max	1:5	Max	1	1.00
Total				4	2.00

Incorrect					
Age range	Children in this age range	Staff-to-child ratio	Children in this staff-to-child ratio	Number of children in this staff-to-child ratio	Staff required
Under 2 years	Tom	1:3	Tom	1	0.33
2-3 years	Bob, Jo, Max	1:5	Bob, Jo, Max	3	0.60
Total				4	0.93
				Staff required	1.00

Example 2

You have a group of 22 children:

- 2 children are under 2 years old
- 9 children are between 2 and 3 years old
- 11 children are between 3 and 5 years old

Correct				
Age range	Qty in this age range	Staff-to-child ratio	Number of children in this staff-to-child ratio	Staff required
Under 2 years	2	1:3	3	1.00
2-3 years	9	1:5	10	2.00
3-5 years	11	1:8	9	2.00
		Total	22	5.00

Incorrect				
Age range	Children in this age range	Staff-to-child ratio	Number of children in this staff-to-child ratio	Staff required
Under 2 years	2	1:3	2	0.67
2-3 years	9	1:5	9	1.80
3-5 years	11	1:8	11	1.38
		Total	22	3.84
			Staff required	4.00

Guidance on how to follow the Level 3 experience-based route

