

What do we know about the 30 hour entitlement?

Literature review and qualitative stakeholder work

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Key Findings – Literature Review

The 30 hour policy

- In England, there is an entitlement to universal part-time early education for three- and four-year-olds, and targeted early education hours for less advantaged children from the age of two.
- Since 2017 there can be seen to be a policy shift in England to focus more on supporting ‘working families’, rather than families living in poverty or disadvantage, through extending the hours of funded places for three and four year olds from 15 to 30 hours and also offering childcare tax advantages and additional benefits, for those in employment.
- The introduction of the 30 hour entitlement has created a system in which the very poorest children are given greater access to funded early education and care at the age of 2, but where many of these same children are then given access to fewer funded hours than better-off children at the ages of three to four.

Take-up

- Take-up rates of the free entitlement for two-year-olds and the universal offer for three- and four-year-olds in all sectors has declined over the last year, but take-up of the two year old entitlement in the maintained sector has increased. There is significant variation in take-up by region and socio-economic status. Take-up rates for children with special needs and disability have been particularly affected by the COVID pandemic.
- Childcare choice and take-up is influenced by both *provider-related* factors such as sufficiency, cost/funding and flexibility of provision and *parent-related* factors such as personal preference, awareness of entitlements and eligibility. The issue of quality does not appear to be a factor in parent choice and take-up, meaning the market is not driving sector improvement or enhanced access.
- Parent-related factors are influenced by socio-economic disadvantage, English as an additional language (EAL), ethnicity, population mobility, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and employment status.
- Research suggests that with greater flexibility of provision, support for parents new to an area and those of children with EAL and SEND, together with a better understanding of the benefits of early education, parents would be more likely to take up funded entitlements. Some parents will still prefer for their child to start formal early education when their child is older, thus limiting take-up rates achievable.

- For parents of children with SEND there are additional barriers to take-up, including lack of awareness and understanding with regard to eligibility; fear of stigmatisation; and concerns over the ability of staff to deal with a child's additional needs.
- There is some evidence that a lack of impact of the entitlements on child outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged children, may be due to lower hours of access and lower qualifications of staff in settings serving these communities. It is suggested that action on enhancing staff qualifications across the sector is needed if free entitlements are not to further disadvantage the less advantaged.

Quality

- Despite a widening of the attainment gap in child outcomes in the last few years, Ofsted inspections indicate that the majority of the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector offers high quality provision.
- A key factor in quality ECEC is the qualification level of the workforce, yet this is deteriorating across the sector and means fewer children are accessing provision with a qualified graduate or teacher.
- Recent policy choices have emphasised increasing the number of childcare/early education places for working parents rather than enhancing the quality of education provision through employing highly trained staff.
- It is suggested that a blurring of the policy intention between childcare and early education means the quality debate is confused.

School Readiness and Attainment Gap

- The attainment gap between more and less advantaged children is increasing, after a period of improvement. It is suggested that the COVID pandemic might have further escalated this widening.
- Closing the gap requires a holistic, complex and sustained approach, supported by a highly trained and stable workforce.
- There is some evidence that the 30 hour extended entitlement for working families may be contributing to the widening in the attainment gap by doubly advantaging the better off with additional hours. Accessing fewer hours, combined with attendance at settings with lower qualified staff, can mean lower attainment for the less advantaged.
- There is some evidence that a strategy to both increase the funded hours and enhance practitioner qualification in settings for the less advantaged would lead to better outcomes for the less advantaged and a closing of the attainment gap.
- There is evidence that the early years pupil premium (EYPP) could further enhance child attainment for the less advantaged, but only if it is adequately funded, well targeted and easier to administer.

Universal versus Targeted Provision

- Evidence shows the benefits of universal provision above targeted provision in closing the attainment gap, as long as take-up rates amongst the less advantaged are high. It is suggested that universal provision encourages a social mix amongst children, attracts more highly qualified staff, removes stigma and encourages take up of places.
- Targeted provision has multiple barriers to access for the less advantaged and can lead to longer term problems for the beneficiaries and more inequality rather than less.

Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Development of Children

- The pandemic has increased and exposed the financial vulnerability of the ECEC sector, with many providers suggesting their futures are no longer sustainable. This has implications for the sector's capacity to absorb any enhanced entitlements.
- The experiences and impact of the pandemic on young children have had less visibility at policy level than for older children, leading to a lack of awareness in policy responses.
- There is emerging evidence that the lack of experience in early years settings due to the pandemic has impacted significantly and disproportionately on the development and learning of less advantaged children and children with SEND. This is particularly in the areas of Communication and Language, Personal, Social and Emotional development, and Literacy.

- There is acknowledged government concern about the loss of time in settings and schools leading to learning loss. The lower take-up of funded places since the pandemic is continuing to cause concern for children's learning potential and progress.
- There is evidence that parental concerns about health and wellbeing are leading to a continued reluctance to allow children to engage in centre based ECEC, which again is more prevalent in less advantaged communities and for children with SEND.

Impact of Formal Hours in Childcare

- It is evident that access to high quality ECEC can result in positive benefits for all children, and especially less advantaged children, particularly in relation to enhanced language and social skills. While evidence on the optimal number of hours is unclear, indications are that this is higher than the current universal entitlement of 15 hours.
- Evidence indicates a range of between 15–25 hours a week after the age of two years as being positive *as long as* provision is of high quality. There is also evidence of a positive association with children's outcomes when attendance is for more than 15 hours in graduate led settings.
- There is some evidence of the negative impact on socio-emotional outcomes of children spending too many hours and starting too early in formal ECEC.
- There is some evidence that the negative effects can be mitigated by a more highly qualified workforce.
- The number of hours and the timing of these hours can also impact on positive or negative outcomes for children.

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Introduction and Methodology

Introduction

The early years 30 hours policy, (also known as the 'extended entitlement'), was introduced for eligible three- and four-year-olds of qualifying parents or carers in England in September 2017 (for more details on eligibility, see Box 1 below).

The policy was primarily designed to support access to affordable childcare for working parents, and was provided additionally to the universal free entitlement of 15 hours of funded early education for all three- and four-year-olds, and to the 15 hours available to 40% of the most disadvantaged children from the age of two years.

However, there are two key and different drivers to each of these funded programmes: early education for the universal and the two-year-old targeted offer; and childcare to support working parents for the additional 30 hours entitlement.

The introduction of the 30 hour entitlement has also created a system in which the very poorest children are given greater access to funded early education and care at the age of 2, but where many of these same children are then given access to fewer funded hours than better-off children at the ages of three to four.

Box 1: Eligibility for the 30 hour entitlement

Eligibility for the 30 hours entitlement is determined by a means-test based on minimum and maximum earnings. Under the extended entitlement, eligible children of qualifying parents are provided with 570 hours of funded childcare in addition to a universal entitlement of 15 hours of early education from the age of three, or two if you are disadvantaged.

To qualify for 30 hours of free childcare, each parent (or the sole parent in a single parent family) needs to earn on average, the equivalent of 16 hours on the national minimum wage per week and no more than £100,000 per year. A family with an annual household income of £199,999 would be eligible if each parent earns just under £100,000.

Self-employed parents and parents on zero-hour contracts are eligible if they meet the average earnings threshold. Parents can still be eligible if they usually work but:

- one or both parents are away from work on statutory sick pay;
- one or both parents are on parental, maternity, paternity or adoption leave.

In addition, parents are eligible if one parent is employed, but the other:

- has substantial caring responsibilities based on specific benefits for caring, is disabled or incapacitated based on specific benefits.

This policy analysis and literature review sets out to generate an evidence base which can inform future priorities for government early childhood and care (ECEC) policy, with a focus on improving outcomes for children from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Specifically, it aims to:

1. summarise existing research on the 30 hours policy;
2. look at potential impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic (both on the early years sector and on child and family needs);
3. summarise some of the policy options for reform and identify pros and cons of each.

Review Methodology

The literature review and policy analysis was desk based and conducted in line with a *methodical review* as defined by Cole-Albäck (2020) to allow for a rapid turnaround, to help inform spending decisions coming out of the pandemic. A methodical review is similar to a systematic review (Booth et al., 2012) in that it is comprehensive, rigorous and transparent following a set protocol of established timeframes, base criteria, agreed keywords and a synthesis of the evidence base. Published studies were included depending on their relevance to the aims of the review.

The policy analysis and literature review set out to generate an evidence base to inform future priorities for government policy. To meet the review aims the analysis of the evidence on England's ECEC policy was framed to address these four agreed questions:

- What is the nature of gaps in education development and school readiness, and what impact has the current 30 hours policy had on these?
- How has the prevailing government view of early years provision as childcare rather than early education impacted on the quality of provision, for example through lack of funding?
- What impact has the pandemic had on the development of pre-school age children, with a particular emphasis on socio-economic gaps?
- How many hours are enough? Does it need to be 30, and in what pattern of delivery, what is known currently about this?

To allow for a rapid turnaround, the review of literature and policy primarily focuses on:

- existing reviews and sources;
- evidence from 2017 to 2021 (and beyond this time frame where appropriate);
- evidence from England and the rest of the UK, especially Scotland.

The review includes literature from websites, peer reviewed articles from the ERIC and BEI database, sources from reference lists (snowballing) and grey literature. For the ERIC and BEI database searches, the following base criteria were used: full text; peer reviewed; academic journals; from OECD countries; from 2017 (when the early years 30 hours entitlement for some working parents was introduced). The keywords used can be found in Appendix 1. Results for searches using Research Indexes (BEI and ERIC) can be found in Appendix 2.

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Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policies in England

Before going on to look at the 30 hours policy in detail, the next section briefly summarises early childhood and care policies in England, to give context to issues related to the 30 hour entitlement.

Key policies in England can be grouped under four broad areas according to Stewart and Reader (2020): parental leave; support for parents and parenting; high quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC); and financial support through cash benefits. It is the latter two that are of particular interest in this report and whether the balance is right in England between investing in affordable childcare for working parents, and supporting child development by investing in high quality early education. This section summarises key policies in each of the UK nations in relation to these two ECEC agendas.

Changes over time

Policy concern for the youngest children can be identified in legislative changes made throughout the 20th century. In the early 1900s the 'new' nursery schools were promoted as the solution for the education of poor children and although the idea that nursery education may be beneficial for all children was there in the 1940s, this did not take off as nursery schools continued to be seen primarily as needed for the most deprived or neglected children and children of working mothers (West, 2020). It was not until the 1970s, after the Plowden Report (DES, 1967), that the idea of universal nursery education began to take hold, as proposed in the White Paper Education: A framework for expansion (DES, 1972), but with recognition that private and voluntary providers would need to 'fill the gap' in state provision (West, 2020). Although it seemed

to be meant as a temporary solution to an insufficient number of places in state provision, this arrangement has largely remained until today, with inherent problems as raised by Chen and Bradbury (2020), and discussed further in Section 3. The legacy of this policy history is very evident in the current ECEC system, which is diverse and fragmented and still largely split between 'education' and 'care' providers.

In 1996 the Conservative Government had introduced a free entitlement for part-time early education for all four-year-olds. In 1998 the Labour Government extended this free entitlement to all three- and four-year-olds. By 2005 take-up of this extended offer meant that access to free, part time early education for three- and four-year-olds had almost become universal. The entitlement was initially for 2.5 hours a day (12.5 hours a week) for 33 weeks a year, but was expanded to cover 15 hours a week (which could be taken flexibly over fewer days) for 38 weeks a year. The Labour government also promoted childcare as part of a National Childcare Strategy, its flagship policy of Sure Start local programmes (announced in 1998) and through the tax and benefit system. The Sure Start programme was superseded by the establishment of Children's Centres, a universal programme rather than one for disadvantaged areas as in the case of Sure Start local programmes. The intention of this policy was to create a 'double dividend' by promoting good quality childcare which would enhance children's development and encourage parental employment (Strategy Unit, 2002). The provision for places was not secured through an expansion of maintained provision but rather through stimulating the private market for childcare and early education that had grown significantly. The free entitlement could be accessed at a local authority nursery school, a nursery class in a maintained school,

or at a private, voluntary or independent setting or with a child-minder (Lewis, 2011).

In 2013, the Coalition government commissioned two new early years policy documents, *More Great Childcare* and *More Affordable Childcare*, which focused specifically on extending childcare to support working parents. It is argued that this policy illustrates the switch of early years policy to focus almost entirely on extending childcare rather than early education (Lloyd, 2015). However, from September 2013, the free entitlement to 15 hours of early education was extended to two-year-olds from low income families by the Coalition Government. It is argued that this inability to reconcile competing early years policy rationales has led to a lack of coherence and progress in social mobility (Moss, 2014; Brewer et al, 2014; Paull 2014).

Recent policy in England

By 2017 the government supported universal and free entitlements had been extended significantly, as described below, to meet the needs of 40 percent of disadvantaged two-year-olds and all three and four year olds (West, 2020). The 30 hour extended entitlement for three year olds built further on this developing system of ECEC support. In summary, there are currently three main funded programmes:

1. The **universal entitlement** for all three- and four-year-olds to 570 hours of free early education provision per year, typically taken as 15 hours per week over a minimum of 38 and a maximum of 52 weeks of the year. Children are eligible from the start of the term after they turn three until they start Reception year. These funded places can be provided by registered childminders, private and voluntary day nurseries, preschools, maintained nurseries and schools. The focus of this policy is to ensure all children have access to quality early education to ensure school readiness prior to entry to compulsory schooling.
2. The **two year old entitlement** is intended to broadly cover the 40% most disadvantaged children and to offer them access to 15 hours of funded early education. Eligibility targets families on low incomes (those on Universal Credit or who receive tax credits) and children who are vulnerable for other reasons, such as looked after children or children in care, and children with Special Education Needs or with a disability. These funded places can be provided by registered childminders, private and voluntary day nurseries, preschools, maintained nurseries and schools. Again, the focus is ensuring these less advantaged children receive early education that can help boost their attainment and 'close the gap' in their development and learning.
3. Since September 2017, three and four year olds with working parents are entitled to a free nursery place equivalent to 30 hours per week over 38 weeks of the year. This is known as the **extended entitlement** (DfE, 2018). These funded places can be provided by registered childminders, private and voluntary day nurseries, preschools, maintained nurseries and schools (see more details in section 1.1). The extended entitlement is specifically targeted at working families to enhance their access to affordable childcare.

In addition to these three policy initiatives, in 2017 the Early Years National Funding Formula (EYNFF) was set up for delivering the universal and additional entitlements. The Department for Education (DfE) provides Local Authorities with six relevant funding streams for the free entitlements as follows (ESFA, 2020b: 4):

1. The 15 hours entitlement for disadvantaged two-year-olds;
2. The universal 15 hours entitlement for three 3- and four-year olds;
3. The additional 15 hours entitlement for eligible working parents of three- and four-year olds;

4. The early years pupil premium (EYPP);
5. The disability access fund (DAF);
6. Maintained nursery school (MNS) supplementary funding.

The average hourly rate for three- and four-year-olds across the Local Authorities is £4.99 (EFSA, 2020a), up two pence from 2020–2021 (EFSA, 2019a). The average rate however does not recognise the variation between inner city London rates (Camden, £8.51) and, for instance, Yorkshire (York, £4.44). Due to Covid-19 Local Authorities have not been paid based on January 2021 census data, but for 2021–2022 will be paid based on actual attendance, with supplementary funding for maintained nursery schools (DfE, 2021a).

Stewart and Reader (2020) highlight that the EYNFF risks undermining quality as it threatens the viability of nursery schools, thought to offer the highest quality as they are led by qualified teachers, because they are now, with the EYNFF, funded at a much lower rate. The fact that there is also regulatory requirement to pass through a set amount of the DfE funding to providers poses an additional challenge for local authorities to support professional development and quality improvement.

A two-year-old child meeting eligibility criteria is entitled to 570 hours of free provision per year, typically taken as 15 hours per week over a minimum of 38 and a maximum of 52 weeks of the year (DfE, 2018). As mentioned above, the DfE provides Local Authorities with the funding for the free 15 hours entitlement for disadvantaged two-year-olds; however, there are no regulatory requirements to pass through a set amount of the DfE funding nor is there a compulsory supplement or a special educational needs inclusion fund (EFSA, 2020b).

For 2021–2022, the average hourly rate for two-year-olds across the Local Authorities in England is £5.62 (EFSA, 2020a). This is down from £5.82 in 2020–2021 (EFSA, 2019a). As mentioned

above, due to Covid-19, Local Authorities this year have not been paid based on January 2021 census data but in 2021–2022 will be paid based on actual attendance (DfE, 2021a).

As to provision for babies and infants under two, there is no free entitlement for this age group (EURYDICE, 2020a). In addition to the universal and extended entitlements there is targeted childcare support through the benefit system (Universal Credit) and/or tax-free childcare.

According to Stewart and Reader (2020), the more recent focus on investing additionally in affordable childcare for working parents can be seen to have contributed to the gradual shift away from supporting child development through investing in high quality early education. In the Nutbrown Review (2012) it was identified that quality of provision requires staff with higher qualifications than are currently required. A review by Mathers and colleagues (2014) for the Sutton Trust explored international evidence on the dimensions of quality which support the learning and development of children from birth to three years old also suggested that Level 3 (A level equivalent) should be the minimum requirement that should be considered, especially when working with two-year-old children from challenging circumstances. The lack of highly qualified staff in early years settings continues to be the case and workforce supply challenges have increased (Pascal et al., 2020a).

Over recent years, school-readiness has also become a more prominent consideration with a growing shift away from a play-based curriculum towards more formal learning through a focus on literacy and numeracy as key aspects of school readiness, according to Stewart and Reader (2020). This shift in focus, together with the introduction of the Reception Baseline Assessment (STA, 2020) and the Phonics Screening Check (STA, 2019) in Year One, puts into question what we mean by ‘quality’ in early childhood education. According to Stewart and Reader (2020: 20) recent policy commitments have been framed “*mainly as improving childcare*

for working parents, with very little attention to early childhood as a life stage in its own right”.

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

Reflecting on early childhood education and care policy in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland alongside England, we can see that all four nations in the UK have a level of universal funded entitlement for three- and four-year-old children, motivated mainly by supporting children's development and learning. The amount of hours offered is part time, between 10–15 hours a week, other than in Scotland, which has recently extended its universal offer to 30 hours a week term-time from summer 2021. In each nation there are very different approaches to supporting parents into work, study or training and more varied levels and types of support for this, with Northern Ireland offering the least support for childcare, concentrating its focus on offering early education prior to compulsory school entry, and England the most support for working families. In Scotland there appears to be a more holistic, integrated approach in ECEC policy which foregrounds quite generous initiatives which blend *both*

early education for children *and* childcare for working parents. In Wales there is an entitlement to universal part-time early education for three- and four-year-olds, and targeted early education hours for less advantaged children from the age of two. (For further details see Appendix 3).

Summary

In summary, all children in England are entitled to part-time (15 hours) of early education from the age of three, and for less advantaged children from the age of two, and additionally, children from working households are entitled to a further 15 hours of childcare (ie 30 hours total) from the age of three and other subsidies before this. It is evident that rather than ensuring an extension of universal access to high quality early education, the policy focus since 2017 has been on affordability of childcare and reforming the benefit system to encourage employment. Of significance is that with this policy focus, government support in England has shifted away from targeting low-income families towards targeting support at working families.

It is worth noting that the new Biden administration in the United States has introduced in 2021 a transformative strategy for early years embedded within the American Jobs Plan and the American Families Plan (The White House, 2021). The American families plan aims to provide universal, high quality preschool to all three- and four-year-olds. It is stated that pre-school and childcare providers will receive funding to cover the true cost of quality early childhood care and education, including a developmentally appropriate curriculum, small class sizes, and culturally and linguistically



responsive environments that are inclusive of children with disabilities. The plan also aims to provide more affordable childcare by ensuring that low- and middle-income families spend no more than seven percent of their income on childcare, and that the childcare they access is of high-quality. The plans will also invest in the childcare and early education workforce by providing scholarships for those who wish to earn a bachelor's degree or another credential to become an early childhood educator. And, educators will receive workplace based coaching, professional development, and wages that reflect the importance of their work. The intention is that all employees participating in pre-K

programs and Head Start will earn at least \$15 per hour, and those with comparable qualifications will receive compensation commensurate with that of kindergarten teachers.

It is also noteworthy to consider the pattern of free entitlements available internationally as shown in Figure 1 below. This data reveals that most of the listed OECD countries offer a level of free entitlement that begins at a younger age in most cases, and is generally unconditional or universal from two to three years of age. The universal hours offered from two to three years vary from 15–60 hours with most in the range of 20–25 hours.

Figure 1: International Comparison of Free Entitlements

Country	Age of child	Entitlement to Free Access	Hours/week the child has access to free childcare
Austria	5	Universal	16–20
Belgium (Flemish)	2.5–5	Unconditional	23.3
Belgium (French)	0–2.5 2.5–5	Targeted Universal	N/A 28
Chile	0–2 4–5	Conditional Unconditional	55 22
Czech Republic	5	Unconditional	≥40
Finland	0–6	Conditional	50
France	0–2 2.5–5	Conditional Unconditional	40 24
Ireland	0–5 3–5	Conditional Unconditional	15–60 15
Italy	3–5	Unconditional	40
Japan	0–2 3–5	Conditional Conditional	55 20/50
Kazakhstan	1–6	Unconditional	50–60
Korea	0–5 3–5	Unconditional Unconditional	30–60 20–25
Luxembourg	0–3 3–5	Conditional Unconditional	3 ≤26
Mexico	0–2 3–5	Targeted Unconditional	N/A 15–20
Netherlands	0–4	Targeted	10
New Zealand	3–5	Unconditional	20
Norway	1–5	Conditional	20
Portugal	0–2 3–4 5	Conditional Unconditional Unconditional	N/A 25 25
Slovakia	3–6	Unconditional	N/A
Slovenia	1–5	Conditional	45
Sweden	1–2 3–6	None Unconditional	N/A 15

Source: Data extracted from OECD Starting Strong 2017, Table 2.2 Characteristics of legal access entitlement (p80)

Key Points: UK Policy

- In England, there is an entitlement to universal part-time early education for three- and four-year-olds, and targeted early education hours for less advantaged children from the age of two.
- Since 2017 there can be seen to be a policy shift in England to focus more on supporting working families, rather than families living in poverty or disadvantage, through extending the hours of funded places for three and four year olds from 15 to 30 hours and also offering childcare tax advantages and additional benefits, for those in employment.
- The introduction of the 30 hour entitlement has created a system in which the very poorest children are given greater access to funded early education and care at the age of two, but where many of these same children are then given access to fewer funded hours than better-off children at the ages of three to four.

3

Review of Research on the 30 hours Entitlement Policy

In this section research evidence on the take-up, quality and impact on children's development and school readiness of the 30 hour extended entitlement policy will be presented, along with evidence about the positionality of this policy against other current ECEC policies, such as the two year old funded entitlement. It will also include evidence addressing the following four specified review questions:

1. What is the nature of gaps in education development and school readiness, and what impact has the current 30 hours policy had on these?;
2. How has the prevailing government view of early years provision as childcare rather than early education impacted on the quality of provision, for example through lack of funding?;

3. What impact has the COVID pandemic had on the development of pre-school age children, with a particular emphasis on socio-economic gaps?;
4. How many hours are enough? Does it need to be 30, and in what pattern of delivery?

Competing Goals

West (2020) provides an historic account and analysis of legislative provision of early childhood education over the twentieth century, starting with the 1918 Education Act and up to the 2017 free entitlements, detailing the shift in policies and provision from providing nursery education specifically for poor children and disadvantaged families to universal early childhood education for all three- and four-year-old children. It should be noted that whilst Government funds early education, they share provision of this service with private, voluntary

and independent providers that have been vital in *“filling the gap’ in preschool provision”* (ibid.: 582).

Cohen and Korintus (2017) look at the ECEC situation in Europe from the 1970s and it is interesting to note that the driver behind initiatives and the expansion of ECEC provision was very much for enabling mothers to work as opposed to providing for disadvantaged children as was the case in England, as mentioned above. Cohen and Korintus (2017: 238–239) recognise, referring to work done by the European Commission Childcare Network (ECCEN) in the 1980s, that many EU countries are *“prisoners of their historic roots, with one set of ‘childcare’ services often developed as a welfare measure for working-class children needing care whilst their parents worked, and another set of ‘early education’ services developed as kindergartens or nursery education or play groups prior to formal schooling”*, what was referred to above as a split system (DEPP, 2020). Cohen and Korintus

(2020: 244) point out that although the EU has been advocating an integrated system for over two decades, few countries have fully integrated ECEC systems *“widely seen as important in developing quality across services and ensuring that services meet the needs of children, families and society”*.

West and Noden (2019: 153) recognise that when Labour came to power in the UK in 1997, they inherited a mixed market economy of providers and that it was retained for pragmatic reasons; *“the PVI infrastructure was already in place so facilitating a rapid expansion of places”*. They were in a sense ‘prisoners’ of previous policies when they introduced the entitlement to free early education as part of their National Childcare Strategy and Sure Start local programmes. The aim was to offer choice and flexibility for balancing work and family life (DfES, 2004) but the mixed market economy came with inherent problems as discussed by Chen and Bradbury (2020) below.

Key Points: Policy Focus

- Early childhood education and care (ECEC) expansion as a policy priority can be seen across Europe and elsewhere over recent decades with mixed goals; in some countries it is primarily viewed as providing childcare for working parents, for others it is seen as a means to support less advantaged children educationally, for others it is a mix or blend of both of these goals.
- In England, funded (maintained) provision began predominantly as educational support for less advantaged children, with the PVI sector developing to fulfil the need for childcare for working parents. These twin goals continue to challenge the efficacy and quality of the multi-sector delivery which continues in England.
- The educational value of ECEC is increasingly recognised in most European countries, even those who continue to have a split system.

ECEC Take-up

Stewart and Reader (2020) note that take-up rates of the free entitlement for two year olds peaked in 2018 and has declined slightly from 72 per cent to 69 per cent in January 2020 and that that take-up rates of the universal offer for three and four year olds has also declined slightly, from 93 to 91 per cent for three year olds and 98 to 94 per cent for four year olds. There is also evidence that take-up by children with special needs or disability has been particularly affected by the COVID pandemic (Disabled Children Partnership, 2020). One explanation put forward by the Disabled Children's Partnership is that the 30 hours offer may have pushed some children out of ECEC altogether but they do not elaborate on why this would be the case. They do however point out that despite a steady increase in take-up of funded places by two-year-olds in the maintained sector, that of three- and four-year olds has declined, and overall, data from the National Pupil Database shows maintained nursery provision is down by 5 per cent. This decline is attributed to children who will later claim Free School Meals (FSM), indicating that those in poverty are less likely to take up their entitlement. As Chen and Bradbury (2020) point out, despite maintained settings offering higher quality provision, parental choice seems to be guided by practical considerations such as the age of the child, opening hours and availability; this may result in nursery closures. According to Stewart and Reader's (2020) data about 63 per cent of three- and four-year-old children not on FSM and 45 percent of children on FSM attended PVI settings in 2017.

Figures released from the DfE in July 2021 (DfE, 2021) and analysed by Early Education (Early Education, 2021) reveal the significant impact of Covid-19 on take-up with:

- 62% of vulnerable two-year-olds taking up their entitlements, down from 69% the previous year, and the number of two-year-olds of Asian origin has fallen by a third;

- 88% of 3- and 4-year-olds taking up the universal 15 hours, down from 93%;
- A 5% fall in take-up of the 30 hours entitlement, estimated at around 3 in 4 of eligible children;
- The number of children in receipt of Early Years Pupil Premium has risen by 6%;
- Take-up of the 30 hours is lower for children with SEND than the universal entitlement (2.8% compared to 6.3%);
- The number of providers delivering the two-year-old offer has fallen, although the number of maintained nursery and primary schools delivering the offer has increased;
- The proportion of staff delivering funded entitlements with a graduate level qualification remained at 9%. 36% of PVI's (including childminders), delivering 51% of children's funded entitlements, contain at least one graduate member of staff.

Chen and Bradbury (2020: 297) highlight the dysfunction and inequalities of the English childcare market, when they state that *"parental choosing behaviours do not conform to the market logic of competition and choice"*. They further (2020: 287) point out that contrary to findings by Grogan (2012), working middle-class parents in England can feel they are at a disadvantage as they are *"tightly constrained to day nurseries and childminders because of extended service age and the opening hours they provide"*. In other words, practical considerations such as the age of the child, term time opening hours and availability limit their choice of provision and level of take-up and are often a priority over education quality and staff qualifications. The parents in Chen and Bradbury's study tended to judge quality emotionally and subjectively on the general feeling they had of a setting, rather than taking Ofsted ratings, staff qualifications and education quality as drivers. Chen and Bradbury suggest childcare choice and take-up is, as such, an emotive issue rather than a rational choice and high-quality nursery schools have not acted

as a market incentive to motivate quality improvement as was expected. This problem, according to the authors, is not limited to the English context but is prevalent in marketised approaches to childcare in Anglophone countries in general.

Albakri and colleagues (2018) also discuss the take-up rate for the free entitlement and group them under *provider-related* factors such as sufficiency, cost/funding and flexibility of provision and *parent-related* factors such as personal preference, awareness of entitlements and eligibility. They state parent-related factors are influenced by disadvantage, English as an additional language (EAL), ethnicity, population mobility, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and employment status. Albakri and colleagues (2018: 9) identified great variation by region with take-up lower in London than other regions; however, across all areas *“children from the most disadvantaged families, who stand to gain the most, are less likely to access the funded entitlements”*. They suggest that with greater flexibility of provision, support for parents new to an area and those of children with EAL and SEND together with a better understanding of the benefits of early education, parents would be more likely to take up funded entitlements. Albakri and colleagues do however point out that some parents will still prefer for their child to start formal early education when their child is older thus limiting take-up rates achievable.

According to the Starting Well report (EIU, 2012) the UK was rated as offering one of the best pre-school programmes globally by ranking 4th out of 45 countries rated. The Starting Well Index assessed social context, availability, affordability and quality along 21 indicators. The report stated that the UK was, in 2012, ahead of many countries by offering the universal entitlement for three- and four-year olds together with subsidies for disadvantaged families. However, as the research by Chen and Bradbury revealed, league tables may hide inequalities or lack of choice, especially

in a system where the childcare market is not only split between full-time working parents and part-time working or stay at home parents, but also has a split provision for children under three and children three to five, as the English system has. Chen and Bradbury (2012: 297) conclude that there is in effect *“little real choice for parents, whose choosing processes are limited by practical concerns, including those inherent in the ‘free hours’ policy”*. Practical considerations include its location, reputation, affordability and opening hours in relation to their employment needs. Degotardi and colleagues (2018) remind us that parents should not be treated as a homogenous group but their research on factors influencing choice of setting in Australia showed that working parents needing what they call ‘long day care’ were also mainly guided by pragmatic factors. Degotardi and colleagues conclude providers and policy-makers should still be guided by children’s right to high-quality early childhood experiences.

In the US, Bassok and colleagues (2017) noted that there was little difference in preferences across pre-school types in Louisiana but differences in search processes between parents looking for a place in publicly funded pre-schools, state funded pre-schools or subsidised private settings, that varied between relying on personal networks, local public schools or using advertisements and the internet. Bassok and colleagues therefore recommend, taking parental needs and experiences in the choosing process into consideration, that policy makers need to address two points in particular: firstly, know better if and what information parents have access to in making choices, and secondly, improve eligibility to and affordability of provision.

Newman and Owen (2021) examined factors preventing eligible families from taking advantage of the two-year-old entitlement, especially barriers that parents with children with SEND face and possible solutions to these barriers. They revealed three themes:

1. *lack of awareness and understanding in regards to eligibility;*
2. *fear of stigmatisation; and*
3. *concerns over the ability of staff to deal with a child's additional needs.*

Lack of awareness is again an aspect as in the study by Bassok and colleagues (2017). Newman and Owen (2021) suggest that if providers want to overcome identified barriers they need to:

1. *Restructure how they approach the families by being more aware of the unequal power relation between them which may involve using parent 'ambassadors' to share their experiences of the free entitlement.*
2. *Address the 'othering' of families who take up the two-year-old entitlement, that maybe only true universal access, irrespective of disadvantage, can solve.*
3. *Build trust that the system can cater to specific needs.*

The evidence indicates that policy needs to be more explicit about its intentions; Is it to support child development and learning? Is it about helping parents into work? Or both of these aims? It is argued that a lack of coherence in policy intentions over time has led to a lack of impact and outcomes from the investments made (Moss, 2014, Brewer et al, 2014, Paull, 2014). To overcome barriers a strength-based approach rather than a deficit approach is needed, according to Newman and Owen, where the onus is on the service provider in making services accessible. This means promoting benefits of accessing provision for children and families rather than a remediating approach to counter disadvantage.

Campbell and colleagues (2018) recognise the dual purpose of investing in ECEC; to support maternal employment and child development through early intervention in the lives of disadvantaged children in particular. However, they point out that for interventions to have

any impact, understanding access is crucial. There are many factors influencing access, one of them, according to the research by Campbell and colleagues, is the availability of different types of settings. In England the free entitlement can be accessed in:

- maintained nursery schools and primary school nursery classes, collectively as 'maintained provision';
- day nurseries run by the private, local authority or voluntary sector, some of them within Sure Start children's centres;
- childminders; and
- sessional, part-day providers.

The availability of these different types of providers varies widely across England but noteworthy is that most new places created since 1997 were in private and voluntary settings (Blanden et al., 2016). This is an important point as there are "tendencies among some families to attend some types of settings" depending on opening hours, fees or simply by preference for one type of provision over another (Campbell et al., 2016).

In their study, Campbell and colleagues looked at the extent of take-up of the free entitlement for three- and four-year-olds using data on 205,865 children from the National Pupil Database (the Early Years Census and the Spring Schools Census datasets). The focus was on children accessing the full five terms they were eligible for before compulsory education. They looked into three pupil characteristics:

1. children eligible for free school meals (FSM);
2. children with English as an additional language (EAL);
3. local factors such as nature of provision available.

The results showed that almost one in five children did not take up their full entitlement of five terms before starting compulsory education

with a clear income gradient of non-attendance. Only 15.7 percent of children 'never on FSM' did not attend on the study's cut-off date compared to 27.4 percent of children on FSM. Among most ethnic groups' figures showed a similar pattern of children more likely to have accessed the full entitlement if they had never been on FSM. There was a however a stronger effect on low income in English-only than EAL households (Campbell et al., 2018: 526). FSM status, EAL and ethnic background are as such important factors influencing take-up. *"Having English as an additional language, or being English-speaking and persistently poor, are both predictors of non-attendance"* (Campbell et al., 2018: 526).

As to local factors such as provision available, *"over-all, the picture suggests the value of a mix of different types of provision in promoting take-up, and particularly the importance of having even a small share in the voluntary sector and in Sure Start children's centres"* (535).

The above points are important for understanding take-up; however, Blanden and colleagues (2016: 718) found when comparing child outcomes of children taking up the free entitlement for three- and four-year-olds (at the age of five, seven and eleven) that *"disadvantaged children do not benefit substantively more from the free entitlement than their more affluent peers"*. They suggest it may be because all new places created under the policy were in the private sector which is less regulated with lower levels of graduate staff. Blanden and colleagues (ibid.) state:

"There is evidence that private nurseries which serve poorer children are particularly bad on these measures [employing graduate teachers], helping to explain why the policy did not have the expected success in reducing gaps in cognitive development between children from different backgrounds."

Campbell and colleagues (2018: 536) suggest another explanation may lie in the fact that there is:

"unequal duration of attendance between groups in the terms preceding the immediately pre-school year. Non-attendance at the beginning of their funded entitlement may be diluting the potential effects of the policy on low-income children."

Quantity together with staff qualifications may as such be important factors. Blanden and colleagues recommend higher quality requirements, particularly in relation to staff qualifications, are needed for private nurseries serving poorer children in England if the free entitlement is to have greater effect. If this does not happen, Blanden and colleagues, as Campbell and colleagues (2018: 537), fear the free entitlement to 30 hours for children of working parents will further disadvantage children from low-income families by *"increasing the extent to which subsidies for early education are concentrated disproportionately on children who least need a head start"*. In the policy review by Akhal and colleagues (2019), they recognise there is a wide variation across local authorities in the take-up of two-year-old places where in some authorities there had been a slowing down of the take-up of the two-year-old entitlement, possibly due to the difference in delivery costs and the prioritisation of the three- and four-year-old entitlements.

A study conducted in Scotland on the take-up of places for eligible two-year-olds revealed that:

"the major barrier to uptake is lack of awareness – rather than opposition to the concept, problems with the application process or dissatisfaction with the nature of the provision" (Scottish Government, 2017: 4).

The study also noted that the offer was promoted through professionals (mainly health visitors), advertising and word of mouth, and of the three, the importance of contact between the professionals and eligible families was the most important means. All the above findings have important policy implications in that extending universal provision is important in creating a more equitable start for children of low-income families.

Key Points: ECEC Take-up in England

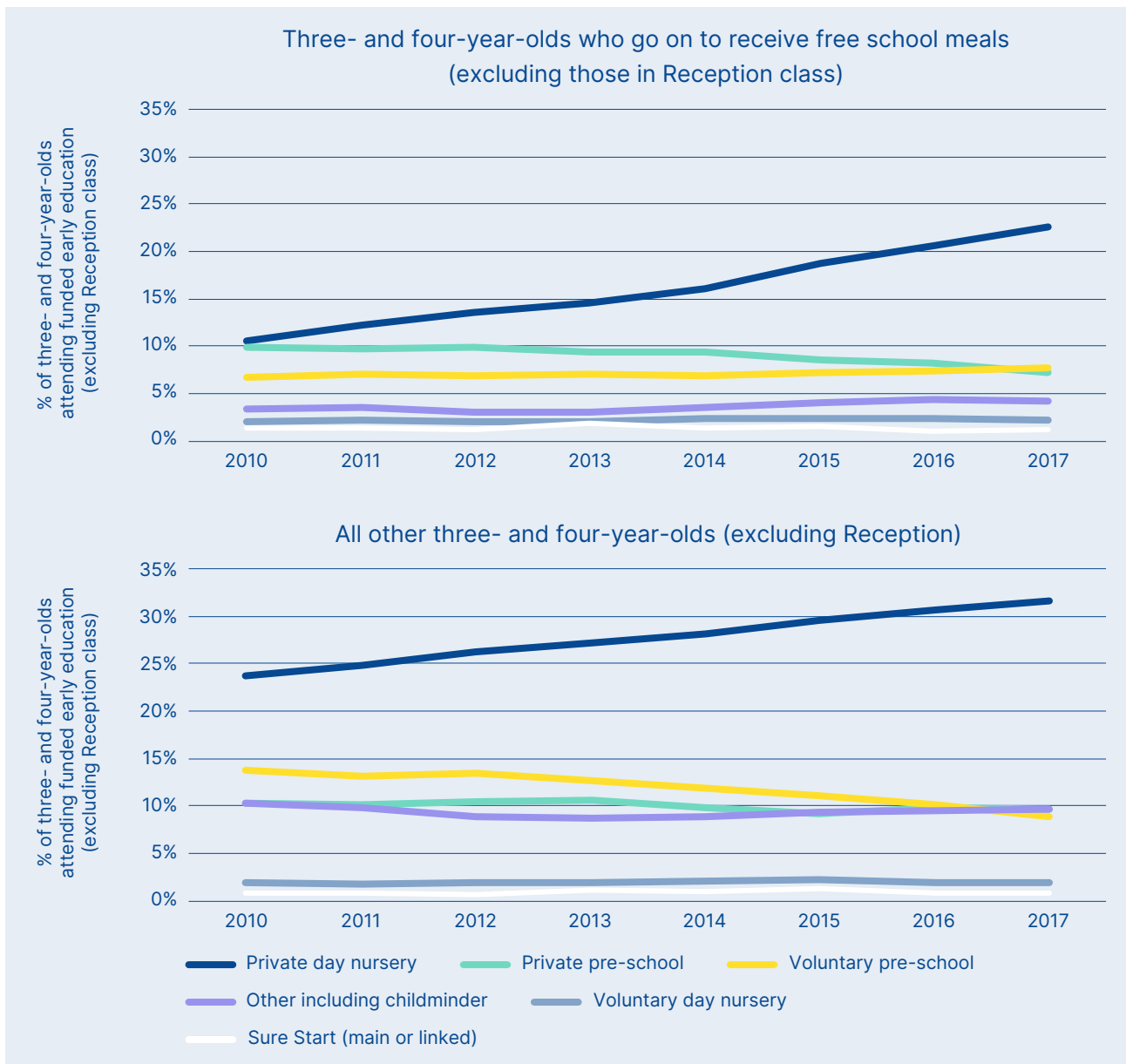
- Take-up rates of the free entitlement for two-year-olds and the universal offer for three and four year olds in all sectors has declined significantly over the last year due to Covid-19. There is significant variation in take-up by region and socio-economic status. Take-up rates for children with special needs and disability have been particularly affected by the COVID pandemic.
- Childcare choice and take-up is influenced by both *provider-related* factors such as sufficiency, cost/funding and flexibility of provision and *parent-related* factors such as personal preference, awareness of entitlements and eligibility. The issue of quality does not appear to be a factor in parent choice and take-up, meaning the market is not driving sector improvement or enhanced access.
- Parent-related factors are influenced by disadvantage, English as an additional language (EAL), ethnicity, population mobility, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and employment status.
- Research suggests that with greater flexibility of provision, support for parents new to an area and those of children with EAL and SEND together with a better understanding of the benefits of early education, parents would be more likely to take up funded entitlements. Some parents will still prefer for their child to start formal early education when their child is older thus limiting take-up rates achievable.
- For parents with children with SEND there are additional barriers to take-up, including lack of awareness and understanding with regard to eligibility; fear of stigmatisation; and concerns over the ability of staff to deal with a child's additional needs.
- There is some evidence that lack of impact on child outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged children, may be due to lower hours of access and lower qualifications of staff in settings serving these communities. It is suggested that action on enhancing staff qualifications across the sector is needed if free entitlements are not to further disadvantage the less advantaged.

ECEC Quality

Campbell and colleagues (2018) point out that following the roll-out of funded places, the introduction of the statutory early years foundation stage (EYFS) (from birth to five) and the development of the ECEC workforce are examples of how successive governments have tried to improve the quality of provision in all sectors. However, despite successive workforce

initiatives, overall qualification levels in the ECEC workforce are declining (Pascal at el 2020). Stewart and Reader (2020) also note there has been a general decline in children attending voluntary pre-schools and an increase in children attending private day nurseries, where qualification levels are comparatively low but as this trend started long before the free entitlements in 2017, see Figure 2, this cannot be attributed to the policy from 2017.

Figure 2: Three and four year olds in PVI sector by FSM status



Source: Stewart and Reader (2020: 58) interpretation of the National Pupil Database

Of concern is the fact that, “the falling share of children eligible for free school meals attending maintained settings means a substantial drop in the share of children from low-income households with access to a QTS [qualified teacher]” (Stewart and Reader, 2020: 60). This is important as level of staff qualification is an important indicator of quality. The EPPE study showed that provision needs to be high quality to ensure it promotes children’s development (Sammons, 2010; Sylva, 2010; Mathers et al., 2014). West and Noden (2019: 163) believe “the government focus on increasing the availability of places via

a mixed economy of providers has come at the expense of staff quality, a prerequisite for long-term benefits for children”.

Child development as identified through the EYFSP data can be used to measure cognitive and social development and in how the attainment gap is narrowing or widening by comparing children on FSM and children who are not. Evidence reveals that the gap in the EYFSP scores had been closing up to 2017 but has since started to widen again (Hutchinson et al, 2019; Stewart and Reader, 2020). The gap

in the phonics screening has however narrowed since 2012 from 17 to 14 percentage points in 2019 and has not started to widen. There is as such overall a stalling of progress in children's development that may be attributed to poverty. Stewart and Reader (2020: 86) conclude:

"...even where there is a commitment to invest in early childhood, policymakers face a series of trade-offs: in the balance between spending on cash benefits and investment in services; in whether to design ECEC services primarily as childcare for working parents or to focus on child development; and in whether to provide services universally or to target them to children and families with most to gain."

They suggest that Government policies since 2015 have helped family finances and also supported an increase in maternal employment; however, despite a rise in graduate staff in the PVI sector (but not qualified teachers) the attainment gap is not closing as there has not been a focus on child development. Stewart and Reader (2020: 88) state: *"We urgently need a renewed policy focus on early childhood as a key life stage, not just as a period when children need looking after so their parents can work"*.

Yet, despite the worsening in workforce qualifications, and the widening of the gap in child outcomes, Stewart and Reader (2020) suggest that Ofsted inspection data can also be an indication of quality and they note that the vast majority of children under five attend settings rated good or outstanding.

A DfE-funded evaluation conducted in 2015–16 by Early Education (2016) suggests that the Early Years Pupil Premium, the funding for disadvantaged three- and four-year-olds, does make a difference to children's outcomes and thus quality. An important point West and Noden (2019: 162) make related to quality is:

"The ambiguity between education and care is particularly stark as regards the 30 hours 'free childcare' policy: this comprises 15 hours a week 'free early education' and 15 hours a week 'free childcare', yet providers are required to provide early education and care that follows the Early Years Foundation Stage across the whole 30 hours (DfE, 2018a)."

A solution to what they call this 'blurring' of what constitutes education and what constitutes care would be to have a regulatory framework in place aligned across all the different providers, with a qualified teacher in every setting, according to West and Noden (2019: 162).

Key Points: ECEC Quality in England

- Despite a widening of the attainment gap in child outcomes, Ofsted inspections indicate that the majority of the ECEC sector offers high quality provision.
- A key factor in quality ECEC is the qualification level of the workforce yet this is deteriorating across the sector and means fewer children are accessing provision with a qualified graduate or teacher.
- Recent policy choices have emphasised increasing the number of childcare/early education places rather than enhancing the quality of provision through employing highly trained staff.
- It is suggested that a blurring of the policy intention between childcare and early education means the quality debate is confused.

School Readiness and Attainment Gap

In 2017, when the 30 hours entitlement was rolled out, Andrews, Robinson and Hutchinson (2017) at the Education Policy Institute recognised, in their report on trends in educational attainment and disadvantage, that the attainment gap was generally, gradually closing between disadvantaged pupils (those eligible for free school meals) and their peers at all levels, but that progress was slow despite significant investment and targeted intervention programmes. There were also large regional variations with some areas going backwards. The attainment gap was evident from the early years and grew to 19 months by the end of secondary school according to their data. They state that:

“[in 2017]...persistently disadvantaged pupils [children eligible for free school meals for 80% of their schooling] end primary school over a year behind their non-disadvantaged peers and are over two years behind by the end of secondary school” (Andrews et al., 2017: 10). They further argue that allowing children to fail to reach their potential is not only a waste of human capital from an economic point of view but also morally unacceptable.

Crenna-Jennings (2018: 16) suggests evidence of what works to close the attainment gap indicates the need for:

“a holistic life-course approach, involving sustained, multi-sectoral investment and joined up working to support families from conception onwards, combined with a highly trained and stable workforce capable of addressing individual pupils’ barriers to learning, and equal access to educational opportunities across all schools.”

Archer and Merrick (2020) in research for the Sutton Trust also recognise the gradual reduction of the school readiness gap between 2007 and 2017 but point out that it is opening

up again, as identified by the data from the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile 2019 (DfE, 2019a). They are concerned about getting the balance right between supporting child development and access to affordable childcare for working parents. In other words, about getting the balance right between quality and quantity. Archer and Merrick (2020) point out that because the 30 hours entitlement is only for eligible working parents meeting a minimum salary threshold, this leaves the most disadvantaged children only qualifying for 15 hours. The 30 hours policy is as such of greater financial benefit for better-off parents and potentially for child development outcomes. Archer and Merrick recommend all families of three- and four-year-old children currently eligible for disadvantaged two-year-old funding, including those out of work or on very low incomes, should also be eligible for the 30 hours free entitlement to provide for better continuity for families on lower incomes and to avoid the gap widening again. The widening of the gap is a real concern as providers struggle to meet the demands of the 30 hours entitlement and if the quality of provision is too low, through employment of less qualified staff, then they argue that child development outcomes suffer. Equally, if the costs of childcare is too high and hours insufficient this will also be a disadvantage.

In Bonetti and Blanden’s (2020: 8) analysis of the early years workforce, they not only noted an association between children’s outcomes and staff qualifications such as QTS and EYTS but in particular that:

“the positive association between exposure to a graduate and attainment is stronger for disadvantaged children when they attend a setting for more than 15 hours. Recent government policies which have abandoned any commitment to expanding EYTS and which exclude disadvantaged children from receiving the 30 hours funded childcare entitlement could therefore be hindering progress in narrowing the gap in the early years.”

Of concern is therefore the fact that, as previously mentioned, the presence of a qualified teacher is not common in PVI settings and also that the number of people enrolling in EYTS initial teacher training has plummeted in recent years; according to Bonetti and Blanden:

“The government should consider the costs and benefits of extending the 30 hours entitlement to be universal, and therefore allow disadvantaged children the same opportunity as their wealthier peers to reap the benefits of attending an early years setting for more than just 15 hours per week. In doing so, it should also assess the extent to which the current design of the 30 hours funded childcare policy affects quality and access for disadvantaged children, with the goal of redesigning the system and making it more equitable” (Bonetti and Blanden, 2020: 9).

Bonetti and Blanden’s (2020) data also suggest attending a graduate led setting for more than 15 hours a week had positive outcomes, but they did not commit to what the optimum number of hours would be.

“Universal policy should be capable of reducing socio-economic disparities” stated Campbell et al. (2018: 515) however, Blanden and colleagues (2016: 716) question the quality of the new places as their research suggests that *“contrary to expectations, disadvantaged children do not benefit substantively more from the free entitlement than their more affluent peers”* with one possible explanation given being that the new places were created in the private sector that is less regulated than the public sector.

Another policy in place for supporting disadvantaged three- and four-year-old children in England is the Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP). Settings can apply for this extra funding to support and improve outcomes for eligible children, on top of the universal 15 hours entitlement. The EYPP provides eligible children with additional annual funding of £302 to the

free entitlement for three- and four-year-olds, to provide support for ‘closing the gap’ and preparing them for school (Brown, 2020). However, according to Brown (2020) this amount is not only far below the annual pupil premium amount of £1,300 that children may be eligible for in primary school, but the administrative process is also a challenge regarding: who is eligible; how it is allocated; and the timing of when it is paid as indicated in the complex eligibility criteria and the funding process for settings. Eligibility requirements mean that families need to meet one of the following criteria:

- Income Support;
- income-based Jobseeker’s Allowance;
- income-related Employment and Support Allowance;
- support under part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999;
- the guaranteed element of State Pension Credit;
- Child Tax Credit (provided they’re not also entitled to Working Tax Credit and have an annual gross income of no more than £16,190);
- Working Tax Credit run-on, which is paid for 4 weeks after they stop qualifying for Working Tax Credit;
- Universal Credit;
- they have been in local-authority care for 1 day or more in England or Wales;
- they have been adopted from care in England or Wales;
- they have left care under a special guardianship order or residence order in England or Wales.

Eligibility needs to be checked annually to ensure circumstances have not changed. And EYPP funding will follow the child. EYPP is paid by the local authority where the child receives the early education and not where they live.

The participants in Brown's study, all in leadership roles, stated they did not believe the funding 'closes the gap' however it is not clear if this is based on anecdotal evidence or data as Brown does not elaborate on why the participants believed this. This is in contrast to the study carried out by Early Education (2016) that reported the EYPP can make a difference to children's outcomes. The report makes useful recommendations for practitioners, local authorities and the government, and concluded that:

"given a good infrastructure to support practitioners in developing their pedagogical knowledge and skills, this funding has the

potential to make a difference to some of our most disadvantaged children, and we would encourage government to continue to support and embed the learning of practitioners so that it can be used consistently to best effect" (Early Education, 2016: 24).

Brown proposes that the EYPP in its current form is not effective, as the participants in her study saw the funding more as targeting developmental delay rather than 'closing the gap' and would therefore prefer if they could apply for the funding on behalf of children (rather than the parents) and allocate it to children they identify as most in need of support, which was not always the children eligible.

Key Points: School Readiness and Attainment Gap

- The attainment gap between more and less advantaged children is increasing, after a period of improvement. It is suggested that the COVID pandemic might have further escalated this widening.
- Closing the gap requires a holistic, complex and sustained approach, supported by a highly trained and stable workforce.
- There is some evidence that the 30 hour extended entitlement for working families may be contributing to the widening in the attainment gap by doubly advantaging the better off with additional hours. Accessing less hours combined with attendance at settings with lower qualified staff can mean lower attainment for the less advantaged.
- There is some evidence that a strategy to both increase the funded hours and enhance practitioner qualification in settings for the less advantaged would lead to better outcomes for the less advantaged and a closing of the attainment gap.
- There is evidence that the EYPP could further enhance child attainment for the less advantaged but only if it is adequately funded, well targeted and easier to access.

Universal Versus Targeted ECEC Provision

Free entitlements are aimed at creating a more equitable start for children in England (Noden and West, 2016). The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education project (EPPE) project demonstrated that, *“disadvantaged children benefit significantly from good quality pre-school experiences, especially where they are with a mixture of children from different social backgrounds”* (Sylva et al., 2004). However, to what extent universal policies versus targeted policies may affect the attainment gap is less clear.

Dearing and colleagues (2018) questioned if the attainment gap may in effect widen in universal provision, compared to targeted provision, as there are important benefits of ECEC for less disadvantaged children too, as the EPPE study also demonstrated. Dearing and colleagues investigated Norway’s universal scale-up, focusing on whether the scale-up had an impact on children’s language skills and if it affected children differently depending on income group. Their findings revealed that the *“scale-up of Norway’s universal ECEC led to improvements in children’s early language skills, with low-income children’s evidencing this most robustly”* (ibid.: 10) and that this may narrow the attainment gap. However, the critical point to recognise according to Dearing and colleagues (2018: 11) is *“that any hope of reducing social disparity via ECEC relies on strong rates of participation in public ECEC among disadvantaged families”*. The policy focus in Norway is therefore now on participation rates (OECD, 2015). Dearing and colleagues conclude, based on their data, that the benefits of universal policies should also include considerations on beginning universal ECEC programmes in infancy (from one-year-old). The European Commission (2011: 5) is also in favour of universal provision:

“universal access to quality ECEC is more beneficial than interventions targeted exclusively at vulnerable groups. Targeting ECEC poses problems because it is difficult in practice to

identify the target group reliably, it tends to stigmatise its beneficiaries and can even lead to segregation at later stages of education. Targeted services are also more at risk of cancellation than universal ones.”

It is interesting to note how changes in policies have gone in the opposite direction in Finland. Lundkvist and colleagues (2017) state that universal full-day provision for children under seven had been in place since the 1990s; however, since 2016 universal provision is now limited to 20 hours for all children, with full-day entitlement only for children with both parents in full-time employment, education or who are self-employed. The financial crisis is seen to have provoked this change, reflecting an ideological shift in policies favouring economic arguments and promoting maternal employment. Finland has as such not been immune to the market led discourse. Drawing on the European Commission report (2009), Lundkvist and colleagues demonstrate how Finland’s ECEC policies are moving away from a clear ECEC rationale based on equality, lifelong learning and social mobility rationale towards an economic, high-quality rationale focused on future economic gains. They conclude that this shift contradicts the traditional notion of universal provision and is *“a step away from the Nordic model of universal services towards a model characterized by targeted policies and higher degrees of inequality”* (2017: 1553).

The report by Stewart and Waldfogel (2017) for the Sutton Trust also points out universal provision can help to narrow gaps in child development; however, with one caveat, it needs to be of high quality to have a positive impact. Stewart and Waldfogel were already concerned about the possible shift away from quality towards childcare affordability when the additional 15 hours entitlement for eligible working parents of three- and four-year-olds was rolled out in 2017. Even with targeted places for two-year-olds and the early years pupil premium, the shift in funding away from quality (progress in improving staff qualifications has stalled) to affordability for working

families is of concern to Stewart and Waldfogel. In addition, the fact that expectations are now that all parents in receipt of state support should work full-time, regardless of circumstances, puts into question if this is always in the best interests of the individual child. Stewart and Waldfogel do recognise targeted provision may have a positive impact on child development and social mobility but only if

take-up is actively pursued and hours accessed are of high quality, which is only possible with adequate funding of all providers. However, as mentioned above, Akhal and colleagues (2019) recognise the low take-up of two-year-old places in some authorities is possibly due to the difference in delivery costs and the prioritisation of the three and four year old entitlements by the PVI sector.

Key Points: Universal versus Targeted ECEC Provision

- Evidence shows the benefits of universal provision above targeted provision in closing the attainment gap as long as take-up rates amongst the less advantaged are high. It is suggested that universal provision encourages a social mix amongst children, attracts more highly qualified staff, removes stigma and encourages take-up of places.
- Targeted provision has multiple barriers to access for the less advantaged and can lead to longer term problems for the beneficiaries and more inequality rather than less.

Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Development of Children

The impact of the pandemic can be looked at from several perspectives. According to Pascal et al (2020) in previous research for the Sutton Trust, and Stewart and Reader (2020: 89) the pandemic has exposed the fragility of the Government's approach to ECEC as profit margins were falling in parts of the private sector already before the pandemic and

“this left childcare providers as a whole with very limited buffers to survive the hit to revenue as parents were laid off or lost earnings ... and reinforced the vital importance of ensuring that, alongside high quality services, families have the resources they need to allow their children to thrive” (Stewart and Reader, 2021: 89).

Secondly, as mentioned above, rollout of expansions have been affected. In Scotland planned changes have been delayed until August 2021

(Scottish Government, 2021b), and Wales put their rollout on hold for three months in 2020 to pay for keyworker children places (Gaunt, 2020). Although policies have not been affected in Northern Ireland, the impact on provision has been recognised there too where in July 2020 the Childcare Recovery Support Fund was set up to support providers reopening (DE, 2020c; Early Years, 2020). Thirdly, the pandemic has posed many challenges for young children.

The 2021 EECERJ Special Issue is particularly concerned with capturing “COVID narratives of young children and their families and the responses of practitioners and policy makers to their expressed needs” (Bertram and Pascal, 2021: 2). Pascal and Bertram (2021) recognise the multiple challenges faced by children during the pandemic and their transnational study, involving England, Scotland and New Zealand, revealed children's desire to regain their daily life and routines; be with their friends; have extended time to play; be outdoors; and have authentic information. Research by Malta

Campos and Vieira (2021) on the impact of Covid-19 on early childhood in Brazil revealed children are worried about the disease, knew about the hygiene measures they have to follow and that they miss their school and friends. As the pandemic progressed some of these children said, four months later, that they were also tired, sad, frustrated and angry.

Quenzer-Alfred and colleagues (2021) research in Germany indicates how the final year of pre-school is now commonly seen as a year for preparing children for school, with a focus on language and mathematics, especially for what they call 'low performing children'. Their study of five and six-year-old children living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods identified that during lockdown, with the lack of face-to-face contact, children's language and mathematical skills showed a significant drop both in normally developing children and children with identified additional needs. Interestingly, parents and staff did not perceive lockdown to have had a negative impact on children, quite the opposite; they considered lockdown a valuable opportunity for families to enjoy spending more time together and as being less stressful. Parents also felt it gave children the opportunity 'to learn something different'. There was a lack of understanding on the part of the education professionals of the importance of their educational role during the last year of kindergarten in supporting transition and as a year of preparation for school to reduce the need for additional support when in primary school, according to Quenzer-Alfred and colleagues.

Ofsted (2020a: 7) similarly reported that four in five of the 208 providers interviewed in October 2020 reported that "*children's mathematics and literacy skills had either not progressed or had declined*" and that they were also concerned about children with additional needs not receiving support, in settings and at home, with some children's speech and communications skills therefore declining. Having said that, the report recognised that children who continued to attend settings during lockdowns, or who

were well supported at home, had made good progress. It was the children who had left and subsequently returned who had been impacted the most, especially children whose parents were not able to spend time with them. This prevented some children from developing their language and communication and their physical skills (Ofsted, 2020a: 5) and in some cases children had also become less independent regressing to nappies and the use of dummies. A finding further supported by the study by KindredSquared (2021) revealing that on average early years and primary school teachers report that 43% of pupils arriving at their school following the lockdown are not school ready. Research funded by the Education Endowment Foundation (Bowyer-Crane et al., 2021), explored the impact caused by the pandemic on children transitioning to Reception classes across England, to understand if, and how, it was different from previous cohorts. The study revealed:

- 76 per cent of schools (44 out of 58 schools) reported that children who started school in the autumn of 2020 needed more support than children in previous cohorts.
- Curriculum areas of learning where children struggled were: Communication and Language, Personal, Social and Emotional development, and Literacy.

The concern is particularly for children in areas of disadvantage. The report concludes: "*It would appear that the pandemic has exacerbated existing issues in oral language development, and this will need to be a key focus for any education recovery plans*" (Bowyer-Crane et al., 2021: 9). Evidence from the Nuffield Foundation (2021) also indicates the areas of learning that schools were concerned with after they re-opened in September 2020 were Literacy; Communication and Language, and Personal Social and Emotional Development.

The DfE (2021b) has been very concerned about loss of time in settings and schools and the resulting learning loss during the pandemic

from two perspectives, the lifetime perspective or potential loss of earnings over a lifetime and the health and well-being perspective. This together with their assertion that *“there is no strong evidence to suggest that early years, schools and colleges play a role in driving large scale transmission in the community”* (ibid.: 10) has been their motivation to limit school and setting closures. Yet at the end of 2020, Ofsted (2020b: 3) reported most providers operate with fewer children on roll and lower demand for places compared with 2019. Of concern is that it was providers in the most deprived areas that reported that they had far fewer children on roll. Ofsted suggests that increases in unemployment, furloughing and reduced working hours which are more common in low earners, may have reduced the need for childcare for some families. In addition, reluctance in some communities to access childcare during the pandemic have also been cited as reducing demand for childcare over recent months (Resolution Foundation, 2021). In addition, some parents

are more anxious about sending their children to nursery, and it appears more parents are considering keeping their children at home during the early years. This has implications for the sector as a whole as well as individual children’s development, especially for the most disadvantaged children.

The pandemic has impacted significantly on the early years sector, which has exacerbated their already precarious financial position, with many questioning their future viability (Pascal et al, 2020c). This loss of provision due to a lack of government support over many years, and particularly during the pandemic, will have long term implications for those young one- and two-year-olds. They have lived through the pandemic at a time in their lives when social interaction and extended language opportunities are vital but have been severely limited and so will need the benefit of high-quality early education to realise their potential as they move through their Foundation Years to compulsory schooling.

Key Points: Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Development of Children

- The COVID pandemic has increased and exposed the financial vulnerability of the ECEC sector, with many providers suggesting their futures are no longer sustainable. This has implications for the sector’s capacity to absorb any enhanced entitlements.
- The experiences and impact of the pandemic on young children have had less visibility at policy level than for older children leading to a lack of awareness in policy responses.
- There is emerging evidence that the lack of ECEC experience due to the pandemic has impacted significantly and disproportionately on the development and learning of less advantaged children and children with SEND. This is particularly in the areas of Communication and Language, Personal, Social and Emotional development, and Literacy.
- There is acknowledged government concern about the loss of time in settings and schools leading to learning loss. The lower take-up of funded places since the pandemic is continuing to cause concern for children’s learning potential and progress.
- There is evidence that parental concerns about health and wellbeing is leading to a continued reluctance to allow children to engage in centre based ECEC, which again is more prevalent in less advantaged communities and for children with SEND.

Impact of Formal Hours in Childcare

It is widely accepted that high quality ECEC can have positive and long-lasting impacts on children's outcomes (Sylva et al, 2010; Melhish et al., 2015). However, positive benefits are dependent on several factors and of interest here is if there is evidence on the association between number of hours in formal childcare and developmental outcomes.

The study by Kohl and colleagues examined the link between quantity (age at entry and hours per week), process quality (as measured by CLASS Pre-K, a quality assessment instrument), structural quality (child-teacher ratio) and composition (percentage of immigrant children) and children's socio-emotional adjustment or development at a specific point in time. Kohl and colleagues point out that looking at time spent in childcare (quantity) needs to also take into account the quality of children's experiences as focusing on one or the other *"is likely to yield an incomplete picture"* (ibid., 180). They do not question the generally accepted positive effect of ECEC on children's cognitive and language development; however, they point out findings from previous studies in the US and Europe have been inconclusive and inconsistent on the potential risk of extensive hours on children's socio-emotional development. The 395 children in the study, across 87 settings, were between two and a half and four years old. Data revealed a small negative association between more hours per week and hyperactivity or conduct problems but only in settings with a high percentage of immigrant children or a high child-adult ratio. The conduct problems were only seen in children who had started before the age of 26 months.

Kohl and colleagues (2020: 194) conclude that, *"centre-based ECEC settings in Germany do not pose a major developmental risk to socio-emotional development"* (ibid., 194) for children entering childcare between the ages of two and a half and four, attending between 20 to 40 hours per week, *"as only certain*

aspects of quantity and structural quality are linked to very specific socio-emotional outcomes under very specific circumstances" (ibid.: 177).

Important context specific points to bear in mind are that:

- *Most children (68 per cent) in the study had started formal childcare between the ages of two and three, only 3 per cent before their first birthday.*
- *No setting was assessed as low quality using the CLASS scoring system.*
- *Staff are highly qualified in German settings. In 2018, 70 per cent of staff in early childhood settings held a graduate degree (Autorengruppe Fachkräftebarometer, 2019).*

In England, the situation looks somewhat different. Melhuish and colleagues (2020: 19) involved in the longitudinal Study of Early Education and Development (SEED), following nearly 6,000 children from the age of two to five, report that formal group care between age two and the start of school was associated with several poorer socio-emotional outcomes for all children:

"Using more formal group ECEC between age two and start of school was associated with several poorer outcomes: more externalising behaviour, more internalising behaviour, less prosocial behaviour, less behavioural self-regulation and less emotional self-regulation, during school year one, at age five to six."

Number of hours attended impact differently on the five above mentioned socio-emotional aspects:

- *Formal group ECEC of greater than 15 hours per week between age two and five was associated with higher levels of **externalising behaviour** (losing temper or arguing with other children) at age five, and lower levels of emotional self-regulation.*

- Formal group care ECEC of greater than 35 hours a week in relation to **internalising behaviour** (being easily upset or anxious) was statistically significant at age five.
- There was an overall negative association between formal group ECEC and **prosocial behaviour** (being co-operative, helpful and sharing) but it was the smallest of the significant effects and regardless of hours attended.
- Formal group ECEC of greater than 25 hours a week was associated with lower levels of **behavioural self-regulation** (follow instructions, waiting their turn) at age five.
- Formal group ECEC of greater than 15 hours per week between age two and five was associated with lower levels of **emotional self-regulation** (being calm, keeping temper) at age five.

The SEED data also suggest that for the 40 per cent most disadvantaged children, using a mean of 10 hours per week formal ECEC no later than age two, and a mean of over 20 hours per week formal ECECE between two and the start of school, increases their chances of achieving expected EYFSP levels in school reception year and improves their verbal ability in school year one. However, an earlier start and higher use was associated with poorer outcomes for externalising behaviour and emotional self-regulation. This supports what was already recognised in the early findings of the EPPE study (Sylva et al., 2004: 3) that *“there was no evidence that full-day attendance led to better development than half-day attendance”*.

The SEED study further states that for the 60 per cent least disadvantaged children:

“who had a mean of up to twenty hours per week formal ECEC between age two and the start of school had significantly better outcomes during reception/year one for sociability, prosocial behaviour and EYFSP numeracy than a reference group who started using ten or

more hours per week formal ECEC aged over three and who had a mean of up to ten hours per week formal ECEC between age two and the start of school” (Melhuish et al., 2020: 91).

Bonetti and Blanden (2020), mentioned above, suggest there is also a positive association on children’s outcomes when attendance is for more than 15 hours in graduate led settings, but they do not elaborate on this and this aspect was not an aspect addressed in the SEED study. As pointed out by Melhuish and colleagues (2020) the importance of these finding will depend on whether the effects are transient effects or whether they persist. This will be addressed in future SEED reports.

Interestingly, comparing the effect of the amount and type of ECEC between the EPPSE (Sylva et al., 2004) and SEED studies, the effects of ECEC in the SEED study on cognitive outcomes were, perhaps surprisingly, more limited. Melhuish and colleagues suggest it can be due to the change in amount and quality of ECEC since the EPPSE study *“which may have allowed children with less pre-school ECEC use to catch up with those who used more pre-school ECEC, resulting in less impact of ECEC use in SEED as compared to the EPPSE study”* (Melhuish et al., 2020: 28).

Mathers and colleagues (2014) make an interesting point noting that the pattern of attendance may also be an important aspect to consider. Although their focus was on children under three, the point made by Mathers and colleagues is still relevant to the years up to formal education as they suggest that (2014: 44):

“Although research in this area is scarce, the few available studies suggest that children’s social skills and well-being are greater when their hours of attendance are spread over more days and when daily staffing and grouping patterns are more stable, perhaps because they have greater opportunity to build up relationships with staff and peers through regular sustained contact.”

Verhoef and colleagues (2018) raise yet another aspect to consider; when during the day the hours in childcare are taken up. They refer to a study of 22 European countries by Bünning and Pollmann-Schult (2016: 308) that notes *“a substantial proportion of the workforce works in the evening, at night or on weekends”*. Verhoef and colleagues therefore believe it is important to consider when children are in childcare and recognise the impact of nonstandard care (early mornings, evening care and overnight care). In their comparative study between the UK, the Netherlands and Finland their results indicated that longer hours in formal childcare, meaning children were in provision earlier and later in the day, was less beneficial in the Netherlands compared to the UK, which they put down to the lower quality care in the Netherlands, although they did recognise that Dutch parents may be more worried about the effects of formal childcare and therefore may have reported more concerns. Association between formal childcare characteristics and child well-being was surprisingly the lowest in the Finnish children, considering Finland’s reputation as one of the top education systems in the world (Sahlberg, 2015) and consistently scoring high on children’s well-being surveys (UNICEF, 2007; 2013). Verhoef and colleagues put it down to young children in Finland spending the largest

number of hours in childcare as well as more hours in overnight care compared to the UK and the Netherlands.

Looking further afield, a paper outside of the 2017–2021 base criteria still worth briefly mentioning is the paper by Li and colleagues (2015) on preschool experiences in China. They reported that on average children started preschool at the age of three (range from 19–54 months) and attended in average 42.72 hours a week (range from 20–55 hours/week). Their data indicated that, *“children who stayed in preschool for more than 45 hours/week got the highest academic scores, but also exhibited the greatest frequency of behaviour problems”*. The authors still consider *“the optimal entry age and intensity for children’s academic and social development were two to three years of age and eight to nine hours for five days a week”* (Li et al., 2015) and that it is up to parents and teachers to mitigate for the impact of longer hours, or conversely, offer enriching experiences for those children starting later or attending less than eight hours a day.

The impact of formal hours in childcare is, as such, bound to various country-specific characteristics with changing working patterns and family policies having implications for children’s cognitive and socio-emotional development.

Key Points: Impact of Formal Hours in Childcare

- It is evident that access to high quality ECEC can result in positive benefits for all children, and especially less advantaged children but evidence on the optimal number of hours is limited.
- There is some evidence of the negative impact on socio-emotional outcomes of children spending too many hours and starting too early in formal ECEC.
- There is some evidence that the negative effects can be mitigated by a more highly qualified workforce.
- Some evidence indicates a range of between 15–25 hours a week after the age of two years as being positive *as long as* provision is of high quality. There is also evidence of a positive association with children’s outcomes when attendance is for more than 15 hours in graduate led settings.
- The number of hours and the timing of these hours can also impact on positive or negative outcomes for children.

4

Policy Options

There are a number of policy options available to improve support and funding for ECEC, especially for children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, which are identified in the table below. Drawing on the evidence, the pros and

cons of each of these policy options will be considered. All of these policies will also have different economic costs, an issue which is discussed in a later section of this report.

Table 1: Pros and Cons of Policy Options

Policy responses	Pros	Cons
<p>Universal provision: Make 30 hours policy universal for all three- and four-year-olds.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides benefits of additional time in ECEC for all children. Removes double advantage of more privileged children with working parents accessing more free hours. No stigma. Removes multiple funding streams Leads to more cohesive communities and more positive self-identities for children. Provides childcare for more working families. Easier access as no need to meet complex eligibility criteria. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 30 hours may be too long, especially if staff qualifications are low, leading to negative impact on children's pro-social outcomes. Sector may not currently have capacity to meet the enhanced demand.
<p>Extending entitlement: Extending eligibility for the 30 hours entitlement to three- and four-year-olds who qualified for the two year old entitlement, with other existing entitlements remaining the same.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As above but focusing support particularly on those who are identified as less advantaged. Increased benefits for less advantaged and from earlier age. Closing the attainment gap Provides childcare for more working families. Help parents with transition to work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As above but less benefits for developing cohesive communities within settings and more positive self-identities for less advantaged children. Lower take-up due to need to meet and demonstrate eligibility criteria.
<p>Re-targeting entitlement: Extending the 30 hours entitlement to three- and four-year-olds who qualified for the two year old offer while reducing the upper income limit.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As above. Incentivises improving take-up in less privileged communities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As above but leads to less diverse communities within settings and further lose benefits of a social mix.

Policy responses	Pros	Cons
<p>Replace current policy: Replace current 15 hour Early Education policy and +15 hour Extended Entitlement policy for working parents with universal Early Education entitlement of 20 or 25 hours per week for children from two or three years of age.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Same benefits for 30 hours universal entitlement. • Avoids issues of over long hours for children leading potential negative outcomes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not provide as much childcare for working families.
<p>Extend the reach of the free entitlement to a broader age range: Extending the eligibility of currently funded places to (some or all) one- to two-year-olds.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows for earlier intervention to support children's learning and development. • Facilitates early identification of SEND. • Provides childcare for working parents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dangers of early admission to poor or mediocre quality settings. • Unless quality high could lead to detrimental outcomes for children.
<p>Universal funding increase: Alongside any other entitlements increase the hourly rate for providers to be able to ensure quality.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhanced quality of provision. • Enhance sector sustainability. • Incentivise quality and enable recruitment and retention of more qualified staff. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Without ring fencing/ minimum quality requirements, mixed economy sector could syphon off funding increases to private providers without enhancing quality. • No incentive to address lack of equitable career structure, pathways and terms of employment.
<p>Increase funding for disadvantaged children: Alongside any other entitlements increase the hourly rate for disadvantaged children and children with SEND.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could support the targeted recruitment of more qualified staff to work with less advantaged children. • Enhanced outcomes for this group and closing attainment gap. • Could incentivise providers to focus on improving take-up by less advantaged groups. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shortage of well qualified staff in the workforce. • Lack of equitable career structure, pathways and terms of employment in all sectors ensuring disadvantaged communities or those who work with children with additional needs attract better qualified staff.

Policy responses	Pros	Cons
<p>Enhance qualified staff in all settings serving less advantaged children or children with SEND: Improve supply of qualified ECEC workforce.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Incentivises best ECEC staff to work with less advantaged.</i> • <i>Provides career structure and ECEC workforce becomes more sustainable and professionalised.</i> • <i>Better quality services for less advantaged.</i> • <i>Better outcomes for less advantaged and closes the attainment gap.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Shortage of qualified staff in workforce.</i> • <i>Longer term investment in workforce needed to ensure recruitment and retention of highly qualified staff.</i>
<p>Make no change: Keep current policy.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>No disruption to current ECEC system and existing demand and supply balance.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Continued lack of reach and access for all children.</i> • <i>Sustainability of the sector remains vulnerable.</i> • <i>Attainment gap continues to grow.</i> • <i>Workforce continues to lose experienced and qualified staff.</i> • <i>No post COVID recovery plan or support for early years sector which remains financially precarious.</i>

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Key Findings – Qualitative work in settings

How well is the current policy of entitlements working?

Current delivery patterns of the 30 hour entitlement:

- Providers reported a range of delivery patterns for the 30 hour entitlement, with some very flexible in how parents accessed their entitlement, while others were very constrained in their offer. The school settings appeared to limit their offer to 5 days, most often from 0900–15.00, and term time only. The Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) sector were more flexible in their offer, allowing the hours taken to be more tailored to parents' needs, with childminders appearing to be the most flexible.
- Some stakeholders felt that for some children and families 30 hours was too many, and was often not fully used. It was also felt that the hours should be available to more children and offered more flexibly to support different working patterns. The stakeholders generally felt around 25 hours for the whole year from 2 years would provide both the learning benefits for children and support working parents.

Funding levels

- In most cases providers indicated that the funding was woefully inadequate to enable them to provide a quality service, and indicated that they were often running at a loss per child, forcing them to apply charges to make their provision viable. The pandemic had made viability more difficult.
- Some stakeholders stated that they cross subsidised poorer families to access their provision and ensure the charges were not a barrier, by charging the better off for extras like nappies, sunscreen and lunch; as one said, it is 'charging by stealth'. This is despite the stated intention of the policy, that it is a free entitlement. Charging policy is clearly a barrier to access in some communities where cross subsidy is not possible.

Challenges in delivery

- Stakeholders widely felt that the 30 hours policy aim for childcare, rather than early education, and its low funding level, meant that providing children with a quality programme was very challenging. All acknowledged the key to quality and enhanced child outcomes was their ability to recruit and retain trained staff who could sustain high quality interactions, low ratios and consistency for children, but were concerned that providing a quality service on current funding was not possible.
 - All stakeholders indicated that the complex eligibility criteria for the 30 hours entitlement caused problems for them and for parents. They argued for greater simplicity and more certainty, as families' personal employment situation was often volatile and unpredictable, especially over recent months with the pandemic.
 - The 30 hour policy had led to increased staffing demands, which was hard to maintain over the year as demand for places was not evenly dispersed across the year.
 - Creating a high-quality programme which is flexible and meets individual children and family needs requires a complex organisational plan, which is very demanding of leadership time and staff flexibility in deployment. The 15 hour entitlement was seen as much more difficult than the 30 hour entitlement to logistically manage, involving more complex staffing and programme planning.
- The respondents felt that the termly eligibility criteria means that some children's learning and development can be severely disrupted as they come in and out of eligibility, with negative consequences for their progress, socialisation and wellbeing.
 - The respondents also felt that the termly eligibility criteria means that when their work or family circumstances changed so their eligibility was lost, some parent's lives and livelihoods can be severely disrupted, with negative consequences for their wellbeing and quality of life.

Impact on the two-year-old entitlement

- Providers felt that they were caught in the middle of two contradictory policy offers, with different objectives and complex eligibility criteria for each. They pointed to their experience of 15 hour places for disadvantaged two-year-olds being withdrawn to prioritise delivering 30 hour places for children of working parents, especially during the pandemic.
- They felt the 30 hour policy was more sustainably financially, and easier to manage organisationally than the 15 hour entitlement for two-year-olds, and this choice leads to further disadvantage for those two-year-olds. It was stated that two groups of 15 hour children are more expensive to deliver than one group of 30 hour children.
- Stakeholders acknowledged that take-up of the two-year-old entitlement was not good in some areas, and this has provided additional capacity for the 30 hour entitlement for three-year-olds.

What are the benefits and limitations of the 30 hour policy for children and families?

Benefits for children

- The stakeholders indicated that the 30 hours entitlement has led to higher attendance levels, which means these children's learning opportunities have increased, leading to better outcomes for those eligible children.
- For some children attending nursery for longer hours provides them with greater security, with more opportunities for their needs to be met and their protection to be secured.
- The stakeholders believed that the longer hours have led to enhanced learning outcomes for the children who access the entitlement.

Benefits for parents

- The stakeholders largely believed the 30 hours policy had benefited parents financially, but were less sure that it had acted as an incentive to employment, as the hours for delivery often did not match parents' employment patterns. Rather, it helped families who were already working but finding paying for childcare a stretch to afford. For many parents, childcare is an enormous financial burden, and the enhanced entitlement relieves them of a huge financial commitment.
- For many parents, the community around the nursery is an important social network of support and socialisation, and accessing additional childcare has enabled their social connectivity.
- The 30 hours entitlement can enhance the quality of home life and parental wellbeing, and this was valued by stakeholders.

Limitations of policy

- The stakeholder group were concerned that the 30 hour entitlement had impacted negatively on non-eligible children, particularly the less advantaged and children with additional needs.
- The funding and eligibility criteria have diverted support away from vulnerable children and children with additional needs, and the stakeholders expressed an anxiety about the long term consequences of this.
- There is a recognition by the stakeholders that the 30 hours policy is not equitable and does not contribute to a 'levelling up' agenda. In fact, they believe it may be doing the opposite, by widening the gap between those who benefit from the enhanced hours entitlement and those who are not eligible as their parents are not working.
- There was some evidence of a concern about the loss of time at home and the impact of long hours on home relationships.

How feasible is it for the sector to deliver an additional entitlement in terms of capacity and what level of funding would be required?

- Most stakeholders expressed a strong commitment that the entitlement should be extended to cover more children and should be offered from an earlier age, and if restricted, it should go to those with particular needs, such as children who were at risk and children with special needs and disabilities.
- Most indicated that they would welcome expansion as they were not running at full capacity, especially since COVID. In some cases the limitation was the physical space, which they felt could not accommodate more children without investment but in principle they supported an expansion of hours for more children.
- It was felt that the government needed to be clearer and consistent as to whether the free entitlements are for childcare or early education, and if it is both then to fund it accordingly, so high-quality provision can be delivered. There was a general agreement that it would be better to fund better quality rather than expanding the hours available to more children, although this would mean some children who would benefit would still not get access.
- Additional hours for more children would be welcomed, but it was universally felt that this would only be feasible if funding levels were increased. Some argued that this additionality could be offered as a disadvantage supplement, to incentivise those who offered places to more disadvantaged children or children with additional needs.
- Stakeholders argued that eligibility criteria and funding applications need to be simplified and made more consistent across the different offers, to allow easier access and delivery of the offer. It was also felt by some that eligibility should also be extended to younger children and also children with SEND.
- It was felt that increased hours and consequent funding could help secure staff and incentivise settings to provide CPD to improve qualifications, and so quality of provision.

Would increasing eligibility give wider benefits to settings?

As indicated in the evidence, the stakeholders identified a number of benefits for settings which increasing eligibility to an enhanced entitlement would provide:

- It would remove the uncertainty over staffing.
- It would enhance financial sustainability and allow longer term planning.
- It would allow the additional funds to be used for CPD and to provide better support for children with special needs.

1

Introduction and Methodology

Introduction

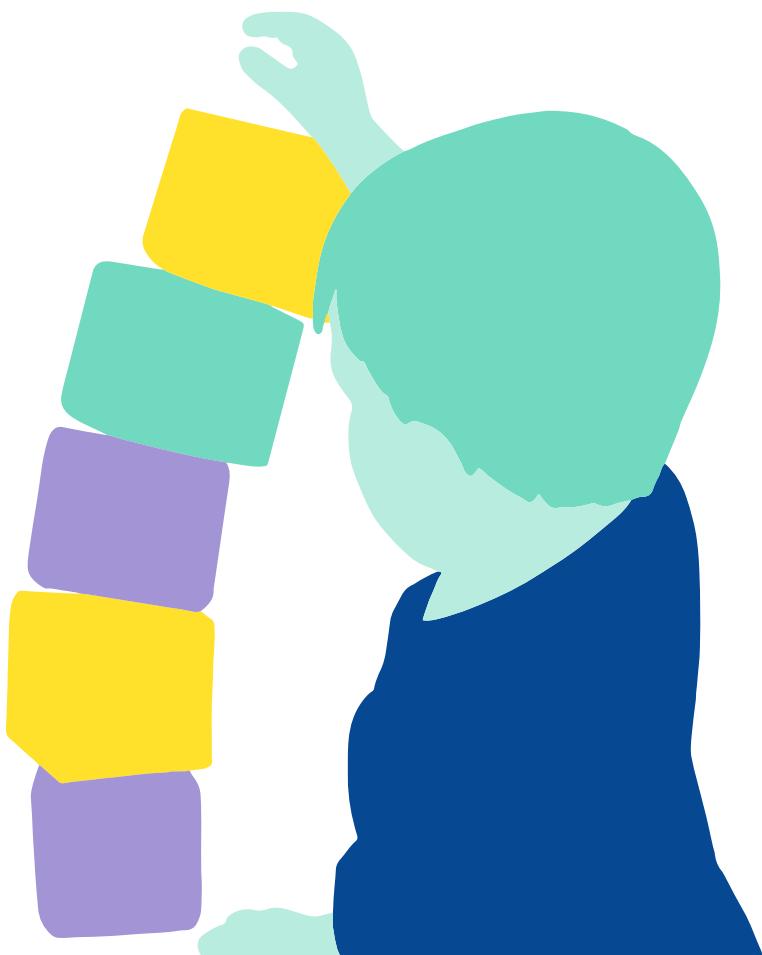
This qualitative research, conducted with a range of early years stakeholders at operational levels, will be framed to address the following questions on the 30 hour policy:

- How well is the current policy of entitlements working?
- What are the benefits and limitations of the 30 hour policy for children and families?
- How feasible is it for the sector to deliver an additional entitlement in terms of capacity and what level of funding would be required?
- Would increasing eligibility give wider benefits to settings?

Research Methodology

This qualitative research aimed to capture stakeholder views of: how the 30 hours policy is currently being delivered and by whom; its viability and reach; its strengths and limitations; funding issues; and what difference it is making to children and families. It also set out to consider views on how the policy might be reconfigured to enable the early years sector to better support young children and families, especially those who are less advantaged or have significant needs. It was carried out in an open, enquiring way without a predetermined hypothesis. CREC's approach embodied a strong element of stakeholder engagement and self-evaluation, which we believe has generated rich information and maximised the learning possibilities. The methodology considered the delivery of the 30 hours entitlement across a range of English local authority area (representing urban, rural and coastal areas) and from the perspective of a range of stakeholders at operational level.

A series of five focus groups were convened, with the aim to secure a purposeful sample of early years providers from a range of settings covering the PVI, maintained (school) sector and childminder sectors, that deliver the 30 hours extended entitlement (across identified regions/LAs of England). These focus groups gathered participant perceptions on the performance of the 30 hour policy against the identified research questions. In total we engaged with 22 respondents (comprising 12 school based providers; 6 PVI providers; 4 childminders) from 7 different and contrasting LA areas. Details of the focus group schedule can be found in Appendix 4.



2 Evidence

The data generated from the focus group dialogues was analysed thematically and is presented against each of the four research questions.

How well is the current policy of entitlements working?

Current delivery patterns of 30 hour entitlement

Varied patterns of delivery: The stakeholders reported a range of delivery patterns for the 30 hours. Some were very flexible in how parents accessed their entitlement, while others were very constrained in their offer. The school settings appeared to limit their offer to 5 days from 09.00–15.00 and term time only, though one offered 10.00–17.00 over 4 days, or 5 days from 09.00–15.00, with lunch and breakfast as additional. Some offered the core hours with paid-for wraparound care. The PVI sector were more flexible in their offer, being open from 0800 until 1800 and all year round and allowing the hours taken to be more tailored to parents' needs. Childminders appeared to be the most flexible with the offer. Additional charges were generally charged in some form and most often required for breakfast, lunches, after school, breakfast clubs and in one case they charged for specialist speech and language support. Those working in more deprived areas indicated that there was little demand for any additional hours, mainly due to affordability, and they could not ask for 'top ups' and they could not charge for lunch which made them less viable financially. Examples of stakeholder offers are:

"5 days from 8.40–3.15. We can extend the day to 6pm in after school club but they pay extra."

"8–4 or 8.30 to 4.30 with some flexibility. Some take it over 4 days and choose which day they don't come, many limit it/share with childminder."

"5 days from 9.00–3.00 lunch is charged for."

"From 08.00 to 18.00 and offer 10 hours from 08.00 to 13.00 or 13.00 to 18.00. We offer a hot meal lunch or in afternoon and are open 51 weeks. We have 5 on 15 hours and charge top ups. We are full with a waiting list. We have qualified teachers and make use of Speech and Language team. Fees are £50 a day and the LA contribution doesn't cover that."

Hourage: It was argued that for some children and families, 30 hours were too many, and often not fully used. It was also generally felt that the hours should be available to more children and offered more flexibly to support different working patterns. The stakeholders generally felt around 25 hours for the whole year from 2 years would provide both the learning benefits for children and support working parents. As stated:

"Families do not necessarily take the whole 30 hours of offer and we go with what's needed at local level and individual context. Some of ours don't take the full offer even now. Maybe 18 or 24 hours would work better, a smaller increased amount for all might make a big difference."

"Families in my area mostly do shift work so there's no demand for a longer day. Many don't take 30 hours because they don't need it for their work."

"Low income should be targeted more and they should have more hours from 2 years."

Funding levels

Insufficient funding: In most cases the stakeholders indicated that the funding was woefully inadequate to enable them to provide a quality service and indicated that they were often running at a loss per child and having to apply charges to make their provision viable. The pandemic had made viability more difficult. They particularly struggled to provide provision to cater for children with additional needs. They argued that increasing the rate to a reasonable level would enable them to stop additional charging and ensure more security and sustainability. As the stakeholders indicated:

“Funding levels don’t cover costs. Our budget manager has to be highly qualified to follow it all.”

“There is no way the funding is enough if you want quality.”

“The rates are really low and paying for wrap around and even lunch makes it expensive for many families.”

“As to the funding level we are just about afloat though with Covid-19 we will be in deficit this year.”

Charges and cross subsidising: Some stakeholders stated that they cross-subsidised poorer families in their provision by charging better-off families for extras like nappies, sunscreen and lunch; as one provider said, it is ‘charging by stealth’. This is despite the stated intention of the policy that it is a free entitlement (though charging for certain items is permitted e.g. snacks but not lunch). In settings located in poorer communities charging is not possible, resulting in a more limited offer. In reality, most stakeholders indicated that they had to include charges for some elements of the programme if they were to be viable as revealed below:

“It’s not ‘free’ childcare but subject to terms and conditions.”

“They don’t understand that our rate is higher than the LA rate and they also need to pay for additional hours and lunch. Government funding doesn’t match the going rate.”

“We are open 51 weeks a year and so we need some top-ups. We have 6 settings (and another 2 in the pipeline), so 30 hours over 38 weeks, we’d struggle without top-ups.”

Challenges in delivery

Ensuring quality: Stakeholders widely felt that the 30 hours policy aim (for childcare, rather than early education), and its low funding level, meant that providing children with a quality programme was very challenging. They felt that the policy priority was quantity of places rather than quality. All acknowledged the key to quality and enhanced child outcomes was their ability to recruit and retain trained staff who could sustain high quality interactions, low ratios and consistency for children. However, many stakeholders found achieving this quality was difficult, with the funding level meaning even paying a minimum of living wages for staff was hard. Some felt at present the funding was spread too thinly and could be more effectively targeted to ensure better quality for those who need it most. They all expressed a concern that providing a quality service on current funding was not possible, as shown below:

“We need to supplement the nursery with qualified teachers, quality staff to make a real difference.”

“We can’t do the additional stuff – the enrichment, trips, forest school, music – it’s limited and the budget is too tight and restricts us as to what we can do with children, especially those who don’t do it at home. They don’t get those experiences.”

Complex eligibility: All stakeholders indicated that the complex eligibility criteria for the 30 hours entitlement caused problems for them and the parents, and argued for more simplicity and more certainty as families' personal employment situation was often volatile and unpredictable, especially over recent months with the pandemic. Many parents find the complexity of the eligibility criteria confusing to navigate and understand, and accessing the portal is difficult for some. Stakeholders stated:

"Ours is a deprived area, some really wanted to get into work, to make a start but missed the cut off date. It needs more flexibility and support to get people back and into college as well as work. Would-be students are dependent on getting on a course or not and are using their mobiles to register. It's hard and complex and some can't navigate it."

"We have dyslexic parents, parents with limited English vocabulary and are always asking them, have you done it? They need to re-validate application every 3 months so we're forever chasing them – Have you done it? Often the answer is, 'no', or they've tried but not done it properly or their phone is off line or the battery flat. It can all be endless and what we really want to do is teach the children."

Staffing: The 30 hour policy had led to increased staffing demands, which was hard to maintain over the year as demand for places was not evenly dispersed across the year, as shown below:

"Termly changes and shifts in staffing, resources and spaces makes delivering the entitlement difficult to predict and manage – we end up juggling it all."

"The big issue term on term is to keep ahead of the game, during non-term time the numbers fall dramatically – we are forever juggling ratios."

Organisational planning: Creating a high-quality programme which is flexible and meets individual children and family needs requires a complex organisational plan which is very demanding of leadership time and staff flexibility in deployment. The 15 hour entitlement was seen as much more difficult logistically to manage. Having children in attendance with different hours of access makes session planning very challenging as testified by many of the stakeholders:

"It requires careful planning – children in different sessions – different days – organisation of the timetable to plan progression not repetition – individualised. We have to constantly assess what a child has covered and what not. This is not necessarily negative, but it has changed provision. How to avoid morning/afternoon repeats, establish consistency and progress so there is individualised delivery. Ensuring the right staff at the right time but also watching curriculum delivery. Tracking and ensuring children are not missing out."

"15 hours is a logistical nightmare, 30 hours has really helped. Sorting out our staffing needs is difficult and meeting appropriate curriculum demand, anticipating that from term to term and predicting take-up is hard."

Continuity for children: The respondents felt that the termly eligibility criteria means that some children's learning and development can be severely disrupted with negative consequences both for their progress, socialisation and wellbeing as illustrated below:

"Continuity becomes an issue with 30 hours. Children start then parents hours are cut or stopped and then the children can't come. They are supposed to pay and then they can't afford it. It's difficult for all but especially children who lose friendships."

Continuity for parents: The respondents also felt that the termly eligibility criteria means that some parent's lives, and livelihoods can be severely disrupted with negative consequences for their well-being and quality of life, as shown below:

"When one of our parents became a widow, her now single income working hours dropped, so she lost that support as she was under 16 hours, so then she lost her job too as she had to care for her kids because as a single parent she could not afford the fees."

Impact on two-year-old entitlement

Contradictory policy objectives: Stakeholders were of the view that they were caught in the middle of two contradictory policy offers with different objectives and complex eligibility criteria for each. They pointed to their experience of 15 hour places for disadvantaged two-year-olds being withdrawn to prioritise delivering 30 hour places for children of working parents, especially during the pandemic. Some stakeholders felt this put them in a morally difficult position having to make difficult choices as to how to allocate their capacity and ensure their sustainability. It also mitigated against some disadvantaged two-year-olds transitioning to the three-year-old entitlement, as shown below:

"The more who take up the 30 hour funding the more that impacts on our clientele, the size of our groups, the sufficiency of places and those who need it more are the ones who tend not to get it."

"[Those taking-up the two-year-old offer] are some of [the] most disadvantaged, 30 hours children are much less so but they get the places."

Sustainability and organisational management: They felt the 30 hour policy was more sustainable financially and easier to manage organisationally than the 15 hour entitlement for two-year-olds, and this choice leads to further disadvantage for those two-year-olds. It was stated that two groups of 15 hour children are more expensive to deliver than one group of 30 hour children. The programme delivery over a longer time period was much easier to manage, as revealed below.

"With our 30 hours we get better routines. It gives us time to develop sustained shared thinking and extend them and we can revisit learning throughout day."

Low take-up levels: It was acknowledged that take-up of the two-year-old entitlement was not good in some areas and this has provided additional capacity for the 30 hour entitlement for three year olds.

"We had new build so we could take all and have massive space with potential for 480 children. There's a significant drop in two-year-old take-up. Our outreach has progressed but the Health Visitor relationship is not there, that's all gone with the end of the Children Centres initiative. 30 hours for two-year-olds maybe helpful but some of them are still not aware of their current entitlement."

What are the benefits and limitations of the 30 hour policy for children and families?

Benefits for children

Raised attendance levels: The stakeholders indicated that the 30 hours entitlement has led to higher attendance levels which means these children's learning opportunities are increased, leading to better outcomes for those eligible children, as shown below:

"I agree with 30 hours and the children's attendance is 96% to 100% and their progress is great. Before we had dropping numbers especially the afternoon sessions."

"During the pandemic hardly any children were turning up, except the in work front line workers and especially the NHS support staff, a big employer in this area. Their group were getting a 1/8 ratio and they made huge progress, but mostly the 15 hours children didn't come at all but the SEN and vulnerable in the 30 hours group really did benefit. In that sense the better off got more of the benefit."

Secure and enriched early experiences: For some children attending the nursery for longer hours provides them with greater security, more opportunities for their needs to be met and their protection to be secured, as shown below:

"For needy families it's better off for the child to be in school."

"These can be long days for small children, but the longer hours allow us to chill a little. The tracking data reveals the benefit, and the 30 hours children are less disadvantaged by pressures and their experiences are spread over 51 weeks – it's less intense."

"It benefits two- or three-year-olds from disadvantaged homes especially – where they can't do activities at home we can provide stimulation."

Improved learning outcomes: The stakeholders believed that the longer hours have led to enhanced learning outcomes for the children who access the entitlement as shown below:

"The 30 hours children have come along in leaps and bounds, they sometimes need the repetition the enhanced hours allows."

"For children there are huge benefits. We get to know families and children early on and can identify early needs. Having both a maintained and a year-round nursery is hugely beneficial."

"We can repeat and reinforce phonics – our children who access the 30 hours get improved scores – they're doing better."

Benefits for parents

Access to employment: The stakeholders largely believed the 30 hours had benefited parents financially but were less sure that it had acted as an incentive to employment. The hours for delivery often did not match their employment patterns. Rather it helped families who were already working but finding paying for childcare a stretch to afford as indicated by respondents:

"It helps parents up the ladder – it's making a difference for parents."

"For disadvantaged families it really helped – parents could work 16 hours without their benefits being affected and with 30 hours they could work and it fits with picking up other children in school."

Affordability: For many parents childcare is an enormous financial burden and the enhanced entitlement relieves them of a huge financial commitment as shown below:

"I had two children close together. It was financially crippling. I waited so long to get the 30 hours at three years. Tax free childcare is ok, and I had to go back to work, but it was costing me more than my mortgage."

"These programmes are a saving for parents of two- and three-year-olds who want childcare which is not cheap."

"One of my parents with 30 hours was already in employment and paying for childcare – so this just added to her income really."

Support and reduced isolation: For many parents the community around the nursery is an important social network of support and socialisation and accessing additional childcare has enabled their social connectivity, as stated below:

"Parent socialising outside is important. It is harder for the newly arrived, so parents are mixing informally, making friends and learning from others."

Improved family life: The 30 hours entitlement can enhance the quality of home life and parental wellbeing and this was valued by stakeholders:

"The benefits have boosted parents and helped mental health. It positively impacts on parenting providing respite for tired working parents. Children get mix of education and play, development improves but HLE is the key."

Limitations of policy

Impact on non-eligible children: The stakeholder group were concerned that the 30 hour entitlement had impacted negatively on non-eligible children, particularly the less advantaged and children with additional needs, and commented:

"Vulnerable children really miss out. There is a much bigger gap created we've noticed where the 25 hours for these children has gone. Funding has played a big part in take-up."

"Some buy just an afternoon but few do as it's an extra £10 a day – some would love it and we have capacity but they just can't afford it."

Lack of provision and support for children with additional needs: The funding and eligibility criteria has diverted support away from vulnerable children and children with additional needs, and the stakeholders expressed an anxiety about the long-term consequences of this:

"The looked after child is a worry for us. The foster carer didn't have income to access the provision. We are seeing high levels of SEN and the LA funding is insufficient and the process of diagnosis is slow. It's not fully covered by the funding so it puts settings off taking those children most in need – also respite would help these parents."

"Some parents have health problems stopping them from working. The system ends up being arbitrary. Quite a few of my three-year-olds have 3 days at 09.00–15.00. Yet a child with additional needs gets no help at all. A universal system is needed that would help. Then there are children who just go missing – as a seaside town we have some transient families but most are not. Covid-19 actually made them more settled as they couldn't travel."

Equity: There is a recognition by the stakeholders that the 30 hours policy is not equitable and does not contribute to a 'levelling up' agenda. In fact, it is argued that they believe it may be doing the opposite, by widening the gap between those who benefit from the enhanced hours entitlement and those who are not eligible as their parents are not working. There is also evidence from the groups that less advantaged children lost their enhanced hours once the 30 hour policy came in to ensure capacity for eligible working parents. It was suggested that the tension between a policy that prioritised childcare for working parents was working to the detriment of other policies aimed at boosting attainment of less advantaged children as shown below:

"Children would benefit from being here longer but we now feel we are not reaching those who really need it."

"Most who picked up the benefit initially were already paying. In this holiday town employment isn't readily available – a big insurance company employer left, and hotels were shut, so there was a big negative impact from Covid-19 on seasonal work, much of which is poorly paid anyway. So many in real need didn't make the criteria – lot's of children could have benefited."

"My parents could easily pay – it seems the richer you are, the more you benefit."

"Before we could offer disadvantaged children more hours, but it seems to be the more privileged getting it now. two-year-old funding does help close the gap. They are the ones who tend to get less stimulation at home too, they just don't get the quality interaction, and we know how important HLE is to progress. We are not picking up on that as we used too."

Loss of family life: There was some evidence of a concern about the loss of time at home and the impact of long hours on home relationships, as some stated:

"They are a lot more tired. Some felt they were missing out on family and home relationships which is an important part of nurturing and child raising."

"I think 15 hours is enough though – family support and relationships would miss out if it was more."

How feasible is it for the sector to deliver an additional entitlement in terms of capacity and what level of funding would be required?

Commitment to expansion: Most stakeholders expressed a strong commitment that the entitlement should be extended to cover more children and should be offered from an earlier age, and if restricted to those with particular needs, as shown below:

"The entitlement should not just be offered to working parents but perhaps to those in training too. There should also be proper funding for Children with SEND and enlarged staff teams to cope. We certainly have capacity for growth but current rates are inadequate to meet EAL and SEND children's needs."

"We could take more and it would give continuity from 2 years, and that would be good for this community. It would need to be carefully directed to those in need."

Capacity: Most stakeholders indicated that they would welcome expansion as they were not running at full capacity, especially since Covid-19. In some cases the limitation was the physical space which they felt could not accommodate more children without investment but in principle they supported an expansion of hours for more children, as shown below:

“We currently can’t expand the building, we have a limited physical space but with planning permission 100% we’d welcome expansion.”

“We couldn’t take more right now. We’d need capital investment. Expansion would need a capital grant.”

“We could extend the 30 hours without impacting on two-year-olds, because with only 49% take-up and steadily declining, it leaves us with some spare capacity.”

Clarity of policy aims: It was felt that the government needed to be clearer and consistent as to whether the free entitlements available are for childcare or early education, and if it is both then to fund it accordingly, so high-quality provision can be delivered. It was agreed that a childcare focus was unhelpful as all provision should contribute to child outcomes and be focused on the child’s needs first, as shown below:

“It’s been hugely successful for us. The earlier the better really, especially for those most in need. The 30 hours entitlement is flexible for parents needs but for children I think maybe less helpful.”

Quality: There was a general agreement that it would be better to fund better quality, rather than expanding the hours available to more children as stated below:

“Quality depends on a qualified workforce, and it is a budget challenge for us.”

“It’s not just length of experience, the hours, but the quality.”

Funding: Additional hours for more children would be welcomed, but it was universally felt that this would only be feasible if funding levels were increased. Some argued that this additionality could be offered as a disadvantage supplement to incentivise those who offered places to more disadvantaged children or children with additional needs. It was felt that without additional funding any expansion would be unwelcome and unhelpful, and the need for more investment was a case strongly made:

“Early Years needs proper funding and policies; it needs to raise visibility; to reorganise; to recognise the importance of early years; and the earlier the better. We should be looking at it from birth, HLE and involving Health Visitors and this requires investment.”

Eligibility: Stakeholders argued that eligibility criteria and funding applications need to be simplified and made more consistent across the different offers to allow easier access and delivery of the offer. It was also widely felt that eligibility should also be extended to younger children and also children with SEND as stated below:

“It should be free for ALL children from 1 year old.”

“Funding goes to parents at younger age, so entitlement from 1 year.”

“SEND children’s eligibility for support is needed earlier.”

Hours: Most respondents felt 15 hours was not enough to secure child learning benefits or to help parents manage their employment demands. It also does not help their financial sustainability. It was argued that there was no evidence to support the 30 hour entitlement, that for some children and families 30 hours were too many, and that the hours should be available more flexibly and across the whole year, maybe with less hours per week but over 52 weeks. They generally felt that around 25 hours for more children could provide the child learning benefits and also some support for working parents, as shown below:

"I don't think you have to make 30 hours universal. We could make 25 hours universal and then for vulnerable children I'd like to take them for longer, as not one size fits all. There should be more autonomy for parents in the offer to meet their needs individually."

"30 hours is needed in some areas of greatest need, in deprived post codes as there are some families under real stress."

"30 hours spread over the year would work for me, over 51 weeks. It needs continuity, the children can so easily go backwards with long breaks. For equality all children should get the same."

Staffing: It was felt that increased hours and consequent funding could help secure staff and incentivise settings to provide CPD to improve qualifications and so quality of provision. It would also remove the current uncertainty about staffing needs over the year. The respondents were aware of the workforce shortages and the under qualified nature of the workforce and felt it would take time to secure staff at level 3 and above to support any expansion in quality or quantity of hours as shown below:

"We'd need to re-staff it at the beginning, stagger it maybe, but 'yes:'"

Would increasing eligibility give wider benefits to settings?

As indicated in the evidence, the stakeholders identified a number of benefits for settings which increasing eligibility to an enhanced entitlement would provide:

- It would remove the uncertainty over staffing.
- It would enhance financial sustainability and allow longer term planning.
- It would allow the additional funds to be used for CPD and to provide better support for children with special needs.



3 Stakeholder policy preferences

The stakeholders interviewed here were offered a number of policy options, and asked to indicate their preferences. They could express support for more than one option, and these are shown in the table below. It should be noted that this was a small sample of 22 providers

which may not be representative of whole sector. A later section of this report (Section 2, **Views on the ground from parents, providers and teachers**), includes a much larger survey of providers.

Table 1: Policy Options

Policy responses	N=22
Universalise current provision: Make 30 hours policy universal for all three and four year olds.	4
Alternative universal offer: Replace current 15 hour Early Education policy and +15 hour Extended Entitlement policy for working parents with universal Early Education entitlement of 20 or 25 hours per week for children from two years of age.	19
Extending entitlement: Extending eligibility for the 30 hours entitlement to all three and four year olds who qualified for the two year old entitlement, with other existing entitlements remaining the same.	17
Re-targeting entitlement: Extending the 30 hours entitlement to three- and four-year-olds who qualified for the two-year-old offer while reducing the upper income limit.	16
Extend the reach of the free entitlement to a broader age range: Extending the funded places to one- and two-year-olds.	4
Universal funding increase: Alongside any other entitlements increase the hourly rate for providers to be able to ensure quality.	22
Increase funding for disadvantaged children: Alongside any other entitlements increase the hourly rate for disadvantaged children and children with SEND.	18

the stakeholders' preferences revealed that a number of these policy options were popular and were not exclusive to each other, suggesting attributes of several options would be welcomed. in particular, the stakeholders would welcome:

replace current policy: replacing the current 15 hour early education policy and +15 hour extended entitlement policy for working parents with a universal early education entitlement of 20 or 25 hours per week for children from two years of age.

universal funding increase: alongside the enhanced entitlements, they argued for an increase in the hourly rate for providers to be able to ensure quality, and in particular to enable them to recruit and retain more qualified staff.

increase funding for disadvantaged children: alongside any other entitlements, additionally increase the hourly rate for disadvantaged children and children with send.

the main concerns of these stakeholders in their expression of preferences was that current policy did not reach many children who really needed to benefit from early education, particularly those who were growing up in poverty and those who had special needs and disabilities. some felt the entitlement should also be extended to younger children who had these needs. they also felt that the current funding levels did not support the sustainability of high quality provision with trained staff, and that this was a significant barrier to enabling them to close the gap in child outcomes. they expressed the belief that the focus on childcare rather than early education in policy statements was confusing and led to conflicting programme objectives which they were then forced to juggle. in short, more clearly articulated early years policy objectives which foregrounded early education, whilst acknowledging parents' childcare needs, and the importance of appropriately trained and remunerated staff to deliver enhanced child development outcomes, was seen as vital in securing a more coherent and equitable vision and a viable system of early education and care to realise it. the role of government funding to drive this vision was seen as vital as they acknowledged the current market failure to deliver these twin objectives.

Appendices

The background features a dark blue field with several overlapping geometric shapes: a teal triangle in the top right, a purple triangle in the middle left, and a large yellow circle in the bottom right.

Appendix 1

Keywords

30 hours free childcare	Free education and childcare for two-year-olds	Universal, targeted, means tested funding	Impact	Quality	UK	Internationally
Extended entitlement	Early	Universal entitlement	Early education	Childcare versus early education	England	EU
Policy	Two year old funding	Universal offer	Outcomes	Optimal hours	Scotland	
Take-up	Funded childcare	Extended offer	Social mobility	Quality and quantity	Wales	
	Take-up	Early years entitlements	COVID and socio-economic gap	Workforce qualifications	Northern Ireland	
		Targeted offer	School readiness			
		Area based funding	Attainment gap			
		Pattern of delivery – split, integrated	Wellbeing			
		Early Years Pupil Premium	Language and literacy			
		Graduate Leader Fund				
		Maintained versus PVI settings				

Appendix 2

Index Search Results

Search Focus	Search Terms	Search Results	Selected Papers
ECEC Policy Focus	30 hours childcare AND policy OR extended entitlement	BEI: 1 paper BEI: 75 papers	17 papers
	childcare AND policy	ERIC: 231 papers	
ECEC Take-up	30 hours free childcare, AND/OR extended entitlement and policy and take-up	BEI: 1 paper ERIC 1 paper	1 paper
ECEC Quality	30 hours childcare AND early education AND quality	BEI: 1 paper ERIC: 1 paper	1 paper
School Readiness and Attainment Gap	30 hours free childcare, AND school readiness, AND/OR extended entitlement and policy	BEI: 1 paper ERIC: 1 paper	2 papers
	30 hours free childcare AND impact or effect or influence or outcome or result or consequence	BEI: 1 paper ERIC: 1 paper	
	early years pupil premium	BEI: 1 paper ERIC: 1 paper	
Universal Versus Targeted ECEC Provision	COVID pandemic AND impact AND early childhood education	BEI: 6 papers ERIC: 1 paper	6 papers
Impact of Formal Hours in Childcare	early childhood education and care, AND quantity, AND outcomes	BEI: 4 papers ERIC: 4 papers	1 paper

Appendix 3

Early Childhood Education and Care Policy Across the UK

Scotland

The Standards in Scotland's Schools Act 2000 established that all three- and four-year-olds, and some two-year-olds, were entitled to a free, part-time pre-school education place (EURYDICE, 2021). The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 meant three- and four-year-olds, and eligible two-year-olds, were entitled to 600 hours per year of free childcare (up from 475 hours), available through local authority provision or through providers in the private or third sector, for 38 weeks a year. The local authorities are required to offer choice for parents through a range of providers so that the hours can be used in different patterns and integrated with additional (unfunded) hours. This is in line with the Government's new concept of Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) as an integrated provision of education and care that makes no distinction between childcare (0–3), pre-school (3–4) and wrap around care (Scottish Government, 2016). The entitlement was due to be extended to 30 hours for 38 weeks a year (1,140 hours) for eligible two and all three- and four-year olds from August 2020; however, due to the COVID 19 pandemic the legal obligation for local authorities to roll this out has been delayed until August 2021 (Scottish Government, 2021a; Stewart and Reader, 2020). Due to the COVID 19 pandemic the implementation of the '*Funding Follows the Child*' guidance has also delayed even though it remains the long-term policy framework that will support the delivery of funded ELC. When fully implemented, all parents in Scotland will be able to choose to use their child's entitlement at any provider in the public, private, third sector or childminders

(Scottish Government, 2021b) in different combinations and integrated with additional unfunded hours.

A new role has also recently been created for the sector, an *Equity and Excellence Lead*, primarily for leading support for the most disadvantaged children to close the attainment gap. It is a graduate role (teacher or early years graduate) that involves working directly with children as well as leading the development of pedagogy settings in the most deprived areas of Scotland. An interesting aspect of this role is that the Equity and Excellence Lead is independent of the child-staff ratio and therefore quite flexible (Scottish Government, 2021a).

In addition to the universal and extended entitlements there is targeted support through the benefit system. Low-income families may be entitled to the following payments through the Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods programmes that do not affect any other benefits or tax credits they get (mygov.scot, 2021):

- Pregnancy and baby payment;
- Early learning payment;
- School age payment;
- Best Start Foods payments.

Since 2018 Children in Scotland has been managing the Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) Inclusion Fund that provides funding to ELC settings to **support children with additional support needs (ASN)**. **Staff apply for the funding that can be used for** training, resources, equipment and adaptations to support children

with ASN within a setting. The motivation behind the Scottish Government's (2016) expansion in ELC are to:

- improve children's outcomes and help close the poverty-related attainment gap;
- increase family resilience through improved health and wellbeing of children and parents;
- support parents into work, study or training.

The Scottish Government recognises not only the dual nature of provision for children before compulsory education, that of education and childcare for working, studying or training parents, but also highlights how childcare and education can impact children and parents' health and well-being. This is evident in the Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) policy framework for improving outcomes and supporting the well-being of children and young people in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2021c). The approach is based on eight factors or well-being indicators often referred to by their initial letters – SHANARRI (Scottish Government, 2018): Safe; Healthy; Achieving; Nurtured; Active; Respected; Responsible; Included.

As to provision for babies and infants under two, there is no free entitlement for this age group but the Scottish Government (2020) had as of December 2020 delivered 163,397 'Baby Boxes' to expectant parents since the start of the initiative in 2017. 'Baby boxes' contain essential items for the baby's first six months including a mattress and bedding for the box that doubles up as a sleeping space.

In summary, Scotland appears to have adopted a more holistic, integrated approach in ECEC policy by funding which foregrounds initiatives which blend BOTH early education and childcare for working parents. It has also recently extended its universal entitlement to 30 hours of early education from the age of three.

Wales

In Wales, all three- and four-year-olds are entitled to free education of 10 hours per week during school terms. This is called the Foundation Phase and is intended to help children "achieve their full potential in preparation for further learning and life" (Welsh Government, 2015a: 5). Working parents are also entitled to 30 hours a week of a mixture of early education and childcare with a minimum of 10 hours of early education and a maximum of 20 hours of childcare, dependent on what local authorities offer (Welsh Government, 2021), over 48 weeks per year. For the nine weeks of school holidays, the full 30 hours can be taken up as childcare by eligible parents (Welsh Government, 2018). However, "In contrast to Scotland and England, early years education is more frequently accessed through Local Authority (LA) maintained school settings in Wales" (ibid.: 20). Approximately 93 per cent of three- and four-year-olds access some early education provision in maintained schools (ibid: 20–21) and of these 99 per cent of attending children are in maintained provision as part of a primary school (EURYDICE, 2020b).

The funding streams are similar to that of England (Welsh Government, 2018):

1. 12.5 hours entitlement for eligible two-year-olds (Flying Start);
2. Universal 10 hours entitlement for all three- and four-year-olds;
3. Additional 20 hours entitlement for eligible working parents of three- and four-year-olds;
4. Early Years Pupil Deprivation Grant (EYPDG) (Welsh Government, 2015b);
5. Childcare Offer Additional Support Grant (Welsh Government, 2020a).

The funding rate is £4.50 per hour for children entitled to childcare but it is up to the discretion of each Local Authority how much is passed on to providers (Welsh Government, 2020b). As to provision for babies and infants under two, there is no free entitlement for this age group (EURYDICE, 2020b). In addition to the universal and extended entitlements there is targeted childcare support through the benefit system (Universal Credit) and or tax-free childcare. The motivation behind the early education and childcare offer is *“that childcare enables parents to work, supports economic growth, and helps tackle poverty and inequality”* (Welsh Government, 2018: 20).

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, the Pre-School Education Programme (PSEP) provides for 12.5 hours of funded places for three- to four-year-old children in either nursery schools, nursery units or classes in Primary schools, playgroups, day nurseries and day-care providers (EURYDICE, 2020c). The sessions are 2 ½ hours and normally offered in 5 sessions across a week for at least 38 weeks a year during the period September to June in any academic year, which equates to 475 hours a year (DE, 2020). The policy has not been extended further since its inception in 2011 (EURYDICE, 2020c).

All non-statutory providers must, when oversubscribed with applications, ensure that *“available places are targeted at children in their final pre-school year who are from socially disadvantaged circumstances”* (DE, 2020: 8) and it is also expected that pre-school education providers in receipt of funded places are required to employ a qualified teacher or early years specialist (DE, 2020: 12). Extended Service Funding is available to eligible pre-school settings in deprived areas for identifying children with social, emotional, communication and language needs (DE, 2020a). The Getting Ready to Learn programme is a programme for settings providing DE-funded

places to help settings engage with parents in developing a positive home learning environment. The system for funded hours in Northern Ireland is as such different from the rest of the UK. Parents can only use the funded hours for early education, not childcare as can be done, to varying degrees in England, Wales and Scotland.

There is no free entitlement for two-year-olds; however, the Sure Start programme may be available to parents living in disadvantaged areas, offering some childcare and a variety of programmes for two- to three-year-olds with a focus on supporting children’s social and emotional development, communication and language skills, and imagination, in readiness for school (EURYDICE, 2020c).

In relation to the revised policy for Special Educational Needs (DE, 2020b), the Northern Ireland government highlights that policies apply to all different providers in the sector but there does not appear to be any disability access or inclusion fund that provides additional funding to early years settings to support children with special educational needs or disabilities. The Department of Education do however provide funding to the five Education Authorities (EA) in Northern Ireland for their Special Educational Needs Early Years Inclusion Service (SENEYIS) *“which aims to promote the optimum development of pre-school children with special educational needs by providing support to children, families and pre-school settings”* (DE, 2020b: 20). The support is through information and training, workshops, advice and tailored programmes (Education Authority, 2021).

In addition to the PSEP entitlement there is targeted childcare support through the benefit system and or tax-free childcare for working parents. As to provision for children under three, there is no funded entitlement; however, if Pre-School Education Programme places have not been filled by three- and four-year-old children, they may be offered to children under three (EURYDICE, 2020c).

The motivation behind the early education and childcare offer is twofold as set out in the 'Ten Year Strategy' (Northern Ireland Executive, 2015: 8):

1. *Developmental: To give all our children the best start in life, preparing them for lifelong wellbeing and achievement, thereby creating the basis for a better, more prosperous future.*
2. *Employment: To enable parents to join the workforce thereby enhancing prosperity, and to improve gender equality by enabling mothers to join the workforce, return to work, remain in work, work the hours they want and progress in their careers.*

In the document (Northern Ireland Executive, 2015: 11–12), reference is also made to children's well-being as an important element:

childcare services can help deliver fundamental and lasting social change by improving children's health and well-being, building their life chances and enabling them to achieve their full potential.

In summary, in Northern Ireland there appears to be a stronger focus on the importance of early education in its funded provision for three- and four-year-olds but this is a more limited offer and there is much less support for younger children.

Appendix 4

Focus Group Schedule

Current Policy

- Do you currently, or have you previously, offered the 30 hour free childcare entitlement for 3–4 year olds at your setting?
- Did the implementation of the 30 hours entitlement cause any changes in the way your setting operated in terms of children served, and the way you offered places?
- How do you offer the 30 hours? Do you have any stipulations for how parents use their entitlement?
- The 30 hour policy was aimed at making childcare more affordable for working parents – how far do you believe it is achieving this aim?
- What additional benefits do you think those families get? eg in terms of additional hours of employment (income), quality of life, gender equality...
- What benefits do you think children get from the additional hours of care/education they receive?
- Thinking about families who are not entitled to the additional hours, are there children who, in your opinion, would particularly benefit from having an additional funded 15 hours?
- For children who are ineligible – is there a demand from parents for additional hours or are parents happy with the 15 hour offer?
- What are the current challenges of the 30 hours policy from your perspective? Eg funding levels, staffing, capacity, take up, admin?

- What are the current successes of the 30 hours policy from your perspective?
- How does the demographic of the families accessing the 30 hour entitlement compare with those who are not eligible? – is it reflective of the local population?
- Has the 30 hour offer had any impact on the delivery of the 15 hour entitlement for disadvantaged two year old children?
- Would you need additional funding to support an expansion and if so how much more? And what for?
- Are there ways of bringing more funding into the sector without increasing the hourly rate? eg a staff qualification bonus/quality bonus?
- Would increasing eligibility give wider benefits to settings? e.g. having more guaranteed funding to spend on CPD for staff/having longer term stability for staff/reduced bureaucracy.

Future Policy

- Would an expansion/change to the eligibility of the 30 hour offer be welcome for settings? Have you got additional capacity for an expansion? If so under what conditions?
- If the 30 hour entitlement were made universal for all 3–4-year-olds, funded at the current rate of funding per hour, could you afford to offer it?
- If it was adequately funded, what do you feel about a universal entitlement to 30 hours funded childcare? Would it raise numbers overall – remove stigma – emphasise education opportunity, particularly relevant post COVID?
- How feasible is it for you to deliver any additional entitlements in terms of capacity?
- Would an expansion of the entitlement need to be phased in?
- Imagine you were being funded at an adequate hourly rate. If a change were made to the 30 hours policy, which of the following would you most like to see?
- Extending eligibility to 3–4-year-olds who qualified for the two-year-old offer, with other existing entitlements remaining the same.
- Extending eligibility to 3–4-year-olds who qualified for the two-year-old offer but lowering the cap at the top end of the income spectrum, above which families cannot access the 30 hour entitlement.
- Make the 30 hours policy universal for all 3–4-year-olds.
- None of the above, I am happy with the policy as it is.
- Another option