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Room to Grow

School-based nurseries literature review





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Executive summary

Background and context

This literature review was undertaken by the Centre for Research in Early Childhood (CREC) as Phase 2 of the *Room to Grow* project which set out to investigate the implementation, challenges, and effectiveness of school-based nursery (SBN) provision in improving access to high quality early childhood education and childcare. The Department for Education (DfE) strategy to establish school-based nurseries through new capital grant funding is one element in the government's mission to establish high quality early childhood education and care particularly for children facing disadvantage and those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in order to enhance their school readiness.¹ This literature review provides a rapid evidence assessment to identify existing knowledge, gaps, and policy implications related to school-based nurseries.

Methodology

The review was conducted in two parts. Initially a scoping review methodology² was adopted to map recurring themes and synthesise the existing data that was relevant to the inquiry. Secondly, a systematic methodical review process³ was applied to interrogate and analyse in depth the evidence identified in Part 1 and an expanded search was undertaken to ensure coverage of the current knowledge base on SBNs. The identified literature was thematically analysed and critically evaluated, and is presented through seven themes in this report, each of which sets out the evidence relating to the key research questions posed by the *Room to Grow* project. In addition, it was noted that the terminology used in describing and evaluating the different types of early years provision in the sector adds complexity and challenge in evidencing the quality and effectiveness of early years provision and this would benefit from clarification and consistency in research, policy and practice.

¹ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Phase 2 of the school-based nursery programme: Everything you need to know. Available at:

<https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2025/09/nurseries-in-schools-everything-you-need-to-know/>

² Arksey H. and O'Malley L. 2005. Scoping studies: Towards a methodological framework *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 8 (1), 19-32.

³ Cole-Albäck, A. 2020. Children's rights in early childhood: An exploration of child rights pedagogy in England and Finland. Ph.D. Thesis. Birmingham City University in collaboration with the Centre for Research in early Childhood.

Key findings

It should be noted that there is an overall lack of SBN specific research papers, indicating the need for more research on SBNs as the programme rolls out, but the review identified emerging evidence of the potential value and impact of this programme to the government's mission of establishing high quality early education and childcare for all.

Research Question (RQ) 1. What does the existing evidence base say about the quality and effectiveness of school-based nursery provision? Does this differ for different groups?

High quality early education and care, offering early intervention, has clear benefits, particularly for disadvantaged children and those with SEND.⁴ Staff qualifications and leadership competencies are core elements of quality provision, with the presence of trained early years teachers being key to securing enhanced outcomes for disadvantaged children and those with SEND.⁵ SBNs, especially Maintained Nursery Schools (MNSs), are more likely to have these core quality elements of higher staff qualifications, competent leadership, access to CPD and the level of professionalism that impacts on child outcomes.⁶ Ofsted evidence indicates an improving trajectory in the quality judgements of early years school-based provision.⁷ There are clear benefits for children, parents and professionals in offering SBNs, including enhanced school readiness and early identification of SEND and supporting working parents with

⁴ Mathers, S. and Smees, R. 2014. Quality and inequality: Do three- and four-year-olds in deprived areas experience lower quality early years provision? Available at:

https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Quality_inequality_childcare_mathers_29_05_14.pdf; Melhuish, E. 2004. A literature review of the impact of early years provision on young children, with emphasis given to children from disadvantaged backgrounds. London: National Audit Office; Melhuish, E. and Gardiner, J. 2023. Equal hours? The impact of hours spent in early years provision on children's outcomes at age five, by socio-economic background. Available at:

<https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/equal-hours/>; Taggart, B., Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P. and Siraj, I. 2015. How pre-school influences children and young people's attainment and developmental outcomes over time. Research Brief. Available at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/455670/RB455_Effective_pre-school_primary_and_secondary_education_project.pdf.pdf

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Taggart, B., Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P. and Siraj, I. 2015. How pre-school influences children and young people's attainment and developmental outcomes over time. Research Brief. Available at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/455670/RB455_Effective_pre-school_primary_and_secondary_education_project.pdf.pdf

⁷ Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) 2025. Main findings: state-funded schools inspections and outcomes as at 31 August 2025. Available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/state-funded-schools-inspections-and-outcomes-as-at-31-august-2025/main-findings-state-funded-schools-inspections-and-outcomes-as-at-31-august-2025>

managing family life. The evidence points to the added value of expanding SBNs, particularly in areas of deprivation and for children with SEND.

RQ2. For which age range is this provision most appropriate?

There is some evidence that schools are not yet fully able to offer high quality early education and care for children under the age of two and there are significant barriers (funding, workforce and physical environment) to expanding their services for this younger age phase, resulting in a focus within SBNs on children from two-to-four years of age.⁸ There are parental and professional concerns about the threat of a 'schoolification'⁹ and a perceived performativity agenda in school-based provision which might squeeze out play-based and more developmentally appropriate pedagogies and curriculum for younger children and those with SEND. There are significant disincentives for primary schools to offer additional services for younger children, including extended day, all-year-round and wraparound services. Strong leadership and governance are critical factors in ensuring and encouraging quality early years provision for under threes in primary schools.¹⁰

⁸ Department for Education (DfE) 2026. Early years school-based nursery provision operating outside of the typical model. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-school-based-nursery-provision-operating-outside-of-the-typical-model?utm_source=Early+Education&utm_campaign=7f7091428e-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2025_04_26_01_48_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_-f994268a67-459807858&mc_cid=7f7091428e&mc_eid=a2f0a505df

⁹ Broogard-Clausen, B 2015. Schoolification or early years democracy? A cross curricular perspective from Denmark and England. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1463949115616327>; Murray, J. 2025. Premature schoolification during early childhood hinders later academic success and productivity. Available at:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09669760.2025.2481759>

¹⁰ Childcare Works 2025. School-based nurseries: Five case studies. Hosted by the DfE from April, 2026. Available via: <https://www.coramhempfalls.org.uk/childcare/childcare-works-EY-WAC>; Douglas, A. L. 2019. Leadership for quality early childhood education and care: OECD education working paper No. 211. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/leadership-for-quality-early-childhood-education-and-care_6e563bae-en.html; Melhuish, E. and Gardiner, J. 2018. Study of early education and development (SEED): Study of quality of early years provision in England (Revised). Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5b438623e5274a376e24e115/Study_of_quality_of_early_years_provision_in_England.pdf; Palaiologou, I. and Male, T. 2019. Leadership in early childhood education: The case for pedagogical praxis. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1463949118819100>

RQ3. How prevalent is this provision already in the UK?

What other countries use this model?

It is very complex to map the prevalence of SBNs in the UK due to its early stage of implementation and the different systems and methods of recording places and types of early years provision involved. The demographics of children under the age of five are changing and subject to a falling birth rate in most, but not all, areas.¹¹ Family patterns are also changing, with more single child and reconfigured households. The admission of younger children into primary schools is not new and has been increasing over recent years prior to the SBN programme, with SBNs currently offering around 22% of registered early years places.¹² The range of other types of provision in the UK is complex and changing, with a significant drop in the number of childminders¹³ over recent years and Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) group-based providers (GBPs) being the dominant provider type. There is continued low sufficiency of early years provision ('childcare deserts') in many localities, and especially in areas of deprivation and for children with SEND.¹⁴ Most OECD countries separate early years provision from school provision. France has an interesting and comparable policy to provide school-based pre-school programmes to enhance school readiness for less advantaged children which has been shown to have some success in enhancing child outcomes, particularly language.¹⁵

¹¹ Office for National Statistics (ONS) 2025. Births in England and Wales: 2024. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/bulletins/birthsummarytablesenglandandwales/2024>

¹² Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Establishing school-based nursery provision. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision>

¹³ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Childcare and early years provider survey. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-provider-survey/2025>

¹⁴ Hurley, P., Tham, M. and Nguyen, H. 2024. International childcare: Mapping the deserts. Mitchell Institute at Victoria University. Available at: <https://content.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/2024-09/childcare-deserts-international-report.pdf>; Pollard, T. Coote, A., Ewart-Biggs, H., Stephens, T. and Sandher, J. 2023. A fair start for all: A universal basic service approach to early education and care. Available at: <https://neweconomics.org/2023/11/a-fair-start-for-all>

¹⁵ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2024. Education at a glance 2024: OECD Indicators. OECD Publishing, Paris.

RQ4. Beyond nurseries within schools, what relationships do schools currently have with local/feeder early years settings?

Some SBNs have early years provision which is operating independently of, but in partnership with, the school, and others come under the governance of schools.¹⁶ There is limited evidence on the impact of these partnership arrangements, with some appearing to be very loose and others much more closely aligned with the school.¹⁷ Establishing clear and legally secure partnership arrangements with early years partners, with clarity of governance and leadership is seen to be a key factor in successful SBNs.¹⁸

RQ5. What learning can we take from existing examples of successful relationships between schools and early years/feeder early years settings?

The evidence indicates a number of features of successful SBNs which can inform the future roll out of the SBN programme. Successful SBNs appear to establish a strong educational foundation for children from entry which is led by qualified teachers and early years specialists and use evidence-based programmes to support key skills such as language development. They also establish smooth transitions from early years to key stage 1 through staff collaboration and joint working.¹⁹ Successful

¹⁶ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Establishing school-based nursery provision. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision>; Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Guidance: Establishing school-based nursery provision. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision#schools-suitable-for-an-sbn>

¹⁷ Childcare Works 2025. School-based nurseries: Five case studies. Hosted by the DfE from April 2026. Available via: <https://www.coramhempalls.org.uk/childcare/childcare-works-EY-WAC>; Leicestershire County Council 2024. Partnership working in Out of School settings. Available at: <https://resources.leicestershire.gov.uk/sites/resource/files/2023-06/Partnership-working-in-Out-of-School-settings.pdf>

¹⁸ Douglas, A. L. 2019. Leadership for quality early childhood education and care: OECD education working paper No. 211. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/leadership-for-quality-early-childhood-education-and-care_6e563bae-en.html; Melhuish, E. and Gardiner, J. 2018. Study of early education and development (SEED): Study of quality of early years provision in England (Revised). Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5b438623e5274a376e24e115/Study_of_quality_of_early_years_provision_in_England.pdf; Palaiologou, I. and Male, T. 2019. Leadership in early childhood education: The case for pedagogical praxis. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1463949118819100>

¹⁹ Childcare Works 2025. School-based nurseries: Five case studies. Available at:

SBNs work closely with their community and parent body to provide a convenient one-stop drop off and pick up point to make daily routines easier and so encourage attendance.²⁰ They also have strategies for ensuring staff wellbeing leading to low staff turnover, and so securing consistent care and relationship building.²¹ Children and family social relationship building is prioritised and parental engagement is seen as a central part of the school's role. Strong partnership working with specialist resources and support services are also developed.²² In other words, time and attention are given to:

- Leadership and governance
- Ensuring financial sustainability
- Adapting the school environment for younger children
- Staffing, recruitment and CPD.

RQ6. How well set-up are primary schools to host this provision? In which areas are the schools who could engage in further roll-out? What are the major obstacles government should consider?

The evidence indicates that primary schools are well placed to cater for less advantaged and children with SEND as they have good geographical coverage due to being part of a universal and publicly funded education

<https://childcareworks.org.uk/school-based-nurseries-five-case-studies/>; Mathers, S. and Smees, R. 2014. Quality and inequality: Do three- and four-year-olds in deprived areas experience lower quality early years provision? Available at: https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Quality_inequality_childcare_mathers_29_05_14.pdf

²⁰ Department for Education (DfE) 2026. Early years school-based nursery provision operating outside of the typical model. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-school-based-nursery-provision-operating-outside-of-the-typical-model?utm_source=Early+Education&utm_campaign=7f7091428e-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2025_04_26_01_48_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_-f994268a67-459807858&mc_cid=7f7091428e&mc_eid=a2f0a505df

²¹ Local Government Association (LGA) 2023. Early education and childcare: Changes and challenges for the future. Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/early-education-and-childcare-changes-and-challenges-future>

²² Childcare Works 2025. School-based nurseries: Five case studies. Available at: <https://childcareworks.org.uk/school-based-nurseries-five-case-studies/>

system and not dependent on the market for sustainability.²³ SBNs are also targeted for development in the most deprived communities meaning reach to children growing up in poverty is a realistic goal.²⁴ Further roll out of the SBNs can ensure primary schools in areas identified as 'childcare deserts', and those highlighted by the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) measure, are prioritised. Primary schools are also more likely to have access to the specialist support and enhanced universal offer for children with SEND required under the 2026 white paper, *Every Child Achieving and Thriving*. The evidence indicates that working families with older children prefer on-site provision and schools note that school readiness and transition from nursery to reception is easier for staff and children.²⁵ Maintained nursery schools are also well placed to become a key part of the SBN programme,²⁶ perhaps in a linked relationship with feeder primary schools. However, current evidence indicates that primary schools might be more prepared to cater for the over twos, and find catering for the under twos much more difficult.²⁷ Key obstacles²⁸ for primary schools undertaking the development of a SBN as the programme rolls out are:

1. School leadership models and expertise

²³ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Early years provision: Expanding through a school-led model. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/early-years-provision-expanding-through-a-school-led-model>

²⁴ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Phase 2 of the school-based nursery programme: Everything you need to know. Available at: <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2025/09/nurseries-in-schools-everything-you-need-to-know/>

²⁵ Childcare Works 2025. School-based nurseries: Five case studies. Available at: <https://childcareworks.org.uk/school-based-nurseries-five-case-studies/>; Department for Education (DfE) 2026. Early years school-based nursery provision operating outside of the typical model. Available at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6981d052015e2ba11991bb53/Early_years_school-based_nursery_provision_operating_outside_of_the_typical_model.pdf

²⁶ Early Education (EE) 2025. Maintained nursery schools financial outlook: 2025 report. Available at: <https://early-education.org.uk/mns-funding-june-2025/>

²⁷ Local Government Association (LGA) 2023. Early education and childcare: Changes and challenges for the future. Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/early-education-and-childcare-changes-and-challenges-future>

²⁸ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Establishing school-based nursery provision. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision>; Department for Education (DfE) 2026. Early years school-based nursery provision operating outside of the typical model. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-school-based-nursery-provision-operating-outside-of-the-typicalmodel?utm_source=Early+Education&utm_campaign=7f7091428e-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2025_04_26_01_48_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_-f994268a67-459807858&mc_cid=7f7091428e&mc_eid=a2f0a505df

2. Workforce capacity and competence, particularly recruiting, retaining and developing competent staff for the under twos and those with SEND
3. Financing and funding, including navigating the complex system of educational entitlements
4. Inappropriate and difficult to adapt physical environments, indoors and outdoors
5. Complex governance and partnership arrangements
6. Different professional cultures between education and childcare provision
7. Lack of local demand due to demographic changes and cultural preferences.

RQ7. How should government develop this policy going forward for a wider roll-out?

There is emerging evidence that primary schools are well placed to offer SBNs in areas of deprivation and for children with additional needs and it could feasibly become the 'norm' for primary schools to cater for early years children, particularly in areas of deprivation.²⁹ For this to be successfully achieved there will need to be:

- Clarity about the aims of the SBN programme, and its target ages and population groups
- Investment in primary school workforce training from leadership level to front line staff, with very young children's learning and development a key focus
- Investment to financially and professionally incentivise primary schools and staff to take on additional responsibilities in SBNs in deprived communities and for children with SEND (linked to 2026 white paper reforms)

²⁹ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Early years provision: Expanding through a school-led model. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/early-years-provision-expanding-through-a-school-led-model>; Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Early years provision: Expanding through a school-PVI partnership. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/early-years-provision-expanding-through-a-school-pvi-partnership>

- Funding reform and enhancement to enable SBNs to meet quality standards, especially with regard to recruiting and retaining professionalised and qualified staffing for this younger age phase
- Clear guidance about partnership and governance arrangements to ensure sustainability over time and clarity of role and leadership of the provision
- Enhanced and integrated databases locally and nationally, that can track children, places and providers
- Curriculum and pedagogy clarification for foundation stage children in primary schools, particularly in reception classes, to ensure appropriate learning experiences for children from low-income, disadvantaged, diverse communities and for younger children with additional needs
- Guidance to ensure coherence with the *Best Start in Life* Strategies, locally and nationally, ensuring partnership working with Family Hubs and Neighbourhood Health Centres to enable integrated working across education, health, social care and family support
- Commissioning more sustained and longitudinal research on the functioning and impact of SBNs.

Final reflections

The development of SBNs is one strand of a significant policy shift to enhance early education and childcare, health and family support for all young children and families, under the umbrella of the *Best Start in Life* strategy. This heralds a time of significant system change for the early years sector bringing funding, opportunities for expansion and a responsibility to deliver enhanced outcomes for all young children, especially those less advantaged and those with additional needs. This review of evidence tells us that there are very stark disparities in the availability of high-quality early education and childcare across parts of England but where school-based provision exists it serves these target populations well. The evidence in this review indicates that school-based nursery provision, and particularly that which is based in, or working in partnership with MNSs, could lead the way towards achieving universal access to more equitable, inclusive and life-changing early education experiences for all young children and especially those living in

disadvantaged communities and those with additional, diverse and complex needs.

Room to Grow: School-based Nursery places and the disadvantage gap

1. Background and context

The Centre for Research in Early Childhood (CREC) was commissioned to carry out a literature review as Phase 2 of a project entitled *Room to Grow* which set out to investigate the implementation, challenges, and effectiveness of school-based nursery (SBN) provision in improving access to high quality early childhood education and childcare. The Department for Education (DfE) defines School-based Nurseries (SBN) as:

...nursery provision located on a school site. The nursery setting may operate independently from the school or could be run by the school. Some will offer childcare for ages three and four, whereas others will cater for younger children. This will depend on the individual setting as there are different regulations for schools to follow depending on the age group.³⁰

Given the new capital grant funding for this form of early education and care provision, which is in an early stage of implementation, there is a need to identify what is currently known about school-based nurseries and conduct new research about how well they can provide high quality early childhood education and care, particularly for children facing disadvantage. The literature review provides a rapid evidence assessment to identify existing knowledge, gaps, and policy implications related to school-based nurseries.

³⁰ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Phase 2 of the school-based nursery programme: Everything you need to know. Available at: <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2025/09/nurseries-in-schools-everything-you-need-to-know/>

This final report of the literature review provides a nuanced and detailed evaluation of the current evidence base relating to school-based nurseries. It examines evidence about their prevalence, operation, quality, reach and potential contribution to closing the attainment gap for less advantaged children from 9 months of age to compulsory school age. It also draws out policy implications from this current knowledge base. The evidence presented in this report has been thematically grouped, with a focus in each theme on the key research questions which framed this review. It is hoped that this literature review provides an evidence base which can inform future priorities for government policy.

2. Review aims and research questions

The literature review aimed to:

- Summarise existing research and knowledge on the functioning and impact of school-based nurseries or similar provision
- Summarise some of the policy options for reform and further development and identify pros and cons of each.

To meet these aims, the literature review was framed to address seven overarching research questions, set out below. Under each of these questions were a series of sub-questions which enabled a more nuanced interrogation of the data and are contained within the themed findings.

Research Questions (RQs)

- RQ1: What does the existing evidence base say about the quality and effectiveness of school-based nursery provision? Does this differ for different groups?
- RQ2: For which age range is this provision most appropriate?
- RQ3: How prevalent is this provision already in the UK? What other countries use this model?
- RQ4: Beyond nurseries within schools, what relationships do schools currently have with local/feeder early years settings?
- RQ5: What learnings can we take from existing examples of successful relationships between schools and nurseries?

- RQ6: How well set-up are primary schools to host this provision? In which areas are the schools who could engage in further roll-out? What are the major obstacles government should consider?
- RQ7: How should government develop this policy going forward for a wider roll-out?

With SEND being increasingly prevalent in the sector, and with a significant overlap with socio-economic disadvantage, this issue was also looked at, as well as how the roll-out may be impacted by ongoing inequities in funded entitlements between ‘working families’ and those from poorer backgrounds.

3. Review methodology

The literature review was conducted in two parts:

3.1 Part 1: Initial scoping review of literature

This study initially followed a scoping review methodology informed by the methodological framework of Arksey and O’Malley.³¹ This framework has six stages of conduct: 1) specify the research question; 2) identify relevant literature; 3) select studies; 4) map out the data; 5) summarize, synthesize, and report the results; and 6) include expert consultation. The initial scoping review operated as a precursor to a deeper and more thematically focused analysis of the evidence in part 2. It set out to ensure the review was identifying themes that were relevant to the project aims and purposes, able to address the research questions and could identify any gaps in the evidence base. This part culminated in a synthesis of emerging findings,³² and enabled the identification of agreed themes which were used to group the research questions and relevant evidence for further analysis in part 2.

3.2 Part 2: Research analysis and contextualisation

In part 2, a methodical review process was applied, as defined by Cole-Albäck.³³ A methodical review is similar to a systematic review in that it is

³¹ Arksey, H. and O’Malley, L. 2005. Scoping studies: Towards a methodological framework. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 8 (1), 19-32.

³² Pascal, C. and Bertram, T. 2025. Room to Grow: School-based nursery places and the disadvantage gap: Research synthesis: Phase 1 literature review. Unpublished Report.

³³ Cole-Albäck, A. 2020. Children’s rights in early childhood: An exploration of child rights pedagogy in England and Finland. Ph.D. Thesis. Birmingham City University in collaboration with the Centre for Research in early Childhood.

comprehensive, rigorous and transparent following a set protocol of established time frames, base criteria, agreed keywords and an analysis of the evidence base.³⁴ A further selection of scholarly literature was made based upon relevance to the identified themes identified in part 1. In this part it was also deemed appropriate to expand the searches beyond our initial database queries to search the grey literature and include snowball searches. *Snowballing*, also known as *citation chaining*, is the process of searching the references of included articles, to identify other relevant material.³⁵ Internet searches using key words for the database searches were also conducted. The evidence identified in both part 1 and 2 was then explored in detail and collated under the themes and evaluated in relation to key policy priorities as identified in the review questions.

3.3 Part 2: Search strategy

Our search used well established databases (see Table 1) with iterative search strings as agreed.

(See Appendix 1 for summary tables of the search terms, searches conducted, and their results).

3.4 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The eligibility criteria applied to each of these searches is set out in Table 1 below:

³⁴ Booth, A., Sutton, A., Clowes, M. and Martyn-St James, M. 2025. *Systematic approaches to a successful literature review*. 4th edition. London: Sage.

³⁵ Oxbridge Essays 2025. *Snowballing in research: A guide to citation chaining*. Available at: <https://www.oxbridgeessays.com/blog/snowballing-in-research-a-complete-guide-to-citation-chaining/>

Table 1: Search Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Data Sources	<p>Scholarly bibliographic data bases, including ERIC; British Education Index; GoogleScholar; ProQuest; <u>EBSCOHOST</u>; <u>CORE</u>; <u>CREDOREFERENCE</u></p> <p>Relevant grey literature, including websites of government and key organisations</p> <p>Government Research and Statistics sites; BERA; Early Education; TACTYC; NEU; OECD; EU</p>
Time Frame	<p>Published evidence from 2015-2025</p> <p>(unless an earlier study is viewed as relevant)</p>
Geography	<p>Evidence from England and devolved nations but with a rapid search for similar provision internationally</p>
Language	<p>English</p>
Population (Age and characteristics)	<p>Primary focus on two-to-five-year-olds, particularly from low-income households and with SEND</p>
EY Provision (Sector and type)	<p>All types of EY provision (PVI and maintained) located on or near school sites</p>

3.5 Data extraction, critical appraisal and thematic coding

Searches were conducted across the selected databases and grey literature. After removing duplicates and irrelevant articles, those articles/documents deemed relevant were progressed to full text screening, which involved reading each article/document in its entirety. Evaluation of each study or evidence report was assessed for its relevance to the research aims, research questions, and curated for use in the report.

The analysis of the evidence base in both phases of the review identified seven themes (see Table 2) which provide the framework for presenting the findings from this review. Each theme is linked to the research questions set out in the front of this report and shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Key Themes Framing the Review

Theme	Research Question
1. Statistics: Cohort numbers and ages in primary schools	RQ3. How prevalent is this provision already in the UK? What other countries use this model?
2. School-based Partnerships and Age Appropriateness	RQ2. For which age range is this provision most appropriate? RQ4. Beyond nurseries within schools, what relationships do schools currently have with local/feeder early years settings?
3. Quality in SBNs (Staffing, Environment, Curriculum/Pedagogy, Parents/HLE, Inclusion/SEND)	RQ1. What does the existing evidence base say about the quality and effectiveness of school-based nursery provision? Does this differ for different groups?

<p>4. SBN Effectiveness and Child Outcomes/GLD</p>	<p>RQ1. What does the existing evidence base say about the quality and effectiveness of school-based nursery provision? Does this differ for different groups?</p>
<p>5. Expansion and Reach Potential</p>	<p>RQ6. How well set-up are primary schools to host this provision? In which areas are the schools who could engage in further roll-out? What are the major obstacles government should consider?</p> <p><i>Working Families</i></p> <p><i>How well is this type of provision able to cater for working families?</i></p> <p><i>Low-income and SEND groups</i></p> <p><i>What are the considerations for key vulnerable groups, including those on low-incomes, and those with SEND?</i></p>
<p>6. Success Factors</p>	<p>RQ5. What learnings can we take from existing examples of successful relationships between schools and nurseries?</p>
<p>7. Learning for Policy and Roll Out</p>	<p>RQ7. How should government develop this policy going forward for a wider roll-out?</p>

4. Review findings

The evidence collected in the part 1 and part 2 reviews is reported under seven key themes and linked to the research questions. The findings begin with a discussion of nomenclature or terminology which is complex, culturally shaped and highly varied with regard to similar concepts and forms of early years provision in the research literature.

4.1 Terminology

It is pertinent at the start of this literature review to make a short comment on the terminology, or words we use, when researching the lives of children in their early years and the types of early years settings which are offered. Terminology and nomenclature in relation to provision for young children, whether on school sites or in the community, is complex, divisive and contentious; for example: education or childcare; nursery or preschool or kindergarten or day nursery; or home based or family based. This complexity can be confusing for both providers and parents. What we call things is significant and meaningful, often having connotations and cultural meanings beyond the label. The language we use can often directly or indirectly shape the way we see the world.

Froebel talked about 'Kindergarten', the garden of children where the seeds are sown, a place where children can grow and develop at their own pace, nurtured by knowledgeable and supportive adults.³⁶ UNESCO uses 'Early Childhood Care and Education' (ECCE) for the pre-primary school phase. UNESCO believes ECCE that is truly inclusive is much more than just preparation for primary school. It can be the foundation for emotional wellbeing and learning throughout life.³⁷ They noted in 2021 that 28% of countries globally have made pre-primary education compulsory.³⁸ The International Standard Classification for Education (ISCED) is the official framework used to facilitate international comparisons of education systems. They have designated this phase as 'ISCED 0', primary education

³⁶ Tovey, H. 2020. Froebel's principles and practice today. Available at:

<https://files.froebel.org.uk/production/documents/FT-Froebels-principles-and-practice-today.pdf>

³⁷ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 2025. What you need to know about early childhood care and education. Available at: <https://www.unesco.org/en/early-childhood-education>

³⁸ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 2021 updated 2024.

Press release: UNESCO urges governments to make early childhood education accessible for all.

Available at: <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-urges-governments-make-early-childhood-education-accessible-all>

as 'ISCED 1', lower secondary education as ISCED 2 and so forth.³⁹ But why should early childhood education be considered '0'? Should it not be '1'? Many countries and research journals tend to use the term '*Early Childhood Education and Development*' (ECD or ECED) placing the emphasis on the children's opportunity to learn and thrive.

In the UK 'childcare', and 'early education' or 'early years' are terms used in tandem. 'Childcare' suggests the offer is for spaces primarily created for freeing parents for employment whilst keeping children safe. When 'early education' or 'early years' is foregrounded it is considered that learning and development for the child are central to the offer. The description of school-based 'nurseries' reflects this complexity and means there is a real difficulty in tracking numbers of under fives in school-based nurseries in government and provider databases and census returns.

4.2 Theme 1: Statistics: Providers, places and location

The evidence in this theme addresses **RQ3: How prevalent is this provision already in the UK?** The evidence shows the trends in demographic data for the under fives cohort and the changing composition of families. It also reports on how many under fives are currently on primary school rolls broken down by age and how this has changed over the last three years. These data precede the introduction of the school-based nursery initiative, revealing that primary schools had already been receiving pre-compulsory aged children for some while.

It should be noted that finding definitive statistics on the number of provider types and the number of places offered by these different forms of provision is very complex and difficult due to recording on different databases and to different time scales and for different purposes. The provider types are grouped variously on different databases and terminology is not consistent. This is a real challenge for tracking providers and places across the early years sector for those working at strategic and operational levels. In this report we have attempted to collate and map these numbers as far as we have been able but should point to a note of caution on their complete accuracy. However, we do believe they reveal patterns of provision types and places.

³⁹ World Bank 2026. International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). Available at: <https://datatopics.worldbank.org/education/wRsc/classification#:~:text=The%20International%20Standard%20Classification%20of,revise%20in%201997%20and%202011>

Number of children under five years and family composition

The Office for National Statistics suggests (Table 3) there were in 2024 about 3.57 million children under the age of five in the UK as analysed by Statista.⁴⁰

Table 3: Numbers of Children under the age of five in the UK in 2026

Age	Number
Under 1	667,994
1 years old	690,113
2 years old	732,532
3 years olds	728,400
4 years olds	755,117
Total	3,574,156

Source: Statista 2026

The number of under fives in the UK is significant but falling. The drop in birth rate is unevenly spread across regions and amongst different groups in society. These are notable demographic changes. Several regions in England have experienced a decline in live births including North East, East Midlands, East, South East and South West. The West Midlands and London however have experienced an increase in live births.⁴¹ Demographic changes in the under five population impacts not only on early years provision but also on the experience and make up of family life.

⁴⁰ Statista 2026. Population of young children (aged 0-4) in the United Kingdom from 1971 to 2024, by single year of age. Available at: https://www.statista.com/statistics/766134/uk-young-children-population-by-single-year-of-age/?srsltid=AfmBOor9mxPUyLzPIGtj4Yw9L-vto45VQdRMVzj9D_ORihnEphBnWHjR#:~:text=Population%20of%20young%20children%20in,three%2C%20and%20755%2C117%20aged%20four

⁴¹ Office for National Statistics (ONS) 2025. Births in England and Wales: 2024. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/bulletins/birthsummarytablesenglandandwales/2024>

Family patterns are also changing. Fertility rates are dropping worldwide and in the UK 50% of children will leave school without having lived with both of their birth parents and they are less likely to have siblings.⁴² Also, women are having children later in life. ONS demographic projections show one child families will shortly reach 50%, with likely older parents and grandparents than previously. These changing demographics will impact on school-based nurseries but also on the characteristics of family life for these children.

Type and number of childcare and early years providers in England

In the Childcare and Early Years Provider Survey, the DfE identify three overarching types of childcare providers:⁴³

1. **Childminders:** Ofsted-registered childminders operating in domestic settings.

2. **School-based childcare providers:**
 - a. **Maintained nursery schools:** These are purpose-built maintained schools specifically for children in their early years and with a qualified teacher present

 - b. **Nursery class childcare settings:** These are other maintained schools, and non-maintained schools, offering nursery provision.

3. **Group-based providers:** These are other childcare providers (such as playgroups and day nurseries) operating on non-domestic premises.
 - a. **Private/Independent group-based providers:** These are private companies and include employer-run childcare for employees

⁴² Office for National Statistics (ONS) 2023. Families and households in the UK: 2022. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2022>

⁴³ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Childcare and early years provider survey. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-provider-survey/2025>

- b. Voluntary group-based providers: These are voluntary organisations, including community groups, charities, churches, or religious groups.

The numbers of each of these types of providers in England in 2025 (as far as we could ascertain from different databases) are set out in Table 4 but information on their location is complex to map.

Table 4: Number of early years provider by type in England in 2025

Provider Type	Number of providers
Total of School-based Providers (maintained nursery schools and nursery classes)	9,900
Maintained Nursery Schools	400
Maintained Nursery Classes	9,500
Childminders	22,300
Private and Voluntary Group-Based Providers	21,400

Source: Department for Education⁴⁴

These data reveal the diversity of early years provider types in England. Longitudinal data from the DfE suggests since 2018 a significant drop in the number of childminders. They also show an increase in school-based providers from 8,600 in 2018 to 9,900 in 2025.⁴⁵ Even with these changes in provision the DfE statistics reveal that childminders are the most numerous type of provider but it should be noted that they cater for smaller numbers of children. Private and voluntary providers are almost equally numerous and cater for more children. School-based providers (nursery schools and nursery classes) are smaller in number but for the less advantaged and children with SEND they become more significant as a

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

provider within the sector. Further evidence on places offered in the different types of provision and take up by less advantaged children and children with SEND is set out in subsequent sections of this report.

Number and distribution of childcare and early education places

The 2025 Ofsted report offers an estimate of the number of childcare and early education places in England and breaks these down by provider types as shown in Table 5 (noting that some of the categories in the table are subsets of each other).⁴⁶ The most recent reliable figures for school-based nursery places are provided by the DfE.⁴⁷ Caution must be taken when interpreting or comparing these figures from different sources and at different dates. They are the most recent sources located and reflect the challenges with locating accurate data on provider places as highlighted earlier in this report. Taken as such these data indicate that currently school-based places are a relatively small proportion of the total childcare and early education places offered but reveal the opportunity for expansion in school-based provision. It is also interesting to note that although 69% of group-based providers, 61% of school-based providers and 42% of childminders reported having spare places in July 2025,⁴⁸ the total number of places provided by all types of providers is much smaller than the total number of under five children listed above in Table 3, suggesting a shortfall in places overall.

⁴⁶ Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) 2025. Main findings: Childcare providers and inspections as at 31 August 2025. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childcare-providers-and-inspections-as-at-31-august-2025/main-findings-childcare-providers-and-inspections-as-at-31-august-2025#figure3-data>

⁴⁷ Department for Education (DfE) 2022. Childcare and early years provider survey Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-provider-survey/2022>

⁴⁸ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Childcare and early years provider survey. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-provider-survey/2025>

Table 5: Number of childcare places offered by providers on the Early Years Register (EYR) as at 15 December 2022 and 31 August 2025

Provider Type	Number of Places
All providers	1.29 million
Childcare on non-domestic premises (Ofsted 2025)	1.14 million
Childminders (Ofsted 2025)	152,000
Childcare on domestic premises (Ofsted 2025c)	5,140
Maintained Nursery Schools (DfE 2022 – using Ofsted data)	35,600
Maintained Nursery Classes (DfE 2022 – using Ofsted data)	292,300

Source: DfE (2022 footnote 45) and Ofsted (2025 footnote 44)

Prevalence of SBN provision

DfE primary school headcounts reveal that prior to the introduction of the SBN programme, some primary schools were admitting children under the age of one onto their school roll, with a growing number of under threes over the last three years (2023-2025), whilst the number of three-to-five-year-olds is falling, as shown in Table 6.⁴⁹ Little evidence is available about the funding, provision and governance arrangements for these younger children admitted to primary schools prior to 2024.

⁴⁹ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Schools, pupils and their characteristics: Academic year 2024/25. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2024-25>

Table 6: Primary school headcounts for under fives 2023-2025

	2023	2024	2025
Birth-1 year	53	109	146
1-2 years	4,328	4,693	5,343
2-3 years	52,501	52,143	55,096
3-4 years	212,605	209,854	207,997
4-5 years	594,809	585,462	569,057

Source: Department for Education

As noted above, it is evident that pre-compulsory age children have been a feature of primary schools for some while prior to the introduction of the SBN programme. In February 2025, SBNs made up about 22% of registered early education places.⁵⁰

In the initial phase, 300 school-based nurseries received £37m in government funding to re-purpose spare space for new or expanded nursery provision.⁵¹

As of September 2025, the government confirmed there were 4,000 extra school-based nursery places available located in 189 of the 300 new or expanded nurseries. 7,000 more places are expected to be available as of September 2026.⁵² In September 2025, the government confirmed there

⁵⁰ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Establishing school-based nursery provision. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision>

⁵¹ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Press release: Parents to save thousands through school-based nursery places. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/parents-to-save-thousands-through-school-based-nursery-places>; Department for Education (DfE) 2025e. School-based nursery capital grant: Application outcomes. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-based-nursery-capital-grant-application-outcomes>

⁵² Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Press release: Government delivers thousands more school-based nursery places. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-delivers-thousands-more-school-based-nursery-places>

were 4,000 extra school-based nursery places available located in 189 of the 300 new or expanded nurseries.⁵³ A press release from March 2026 states that a further 331 schools across the country have been successful in securing funding to build or expand nurseries on their site. These nurseries will create over 6,000 more childcare places, on top of the now up to 6,000 already being delivered from the first phase of the programme.⁵⁴ The majority of Phase 1 SBNs are in the North and Northeast or Midlands. For Phase 2, the Government's goal is to build capacity in areas of need. They aim to build new SBNs across the country, especially in places that are disadvantaged.⁵⁵

Despite recognising that the government initiative is in an early stage, there has been some criticism of where the Phase 1 new SBNs are; whether *new* SBNs have been funded (as opposed to funding the expansion of existing provision); and whether the funding has really gone to schools with a higher FSM percentage.⁵⁶ Although Bradbury *et al.*'s research showed that the majority of SBNs who received Phase 1 funding are in the North and Midlands, they are critical of the fact that in 58% of schools, funding is being used to expand existing provision rather than creating new provision. They do acknowledge that there are areas where there are more new SBNs than those expanding (South East, East of England, South West and East Midlands); however, they are critical of the fact that there are only seven new nurseries in London and seven in the North East. Bradbury *et al.* do acknowledge that the policy has worked in targeting some highly disadvantaged areas but point out that 58% of the schools had below average FSM rates.⁵⁷

Rounded to the nearest 100, the DfE states there were 9,500 maintained and non-maintained nursery classes in England in May 2025.⁵⁸ With 16,743

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Department for Education DfE 2026. Press release: New school nurseries to help cut childcare costs in poorest areas. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-school-nurseries-to-help-cut-childcare-costs-in-poorest-areas> Accessed 19 April 2026.

⁵⁵ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Phase 2 of the school-based nursery programme: Everything you need to know. Available at: <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2025/09/nurseries-in-schools-everything-you-need-to-know/>

⁵⁶ Bradbury, A., Garland, R. and Sailer, K. 2006. The government has promised many new nurseries based in primary schools – but where are they opening? Available at: <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/2026/01/22/the-government-has-promised-many-new-nurseries-based-in-primary-schools-but-where-are-they-opening/>

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Childcare and early years provider survey. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-provider-survey/2025>

primary schools in England⁵⁹ there is as such potential for expansion of existing as well as new provision. Of the 300 schools that were successful in their application for the first round of the SBN grant, 58% already had some form of existing school led nursery and 42% planned to create a new setup.⁶⁰ Evidence on how well set up individual primary schools are to be able to expand is discussed later in this report, whether in relation to funding, physical space, retain and recruit staff or knowledge and understanding of early childhood pedagogy, to be able to deliver high-quality education and care.

Location of SBNs

In 2024, the Coram Family and Childcare annual childcare survey revealed low sufficiency levels across all categories of current provision with less than half of local authorities having enough childcare for children who are eligible for the current two-year-old funded entitlement.⁶¹ However, in their 2025 survey they used new sufficiency questions and found high levels of sufficiency reported for all the funded entitlements. Around 8 in 10 local authorities reported having enough places for at least 75% of children in their area for all the funded entitlements. However, for parents of older children, parents working atypical hours, children with SEND, and families in rural areas, the trends of low sufficiency remained the same as in previous years. Less than a third of local authorities said for instance that they had enough places for at least 75% of children with SEND.⁶²

Orso *et al.* identified in 2024 that there is currently not only unequal access to high-quality childcare in England, but also unequal access to childcare provision per se. That means that where you live affects your access to childcare.⁶³ Hurley *et al.* use the term 'childcare deserts' for areas with low access to childcare for children under five. Their definition is

⁵⁹ Local Government Association (LGA) 2025. Number of state-funded primary schools in England. Available at:

https://lginform.local.gov.uk/reports/lgastandard?mod-metric=2198&mod-area=E92000001&mod-group=AllRegions_England&mod-type=namedComparisonGroup&mod-period=1

⁶⁰ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. School-based nursery capital grant 2024 to 2025: successful applicants. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/csv-preview/6821decbd9c9bb76078f7f1f/School-based_nurseries_successful_applicant_list.csv

⁶¹ Hodges, L., Shorto, S. and Goddard, E. 2024. The childcare survey 2024: Coram Family and Childcare. Available at: <https://www.coram.org.uk/resource/childcare-survey-2024/?gad>

⁶² Hodges, L., Goddard, E., Shorto, S. and Knights-Toomer, A. 2025. The childcare survey 2025: Coram Family and Childcare. Available at: <https://www.coram.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/ChildcareSurvey2025-1.pdf>

⁶³ Orso, L., Jones, L., Cattan, S., Roy-Chowdhury, V. and Snaquest, C. 2024. Where you live shouldn't stop you accessing the very best childcare – but in some places it does. Available at:

<https://www.nesta.org.uk/data-visualisation-and-interactive/where-you-live-shouldnt-stop-you-accessing-the-very-best-childcare-but-in-some-places-it-does/>

“where there are less than 0.333 places per child, or more than 3 children per place” (p4).⁶⁴ Recognising that all counties have some areas that can be classified as childcare deserts, England has 30% of children living in ‘childcare deserts’. The percentage for the other UK nations is 23% in Northern Ireland, 19% in Wales and 7% in Scotland (these numbers include childminders).⁶⁵ Exactly half of local authorities in England meet the definition of ‘childcare desert’ according to Pollard *et al.*, with a large majority of these being the most deprived local authorities.⁶⁶

To address the problem of ‘childcare deserts’, Pollard *et al.* discuss the concept of universal basic services (UBS).⁶⁷ Their notion of UBS is that it is based on the premise that *“the first job of good government is to make sure everyone’s basic needs are met’ and that ‘this is often best achieved through collective services rather than individual market transactions.”* They set out a framework that public services should be fulfilling:

- Free or affordable access according to need, not ability to pay
- A mixed economy of provision, bound by a set of public interest obligations
- Guaranteed fair pay and conditions for service workers
- Environmental sustainability built into the design and delivery of services
- Devolved powers to the lowest appropriate level.

Pollard *et al.* believe this framework *“provides a basis to reimagine the design and delivery of ECEC provision as a universal public service that can better meet the needs of children, parents and staff, while making a positive contribution to the economy, society, and environment in which it sits”* (p3).

⁶⁴ Hurley, P., Tham, M. and Nguyen, H. 2024. International childcare: Mapping the deserts. Mitchell Institute at Victoria University. Available at: <https://content.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/2024-09/childcare-deserts-international-report.pdf>

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Pollard, T., Coote, A., Ewart-Biggs, H., Stephens, T. and Sandher, J. 2023. A fair start for all: A universal basic service approach to early education and care. Available at: <https://neweconomics.org/2023/11/a-fair-start-for-all>

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Pollard *et al.* set out a vision that rests on a new funding system that could be rolled out to eventually replace the existing system; however, this would require greater commitment from the government as serious concerns remain about the sufficiency of the hourly funding, the availability of staff and their working conditions, and the implications for the quantity and quality of available provision.

Writing for the Institute for Fiscal Studies, Farquharson states:

One potential advantage of Labour's plans is that the government can play a more direct role in targeting where new provision is created. That could help to nudge the market towards areas with lower levels of provision. But the party will need to exercise care in choosing these locations: the most disadvantaged areas, where childcare supply is lowest, also tend to have lower demand for childcare (because of lower employment rates and lower eligibility for the free childcare offer). Any centrally-planned shortlist should take account of demand as well as supply.⁶⁸

The majority of Phase 1 school-based nurseries are in the North or Midlands, including around one in ten in the North East. Phase 2 was launched in September 2025, with the goal to build capacity in areas of need. The ultimate aim is to build new school-based nurseries all over the country, especially in places that are disadvantaged.⁶⁹

Critical questions

Although the government has stated that SBNs are to be seen as just one feature of the diverse early years landscape in England that contribute to delivering the Government's expanded childcare entitlements, the expansion to date has not come without critical debate. The Early Years Alliance, a large early years membership organisation with 14,000 members supporting 80,000 families in England⁷⁰ has received numerous case study reports of primary schools terminating leases with PVI providers operating on their premises with a range of justifications, including the desire to more fully absorb the early years provision into the

⁶⁸ Farquharson, C. 2024. Labour's plans to build childcare spaces in schools will nudge the market in a different direction - but not transform it. Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/articles/labours-plans-build-childcare-spaces-schools-will-nudge-market-different-direction-not>

⁶⁹ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Phase 2 of the school-based nursery programme: Everything you need to know. Available at: <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2025/09/nurseries-in-schools-everything-you-need-to-know/>

⁷⁰ Early Years Alliance (EYA) 2026. About us. Available at: <https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/about-us/>

school governance and leadership.⁷¹ The Early Years Alliance has therefore called for a ban on primary schools that have forced private, voluntary or independent (PVI) settings to close and leave their premises, for the primary school to then apply for the government school-based funding for themselves. The National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) recognises this may have been an unintended consequence of how Phase 1 of the SBN policy was implemented and welcomes that guidance has been strengthened to discourage this practice for the second and third phase of the policy. The NDNA asked the government to ensure that public money is not being used to create new childcare places that put existing local providers out of business.⁷²

In 2025, the Early Years Alliance filed a Freedom of Information request to the DfE, asking how many of the primary schools awarded school-based nursery funding have had PVI providers operating on their premises over the past two years, and how many had served notice on PVI providers operating on their premises over the same period. However, the DfE has since confirmed that it does not hold that information.⁷³

International evidence

International comparisons and cross-national studies can be helpful in developing and evaluating national policy agendas in the early years. However, an appreciation of details, national context and cultural differences is imperative for nuanced and prudent transference of knowledge and strategies to other contexts. The OECD *Education at a Glance* report provides a comprehensive overview of education systems worldwide, focusing on equity in education and its relationship with labour market outcomes.⁷⁴ This report reveals there is wide variation in the age of compulsory education internationally, with increasing numbers of OECD countries making early education universal and compulsory from three or four years of age. Twelve OECD countries have extended compulsory

⁷¹ Early Years Alliance (EYA) 2025. Alliance calls for ban on schools closing PVI early years settings to take up government school-based nursery funding. Available at:

<https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/news-events/news/alliance-calls-ban-schools-closing-pvi-early-years-settings-take-government-school/>

⁷² National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) 2025. Submission EYS0112: Written evidence submitted to the Education Committee. Available at:

<https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/149820/pdf/>

⁷³ Early Years Alliance (EYA) 2025. Alliance calls for ban on schools closing PVI early years settings to take up government school-based nursery funding. Available at:

<https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/news-events/news/alliance-calls-ban-schools-closing-pvi-early-years-settings-take-government-school/>

⁷⁴ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2024. *Education at a glance 2024: OECD Indicators*. OECD Publishing: Paris.

education into at least one year of pre-primary and in France and Hungary attendance is compulsory at three years but not in a school building. It reflects a growing recognition of the importance of early childhood education. Where the age of admission to elementary/primary school has been lowered to the year prior to compulsory schooling, a common strategy over the last decade, it is often on a school site. However, provision catering for even younger children is generally not provided in a school building or on a school site but is seen as a separate organisation with separate governance and funding arrangements to school provision.

In countries with well-established early education for under fives for example France and Denmark, it is not generally on school sites and viewed as a separate entity to schools, and is governed separately. However, there has been a recent initiative in France to enable children to access school-based pre-school programmes from the age of two which provides some interesting and relevant evidence. Herbaut *et al.* led a study to assess the effects of early schooling in France, where children can access school-based preschool programmes from the age of two. The aim of this policy is to increase readiness for school, and it especially targets children from disadvantaged areas. The authors used the Elfe cohort survey (a French longitudinal study of children which began in 2011) to estimate the effect of the policy on child development outcomes at age three and five, and the contribution it makes to reducing developmental gaps among children. The study controlled for a rich set of potential confounding variables, including children's baseline level of development and access to other forms of early years provision. Using OLS regressions, the study found that early schooling (provision on school sites) had a positive effect on motor skills, language skills, and knowledge of letters and numbers and to a lesser extent on social and self-help skills. Conversely, however, it had no effect on non-verbal reasoning abilities. They also found that disadvantaged children and those with a low level of skills at age two benefited more from early schooling. The authors used logistic regressions to show that socially disadvantaged children and high-skilled children were more likely to access early schooling. The study concludes that to make a more effective contribution to reducing gaps in child development, early schooling in France should be made more accessible to 'low-skilled' children.⁷⁵

⁷⁵Herbaut, E., Farges, G., Giret, G-F. 2025. Can early schooling at age 2 narrow the gaps in child development? Evidence from the French Elfe cohort. *Oxford Review of Education*, 51 (3), 320-338.

4.3 Theme 2: Local partnerships and age appropriateness of school-based nurseries

The evidence in this theme addresses **RQ4 Beyond nurseries within schools, what relationships do schools currently have with local/feeder early years settings?** And **RQ2 For which age range is this provision most appropriate?** The evidence presented explores evidence about the partnership relationships between schools and other local early years providers and whether primary schools are better set up to cater for the older ages of this age group (three to four years) or able to provide quality experiences to younger children from 9 months of age. The review also looked for evidence of any potential limitations for school-based nurseries to be able to cater to younger age groups (e.g. physical environment requirements involving structural changes to buildings and issues with staff age-range expertise). This theme sets out an analysis of current evidence about what is known about the capacity of primary schools to cater for children from 9 months of age and what the limitations and barriers are to them meeting the needs of significantly younger aged children.

Range of early years partnerships and relationships with schools

There are a range of different provider partnership relationships on school sites as identified by the DfE:⁷⁶ childminders, school-based childcare providers and group-based providers. An SBN is nursery provision located on a school site or satellite site. This form of provision can operate under different models:⁷⁷

- Nursery classes that are an embedded part of a school where the nursery children are enrolled as pupils and included in the school age range
- Nursery units that are governor run as a community facility in a maintained school
- Provision run by a PVI nursery leasing space on a school premises or operating on the school's behalf

⁷⁶ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Childcare and early years provider survey. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-provider-survey/2025>

⁷⁷ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Establishing school-based nursery provision. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision>

- Provision run by a childminder or a group of childminders, leasing space on a school premises
- Maintained nursery schools, which are schools that only offer early education provision.

Some of the nursery provision on school sites is operating independently and some are under the governance of the school. It is difficult to evidence in detail what types of providers are currently offering early education on primary school sites and what the governance arrangements are due to the individual and local context of the school setting and its pre-existing partnership arrangements with other nursery providers as evident in the 5 case studies produced by Childcare Works. The five case studies and other resources used to be available to the general public until March 2026 but are currently hosted by the DfE and only available on the DfE EY Team K-Hub titled Early Years Expansion and Wraparound Programmes.⁷⁸ However, the 5 case studies are summarised in Appendix 2.

Benefits and limitations of school-based delivery models

There is some evidence reported in case study evidence (Appendix 2) that smaller non-school settings are seen by parents and professionals as more homely and intimate for younger children, with close bonding with a key worker and fewer children allowing for closer socialisation and friendships, individualised attention and an easier transition from home for parent and child. Childminder settings are also seen as more flexible about taking younger siblings and offer pre- and post- school care for older siblings, so can provide a convenient one-stop drop off.

According to the DfE, the value of current school-based providers is that they make up a greater share of places in the most deprived areas and have a greater proportion of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) compared with private group-based providers.⁷⁹ It is worth noting that this is closely linked to schools admission policies which means they are less likely to turn these families away. SBNs therefore can play a key role in helping to establish and build relationships between families and schools ahead of formal education and offer convenience for parents and carers with other children already attending the primary school. Additionally, it is suggested that opening or expanding SBN

⁷⁸ Childcare Works 2025. School-based nurseries: Five case studies. Hosted by the DfE from April 2026. Available from: <https://www.coramhempshalls.org.uk/childcare/childcare-works-EY-WAC>

⁷⁹ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Phase 2 of the school-based nursery programme: Everything you need to know. Available at: <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2025/09/nurseries-in-schools-everything-you-need-to-know/>

provision can be an effective use of surplus space in school buildings or on a school site, where this space is not needed in the immediate future for other provision. SBNs are likely to have more resources and access to larger spaces and equipment, including the outdoors for physical activity and staffrooms for discussions; staff development is more likely to be readily available; and there is increased opportunity for economies of scale. DfE guidance suggests that spaces for the youngest children can be softened with fabrics and furniture to create a less institutionalised environment.⁸⁰ Other beneficial features of SBNs, according to the DfE is the continuity, from nursery to reception. On-site SBNs can, in addition, provide specific locally delivered support to children and families due to their location such as for instance creating places for two-year-olds because of identified local need.⁸¹ Children and parents are able to meet others from different communities and create socially cohesive school-based spaces which can become 'community anchors' within a locality which acknowledge and build upon the rich diversity of cultural capital and funds of knowledge that children and families bring.

Early 2025 the DfE conducted a survey of primary school leaders asking whether nursery provision was available on their school site.⁸² Those who responded by saying they had nursery provision on site were asked what the benefits were (n = 436). The leaders were able to select all responses they felt applied to their school and the result was as illustrated in Table 7 below. This is in line with above sources.

⁸⁰ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Guidance: Establishing school-based nursery provision. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision#schools-suitable-for-an-sbn>

⁸¹ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Early years provision: Expanding through a school-PVI partnership. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/early-years-provision-expanding-through-a-school-pvi-partnership>

⁸² Department for Education (DfE) 2025. School and college voice: January 2025. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-and-college-voice-omnibus-surveys-for-2024-to-2025/school-and-college-voice-january-2025#sec-nurseries>

Table 7: Benefits from having a nursery on the school site

Response	Percentage
Building relationships with families	93%
Improving school readiness of reception pupils	89%
Identifying SEND needs early	87%
Supporting disadvantaged children	72%
Increased take up of school places	67%
Financial profitability	18%
Career development opportunities for staff	13%
None	1%
Other	1%
Don't know	1%

Source: DfE 2025⁸³

However, challenges for schools offering a school-based nursery include the need to make changes to the physical environment to be able to cater for the different needs of younger children, both indoors and outdoors, to make the environment age appropriate (see below). This may have an initial short-term financial implication but also possibly create issues about

⁸³ Ibid.

longer-term financial sustainability.⁸⁴ There is a current pilot project by University College London⁸⁵ on the barriers to, and enablers of, the expansion of school-based nursery provision in primary schools and the key considerations in terms of pedagogy and space for schools wishing to establish a school-based nursery. This study is exploring if, and how easily, empty classrooms can successfully convert to early education spaces both physically and pedagogically with a focus on how the architecture of the spaces intertwine with pedagogical practices. For example, they are documenting if children's ability to engage in age-appropriate play is limited by the provision of suitable spaces inside and outside, which may not match existing classroom layouts. They suggest in this work that the realisation of early years pedagogical principles such as free flowing play and the need for sightlines for staff require architectural answers to the limitations of the existing estate. This study is yet to report. Another study by Merrick identifies some of the challenges or limitations to age appropriate ECEC implementation within the SBNs roll-out and lists a number of considerations schools should consider, such as financial implications, suggesting that although funding rates are higher for younger children, staffing costs are also higher.⁸⁶ This paper also highlights the different needs of younger children and questions whether schools have staff or can recruit staff to be able to offer high quality care and education.

The DfE⁸⁷ has published detailed guidance on how to establish SBN provision. They identify that important challenges for consideration when setting up a SBN are:

- Suitable space on the school premises
- Shared spaces with the school

⁸⁴ Greene, V., Joshi, P., Street, C., Emma Wallace, E. and Kurtz, A. 2014. Two year olds in schools: summary of delivery approaches and support needs: Baseline survey of schools. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7db861e5274a5eaea65ec3/RR348_-_Two_year_olds_in_schools_baseline_survey.pdf

⁸⁵ University College London (UCL) 2026. School-Based Nurseries expansion policy: Exploring feasibility and what works in real-world contexts. 2025-2026 Pilot Project. Available at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/research/domains/collaborative-social-science/social-science-plus/pilot-projects/2025-26-pilot-projects/school-based>

⁸⁶ Merrick, B. 2024. School-based nurseries: What the DfE doesn't say. Available at: <https://early-education.org.uk/2024/11/05/>

⁸⁷ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Establishing school-based nursery provision. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision>

- Safe and welcoming arrival route
- Indoor space requirements per m² as outlined in the EYFS statutory framework
- Layout options of the indoor space for various areas of provision
- Supplementary space for children with SEND
- Toilets and changing areas
- Additional spaces such as cloakrooms, storage, kitchenette, and office space
- Finishes, furniture and technology
- Outdoor learning environment.

In addition to the above points, there is also the issues of funding and recruiting well qualified staff or staff requiring mentoring to consider as mentioned in the five Childcare Works case studies summarised in Appendix 2. The points raised above are also echoed in the responses given by the primary school leaders in the DfE survey previously referred to.⁸⁸ The primary school leaders who were not offering nursery provision on the school site were asked to give the biggest barriers to offering this provision (n = 243). They were allowed to select up to 3 responses and the result was as illustrated in Table 8:

⁸⁸ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. School and college voice: January 2025. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-and-college-voice-omnibus-surveys-for-2024-to-2025/school-and-college-voice-january-2025#sec-nurseries>

Table 8: Biggest barriers to extending nursery provision

Response	Percentage
We don't have the space	45%
Availability of capital funding	39%
We don't have the staff resource	21%
Insufficient demand for places	9%
Concerns about recruiting staff	8%
Leadership capacity	8%
Property and estates expertise	7%
None	2%
Other	13%
Not applicable - we are not considering offering nursery provision	20%
Don't know	0%

Source: DfE 2025⁸⁹

It is also interesting to note the biggest barriers to extending nursery provision was funding, space and staffing but at different percentages. Leaders were again allowed to select up to 3 responses as illustrated in Table 9 below:

⁸⁹ Ibid.

Table 9: Biggest barriers to extending nursery provision

Response	Percentage
Availability of capital funding	38%
We don't have the space	37%
We don't have the staff resource	31%
Insufficient demand for places	21%
Concerns about recruiting staff	17%
Leadership capacity	4%
Property and estates expertise	4%
Other	4%
None	3%
Not applicable - we are not considering extending nursery provision	15%
Don't know	5%

Source: DfE 2025⁹⁰

Environmental and staffing requirements for different ages

The statutory physical environment and staffing requirements for nurseries catering for different age phases, and for different provider types, are set out in a range of government and Ofsted documents. For schools offering SBN provision, whatever model of delivery is adopted, the requirements set out in statutory regulations need to be addressed before formal permission to operate provision is given. The staffing and physical environment (indoors and outdoors) requirements for establishing a SBN are detailed in the SBN guidance from the DfE and reflect the differing needs of younger and older foundation stage children. These differing requirements include space (indoors and outdoors), entrances, resources, furniture, safety features and staffing ratios. The technical requirements for different providers on school-based sites are complex, and set out in

⁹⁰ Ibid.

detail in the DfE guidance.⁹¹ For example, there are different indoor space requirements (including the school entrance) for children at different ages as shown in the example below from the guidance.⁹²

“Indoor learning environment

You must adhere to the indoor space requirements outlined in the EYFS statutory framework.

Age range	Base space requirement
Children under 2 years	3.5m ² per child
2-year-olds	2.5m ² per child
Children aged 3- to 5-years-old	2.3m ² per child

‘Base space requirement’ is the minimum usable room area used by children for play and learning, excluding support spaces.

For example:

- *26 pre-school children (three-to-four years) would need a minimum usable area of 60m²*
- *26 toddlers (two-to-three years) would need a minimum usable area of 65m²*

⁹¹ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Guidance: Establishing school-based nursery provision. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision#schools-suitable-for-an-sbn>

⁹² Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Guidance: Establishing school-based nursery provision. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision#schools-suitable-for-an-sbn>

Where possible, it is recommended that the number of children in the baby room (children under two years old) does not exceed 12 children”.

In summary, the DfE⁹³ guidance suggests that SBNs must ensure indoor learning environments meet EYFS space requirements, with separate rooms for different age groups and inclusive, flexible spaces for various activities. They must provide good visibility for supervision, safe sleeping areas and direct access to outdoor play areas. Children’s toilets and changing areas should be welcoming, hygienic and easily supervised, balancing privacy with safeguarding needs. Careful consideration should take place when sharing key facilities with the rest of the school, such as staff rooms, accessible toilets, meeting rooms, first-aid posts, kitchens and halls. For partnerships with PVIs or childminders, separate facilities are recommended to ensure security. All nurseries must provide access to outdoor play areas or plan daily outdoor activities, ensuring inclusivity. Facilities must be designed safely, varied and offer inclusive spaces with natural materials, covered play areas and nature-based play to support physical and imaginative development. It is required that all works to make provision for nursery age children must comply with statutory and regulatory requirements, including Building Regulations and Health and Safety standards. Key considerations include fire safety, acoustics, lighting, ventilation, power, water supply, drainage, building fabric, maintenance and energy efficiency.

‘Schoolification’ anxieties and the capacity of primary schools to meet the needs of the under threes

There is published evidence indicating that a school-based nursery can be overtaken by a primary agenda and Ofsted performativity pressures to focus on academic outcomes earlier, with resulting inappropriate pedagogy and curriculum for younger children offered in the pressure to drive academic attainment.⁹⁴ There is significant expressed worry about a ‘schoolification’ agenda which drives out play based learning experiences that celebrate child agency and individual pathways of development with a pedagogy that is neither participatory nor democratic. There is a real fear in the sector that early admission is seen as an opportunity to drive the primary school agenda too soon, with play seen as ‘not proper work’, putting pressure on young children, parents and professionals. It is argued

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Broogard-Clausen, B. 2015. Schoolification or early years democracy? A cross curricular perspective from Denmark and England. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1463949115616327>; Murray, J. 2025. Premature schoolification during early childhood hinders later academic success and productivity. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09669760.2025.2481759>

that parents and professionals will only be able to stand up for a developmentally appropriate pedagogy with the support of strong ECEC-informed leadership.⁹⁵

Evidence from the five case studies of school-based nurseries developed by the Childcare Works consortium (summarised in Appendix 2) suggest that in order to achieve good outcomes for children, successful relationships between nurseries and schools depend on a strong joint leadership and integration of nursery governance into the whole-school structure. This was based on a fundamental understanding on the part of the schools of the different needs of younger children. Secondly, recruiting, retaining and developing early childhood professionals, to be able to deliver high quality provision, was equally essential. In three of the Childcare Works' case studies the SBN offered places for children under one, and it was highlighted that they had to undergo two separate Ofsted inspections: one under the *Early Years Register for babies and toddlers*, and another as part of the school inspection covering nursery and Reception classes. This required not only knowledge and understanding of the EYFS framework but also the Ofsted requirements for younger children. The Ofsted inspection framework can as such be seen as a key framework in guiding primary schools new to offering SBN places for children under two. The Ofsted framework for children under two would look for developmentally appropriate practice, such as secure attachment, nurturing routines, the key person approach and focus on communication, physical development, and sensory exploration rather than formal learning. The Orchid Nursery School also pointed out that an important area of focus for them as a new SBN was to ensure that:

Governors fully understand EYFS statutory guidance, particularly around staffing ratios, qualifications, learning and development requirements, and safeguarding protocols which differ in key ways from those in the rest of the school (p6).⁹⁶

The new Ofsted guidance for the early years that came into effect at the end of 2025 goes some way to limit the possible top-down pressure or 'schoolification' of the early years phase. With limited evidence at the moment, it is not possible to provide evidence to answer the question if schools are better set up to cater for the older end of the under fives (three-to-four-year-olds) than babies and toddlers from nine months up.

⁹⁵ Palaiologou, I. and Male, T. 2019. Leadership in early childhood education: The case for pedagogical praxis. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1463949118819100>

⁹⁶ Childcare Works 2025. School-based nurseries: Five case studies. Hosted by the DfE from April 2026. Available from: <https://www.coramhempshalls.org.uk/childcare/childcare-works-EY-WAC>

However, clearly the school buildings were built and established to deliver education to older children, and so providing the appropriate smaller spaces and resources (e.g. beds, changing tables) for younger children will be a key area for development and monitoring as the SBN programme rolls out. The DfE guidance for school-based nurseries makes the complexity of creating appropriate spaces and recruiting appropriately qualified staff very explicit.⁹⁷

Relationships of primary schools with feeder/local early years settings

The DfE guidance for school-based nurseries suggests that if it is not possible to meet some of the requirements, or to complement existing provision, there is the option to work with existing local off-site providers that may offer more than term-time provision and longer hours.⁹⁸ This strategy is also visible in the Childcare Works case studies⁹⁹ (summarised in Appendix 2) and demonstrates that partnership working may enable the school to provide more flexible care for working families (see evidence on non-typical provision in SBNs below). It is pointed out in the guidance and case studies that partnership working with feeder settings in the PVI sector, independent nurseries, or childminders is not only important for transitions but also for SBNs to collectively be able to meet the needs of children and families in the local community.

There is emerging published evidence on the nature and extent of partnership working between schools and other local early years which demonstrate the value of partnership working between schools and the wider early years sector. Leicestershire County Council has published a document on partnership working in out-of-school settings and briefly mention on page 4:¹⁰⁰

Partnerships with the infant and junior schools that children attend are effective. Staff use drop-off and collection times to communicate with teachers and exchange important information

⁹⁷ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Establishing school-based nursery provision. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision>

⁹⁸ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Guidance: Establishing school-based nursery provision. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision#schools-suitable-for-an-sbn>

⁹⁹ Childcare Works 2025. School-based nurseries: Five case studies. Hosted by the DfE from April 2026. Available from: <https://www.coramhempshalls.org.uk/childcare/childcare-works-EY-WAC>

¹⁰⁰ Leicestershire County Council 2024. Partnership working in Out of School settings. Available at: <https://resources.leicestershire.gov.uk/sites/resource/files/2023-06/Partnership-working-in-Out-of-School-settings.pdf>

about the children. This helps staff to meet the individual needs of children.

The evidence suggests that establishing a positive relationship between a primary school and its early years feeder settings is dependent on many factors and relationships between schools and local early years settings varies widely. It seems that motivation for developing these relationships is aimed primarily at improving 'school readiness' and ensuring a smooth transition into primary school reception classes. The evidence indicates that effective partnerships involve:

- **Transition.** Good practice centres on not waiting until children are in school but working closely with early years settings beforehand to facilitate smooth transitions.¹⁰¹
- **Information sharing.** Good communication includes the sharing of information about children and transfer of records to ensure continuity in learning and development.
- **The curriculum.** An understanding on the part of the school as well as the early years settings on how the EYFS aligns with the primary curriculum.
- **Networking and training.** In the SEED report, Callanan *et al.* stated that staff valued networking and training events to share ideas and good practice as well as establishing links with each other. They were also seen as an important source of peer support.¹⁰²
- **Identification of SEND.** Close collaborations may help children with SEND as schools can prepare appropriate support for when the child enters the school system.

¹⁰¹ Cameron, G. and Harding, C. 2016. Academisation and early years education. Available at: https://www.coramfamilyandchildcare.org.uk/childcare-and-family/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2025/06/Academisation-and-early-years-education-report_5-2.pdf

¹⁰² Callanan, M., Anderson, M., Haywood, S., Hudson, R. and Speight, S. 2017. Study of early education and development: Good practice in early education. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a8061f4ed915d74e622e223/SEED_Good_Practice_in_Early_Education_-_RR553.pdf

The series of five case studies of SBNs previously mentioned¹⁰³ offer some detailed insight into partnership working and additionally, and Lawley Primary School and Nursery state on their website that:

*Effective transition into school is crucial – it is important to us that children feel happy and secure in their new learning environment. With this in mind, we are the lead school in a local hub ‘The Ironstone Children’s Hub’, whereby we share information, resources, training and ideas with local Schools, Nurseries, Childminders and other childcare providers.*¹⁰⁴

They state that they carry out home visits; however, if they are not able to carry out a home visit before a child starts at their school, they contact the nursery and speak to a child’s keyworker. All pre-schools are also asked to send a transition document with key information regarding the child to aid a smooth transition. Feeder nurseries are invited to join the school for three transition sessions including a teddy bears picnic, a forest school afternoon and a school dinner. Class teachers also visit as many feeder settings as possible to meet the children in the summer term before they start reception.

Ashby Hill Top Primary School have developed strong partnerships with their feeder pre-schools and communicate with them throughout the year, not just in the summer term before transition to school. They state that as soon as they get their new cohort list, they phone each pre-school to get early information about children with possible SEND, safeguarding issues or medical requirements, so that they can put any necessary support, training or procedures in place. They also visit all pre-schools to talk to key workers and observe the children in their setting where they are comfortable and have trusting relationships with staff. They feel this gives them a good idea of how they will adapt to the school environment. Dexter and Middleton state the insights the pre-school staff give them into children’s learning and emotional development is invaluable for a seamless transition. The staff at Ashby Hill Top Primary School also share

¹⁰³ Childcare Works 2025. School-based nurseries: Five case studies. Hosted by the DfE from April 2026. Available from: <https://www.coramhempshalls.org.uk/childcare/childcare-works-EY-WAC>

¹⁰⁴ Lawley Primary School and Nursery 2025. EYFS at Lawley Primary School. Available at: <https://lawleyprimary.co.uk/curriculum/early-years%20Accessed%205%20February%202026>

information to help pre-schools prepare children for the transition to school.¹⁰⁵

Drawing on this evidence it can be inferred that the collaboration between primary schools and the nurseries before and after they became SBNs was based on positive relationships where the primary schools valued the expertise of the early years providers. Part of their success they attributed to the fact that the schools and early years setting teams intentionally aligned their early years curriculum with the school's overarching approach and the EYFS framework. This was done by involving school leaders, the reception teacher(s) and early years leads. At Brookstead Nursery, the close alignment between the school curriculum and the EYFS curriculum ensured a seamless transition for approximately 80% of the children who progressed from nursery into reception. Three of the London primary schools identified that having a designated early years governor at the school was also important because they felt standard governor training did not cover the early years curriculum and practice adequately.¹⁰⁶

Although the DfE case study (DfE 2025) about Scargill Infant School was about launching a nursery on an existing infant school site, they raised an important relevant point about valuing different types of providers, namely that nursery leaders and staff have a different skill set or expertise that needs to be recognised. They stated that collaborating with a strong EYFS lead can enhance both nursery and reception outcomes.¹⁰⁷

SBNs providing non-typical provision for younger children

The DfE has recently published a review of early years school-based nursery provision operating outside of the typical model.¹⁰⁸ This review looked at different childcare operating models for school-based nurseries

¹⁰⁵ Dexter, D-L. and Middleton, N. 2026. How we collaborate with families, pre-schools and professionals to support early years transition. Available at:

<https://www.ambition.org.uk/blog/how-we-collaborate-with-families-pre-schools-and-professionals-to-support-early-years-transition/#:~:text=The%20importance%20of%20collaboration%20with,the%20first%20day%20of%20school>

¹⁰⁶ Childcare Works 2025. School-based nurseries: Five case studies. Hosted by the DfE from April 2026. Available from: <https://www.coramhempalls.org.uk/childcare/childcare-works-EY-WAC>

¹⁰⁷ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Early years provision: Expanding through a school-PVI partnership. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/early-years-provision-expanding-through-a-school-pvi-partnership>

¹⁰⁸ Department for Education (DfE) 2026b. Early years school-based nursery provision operating outside of the typical model. Available at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6981d052015e2ba11991bb53/Early_years_school-based_nursery_provision_operating_outside_of_the_typical_model.pdf

offering non-typical provision, including provision for under threes, out of term provision and out of hours provision and explored how they are run and the guidance and support offered. This review undertook 22 qualitative interviews with a selection of school-based nurseries, alongside quantitative data analysis using data from the 2024 *Childcare and Early Years Provider Survey*.¹⁰⁹ The purpose of the report was to gather evidence on the benefits and challenges of different childcare models and to guide stakeholders, such as local authorities and the Department for Education, on delivery approaches and support and guidance. This study revealed some important insights into the current functioning and operational strategies of the SBNs and future considerations, as summarised below:

Provision for under threes in SBNs: All of the SBNs offering provision to under threes interviewed for the research offered places to two-year-olds, and a small number to under twos as well. This provision typically mirrored the provision for older children in terms of operating hours and session structure. Most of these SBNs had separate rooms for different age groups, though some mixed age groups during quieter sessions. The main reason for offering provision to under threes was local parental demand, especially from working families and those with older siblings at the school. The surveyed SBNs indicated that lack of demand was shaping their responses to expansion of these services. This was despite SBNs identifying clear benefits of providing provision for under threes, which included:

- supporting working parents and simplifying drop-off logistics for families with older children
- smooth transitions to school for children
- earlier identification of and support for children from disadvantaged areas and those with SEND
- supporting continuous intake for the school.

The SBNs also reported that staffing for under threes provision was a challenge. The main barriers stopping SBNs that do not currently offer provision for under threes from offering it were:

¹⁰⁹ Department for Education (DfE) 2024. *Childcare and early years provider survey*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-provider-survey/2024>

- a lack of demand from local parents
- inability to adapt the premises
- challenges recruiting staff.

All of these factored into a perception from some that this provision would not be financially viable for their setting. It is important to note that very few of the SBNs in this review had specific plans to offer provision to under threes in the future.

Out of hours (wraparound) provision: 88% of the SBNs offered before- and after-school provision. The benefits of breakfast clubs were that children access nutritious meals and overall supervised and structured opportunities to socialise with older children, with an opportunity to provide a calmer environment for those with SEND. Most SBNs reported unfilled places in their wraparound provision, despite reported demand. The majority of SBNs charged fees for wraparound provision. Few SBNs had concrete plans to expand wraparound provision, with most citing limited parental demand and financial constraints as barriers; for SBNs not offering wraparound provision, their main reason was low parental demand. Important to note again was that few of these SBNs were considering this type of provision in the future without adequate financial support from local authorities.

Out of term provision: This provision was mostly available for all school holidays. The primary reason for offering out of term provision was local demand from working parents. SBNs also noted the financial benefit of year-round income. Benefits for children included consistency of care, which was particularly beneficial for those with SEND or from disadvantaged backgrounds. Where provision involved mixing with older children, SBNs also considered this to have benefits for social skill development. The main reason for not offering out of term provision was lack of parental demand locally. Again, important to note was that none of the SBNs not currently offering out of term provision had plans to start.

Other non-typical provision among SBNs: Some SBNs offered extracurricular lessons and seasonal forest schools, supported financially by their Local Authority. These extracurricular activities, including language, PE, music, and art classes, were delivered by existing teaching staff and were seen as beneficial for nurturing children's creative skills and development.

In summary, the profile of SBNs operating outside of the typical model was that statistically they were significantly less likely than other providers to offer each of the three types of non-typical provision (under threes, out of hours and out of term provision). Just over a quarter of SBNs offered provision for under threes (27%), compared to 97% of group-based providers (GBPs: defined as “childcare providers registered with Ofsted and operating in nondomestic premises (excluding providers solely on the voluntary register), typically in settings like day nurseries” (p10).

Just over a fifth of SBNs offered out of hours provision (22%), compared to 77% of GBPs, and only 6% of SBNs offered out of term provision, compared to 66% of GBPs. Out of hours provision amongst SBNs has increased from 14% in 2022 to 22% in 2024, but provision for under threes and out of term provision has remained mostly stable over the same time period. Out of hours provision amongst GBPs increased from 73% in 2022 to 77% in 2024. Larger SBNs were significantly more likely to offer non-typical provision; larger GBPs were also more likely to offer non-typical provision. SBNs offering provision for under threes were more likely to have at least one child with SEND, though there was no difference for those with a higher proportion of SEND children. SBNs in less deprived areas were more likely to offer out of hours and out of term provision. No difference was found for under threes provision by deprivation. By contrast, GBPs in the most deprived areas were more likely to offer provision for under threes and out of term provision.

This study concluded that demand from working parents was the main driving factor as to whether SBNs offered non-typical provision. The evidence suggests there was limited financial benefit to SBNs offering non-typical provision, however, other benefits of offering non-typical provision were focused on giving the children, especially those from disadvantaged families, additional learning and social experiences and also supporting working families. Known recruitment and retention challenges of the early years sector become even more challenging in the context of staffing for non-typical provision. It was acknowledged that in addition to staffing, there are other logistical barriers and challenges that SBNs would need to overcome to be able to offer non-typical provision. This perception of low financial viability means that support with funding would be desired, which SBNs typically expected should come from local authorities. A key finding from this review was that the SBNs reported they had no plans to keep offering their under threes or out of hours provision in the future, especially not without financial support. This has implications for the wider market and the need for either more funding for SBNs or the need for other provider types in the sector.

4.4 Theme 3: Quality in SBNs (Staffing, environment, curriculum/pedagogy, parents/HLE, inclusion/SEND)

The evidence in this theme addresses **RQ1: What does the existing evidence base say about the quality and effectiveness of school-based nursery provision? Does this differ for different groups?**

Key elements of high-quality early education and care provision for different age groups:

It has long been known that high-quality early education and childcare has clear benefits especially for disadvantaged children, families and their communities (Mathers and Smees 2014; Melhuish 2004; Melhuish and Granger 2023; Taggart *et al.* 2015).¹¹⁰ Quality as applied to provision that best supports developmental outcomes for children from birth is multi-faceted and culturally based. Key elements of quality provision at all ages from birth to five (and probably beyond) are well established and include:

- Capacity and skills to engage with the diversity of parents and home circumstances to enhance Home Learning Environments
- Leadership knowledge and understanding of the developmental needs of young children and status of this in strategic and operational planning
- Appropriateness and level of educator's qualification and status within the school team, and level of access to continuous professional development (CPD) and other development models including co-planning, regular coaching and mentoring
- Recruitment and deployment of staff to ensure continuity and a high level of age/stage appropriate skill and responsiveness to individual needs at all ages and developmental stages

¹¹⁰ Mathers, S. and Smees, R. 2014. Quality and inequality: Do three- and four-year-olds in deprived areas experience lower quality early years provision? Available at:

https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Quality_inequality_childcare_mathers_29_05_14.pdf; Melhuish, E. 2004. A literature review of the impact of early years provision on young children, with emphasis given to children from disadvantaged backgrounds. London: National Audit Office; Melhuish, E. and Gardiner, J. 2023. Equal hours? The impact of hours spent in early years provision on children's outcomes at age five, by socio-economic background. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/equal-hours/>; Taggart, B., Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P. and Siraj, I. 2015. How pre-school influences children and young people's attainment and developmental outcomes over time. Research Brief. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/455670/RB455_Effective_pre-school_primary_and_secondary_education_project.pdf

- Suitability of pedagogy with regard to recognition of the individuality and agency of the child and provision of rich, stimulating and play full sessions
- A rich and varied curriculum full of first-hand experiences
- A social and physical environment and context, including daily outdoor experiences.

'Quality' as applied to young children's development achievements is often measured as:¹¹¹

- process quality**, which includes the quality of the curriculum, pedagogical practices and child experiences that support children's development; and
- structural characteristics**, including adult-child ratios, staff qualifications, group size and characteristics of the physical space.

The seminal Study of Early Education and Development (SEED)¹¹² is a major longitudinal study into the impact of childcare on children throughout their childhood. The study is following nearly 6,000 children from across England from age two. It started in 2013, and it is funded by the DfE. It provides vital evidence on the quality of ECEC and its impact on children's long-term development. This study found that structural quality or characteristics such as staff qualifications, staff training and turnover, staff-to-child ratios, the age range of children at settings, size of settings and whether or not settings offer specialist SEND provision have an impact on quality provision.¹¹³ In the SEED study, process quality was

¹¹¹ Melhuish, E. and Gardiner, J. 2018. Study of early education and development (SEED): Study of quality of early years provision in England (Revised). Available at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5b438623e5274a376e24e115/Study_of_quality_of_early_years_provision_in_England.pdf; Sylva, K., Melhuish, E.C., Sammons, P., Siraj, I. and Taggart, B. 2004. The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Technical paper 12 - The final report: Effective Pre-School Education. London: DfES / IOE, University of London.

¹¹² Callanan, M., Anderson, M., Haywood, S., Hudson, R. and Speight, S. 2017. Study of early education and development: Good practice in early education. Available at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a8061f4ed915d74e622e223/SEED_Good_Practice_in_Early_Education_-_RR553.pdf

¹¹³ Melhuish, E. and Gardiner, J. 2018. Study of early education and development (SEED): Study of quality of early years provision in England (Revised). Available at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5b438623e5274a376e24e115/Study_of_quality_of_early_years_provision_in_England.pdf

measured looking at environmental provisions, safety, staff-child interactions, and the curriculum. This study concluded that:

On average, process quality scores tended to be higher at nursery classes/schools and at children's centres than at the private and voluntary settings, providing for two-year-olds. This was in part explained by differences in structural characteristics between setting type, such as staff level of qualification (p61).

The SEED study also found that having a higher mean level of staff qualification was the strongest predictor of higher quality in settings providing for three-and-four-year-olds.¹¹⁴

Regulatory ratios (a structural characteristic) within early childhood settings are a significant operational factor economically and for continuity and sustainability, but having a higher overall staff-to-child ratio for two-year-olds was found to be the strongest predictor of process quality in private settings, and the strongest predictor of both structure and process quality in voluntary settings, according to the SEED study. Having a higher overall staff-to-child ratio for three-to-five-year-olds was also a strong predictor of quality. Age is as such an important structural characteristic when considering the age range SBNs should be admitting. The SEED study identified that one of the predictors of higher quality at private settings was having a minimum age for children of two-years-old.¹¹⁵

In the SEED study, nursery classes/schools and children's centres tended to score higher on process quality than private and voluntary settings which make up the majority of provision. *"Higher process quality scores on the SSTEW scale (sustained shared thinking and emotional well-being¹¹⁶), a measure of quality of interactions between staff and children, were observed in three-to-four-year-old settings than in two-year-old settings"* (p106)¹¹⁷, which may be an indication that the focus needs to be

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Melhuish, E. and Gardiner, J. 2018. Study of early education and development (SEED): Study of quality of early years provision in England (Revised). Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5b438623e5274a376e24e115/Study_of_quality_of_early_years_provision_in_England.pdf

¹¹⁶ Siraj, I., Kingston, D., Melhuish, E. 2015. Assessing quality in early childhood education and care. Sustained shared thinking and emotional well-being (SSTEW) scale for 2–5- year-olds provision. London: Trentham Books.

¹¹⁷ Melhuish, E. and Gardiner, J. 2018. Study of early education and development (SEED): Study of quality of early years provision in England (Revised). Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5b438623e5274a376e24e115/Study_of_quality_of_early_years_provision_in_England.pdf

on improving quality for two-year-old settings. Understanding the needs of two-year-olds is as an important consideration when setting up SBNs for that age group.

It has also been suggested that there is a need to theorise leadership in ECEC because the divide between ECEC and formal schooling is still present. Palaiologou and Male argue that ECEC-informed leadership needs to be different in order to defend its values in light of the policy reforms in England. They state, because the divide between ECEC and formal schooling is still present, leadership in SBNs need to adopt a broader notion of leadership to be able to understand their specific ECEC context. This requires *“paying attention to its own environment through engaging with the historicity, culture and subjective perspectives/realities of the contexts that are involved”* (p31). Leadership in ECEC encompasses, in other words, both administrative and pedagogical functions.¹¹⁸

Addressing process quality (the interactions and relationships children experience in ECEC settings), Douglas distinguishes in her leadership model on process quality, between ‘proximal’ and ‘distal’ quality. Proximal quality encompasses staff-child interactions, and distal quality more indirect indicators. Distal quality is for instance regulations in place regarding staff qualifications, group size and staff-child ratios (p7). Douglas’ literature review identified that central to leadership in supporting and sustaining quality in ECEC settings is leadership training and qualifications, as well as continuing professional development for other staff, in addition to policies and regulations that enable effective leadership, all of which requires adequate funding.¹¹⁹

It should be noted that another related important aspect of quality in ECEC provision is the skill and capacity of the setting in engaging with parents especially regarding improving the Home Learning Environment (HLE). Roy-Chowdhury *et al.* published a report for NESTA which identified 135 different parenting programmes for families with children younger than five years old. This report found that while there is a large number of parenting programmes available on the market, they vary a lot in the outcomes they are seeking to achieve, how widely they are

¹¹⁸ Palaiologou, I. and Male, T. 2019. Leadership in early childhood education: The case for pedagogical praxis. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1463949118819100>

¹¹⁹ Douglas, A. L. 2019. Leadership for quality early childhood education and care: OECD education working paper No. 211. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/leadership-for-quality-early-childhood-education-and-care_6e563bae-en.html

implemented and their evidence of impact on child development.¹²⁰ In the ‘*Giving every child the best start in life*’ strategy, the DfE sets out the plan to create Best Start Family Hubs, open to all but based in disadvantaged communities where they are needed most. They have pledged that “We will fund more evidence-based parenting and home learning offers to achieve the 75% good level of development milestone, and bridge the critical gap before children enter school” (p20).¹²¹ Although there is little evidence on the adoption of parenting programmes in primary schools or SBNs, it is clear that given that a child’s central relationship is most often with their parent, HLE programmes can be of great help in making parents “understand the process of brain development in the early years so they can provide responsive caregiving and early education” (p11).¹²² This is an area of support that SBNs, and all nursery providers, will need to engage much more directly with under the *Best Start in Life Strategy*.

The importance of staff qualifications and professional training

SBNs must meet the requirements on staff training, qualifications and ratio arrangements set out in the EYFS statutory framework.¹²³ The type of sessions (fixed hours or flexible, one or two sessions a day) and the age and additional needs of children, all impact on SBN staffing needs, scheduling and contracts. If an SBN is part of a maintained school or academy, they are obliged to follow the terms and conditions set out in the school teachers’ pay and conditions statutory guidance for school leaders and school teachers. Maintained schools need to follow the National Joint Council for Local Government Services for other staff. If the SBN is a PVI, it is not bound by national pay and conditions and can set their own.¹²⁴ This complexity means that evaluating the workforce professional qualifications and training of staff working within SBNs is complex and nuanced according to provider type.

¹²⁰ Roy-Chowdhury, V., Bazalgette, L., Liotti, L., Anand, P. and Rao, Z. 2025. Parenting support at scale: Market analysis. Available at: https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/Parenting_support_at_scale_-_market_analysis_oXdn3HX.pdf

¹²¹ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Giving every child the best start in life. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/giving-every-child-the-best-start-in-life>

¹²² Ipsos MORI 2020. State of the nation: Understanding public attitudes to the early years. Available at: https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2020-11/ipsos_trf_earlyyears_execsummary_final.pdf

¹²³ Department for Education (DfE) 2025o. Early years foundation stage (EYFS) statutory framework. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68c024cb8c6d992f23edd79c/Early_years_foundation_stage_statutory_framework_-_for_group_and_school-based_providers.pdf.pdf

¹²⁴ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Establishing school-based nursery provision. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision>

To raise the quality in early education the government has pledged to invest in training and qualifications, in other words, to raise the skill level of the workforce. The evidence is that staff qualifications and professional training matter and that these tend to be higher and better in school-based nursery provision, thus strengthening the case for expanding this form of provision. The government has also promised to increase the number of qualified early years teachers and educators, “with the long-term aim of an early years teacher in every nursery setting” (p40).¹²⁵

However, the research of Blanden *et al.*¹²⁶ suggests that raising staff qualifications alone is not sufficient and that staff practices, or what could also be called ‘competence’ is also important.¹²⁷ Urban *et al.*’s research looked at the impact of an additional term of early education on children’s outcomes at age five. They concluded that only access to settings rated highly by Ofsted improved “children’s chances of achieving both expected and higher levels of attainment” (p818).¹²⁸ The claim by Blanden *et al.* that raising staff qualifications alone is not sufficient, is in contradiction to the study by Mathers and Smees that concludes that settings with well-qualified staff scored more highly on all three of their quality measures.¹²⁹ Where the two studies concur is that Ofsted ratings seem to matter, however Mathers and Smees link it to staff qualifications rather than the Ofsted grading. Supplementary analysis from Ofsted showed that settings with an overall well-qualified staff team (at least 75% at Level 3) and a graduate Early Years Professional tended to achieve better inspection grades, with the most highly graded settings having both these features.¹³⁰ Thus, better qualifications are associated with better quality for *all* children and better qualifications are associated with school-based provision.

Spiegel *et al.*¹³¹ write from a US perspective but their arguments are relatable globally. They discuss the process features of pedagogical

¹²⁵ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Giving every child the best start in life. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/giving-every-child-the-best-start-in-life>

¹²⁶ Blanden, J., Del Bono, E., Hansen, K and Rabe, B. 2022. Quantity and quality of childcare and children’s educational outcomes. *Journal of Population Economics*, 35 (2), 785-828.

¹²⁷ Urban, M., Vandenbroeck, M., Van Laere, K., Lazzari, A. and Peeters, J. 2012. Towards competent systems in early childhood education and care: Implications for policy and practice. *European Journal of Education*, 47 (4), 508-526.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Mathers, S. and Smees, R. 2014. Quality and inequality: Do three- and four-year-olds in deprived areas experience lower quality early years provision? Available at: https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Quality_inequality_childcare_mathers_29_05_14.pdf

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Spiegel, M., Hill, Z. and Gennetian, L. A. 2020. Harnessing a behavioural economic framework for supporting providers in improving early childhood care. *Early Years*, 42 (3), 310-326.

practices and adult-child interactions. They state that the theory of change behind many existing initiatives targeting ECEC practices to improve outcomes assumes that through education, training, and exposure to information, staff will successfully absorb the information and seamlessly and universally implement 'best practice' in settings. They question this and refer to individual specific characteristics and contexts that may be barriers to implementing best practice. They suggest a tailored social media platform to support and encourage best practice and communication between staff and parents, and parents' engagement with children. Although there is nothing inherently wrong with a tailored social media platform for developing staff practices or sharing and encouraging best practice with parents, their underlying theory and focus on individual specific characteristics risks assigning too much responsibility or 'blame' to individual staff or settings, as discussed further below. However, if we go along with the arguments of Blanden *et al.* and Spiegel *et al.* that staff practices also matter to quality early education, then how this can be defined is of interest to SBNs and early education as a whole.

One way of defining staff practices or 'competencies' could be to use the key aspects identified in a European research study on competence requirements in early childhood education and care (CoRe).¹³² The study reviewed international literature on quality, competence and professionalism, conducted a 15-country survey, carried out case studies and consultations with key stakeholders. The conclusion reached was *that "competence unfolds in the dimensions of knowledge, practices and values"*, which is relevant not only at an individual level but relevant to all four levels of the early childhood system (p516):

1. Individual level
2. Institutional and team level
3. Inter-institutional level
4. Level of governance.

In other words, as Peeters, one of the co-researchers of the CoRe study summarised, quality depends on well educated, experienced and

¹³² Urban, M., Vandenbroeck, M., Van Laere, K., Lazzari, A. and Peeters, J. 2012. Towards competent systems in early childhood education and care: Implications for policy and practice. *European Journal of Education*, 47 (4), 508-526.

competent individuals at *all* levels of the early childhood system.¹³³

Evidence on the capacity of SBNs to secure staffing which meets these competencies is not yet available, other than it meets statutory guidelines, which vary for different types of providers in SBNs.

Quality in school-based nursery provision (including Maintained Nursery Schools)

Melhuish and Gardener, reporting on the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED), found that:

*Although **regional variation** in setting quality was observed, this is partly explained by regional differences in the distribution of setting types, with areas of lower quality having more private and voluntary settings and fewer nursery classes/schools or children's centre settings. Furthermore, regional variation does not appear to relate to **area deprivation** (p107).¹³⁴*

This is in line with the DfE statement that the value of current school-based providers is that they make up a greater share of places in the most deprived areas and have thus had a positive effect for children.¹³⁵ SBNs have also been found to have certain quality characteristics over and above other providers, including staff with higher and appropriate qualifications and status and ECEC informed leadership.¹³⁶

It is important to note the particular role and contribution of MNSs in this

¹³³ Peeters, J. 2012. CoRe: Competence Requirements for ECEC professionals in Europe, VIDA Conference Copenhagen 24th May 2012. Available at:

https://edu.au.dk/fileadmin/edu/Forskningsprojekter/VIDA/Peeters_Staff_Compentence_Requirements_in_Early_Childhood_Education_and_Care.pdf

¹³⁴ Melhuish, E. and Gardiner, J. 2018. Study of early education and development (SEED): Study of quality of early years provision in England (Revised). Available at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5b438623e5274a376e24e115/Study_of_quality_of_early_years_provision_in_England.pdf

¹³⁵ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Phase 2 of the school-based nursery programme: Everything you need to know. Available at: <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2025/09/nurseries-in-schools-everything-you-need-to-know/>

¹³⁶ Melhuish, E. and Gardiner, J. 2018. Study of early education and development (SEED): Study of quality of early years provision in England (Revised). Available at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5b438623e5274a376e24e115/Study_of_quality_of_early_years_provision_in_England.pdf

evidence review.¹³⁷ MNSs in England are local authority-maintained institutions, separate from primary schools, that provide high-quality, early years education for children aged 2-4, often in disadvantaged areas. Led by headteachers and staffed by qualified teachers, they focus on closing the attainment gap, often providing wrap-around care. There are, as listed above, fewer than 400 remaining in England. Key details about MNSs:

- **Definition and Governance:** They are legal entities, similar to local authority schools, with their own headteachers, staff, and governing bodies
- **Staffing:** They must be led by a qualified head teacher and employ qualified teachers and early years educators
- **Inspection:** They are inspected by Ofsted in the same way as primary and secondary schools
- **Purpose:** They focus on providing high-quality early education, particularly for disadvantaged children, and are effective at closing the attainment gap
- **Admissions and Services:** They may take children from age 2, offer places before and after school, and provide holiday care.

It should be noted that while often confused with school-based nurseries (which are often classes inside a primary school), MNS are distinct entities. It is also significant in this review to note that MNSs, unlike other school-based nurseries, receive additional funding to support their higher operating costs, which include employing qualified teachers (rather than just practitioners) and supporting high proportions of disadvantaged children. This funding, often delivered through supplementary grants, ensures these schools can remain viable, provide specialized SEND support, and cover the costs of high-quality early education.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Early Education (EE) 2025. Maintained nursery schools financial outlook: 2025 report. Available at: <https://early-education.org.uk/mns-funding-june-2025/>; Local Government Association (LGA) 2023. Early education and childcare: Changes and challenges for the future. Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/early-education-and-childcare-changes-and-challenges-future>

¹³⁸ Paull, G. and Popov, D. 2019. The role and contribution of maintained nursery schools in the early years sector in England (Revised April 2019). Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f48d4398fa8f57fb653f840/Frontier_Economics_MNS_report_REVISED_v2.pdf

Noting these distinct characteristics, the evidence on the added value of SBNs, including MNS, provides additional weight to the decision to open up more nurseries on school sites and follows on from the robust evidence from the SEED and EPPE projects that,

Weighing up all the evidence, the single most important action to bridge the gap [in school readiness] is to provide high-quality, teacher-led early education, ideally starting from two years of age for children from low-income families (p6).¹³⁹

However, they also note that ‘readiness for school includes [not only] cognitive and linguistic skills but also, and importantly, social and emotional skills that underpin positive relationships’ (p16) thus addressing the ‘schoolification’ worry expressed by some.¹⁴⁰

In England, Ofsted makes key judgements on the quality of early years provision across MNS and primary schools, including primary schools with nursery classes as well as those with reception classes only.¹⁴¹ In recently published Ofsted reports on early years provision in the state-funded school sector, numbers show an overall improvement in judgements when comparing the latest data from 2024/2025 with the 2022/2023 data. Data from previous years was reported using a different methodology and therefore not comparable. Current Ofsted data for state-funded schools inspections shows the following key judgements of 2,374 inspections between 1 September 2024 and 31 March 2025:¹⁴²

- Outstanding 27%
- Good 66%

¹³⁹ Sylva, K. and Eisenstadt, N. 2024. Transforming early childhood: Narrowing the gap between children from lower- and higher-income families. Available at: <https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/transforming-early-childhood-narrowing-the-gap-between-children-from-lower-and-higher-income-families/>

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) 2025. School inspection: Toolkit, operating guides and information. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information>

¹⁴² Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) 2025. Main findings: State-funded schools inspections and outcomes as at 31 August 2025. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/state-funded-schools-inspections-and-outcomes-as-at-31-august-2025/main-findings-state-funded-schools-inspections-and-outcomes-as-at-31-august-2025>

- Requires improvement 6%
- Inadequate 0%

Ofsted data reported on in 2023 shows the following key judgements of 845 inspections as at 31 December 2022.¹⁴³

- Outstanding 9%
- Good 78%
- Requires improvement 11%
- Inadequate 2%

It is encouraging to see that the number of *outstanding* and *good* early years provision on school sites has increased and the number of early years provision *requiring improvement* or *inadequate* has decreased. These judgements were made under the old inspection framework in the areas of:¹⁴⁴

- Quality of education
- Behaviour and attitudes
- Personal development
- Leadership and management.

¹⁴³ Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) 2023. Main findings: state-funded schools inspections and outcomes as at 31 December 2022. Available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/state-funded-schools-inspections-and-outcomes-as-at-31-december-2022/main-findings-state-funded-schools-inspections-and-outcomes-as-at-31-december-2022>

¹⁴⁴ Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) 2024. School inspection handbook. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-handbook-eif/schoolinspection-handbook-for-september-2023#ofsted-judgements>

The new evaluation areas for early years providers as of November 2025 are:¹⁴⁵

- Safeguarding
- Inclusion
- Curriculum and teaching
- Achievement
- Behaviour, attitudes and established routines
- Children's well-fare and well-being
- Leadership and governance.

These areas have some correspondence with the four levels of what makes a competent system in early childhood education and care as discussed by Urban *et al.*¹⁴⁶ but more could be done to have a broader, more multi-dimensional inspection system, to embrace the complexity that characterises quality early childhood education and care.

4.5 Theme 4: SBN effectiveness and child outcomes (Good Levels of Development (GLD))

The evidence in this theme addresses **RQ1: What does the existing evidence base say about the quality and effectiveness of school-based nursery provision?** The focus here is on what impact does school-based provision have on child outcomes and progress in achieving the Government's goal of closing the attainment gap for less advantaged children and those with SEND by ensuring that 75% of all children attain a Good Level of Development (GLD) on entry to compulsory schooling. This

¹⁴⁵ Department for Education (DfE) 2026. Inspection of early years register providers: Requirements for Ofsted. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-register-providers-inspection-requirements-for-ofsted/inspection-of-early-years-register-providers-requirements-for-ofsted>; Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) 2025b. Education inspection framework: For use from November 2025.

Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-inspection-framework/education-inspection-framework-for-use-from-november-2025>

¹⁴⁶ Urban, M., Vandenbroeck, M., Van Laere, K., Lazzari, A. and Peeters, J. 2012. Towards competent systems in early childhood education and care: Implications for policy and practice. *European Journal of Education*, 47 (4), 508-526.

theme explores how well school-based provision can support and enhance developmental outcomes for young children from 9 months old, particularly children who come from low-income families and children with additional and complex needs. It will also explore evidence that can link SBN experience to GLD levels at end of Reception (exit from foundation stage).

Wider social and economic factors affecting child development and progress

The SBN strategy is one element in the Government's drive to end the 'pernicious link' between a child's socio-economic background and their future life chances (success). Breaking this link is a central focus of the 'Best Start in Life' initiatives, which aim to ensure that a child's origin, family income, or location does not determine their potential, talent, or future outcomes. The *Best Start in Life strategy* focuses on reversing this by investing in early years education, family support, and health services (such as nursery places for babies from 9 months and free breakfast clubs) and by providing high-quality, accessible, and affordable early education.¹⁴⁷ The expansion of SBNs with a particular focus on reaching children in poverty and those with additional needs is a key acknowledgement of the wider social and economic factors affecting a child's development and progress.

Sylva and Eisenstadt point to the wider social and economic challenges that some children face when considering their educational progress. They argue that:

All children need supportive adults who have the capacity to provide the activities that promote healthy development and adequate financial resources to meet essential needs. Certain characteristics within families make it more or less likely that children will do well on school entry. Mother's education at birth and mother's mental health are both critical factors that influence child outcomes for good and ill. Financial security is also important. Money itself makes a difference, not only in terms of the ability to provide the basics, but also because living in poverty can increase tensions between adults in the family, which itself is linked with poorer outcomes. However, no single factor ensures good or poor outcomes.

¹⁴⁷ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Giving every child the best start in life. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/giving-every-child-the-best-start-in-life>

*Some poor children do well against the odds. Some children from better off families do less well than expected (p6).*¹⁴⁸

It is important to recognise the wider social and economic context in which all early years providers, including schools are operating within.

Mowat's work also suggests that that the focus should not be on attainment outcomes alone, but that a holistic approach is required "*which takes account of the economic, social and relational constraints which impact upon families in poverty*" (p299).¹⁴⁹ She argues that "*the problem cannot be addressed by focussing primarily, and almost exclusively, on the school as the agent of change*" (p300). Mowat further states that:

We cannot focus alone on what schools and individual teachers can do to address the problem. It needs to be addressed holistically, requiring a systems approach and a critical scrutiny of the range of policies – educational, social and economic – which combine together to create the conditions under which families are living in poverty and which may be culpable in creating the attainment gap in the first instance. (p30)

The starting point for change according to Mowat should be addressing endemic inequalities in society which calls for a system-level approach, as others, like Urban *et al.*¹⁵⁰ mentioned above, also have called for. Mowat states, referring to Smyth and Wrigley¹⁵¹, that examining schooling in isolation of wider societal issues is not helpful as it risks putting the blame on parents, teachers, school leaders, neighbourhoods and communities, "*rather than critiquing the neo-liberal, 'quasi-market', 'survival of the fittest' agenda*" (p302).¹⁵² What is needed is to address the issue at all levels of the system; however, according to Harris¹⁵³ system level reform is "*heavily dependent upon the competence and capability of different*

¹⁴⁸ Sylva, K. and Eisenstadt, N. 2024. Transforming early childhood: Narrowing the gap between children from lower- and higher-income families. Available at:

<https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/transforming-early-childhood-narrowing-the-gap-between-children-from-lower-and-higher-income-families/>

¹⁴⁹ Mowat, J. G. 2017. Closing the gap - a realistic proposition or an elusive pipe-dream? *Journal of Education Policy*, 33 (2), 299-321.

¹⁵⁰ Urban, M., Vandenbroeck, M., Van Laere, K., Lazzari, A. and Peeters, J. 2012. Towards competent systems in early childhood education and care: Implications for policy and practice. *European Journal of Education*, 47 (4), 508-526.

¹⁵¹ Smyth, J., and Wrigley, T. 2013. *Living on the edge: Rethinking poverty, class and schooling*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.

¹⁵² Mowat, J. G. 2017. Closing the gap - a realistic proposition or an elusive pipe-dream? *Journal of Education Policy*, 33 (2), 299-321.

¹⁵³ Harris, A. 2010. Leading system transformation. *School Leadership and Management*, 30 (3), 197-207.

parts of the system to respond to the changes required and to connect together” and “[t]o achieve system-wide reform will require a particular type of leadership; one that brokers, resources, supports, challenges and makes connections across the system” (p203). This connects with the evidence on the importance of partnership working at locality level.

In the document *‘Transforming early childhood: Narrowing the gap between children from lower- and higher-income families’*, Sylva and Eisenstadt¹⁵⁴ offer a comprehensive blueprint for creating an ideal system for all children growing up in England, irrespective of their family’s financial circumstances. They give nine recommendations to narrow the gap in school readiness:

- Improve pay, working conditions and career structure for the early years workforce
- Improve workforce training, building collaboration between universities, further education colleges and providers to ensure a ladder of qualifications
- Increase the pupil premium to the primary school level, and allowing providers to apply for it instead of parents
- Increase the hourly rate for childcare entitlements funded by the state
- Give PVI providers the same business rate status as providers in the maintained sector
- Offer an entitlement to state-funded ECEC for all children from two years of age, 20 hours per week, 48 weeks per year. For children between 12 and 24 months whose parents are in employment, education or training, we recommend 20 hours per week, 48 weeks per year state-funded ECEC
- Build on, or establish new children’s campuses providing a range of family support services for parents and early education and care for children

¹⁵⁴ Sylva, K. and Eisenstadt, N. 2024. *Transforming early childhood: Narrowing the gap between children from lower- and higher-income families*. Available at:

<https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/transforming-early-childhood-narrowing-the-gap-between-children-from-lower-and-higher-income-families/>

- Give parents one year of paid parental leave from the birth of the baby, shared between both parents, and
- Remove the two-child limit on Universal Credit and other benefits.

The recommendations aim to balance parents' need to have flexible childcare options that support various working patterns, with the needs of children for high-quality ECEC. Sylva and Eisenstadt reflect a mix of financial measures, enhanced service provision and system redesign according to NESTA.¹⁵⁵ Sylva and Eisenstadt single out that *"if the goal is to narrow the gap in school readiness, investment in the quality of early education is the most important first step."* The well-known longitudinal EPPE research study in the UK, that investigated the impact of early years education on children's development from age 3 to the end of key stage 3, reported that the highest quality ratings were identified in the maintained sector such as nursery schools and nursery classes, linking it to staff with higher qualifications and a good proportion of trained teachers.¹⁵⁶

The calculation is that school-based nurseries, with the enhanced staffing and reach to children in poverty and those with additional needs, will enhance progress towards the government's target of ensuring 75% of all children reach a Good Level of Development (GLD) on entrance to compulsory schooling.¹⁵⁷ The evidence indicates that despite the enhanced workforce, these wider social and economic challenges might continue to inhibit child outcomes unless the SBNs engage with the wider *Best Start in Life* agenda of engaging in the delivery of integrated health, education and family support services at a locality level.

The value of school-based provision in closing the attainment gap

As stated earlier, school-based providers currently constitute a smaller proportion of the early education and childcare landscape, with school-based providers providing about 22% of registered early years places and childminders and PVI settings currently being the major and instrumental providers. However, the evidence set out previously indicates that children

¹⁵⁵ National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) 2026. Website summary. Available at: <https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/transforming-early-childhood-narrowing-the-gap-between-children-from-lower-and-higher-income-families/>

¹⁵⁶ Taggart, B., Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P. and Siraj, I. 2015. How pre-school influences children and young people's attainment and developmental outcomes over time. Research Brief. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/455670/RB455_Effective_pre-school_primary_and_secondary_education_project.pdf.pdf

¹⁵⁷ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Giving every child the best start in life. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/giving-every-child-the-best-start-in-life>

from the most disadvantaged families are more likely to receive early years provision at school-based nursery classes, or nursery schools, suggesting that this type of provision needs further consideration if the attainment gap is to be closed for these children. Hoskins *et al.*¹⁵⁸ argue, based on their case study research, that:

Nursery schools have become a frontline service for many deprived and marginalised families, due to the shrinking welfare state and associated loss of policies that protect socio-economically disadvantaged families and minority ethnic immigrant families (p364).

Their data suggest that this is done by providing clothing, trips and food voucher advice to families as well as supporting an increasing number of children with SEND. Hoskins *et al.* argue that “[n]ursery Schools have a key role to play to enable all children to have a chance to be school ready when they enter Reception” (p365). They insist nursery schools play a vital role in reducing the socio-economic disadvantage experienced by some children based on their multidimensional conceptualisation of social justice that combines distributional, relational and associational elements. They therefore conclude that MNSs’ funding must be protected so that they can continue to provide support to some of the most vulnerable children and their families in England.

As mentioned previously, the pattern of nursery provision may not only be different in most deprived areas but in addition Save the Children has reported that “amongst the poorest fifth of parents with young children, only a third (36%) use formal childcare, compared to double that (73%) of the highest earning households.”¹⁵⁹ The reason for disadvantaged families being less likely to use formal childcare may be due to a combination of reasons such as lack of local access to suitable provision or cost barriers. “Those living in disadvantaged or rural areas are least likely to have good

¹⁵⁸ Hoskins, K., Bradbury, A. and Fogarty, L. 2021. A frontline service? Nursery schools as local community hubs in an era of austerity. *Journal of Early Childhood Research* 19 (3), 355-368.

¹⁵⁹ Save the Children 2024. Two thirds of poorest families miss out on childcare, as government urged to ‘think differently’. Available at: <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/news/media-centre/press-releases/2024/two-thirds-poorest-families-miss-out-childcare-government>

access to private and voluntary provision, and least likely to have good access to good quality provision” (p36).¹⁶⁰

What also needs to be recognised is that although government is making funding available for children from the term after the child turns 9 months, for eligible working parents,¹⁶¹ this may only be a good option if there is access to high-quality provision for children under the age of three¹⁶², which is unevenly available in England according to Orso *et al.*¹⁶³, with the lowest number of high quality provision in the poorest areas. The well-known longitudinal EPPE research study in the UK, that investigated the impact of early years education on children's development from age three to the end of key stage 3, reported that the highest quality ratings were identified in the maintained sector such as nursery schools and nursery classes, linking it to staff with higher qualifications and a good proportion of trained teachers.¹⁶⁴ This provides further evidence for the expansion of school-based provision with qualified teachers (which SBNs are better positioned to offer) in less advantaged localities, and where quality (as judged by Ofsted inspections cited earlier) is improving.

¹⁶⁰ Reed, J. and O'Halloran, J. (IPPR) 2024. The childcare challenge: How can the new government deliver a real childcare guarantee? Available at:

<https://ippr-org.files.svdcdn.com/production/Downloads/Childcare-challenge-December-2024.pdf?dm=1734434967>

¹⁶¹ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Giving every child the best start in life. Available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/giving-every-child-the-best-start-in-life>

¹⁶² Mathers, S. and Smees, R. 2014. Quality and inequality: Do three- and four-year-olds in deprived areas experience lower quality early years provision? Available at:

https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Quality_inequality_childcare_mathers_29_05_14.pdf; Melhuish, E. 2004. A literature review of the impact of early years provision on young children, with emphasis given to children from disadvantaged backgrounds. London: National Audit Office;

Taggart, B., Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P. and Siraj, I. 2015. How pre-school influences children and young people's attainment and developmental outcomes over time. Research Brief. Available at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/455670/RB455_Effective_pre-school_primary_and_secondary_education_project.pdf.pdf

¹⁶³ Orso, L., Jones, L., Cattani, S., Roy-Chowdhury, V. and Snaquest, C. 2024. Where you live shouldn't stop you accessing the very best childcare – but in some places it does. Available at:

<https://www.nesta.org.uk/data-visualisation-and-interactive/where-you-live-shouldnt-stop-you-accessing-the-very-best-childcare-but-in-some-places-it-does/>

¹⁶⁴ Taggart, B., Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P. and Siraj, I. 2015. How pre-school influences children and young people's attainment and developmental outcomes over time. Research Brief. Available at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/455670/RB455_Effective_pre-school_primary_and_secondary_education_project.pdf.pdf

Axford and Albers' report¹⁶⁵ also addressed distal and proximal factors that affect children's learning and development. The distal factors they grouped under family socio-economic aspects such as the mother's physical and mental health, nutrition, exposure to domestic abuse and poor housing as possible harmful effects on children's learning and development. Their evidence review identifies two main proximal factors that directly affect children's learning and development (a) parenting and the home learning environment, and (b) quality of ECEC. Axford and Albers state the effect of poverty on children's early learning can be moderated to some degree by seeking to improve aspects of parenting and the home learning environment. With regards to ECEC, the report states that the effectiveness of ECEC depends to some degree on quantity and two types of quality, structural and process quality, as also discussed above. The report recommends taking a two-generation approach in which high-quality ECEC is combined with support for parents to engage in their children's learning and development.

4.6 Theme 5: Expansion and reach potential

The evidence in this theme addresses **RQ6. How well set-up are primary schools to host this provision? In which areas are the schools who could engage in further rollout? What are the major obstacles government should consider?** This theme explores in which areas the SBNs are currently found and how far that matches up with areas of need, as well as patterns of disadvantage. It also sets out evidence on the reach and ability of school-based provision to cater for the needs of target groups such as working families, low-income families and children with SEND.

Access to and take-up of education entitlements

The extension of school-based nurseries is in part a response to the need to stimulate greater take up of education entitlements and increase access to early education and childcare, particularly for working families, children from low-income families and children with SEND or additional needs. Access data published by Ofsted¹⁶⁶ includes both Ofsted-registered provision and school-based nurseries (SBN numbers did not used to be

¹⁶⁵ Axford, N. and Alber, B. 2018. Improving the early learning of children growing up in poverty: A rapid review of the evidence. Available at:

<https://pure.plymouth.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/39569289/Improving%20the%20Early%20Learning%20Outcomes%20of%20Children%20Growing%20Up%20in%20Poverty%20-%20A%20Rapid%20Review%20of%20the%20Evidence.pdf>

¹⁶⁶ Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) 2026. Commentary: The effect of school-based nurseries on childcare accessibility.

Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-effect-of-school-based-nurseries-on-childcare-accessibility/commentary-the-effect-of-school-based-nurseries-on-childcare-accessibility>

included as they were part of the primary school inspection numbers). Analysis of these data reveal that including school-based nurseries in childcare accessibility calculations changes the level of relative childcare accessibility in some areas but also indicate that average access to childcare in England has declined in recent years. There is uneven access with '*childcare deserts*' and '*childcare oases*', meaning parents and carers experience very different levels of access depending on where they live. At a regional level, accessibility is highest in London and lowest in the West Midlands. Outside London, accessibility is highest in the North West. It is most variable in the South East, and least variable in London.

Relevant in this review is that the proportion of childcare accessibility from SBNs is higher in the most deprived communities than it is in more advantaged areas. This proportion rises with increasing levels of deprivation. Statistically, low accessibility clusters have a higher-than-average proportion of lone parent households where there is a dependent child aged 4 or under. A higher-than-average proportion of people in high accessibility clusters work full time. These areas also have higher economic performance than both the national average and low accessibility clusters. As the Ofsted report comments, "*Low accessibility clusters [childcare deserts] could be prioritised for interventions to improve access, either by increasing childcare provision [e.g. SBNs] or addressing socioeconomic factors where these differ from other areas*" (p13).¹⁶⁷ The focus on locating SBNs in areas of greatest deprivation need is validated by this evidence.

Recent evidence indicates that take up of education entitlements across the whole under five age range is relatively high (83%) but it varies regionally and locally, across different groups in society, and by child age, with take up increasing significantly as the child gets older.¹⁶⁸ In 2025 it was estimated that 93.1% of three-and-four-year-olds were registered for the universal entitlement. This is the lowest proportion since reporting started in 2011. The highest proportion was recorded in 2018 (97.2%); however, it has remained above 90% throughout.¹⁶⁹ There is no universal entitlement for two-year-olds but targeted entitlements, the 'Families Receiving Additional Support (FRAS) Entitlement' for disadvantaged

¹⁶⁷ Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) 2026. Commentary: The effect of school-based nurseries on childcare accessibility.

Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-effect-of-school-based-nurseries-on-childcare-accessibility/commentary-the-effect-of-school-based-nurseries-on-childcare-accessibility>

¹⁶⁸ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Funded early education and childcare: Reporting year 2025. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/funded-early-education-and-childcare/2025>

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

children and the new 'Working parents Entitlement'. In 2025 it was estimated that the uptake was 65.2% of eligible two-year-olds registered for the FRAS entitlement, which follows a downward trend in the past 10 years, which is partially due to decreasing birth rates but also because of a change in eligibility criteria.¹⁷⁰

The government acknowledges that *'the range of early education and childcare offers [in England] is complex for parents to navigate'* and that the different schemes that are available can be confusing and even difficult to access (p7).¹⁷¹ However, even more concerning is the fact that there are parents not aware of their eligibility for existing offers. The percentage of parents not aware of their eligibility has remained about the same in the past 10 years. 27% of parents were unaware of eligibility in 2015 versus 25% in 2024.¹⁷² A troubling statistic is that the awareness of existing offers increases with annual income. Parents in families with an annual income under £20,000 per year were the least likely to know about eligibility (71%) versus families with an annual income of £65,000+ (82%).¹⁷³ By extension it can be expected that parents are therefore also not aware of what type of formal provision is available to their child. Reporting on the Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents in 2010, one of Speight *et al.*'s key findings was that *"Children from the most disadvantaged families were more likely to receive early years provision at nursery classes"* (p4).¹⁷⁴ In line with this, Jarvie referring to the Coram Family and Childcare annual survey, states that *"children with special*

¹⁷⁰ Ibid; Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Giving every child the best start in life. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/giving-every-child-the-best-start-in-life>

¹⁷¹ Department for Education (DfE) 2025h. Giving every child the best start in life. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/giving-every-child-the-best-start-in-life>

¹⁷² Department for Education (DfE) 2016. Survey of childcare and early years providers, England 2016. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childcare-and-early-years-providers-survey-2016>; Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Childcare and early years survey of parents. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-survey-of-parents/2024>

¹⁷³ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Childcare and early years survey of parents. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-survey-of-parents/2024>

¹⁷⁴ Speight, S., Smith, R., Coshall, C. and Lloyd-Reichling, E. 2010. Towards universal early years provision: Analysis of take-up by disadvantaged families from recent annual childcare surveys. Available at: <https://uel-repository.worktribe.com/output/480430/towards-universal-early-years-provision-analysis-of-take-up-by-disadvantaged-families-from-recent-annual-childcare-surveys>

*educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and children from deprived backgrounds were far more likely to attend maintained settings.*¹⁷⁵

She furthermore states that:

children from poorer households or with additional needs attend different types of provision than children from more wealthy households, driven in part by differences in local childcare landscapes. In deprived areas, school nurseries are more common compared to private providers, whereas in more affluent areas, the situation is reversed.

Phase 2 of the Government's School-based Nursery programme is currently being rolled out aiming to deliver at least 300 new or expanded school-based nurseries, ready to offer new childcare places in the 2026-27 academic year. The plan is to build them all over the country but in this phase the focus is on supporting families in disadvantaged areas to better access early years provision. With schools being at the heart of communities, it is felt that they are well located for offering services families need and the evidence on access and take up supported this strategy. SBNs also see lower staff turnover, which is positive for everyone working in the field and families accessing provision. They also serve a greater proportion of children with SEND compared with private group-based providers, and are also more prevalent in deprived areas.¹⁷⁶

Areas for development in future SBN roll out

The evidence suggests four targeted areas for action to be considered in the future SBN roll out.

1. Targeted action in deprived localities

According to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), the *Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index* (IDACI) measures the proportion of all children aged 0 to 15 living in income deprived families and is a sub-set of the Income Deprivation Domain. The

¹⁷⁵ Jarvie, M. 2023. Changing the mix of childcare provision to meet families' needs. Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/care/changing-the-mix-of-childcare-provision-to-meet-families-needs#:~:text=These%20differences%20also%20mean%20that,likely%20to%20be%20rated%20outstanding>

¹⁷⁶ Department for Education (DfE) 2025a. Phase 2 of the school-based nursery programme: Everything you need to know. Available at: <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2025/09/nurseries-in-schools-everything-you-need-to-know/>

Income Deprivation Domain measures the proportion of the population in an area experiencing deprivation relating to low income. The definition of low income used includes both those people that are out-of-work, and those that are in work but who have low earnings (and who satisfy the respective means tests).¹⁷⁷ The MHCLG reports that the most deprived Local Authority Districts on the IDACI measure are spread across the Midlands, Greater London and the north of England. In 27 Local Area Districts across England, 50% or more children are reported as living in income deprived households. Tower Hamlets has the highest proportion at 71.3%. The 10 most income deprived households are located in:

1. Tower Hamlets (71.3%)
2. Hackney (64.1)
3. Birmingham (61.7%)
4. Newham (59.7%)
5. Brent (58.5%)
6. Manchester (57.5%)
7. Enfield (55.5%)
8. Nottingham (55.4%)
9. Luton (55.3%)
10. Middlesbrough (55.2%)

Building capacity and supporting families in these disadvantaged areas to access early years provision should be one focus in Phase 2 of the roll-out.

¹⁷⁷ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) 2025. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2025/english-indices-of-deprivation-2025-statistical-release>

2. Targeted actions to enhance reach and SBN coverage

There are major challenges for the government in the roll-out of the SBN programme and their aim to reach the children and families most in need, including working families, low-income families and children with SEND.

Working families: Many primary schools now do free breakfast clubs and after school activities (usually at additional cost) which when used together offer an 'extended day' choice to busy working parents. SBNs, too, would be able to benefit from such a facility for their younger children. However, as set out earlier in this report, the financial burden of offering these additional activities around the school day and the perceived lack of demand in some communities acts as a disincentive to schools in offering these 'extended day' and 'extended year' services.

Low-income families: The evidence shows the MNS provision located in areas of disadvantage impacts positively on educational outcomes of children living in poverty and that school-based nurseries also have potential to reach more low-income families. As stated above, targeting the SBN roll-out more actively in localities with the highest level of deprivation would enable better reach to children growing up in poverty.

Children with SEND: Many studies indicate that early identification is not only a key factor in successful integration and educational progress but that it is likely to produce economic benefits in reducing the need for long-term interventions. Schools generally have well-established, systemised approaches to the identification of SEND and all schools will have a designated SEND coordinator. School-based nursery settings also see lower staff turnover, serve a greater proportion of children with SEND and are more prevalent in deprived areas. The 2026 white paper, *Every Child Achieving and Thriving*,¹⁷⁸ sets out to create a simplified system to meet the needs of all children and young people with SEND. In summary the proposed new system starts with a universal offer of support for every child in all schools. This includes high quality adaptive teaching, calm environments and early help when needed. For children with additional needs there are three further levels of support to be offered:

“Targeted – Structured support such as speech and language support in small groups or help with managing sensory needs. This

¹⁷⁸ Department for Education (DfE) 2026d. SEND Reform: Putting Children and Young People First. CP 1509. London: HMSO. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/69986263b33a4db7ff889ecb/SEND_reform_putting_children_and_young_people_first_government_consultation.pdf

will be recorded in their digital Individual Support Plan, developed by schools and in partnership with parents.

Targeted Plus – *More specialist support from education and health professionals, including Speech and Language Therapists and Educational Psychologists. This will be delivered in partnership with our 'Experts at Hand Offer'. This will also be recorded through their Individual Support Plan.*

Specialist – *Children with complex needs will get comprehensive, specialist support through a Specialist Provision Package and EHCP in a mainstream or specialist setting. The detail day to day support they will receive will be recorded in their Individual Support Plan.*¹⁷⁹

The SEND reforms have significant implications for staffing, curriculum and pedagogy in all schools, including SBNs and their partner providers, and these plans to increase early intervention and support for children with additional needs will need to be factored into requirements in the future roll out of the SBN programme.

3. Targeted Action to Support Maintained Nursery Schools

The Early Education 2025 report also stated that in maintained nursery schools,

...there has been a clear increase in demand for two-year-old places for working parents, but, concerningly, also widespread fall in demand for places for disadvantaged two-year-olds, for the 30 hours for three-and-four-year-olds and the universal three-and-four-year-old entitlement. Attempts to prioritise the most vulnerable children are impacted by the need to maximise enrolments to sustain viability, meaning that if disadvantaged families apply later in the cycle, fewer places are available.

The evidence from Early Education and the LGA¹⁸⁰ indicates that the government may not be reaching the children and families they are

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Local Government Association (LGA) 2023. Early education and childcare: Changes and challenges for the future. Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/early-education-and-childcare-changes-and-challenges-future>

attempting to reach and needs to look at the whole picture of providers and support all providers in the current system, and not ignore MNSs since the evidence shows that MNS provision located in areas of disadvantage impacts positively on educational outcomes of children living in poverty.¹⁸¹ The research of Hoskins *et al.*¹⁸² also indicates that nursery schools play a vital role in reducing the socio-economic disadvantage experienced by some children. They therefore urge that nursery school funding must be protected so that they can continue to provide support to some of the most vulnerable children and their families in England. Funding for more SBN on existing MNS sites would therefore make educational sense.

4. Targeted action for the workforce

The National Partnership in Early Learning and Childcare (NPELC) represents ten of the largest nursery groups across England. In 2025 they provided evidence to the Education Committee stating that, *“the system is under significant strain, with workforce shortages, rising cost pressures and uneven access threatening the ability of many children to benefit from consistently high-quality provision”* (p1).¹⁸³ They stated that to secure a sustainable workforce, the government should focus on three key themes: workforce capacity and sustainability, access and affordability, and quality and outcomes. These issues have resonance across the early years sector and also for school-based nurseries and are considered in more detail below.

Workforce capacity and sustainability limitations

NPELC further state that, *“providers are facing an escalating recruitment and retention crisis that threatens both capacity and quality”* (p1). To address this, they recommend that the government should:

- Add early years roles to the *Health and Care* visa list. This would lower salary thresholds and costs, open up

¹⁸¹ Solvason, C., Webb, R. and Sutton-Tsang, S. 2021. 'What is left...?': The implications of losing Maintained Nursery Schools for vulnerable children and families in England. *Children & Society*, 35 (1), 75-89. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12391>

¹⁸² Hoskins, K., Bradbury, A. and Fogarty, L. 2021. A frontline service? Nursery schools as local community hubs in an era of austerity. *Journal of Early Childhood Research* 19 (3), 355-368. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X20969850>

¹⁸³ National Partnership in Early Learning and Childcare (NPELC) 2025. Submission EYS0009: Written evidence submitted to the Education Committee. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/148904/pdf/>

international recruitment to help fill urgent vacancies and reduce waiting lists for families

- Publish a government-approved list of qualifying childcare training courses. This would ensure students are work-ready at graduation and reduce inefficiencies where providers must retrain new recruits
- Fast-track Level 3 qualifications for experienced practitioners. This could help address current shortages by enabling suitably skilled and experienced staff to progress more quickly through a level 3 qualification. This would help to ensure more people are able to upskill and reach Level 3, which is particularly pertinent given that the new experience-based route is having a very limited impact in achieving this.

Access and affordability

The NPELC survey also expressed that the new SBNs in Phase 1 of the roll-out were sometimes allocated to areas that already have sufficient provision, while others with greater need receive little support. The survey report stated,

While we understand that the first round was affected by varying levels of engagement from schools and local authorities, it will be important in future phases to ensure partnerships are better targeted. Securing the right SBN locations depends not only on government planning but also on active collaboration from schools and LAs. Without this, there is a risk of displacing established provision, increasing workforce pressures, and missing the opportunity to expand access where it is most urgently required (p2).

To improve access and affordability the NPELC recommends the government should:

- Introduce a nationally standardised local authority contract, with a single HMRC–DfE portal. This would eliminate duplication, reduce bureaucracy for providers with settings across more than one county
- Not only ring-fence funding but also align funding with the true cost of 52 weeks of care and raise EYPP, to match primary school level as well as widening eligibility, to enable providers to deliver consistent and inclusive support

- Improve parental awareness of entitlements to ensure families understand and access the support available to them
- Remove the 10-hour daily cap or extend it to 11-12 hours. This would increase flexibility for working families, reduce the need for additional hours in a funded day for parents, and better reflect modern working patterns.

4.7 Theme 6: Success factors

The evidence in this theme addresses **RQ5. What learnings can we take from existing examples of successful relationships between schools and nurseries?** The theme sets out current evidence on what works well and has been successful in achieving the goals of the School-based Nursery programme which aims to increase the number of nursery places available and improve the quality of early education and childcare.

What makes SBNs successful?

The five case studies summarised in Appendix 2 by Childcare Works¹⁸⁴ provide useful evidence from which to draw learning about what makes a successful SBN. The Heathfield Knoll School¹⁸⁵ case study reveals that SBNs offer a unique approach because they connect early education to the wider school community. They suggest what can make SBNs successful and foreground the following features which contribute to the success of an SBN:

1. **Strong educational foundation led by qualified teachers**
Children get a stronger educational foundation because they benefit from daily contact with qualified teachers and early years specialists. A child's specific needs can be identified early, and teaching adapted accordingly, to support progress. Teachers in SBNs use proven methods such as phonics programmes to develop early language and literacy, laying a strong foundation for later subjects.
2. **Easier transition to primary school through staff collaboration**
Staff collaboration helps children prepare for reception class, often making the transition to primary school and formal education

¹⁸⁴ Childcare Works 2025. School-based nurseries: Five case studies. Hosted by the DfE from April 2026. Available from: <https://www.coramhempalls.org.uk/childcare/childcare-works-EY-WAC>

¹⁸⁵ Heathfield Knoll School 2025. 9 key benefits of a school-based nursery. Available at: <https://www.hkschool.org.uk/9-key-benefits-of-a-school-based-nursery/>

smoother and less stressful. Children do not need to worry about settling into a new environment or making friends from scratch. They are also familiar with the school grounds and school staff. The connection to the wider school ensures that the early education is directly linked to the child's long-term learning journey.

3. Convenient location for families with older children

Drop off and pick up is in one place, which can save time in the morning and afternoon by reducing the need to travel between different childcare and school locations, thus making daily routines easier.

4. Lower staff turnover ensuring consistent care

Lower staff turnover means children spend more time with the same adults. Stable relationships create smoother learning and emotional development because frequent staff changes can be disruptive and affect children's progress.

5. Enhanced social development and making lifelong friends

Children who attend a SBN spend time with children who they will be likely to continue their school journey with.

6. Improved parental engagement

Close collaboration between early years, primary school staff and parents is possible being on the same site. By being present in the school environment from an early stage, parents become familiar with the wider school environment which makes it easier to take part in events, meetings or activities that connect families with the school community.

7. Access to specialist resources and support services

There may be access to wider school resources, such as speech and language support or early intervention programmes eliminating the need to seek external help. Additional support staff may also be available to meet individual needs.

The Childcare Works consortium¹⁸⁶ confirm the positive aspects of SBNs are that they can help establish and build relationships between families and schools ahead of formal education and offer convenience for parents and carers with other children already attending the primary school. The Childcare Works consortium has also created a series of five infographics

¹⁸⁶ Childcare Works 2025. School-based nurseries: Five case studies. Hosted by the DfE from April 2026. Available from: <https://www.coramhempshalls.org.uk/childcare/childcare-works-EY-WAC>

designed to support schools interested in establishing, expanding and sustaining early years provision on their own site. These practical tips summarise key learning from the five SBN case studies undertaken by Childcare Works¹⁸⁷ and are summarised under the following headings:

Financial sustainability

- Use break-even analysis
- Leverage shared school resources
- Highlight your unique strengths
- Consider appointing an administrator
- Maximise outreach and visibility
- Plan for holiday provision strategically.

Adapting the school environment for nursery provision

- Invest in durable, sustainable resources
- Create outdoor spaces that connect children to nature
- Include calming and sensory zones indoors
- Plan nursery infrastructure in advance
- Repurpose existing school spaces
- Support sensory and SEND needs.

Staffing, recruitment and CPD

- Recruit for values and potential, alongside qualifications
- Establish a mentoring system for new staff

¹⁸⁷ Childcare Works 2025. Top tips for school-based nurseries. Hosted by the DfE from April 2026. Available from: <https://www.coramhempshalls.org.uk/childcare/childcare-works-EY-WAC>

- Schedule CPD creatively
- Engage local authority support
- Track progress and tailor training
- Recruit for needs; rather than like-for-like replacement.

Leadership and governance

- Integrate nursery governance into whole-school structure
- Appoint a dedicated early years governor
- Prepare for dual inspection frameworks
- Strengthen SEND oversight and accountability
- Hold regular leadership check-ins
- Embed a culture of inspection readiness.

In the case study of Scargill Infant School in Essex,¹⁸⁸ they describe some aspects of their journey in establishing a SBN on site. They state their decision was informed by parent and carer feedback, local authority engagement and their own experience with transition challenges having children coming to school from 28 different feeder nurseries. Their advice for succeeding falls roughly into three of the below categories:

Financial

Develop a clear model, document the process and avoid trying to please everyone. Contact the local authority and other nurseries to ask for guidance.

¹⁸⁸ Department for Education (DfE) 2025. Early years provision: Expanding through a school-PVI partnership. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/early-years-provision-expanding-through-a-school-pvi-partnership>

Staffing

Build the right team by bearing in mind that nursery staffing and leadership require different skills than in a school setting. Draw on EYFS expertise, a strong EYFS lead can enhance both nursery and reception outcomes.

Leadership

Engage with the local community. Consult with parents, carers and local networks to shape the offer to meet local needs.

From the above case studies by Childcare Works and Scargill Infant School, what appears to be emerging, in order to achieve good outcomes for children, is that successful relationships between nurseries and schools depend on a strong joint leadership and integration of nursery governance into the whole-school structure. This success was based on a fundamental understanding on the part of the schools of the different needs of younger children. Secondly, recruiting, retaining and developing early childhood professionals, to be able to deliver high quality provision, is equally essential.

4.8 Theme 7: Learning for policy and roll-out

The evidence in this theme addresses **RQ7. How should government develop this policy going forward for a wider roll-out?** The theme considers how the evidence presented can inform a wider roll out of SBNs and maximise the positive impact on disadvantaged children (including by income and SEND), so contributing to narrowing the school readiness gap. It suggests policy options for reform and further development and the pros and cons for these options from the existing evidence base.

There are several reports included in this review which carry evidence informed policy recommendations which have been highlighted in the above thematic narratives. The evidence base on SBN and the statistics which map its reach and impact are in an early stage of development. The evidence in this review suggests that policy priorities around this initiative should focus on:

- Increasing the capacity and number of school-based nursery providers so that it becomes the 'norm' for primary schools to embrace and cater for pre-compulsory aged children. In the roll-out prioritising access to school-based nurseries for less advantaged children, low-income families and children with additional needs should be a primary concern

- Funding reform and enhancement to enable high quality early years provision on school sites
- Encouraging locally shaped delivery models with clear and unified governance
- Clarifying and promoting cohesive sector nomenclature so the parents and the wider public understand what the provision is and what to expect
- Reducing the complexity of the sector through integration of services through partnership working strategically and operationally
- Developing enhanced and integrated databases to track children, places and providers
- School leadership development and career progression at middle and senior team levels to ensure leaders have an early years specialism
- School workforce professional development, particularly for all staff working with younger age groups
- Curriculum and pedagogy clarification for foundation stage children, particularly in reception classes to better support children from low-income, disadvantaged families and children with SEND
- Enhancing parenting and whole family support in school-based settings by linking with Family Hubs
- Improving access to school-based nursery provision by targeting funding and entitlements on children's needs rather than family circumstances, including children living in disadvantaged and low-income households and children with SEND and other additional needs
- Developing a more positive rhetoric around the power and importance of early education from babyhood onwards to transform life chances
- Developing inclusive educational strategies to support access, participation and early intervention for young children and the early years workforce with diverse needs

- Commissioning more sustained and longitudinal research on the functioning and impact of school-based nurseries.

Final reflections

The development of school-based nurseries is one strand of a significant policy shift to enhance early education and childcare, health and family support for all young children and families under the umbrella of the Best Start in Life strategy. This heralds a time of significant system change for the early years sector bringing funding, opportunities for expansion and a responsibility to deliver enhanced outcomes for all young children, especially those less advantaged and those with additional needs. In December 2025 the government published the policy paper *Our Children, Our Future*.¹⁸⁹ In this policy paper they state that the government will boost family income by increasing Universal Credit, rolling out free breakfast clubs, expanding free school meals, investing in the 'Holiday Activity and Food Programme', rolling out 'Best Start Family Hubs', increasing 'Early Years Pupil Premium', and delivering the SBNs programme. These are all policy initiatives that will make a difference to children and families living in poverty with the hope of improving child outcomes.

Writing for NESTA, an independent UK innovation agency and research foundation, Orso *et al.* identified in 2024 that there was an unequal access to high-quality childcare in England. This is not only due to a lack of places but also due to a decline in providers achieving an 'outstanding' rating by Ofsted. They state the percentage of 'outstanding' providers in the most deprived areas is 14%, compared to 20% in the least deprived areas which, in practical terms means that:

*[f]or every 1,000 children, the number of childcare places in settings judged outstanding varies considerably. By local authority, Kensington and Chelsea has 104 outstanding places for every 1,000 children – the highest number in England – whereas Rutland has none.*¹⁹⁰

These numbers tell us that there are very stark disparities in the availability of high-quality early education and childcare across parts of England but where school-based provision exists it serves these target populations

¹⁸⁹ Cabinet Office 2025. *Our children, our future: Tackling child poverty*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/our-children-our-future-tackling-child-poverty>

¹⁹⁰ Orso, L., Jones, L., Cattan, S., Roy-Chowdhury, V. and Snaquest, C. 2024. *Where you live shouldn't stop you accessing the very best childcare – but in some places it does*. Available at: <https://www.nesta.org.uk/data-visualisation-and-interactive/where-you-live-shouldnt-stop-you-accessing-the-very-best-childcare-but-in-some-places-it-does/>

well. Orso *et al.* conclude that the uneven availability of childcare, the unequal quality of available places and the reduction of quality of providers creates a serious challenge to achieving the Government's aims of giving every child the *Best Start in Life*. It is clear that this mission cannot only be about building and expanding nurseries in schools across England, but the SBN programme has potential to make a real difference to children and families in the most need. Along with this it is imperative that all providers can deliver high-quality early education and care which requires a significant investment and clear strategies for improving the quality across the whole sector. The evidence in this review indicates that school-based nursery provision, and particularly that which is based in, or working in partnership with, MNSs, could lead the way towards achieving universal access to a more equitable, inclusive and life changing early education experiences for all young children and especially those living in disadvantaged communities and those with additional, diverse and complex needs.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Summary tables of search terms, searches conducted, and results

Search 1

A key word search using the words 'school-based nurseries' was conducted across five databases to find peer reviewed research published between 2015 and 2025. It yielded 2 papers that were not about SBNs and therefore excluded. Any other combination of words including the words 'school-based nurseries' AND another word, only yielded 1 paper. For example, to expand the search, searches including all the countries of the UK using the following key word chains:

- School-based nurseries AND England
- School-based nurseries AND Wales
- School-based nurseries AND Scotland
- School-based nurseries AND Northern Ireland
- School-based nurseries AND UK.

School-based nurseries AND UK resulted in the one hit, a relevant paper by Hoskins *et al.* (2021) included in this report.

An internet search was carried out, exploring the first 10 hits, using the following key phrases:

- PVI settings on primary school sites in England
- Maintained nursery settings on primary school sites
- Childcare settings on primary school sites
- School-based nurseries and primary schools.

Of the 40 sites listed, 16 were explored. Accounting for duplicate listings, 7 are included in this report. 5 are DfE publications and 2 are publications by associations, the Early Years Alliance and Early Education.

Search 2

A key word search was conducted across five databases to find peer reviewed research published between 2015-2025. The following key words were used:

- Private voluntary and independent (PVI) settings AND primary schools
- Maintained nurseries AND primary schools
- Maintained nursery schools AND primary schools
- School-based nurseries AND age range
- School-based nurseries.

The search yielded 2 papers from the search on 'school-based nurseries' but they were not relevant to our research questions, therefore excluded.

Search 3

A combination of key word searches was conducted across five databases to find peer reviewed research published between 2015-2025 in relation to SBNs and quality, effectiveness and school readiness. This resulted in 5 hits with 1 relevant duplicate paper used in another section in this report.

- School-based nurseries AND quality
- School-based nurseries AND readiness
- School-based nurseries AND effectiveness OR efficacy OR effective.

To expand the previous internet search, a search was conducted exploring the first 10 hits, using the words 'Quality in school-based nurseries' which resulted in 3 relevant documents by the DfE already included in this report.

Search 4

The combination of a key word search was conducted across five databases to find peer reviewed research published between 2015-2025 which resulted in 13 hits, with 2 possibly relevant papers reviewed, both included in this report.

- Policy and practice AND poverty AND child outcomes.

The whole research question 'How can policy and practice improve child outcomes, in particular, those from low-income households?' was entered in the search engine. The first 10 hits resulted in 7 possibly relevant documents, with 5 included in this report.

Search 5

This final search included several whole question searches.

The question '**How well set-up are primary schools to host school-based nurseries**' was entered in the search engine. The first 10 hits resulted in 7 possibly relevant sources. Accounting for 3 duplicate, 4 sites were visited, but none provided relevant new sources.

The statement '**Major obstacles to the roll-out of school-based nurseries**' was entered in the search engine. The first 10 hits resulted in 4 possibly relevant sources. 3 sites provided relevant new sources.

The question '**What learnings can we take from existing examples of successful relationships between schools and nurseries**' was entered in the search engine. The first 10 hits resulted in three possibly relevant sources. 2 sites provided relevant new sources.

The words '**Case studies on school-based nurseries**' were entered in the search engine. The first 10 hits resulted in 6 possibly relevant sources. Accounting for 3 duplicates, 1 site provided a relevant new source.

The question '**What relationship do schools have with local early years feeder settings?**' was entered in the search engine. The first 10 hits resulted in three possibly relevant sources. 2 sites provided relevant new sources.

Summary Tables of Database Searches (✓, x)

Filters: Peer reviewed, full papers from past 10 years

NB: Point to note is the lack of SBN specific research papers indicating the need for more research on SBNs as the programme rolls out.

BEI	Private voluntary and independent (PVI) settings AND primary school	0
ERIC		
Including other databases: Education Abstract, Child development and Adolescent Studies, Educational Administration Abstract		0
BEI	Maintained nurseries AND primary school sites	0
ERIC		
Including other databases: Education Abstract, Child development and Adolescent Studies, Educational Administration Abstract		0
BEI	Maintained nursery schools AND primary school sites	0
ERIC		
Including other databases: Education Abstract, Child development and Adolescent Studies, Educational Administration Abstract		0
BEI	School-based nurseries	1
ERIC	Choc, T. <i>et al</i> 2021. Job satisfaction and risk of burnout in special needs nursery school teachers. <i>Cypriot Journal of Educational Sciences</i> . Does not meet inclusion criteria	x
Including other databases: Education Abstract, Child development and Adolescent Studies, Educational Administration Abstract		1

Grazzani, I et al 2016. How to foster toddlers' mental state talk ... Does not meet inclusion criteria	x

BEI	School-based nurseries AND England	0
ERIC		
Including other databases: Education Abstract, Child development and Adolescent Studies, Educational Administration Abstract		0
BEI	School-based nurseries AND Wales	0
ERIC		
Including other databases: Education Abstract, Child development and Adolescent Studies, Educational Administration Abstract		0
BEI	School-based nurseries AND Scotland	0
ERIC		
Including other databases: Education Abstract, Child development and Adolescent Studies, Educational Administration Abstract		0
BEI	School-based nurseries AND Northern Ireland	0
ERIC		

Including other databases: Education Abstract, Child development and Adolescent Studies, Educational Administration Abstract		0
BEI	School-based nurseries AND UK	1
ERIC	Hoskins <i>et al</i> 2021. A frontline service? Nursery schools as local community hubs in an era of austerity	✓
Including other databases: Education Abstract, Child development and Adolescent Studies, Educational Administration Abstract		0

School-based nurseries AND age range	0
Included databases: BEI, ERIC, Education Abstract, Child development and Adolescent Studies, Educational Administration Abstract	

School-based nurseries AND limitations	0
Included databases: BEI, ERIC, Education Abstract, Child development and Adolescent Studies, Educational Administration Abstract	

<p>School-based nurseries AND quality</p> <p>Including other databases: Education Abstract, Child development and Adolescent Studies, Educational Administration Abstract</p> <p>Hoskins <i>et al</i> 2021 (duplicate)</p> <p>2 excluded (1 about video observations, 1 about mathematics)</p>	<p>3</p> <p>-</p>
<p>School-based nurseries AND readiness</p> <p>Including other databases: Education Abstract, Child development and Adolescent Studies, Educational Administration Abstract</p> <p>Poisson, E., Pnce, C. and Rouyer, V, 2025. Becoming a student in nursery school: identification of profiles and their evolution prior to elementary school in France. <i>European Journal of Psychology of Education</i>, 40 (1)</p> <p>(psychosocial and cultural nature of the process of becoming a student)</p>	<p>1</p> <p>x</p>
<p>School-based nurseries AND effectiveness</p> <p>Including other databases: Education Abstract, Child development and Adolescent Studies, Educational Administration Abstract</p>	<p>0</p>
<p>School-based nurseries AND effectiveness or efficacy or effective Grazzani, I <i>et al</i> 2016. How to foster toddlers' mental-state talk ... (excluded)</p>	<p>1</p> <p>x</p>
<p>Included databases: BEI, ERIC, Education Abstract, Child development and Adolescent Studies, Educational Administration Abstract</p>	

Policy and practice AND poverty AND child outcome	14
Kim and Yu 2024. Home-based parent involvement (not about policy and practice, in the US, 2010-2011)	x
Gullo 2023. Family social capital ... US ... data from 2010-2011	x
Ward 2021. Transition to adulthood in 19 th century England	x
Conrad <i>et al</i> 2020 US welfare system	x
Gaynor Mowat 2017 Closing attainment gap (Scotland)	✓
Spiegel <i>et al</i> 2022 Harnessing a behavioral economic framework for supporting providers in improving early childhood care	✓
Markson, 2016 – prison ...	x
Ghadai 2016 – India	x
La Forett 2024, Headstart USA	x

Ferrans 2022, Nigeria	X
Headstart (duplicate)	X
Greeson 2024, Kenya	X
Wolf 2019, Ghana	X
Included databases: BEI, ERIC, Education Abstract, Child development and Adolescent Studies, Educational Administration Abstract	

Primary schools or primary school AND school-based nurseries	0
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Early childhood AND school-based provision	3
	X
None meeting inclusion criteria	X
	X

Childcare AND school-based provision	0

Childcare AND school-based nurseries	0
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School-based nurseries AND childcare AND barriers or obstacles or challenges	1
Partica <i>et al</i> 2024 Opportunities and challenges in the use of video in early childhood classroom quality observations.	x

School-based care AND barriers or obstacles or challenges	15
All were about health issues or wrong age group	0

Primary school AND partnership working AND early years or pre-school or nursery	0
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Internet Google Searches Summary Tables (✓, x)

The 10 first hits were reviewed. Potentially relevant sites were visited as listed below, with a symbol indicating if they were included or excluded

Google Search Terms

PVI settings on primary school sites in England		
1.	DfE, Establishing SBN provision https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision	✓
2.	Early Years Alliance Varenne, Z. and Gibson, J. (2025) Alliance calls for ban on schools closing PVI early years settings to take up government school-based nursery funding. Available at: https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/news-events/news/alliance-calls-ban-schools-closing-pvi-early-years-settings-take-government-school/ Accessed 8 January 2026.	✓
3.	DfE, EY provision: expanding through a school-PVI partnership: Case study https://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/early-years-provision-expanding-through-a-school-pvi-partnership	✓
4.	NDNA, Latest provider statistics show PVI sector crucial to expansion https://ndna.org.uk/latest-provider-statistics-show-pvi-sector-crucial-to-expansion/ (The latest 2025 survey statistics included instead – 5.)	✗
5.	DfE 2025 Childcare and early years provider survey https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-provider-survey/2025	✓
6.	DfE 2025. Childcare and survey of parents. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-survey-of-parents/2024	✓

Google Search Terms		
Maintained nursery settings on primary school sites		
1.	DfE, Establishing SBN provision	-

	https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision (duplicate)	
2.	DfE, Phase 2 of the school-based nursery programme: Everything you need to know https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2025/09/nurseries-in-schools-everything-you-need-to-know/	✓
3.	DfE 2025. Childcare and survey of parents. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-survey-of-parents/2024 (duplicate)	-
4.	Early Education SBN: what the DfE guidance does not say 2024 https://early-education.org.uk/school-based-nurseries-what-the-dfe-guidance-doesnt-say/	✓

Google Search Terms		
Childcare settings on primary school sites		
1.	DfE, Establishing SBN provision https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision (duplicate)	-
2.	DfE, Phase 2 of the school-based nursery programme: Everything you need to know https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2025/09/nurseries-in-schools-everything-you-need-to-know/ (duplicate)	-

Google Search Terms		
School-based nurseries and primary schools		
1	DfE, Phase 2 of the school-based nursery programme: Everything you need to know https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2025/09/nurseries-in-schools-everything-you-need-to-know/ (duplicate)	-

2	DfE 2025. School-based Nursery Capital Grant 2025 to 2026 https://www.gov.uk/guidance/school-based-nursery-capital-grant-2025-to-2026 (about the grant application)	x
3	Early Education SBN: what the DfE guidance does not say 2024 https://early-education.org.uk/school-based-nurseries-what-the-dfe-guidance-doesnt-say/ (duplicate)	-
4	DfE, Establishing SBN provision https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision (duplicate)	-

Google Search Terms		
Childcare attendance in deprived areas		
1	Save the Children 2024. Two thirds of poorest families miss out on childcare, as government urged to 'think differently'. https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/news/media-centre/press-releases/2024/two-thirds-poorest-families-miss-out-childcare-government	✓
2	DfE, 2025. Childcare and early years survey of parents. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-survey-of-parents/2024 (duplicate)	-
3	Mathers and Sylva 2014. Deprivation and quality of preschool provision https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/deprivation-and-quality-of-preschool-provision	✓

Google Search Terms		
Quality in school-based nurseries		

1	DfE 2025 Childcare and early years provider survey https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-provider-survey/2025 (duplicate)	-
2	DfE, Phase 2 of the school-based nursery programme: Everything you need to know https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2025/09/nurseries-in-schools-everything-you-need-to-know/ (duplicate)	-
3	Early Education SBN: what the DfE guidance does not say 2024 https://early-education.org.uk/school-based-nurseries-what-the-dfe-guidance-doesnt-say/ (duplicate)	-

Google Search Terms		
State-funded school inspections and outcomes		
1	Ofsted 2026. State-funded school inspections and outcomes: management information https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/monthly-management-information-ofsteds-school-inspections-outcomes	x
2	State-funded school statistics 2026 https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/maintained-schools-and-academies-inspections-and-outcomes-official-statistics	✓
3	Ofsted 2025 Main findings: state-funded schools inspections and outcomes as at 31 December 2024 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/state-funded-schools-inspections-and-outcomes-as-at-31-december-2024/main-findings-state-funded-schools-inspections-and-outcomes-as-at-31-december-2024 (more recent document found)	x
4	House of Commons 2024. Ofsted school inspection in England https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/ofsted-school-inspection-in-england/	x

5	GOV.UK Summary table of Ofsted state-funded school inspections https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66fbb3c1e84ae1fd8592ebac/School_inspection_summary_-_types_of_inspections.pdf	x
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Google Search Terms		
School-based nurseries and limitations (same search terms as for database search)		
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2	DfE, Establishing SBN provision https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision (duplicate)	-
3	Pentagon Play 2024. An in-depth look into Labour's plans for school-based nurseries. Available at https://www.pentagonplay.co.uk/news-and-info/labours-plans-school-based-nurseries?srsId=AfmBOoqphW4YB7InwoYdv2-cAA7Av6eopMPMIDmTPSkG7mmkolEnBDJQ Accessed 22 January 2026. (School Playground Equipment Specialist)	x
4	Early Education 2024. School-based nurseries: What the DfE guidance does not say Available at https://early-education.org.uk/school-based-nurseries-what-the-dfe-guidance-doesnt-say/ Accessed 22 January 2026. (professional journal, not research journal)	x
5	Local Government Association 2023. https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/early-education-and-childcare-changes-and-challenges-future (but lead to relevant report but got more recent report by Orso for NESTA)	x
6	Nursery World 2025. School-based nurseries push PVIs off-site and into closure. https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/content/news/long-read-school-based-nurseries-push-pvis-off-site-and-into-closure (professional journal, not research evidence)	x
7	BBC News 2025. Britain's nursery problem: Parents still face 'childcare deserts'. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c8x8rznw9gyo	x

8	Schools week 2026. Revealed: The first 300 schools splitting £37m nursery cash. https://schoolsweek.co.uk/revealed-the-first-300-schools-splitting-37m-nursery-cash/ (podcast)	x
9	DfE 2024. Establishing school-based nursery provision. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision (duplicate)	-

Google Search Terms		
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1.	Sutton Trust 2017, https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Closing-Gaps-Early_FINAL.pdf	✓
2.	Vicky Nevin, NSPCC and Rebecca Jacques UNICEF 2024 https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/12jimcnr/opening-doors-family-poverty-research-report.pdf	✓
3.	UK Parliament 2025 https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5901/cmselect/cm Pubacc/365/report.html	✓
4.	Duncan 2023 https://eprints.worc.ac.uk/12794/7/Mandy%20Duncan%20How%20can%20early%20years%20practitioners%20support%20the%20parenting%20of%20young%20children%20living%20in%20poverty%20-%20Post%20peer%20review.pdf (not about policies, restricted access) Duncan, Mandy (2023) <i>How can early years practitioners support the care of young children living in poverty?</i> International Journal of Birth and Parent Education, 10 (2). pp. 3-7. ISSN Print: 2054-0779 Online: 2054-0787	✓
5.	Evans and Cebula, 2024 (Scotland) Poverty proofing the future of early years childcare https://www.jrf.org.uk/child-poverty/poverty-proofing-the-future-of-early-years-childcare	x

6.	Estyn 2024 (Wales) Impact of poverty on educational attainment, support, provision and transition for early education https://estyn.gov.wales/app/uploads/2024/11/Impact-of-poverty-on-educational-attainment-support-provision-and-transition-for-early-education.pdf	X
7.	LSE (nd) Investing in early childhood education and care and in early intervention https://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/case/_new/research/Inequalities_and_Poverty/policy-toolkit/mechanisms-childhood-education.asp	X
8.	DfE 2025 Giving every child the best start in life – Policy Paper https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/giving-every-child-the-best-start-in-life/giving-every-child-the-best-start-in-life	X
9.	Early Intervention Foundation, 2018 How early childhood education and care can help to tackle the impact of childhood disadvantage - Blog https://www.eif.org.uk/blog/how-early-childhood-education-and-care-can-help-to-tackle-the-impact-of-childhood-disadvantage	X
10.	Axford and Albers, eds, 2019 Improving the early learning outcomes of children growing up in poverty: A rapid review of the evidence https://pure.plymouth.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/39569289/Improving%20the%20Early%20Learning%20Outcomes%20of%20Children%20Growing%20Up%20in%20Poverty%20-%20A%20Rapid%20Review%20of%20the%20Evidence.pdf	✓

Google search terms x✓		
How well set-up are primary schools to host school-based nurseries		
1.	Nuffield Introduction to OUR research https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/room-to-grow-school-based-nursery-places-and-the-disadvantage-gap	X

2.	Frontier Economics, Paull and Fitzpatrick 2024. Using spare capacity in schools https://www.frontier-economics.com/media/lmdlgy0n/report_using-spare-capacity-in-schools-for-new-nurseries_-clean-004.pdf (a consultancy firm)	x
3.	Tapestry, 2025?. School-based nurseries – our reflections on their roll out https://tapestry.info/school-based-nurseries-our-reflections-on-their-rollout/ (opining piece)	x
4.	DfE, Phase 2 of the school-based nursery programme: Everything you need to know https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2025/09/nurseries-in-schools-everything-you-need-to-know/ (duplicate)	-
5.	EE 2024. (duplicate)	-
6.	Education under cover, 2025. Revealed: how academies dominate government’s new childcare places scheme https://educationuncovered.co.uk/news/revealed-how-academies-dominate-governments-new-childcare-places-scheme (not research based)	x
7.	DfE, Establishing SBN provision https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision (duplicate)	-

Google search terms x✓		
Major obstacles to the roll out of school-based nurseries		
1.	Nuffield Introduction to OUR research https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/room-to-grow-school-based-nursery-places-and-the-disadvantage-gap	x
2.	EE 2025. More than half of England’s maintained nursery schools struggle to cover core costs https://early-education.org.uk/mns-funding-june-2025/	✓

3.	LGA 2023 Early education and childcare: Changes and challenges for the future https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/early-education-and-childcare-changes-and-challenges-future	✓
4.	Education Committee 2025 National Partnership in Early Learning and Childcare (EYS0009) https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/148904/pdf/#:~:text=%E2%80%A2%20The%20rollout%20of%20School%2DBased,others%20with%20greater%20need%20receive	✓

Google search terms x✓		
What learnings can we take from existing examples of successful relationships between schools and nurseries		
1.	Heathfield Knoll school, 2025, https://www.hkschool.org.uk/9-key-benefits-of-a-school-based-nursery/	✓
2.	Childcare works, 2025 School-based Nurseries: Five Case Studies https://childcareworks.org.uk/school-based-nurseries-five-case-studies/	✓
3.	Oliver McLeod FOR NDNA 2023 Build positive home-nursery relationships: 6 fun parent engagement ideas. https://ndna.org.uk/blog/build-positive-home-nursery-relationships/	x

Google search terms x✓		
Case studies on school-based nurseries		
1.	Childcare works, 2025 School-based Nurseries: Five Case Studies https://childcareworks.org.uk/school-based-nurseries-five-case-studies/ (duplicate)	-

2.	DfE 2025. Early years provision: expanding through a school-led model. https://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/early-years-provision-expanding-through-a-school-led-model	
3.	Sutton Trust 2026-2026 - ours Room to grow (research proposal)	
4.	DfE, Phase 2 of the school-based nursery programme: Everything you need to know https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2025/09/nurseries-in-schools-everything-you-need-to-know/ (duplicate)	-
5.	Childcare works, 2025 School-based Nurseries: Five Case Studies https://childcareworks.org.uk/school-based-nurseries-five-case-studies/ (duplicate)	
6.	SBN Case Study: Oakwood, Birchfield and Maple Grove (duplicate)	-

Google search terms x✓		
What relationship do schools have with local early years feeder settings?		
1.	Lawley primary school and nursery 2025. EYFS at Lawley primary school. Available at: https://lawleyprimary.co.uk/curriculum/early-years Accessed 5 February 2026.	✓
2.	Foundation Years 2014. Early Learning and childcare partnership hubs. Available at: https://www.foundationyears.org.uk/hubs/#:~:text=Teaching%20schools%20must%20provide%20evidence,lot%20to%20offer%20Hub%20members.&text=A%20focus%20on%20the%20transition,disadvantaged%20children%20and%20their%20peers.&text=One%20of%20the%20goals%20of,development%20of%20the%20childcare%20marke t. Accessed 5 February 2026. (all links broken)	x
3.	Ofsted 2026. Commentary: The effect of school-based nurseries on childcare accessibility. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-effect-of-school-based-nurseries-on-childcare-accessibility/commentary-the-effect-of-school-based-nurseries-on-childcare-accessibility Accessed 5 February 2026.	✓

Appendix 2: Summary of five SBN case studies

(Full case studies from Childcare Works (2025), currently held by the DfE and shared on the DfE EY Team K-Hub, titled Early Years Expansion and Wraparound Programmes).

Case Study 1: Brookstead Nursery

Brookstead is part of a Unity Trust Primary School. It provides term-time places for children three to five years in Hertfordshire. To create a designated space, they took particular areas into consideration.

1. **The curriculum.** The curriculum aligns with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework. Because the EYFS draws inspiration from elements of the Year 1 curriculum, it ensures a seamless transition for approximately 80% of children who progress from nursery into reception.
2. **Physical adaptations.** Inside new resources were bought from tables to book corners with a lifespan of at least 10 years to reduce long-term replacement costs from backfilling used furniture. Open ended resources were bought which could be used across age ranges. Outside a mud kitchen was installed and large sand and water trays and simple climbing frames were repurposed from other school areas. Adaptations were made for children with SEND e.g. installation of acoustic ceiling tiles and carpeted areas to cut back noise for hearing impaired and neurodivergent children.
3. **Timetable.** Not mentioned.
4. **Investment.** Furnishing was bought with a lifespan of at least 10 years to reduce long-term replacement costs.
5. **Staffing and CPD.** The nursery staff has a blend of Early Years Teacher Status holders with Level 3 practitioners and apprentices funded by the apprenticeship levy. Fortnightly CPD sessions cover various topics. Staff also access bite size modules on the National College platform. Half-termly formal observations lead to action plans. The local authority school improvement adviser visits termly to evaluate any meaningful improvements that can be made.
6. **Governance.** The head teachers and governors recognising the importance of early years as equal to other phases.

Regular termly visits by the early years governor, alongside Ofsted and school effectiveness adviser feedback, help maintain strategic oversight. Phase leaders and curriculum leaders ensure that nursery practice is fully integrated into the school's overall curriculum strategy.

7. **Ofsted.** As the nursery operates under the primary school's single Ofsted registration, it does not require a separate early years registration.
8. **Funding.** Financial planning required careful internal resource management regarding staffing ratios. The nursery only increased capacity in cohorts of 13 children to ensure staffing remained efficient and financially viable, because for every 13 children, one qualified teacher was required therefore all intake and expansion decisions were based on this ratio. Being part of a school setting allowed for flexibility, staff could be redeployed from within the school to respond to emerging SEND needs while maintaining financial sustainability.
9. **Evidence of success.** Delivering seamless continuity for children.
10. **Advice to others.** To campaign more strongly with school leadership for investment from the outset, especially for dedicated SEND expertise and permanent adaptations to the space. It's important to plan for top-up investment from school funds and explore entitlement negotiations with the local authority.

Case Study 2: Everkind Nursery

Everkind is a charitable PVI network established in 2020. It provides year-round places for children from nine months to five years in south and west London. To transform underutilised school space, they took particular areas into consideration.

1. **The curriculum.** They follow a carefully designed curriculum that aligns with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework. The Director of Early Years plays a pivotal role by supporting curriculum development and educator training in both nursery and school settings, which helps ensure consistency in teaching approaches and expectations.
2. **Physical adaptations.** They only needed to undertake 'cosmetic' changes to the environment such as installing secure fencing or partition walls to create a distinct entrance and outdoor play area

for nursery children, ensuring that safeguarding standards matched those of standalone nurseries. Inside the buildings, the team used movable shelving units, low partitions and flexible room dividers to define play, dining and quiet-time zones without reducing the sense of openness.

3. **Timetable.** Nursery leaders and school leaders collaborated to align daily timetables, ensuring that school assemblies, pick-up times and holidays integrate smoothly with nursery operations.
4. **Investment.** Rather than purchase one-off, expensive resources, Everkind relies on a rotating inventory of books, loose-parts materials and curriculum kits aligned to each half-termly theme.
5. **Staffing and CPD.** At the heart of their approach, they state is a Manager-in-Training programme, apprenticeships. They also have a team of qualified practitioners, maintained centrally and allocated to cover planned and unplanned absences across their five sites. By offering the London Living Wage and clear career progression, they believe they have higher staff retention and morale than the sector average.
6. **Governance.** The Director of Early Years is responsible for health, safety and quality on site. There is a joint Nursery Board, which includes school governors and the host school's Director of Education. They meet five times a year to review performance indicators such as child outcomes, safeguarding incidents and budget forecasts. Between board meetings, the nursery's Head of Early Years holds fortnightly check-ins with the school headteacher to align calendars, share site-wide risk assessments and coordinate school events.
7. **Ofsted.** Ofsted registration was time-intensive and can take six months therefore factoring in time for this is important.
8. **Funding.** Everkind sustains its operations through a financial model that balances grants, philanthropy, funded entitlements and private fees. Each setting is designed with the goal of breaking even through funded-only hours, maintaining consistently high enrolment is therefore a priority. Unlike schools, where funding is allocated based on a fixed pupil headcount collected once per year, early years settings must adapt to more immediate and fluid changes in enrolment and attendance patterns.

By undertaking a detailed needs analysis, combining data on local birth rates, existing nursery quality ratings and parental surveys they assessed demand before launching each of the five SBNs. As a SBN Everkind shares costs with partner schools when operating within school buildings, which allows for savings on rent, maintenance, and catering. Rather than paying commercial rates, the nurseries contribute to shared operational expenses, creating a mutually beneficial arrangement.

9. **Evidence of success.** Their most significant success is that 89% of children at Everkind nurseries achieved a 'Good Level of Development'.
10. **Advice to others.** Operating a nursery within a school context demands the agility of a small business underpinned by a clear educational mission. Partnerships with sector experts from the earliest planning stages help balance regulatory and operational demands with the day-to-day reality of delivering exceptional early years experiences. Finally, agile administration and daily monitoring of occupancy was said to be indispensable for maintaining viability.

Case Study 3: Hawthorne Nursery School

Hawthorne School Nursery is a 26-place maintained nursery. It provides places for children from three to five years in Sutton. They offer a PVI run breakfast and after school club. To create a designated space, they took particular areas into consideration.

1. **The curriculum.** The school leadership works closely with the school's Early Years leader and the Reception teacher to ensure the nursery curriculum is consistent with that of the school. The Nursery School's vision is to bridge the gap between home and formal schooling, ensuring every child enters Reception confident, curious and eager to learn.
2. **Physical adaptations.** Limited outdoor adaptations were needed for the nursery as there was already a natural mud kitchen, tiered climbing stumps, covered sand pits, water-play points and power sockets available. Permanent overhead covers were also installed. The school successfully bid for funding to install robust, natural-material play structures at varying heights.
 - a. For safety purposes ramps and step-free thresholds were added to improve accessibility. Privacy screening was fitted to public-facing fences, and the drop-off gate was secured.

3. **Timetable.** The school holds weekly liaison meetings with the clubs, so routines, safeguarding and the child's and parent's experience remain consistent from 7:30am to 6pm.
4. **Investment.** Planning-permission negotiations over fencing extended timelines and led to unanticipated costs so they recommended to others this should be factored in when converting spaces.
5. **Staffing and CPD.** There is a nursery teacher role with a full qualified teacher's salary and support staff with Level 3 teaching assistant qualifications. Hawthorne believes that they have a high retention rate because of the pay parity of nursery teachers at qualified teacher level.
 - a. Fortnightly learning walks are conducted to observe adult-child interactions. Training is further enriched by support from the local authority, including free courses, and visits and feedback from an early years representative. Staff are also engaged to undertake peer visits to other settings during inset days.
6. **Governance.** Hawthorne's nursery is embedded within the wider school governance structure. Governors receive half-termly reports detailing nursery numbers, budget implications, and recruitment challenges. Hawthorne ensures governors receive concise briefings outlining the structure and core objectives of the EYFS.
 - a. To improve financial sustainability, the school has introduced paid afternoon sessions for families using their funded morning entitlement
7. **Ofsted.** In line with school inspections.
8. **Funding.** The Nursery School contributes to the whole-school pupil intake, particularly by supporting seamless sibling transitions into the reception class. This not only strengthens enrolment but also nurtures sustained engagement with families.
9. **Evidence of success.** Seamless transition.
10. **Advice to others.** Hawthorne acknowledged that including kitchen facilities for hot lunches and a quiet nap area at the beginning

would have been advantageous and is something they would like to add if funding became available.

- a. Hawthorne also highlighted the need to ensure, for safety and accessibility indoors, that toilets are low-level, enabling children to use them independently.
- b. Key facilities such as running hot and cold water, accessible changing rooms, secure indoor-outdoor flow, and precisely calculated staffing ratios should be considered essential. They also highlighted that it is important to define the daily timetable in detail.

Case Study 4: Oakwood, Birchfield and Maple Grove Nurseries

Oakwood, Birchfield and Maple Grove are part of a federation of three nurseries in London. Oakwood provides places for children two to four years term time only, Maple Grove provides places for children six months to four years with year-round wraparound care, and Birchfield nursery merged into a foundation stage unit due to a low number of children attending. To adapt to local needs, they took following issues into consideration.

1. **The curriculum.** Oakwood and Maple Grove hold joint professional development days with Reception teams so that every child experiences a consistent approach as they move into reception.
2. **Physical adaptations.** All three nurseries are operated by the school, benefiting from the full use of its premises and the support of shared senior leadership and administrative teams.

Outdoors, a priority was to make sure children had a useable outdoor space therefore all three sites designed their spaces with a commercial provider. Each nursery features dedicated indoor-outdoor access with equipment ranging from water and sand tables to mark-making stations and climbing frames.

Maple Grove and Oakwood developed calm and alert rooms, fitted with specialist lighting, soft furnishings and bespoke resources for children with autism and other additional needs. Flexible partitions create two breakout zones for small-group work and one-to-one interventions, ensuring every child receives tailored support.

3. **Timetable.** Sessions align with school term dates and range from flexible three-hour blocks to full-day care, to accommodate a wide range of needs in the market, enabling parents to tailor provision around work while maintaining statutory staff-to-child ratios.
4. **Investment.** By integrating joint utility services, the nurseries are able to significantly reduce rent and business-rate overheads.
5. **Staffing and CPD.** All three nurseries are operated by a school, benefiting from the full use of its premises and the support of shared senior leadership and administrative teams.

Sessions align with school term dates and range from flexible three-hour blocks to full-day care, enabling parents to tailor provision around work while maintaining statutory staff-to-child ratios. Thanks to strong demand from parents, the nurseries' flexible approach remains both financially sustainable and responsive to the needs of the community.

Although attracting and retaining qualified Level 3 educators had been a challenge, thought to be impacted by some local private providers offering higher salaries, the nurseries have worked hard to ensure high retention rates of 90% per year.

New staff have an induction into the school policies. The nurseries also schedule regular CPD sessions, bespoke early years inset days and a structured mentoring programme that pairs apprentices with experienced practitioners. This quality-assurance process includes systematic learning walks, formal observations and SMART appraisal targets aligned to nursery priorities, which they believed fosters a culture of reflection and continuous improvement in practice.

6. **Governance.** The Federation has embedded nursery governance within each school's leadership governance by having an early years governor in all three schools. These designated governors conduct termly visits. They also identified that standard governor training does not cover the early years curriculum and practice adequately, so they recommended bespoke training for governors.
7. **Ofsted.** Aligning the Federation model with registration processes presented some challenges. The Federation worked collaboratively with Ofsted to increase awareness of the experience in the less-familiar area of processing simultaneous registrations for multiple settings within a federated structure.

- 8. Funding.** Core funding comes from government entitlements, 15 hours for two-year-olds and up to 30 hours for older children, supplemented by additional hours parents purchase and means-tested benefits such as childcare support through Universal Credit. Detailed break-even analyses are carried out, comparing staffing costs with anticipated income to establish the minimum occupancy needed to cover salaries and overheads. Waiting lists are reviewed regularly and parental surveys inform adjustments to session lengths, term-time versus holiday provision and fee tiers, ensuring they remain responsive to local needs and financially viable.

Thanks to strong demand from parents, the nurseries' flexible sessions the nurseries remain both financially sustainable and responsive to the needs of the community.

- 9. Evidence of success.** Parent surveys show that families are highly satisfied with the Federation nurseries, valuing the seamless integration of school and nursery, the quality of care and their children's developmental progress. Rapid uptake of new funding entitlements and the expansion of wraparound services were also noted as standout successes.
- 10. Advice to others.** To conduct in-depth market research before launch and secure larger capital investments, particularly under Basic Need or SEND grant programmes, to ease early cash-flow pressures and accelerate growth.

The Federation recommended networking with other school nurseries, engaging actively with sector bodies such as the National Day Nurseries Association and maintaining open dialogue with the local authority by asking for their advice. They also recommend grounding provision in robust demand analysis, pricing services to reflect the quality offered and leveraging the unique strengths of school-based models in terms of shared leadership, facilities and governance. They believed this helps to build a sustainable, high-quality early years environment that genuinely serves the community.

Case Study 5: Orchid Nursery

Orchid nursery is a maintained nursery that was established around 2000 under the national Sure Start local programme. It provides year-round places for children from six months to five years in London. To create a new collaboration the primary school took particular areas into consideration.

1. **The curriculum.** The nursery team has intentionally aligned their early years curriculum with the school's overarching approach and the EYFS framework because 50% of the children from the nursery progress to the Orchid Primary Reception class.
2. **Physical adaptations.** Already running a year-round service meant retrofitting walls, moving toilets or installing new windows, working around live sessions, coordinating staff cover, and often hiring external contractors for out-of-hours work.

Indoors, investing in high-quality tables, chairs, shelving and play frames pays off in the long run. The 'nest' room, a dedicated, quiet space, which includes a sensory light area, has become indispensable for the growing number of children with a range of needs.

Outdoors, the new wildlife garden, pond and treehouse is particularly effective for many children living in a big city. Access to genuine green space can be limited, so creating a little 'forest school nook' onsite allows babies, toddlers and pre-school children to benefit from sensory experiences such as mud, water, wood, leaves, in a way that concrete playgrounds cannot.

3. **Timetable.** They offer breakfast and after-school club which means the nursery is open from 8am to 6pm. They also provide holiday provision throughout school breaks for children from six months through to Reception to ensures continuity of care for both children and working families.
4. **Investment.** Parents contribute to the cost of inset days through their fees.
5. **Staffing and CPD.** When a highly skilled, experienced practitioner leaves, they are sometimes replaced with a less experienced candidate who brings enthusiasm and fresh ideas. They are paired with someone from the senior team for in-house mentoring. This not only reduces salary expenditure but also fosters professional development within the existing staff cohort. The team composition is re-evaluated each year, matching skill sets to emerging service needs rather than defaulting to like-for-like replacements. However, the two Nursery Classes taking up to 26 children each, are headed up by a teacher and early years practitioners.

Each year the setting closes for five inset days with six formal 'check-ins' (supervisions) annually.

The nursery employs both all-year-round staff and term-time-only staff. Year-round children are cared for exclusively by year-round staff, and term-time children consistently engage with term-time staff. This allows for Orchid to ensure that each child is matched with a consistent key person.

Orchid nursery believes that targeted health and safety protocols, included in the EYFS safeguarding requirements, combined with a robust induction, equips the teams to meet the nuanced needs of **six-month-olds** through to the toddler years.

6. **Governance.** Orchid Governors oversee the nursery in the same forum as the rest of the school; they do not hold separate meetings. They felt this is important to the governance of Orchid, as this raises the profile of the early years within the school. They recently secured a dedicated Early Years link Governor who meets termly with the nursery leadership team, visits the rooms, and checks that they are meeting statutory requirements and the school's own improvement plans.
7. **Ofsted.** Orchid nursery undergoes two separate inspections: one under the Early Years Register for children under two years and another as part of the school inspection covering nursery and Reception classes.

An important area of focus is ensuring that Governors fully understand EYFS statutory guidance in order to help nursery staff prepare for a separate Ofsted inspection.

8. **Funding.** Private fees are set via a twelve-band system based on each household's gross annual income. Orchid felt that a sliding-scale approach ensures that charges rise proportionally with ability to pay, promoting fairness and widening access for lower-income households.

Recruiting a strong early years administrator who understands the unique funding and operational nuances has kept their occupancy high and processes smooth.

One of the nursery's most effective strategies involves employer-sponsored childcare schemes, called Enjoy Benefits, which function

as a tax-efficient voucher system. Employers register with Enjoy Benefits and contribute £110 per child per month directly to the nursery. Currently, eight to ten families participate in the scheme, generating approximately £10,000 to £12,000 in additional annual income. This funding is ring-fenced for purchasing new toys, books, and learning materials. By tapping into external income streams like this, they felt they had reduced reliance on general fee income while continually enhancing its resources without passing extra costs onto parents.

The local borough proactively shares data so that the Orchard team can plan its own sufficiency.

School run provision has to abide by specific child staff ratios of 1:13, led by a teacher with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) unlike PVI nurseries which can operate with 1:13 or 1:8 ratios depending on staffing. While this ensures a high standard of pedagogy, it requires a higher salary investment. Moreover, as QTS teachers are typically contracted on a term-time basis, alternative staffing solutions must be arranged during holiday periods, often involving supply cover or internal rotation, which needs to be considered when planning and budgeting. To address this, the nursery has adopted a flexible staffing model: senior teachers rotate across both term-time and holiday periods. In addition, they blend qualified and Level 3 staff with support practitioners in each room. This enables the nursery to meet statutory ratios and qualification requirements while maintaining manageable costs, ensuring financial sustainability remains balanced with quality provision.

9. **Evidence of success.** Maintaining consistency in quality across all rooms is Orchid's greatest achievement, from the baby room to reception.

Employing a skilled early years administrator with a deep understanding of funding intricacies and operational specifics has helped maintain high occupancy and streamline processes.

10. **Advice to others.** To visit a wide range of settings is strongly encouraged because no two contexts are identical. Seeing a variety of models can spark ideas and help ensure success when designing and operating your own provision.