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Room to Grow

School-based nurseries and the
disadvantage gap



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Key findings

The School-based Nursery Programme

- **The School-based Nursery (SBN) programme is a major government policy aiming to address two key goals in the early years:** expanding available childcare places so that more parents can work, and improving children's development and school readiness. It aims to create 3,000 new or expanded nurseries in schools, making use of spare space on existing sites.
- **The policy has evolved across 3 different application phases.** Phase 1 saw a focus on rapid expansion through school-led bids, but early analysis suggests it did not adequately target disadvantaged areas and populations, as well as often funding the expansion of existing provision rather than entirely new nurseries.
- **Phase 2 and 3 have seen a greater focus in the government's funding criteria on disadvantaged areas and children. Phase 3 has also seen major changes to the policy,** including giving local authorities a much larger role in the application process. They are now entirely responsible for submitting what have become multi-year bids, rather than responsibility sitting with individual schools. Phase 3 has also seen the programme expanded beyond schools, with the funding now also available to create new early education and childcare spaces in Best Start Family Hubs.
- **While in Phase 2 there was a small increase in in the proportion of schools supporting disadvantaged children, with FSM rates at participating schools up from 25.3% to 26.2%, this is still lower than the 27.7% for school-based nurseries which pre-existed the scheme.** In Phase 2, there were fewer new nurseries (down from 42% to 32%), schools were on average smaller, and there has been a decline in nurseries run directly by the school's SLT (from 75% to 59%). New nurseries have even lower levels of FSM, at 22.9% across both phases. These nurseries are **around a third less likely to be located in the most disadvantaged schools** than pre-existing nurseries.

The existing evidence base

This research begins with a literature review of the existing evidence base on and related to school-based nurseries.

- **Access to childcare and early education remains highly unequal.** Large parts of England face 'childcare deserts', particularly in more disadvantaged areas, suggesting that expansion of provision could help to address access gaps, but only if properly targeted.
- **Existing school-based provision (in the form of maintained schools and nursery classes) has real strengths, particularly for disadvantaged children.** Existing research finds these settings are more likely to provide places to disadvantaged children and those with SEND, as well as offer higher quality provision with better-qualified staff, and stronger links to schools.
- **However, suitability is likely to vary by age.** Schools are likely to face much larger challenges in delivering high quality age-appropriate provision to younger children, due to staffing, space and pedagogical requirements.
- **Quality is the key driver of impact, not just access.** Existing evidence shows that high-quality early education (especially with well-qualified staff) is what improves outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged children.
- **International models of school-based approaches vary.** While many countries are expanding early education to younger ages, (particularly three-to-four-year-olds) provision for younger children is usually delivered outside of schools, with separate governance and funding.
- **A study looking at a recent initiative in France to enable children (with a focus on disadvantaged areas) to access school-based pre-school from the age of two found that time in school-based preschool programmes 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.

The view from primary schools

Over 1,300 senior leaders in primary schools were surveyed to get a better picture of the existing landscape, as well as their views on school-based nurseries and their capacity and appetite for further expansion. The survey found that:

- **School-based provision is already common.** Just over half of senior leader respondents report having early years provision on site, with much higher prevalence in schools with more disadvantaged intakes (74% vs 49%), and some regional variation.
- **These settings tend to focus on older children,** virtually all settings serve three-to-four-year-olds (95%), but far fewer also cater to younger age groups. Less than half said their school's setting covered two-to-three-year-olds (42%), and just 6% said there was provision for one-to-two-year-olds.
- **Most settings have the same accountability structure as their school.** The vast majority of leaders said their onsite pre-schools and nurseries were accountable to the same Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and governing body as the school more widely (82%), with 9% run by a Private, Voluntary or Independent (PVI) provider.
- **When asked about relationships with early years settings off-site, senior leaders report that links with external providers are relatively weak,** despite 89% saying such links are important.
- **Schools face several barriers to setting up new early years provision.** When those who do not have an early years setting on site were asked about the barriers to doing so, the most common responses were no suitable indoor space (51%), high start-up costs (50%) and financial viability (46%). Of those citing financial viability, 73% cited the cost of staff to child ratios needed, 67% ongoing staff costs, and 65% capital costs of converting a space in the school.
- **Appetite for further expansion does exist, but is limited.** Out of those who do not already have a setting, 1 in 5 either said that their school already has plans in place to set up a school-based nursery or it is likely that they will set one up. 3% have plans in

place at their school, 5% said it is very likely that there will be one set up and 12% said it is quite likely. The majority said it is not likely that they will set one up. Even if all those who said it was likely followed through, this would leave the programme significantly short of the targeted 3,000 settings.

Interviews with existing school-based nurseries

Staff from 13 different settings were interviewed, offering rich, detailed accounts of how different models operate in practice, as well as the challenges and enablers in their settings, information which is not available from quantitative data alone.

- **Staff interviewed highlighted what in their view were clear educational benefits, but operated with constraints.** Case study school-based settings largely focused on three-to-four-year-olds, citing limited capacity for younger children due to staffing, space and suitability challenges.
- **Case study early years settings viewed strong links to schools as a benefit for children and parents.** Leaders highlighted perceived benefits including smoother transitions, earlier SEND identification, and improved school readiness, with what many felt were particular benefits for disadvantaged pupils. Interviewees highlighted many ways in which these benefits were only possible due to close physical proximity, although examples were also given which would be possible at greater distance.
- **In many of the settings interviewed, staff in school-based settings were highly qualified (with graduates as well as other staff at least Level 3),** with staff either shared between the nursery and primary classes or ex-primary staff moving to work in the early years provision on site.
- **Decisions to initially start the setting were shaped by practical and financial trade-offs.** Barriers include space (especially for early years specific facilities), start-up and staffing costs, and concerns about the impact of the setting on the local early years market more broadly, potentially leading to closures as parents may view school-based settings as higher quality and/or routes into the primary school.

- **Many school senior leaders recognised the benefits to their incoming primary year groups from attending a nursery on site. This can be a strong motivator for opening a setting.**
Some schools told us they use pupil premium funding to cover the costs, and there should be acknowledgement that there can be financial difficulties, such as high setup costs, that the school may have to absorb.
- While the case studies here demonstrate common themes between settings, they also show that **ways of working and motivations to open school-based early years settings differ considerably.**

Policy recommendations

For government

- **The government should continue the expansion of the School-Based Nursery Programme into the medium term**, with a considerable funding commitment given to the project, running up to 2030. The programme is successfully creating new early years places, and there are signs that some elements of quality (e.g. improving connections between on-site early years providers and schools) are being enabled and encouraged. However, future phases should have a sharper focus, based on evidence of what is working. Government should also **look at ways to build relationships between schools and early year settings more widely**, given the limits of the SBN programme.
- **There is still a need to clarify the programme's purpose**, whether it is designed to allow the quick expansion of places for childcare, or if the focus is on improving access to high quality early education. The programme is delivering new places, but beyond stronger links with schools, whether it is delivering on quality is not clear. There is a risk that the funding model may push schools towards lower quality delivery models with lower staff qualification levels, rather than acting as a way to expand high quality provision found in maintained schools and nursery classes, but there is not yet enough evidence to know whether this is the case.
- **Ultimately, more data is needed. The government should monitor the performance of SBNs, including by the different types identified in this report (for instance, distinguishing between maintained and PVI settings)**. The SBN policy has so far encouraged a range of different types of SBN, but it is not yet clear how well PVIs on school sites, with the benefits of proximity (whether one set up by a school or entirely independent) can deliver on quality, particularly when compared to maintained nurseries or maintained classes in schools.
- **The government should prioritise disadvantaged areas in the roll-out, but children on lower incomes will continue to miss out on the benefits of the programme without wider changes to early years funding**. While historic SBNs are located in

disadvantaged areas, this has not been borne out in the ongoing expansion scheme to date and targeting in future phases should improve.

- **Financial barriers to expansion should be addressed, particularly ongoing costs past the initial set-up.** Ongoing running costs are a key concern for schools and support for those particularly in the most disadvantaged areas should be considered.
- **The government should be cautious not to dilute the original intention of the SBN programme.** For example, while it is sensible to allow the delivery of additional childcare places via Best Start Family Hubs (where space to do so), this is a different delivery model, and may not have some of the benefits of SBNs, including strong links to schools promoted by co-location. This should be viewed as separate to, rather than a part of the SBN programme, and should be accompanied by new funding, rather than repurposing funding from SBNs.
- **The government should also be cautious to avoid the 'schoolification' of early education.** While there are many benefits to SBNs, and school readiness is an important aim, the provision they offer should be tailored to the age groups they cover. Particularly where SBNs serve younger age groups (e.g. two-year-olds) government should ensure staff and leaders running the settings have relevant expertise for that age group, and that the environment is age-appropriate.
- Access to quality early education will remain unequal while the 30 hour entitlement is not accessible to all children. **There should be equal access to funded entitlements at least from age 2.** At a minimum in the short term, the government should look to widen eligibility to the 15 hour disadvantage entitlement at age 2, by uprating eligibility requirements to reflect inflation. This would mean that the proportion of children able to access it returns to its previous level of 40% (currently just under a quarter of two-year-olds are eligible).
- **Longer-term, government should use learnings from the programme to look at the structure of the early years system more widely, including the balance of state and private provision, as well as clarifying the role of school-based**

nurseries in this wider ecosystem. The SBN programme points at greater state involvement in the delivery of early education and childcare, particularly in the context of the large amount of state subsidy now going to the sector. Government should use lessons from the School-Based Nurseries Programme to look at the structure of the early years system more widely, including any further expansion of state run settings, whether in schools or elsewhere. This report highlights many of the benefits of SBNs as a model, particularly their potential to support early education. However, these settings often (although not always) have shorter hours, term time only provision and variable wraparound offerings, as well as a focus on older age groups, and thus may not work for many working parents for childcare purposes. Establishing a balance of provision at both local and national level will be key.

For schools and early years providers in existing SBNs

- **Schools should look to ensure SBNs on their site employ staff with age-appropriate early years experience and expertise,** particularly when moving down to younger age groups, and that provision and the environment it is delivered in is designed to be age-appropriate, looking to avoid 'schoolification' of the early years.
- **While having early years provision on a school site is likely to encourage collaboration, this process is not automatic.** Both settings and schools need to create a strong relationship built on mutual respect to ensure the benefits of SBNs are fully realised.
- **Support from senior leaders is vital for success.** Leadership within both the school and the early years setting needs to be engaged in the relationship for it to work, and the setting shouldn't be seen as an 'add-on'. There are also likely benefits of embedding early years representation into the school's overall leadership structure, including the governing body. Having an SBN can help to elevate the status of the early years within a school, again with likely benefits for children.

- **Schools should ensure that disadvantaged households are able to access their early years provision**, making sure that families eligible for the disadvantaged two-year-old offer, as well as those only eligible for the universal 15 hours offer at three and four are not disadvantaged in admissions. There are several models for catering to those with 15 hour eligibility, including split weeks and offering subsidised extensions for those who cannot afford it.

For schools, early years providers and local authorities thinking about opening new SBNs

- **When putting together plans for an SBN or SBNs locally, local authorities, schools and early years (EY) providers should draw on the experience and knowledge of others.** A wealth of expertise is now being built by schools and EY providers who have already been through the SBN process, which is likely to benefit those at an earlier stage.
- **Where schools are setting up new school-run early years settings, they should ensure they bring in early years specific expertise.** For example, consulting with other schools who already run similar settings in the initial proposal, and bringing in senior staff with prior early years experience to run the setting day to day.
- **PVI settings inside schools can work well, particularly where there is an experienced and well run setting looking for a new space or to expand.** While schools can successfully run this provision with the right support, depending on local need and knowledge, bringing an existing PVI provider into the school can work well and have benefits for both parties, and is an option which should be considered by schools and local authorities when applying for SBN funds.
- **Local authorities should carefully consider whether to put forward settings in Best Start Family Hubs.** While these will likely bring benefits - including their locations in less advantaged areas, as well as helping to link families to wider services - they are a very different delivery model to what has so far been delivered via the SBN programme, and may not see many of the benefits of co-location for educational quality. Where new

settings are in family hubs, if possible local authorities could look to prioritise those near or attached to primaries.

For all schools and early years providers:

- **Primary schools should look to build relationships with local early years settings.** School-based nurseries have some benefits which will not be replicable in all schools, largely related to proximity. However, the following learnings from this research are likely to be of use more widely.
- Primary schools and early years providers (particularly where the EY setting acts as a feeder to the primary) should look to implement the following where possible:
- **Staff should have regular contact, including visiting each other's settings, and look to build strong and trusting relationships.** Having these strong relationships, built on mutual trust and respect, can have major benefits in smoothing the transition from an early years setting to primary, by allowing information sharing about children (particularly including those with SEND), as well as coordination on pedagogy and curriculum. These relationships can also help to ensure children have trusted adults who can help them in the transition between settings, as well as opening up the opportunity for wider support e.g. shared CPD or training .
- **Where practical, schools should look to invite children at local nurseries to some school events** - or look to partner with the nursery to run events within the nursery itself. Similar to the above, these events can help to establish trusted adult relationships for children ahead of transition, as well as strengthening relationships for parents with school staff.

Introduction

The current government has two key priorities for early years policy. The first is to expand access to childcare to enable parents to work, with hopes for associated economic gains as well as tackling the growing cost of living for young families. The second is to increase the proportion of children reaching a good level of development, as measured using the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). The government has set a target to increase this from the current rate of 68% to 75% by 2028.¹

One major policy is designed to deliver on both fronts, the School-based Nursery (or SBN) programme. The programme is looking to ultimately create 3,000 new or expanded nurseries on school grounds, making use of existing empty classroom space. By creating stronger links between schools and early years settings, as well as focusing on early education, the policy has the potential both to increase capacity, and to push up quality in the early years.

School-based nurseries have received relatively little media attention outside of the education trade press, but depending on the results of the initial roll-out, the policy could ultimately considerably re-shape delivery of early education and childcare in England, with wider impacts for the whole education system.

Beyond simply adding new places, the success of the policy is not guaranteed. There is limited data about how best to implement SBNs, and the need for additional evidence has been previously highlighted.² How common are nurseries on school sites already in England, and have other countries used this model? What does the existing evidence base tell us about the likely quality and effectiveness of school-based provision? What age range is it likely to be most appropriate for? What learnings can be taken from existing relationships between schools and nurseries? To what extent does the provision being situated on-site make the difference, or are close relationships possible without co-location? What are the main challenges for schools in setting up this

¹ 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>

² Bonetti, S. and Newton, R. 2025. *School-based early years provision: We need to know more about how to support effective leadership*. BERA. Available at: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/school-based-early-years-provision-we-need-to-know-more-about-how-to-support-effective-leadership>

provision, and how can the government best support them in future phases of the roll-out?

This work looks to answer those questions, and to provide actionable recommendations to the government for future phases of the programme. Research here includes:

1. **A literature review of the existing evidence base on and related to school-based nurseries, alongside wider school-early years partnerships** - carried out by Professor Chris Pascal, Professor Tony Betram and Dr Aline Cole-Albäck, all from the Centre for Research in Early Childhood.

And original research by a team of researchers from the Sutton Trust and the Social Market Foundation, including:

2. **A nationally representative survey of primary school senior leaders** to explore their views and experience of school-based nurseries, and potential barriers to implementation.
3. **Case studies showcasing successful existing relationships between schools and nurseries** (both those on site and located elsewhere).

Policy background

The early years landscape in England has shifted considerably in the last few years. In March 2023, the then Conservative government announced a major expansion of funded entitlements in England. The policy extended access to the 30 funded hours to younger age groups, previously only covering three-to-four-year-olds. It would now run from the first term after a child turns nine months old. This expansion has largely been rolled out in stages by the current Labour government between 2024 and 2025, and was estimated by the Department for Education to require an additional 70,000 childcare places, as well as 35,000 additional staff.³

The policy was largely welcomed by working parents, who often struggle with childcare costs. In the government's most recent

³ Department for Education. 2024. Early years places and workforce need. DfE. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-places-and-workforce-need>

childcare and early years parent survey, 59% of parents who used the new offer said it gave them more flexibility in the hours they could work, and 91% were satisfied with the way they could use the hours for their child.⁴ However, concerns have also been raised on availability of places throughout the expansion, as well as high additional charges made by early years providers for other costs, including for any additional hours needed by parents.

Amid this backdrop, the School-Based Nursery Programme was announced by Secretary of State for Education Bridget Phillipson in Autumn 2024, aiming to increase capacity in the system by delivering 3,000 new nurseries using spare space in primary schools. The programme initially invited schools to bid for a share of £15 million in capital funding, aiming to deliver up to 300 new or expanded nurseries in the first round.⁵

Who delivers early years education and care?

A more detailed exploration of existing early years provision is included in the literature review of this report, but this section gives a brief summary of current delivery.

Following the recent expansion of state-funded hours, the government now funds around 80% of early education and childcare hours in England⁶ (although, as has been widely reported, settings report that these hours often need to be subsidised by higher rates on additional hours, alongside other charges).⁷

These places, alongside the 20% of hours funded privately, are delivered by a mixed market of state, private, voluntary and independent providers. The system has developed gradually over many years, influenced by a number of different government policies.

⁴ Department for Education. 2025. Childcare and early years survey of parents. DfE. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-survey-of-parents/2024>

⁵ Department for Education. 2024. School-based nurseries funding round to launch next month. DfE. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/school-based-nurseries-funding-round-to-launch-next-month>

⁶ Farquharson, C. 2024. What you need to know about the new childcare entitlements. Institute for Fiscal Studies. Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/articles/what-you-need-know-about-new-childcare-entitlements>

⁷ Limbu, D. and Taylor, C. 2025. Nurseries say subsidies aren't enough to survive. BBC News. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cly4m3nzy51o>

According to the latest government statistics, as outlined in the literature review, currently about 35% of settings are private voluntary or independent (PVI), 16% are school-based (maintained nursery schools or nursery classes), and 37% are childminders.

What are school-based nurseries?

The Department for Education defines a school-based nursery as “nursery provision located on a school site. The nursery setting may operate independently from the school or could be run by the school.”⁸

A variety of different school-based nurseries have existed within the education system in England for some time. Definitions of the different sub-types of school-based nursery are briefly outlined below:

1. *Maintained nursery classes*

These are classes within a primary school or classes that are part of a separate entity run by the school. There must be a qualified teacher holding QTS responsible for the class. Classes may also have support from Level 3 staff or teaching assistants. In Ofsted inspections, these classes are inspected as part of the school as a whole. These can be delivered and governed by maintained schools or within an academy school and governed by an academy trust.

2. *Other school run nursery*

Schools can also run other types of nurseries themselves, which are registered separately as an early years provider. They are inspected separately to the school by Ofsted, and follow the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework, allowing them to have looser regulations on staffing qualifications than maintained nurseries. A legal provider must be registered for the early years setting, which could be:

- The school’s governing body
- A trading company or charity set up by the school

⁸ Department for Education. 2024. School-based nurseries funding round to launch next month. DfE. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/school-based-nurseries-funding-round-to-launch-next-month>

- A trading company or charity set up by the school's multi academy trust

Day to day operations for this type of nursery may still be run by the school, for example by the school's Senior Leadership Team (SLT), the headteacher, or they may be run by a nursery manager employed by the school.

3. *PVI or other independent setting on a school site*

This type is one in which a private, voluntary or independent provider runs a setting which is situated inside of a school, either under a leasing model (paying rent to the school for the space), or whereby they are commissioned to provide the early years provision for the school. These are also inspected separately to the school by Ofsted, and follow the EYFS framework, including for staffing. This category can also include Children's Centres running childcare provision inside a school, where the provision is run by the local authority.

While not directly school-based nurseries, *Maintained Nursery Schools* are also relevant here. These are stand alone schools specifically for the early years. They are state funded nurseries, maintained by local authorities with their own headteacher and governing body. The headteacher must hold Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), and employed teachers there must also have QTS. Other staff can be employed with qualifications at Level 2 or 3. Maintained nursery schools can be federated with each other or with primary schools, in arrangements where two or more schools share a governing body and leadership structure (including a headteacher).

Childminders can also independently act on a school site, again renting the space from the school, where they operate under the regulations applicable to all childminders.

The School-based Nursery Programme would in theory allow a school to open any of the main types above, as the funding was for capital costs including building conversion, refurbishment or expansion to adapt spaces for the early years. Grants were available of up to £150,000 per project.

However, as funding was for capital costs only, schools running maintained settings with higher staff costs have often needed significant investment from the school itself. Indeed, previous research

from Save the Children has highlighted the funding shortfall in the maintained sector, with only a small group of 300 maintained settings receiving supplementary hourly funding above and beyond funded hour entitlements.⁹

Phase 1

Phase 1 of the programme opened with an initial £15 million available for up to 300 school-based nurseries. The phase was announced in October 2024, with funding allocated to successful schools in spring 2025, and initial places opening in September 2025.

Assessment criteria for Phase 1 included weighting for the project overview and value for money (35%), the local need for childcare provision (25%), educational approach (25%) and management approach (15%). This included outlining the construction work required, how much additional capacity would be added in childcare places, whether holiday childcare would be offered, local demand within the school catchment area, evidence of plans to deliver the EYFS to a high quality (including evidence of how the provision will focus on improving outcomes for children from disadvantaged families), and evidence of how well the school and early years setting would be governed. Schools were also asked to consult with their local authority to ensure the application was filling a genuine local need for additional provision, and LAs were given a chance to comment on applications.¹⁰ Phase 1 did not however have any specific disadvantage weighting in terms of the local population or likely children using the provision.

Schools successful in Phase 1 were announced in April 2025, with funding for the project at this stage more than doubled to £37 million. Together, the 300 sites would provide up to 6,000 new places, with 5,000 available by September 2025.¹¹

Researchers at UCL conducted analysis looking at which schools were awarded capital grants in the first phase of the pilot, raising questions around how well these schools matched up with the stated vision of the

⁹ Talbot, R. 2025. Closing the Gaps: Funding, Inclusion and Quality in Childcare. Save the Children. Available at: <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/blogs/2025/closing-the-gaps-in-childcare>

¹⁰ Department for Education. 2025. School-Based Nurseries Capital Grant 2024 to 2025. Information for applicants. DfE. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6762c577be7b2c675de30759/School_-_based_nurseries_capital_grant_2024_to_2025.pdf

¹¹ Department for Education. 2025. Childcare offer exceeds target, benefiting over 500,000 children. DfE. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/childcare-offer-exceeds-target-benefiting-over-500000-children>

policy.¹² The provisional findings showed a geographical spread of successful schools with the highest number of SBNs in the South East (14%) and the lowest in the East Midlands (9%), in contrast to reporting from government, which said the majority were in the North or the Midlands. Secondly, they found that, of the 300 schools, 58% had a nursery already and the funding was being used to expand this provision.

The policy has also been presented as targeting disadvantaged areas and children. The analysis, however, showed that 58% of the successful schools had below average FSM eligibility rates. Successful schools with higher FSM percentages were no more successful than schools with lower FSM percentages, suggesting the initial policy was not effective in prioritising schools with more disadvantaged intakes.

Phase 2

The government invited applications for Phase 2 of the programme in September 2025, with a further £45 million made available for the programme to create or expand about 300 additional nurseries, ready to offer new childcare places in the 2026/27 academic year, with successful applicants notified by April 2026.

For the second phase, the eligibility criteria have been updated, with schools now being assessed on the proportion of FSM eligible pupils as well as their Ofsted performance. Applications are scored against four criteria, with disadvantage weighted at 50%, local need weighted at 20%, value for money weighted at 20% and Ofsted key judgements weighted at 10%. Phase 2 aimed to build capacity in areas of need, “especially in places that are disadvantaged.”

Phase 2 also allowed maintained nursery schools to apply for this funding for the first time, which was not allowed within Phase 1. Schools who were successful in Phase 1 were not able to apply again for funding within Phase 2, but were invited to register interest for Phase 3.

The need for local authority approval also appears to have been strengthened in Phase 2, with a local authority approval form added to the application process, and LAs also being able to impose conditions,

¹² Bradbury, A. *et al.* 2026. The government has promised many new nurseries based in primary schools – but where are they opening?. UCL IOE. 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/>

including how many additional places would be created and the age range of children that would be covered. The DfE did not limit the number of proposals an LA could approve, acknowledging that this could cause difficulty in place planning. As part of this process, LAs were also asked to consider whether the provision would deliver places for disadvantaged children locally, suggesting the use of proxies including number of children eligible for the disadvantaged two-year old-offer, children eligible for Early Years Pupil Premium, children with SEND or looked after children.

The government also made other changes in this phase, likely looking to address some issues that arose in Phase 1 for some schools, including streamlining the process by which maintained schools alter the age range they serve, and simplifying some processes for academies. Phase 2 guidance also outlined a streamlined process for changes to use of school land necessary to provide childcare. Interestingly, Phase 2 also explicitly advised schools that already had a PVI on site (and were potentially looking to remove them to provide their own nursery) that they should first explore the potential of continuing the existing partnership, stating the intention of the grant is not to displace existing like for like provision,¹³ potentially a response to criticisms from the PVI sector concerning Phase 1.

Settings successful in Phase 2 have recently been released. Details of the 330 settings announced alongside Phase 1 nurseries can be seen in Table 1. 59% of this batch will be run by the school, 9% by a governor, 8% by a PVI provider and 24% by a MAT, with the school run proportion down from Phase 1. 56% are in academies or free schools, compared to 67% in Phase 1. In Phase 2, just 32% will be new settings, down from 42% in Phase 1.

The region with the highest proportion of successful applications was the West Midlands (16%), followed by the North West (13%). As with Phase 1, the lowest regions proportionally were the East Midlands (6%) and the North East (9%). The average school size in Phase 2 is 265, compared to 290 in Phase 1.

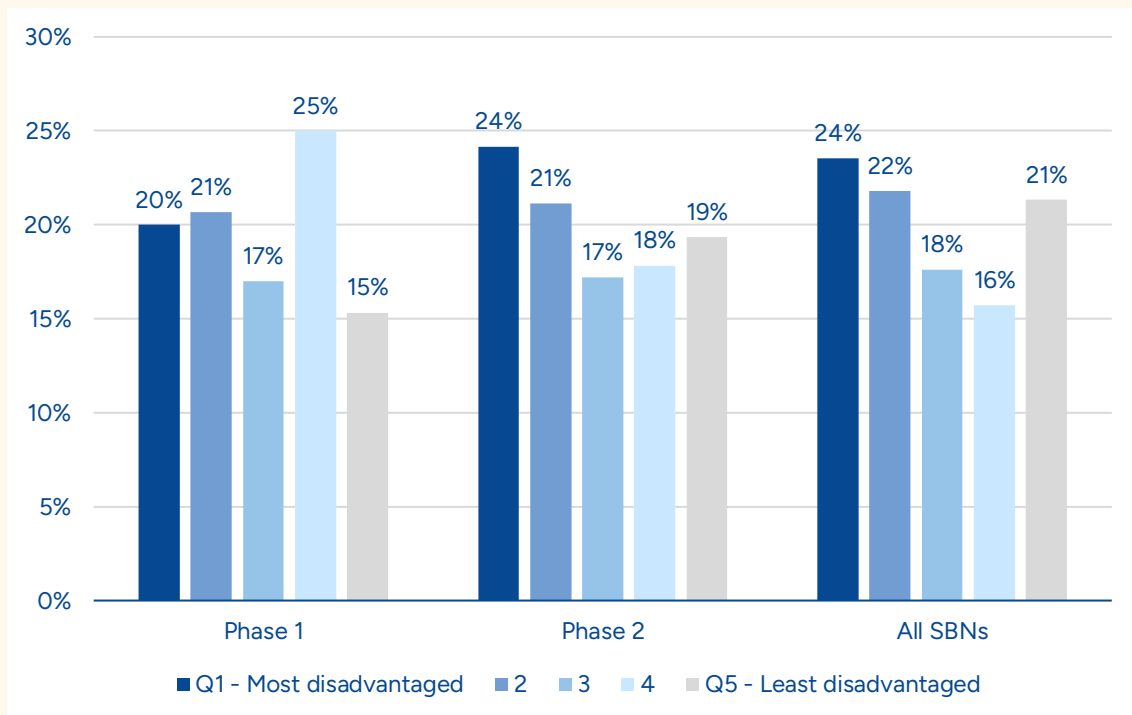
¹³ Department for Education. 2025. School-based Nursery Capital Grant 2025 to 2026. Information for applicants. DfE. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/693967d07a605b2d61cd9053/School-based_Nursery_Capital_Grant_2025-26_-_for_information_only.pdf

Table 1. Characteristics of Phase 1 and Phase 2 School-based Nurseries

		Phase 1	Phase 2
Governance	A governor	1%	9%
	Multi-Academy Trust	15%	24%
	PVI	9%	8%
	The school	75%	59%
Existing nursery	New	42%	32%
	Existing	58%	68%
Region	South East	14%	13%
	North West	14%	13%
	West Midlands	10%	16%
	East of England	12%	11%
	Yorkshire and the Humber	12%	12%
	London	10%	10%
	South West	10%	10%
	North East	9%	9%
	East Midlands	9%	6%
	School FSM	(Average)	25%
School size	(Average)	290	265

In terms of disadvantage, the average FSM rate in Phase 2 nurseries was 26.2%, compared to 25.3% in Phase 1, but still below the 27.7% among School-based Nurseries which pre-existed the pilot. So while the targeting of disadvantaged schools has seen a small improvement since Phase 1, it is still below the profile of existing SBNs (Figure 1). Some of this is driven by the location of the entirely new nurseries. Looking at schools which did not have existing nursery provision, the average FSM rate was even lower, at 21.6% in Phase 1 and 24.5% in Phase 2. Just 14% of new nurseries in Phase 1 were in the highest quintile of FSM compared to 24% of all schools with nurseries. While this had increased to 18% at Phase 2, overall new schools in the pilot are around a third less likely to be in the most disadvantaged schools than pre-existing SBNs. Disadvantaged schools are underrepresented rather than overrepresented, so there is clearly still work to be done in terms of targeting.

Figure 1. FSM quintile of Phase 1, Phase 2, and all School-based nurseries



Phase 3

Guidance for applications to Phase 3 were released in March 2026, with £325 million of further funding available for future phases of the programme between 2027 and 2030.

There are two significant changes to Phase 3 - the first being that the fund is moving entirely to a local authority-led delivery model, with government saying this is to reflect the multi-year nature of the next phase, but which may potentially also reflect challenges from previous phases around local place planning.

The government has outlined that bids from local authorities should look to develop multi-year funding proposals to deliver and extend SBNs between 2027 and 2030. In guidance for phase 3, government also encourage local authorities to look for other funding sources alongside the SBN grant. They state that there is no set limit to how much they can bid for within this grant - but that they expect the majority of schemes to cost no more than £1 million (and that those largely repurposing existing space they expect would cost no more than £500,000). Phase 3 is also designed to ramp up over time, with guidance that 20% of total funding requested by an LA is expected to be spent in Year 1 of the new programme (April 2027-March 2028), 30% in Year 2 (April 2028 - March 2029) and 50% in Year 3 (April 2029 to March 2030).

In this new local authority model, interested schools and academy trusts are required to submit information to the LA, which will then decide whether to include a school in their bid (and indeed, whether to apply at all), a very different process to that used in previous phases. LAs are only able to submit one bid, but it can include several different projects.

As part of phase 3, Best Start Family Hubs (BSFHs) have also been made eligible for capital funding to set up nurseries (again applying via their LA), with the aim to strengthen links between nursery provision and local family services. Government also state they require BSFHs looking to use this funding to have strong links to local schools, and in their proposal to outline the school(s) they link to or will link to, along with the nature of the relationship, including how they will look to support school readiness. BSFHs are also themselves targeted at disadvantaged areas, so this may be a way in which the DfE is looking to ensure additional nursery provision is available in these areas through the programme, above and beyond what is perhaps possible within suitable and willing schools.

In some ways this is very similar to the existing SBNs programme, in that it looks to make use of existing spaces to provide additional early years places - but co-location with BSFHs is a very different model

(with likely different benefits and drawbacks) to the existing SBN programme. This issue is discussed in more detail in the discussion section of this report, which looks at options for the SBN programme going forward.

Phase 3 retains a stronger focus on serving disadvantaged children, with LAs urged to examine whether a proposal from a school, academy trust or BSFH has a clear plan to provide provision to disadvantaged children, and whether it has a previous track record of doing so, as well as a plan specifically to drive up take-up of the disadvantaged 2-year-old offer. Disadvantage is also again a key part of the assessment criteria being used by the DfE, with the same datasets used as in Phase 2 (FSM eligibility levels and IDACI). For BSFHs, IDACI only will be used to assess local levels of disadvantage.¹⁴

LAs are also asked to consider whether the project could potentially partner with a PVI or with childminders to extend opening hours for childcare purposes.

The next section assesses the existing literature and adds further background to the school-based nursery policy.

¹⁴ Department for Education. 2026. School-based Nursery Capital Grant 2027 to 2030: Information for local authorities. DfE. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/69b01c3d95b74651603495a7/school-based-nursery-capital-grant-2027-to-2030-information-for-local-authorities-march-2026.pdf>

Literature Review – Summary

Tony Bertram, Chris Pascal, Aline Cole-Albäck

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. This is a summary version of the [full literature review](#), which is published alongside the main report.

The DfE strategy to establish school-based nurseries (SBNs) 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.¹⁵ This literature review provides a rapid evidence assessment to identify existing knowledge, gaps, and policy implications related to school-based nurseries.

The Department for Education (DfE)¹⁶ defines SBNs 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.

¹⁵ Department for Education. 2025. Phase 2 of the school-based nursery programme: Everything you need to know. DfE. Available at: <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2025/09/nurseries-in-schools-everything-you-need-to-know/>

¹⁶ Ibid.

Methodology

The review was conducted in two parts. Initially a scoping review methodology¹⁷ was adopted to map recurring themes and synthesise the existing data that was relevant to the inquiry. Secondly, a systematic methodical review process¹⁸ 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. The research questions were:

- 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?

¹⁷ Arksey, H. and O'Malley L. 2005. Scoping studies: Towards a methodological framework *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 8 (1), 19-32.

¹⁸ 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.

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

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. 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.

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.

RQ1. 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.¹⁹ The most important factor in trying to bridge the gap in school readiness, according to Sylva and Eisenstadt, is to provide high-quality,

¹⁹ Mathers, S. and Smees, R. 2014. Quality and inequality: Do three- and four-year-olds in deprived areas experience lower quality early years provision?. Nuffield Foundation. 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. The Sutton Trust. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/equal-hours/>; Taggart, B. et al. 2015. How pre-school influences children and young people's attainment and developmental outcomes over time. Research Brief. GOV.UK. 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

teacher-led early education, ideally starting from two years of age for children from low-income families.²⁰ School readiness may however be affected by take-up. Although recent evidence indicates that take-up of education entitlements across the whole under-five age range is relatively high (83%), take-up varies regionally and locally, and across different groups in society.²¹ Disadvantaged families are less likely to use formal childcare which may be due to a combination of reasons such as lack of local access to suitable provision or cost barriers. Families living in disadvantaged or rural areas are least likely to have good access to private and voluntary provision, and least likely to have good access to good quality provision.²²

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 to improve quality in early years settings and reception classes and drive better outcomes for children.²³ An aspect of the skill level of the workforce and quality in ECEC provision is the capacity of the setting in engaging with parents, especially regarding improving the Home Learning Environment (HLE). There are a large number of parenting programmes for families with children under five that parents and staff can engage with to help improve the HLE.²⁴ Staff qualifications and leadership competencies are as such 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. 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

²⁰ Sylva, K. and Eisenstadt, N. 2024. Transforming early childhood: Narrowing the gap between children from lower- and higher-income families. NESTA. Available at: <https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/transforming-early-childhood-narrowing-the-gap-between-children-from-lower-and-higher-income-families/>

²¹ Department for Education. 2025. Funded early education and childcare: Reporting year 2025. DfE. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/funded-early-education-and-childcare/2025>

²² Reed, J. and O' Halloran, J. 2024. The childcare challenge: How can the new government deliver a real childcare guarantee?. IPPR. Available at: <https://ippr-org.files.svdcdn.com/production/Downloads/Childcare-challenge-December-2024.pdf?dm=1734434967>

²³ Department for Education. 2025. Giving every child the best start in life. DfE. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/giving-every-child-the-best-start-in-life>

²⁴ Roy-Chowdhury, V., Bazalgette, L., Liotti, L., Anand, P. and Rao, Z. 2025. Parenting support at scale: Market analysis. NESTA. Available at: https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/Parenting_support_at_scale_-_market_analysis_oXdn3HX.pdf

that impacts on child outcomes.²⁵ In the process of developing staff practices or sharing and encouraging best practice with parents, care needs to however be taken not to assign too much responsibility or 'blame' to individual parents, staff, settings or neighbourhoods.²⁶ What is needed is to address issues at all levels of a system to achieve a system-wide reform, on an individual level, institutional and team level, inter-institutional level and at the level of governance.²⁷

It is important to recognise in this review the particular role and contribution of MNSs can play in the roll-out of high-quality SBNs. 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 at least one qualified teacher. They focus on closing the attainment gap, often providing wraparound care.²⁸ Hoskins *et al.*'s research suggests that MNSs "*have a key role to play to enable all children to have a chance to be school ready when they enter Reception*" (p365).²⁹ According to Paull and Popov, '*MNS are more likely to be located in disadvantaged areas than other provider types*' (p10), with 43% being located in the most deprived quintile.³⁰ Hoskins *et al.* insist because nursery schools play a vital role in reducing the socio-economic disadvantage experienced by some children, because of their multidimensional conceptualisation of social justice that combines distributional, relational and associational elements. They therefore urge that MNSs' funding must be protected so that they can

²⁵ Paull, G. and Popov, D. 2019. The role and contribution of maintained nursery schools in the early years sector in England (Revised April 2019). GOV.UK. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f48d4398fa8f57fb653f840/Frontier_Economics_MNS_report_REVISED_v2.pdf

²⁶ Mowat, J. G. 2017. Closing the gap - a realistic proposition or an elusive pipe-dream? *Journal of Education Policy*, 33 (2), 299-321; 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.

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ Paull, G. and Popov, D. 2019. The role and contribution of maintained nursery schools in the early years sector in England (Revised April 2019). GOV.UK. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f48d4398fa8f57fb653f840/Frontier_Economics_MNS_report_REVISED_v2.pdf

²⁹ 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.

³⁰ Paull, G. and Popov, D. 2019. The role and contribution of maintained nursery schools in the early years sector in England (Revised April 2019). GOV.UK. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f48d4398fa8f57fb653f840/Frontier_Economics_MNS_report_REVISED_v2.pdf30 Accessed 12 February 2026.

continue to provide support to some of the most vulnerable children and their families in England.³¹

In the conversation on quality, Ofsted judgements can be seen as an indication of quality of provision. In England Ofsted makes key judgements on the quality of early years provision across MNSs and primary schools, including primary schools with nursery classes as well as those with reception classes only.³² Current Ofsted data for state-funded schools inspections shows an improving trajectory in the quality judgements of early years school-based provision. 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.³³ There appears to be clear benefits for children, parents and professionals in offering SBNs (enhanced school readiness, early identification of SEND, supporting working parents with managing family life and access to CPD). 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.³⁴ This focus does however align with the recommendation from

³¹ 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.

³² Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. 2025. School inspection: Toolkit, operating guides and information. Ofsted. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information>

³³ Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. 2025. Main findings: state-funded schools inspections and outcomes as at 31 August 2025. Ofsted. 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>; Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. 2023. Main findings: state-funded schools inspections and outcomes as at 31 December 2022. Ofsted. 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>

³⁴ Department for Education. 2026. Early years school-based nursery provision operating outside of the typical model. DfE. Available at:

the SEED study that identified that one of the predictors of higher quality at private settings was having a minimum age for children of two.³⁵ Therefore, the appropriate age range for SBNs may be from the age of two. There are however significant disincentives and challenges for primary schools to offer additional services for younger children, including extended day, all-year-round and wraparound services.³⁶ There are also parental and professional concerns about the threat of a 'schoolification' 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.³⁷ For this not to happen, strong leadership and governance are critical factors in ensuring and encouraging quality early years provision for under threes in primary schools. Central to any delivery model is leadership training, continuing professional development, and the need to theorise leadership in ECEC because the divide between ECEC and formal schooling is still present. Leadership in SBNs need to therefore adopt a broader notion of leadership to be able to understand their specific ECEC context.³⁸ Case studies have shown that successful relationships between SBNs and schools depend on a strong joint leadership and integration of nursery governance into the whole-school structure.³⁹

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

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

³⁵ Callanan, M., Anderson, M., Haywood, S., Hudson, R. and Speight, S. 2017. Study of early education and development: Good practice in early education. GOV.UK. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a8061f4ed915d74e622e223/SEED_Good_Practice_in_Early_Education_-_RR553.pdf

³⁶ Merrick, B. 2024. School based nurseries: What the DfE doesn't say. Early Education. Available at: <https://early-education.org.uk/2024/11/05/>

³⁷ 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>

³⁸ Childcare Works. 2025. School-based nurseries: Five case studies. Available at:

<https://childcareworks.org.uk/school-based-nurseries-five-case-studies/>; Douglas, A. L. 2019. Leadership for quality early childhood education and care: OECD education working paper No. 211. OECD. 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). GOV.UK. 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>

³⁹ 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>

SBNs offering places for children under two, require two separate Ofsted inspections: one under the Early Years Register for babies and toddlers⁴⁰, and the other as part of the school inspection covering nursery and Reception classes.⁴¹ This requires not only knowledge and understanding of the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework⁴² but also the Ofsted requirements for younger children. The two Ofsted inspection frameworks can as such be seen as key frameworks in guiding primary schools new to offering SBN places for children under two. This matters because research suggests that access to settings rated highly by Ofsted improved children's chances of achieving both expected and higher levels of attainment.⁴³ Analysis of Ofsted data 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. Thus, better qualifications were associated with better quality for children and better qualifications were associated with school-based provision.⁴⁴

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 is also changing and

⁴⁰ Department for Education. 2026. Inspection of early years register providers: Requirements for Ofsted. DfE. 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. 2026. Early years inspection: Toolkit, operating guide and information. Ofsted. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information>

⁴¹ Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. 2025. School inspection: Toolkit, operating guides and information. Ofsted. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information>

⁴² Department for Education. 2025. Early years foundation stage (EYFS) statutory framework. DfE. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68c024cb8c6d992f23edd79c/Early_years_foundation_stage_statutory_framework_-_for_group_and_school-based_providers.pdf.pdf

⁴³ 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.

⁴⁴ Mathers, S. and Smees, R. 2014. Quality and inequality: Do three- and four-year-olds in deprived areas experience lower quality early years provision?. Nuffield Foundation. Available at: https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Quality_inequality_childcare_mathers_29_05_14.pdf

subject to a falling birth-rate in most, but not all, areas, which has had and will have an impact on provision.⁴⁵

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 2.

Table 2: 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.⁴⁶

The admission of younger children into primary schools is as such not new and had been increasing over recent years prior to the SBN programme. DfE data on providers for children under five shows there has been a drop in number of childminders between 2018 and 2025, from 36,500 to 22,300, a smaller drop in group-based providers from 21,500 to 21,400 and a slow but steady rise in school-based providers

⁴⁵ Office for National Statistics. 2025. Births in England and Wales: 2024. ONS. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/bulletins/birthsummarytablesenglandandwales/2024>

⁴⁶ Department for Education. 2025. Schools, pupils and their characteristics Academic year 2024/25. DfE. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2024-25>

from 8,600 to 9,900 (all numbers rounded to the nearest 100).⁴⁷ SBNs were at the end of 2025 offering around 22% of registered early years places.⁴⁸ These places are more prevalent in deprived areas; however, there is continued low sufficiency of early years provision or ‘childcare deserts’ in many localities, and especially in areas of deprivation and for children with SEND.⁴⁹

One definition of ‘childcare desert’ is “*where there are less than 0.333 places per child, or more than 3 children per place.*”⁵⁰ 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). Exactly half of local authorities in England meet the definition of ‘childcare desert’, with a large majority of these being the most deprived local authorities.⁵¹ To address this issue it has been suggested that the concept of universal basic services (UBS) is adopted, replacing the existing system, so that ECEC provision better meets the needs of children, parents and staff. This public services framework involves:⁵²

- 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.

⁴⁷ Department for Education. 2025. Childcare and early years provider survey. DfE. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-provider-survey/2025>

⁴⁸ Department for Education. 2025. Establishing school-based nursery provision. DfE. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision>

⁴⁹ 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. *et al.* 2023. A fair start for all: A universal basic service approach to early education and care. New Economics. Available at: <https://neweconomics.org/2023/11/a-fair-start-for-all>

⁵⁰ 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>

⁵¹ Pollard, Tet *et al.* 2023. A fair start for all: A universal basic service approach to early education and care. New Economics. Available at: <https://neweconomics.org/2023/11/a-fair-start-for-all>

⁵² *Ibid.*

- Environmental sustainability built into the design and delivery of services.
- Devolved powers to the lowest appropriate level.

If we look at other countries, 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.⁵³

The majority of Phase 1 SBNs are located in the North and North East or Midlands. For Phase 2, the government's goal is to build capacity in areas of need.⁵⁴ In parallel with this, the government needs to raise awareness of free education entitlements across the whole under-five age range because parental awareness varies regionally and locally, across different groups in society, and by child age with take-up increasing as the child gets older. 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.⁵⁵ There is no universal entitlement for 2-year-olds but targeted entitlements, the "Families Receiving Additional Support" (FRAS) Entitlement' for disadvantaged children and the new "Working parents Entitlement". In 2025 it was estimated that the uptake was 65.2% of eligible 2-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.⁵⁶ Concerning is the fact that there are parents not aware of their eligibility of existing offers. The percentage of parents not aware of their eligibility has remained about the same in the past 10 years, with 27% of parents unaware of eligibility in 2015

⁵³ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. 2024. Education at a glance 2024: OECD Indicators. OECD Publishing, Paris.

⁵⁴ Department for Education. 2025. Phase 2 of the school-based nursery programme: Everything you need to know. DfE. Available at: <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2025/09/nurseries-in-schools-everything-you-need-to-know/>

⁵⁵ Department for Education. 2025. Funded early education and childcare: Reporting year 2025. DfE. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/funded-early-education-and-childcare/2025>

⁵⁶ Department for Education. 2025. Funded early education and childcare: Reporting year 2025. DfE. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/funded-early-education-and-childcare/2025>; Department for Education. 2025. Giving every child the best start in life. DfE. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/giving-every-child-the-best-start-in-life>

versus 25% in 2024.⁵⁷ 25% is still a significant number of parents. Parents in families with an annual income under £20,000 per year were the least likely to know about eligibility of existing offers.⁵⁸ Parental awareness of provision available needs to be raised, especially the free entitlement for 2-year-olds. Staff at the government's planned 'Best Start Family Hubs' should be in a good position to inform and support parents in the application process of funded early education.⁵⁹

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.⁶⁰ 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.⁶¹ 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.⁶² This strategy is also visible in the five Childcare Works case studies,⁶³ and demonstrates that partnership working may enable the school to

⁵⁷ Department for Education. 2016. Survey of childcare and early years providers, England 2016. DfE. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childcare-and-early-years-providers-survey-2016>; Department for Education. 2025. Childcare and early years survey of parents. DfE. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-survey-of-parents/2024>

⁵⁸ Department for Education. 2025. Childcare and early years survey of parents. GOV.UK. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-survey-of-parents/2024>

⁵⁹ Department for Education. 2025. Giving every child the best start in life. DfE. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/giving-every-child-the-best-start-in-life>

⁶⁰ Department for Education. 2025. Establishing school-based nursery provision. DfE. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision>; Department for Education. 2025. Guidance: Establishing school-based nursery provision. DfE. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision#schools-suitable-for-an-sbn>

⁶¹ 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>; Leicestershire County Council. 2024. Leicestershire.gov.uk. 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>

⁶² Department for Education. 2025. Guidance: Establishing school-based nursery provision. DfE. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision#schools-suitable-for-an-sbn>

⁶³ 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>

provide more flexible care for working families.⁶⁴ It is pointed out in the guidance on establishing school-based nursery provision and in the 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.

Evidence from the five case studies of school-based nurseries developed by the Childcare Works consortium⁶⁵ 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.

Leicestershire County Council has published a document on partnership working in out-of-school settings and briefly mentions on page 4.⁶⁶

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

⁶⁴ Department for Education. 2026. Early years school-based nursery provision operating outside of the typical model. DfE. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6981d052015e2ba11991bb53/Early_years_school-based_nursery_provision_operating_outside_of_the_typical_model.pdf

⁶⁵ 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>

⁶⁶ Leicestershire County Council. 2024. Partnership working in Out of School settings. Leicestershire.gov.uk. Available at: <https://resources.leicestershire.gov.uk/sites/resource/files/2023-06/Partnership-working-in-Out-of-School-settings.pdf>

The evidence suggests that establishing a positive relationship between a primary school and its early year's feeder settings is dependent on many factors, and that relationships between schools and local early year's 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. 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.⁶⁷

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.⁶⁸ Successful 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.⁶⁹ They also have strategies for ensuring staff wellbeing leading to low staff turnover, and so securing consistent care and relationship building.⁷⁰ Children and family social

⁶⁷ 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). Gov.uk. 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>

⁶⁸ 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>; Mathers, S. and Smees, R. 2014. Quality and inequality: Do three- and four-year-olds in deprived areas experience lower quality early years provision?. Nuffield Foundation. Available at:

https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Quality_inequality_childcare_mathers_29_05_14.pdf

⁶⁹ Department for Education. 2026. Early years school-based nursery provision operating outside of the typical model. DfE. Available at:

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

⁷⁰ Local Government Association. 2023. Early education and childcare: Changes and challenges for the future. LGA. Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/early-education-and-childcare-changes-and-challenges-future>

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.⁷¹ 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.

The five case studies summarised in an appendix available in the [full literature review](#) provide useful evidence from which to draw learning about what makes a successful SBN. The Heathfield Knoll School 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 a SBN:

1. **Stronger 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 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

⁷¹ 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>

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 consortium 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.⁷²

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 system and not dependent on the market for sustainability.⁷³ 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.⁷⁴ How well set up individual schools are to be able to expand is a different matter, whether in relation to funding, physical space, retaining and recruiting staff or knowledge and understanding of early childhood pedagogy, to be able to deliver high-quality care.

Primary schools are also well set up to host SBNs because they are 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 the working families with older children prefer one-site provision and schools note that school readiness and transition from

⁷² 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>; Department for Education. 2026. Early years school-based nursery provision operating outside of the typical model. DfE. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6981d052015e2ba11991bb53/Early_years_school-based_nursery_provision_operating_outside_of_the_typical_model.pdf

⁷³ Department for Education. 2025. Early years provision: Expanding through a school-led model. DfE. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/early-years-provision-expanding-through-a-school-led-model>

⁷⁴ Department for Education. 2025. School-based nursery capital grant 2024 to 2025: successful applicants. DfE. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/csv-preview/6821decbd9c9bb76078f7f1f/School-based_nurseries_successful_applicant_list.csv

nursery to reception is also easier for staff and children.⁷⁵ MNSs are also well placed to become a key part of the SBN programme,⁷⁶ 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.⁷⁷

In Phase 2, SBNs are also targeted for development in the most deprived communities meaning reach to children growing up in poverty is a realistic goal.⁷⁸ 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. The IDACI measures the proportion of all children aged 0 to 15 living in income deprived families.⁷⁹ However, it has been suggested that the government should in Phase 2 exercise care in choosing the locations of new SBNs because families living in 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 therefore take account of demand as well as supply.⁸⁰

From an Ofsted perspective, many primary schools are in a good position to host SBNs if we take ratings as an indication of quality. Currently early years provision in schools is showing an overall improvement in judgements with 87% having been judged 'Good' or 'Outstanding' in December 2022 to 93% in March 2025. These number

⁷⁵ 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>; Department for Education. 2026. Early years school-based nursery provision operating outside of the typical model. DfE. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6981d052015e2ba11991bb53/Early_years_school-based_nursery_provision_operating_outside_of_the_typical_model.pdf

⁷⁶ Early Education. 2025. Maintained nursery schools financial outlook: 2025 report. EE. Available at: <https://early-education.org.uk/mns-funding-june-2025/>

⁷⁷ Local Government Association. 2023. Early education and childcare: Changes and challenges for the future. LGA. Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/early-education-and-childcare-changes-and-challenges-future>

⁷⁸ Department for Education. 2025. Phase 2 of the school-based nursery programme: Everything you need to know. DfE. Available at: <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2025/09/nurseries-in-schools-everything-you-need-to-know/>

⁷⁹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. 2025. English Indices of Deprivation. GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2025/english-indices-of-deprivation-2025-statistical-release>

⁸⁰ Farquharson, C. 2024. Labour's plans to build childcare spaces in schools will nudge the market in a different direction - but not transform it. Institute for Fiscal Studies. Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/articles/labours-plans-build-childcare-spaces-schools-will-nudge-market-different-direction-not>

may be an indication that current early years provision in primary schools is in a strong position to support the development of SBNs.⁸¹

A major concern however is the evidence⁸² indicating that the government may not be reaching the children and families they are attempting to reach and needs to look at the whole picture of providers and support all providers in the current system, and not ignore for instance MNSs since the evidence shows that MNS provision located in areas of disadvantage impacts positively on educational outcomes of children living in poverty.⁸³ Research also indicates that nursery schools play a vital role in reducing the socio-economic disadvantage experienced by some children. They therefore urge that Nursery Schools' 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 SBNs on existing MNS sites would therefore make educational sense.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. 2023. Main findings: state-funded schools inspections and outcomes as at 31 December 2022. Ofsted. 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>; Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. 2025. Main findings: state-funded schools inspections and outcomes as at 31 August 2025. Ofsted. 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>

⁸² Early Education. 2025. Maintained nursery schools financial outlook: 2025 report. EE. Available at: <https://early-education.org.uk/mns-funding-june-2025/>; Local Government Association. 2023. Early education and childcare: Changes and challenges for the future. LGA. Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/early-education-and-childcare-changes-and-challenges-future>

⁸³ 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.

⁸⁴ 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.

Key elements for consideration⁸⁵ for primary schools undertaking the development of a SBN as the programme rolls out are:

1. **School leadership models and expertise;**
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.

To this list can be added issues raised above such as access and take-up of education entitlements.

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.⁸⁶ For this to be successfully achieved the following points need to be considered:

- Clarity about the aims of the SBN programme, and its target ages and population groups;

⁸⁵ Department for Education. 2025. Establishing school-based nursery provision. DfE. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision/establishing-school-based-nursery-provision>; Department for Education. 2026. Early years school-based nursery provision operating outside of the typical model. DfE. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6981d052015e2ba11991bb53/Early_years_school-based_nursery_provision_operating_outside_of_the_typical_model.pdf

⁸⁶ Department for Education. 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>

- Review the effectiveness of intervention programmes. The Pupil Premium policy is relatively strong compared to other interventions and should be increased to the primary school level. Providers should also be allowed to apply for it instead of parents;⁸⁷
- The entitlement offer also needs to be reviewed and made easier for parents to apply for;
- More should be done to reach families not taking up their free entitlements;
- An independent review should undertake to establish the true cost of delivering high quality provision and ensure that this keeps rate with inflation and minimum wage pressures;
- Review and invest more in primary school workforce training from leadership level to front line staff, with very young children's learning and development a key focus;
- Explore flexible working for the workforce;
- Review the pay of ECEC staff;
- 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);
- 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;
- Funding for MNSs should be protected and funding for more SBNs on existing MNS sites should be considered, so that they

⁸⁷ Sylva, K. and Eisenstadt, N. 2024. Transforming early childhood: Narrowing the gap between children from lower- and higher-income families. Nesta. Available at: <https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/transforming-early-childhood-narrowing-the-gap-between-children-from-lower-and-higher-income-families/>

can continue to provide support to some of the most vulnerable children and their families;

- Ringfence funds for children with SEND;
- The government should work more closely with councils and wider stakeholders to develop a clear strategy for what the childcare and early education provider market should look like in the long term;
- Clear guidance about partnership and governance arrangements to ensure sustainability over time and clarity of role and leadership of the provision;
- Enhanced and integrated data bases 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.

In early 2025 the DfE conducted a survey of primary school leaders asking whether nursery provision was available on their school site.⁸⁸ 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

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>

as illustrated in Table 3 below. This links in with much of the research discussed throughout this report.

Table 3: Benefits from having a nursery on the school site

	Response (%)
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 2025.⁸⁹

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, with the top three being availability of space, capital funding and staff resource. The same three were also reported as the biggest barriers to existing nurseries expanding, but with capital funding the biggest. Concerns about parental demand and staff recruitment were also prominent.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

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.

Views from senior leaders

Remaining sections are authored by the core team of Dr Rebecca Montacute, Erica Holt-White, Dr Kevin Latham, Carl Cullinane and Dr Esme Lillywhite

Key findings

- Just over half of primary SLT reported that there is an onsite pre-school or nursery at their school. Those working in schools with the most disadvantaged intakes were more likely to report having an onsite pre-school or nursery, at 74%, compared to 49% working in schools with the most affluent intakes. Those at schools in Yorkshire and the North East as well as London were most likely to report having a setting.
- The vast majority of leaders said their onsite pre-schools and nurseries were accountable to the same SLT and governing body as the school (82%).
- Almost all said three-to-four-year-olds were covered, at 95%. Less than half said their school's setting covered two-to-three-year-olds (42%), and just 6% said there was provision for one-to-two-year-olds.
- 85% said that their school and the early years setting on-site had joint policies, for example on SEND. Less common activities included having a priority system for admissions for their primary and running joint classes.
- The majority of SLT thought it was important to have strong links with off-site nurseries, at 89% (with 58% saying it was very important). However, when asked if they had a range of links (including shared space and CPD opportunities), 73% reported that their school does not coordinate at all with local off-site early years providers.
- When asked to indicate which barriers they might face to strengthen their school's links with local early years settings, 49% selected limited time or capacity in school; 33% selected low engagement from local settings; and 25% selected no shared data systems.

- When those who currently do not have an early years setting on their site were asked about the barriers to doing so, the most common responses were no suitable indoor space (51%), high start-up costs (50%) and financial viability (46%).
- SLT from primary schools with more affluent intakes were more likely to cite lack of indoor space compared to those in schools with the most disadvantaged intakes, at 63% and 37% respectively. Outdoor space was also a more likely barrier for this group, whereas those at more disadvantaged schools were more likely to report financial issues.
- Those in schools without space to offer a nursery said problems included not having spare rooms (90%), no space for extra toilets (77%), no space for changing facilities (68%) and no space for buggy storage (68%).
- The most common issues for those who said financial concerns were a barrier included the cost of ratios needed in an early years setting (73%); ongoing staff costs (67%); and capital costs of converting a space within the school (65%).
- Out of those who do not already have a setting, 1 in 5 either said that their school already has plans in place to set up a school-based nursery or it is likely that they will set one up. 3% have plans in place at their school, 5% said it is very likely that there will be one set up and 12% said it is quite likely. The majority said it is not likely that one will be set up.
- When asked about the possible benefits opening a school-based nursery could bring to their school, the most popular choices were a smoother transition into reception (78%); earlier identification and better continuation for children with SEND (75%); and more children arriving ready for school (71%).
- Respondents were most likely to say that their school would be well placed to deliver or expand their provision to three-to-four-year-olds (40%), with 32% saying two-to-three-year-olds and just under a quarter saying no age groups (22%). Just 1 in 10 said they were well placed to cater for one-to-two-year-olds,

Introduction and methods

As shown by this report's literature review, school-based nursery provision, particularly linked to maintained settings, has the potential to increase access to early education, particularly among disadvantaged communities and those with special educational needs.

Before any further roll out can occur, it is important that more insight is gathered into both the benefits and challenges of setting up a school-based nursery from those working on the ground in early education. Therefore, this section looks to fill the evidence gaps on school-based nurseries and gather views from schools themselves on the feasibility of expanding the government's school-based nursery policy. This adds to further evidence gathered from early years settings themselves featured as case studies in this report.

Senior leaders were asked a series of questions to gather an overall picture of the prevalence of school-based early years settings across the country, where they are located, how they are run, what ages they cover and what ages could be covered if funding and space were unlimited. Those with a school-based nursery were asked about the links between the provision and the primary; while those without an early years setting on-site were asked about barriers in doing so; future plans to open a setting; and the potential benefits they could gain from opening a school-based nursery, to understand how appetite maps to levels of need and areas of disadvantage. In addition, all leaders were asked about the links to local early years settings, why such links are important and the barriers to strengthening such links.

Where relevant, results have been broken down by school type, region and deprivation level of the school's intake.

Methodology

1,372 senior leaders working in primary schools were surveyed via Teacher Tapp in February 2026. Teacher Tapp is a daily survey app that asks over 11,000 teachers questions each day and re-weights the results to make them representative. Teacher Tapp has a wide sample spread across schools. Sample weighting is based on observables from the School Workforce Census, to represent the national teaching population according to school funding and phase, along with teacher age, gender and level of seniority.

Although the panel is self-selecting—teachers must download the app and choose to participate in the daily surveys - the platform takes several steps to ensure data is representative. These steps include providing interesting articles to teachers on the platform, to give them a reason to engage beyond just answering survey questions.

Analysis compares responses from groups of a minimum of 50 respondents. Statistical significance of any differences found between groups has been tested using a statistical significance level of 0.05 and, unless otherwise stated, differences are only reported when this level has been reached.

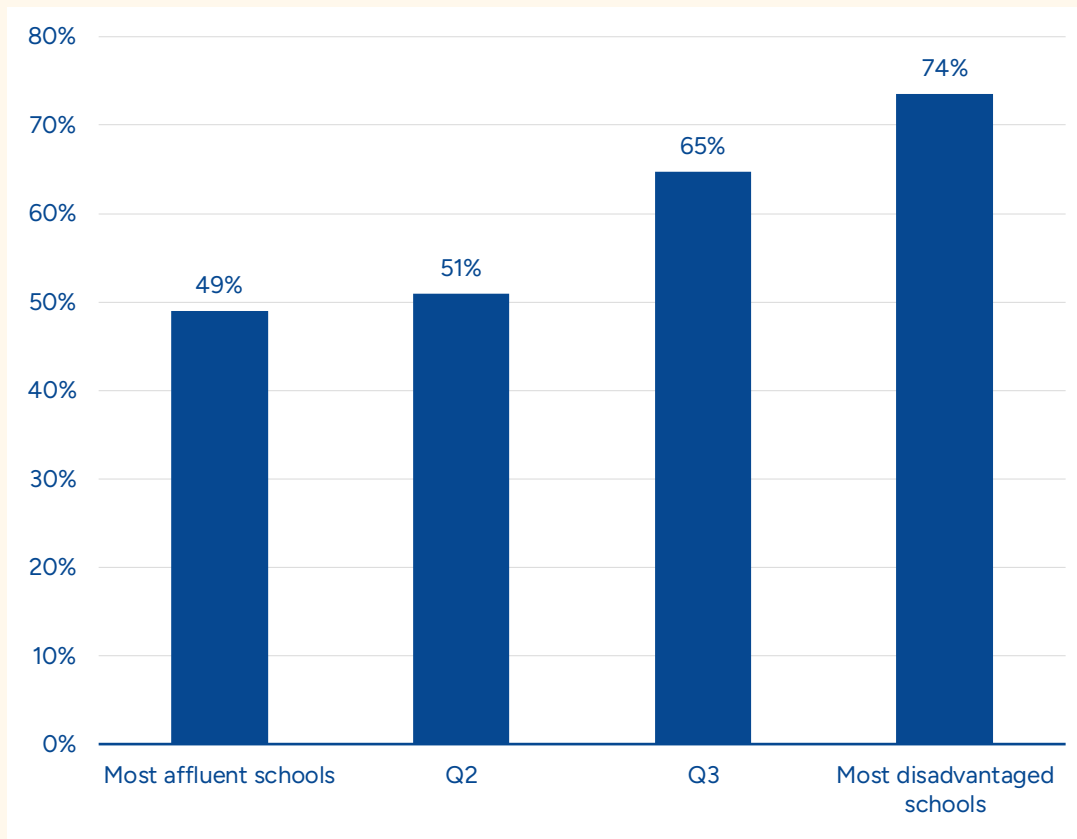
Findings

Current school-based nurseries

60% of primary SLT reported that there is an onsite pre-school or nursery at their school. However just 1% said childminders were operating on their site.

Those working in schools with the most disadvantaged intakes were more likely to report having an onsite pre-school or nursery, at 74%, compared to 49% working in schools with the most affluent intakes (Figure 2).

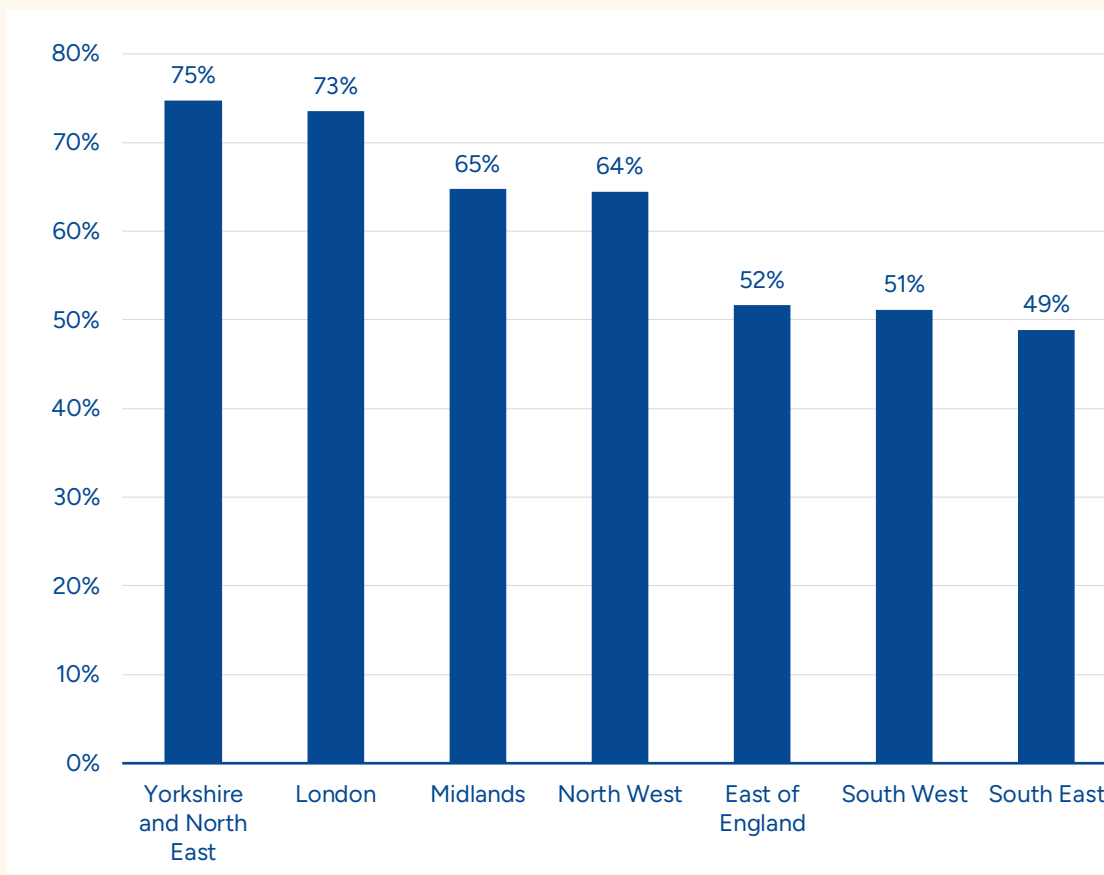
Figure 2: Presence of a school-based nursery, by level of disadvantage



Notes: Sample size = 1,157. Analysis does not include those who answered “Don’t know, not sure, not relevant or cannot answer”.

Looking across the country, those at schools in Yorkshire and the North East were most likely to report having an onsite setting, at 75%, as well as London at 73%, compared to 49% in the South East (Figure 3). As shown in Table 4, large schools were much more likely than smaller schools to have an SBN. Standalone academies were the least likely to have one, with local authority and MAT schools having broadly similar numbers. There is also a significant state/private divide, with 71% of private primaries having a nursery compared to 60% in the state sector.

Figure 3: Presence of a school-based nursery, by region



Notes: Sample size = 1,304. Analysis does not include those who answered "Don't know, not sure, not relevant or cannot answer".

Table 4: Presence of a school-based nursery

Has a school-based nursery	
Average	60%
State primary schools	60%
Private primary schools	71%
Most disadvantaged schools	74%
Q3	65%
Q2	51%
Most affluent schools	49%

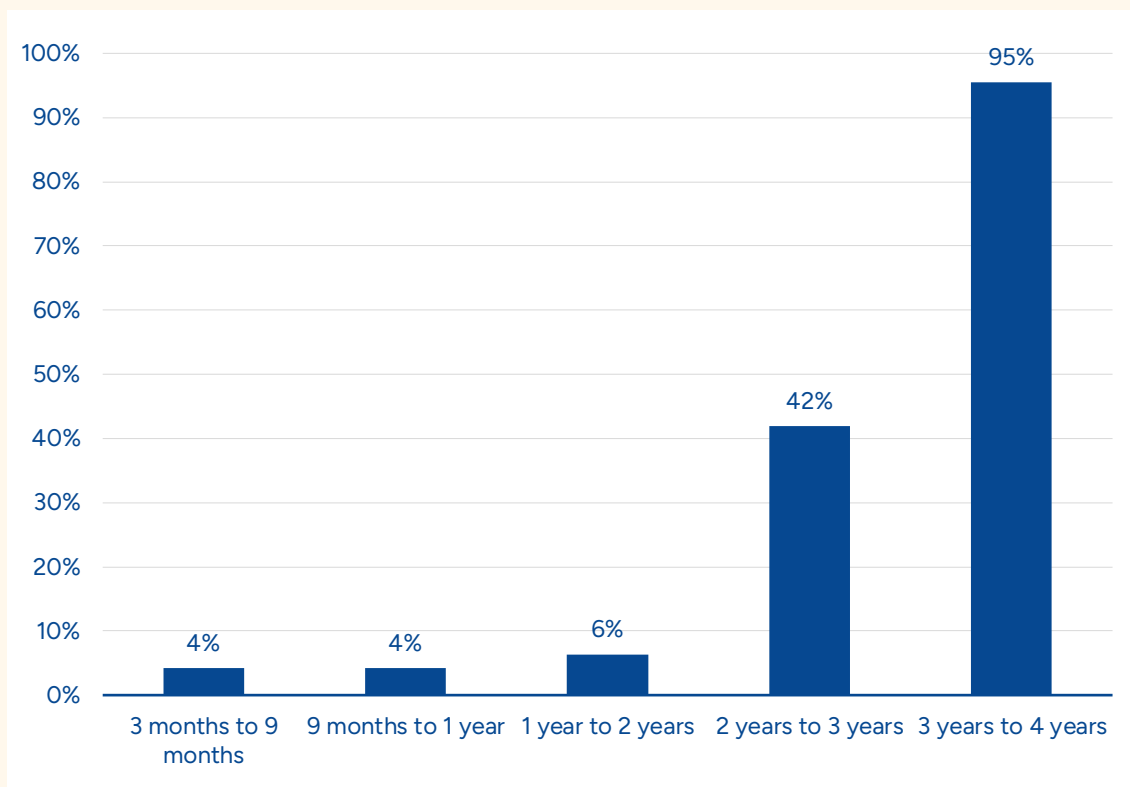
Large schools	75%
Q3	61%
Q2	61%
Small schools	49%
LA community	63%
LA non-community	58%
Large MAT (4+)	59%
Small MAT (3/less)	68%
Stand-alone Academy	46%
East of England	52%
London	73%
Midlands	65%
North West	64%
South East	49%
South West	51%
Yorkshire and North East	75%

Notes: Analysis does not include those who answered "Don't know, not sure, not relevant or cannot answer".

Those with a pre-school or nursery on their school's site were asked follow-up questions regarding accountability, the ages of the cohort covered and the relationship between the early years setting and the attached primary school.

In terms of the age ranges covered by the early years setting at their school, the vast majority said three-to-four-year-olds were covered, at 95% (Figure 4). Less than half said their school's setting covered two-to-three-year-olds (42%), and just 6% said there was provision for one-to-two-year-olds.

Figure 4: Ages covered by early years setting on-site



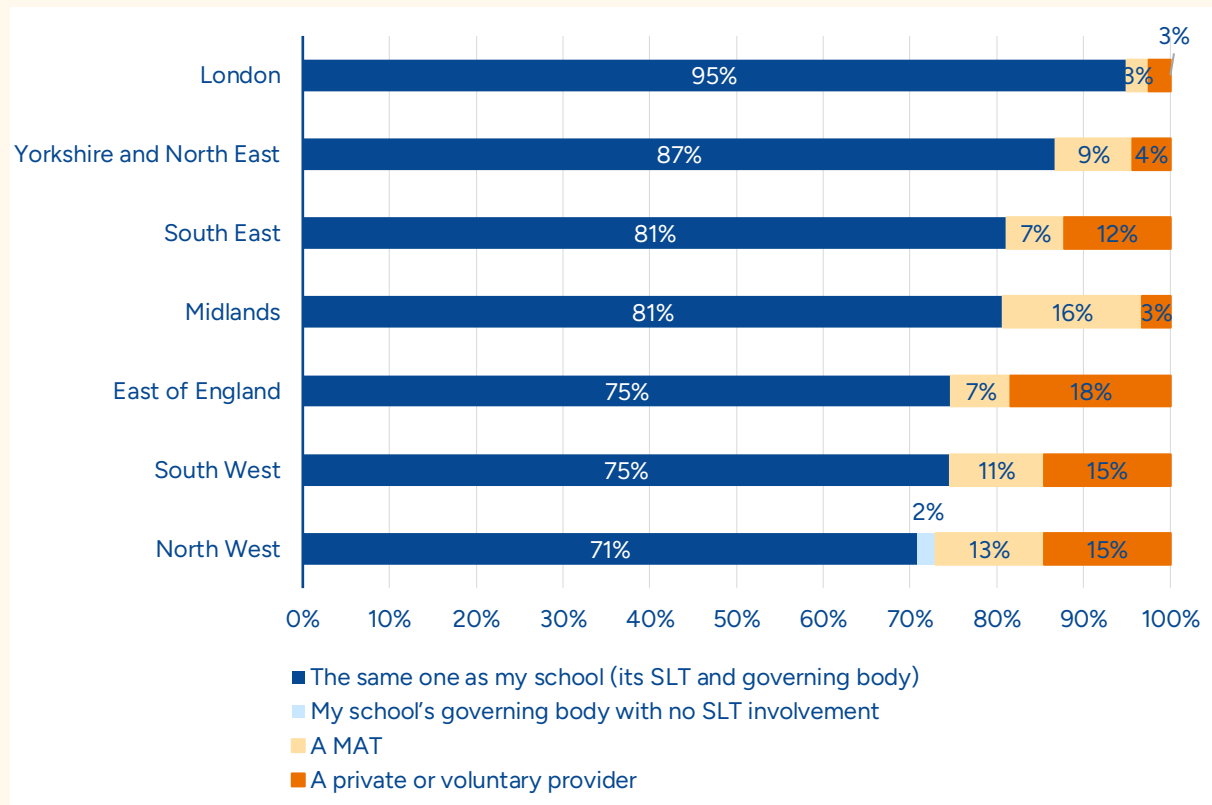
Notes: Sample size = 599. Analysis does not include those who answered “Don’t know, not sure, not relevant or cannot answer”.

In the South West, there appeared to be more provision for one-to-two-year-olds, with around 15% reporting this compared to around 2% in Yorkshire and the North East. There was also some variation in provision for two-to-three-year-olds, with leaders in the South East twice as likely to report provision for the age-group compared to London (56% vs 28%). There was less variation for three-to-four-year-olds, with over 94% coverage across all regions. Those in schools with PVI-led settings were much more likely to take younger ages, with 25% taking one-to-two-year-olds compared to up to 4% of school or MAT-led settings.

In terms of governance, the majority of school leaders said their onsite pre-schools and nurseries were accountable to the same SLT and governing body as the school (82%). The rest were governed by a MAT (8%) or a private or voluntary provider (9%). Leadership from a private or voluntary provider was highest for settings operating in schools with the most affluent intakes, at 18% compared to just 3% of those operating in schools with the most disadvantaged intakes (who were the most likely to be governed by a MAT).

As shown on Figure 5, SLT in London schools were the most likely to say that the onsite early years provision is governed by the same body as their school (95%) compared to only 71% in the North West, where MATS and PVI led settings were more common (13% and 15% respectively). MAT and PVI led settings were also more common in the East of England and the South West, making up a quarter of provision.

Figure 5: Leadership of on-site early years setting, by region

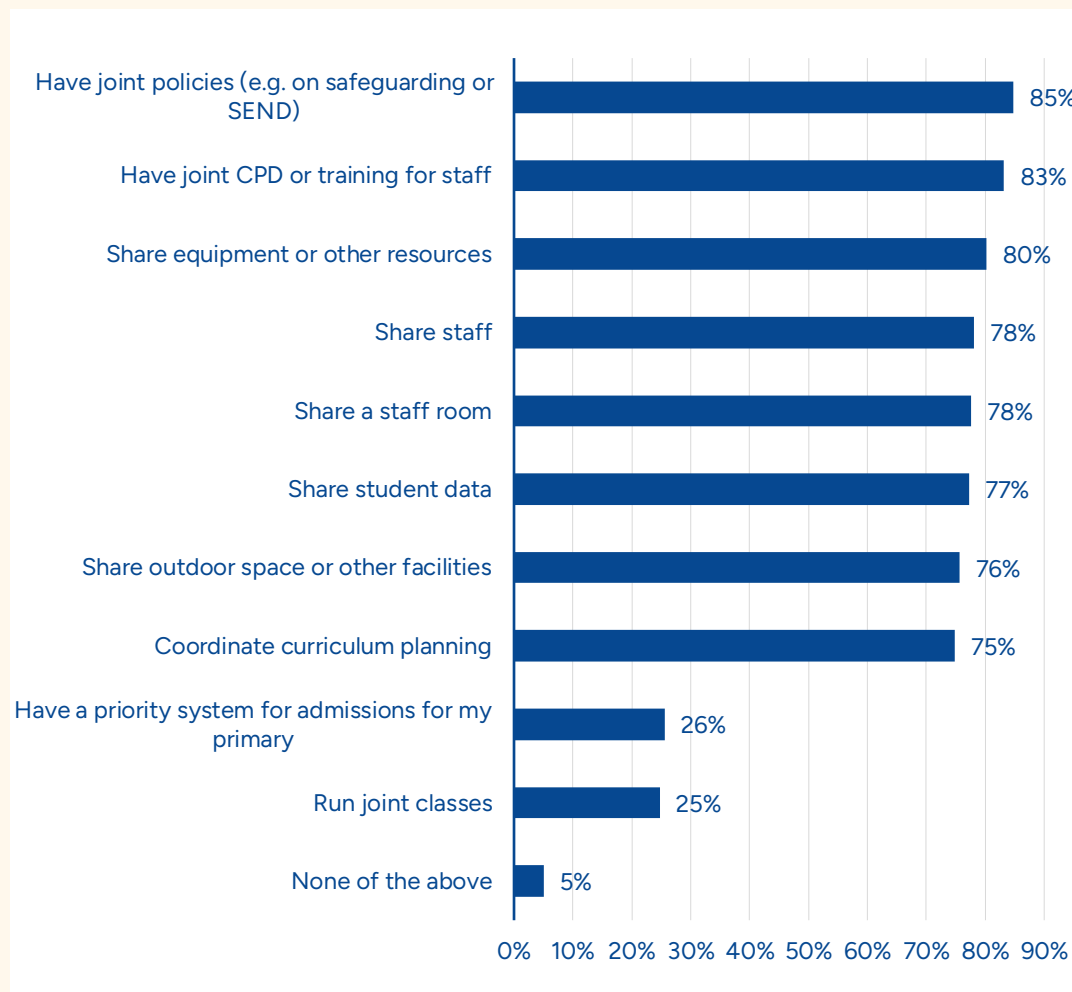


Notes: Sample size = 599. Analysis does not include those who answered “Don’t know, not sure, not relevant or cannot answer”.

95% of leaders in private schools report their SLT and governing body are ultimately accountable for their early years provision, compared with 82% of senior leaders in state-funded schools.

Leaders were also asked about the relationship between the school and early years setting. When asked to select options that applied from a range of possible links, 85% said that their school and early years setting on-site had joint policies (for example on SEND) (Figure 6). Less common activities - reported by only a quarter of SLT - included having a priority system for admissions for their primary and running joint classes.

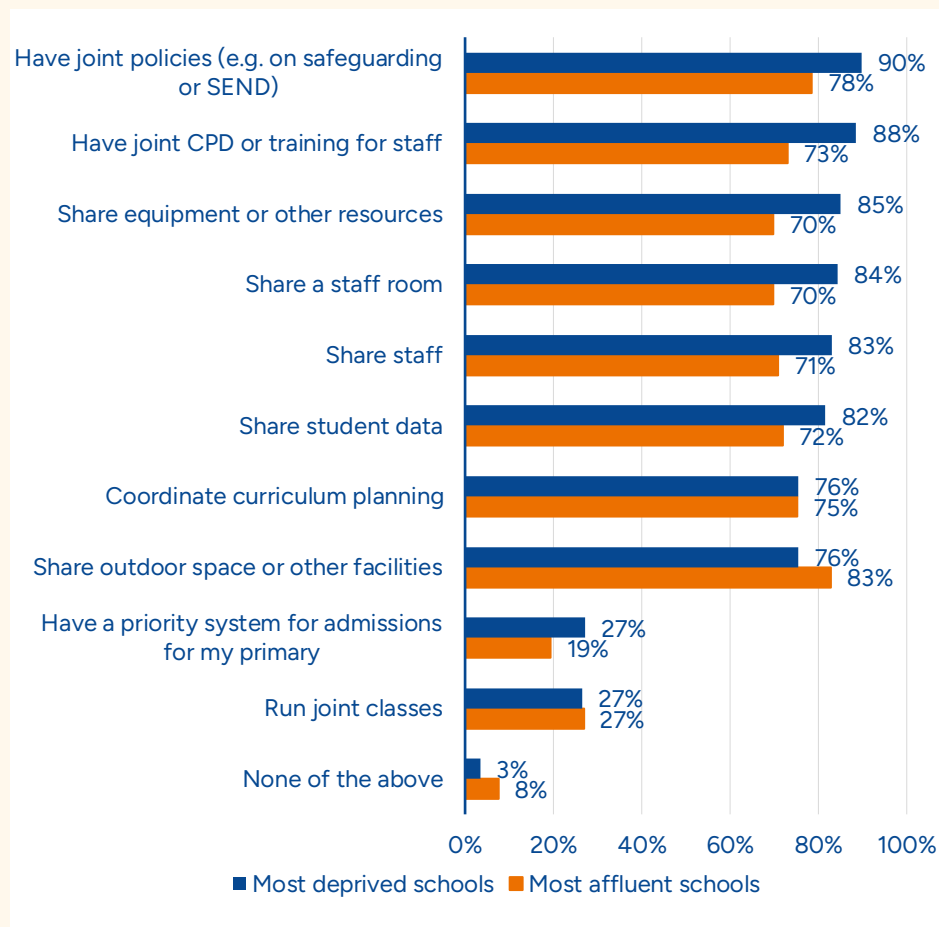
Figure 6: Shared links between schools and on-site early years settings



Notes: Sample size = 594. Analysis does not include those who answered “Don’t know, not sure, not relevant or cannot answer”.

Those primary schools in London were the most likely to use the listed strategies, with only 1% saying none of the above, compared to 12% in the East of England. However, broadly across regions, strategies used were similar proportions. There was also a socio-economic gradient to links to onsite pre-schools and nurseries, with those in the more deprived areas more likely to report all links except sharing outdoor spaces, running joint classes and coordinating curriculum planning (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Shared practices between school and on-site early years setting, by level of deprivation



Notes: Sample size = 564. Analysis does not include those who answered “Don’t know, not sure, not relevant or cannot answer”.

32% of those with a PVI on-site said that none of the links listed existed between the setting and the school, compared to 2% of settings governed by the school/MAT. Lower proportions of PVI-ran settings onsite reported using any of the mentioned practices, with the most common strategies reported by those with a PVI onsite nursery setting were sharing outdoor space or other facilities (54%); sharing student data (28%) and sharing equipment or other resources (23%). The biggest gaps between school run and PVI run settings were on staffing related questions, including sharing staff or conducting joint training.

Connections between schools and off-site nurseries

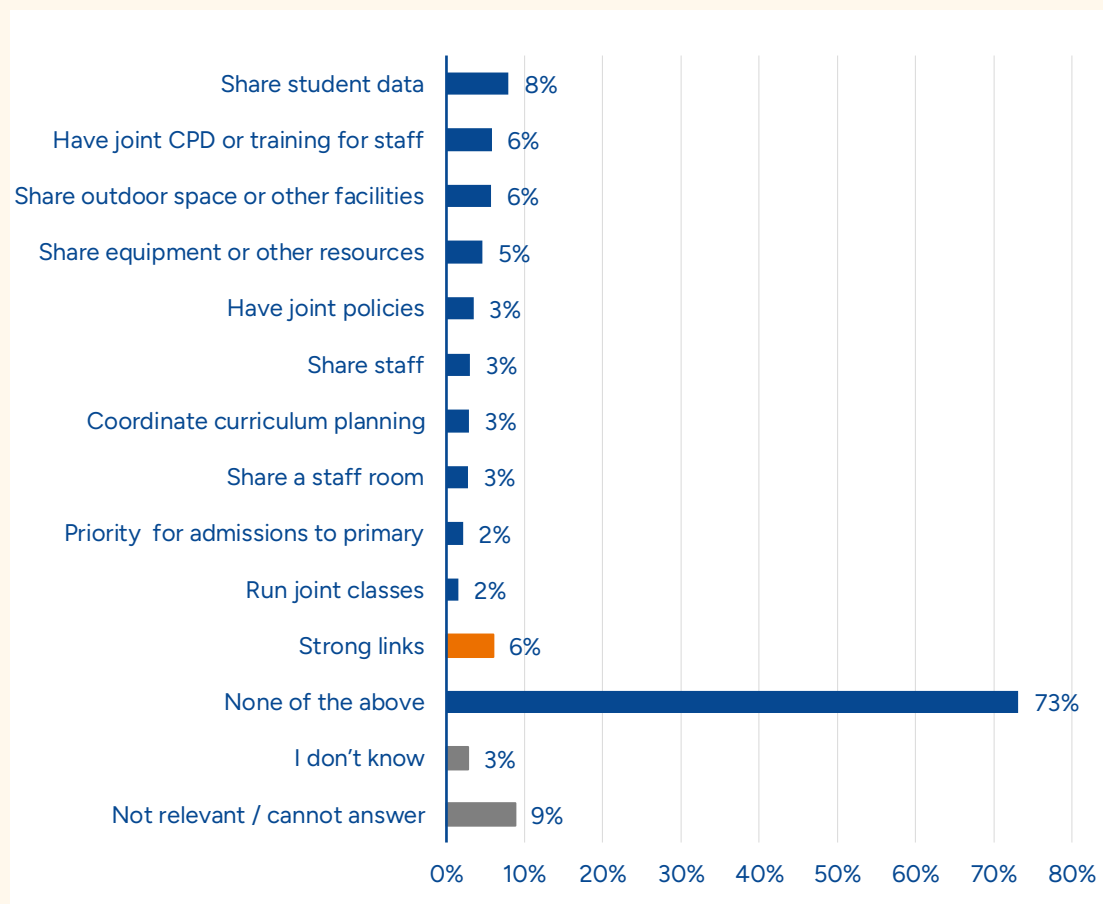
Aside from having an early years setting on site, primary schools may also have strong links to nurseries operating in the area. To investigate these relationships, all SLT in this report’s sample were asked questions regarding links to local early years settings.

When asked how important it is for primaries to have strong links with local early years providers for activities like information sharing or curriculum planning, the majority thought it was important to have strong links, at 89% (with 58% saying it was very important).

However, most did not report extensive links with offsite nurseries, at 73%. Selecting from a set of proposed links between a school and an off-site early years setting, the most common sharing student data at 8% (Figure 8). Other more common links included having joint CPD or training for staff (6%) and sharing outdoor space or other facilities (6%).

Those who selected three or more of the set links, or selected one of the options of shared staff; joint policies, or joint classes, were grouped into a 'strong links' category. 6% of respondents fell into this category. Among this group, 59% shared equipment or other resources with a nursery, 56% had shared policies, 56% shared student data and 56% had joint CPD/staff training opportunities.

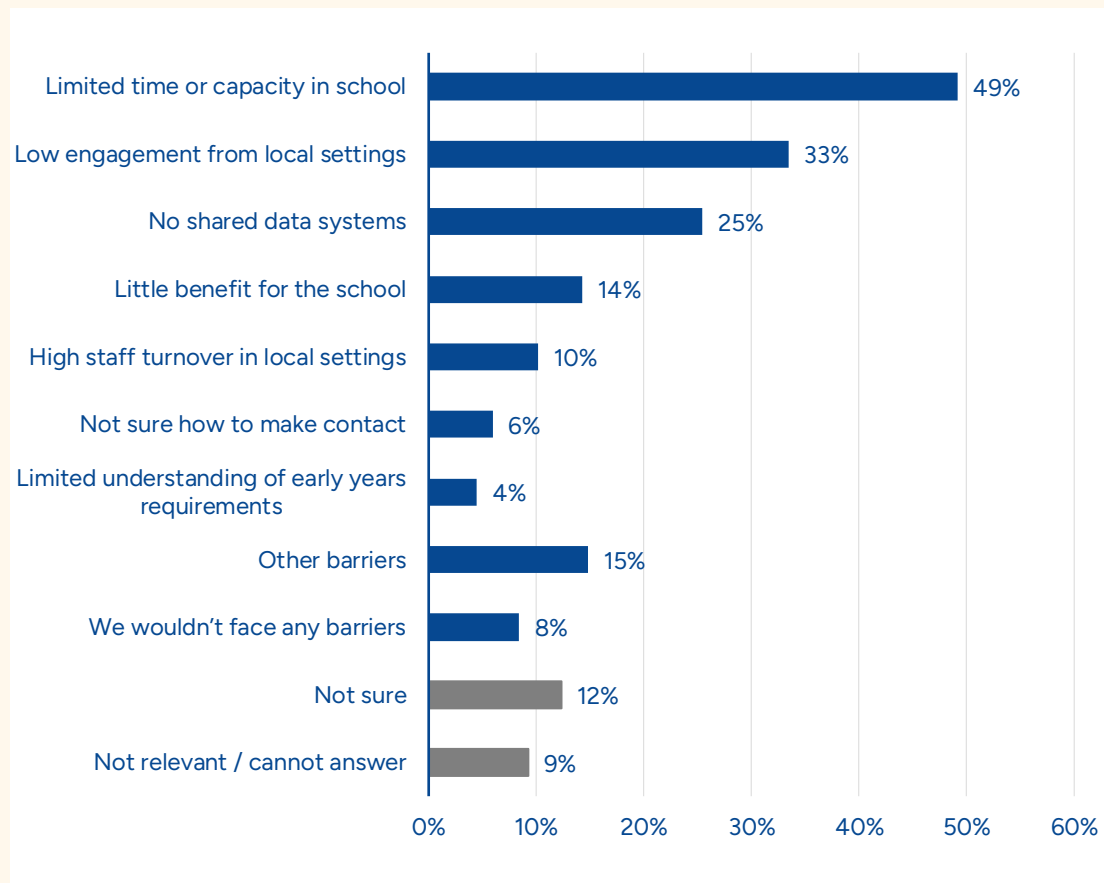
Figure 8: Type of link between school and local early years setting



Notes: Sample size = 1,336

When asked to indicate which barriers they might face to strengthen their school's links with local early years settings, 49% selected limited time or capacity in school; 33% selected low engagement from local settings; and 25% cited a lack of shared data systems (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Barriers to strengthen strong links



Notes: Sample size = 1,328

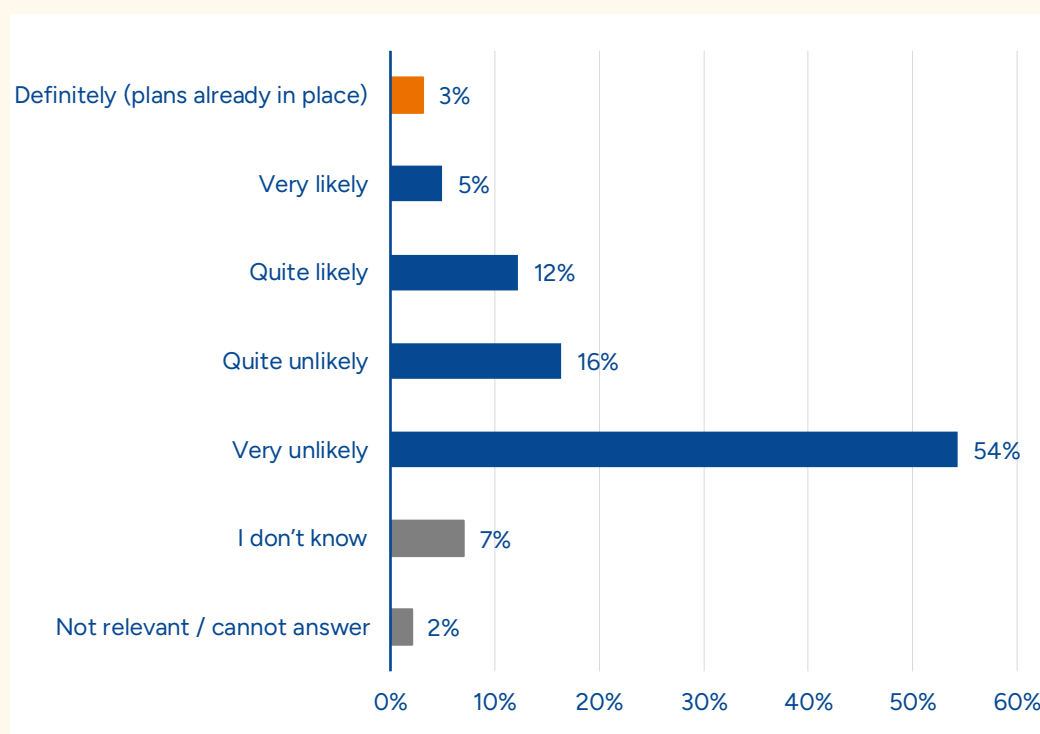
There was not a clear socio-economic pattern to most of the barriers reported, except SLT working in schools with the most disadvantaged intakes were more likely to choose 'low engagement from local settings' at 44%, compared to 34% of those from schools with more affluent intakes.

There was little variation when comparing responses from those with strong existing links to the average response, apart from 'no shared data systems' – 25% of the overall sample selected this, but only 5% of those in schools with strong external links did so.

Future provision

Those without an early years setting on their school site were asked if it is likely they will set one up in the future. 1 in 5 primary SLT either said that their school already has plans in place to do so or it is likely that they will set one up. As shown on Figure 10, 3% have plans in place at their school, 5% said it is very likely that there will be one set up and 12% said it is quite likely. Around half (54%) said that it is very unlikely, with a further 16% saying it was quite unlikely. Those working in London schools were the least likely to say that there were plans in place or that it was very likely for a setting to be set up.

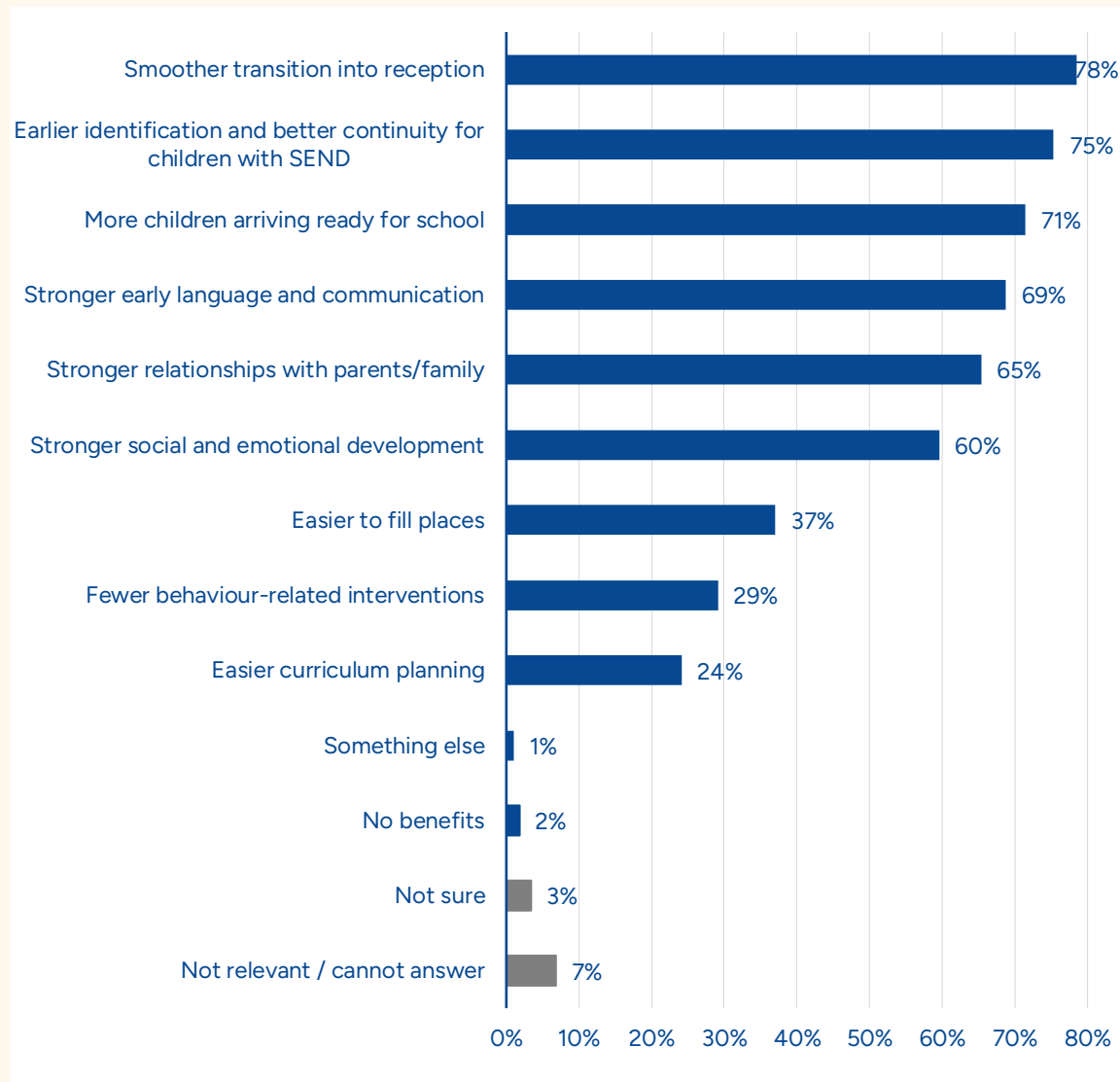
Figure 10: Likelihood of setting up a school-based nursery



Notes: Sample size = 385

Those currently without an early years setting at their school were also asked if their school opened an early years setting next year, if they would expect there to be any benefits seen amongst reception children within five years. Selecting from a list of specified benefits, the most popular choices were a smoother transition into reception (78%); earlier identification and better continuation for children with SEND (75%); and more children arriving ready for school (71%) (Figure 11). Just 2% said there wouldn't be any benefits.

Figure 11: Potential benefits seen within five years of setting up a school-based setting



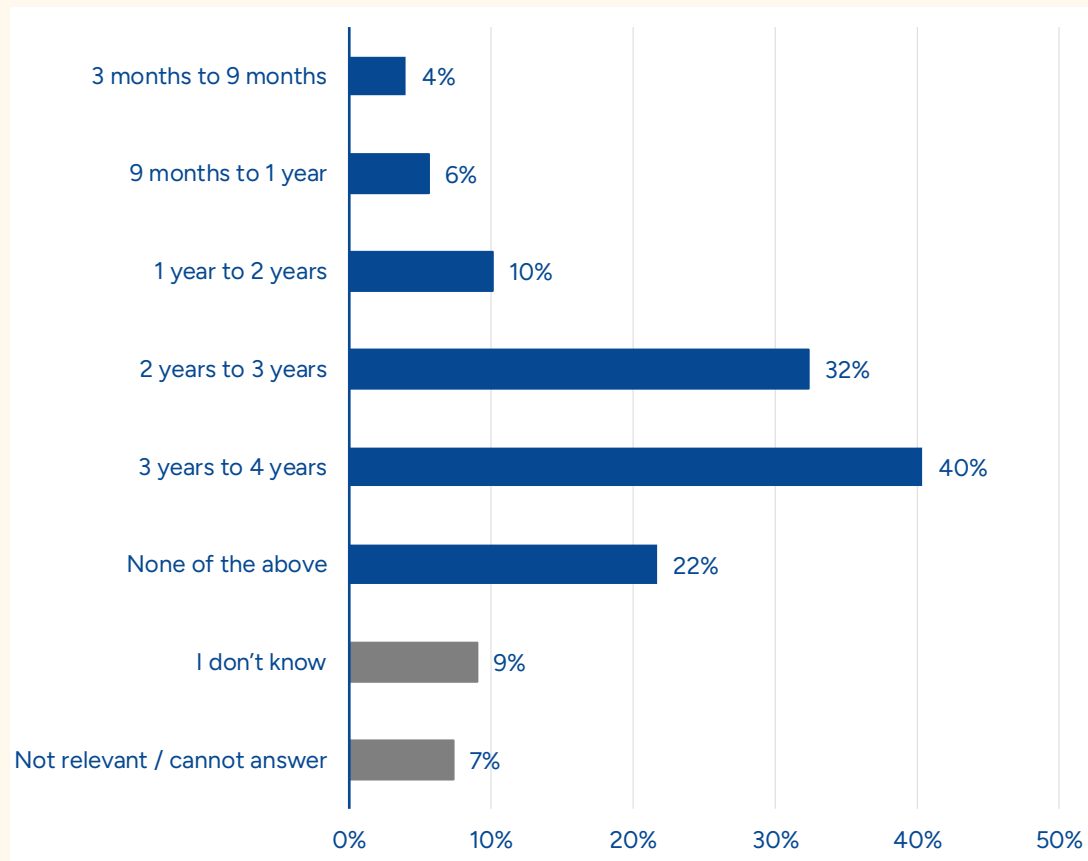
Notes: Sample size = 381

'Fewer behaviour-related interventions' was more likely to be selected by SLT in schools with the most disadvantaged intakes, at 39%, compared to those with the most affluent intakes (28%). On the other hand, 'earlier identification and better continuity for children with SEND' was more likely to be selected by those working in schools with more affluent intakes than those with disadvantaged intakes, at 89% vs 63% respectively.

Including those who said they already have an early years setting at their school, primary SLT were asked about the age ranges their school would be well placed to deliver or expand its provision to, if the right

level of funding and space were available. Respondents were most likely to say that their school would be well placed to deliver or expand their provision to three-to-four-year-olds (40%), with just under a quarter said no age groups (22%). The ability to host a particular age group increased over the age ranges; with only 4% saying their school would be well placed to provide for three months to nine months (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Ages that expanded provisions could cover



Notes: Sample size = 1,328

This pattern was similar between state and private primary SLT, although in general private primary SLT felt more well placed to provide for under 2s.

As for regional differences, SLT in London schools were more skewed to younger pupils (under 2), whereas places like the North West, North East and Yorkshire were more likely to skew to older pupils (three-to-four-year-olds).

Those in schools with strong links to off-site early years settings were the most confident in general for expanding to three-to-four-year-olds

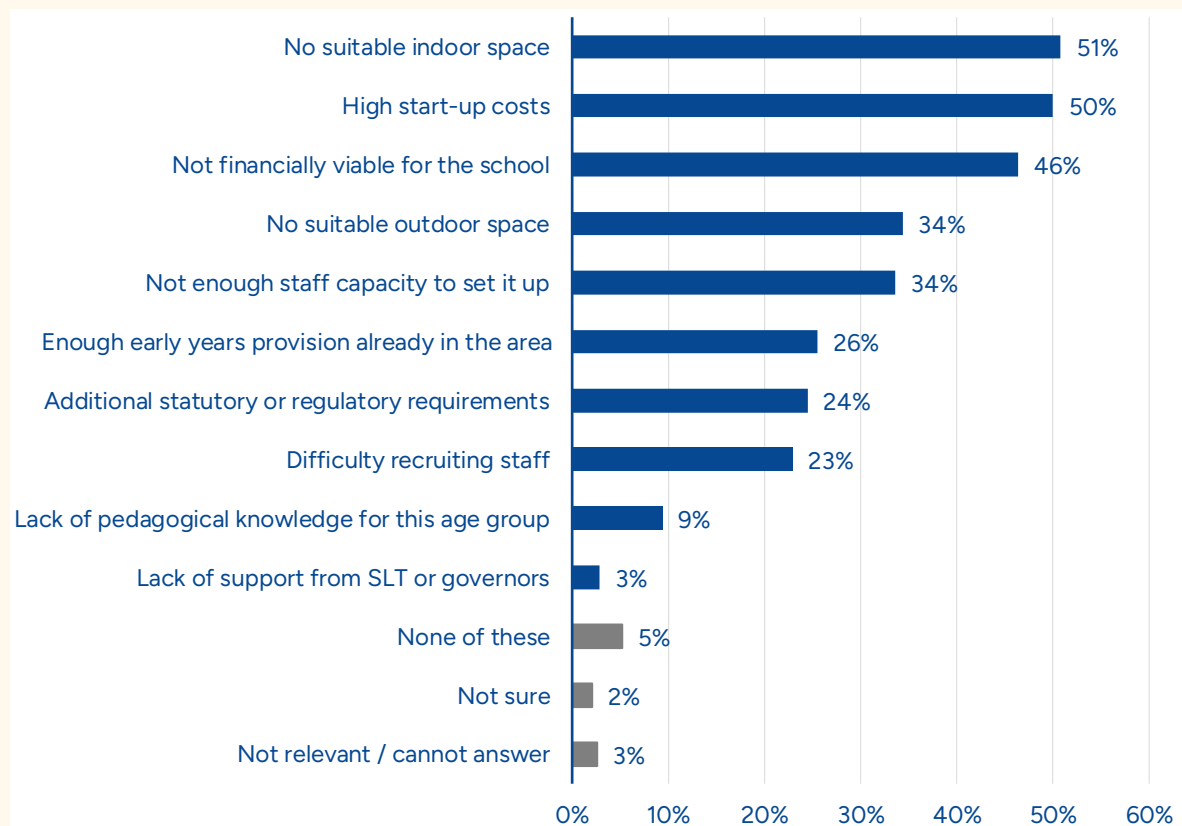
at 47% (compared to 40% overall), and those with settings on-site already were slightly more likely to say they could cover younger ages than average.

For schools without existing provision just under half reported they could cater to three-to-four-year-olds, more than those with current provision, but less than a quarter two-to-three-year-olds, much less than those with existing provision. This reflects the different starting points of the two groups and indicates schools may be more comfortable providing for three-to-four-year-olds first before expanding to younger ages.

Barriers to setting up a school-based nursery

Building on responses from those who currently do not have an early years setting on their site, this group were asked what barriers, if any, they would face if they were to set up a setting. As shown on Figure 13, the most common responses cited were a lack of suitable indoor space (51%), high start-up costs (50%) and financial viability (46%).

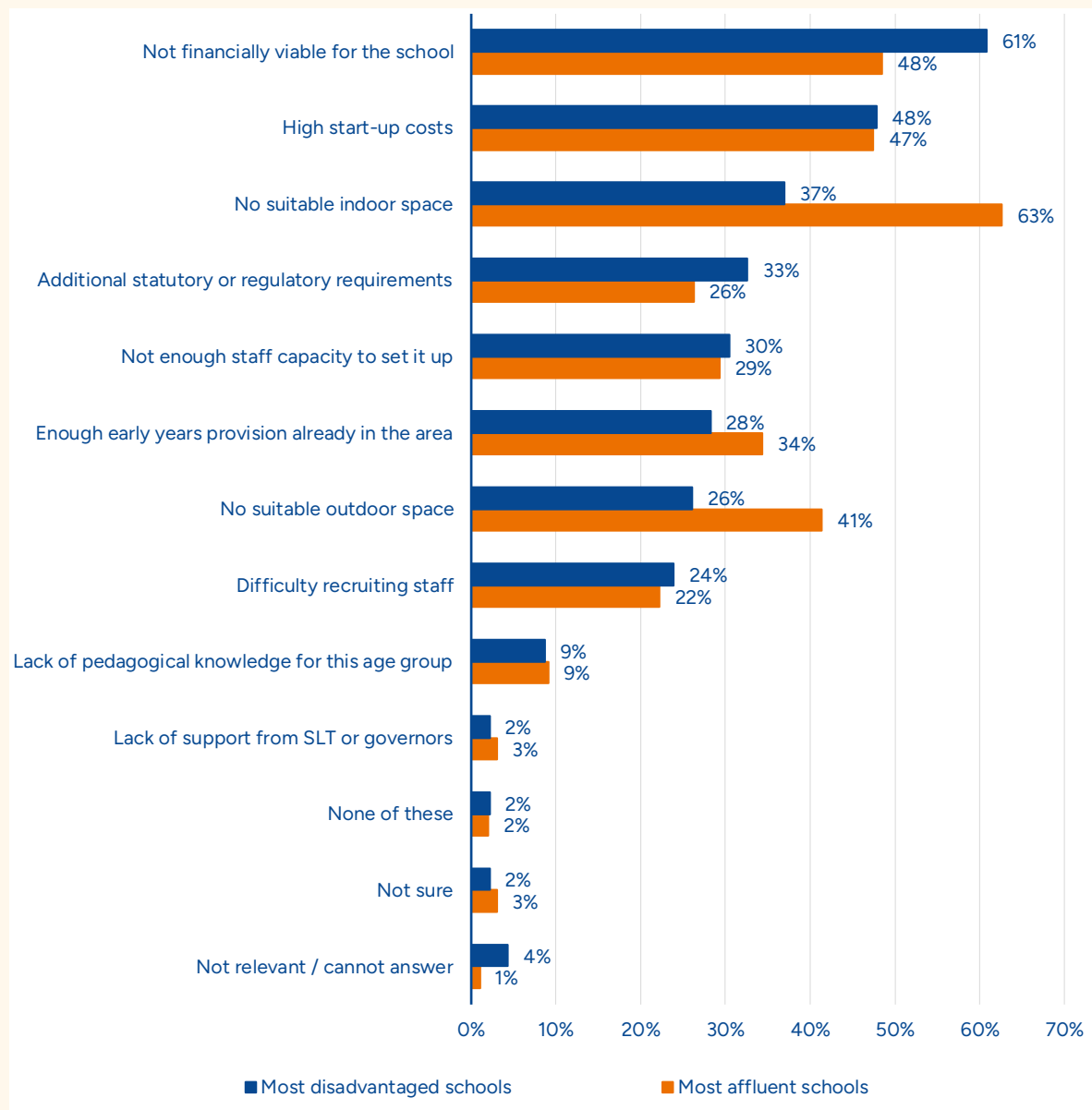
Figure 13: Barriers to setting up a school-based nursery



Notes: Sample size = 384

Those from schools with more affluent intakes were more likely to cite lack of suitable indoor space compared to those in schools with the most disadvantaged intakes, at 63% and 37% respectively (Figure 14). Outdoor space was also a more likely barrier for this group, whereas those at more disadvantaged schools were more likely to report financial issues.

Figure 14: Barriers to setting up a school-based nursery, by level of deprivation

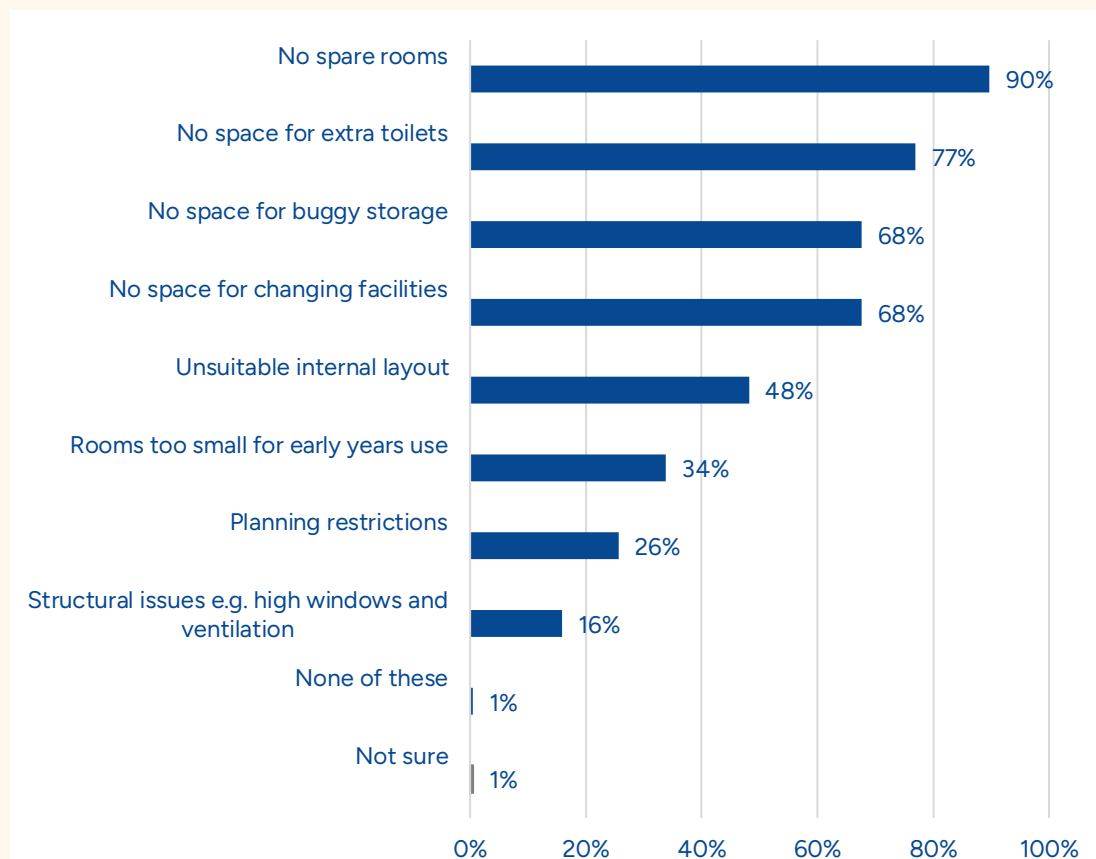


Notes: Sample size = 332

There was also some regional variation, with those in Yorkshire and the North East most likely to report issues on cost and space, and those outside of London more likely to report staff capacity issues.

To find out more about why those who selected 'no suitable indoor space' chose to do so, this subgroup were presented with a list of specific constraints. The vast majority (90%) said that they didn't have spare rooms. As shown on Figure 15, other common reasons included no space for extra toilets (77%), no space for changing facilities (68%) and no space for buggy storage (68%).

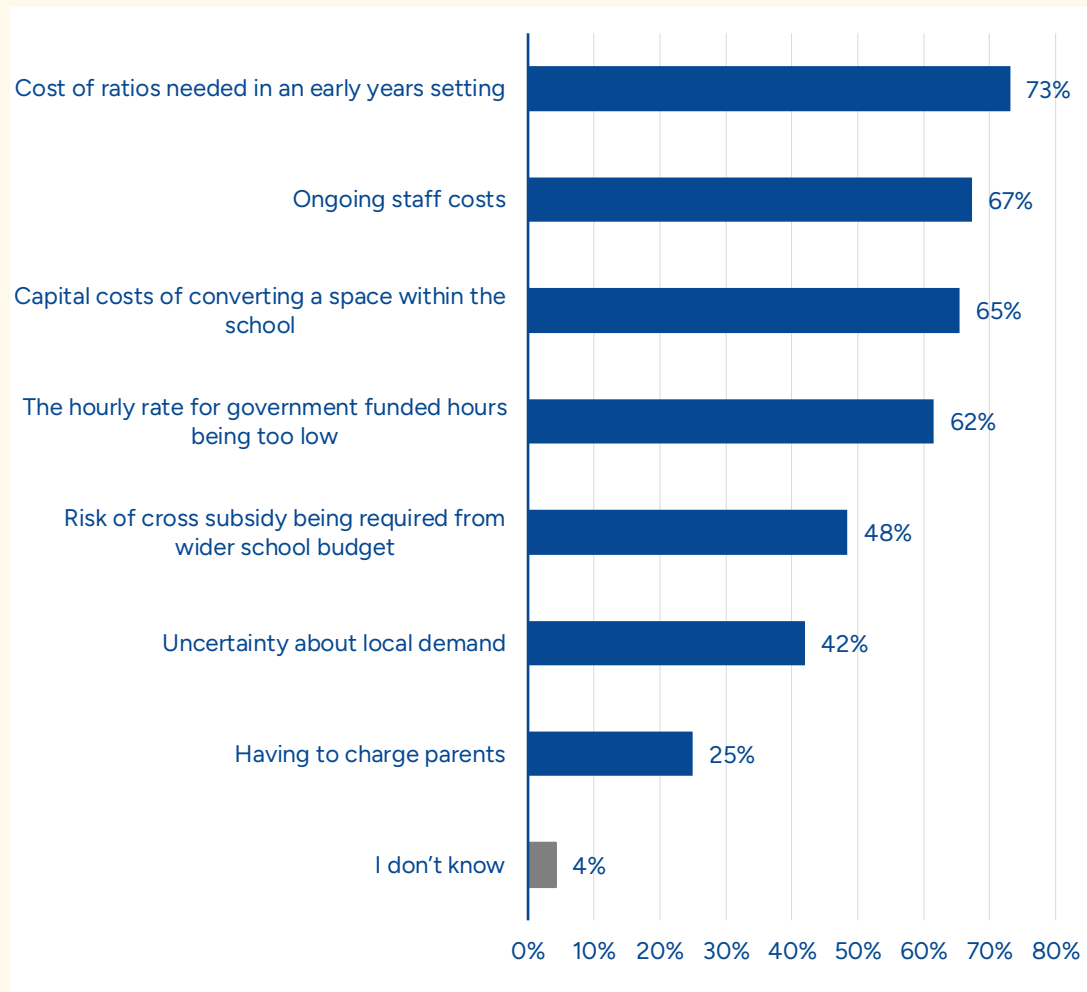
Figure 15: Reasons why a lack of space may be a barrier to setting up a school-based nursery



Notes: Sample size = 195

Those who said they would face high start-up costs or said that it would not be financially viable were also asked a further question, which proposed a set of specific concerns related to this issue. The most common reasons chosen included cost of ratios needed in an early years setting (73%); ongoing staff costs beyond initial set up (67%); and capital costs of converting a space within the school (65%) (Figure 16).

Figure 16: Reasons why setting up a school-based nursery may be expensive or not financially viable



Notes: Sample size = 260

Summary

This survey has demonstrated that school-based nurseries are more likely to be in schools with more disadvantaged intakes, they are more likely to be at schools in Yorkshire and the North East, and they tend to share a senior leadership team and/or governing body. Most settings offer places to three-to-four-year-olds, but far fewer offer places for two-to-three-year-olds, and fewer still for under-twos, which raises questions for how school-based settings may offer places for those eligible for funded hours at these ages.

Schools with early years settings on sites often report links between the two, particularly regarding policies, space and staff. And while a

large proportion of primary SLT believe it is important for a primary school to be well connected to off-site early years settings in the local area, only a small proportion of schools appear to have 'strong links' with local settings. For those who do, having shared data appears to be a strong component of those relationships.

Findings from those without an early years setting on site indicate that space, start-up costs and financial viability are likely barriers to expanding the number of school-based nurseries as part of the next phases of the government's pilot. Therefore, it is encouraging that funding offered through the pilot can be spent on needs relating to space. But further expansion should acknowledge the fact that some schools do not see a school-based setting as a financially viable decision, particularly in more disadvantaged areas. And aside from space, it is clear that the costs associated with staff, such as staffing ratios, is an area where schools will need support. In particular ongoing staff costs were a concern for many schools, which is not something supported in the current expansion programme. A large proportion of SLT surveyed said it is unlikely that their school will set up a school-based nursery – results here show that many SLT are aware of and support the benefits of having an early years setting on site, but this is not yet translating into plans to set one up for many schools.

Further research that covers the views of parents may also be useful to understand, if any, the benefits they have seen from sending their child to a school-based nursery. Surveying parents would also help to gauge demand for this style of provision.

Views from the ground: Case studies

Key findings

Staff from 13 different settings were interviewed, including a mix of existing school-based nurseries, and early years settings and schools with close existing relationships. These interviews offer rich, detailed accounts of how different models operate in practice, as well as the challenges and enablers in their settings, information which is not available from quantitative data alone. [All case studies can be found in Appendix 1.](#)

- Many of the staff members interviewed reported their settings are closely integrated into their communities, with their offer adapted (including ages served, hours offered and fees charged) accordingly.
- Of the school-based settings interviewed, most typically offer places in term time only. While some do have wraparound offerings, others did not offer this (which was often linked to staffing and/or perceived demand from parents).
- The school-based settings interviewed here largely offered places for three- and four-year olds, while places for under threes were less common. Barriers to caring for under threes in a school setting cited by interviewees ranged from age expertise to staff training and qualifications, as well as space and resources. There are concerns from those in school-based settings and those outside of schools alike regarding the differing skills needed for staff to care for younger children, linking to the wider issue of 'schoolification' covered elsewhere in this report.
- Interviewees reported that staff in the school-based settings covered tended to be highly qualified, with staff either shared between the nursery and primary classes or ex-primary staff moving to work in the early years provision on site.
- Transition from nursery to primary school was cited as important across all types of early years settings, with those at school-

based nurseries closely valuing their link between the nursery and primary year groups.

- Interviewees reported that recognition from senior leaders of the benefits to their incoming primary year groups from attending a nursery on site can be a strong motivator for opening a setting. Some schools also shared that they were happy to use pupil premium to cover the costs, with an acknowledgement that there might be financial difficulties such as high setup costs that the school may have to absorb.
- Maintained settings in schools interviewed here reported they aim to keep costs low, so that low income families ineligible for funded hours can attend. Maintained settings in schools with high proportions of low-income children highlighted parental engagement and carrying that through into primary school as a key strength.
- Those from schools with an early years setting run by the school highlighted early identification of SEND needs as a major benefit to them of this type of setting.
- There are some concerns among providers about the potential impact of wider expansion of school-based settings on take-up of places at other settings, with concerns it could lead to closures elsewhere.
- When discussing space, toilets came up as a repeated limitation for those at school-based settings. Others mentioned limited space to expand to larger cohorts or younger age groups.
- While only a small group were interviewed, experiences of the application process for the first round of the government's school-based nursery pilot differed depending on the level of involvement of early years staff. Interviews here covered those who used the funding for a brand-new setting as well as those who wished to expand their existing nursery.
- While the case studies here highlight themes between settings, they also show that motivations to open and ways of working in school-based early years setting differ considerably. There is not a 'one size fits all' model for operating a school-based nursery.

Introduction and methods

Many school-based nurseries are already in operation, including some which were set up during Phase 1 of the current SBN programme, as well as many longer running settings, established long before the existing government policy.

For the next section of this report, qualitative interviews were carried out with a wide range of settings, looking to pull out learnings and examples of good practice with relevance to the SBN programme. These include interviews with a range of different SBNs, including those run directly by schools themselves, as well as PVI settings renting spaces on school sites. Other settings were also interviewed which are likely to have learnings applicable to SBNs, including settings not on school sites, but with strong links to a local school or schools.

In these interviews, several issues have been explored. For those on school sites, the benefits and any potential drawbacks of being physically co-located are examined. The varying approaches to leadership, from SBNs with staff integrated into the school's wider leadership team, to PVIs with completely separate leadership structures, have been considered

This section looks at how a number of these sites were first set up, any barriers faced by the school and/or early years setting in adapting spaces, and any ongoing issues related to the spaces available. It looks at the relationship between staff at the school and nursery, and how these impact on issues including the transition experiences for children, as well as their parents. Interviewees were also asked about their views on the government's SBN policy, and where they felt there were opportunities and potential pitfalls for the policy going forward.

The full case studies are available in an accompanying [appendix](#) to this report. Here, key themes are pulled out from across those case studies, as well as issues raised by those interviewed where they requested they not be attributed directly to their own setting.

While these interviews provide valuable insights, findings here should be interpreted with some caution. This is a relatively small number of qualitative interviews, and should not be seen as being representative of all SBNs, or all early years settings with close relationships with schools, but instead viewed as a window into the wide range of provision among settings seen as embodying good practice, as well as

the views of those running them. They offer rich, detailed accounts of how different models operate in practice, as well as the challenges and enablers in their settings, information which is not available from quantitative data alone. As such, they provide a useful complement to the wider data provided in this research, highlighting useful information and considerations for the ongoing SBN programme.

Methodology

Case studies were collected from across the country, as well as from a spread of urban, coastal and rural locations. Those featured were selected from a pool gathered via an open call, advertised online, including via social media. Experts on the project's advisory board shared the open call with their networks, and also shared their own suggestions.

Potential case studies had to meet minimum criteria on quality, including having a Good or Outstanding Ofsted rating. Settings were then selected for interview to ensure coverage of key criteria, including region, area type (e.g. urban, rural and coastal), level of socio-economic disadvantage in the cohort (determined by Free School Meal Eligibility) and participation in the school-based nursery government pilot.

Staff from 13 settings were interviewed. Of these, seven were nursery classes in maintained primary schools, two were standalone maintained nurseries, two were private nurseries on primary school sites, one was a private nursery on a secondary school site and one was a separately located private nursery though in close vicinity to a neighbouring primary school. Four nurseries were in towns and seven were in cities. Two were in coastal locations. Three nurseries were in the South East, two in the North of England, three in London, two in the South West and three in the Midlands. All of the nurseries (and/or attached schools) bar one, which had not yet had its first inspection, had either Good or Outstanding Ofsted ratings. All settings were asked about specific provision for low income and SEND children, with at least 7 settings featured having an above average share of low income children (determined by Free School Meal eligibility).

An interview rubric was set and followed for all interviews, which predominantly took place online, with one conducted in person. Interviews were semi-structured, with follow up questions asked based on interviewee responses. Participants had the option to express off the record positions that could be anonymously reflected in our analysis

while not directly attributed to their workplace. Where possible, and particularly where they were separate organisations, at least two members of staff were interviewed, one from the school and one from the early years setting.

Case studies were then written up to summarise the setting in terms of location and style of provision offered. Key themes that aligned with the particular selection criteria for each setting were prioritised for the write up; for instance covering how the setting was set up and why, if they were part of the government's pilot. Key quotes and ideas were identified from each case study to match with the themes set out in the interview rubric, and have been presented below.

Motivation for and advantages of setting up school-based nurseries

While not all staff interviewed worked at their current setting when it first opened, those who were (as well as those who reflected on conversations with colleagues) often cited the advantages to their associated primary as the key motivations for opening.

All participants interviewed at school-based nurseries pointed to the support they felt they could provide in transition into primary school as one of their strengths and drivers for opening a nursery. They also highlighted improved parental engagement, that could be carried from the early years all the way through the primary school. These advantages of school-based nurseries were also widely recognised by staff in other settings.

One school-based nursery leader summarised what they saw as the main advantages of these settings:

"You have access to so much additional provision, but also that understanding of where children are coming in and where they're going to and that sort of oversight of their journey. Also from a safeguarding perspective, having nursery children sitting under the umbrella of really strong whole school practices is a really, really good thing because I think it runs really safely and efficiently and we're really benefiting from that. Also, in terms of the SEND pathway, it means we can get children accessing support really early, which really improves their outcomes later on. So I think the expansion of school-based nurseries is something that's really exciting and definitely has benefits."

Similar views were expressed by others. Leaders at Billesley Primary School and Nursery in Birmingham, for instance pointed to children sharing activities with primary pupils, developing familiar routines that flow seamlessly into reception and the advantages for language learning that the school-setting can offer. However, staff put particular emphasis on early identification and continuity for SEND children making sure the school SENCO was involved in early assessment of new children right from the beginning.

One setting said their motivation was to have more autonomy and control over early years provisions on their site. They shared that there was a PVI previously operating on-site, who rented a room at the school. However, the nursery closed due to staffing issues and difficulties in offering the wraparound care parents were looking for. The current maintained setting, however, is running more smoothly (in the interviewee's opinion) and good enrolment, a long waiting list and only has one intake across the academic year to fill all places. The interviewee said that in their view, this eases settling in and transition period workload.

These advantages of school-based nurseries were also widely recognised by staff in other settings. For instance a senior leader at the Roots Federation explained that in school-based nursery settings:

"You get qualified teachers and people who know families for a lot longer. You get people who will have more knowledge of communities and charities and wider services available to families and they've got an investment in the family because ideally they'll be there for the next seven years and we all know early intervention works."

Involvement in school-based nursery pilot

Those involved in the government's school-based nursery pilot highlighted that they needed support with both their application and delivery. This came from academy leadership and/or external consultants. Funding was used to build new spaces as well as expand existing settings to accommodate more and/or younger children. As explored in Box 1, while one setting featured used funding to expand its nursery, another chose to open a new nursery, and another used funding to switch their provision type.

Box 1: Experience of school-based nursery pilot

Orion Little Stars Ravensworth, London (on-site maintained nursery)

As a multi-academy Trust, Orion were successful in gaining funding for nurseries at three of their primary schools – one of which is Little Stars Ravensworth. Classroom staff and representation from the nursery's senior leadership (specifically the area management team) were spoken to for this interview. A senior staff member shared that originally the school was going to set up a private entity open all year round, but when they better understood the needs of parents in the area they decided to offer term-time only provision and applied for government funding.

Lift Montgomery, Midlands (on-site maintained nursery class)

Lift Montgomery is a primary school in the Midlands and is part of the Lift multi-academy trust. Montgomery has accessed funding through the first round of the government's school-based nursery pilot to extend their established nursery provision to two-year-olds. The school's headteacher says their nursery classes are a continuous part of their school, saying the setting has children from ages 2 to 11. An early years staff member said that a key motivation to expanding to younger ages was related to children's development. They were also keen to strengthen relationships with parents and facilitate a smoother transition into the primary year groups. Senior leadership added that it was these factors that brought the local authority on board for their expansion, as there were initial concerns on whether places would be filled.

Staff member, Ark Start John Keats, London (on-site maintained nursery)

Before entering the pilot, the school previously had another school-based nursery on site, roughly half of the footprint of the new SBN, which only took three- and four-year olds, with children accessing 15 hours over three days either in the morning or afternoon. The expansion took over and converted what was previously the school hall, which has allowed the new SBN to take on more children, with children also now in for longer hours. Ark Start John Keats now takes children from nine months of age. "The network [Ark] more widely had worked with younger children already, when they were looking at extending the offer and reducing down the age range, the big consideration was - do we have the domain specific expertise and knowledge? Ark Start was born out of the idea that we know how unique the early years are, and can bring that expertise."

When reflecting on the setup of the nursery at the Orion Little Stars nursery in Ravensworth, the setting's Nursery Area Manager explained that while there was pilot funding to support the initial building work, there were further costs for furnishings and then recruitment that were not covered. The school was assisted by an external consultant, but the manager said that as they were not from the local area, there was sometimes a misunderstanding of the local-level needs driving demand for places. The setting's Nursery Area Manager said they reached out to settings featured as case studies by the government and they found their views helpful in developing their setting over the past year.

Some pilot schools pointed to how setting up a school-based nursery involved building and developing a relationship. They said that in some cases the school leadership had envisaged having an autonomously running nursery added to their school, but then quite quickly came to realise the complexity of the relationship. The nursery was not so much a separate entity but needed to be considered much more an integral part of the school. In some cases this realisation only came about as the process unfolded, when the involvement of senior leadership and the cross-setting of strategies became apparent.

Ages covered

The settings interviewed for this research provide early education and care to a range of different ages, ranging from very young babies through to primary school aged children.

In the case studies included here, all offered cover for three-to-four-year-olds, but provision for under 3s was variable and less common. There was an interest from some settings without provision for younger children to expand their offering, but participants cited the different staffing needs and space requirements (like changing facilities) as barriers to offering this provision. Nursery leaders in some maintained and PVI settings also suggested that school-based settings may be less appropriate for children two and under, particularly babies.

Box 2: Age-appropriate care

"I don't think necessarily having young babies in a school environment is going to be the best way to go... when you look at a private setting like ourselves, the amount of training that the staff have and the level of qualification and the level of experience is very high, I would say. I think that's a huge advantage for coming to a private setting because we put so much time and money and effort into the staff being trained."

- Nursery leader, Footsteps Nursery, Bristol (PVI run).

"You need the right skillset and trained staff to be able to manage that, and the physical space. You can't just shoehorn them into a classroom, and nine month olds are very different to four-year-olds."

- Nursery staff, Mead Vale Community Nursery, (on-site PVI run).

"The network [Ark] more widely had worked with younger children already, when they were looking at extending the offer and reducing down the age range, the big consideration was - do we have the domain specific expertise and knowledge? Ark Start was born out of the idea that we know how unique the early years are, and can bring that expertise."

- Nursery staff, Ark Start, John Keats Nursery, London (on-site PVI run)

Other early years leaders reported experiences of staff in school-based nurseries (outside of their own) being less-sensitive to age-appropriate care and behaviour expectations for the younger children, fearing the 'schoolification' of nursery care too early.

Some leaders also raised concerns that with the limitations on space, staff and age coverage in many school-based nurseries, expansion could lead to narrower choice for parents. Some reported, for instance, that PVI settings had closed in their areas due to changing demographics, with interviewees pointing to the risk that if their intakes were further challenged by the expansion of school-based nurseries, it could lead to further closures, including their cover for younger children and babies. As one maintained setting leader put it:

"PVI's absolutely have a place in the sector and I worry about their longevity with this [policy]. Parents believe they're making the best choice for their child in the absence of accurate knowledge and the consequence of that for local PVI's and we can see the amount that are closing." In this regard, planning for future demographic changes is

also likely to be an important factor in ensuring future coverage across the sector.

Other early years leaders pointed to the possible segmentation of the sector with PVI and some maintained nurseries becoming more specialised on care for under threes, under twos or children with special educational needs, (SEND) while parents would look to get their three-to-four-year-olds into school-based nurseries, often with an expectation, not necessarily correct, that their children would be guaranteed a place in the primary school.

Funding

All of the nurseries spoken to for this research indicated some difficulties with funding, with many reporting having to find ways to supplement or subsidise government funded hours. This could take different forms in different settings. For instance, some school-based nurseries run by the school itself reported budgeting at the whole-school level, with the nursery considered part of the school, with this allowing for some flexibility to subsidise the early years setting if necessary. Some schools said that they would use pupil premium funding to support their nurseries as well. This kind of cross-subsidy may be important for the expansion of school-based nurseries, as different nursery leaders told us that funding could be a challenge for newly opened school-based nurseries which may not break even.

In some maintained and PVI settings, funding was supplemented or subsidised by the goodwill of dedicated staff who worked beyond their funded hours - for instance to offer wraparound care - or offered some families additional hours beyond their 15 hours entitlement at low or no additional cost to the family. One maintained setting leader reported putting in unpaid extended hours to cover wraparound care.

"We've had previous funders that have given us money that's enabled us to help a vulnerable family whose mum had a disability and physical impairment and we were able to add an extra 15 hours onto his 15 already. We did this for his big sister as well, to support the family." - **Nursery leader, Little People Nursery, Oxford.**

Maple Court nursery in the Midlands offers families on low incomes who are only entitled to 15 hours per week a top up to 30 hours for just £15 per week, when many settings could charge that much per hour. The majority attending pay this top up fee. In another PVI-run setting, nursery leaders explained how they could not break even on the funding

for three- and four-year-olds, which were effectively subsidised by their additional income from care for the under twos. This suggests a potential funding challenge for schools focusing on three- and four-year-olds only.

As outlined, the early years settings interviewed outlined a variety of approaches, some of which are only available to SBNs, while others have been reported more widely by EY settings. Schools may be better placed to cross-subsidise within broader school budgets, but there is an open question of for how long and to what extent that will remain a viable or attractive option for those schools.

Funded hours and covering needs of working families

Some settings were taking children eligible for the 30 funded hour scheme, although in the small number of settings interviewed here, this was less common in the schools with nurseries with high levels of disadvantage in their intake. The maintained settings in schools covered here tended to offer term-time only provision and wraparound care was variable, with some offering services such as breakfast clubs.

The reported importance of different funded hours for different nurseries interviewed varied depending on the setting, the availability of wraparound and/or holiday hours and the community the school serves. All of this feeds into, and is shaped by government policy on early years funding.

Some settings have organised themselves around 15 hour funded care, particularly with more deprived, non-working families in mind (see Box 3).

Box 3: Adapting to the local community

City Academy Whitehawk's Hatchlings Nursery is a school-based nursery is based in a deprived area of Brighton. Staff interviewed reported that children at the setting largely access the universal 15 hour entitlement.

Given that, the nursery has organised its provision into two cohorts - Mondays to Wednesday mornings and Wednesday afternoons to Fridays – with staff reporting this approach maximises the number of children they are able to support in a small setting with limited capacity.

The setting keeps a few places for children who are eligible for 30 hour entitlement, with staff reporting this can suit some working families. These hours are spread to align with the school day as many nursery pupils also have siblings at the school. However, this cover is school hours and term time only, in contrast to what is offered by the main school, which has wraparound support from reception onwards.

Overall, staff felt their set up works well to support the disadvantaged families in their area but they also raised that their model may not work for settings where the majority of families are requiring longer hours of care.

Other settings reported adapting in different ways to the needs of the families they serve. For example, the Little People Nursery in Oxford, a PVI run by an early years charity, offers parents either term-time only or 48 weeks per year. The setting also gives parents taking the latter option the chance to spread their funded entitlement over the full 48 weeks.

However, by contrast, in other settings wraparound cover is crucial, as well as some offering other forms of flexibility on hours. A senior leader at Roots Federation summarised the issue in their setting:

"The initiative from the government is to get people back to work," they said, "but schools typically don't allow nursery aged children in wraparound care. So, they operate school hours from 8.50am to 3.15pm. The initiative of 30 hours to get people back to work and the reality of school-based nurseries don't go hand in hand."

The Orion Little Stars nursery in Ravensworth also reported adapting to its local community. The school has originally planned to set up a private entity open all-year round, but reported that after better understanding the needs of parents in the area, they decided to offer

term-time only provision, as well as accepting government funded entitlements. Again the setting staff reported this was due to many families in the community not currently working, including many living in social housing. Indeed, most children attending the setting have 15 funded hours, with some parents choosing to top up. The setting's staff felt it was important to meet the needs of this community:

"A notable commitment for us is helping families in our community back into work. By sending their young children to us even for just a part of the week, they can go out and look for work or jump on a course at college or university. They can then grow and develop, potentially moving to full-time employment."

- Ravensworth's Nursery Area Manager

Various settings interviewed suggested government funding for early years places is insufficient. One PVI leader explained the dilemma faced in settings where most of their children relied upon government-funded hours, but that funding was not enough to cover their costs, to the point that some had started questioning whether to take funded children at all. However, among those interviewed, whether and which government funded children (15 or 30 hours) they accepted was often reported as being dependent on the local area context. Some nurseries said they only offered 15 hours funded places, reporting that they felt this suited families in their area, for example those who are currently not working or are looking to get back into part-time work, while others said they offered additional hours which parents paid for themselves.

Wraparound care

The school-based settings interviewed often reported that they did not offer wraparound care. Common barriers cited included the extra costs required to operate outside of school hours and how those interviewed felt this would influence recruitment; as well as a perceived lack of demand from parents not in full time work. One setting said they have partnerships with local services like walking buses so that parents can still send their children to their nursery as well as getting additional access to care outside of operating hours, while another who only operates part time said they allow families to use some of their hours with them while their other funded hours are used at a setting offering different hours.

As explained in Box 4 below, wraparound care can operate successfully at a school-based setting.

Box 4: Offering wraparound care at Alexandra Park Primary School and Nursery, Stockport (Maintained on-site nursery)

Alexandra Park Nursery is a maintained setting in Stockport for three-to-four-year-olds, operating as part of Alexandra Park Primary. The setting has been operating for three years, in an area that school staff reported as being diverse; with pockets of high deprivation. Staff also highlighted ongoing changes to local demographics, for example saying “house prices are rapidly rising in some parts of the area, which has contributed to a decline in the number of FSM children at the setting.”

Alexandra Park’s nursery is open five days a week, with long operating hours, from 7.30am to 6.00pm. This is term-time only. Staff reported this offer was designed to meet a clear demand from parents in the area, with around 70% of the current cohort eligible for the 30 hour offer. One day is split into two sessions, and the setting requires child to attend for at least five sessions per week.

The setting opened with this operating model, so staff were recruited on contracts designed to work for it. School staff interviewed said that:

“When we set up our nursery, we could employ staff on our own terms, and we could create the admin and finance systems to make that work. I can see it being more difficult for existing school-based nurseries to extend their offer, if their current staff cannot work the additional and-or flexible hours.”

Staff also reported the wraparound offer brings in additional funding, helping to limit overall running costs for the school. School staff interviewed said that as their school is in a strong financial position, they are also able to fund additional sessions for some children on top of their entitlements if they are benefiting from a particular learning intervention (often for those from a disadvantaged background or those with SEND needs).

“The offer is based around complete flexibility for children. Our whole motivation for opening the nursery is to have as many of our 60-reception cohort into our setting a year earlier, so we can do all of the things that we know is going to really benefit them.”

Staffing and leadership

Maintained settings on school sites or just in the immediate vicinity of a feeder primary school reported having qualified early years teachers as well as teaching assistants, some of whom had previously worked with other year groups at the school. One maintained nursery which worked very closely with its neighbouring primary school had also benefited from staff secondments in both directions between the nursery and the primary in recent years. This, the nursery leader explained, had greatly strengthened the collaboration and understanding between the two settings.

School-based maintained settings tended to employ staff to work full time in the early years setting, particularly those with Level 2 qualifications, while early years leads were more likely to also work with reception classes as well. Some school-based settings also reported having more Level 3-qualified staff in the setting than required, which may be linked to the recruitment pool of a setting in a school as opposed to external settings.

School-based settings also highlighted the benefits of highly qualified staff, particularly those with staff who had previously worked in primary school, to pedagogy and attitudes for learning. For example, staff at a maintained nursery school shared "they value the autonomy of a maintained setting nursery where pedagogy and educational support could take priority over just targeted preparation for reception".

Some of those interviewed pointed to the strong support they receive from their partner school's headteacher and wider senior leadership team. Indeed it was not uncommon among the settings spoken to for this research for the nursery to be treated as just another part of the school in terms of planning, curriculum, budgeting, staff development, training and more. In some schools with a nursery, such as the City Academy Whitehawk school in Brighton (home of Hatchlings Nursery), staff regularly attended staff meetings and shared CPD with teachers in the primary and there is a very close working relationship between the school and nursery leadership.

Box 5: Primary-nursery staff collaboration

"I previously worked in nurseries outside of schools so this was a new way of working, but from early on the school's senior leaders were open to our suggestions and wanted to work together. The head was willing to listen and give us the resources and backing for staff we needed to succeed. I think that is really important."

- Member of leadership team, Ravensworth's Nursery, London (on-site maintained nursery).

At Maple Court in the Midlands, the nursery is seen as an integral part of the primary school. A member of the leadership team at the school described this relation as "seamless". The EYFS leader is part of the overall leadership team for the school which a member of the leadership team suggested was vital for successful collaboration: "So I'm one that bangs the early years drum very loudly to make sure that we are all working together. People are seeing what challenges are being faced in the nursery while those in the nursery can also see the challenges facing the rest of the school and what we can do to help and support."

Other schools shared this outlook: "At Whitefield, the early years is not seen as tokenistic and I think that staff in key stage one and two really benefit from working alongside our nursery. Our senior leadership team understand the importance of early years and use those skills really well through the school to actually upskill and develop understanding amongst staff. If a school were to see nursery as an add-on, I think it may encounter issues."

- Member of the EYFS leadership team at Whitefield Primary School and Nursery, North England (maintained nursery class).

Leadership style varied across the school-based settings interviewed. Some had an early years lead managing the nursery who also held a role on the school's SLT, whereas others had managers whose primary role was to lead the nursery. At one setting, school SLT had strategic oversight, while an early years lead had day to day leadership and management.

Supporting low income children

The nature and level of support for low income children varied greatly across settings, in part relating to the proportion of disadvantage in the area or the school. For instance, some PVI's had just a handful of low income children, for whom nursery staff were able to offer tailored support depending on the needs of the family, whether that was providing additional resources for the child or using EYPP funds to discount the families' bills.

At the other end of the spectrum, nurseries like Hatchlings in Brighton or Billesley Primary School and Nursery in Birmingham served highly disadvantaged communities. Around 80% of pupils at Hatchlings are among the 10% most deprived in the country, with 65% eligible for free school meals. At Billesley FSM eligibility is around 50% and 20% with special educational needs. In schools like these, support for low income children is far more integral to the way the nursery works. Indeed a school leader at Hatchlings said that in their view:

"I think the nation's narrative around areas of socioeconomic deprivation can be shame heavy. The rhetoric there can be heavy on shame for families who might be needing to do a better job or they're out of work and they're part of the problem. We just don't believe that to be true. And so we can't afford for that to be the school's outward view because it's not. And so those families need to feel that they're really welcome here."

Some nurseries and primaries work closely with local partners to support low income families. That could be in helping register at local food banks, working with charities that provide school uniforms or acquiring food vouchers from local supermarkets. Nurseries also pointed to the need to work closely with and support parents from low income families signposting local charities and services as well as supporting them to help their children with their learning. At Maple Court nursery staff provide a range of services for children from low income families including a hygiene bank (offering toiletries to families) and a uniform recycling service. They also provide children with waterproofs to ensure they can use the outside area on site. While at Orian Little Stars Ravensworth, early years pupil premium was used to fund lunches for children whose parents could not afford the fee typically charged for meals at the setting.

Hatchlings Nursery has a strong welfare 'spine' running through nursery and primary with dedicated staff supporting all families. This includes

running an online padlet signposts links to local area groups, local authority services and advice and support for families. The school also have a dedicated Welfare and SEND team who provide additional support to children and families from Nursery to Year 6.

This was similar to the approach taken at other schools such as Whitefield Primary School and Nursery. Settings cited the importance of identifying the key areas for development amongst their socio-economically disadvantaged cohort at an earlier age, so that long term support can be put in place if they are to stay on at their primary school.

At Whitefield, the nursery staff attached great importance to working with and supporting parents. The nursery's EYFS lead suggested that strong links with parents were particularly important for disadvantaged families.

"We made this digital classroom, which all the parents can access and on there we tell them what stories we're going to be doing that week, we give them the key vocabulary, we share a lot of the information around the learning that goes on behind what the children are doing." Working closely with parents was also important for helping them understand the expectations for school in terms of learning but also for example toilet-training and using cutlery.

Several settings on school sites mentioned difficulties in determining who was eligible for funded hours and further support, such as free school meals, with some saying this was more complicated than school pupil premium eligibility. Alexandra Park Primary and Nursery said they had meetings with parents where they shared their national insurance numbers to help them work out their eligibility:

"When they find out that their child has a place with us, we invite parents to the school. We do the paperwork side of things together so parents are really clear what they are entitled to and how we can offer the hours. It is much easier to do this face-to-face through a conversation and agree hours with the parent. This takes quite a lot of time but it gets easier each year you do it and it is a great way to start building relationships and understand the needs of the child and family. We ask all parents to fill out a form that we then use to check for eligibility for Pupil Premium through an online system we pay for as a school. We talk through the process to ensure they know what they are consenting to. Then we talk to them about how we use the

Pupil Premium funding and we are really specific about the benefits for their child."

Supporting children with SEND

Several settings interviewed for this research had high levels of children with SEND. All of them emphasised the importance of identifying needs as early as possible. For this, involvement of specialist staff, whether from the nursery itself or the primary school, from an early stage was important. Leaders pointed out, however, that this approach was not always popular with parents who could be reluctant at such an early stage to accept that their child had special needs.

Approaches from school-based settings particularly pointed to how the needs of children can be identified earlier, which is particularly beneficial for children who then go on to attend the linked primary school. One setting shared that they assess SEND in the same way in both their nursery and other year groups. Another shared that staff in the nursery and primary often discuss SEND needs for the children who attended the nursery who are now at the primary – the nursery produces transition documents that are passed to school staff that includes SEND needs.

While school-based settings were often keen to stress the early identification of SEND needs as a benefit of their model, other early years settings also shared examples of how early identification enabled staff to tailor support for the particular child as much as possible. This also helped parents applying for diagnoses or EHCPs for primary school. Nursery leaders pointed out the advantage of children starting nursery young in this regard due to the time it takes to apply for support (see Box 6).

Box 6: SEND diagnosis and identification.

Member of leadership team, Abbey Wood Nursery, London (maintained nursery school).

"I can't with the best will in the world, if a child arrives with me in September, who will need an EHCP, get an EHCP for them ready for September when they go into reception."

Senior leader, Roots Federation, Hertfordshire (maintained nursery schools).

"Sadly, affluence has a large part to play in allocation of provision and identification of need which is not equitable across all settings."

All types of settings interviewed explained the lengths they went to in order to support SEND children with transitions to primary schools, including organising meetings with parents, primary SENCOs and relevant professionals in order to plan and prepare.

However, this level of support is not uniformly available to parents. A senior leader at the Roots Federation explained why one of their settings had a higher concentration of SEND children than their others. First of all, they explained, a key issue was reputation, with children travelling sometimes quite long distances to attend the nursery. Secondly, they explained it related to socio-economic status and how it is easier for wealthier families to navigate complicated bureaucratic processes (see Box 6). This reflects wider Sutton Trust work on the interplay of socio-economic factors with SEND provision.

Space available

Shared indoor and outdoor spaces or closely adjoining classrooms for nursery and reception children were often seen as advantages in preparation for transition to primary school. In some cases this meant the transition was barely noticeable for the children. Shared outside spaces were reported by some school-based nurseries, which staff said allowed young children to engage with older children to learn from (including their siblings, if they were at the partner school). However, not all had enough or appropriately positioned spaces to make this possible.

Staff from school-based nurseries also often identified toilets as an issue, particularly if they were outside of the classroom. One interviewee shared that even though their nursery was newly built, toilets were still built outside of the classroom, whereas in other early years settings they are almost always inside the classroom. This can impact staff ratios, often groups of children might have to go to the toilets together and further issues can arise with children who may not be toilet trained.

In nurseries catering also to younger children and babies, there were separate spaces and facilities for the youngest children.

Links to school and other local settings

All the early years settings we spoke to for this research made arrangements to facilitate transitions. For school-based nurseries this transition was often an integral part of how they operated, for example sharing outdoor and/or indoor spaces with reception children, specific visits of young children to the school and to reception classes (made easier by their proximity) and with nursery children often also participating more broadly in activities in the school ranging from lunch and assemblies through to Christmas performances. There was also close collaboration between Nursery, Reception and sometimes Year 1 or 2 staff for curriculum planning such as for phonics or maths. However, it should also be noted that many of the same activities were also done by a setting very nearby to a school, but not physically on site, suggesting close proximity is important, but not necessarily having the early years setting and schools on the exact same site.

The maintained nurseries interviewed in close proximity to their main feeder primary school staff arranged transition visits and activities for the children and parents to prepare them for their next setting. This could include role playing with uniforms, sharing play with children in reception and spending time in their future classrooms and reception spaces. There is particularly close collaboration between staff across settings for children with SEND, who often need additional levels of support.

As well as including nursery leaders in the school leadership team (see above) and sharing CPD SBNs may also share policies and curriculum planning. For instance, Hatchlings has a shared behaviour policy across their partner school, though with an addendum to allow for differences between age groups.

"Our behaviour policy... needs to be consistent so that children are successful and understand that really clearly all the way through."

Similarly Whitefield Primary School and Nursery share a variety of joint policies and documents across both settings, including their teaching handbook and policies on play, which are then embedded across all year groups. Contrastingly, at Ark Start John Keats, there are unique policies for the early years setting only, which in their view was particularly important given the young age of some of the children there, including two-year-olds, with setting staff explaining:

"There are just such different needs for younger children. In the network, even where the school itself is running the early year setting [rather than Ark Start], we still have different policies for those different age groups."

Discussion

This report brings together a wide range of evidence on school-based nurseries, including a literature review, original data collection from primary schools (both with and without school-based nurseries themselves), and case study analysis of existing school-based nurseries. Looking across that evidence base, a number of key themes emerge. From the potential benefits to children from an educational and developmental point of view, improved early identification and joined up support when it comes to Special Educational Needs (SEND), to the challenges of school/nursery relationships, challenges around provision for younger children in particular, and what can be difficulties in catering to the needs of working parents.

It is worth keeping in mind, that as outlined throughout this report, school-based nurseries cover a wide range of different types of settings.

Strengths: Quality, child development and education, alongside SEND join up

The key strengths of school-based nurseries lie in the focus on child development and education, coupled with what can be more highly qualified staff (particularly when they can be shared between the school and the early years setting), in combination with a greater level of join-up, aided by proximity, that can smooth transitions to Reception. Maintained nursery classes are required to be staffed by a qualified teacher, and even where SBNs are not set up on this model, staff are likely to benefit from being integrated with the wider teaching staff, with many schools sharing CPD across the nursery and the school. Higher quality provision can help to achieve the government target of increasing good levels of development, and, if targeted correctly, could also help to narrow the wide disadvantage gaps in development. It can also help with a more general refocusing of the sector on child development and education and not simply childcare.

Greater integration with school can also facilitate an easier transition, with children getting to experience more easily the Reception environment before they start, connecting with staff earlier in the process, and their needs can be more easily discussed between the setting and the school.

In particular, support for pupils with SEND has come through as a significant strength of the model, allowing for earlier identification as well as smoother transition in terms of support, with the school able to prepare in advance of the pupil starting. Given wider government policy in this area and the importance of early identification and support, the school-based nursery expansion dovetails well.

Many of these benefits do appear to be particular advantages of and encouraged by co-location, although to some extent some aspects including data sharing (particularly around transition) would be possible between primaries and other local early years settings. However, in practice physical proximity plays a significant role in facilitating this co-operation and while many schools wish to have closer relationships with other local settings, this remains rare.

Age groups

Three- to four-year-olds have been a key focus of existing school-based nurseries, and are for many, a natural extension of reception provision. Notwithstanding concerns about 'schoolification' for this group, the bigger questions have been at younger ages. Most current SBNs (largely set up before the current SBN programme) do not cater for two-year-olds, and there are concerns coming through across the project about whether schools have the right age-appropriate facilities and understanding of this group. Though this will of course differ on a case by case basis. If SBNs do struggle to cater for two-year-olds, this does raise an issue about those eligible for the disadvantaged two-year-old offer who could benefit from SBN provision. This is a group that has shrunk over time with frozen thresholds, as well as having been squeezed by consecutive expansions of eligibility for 30 hour funding, which has impacted take-up as well as incentives for providers. SBNs are largely located in more disadvantaged areas, and have the staffing and quality to prioritise the development of this group, so are in many ways well placed to cater to this group. However, it is important that the right expertise is in place, as well as a focus on making places available for this group. In the absence of a universal extension of 30 funded hours, it is vital that disadvantaged two-year-olds are not forgotten about.

Provision for under twos in SBNs is rare, and although some of the case studies here show good provision for this group is possible within SBNs, our survey showed little appetite to extend provision to this age group for most schools at this time.

Working families and the wider system

Significant expansion of school-based nurseries is likely to have a substantial impact on the early years sector as a whole. As a diverse and complex sector with many different operating models, there are likely to be complex impacts of the growth in SBNs, in particular on the PVI sector. It is important that the long term health of the market is considered in the coming years, at a local level in particular, given how reliant the early years sector is on PVI provision more widely.

SBNs have a vital role to play, and an increased role of state provision could be seen as a natural consequence of the level of state investment in the sector, but challenges in delivering wraparound care, as well as out of term time provision, mean they are not always suitable for working parents. Some SBNs which have sought to provide wraparound care have faced lower than expected parental demand, and such demand can differ substantially depending on the socio-demographics of the local area. It is important therefore, that an equilibrium is found which can play to the strengths of both school-based and 'group based' provision. PVI-run settings on school grounds can in some ways combine the best of both, but there are some drawbacks to the model, particularly around staffing.

If there is a move towards even more age segmentation in the system, with the offer for three-and-four-year-olds increasingly based in schools, and under twos mainly catered by the PVI sector, there could be significant transitional issues, including the financial viability of both types of provision at a local level, particularly when cross subsidisation across age groups is often necessary under current funding levels. This issue should be carefully considered by local authorities in their bids for Phase 3 of the SBN programme and beyond. Financial concerns beyond initial capital costs should also be considered by government.

SBNs and the disadvantage gap in school readiness

The location of SBNs in predominantly more deprived areas should be positive from the perspective of the potential to address early gaps in development. However to date, the expansion of new SBNs has not been so well targeted, with schools in the first phase having lower levels of FSM than average. While more explicit targeting was put in place for the second phase, this has only improved things slightly, and the 331 schools recently announced still mostly have FSM rates below average.

While our case studies demonstrated schools making significant efforts to include and cater to pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, this will

not be the case in every setting. More advantaged households who are more likely to take on more hours, as well as being able to afford extras, which often help to subsidise low funding rates, are often more attractive for settings. While the incentives are different for school-run nurseries compared to PVI, and the focus is often more on term time provision, it is vital that SBNs in deprived areas are actually serving the deprived parts of their communities, and quality nursery places are not simply snapped up by better-off families. There should be strong expectations on SBNs to be inclusive of their local communities, both in terms of disadvantage and in terms of Special Educational Needs.

Greater collaboration between schools and offsite nurseries

SBNs are not going to be right for every school and locality. While some benefits of school-based nurseries can only be achieved through co-location, others could be achieved through stronger school links with off-site nurseries. While our school survey indicated strong agreement with this in theory, in reality few are putting this into practice. Smoother transitions, particularly when it comes to those with SEND, could be achieved through stronger links between settings and schools. Schools without early years provision should look at greater outreach to local settings, which could have significant benefits to their incoming Reception classes.

Different governance models matter

There is a huge range of diversity in the early years sector generally, but also even within the SBN category. Whether the setting is run by the school, a MAT, a governing board or a private or voluntary provider has an impact on the provision. It impacts school-setting relationships both at a leadership and strategic level, but also can impact things like mixing and cross-pollination of ideas and information between teaching staff at the nursery and the school. Senior leadership is key to a successful setting, and integration with school senior leadership is important, along with ensuring buy-in to the value of the early years setting, and that the setting is not seen as an 'add on', but an integral part of the school.

It also impacts the staffing of the setting, with different requirements depending on governance, as well as the culture of the setting. The expansion programme to date has been agnostic on the governance and delivery model, but as the programme matures, should perhaps

move towards more specific expectations based on what is working amongst pilot schools to support high quality provision.

Purpose and clarity of SBN policy within wider government policy goals

One other key theme that has come through is a lack of clarity in the purpose of the SBN expansion policy. Is it about sufficiency of places for working families; is it about making use of empty school spaces due to population decline; is it about achieving the school readiness target; is it about providing quality provision for disadvantaged groups? The answer may be all of the above, but these aims do not always align, and providers are not always clear about what they should be prioritising. The need for nursery places may not always line up with the availability of space in primary schools, particularly if driven by declines in the child population. Financial viability was also seen as a key barrier for schools in more disadvantaged areas, where schools are wary about demand, when many low income families have a limited entitlement to funded hours and don't have the means to pay for more.

Phase 3 and the future of SBN programme

Overall, the evidence suggests that school-based nurseries have real potential to play a valuable role in the early years system, particularly in improving school readiness and supporting children with SEND, with co-location a particular benefit in aiding transition between the early years setting and primary. However, exactly how well they can support children depends on the model used, with a wide variety of different approaches being taken, with different impacts on the ages covered, the qualification levels of staff, and the hours that provision is offered. Ultimately, more data and evaluation is needed to know how well different types of school-based nursery perform, and this should be urgently collected to inform future years of the programme.

There are also potential issues ahead. The move within Phase 3 to allow the delivery of additional childcare places via Best Start Family Hubs is sensible, and could see benefits in terms of integration with wider health and family services. However, this is a different delivery model to being based in a school, and may not have many of the benefits of existing SBNs, including the strong links to schools promoted by co-location. It may be preferable to view such settings as separate to, rather than a part of the SBN programme, and should be accompanied by additional new funding, rather than repurposing funding from the existing SBN policy.

Financial barriers should also not be underestimated, both in terms of set up costs, which are subsidised by the expansion programme, but more so operating costs thereafter. Particularly when PVI settings report cross subsidisation of the three-to-four age group from younger ages, and schools often repurpose Pupil Premium spending to subsidise the nursery. Ongoing staff costs were a significant concern among schools without SBNs, particularly in the most disadvantaged areas. Given the ambition to open or expand places at 3,000 nurseries, findings in this report should give some pause. Just 1 in 5 primaries without existing provision indicate they are likely to set one up, which if borne out, could leave the programme significantly short of that target.

The government should also go further in prioritising disadvantaged areas in the roll-out if the policy is to make a material difference in terms of giving the 'best start' to children from all backgrounds. However, children on lower incomes will continue to miss out on the full benefits of the programme without wider changes to early years funding.

Access will remain unequal while the 30 hour entitlement is based on minimum parental income. In the medium term, this should be expanded to all children. This would have significant advantages both to schools which already have provision as well as those looking to expand, in terms of simplicity as well as demand.

If this is not possible in the short term, then the government should look to urgently widen eligibility to the 15 hour disadvantage entitlement at age two - updating eligibility requirements to reflect inflation - so that the proportion of children able to access it returns to its previous level of 40%, as well as putting in place further efforts to improve take-up.

School-based nurseries have a great deal of potential to improve England's early years system, but whether or not that potential is met will depend on implementation of the next few years of the programme, as well as wider changes to early years policy.