

# Vision for childcare

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## Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



In The Big Ask, the largest-ever survey of children, I heard from children about how critical and important families were to their lives. That is why I was pleased to begin work earlier this year on the Independent Family Review, which was commissioned by Government to understand more about family life across the UK. I went out across the country and spoke to communities, families, parents and children from all areas, backgrounds, and income groups to find out what family meant to them. It was an honour to hear from all these families and at the end of the summer I published *Family and its protective effect: Part 1 of the Independent Family Review*.

One of the clear things that came out of this comprehensive research-led Review was how important childcare was to families. They told me they wanted high-quality and affordable childcare which suited their needs. The Family Review showed that families, where they could, firstly chose to draw on support from their own family and friends. When family networks were not available, they wanted childcare which had a familial feeling, which was trusted, reliable and affordable. The Family Review also showed that we need to understand more about childcare and that families wanted solutions to some of the challenges they were facing.

That is why I have conducted unique research in this Report. I outline the opportunities, challenges, and solutions to providing childcare and early education. I have looked at the share of local authorities that are meeting the statutory guidance that they should provide up to date and comprehensive information

about local childcare to families through the Family Information Service. I found that for 27% of local authorities it was difficult to find a local childminder on their Family Information Service and for 60% of local authorities, the childcare directory didn't contain all of the information recommended in the statutory guidance. And I have conducted new analysis, linking data between the School Census and the Early Year Census, to look at take-up of the universal childcare offer. What I found is take up is varied across the country by local authority, ethnicity, English as an additional language and Special Education Need Status.

By shining a light on what families want from childcare and outlining some of the challenges and proposed solutions to these I am confident that we can deliver change for these families. I am optimistic that we can implement solutions to provide childcare and early education that is trusted, affordable, accessible, and nurturing for families. Some of the solutions I have proposed are ones that I myself have implemented first-hand and seen the positive results of when I was running schools as a headteacher. Now is the moment that we can rollout these solutions further to benefit more children and more families.

By providing high-quality, affordable, and accessible childcare and early education I believe that we are laying the foundation for children's future happiness, health, and educational achievements. We are also giving parents and families across the country the support they want, need, and deserve.

## Executive Summary

- High-quality, accessible, and affordable childcare and early education is something every child and family across the country should be able to access. Both childcare and early education set a child up for success and improve their life chances. This was a consistent theme that came up in the Family Review.<sup>1</sup>
- This Report outlines the ambition and vision that is needed for delivering a fit-for-purpose early education and childcare offer that works for children and families. It summarises what families want from childcare – based on what they themselves told us they want. It also sets out the main challenges around the current provision of childcare including complexity of funding, affordability, availability of placements - particularly for those with children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and older children, flexibility of provision, and availability of information about local childcare.
- New analysis by the Children’s Commissioner’s office shows that in an audit of 60 local authorities it was difficult to navigate the Family Information Service – a statutory requirement for local authorities to provide – and information on childcare providers was often missing.
  - For 27% of local authorities, it was difficult to find a local childminder on Family Information Service.
  - For 60% of local authorities, the directory of childcare didn’t contain all the information required in the statutory guidance (including on the suitability for children with a disability, fees, age range, Ofsted details or rating, and information on whether the setting accepts the universal or extended offer funding)
- New analysis by the Children’s Commissioner’s office on the take-up of the free 15 hours a week of early education, that all 3- and 4-year-olds are entitled to, shows while overall take-up is fairly high, there are large differences in the rate of childcare take-up between ethnic groups, local areas, English as an additional language status and SEND status. Low take-up rates could be indicative of challenges around childcare provision outlined in Chapter 2.
  - While overall take-up of the 3- and 4-year-old offer was 93% in 2019, estimated take-up is low among Chinese, Irish Traveller and Gypsy/Roma children (71%, 66%, and 62%) and pupils with English as an additional language (85%).
  - Take-up varies by local authority, with lower take-up in London local authorities.

- Children receiving Free School Meals (FSM) in state-school were much less likely to attend private early years provision than non-FSM peers.
- This Report provides solutions to provide what families told us they wanted: childcare that was available and flexible to their working arrangements, particularly for school age children and those with additional needs; high quality care which they knew would help their children to thrive; provision which was affordable, available and easy to find. We propose solutions for early education and childcare that place schools at the heart of delivery, drive up the number of childminders, make sense of current funding streams, and provide accountability and oversight of quality. It also calls for reforms to parental leave to allow parents to spend time bonding with their child in the crucial early weeks and months.

# **Chapter 1 - Delivering a world class childcare and early education offer for every child and family**

## **1.1. Summary of Chapter 1**

In this paper the Children's Commissioner sets out a vision that meets the ambition families have for themselves. It sets out ways to redesign the system that tackle the problems revealed in our research - the patchy and varied take-up of early years education, the hard to navigate system, and the practical barriers standing in parents' way. Providing a truly world class early education and childcare offer will need ambition. It will mean doing much more than tinkering around the edges of reform by looking at changes to ratios or thinking about hours of free childcare.

A new model for early education and childcare needs to be transformative to the system. This paper sets out how that transformation can happen in practice. It proposes ways to draw on the brilliant existing resource we have, to deliver an early education sector that can pride itself in delivering for children as well as providing rewarding and attractive careers. It provides solutions that work for families who need reliable, flexible after school and wraparound care. Too often ideas for early education and care have worked either for children or for parents, as if they existed in isolation from one another. This Report demonstrates how to create a system that works for families – one that never compromises on quality, that is accessible and affordable, and flexible to the reality of family life.

## **1.2. Children and families deserve a high-quality early education and childcare offer**

Families need a system that is easy to understand and navigate, and which they can trust to deliver quality and consistent care. And they need it to be affordable and available. Getting early education and childcare right would mean not only ensuring every child can thrive at school, but also that parents and carers can manage work and family life while pursuing their own careers with confidence. And these two elements – a high quality offer and the flexibility that parents need – must work alongside and complement each other. It is not enough to have a brilliant early education offer if parents still find themselves unable to work because they have no childcare for their older child in the school holidays.

The best early education is vital for children's life chances. In children's responses to the Children's Commissioner's The Big Ask, they spoke about how highly they valued education, and the ambitious goals they had for themselves.<sup>2</sup> To deliver on these ambitions we have to start early. It is only by getting

early education right that it will be possible to make sure that every child leaves school with the qualifications they need to live a successful life, and to close the attainment gap between children receiving FSM and their peers. Evidence shows that children who receive high quality early education go on to get better GCSE results at 16.<sup>3</sup>

But getting early education right does so much more than that. All the things that children value most – not only education, but good mental and physical health, happy, loving relationships with family, great careers – have their foundations laid by the quality-of-care children receive in the early years. Research shows us that children who are falling behind at the age of 5 are not only far more likely to be struggling with reading and writing at the end of primary school but are also more likely to be excluded and to have involvement from children’s social care.<sup>4</sup> Getting early education right will therefore have wide-ranging positive repercussions.

Now more than ever it is essential that Government focuses on early education. The rate of increase of children meeting all their early learning goals was slowing even before 2020, and there are widely held concerns that children who missed out on periods of early education during the pandemic have been significantly affected.<sup>5</sup>

For the past decade within Government there has been a relentless focus on driving up school standards. Now this focus must be extended to the early years. Every parent and carer should have confidence that the early education they choose for their child will be of the highest quality. But we also need a flexible childcare offer that wraps around education, and that works for the realities of family life.

### **1.3. What families want from early education and childcare provision**

The Family Review was comprehensive research-led research which used novel techniques, focus groups, conversations with families, parents, and children. In this Review families made it clear that they wanted high-quality and affordable childcare which suited their needs. Many families told the office that, often, they drew on support from their own support networks – family and friends. When they did this, families felt happier and more supported. Families that didn’t have family and friends to lean on for childcare, and therefore had to reach out to professional services, told the office that they wanted this familial feeling to be emulated in these services. When strong and positive relationships – with professionals and peers – were in place, help was often welcome and valued with many services doing an exceptional job of supporting families. Families want childcare to be local, familiar, and reliable.

The Family Review showed that three main themes emerged from what families wanted. These were: they wanted childcare that was available and flexible to their working arrangements, particularly for school age children and those with additional needs; they wanted high quality care which they knew would help their children to thrive; they wanted it to be affordable.

## Chapter 2 - Analysis on current childcare provision

### 2.1. Summary of Chapter 2

This Chapter draws on existing Department for Education survey data as well as data from the Family Review to demonstrate how families currently feel about the childcare offer and what families say they want from childcare.

### 2.2. Challenges in the current provision of childcare for families

Alongside the things that families said they wanted from childcare in the Family Review they also referenced four key challenges they currently find. These challenges were understanding the existing offer, affordability for families, lack of availability of spaces, and particular difficulties for parents of children with SEND.<sup>6</sup> These challenges were also reflected in the Department for Education's Survey of Childcare and Early Years. Parents were asked about changes to childcare provision that would make it better suited to parents and the top issues raised in 2021 were more affordable childcare (31%), more childcare available during school holidays (20%), longer opening hours (14%), more flexibility about when childcare is available (14%), more information about what is available (14%) and more childcare places in general (12%).<sup>7</sup> Below the challenges families are facing are outlined in more detail.

#### 2.2.1 The existing offer is difficult for families to navigate

The way that childcare is funded is complicated for families to navigate. There are currently five different strands of support for childcare, run by three different Government departments:<sup>8</sup>

- Tax free childcare, which covers 20% of costs to provide a total of up to £2,000 a year (HM Revenue and Customs)
- The childcare element of Universal Credit (or Tax Credits) which covers 85% of costs to provide a total of up to £7,752 a year (Department for Work and Pensions)
- 15 free hours a week for all 3- and 4-year-olds (Department for Education)
- 30 free hours a week for 3- and 4-year-olds in working families (Department for Education)
- 15 free hours for 2-year-olds whose parents receive certain benefits, who have a disability, or are in care (Department for Education)

Awareness of these different programs varies. In 2021, 93% of parents with a child 0-4 were aware of the universal 15 free hours a week offer, 89% of eligible parents were aware of the 30 free hour offer, 80% of parents with a 2-year-old were aware of the 2-year-old offer, and only 49% of working families were aware of the tax-free childcare scheme.<sup>9</sup>

Finding a local childcare provider can be difficult for parents. The Department for Education's Childcare and early years survey of parents found that 21% of parents with a child between 0 and 14 thought there was 'too little' information about childcare in their local area in 2021.<sup>10</sup>

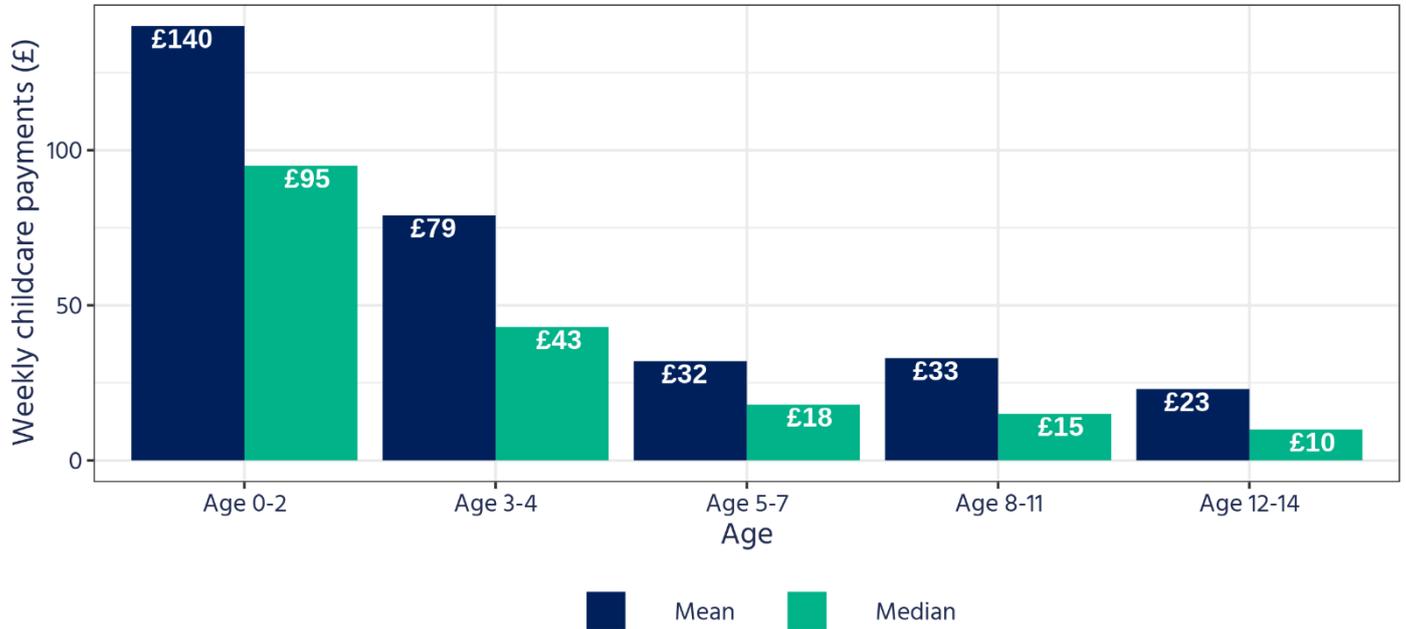
### **2.2.2 Childcare is unaffordable for many families**

In the Family Review, families across the country told us how the cost of childcare, and the difficulty of organising it, placed a stress on them. This was true for those with children of all ages as they tried to make working life co-exist with the timings of the school day and holidays. The Review showed that one of the most significant changes to family life in the past twenty years has been the dramatic increase in maternal employment, and yet too often it seems the expectation remains that there is always one parent available to provide care.<sup>11</sup>

Families told us that not only were the costs of childcare challenging, particularly as they considered rising costs elsewhere in their budgets, but that navigating the funding systems was complicated and often counter-intuitive. Why was there the least support with costs when their children were one, and childcare was most expensive? Why was there no single place they could go to find accurate information about childcare options? Childcare was spoken about as being very expensive, so much so that some people felt that they were financially better off not working. *'The fact that they're expensive forces one person to stay at home, almost a default that one person stays at home. If you want mums back at work, that's all part of it' – Father, playgroup. 'It's very expensive childcare [...] we just weren't in a position to pay' – Mother, playgroup.*<sup>12</sup> To further understand these challenges the office has analysed survey data the cost of childcare to families.

Childcare costs to parents vary substantially by the age of child and number of hours used. The Department for Education's Childcare and early education survey to parents shows that the average weekly childcare payment is much higher than the median weekly childcare payment.

**Figure 1: Weekly childcare payments for parents using some form of childcare in 2021**



Source: Childcare and early education survey of parents, 2021

24% of families with a child between 0-4 who paid for childcare in 2021 find it 'difficult' or 'very difficult' to meet their childcare costs.<sup>13</sup> Increases in childcare fees have outstripped increases in inflation. An Institute for Fiscal Studies report found the cost of a part-time nursery spot for a child under 2 increased by 30% in real terms from 2010 to 2021.<sup>14</sup>

For some families, costs are a barrier to using childcare. In Department for Education's 2021 survey of parents, among families with pre-school children who haven't used any childcare, the top reasons were that parents would rather look after their children themselves (67%), that they rarely need to be away from their children (24%) and that they cannot afford childcare (14%).<sup>15</sup>

### 2.2.3 Some areas have a lack of sufficient places

In some areas, there is a lack of available childcare places. According to Coram Family and Childcare's annual survey to local authorities – who are required to carry out an audit on the sufficiency of childcare in their area – while there is a sufficient amount of childcare for younger children in most areas, there is not a sufficient amount of childcare for older children or disabled children. Only 57% of local authorities reported sufficient childcare 'in all areas' for children under 2.<sup>16</sup> Even when looking at the statutory early education free entitlements only 63% of local authorities reported sufficiency 'in all areas' for the 2-year-

old free entitlement; 79% of local authorities for the 3 and 4-year-old 15-hour entitlement and 73% of local authorities for the 3- and 4-year-old 30-hour entitlement.<sup>17</sup>

There was significantly less available childcare provision for school aged children: 26% of local authorities reported sufficient childcare in all areas for 5-11-year-olds after school and only 13% of local authorities in all areas for 12- to 14-year-olds after school.<sup>18</sup>

When looking at regional variation in early years childcare, the South West generally had the least provision (from 25% for children under 2 to 50% for 3- and 4-year-old 15 hour entitlement). The North East had the reportedly most at 100% of all local authorities followed by Inner London.

### **2.2.4 Finding suitable childcare is particularly difficult for parents of children with SEND**

In the Family Review, parents of children with SEND spoke about the challenge of finding childcare. As one father of a 3-year-old child with SEND explained: *'No nursery will take him [...] they say 'but we can't offer that'. My child is 3. He's entitled to 30 hours childcare and we get 12 and that's because they can't move for the one to one support'* – Father, support group. Others raised the lack of SEND nurseries, with one mother saying: *'If there's enough children to go to SEND school in the local area, the fact there isn't a SEND nursery doesn't make sense'* – Mother, support group.<sup>19</sup> This difficulty is reflected in the office's analysis. Only 21% of Local Authorities reported sufficiency for childcare 'in all areas' for disabled children. 41% of parents with a child with SEND reported it was 'difficult' or 'very difficult' to find a local provider than can cater for their child's SEND.<sup>20</sup>

## **Chapter 3 - New analysis on the accessibility and take-up of childcare**

### **3.1. Summary of Chapter 3**

This chapter draws on new Children's Commissioners office research on the information available on local childcare provision and take-up of the universal childcare offer. In an audit of 60 local authorities it was difficult to navigate the Family Information Service – a statutory requirement for local authorities to provide – and information on childcare providers was often missing. New analysis on the take-up of the free 15 hours a week of early education that all 3- and 4-year-olds are entitled to shows while overall take-up is fairly high, there are large differences in the rate of childcare take-up between ethnic groups, local areas, English as an additional language status and SEND status. Low take-up rates could be indicative of challenges around childcare provision outlined in Chapter 2.

### **3.2. Finding childcare on Family Information Service**

#### **3.2.1 Background on Family Information Service**

Informal sources of information are the most popular sources of information on childcare. When asked about the sources of information on childcare used in the last year, 47% of parents used word of mouth, 36% used a school, 25% used social media and 9% used their local authority/Family Information Service.<sup>21</sup> Only 20% of parents have ever used their local authority/Family Information Service to find information about childcare.<sup>22</sup>

While informal sources of information are clearly trusted and helpful for parents, given issues around sufficiency of childcare placements, a comprehensive and up-to-date source of information is necessary to ensure that all parents can easily find a suitable childcare provider. Section 12 of the Childcare Act 2006 requires local authorities to establish and maintain a Family Information Service which provides information on the provision of childcare in their area.<sup>23</sup> They are required to update information on childcare provision at a minimum termly on 1 January, 1 April and 1 September.<sup>24</sup> Statutory guidance specifies that information about Ofsted registered childcare should include the contact and location details, type of childcare provided, Ofsted rating, whether the provider offers free early years provision, the cost of the childcare, the time and duration of the childcare provided, the number and ages of children to whom childcare is provided, and the suitability of the childcare for disabled children.<sup>25</sup>

Local authorities face pressures in maintaining a Family Information Service. A 2016 survey of 115 local authorities by the National Association of Family Information Service found that 66% of local authorities reported a reduction in budget allocated to Family Information Service and 51% reported a reduction in staff over the past year.<sup>26</sup> There is also churn in childcare provision which makes it difficult to maintain an updated directory of providers. Within the span of 3 months (April 2022-June 2022), local authorities experienced an average of 12 early years registered (EYR) providers leaving and 5 EYR joining as well as 7 non-EYR providers leaving and 5 non-EYR providers joining.<sup>27</sup>

### **3.2.2 Methodology of Family Information Service audit**

The office conducted an audit on a sample of 60 local authorities to assess whether the Family Information Service provides information on the provision of childcare.<sup>28</sup> 6-9 local authorities in each region were chosen randomly to ensure the sample is geographically dispersed. For each local authority, the office checked whether it was possible to find a local childminder in 2 minutes of navigation on the website, given a randomly selected postcode in the local authority and what information was provided in the childcare directory for a randomly selected provider.

### **3.2.3 Results of Family Information Service audit**

For 27% of local authorities the office was unable to easily find a local childminder on the Family Information Service. For 60% of local authorities, the childcare directory was missing information recommended in the statutory guidance. 37% were missing information on the suitability for children with a disability, 32% were missing information on fees, 22% were missing information on the age range, 20% were missing Ofsted details or rating, 18% were missing information on whether the setting accepts the free offer, and 12% were missing information on hours and availability of provision.

## **3.3. Take-up of the universal childcare offer**

### **3.3.1 Background on take-up of universal childcare offer**

National statistics from the Department for Education show that among children aged 3 and 4, the take-up rate of formal childcare is 92% in 2022 and the majority are in private, voluntary, and independent (PVI) settings.<sup>29</sup> However, underlying these figures there is substantial variation across regions and groups. The national data on take-up rates is based on ONS mid-year population estimates derived from the 2011 census and only produced at the national level in recent years. Previous Department for Education analysis found that take-up rates of childcare among 3-4-year-olds was lower in areas with higher income deprivation, higher proportions of children whose first language is not English, higher

proportions of children who identify with a minority ethnic background, and higher proportions of children who have a SEND.<sup>30</sup> This analysis fills a gap in the existing analysis around childcare take-up by examining the differences in take-up rates at an individual level.

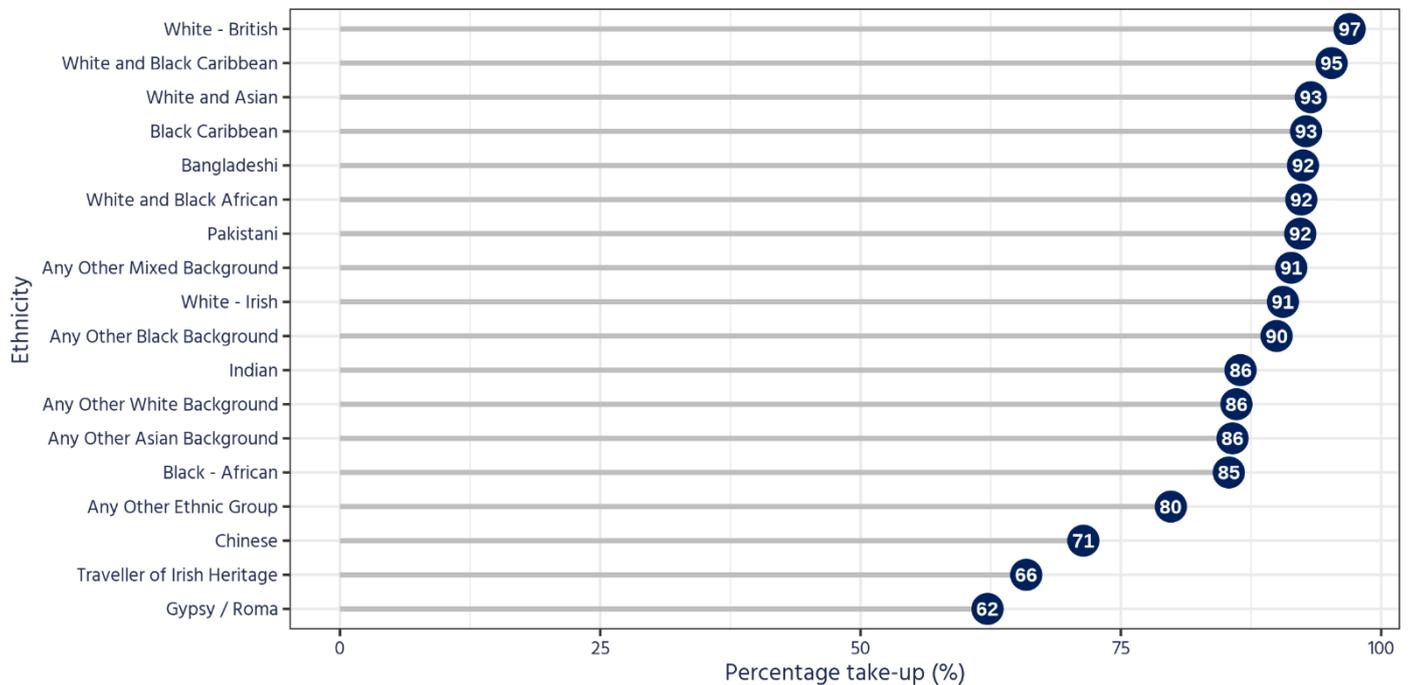
### **3.3.2 Take-up analysis methodology**

The Children's Commissioner's office linked the 2019-2020 Early Years Census and School Census to the 2021-2022 School Census using the pupil's unique identifier. The office focuses on the cohort of children who are in state-funded provision in Year 1 in the 2021-2022 school year. This cohort was aged 3-4 in 2019-2020 and eligible for universal childcare. This cohort includes 639,000 pupils, with an average childcare take-up of 94%. This cohort excludes children who are not attending a state-funded school in Year 1 and this cohort could include children aged 3-4 who moved to England between 2020 and 2022 and therefore wouldn't have been able to take-up childcare in England with the rest of their cohort. Therefore, estimated take-up rates for this cohort will differ from the true take-up rates. The average take-up in this cohort (94%) is within 1 percentage point of the average take-up among 3- and-4-year-olds in 2020 estimated by the Department for Education (93%).<sup>31</sup>

### **3.3.3 Results of take-up analysis**

Take-up of childcare varies by ethnicity, with children in some ethnic groups (Gypsy/Roma, Traveller of Irish Heritage, Chinese and any other ethnic groups) having lower take-up. Figure 2 shows that the take-up rate varies from 62% among Gypsy / Roma traveller children to 97% among White – British children.

**Figure 2: Share of cohort in early years provision in 2019-2020, by ethnic group**

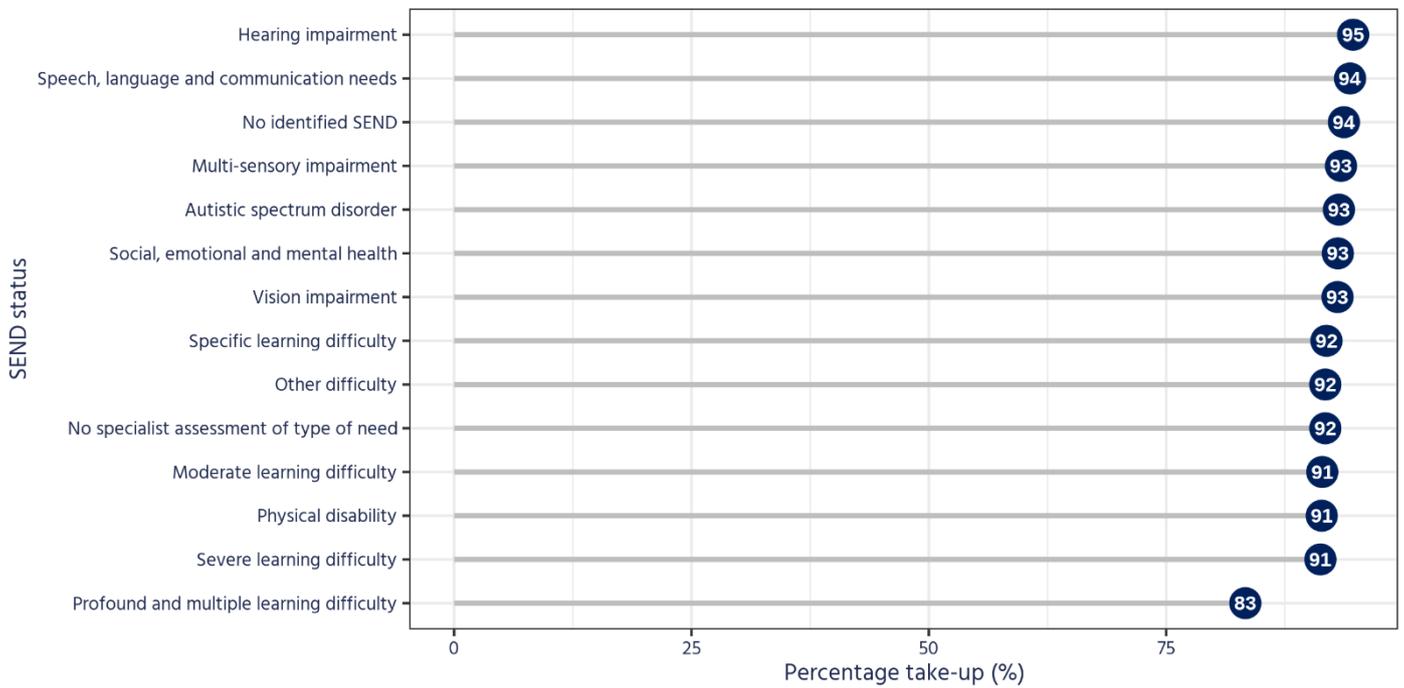


Take-up varies by local authority, from 51% to 98%, with the half of local authorities in the range of 92% to 96%. Take-up is lower in London (90%) than outside of London (94%).

There was a higher take-up rate for pupils with English as their main language (96%) compared to pupils with English as an additional language (85%). We find a small difference in the take-up rate for pupils in the most deprived neighbourhoods (93% across the bottom half of neighbourhoods in terms of Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI)) compared to the pupils in the top third least deprived neighbourhoods (95%).

Figure 3 shows that the take-up rate of formal childcare varies by SEND status. While 94% of all children aged 3-4 in this cohort take-up childcare, 83% of those with profound, multiple learning disabilities taking up childcare.

**Figure 3: Share of cohort in early years provision in 2019-2020, by SEND status in Year 1**



Formal childcare includes nurseries in state-funded schools, private settings, voluntary settings, childminders, other types of settings (including day nurseries). Figure 4 shows that use of school-based nurseries is much more common among Pakistani and Bangladeshi children (67% and 75%).

**Figure 4: Share of cohort in early years provision in 2019-20, by ethnicity and type of provision**

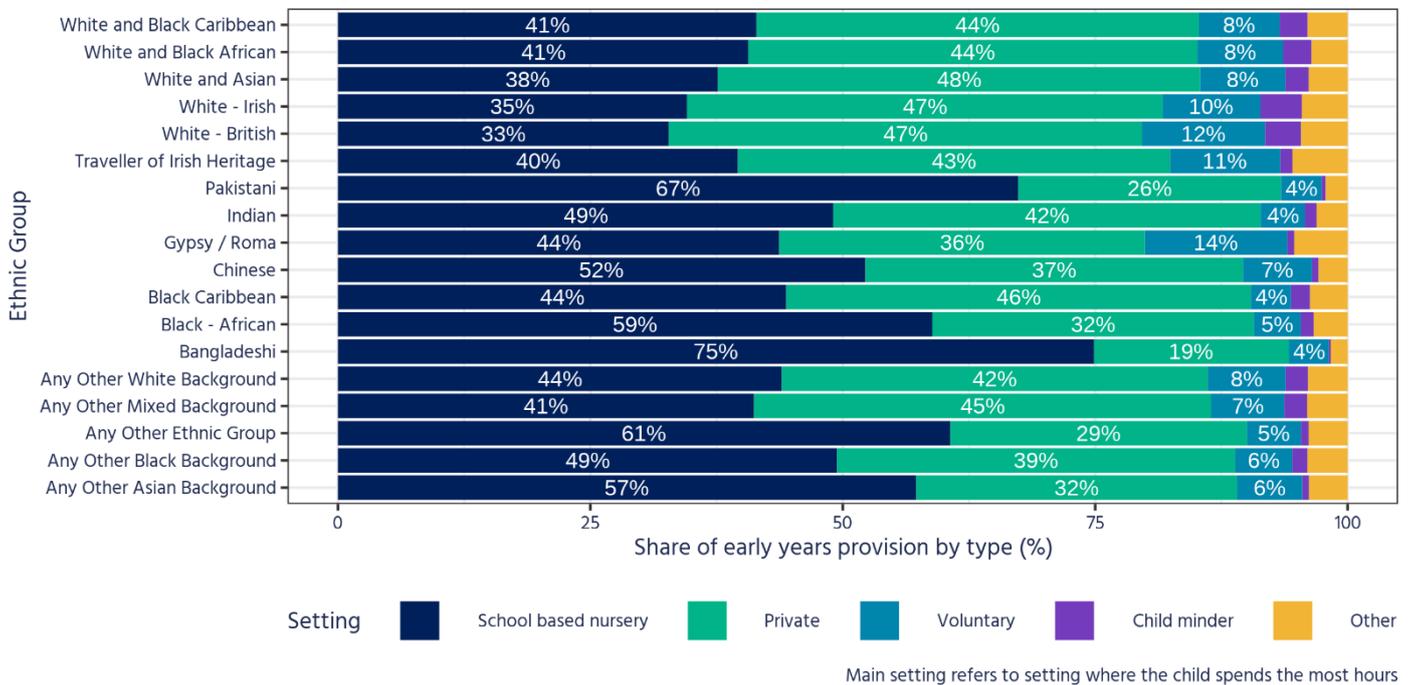
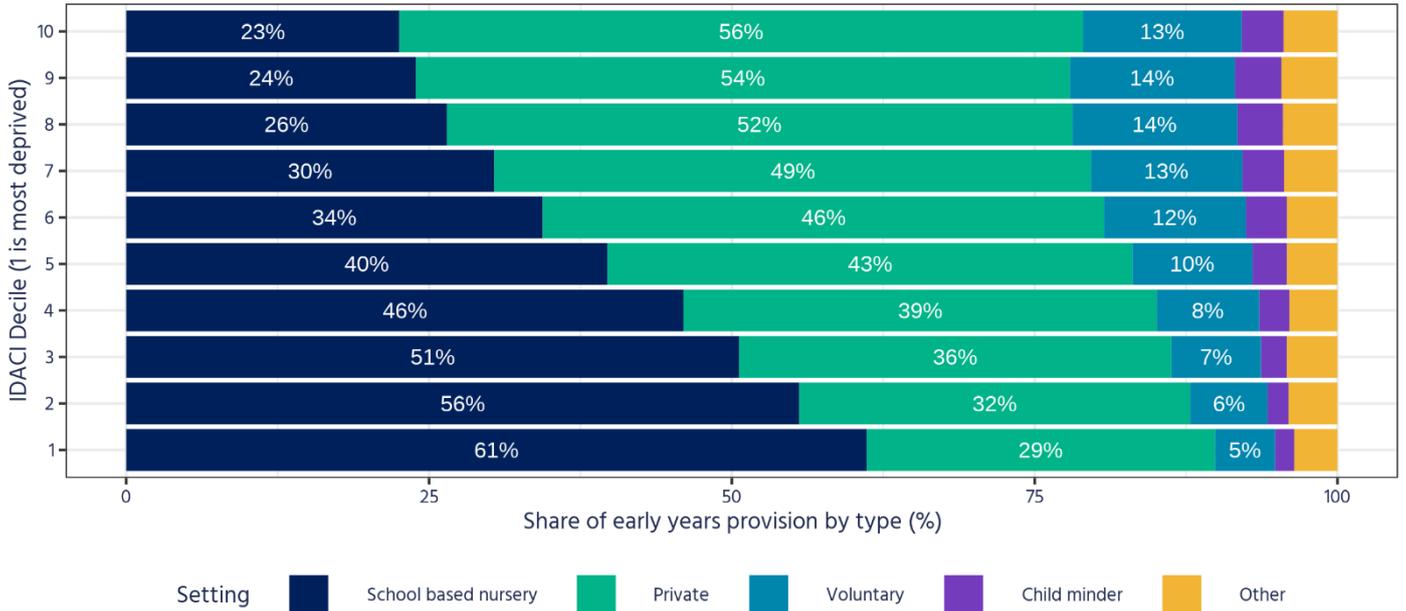


Figure 5 shows that the share of children in private provision is much lower in deprived neighbourhoods (29%) than in less deprived neighbourhoods (56% in the least 10% deprived neighbourhoods). Children eligible for free school meals (FSM) are much less likely to be in private provision (34%) compared to children not eligible for FSM (47%).

**Figure 5: Share of cohort in early years provision in 2019-2020, by IDACI and type of provision**



IDACI refers to the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index, Main setting refers to setting where the child spends the most hours

## **Chapter 4 - Delivering a world-class early education and childcare system**

### **4.1. Summary of Chapter 4**

Drawing on the office's work with children, families, and communities, alongside evidence in the Family Review, this chapter proposes solutions for early education and childcare. The solutions place schools at the heart of delivery, drive up the number of childminders, make sense of current funding streams, and provide accountability and oversight of quality. It also calls for reforms to parental leave to allow parents to spend time bonding with their child in the crucial early weeks and months.

### **4.2. Putting school at the centre of the system**

Schools sit at the heart of their communities, visible to and trusted by families in the area. When it comes to school age children the most straightforward approach to making childcare manageable and affordable is by providing an extended school day, so that children can be cared for on school premises. This would address the biggest existing gap in childcare provision, with the majority of areas saying there is a lack of provision for after school care for children aged 5-14.<sup>32</sup>

An extended school day not only works best for parents but can also open up opportunities for additional extra-curricular activities and clubs, including breakfast clubs, in the place that children are already familiar with.

Schools should also be utilised to help address the early education challenge. As school rolls fall across the country, with the number of pupils in state funded primaries set to fall by a fifth over the next decade, there will be significant underused space in schools.<sup>33</sup> Currently, rent or mortgage payments account for 12% of private providers' costs, and other costs (including utilities) account for 11% - these are only likely to increase in the short term, and may make many childcare settings unsustainable.<sup>34</sup> Opening up schools to provide more early years education would address both these issues.

Our research has shown that take-up of free hours around the country is hugely variable, and that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to be in private provision, and more likely to take up their place in a nursery class in school. Local authorities around the country report huge variation in their ability to secure sufficient childcare. Drawing on school resources to increase provision for 2, 3- and 4-year-olds in school would be a way to meet this challenge and provide greater consistency across the country.

One of the most significant challenges facing the sector is recruitment and retention of staff, with low pay and poor progression opportunities often cited as the cause.<sup>35</sup> Bringing early education into the wider school sector would present an opportunity to align workforce training, development, and support with that of wider school staff and teachers. For too long those educating the youngest children haven't had the respect and opportunities they deserve, and this needs to change.

### **4.3. Driving up childminder numbers**

The number of childminders has continued to decrease, with various policy initiatives introduced to try and reverse this trend.<sup>36</sup> Childminder agencies were launched in 2014, but have not taken off significantly – there are only 5 registered with Ofsted, with a total of 1,100 childminders between them, while 31,400 childminders remain registered directly with Ofsted.<sup>37</sup>

Research has shown that childminders often feel isolated from other parts of the early years system, without the support and development opportunities they would like. They also feel overwhelmed by a registration and inspection system that appears designed for group-based settings.<sup>38</sup> To bring more childminders into the sector it is essential to ensure the right balance is struck between easing administrative burdens, and ensuring there is the right oversight and support in place to drive up quality. Instead of leaving childminders as an afterthought to the childcare puzzle, they must be front and centre to an offer. Every local area should be required to have an agency for childminders – this could be run directly by a local authority, a multi-academy trust, a group of school or the local Family Hub. These agencies should transform the way information is provided to parents, childminders are supported, and different parts of the system are joined up.

Our research has shown that too often information provided by local authorities on childminders consists simply of a list, often with insufficient information a parent needs to decide whether to use it. Instead, an agency should be able to provide a bespoke brokerage service for parents – understanding what their working patterns are, what additional needs their child has, and what their existing childcare arrangements are. They would have excellent local knowledge and be able to suggest - for example - how childminders could support with school drop-offs and collection, even matching parents with children in the same school or nursery. They would also provide a vital layer of support to childminders, as well as accountability on quality. Currently, Ofsted should visit within the first 30 months of a childminder registering, and then at least every 6 years. Given concerns about how Ofsted inspects in early years' setting, this does not provide sufficient confidence on quality<sup>39 40</sup>. But equally importantly it means limited opportunities for childminders themselves to learn how they are doing and how they could improve. While local authorities have a statutory duty to secure information, advice and training

to providers, there is a lack of clarity about their role, and little incentive for providers – especially those who are good or better – to work with them.<sup>41</sup> Agencies could take on the direct role of providing training, support, and networking opportunities to childminders, with much more frequent contact and oversight.

#### **4.4. Rationalise funding**

Government must grasp the nettle of funding and design a system that works for families. Currently, funding is heavily weighted towards 3- and 4-year-olds, with working families receiving 30 free hours a week when their child turns 3, when previously they would only be eligible for Tax Free Childcare or the childcare element of Universal Credit. Yet costs are highest for children under 2, and parental leave finishes when a child is 2. As this Report shows, parents of children aged 2 or younger have much the highest weekly spend on childcare. The system needs to be designed to work for families whatever the age of their children, with support spread more evenly. This could take the form of a childcare account for families, drawing on some of the user-friendly elements of the tax-free childcare account, with parents able to allocate guaranteed hours as well as additional fees to providers throughout their child's early years. This system should be used for all families, regardless of the type of benefit they receive, which in turn would create greater fairness, with no parent being paid in arrears and expected to cover full upfront costs themselves.

#### **4.5. A progress measure for the early years**

To make sure that whatever changes are introduced have a relentless focus on quality, it is essential to be able to hold the system to account on children's outcomes. The school system is rightly focused on ensuring that all children make the expected level of progress from entering school to GCSEs and beyond. However, there is no way to ensure the same is true for children before the age of 5. The Best Start for Life review rightly identified that currently the kind of data collected on children in their early days is not always useful for this purpose.<sup>42</sup>

Currently, children's development should be checked at age 2 as part of the Early Years Foundation Stage, and also be checked by a health visitor as part of the Healthy Child Programme. However, it is not possible to link the outcomes of these developmental checks with their outcomes on the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile at age 5. That means there is no real way to understand whether needs identified at 2 have been addressed, and whether children have made the progress we would expect. Two things are needed to address this problem. Firstly, the introduction of a unique child identifier, so that children's early development can be linked to data on how they do at school. And secondly, a reformed check for 2-year-olds should be developed, which will incorporate all the essential health

assessments as well as all areas in the Early Years Foundation Stage, so it can be used as a baseline for how a child does throughout their education.

#### **4.6. Reformed parental leave**

Getting early education and childcare right is essential to allow parents and carers to work, while children are supported to develop and thrive. But in the Family Review it was also clear that parents, particularly fathers, had been transformed by their experiences during the pandemic. Fathers spent more time caring for their children during lockdown than ever before, and while this has fallen back since it is still much higher than pre-pandemic levels.<sup>43</sup> Now is the time to fully modernise parental leave, with an offer that protects time for each parent and allows them to spend quality time with their child at a time that suits them.

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