School Ready?

A survey of school leaders by NAHT and Family and Childcare Trust

Foreword

The start of term in September is a new beginning for everybody in the school community, especially its newest members: children starting primary school.
For many of these children and their parents, school is an unfamiliar environment which is why schools spend a lot of time, effort and resources on making sure that they settle in quickly.

And in most cases, that's exactly what happens.

Most children are ready to participate in classroom activities and the other aspects of school life when they enter the classroom for the first time.

But, school leaders and practitioners have been raising concerns with NAHT and the Family and Childcare Trust about children falling behind in the early years. Our survey finds that the majority of schools are worried about the school readiness of their youngest children.

The abiding message of this report is that schools and families must both be ready for each other in order for the first steps of a child's journey through school to be successful.

The first years of school education are vital to making sure that all pupils have equality of opportunity in later life. So, just as schools need to be ready to welcome pupils on day one and meet the various needs that they have, having a school full of children ready to learn and participate right at the beginning of term can make a real difference to the progress children are able to make during the year.

The problem is that there isn't a simple, cookie cutter fix to get children ready for school. For different reasons, getting ready for school can be a struggle for any family, regardless of their circumstances.

However, we know that high quality early education can help to boost children's outcomes and narrow the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers. Recent investment in extending early education is welcome, but making sure that every child can access early education of this quality must be a priority.

In recent years we have seen the sources of support that families regard as essential being cut back or disappearing entirely. Without adequate investment, more and more children will be starting off at a disadvantage, with uncertain chances of catching up.

It is our belief that the government now needs to prioritise funding for support for families in the early years or face paying the much higher cost that a poor start to school can have on our children's futures.

Ellen Broomé, Chief Executive,
Family & Childcare Trust

Paul Whiteman, General Secretary,
NAHT

Executive Summary

School leaders and practitioners have been raising concerns with NAHT and Family and Childcare Trust about children's school readiness for some time. We decided that we would look further into this matter to better understand the issue of school readiness and test the perception that this has declined over recent years. We received 780 responses to our survey on this subject from school leaders in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in June and July 2017.

The findings of our survey confirm that this is an area of concern for school leaders, with 83 per cent of respondents reporting an issue with school readiness and a majority believing this has become worse in the last five years. Respondents identified a number of issues that mean that some children are not ready for school, in particular concern about their speech, language and communication skills were highlighted. The social, emotional and physical development of some children were also cited as areas of concern.

Our survey findings emphasise how important it is to have adequately funded support services in place for young children and families. Reductions in local authority and health budgets, combined with pressures on school budgets as a whole, would appear to be having a knock-on effect on children's school readiness and schools' abilities to help support their children's transition once in school. Many of these issues had already been identified in NAHT's Breaking Point Survey 2016/17 of school funding.

Support for parents, early years providers and schools is essential to help tackle the issue of school readiness as early as possible, especially for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Partnerships between early years providers, schools, parents, local authorities, health services and other services need to be adequately funded and well-coordinated to help support all children who may find starting school challenging.

Understanding school readiness

We recognise that there is a debate surrounding the definition of 'school readiness', and that inevitably there will be different interpretations of what constitutes a child as being 'school ready'. There is also some debate regarding when children should start formal schooling and therefore when we should assess whether a child is 'school ready'.

For the purpose of this research and to achieve a degree of consistency, school leaders were asked to consider a child to be 'school ready' if the child was able to begin to participate in the curriculum and wider school life upon reaching the current compulsory school age.

For schools in England this would mean children entering reception year. For schools in Wales and Northern Ireland, this would mean children entering year one. Where parents have deferred a child's entry to school, we asked respondents to consider the starting point to be the term in which they begin school.

We also recognise that schools must, and do, work to meet the needs of children with a wide range of abilities and at different stages of development.

Children develop in different ways and at different rates, and they have different experiences in the early years. This means that the ways in which children are not ready for school will always vary, but examples may include:

- Communication and language – finding it difficult to express themselves and describe their needs, or to understand what others are saying

- Physical development – issues with coordination, control and movement, for example with putting on outdoor clothes or using the toilet independently

- Personal, social and emotional development – finding it difficult to form relationships with others, or not having a positive sense of themselves

- Literacy and mathematics – not having a simple understanding of numbers, or of the link between letters and sounds

- Understanding the world – having a limited understanding of the physical world and their community

Key findings

- Four fifths of respondents (83 per cent) to our survey said that they believed that there is an issue with the school readiness of some pupils starting school.

- Of those that said there was an issue with school readiness:
  - 86 per cent believed the issue of school readiness has become worse over the past five years.
  - Almost a quarter (24 per cent) said that more than half of their intake was not school ready.
  - Speech, language and communication issues were of greatest concern with 97 per cent of respondents identifying this as a problem and almost half (47 per cent) saying it was the most significant.
  - Two thirds (67 per cent) said one of the likely reasons children are not school ready is a failure to identify and support additional needs early enough.
  - 66 per cent said that parents had fewer available resources or that there are more pressures on family life.
  - Almost 9 out of 10 (88 per cent) said that funding was a barrier to improving school readiness and more than half (56 per cent) said that funding was the greatest barrier they faced.

- To help improve school readiness, almost two thirds (61 per cent) of school leaders responded that they were using home visits prior to the child starting in reception and more than half (54 per cent) said that they were engaging with health and social care services.
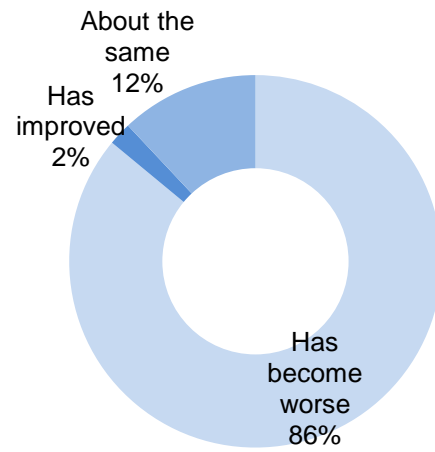
Is there an issue with school readiness?

More than four fifths of respondents (83 per cent) said that they believed there is an issue with school readiness. Only 11 per cent said that they did not feel this was an issue. Of those who had indicated that they believed there is an issue with school readiness, 86 per cent thought that this had become worse over the past five years.

Chart 1: Is there an issue with school readiness?

Don't know 6%
No 11%
Yes 83%
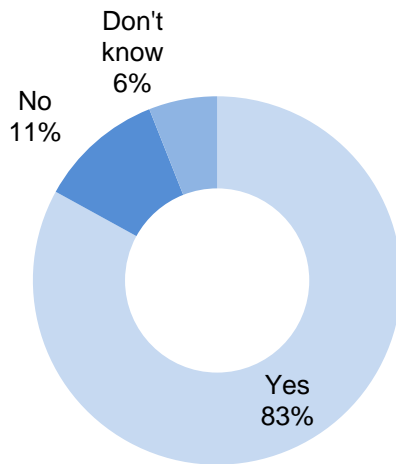
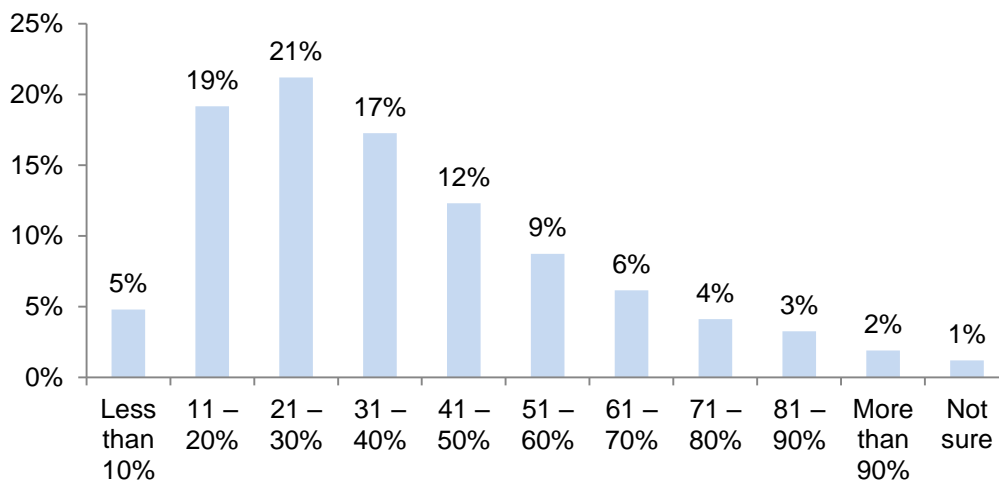*Number responding to question = 780

Chart 2: Has the issue of school readiness become worse over the past 5 years?

About the same 12%
Has improved 2%
Has become worse 86%

*Number responding to question = 586

Almost a quarter (24 per cent) said that more than half of their intake was not school ready. Four fifths of respondents who believed there was an issue with school readiness said that children who had no previous early education demonstrated the most challenging issues.

Chart 3: Approximately what proportion of your intake at reception do you feel are not school ready?

| Less than 10%	11 – 20%	21 – 30%	31 – 40%	41 – 50%	51 – 60%	61 – 70%	71 – 80%	81 – 90%	More than 90%	Not sure
5%	19%	21%	17%	12%	9%	6%	4%	3%	2%	1%

*Number responding to question = 585

Issues causing concern

For those that said there was an issue with school readiness, we asked respondents to identify which issues are causing concern and then to rank those issues from most to least concerning. Speech, language and communication was the issue causing greatest concern, with 97 per cent of respondents to this question identifying this as of concern and almost half (47 per cent) saying it was of most concern. Personal, social and emotional development (including behaviour) was identified as the second issue causing concern and physical development (including self-care) as the third. This is shown in chart 4 below.

Chart 4: What issues are causing concern and which are of most concern for those children that are not considered school ready?
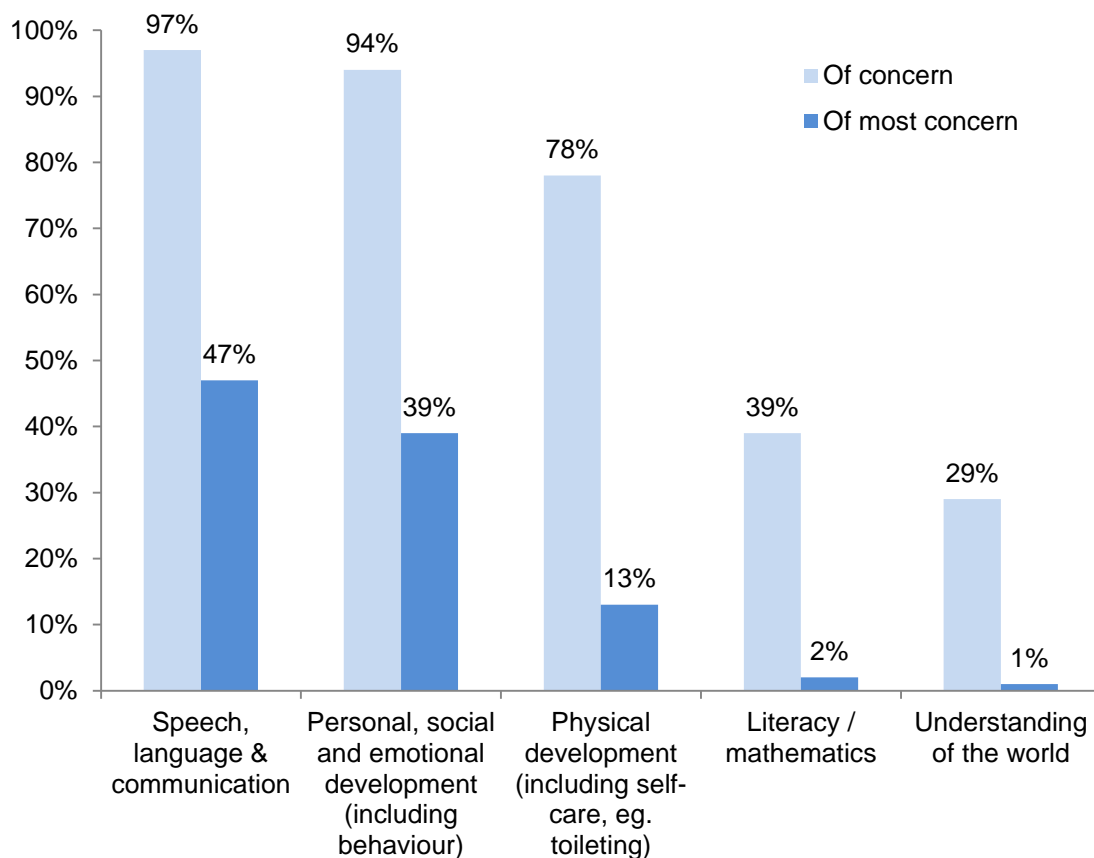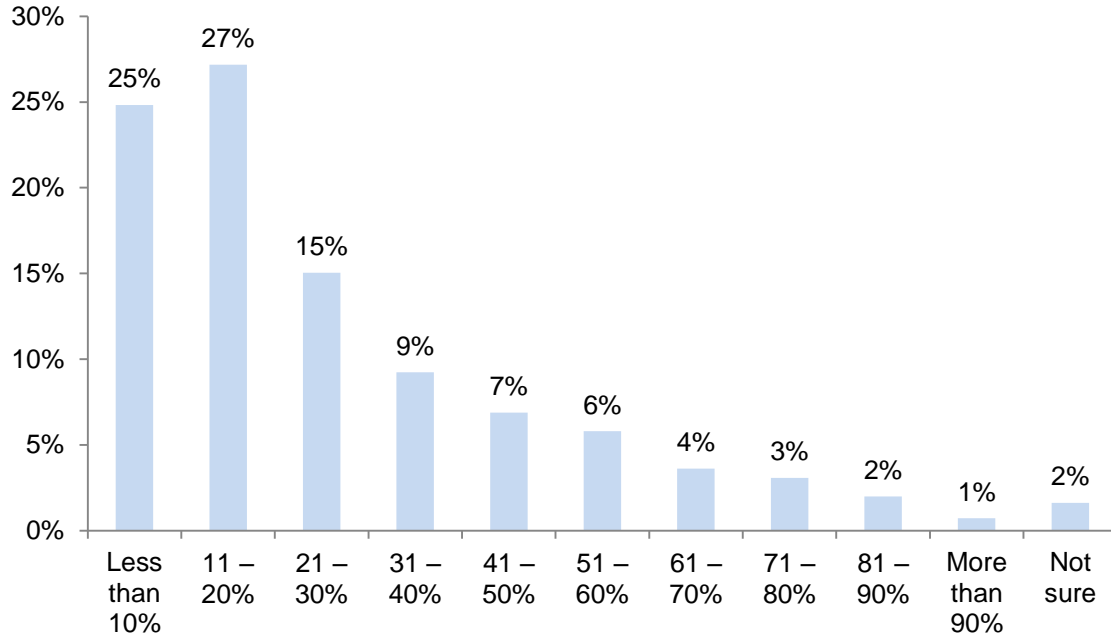

*Number responding to both questions = 520

Respondents who had indicated that they believe that there is an issue with school readiness also reported a key issue that pupils were starting school with unidentified special educational needs or disabilities (SEND). Forty two per cent said that between 11 per cent and 30 per cent of their pupils not yet ready for school had unidentified SEND, 15 per cent of respondents said that more than half of pupils not ready for school had an unidentified SEND. This is shown below in chart 5.

Many respondents raised concerns over a lack of support for parents and that issues were not being picked up early enough, meaning that issues were left unaddressed for too long and opportunities for early intervention were missed.

Chart 5: Of those children that are not considered school ready, what percentage would you say have unidentified SEND?
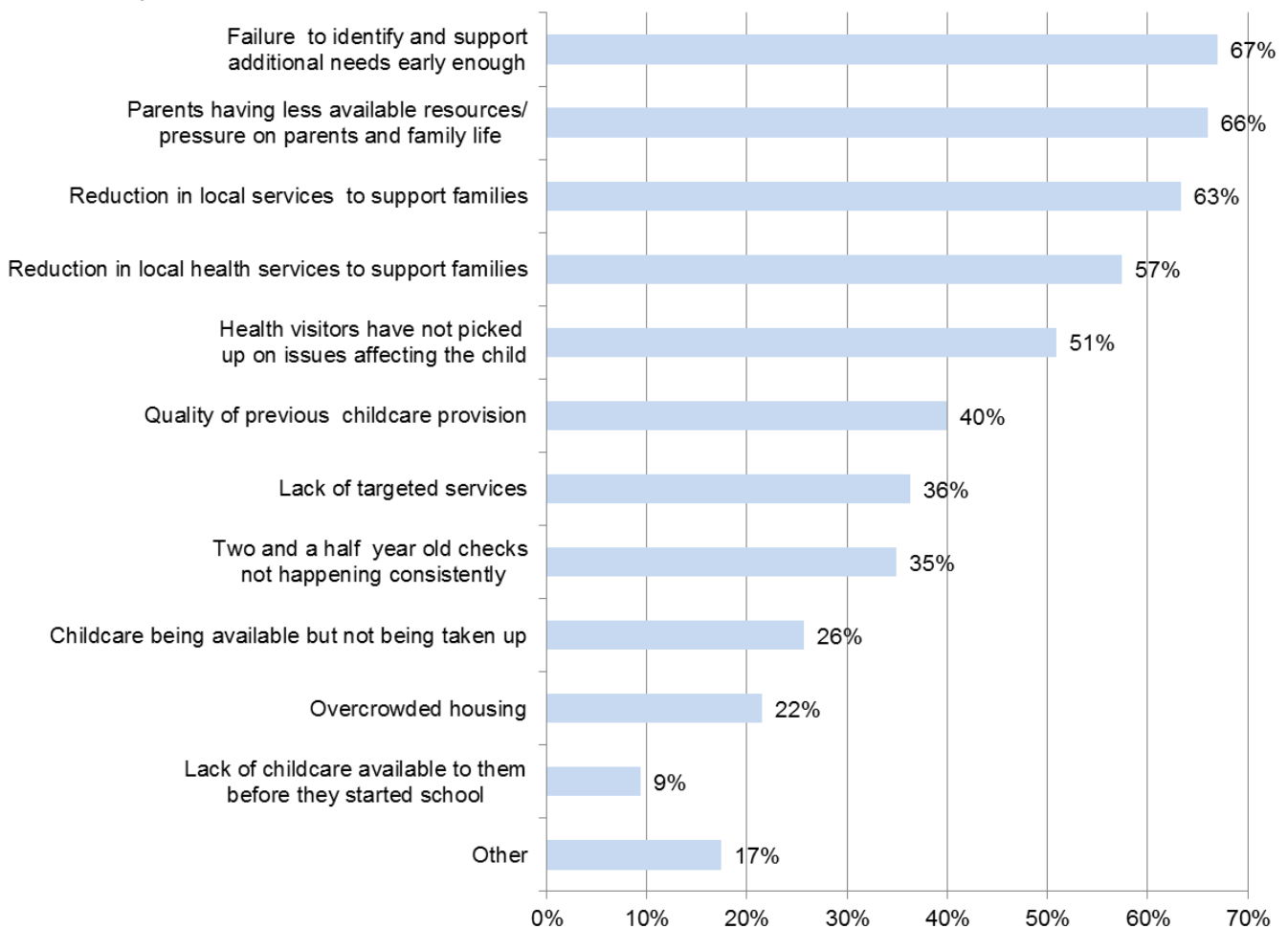

*Number responding to question = 552

Factors affecting school readiness

We asked respondents what they thought were the likely reasons that children are not school ready. Of those that said they believed there was an issue with school readiness, two thirds (67 per cent) said there was a failure to identify and support additional needs early enough and 66 per cent said that parents had less available resources or that there were pressures on family life. This is demonstrated in chart 6.

A number of respondents also highlighted through additional comment boxes their concerns over support for parents and pressures of family life. Reductions in local authority funding, reductions in Children's Centre services and extra pressures on school budgets could be associated with the perception that there is less support for parents than before.

Chart 6: What do you think are the likely reasons why children are not school ready?

| Reason	Percentage
Failure to identify and support additional needs early enough	67%
Parents having less available resources/ pressure on parents and family life	66%
Reduction in local services to support families	63%
Reduction in local health services to support families	57%
Health visitors have not picked up on issues affecting the child	51%
Quality of previous childcare provision	40%
Lack of targeted services	36%
Two and a half year old checks not happening consistently	35%
Childcare being available but not being taken up	26%
Overcrowded housing	22%
Lack of childcare available to them before they started school	9%
Other	17%

*Number responding to question = 521 - includes those who gave at least one response

Barriers to supporting children who are not school ready

We asked respondents what barriers they face in supporting children who they feel are not school ready. Of those who said they felt there was an issue with school readiness, almost 9 out of 10 (88 per cent) said that funding was a barrier and more than half (56 per cent) said that funding was the most concerning barrier they faced. Eighty four per cent reported a shortage of additional adult support to meet children's needs and almost two thirds said there was a lack of access to specialist services. This is shown in chart 7 below.

Chart 7: What are the barriers faced in supporting children who are not school ready?
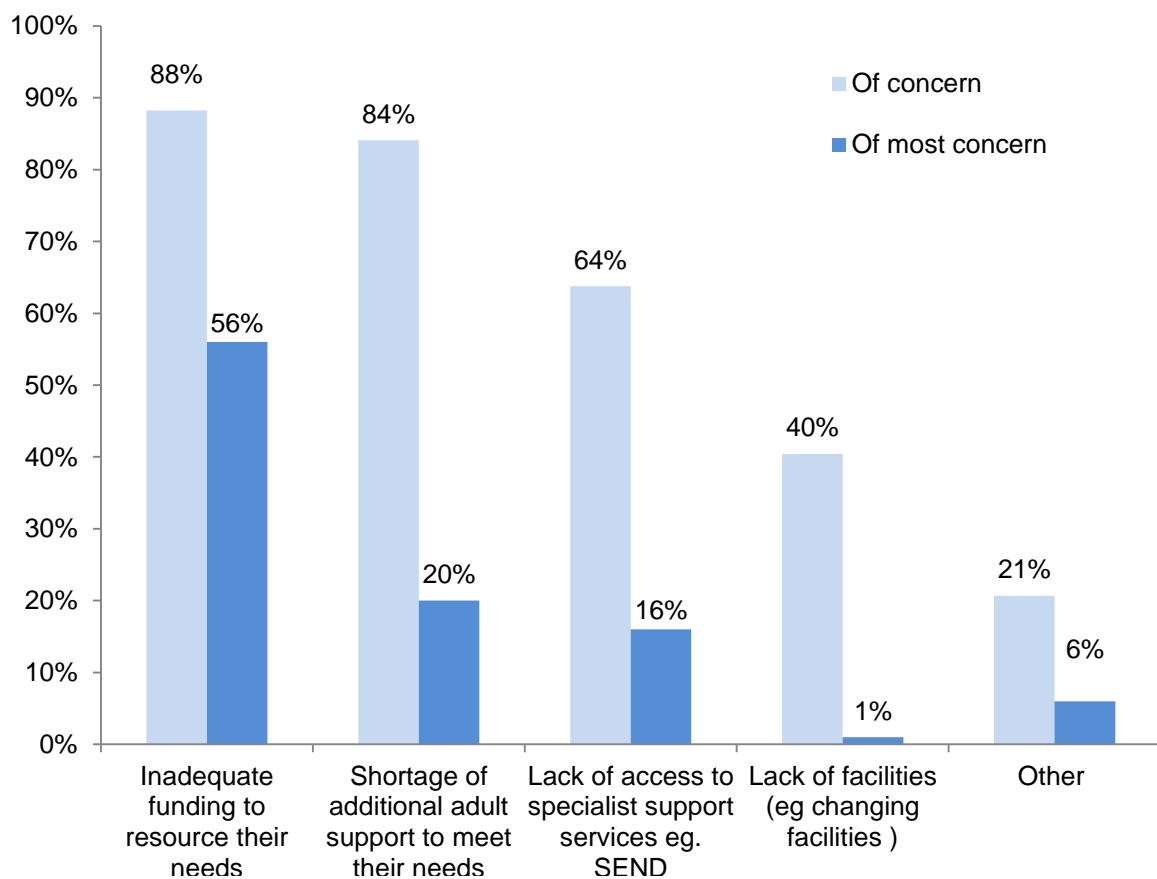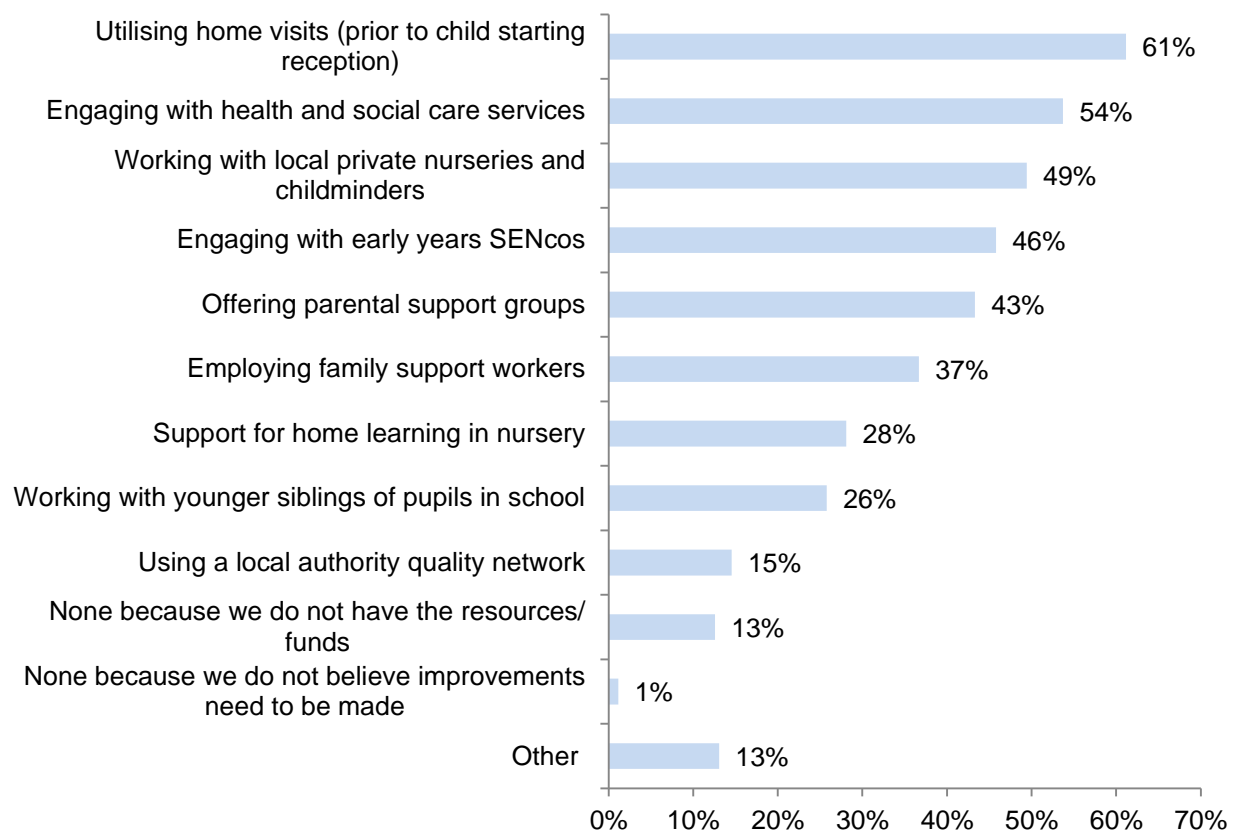

*Number responding to both questions = 526

These findings relate to previous issues identified, such as the number of children with unidentified SEND and lack of support for parents. Schools are unable to fully plug the gap in the reduction of local authority and health services that help support children in the early years. These funding issues correlate with other NAHT research on funding. The Breaking Point Survey in the autumn of 2016 identified that an increasing number of schools are facing deficit budgets and are having to make very difficult decisions on cutting additional support services that they had developed to plug the gaps in health and social care provision.

Improving school readiness

We asked all school leaders responding to the survey to tell us what they are currently doing to improve school readiness and what else could be done locally. Almost two thirds (61 per cent) of respondents said that they were using home visits prior to a child starting in reception, more than half (54 per cent) said that they were engaging with health and social care services and almost half (49 per cent) said they were working with local private nurseries and childminders. Such strategies have a staffing and therefore cost implication for schools and may become increasingly unaffordable in the light of the school funding crisis. Working with a large number of 'feeder' private, voluntary and independent early years settings (PVIs) can be challenging for schools because of the resource implications. Many respondents reported working with at least five different PVIs and one said that they worked with 28.

Chart 8: What are you doing to improve school readiness?

Strategy	Percentage
Utilising home visits (prior to child starting reception)	61%
Engaging with health and social care services	54%
Working with local private nurseries and childminders	49%
Engaging with early years SENcos	46%
Offering parental support groups	43%
Employing family support workers	37%
Support for home learning in nursery	28%
Working with younger siblings of pupils in school	26%
Using a local authority quality network	15%
None because we do not have the resources/ funds	13%
None because we do not believe improvements need to be made	1%
Other	13%

*Number responding to question = 605 – includes those who gave at least one response.

We also asked all respondents what they felt would help improve school readiness in their area and more than half (52 per cent) felt that offering parental support groups would assist with school readiness. This follows on from what many respondents described as one of the barriers to school readiness: parents needing more support with their children. Similarly, just over a third (36 per cent) believed that support for home learning would be beneficial. Almost a third (31 per cent) said that working with local private nurseries and childminders would also help. Thirty nine per cent of schools were not currently working with PVIs in their area through partnerships.

Conclusion

Children develop at different paces and many children will fall behind and catch up again at different points in their childhood. But, despite the efforts and expertise of school staff, some children find it harder to catch up again. It can be particularly difficult when a child starts school not yet ready to take part in educational activities with their peers and to participate in school life.

This survey demonstrates the extent to which this has become a problem, and the depth of school leaders' concern about this. The good news is that there is the opportunity to support children, and families, before they start school and in their first years at school.

NAHT and the Family and Childcare Trust are calling on the government to prioritise funding to support families in the early years to help set children up to learn at school and beyond. This includes additional funding for education, including early education, before children start school and renewed investment in critical services for families. These measures will help to level the playing field at the beginning of children's education.

About the authors

About NAHT

NAHT is an independent trade union and professional association representing over 28,500 members in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Members hold leadership positions in early years; primary; special and secondary schools; independent schools; sixth form and FE colleges; outdoor education centres; pupil referral units, social services establishments and other educational settings. We represent, advise and support school leaders and we use our voice at the highest levels of government to influence policy for the benefit of leaders and learners everywhere.

About Family and Childcare Trust

The Family and Childcare Trust aims to make the UK a better place for families. We are a leading national family charity in the field of policy, research and advocacy on childcare and family issues, with over 40 years' experience. Our on-the-ground work with parents and providers informs our research and campaigns. We focus on the early years and childcare because they are crucial to boosting children's outcomes throughout life and supporting parents to work.