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Early education for disadvantaged children: How local action can support take-up of the 15 hours entitlement



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Some of the work included in this report was produced using statistical data from ONS. The use of the ONS statistical data in this work does not imply the endorsement of the ONS in relation to the interpretation, or analysis of the statistical data. This work uses research datasets which may not exactly reproduce National Statistics aggregates.

Executive Summary

The 15 hours early education entitlement for all 3-4-year-olds and disadvantaged 2-year-olds in England was introduced to support children's development and reduce inequalities in participation in early education. While take-up of early education has risen considerably since the introduction of this policy, a substantial minority of children, especially disadvantaged children, miss out on their 15 hours entitlement. Moreover, there is significant geographical variation in take-up. This raises some key questions:

- Why do some children, particularly disadvantaged children, not take up their 15 hours entitlement?
- What explains the geographical variation in take-up of the 15 hours entitlements?
- Can local authority (LA) actions support take-up of the 15 hours entitlements?
- What can be done nationally and locally to increase take-up and reduce inequalities in participation in early education?

The study addressed these questions through an extensive programme of research carried out in 2023 and 2024. The study included: a national survey of LA early years staff; qualitative research with parents, early education providers and LA early years staff; extensive analysis of secondary data on factors associated with take-up and LA variations in take-up; consultations with stakeholders.

The study did not explore influences on take-up of the additional 15 funded hours (30 hours in total) for working families, which aim to reduce childcare costs and support parents to work. However, the 30 hours for working families provide an important backdrop against which take-up of the 15 hours entitlements plays out.

What influences take-up of the 15 hours entitlement?

Our research highlights barriers to accessing the 15 hours entitlement driven by policy design, policy delivery, as well as family beliefs and preferences.

As previous research has shown, the eligibility criteria and application process for the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement can be a barrier to take-up for families. Our qualitative research highlights that this complexity was mirrored by the experiences of providers, who spoke of significant time spent administering this entitlement.

After years of perceived underfunding of the entitlements, research participants believed that the new funding rate for 0-2-year-olds makes provision for those age groups more financially viable. However, there was ongoing concern about the adequacy of funding for the 3-4-year-old entitlement, and inadequate funding to support disadvantaged children and particularly those with special education needs and disabilities (SEND). This combined with weak regulation of the delivery of funded hours has triggered responses by providers which create further barriers to take-up.

While some providers make inclusive free provision a priority, it now appears common practice (although not universal) for settings to constrain the number and structure of funded places offered and to ask families to pay additional charges for their entitlement. A two-tier system of provision is emerging in some cases, which, at its most extreme, is inferior and stigmatising for parents accessing the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement.

These provider responses, in turn, create further barriers to families which, together with views about the merits of early education for children of different ages, influence parental decisions about take-up.

The additional entitlements for working families appear to have complicated the picture. They are sending conflicting and confusing messages to parents about eligibility for, and the purpose of, the funded hours, presenting more barriers to take-up and adding to the administrative burden for providers.

Can local authorities make a difference to take-up of the 15 hours entitlements?

One of the reasons why take-up may differ across areas is because of variation in how the barriers described above exist and differentially play out across different local contexts. Our secondary analysis explored the relationship between local contextual factors – including the area socio-demographic profile and features of the local labour and childcare markets – and take-up of the entitlements at LA level.

This analysis shows that these factors can collectively explain around two thirds of the variation in take-up rates across areas for 3-4-year-olds, but just over one third for disadvantaged 2-year-olds. Among the factors that emerged as individually significant in affecting take-up were the proportion of the local population from minority ethnic groups and in professional occupations (in relation to the 2-year-old entitlement), and the

percentage of early education places delivered by the maintained sector¹ and in settings rated as outstanding by Ofsted (in relation to the 3–4-year-old entitlement).

This leaves plenty of room for other things to vary across LAs – potentially including LA actions – to help explain variations in take-up rates across areas, particularly the take-up of the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement.

Analysis of a national survey of LAs' actions to support take-up of the 15 hours entitlements found a reasonably strong and statistically significant association between home visits and take-up of the entitlement for disadvantaged 2-year-olds. There was also more tentative evidence that LAs which promoted entitlements via text messaging saw higher-than-expected take-up amongst disadvantaged 2-year-olds.

Through this analysis we also identified a set of LAs with higher-than-expected take-up of the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement and/or the universal entitlement for 3-4-year-olds given the context of their local areas. It was from this group that our sample of 18 LA case studies was drawn.

How can local authorities make a difference to take-up of the 15 hours entitlements?

We conducted in-depth research with early education and childcare teams across the 18 case study authorities, examining their methods for supporting families and providers. Our goal was to identify practices that might contribute to higher take-up rates.

LA support for families to make informed choices about entitlements comprise two interconnected components.

- Promoting widely the universal 3-4-year-old entitlement through a range of media, with support from other family-facing professionals and through peer-to-peer communication.
- Using a targeted and more resource-intensive approach to engage families eligible for the entitlement for disadvantaged 2-year-olds. This involved a relentless focus on monitoring families' engagement so that at every stage in the process the LA could step in to remove barriers to take-up. It also involved tailored and one-to-one support provided by a trusted professional over the phone or in person (e.g. home visits).

Case study LAs ensured sufficiency of local provision for all eligible children in two main ways:

- by regularly gathering comprehensive data on the state of the local early education services to identify gaps in provision and how to intervene to fill them,
- by relying heavily on some local settings to ensure sufficiency for disadvantaged children. These providers were primarily in the maintained and voluntary sector. While some for-profit settings also played an important role in catering for these

¹ The maintained sector includes nursery classes in primary schools, maintained nurseries and LA-run day nurseries.

groups, admission policies in this sector were much more varied and did not always support inclusive provision

The findings highlight four defining features of LAs that support high take-up of the 15 hours entitlements.

- Early education fully embedded in a robust local early years offer, with co-ordinated work across professional groups to identify and reach the families who need support to take up their entitlement.
- Effective use of local data and intelligence on families' needs and supply of early education services.
- An in-house Family Information Service (FIS) with a telephone line and substantial experience to provide tailored support to meet families' diverse needs.
- An early education team with sufficient capacity, expertise and connections with other services to effectively support take-up and delivery of the 15 hours entitlements.

A robust early years offer with fully embedded early education seems particularly important for strengthening LA approaches to supporting take-up. However, it may not be enough on its own; the other three features also appear vital for supporting high take-up of the 15 hours entitlement.

Recommendations for supporting higher take-up of the 15 hours entitlements

Our findings suggest that changes in policy design and delivery are needed for the 15 hours entitlements to achieve the aim of reducing inequalities in access to early education, particularly given the expanding 30 hours entitlements for working families.

Policy design

The following policy changes would help to ensure that children from more disadvantaged backgrounds are better able to access high quality and genuinely free early education.

- **Making the 2-year-old entitlement universal** could support take-up among disadvantaged children and eliminate a complex system with different application processes which are time consuming for parents, providers and LAs.
- **Funding rates that cover all the costs of delivering a funded place** with a review of the 3-4-year-old funding rate, which is still widely seen as not financially viable.
- Increasing the **Early Years Pupil Premium in line with the Primary Pupil Premium** to support the learning and development of disadvantaged children and better support providers who cater for them.
- A more **flexible SEND funding system**, based on assessments that can adequately identify additional needs in the early years, with adequate SEND funding ring-fenced for early education.

These measures could reduce unequal access, but differences between funding rates and parent-paid fees may persist in a system with primarily non-maintained providers, perpetuating unequal access risks. A progressive subsidy model should be considered where fees for all families are subsidized based on income, offering higher subsidies for lower-income families and lower subsidies for higher-income families.

Policy delivery

Delivery of the entitlements would be strengthened through the following national actions:

- **Clear and effective conditionalities** attached to the delivery of funded hours to ensure they are genuinely free and inclusive, and giving LAs the levers and support to enforce such conditions.
- All publicly funded **providers should prioritise the admission of children in care and adopted children** – this is a small but vulnerable group that is not well served by the current system.
- **Separate and dedicated funding to LAs** to support take-up of the entitlements, rather than funding deducted from the government grant to pay providers for the entitlement.
- A national strategy to provide additional resources to settings for **supporting inclusive participation and high-quality provision**.
- **Peer learning** to enable LAs to share promising practice on how to support take-up of the early education entitlements.
- A robust **national strategy to strengthen the early education workforce** to ensure good quality funded early education for all eligible children.
- A **transparent offer** that makes it clear to parents how many funded hours their child is entitled to - for example, 15 hours a week during term time or 11 hours a week all year round, or 570 hours a year.
- **Co-production with parents** from a range of backgrounds to develop more fit-for-purpose messages and communication tools about the early education entitlements.

Local action

National policy changes would be more impactful if complemented with local efforts to enhance LA approaches for supporting take-up of the 15 hours entitlements, such as:

- A **relentless focus on ensuring no opportunity is missed to identify disadvantaged children** using a variety of data sources and ensuring that early education entitlement 'conversations' become a routine part of the work of all family-facing professionals.
- **Tailored one-to one-support to families who face barriers to take-up** provided by an in-house Family Information Service (FIS), a FIS telephone line and home visits to families who need this type of support.
- Supporting **peer-to-peer communication** to promote the benefits of the entitlements and gather parental feedback on what LAs can do to remove barriers to take-up.
- The above initiatives would be more effective if they are underpinned by a **robust multiagency vision and strategy** for early years supported by senior managers and elected members, with early education seen as a key part of the local early years offer and embedded in the work of all family-facing professionals.

In conclusion

A growing body of evidence shows we may be reaching a crossroad. There is a serious risk that a policy environment which prioritises working families and practices that undermine equitable access to the 15 hours entitlements could exacerbate inequalities in early childhood.

Our research suggests that the following actions should be prioritised for the policy to achieve its original aim of supporting participation in early education and reducing inequalities:

- A **universal entitlement to 15 hours of funded early education for 2-year-olds**, as this is possibly the most effective way of supporting participation among disadvantaged children.
- A **'fair' funding model** that fully covers the costs of delivering funded hours, including the resources required to support children with SEND and other disadvantaged groups.
- **Strengthening conditionality** for the delivery of the entitlements and supporting LAs to enforce it to ensure that the 15 hours are genuinely free.
- **Recognising the key role LAs can play** in ensuring children who can benefit most from early education access the 15 hours entitlements, with separate, dedicated funding to deliver the policy locally.

1. Introduction

This chapter outlines the aims of our study and briefly discusses developments in the early education entitlements policy. It then provides an overview of the study methodology and the report content.

1.1. Aims of the study

The 15 hours early education entitlement for all 3-4-year-olds and disadvantaged 2-year-olds in England aims to support children's development and reduce inequalities in participation in early education. While take-up of early education has risen since the introduction of this policy, a substantial minority of children, especially disadvantaged children, miss out on their entitlement.

This raises the questions of why some children don't take up their entitlements; why take-up is lower among disadvantaged children; and what can be done to increase take-up and reduce inequalities in participation.

The study was undertaken to address these questions and provide robust and comprehensive evidence on the barriers to, and facilitators of, take-up in different local areas and amongst different groups. The latter include those from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and ethnic groups and children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND).

More specifically the study aimed to:

- Produce new qualitative and quantitative evidence on structural features of local early education systems that seem to support (or undermine) take-up of the 15 hours entitlement among different groups of children.
- Construct richer measures of take-up of the 15 hours entitlements and explore how these vary across groups of children and local authorities (LAs).
- Identify promising local approaches and good practice to support take-up of the 15 hours entitlements that could be adopted more widely.
- Identify what policy changes may be required to support take-up of the 15 hours entitlement.

The study did not explore influences on take-up of the additional 15 funded hours (30 hours in total) accessible to working families, which aim to reduce childcare costs and support parents to work. This is because our focus was on the policy's aim to support children's development and reduce inequalities in participation in early education.

However, the 30 hours for working families provide an important backdrop against which take-up of the 15 hours entitlements plays out. As discussed later, the current policy focus on working families may exacerbate barriers for take-up among children who are most likely to benefit from early education.

1.2. Background

1.2.1. The early education entitlements policy development

Inequalities in children's development emerge early and widen as they get older (Crawford et al., 2017). Participation in early education, especially higher quality settings, benefits children's development in the short and longer term (Blanden et al., 2016; Gray-Lobe et al., 2021; Taggart et al., 2015). These benefits are bigger for disadvantaged children (Burger, 2010; Cascio, 2015), indicating participation in high-quality early education can be a route to reducing inequalities.

The early education entitlements policy was originally introduced to support children's early learning and development and to reduce inequalities in participation in early learning. However, since 2017, the policy focus has shifted with new entitlements for more hours and younger children introduced to support parental (mainly maternal) employment (Figure 1.1). This policy shift is leading to a substantial increase in younger children from working families² entitled to funded hours, while the number of disadvantaged³ 2-year-olds eligible for the entitlement has declined.

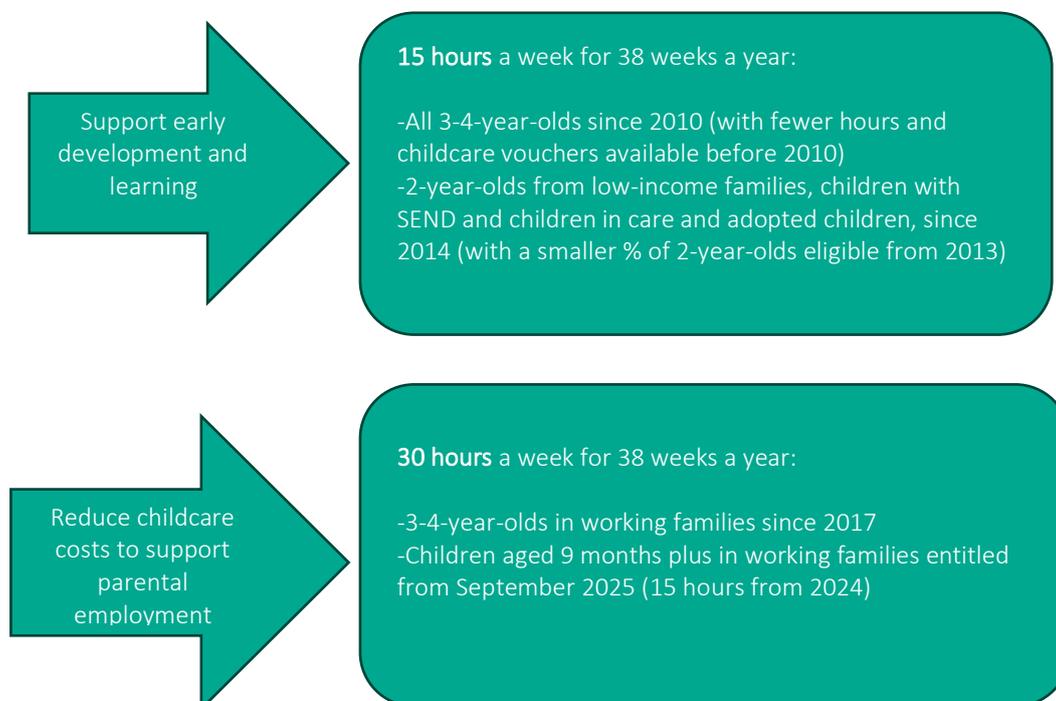
In 2015 the government estimated that approximately 40% of 2-year-olds would be classified as disadvantaged and be eligible for the entitlement. By 2022-23 the actual percentage of 2-year-olds estimated to be eligible had dropped to 27% as income

² To be eligible for this entitlement, all parents in the household must earn between the equivalent of 16 hours per week at the national minimum wage and £100,000 per year.

³ This includes children with special educational needs, those in care or adopted, or those from low income families, in which caregivers are in receipt of one of the following benefits: Income Support, Income-based Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA), Income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), Universal credit and an annual household income below £15,400 (after tax, and not including benefits), the guaranteed element of Pension Credit, Child Tax Credit and/or Working Tax Credit and an annual household income below £16,190 (before tax), the Working Tax Credit 4-week run-on.

thresholds for the entitlement have not changed since 2018, despite substantial inflation since then (Drayton and Farquharson, 2023).

Figure 1.1: Early education entitlements



1.2.2 Take-up of the entitlements: who is missing out?

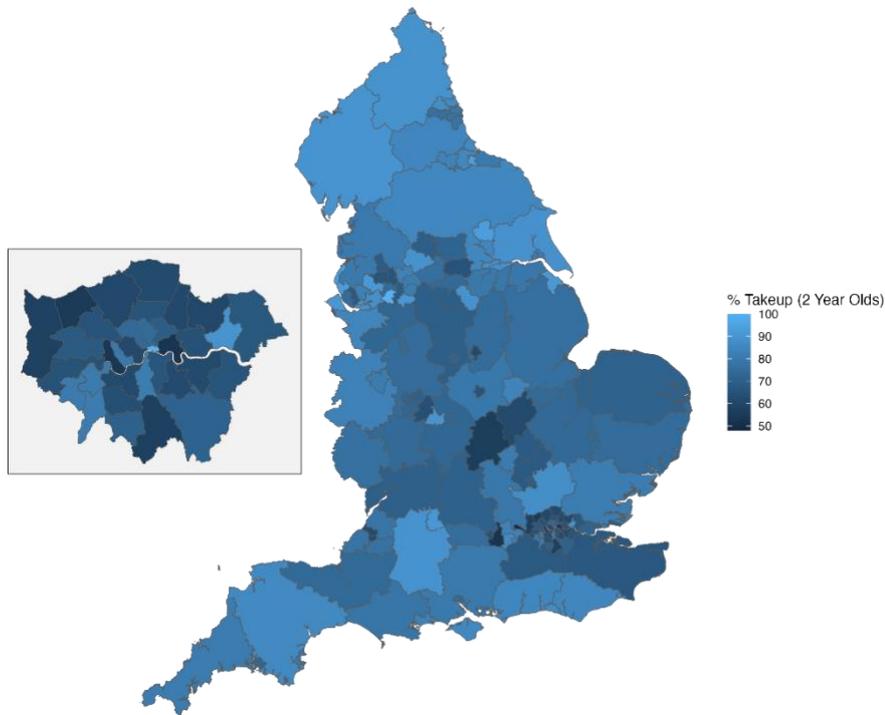
Since the introduction of the entitlements, participation in early education has substantially increased. In 1999, 65% of 3-4-year-olds were in early education (La Valle et al., 1999), compared with 95% in 2024 (DfE, 2024). In 2015, a year after the entitlement was expanded to the 40% most disadvantaged 2-year-olds, take-up was 58% (NAO, 2020), compared with 75% in 2024 (DfE, 2024).

Despite this progress, a substantial minority of children miss out on some or all of their entitlement, including some who start school with no formal learning experiences. Disadvantaged children, including those from persistently poor White British households, ethnic minority backgrounds, with English as an additional language, and children with SEND are significantly less likely to take up their entitlements (Campbell et al., 2018; Harding & Hardy, 2016). A recent study has also highlighted that even when children do access their entitlement, attendance can be inconsistent. Analysis of data from three LAs (Leeds, Stockport and York) shows that disadvantaged 2-year-olds taking funded hours were twice as likely as other 2-year-olds in the nursery to attend for less than 70% of registered hours (Nesta, 2023).

Of particular interest for our purposes is the fact that there are large geographical differences. Take-up rates are lower in urban areas and particularly in London (Albakri et al., 2018), which may be due to higher levels of disadvantage and population mobility (London Councils, 2021). There is also substantial variation across different LAs. For example, as shown in Figure 1.2, in January 2023, take-up of the 2-year-old entitlement varied from less than 50% to more than 90% across different authorities. Moreover, as shown in Figure 1.3, even amongst areas with similar local contexts there are large

differences, for example take-up of the 3-4-year-old entitlement varied from less than 50% to more than 90% amongst LAs within London.⁴

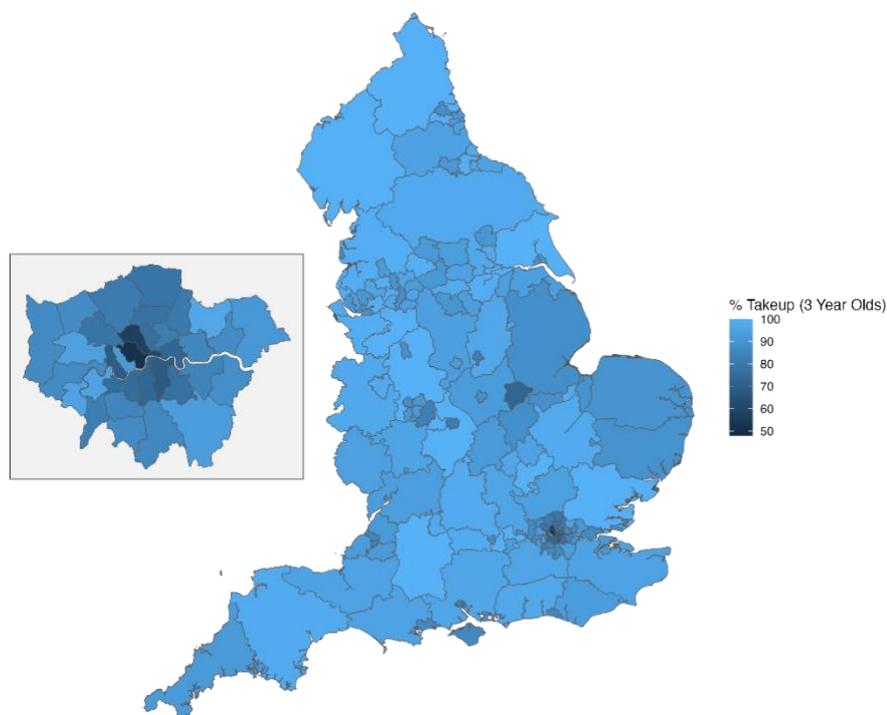
Figure 1.2: Take-up of the 15 hours entitlement for disadvantaged 2-year-olds by local authority, January 2023



Notes: map created from figures published by the Department for Education: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-provision-children-under-5/2023>.

⁴ Authors' calculations using statistics from <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-provision-children-under-5/2023>.

Figure 1.3: Take-up of the 15 hours entitlement for all 3-4-year-olds by local authority, January 2023



Notes: map created from figures published by the Department for Education: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-provision-children-under-5/2023>.

These differences suggest not only that local context matters for the take-up of the 15 hours entitlements, but that there is a potentially large role for other local factors – including LA actions – to influence take-up. A key goal of our study was to identify such factors, with the aim of sharing learning about successful practices.

1.3. Overview of the study design

The study involved a comprehensive programme of quantitative and qualitative research (Figure 1.4), focused on exploring variations in take-up of the entitlements across LAs. Key elements of our design were:

- A survey of LAs in England to gather quantitative data on how they support families to take-up the 15 hours entitlements and how they help local early education providers to deliver funded hours. The survey also explored perceptions of how restrictions on the way in which funded hours are offered affect take-up of the entitlements (Appendix A includes information on the survey design).
- Analysis of secondary data to identify LAs with higher take-up of the entitlements than would be expected given their socio-demographic profile and features of the local labour and childcare markets. The secondary analysis was also combined with the LA survey data and data from Coram Family and Childcare on their Parent Champions scheme to identify correlations between take-up of the 15 hours and

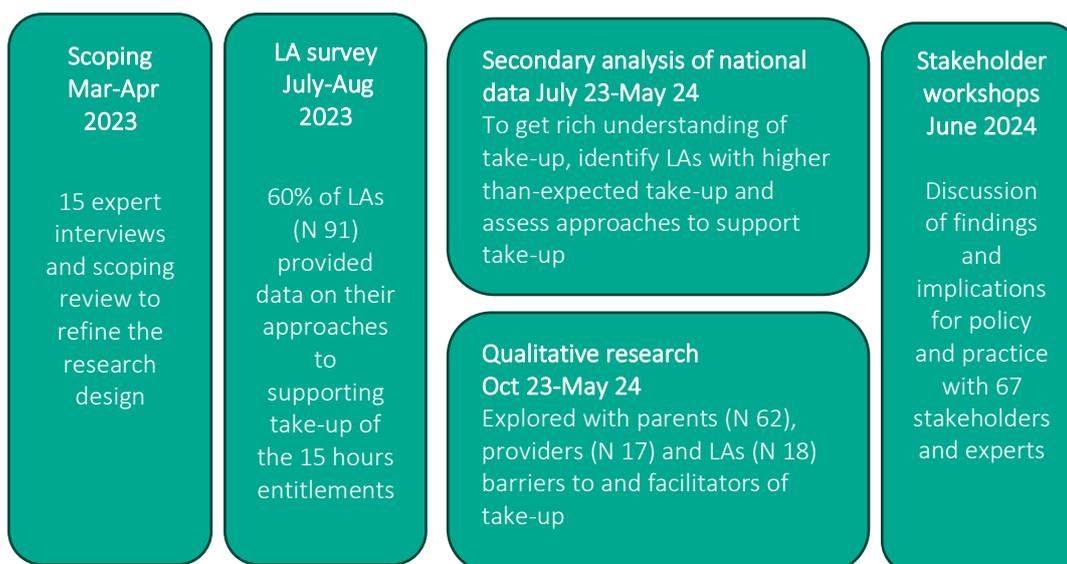
LA actions to support take-up (Appendix B includes technical information about the secondary analysis).

- Qualitative interviews with 18 LAs with higher-than-expected take-up of the entitlements, to provide an in-depth understating of their approaches for supporting take-up. Qualitative data was also collected from parents and early education providers from a range of geographic areas in terms of take-up levels. This included parents who made different choices about take-up of the entitlements, and a mix of provider types (including not-for-profit, for-profit and maintained settings) (Appendix C includes information on the qualitative research design).

The design was informed by a scoping review (Outhwaite et al, 2023) and 15 expert interviews. The emerging findings and recommendations from the study were discussed at three workshops with early education stakeholders and experts.

Throughout the study our work was informed by an advisory group of parents with young children and an advisory group including early education experts, representatives from the early education sector, and national and local policy makers.

Figure 1.4: Overview of the study design



1.4. Report outline

Chapter 2 provides qualitative and quantitative findings on the structural and other factors that influence take-up of the 15 hours entitlements, with a particular focus on disadvantaged 2-year-olds.

Chapter 3 summarises quantitative analysis undertaken to explain how much of the variation in take-up rates across areas can be explained by contextual factors, and to what extent LA actions may matter. It also describes correlations between take-up and LA actions using a national sample.

Chapter 4 explores how LAs can make a difference to take-up, by focusing on 18 authorities with take-up above what would be expected given the context of their local areas. The chapter provides an insight on local approaches to support inclusive participation in early education and shows how LAs can overcome barriers to take-up.

Chapter 5 presents our conclusions and recommendations for ensuring that children who may benefit the most from early education can access the 15 hours entitlements. The chapter provides recommendations for national policy, as well as suggestions of local approaches to supporting take-up that could be more widely implemented.

2. What influences take-up of the early education entitlements?

This chapter looks at what influences take-up of early education entitlements by families, with a particular focus on the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement. It draws on the qualitative research with parents, providers and local authorities (LAs), a survey of LAs undertaken in Summer 2023, and analysis of national datasets. Full details of these approaches can be found in the Appendix.

Our analysis takes a systems approach. It recognises that parents' decisions are shaped by influences at multiple levels - considerations relating to the child, the wider family and the community, but shaped also by the policies surrounding entitlements and by how providers implement and respond to those policies. LAs mediate those multiple influences, enhancing ways in which these influences might positively

affect the take-up of early education or compensating for ways in which influencing factors might act against it - discussed further in the two chapters that follow this one.

2.1. Policy-level influences

Our analysis highlights ways in which competing policy aims and shortcomings in the formulation of policy around the early entitlements play out across the system.

Multiple entitlements create very a complex system for parents (and providers) to navigate, with conflicting messages to parents and unclear communication by national government departments and agencies. At its heart is a longstanding tension between the different aims of the early education entitlements. As highlighted in the introduction, for some entitlements, the primary aim is to incentivise parents' (and particularly mothers') labour market participation, and for others, the primary aim is to support the development of children (with particular regard to those growing up in adversity).

The dominance of the labour market participation aim plays out in the prevalent language of 'childcare' rather than 'early education' in national government communications, and in the more generous entitlements for working families. It is reinforced further by the expansion of funded entitlements, as we discuss in Chapter 4.

The result, as shown in previous research, is that some parents are not aware of their entitlement to a funded place (Ipsos MORI, 2012) and this is particularly true of the 2-year-old entitlement (Harding & Hardy, 2016). Awareness of entitlements is disproportionately low among families in low-income areas and in temporary accommodation, as well as among ethnic minority families, recent migrants and transitional families (Albakri et al., 2018; Dickens et al., 2012; Gibb et al., 2011; Harding & Hardy, 2016; Pascal et al., 2022; Speight et al., 2010).

Parents find the system confusing, hard to access and navigate (Albakri et al., 2018; Chadwick et al., 2017), and for some there is a stigma associated with the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement (Kazimirski et al., 2008; Pascal et al., 2022) to a degree that means some do not access a place. Our research, added to previous evidence, highlights that some parents know about the entitlements from their social networks, children's centres, workplaces, and national news, but felt the information provided was often incomplete or inaccurate. Parents frequently found the information presented on government websites confusing and tough to navigate.

*"[Funded hours are] a bit of a grey area It's about as clear as mud."
(Parent Focus Group)*

Parents found it difficult to access information about the types of support available and their eligibility, confusing entitlements with other forms of support such as Tax-Free Childcare and finding it hard to grasp the different entitlements.

"I think there's two different entitlements I've known people that tried to go for one and they're not entitled to that, [then] they've gone after the other one and they are, but in between they've hesitated whether they even want to apply for the

second one because they felt a little bit silly applying for the first one and getting rejected. [Ascertaining entitlements is] trial and error.” (Parent Focus Group)

Confusion about entitlements was particularly evident among parents of 2-year-olds in our sample, that also included two international student parents who had not known that their child was entitled to funded early education:

*“There was entitlement for international overseas students who earn minimum wage, [and] we were entitled to have 15 hours from two years old ... [but] we didn't know that ... until our [second child] was turning two-and-a-half My son started [at] three-and-a-half It's like a year he spent with me [instead of going to nursery] because we didn't have money for any kind of nurseries.”
(Parent Focus Group)*

LA representatives (and to a lesser extent providers) described the challenges this raises for families. They frequently encounter parents not aware of the entitlements, or who wrongly understand them as being for working families only, or believe they will have to look for work if they take a funded place. The lengthy application processes, complex calculations regarding a child's age or start term, and online platforms organised by eligibility criteria rather than a universal system, make this a formidable task for parents, particularly those with English as an additional language or with low literacy or digital skills.

“Childcare Choices is a very, very confusing platform It talks about 30 hours, it talks about 15 hours, which is working families. It talks about 15 hours for families in receipt of government support. If you've got low literacy levels, how on earth do you navigate your way around that system? We've got two systems the system for disadvantaged two-year-olds, the low-income families, and a system for working families. It's all linked to [your] National Insurance number and [the] DWP. Why is it not the same system and [families] get told which [entitlement] they're eligible for?” (LA representative)

The system also places a significant administrative burden on providers and LAs. Having to navigate between different funding sources was experienced as confusing and over-complex. Providers face an administrative burden when conducting eligibility checks, handling appeals, following up with parents, and assisting with applications and verification. This extra work can make providers hesitant to offer funded places.

“[The setting has] one person [whose] sole job ... is to support parents on their funding, and she does that, it takes her ... four days a week. She had 52 emails in two hours yesterday from parents The funding forms that the local authorities sent out that our parents have to complete are so complicated that the parents don't know how to complete them. [we] have to help them do that.” (For-profit setting)

“There does need to be a complete review I think the whole system is quite flawed now. We have got a lot of different funding systems coming in. Parents don't understand them. Providers don't really understand it. There's a huge amount of admin. There are little bits of funding coming here and there, and it's just really clunky.” (LA representative)

Funding from the Early Years Pupil Premium, which is available to support providers in meeting the needs of disadvantaged children, was seen as low, particularly in comparison

to the Primary Pupil Premium. The work involved in gathering the information from parents to apply for what was considered a small sum (around £300-400 a year) was not seen worth it.

The second key issue is that (as we note in Chapter 1) the income threshold for eligibility for the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement has not been raised since 2018. LA representatives noted that a cohort of disadvantaged families who would have been entitled to 15 hours had the income threshold been uprated, are not able to access this support, even though this group is more likely than better-off parents to have additional needs (for example, multiple births or where a child has developmental challenges).

2.2. Delivery-level influences

The early education entitlements are intended to provide access to free early education for all 3-4-year-olds and disadvantaged 2-year-olds. In practice, we heard widespread examples of providers implementing the policy in ways not aligned with this intention. Our analysis highlights the twinned issues of government guidance for providers which lacks clarity and precision, and reduced powers for LAs to intervene where providers' implementation goes against either the letter or the spirit of the policy. In this section we describe providers' approaches, and in Chapter 4 we describe how LAs respond to these.

The key issues we discuss here are provider approaches to restricting the number of funded places and charging additional fees. Table 1 below illustrates the prevalence of these issues as reported in our national LA survey.

Table 2.1: LAs who agreed or strongly agreed that the statements listed in the table were barriers to take-up of the entitlements in their area in the 2022-23 academic year

In relation to:	Disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement	3-4-year-old entitlement
	% of LA representatives that agree or strongly agree	% of LA representatives that agree or strongly agree
Local providers:		
Do not offer/limit 15 hours funded places for children with SEND	65	50
Do not offer/limit 15 hours funded places	57	30
Offer 15 funded hours in a way that doesn't work for families e.g. limit on the days/hours when hours can be taken	51	34

In relation to:	Disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement	3-4-year-old entitlement
Expect families to pay for additional hours or top ups when taking 15 funded hours	40	54
Offer 15 funded hours only if cannot fill spaces with fee-paying families/those entitled to 30 hours	21	20

Source: Early Education Entitlement Study survey of local authorities

There was clear variation among the providers in our study on these issues. Larger chains were most likely to restrict the number of funded places and make additional charges, not-for-profit and school-based settings were less likely do so. But the distinctions were not clear cut, and some small for-profit providers described prioritising the needs of local families and children over their profits. For example, a small private chain in our sample served the most deprived areas of the LA and delivered only funded and genuinely free places. It had a strong community focus including setting up an eight-place nursery in a high-rise block of council flats because there were no other suitable premises that parents from that estate could easily reach. The providers also described how they support new children:

“We do home visits before children start ... so we build a really good picture of the journey before they even come in ... we learn so much from these visits ... they help us to prepare the room with personalised items based on the child’s interest such as rhyme bags or painting materials. We work hard with our families here. They know us and they feel safe... they don’t feel judged.” (For-profit setting)

2.2.1. Restricting funded places

Some providers in our sample, particularly in voluntary and maintained sectors prioritise places for disadvantaged 2-year-olds, because of the higher funding rates or because of the setting's social purpose. However, others said they restrict the number of 2-year old places because they carry additional costs, as disadvantaged children may have more needs, and are less likely to pay for additional hours.

Additionally, some providers described restricting the number of places for 3-4 year olds who only took 15 hours or the number of 3-4 year old places overall (because of the funding rates), to sustain their financial viability. The school-based providers in our sample offered few or no disadvantaged 2-year-old places. Some for-profit providers similarly offered few or no places for disadvantaged 2-year-olds, instead prioritising places for working parents who generated additional income paid by parents.

“In my accountant's words, 'steer away from three- and four-year old children and take the two-year-olds and under' from a financial benefit and for sustainability of the setting.” (For-profit setting)

Providers also described limiting the number of children with SEND that they take. LA representatives widely described providers discouraging or refusing places to parents using

the disadvantaged entitlements, or who have children with SEND and, to varying degrees, tried to intervene to stop this (see Chapter 4 for further information).

Providers also structure funded places in ways that are not in line with what families want and need, with the result (and sometimes the explicit intention) of discouraging parents of disadvantaged 2-year-olds. It was common to require parents to take hours that fit with pre-set morning and afternoon sessions, but many providers went beyond this. For example, they offered only the less popular sessions (usually afternoon sessions), or three five-hour sessions rather than sessions spread across five weekdays, or in 1.5 full days. Some insisted on places being taken all year, where some families wanted term-time only provision. LA representatives similarly described these practices as widespread, the most extreme example being a setting that insisted on the hours being taken in a single 10-hour block on Fridays.

"The problem starts if a family wants to access ... only the funded hours, because that makes it less sustainable for us, and it forces us to impose on them a particular pattern or restriction on the hours they can access, essentially." (For-profit setting)

The parents in our interviews and focus groups had experienced these restrictions on the structure of places they were offered:

"It's down to the nurseries how they choose to [offer funded hours]. So ... say your child is in three days a week from 9:00 till 3:00, and if you're working part-time it might be better for you to have one full day or maybe spread it across two days, but you don't have much of a say in it, it's fixed." (Parent Focus Group)

Flexibility is often more easily granted when parents can pay additional costs, making it unsustainable for some families.

"A lot of places are trying to do the whole morning and afternoon thing, from what I've heard from other friends, unless you're paying for it, and then they're more happy to work with you." (Parent Interview)

2.2.2. Additional charges for funded places

As well as restrictions on how funded hours could be accessed, additional charges also could represent a barrier to take-up of the 15 hours entitlements. Parents, providers and LA representatives reported that only some funded places are genuinely free, as it has become common practice for settings to charge for extra hours and registration fees (prohibited by national guidance – see Box 2.1), deposits, or meal/consumable charges (permitted by the guidance). Children from disadvantaged families may therefore have to pay for meals while in early education, though they would be entitled to free school meals once they start school.

At the time of field work, the *Early education and childcare: Statutory guidance for local authorities* stated that, though parents can "be expected to pay" for additional goods and services such as meals and snacks, trips, and nappies, those charges "must be voluntary". The use of the word 'voluntary' was removed from the most recent update, as shown in box 2.1 below.

Box 1: New Early education and childcare: Statutory guidance for local authorities (from 1 April 2024)

“Government funding is intended to deliver 15 or 30 hours a week of free, high quality, flexible childcare. It is not intended to cover the costs of meals, other consumables, additional hours or additional services.

Local authorities should...:

- Ensure that providers are aware that they **can charge for meals and snacks as part of a free entitlement place** and that they can also **charge for consumables**, such as nappies or sun cream, and for services such as trips and specialist tuition.
- (...) Ensure that providers are **mindful of the impact** of additional charges on parents, especially the **most disadvantaged**.
- Providers, who choose to offer the free entitlements, are responsible for setting their own policy on providing parents with options for alternatives to additional charges, including allowing parents to supply their own meals or nappies, or waiving or reducing the cost of meals and snacks.
- Ensure that providers are aware that they can charge a refundable deposit to parents accessing the free entitlements but should also consider if this would prevent take up, especially for disadvantaged families.
- (...) Ensure that providers **do not**:
 - **charge parents top-up fees** (any difference between a provider’s normal charge to parents and the funding they receive from the local authority to deliver free places)
 - require parents to pay a **registration fee** as a condition of taking up their child’s free place.”

Some providers - particularly not-for-profit and maintained settings - had a policy of no additional charges for parents using the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement and would not mention any such charge to parents. However, many described their approach as asking parents for a 'voluntary contribution', either raising it with all parents on disadvantaged entitlements or forming their own view of which parents '*genuinely*' or '*really*' could not afford it. The level of charge varied, as did whether providers exercised discretion in applying it.

It was clear that some providers exerted pressure on parents to pay, for example sending a letter emphasising that the setting is not a charity and needs to cover its costs, not allowing children to take part in activities where there was a charge for consumables, and telling parents that their child would not feel included.

In the provider interviews, there were examples of approaches allowed in the guidance, such as giving parents the option of providing their own nappies, baby wipes and snacks if they did not pay the top-up fee or providing a packed lunch for their child if they did not pay the lunch charge.

However, there were also examples of parents being given fewer hours (other hours being used notionally to fund additional costs), or the 'option' to accept fewer hours in return for lunch being provided. LA representatives widely described these approaches, including an

example where parents using funded places had been told to provide their own toilet paper, and when a new (paying) parent asked whether she should do the same, she was told that this was not necessary, because the parents bringing toilet paper were those on funded entitlements.

"[Charges are technically voluntary] but we do rely very heavily on all the families ideally complying with it ... otherwise we wouldn't be surviving In a cohort there might be one or two families that find it difficult or ask us for a reduction, or if there are some sort of extenuating circumstances where we choose to forfeit some of it." (For-profit setting)

"They would have to bring a separate snack every day for their child. I explain to them that we're an inclusive setting, and through their own choices, they may be choosing for their child not to be included. Of course, they're included in snack time, but they'll be eating something different." (For-profit setting)

"We usually send something saying we're a charity and we rely on this, just to encourage people to pay it." (Not-for-profit setting)

Parents had experienced these costs, and LAs described them as widespread:

"I managed to register [my child] for the free childcare but it wasn't as free as they say It's less money, yes, but I don't think they should call it free childcare, because it's not free." (Parent Focus Group)

2.2.3. Inequity in provision

Parents also report unwelcoming attitudes from providers when inquiring about entitlements. This may mean less consideration for their requests or unhelpful responses for application procedures or general entitlement information.

"Especially ... private nurseries [respond to requests saying] 'Oh, free ones', because they've only got limited spaces Sometimes, it felt not very nice calling them because [of] the energy you would get off them on the phone once you tell them you're not actually paying." (Parent Interview)

In some cases, this unwelcoming attitude has led to parents witnessing funded and paid children being separated into different rooms, with different activities and materials being offered. Two providers similarly referred to other settings where children on funded places were in a separate room - a practice that providers and LAs we interviewed said they would never countenance.

"I found out personally the paid children are given more importance. I saw [and] found out from other parents as well [that] paid children ... have many activities like craft, colouring, many things ... but my son's ... classroom [doesn't] have anything. It's just toys around. They don't even allow us to enter the classroom or to see what is happening We have to stand outside, and there is no shade. When we go to collect or drop, we have to stand in the rain. It's on the roadside but the paid classrooms are into the compound." (Parent Focus Group)

"There was one nursery I visited ... They had one room which was funded only, and it was the only room that was upstairs with no access to a garden. It was very

much a two-tier nursery. It was like this is all beautiful and lovely, and 'Oh, yes, that room is for the funded only', and it was awful." (Parent Focus Group)

It was clear from the accounts of parents that these experiences play into their decisions about the use of early education. LA representatives had not encountered these practices but said they would immediately intervene if they were aware of them.

2.2.4. Provider pressures created by policy shortcomings

The provider practices stem from delivery challenges which are interconnected, and reported to be the result of policy shortcomings:

- The funding levels for 3-4-year-old places in particular were widely described by providers and LA representatives as below the actual costs incurred, with the result that providers need to raise additional charges and/or prioritise parents paying privately or topping up the entitlements. New rates were being announced around the time that fieldwork was undertaken, and the new rates for the 2-year-old entitlement were often seen as more viable.

"The 3-4-year-old funding [level] has the capacity to decimate the sector. I've been in early years since 2000 I have never known it to be as bad as it is now, ever." (LA representative)

'It is the rate for 3-4-year olds that is terribly low. It's actually gone down. They're actually now paying us less than they were last year.'" (Not-for-profit setting)

- Providers and LA representatives reported recruitment and retention challenges which they perceived to be largely driven by low wages and high stress. Many providers are not operating at full capacity because of this. Operating with small numbers of children each taking more hours, and deprioritising funded 2-year-old places because of additional pressures, were viewed as necessary efficiencies.
- Providers also widely described post-Covid-19 increases in the number of children with additional needs, including speech and language delays and emotional or behavioural difficulties. They reported insufficient staff and local support capacity to meet these children's needs, putting further pressure on staffing and on setting capacity. For example, an LA representative described a setting where 12 children in one room had some form of additional educational need. Providers described heavy administrative demands and delays in receiving payments to support these children.
- Places for disadvantaged 2-year-olds were seen as particularly burdensome for settings due to higher ratios, more turnover of children over the week, less chance of top-up income, safeguarding issues and additional work assessing and meeting additional needs. While the new funding rate for children aged 2 and under was seen as more financially viable, SEND funding and the Early Years Pupil Premium were still seen as inadequate to support children who required additional support.
- A final weakness in policy design, perhaps more pertinent to the 3-4 year-old entitlement, is the absence of constraints on profit-making by providers.

As shown in Table 2.1, the LA survey mapped the proportion of LAs indicating that different restrictions are used by providers, with half or more indicating that providers restrict or do not offer funded places for 2-year-olds or limit places for children with SEND. Whether or not LAs were able to intervene, and how firmly, varied. They noted that national

government guidance is not sufficiently clear to providers about what is and is not allowed, leaving space for these practices.

2.2.5. Implications of entitlements for working families

There was widespread concern among LA representatives and settings serving disadvantaged families that the new entitlements for working families will place further pressures on provision for disadvantaged children. Some LA representatives anticipated limited additional demand as many of the families with new entitlements were already using early education, and some providers welcomed the opportunity and planned to expand. However, there were concerns about:

- Working families being likely to act faster than disadvantaged families, particularly given that children in working families become entitled at a younger age. Several providers were already seeing this, and some LAs had chosen not to publicise the new entitlements so that available places were not taken up by faster-acting working families, before those with greater needs could secure a place.

"Is it Child A or Child B that the setting takes? [Places for disadvantaged 2-year-olds will be] swallowed up with the rapid surge of working parents who know how to find things and get things and know their entitlements." (LA representative)

"The disadvantaged families who had that funding for a really, really important reason won't get it because our working parents are much more organised, and the implication of [disadvantaged families] not getting a childcare place is that they have to give up work." (School-based setting)

- Providers prioritising working families because they would purchase additional hours, pay add-on charges, require fewer handovers and children would have fewer additional needs. Several providers anticipated making these choices.

"I think from a company perspective and financially, you're going to have to pick the parent that's paying But some of them are from very vulnerable families and they would benefit so much more from being in a nursery I would like to think not but in the real world, we have to be realistic. I think I would go with paying [families]." (Not for-profit setting)

- The number of hours available through the disadvantaged entitlement compared with working entitlements increasing the attainment gap:

"They're getting only half the entitlement of working parents Is the gap going to widen between these two groups again? The whole reason for the two-year-old disadvantaged programme was to close that gap." (LA representative)

- Pressures on staff capacity, both in terms of number of children and the capacity to meet the needs of very young children, and challenges in sustaining quality in the face of stretched staffing capacity.
- The increased proportion of funded places requiring more administration, with additional challenges where LAs were viewed as late payers.
- Increased pressure on SEND inclusion funds and other support.
- An increasingly complex array of existing, changing and new entitlements.

These pressures were seen as particularly acute for the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement, with concerns that these children would find it particularly difficult to find

places. Overall, our analysis suggests that entitlements for working families are likely to exacerbate distinctions between funding entitlements.

'It's just a frustration that the reform work that will be taking place is focused on working parents. There just doesn't seem to be anything nationally that's coming down about the disadvantaged children. We have to support their outcomes It just seems to be driven by the economy.' (LA representative)

2.3. Family and community-level influences

The final set of influences that shape take-up of early education are family- and community-level influences. We focus on the views of parents, providers and LAs, as well as some of the characteristics of the neighbourhoods in which parents are making choices, including the demographic profile of the communities living there, and the characteristics of their labour and childcare markets. We included a wide range of parents in the qualitative research, including some who had not been eligible for the disadvantaged entitlements, and we were not able to systematically link parents' views with their eligibility for and take-up of the funded entitlements.

2.3.1. Parents' views

Family influences centre on the pre-eminent role that parents see themselves as playing in their children's development. Parents recognise that the first years of their children's lives serve as a foundational period for their development and growth. They emphasise the importance of attending to children's care during these years and consider the environment central to their well-being. This includes meeting basic needs like nutrition and sleep, as well as cognitive and socio-emotional needs through learning and interaction. Interactions with adults and other children stand out as enriching experiences, and safety is also crucial.

"What definitely helps children learn ... is ... the family. All learning starts from the family before the child goes out to nursery Whatever the child sees at home, from his siblings, his parents, he's quick to copy that aspect of life before taking it outside The primary thing that really influences a child's behaviour or learning pattern all centres on the family." (Parent Focus Group)

"Playing, it's an important [influence]. [Children] just learn a lot just from grabbing objects, being around pastels, building towers, seeing colours ... reading books to them. They learn to look at the pictures and to follow a story, and they learn new vocabulary, and when they start learning words they can ask you 'What does this mean, and that?' In general, spending time with adults just doing things with them, interacting with them ... feeling loved when you're with them, and you hug them and you cuddle them ... That creates those connections ... that they need when they're little." (Parent Interview)

Early education is seen by parents as a crucial influence in children's development as well, but there was a view that children may not be ready for early education at the point when they become eligible for a funded place, with some parents perceiving that younger children, facing emotional regulation challenges like tantrums and mood swings, benefit most from close, personalised care. This belief is reinforced when they observe their children struggling to adjust to nursery or hear about this from other parents. Such difficulties highlight their preference for delaying nursery enrolment until they feel their child is more prepared to start early education.

“[A] key influence when [children] are this young ... until they are 2 or 3 years old and a bit more established ... is a healthy, happy parent ... that is not stressed and is just there for the child.” (Parent Interview)

“I've noticed among some fellow parents, that three seems to be an age where they decide to go to nursery It's getting close to that school age and ... preparation for that.” (Parent in Focus Group)

A general belief is that early education aligns better with developmental needs for older children (e.g. from 3 years old onwards), and is strongly linked with school preparation and readiness. From this standpoint, parents consider early education offers a distinct and complementary learning environment compared to home. Structure and activities provided in early education settings are believed by parents to foster healthy routines, reinforce limit-setting and developmentally appropriate behaviours, and promote children's confidence, independence, and autonomy. Socialising opportunities that provide peer interactions are particularly valued by parents, especially for children from small families, those born during Covid-19, or with developmental difficulties, and (for families moving to the UK) to help children consolidate English.

“Having an environment where there are rules ... set times for stories or lunchtime and snack time, but throughout the day they can go where they want, they can pick which activity they want to do, and there are just teachers around to help them. I think it makes them also in control. I think a child having a little bit of control also helps them to deal with their emotions a little bit better.” (Parent Focus Group)

Overall, parents view early education settings as partners in childrearing, supporting them in their role and enhancing their children's development. Early education also serves as a resource for parents to learn about child development and effective support strategies. This includes identifying and helping to address additional needs or signposting to other services and providing reassurance.

“I think also, for parents whose kids have special needs ... or they suspect that their kids might, it's easier for someone objective to look and say, 'We've noticed this,' or 'We've picked up this' If you have concerns about speech, language, like especially a lot of COVID kids or anything like that [staff at a nursery] would signpost you to someone else.” (Parent Focus Group)

Parents' attitudes towards early education are shaped by personal factors and life circumstances. Childhood experiences and cultural norms, gender role traditions, including whether nursery attendance was common or accepted when they were young, the extent of their wider support network, and the challenges of living abroad without immediate family support, can influence parents' decision-making when considering early education options.

“What you've seen or experienced when you were growing up as a child. If your culture is natural to go to a childminder or a nursery, then perhaps you are more prone to do this ... with your children. Other cultures might be more family-orientated, and they may feel a bit of this resistance to go to other settings because they've grown in this way, supported by the family.” (Parent Focus Group)

“In our case, going for a childminder [was] less of a natural option because in my country of origin, it's not as common as [here].” (Parent Focus Group)

Finally, for many of the parents in our study, early education was used because of the need to work.

“Had I not had a job or been going back to work, my choices might have been different. I might have used childcare a little bit less. I certainly would have taken it up to support her learning and social skills and preparation for school [but] in later years. It might have looked a lot different had I been able to stay at home with her.” (Parent Focus Group)

2.3.2. Local authority and provider views

As noted earlier, we included a wide range of parents in the study including parents who had not been eligible for the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement. The interviews with LA representatives and providers focused more clearly on their perceptions of the decision-making of families eligible for the disadvantaged entitlements. They identified a wider set of issues that they saw as influencing take-up.

They acknowledged significant logistical and practical challenges for families. Especially for those facing housing instability and deprivation, committing to routine attendance at a setting is difficult.

Managing children's schedules across various locations and durations is demanding, particularly in rural areas or where public transport is limited, leading some families to delay early education until a local place is available.

A third (32%) of LA representatives we surveyed agreed finding a nearby setting for funded hours is a barrier to 2-year-old entitlement uptake, while 27% felt the same for 3-year-old entitlement.

LA representatives had widely heard the views from parents that family care is best, particularly for under-threes. Several expressed the view that parents' preference for family care had been exacerbated by the experience of Covid-19, leaving children more anxious about separation and with more emerging developmental needs.

They also described cultural values and norms which reinforced the preference for family care, reinforced inter-generationally, and associated these particularly with multi-generation households and communities where maternal employment was less the norm or affected by longstanding high levels of unemployment, as well as with transient or Traveller communities. They noted an additional concern expressed by some migrant communities about early education settings not reflecting the values of their own culture, or 'testing' children in English.

There were references to adoptive parents and foster carers wanting to prioritise strengthening family relationships at a time of a lot of change and demands and social workers not doing enough to encourage the use of early education. Finally, there was also a reflection that isolated parents may gain self-worth and identity from parenting: one LA representative described supporting these parents to engage with other services and activities and develop social networks.

“Some of our communities will think, well, they've got a really enriched extended family, so why would they put their child in childcare, unless it's endorsed, like I've

said - is it linked to a mosque or to a local church? A lot of our communities don't think it's for them because they don't actually need it." (LA representative)

"There are sometimes cultural issues, and it's not the done thing for that culture to send their children to nursery. They think they should be at home with, usually, mothers.." (Not-for-profit setting)

As discussed in Chapter 4, these views are seen as reinforced by national government websites and communication that promote early education as 'childcare' and by their emphasis on entitlements for working parents.

2.3.3. Local area context

Previous research has explored the role of local area characteristics in explaining variation in the take-up of early education. For example, there is some evidence that more affluent areas have a greater number of childcare places⁵. Some studies found that low-income families are more likely to experience difficulties in securing funded places where there are pockets of deprivation next to more affluent areas because providers are reported to be more responsive to the needs of more affluent parents who pay for their provision (Albakri et al., 2018; Teager & McBride, 2018).

We might therefore expect (variation in) deprivation levels within an LA to be associated with lower take-up of the 2-year-old entitlement. Other studies have found that provider mix matters, for example, areas with a higher share of private provision have greater inequalities in take-up, compared with areas with more voluntary or maintained provision (Campbell et. al., 2018).

We used publicly available national data to explore the links between take-up of the 15 hours entitlements at LA level and characteristics of those areas, to better understand how local environments might affect take-up rates. Table 2.2 highlights the local area characteristics we considered, including those identified as important in previous research. We explored how these factors influenced the take-up of entitlements amongst disadvantaged 2-year-olds and all 3-4-year-olds separately. Appendix B sets out our approach in more detail.

Accounting for all characteristics simultaneously, we found very few local area characteristics to be significantly related to area-level take-up.

For disadvantaged 2-year-olds (shaded grey in Table 2.2), it was demographic characteristics that seemed to emerge as more important in explaining differences in take-up. Holding all other factors constant, areas with a **lower** percentage of residents from ethnic minority backgrounds and a **higher** percentage working in professional occupations tended to have, on average, higher take-up rates. In contrast to the studies identified above, we did not find that variation in local area deprivation scores significantly affected take-up, over and above the other factors we considered.

For 3-4-year-olds (shaded purple in Table 2.2), system-related factors seemed to play more of a role, with take-up being higher in areas with a higher percentage of early education places delivered by the maintained sector and in outstanding settings, in line with previous research.

⁵<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare/articles/childcareaccessibilitybyneighbourhood/2024-06-04>

Table 2.2: Local area characteristics explored in secondary data analysis

Demographic factors	Employment factors	Early education system and funding factors
Population size and density	Economic activity rates	% of 2- and 3-4-year-old places delivered in maintained sector
% residents from an ethnic minority background	Employment and self-employment rates	% of children taking up places in settings rated as outstanding by Ofsted
Average local area deprivation and variation across LA	Unemployment rates	% of places delivered by large (private) chains
% children eligible for free school meals, % with EAL	% of residents claiming out-of-work benefits	Funding rate for 2- and 3-4-year-old places
% residents working in professional occupations		% of funding retained to support LA delivery

Transience of 0–4-year-old population

2.4. Summary

The analyses described in this chapter highlight that take-up of the 15 funded hours is impeded by shortcomings and competing policy aims, resulting in a complex system which is very challenging for parents to navigate. Policy shortcomings, and the pressures they place on settings, trigger responses which create further barriers to take-up - particularly providers constraining the number and structure of funded places offered and creating the need and scope for providers to ask for additional charges.

These responses, in turn, create further barriers to families, together with views about the merits of early education for children of different ages.

Analysis of national data shows that very few characteristics of local areas help to explain local levels of take-up. Those that do are the proportion of local residents from minority ethnic groups and in professional occupations (in relation to the 2-year-old entitlement) and the percentage of early years places delivered by the maintained sector and in outstanding settings (in relation to the 3–4-year-olds entitlement).

In the following chapters, we explore how far LA actions explain take-up levels, and what it is that LAs do that can make a difference.

3. Can local authorities make a difference to take-up?

We saw in the previous chapter that a range of system, service and contextual factors influence families' decisions of whether or not to use early education for their children. Some of these factors may vary across areas, but are such differences sufficient to explain why take-up rates for the 15 funded hours are higher in some local authorities (LAs) than others? Or is there a role for LA actions to play as well?

This chapter summarises quantitative analysis we conducted to understand how much of the variation in take-up rates across areas can be explained by contextual factors, and to what extent LA actions may matter. It also describes findings from our survey of LAs carried out in Summer 2023 to understand the approaches taken by LAs to support take-up, and explores the extent to which these factors can help to

explain the remaining variation in take-up after contextual factors have been taken into account.

3.1 Potential role for local authority actions

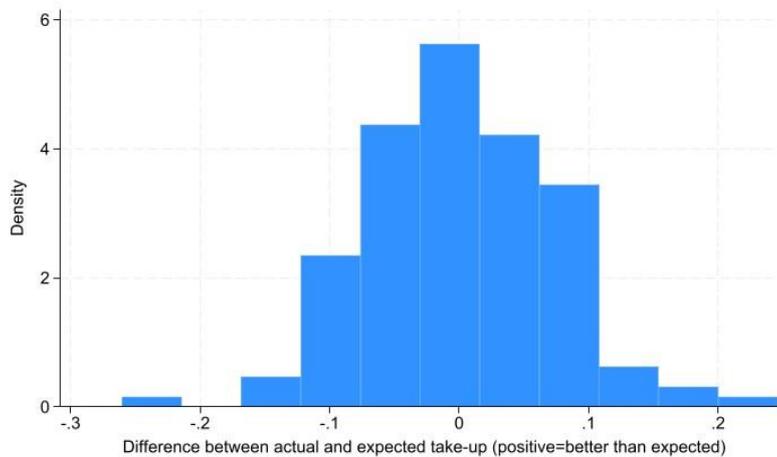
Section 2.4.3 in Chapter 2 set out local area contextual factors we considered as potential explanations for why take-up rates for the 15 funded hours are higher in some areas than others. Some of these factors are positively associated with take-up rates – in other words, areas with higher levels of this factor tend to have higher take-up rates, on average – while others are negatively associated (higher levels tend to mean lower take-up rates). Based on the values of these factors in each LA, we can use our knowledge of these relationships to ‘predict’ what we would expect take-up rates in a given LA to be, separately for all 3-4-year-olds and disadvantaged 2-year-olds, given their local area context.

If these factors were the only things that mattered for the take-up of the 15 hours entitlements, then we would expect to be able to perfectly predict take-up rates across areas. Taking into account all the factors listed in Table 2.2 in Chapter 2 simultaneously, we were able to explain 66% of the variation in take-up rates across areas for 3-4-year-olds, but only 37% for disadvantaged 2-year-olds. Another way of putting this is that roughly one third of the variation in take-up rates amongst 3-4-year-olds and two thirds of the variation in take-up rates amongst disadvantaged 2-year-olds across areas cannot be explained by contextual factors. In other words, there is room for other things that vary across LAs – potentially including LA actions – to help explain why take-up rates are higher in some areas than others, and the potential role of these factors is greater for disadvantaged 2-year-olds than for all 3-4-year-olds.⁶

Given this, we would not expect to be able to predict take-up rates perfectly. Indeed, as shown in Figures 3.1 and 3.2 below, in roughly half of LAs our predictions were higher than the actual take-up rates – in other words, given the characteristics of the local area, we would have expected take-up rates to be higher than we saw in reality. And in the other half, the observed take-up rates were higher than the predictions – and in some cases quite substantially higher, particularly for disadvantaged 2-year-olds. So, something was happening in these areas which meant that take-up rates were higher than we might have expected given the local context. We were particularly interested in these areas, as they are the ones where there is room for LA actions to be positively affecting take-up rates, enabling them to ‘out-perform’ the characteristics of their local areas.

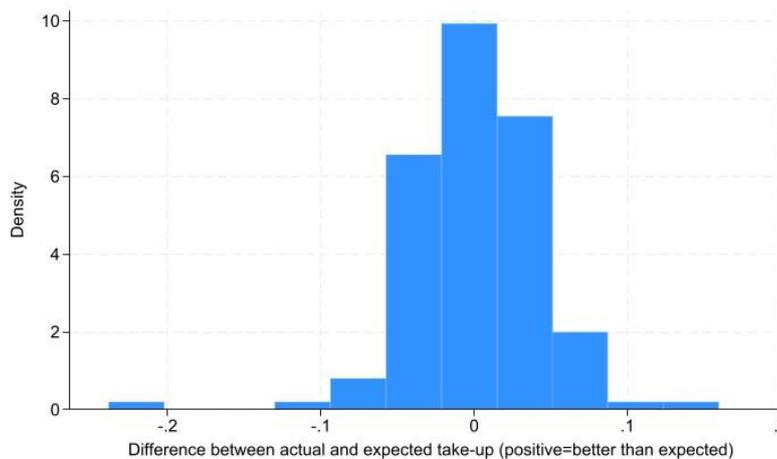
⁶ This may have been because we were only able to consider factors relating to local communities in general, rather than those relating specifically to disadvantaged communities living in those areas. But it may also reflect that LAs do more to try to influence the take-up rates of disadvantaged 2-year-olds, which our research supports.

Figure 3.1: Distribution of difference between actual and predicted take-up rates for disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement at LA level



Notes: the figure summarises the difference between the actual take-up rate of the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement in each LA and the take-up rate for the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement predicted for each LA based on a linear regression model accounting for the characteristics summarised in Table 2.2. Further details can be found in Appendix B.

Figure 3.2: Distribution of difference between actual and predicted take-up rates for 3-4-year-old entitlement at LA level



Notes: the figure summarises the difference between the actual take-up rate of the universal 3-4-year-old entitlement in each LA and the take-up rate for the universal 3-4-year-old entitlement predicted for each LA based on a linear regression model accounting for the characteristics summarised in Table 2.2. Further details can be found in Appendix B.

We therefore set out to establish what was happening in these areas and also across LAs in general, to understand whether we could identify LA actions and experiences that could help to explain why take-up was higher in some areas than others. In particular, we wanted to explore whether there were any common approaches being taken by the areas that had much higher take-up rates than expected given their local context.

We did this in two ways: first, we conducted a survey of LAs asking them about perceived barriers to take-up in their areas, and what actions they were taking to support take-up,

primarily in academic year 2022-23, but also, in a limited number of cases, historically. We also used data shared with us by Coram Family and Childcare on their Parent Champions programme (see later). Second, we undertook a series of qualitative case studies in LAs with higher-than-expected take-up for either 3-4-year-olds or disadvantaged 2-year-olds or both.

Sections 3.2 and 3.3 below summarise, respectively, the actions reported by a national sample of LAs to support take-up and the role those actions played in helping to explain variation in take-up rates across areas. Chapter 4 then reports on the findings from the qualitative case studies, where we were able to consider a wider range of factors considered too challenging to ask about in the type of closed form questions appropriate to online surveys.

3.2 What do LAs do to support take-up?

The survey was sent out to all LAs in Summer 2023, with a number of online and telephone follow-ups undertaken to boost responses. In total, 91 of 152 (60%) of LAs responded to at least part of our survey. We reported on some of the key findings in a briefing note published in early 2024⁷, and discussed some of the barriers to the take-up of early education places identified by LAs in the previous chapter.

In terms of LA actions to support take-up of the 15 hours entitlements, these could broadly be split into two types:

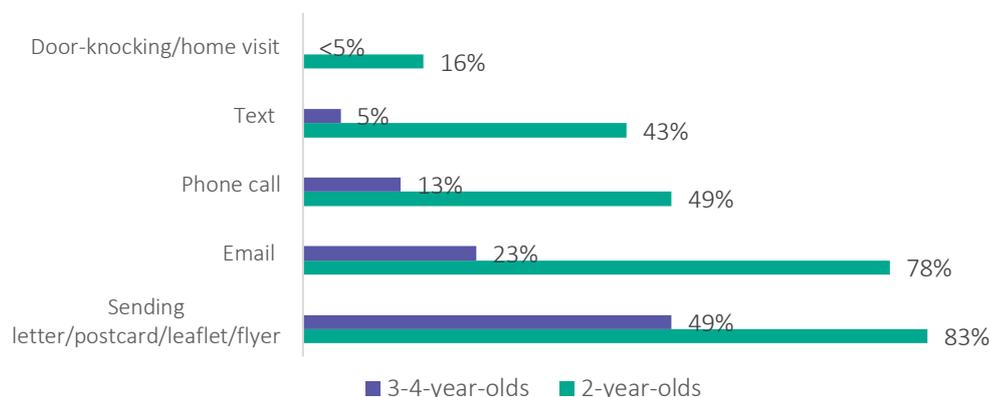
- those aimed at boosting the supply of places i.e. working with providers to support the delivery of free and inclusive places (see Section 3.2.3 below),
- those aimed at supporting parents to take up places i.e. working with families to promote the entitlements (3.2.1) or provide support to apply for or secure a funded place (3.2.2).

3.2.1 Promoting the early education entitlements

We asked LAs about the methods through which they contacted families to tell them about the 15 hours entitlements. As shown in Figure 3.2, most LAs adopted less resource-intensive means of promoting funded hours, with over three quarters using emails and letters or flyers to advertise the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement to most or all eligible families, and a similar proportion reporting that they promoted the entitlement through outreach at parenting-related activities or events. Only around half of LAs reported that their written publicity materials were available in some or most of their community languages.

⁷<https://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/sites/default/files/Resource%20Library/Early%20Education%20Entitlements%20LA%20survey%20findings%20Jan%202024.pdf>

Figure 3.2: Methods used to promote the 15 hours entitlements to most/all eligible 2-year-olds and to 3-4-year-olds in the 2022-23 academic year



Source: Early Education Entitlement Study survey of local authorities

Around half of LAs used methods such as texts or phone calls to promote the offer to most or all families of potentially eligible 2-year-olds and only a minority (less than one in six) used the most resource intensive methods, e.g. home visits. In all cases, LAs were more likely to promote the entitlements to most or all 2-year-olds than to most or all 3-4-year-olds, with resource intensive methods very unlikely to be used to reach 3-4-year-olds.

Even LAs who used these more intensive methods did not necessarily rate them as being amongst the top two most effective methods of promoting the entitlements. Most LAs (60% overall, 70% amongst those who used them to reach parents) reported that letters were one of the most effective methods of advertising the offers. All other methods were selected by fewer than half of reporting LAs. This may suggest LA respondents viewed reaching large numbers of parents as at least as important for supporting take-up as working more intensively with a few families.

We separately obtained data on the Parent Champions scheme run by Coram Family and Childcare, which supports LAs to train and manage a network of parent volunteers who promote services available to families to local parents. Around a fifth of LAs ran a Parent Champions scheme in 2022-23, with two fifths having run a scheme at least once in the previous five years. Most schemes (80-90%) identify support for early education as a focus and most are relatively small: the median number of Parent Champions actively volunteering as part of the scheme in any given quarter is six, and the median number of parents engaged per quarter is around 32 (19 on a one-to-one basis and 13 in a group setting), although it is likely that this is an under-estimate given the challenges of collecting accurate data from all Parent Champions in every quarter.

3.2.2 Targeted and tailored support for families

The vast majority of LAs (nearly 90%) reported helping some or many families to apply for a place for their potentially eligible 2-year-old, although the precise nature of this support is unknown.

We also asked authorities whether they had previously used automatic enrolment for 2-year-old places. Such schemes were sometimes known as ‘Golden Tickets’ and meant that if a child was on the list of potentially eligible families shared with LAs by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), that child would automatically be assumed to be entitled to

a place, thus foregoing the need for families to complete the application form entirely. This practice has since been restricted by the Department for Education, although some authorities still award places to all children on the DWP list, paying for the place themselves if, on further checking, a child is found to no longer be eligible for a government funded place. Around two fifths of LAs reported having used automatic enrolment in the past, with the majority sending families their ‘Golden Ticket’ by letter.

Around three quarters of LAs reported helping some or all families of potentially eligible 2-year-olds to find a suitable funded place (known as ‘brokering’) and around 60% reported doing the same for some or all 3-4-year-olds. This again leaves scope for a variety of approaches to have been used, and for different numbers of families to have been supported, in different areas.

3.2.3 Support to deliver free and inclusive places

We asked LAs about incentives offered to providers to encourage them to deliver funded places for the 15 hours entitlements. Around 45% offered free or discounted training or support for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), potentially including portage (a home visiting service for families with SEND children). A minority (15%) offered free or discounted rent, nil or reduced business rates, or business grants or loans. A very small minority (less than 5%) topped up the hourly funding rate paid by the government, thus making it more financially attractive for providers to offer such places. In most cases these incentives were offered similarly for 2-, 3- and 4-year-old places.

We also asked whether LAs offered more funded hours to some or all children in their areas. Around a quarter of LAs reported doing so. These additional hours were generally targeted towards younger children (age 2 or below) with priority given to those in care or with SEND; those who just missed out on eligibility for the government funded hours; or sometimes to bridge the gap between when a child turned two and when the entitlement started (at the start of the following term).

3.3 Potential role for local authority actions

The previous section highlighted variation in the ways in which different LAs support take-up in their areas. We wanted to understand to what extent these differences in actions were associated with differences in take-up rates across areas, over and above differences in the types of local contextual factors discussed in the previous chapter.

We did this in two ways: first, we related the difference between actual and predicted take-up rates across areas (described above) to the LA actions identified in the survey and features of Parent Champion programmes from data shared by Coram Family and Childcare. Second, for a more limited set of actions for which we were able to obtain historic data – namely the use of ‘Golden Tickets’ and implementation of the Parent Champions programme – we compared changes over time in take-up within LAs with changes over time in the use and features of these schemes within LAs. Appendix B discusses these two approaches in more detail.

Neither approach identified much statistically significant evidence of strong relationships between the kinds of actions described above and the take-up rates across different LAs. This does not necessarily imply that these things don’t matter for take-up. It could be that the relatively crude measures we were able to capture via a short online survey were not sufficient to adequately distinguish variations in the level and nature of support provided. For example, reaching “most or all” families via different approaches could in practice

mean quite different levels of activity intensity. It is also difficult to identify smaller relationships with a limited sample.

In terms of data from the LA survey, we found a reasonably strong positive relationship between the use of home visits to promote the entitlement to potentially eligible 2-year-olds and take-up rates. This suggests that, taking account of the other ways in which LAs promoted the 15 hours entitlements (including letter, email, text, phone calls), reaching most or all families eligible for the 2-year-old offer via home visits was associated with significantly higher take-up – of the order of magnitude of around 6-7 percentage points (compared to an average take-up rate of 74%). These findings are in line with the evidence discussed in the next chapter from the qualitative case studies which point to the potential importance of using more intensive holistic approaches to support families facing barriers to take-up.

There was also some more tentative evidence that LAs that promoted the entitlements through text messaging had higher than expected take-up, although these relationships did not meet standard thresholds of significance in all specifications.

The data on the Parent Champions scheme highlighted positive correlations between various features of these schemes and take-up of the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement, but small sample sizes meant that these relationships did not meet standard thresholds of statistical significance.

3.4 Summary

Local take-up of early education may be driven by variation in how the barriers identified in Chapter 2 manifest and differentially play out in different local contexts.

The analysis in this chapter showed that the socio-demographic profile of an area, and the characteristics of its local labour and childcare markets, can collectively explain around two thirds of the variation in take-up rates of the 15 hours across areas for 3-4-year-olds, but only just over one third for disadvantaged 2-year-olds. This leaves plenty of room for other things that vary – potentially including LA actions – to help explain differences in take-up rates across areas, particularly of the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement.

Amongst the actions captured through our national LA survey, we found a reasonably strong and statistically significant association between home visits and take-up of the entitlement for disadvantaged 2-year-olds. There was also some more tentative evidence that LAs that promoted the entitlements through text messaging had higher than expected take-up amongst disadvantaged 2-year-olds.

This analysis was also used to identify a set of LAs with take-up of the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement and/or the universal entitlement for 3-4-year-olds that was higher than might have been expected given their local context. It was from this group that the sample of LA case studies was drawn. The next chapter discusses the findings of the qualitative research we conducted in these areas.

4. How local authorities can make a difference

This chapter focuses on how local authorities (LAs) support take-up of the 15 hours early education entitlements for all 3-4-year-olds and disadvantaged 2-year-olds. It presents the findings of qualitative research with 18 authorities that were in the top 20 LAs with take-up of one or both entitlements above what would be expected given their area socio-demographic profile and features of their local labour and childcare markets (see Chapter 3). The LAs sample included a mix of geographical areas, with different levels of disadvantage and proportions of the population from different ethnic communities.

The chapter provides an insight into how these LAs supported parents to make informed choices about early education and ensured sufficient provision accessible to all eligible families. The chapter concludes by looking at

features of LAs' approaches that seem key to supporting high take-up.

4.1 Supporting parents to make informed choices

In all LAs in the study, approaches to supporting families to make informed choices about the entitlements included two interconnected components:

- wide promotion of the entitlements to local families through a range of non-targeted activities,
- targeted promotion and tailored help to families to support take-up of the entitlement for disadvantaged 2-year-olds.

Our discussions with LAs focused on actions to support take-up of the 15 hours entitlements for all 3-4-year-olds and disadvantaged 2-year-olds. While their targeted action was clearly focused on the latter, non-targeted promotion activities were often used to promote both the 15 and 30 funded hours.

4.1.1 Promoting the early education entitlements

Promotion involved identifying clear and consistent messages about the entitlements and channels of communication that could reach local families through a range of non-targeted activities. In most case study LAs, parents were also involved in supporting the entitlements through Parent Champions (discussed in Chapter 3) and other similar schemes.

Key messaging about the entitlements

In all case study LAs the 15 hours entitlements were promoted as supporting children's development, and typically described as early learning or early education. The messaging focused on the benefits for children, for example, learning through play, preparation for school, and supporting language and communication.

LAs reported that parental feedback suggested that messaging around benefits for parents (e.g. free time, training, employment) and 'childcare for work' could put off families who did not want free time or did not need 'childcare' for work. This messaging was therefore used more selectively in conversations with parents when it seemed appropriate.

LA representatives said that to be effective, messaging about the entitlements must be concise and consistent. As discussed in Chapter 2, the entitlements for working families make it challenging to have a consistent focus on the benefits for children:

"For families it's really overwhelming to explain all this [different entitlements]. So we try to break it down as much as we can... we have focused quite a lot on early education and the impact it's going to have on child's attainment later on." (LA representative)

Inevitably the messaging of the entitlements for working families had to mention 'work' and 'childcare'. However, at the time of the fieldwork (December 2023-May 2024) LAs' messaging seemed primarily focused on child development and early learning. It remains to be seen how this messaging will evolve with the rollout of the entitlements for working families.

Another key issue in relation to messaging was whether the entitlements should be described as 'free' or 'funded'. Concerns about misleading parents meant that many LAs in the study had opted for 'funded'. However, a few were still advertising it as 'free hours' or 'paid by the government'. They thought that as charges have become common, families who cannot afford to pay need reassurance that there are still settings that offer "*genuinely free places*".

Communication channels

Non-targeted promotion channels were seen as particularly suitable to advertise the 3-4-year-old entitlement, as this is universal and well-established. LAs also do not typically have a list of eligible 3-4-year-olds to use for targeted communications.

LAs advertised through social and local media, billboards on public transport, banners outside early years settings and schools, and information disseminated at community events and in community venues. However, they reported a significant reduction in promotion activities compared with the past, when they had considerably more funding, including national funding streams (e.g. to support implementation of the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement). This could explain why, as discussed in Chapter 2, parents thought the entitlements were not well advertised.

A feature of all LAs involved in the study was the involvement of other family-facing professionals in promoting the early education entitlements. This was seen as an effective strategy to engage families, but also a necessity due to declining resources. The range of professionals involved in promoting the entitlements (and supporting take up) is shown in Box 4.1.

The extent to which other professionals were involved varied. In LAs where early education was a key element of a strong vision and strategy for early years, entitlement 'conversations' were reported to be well embedded in the work of family-facing professionals.

"It's about whatever contact a family has with a professional, it [the funded offer and its benefits for the child] being on the professional's agenda, on their list of things they talk about." (LA representative)

In other LAs, family-facing professionals were also contributing to the promotion of the entitlements. However, they were not seen as the main way of supporting take-up and early education and childcare teams had to invest considerable time and resources to engage other professionals:

"I'm constantly having to identify and negotiate resources [from other services] to do the work we need." (LA representative)

Box 4.1: Who helps to support take-up of the entitlements

- In all LAs in the study, universal family services and early help services, including Children's Centres and Family Hubs, supported the promotion of the entitlements. However, they were not providing as much support (particularly with outreach and home visits) as Children's Centres used to do 10-15 years ago.
- The health visitor's health check was seen as a key opportunity to promote the entitlements. This worked well where there was sufficient health visitor capacity.
- In some LAs community health teams and specific programmes such as the Family Nurse Partnership and Home Start were involved in promoting the entitlements.
- Early education and childcare teams typically worked closely with children's social services and virtual schools to support take-up among children in need including children in care, who were reported to have very low take-up rates.
- Equity and diversity teams, migration teams and voluntary organisations working with refugees were seen as key to engaging parents from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds.
- Some LAs worked with their housing team to identify eligible children and promote the entitlement.
- Some early education settings, particularly those catering primarily for disadvantaged families, were involved in promoting the entitlements in their local community.

The role of parents in promoting the entitlements

Peer-to-peer communication was considered the most effective way of telling parents about the child development benefits of the 15 hours entitlements. Engaging parents in promoting the entitlements also provides an opportunity to gather feedback on strategies for supporting take-up.

Some LAs in the study had a Parent Champions scheme (described in Chapter 3). This was seen as crucially important to help engage parents in early education:

"Our Parent Champions provide a huge network in terms of getting the message out there ... hearing the services for families available from another parent is very important ... the-peer-to-peer is so important to communicate the value of engaging with the 15 hours." (LA representative)

Parent Champions also provided feedback used by LAs to inform their messages about the entitlements and promotion channels, as well as strategies for removing barriers to take-up.

Other LAs had different peer support mechanisms (e.g. community champions, community alliances) to promote the entitlements and gather parental feedback.

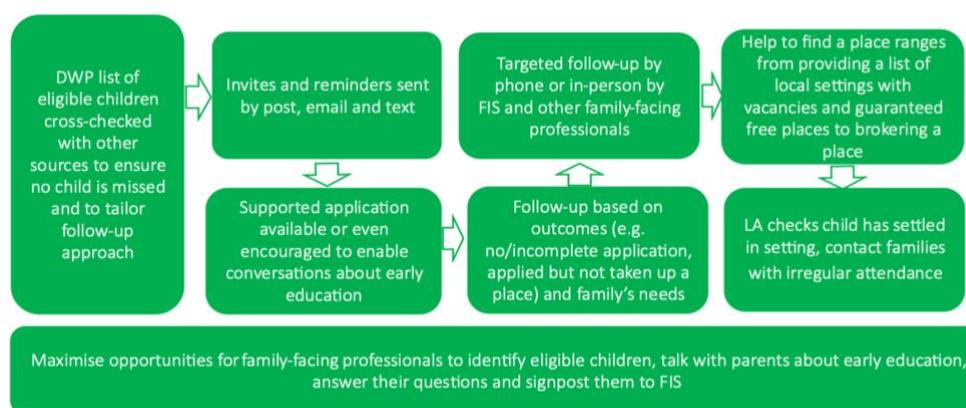
4.1.2 Targeted and tailored support

The promotion activities described above were believed to work well for the 3-4-year-old entitlement as it is universal, well-established and ‘the norm’. However, all case study LAs had developed a targeted and more resource-intensive approach to reach disadvantaged families eligible for the 2-year-old entitlement, as found by previous research on supporting take-up among this group (Gibb et al., 2011; Kazimirski et al., 2008).

The approach is outlined in Figure 4.1 and described in more detail in the rest of the section. LA representatives reported three features of this approach that made it effective:

- a relentless focus on monitoring families’ engagement so that the LA can step in to remove barriers to take-up at every stage in the process,
- at key stages of the early education journey a trusted professional (or another parent) can help families deal with possible barriers to take-up,
- families are offered support that is tailored to the child’s and family’s circumstances.

Figure 4.1: Supporting take-up of the disadvantaged 2-year-olds entitlement



Identifying eligible children

The list of eligible children provided by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) several times a year was key to identifying eligible children, but it was typically complemented with other sources. The latter included data from children’s social care, early years services and, when data-sharing agreements were in place, from health services and the birth registrar. In some LAs, these data sources also provided the opportunity to establish who may be working with the family and could support them through the early education journey.

Putting together a list of families to target involved considerable work every term, as not all children are included in the DWP list (e.g. refugees, children in care, children with additional needs). Furthermore, removing children who had already taken up the entitlement was complicated by changing family circumstances, and because DWP data could only be used for a limited period due to data protection requirements.

Informing families of their entitlement

LAs contacted families via email, text, and post to let them know about the entitlement. Text messages were seen as particularly effective. On the other hand, postal communication was typically seen as less effective as addresses go out of date and is a less familiar method for new parent generations. This is in contrast with the LA survey findings (in Chapter 3) showing that nationally most LAs representatives believed that sending letters/cards was an effective way of promoting the entitlement. All case study LAs sent reminders, before proceeding to a more tailored approach involving a conversation with parents.

In some LAs other family professionals played a key role in ensuring families were aware of the entitlement for disadvantaged 2-year-olds. For example, health visitors would mention the entitlement when they did the health check, and those delivering the Family Nurse Partnership programme mentioned it to their families around the time the child turned two.

Supported application

In all LAs, parents could get help with the online assessment of families' financial circumstances and children's additional needs required to apply for the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement. For example, the application could be done on behalf of parents by settings, Family Information Services (FIS), Children's Centres and Family Hubs.

Some LAs strongly encouraged parents to contact these services, as this provides an opportunity to discuss whether early education is right for the child and ensures that the online application does not become a barrier. Furthermore, these services have more experience in navigating the application process and understand how to help parents avoid an ineligible outcome if incorrect information is provided.

Follow-up

In all LAs, parents who did not take up the entitlement after receiving the invitation and reminders were contacted by phone or in person to check if they needed help. In many cases answering a few straightforward queries (e.g. Do I have to take all the 15 hours? In which settings can I take the 15 hours? Can I try it and see if my child likes it?) was enough to help parents decide. Typically, parents were sufficiently reassured to take up the entitlement. However, some parents required more reassurance and information, for example if a child had SEND, they would want to know if a setting could adequately cater for their child's needs.

Reflecting the quantitative results in Chapter 3, our qualitative findings also highlight the potential importance of home visits for supporting take-up, particularly among parents with greatest concerns or who faced more barriers to access to early education.

LAs monitored 'outcomes' for eligible families to anticipate the kind of help they may need and tailor the approach accordingly. This was done by cross-checking different data sources. For example, the application data was examined to establish if a family had not applied or had an incomplete application so they could be offered help with the application process. Application data and data on take up of the entitlement was analysed to identify those who made a successful application but did not take up a place, so they could be offered help in finding a suitable setting.

In some LAs, staff and volunteers working with different communities did the follow-up. For example, in an LA with a large Turkish-speaking community:

“The Turkish speaking staff send a postcard in Turkish handwritten on the back saying ‘Hi, I’m your link worker. Let’s chat. Let me tell you about it [the entitlement]’ and then invite them along to see some settings.” (LA representative.)

Finding a suitable setting

LAs have a statutory duty to provide information about local early education and childcare services and this is done through Family Information Services (FIS). At a minimum FIS provide a website with this information.

All LAs in our study also provided a FIS telephone line and stressed it is important for some parents to be able to speak with someone if they have any queries or concerns. The findings from parents (in Chapter 2) also suggest a digital service is insufficient to remove perceived barriers to take up. For example, some parents may need a conversation to understand what charges settings can apply, while others may need reassurance that children are not treated differently, depending on whether they pay top-ups.

In addition to signposting parents to the FIS website, typically, the initial eligibility communication to families includes a list of local settings that provide funded places. Some LAs also point out settings that guarantee completely free places.

A small number of families require brokering, particularly those with children with SEND and children in care. These parents and carers were typically signposted to FIS for brokering by other professionals or were identified in follow-ups with parents who did not take up the entitlement.

Attendance

Some LAs followed-up with families after they had taken up a place to check whether the child was settling in and offer support if the setting did not seem right for the child, or with other issues that may lead to a child dropping out.

A few LAs also monitored whether a child attended the setting, as they have recently become aware that irregular attendance and children dropping out could be an issue for a small number of children (Nesta, 2023). This was different from attendance monitoring linked to possible safeguarding concerns. It was about ensuring that the LA could help remove barriers that may prevent a child from fully benefitting from their early education experience.

However, most case study LAs did not monitor attendance and the research interview prompted them to look at their attendance data and consider if action may be required to support attendance.

4.2 Sufficiency of free and inclusive provision

All LAs stressed that high take-up requires a focus on sufficiency to ensure that all eligible families can find a suitable place. This section explores:

- how LAs ensure that they have robust, comprehensive and up-to-date evidence on local early education services,
- what LAs can (and cannot) do to ensure the entitlements are free at the point of delivery and available to all eligible children,

- how LAs work with settings that cater for a large proportion of disadvantaged children.

4.2.1 The state of play of local early education services

A typical feature of LAs in our study was a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of their local early education services. This required data at the micro level (e.g. ward level), as early education must be near where families live to be accessible. This is particularly true for the 15 hours entitlement, which commonly consists of three-hour sessions and can be difficult for families to access if it is not within walking distance.

LAs in the study collected this evidence in several ways. In addition to the annual early years census, a similar data collection exercise was carried out termly to establish the number of places for different ages and entitlements, how funded hours are provided (e.g. whether there are payments for extras) and take-up among various groups (e.g. children with SEND, disadvantaged 2-year-olds). This information was complemented with softer intelligence from provider network events, meetings with settings, and through ad-hoc contacts to gather sufficiency information (e.g. the latter had become more frequent due to the rollout of the new entitlements).

Evidence from settings was combined with information about families' needs and anticipated changes in demand (e.g. decline in birth rate, new entitlements, parents' feedback on unmet needs). This enables LAs to identify gaps in provision in different parts of the borough and for different groups, and plan how to intervene to fill these gaps. This is the analysis included in annual Childcare Sufficiency Assessments, but LA representatives stressed that it is not a once-a-year exercise, it needs to be updated regularly as families' needs and providers' responses can change quickly.

Evidence from providers is also used to update the FIS website and to customise the information sent to families about taking up the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement. For example, to provide a list of local settings with vacancies for the 2-year-old funded offer. Some LAs highlight which of these settings guarantee access to a completely free place and which providers offered a "*range of childcare packages*" that may involve a payment (see next section).

4.2.2 Ensuring free and inclusive provision

Our qualitative research with LAs, providers and parents, and the findings from our LA survey (see Chapter 2) add to the body of evidence showing that the entitlements are not always free.

The evidence indicates that school-based provision is still largely free of any charges. While charges are becoming common in the voluntary sector, they are typically modest and applied with discretion to ensure children aren't excluded if they cannot pay.

It is in the for-profit sector that a wide range of "*childcare packages*" were reported with various levels of charges and restrictions on how funded hours could be accessed (see Chapter 2). LAs reported that in this sector children considered to be "*less financially viable*" are under-represented, as they do not generate additional income or because they require additional support. As discussed in Chapter 2, there is also emerging evidence from parents of a two-tier system, depending on whether children generate non-funded income.

The guidance regulating delivery of the entitlements was considerably diluted with the introduction of the 30 hours for 3-4-year-olds to encourage providers' engagement with a

scheme they were threatening to boycott because of low funding rates (Paull and La Valle, 2018). Since then, additional charges and restrictions on how funded hours can be accessed have become widespread, as our research and other studies have indicated (Hardy et al., 2022; La Valle et al., 2022). All case study LAs said this is because they have no effective tools to ensure funded provision is genuinely free and inclusive, as the guidance to settings allows these practices and government guidance to parents says that they can be expected to pay.

“This [providers charging for consumables] is a very dicey area for us, we know that nationally, not just in [LA], people have been using that effectively as a top-up. A number of parents have questioned ‘I’ve got a free entitlement but I cannot afford it because I can’t pay the consumables’... Legally we’re very restricted, as a local authority, it’s very clear that we cannot interfere.” (LA representative)

As discussed in Chapter 2, inadequate funding rates were also seen as having contributed to a substantial increase in charges and restrictions. The new rate for children aged 2 and under was typically seen as financially viable, but the rate for 3–4-year-olds, the largest group accessing the entitlement, is still considered inadequate. As this participant explained when discussing the difference between the rate for 3-4-year-olds and for younger children:

“When you drop an hourly rate by almost £2.50 times 15, the whole term, the impact it’s massive.” (LA representative)

There were concerns about the possible unintended consequences of this funding gap. For example, some LAs thought that increasingly providers may offer free places to 2-year-olds but then start charging for consumables when they turn 3, and families may lose their place if they cannot afford to pay.

4.2.3 Working with settings that deliver inclusive provision

Given the lack of effective conditionalities attached to delivery of the entitlements, LAs in the study developed alternative approaches for ensuring that children from low-income families and disadvantaged backgrounds access the entitlements. While LAs encouraged all providers to deliver funded hours to all eligible children, places suitable for disadvantaged children were concentrated in some settings, while others catered primarily for working families and parents who can pay ‘top-ups’, and typically offered a small number of completely free places.

School-based settings (nursery classes and maintained nursery schools) were seen as key to ensuring sufficient inclusive provision primarily for 3-4-year-olds. While maintained nursery schools typically offer places for 2-year-olds, most school-based places are in nursery classes and very few cater for this age group. It was reported that with a declining birth rate, some schools are struggling to fill nursery classes, and this may encourage them to offer 2-year-old places, particularly as there is now government funding to support the expansion of school-based provision.

LAs also typically worked with some non-school settings highly committed to the delivery of inclusive funded provision to ensure sufficiency for low-income and disadvantaged families. These were typically, but not exclusively, not-for-profit settings (e.g. committee-run playgroups, social enterprises) and a few remaining LA-run nurseries. Disadvantaged families (particularly those eligible for the 2-year-old entitlement) were often signposted to these settings, which were seen as particularly suitable to meet their needs:

“We also have a separate list of providers that ... guarantee us that if the family comes in and says because of additional benefits or whatever [i.e. disadvantaged entitlement], they will only be offered a completely free place ... and they won't have to ask: 'Are there any additional charges?' When the families go and visit those providers, they are made very welcome, the process is made very easy for them and those providers understand the needs of those families. I think some of our providers play a huge part in that engagement.”(LA representative.)

While LAs reported that financial motives, rather than inclusive provision, are more likely to shape the admission decisions of for-profit settings, there were exceptions as discussed in Chapter 2. However, engaging some for-profit settings in the delivery of genuinely free places was reported by LAs to be challenging and involved a lot of persuasion and cajoling.

It also resulted in de facto agreements that a setting would offer a small number of free places, while other places involved a range of “funded childcare packages”. LA representatives were frustrated that large settings (e.g. 100+ places) receiving substantial public funding are allowed to deliver only 1-2 genuinely free places. In some cases, these were only guaranteed for 2-year-olds who may then have to move to avoid charges when they turned 3, if the setting needed their place.

LA representatives reported that settings that cater for disadvantaged families are declining, while places delivered by large national (and international) chains set up to cater for more affluent working families are increasing. Some nursery classes are closing because they cannot fill their places. Some settings have had to close because their decision not to charge parents or charge very little for the entitlements made them financially unviable. LAs are increasingly struggling to subsidise their own nurseries. Small providers also face considerable competition from the increasing number of large nursery chains that benefit from economies of scale.

While the pool of providers who support the delivery of inclusive funded hours is declining, LAs did not appear to have comprehensive and well-publicised approaches for incentivising these providers.

Maintained nursery schools receive higher government funding than other providers and the few remaining LA-run nurseries are subsidised. However, additional support for other provider types seems to be limited and typically ad-hoc (e.g. sufficiency grants when they are at risk of closure, help to access capital funding). For example, only one LA reported a substantial additional payment (£2 an hour) for the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement and another subsidised community settings that catered mainly for disadvantaged families. This may largely reflect the fact that LAs do not have the resources to incentivise providers. However, there also seems to be uncertainty over whether LAs should have robust strategies for supporting providers that make a greater contribution to inclusive participation and high-quality provision.

4.3 Key features of LAs that make a difference

Four key features characterised the 18 case study LAs and underpinned their approaches to supporting take-up of the 15 hours entitlements, although the extent to which each of these features had shaped their approaches varied.

4.3.1 Multi-agency vision and strategy for early years

Some LAs' approaches were supported by a robust multiagency vision and strategy for early years. In these LAs early education was a key part of the local early years offer and take-up of the entitlements highlighted as key to achieving local priorities for children's outcomes and wellbeing, with a focus on disadvantaged children. This was reflected in strong support and engagement from elected members and Director of Children's Services, and a range of family-facing professionals.

In all LAs early education was seen as part of the early years strategy. However, it was evident that in some LAs the early years strategy was stronger and early education was more embedded in the work of family-facing professionals. These LAs demonstrated particularly effective approaches in supporting take-up.

4.3.2 Use of data and local intelligence

All LAs made extensive use of data and intelligence from a range of sources to support participation in early education among children who are most likely to benefit from it. As discussed, this included data to identify eligible 2-year-olds, parental feedback on barriers to take up, and information on families' circumstances to tailor support to parents. There was a similar data-informed approach to ensuring that the local early education system delivers inclusive funded provision where it is needed.

In LAs with strong buy-in from other professionals, families who needed help were more likely to be identified (and supported) by those who were already working with the family (e.g. health visitor, family support worker). In areas where early education was not so well embedded in the work of family-facing professionals, early education teams relied much more on accessing a range of data sources to identify families who may need support. For example, in these areas staff were relying more on children's social care and Children's Centres data to identify 2-year-olds eligible for the entitlement, rather than relying on relevant professionals to identify these children.

4.3.3 Family Information Service (FIS)

The professionals we interviewed felt that most parents were able to navigate a digital information system to access the entitlements and early education services, and all LAs had largely digitalised their FIS.

However, supporting take-up among disadvantaged families, and particularly those eligible for the 2-year-old entitlement, required a more tailored approach to remove barriers to take-up. This is why all case study LAs had kept their FIS in-house. They believed that contracting out FIS would result in a 'one-size fits-all' service lacking the capability, expertise and connections with other services to provide tailored support.

All LAs had maintained a FIS telephone line as giving parents the opportunity to speak to someone was considered important to support take-up of the entitlements. The FIS telephone line also provided support with the application for the entitlement for disadvantaged 2-year-olds, as the application process could be a barrier for some families.

FIS provided brokering to families who needed help to secure a suitable funded place. While the number receiving this support was typically small, it was key to facilitating access among children who could most benefit from early education, including children with SEND and children in care.

As we have seen, other family-facing professionals (and settings) helped families with the entitlement application and discussed with parents the pros and cons of early education, particularly before the age of three. However, even with a high level of involvement from these professionals, a fit-for-purpose FIS tailored to local needs and with extensive knowledge of local early education services seemed key to supporting take-up.

4.3.4 Early education and childcare teams

All LAs in the study had experienced and well-resourced early education and childcare teams. These teams included FIS staff, but also staff who provided SEND, quality improvement and business support to providers and who administered funding to settings.

While all early education and childcare teams reported a substantial reduction in resources, they thought they were still relatively well resourced compared with other LAs, where cuts had been more substantial, and they struggled to cover key functions.

4.3.5 What matters most

The evidence suggests that all four features discussed above are important to support take-up of the 15 hours entitlements, particularly among disadvantaged children. LAs varied in the extent to which they were particularly strong in one or more of these areas of work and none were very strong in all four areas. However, they were sufficiently strong in each of these areas to achieve higher than expected take-up levels, which could probably be higher still if they strengthened some aspects of their work.

Integrating early education into a robust early years offer is crucial for enhancing LAs' approach to take-up support. As discussed, professionals already working with eligible families can effectively identify and assist them in accessing entitlements. This not only reaches more families, including those not listed by the DWP, but enables tailored advice from professionals, addressing the circumstances of each family.

Although early education fully embedded in a robust early years offer provides a very effective way of supporting take-up, it is unlikely to be effective on its own. Achieving high take-up is likely to need effective use of local data and intelligence, a fit-for-purpose FIS and a team with the capacity and capability to support take-up and delivery of the entitlements also.

4.4 Summary

This chapter has provided an in-depth exploration of the approaches of 18 authorities with higher-than-expected take-up of the 15 hours entitlements.

Approaches for supporting families to make informed choices about the 15 hours entitlements included two components:

- the universal 3-4-year-old entitlement was promoted through a range of media, with support from other family-facing professionals and through peer-to-peer communication, and
- a targeted and more resource-intensive approach was used to engage families eligible for the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement. This involved a relentless focus on monitoring families' engagement so that at every stage in the process the

LA could step in to remove barriers to take-up. It also involved tailored and one-to-one support provided by a trusted professional (or another parent).

LAs ensured sufficiency of local provision for all eligible children in two main ways:

- by gathering comprehensive data on the state of the local early education system to identify gaps in provision and how to intervene to fill them,
- by relying heavily on some settings to ensure sufficiency for disadvantaged and low-income families.

The findings highlight four LA features that support high take-up:

- early education fully embedded in a robust local early years offer,
- effective use of local data and intelligence on both families' needs and supply of early education services,
- an in-house Family Information Service (FIS) that provides tailored support, and
- a team with sufficient capacity, capability and connections with other services to effectively support take-up and delivery of the entitlements.

Early education embedded in a robust early years offer seems particularly important to provide a solid foundation for strengthening an LA approach for take-up. However, it's unlikely to be sufficient on its own, and the other three features are critically important to support high take-up of the 15 hours entitlements.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The study has explored take-up of the 15 hours early education entitlement for all 3-4-year-olds and disadvantaged 2-year-olds. Evidence suggests that access to at least this amount of high-quality early education can support children's development, especially for those from more disadvantaged backgrounds (Crawford et al., 2017).

However, our findings support and build on previous evidence showing that some children who may benefit the most from early education are missing out, for a variety of reasons (Albakri, 2018; Campbell et al., 2018; Hardy et al., 2022; La Valle et al., 2022). Some of these reasons relate to the design and delivery of the policy, others to local approaches for supporting take-up.

In the first part of the chapter, we argue that changes in the design and delivery of early education policy would better enable the 15 hours entitlements to achieve their intended

aim of supporting participation in early education and reducing inequalities in early childhood. In the second part, we highlight learning for strengthening local authority (LA) approaches to supporting take-up of the 15 hours entitlements.

5.1. Does early education entitlement policy need to change?

This study has highlighted two key challenges to the policy aim of supporting participation in early education and reducing inequalities in early childhood:

- competing policy objectives,
- an early education entitlement that is not always free.

In line with previous research (e.g. Hardy et al., 2022; La Valle et al., 2022), our study has also shown the crucial role of the early years workforce in enabling access to high quality and inclusive early education.

5.1.1. What is the main goal of early education entitlement policy?

The first challenge relates to the dual aims of early education and childcare policy to support child development and parental employment, which can drive the policy in different directions (Farquharson et al., 2023). The entitlement to 15 hours for all 3-4-year-olds and disadvantaged 2-year-olds were introduced to support child development and reduce inequalities in school readiness. However, recent policy developments that more strongly support parental employment, including the 30 hours entitlements for working families, are likely to perpetuate inequalities in early childhood in a range of ways.

- The early education entitlements to working families provide considerably more early education opportunities at an earlier age to children from more affluent families. The evidence suggests that this will give them an advantage over their peers who access early education later and for fewer hours (Sutton Trust, 2021).
- Our research found widespread concern that an increase in demand from working families may crowd out children who are only entitled to 15 funded hours, particularly disadvantaged 2-year-olds.
- Our findings show that the entitlements for working families have added to the already complex picture of financial support for early education. There is growing confusion among families about who is eligible and what the entitlements are for. This could put off some parents, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, from accessing their entitlements.
- The income threshold for eligibility for the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement has not increased since 2018. This has resulted in a considerable reduction in the number of children who benefit from a programme that is seen as key to reducing early childhood inequalities.

Our findings show that there is a clear risk that the original goal for the 15 hours entitlements is being undermined by these wider policy choices.

5.1.2. Should the early education entitlements be free?

The second challenge relates to the weak mechanisms in place to ensure that the policy can deliver free early education. The guidance that regulates how the entitlements should be delivered allows the use of additional charges to cover the cost of food and other activities that are not part of the 'core' early education provision, such as music lessons or forest school. As our findings show, this leaves open the possibility that even those eligible for the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement may not receive early education that is free at the point of use. Our research also shows that the guidance does not provide an effective tool for preventing unintended consequences, such as admissions primarily determined by financial considerations.

As discussed in Chapters 2 and 4, this means parents must navigate a system where who gets what in terms of 15 funded hours depends on what part of the system they access. It is primarily in the for-profit sector that unintended consequences are reported, including:

- various levels of charges, even for those from disadvantaged backgrounds,
- considerable restrictions on how funded hours can be used and the number of funded-only places offered,
- under-representation of disadvantaged children and particularly children with SEND,
- a two-tier system for children who only access 15 funded hours and their peers who access more hours, with different experiences (e.g. separate rooms, with/without forest school) depending on whether children access a funded-only place or also generate non-funded income.

Other research (e.g. Simon et al., 2022) has raised concerns about the lack of regulation of profits amongst for-profit providers, which may be underpinning some of these decisions.

Our findings show that guidance allowing extra charges but without the levers to address non-inclusive admissions leaves LAs uncertain on intervention strategies. Also, there are inconsistencies between early education and broader education policies. For example, children from families getting benefits qualify for free school meals throughout primary and secondary school, yet guidance permits charging for 2-year-olds' meals in similar circumstances.

Our evidence clearly indicates that the 15 hours entitlements must be genuinely free and widely available to achieve the policy aim of supporting participation in early education for all children and hence reducing inequalities in early childhood.

5.1.3. Do we have the workforce to deliver a large expansion in early education services?

A key aspect of the context of early education is challenges in staff recruitment and retention (Hardy et al. 2022; La Valle et al., 2022). Our evidence confirms previous studies, which found that settings are experiencing unprecedented difficulties in recruiting and retaining suitable staff. Low pay and unattractive working conditions have always made it difficult for the sector to attract and retain suitably qualified and experienced staff. In a tight labour market these challenges have grown, leading to severe staff shortages and providers unable to work at full capacity due to lack of staff.

This means a considerable risk to the quality and sufficiency of provision. Children not eligible for the working families' entitlements, particularly disadvantaged 2-year-olds, may be more affected if places for working families are prioritised as they are more financially viable (Hardy et al. 2022; La Valle et al., 2022; Sutton Trust 2021).

5.2. How could early education entitlement policy be changed to be more inclusive?

As outlined above, there is a clear risk that the original goal of the 15 hours entitlements is being undermined by expansions for working families. Our findings suggest changes to the policy environment are needed to ensure this overall goal is achieved. At the very least this would require changes to the 15 hours entitlements, but reforming early education entitlement policy as a whole is likely to be a more effective way of reducing inequalities in early childhood. In this section we discuss changes that could be made to the design and delivery of the policy to support these original aims.

5.2.1. Design of the early education entitlement policy

Universal 2-year-old entitlement

Giving more affluent children more hours of funded early education is likely to give them an advantage over their less affluent peers, thus perpetuating inequalities (Sutton Trust, 2021). Increasing entitlements targeted specifically at disadvantaged children could help to counteract this imbalance. However, as our findings show, targeted provision can bring with it considerable challenges including stigmatisation, variable awareness and participation. England's experience of the 3-4-year-old entitlement indicates that a universal offer has high levels of acceptability and awareness resulting in high participation.

Making the 2-year-old entitlement universal could:

- increase acceptability, awareness and take-up of the entitlement,
- eliminate a complex application system that currently represents a barrier to take-up,
- reduce considerable administrative burden for providers and LAs,
- prevent a small group of 2-year-olds from low income families falling through the gap between the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement and the entitlement for working parents.

'Fair' funding rates

The funding rate for children aged 2 and under is now perceived to be financially viable by the stakeholders interviewed in this project. However, we found widespread concerns about the rate for 3-4-year-olds and this should be reviewed to ensure it covers delivery costs.

It has been estimated that with the expansion of the entitlements to 0-2-year-olds in working families, 80% of settings' income will come from funded provision (Drayton & Farquharson, 2023). It is therefore essential the funding rate is sustainable, while ensuring it makes effective use of public funding.

It is also equally important that funding rates cover all the costs of delivering a funded place so all eligible children can access genuinely free hours. This should, for example, include the

cost of providing food, especially for children who would receive free school meals were they in school. We return to this point below.

Early Years Pupil Premium

The evidence from previous chapters and elsewhere (Hardy et al. 2022; La Valle et al., 2022; Sutton Trust 2021) highlights the growing needs of children who now enter early education, particularly amongst disadvantaged children. As discussed in Chapter 2, currently the Early Years Pupil Premium is not supporting disadvantaged children effectively as funding is low and not justifying the time required to apply for it, hence a low take-up rate.

Early intervention plays a major role in identifying and supporting children with greater needs. Some providers report hesitation in offering places to disadvantaged children due to perceived extra costs and complexity. Ensuring enough funding for disadvantaged children is crucial to prevent developmental inequalities. In our view the Early Years Pupil Premium should be increased in line with the Primary Pupil Premium.

Early education SEND funding

Our findings add to the considerable body of evidence (Coram Family and Childcare, 2024; Hardy et al. 2022; La Valle et al., 2022) showing that children with SEND face more barriers to accessing early education.

Our evidence suggests that there is a need for a more flexible SEND funding system, tailored to the needs of young children. First, it should be based on assessments that can adequately identify additional needs in the early years. Second, adequate funding should be ring-fenced for early education. There is evidence (e.g. La Valle et al., 2022) that accessing support from the SEND funding pot for schools can take a long time for funding requests to be considered, making the system unsuitable for children who may spend just over a year in early education.

A progressive early education subsidy model

The measures described above to support a 'fair' funding model that covers the cost of delivering funded hours to children with different needs, while ensuring effective use of public funding, should help to reduce unequal access to funded early education. However, in a system where most provision is delivered outside the maintained sector, differences between funding rates and hourly parent-paid fees are likely to continue, and thus will the risk of a 'two-tier' system of the kind described earlier. This means some children accessing only funded hours may continue to have different experiences to those from families paying for extra hours.

In reviewing options for improvement, consideration should therefore be given to replacing the funded entitlement model with a progressive subsidy model which would apply to all parents, regardless of work status. Under such models, all fees would be paid directly by parents, with the proportion of those fees subsidised by the government differing by family income, with higher (potentially 100%) subsidies for lower income families and lower (potentially 0%) subsidies for higher income families. Such an approach would not eliminate providers' ability to distinguish and potentially treat differently families requesting different numbers of hours but would mean they received the same amount of funding for each hour provided, regardless of which families used that provision. It would additionally eliminate the 'cliff-edges' inherent in the current system at 15 and 30 hours, which can distort labour supply incentives, e.g. discouraging parents from upping hours of work beyond these levels.

5.2.2. Delivery of the early education entitlements

Strengthening conditionality and supporting LAs to enforce it

Our findings show that additional charges and admissions practices which are not sufficiently inclusive can be a considerable barrier to take-up, particularly among disadvantaged children. LA representatives we interviewed clearly recognised this, but did not really have the means to prevent and challenge such practices. Our research suggests the conditions attached to the funding should be strengthened, and LAs should be given the levers and the support to enforce these conditions more effectively.

In parallel with a higher funding rate covering delivery cost, the guidance should be strengthened to remove the acceptability of charging for ‘extras’ like food and activities, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, which are not in line with policy actions taken elsewhere in the education system. While funding rates for 3-4-year-olds continue to pose a challenge, there is a risk such charges could become normalised without further preventative action.

In addition, our research has highlighted the two-tier nature of the provision that exists in some places. For example, separating children who access funded-only places from other children in the same age group, and providing different quality experiences to children who only access funded hours. LAs should be given the levers to monitor and robustly challenge practices that result in a two-tier-service.

Settings should offer entitlements based on their operating model (term-time or all year-round places) without mandating parents to pay for extra hours. Despite guidance against this practice, our findings show it remains widespread. LAs must monitor and challenge providers not offering sufficient funded-only places or places for children with SEND. Also, all publicly funded providers should prioritize the admission of children in care or who are adopted, as they are a vulnerable group still underserved by the system. Currently only school-based settings are required to prioritise this group.

Dedicated LA funding to support take-up of the entitlements

Funding to administer the entitlements and support take-up is deducted by LAs (up to 5%) from the government grant to pay providers for delivering funded hours. This system seems to assume that the more funding authorities pass on to providers, the fewer resources they need to support take-up. There is no evidence for this assumption, while our research has shown that effective and well-resourced teams are better able to support high take-up of the entitlements.

An authority’s ability to deliver such a service should not need to rely on the level of take-up in the area, nor take funds away from providers. Our findings support separate and dedicated funding to LAs to support the delivery and take-up of the entitlements

Supporting inclusive and high-quality early education

The evidence from this and other research (La Valle et al., 2022) shows that some providers cater for a high proportion of disadvantaged children, with some employing higher qualified staff to deliver high quality provision and SEND support. Apart from the small number of maintained nursery schools that receive higher government funding, there does not appear to be a strong drive nationally to incentivise these providers.

This is reflected in uncertainty and even reluctance at local level to have robust and openly advertised approaches to support these providers. A national strategy that supports

settings that cater primarily for disadvantaged children and provide high-quality provision could sit alongside funding conditionality to incentivise providers to offer the types of provision that best supports national policy aims.

Peer learning

Our research has shown that some LAs have considerable expertise in supporting take-up of the entitlements, and in our stakeholder consultations it was suggested this expertise should be more widely shared through peer learning. LAs already have opportunities to share learning, for example through regional early years networks and events supported by organisations such as Childcare Works and the National Association of Family Information Services. The approach developed for children's social care services (Davey et al., 2022) shows that peer learning can be particularly effective if it provides funding for LAs with a strong track record to provide ongoing support to authorities that need to strengthen their approach and support service improvement.

The early years workforce

As mentioned earlier, lack of suitable staff could particularly affect sufficiency of provision for disadvantaged children, creating more barriers to take-up. The government has recently announced the intention to develop an early years workforce strategy. The evidence suggests this should be implemented as soon as possible.

Transparent and more effectively promoted early education entitlements

Our findings show that there is confusion and resentment among parents who feel the entitlements do not provide all the free hours they expected. This suggests a need for more transparency and making it clear how many free hours a child is entitled to. For example, 15 hours a week during term time or 11 hours a week all year round, or 570 hours a year.

As discussed in earlier chapters, national strategies for promoting the entitlements do not appear to work well from parents' perspectives. LA experiences of involving parents in developing more effective ways of promoting the entitlements were very positive. This suggests that co-production with parents from a range of backgrounds could also help to develop more fit-for-purpose national messages and communication tools.

5.3. Local action can make a difference

Effective implementation locally of the national actions described above would be key to ensure they work as intended. Our research has shown that LAs can make a considerable difference to the take-up of the 15 hours entitlements and the following local actions can strengthen approaches to support take-up.

Relentless focus on reaching disadvantaged children

Our findings show that the entitlement for disadvantaged 2-year-olds is not as well known, understood and appreciated by parents as the universal entitlement for 3-4-year-olds. So supporting take-up of an entitlement targeted at disadvantaged 2-year-olds requires a relentless focus on ensuring that no opportunity is missed to identify disadvantaged children to help their parents to make informed choices about early education.

In our case study LAs, this involved a considerable data exercise several times a year to identify eligible disadvantaged 2-year-olds from the list provided by Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), and cross-checking this with several other data sources (e.g. health records, data from children's social care, Family Hubs and Children's Centres).

It also meant early education entitlement ‘conversations’ with eligible families are a routine part of the work of all family-facing professionals. This was done more effectively where early education was seen as a key part of the local early years offer and embedded in the work of all family-facing professionals, and where teams adopted a collaborative model, working together to identify and reach families who may not otherwise have engaged with the early education team.

Tailored support to remove barriers to take-up

Our findings suggest that many parents can navigate the early education entitlements through digital information services, although, as noted, they could benefit from more transparent and user-friendly information. However, supporting take-up among disadvantaged children requires tailored one-to-one support to families who face more barriers to take-up.

All case study LAs had kept their Family Information Service (FIS) in-house and provided a telephone line. This was to ensure that at every stage of the early education journey FIS staff or other family-facing professionals supported parents to make informed choices about early education.

Evidence from both our qualitative and quantitative research also pointed towards the potential importance of home visits for supporting take-up. These were used by all case study LAs, which had higher-than-expected take-up of the entitlements. Home visits were also one of the few factors that came through strongly in the secondary analysis.

Approach to communication

Our qualitative evidence suggests peer-to-peer communication is effective in informing parents about the child development benefits of entitlements. LAs in our study utilized Parent Champions and other peer support mechanisms. Secondary analysis revealed positive correlations between various features of Parent Champions schemes and higher take-up of the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement.

There was also some more tentative evidence suggesting that moving away from communicating with parents about the entitlements via letter to text messages might additionally support take-up, a path followed by many of the LAs in our case study areas.

Ensuring sufficient inclusive provision

As our findings show that ensuring local sufficiency goes beyond securing places where they are needed. It requires ensuring enough funded places that can be accessed by parents who cannot pay and children who require additional support.

LAs in our case study areas regularly collected detailed data on the availability of places to meet different needs and used this in combination with wider data (e.g. about birth rates) to more actively manage the supply of funded provision.

Our suggestions above for strengthening conditionality and providing greater incentives for the delivery of inclusive provision would also require LAs to have detailed and up-to-date information about the state of local early education services.

A strong local early years offer

Our research has shown that all the above activities can be much more effective if they are underpinned by a robust multiagency vision and strategy for early years supported by

senior managers and elected members, with early education seen as a key part of the local early years offer and embedded in the work of all family-facing professionals.

5.4. Summary

A growing body of evidence shows that we may be reaching a crossroad. There is a serious risk that a policy environment that prioritises working families and practices that undermine equitable access to the 15 hours entitlements could exacerbate inequalities in early childhood.

Our research suggests that the following actions should be prioritised for the policy to achieve its original aim of supporting participation in early education and reducing inequalities:

- A universal entitlement to 15 hours of funded early education for 2-year-olds, as this is possibly the most effective way of supporting participation among disadvantaged children.
- A 'fair' funding model that fully covers the costs of delivering funded hours, including the resources required to support children with SEND and other disadvantaged groups.
- Strengthening conditionality for the delivery of the entitlements and supporting LAs to enforce it to ensure that the 15 hours are genuinely free.
- Recognising the key role LAs can play in ensuring that children who can benefit most from early education access the 15 hours entitlements, with separate, dedicated funding to deliver the policy locally.

Appendix A: Local authority survey

A.1 The survey

The online survey was sent to a named contact in all 152 local authorities (LAs) in England. The sample was compiled by Coram Family and Childcare with publicly available information on LA staff with strategic and/or operational responsibility for early education and childcare.

The online survey was administered by Coram Family and Childcare, an initial invite was followed by several email and telephone reminders. The survey was also advertised via the National Association of Family Information Services and the Local Government Association.

The survey was carried in July and August 2023. We received 91 responses, giving a response rate of 60%.

A.2 The questionnaire

A scoping review, strategic interviews with stakeholders and out advisory groups informed the design of the questionnaire, which focused on two broad topics: what LAs do to support parents to take-up the early education entitlements for all 3-4-year-olds and for disadvantaged 2-year-olds.

The draft questionnaire was tested with five LA representatives to ensure the questions well clear and drew the required information.

Understanding take-up of the early education entitlements – LA survey questionnaire

Survey programme instructions

- Questions require an answer unless stated otherwise [i.e. optional]
- Questions require one pre-coded answer, unless stated otherwise i.e. [multiple choice] [open reply]
- Routing instructions are in italics, just before the relevant question

Thank very much for taking the time to complete the survey on understanding take-up of the **15 hours early education entitlements**. This survey is an important part of a [study](#) we hope will be useful to your work supporting take-up of the early education entitlements.

It should take around 15-20 minutes to complete the survey. The information you provide will be treated as confidential and no individual nor local authority will be identified when the findings are published.

Q1 Before you start completing the survey, can you please confirm that you have received information about the purpose of the study, who will have access to the survey data, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the study [Yes; No; Don't know]

If 'No' or 'Don't know' at Q1 display following message

The information sheet we sent you with the survey invite provides this information, if you need more information please email: childcare@coramfamilyandchildcare.org.uk

Q2 Please tell us which local authority you are from [open reply]

Supporting take-up of the early education entitlements

The survey focuses on the **15 hours** entitlement for disadvantaged 2-year-olds and the universal entitlement for 3-4 year olds, it does **not cover** the 30 hours entitlement for 3-4 year olds from working families.

We start with some questions about publicising the 15 hours entitlements in the **past academic year**, that is since September 2022.

Q3 Thinking about the early education entitlements publicity material (leaflets, posters, flyers, social media and videos), in the past academic year, has this material been available in the community languages spoken in your local authority for the **15 hours 2-year-olds entitlement?**

- Not available in our community languages
- Available in a few of our community languages
- Available in some/most of our community languages
- Don't know

Q4 Thinking about the early education entitlements publicity material (leaflets, posters, flyers, social media and videos), in the past academic year, has this material been available in the community languages spoken in your local authority for the **15 hours 3-4-year-olds entitlement?**

- Not available in our community languages
- Available in a few of our community languages
- Available in some/most of our community languages
- Don't know

We would like to find out how your local authority has promoted the 15 hours early education entitlements in the past academic year, that is since September 2022. Please include promotion carried out by different teams, for example, Family Information Services, Early Years and Children's Centres.

Q5 In the past academic year, how has your local authority promoted the **15 hours entitlement for 2-year-olds?**

	To most/all eligible families	Have not or rarely used this method	Don't know
Letter, postcard, leaflet or flyer			
Email			
Text			
Phone call			
Doorknocking/ home visit			

Q6 In the past academic year, how has your local authority promoted the **15 hours entitlement for 3-4-year-olds**?

	To most/all eligible families	Have not or rarely used this method	Don't know
Letter, postcard, leaflet or flyer			
Email			
Text			
Phone call			
Doorknocking/ home visit			

Q7 In the past academic year, has your local authority run **online group sessions** for parents to promote the 15 hours entitlements? [Multi coded; can't select 'don't know and other replies]

- Yes, to promote the 15 hours entitlement for 2-year-olds
- Yes, to promote the 15 hours entitlement for 3-4-year-olds
- Not used this method to promote the 15 hours entitlements
- Don't know

Q8 In the past academic year, has your local authority promoted the 15 hours entitlements through **outreach**, that is promotion at parent activities, groups, venues and events? [Multi coded; don't know exclusive reply]

- Yes, the 15 hours entitlement for 2-year-olds
- Yes, the 15 hours entitlement for 3-4-year-olds
- Not used outreach to promote the 15 hours entitlements
- Don't know

Q9 Below are the different ways of promoting the 15 hours entitlement for 2-year-olds. Please select **up to two methods** you consider most effective. [Max of replies allowed, don't know exclusive reply]

- Letter, postcard, leaflet or flyer
- Email
- Text
- Phone call
- Door knocking/home visit
- Online group sessions
- Outreach
- Don't know

Q10 Below are the different ways of promoting the 15 hours entitlement for 3–4-year-olds. Please select **up to two methods** you consider most effective. [Max of replies allowed, don't know exclusive reply]

- Letter, postcard, leaflet or flyer
- Email
- Text
- Phone call
- Door knocking/home visit
- Online group sessions
- Outreach
- Don't know

Q11 In the past academic year, has your local authority helped families with the **application** for the 15 hours entitlement for 2-year-olds?

- Helped some/many families with the application
- Not helped/rarely helped families with the application
- Don't know

Q12 In the past academic year, has your local authority helped families to broker a **funded place in an early education and childcare setting**: [multi coded; 'not/rarely' exclusive reply]

- Helped some/many families to broker a 2-year-olds funded place
- Helped some/many families to broker a 3–4-year-olds funded place
- Not/rarely helped families to broker a funded place
- Don't know

In the past it was possible for local authorities to offer '**automatic entitlement**' to 2-year-olds identified by DWP as eligible for 15 funded hours. These families were automatically enrolled, they were given a code and did not need to apply to confirm their eligibility. This scheme was often called 'Golden Tickets'.

While, the Department for Education no longer allows 'automatic entitlement', we are asking about past experiences to assess what impact 'automatic entitlement' had on take-up of the 2-year-olds offer, as this could provide valuable learning for supporting take-up in future.

Q13 When it was allowed, did your local authority offer eligible 2-year-olds '**automatic entitlement**' to 15 funded hours, that is a code that enabled them to take-up the entitlement without confirming eligibility? [Yes; No; Don't know/can't remember]

If yes at Q13

Q14 In September 2020 - July 2021, did you offer an automatic entitlement to 2-year-olds identified as eligible by DWP?

- Yes to all children
- Yes to some children
- Not offered in 2020-21
- Don't know

If 'Yes to some children' at Q14

Q15 Can you explain which eligible 2 year-olds were offered automatic entitlement in **September 2020-July 2021**? [open reply – optional]

If 'Yes to some or all children' at Q14

Q16 In **September 2020-July 2021**, how did your local authority inform families that their 2-year-old had an automatic entitlement to 15 funded hours? Please select all methods that apply. [multi coded; don't know/can't remember exclusive reply]

- By sending a letter, postcard, leaflet or flyer
- By emailing families
- By texting families
- By phoning families
- By visiting families at home/door knocking
- I don't know/can't remember

Q17 In **September 2020-July 2021**, on average how many times did your local authority contact families to inform them that their 2-year-old had an automatic entitlement to 15 funded hours? Please include all methods used to contact families.

- Once or twice
- Three or four times
- Five or more times
- I don't know/can't remember

Q18 In **September 2020-July 2021**, did your local authority help families with an automatic entitlement to broker a funded place in an early education and childcare setting?

- Helped some/many families
- Not/rarely helped families
- I don't know

Repeat Q14-Q18 for: 2019-20, 2018-19 and 1017-18 academic years.

Additional help to support children's early learning and development

Now some questions about discretionary schemes to support children's early learning and development, that is schemes funded by your local authority, **excluding** entitlements funded by central government i.e. the 30 hours entitlement for 3–4-year-olds with working parents, and childcare subsidies for working families.

Q19 In the past academic year, have you had a discretionary scheme funded by your local authority which has provided **additional funded hours for children from any age groups**. [Yes/No/Don't know]

If yes at Q19

Q20 Can you please explain which children were offered additional funded hours and how many funded hours were provided by your discretionary scheme [open reply - optional]

Supporting providers to deliver the 15 hours early education entitlements

Now some questions on **incentives to early education and childcare providers** to deliver the 15 hours early education entitlements.

Q21 In the past academic year, has your local authority offered any of the **incentives** listed below to providers to deliver the **15 hours entitlements**?

	For the 2-year-olds entitlement	For the 3–4-year-olds entitlement	For both entitlements	For neither entitlement	Don't know
Local authority has topped-up the hourly funding rate					
Free or discounted training /consultancy					
Free or discounted SEND support/portage					
Free or discounted rent; nil or reduced business rates; business grants or loans					

Barriers to take-up

The next questions are about barriers to take-up of the 15 hours early education entitlements. Using the scale provided, can you please indicate if you think that, in the past academic year, these have been barriers to take-up in your local authority.

Q22 Have the following been barriers to take-up of the **15 hours entitlement for 2-year-olds**? [Scale for each statement: Strongly agree; agree; disagree; strongly disagree; neither agree nor disagree]

- Providers do not offer/limit places for the 15 hours entitlement for 2-year-old
- Providers do not offer/limit places for the 15 hours entitlement for 2-year-olds with SEND
- Providers only offer places for the 15 hours entitlement for 2-year-olds if they cannot fill spaces with fee-paying families or families eligible for the 30 hours entitlement
- Families offered the 15 hours entitlement for 2-year-olds in a way that doesn't work for them e.g. limit on the days/hours when funded hours can be taken
- Families expected to pay for additional hours or top ups when taking up the 15 hours entitlement for 2-year-olds
- Families cannot find a setting near home where they can take-up the 15 hours entitlement for 2-year-olds
- Families think that local settings would not adequately support their child's learning and development needs or are not good options for their child

Q23 Please explain if there have been other barriers to take-up of the entitlement for 2-year-olds in your local authority [Open reply, optional]

Q24 Have the following been barriers to take-up of the **15 hours entitlement for 3–4-year-olds**? [Scale for each statement: Strongly agree; agree; disagree; strongly disagree; neither agree nor disagree]

- Providers do not offer/limit places for the 15 hours entitlement for 3-4-year-olds
- Providers do not offer/limit places for the 15 hours entitlement for 3-4-year-olds with SEND
- Providers only offer places for the 15 hours entitlement for 3-4-year-olds if they cannot fill spaces with fee-paying families or families eligible for the 30 hours entitlement
- Families offered the 15 hours entitlement for 3-4-year-olds in a way that doesn't work for them e.g. limit on the days/hours when funded hours can be taken
- Families expected to pay for additional hours or top ups when taking up the 15 hours entitlement for 3-4-year-olds
- Families cannot find a setting near home where they can take-up the 15 hours entitlement for 3-4-year-olds
- Families think that local settings would not adequately support their child's learning and development needs or are not good options for their child

Q25 Please explain if there have been other barriers to take-up of the entitlement for 3–4-year-olds in your local authority [Open reply, optional]

Resources available to support early education and childcare

And finally, some questions on the level of government early education funding that your local authority retained for administration and support activities in the **2022-23 financial year**.

Q26 Do you know what percentage of government funding for the 2 year old entitlement you retained for the **2022-23 financial year**? [Yes; No]

If Yes at Q26

Q27 **In the 2022-23 financial year**, what **percentage** of government funding for the **2 year-olds entitlement** did your local authority **retain**? Please enter 0 if no funding was retained [0:100]

Q28 Do you know what percentage of government funding for the 3–4-year-old entitlement you retained for the **2022-23 financial year**? [Yes; No]

If Yes at Q28

Q29 **In the 2022-23 financial year**, what **percentage** of government funding for the **3–4-year-olds** entitlement did your local authority **retain**? Please enter 0 if no funding was retained [0:5]

5. Thank you and keeping in touch

Q30 Thank you very much for taking the time to complete the survey. Please add below any other insights you have about understanding and supporting take-up of the early education entitlements [open, optional]

Q31 We would like to ask for your permission to keep in touch about the research. Please select from the following options [Multi-coded, 'No' exclusive reply]

- Yes, you can send me the research findings
- Yes, you can invite me to take part in a telephone interview as part of our case studies
- Yes, you can invite me to online events to discuss the research findings and possible policy solutions
- No, I don't want to be contacted

If yes at the Q31

Q32 Please provide your name and email address

Q33 Would you be happy for the survey data to be used by members of the research team for other research on early education and childcare before the data is deleted? [Yes; No. Optional]

Appendix B: Secondary analysis

B.1 Overview

The aim of the secondary data analysis described in this report was to:

- 1) Explore which characteristics of local areas could help explain the variation in take-up rates of the 15 hours entitlements across local authorities
- 2) Identify a set of local authorities with higher-than-expected take-up given their local context to inform the selection of qualitative case study areas (discussed further in Appendix C)
- 3) Use data from the local authority survey (described in Appendix A) and from the Parent Champions programme run by Coram Family and Childcare to try to identify and evidence which local authority actions help to support take-up

B.2 Data

On the basis of theory and prior research we identified a number of local area characteristics that we thought could plausibly affect early education entitlement take-up and collated data on these, as far as possible, at local authority level. Table B1 outlines the measures we used and the sources from which we obtained or calculated these measures.

Table B.1: Local area characteristics

Measures	Source
Take-up	
Entitlement take-up in 2022-23	Department for Education: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-provision-children-under-5/2023
Demographic factors	
Population size	Office for National Statistics: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/populationandhouseholdestimatesenglandandwales/census2021
Population density	Office for National Statistics: https://www.ons.gov.uk/datasets/TS006/editions/2021/versions/4
% residents from ethnic minority background	Census 2021 from the Office for National Statistics: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/bulletins/ethnicgroupenglandandwales/census2021
% with English as an additional language	Census 2021 from the Office for National Statistics: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/language/bulletins/languageenglandandwales/census2021

Measures	Source
Average local area deprivation and variation across LA	Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) 2019: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019 . Data at super output area (SOA) level was used to estimate the variation in deprivation levels within each LA.
% children eligible for free school meals	Department for Education: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics
% residents working in professional occupations	Constructed using the Annual Population Survey at LA district level across the 12 months to December 2022 from: https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/query/construct/summary.asp?mode=construct&version=0&dataset=17
Transience of 0–4-year-old population	Constructed by combining estimates of the percentage of the population at LA level missing from the 2021 census with estimates of the 0-4-year-old population in each LA: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/methodologies/compareagesexesimatesfromcensus2021toareaswithinenglandandwales
Employment factors	
Economic activity rates	Constructed using the Annual Population Survey at LA district level across the 12 months to December 2022 from: https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/query/construct/summary.asp?mode=construct&version=0&dataset=17
Employment and self-employment rates	
Unemployment rates	
% of residents claiming out-of-work benefits	
Early education system and funding factors	
% of 2- and 3-4-year-old places delivered in the maintained sector	Department for Education: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-provision-children-under-5/2023
% of children taking up places in settings rated as outstanding by Ofsted	Department for Education: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-provision-children-under-5/2023
% of places delivered by large (private) chains	Authors' calculations using a list of the 25 largest nursery chains from Nursery World, combined with information about the locations of settings within these chains and the number of places they provided (relative to all places in the LA) from the Ofsted early years register: https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/content/features/nursery-chains-2023-groups-by-size-gaining-ground/ and https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childcare-providers-and-inspections-as-at-31-march-2023 .
Funding rate for 2- and 3-4-year-old places	Department for Education: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-funding-2022-to-2023
% of funding retained to support LA delivery	Department for Education: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/fast-track/b85c79f6-d53e-4c6e-89d2-e9c6bae052bc

In addition to data on local authority actions from the LA survey (described in Appendix A), we additionally used data collected by Coram Family and Childcare (CFC) in relation to their

Parent Champions (PC) programme. This data comprised administrative records held by CFC relating to which LAs ran a PC scheme in which years, plus quarterly data shared by individual PC schemes with CFC relating to the programme's activities within a particular quarter. This included information such as the focus of the programme, the number of Parent Champions actively volunteering in a particular quarter, the number of parents engaged via different means (one-to-one, in group settings, etc).

Table B.2 sets out the variables we constructed and used from the LA survey and PC data. All variables from the LA survey were created separately for the disadvantaged 2-year-old and universal 3-4-year-old entitlements, with the exception of the questions relating to application assistance, which relate only to the 2-year-old entitlement. These variables were populated for all LAs who had responded to the LA survey and missing otherwise. All PC data relates to the scheme as a whole and does not distinguish activity by entitlement.

Table B.2: Source of local area characteristics

Indicators	How it was constructed
<i>Local authority survey</i>	
Communication methods used to tell families about the entitlements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letter/postcard/leaflet/flyer • Email • Text • Phone call • Door-knocking/home visit 	A series of binary indicators, each taking a value of 1 if the method was used by the LA to promote the entitlement to most/all eligible families and 0 if they had not or rarely used this method.
Additional communication methods: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online group sessions • Outreach 	Two binary indicators, each taking a value of 1 if the method was used by the LA to promote the entitlement and 0 if it was not.
Whether early education publicity materials are translated into community languages	A categorical variable taking a value of 0 if the materials are not available in community languages, 1 if they are available in a few languages, and 2 if they are available in some or most community languages. Entered as two binary indicators in regression analysis.
Provision of application assistance (2-year-old entitlement only)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A binary indicator taking a value of 1 if the LA had helped some or many families with their application and 0 if they had not or rarely helped families with their application. • A series of binary indicators taking a value of 1 if the LA had, in a given academic year, offered families 'Golden Tickets', i.e. bypassed the application process entirely for potentially eligible families (on the DWP list), and 0 if they had not offered them. • A binary indicator taking a value of 1 if the LA had, at any point in the last 5 years, used 'Golden Tickets', and 0 if they had not.
Provision of brokered places	A binary indicator taking a value of 1 if the LA had helped some/many families to find a funded place, and 0 if they had not/rarely helped families.

Additional hours

A binary indicator taking a value of 1 if the LA had provided additional funded hours for children in any age in the past year, and 0 if they had not.

Incentives offered to providers to deliver places for the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement or universal 3-4-year-old entitlement:

A series of binary indicators, created separately for incentives relating to the two entitlements, each taking a value of 1 if the LA reported offering the incentive in question, and 0 if they did not.

- Topped up hourly funding rate
- Free or discounted training/consultancy
- Free or discounted SEND support/portage
- Free or discounted rent; nil or reduced business rates; business grants or loans

Parent Champions data

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Had a PC scheme in 2022-23	A series of binary indicators taking a value of 1 if the statement was true and 0 otherwise.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Had an active PC scheme in 2022-23 (i.e. some quarterly activity reported)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ever had a PC scheme (since 2017-18)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Number of years for which had a PC scheme (since 2017-18)	A categorical variable counting the number of years for which a PC had been in operation (entered linearly in regression analysis)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Average number of Parent Champions per 10,000 population	A series of continuous variables averaging the quarterly data reported by PC schemes across the year and scaling by the size of the local authority
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Average number of parents engaged one-to-one per 10,000 population	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Average number of parents engaged one-to-one about early education specifically per 10,000 population	

B.3 Methods

To understand which, if any, of these characteristics was related to the take-up of early education entitlements, we ran LA-level Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analysis, separately relating take-up of the disadvantaged 2-year-old and the universal 3-4-year-old entitlement to all of the local area contextual characteristics described in Table B.1. Analysis was restricted to local authorities with non-missing data for all variables – 139 of 152 LAs (just over 90%) in total.

To identify local authorities with higher-than-expected take-up given their local context, we used these same regression models to predict take-up in each LA and then compare this prediction to the actual take-up rate observed in reality. These predictions create a measure of take-up by combining the characteristics in each LA with the relationships identified through the regression model, effectively assuming that these characteristics can perfectly explain take-up. Any deviation of these predictions from reality is thus indicative that other factors matter for take-up, with the sign of the deviation in a given LA pointing to whether other characteristics observed in that LA may be positively or negatively associated with take-up. LAs with higher-than-expected take-up are ones in which we might expect them to be taking actions that have a positive effect on take-up. We recruited 18 of these LAs for the qualitative case studies (described in Appendix C). Predictions were restricted to the same sample of 139 LAs.

The third part of our analysis used the LA actions identified through the local authority survey (discussed in Appendix A) and data from the Parent Champions programme run by Coram Family and Childcare to try to identify and evidence which local authority actions help to support take-up. We did this in two ways: first, we used OLS regression analysis to relate the difference between actual and predicted take-up rates observed in each LA to the factors described in Table B.2. We did this separately for take-up of the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement and the universal 3-4-year-old entitlement, in each case relating policy actions taken to address take-up of the relevant entitlement to take-up of that entitlement. In each case, this analysis was restricted to the sample of LAs for which we observed the relevant policy action.

By construction, these regressions account for the influence of the characteristics in Table B.1 on take-up and look for associations with the variation that remains unexplained by these characteristics. However, there could be many reasons why LAs make different decisions regarding their policy actions, or there could be other LA characteristics that

matter for take-up which we were not able to observe. This means that we should regard this analysis as correlational rather than causal.

To try to overcome some of this potential omitted variables bias, the second approach we used was a panel data analysis with local authority fixed effects. We were only able to run this on a limited subset of variables for which we were able to collect historic data, which we did for the use of ‘Golden Tickets’ through the LA survey and which were able to obtain from CFC in relation to the Parent Champions programme. This approach exploits variation in take-up over time within an LA and looks to see whether rises or falls in take-up are associated with a local authority starting or stopping the use of ‘Golden Tickets’ or a Parent Champions scheme. It was run on the small subset of local authorities for which we were able to collect historic data, and did not produce any statistically significant results.

B.4 Results

In the tables below, we focus on the statistically significant results we identified amongst the OLS regression analyses described above. In each table we report: the coefficient estimate, the standard error (in square brackets underneath), the level of statistical significance associated with the estimate (i.e. how confident we are that it differs from zero) in the form of stars next to the coefficient estimates, and the number of LAs contributing to the analysis. In Table B.3 we additionally report the percentage of the variation in take-up across local authorities that the model is able to explain.

Table B.3 focuses on the local contextual factors associated with take-up of each of the 15-hour early education entitlements. Table B.4 focuses on the policy actions associated with take-up over and above local context. We only found evidence of statistically significant relationships between policy actions and take-up for the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement, so we only present results from analysis of this entitlement.

Table B.3: Local contextual factors which are significantly associated with take-up of early education entitlements at LA level

	Take-up of the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement	Take-up of the universal 3-4-year-old entitlement
% of residents from an ethnic minority background	-0.342*** [0.112]	
% of residents working in professional occupations	0.378** [0.158]	
% of funded places taken in the maintained sector		0.102** [0.039]
% of funded places taken in outstanding settings		0.165** [0.072]
Number of LAs	139	139
% of variation in take-up explained by the model	37%	66%

Notes: *** indicates significance at the 1% level; ** at the 5% level; * at the 10% level.

In terms of local area contextual factors predicting take-up of the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement, Table B.3 shows a 10 percentage point increase in the percentage of LA residents from an ethnic minority background is associated with a 3.4 percentage point reduction in take-up at LA level, and that a 10 percentage point increase in the percentage

of residents working in a professional (social class 1 or 2) occupation is associated with a 3.8 percentage point increase in take-up at LA level.

In terms of take-up of the universal 3-4-year-old entitlement, Table B.3 shows that a 10 percentage point increase in the percentage of 3-4-year-old funded places being delivered by the maintained sector is associated with a 1 percentage point increase in take-up of the 3-4-year-old entitlement at LA level, and a 10 percentage point increase in the percentage of 3-4-year-old funded places being delivered by settings rated as outstanding by Ofsted is associated with 1.7 percentage point increase in take-up at LA level.

Table B.4: LA policy actions significantly associated with take-up of the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement over and above local context in at least one model specification

	Local area contextual factors only	Conditional on other communication methods	Conditional on all other policy actions
Most/all families contacted via home visits	0.057*** [0.021]	0.061*** [0.023]	0.049 [0.033]
Most/all families contacted via text	0.033** [0.016]	0.025 [0.018]	0.025 [0.024]
Number of LAs	70	63	54

Notes: *** indicates significance at the 1% level; ** at the 5% level; * at the 10% level.

After accounting for local area contextual factors, Table B.4 shows that take-up of the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement was 5.7 percentage points higher in LAs that promoted it to most or all eligible families using home visits compared to few or no families using this method. After additionally accounting for other ways in which the entitlement was communicated to potentially eligible families, this effect remained statistically significant and of similar magnitude (6.1 percentage points).

After accounting for all other policy actions undertaken by LAs, the magnitude of the effect fell slightly and was no longer statistically significant. This may have been driven partly by a loss of degrees of freedom (i.e. the fact that there were a lot of actions to account for, and not many LAs across which we could assess their effect), which inflates the standard errors.

Table B.4 also shows that, accounting for local area context, take-up of the disadvantaged 2-year-old entitlement was 3.3 percentage points higher in LAs that promoted it to most or all eligible families using text messages compared to few or no families using this method. After accounting for other ways in which the entitlement was communicated to potentially eligible families, the magnitude of this effect fell slightly and was no longer statistically significant. This evidence is therefore more tentative than that relating to home visits.

Appendix C: Qualitative research

The qualitative research included interviews with 23 participants from 18 local authorities (LAs), 17 early education providers and 8 parents, and 8 focus groups with parents.

The first section outlines how the samples for these groups were selected, the second section how the qualitative fieldwork was carried out, and the last section how the qualitative data was analysed.

C.1 The qualitative samples

Local authorities

The sample was selected from LAs that took part in our survey and through contacts provided by the research team and members of the advisory group.

The 18 LAs included in the research were selected based on the results of our secondary analysis (see Appendix B) and included LAs that were in the top 20 with higher-than-expected take-up for the universal entitlement for 3-year-olds and/or the disadvantaged entitlement for 2-year-olds in 2023.

The sample included a mix of geographical areas (i.e. large and small cities and rural areas) with different levels of disadvantaged and with proportion of the population from different ethnic communities.

Early education and childcare settings

The sample was selected from public available sources (e.g. LA childcare directories, daynurseries.co.uk, Ofsted) and participating LAs also suggested providers to invite or publicise the study through their early years provider networks.

We planned to interview 45 group providers however we experienced considerable challenges in achieving this number. We struggled to engage this group because several other provider studies were being carried out at the same time and because this was an exceptionally busy time for the sector, getting ready for the expansion of the early education entitlements for working families.

We developed a comprehensive recruitment strategy which included:

- An issued sample of 200 providers who received an invite followed by several email and telephone reminders
- User-friendly recruitment documents that emphasised confidentiality and the importance of the study to support take-up of the early education entitlements
- An extensive fieldwork period i.e. from December 2023 to May 2024

- Asking local authorities in the study and national organisations (i.e. Early Learning Alliance, Early Education and the Local Government Association) to publicise the study to providers
- In the second part of the fieldwork, we offered a £40 voucher to participants, and stressed that interviews could be done outside working hours, meaning that participants could consider the incentive a payment for their time (a common practice with teachers)

Despite these efforts we were only able to include in the study 17 settings.

The sample was from a mix of LAs with take-up levels for the early education entitlements that were below (N=4) and above (N=13) the expected take-up level, including areas where we also conducted LA interviews. The sample also included provider with different delivery models i.e.: 7 private for-profit nurseries (3 single-site and 4 chains); 8 not-for-profit nurseries (6 single-site and 2 chains); and 2 school-based settings.

Parents

The sample was recruited by Coram Families and Childcare, through their local parent networks.

The sample included 62 parents of children aged 2-to-4 years old, which was purposively selected to reflect diverse attitudes to and experience of early education and the entitlements, as well as different socio-economic backgrounds. It included:

- 18 fathers
- 38 parents eligible for income support
- 31 parents of children with additional needs (SEND)
- 10 parents with English as an additional language
- 44 parents from diverse ethnicity backgrounds
- 23 parents eligible for 2-year-old entitlement currently or in the last year
- 37 parents eligible for the universal 3-to-4-year-old entitlement
- 19 parents who have not taken up the 2-year-old entitlement nor intend to
- 16 parents who have not taken up the universal 3-to-4-year-old entitlement nor intend to

C.2 The qualitative fieldwork

For each research population, a topic guide was created to cover key issues consistently while allowing flexibility to explore unforeseen issues and adapt questions to individual participants.

Local authorities

The LA interviews explored the views on early education entitlements policies, challenges in ensuring sufficiency of funded places, barriers to the take-up of the entitlements and what works to support the take-up.

The participants had strategic and/or operational responsibility for early education and childcare in the LA (e.g. Early Years Strategic Lead, Head of Early Years and Childcare, Early Years and Family Hubs Manager). Most interviews were with one participant, but 5 involved 2 participants. Interviews lasted around 90 minutes, they were carried via video conference between November 2023 and May 2024.

Providers

The provider interviews explored their experiences of delivering funded hours, the funding rate for the early education entitlements and the implications for the setting's financial sustainability and service offer, and their views of supporting take-up of the entitlements.

The participants had managerial and/or operational responsibility for the setting (e.g. Headteacher, Manager, Director). All interviews were with one participant, lasted around 45 minutes and were carried via video conference between December 2023 and April 2024.

Parents

Parent fieldwork occurred from February to April 2024. Eight parents participated in 20-minute individual interviews, while 54 parents joined eight 60-minute focus groups (one in-person, seven via video conference).

C.3 The qualitative analysis

Interviews and groups were digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed using the rigorous Framework method (Spencer et al., 2014), allowing in-depth thematic, within-case analysis, and comparisons between various groups, such as rural and urban LAs, provider types, and families in different situations. One parent did not consent to recording; instead, detailed notes were transcribed for analysis.

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