

# General Election Policy Briefing

## Inequality in early years education



**JANUARY 2024**

### OVERVIEW

- Just 20% of families in the bottom third of the earnings distribution are eligible for the existing offer of 30 hours of early education and childcare for three- and four-year-olds, and all parents in full-time education or training are ineligible. 70% of those who are eligible for the support are from homes in the top half of earners.<sup>1</sup>
- Just 1 in 5 (or 20%) of families earning less than £20,000 a year will have access to the planned expansion of funded places for one- and two-year-olds in some working families, compared to 80% of those with household incomes over £45,000.<sup>2</sup>
- In 2023, 1 in 5 early years staff members were unqualified (did not have a relevant GCSE/level 2 qualification), up from 1 in 7 in 2018.<sup>3</sup>
- Funding given to early years settings to support disadvantaged children in their cohort (the early years pupil premium) is just a quarter of the amount given in pupil premium funding to primary schools for disadvantaged pupils.<sup>4</sup>
- Despite an increase in the proportion of children in the early years qualifying as disadvantaged (using the same eligibility criteria as free school meals), the proportion of the Early Years National Funding Formula ringfenced for disadvantaged children has remained the same since 2017-18.<sup>5</sup>
- While there are now around 500 Family Hubs in England,<sup>6</sup> over 1,400 Sure Start Children's centres have closed since 2010.<sup>7</sup>
- The early years attainment gap had been narrowing, but pre-pandemic this trend reversed, and the gap started to widen. Measured here as the percentage of each group meeting expected early learning goals, the gap between children eligible for free school meals and their peers had decreased from 19 percentage points in 2012/13 to 17 percentage points in 2016/17, but began widening again in 2017/18, standing at just under 20 percentage points in 2022/23 (Department for Education data).

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NEXT GOVERNMENT

- Recent changes in England's early years provision have shifted the sector's focus away from early education and towards childcare. Both roles are crucial, and the next government should prioritise restoring the sector's role and emphasis on early education.  
**Equalising access to early education**
  - There is a substantial gap in development between the poorest children and their better off peers before they start at school. The early years are crucial to narrowing this gap. However, the existing system in England provides less time in early education and care to the children from low-income families who stand to benefit the most. If an hours-based system is retained long-term, the next government should guarantee a core entitlement of at least 20 hours per week for all children, irrespective of their family's working status or income level. Priority should be given to providing this for all three- and four-year-olds, followed by two-year-olds.
  - Where provision beyond this core educational entitlement is necessary for childcare purposes, additional hours should be affordable for all families, for example through a sliding scale of fees by income level.
- The next government could also consider a more substantial re-design of the system, for instance by bringing in a means-tested model for all funded hours. This type of approach could also work well for disadvantaged children and their families, as long as subsidy levels are set appropriately.  
**A focus on quality**
  - Any expansion of places should be staggered, so that providers have time to successfully deliver high-quality additional places.
  - To ensure quality, the next government should put in place an early years workforce strategy, with minimum qualification levels specified (for example, making level 3 a benchmark qualification), alongside adequate funding for settings to offer the higher wages needed to attract qualified staff, and to support training.
  - Having staff with graduate-level qualifications is beneficial for children. The government should introduce specific funding to attract graduates to the

sector, for example through a 'Leadership Quality Fund', with the most disadvantaged areas prioritised for funding. Additional funding would help to attract qualified staff with enhanced pay and status, with the long-term aspiration of having a qualified teacher in every setting.

#### **Additional funding for disadvantaged children**

- The next government should review the early years pupil premium (EYPP). Improvements to its administration could enhance its impact at very little cost, for example by ensuring prompt payment to providers, as well as making the process easier for parents and less volatile for providers.
- Government should also look to increase the overall level of the EYPP, to match the level in primary schools. This would allow settings to offer better targeted and individualised support to children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and incentivise settings to apply for the

funding and recruit eligible children.

- The additional funding settings receive through the Early Years National Funding Formula allows them to better support disadvantaged children. However, as disadvantage levels have risen, the amount of funding per pupil has fallen. This funding should be re-instated to previous per-pupil levels.

#### **Reinvigorating children's centres**

- Given the evidence of the benefits of children's centres, the next government should develop a new national strategy for the reinvigoration of service provision for this age group. Appropriate support should be offered to families with young children, either within an all-age model, as in Family Hubs, or through services specifically for young families through the previous Sure Start model. Any national roll out of this type of programme should prioritise the most disadvantaged areas.

## **CONTEXT**

Early years policy in England is at a turning point. There has perhaps never been more political attention on the sector, with growing sentiment from parents that existing provision does not serve their needs. The Government recently announced plans to expand what's on offer for some working families, but concerns have been raised about fair access to this expanded provision, and the sector's ability to deliver it under planned timescales and budgetary constraints. Indeed, there are already concerns that nurseries and preschools are being forced to close due to funding issues and difficulty in recruiting staff.<sup>8</sup>

**"A key question for the next government is how to create a system which offers high quality early education to children from all backgrounds, while also facilitating the childcare needs of working parents, all within a system which is financially sustainable for government, providers and parents."**

While much of the recent interest and associated announcements on the early years have so far focused on the sector's role as childcare, relatively little attention has been paid to the other major part the sector plays, that of early education. A key question for the next government is how to create a system which offers high quality early education to children from all backgrounds, while also facilitating the childcare needs of working parents, all within a system which is financially sustainable for government, providers and parents.

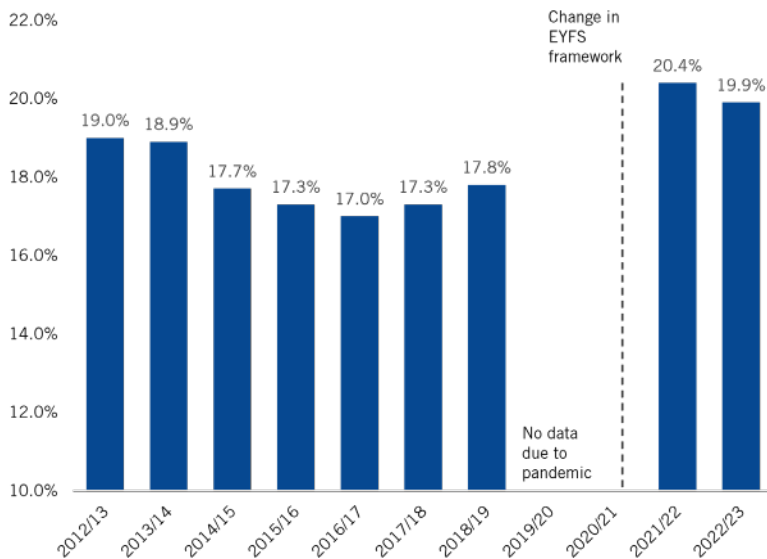
The recently announced early years expansion had a strong focus on the sector's role as childcare.<sup>9</sup> Once the expansion is in place, it will widen existing inequalities in access to early years provision, and therefore to early education, with poorer families less likely to be able to access government funded entitlements. This is also against a backdrop of historic policies which did see the sector as playing a key role as early education, with a particular emphasis on provision being accessible to more disadvantaged children, as evidence points to this group benefiting the most from additional hours,<sup>10</sup> a vital intervention to reduce the gap in school readiness. What is now left is an inconsistent set of policies, without a clear overarching narrative for what the early years is really for, and much less focus on its role as early education.

This briefing lays out existing evidence for the benefits of early education, including inequalities in access to existing entitlements, how many hours children are likely to benefit from, and potential changes that would help to widen access. It also looks at evidence on qualification levels of staff, additional support required for the most disadvantaged children, and the role that children's centres can play in enabling families to aid with their children's learning outside of formal early years settings. Overall, it provides a summary of existing evidence on the early years, and in particular the policies which are likely to benefit the life chances of children from poorer homes.

## **THE BENEFITS OF EARLY EDUCATION**

The first few years of a child's life are a vital point of development, building the foundations for a lifetime of learning. During those early years, young children's brains develop considerably. In this period, children build both their understanding of themselves and of the world around them, through the development of both cognitive and socio-emotional skills. It's also a time when a child's development is highly malleable; it can be influenced considerably by the environment around them.<sup>11</sup>

Figure 1: Attainment gap by Free School Meal status in 'good level of development' in Early Years Foundation Stage Profile, 2013-2023



Source: Sutton Trust, *Getting the Balance Right*, and [Department for Education](#).

Note: Please see [Changes to the early years foundation stage \(EYFS\) framework](#) for more information

**"In terms of economic benefits, research has found high quality early education to have a 13% return on investment, and that for every £1 spent on early years education, £7 has to be spent to have the same impact in adolescence."**

A recent review on early childhood development in preschool and at home suggests that early interventions can be effective when they focus on skills, behaviours, capacities and beliefs which meet the following criteria - they are changeable via intervention, they are fundamental to the success of children, and they would not be likely to develop without intervention. The evidence also supports interventions aimed at supporting school readiness, so that children can make the most of their time in the classroom when they first begin at school. There are two main policy approaches commonly taken in the early years; early education programmes (often termed preschool or nursery), and programmes targeted at improving the

home learning environment (for example, some of the interventions historically delivered via children's centres, such as Family Hubs or Sure Start centres). There is evidence that both types of intervention can be effective in developing children's skills into the long term,<sup>12</sup> with benefits found at school entry, adolescence and into adulthood, with particular benefits for less advantaged children.<sup>13</sup> In terms of economic benefits, research has found high quality early education to have a 13% return on investment,<sup>14</sup> and that for every £1 spent on early years education, £7 has to be spent to have the same impact in adolescence.<sup>15</sup>

Given the benefits for disadvantaged children particularly, the early years is an important time for social mobility. The poorest children are already months behind their peers when they start at primary school. There is also evidence that the gap has started to widen again in recent years (Figure 1).<sup>16</sup> High quality early education, as well as parenting support focusing on the home learning environment, have the potential to reduce this gap and to improve life chances for children from lower income families.

#### **ACCESS TO EARLY EDUCATION** How many hours in early education are beneficial?

While there is evidence that early

education programmes can be beneficial, less is known about exactly which elements of existing programmes have produced their impact, and there is little evidence on many of the key details relevant to policymaking.<sup>17</sup>

Given the hours-based approach to early years provision taken in England, an important question for policymakers here is the optimum number of hours for young children in early years settings. There had previously been a lack of high quality evidence on this issue. To provide that evidence, the Sutton Trust commissioned Professor Edward Melhuish, an international expert in human development, to carry out new analysis of the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED). SEED is a longitudinal study looking at the impact of early years provision, the home environment and parenting on cognitive and socio-emotional development. This new analysis used the SEED dataset to look in greater detail at the number of hours children benefit from in early years provision, and how that differs by socio-economic background.

That work, released in early 2023, found that for disadvantaged children (defined in the research as those in the bottom 40% of the income distribution), there are clear benefits of time in early years provision up to 20 hours per week, and no evidence of negative impacts (for example socio-emotional problems) for longer hours, as long as provision is of high quality. Outcomes from attendance for more advantaged children were more mixed, with concerns that emotional and behavioural self-regulation could be negatively impacted. However, this was less likely when attending high-quality provision.<sup>18</sup>

#### **Existing entitlements**

The recently announced expansion to early years entitlements for some working families come into effect in April 2024, with a gradual roll-out ongoing until September 2025.<sup>19</sup> Until April 2024, the entitlements outlined in Table 1 are in effect in England (see overleaf):

Table 1: Existing government entitlements in England (December 2023)

Age group	Universal provision	Working families (meeting certain criteria)	Low income children/those with additional needs
9 to 23 months			
2 years old			15 hours
3 to 4 years old	<b>15 hours</b>	30 hours	<i>(No specific policy - access to universal 15 hours)</i>

**"According to analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), the proportion of two-year-olds eligible for the offer has decreased from 40% in 2015, to just over 25% in 2022."**

Source: The Department for Education

Ahead of the government's planned expansion, there are currently no government funded hours available for children aged 9 months to 23 months, leaving a gap in support for parents between the end of parental leave and the start of government entitlements.

**Entitlements at age two**

At age two, children from lower income families can access 15 hours in early years education. This entitlement was initially launched as a pilot under the then Labour government in 2006, aiming to help disadvantaged children to be better prepared for school. The offer was originally for a lower number of hours, and initially local authorities were free to define disadvantage themselves, with a large amount of variation in how this was done across

the country.<sup>20</sup>

The offer as it is today was subsequently brought in by the Coalition (Conservative and Liberal Democrat) government, which introduced a legal entitlement for 15 hours of provision for disadvantaged two-year-olds. The current eligibility criteria for the two-year-old offer is outlined in Box 1.

The group of children covered by the disadvantaged two-year-old offer has narrowed over time, due to a combination of factors including the transition from legacy benefits to universal credit, a general reduction in the generosity of the benefits system and the maximum allowable income level being frozen in cash terms. According to analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), the proportion of two-year-olds eligible for the offer has decreased from 40% in 2015, to just over 25% in 2022.<sup>21</sup>

There are also issues related to the take-up of the disadvantage offer. A report released by Nesta in 2023 looked in detail at existing usage of the offer, with take-up at around 72%, and lower attendance rates amongst those who do use the offer when compared to their more advantaged peers. Nesta also carried out a randomised control trial across six local authorities, to test whether some simple changes to the letter inviting parents to apply for the offer could increase take-up. Unfortunately, they did not find any benefits to this approach. To improve take-up and attendance for this group, they recommended:

- Introducing a unique identifier for all children from birth to be used across government departments, local authorities and the health system, to improve future evaluation work.
- Allowing the auto-enrolment of families, to make the process less burdensome.
- For local authorities to trial text and email prompts to families to promote the offer.

However, they also recommended wider scale changes were likely needed for a substantial impact on take-up rates, including universalising the offer to make take-up simpler and to reduce stigmatisation for families.<sup>22</sup>

Recent research from the Sutton Trust has looked at international evidence on improving the enrolment of less advantaged children into early years provision. Summarising existing evidence, the piece found that being provided with information about the likely benefits of attendance is one of the most important facilitators

Box 1: Eligibility for the 15 hour offer for disadvantaged two-year-olds

Two-year-olds in England are eligible for 15 hours of free early years provision if their parents receive any of the following benefits:

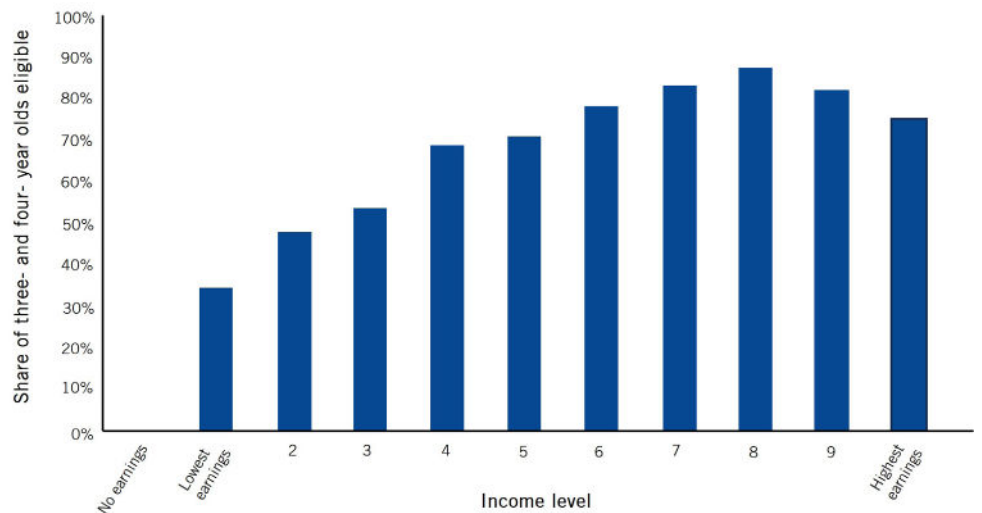
- Income Support
- Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA)
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)
- Universal Credit, and their household income is £15,400 a year or less after tax, not including benefit payments
- The guaranteed element of Pension Credit
- Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit (or both), and their household income is £16,190 a year or less before tax
- The Working Tax Credit 4-week run on (the payment given when a household stops qualifying for Working Tax Credit)

Source: The Department for Education

in enabling participation for disadvantaged families, alongside building relationships with families and their communities to reduce barriers. Internationally, countries take a range of approaches to providing early education and care to disadvantaged families, including sliding scale approaches where poorer families have very low or no cost provision and providing universal free access for specified hours. Other countries offer universal provision in targeted areas of high disadvantage, to encourage take-up by reducing both costs for families and the stigma of having to apply for a targeted offer.<sup>23</sup>

One international example of a successful intervention to increase uptake of places by disadvantaged families in early years provision is in New York, where between 2013 and 2014 enrolment rates in non-statutory early education and care for four-year-olds from low-income families nearly tripled. This followed a large grassroots marketing campaign in deprived areas, using a range of techniques including

Figure 2: Eligibility for the existing 30 hour entitlement at ages three and four by income level



Source: Sutton Trust, [A Fair Start](#)

canvassing, cold-calling and public advertising campaigns.<sup>24</sup>

#### Entitlements at age three and four

The Sutton Trust's Fair Start research looked at access by income level to the existing 30 hour entitlement at ages three and four, which is available to working parents meeting certain criteria (see Box 2).<sup>25</sup>

The Sutton Trust's research on the offer found that just 20% of families in the bottom third of the earnings distribution were eligible for the 30 hour entitlement, while 70% of those who could claim the hours were from homes in the top half of earners.

Parents who are in full-time education or training are also not eligible for the current 30 hour entitlement. This can prevent parents from engaging with training opportunities that are likely to benefit their employment prospects in the long term. Figure 2 shows eligibility to the 30 hour entitlement by income level.

Children who do not qualify for the 30 hour entitlement will only qualify for 15 hours at ages three and four. This means children from predominantly lower income families receive fewer state funded hours. Experts from the Centre for Research in Early Childhood concluded that *"There is some evidence that the 30 hour extended entitlement for working families may be contributing to the widening in the attainment gap by doubly advantaging the better off with additional hours. Accessing fewer hours, combined with attendance at settings with lower qualified staff, can mean lower attainment for the less advantaged."*<sup>26</sup>

Given that many of these lower income families are unlikely to 'top-up' these hours with privately funded ones, this difference in access also

#### Box 2: Eligibility for the 30 hour entitlement

Eligibility for the 30 hours entitlement is determined by a means-test based on minimum and maximum earnings. Under the extended entitlement, eligible children of qualifying parents are provided with an extra 15 hours a week (30 hours total), in addition to a universal entitlement of 15 hours of early education from the age of three.

To qualify for 30 hours of free childcare, each parent (or the sole parent in a single parent family) needs to earn on average the equivalent of 16 hours on the national minimum wage per week, and no more than £100,000 per year. A family with an annual household income of £199,999 would be eligible if each parent earns just under £100,000.

Self-employed parents and parents on zero hour contracts are eligible if they meet the average earnings threshold. Parents can still be eligible if they usually work but:

- one or both parents are away from work on statutory sick pay;
- one or both parents are on parental, maternity, paternity or adoption leave.

In addition, parents are eligible if one parent is employed, but the other:

- has substantial caring responsibilities based on specific benefits for caring, is disabled or incapacitated based on specific benefits.

Source: Sutton Trust, [A Fair Start](#)

risks making children from these families less attractive to providers. And given the general shortage of early years places, many will be able to pick and choose between families for places. There is also the risk that providers may give very limited choice to families in how the lower number of hours can be used, for example only offering them on Mondays or Fridays, when there is less demand from families with access to the 30 hour entitlement.

#### Schemes expanding access to the 30 hour entitlement

Some local programmes have been put in place to expand the 30 hour entitlement beyond those covered by government's existing 30 hour offer. Two such examples are covered in Boxes 3 and 4:

#### Box 3: London Early Years Foundation (LEYF) – Doubling down.

LEYF is a social enterprise which runs 40 nurseries across London. The organisation self-funds their “Doubling-down” programme, which doubles the 15 hour entitlement to 30 hours for some of the most vulnerable children who are currently ineligible for the 30 hour offer.

They found on average an 8% increase in expected development levels across the seven areas of Learning and Development from the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) for children in the programme, and over 70% of the parents and staff LEYF consulted saw positive impacts on communication skills, social development and behaviour for children taking part in the programme; with 90% of staff reporting improvements in children's behaviour. Parents also felt they benefited, with 77% saying their health and wellbeing had improved. And 85% of staff felt parents whose children were in the programme were more engaged with the home learning environment.

Source: [Doubling Down, Summary Evaluation Report. LEYF.](#)

#### Box 4: The Camden Enhanced Offer

The London Borough of Camden funds additional families to access 30 hours at ages three and four, a programme called “The Camden Enhanced Offer”. The programme is focused on increasing access to the offer for more disadvantaged families. Families are eligible if they meet at least one of the criteria below:

- The family meets the criteria to receive free school meals.
- The family receives working tax credit, and has a household income less than £16,190.
- The family receives Universal Credit and has an annual net earned income equivalent to and not exceeding £15,400.
- Their child is being 'looked after' by the local authority or has left care.
- Their child has an education, health and care plan.
- The family receives disability living allowance for their child.
- The family receives support from the National Asylum Support Service (NASS).

#### A parent's view of the Camden Enhanced Offer

Chloe Fair lives in Camden and has a daughter, Ava. At age 3, Ava qualified for the Camden Enhanced Offer, which Chloe felt had a huge benefit to both herself and her daughter.

*“Ava started nursery when she was two and a half and did 15 hours on a funded scheme. I assumed that every child got 30 hours when they turned three, so it was a shock to learn that she wouldn't be eligible.*

*I got the opportunity to apply for Camden Council's 'Camden Enhanced Offer'. It means that Ava can benefit from an extra 15 hours of nursery a week, meaning she's there for 30 hours and attends for school hours every day.*

*Without this scheme, I wouldn't qualify for the 30 hours entitlement as I'm a student. Previously, the 15 hours wasn't enough time to study properly, and I was struggling to get it all done. Going to 30 hours means I have enough time to study and write my essays.*

*Most of all Ava has benefitted from the social elements of nursery. She loves it. Before nursery she was quite scared of other children, but now she's so sociable. She has little best friends and I've seen her blossom and be much more confident.”*

*I was surprised to find out that Camden is one of only a few places offering extra hours to people like me. The extra hours are setting Ava up for starting school in September and having the routine and habit of getting up every morning and getting ready.”*

Source: [Camden.gov.uk](#)

Table 2: Planned changes in government entitlements in England

Age group	Universal provision	Working families (meeting certain criteria)	Low income children/those with additional needs
9 to 23 months		15 hours (September 2024) 30 hours (September 2025)	
2 years old		15 hours (April 2024) 30 hours (September 2025)	15 hours
3 to 4 years old	<b>15 hours</b>	30 hours	(No specific provision - access to universal 15 hours)

hour offer for some working families, with those children receiving no time in funded early years provision.

The New Economics Foundation has also looked at the likely distributional impact of the new government 30 hour entitlements by income level, looking at access to all entitlements following the expansion, from 9 months to 4 years of age.<sup>30</sup> They too found very few poorer households will have access to the expansion, and a clear income distribution in access to early years entitlements, with better-off families benefitting the most. Eligibility by income decile is outlined in Figure 3.

#### What are the options to widen access?

Following the next general election, government spending across public services is likely to be constrained. There are also challenges in delivering any expansion of places, given existing capacity pressures within the sector.

Given that, the following section lays out evidence-based recommendations on access to government funded early years provision, with a focus on improving equality of access, and on restoring the vital role of the sector as early education as well as childcare.

Source: The Department for Education

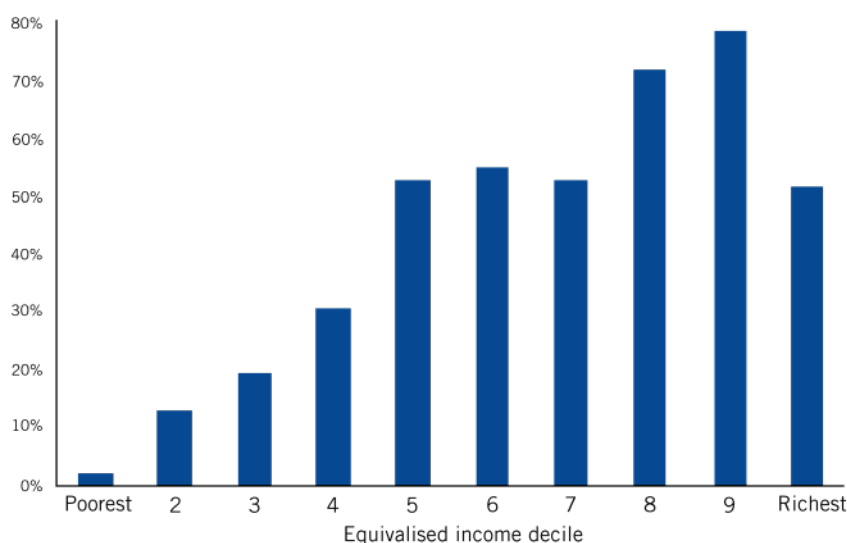
#### How will the planned expansion impact eligibility and access?

In the 2023 Spring Budget, the government announced an expansion of existing early years entitlements, with more hours available to parents in families meeting the same work related criteria used for the existing 30 hour entitlement.<sup>27</sup> The hours included, and when the government plans for them to be available, alongside remaining existing entitlements are outlined in Table 2. With the change, a much larger proportion of government spending will be on providing funded entitlements for some working families as childcare, rather than on hours in provision for early education. Looking at the change in spending from universal provision to that for working parents, the IFS estimated that before this expansion, just under half of total spending on early years entitlements goes on universal programmes (i.e. the 15 hour entitlement for three- and four-year-olds), but with the expansion, this will fall to just a quarter in 2027, whereas the proportion which is targeted only at those meeting the work requirements will more than double.<sup>28</sup>

The IFS also analysed the impact on families at different income

levels, finding that just 1 in 5 (or 20%) of families earning less than £20,000 a year will have access to the expansion, compared to 80% of those with household incomes over £45,000.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, at age two there will now be a group of families who are not disadvantaged enough to access the existing 15 hour offer, but who do not qualify for the new 30

Figure 3: Percentage of families, by income bracket, eligible for 30 free hours of early years provision for children from 9 months to four years old under planned changes announced at the 2023 Spring Budget



Source: Reproduced from the New Economics Foundation's "[A Fair Start for All](#)" with the author's permission.

## Equalising access to early education

There should be equal access to the government's free early education and childcare entitlements for all children, particularly at ages two, three and four.

- The core government entitlement should be seen as a statutory offer of early education, and as with school, it should be available for all children.
- Any expansion should be staggered so that providers have time to successfully deliver high-quality additional places.
- Given there is evidence of a benefit from early education of 20 hours per week, this is the minimum time that should be covered by this core educational entitlement, and this provision should be available for all children aged two to four (where there's the strongest evidence of educational benefit).
- As the existing offer is 30 hours, it may be difficult politically to remove hours in early years provision from families already able to access them. Government may therefore wish to make 30 hours available to all children.
- The next government should, however, avoid any policy which creates a two tier system, whereby some families can access a core entitlement of 30 hours, and others only 20. This would risk giving perverse incentives to providers, who would be likely to be encouraged to prioritise families eligible for more hours. There is also the risk that providers may give very limited choice to families in how the lower number of hours can be used. All of these issues have been seen with the existing 15 hour entitlement, available alongside the 30 hour offer.
- Where provision beyond this core educational entitlement is necessary for childcare purposes, and universal access is not possible, the focus should be on making additional hours affordable for all families, for example a sliding scale of fees by income level.

A core issue alongside any expansion of provision is the capacity of the sector to successfully deliver it. The sector is facing considerable challenges. Any expansion will be

difficult and needs to be funded at an appropriate hourly rate at every age. There is also the risk that any expansion which does not include lower income families and does not provide adequate funding for publicly-funded hours will result in early education and childcare 'deserts' in less advantaged areas, with very little available provision.

If a future government decides a more substantial re-working of the system is required, there is also the option of removing the hours system, and instead adopting a fully means tested system, with a sliding scale model for fees based on a family's income level. This model is used across several OECD countries with varying levels of subsidy, including Australia, Canada, Denmark and Slovenia. In some countries, including Sweden, a similar approach is taken whereby fees are capped as a proportion of a family's income. These models can also work well for disadvantaged children and their families, as long as subsidy levels are set appropriately to ensure all families can access this support. For more information on these international models, see the Sutton Trust's recent report, [World Class](#).

## QUALIFICATIONS

Just as in the school system, having a skilled workforce is an important factor in improving the quality of early years education, which is key to realising the long-term benefits of early years provision. Importantly, it has been shown that early years educators with appropriate skills, knowledge, and qualifications significantly contribute to children's early learning and development, particularly for children from low income and at-risk families.<sup>31</sup>

The next section looks at existing qualification levels in the sector, and evidence on the benefits of staff qualifications for early educational outcomes.

### Existing requirements

While qualification requirements for early years staff are not as heavily regulated as staff-to-child ratios,<sup>32</sup> government guidance states that a manager of any setting (excluding childminders) must hold a relevant level 3 qualification (equivalent

to A levels) and have at least two years' experience. Alongside this requirement, half of all other staff must have a level 2 qualification (equivalent to GCSEs), and at least one member of staff should hold a paediatric first aid qualification.<sup>33</sup> New criteria are also set to come in regarding maths qualifications, specifying that nursery managers must hold a level 2 maths qualification (or gain one within two years of starting their role).<sup>34</sup> Alongside this, the expectation that all level 3 Early Years Educators should hold this qualification has been removed.<sup>35</sup>

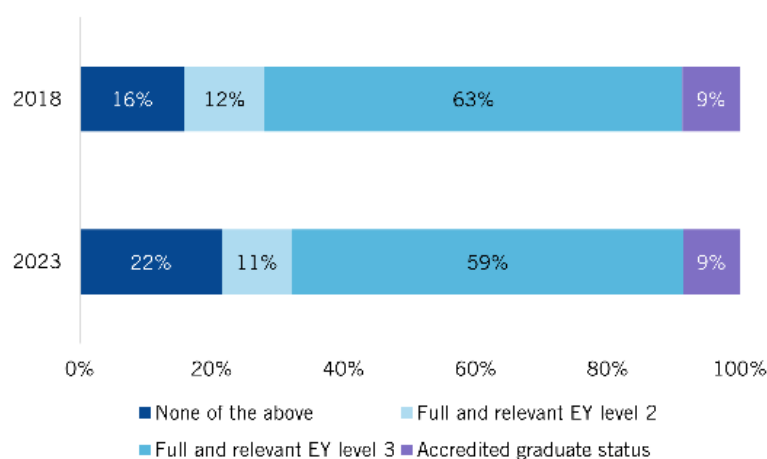
## **"The proportion of unqualified staff working in the early years sector has risen in recent years: in 2023, 1 in 5 staff members were unqualified, up from 1 in 7 in 2018."**

In recent years, the early years sector has faced a worsening recruitment crisis, as the sector has had to compete for pay and benefits with other sectors, many of which are more attractive to those with level 2 and 3 qualifications. Low salaries and a lack of career benefits (notably the drop in CPD opportunities in the sector following austerity) are also contributing to rapid staff turnover: a 2020 workforce review from the Sutton Trust found that pre-pandemic, staff turnover in the sector was at 24%, compared to a UK average of 15-18%.<sup>36</sup>

The proportion of unqualified staff working in the early years sector has risen in recent years: in 2023, 1 in 5 staff members were unqualified, up from 1 in 7 in 2018.<sup>37</sup> The proportion of staff with full and relevant level 3 qualifications dropped from 63% in 2018 to 59% in 2023. 94% of local authorities have said it is a struggle to recruit qualified staff for maintained early years settings.<sup>38</sup> More information on staff qualification levels over time can be seen in Figure 4 (see overleaf).



Figure 4: Percentage of staff at each qualification level in England, 2018 – 2023.



Source: [The Department for Education](#)

Recent changes to qualifications available for early years staff aiming to increase qualification levels, such as the introduction of a level 3 qualification to become a named 'Early Years Educator (EYE)' in 2014, have not so far improved qualification levels.<sup>39</sup> Since these changes were brought in, the proportion of level 3 qualified staff actually fell from 83% in 2015/16 to 52% in 2018/19.

Furthermore, efforts to have a graduate leader in all settings have stalled, partly due to the removal of the Graduate Leader Fund (discussed in more detail below). The Education Policy Institute has also commented that the early years degree landscape is currently fragmented in terms of both degree choice and content, and there is little financial incentive for completing an early years degree.<sup>40</sup>

Evidence shows that having staff with graduate-level qualifications is impactful. There is a small, but positive, link between having a degree-qualified early years professional in a private, voluntary or independent setting and improved children's learning outcomes at age five. This positive association is sustained over time through both Key Stages 1 and 2, and it is twice as strong for those attending settings for more than 15 hours per week compared to those registered for fewer hours.<sup>41</sup> The association is also larger when looking at those with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) than for professionals holding the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS).

A positive association has also been found between attending early years settings with a graduate for over 15 hours per week and school attainment, including for disadvantaged children.<sup>42</sup> Up until 2011, a Graduate Leadership Fund was ringfenced for providers to fund employing graduate-level staff. However, once this incentive was withdrawn, providers have struggled to afford the higher wages to pay employees at this level.

Evaluation of the Graduate Leadership Fund found that settings with a graduate leader with EYPS made significant improvements in overall quality and specific dimensions of practice (for example, staff-child interactions and programme structure) for preschool children (aged thirty months to five years) compared with settings without.<sup>43</sup> This evaluation provides positive evidence that the use of specialised early years graduate training pathways can lead to improvements in quality within the private, voluntary and independent sector.

#### Options to improve qualification levels

The next government should have a clear vision for the early years workforce, including setting out a national strategy for the sector to improve qualification levels. This will need to be accompanied with more funding, both to allow settings to pay the higher salaries needed to attract qualified staff, and to give existing

staff access to training opportunities. Making level 3 a benchmark qualification for the sector could be one approach, with training opportunities available for entry-level staff to achieve such qualifications. The Irish government recently announced plans to regulate minimum qualification levels of all early years setting staff, linked to funding increases for providers.<sup>44</sup> This approach could also be used in England, to ensure a minimum standard of provision is set.

The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) suggested that setting out a workforce strategy which recognises the steps necessary to tackle access gaps and improve quality, supported by higher funding rates for providers to pay qualified staff, should be carried out before any expansion of funded hour eligibility.<sup>45</sup> Affording the salaries of qualified staff is already a struggle for many early years providers. Settings with funding constraints and few avenues from which to cut costs from are likely to reduce the number of qualified staff they hire, so that wage costs are lower.<sup>46</sup> There is a risk that, if funded hours are expanded without sufficient funding increases alongside, more settings will have difficulties affording the qualified staff needed to deliver high-quality places.

### **"The next government should have a clear vision for the early years workforce, including setting out a national strategy for the sector to improve qualification levels."**

The next government should introduce specific funding to attract graduates to the sector, for example through a new 'Leadership Quality Fund'. This would allow providers to offer graduates roles with enhanced pay and status. Any incentives for settings to employ graduates should be initially targeted towards disadvantaged areas, where the need for high quality support is greatest.

In the long term, such a programme could help achieve a goal of having a qualified teacher in every early years setting.

Ensuring existing staff have access to Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is also key for delivering quality provision. Social Mobility Commission research found only 17% of early years workers reported receiving job-related training.<sup>47</sup> Increased funding, for example through the early years pupil premium (see below), could help more settings, especially in disadvantaged areas, to invest in CPD and to offer better paths for career progression, ultimately building a skilled workforce. By offering training opportunities at a range of levels, and protecting time to ensure staff can complete training when they need to, the existing early years workforce could be upskilled.

Other countries with successful early years systems, as well as countries that have seen recent improvements, have previously focused on improving salaries and benefits to improve the qualification levels of early years staff. For instance, as highlighted in a review of global early years systems from the Sutton Trust in 2023, in Estonia the minimum requirement for Early Years educators, directors and headteachers has been a three-year bachelor's degree programme since 2015.<sup>48</sup> One factor in achieving this new requirement was increasing the salaries of qualified preschool teachers to 80% of a school teacher's salary. The share of early years teachers with higher education increased from 20.9% in 1995 to 69% by 2018.

#### **ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FOR DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN**

In 2015, the early years pupil premium (EYPP) was introduced by the Coalition (Conservative and Liberal Democrat) government as additional funding for providers, to allow them to better support disadvantaged three and four year-olds in their settings.<sup>49</sup> This funding is available to providers based on how many disadvantaged pupils they have, and sits separately to funding given to local authorities based on deprivation levels in their

area awarded through the Early Years National Funding Formula (discussed below).<sup>50</sup> Despite recent increases, the amount awarded per pupil is less than the amount given to schools for disadvantaged pupils at primary level (EYPP is up to £353 per year, compared to £1,455 for primary pupils eligible for FSM, or more for those previously or currently in care),<sup>51</sup> and IFS analysis indicates the premium will be 2% lower in real terms in 2023-24 compared to 2017-18.<sup>52</sup> However, evidence suggests that funding has a better return when invested at earlier life stages.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, providers have reported the administrative process to access EYPP is overly complicated, with reports of delays in payments and difficulties in getting parents to engage in the application process. Many settings have had to decide whether it is "worth" chasing families to apply.<sup>54</sup>

A DfE funded review from 2016 found that the existing premium does make a difference, both in the outcomes for children and the quality of services offered.<sup>55</sup> However, providers report that the current amount awarded from the premium is not high enough to fund all the costs of adequately supporting disadvantaged pupils.<sup>56</sup> The administrative process is also seen as overly complicated, with families dipping in and out of poverty not meeting eligibility criteria. Raising the early years pupil premium at least to the levels seen at primary school age and simplifying the eligibility criteria would improve the impact of the premium and more disadvantaged children would benefit. Raising pupil premium for early years pupils to the same levels seen at primary school would allow settings to offer better targeted and individualised support to children from disadvantaged backgrounds, to help better prepare them for primary school. It would also help to reduce inequalities between settings, created by the spending power of wealthier parents, who are able to pay higher fees for additional hours which can be put back into the general provision a setting can offer. Making administration more straightforward would also help both providers and parents to understand

more about the premium and who is eligible, improving the likelihood of uptake.

Another way in which funding is targeted at less advantaged children is through the Early Years National Funding Formula (EYNFF); the formula used to allocate free entitlement funding between areas, to ensure parts of the country with similar characteristics receive similar funding. This funding is then distributed by local authorities. Part of the formula is weighted for levels of deprivation, determined by the proportion of three- and four-year-olds eligible for free school meals. While the most deprived fifth of England's local authorities receive hourly resources 12% higher than the most affluent fifth, the proportion of the core funding rate has fallen from 60% in 2017-18 to 38% in 2023-24.<sup>57</sup> This is because over the same time period, the number of children classified as disadvantaged has increased, but the amount of extra funding awarded per pupil has not, resulting in the same funding pot being spread more thinly across a larger pool. The way the formula is constructed means that the proportion of spending on the universal 15-hour entitlement for three- and four-year-olds has been constrained at around 8% since 2017-18.<sup>58</sup> In contrast, around 17.4% is given for this group in the schools National Funding Formula.<sup>59</sup>

**"Other countries with successful early years systems, as well as countries that have seen recent improvements, have previously focused on improving salaries and benefits to improve the qualifications of early years staff."**

To ensure early years settings are receiving adequate funding for disadvantaged children taking funded places, there is a clear need to

ensure enough funding is going into the EYNFF, so that disadvantaged areas get the support they need.

### **CHILDREN'S CENTRES (SURE START AND FAMILY HUBS)**

Children's centres are local authority-led services to support families with young children. They typically cover early education and childcare settings, social services, health services and parenting information services.<sup>60</sup>

Evidence has shown the wide range of benefits of attending children's centres to children and their families, from reductions in hospital visits to improved home learning environments.<sup>61</sup> But despite this, by 2019 the funding for these services had fallen considerably, especially in the most disadvantaged areas.<sup>62</sup> Subsequently, usage of such services has also fallen faster in more deprived areas than in more affluent ones.<sup>63</sup>

#### **Previous policy**

Sure Start centres were first established during a Labour government, with initial funding pledged in 1998 for 250 local Sure Start programmes, with more funding awarded in 2000 to have over 500 'Sure Start Local Programmes' in operation by November 2003.<sup>64,65</sup> In 2002, a government spending review set out how provision would shift to 'Sure Start Children's Centres' (local-authority led programmes which joined up multiple services for families with young children).<sup>66</sup> By 2010, 3,500 centres had been set up, accessible to over 2.9 million under-fives.<sup>67</sup>

Under the Coalition government from 2010, ringfenced funding for Sure Start centres ended. Guidance for children's centres shifted to targeting 'high needs' families rather than a broader programme. In 2014, the Centre for Social Justice proposed a new programme of 'Family Hubs', aiming to join-up local children's services and extend provision to also include families with older children.<sup>68</sup> This model was backed by the Children's Commissioner for England in 2016,<sup>69</sup> and was included in the 2019 Conservative manifesto,

with £82 million pledged in 2021 to pilot 75 hubs.<sup>70</sup> These services are designed to bring together multiple organisations for children, from mental health support to parenting classes, to make navigation for families and communication between services simpler.<sup>71</sup>

### **"Spending cuts have been disproportionately higher in deprived areas, with per capita spending on children and young people's services falling five times as fast compared to more affluent areas between 2010 and 2019."**

Following funding changes, pre-pandemic the level of spending on preventative children's health services (such as Sure Start) in England was falling year on year. While planned spending per capita on Sure Start and other services for children under five increased from £37 in 2022-23 (£442 million total) to £39 in 2023-24 (£456 million total), this is still significantly lower than 2015, when planned per capita spending stood at £66 (£764 million total).<sup>72</sup> Spending cuts have been disproportionately higher in deprived areas, with per capita spending on children and young people's services falling five times as fast compared to more affluent areas between 2010 and 2019.<sup>73</sup>

With funding cuts has come closure of many Sure Start services: previous research by the Sutton Trust found that by 2017, 1,000 centres had closed.<sup>74</sup> By February 2023, a further 400 centres were closed.<sup>75</sup> Often due to public spending cuts (for instance, local authority public health spending on services for children aged 0-5 was cut by 19% between 2015/16 and 2023/24)<sup>76</sup> and the need to make children's services more efficiently run, local authorities have combined children's services that were once run separately into Family Hubs.<sup>77</sup>

As this programme is still relatively new, there is little evidence on whether this is a successful approach. Bringing multiple services together may make it easier for families to access help and support, and the Local Government Association has highlighted several examples of successful Family Hubs.<sup>78</sup> However, concerns have been raised that as Family Hubs are often targeted to referred families with high need, they may not be able to offer support to other low income families who might benefit.<sup>79</sup> There is also a risk that early years specific services are diluted, with Family Hubs potentially unable to offer the same level of service for this age range as was available in an early years specific centre.

In the Department of Health and Social Care's key 2021 review, *The best start for life: a vision for the 1,001 critical days*, Family Hubs are set out as one of six key pillars to 'set the foundations for lifelong emotional and physical wellbeing'.<sup>80</sup> It is suggested that existing Sure Start centres can be brought in to larger Family Hubs to improve the services on offer for families. Despite this, Family Hub provision has not yet matched the levels lost through cuts to Sure Start. Encouragingly, in February 2023, the government announced the 'Family Hubs and Start for Life programme', pledging £300 million of investment up to 2025 accessible to 75 eligible councils.<sup>81</sup> But provision has not yet spread fully across the country.

#### **Evidence on the importance of children's centres**

Most evidence on the impact of children's centres in England applies to when Sure Start centres were the more common form of provision. For instance, early evaluations in 2005 highlighted that mothers attending settings were more likely to report better life satisfaction, offering a stimulating home environment for their child, and lower engagement in harsh discipline at home.<sup>82</sup>

Evidence also shows that attending Sure Start settings is beneficial for health. A 2019 review by the IFS found that children in disadvantaged

areas were more likely to see benefits to their health following attendance to Sure Start centres: those in the 30% poorest parts of the country saw the probability of any hospitalisation decline by 11% at age 10 and 19% at age 11, whilst those in the richest 30% of areas saw a negligible impact.<sup>83</sup>

Such health impacts were also seen in later life: further IFS research found that, at their peak, Sure Start centres were preventing almost 13,000 hospital admissions for 11 to 15-year-olds each year.<sup>84</sup> Longer term impacts range from improved immune systems through vaccination campaigns, better behavioural development and safer parenting practices.<sup>85</sup>

## **"2019 estimates from the IFS found that the financial benefit of Sure Start at its peak in the late 00s was around £65m."**

Attendance at children's centres has also been associated with higher likelihood of taking up funded places in early years settings amongst disadvantaged families, which means they are more likely to reap the benefits, as highlighted above, of participation in early education.<sup>86</sup>

Moreover, in terms of costings, 2019 estimates from the IFS found that the financial benefit of Sure Start at its peak in the late 00s was around £65m, which was attributed to direct NHS savings, of which £5m is attributed to direct cost savings to the NHS from avoided infections and injuries, while the

remainder is attributed to averted indirect (parental and societal) costs, and the financial impact of their consequences over the life course. The benefits from reduced hospitalisation offset around 6% of the programme cost. And importantly, the study found that the benefits are more pronounced in the more deprived parts of the country.<sup>87</sup>

Government-commissioned research also found the centres to be impactful for improving the home learning environment; reducing risk of physical and mental health problems; and higher educational attainment later in life.<sup>88</sup> And overall, the review concluded that Sure Start services provided value for money. Another review of research from the University of Essex also found that areas with children's centres saw larger reductions in child poverty between 2005 and 2011 compared to the national average.<sup>89</sup>

A more recent evaluation by the Local Government Association looked at six Family Hubs, and found that strong partnerships and communication between all services involved to be a key factor of success.<sup>90</sup> However, concerns were raised over short-term funding and subsequently sustainability.

Furthermore, the Sutton Trust's review of international early years best practice found that 'Family Centres', where childcare, health, and family support services are integrated into one centre (similar to the Family Hub model), were common across countries like Australia, Sweden and Iceland.<sup>91</sup> Such services were found to be particularly impactful at engaging with disadvantaged families and

encouraging them to use other services and take up funded childcare places.

### *The future of children's centres*

Currently, provision across the country is fragmented, with some areas having a Family Hub, some still having a Sure Start centre, and others having no child centre type provision available.

The government should reinvigorate high quality, community based early years support through children's centres in the most disadvantaged areas, where children are likely to benefit the most. The central purpose of provision should be to promote positive child development and parental engagement for the 0-5 age group, with a focus on the most disadvantaged areas in any roll-out. If the Family Hub model is used, it is vital that the quality of provision for 0-5 is not diluted by the pressures of providing services for other age ranges. Alternatively, an expansion of Sure Start centres could be specifically targeted at families with young children.

If the Family Hubs model is adopted by the next government, evaluation of existing Hubs would assist the creation of a set of clear requirements for national rollout. Indeed, the Nuffield Foundation has said there is a need for improved understanding for how early years services can be better integrated and coordinated.<sup>92</sup> Ultimately, what is crucial is that there is a new strategy that is coherent, sustained and national in scale for this provision, to reverse the decline and fragmentation of family services in the last two decades.

## CONCLUSIONS

With a large amount of both public and political interest in the early years, there is a major opportunity for the next government. They will have the chance to shape the early years system in England for generations of children to come, with major implications for the wider education system, and the economy. But while it is welcome that there has been so much focus on the early years in political debate, there has been far too much focus on its role as childcare, and much less on it as early education. A major challenge for the next government will be restoring this balance. This briefing has laid out existing evidence on the sector's role as early education, and on how best to make changes so that the system works for all children and their families, including those on the lowest incomes. The early years is the most cost-effective place to invest in education. By investing here, government has the chance to narrow the attainment gap before children start at school, preventing them from beginning their time in the education system already at a disadvantage.

### **"Current government plans not only risk exacerbating inequalities, but also worsening the quality of education for all young children."**

However, the current Conservative government's plans for the early years treat the sector primarily as childcare, with much less focus on its role as education. This has put quality at risk, and will considerably widen gaps in access. This not only risks exacerbating inequalities, but also worsening the quality of education for all young children. There are also concerns about the sector's ability to deliver the expanded offer, with no workforce strategy for the early years sector in place.

The Labour Party is currently undergoing a review on its early years policy, chaired by Sir David Bell. While Labour has criticised the government for "neglecting the importance of childcare as education that sets children up for school and for life, particularly affecting children from lower-income backgrounds",<sup>93</sup> as of yet, it has not made any commitments to address this inequality in provision. Nor has it announced a long-term strategy for the early years workforce.

By not taking action, the next government will bake in disadvantage for children before they even start at school, and risks widening, when it should be narrowing, the attainment gap. This will impact not only on individual children's life chances, but also the long-term economic health of the country, as we will fail to make the most of all our young people's talents. By investing in early education, there is a big opportunity for the next government to deliver for children, families and the wider economy.

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