



Department  
for Education

# **School-based nursery capital grant 2024 to 2025**

## **Research report**

**June 2026**



Government  
Social Research

# Contents

|                                                       |    |
|-------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Executive summary                                     | 4  |
| Applications                                          | 4  |
| Establishing the provision                            | 4  |
| Benefits                                              | 6  |
| Introduction                                          | 7  |
| Methodology                                           | 8  |
| Starting context and diversity of baseline conditions | 9  |
| Supplementary quantitative evidence                   | 9  |
| Applications for funding                              | 11 |
| Motivations for engaging with the SBN programme       | 11 |
| Local demand                                          | 11 |
| Benefits for the trusts or schools themselves         | 11 |
| Supporting students with additional needs             | 12 |
| Consultations                                         | 12 |
| Establishing the provision                            | 14 |
| Previous experience                                   | 14 |
| Space                                                 | 14 |
| Funding experiences                                   | 14 |
| Opening                                               | 15 |
| At the point of the first interview                   | 15 |
| At the point of the second interview                  | 15 |
| Workforce                                             | 19 |
| At the point of the first interview                   | 19 |
| At the point of the second interview                  | 20 |
| Places                                                | 22 |
| At the point of the first interview                   | 22 |
| At the point of the second interview                  | 22 |
| Hours and sessions                                    | 25 |
| At the point of the first interview                   | 25 |
| At the point of the second interview                  | 25 |

|                                      |    |
|--------------------------------------|----|
| Overall experiences with the process | 27 |
| At the point of the first interview  | 27 |
| At the point of the second interview | 27 |
| Benefits of the nursery provision    | 29 |
| Benefits for children                | 29 |
| Benefits for parents and families    | 29 |
| Benefits for the community           | 30 |
| Advice for schools looking to engage | 31 |
| Closing remarks                      | 32 |
| Acknowledgements                     | 33 |
| Annex A – Useful resources           | 34 |

## Executive summary

This learning-focussed, non-representative report explores the journeys of a selection of school-based nurseries who secured funding as part of the school-based nursery (SBN) capital grant 2024 to 2025. Phase 1 was a test and learn, and the research aimed to shed light on schools' experience of the programme. Learnings fed directly into the guidance and case studies for schools and informed the development of future phases.

21<sup>1</sup> schools who planned to open in September 2025 were successfully recruited to take part in two waves of qualitative interviews with researchers from the Department for Education (DfE) to understand their experiences of the programme and their processes for creating or expanding their nurseries, alongside the opportunity to take part in optional summer reflections. Schools were recruited via email.

The key findings are as follows:

## Applications

- Schools engaged with the SBN capital programme primarily because funding was essential to enable nursery expansion or creation; without the grant, many projects would not have been feasible or would have delivered provision to a lower specification.
- Motivations for participation included responding to clear local demand for early years places, such as oversubscribed nurseries, long waiting lists, and new housing developments.
- Schools viewed nursery provision as strategically beneficial, supporting improved reception intake, higher overall enrolment, and enhanced local competitiveness.
- Some schools were particularly motivated by the opportunity to support disadvantaged pupils through early intervention, including children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), English as an additional language (EAL) need, and those from high-deprivation communities.
- Engagement with stakeholders, especially parents, local authorities, multi-academy trusts (MATs)/dioceses, and other local providers, was seen as valuable in evidencing demand and shaping applications.

## Establishing the provision

- Schools reported mixed levels of prior experience in establishing nursery provision, with a mixture of schools expanding nursery provision and those opening provision for the first time.

---

<sup>1</sup> Not all schools took part in both interviews and the optional summer reflections. See methodology section for further detail.

- A wide range of spaces were adapted to house nurseries, with many schools demonstrating flexibility and creativity. While outdoor space improvements featured in most projects, these varied in ambition, ranging from modest enhancements to outdoor play areas to, in a smaller number of cases, more dedicated outdoor learning or forest-school-style approaches.
- While most schools opened broadly as planned, such as within the same academic term, it was common to report experiencing unexpected delays or delivery challenges during implementation. Feedback highlighted that successful opening often reflected active planning and flexibility rather than straightforward delivery.
- Some schools also reported delays or inconsistencies in payments via local authorities, which created short-term financial and administrative challenges.
- Despite intensive summer build periods and tight timelines, early planning, proactive contractor engagement, and transition activities with families supported smooth openings and positive parental feedback.
- Workforce: Most schools were able to staff their nurseries in time for opening, often successfully relying on internal redeployment, apprenticeships, and upskilling existing staff. External recruitment was more challenging for some with references made to national workforce shortages, but contingency planning (e.g. agency staff, phased openings) helped mitigate risks. Investment in continuous professional development (CPD), mentoring, and shared early years foundation stage (EYFS) expertise was seen as strengthening nursery quality.
- Places and demand: Nursery capacity generally remained in line with initial plans, with mixed experiences around take up. Some schools filled places quickly and developed waiting lists, while others expected a gradual fill.
- Provision for under-3s: Decisions to offer places for under-3s were shaped by demand, space, staffing, and operating models. Schools that did offer places highlighted benefits such as early intervention, stronger family relationships, and smoother transitions into school.
- Schools offering places for under-3s made targeted adjustments to meet regulatory and care requirements, including nap and changing facilities, age-appropriate environments, and staggered routines to maintain staffing ratios.
- Hours, wraparound, and flexibility: Most nurseries aligned core hours with the school day to reflect parental demand and support logistics for families with multiple children. Many schools offered wraparound provision using existing school child-care models, with funded hours used during core sessions and paid provision outside these times.
- Out-of-term provision: Decisions on operating outside of term time were primarily driven by parental demand, financial viability, and staffing models. While some schools offered holiday provision to meet the needs of working parents, others chose term-time-only models due to low demand or the constraints of a teacher-led approach, with some viewing expanded provision as a longer-term aspiration.

## Benefits

- Schools reported clear benefits, particularly for children. These included improved confidence, reduced anxiety around transition into Reception, and strong school-readiness skills.
- Parents and families benefit from greater convenience, including single-site drop-off for siblings alongside flexible provision that supports employment.
- Benefits to the community included increasing local childcare capacity, easing pressure on other providers, and strengthening links between schools and families.

## Introduction

The school-based nursery (SBN) programme is a multi-phase capital investment designed to increase the availability of quality, school-based early years places across England, with a particular focus on improving access in disadvantaged areas. The school-based Nursery Capital Grant 2024 to 2025 awarded approximately £37 million in capital funding to 300 schools.

The 2024 to 2025 capital grant was a test and learn phase of the programme and, as part of this, researchers at the Department for Education undertook research with a selection of schools taking part in the programme, with learnings feeding directly into guidance and case studies for schools and informing development of future phases of the programme.

The 2024 to 2025 grant required schools to use surplus space on existing sites when establishing new or expanded nursery provision. This influenced the approaches taken to space and refurbishment described in this report. Later phases of the programme allow for greater flexibility in how space requirements are met.

The next phase of the programme (2025 to 2026 grant) awarded around £45 million to a further 331 projects announced in March 2026. The capital grant for 2027 to 2030 (phase 3) will constitute a multi-year local authority-led investment model, with total programme funding exceeding £400 million across all phases. This represents a major expansion of school-based nursery provision within the wider Best Start in Life mission.

Phase 2 of the programme allowed for applications from maintained nursery schools (MNS) and, in the most recent phase, local authorities are also able to submit projects in Best Start Family Hubs with connections to local primary schools. These estates were not eligible for funding in the first phase of the programme and so are not discussed in this research.

## Methodology

Researchers from the Department for Education conducted research with 21 schools that received funding through the school-based nursery capital grant 2024 to 2025 and were progressing towards opening new or expanded nursery provision in September 2025. Schools were recruited by inviting schools via email using contact details provided as part of their SBN funding application.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure diversity across key characteristics, including type of provision such as new or expanded nurseries, geographical region, nursery governance model, project type, age range of places offered, and availability of holiday provision, although the final sample depended on schools opting in to the research.

The final sample included:

- 11 schools offering a new nursery and 10 schools offering an expanded nursery.
- Settings operated under a range of governance arrangements, including school-run nurseries (8), multi-academy trust-led provision (7), private, voluntary and independent (PVI) childcare providers (4), and governor-led nurseries (2).
- 15 of the schools taking part in the interviews offered places to children under the age of 3, meanwhile 6 offered places to children aged 3 and upwards.

Two waves of interviews were conducted. A range of individuals were interviewed, including school headteachers, school senior leaders, trust leads and business managers, and early years leads.

Wave 1 interviews carried out in July 2025 focused on schools' early experiences of the SBN programme including the application process and motivations, planned nursery provision (including hours, places, age groups), and preparations underway for the summer period. Wave 2 interviews, carried out in October 2025, were designed to capture schools' experiences of the summer build phase and gather initial feedback on the opening of their new or expanded nursery provision.

In addition, schools were offered the opportunity to take part in optional fortnightly summer reflections via a survey platform to provide feedback on how their builds and projects were progressing over summer. There were three main questions to guide the reflections, focused on successes, challenges and next steps. This provided the Department with interim real-time insights into progress and challenges during the build and preparation period.

Qualitative data were analysed using a framework-based approach, drawing on interviewer notes, interview transcripts and summer reflection submissions. Analysis was structured around the main topic guide areas and refined to reflect common themes and learning across interviews.

In total, 21 schools participated in at least one aspect of the research: all 21 completed the Wave 1 interview, 18 schools completed a wave 2 interview and 13 schools submitted at least one optional summer reflection.

## **Starting context and diversity of baseline conditions**

The 21 schools participating in Phase 1 research entered the programme from markedly different starting points: provision ranged from small openings of around ten places to larger expansions of up to 60 places, and varied in prior early years' experience, from no existing nursery to long-established provision or PVI partnerships.

Levels of organisational support also differed, with some projects delivered through trust-led, centrally coordinated models, while others were overseen directly by headteachers. Additionally, schools faced different degrees of landlord and estate complexity, including leased or church-owned buildings requiring consent, legacy estates presenting refurbishment risks, and simpler reconfiguration projects. This diversity of baseline conditions means findings in this report should not be treated as applying to all schools establishing SBN provision, and schools should consider which findings might provide the most relevant insight in relation to their own context.

## **Supplementary quantitative evidence**

The quantitative evidence presented below provides high-level context on all schools supported by the school-based nursery capital grant 2024 to 2025, providing information beyond the 21 schools included in the qualitative research. The quantitative data was collected by DfE for grant monitoring purposes and is self-reported by schools. It is intended to support interpretation of the qualitative findings by illustrating how the research sample sits within the wider population of funded projects.

**Table 1: Profiles of schools in the programme / successful schools<sup>2</sup>**

| Characteristic         | Subgroup                            | Schools participating in Phase 1 | Sample (21) <sup>3</sup> |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| School type            | LA maintained                       | 33%                              | 38%                      |
| School type            | Academy                             | 67%                              | 62%                      |
| Project type           | New                                 | 42%                              | 52%                      |
| Project type           | Expansion                           | 58%                              | 48%                      |
| Nursery responsibility | School/governor/MAT                 | 91%                              | 81%                      |
| Nursery responsibility | PVI                                 | 9%                               | 19%                      |
| Rurality               | Urban                               | 80%                              | 67%                      |
| Rurality               | Rural                               | 20%                              | 33%                      |
| Out-of-term provision  | Offers holiday childcare            | 37%                              | 38%                      |
| Out-of-term provision  | Does not offer holiday childcare    | 63%                              | 62%                      |
| Local authority (LAs)  | Number of LAs included <sup>4</sup> | 107                              | 18                       |

<sup>2</sup> Information based on school grant applications in December 2024

<sup>3</sup> Not all schools took part in all elements of the research. This column represents the breakdowns from those taking part in the first interview, based on the data provided in the grant monitoring forms.

<sup>4</sup> Out of 153 local authorities in total.

# Applications for funding

## Motivations for engaging with the SBN programme

Schools reported various reasons for engaging with the SBN capital programme. Many schools wanted to expand or open nurseries but lacked the necessary funds to do so before the grant was introduced. The capital grant was seen as essential for many schools interviewed, enabling those with long-standing, but financially unviable, ambitions to progress. It supported both schools that otherwise could not have gone ahead and those that might have done so later but at a different standard.

"There is no way we could have achieved this without the funding. It just would never have been feasible."

"We could have possibly sort of done a little bit of changing around of a couple of classrooms, but we couldn't have provided the provision that we are going to be able to because of a grant."

Rationale for wanting to either expand nursery provision, or create new nursery provision, included (but was not limited to) local demand, benefits to the school, and supporting students with additional needs through early intervention.

### Local demand

Local demand strongly influenced schools' decisions to join the programme. Both schools with existing nurseries looking to expand and those planning to open a nursery for the first time saw clear need for early years places. Schools were aware of local provision and cited factors such as new housing developments, oversubscribed nurseries and long waiting lists as evidence of demand that motivated their applications.

"We are oversubscribed already [...] it's a growing demand, it's constantly growing [...] We invited our local authority in and our early years leads [...] they agreed that yes there was a need for it."

### Benefits for the trusts or schools themselves

Offering new or expanded nursery provision was seen to improve school sustainability and had strategic alignment to the school or trust strategy, often seen to improve pupil pipelines, future Reception intakes, as well as making better use of surplus or under-used space.

"If we can get a thriving nursery that gives us a flow of children for the main school, then we're safeguarding our admission numbers going forward through the nursery, which we feel gives us the USP for the schools."

"Admission numbers weren't what we wanted [them to be]. We noticed there was a gap locally around preschool [...] there's potential for financial benefit for the trust, but also that kind of pipeline for admissions."

Some schools also noted emerging financial and operational benefits, including income generation and efficiencies through shared staffing, training, or facilities, which were seen as supporting the wider EYFS provision sustainability within schools or trusts.

## **Supporting students with additional needs**

Some schools also highlighted that a key motivation for wanting to engage with the programme was supporting disadvantaged students through early intervention, particularly in high-deprivation areas, including those with EAL needs.

"We're above national average for pupil premium funding and we're also above national for SEND pupils, and across school we've got high number of EHCPs [...] There's that springboard and that transition for the children to then join us in in reception and provide them, you know, with that really good start, get the relationships with the parents and then if there are any referrals needing to be made."

"[When describing the school having a high proportion of EAL pupils] the earlier we get them, the earlier we can work with them."

## **Consultations**

Schools were asked about who they consulted during the application process. Schools generally found engaging with parents, local authorities, MATs, dioceses (where relevant), and other nurseries helpful for understanding local demand and shaping their plans. Surveys and social media groups were common methods to collect data from local communities.

"There was a consultation undertaken with parents at the school with families within the local community. We wrote to the other surrounding nurseries, whether they were school based [...] or PVI's [...] inviting their feedback as well [...] it [the consultation] was useful to do because it gave some foundation to what we were doing and suggesting."

Schools had to show they had the support of their local authority in their application. During the interviews, many schools cited a positive experience with their local authority and found engaging with them very helpful, particularly when assessing demand.

"We could gather to learn about what kind of provision was missing for people and the early years team at the local authority were really, really helpful in sharing

information [...] that they'd gathered around nursery places with us. So there was a lot of information available to support.”

However, some schools reported difficulties with timeline challenges in getting their bids ready, for example obtaining pupil planning numbers from their local authority and noted delays in securing appointments. To mitigate this risk, they recommended engaging with the local authority as early as possible.

# Establishing the provision

## Previous experience

Schools reported mixed levels of experience with similar capital projects. Whilst some were opening a nursery for the first time and as such were learning as they went through the process, others who were expanding their nursery provision through the grant had previously opened or operated a nursery and were able to draw on their previous experience, which was deemed helpful.

"Because we set up the previous nursery, we knew which contractors not to use and which ones to use [...] we knew what worked and what didn't".

Some schools with MAT support, or using external project managers, also attributed smooth progress to prior experience and having familiarity with grant processes.

"I worked with our project manager, so he obviously has done lots of DfE bids and grants so understood the process really well."

## Space

Schools reported transforming a range of spaces to accommodate the nurseries and establish their provision. Common adaptations involved internal reconfigurations such as wall removals or installations, alongside flooring and decoration enhancements. Some schools repurposed existing school buildings, such as unused classrooms, portacabins, and other spaces that were previously used for other non-teaching purposes.

Many schools reported plans to make substantial outdoor improvements, such as new fencing, nature areas, and play spaces, with a strong emphasis on the benefits of outdoor learning for the nursery children.

"Forest schools will be a big part of our nursery vision, so we've expanded our forest school area as well."

## Funding experiences

Whilst most schools reported smooth processes in accessing funding and managing project finances in order to establish the provision, a small number described challenges linked to variation in local authority processes. These included delays in receiving funding, additional administrative requirements, and differences in how payments were processed. Whilst they did not halt overall delivery, in some cases schools reported needing to manage short-term cash-flow pressures by making payments from existing school budgets, or seeking options for potential advances from local authorities, which added complexity when managing finances and increased stress for senior leaders. Where this

was communicated in summer reflections, schools showed a concern over the potential impact payment delays would have on being able to pay contractors and invoices, which added to stress during an already compressed timeline.

## Opening

### At the point of the first interview

As outlined in the methodology section, schools selected for the research were those who planned to open in September 2025. Most schools, at the point of the first interview, were confident that they were on track for a September opening.

"From the moment we got the email that we'd secured the funding, it's been all systems a go because our aim was to have this up and running for September [...] and my aim was to have the work done before we left for summer and we've pretty much managed that as well. We've run a very tight ship."

However, schools during the first interview showed awareness of numerous risks that could threaten a September opening date. These included needing landlord consent and legal availability, ensuring contractors and equipment could be in place in time, and ensuring Ofsted registration was secured if it was needed.

### At the point of the second interview

#### Summer builds and refurbishment work

Most schools described the summer period as intensive, busy, and tight in terms of timelines. There was feedback that there were often multiple workstreams running in parallel, and tight sequencing of contractors, procurement and nursery set up. Where challenges arose, such as limited contractor availability due to demand, coordination across multiple suppliers, or unanticipated technical issues, schools described drawing on existing contractor relationships, trust-level estate support, and rapid re-planning to maintain progress.

Most schools emphasised that the biggest challenge throughout the process was time: largely driven by the short summer holiday window and dependencies that could not be accelerated, such as consent, deliveries and contractor work; however, whilst time and resource intensive, the projects were still manageable. Staff put in a lot of hours over the summer to make progress and meet their planned opening dates, and many schools reported a heavy reliance on good will and extra effort from their teams, which was highly appreciated by leads interviewed. Several schools reported that summer delivery benefited strongly from early preparation and planning, for example beginning preparatory work before the summer holidays if this was possible.

Communication and collaborative team working between stakeholders was often seen as a clear benefit during the summer reflections, and schools often reported how impressed they were with the contractors during the build phase.

“The collaborative effort between leadership, staff and contractors has been a real strength, ensuring that the vision for our nursery space has been brought to life effectively.”

“Excellent contractors are going above and beyond to make this extra special.”

In some circumstances, depending on governance type, landlord or diocesan consent was a key delivery dependency and a risk to opening on time. These processes could take time and be procedurally complex, and in some cases dictated the order in which works could take place. These schools reported having limited leverage to accelerate decisions, which compressed summer timelines and intensified delivery pressures compared to schools able to proceed on wholly school-owned estates.

## Opening dates

In the second interview, most schools confirmed opening dates aligning with their original grant monitoring and assurance submissions, although there were occasions where schools had experienced challenges which led to delays or longer timelines than expected.

Many schools noted that these unexpected delays and challenges occurred during the summer build phase and preparation for the opening of the nursery. These ranged in scale and nature but were often described as manageable and anticipated risks. For example, some summer reflections highlighted that minor design changes required swift coordination to avoid delays. To manage these risks and open when planned, schools frequently emphasised the need for proactive planning, flexibility, and ongoing problem-solving. For example, some schools described opening on time despite some final finishing works or snagging still needing to be completed, as they found they were able to manage these after the children arrived.

“There were just a few finishing bits, like painting the doors and cleaning the windows, which we saved until half-term, but nothing that stopped us opening.”

Some schools reported a few minor, short delays to opening, originally within a few weeks of the original opening date but within the same academic term. Causes of these delays were varied, but typically included limited contractor availability, changes needing to be made to the refurbishments during the build phase that were unexpected, or limited staff availability<sup>5</sup>. Where this was the case, the changes were reflected in grant monitoring forms provided to the DfE as part of programme oversight. As above, these delays were

---

<sup>5</sup> As mentioned above, a lot of projects were reliant on staff working throughout the summer holidays.

described as manageable and schools were able to effectively adapt where challenges arose.

"There were the hiccups that you would anticipate renovating an old building [...] So flooring, water, pipes, electric, all of those sorts of things that needed sorting out."

A small number of schools during the interviews had not yet opened their nursery at the point of the second interview, with a reason for delays being limited contractor availability. The main impact was an increase in the operational burden by senior leaders managing the project whilst school running was ongoing while works continued.

A common theme throughout the interviews surrounded recommendations to engage contractors early to help minimise the risk of delays, especially where contractors are in demand during school holidays.

"The difficulty is the timescale [...] contractors are busy [...] it was just a tight turnaround."

### **Quantitative evidence on opening dates**

Given the small sample of the research, we explored whether the delayed openings identified were isolated to participating schools or reflected more widespread delays across the programme. This was particularly relevant given the focus on schools aiming for a September 2025 opening date and therefore expected to have fewer complex delivery challenges.

Analysis of grant monitoring data on changes to planned opening dates suggests a similar pattern to the findings from this research. While small adjustments to planned opening times were relatively common, most projects remained on track to open within the same broad timeframe originally anticipated at the point of grant award. However, there is some evidence of slippage from autumn 2025 into later terms, particularly spring 2026, as projects progressed.

Table 2 shows how planned opening dates have evolved between the application stage (December 2024) and the most-recent monitoring returns (January 2026). While most projects were initially expected to open in autumn term 2025, a proportion shifted into spring term 2026 or later over time as delivery progressed.

Some of the differences observed may reflect variation in how schools interpreted the timeline for grant announcements (for example, differing assumptions about the timing of a "spring" announcement), rather than delays that occurred during delivery. This was also reflected in early qualitative interviews, where some schools reported that they had initially expected to begin works earlier.

**Table 2: How opening dates have changed**

| <b>Term planned to open</b>  | <b>December 2024 application</b> | <b>January 2026 update</b> |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Before autumn term 2025      | 8%                               | 2%                         |
| Autumn term 2025             | 86%                              | 73%                        |
| Spring term 2026             | 3%                               | 19%                        |
| Summer term 2026             | 0%                               | 0%                         |
| Autumn term 2026 and onwards | 3%                               | 6%                         |
| Totals <sup>6</sup>          | 100%                             | 100%                       |

## **Easing transitions**

To aid with smooth openings and ease transitions, several schools reported the benefits of early engagement with families and offered stay and play sessions ahead of opening, or part-time sessions for the children. These activities were reported to enable faster settling for the children and helped build greater parental confidence from the outset.

“We actually had [...] a transition day as well for the nursery children to come with their parents [...] They got to come and do a session and stay with their children as well, so they could get to see [the classroom].”

However, several schools reflected that opportunities to engage parents and children ahead of opening were limited over the summer period, due to ongoing building works, school closure, and the timing of funding confirmation. In hindsight, some schools felt that earlier or more opportunity for structured events allowing families to see the space might have supported smoother settling-in. These reflections were retrospective rather than critical and typically framed as learning that could inform future openings where timelines allow.

## **Parental feedback from the opening of the nurseries**

Even with challenges over summer, most schools described the opening of the nurseries themselves as smooth and positive, and where it was busy it was manageable.

As mentioned above, schools reported using staggered starts, settling in sessions, and home visits or stay and play sessions to support a smooth opening. There was strong evidence of positive parental feedback, even in instances where the building work was not fully complete.

---

<sup>6</sup> Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

“Parents were all very positive [...] happy with how we accommodated children even though the building wasn't finalised.”

“Lots of feedback from parents; They have messaged to say it's phenomenal.”

“I don't want to say hard but different trying to settle in 18 different children but now we're in it, it'll be a little bit more manageable [...] It's been really positive [...] a lot of people have shared how nice it is. They can't believe what the nursery looks like.”

## Workforce

### At the point of the first interview

Overall, most schools were confident about staffing their nursery once it opened, making use of both internal redeployments, for example of experienced EYFS teachers and teaching assistants, and external recruitment.

"So where we've had good staff, we have looked at their qualifications and whether they are able to be moved."

"We never have any difficulty recruiting here. We get a lot of applications for positions."

Schools also demonstrated thought-out contingency plans in case there were any issues or risks that arose with staffing and threatened the opening of the provision. This included upskilling existing staff to meet ratios and necessary staffing levels needed for the expansion, accessing supply staff, or phasing the opening of the nursery.

"They [the nursery] have a bank [...] of staff that they use to cover sickness [...] they've just utilised those people."

Many schools and MATs emphasised strengthening their nursery provision through offering qualifications, structured CPD, mentoring, and the transferring of in-house EYFS knowledge across staff. This was believed to help embed school-based best practice into the early years settings.

" We've [the MAT] invested heavily over the past couple of years in CPD for early years [...] we also use an instructional coaching model for our training and CPD so [the nursery manager] will be constantly receiving coaching and advice and support."

## At the point of the second interview

At the second interview schools were asked how their staffing and recruitment processes went compared to their plans and expectations. All schools reported that they had sufficiently staffed their provision in line with opening dates, however there were varying levels of difficulty faced with recruitment and retention.

Schools who had planned to rely on existing staff and internal deployments typically reported that this went well and matched their expectations. This often took the form of either utilising apprentice in the nurseries,

"We're pretty good at [...] trying to grow our own where we can and using apprenticeships to support with that [...] we do rely quite a lot on apprenticeships and young people coming through into the sector."

or moving existing teachers from within the school into the nursery and backfilling the posts that became available in the school. This worked especially well where the teachers were EY leads or had backgrounds in early years, and the approach was often welcomed by parents.

"I moved an existing teacher that I already had, she was my reception teacher and my EY lead [...] our parents really like a familiar face [...] they know they can trust you in coming in with their little ones as well, so that was really important."

However, for some schools who had to recruit externally, there were challenges reported in recruiting these early years staff members, pointing to national shortages and increased difficulty finding qualified people. However, despite these challenges they were able to recruit the required number to staff their nurseries in time for opening.

"It wasn't easy [...] it's a national problem isn't it. There just aren't enough workers and it's obviously trying to incentivise people to go and work in this area. It wasn't easy, but we have managed to find people in the end."

As in the first interview, there was evidence of thought-out back up plans in case staffing challenges led to potential risks of having to delay the nursery openings. These plans included utilising other existing staff from settings nearby or getting agency staff to support.

"We would have been able to open because worst case scenario we would have pulled in agency staff and moved people around within the school."

To boost interest in the roles, there was also feedback that it may have been beneficial to have adjusted approaches to recruiting the nursery posts, taking a broader approach than advertising the individual roles.

"We could have been a bit clearer about career pathways, recruitment events [...] there's more that we could do ourselves instead of [...] just advertising a single role in a single school."

In the second wave of interviews, many schools reported that staffing implications only became fully apparent once children arrived and cohorts began to settle. This was evident where schools opened with multiple cohorts simultaneously, expanded provision for under-3s, or identified SEND needs within the cohort early on. In these situations, initial staffing models based on minimum ratios<sup>7</sup> were not always workable in practice, and some schools increased staffing shortly after opening. While staffing pressures rarely delayed openings, they constrained what schools could offer in the early weeks, including the pace of expansion and number of places.

"We were within ratio with just having two members of staff, however we very quickly realised that was an incredibly big ask with children that weren't toilet trained. You needed more than two staff."

### **Impact of staffing on places**

Staffing was also seen as a challenge for the number of places that could be provided at the nursery, especially in terms of offering places outside of term time. This was often seen as a common reason for not offering places outside of typical provision models, such as holiday care.

"The policies and guidelines can become really murky [...] all of our staff are on school terms and conditions, which means they're on a yearly salary that's pro-rata includes holiday pay [...] you can pay support staff overtime to cover a holiday, but you can't a qualified teacher because they're already under a 52-week contract"

In some instances, the number of places available was limited by staffing and logistical considerations attached to their workforce, such as staffing costs, as opposed to physical space within the nursery.

"If I could get another member of staff in now, I could start taking more preschoolers. But because of funding implications for that, I need to cap the numbers as they are now."

---

<sup>7</sup> See 'Places' section below for more detail on ratios for under 3s.

## Places

### At the point of the first interview

At the point of the first interview, schools had typically decided on how many places they would offer by the metres squared of the nursery to adhere to the EYFS space requirements, by the staffing needed, or a combination of both.

“Looking at the space available, but obviously knowing the guidelines around space per child, etc so it was a mix of doing the maths and also experience of the people running it.”

However, several schools referred to plans of staggering child admissions due to reasons such as recruitment and staffing - anticipating that places would not be full - or to manage logistics and ensure a smooth opening.

### Filling places:

The majority of schools were confident that their places would be filled. However, the point at what stage schools were at in July during the first interview differed. Some schools had already filled the places,

"We filled the nursery already for the whole of the next academic year and some of the year after."

while others were confident they would fill places but had not yet done so. This was due to factors such as delaying marketing, waiting for nursery building work to finish, and wanting to show parents the space once more progress had been made over the summer.

"Highly confident [...] as soon as the building work is completed, we've got someone booked to come in and do drone footage [...] we know that the plan for the new nursery room will draw people in."

Some schools noted they did not expect to be full immediately, anticipating that places, especially in larger nurseries, would fill gradually once the nursery was established and operating. Not being full immediately was not seen as a big concern.

"I think we're confident. I think we're realistic about when that will be. That's a very big nursery at 55 [places], so we won't expect that to happen over the next few months, but you know hopefully kind of this time next year."

### At the point of the second interview

In the second interview following the majority of schools' having opened the nurseries, schools were asked a series of questions around the places they were able to offer and

how this matched their expectations. Most schools reported that their nursery capacity was broadly as planned throughout the process and had remained unchanged.

Like the first interview there were mixed experiences, with some schools reporting that they were full and had waiting lists,

"There's no existing places for two-year-olds within the local area [...] and so by offering it in the village area, which is quite highly populated, it's being greeted with open hands, so I don't think they've had a problem, certainly with the two-year-olds."

and others reporting that whilst they were not full yet, this was expected and was due to various reasons such as limited marketing, being quieter in the autumn term due to the age of children joining the nursery, and because of current staffing limitations.

"This is always the quieter time because they're waiting for children to get to their birthdays [...] so this is a real ideal time for us to be getting the project done rather than if we'd have done it in the summer term where everywhere is full and they're desperate for places"

## Advertising

Schools used a variety of advertising techniques, such as social media, flyers, show rounds and word of mouth.

"Flyers, so they have gone out on social media, and we've also put things into like our local magazines. We've also put posters up in our local community, particularly doctors' surgeries."

Several schools noted the potential difficulties with advertising the nursery prior to it being built or completed. However, on many occasions this was seen as a barrier that could be overcome.

"Another success, I suppose, is that we had to sell our nursery on a vision. We had to say, this is what we're going to open a nursery and it's going to be great. We have no pictures; we had nothing to show people [...] And we had parents who were willing to kind of go with us and say we're prepared to take a gamble on you."

## Places for under 3s

Whether or not schools intended to offer places to under 3s was based on demand, space, staffing, or this age being out of scope for their operating plans. Places for younger children, especially for those under 2, would require additional space and staffing capacity.

"[the nursery manager] was considering having under twos, but, and she might in the future expand to under twos, but [...] that would need a separate building to be built."

"I think the vision of the local authority is that we're providing quality education for three-year-olds and upwards. Nurseries in the surrounding area will adapt and provide care for younger children."

For those planning to offer provision for under-3s, reported benefits included strong outdoor opportunities, and enabling children to start their school journey earlier and aid with making sure children are school ready. Schools said this also helped them build strong relationships with families sooner.

"Building that relationship earlier with families is key for attendance and for the well-being and engagement of the children and families. We find that the children who attend our 2s provision go through those transitions much smoother [...] because they're used to routines and they've got relationships with staff, which helps in all areas of their development."

### Space adaptations

Several schools who planned to offer places to under 3s reported making several adaptations to make sure the space was fit for under 3s. This included arrangements such as nap areas, nappy changing facilities, age-appropriate furniture, and separating dining spaces to support younger children's needs. They also reported staggering lunch times to maintain staff: child ratios where places were offered that spanned numerous age groups.

"As we've got a few children who are in nappies [...] we've had to think about changing spaces and sleeping spaces, which we haven't really considered before. We've also had to create a new and separate dining area."

### Ratios for under 3s

At the time of the second interview, numerous schools flagged the ratio considerations when providing care for under 3s and the practical and logistical considerations of staffing that come with caring for the younger children. They flagged that in some instances they benefited from operating at different ratios to those in the EYFS.

"The first week was a very steep learning curve for us [...] because we had a teacher in there [...] that gave us a ratio of 1:13 and 1:5 with the rising threes that we did have [...] we were within ratio with just having two members of staff, however we very quickly realised that was an incredibly big ask with children that weren't toilet trained. You needed more than two staff."

This was an especially important consideration when caring for children who may have additional or complex needs.

"I would say if the nurseries are going to be taking on children with complex needs, SEND children or any children that experience trauma and need that additional adult, ratio of 1:5 with 2-year-olds is hard."

## Hours and sessions

### At the point of the first interview

Schools reported offering tailored sessions to working parents, showcasing a desire to be flexible. Whilst some schools preferred offering full days, most schools intended to offer a mix of full days, half day, and wraparound options.

"We do try and be as flexible around 15 and 30 hours as possible. So [nursery name] actually offers quite a wide range of options for their families, so they can have their 15 hours [...] so if you wanted to work, it gives you that flexibility."

### At the point of the second interview

Most schools reported offering hours that typically aligned with school hours, as this was most in line with local demand and what parents wanted, especially where parents were dropping siblings off at the school.

"When we toyed with loads of hours and times, and went back and forth with our parents and set out what was best, we all agreed that safeguarding reasons to do with the gates and then what parents needed was the same times [as the school]"

Numerous schools pointed out the benefits of opening and finishing the nursery sessions between five and fifteen minutes before or after the school hours. This was deliberate to help with drop offs and accommodate the lunch time between morning and afternoon nursery sessions.

"The nursery opening time at 8.30am is fifteen minutes earlier than our start time for the main school. That was to help with drop offs and pickups and to accommodate the lunch time. To fit in the two–three-hour sessions we need to have lunch at a particular time in order to create staffing and all those types of things."

"They do two sessions [...] 8.45am until 11.45am and then 12.15pm to 3.15pm, so they start five minutes later than us [...] It's deliberately done so that the parents aren't trying to be in two places at once."

There were some instances where schools' initial opening intentions listed in their bid needed to be revised due to a lack of demand. Where this was the case, this was reported to the Department for Education via the scope change process, as mentioned earlier in the report.

"Originally when we put the bids in, we thought we would do 7am to 7.30pm, Monday to Friday all year round [...] and it transpired that isn't what the local people have wanted. They just wanted school hours term time only [...] so we did a scope change through the DfE process and made them all term time only."

## Wraparound

Many schools reported that whilst the core nursery hours they offered typically aligned to school hours, they offered school wraparound provision that was extended to the nursery children. This emphasised the importance of a flexible approach for parents in these local communities.

"The actual hours of the nursery, the morning sessions are 8.30 to half 11, and then our afternoon sessions 12.20 till 3.20. However, we can offer breakfast club in the morning, and we have got extended childcare in the afternoon and dinner going across that [...] in theory you could have a child that comes in at 8 and goes right through until 6 as well. So, we have got those capacities to make that happen."

When asked about implications of wraparound care and funded entitlement hours, some schools reported that whilst funded hours could be used during the core nursery hours, anything beyond this was in line with typical wraparound hourly costs.

"They use their funded hours between 9am and 3pm, and then anything before and after that is charged at our hourly rates as breakfast club and Tea club."

Several schools who did not currently offer wraparound showed an awareness of potential future demand for this provision, however, took a cautious and balanced approach in terms of offering this, emphasising the importance of the provision needing to be sustainable and financially viable.

"it's in our long-term plans [operating outside of term time] [...] but as it stands, we don't have the staff, we don't have the children, so it's not financially viable as yet."

"The research that was undertaken by the county council [...] showed what was missing was term-time provision [...] but there's absolutely no barrier from the school to that being either more longer days or more weeks of the year."

## Out-of-term provision

The main reason for the nurseries operating outside of term or not was due to demand. For those who did offer out-of-term provision, this was largely due to wanting to appeal to working parents.

"It was really to encourage as many people to use our nursery as much as possible [...] lots of our parents in this local area are working parents as well."

"We just felt that's what parents, working families would need [...] we just wanted to make sure that we will meet the needs of the local community."

Schools who did not plan to offer out-of-term provision explained that this was due to lack of parental demand, and wanting to align the nursery opening hours to the schools' opening hours.

"We initially said holidays as well, but at the moment there is no need for it."

Some schools reported that they did not offer out-of-term provision because it did not align with the teacher-led model and posed logistic challenges which were also highlighted in the workforce section of the report.

"We're having a teacher-led nursery, so we couldn't really offer a teacher-led nursery, but this teacher isn't allowed to have any holidays that other teachers are having."

However, for others, they explained that the delivery of the nursery may differ depending on term-time provision and out-of-term provision.

"It's going to be a teacher-led nursery, purely and simply because the ratio changes when it's a teacher-led nursery. During term time, we need less staff in there because of the ratio and then during holiday time it will be led by a nursery manager."

## **Overall experiences with the process**

### **At the point of the first interview**

Schools reported challenges with the timelines associated with the first phase of the programme. These included the wait from putting in the application to finding out the outcome, especially where they wanted to open in September 2025.

"Our application for funding went in before Christmas. We got told of our success on the first of April, so there's quite a period of time we didn't know. Do we start? Do we not? [...] That biggest challenge of not knowing [if we were] getting the funding or not."

There was also feedback that a roadmap to set out clear steps would be helpful. Some schools pointed out that they found the guidance<sup>8</sup> published by the DfE to be very helpful, which includes a suggested checklist to follow when establishing the new provision.

### **At the point of the second interview**

Schools were asked to reflect upon their experiences of the process and the administrative aspects of the programme. Most schools thought that whilst the processes overall were demanding, they were proportionate. Where there were time-consuming aspects and complex administrative processes, they did not think the process was duplicative and felt

---

<sup>8</sup> The guidance can be found here: [Establishing school-based nursery provision - GOV.UK](#)

the burden was proportionate to the scale of funding they received and requirements set out were understandable given the accountability expectations.

"Not duplicative [...] time consuming in the sense that things had to be done, but I think the thing is if someone's giving you [funding amount] you don't mind investing the time."

Some schools provided reflections similar to the first interview, emphasising how whilst they were able to complete the required paperwork in time, they thought the timelines were tight to gather the required information with a long wait to find out the outcome.

Additionally, feedback from schools included questioning why the administrative and payment processes were different depending on if a school was part of an academy or not.

### **Support from the Department for Education**

Schools felt supported by the Department for Education, especially where they needed to submit scope change requests where their plans had changed from their bid, and reported that the scope change process was clear, smooth and well-managed.

"The change of scope process was absolutely first class [...] I mean, it was the quickest turn around I could have possibly expected."

There was also feedback that the Department for Education's webinar was useful and provided helpful information, with several schools recommending attending these where possible.

"What really helped me was I attended every webinar that's been available since we've started the process."

## Benefits of the nursery provision

During the second interview, schools were asked about what they thought the perceived benefits of the nursery provision was based on their experience so far.

### Benefits for children

Most schools identified clear benefits for children, describing them as already visible rather than anticipated. Benefits for the children were often described as the primary justification for undertaking the nursery projects. These benefits included improving the confidence and reduced anxiety of the children, especially in relation to transitions into Reception, stronger social and communication development, and earlier identification of SEND or additional needs.

"For the children, there's going to be a really positive impact with school readiness [...] we'll really get to know that child and build that really positive relationship. And hopefully that early identification of need in relation to not only SEND but also with safeguarding, so we'll be able to identify those vulnerabilities earlier."

Schools often emphasised the value of being able to offer high-quality indoor and outdoor environments which they would not have been able to provide without the grant funding.

Separately, schools highlighted pedagogical benefits of nursery provision being embedded within the school, including consistent routines and closer alignment of nursery practice with the school's wider EYFS approach.

"There is an intention to increasingly work together to make sure that where preschool children in the nursery are looking at phonics, they look at phonics in the way the school does."

### Benefits for parents and families

There were also benefits cited for parents and families throughout both interviews. These included the convenience of dropping off to a single site where siblings attended the school, reduced travel and logistical burden, and greater flexibility compared to other local alternatives in some instances. Several schools reported actively collecting positive parental feedback, often spanning the quality of the environments, the convenience of locations, and the communication and responsiveness of staff.

"It's really convenient for families. One mum I was speaking to this morning, she said I can't tell you what a difference this makes. I only have to go to one place [...] it takes away a barrier."

For several schools, parental benefit was linked to offering childcare provision that allowed parents to return to work or find more stable employment.

"The biggest thing for parents [...] there was a gap locally and we've filled that, and the hours are friendly for working parents."

## **Benefits for the community**

Several schools also referenced benefits to the community, such as reducing pressure on nearby providers, increasing local childcare sufficiency, and strengthened links between schools and local communities.

"Because of the nursery, now some local nurseries can take more babies [...] it's taken some pressure off some of the local nurseries that we can take 3- and 4-year-olds for them."

In some areas, particularly those described as experiencing falling birth rates or recent nursery closures, schools mentioned community level benefits, helping to stabilise local childcare provision and retain families within the area.

## Advice for schools looking to engage

Schools were asked what lessons they would share with schools who may look to engage with future phases or do similar nursery projects in the future.

Schools found starting the process early as very helpful, accounting for time to scope out details such as contracts, obtain quotes and understand what regulations were needed. This also helped them understand how many staff would be needed and allowed them to start recruitment early. Keeping clear records of scope, costs and decisions was seen to be beneficial, alongside reading the guidance closely and following it. Consultations, market research and the importance of understanding demand in the schools' specific context was seen as very important.

Schools also found seeking support and advice from others as crucial, as the application process and the scoping of the nursery plans was very much a team effort. Using peer support networks and informal knowledge-sharing was highly valued.

"Seek advice from people who know what they're doing. I think whoever it is who puts the bid together needs to be the person who co-ordinates the information and skills set, rather than tries to have all the answers to themselves because it's too hard."

Numerous schools advised speaking to other schools who have similar experiences and can offer advice and guidance.

"Talk to other schools [...] it doesn't need to be a frightful thing [...] if they're talking to people who've already been through the process, you can find out very quickly how seamless it is."

## Closing remarks

Overall, all participating schools in the research reported that the programme was worthwhile to engage in and that, despite its challenges and resource-intensive nature, the benefits of the nurseries significantly outweighed any associated barriers. While the findings are not intended to be representative, particularly given the compressed delivery timelines linked to September opening dates as explained further in the methodology section, schools were nonetheless generally able to open as planned, demonstrating considerable adaptability and commitment.

Key lessons learned included the importance of drawing on existing expertise and external support, being prepared for the demands of delivery, and engaging early with consultations and contractors to mitigate risks and support successful implementation.

## Acknowledgements

The Department for Education would like to thank all representatives from the schools engaging in the programme who took the time to participate in our research and share their experiences of the programme so far, as well as all schools, staff and stakeholders who have been involved in the delivery of phase 1.

## Annex A – Useful resources

- Department for Education case studies: Expanding through a governor-led model [Early years provision: expanding through a governor-led model - Case study - GOV.UK](#)
- Department for Education case studies: Expanding through a school-led model [Early years provision: expanding through a school-led model - Case study - GOV.UK](#)
- Department for Education case studies: Expanding through a school-PVI partnership [Early years provision: expanding through a school-PVI partnership - Case study - GOV.UK](#)
- Early years school-based nursery provision operating outside of the typical model research report - [Early years school-based nursery provision operating outside of the typical model](#)
- Establishing school-based nursery provision - [Establishing school-based nursery provision - GOV.UK](#)



Department  
for Education

© Department for Education copyright 2026

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0, except where otherwise stated. To view this licence, visit [nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3](https://nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3).

Where we have identified any third-party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

**Reference:** RR1639

**ISBN:** 978-1-83870-814-6

For any enquiries regarding this publication, contact [www.gov.uk/contact-dfe](https://www.gov.uk/contact-dfe).

This document is available for download at [www.gov.uk/government/publications](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications).