



REPORT

Parents at the Centre

Dalia Ben-Galim

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Executive summary

A wealth of research evidence demonstrates that resources spent upstream in giving children the best start in life save money spent downstream on dealing with the consequences of social disadvantage. Early intervention is now a cornerstone of social policy, and high-quality early years services have been expanded in the UK and many other countries in recent years to help promote social mobility, reduce child poverty and narrow educational inequalities. Early years services (or childcare) also enable families to balance work and caring responsibilities and, in so doing, help to promote higher employment rates and reduce gender inequalities. They are, therefore, a key foundation of policy frameworks for achieving social justice more widely.

Yet despite a great deal of expansion and investment in early years provision over the last decade in the UK, it is children from disadvantaged backgrounds – arguably with the most to gain – who use these services least.

The objective of the research presented in this report is to understand why some parents who are entitled to use early years services don't normally do so.¹ More specifically, our research seeks to understand how parents access information that shapes their decision-making about early years provision, and how service providers can better engage with and support parents to meet their families' needs. On the basis of our findings, we make the case for a number of key policy changes, meant to ensure that early years provision enables children from low-income families to break out of the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage.

Key findings

ippr undertook 10 deliberative workshops with 104 parents from across the UK. The sample was selected from parents from low-income backgrounds, with diverse attitudes, opinions and preferences. Our aim was to engage with parents who don't normally access early years provision and who live in poverty or face a substantial risk of becoming poor.

Each workshop covered a number of themes, including reasons for using childcare, the quality, accessibility and affordability of services, the relationship between childcare and parental employment, and communication between service providers and their clients. Key findings include:

- Beyond the entitlement to a free part-time nursery place for three- and four-year-olds, parents rarely used childcare provision.
- Parents used childcare primarily to support their child's social development. Other reasons included educational development and preparing children for school.
- In general, parents did not use early years provision in order to sustain work. Some used childcare in order to attend courses – in these cases provision was often free. Many said the free nursery entitlement limited employment opportunities, that it is too short and inflexible to enable employment to be fitted around it.
- Most parents felt strongly that there should be no formal role for childcare provision while their child was less than two years old, and that such children should be with their families.
- In the early years of their child's life, parents almost always preferred to leave their children with family members rather than with childminders or other professionals.
- The quality of childcare was predominately judged by the child's happiness. Other criteria that parents used to judge quality were the standard of education; adequate preparation for school; the friendliness, safety and space of the childcare environment; the life experience and attitude of the staff, although not necessarily their qualifications; and the ratio of children to staff (the lower the better).
- When asked about accessibility, location was the most important factor for the majority of parents. Services had to be provided close to home, preferably within walking distance.
- Affordability was also a major concern, with few being willing or able to pay any additional fees.

¹ The research took place across the UK. Recommendations outlined here refer to policy in England but best practice is relevant nationwide.

- The inflexibility of the free nursery entitlement also emerged as an issue, particularly the way in which it coincides with school term times and the availability of work.
- On communication, parents felt that family and friends were the most useful and most trusted sources of information. They wanted basic factual information from the state that would enable them to make informed choices about which local provision to take up, and welcomed communication direct from children's centres.
- Some parents explained that written communication was often difficult for them to use because they could not read, or read English.

Access, affordability and quality

The Coalition government is committed to early intervention approaches to improving the lives of disadvantaged children. Recent policy developments include an expansion of free early years provision for disadvantaged two-year-olds, an expansion of the health visitors scheme, and the extension of Family Nurse Partnerships. However, with funding for children's centres being maintained in cash terms only, and the government keen to re-focus children's centre services on disadvantaged children, many local authorities are already making significant cutbacks, looking at efficiency savings and pooling resources.

Access, affordability and quality remain the perennial challenges in the development and implementation of early years policy. Low-income families tend to use early years provision less than higher-income families do, which reduces the effectiveness of early years provision as a tool to tackle social inequality.

The recommendations presented here echo the voices and concerns of parents who don't regularly access childcare and who don't usually inform the policy debate.

Widening affordable access

- Evidence from countries with higher employment rates and lower levels of educational inequality than the UK suggests that high-quality, affordable and universal childcare and early years services are critical to better outcomes for children and families. Universal early years services secure widespread public commitment, ensure that children from all social backgrounds can learn and develop together, and enable all parents to meet their aspirations for work and family life. Universal provision of early years services should therefore remain the long-term policy goal. Given current fiscal constraints, the priority in coming years should be to extend free part-time nursery places to *all* two-year-olds.
- Reforms to the tax credit and welfare systems must involve widening access to free and affordable childcare rather than narrowing it.
 - In the short term, the government should reconsider its decision to reduce support through the childcare element of the Working Tax Credit. The amount of support that low-income working families can claim from the tax credit system is being cut from 80 per cent to 70 per cent. This reduction, combined with increasing childcare costs and VAT rises, will make childcare even more unaffordable for many families.
 - The government should also reconsider its decision to integrate the childcare element of the tax credit system into the new Universal Credit. While the principle of the Universal Credit is sound, the integration of childcare support into its architecture is likely to diminish the affordability of services for many families because of asset means-testing and other factors. Instead, the government should consider a single, integrated funding system for childcare that merges tax credit provision and the tax relief provided for childcare vouchers. This single system could be designed to ensure support for all parents while offering the greatest amount of support to those on low incomes. It could function as a top-up in childcare support that is additional to any universal entitlement to free part-time nursery places.

These measures alone, however, will not be enough to reform early years provision and ensure that low-income families regularly access services. The sector also needs to strengthen its engagement with parents and the quality of information and support it provides to them.

Support, engagement and information for parents

A slide pack for practitioners is available to accompany this report, providing suggestions on how to design and deliver services that engage with and support parents.² However, other gaps in provision also emerged from our research evidence, particularly in access to information.

- First, the government should facilitate the development of an early years ‘service comparison’ website. Building on the popularity of price comparison websites, Ofsted ratings and online parenting websites, we suggest that a website is established that allows parents to rate and comment on early years provision. Our research has shown that parents trust other parents, so this single source of information could be useful to those seeking advice on childcare services in their local area. These types of websites already work in other areas, such as health care, providing information that is valuable in decision-making, including ratings, feedback and user satisfaction levels.
- Local authorities should view engagement initiatives as frontline activity and protect their funding accordingly. For example:
 - Family Link Workers and other outreach staff – by receiving referrals, working with other services, such as health visitors, and making home visits themselves – help to bridge the gap that can exist between parents and services, and are often seen as a ‘lifeline’.
 - Parent Champion schemes are an effective way of harnessing existing service-users’ time and energy to engage new potential users.

Early years provision for two-year-olds

The government’s intention to fund 15 hours per week of early years education and care for all disadvantaged two-year-olds from 2012–13 is a significant development, one which builds on pilots set-up by the previous government. Some £300 million has been earmarked to extend the number of free places for two-year-olds from 20,000 to 130,000 over the next four years.

While details are yet to emerge as to how these families might be targeted, it is likely that many will share similar characteristics with the families involved in our research. As a result, our research offers an opportunity to take their concerns and ideas into account in the shaping of this new policy.

- Building on evidence that outreach professionals act as the ‘first frontline’ of provision, local authorities and the NHS must ensure effective integration between health visitors, Family Nurse Partnerships and family key workers. Integration of services can be improved and cost savings achieved through effective data-sharing and the co-location of services. There is still too little effective integration of local authority and NHS maternity and child health services and early years provision.
- Our research has shown that some parents will not simply turn up to a children’s centre to claim their free entitlement. The group of families at which that the two-year-old provision is targeted may, in particular, be less likely to perceive that the services are for them. To encourage take-up of this entitlement, outreach professionals should be empowered to use conditional cash transfers (CCTs) to fill targeted places more effectively. Evidence from overseas suggests that CCTs can offer immediate poverty relief as well as an opportunity for parents to invest in their child’s human capital, primarily via education.

The early years workforce

Current levels of funding and provision suggest that radical change is required if the UK is genuinely to transform its early years sector. This calls for a shift in how the early years sector is valued, rethinking the current market model and prioritising the sector over the long term. There are compelling reasons for doing this: as this research and wider academic evidence shows, there are significant short- and long-term returns from investment in the early years, and a clear link between outcomes for children and the quality of the workforce.

The current fiscal climate provides an opportunity to think more innovatively about recruitment into the early years workforce. There are thousands of skilled graduates seeking work who might

² Available at <http://www.ippr.org/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=813>

consider the opportunity to train as early years professionals or to gain experience in the sector while preparing for future career choices.

We recommend that:

- The government should reinstate the long-term commitment to having an early years professional in every children's centre. In the short term, the priority should be to ensure that every setting offering places to disadvantaged two-year-olds is led by graduate-level staff. Without this guarantee of quality, resources spent on expanding free nursery places will largely be wasted.
- The government should pilot a new 'Teach Early Years First' programme, building on the runaway success of the existing Teach First graduate recruitment scheme in schools. This should include a high level of competition for entry and a rigorous selection process, to increase the status of the profession, and work in partnership with local authorities and children's centres in particular. This would also offer opportunities to graduates struggling to enter the labour market.

The voices of parents who don't regularly access childcare are rarely heard in policy debates on early years provision. However, it is often these families which are most vulnerable to the risks and consequences of poverty. The recommendations presented here on universality, effective outreach and engagement with parents and rethinking workforce development respond to the concerns and views of these families, offering policymakers an opportunity to ensure that early years provision can provide the very best opportunities for all children.

1. Introduction

A wealth of research evidence³ demonstrates that resources spent upstream in giving children the best start in life save money spent downstream on dealing with the consequences of social disadvantage. Early intervention is now a cornerstone of social policy, and high-quality early years services have been expanded in the UK and many other countries in recent years to help promote social mobility, reduce child poverty and narrow educational inequalities.⁴ Early years services also enable families to balance work and caring responsibilities and, in so doing, help to promote higher employment rates and reduce gender inequalities (Esping-Andersen 2009, Moss 2010). They are, therefore, a key foundation stone of policy frameworks for achieving social justice more widely.

Yet despite a great deal of expansion and investment in early years provision over the last decade in the UK, it is children from disadvantaged backgrounds – arguably with the most to gain – who use these services least.

The objective of the research presented in this report is to understand why some parents who are entitled to use early years services don't normally do so.⁵ More specifically, our research seeks to understand how parents access information that shapes their decision-making about early years provision, and how service providers can better engage with and support parents to meet their families' needs. On the basis of our primary research and the existing evidence base, we make the case for a number of key policy changes, meant to ensure that early years provision enables children from low-income families to break out of the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage.

A slide pack aimed at those delivering and commissioning early years provision, through children's centres and local authorities for example, is available to accompany this report. It presents findings from the primary research that explored how current provision supports and engages with parents.

Our report provides a summary of the methodology employed and the profile of the participants, followed by a brief consideration of the current policy context, in particular the relationship between child poverty and early years provision. It then draws on data generated from our interviews with parents, alongside the wider academic literature, to present evidence-based policy recommendations to tackle the main challenges facing early years services: access, affordability and quality.

Crucially, the arguments presented here on universality, workforce development and effective outreach and engagement with parents echo the voices of parents who don't regularly access childcare and who, as a result, don't usually inform the policy debate. This is important because it is these families who are often most vulnerable to the risks and consequences of poverty.

Methodology and parent profile

ippr undertook 10 deliberative workshops involving 104 parents from across the UK. There were five workshops in England, two in Scotland, two in Wales and one in Northern Ireland.

Sixty-one mums and 43 dads took part. Participants were recruited through a number of different routes: through existing initiatives and programmes that work with parents, by 'snowballing' (where parents introduced us to other parents) and via a recruitment agency. Workshops covered a wide range of topics on childcare and early years, including affordability, accessibility, quality of provision, decision-making and communication.

The first eight workshops were focused on working with parents from particular groups among which childcare take-up is often low. In England, we worked with 34 dads; in Wales, with 11 parents (six mums, five dads) living in rural communities; in Scotland, with 36 BME parents (34 mums and two dads); and in Northern Ireland, with nine traveller parents (all mums). The final two workshops provided an opportunity to feed back our findings to parents and test our conclusions; both of these were held in England, with two dads and 12 mums.

3 See Carneiro and Heckman 2003, Field 2010, Allen 2011

4 See Feinstein 2003, Sylva et al 2004, Waldfogel 2005, Wilkinson and Pickett 2009, Goldthorpe 2010, Waldfogel and Washbrook 2010

5 The research took place across the UK. Recommendations outlined here refer to policy in England but best practice is relevant nationwide.

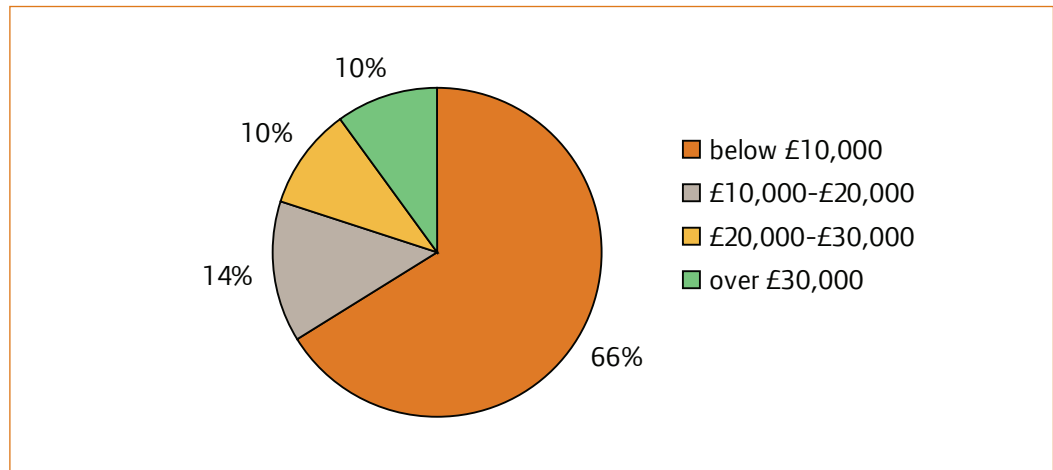
Employment and income

The sample was selected from parents from low-income backgrounds, with diverse attitudes, opinions and preferences.

Of the 98 parents who provided details about their employment status, 67 (68 per cent) were not currently in work. Twenty-five parents (25 per cent) were in work – 14 fulltime and 11 part-time. Four others were studying, and one was self-employed. Twelve parents indicated that they had a disability.

Seventy-two parents provided information on their household income. Of those, 48 (66 per cent) earned less than £10,000 annually. Ten parents (14 per cent) had incomes between £10,000 and £20,000; seven (10 per cent) had annual incomes between £20,000 and £30,000. Seven parents reported incomes over £30,000.

Figure 1.1
Annual household income



N = 72

Table 1.1
UK poverty line (weekly income) for different household types

Household type	Weekly income
Single person	£119
Couple	£206
Lone parent with two children (aged 5 and 14)	£247
Couple with two children (aged 5 and 14)	£333

Source: 'Poverty in the UK: a summary of facts and figures', webpage. <http://www.cpag.org.uk/povertyfacts/index.htm#line>

Although it is not possible to compare directly the families in our research to this data, it suggests that the majority of the families we spoke to are living below the poverty line.

Demographics

Sampling techniques were deliberately chosen to generate a diverse sample in terms of the participants' ethnic backgrounds.

Table 1.2
Ethnicity of participants

	Scotland	Wales	England	NI	TOTAL
White	4	11	24	2	41
Asian or Asian British	30	–	9	–	39
Black or Black British	1	–	1	–	2
Any other ethnic group	–	–	14 (Roma)	7 (Travellers)	21
Mixed	1	–	–	–	1

Forty-eight parents (46 per cent) were aged between 25 and 34; 26 (25 per cent) between 35 and 44; and 22 (21 per cent) between 18 and 24. One parent was under 18 and seven were over 45.

The majority of participants lived in two-parent households. Twenty-one parents were lone parents and 10 parents were living in households with three or more resident adults. The number of children in each household is shown in the table below.

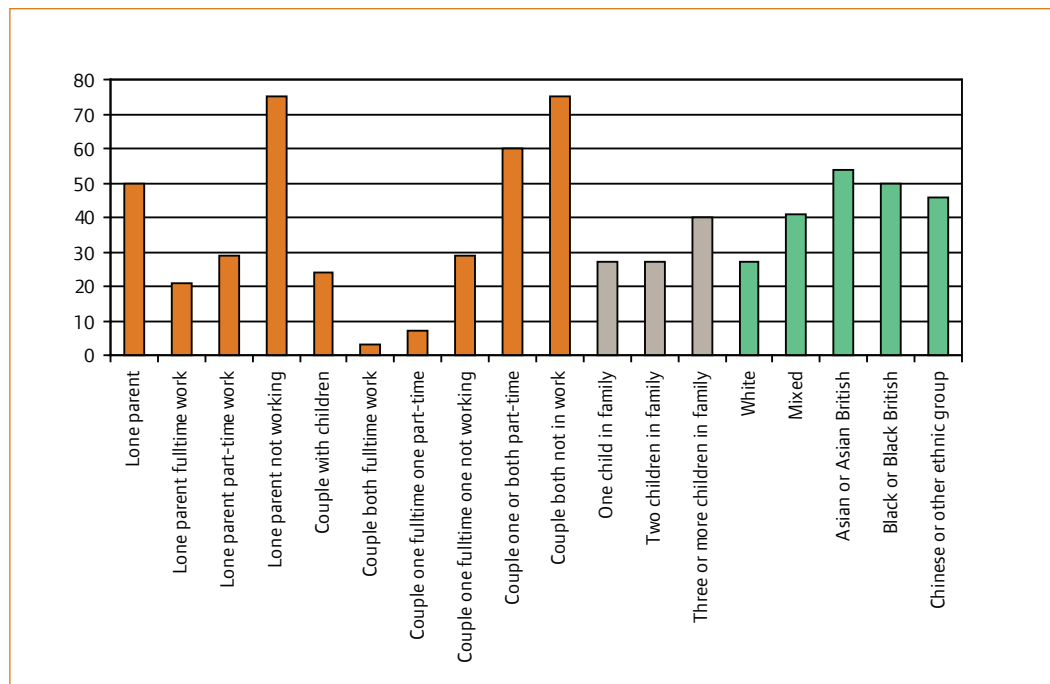
Table 1.3
Number of children in household

	Scotland	Wales	England	NI	TOTAL
1	10	–	14	2	26
2	14	9	17	3	43
3	6	2	8	3	19
4	5	–	8	1	14
5	1	–	–	–	1

N = 103

The chart below, based on HBAI data, shows that certain groups are more likely to experience income poverty. Again, while we are not able to make direct comparisons with the data, this suggests that many of the parents we spoke to are in these high-risk groups.

Figure 1.2
Percentage of children in poverty by household characteristics, 2008/09



Source: Data from Households Below Annual Income (HBAI), published by the Department for Work and Pensions, shows the UK poverty line (60% of median income after housing costs) for different family types. See tables 4.3 and 4.4. http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/hbai/hbai_2009/pdf_files/chapters/chapter_4_hbai10.pdf

While it is always difficult to compare different data sets, this summary illustrates the characteristics of our sample. Essentially, our aim was to engage with parents who live in poverty or face a substantial risk of becoming poor, and who don't normally access early years provision.

2. Child poverty and early years provision: the context

There is no doubt that the Coalition government is firmly committed to early years provision. In fact, the Coalition Agreement was explicit in laying out the government's priorities:

We will take Sure Start back to its original purpose of early intervention, increase its focus on the neediest families, and better involve organisations with a track record of supporting families. We will investigate ways of ensuring that providers are paid in part by the results they achieve.

We will refocus funding from Sure Start peripatetic outreach services, and from the Department of Health budget, to pay for 4,200 extra Sure Start health visitors.

We will investigate a new approach to helping families with multiple problems.

HM Government 2010: 19

The emphasis is clear: Sure Start should be an early intervention programme targeted at families most in need. Providers will be paid by results, and there is an emphasis on health visitors to provide early intervention and support parents. Subsequently, the Spending Review (HM Treasury 2010) and other policy announcements have provided more detail on the government's intentions.

Key policy announcements to date include:

- A commitment to maintain the Sure Start budget in cash terms.
- £300 million in funding for 15 hours a week of early years education and care for all disadvantaged two-year-olds from 2013.
- Measurement of success to be improved by greater competition in the early years market and payment by results.
- The development of an Early Intervention Grant, worth about £2 billion by 2014/15, for local authorities to spend on early intervention schemes.
- From April 2011, the childcare element of the working tax credit will be reduced from up to 80 per cent of childcare costs to a 70 per cent limit.

The government has also commissioned several reviews in this area. One, led by Frank Field, published *The Foundation Years: preventing poor children becoming poor adults* in December 2010, while a second, by Graham Allen on early intervention, resulted in *Early Intervention: The Next Steps*.

The key recommendations from Field's review were: '[to establish] a set of Life Chances Indicators that measure how successful we are as a country in making life's outcomes more equal for all children ... and to drive this policy of raising life chances the Review proposes establishing the 'Foundation Years' covering the period from the womb to [the age of] five.' (Field 2010: 6)

Field suggests that funding should be weighted towards the most disadvantaged children and warns against automatically increasing benefits that are not well targeted.

Graham Allen's report reiterates the case for early intervention. Its central recommendation is the creation of an independent Early Intervention Foundation to drive investment and long-term funding into schemes and initiatives that show a demonstrable long-term gain (Allen 2011). Allen emphasises that no new legislation or funding is required to support any of his recommendations. Together, these reports reinforce the emphasis that the government places on early years provision.

However, with heavy spending cuts looming, many concerns are being raised about the future of these services. With central government reducing funding to local authorities by 28 per cent over the next four years, it is almost certain that there will be cuts to childcare services and children's centres. While the spending review announcement included a commitment to maintain the Sure Start budget in cash terms, this means a reduction in real terms, thereby placing additional pressure on Sure Start services. In addition, Sure Start funding is not ringfenced.

A survey published by 4Children and the Daycare Trust warns that 250 children's centres face closure over the next 12 months, affecting up to 60,000 families (DayCare Trust and 4Children

2010). Local authorities have now set their budgets, with many streamlining and merging services locally. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in some areas this means direct cuts to some services or an increase to fees, making childcare less affordable for some families.

The government's decision to expand the offer of free childcare to disadvantaged two-year-olds is to be welcomed, as it recognises the importance of early years provision for poorer families. This provision builds on the success of universal provision of 15 hours of early years education for all three- and four-year-olds. Our findings suggest that this expanded offer is also likely to be welcomed by parents, many of whom believe that early years provision is important in their child's development from the age of two onward.

But, as our findings also show, parents do not simply turn up to use early years services. This raises questions for the government about eligibility, accessibility and engagement. Our findings and recommendations suggest that more effective outreach, targeting and alignment of services will need to be embedded in the system if the roll-out of new places for two-year-olds is to be widely effective.

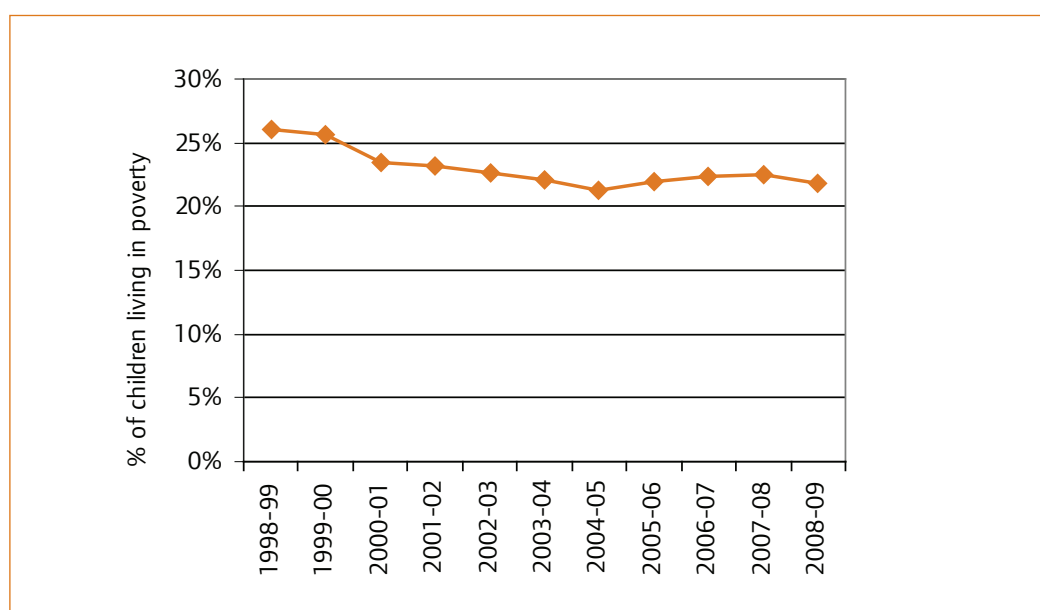
Tackling child poverty

As the profile of participants above shows, our research involved many families that are exposed to a high risk of poverty. In this section, we outline evidence to demonstrate the importance of early years policies to tackling child poverty.⁶

The child poverty agenda

In 1999, Prime Minister Tony Blair made an historic pledge: to eradicate child poverty in the UK by 2020. This was an extremely ambitious commitment, as child poverty had risen significantly in the 1980s and stayed high in the 1990s. Figure 2.1 shows the trajectory of child poverty (as measured by relative income poverty) since 1998/99. In 1998/99, approximately 3.4 million children (26.1 per cent) were living in poverty. In the years following Blair's child poverty pledge, rates fell significantly. Since 2004/05, however, poverty rates have begun to creep up again, and the most recent data, from 2008/09, shows that there are still 2.8 million children living in poverty (21.8 per cent). The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) has suggested that between 2008/09 and 2010/11, relative child poverty will have fallen by another 300,000 to approximately 2.5 million children (19 per cent) as a result of policy changes enacted in the last years of the Labour government (Brewer and Joyce 2010). The IFS also projects that child poverty (and working-age poverty) will rise between 2010/11 and 2013/14, based on its analysis of the Coalition government's reforms (ibid).

Figure 2.1
Towards the child poverty target, 1998/99–2007/08



Source: IFS poverty, inequality and living standards statistics, webpage. <http://www.ifs.org.uk/fiscalFacts/povertyStats>

⁶ For more information on the child poverty agenda and how different nations within the UK adopted the child poverty strategy see Ben-Galim et al 2010.

The Labour government was ambitious in its pursuit of its child poverty reduction targets, and implemented a range of initiatives and programmes aimed not only at tackling child poverty but also at providing support for families. Many of these policies, including the introduction of the National Minimum Wage, tax credits and welfare-to-work programmes, were focused on work as a route out of poverty. While these policies have been effective in increasing income for many families at risk of poverty, work-based strategies alone have been insufficient in reducing the incidence of poverty. In 2008/09, 61 per cent of poor children were living in working households, up from 50 per cent in 2005/06 (Gottfried and Lawton 2010).⁷

The role of early years provision

Academic evidence illustrates the importance of early years policy in improving a range of childhood and adult outcomes, particularly for poorer children. The large-scale Effective Provision of Pre-School Education study (EPPE, 1997–2004) found that children who attended high-quality early years provision achieved higher results in language, reading and numeracy, even once family background had been accounted for (Sylva et al 2004). Furthermore, it found that children from deprived backgrounds benefited most from this type of provision. Similar evidence has been published across the other UK nations – where early years provision is devolved – emphasising the benefits of affordable and high-quality early years provision (Melhuish et al 2006, Bradshaw and Wasoff 2009). The benefits of high-quality early years provision last well into a child's school years and are important in closing attainment gaps between children from poorer and more affluent households.

Analysis undertaken for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has estimated that getting early years provision right – in terms of providing access to affordable, high-quality early years education and childcare – could move between one-sixth and half of children out of poverty (Waldfogel and Garnham 2008). Like any policy, it is important to recognise that early years policies by themselves will not eradicate child poverty – nevertheless, they have a critical role in achieving that goal.

Our research aims to generate a better understanding of parents' decisions about childcare and the reasons why they may not be using early years services. It is based on the hypothesis that early years provision can play a significant role in tackling child poverty and generating better outcomes for children and families, although this is not to denigrate the importance of income, tax credits and other service provision. Drawing on the parents' own evidence, and analysis of the current policy landscape, the next section focuses on how changes to provision could benefit families and reduce inequality.

⁷ For more on the relationship between low pay, in-work poverty and child poverty see Cooke and Lawton 2008, DWP 2009, Lawton 2009.

3. Access, affordability and quality

Parents use childcare for a variety of reasons. Some are value-driven, reflecting the experiences that parents want for their children. Others are practical.

Reasons for accessing childcare

Almost all the participants in our research agreed that childcare is important for their child's social development – this was the reason most commonly cited reason to use it. Most parents recognised that through interacting with other children their child would learn and develop.

So they can make friends. Playing with other children; learning how to interact with them.

Social contact was seen as important in the development of confidence and social skills, learning to share, making friends, getting to know children they would later go to school with, fostering independence, and preparation for other environments, especially school.

Confidence and interacting makes them learn, gives them energy.

If a child is constantly interacting with other children, they learn how to be more agreeable. They'll share and they'll play and they're more at ease and more comfortable.

Other parents, particularly those from minority ethnic and traveller communities, stressed the importance of childcare as an opportunity for their children to mix with children from different backgrounds.

The second-most frequent reason given for using childcare was to support a child's educational development. Essentially, childcare was seen as preparation for school, including verbal language skills and reading and writing. Parents believed that if their children were not prepared for school they were in danger of falling behind and potentially being overlooked throughout their school lives.

Parents who didn't speak English as a first language noted English language skills as being particularly important for their children. This was a clear finding from BME parents and Welsh-speaking parents in particular.

It's a good idea for Asian children to take their kids to the children's centre to learn English, as we usually speak Bengali at home.

For some parents, particularly those from traveller communities and Welsh-speaking communities, it was important that children were given the chance to be integrated into mainstream schooling. A significant number of parents spoke about their own childhood experiences of isolation and a lack of mainstream educational opportunities, experiences which were particularly scarring. These parents were keen that their own children would have a different experience of childhood and be able to read, write and speak English.

A few parents were less concerned with education as a feature of childcare – particularly when their children were very young – insisting that there would be 'time for that later' and that education is just one aspect of a child's development.

I'm not interested in the education side. I am interested in the social development.

As soon as you bring in the education, the fun goes: you can learn a hell of a lot more through play. I think that they start school too young. I think that they should start school no younger than six.

It was not only the children's social and educational development that played into parents' decisions. Some parents, particularly dads and those from ethnic minorities, said they used childcare for their own social or educational development: meeting other parents, making friends or learning English. Several also mentioned that it enabled them to study.

It's good that they offer English classes for the parents.

The dads have made new friends through attending the centre.

Childcare also provides an opportunity for parents to take a break – some said the peace and quiet this gave them replenished their patience and calmed them down.

It is nice for mummy to have a break as well. By the time they come back you have a bit more patience.

They need to be away from you, and you need them to be away from you too.

These factors combine in different ways for each family, and also change as children get older, and educational concerns become more important.

However, significant tensions become clear when we consider how these reasons translate into what types of services parents actually access, and these tensions are based particularly around issues of affordability, accessibility and quality.

Three key challenges

Access, affordability and quality remain the perennial challenges in the development and implementation of early years policy. These factors can have a particularly negative effect on take-up by low-income families, which reduces the effectiveness of early years provision as a tool to reduce social inequalities. This conclusion was supported by our research.

Take-up of the free nursery places entitlement for three- and four-year-olds is very high. The Department for Education published figures in 2010 showing that 98 per cent of four-year-olds and 92 per cent of three-year-olds were benefiting from their entitlement (Department for Education 2010a). But data on take-up shows an association between higher levels of multiple disadvantage⁸ and lower take-up.

Children from lower-income and larger families ... those whose mothers did not work and those whose mothers did not have any academic qualifications were less likely to receive early years provision.

Speight et al 2010: 2

In families experiencing disadvantage, 13 per cent of children were not attending any early years providers – this figure was three per cent in families experiencing no disadvantage (ibid).

There is also evidence that the government's focus on labour market outcomes has deterred some families from accessing childcare – especially if they are not in work. Moreover, some parents have concluded that childcare is not in their child's developmental interests. Low-income parents are also less likely to feel that affordable and appropriate childcare is available locally (Waldfoegel and Garnham 2008, Speight et al 2009).

The parents' voice

Surveys consistently show that childcare costs across the UK are high, with annual price increases outstripping wages. The latest data published by Daycare Trust reveals that the cost of childcare in England for a child aged two and over has increased by 4.8 per cent since last year (Daycare Trust 2011). Similar increases have been documented for children under two, with current prices displayed in Table 3.1).

Table 3.1
Average yearly expenditure, 25 hours nursery care per week for a child under two, 2011

England	£5028
Scotland	£5178
Wales	£4723

Source: Daycare Trust 2011

⁸ In this case, disadvantage was defined by an index of multiple disadvantage.

Eighty per cent of the parents who participated in our research had an annual household income of less than £20,000, meaning that these costs are significantly beyond the reach of many.⁹

Every participant agreed that spending money on education is an investment in a child's future. That said, many had very limited means and insisted they could not use childcare if all or at least some of it was not free.

At present it is free. If we had to pay for it, it would affect us.

Some parents in the research would be willing to take up more hours of childcare, but it would have to be free or at a lower cost than is currently the case. Some were willing (and able) to pay a limited fee, but there were mixed views on what constitutes an affordable charge.

Parents would definitely use more hours if more were available for free – or at very low cost.

Affordable means a couple of pounds a day.

We'd be willing to pay a couple of pounds an hour, but anything more than that wouldn't be worthwhile.

This [provider] is just £2.50 a week. I would be happy to pay a bit more – I think it's a great place.

These quotes highlight the enormous gulf between parents' perceptions of affordability – up to a couple of pounds an hour – and the average actual cost of childcare, as highlighted by the Daycare Trust.¹⁰

Several parents explained how they weighed up the costs of childcare against their (potential or actual) wages and noted that they were rarely able to afford to pay for fulltime childcare. Some had not used childcare when they had wanted to due to its prohibitive cost. They were adamant that the sums needed to add up: it was no good if childcare cost a large proportion of what they earned.

It would be OK to pay £2.50 an hour. Because if you were in work on £5 an hour, then it would be half your money and at least you would still have something. When [the cost] comes to £5–£6 an hour, then there is no point going to work because you are not making any money.

We pay for childcare. It starts at two-and-a-half hours for free and then we pay £17.50 a week ... and it worked out that because it was a 14-week term, it was about £240 [a term], so I couldn't do it.

One parent who has a disability and is not able to work did not feel able to justify the cost of childcare.

I'm at home anyway, because I have a bone disease and arthritis – but we thought that if we put him [into childcare] then he will have time with other kids, to socialise – but £27 a day is disgusting, and so we didn't bother in the end.

Some children are missing out on early years provision due to its cost, even when their parents are keen to take it up and despite the free hours they are entitled to.

Childcare and parental employment

The relationship between childcare and parental employment is one of the most significant challenges for families as well as policymakers. Adequate provision of childcare can change the way that mothers work and fathers care, while improving the employment rate and reinforcing tax revenues (see Ben-Galim 2011).

⁹ Some of the parents currently in employment would have been eligible for tax credits. This did not come up in any of the focus group discussions.

¹⁰ Based on 25 hours a week for 52 weeks, £2/hour equates to £2600 per year, £3/hour to £3900.

Gøsta Esping-Andersen (2009) provides an analysis that accounts for the costs and returns from daycare in Denmark. Using variables such as the cost of crèche (for costs to government) and lifetime wage gain from no interruptions (for gains to the mother), he concludes that universal daycare provides a net return to the exchequer. In the UK, the policy agenda has been too fragmented, with many parents weighing up the cost of childcare against their own potential earnings.

For a number of parents in our research, the lack of affordable fulltime (or even part-time) childcare presented a barrier to employment. Some of the unemployed parents were working before they had children and planned to work again at some point in the future. With a wide range of factors affecting decisions on care and work – including cost, potential salary, the parent’s qualifications, the child’s age, work opportunities and preferences for care – direct causality is difficult to determine. However, the lack of affordable childcare meant that some parents could not go back to work as soon as they wanted to as they felt that the financial trade-off between work and childcare was not worth it.

If you’re on benefits they complain ... but if you want a job you can’t do that because they’re not providing you with childcare.

A while ago I was offered a job and I really wanted to take it, but by the time I calculated how much the childcare would cost I would be earning £30 a week ... If I was in work then I would only be making £30 a week after childcare and I would have less time with my kids.

Most considered it impossible to work during the limited hours their child was in free childcare. Extending the hours of free childcare or making them more flexible could help to address this.

What can you do in three hours?

Let’s say your job finishes at 5 o’clock, so what are you going to do from 3.30pm–5.00pm?

Better session times could help get mothers into work.

Regardless of cost or income, a high proportion of the participants did not want to work while their children were very young.

I want to work, but not until my kids start school.

If you are at work 9-to-5, then all you are doing is putting them to bed. I think that if I worked, I would spoil them, over-compensate, because I would feel so guilty.

This was not the case for everyone. For instance, one mum was keen to find work for her own satisfaction.

I’ve been a mum for nearly nine years – I want a job to make me a better person, a wholer [sic] person.

Lone parents often face different considerations, as the balance between work and time can be more difficult to achieve.

Childcare enabling you to work is a more important consideration if you are a single parent.

Others commented on more general difficulties getting a job in the current economic climate.

If I had a job I would put them in [childcare], but I can’t get a job. But while I haven’t got a job, I’ll keep them.

*The only work going is cleaning jobs. Or jobs where you need experience that you don't have. The credit crunch took everything. Every job you apply for, there are two or three thousand people waiting. The people who get the jobs have A*s. I don't think that's fair. You need training on the job.*

Parents thought childcare enabled them to study more readily than it enabled them to work. In particular, co-located childcare and classes for parents were popular.

Having learning for adults and learning for kids in the same place is a good thing.

We learn while the kids play in the crèche. They loved it.

Study was seen by some parents as a way into work, or back into work.

The Job Centre called me in for six months, because I am on income support, and I went in. Most people go in and say "Why do I have to come and see you? My oldest child isn't at school yet." But I went in and I said "Right, what can you offer me?" and "I want to do a course". That was on the Tuesday. By the Friday, this woman had come out and set up an individual learning account for the IT course, and she said "We'll pay your childcare". Then I couldn't find a childminder anywhere – for three hours. Then I said, "How about if I do another course – will you pay for it?" Then they said "Yes, we'll pay for your family history course, we'll even pay for your childcare as well." If I hadn't had the incentive to say to the women in the job centre "can you ring them for me?" I would have left with my little leaflet and not bothered ringing.

Again, cost emerged as crucial in allowing parents to attend courses.

The only way I could do these courses is because they are paying for childcare.

These views outline the difficulties that many low-income families face in weighing up the financial costs and benefits of childcare.

Assistance to families

The key mechanism for directly supporting parents with the costs of childcare and early years education has been the childcare element of the Working Tax Credit (previously the Childcare Tax Credit, which formed part of the Working Families Tax Credit prior to April 2003). Working Tax Credits are available to working parents on low wages if they usually work 16 hours or more each week, and are responsible for at least one child.¹¹ The childcare element of the Working Tax Credit, which is claimed by around 450,000 working households across the UK, is changing. This will increase childcare costs for working families. The tax credit currently provides parents with support for up to 80 per cent of their childcare costs¹² – from April 2011, this has been cut to a maximum of 70 per cent. The Resolution Foundation (2010) has estimated that working families will on average lose £436 a year in support as a result of this single change.

The Welfare Reform Bill – which establishes a single Universal Credit to 'make work pay' – will have a profound impact on many families like those who participated in our research. The government has indicated that the childcare element of the tax credit will be merged into the Universal Credit. As well as lowering the maximum level of childcare support, the government's changes will increase marginal deduction rates (CAB 2011, Family Action 2011). This means that for many parents, particularly those on low incomes, work might not pay.

One of the options that the government floated in its welfare reform white paper was to provide 'support for childcare through a voucher or discount system, rather than as part of the Universal Credit award' (DWP 2010). The idea of fully integrating childcare support via a merger of the tax credit system and childcare voucher funding into a single, sliding-scale system warrants further consideration.

11 Working Tax Credits are also available to people without children if they are 25 or over and usually work 30 hours or more a week, and to disabled people with or without children if they work 16 hours a week or more.

12 The maximum is £175 per week for one child and £300 per week for two or more children.

As highlighted by our research and others', the inflexibility of early years provision and its high cost act as barriers for many parents. Just as the childcare provision for three- and four-year-olds is universal, a simple and universal system for funding would be an attractive option. The current funding model tends to offer the best support to the lowest earners through tax credits and to high earners through childcare vouchers (Konings 2010). This should be reformed to offer some support to everyone, with the greatest support offered to those on the lowest incomes. A single system could also offer parents a smoother transition into work and be more responsive to changes in parental employment.

Access to appropriate and flexible provision

Problems also remain with ensuring sufficient provision of early years places, despite the guarantees of free entitlement. Various studies have found that a significant number of parents continue to have difficulty accessing childcare places in each of the four nations of the UK (see for example Symonds and Kelly 2005, Winckler 2009). The latest research from Daycare Trust shows that 60 per cent of Family Information Services reported a lack of available childcare places (Daycare Trust 2011) despite a duty on local authorities to ensure sufficient provision.

Location

Parents involved in our research provided more detail on accessibility, highlighting in particular the issues of location and flexibility of hours, which inevitably intersect with concerns about cost and decisions on employment.

Almost all of the parents agreed that location – meaning proximity to home – was a critical factor. There was a consensus that childcare services should be located within a couple of miles of where they live, and ideally within walking distance.

In particular, parents from rural areas in Wales identified location as a significant barrier, with limited choice, inadequate public transport and long distances all presenting obstacles to accessing early years provision.

In rural districts, you are confined to not much choice.

However, distance did not present a problem to parents living in rural communities only. More specifically, there was a sense that those with more resources had more options. For instance, it was widely observed that not every parent can drive or has a car. Where childcare is more distant, parents worried that they and their children would often end up being late and missing out.

If you don't drive, your options are limited.

In certain communities where take-up of childcare is particularly low, such as traveller communities or where there are young mums, transport was often arranged by childcare providers. This acted as an additional incentive for parents, significantly increasing children's attendance.

Barnardo's comes and collects the kids and drops them off: that makes a big difference. They're all little friends on the bus.

In this case, a bus arranged by Barnardo's provides free transport for children in a particular traveller community. There is an obvious cost saving, but parents also spoke of the wider value – for example, those with more than one child were able to juggle their children's different morning and afternoon schedules. Some reported that it would not be possible to send their children to nursery at all without this transport service.

Hours

Participants differed in their views about when and for how long they would use childcare. Many, however, expressed the view that the limited number of free hours of nursery learning per day did not allow them to do much else, including work or study.

Extending it would be good, so we could work or study.

Two-and-a-half hours isn't very long. It is hard to work in that period of time.

Extending the free provision to match the primary school day could help parents to work or study and children to prepare for school.

Nursery should be the same hours as school, because that's what nursery is for, to get ready for school.

But there was no consensus over hours – some felt that full half-days of childcare would be helpful, while others thought leaving a child in childcare all day was irresponsible parenting. Much depended on the age of the child.

There is an understanding among parents of why it is difficult for providers to offer flexibility. Nevertheless, it does create a barrier for some parents.

I understand why they can't be more flexible, because obviously they have to pay the staff and have so many staff in for how many children they have – but that doesn't help me.

Responding to parents: improving provision and opportunities for children

The evidence presented by the parents in our study shows that early years provision is valued and wanted, but that access remains the most significant barrier. Access is defined in a number of ways – primarily on the basis of cost and affordability, but also with respect to location and hours. A gulf exists between what parents think is affordable and what childcare actually costs. And the lack of flexibility in provision constrains some parents' ability to consider options for employment.

Combining parents' attitudes with strong and persuasive evidence on early years provision, we present a strong case for universal provision of early years services. Early years provision is critical to promoting social mobility, tackling child poverty, narrowing educational inequalities, reducing gender inequalities in work and care, enhancing capital (human and cultural) across generations, and boosting family wellbeing. James Heckman demonstrates that public investment in the early years will pay significant societal dividends and reduce expenditure in other public services (Heckman 1999, Carneiro and Heckman 2003). Leon Feinstein (2003) highlights significant developmental gaps emerging by 22 months that have a long lasting impact on inequality. The EPPE evaluation of Sure Start found that children from poorer backgrounds benefited most when children from a range of socio-economic backgrounds attended the same setting. The whole range of policy agendas that converge on early years provision is important, further strengthening the case for prioritising investment in universal early years provision.

Given the UK's current fiscal position, it would be remiss not to recognise the cost implications of this proposal. However, investment in early years provision can improve employment prospects and opportunities for parents, which can generate increased tax revenues and reduce the benefits bill.

Crucially, the government has options for as to how it goes about reducing the fiscal deficit. Arguably, decisions made in the government's spending review were skewed towards older people, as winter fuel allowances, TV licences and bus passes retained their universal eligibility. With a combined cost of over £4 billion, some of these provisions could be targeted rather than universal, with the surplus redistributed across the lifecycle – in effect, from older people to children. Another possible realignment of current funding lies in ippr's proposal to replace Inheritance Tax with a Capital Receipts Tax (Dolphin 2010). This progressive tax could generate £1 billion more for the exchequer than the current tax does, and these proceeds could be invested in early years provision.

Alongside the evidence from parents, the literature in this area highlights that there are not always enough early years places in a particular location and provision is often too inflexible. Different measures have been adopted to address this, such as the childcare element of the Working Tax Credit and a duty on local authorities to provide childcare. But gaps remain. In 2008/09, the childcare element of the tax credit supported 448,000 low-income families to pay for childcare. However, it is estimated that 52,000 families who received tax credits were entitled to but did not claim the childcare element. Add to that the number of eligible families who do not receive working tax credits at all and the result is over 100,000 eligible families that are not receiving support with

their childcare costs (HMRC 2011). The complexities of the tax and benefit system contribute to this considerable gap. This stands in contrast to comprehensive take-up of the nursery places for three- and four-year-olds (92 and 98 per cent respectively), which are universal and free.

In addition, the extent to which local authorities are meeting their duty to provide childcare is not clear, due to variations in administering and completing Childcare Sufficiency Surveys. This results in a lack of information for determining needs and identifying gaps in provision.

Recommendations on access and affordability

- Evidence from countries with higher employment rates and lower levels of educational inequality than the UK suggests that high-quality, affordable and universal childcare and early years services are critical to better outcomes for children and families. Universal early years services secure widespread public commitment, ensure that children from all social backgrounds can learn and develop together, and enable all parents to meet their aspirations for work and family life. Universal provision of early years services should therefore remain the long-term policy goal. Given the current fiscal constraints, the priority in the coming years should be to extend free part-time nursery places to *all* two-year-olds.
- Reform to the tax credit and welfare systems must involve widening access to free and affordable childcare rather than narrowing it.
 - In the short term, the government should reconsider its decision to reduce support through the childcare element of the Working Tax Credit. The amount of support that low-income working families can claim from the tax credit system is being cut from 80 per cent to 70 per cent. This reduction, combined with increasing childcare costs and VAT rises, will make childcare even more unaffordable for many families.
 - The government should also reconsider its decision to integrate the childcare element of the tax credit system into the new Universal Credit. While the principle of the Universal Credit is sound, the integration of childcare support into its architecture is likely to diminish the affordability of services for many families because of asset means-testing and other factors. Instead, the government should consider a single, integrated funding system for childcare that merges tax credit provision and the tax relief provided for childcare vouchers. This single system could be designed to ensure support for all parents with the costs of childcare, while offering the greatest amount of support to those on low incomes. It could function as a top-up in childcare support that is additional to any universal entitlement to free part-time nursery places.

These measures alone, however, will not be enough to reform early years provision and ensure that low-income families regularly access services. The sector also need to strengthen its engagement with parents, the quality of information and support it provides to them.

4. Parental engagement

Our research was specifically focused on parents who don't regularly access childcare. Early years policy has increasingly recognised the role of parents and support for parents. The emphasis on the government's Big Society agenda reinforces the ongoing importance of engaging parents as local citizens in the design and delivery of their public services.

Our research identifies two distinct but connected components of parental engagement. The first is outreach and access to information about different options. The second component is parental engagement once children are attending a particular service.

Outreach

In relation to outreach and information-gathering, participants in our research identified word of mouth, especially among family or friends, as the most popular source.

Family and word of mouth are the best sources of information.

Word of mouth often served as a starting point for parents to investigate further or narrow down their options rather than making a decision. Information and advice received in this way was trusted.

Friends and family are a start – because then you can take the initiative and ask other people.

But parents were also keen to make their own decisions.

Learning from other parents can be useful. But sometimes they're too interfering.

For some, community organisations and support networks were also viewed as important to building confidence. One parent referred to a service that supports traveller parents:

My mother was coming in here [to the community centre] when I first got married. I didn't want to come in here. I wasn't a big mixer. I wouldn't really go out around anybody. She said, "No, come on down, it's really good." Then I started coming in from then, started talking, started to do things, maybe even go places on my own, which I wouldn't do before, because I can't read and write, and I could do things I couldn't do before.

Many parents were critical of the lack of information from local authorities. Some believed that local councils know how many kids live in each house and, as a result, that they should have more responsibility for communicating with parents about childcare provision locally. In particular, parents wanted basic factual information – in leaflets or letters – from the local authority, including how many nurseries there are in the local area, where they are, when and how to apply, and how much they cost.

The local council only communicate when they want money!

The local authority should send us information about nurseries, and when to put your name on the waiting list. Lots of people are not aware that there is a waiting list and don't know when to put their name on it.

Parents were receptive to communications about childcare directly from children's centres, which took a variety of forms, including billboards, personal visits and leaflets. But there was a sense that these organisations could do more.

Maybe invite parents to come in, not just the month before [the child becomes eligible], just to see how it works.

There is a billboard outside the community centre – some people found out about courses through that.

Sometimes people from the centre come around in person to tell you about opportunities for your children: this is good – you can ask questions of them.

Nurseries could do more to promote their services and include costs.

Supporting our findings, Daycare Trust research (2008) has previously suggested that word of mouth is seen as the most trusted source of information about childcare for parents, partly because they feel that their personal contacts understand them and have the interests of their children at heart. The fact that many of these contacts have had their own experiences of childcare, which they can share with newer parents, is also seen as advantageous.

Despite this level of trust in word of mouth information, it is important to recognise that the opposite is also true for some parents, who prefer to learn about their options from a professional (DCSF 2009). Furthermore, Carol Vincent et al (2009) draw a class distinction, suggesting that working class parents are more likely to rely on the recommendations of family and friends while middle class parents more often research and visit different options: 'For some of these [more often working class] families, others "like us" are sought out in the process of choice both as a means of instrumental reassurance and as an expressive reaffirmation of social ties and social identities.'

These findings imply that word of mouth has an important role in 'opening the door' but that other information is then required to 'back up the claim', usually something official either from government sources or Ofsted. Parent Champions – an idea promoted by the Daycare Trust and implemented in a number of local authorities – often play this role in 'opening the door'. Paid or voluntary employees who represent the service and encourage participation, parent champions perform several important and distinct tasks – sharing information, sharing experiences, and encouraging engagement with services. Websites such as Netmums and Mumsnet¹³ have also become popular sources of information for mothers.

Our research also confirms that word of mouth can snowball, thereby reaching a wider network, building knowledge and information, and creating a multiplier effect.

The role of professionals in validating a service can also elevate a personal recommendation, giving parents more confidence in their choice. It is seen as critical by some parents, who arguably would not have engaged at all without the support of a professional.

The role of outreach and key workers was frequently mentioned. Outreach workers were seen to be critical to ensuring parents are able to access services.

Jenny was a lifesaver.

I wouldn't have come here if not for Carole.

Often linked to a children's centre or local authority team, outreach workers¹⁴ are generally tasked with building relationships with parents to offer support and advice and increase their engagement with services. Recognising the value of outreach workers, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) from 2008/09 provided an additional funding stream to encourage local authorities to support two additional outreach workers per centre in the most disadvantaged communities. But with no formal mechanism in place to ensure compliance, it is not clear how many local authorities accessed this funding for this purpose (NAO 2009). Anecdotal evidence gathered from children's centres throughout the course of this project suggests that outreach workers are at risk during this period of public spending cuts because they are often not perceived to be 'frontline'. But our research has shown that for some families, outreach workers are in fact the first frontline.

13 See <http://www.netmums.com/> and <http://www.mumsnet.com/>

14 Sometimes also called key workers or family key workers.

Engagement after enrolment

Discussion about engagement also looked at what type of information and communications parents would want to receive from providers once their children are attending.

At this stage, most parents wanted to know more about how their child was getting on. Some wanted to know what their child was going to be learning over the months to come, so they could complement this at home. All forms of communication from the children's centre regarding their children's progress were welcomed.

The level of such communication varied between groups and individuals. Parents were keen to communicate with children's centre staff in person, in addition to receiving written updates about their child. We heard of some excellent examples of such communication, which could be readily replicated – these ideas are explored in more detail, alongside practical advice and suggestions, in the accompanying slide pack aimed at children's centres and other early years providers.

Sometimes, parents were told too late about important developments. In one case, a nursery had been shut by the local authority and parents didn't find out until late in the process, which fuelled uncertainty. Other parents said they had not been told about local childcare provision – or elements of it – which they would have liked to have taken up. There was agreement that all parents with young children should be told about any children's centre in their area. More broadly, information at children's centres about other services, such as JobCentre Plus, was welcome, where it existed.

Parents held varied opinions about which methods of communication were appropriate. For some parents, such as those unable to read or for whom English isn't their first language, complicated written material was not helpful. Others had requested simple information with explanatory pictures. Bilingual staff and service provision was considered important by some, and lack of it a problem. Other parents identified that they didn't have access to the internet, which made tasks such as finding information difficult.

Style of communication matters too. One single parent suggested that staff should talk about 'mums' and 'dads' rather than 'parents', as not everyone is in a couple. This was also raised by fathers we spoke to: some dads felt uncomfortable in a female-dominated environment and that there were fewer opportunities for dads to feel included. For example, there are quite a number of childcare activities targeted at women, such as mother and toddler groups. While this 'gender divide' was not generally seen as a problem, it was highlighted as a potential gap in communication that should be avoided.

Other research has explored the role of dads in more detail. For example, in a study focused on fathers, Tim Khan (2005) recommended that programmes should be developed that are 'sensitive to the local context in which fathers reside; sensitive to fathers' schedules and their economic roles; sensitive to fathers' interests; effectively marketed and advertised; supported by mothers'. This inclusive approach could include a focus on style of communication, so that fathers feel welcome and valued, as well as wider issues, such as addressing the gender imbalance in the early years sector. Work with dads has also identified that there can be resistance to engaging dads or a lack of awareness among practitioners of the ensuing gender imbalances. In addition, research has identified 'gatekeeping' (or lack thereof) by mothers can either constrain or enable engagement (Khan 2005, Vincent et al 2009).

Parental engagement has risen up the policy agenda alongside a clearer recognition that parents are 'children's first and most enduring educators' (Draper and Wheeler 2010: 179). Where some approaches to parental engagement have involved professionals 'educating' parents, others have shown that working closely with parents and recognising their inherent ability to reflect on parenting experiences can increase their confidence and so have a positive impact on their approach to parenting. The underlying principle is that parents have a rich understanding of their own children, and that professionals and parents can work in partnership to fully utilise the skills and experiences they both have in the interests of the child (Whalley 2007).

Our research highlights that parents need to be provided with the right information and a supportive environment in order to make genuine and informed choices for their families.

Recommendations for engaging and supporting parents

A slide pack aimed at practitioners is available to accompany this report, providing suggestions on how to design and deliver services that engage with and support parents.¹⁵ However, we have identified other gaps in provision, particularly on access to information. Below, we set out a series of proposals aimed at tackling these gaps:

- First, the government should facilitate the development of an early years ‘service comparison’ website. Building on the popularity of price comparison websites, Ofsted ratings and online parenting websites, we suggest that a website is established that allows parents to rate and comment on early years provision. Our research has shown that parents trust other parents, so this single source of information could be useful to those seeking advice on childcare services in their local area. These types of websites already work in other areas, such as health care, providing information that is valuable in decision-making, including ratings, feedback and user satisfaction levels.
- Local authorities should view engagement initiatives as frontline activity and so protect their funding accordingly. For example:
 - Family Link Workers and other outreach staff – by receiving referrals, working with other services, such as health visitors, and making home visits – help to bridge the gap that can exist between parents and services, and are often seen as a ‘lifeline’.
 - Parent Champion schemes are an effective way of harnessing existing service-users’ time and energy to engage new potential users.

¹⁵ Available at <http://www.ippr.org/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=813>

5. Rolling out the two-year-old offer

The government's intention to fund 15 hours per week of early years education and care to all disadvantaged two-year-olds from 2013 is a significant development, one which builds on pilots established by the previous government. It also recognises that there is a gap in provision for many families with children under five from the end of maternity leave through until nursery provision begins (Ben-Galim 2011).

The Department for Education's website provides more detail on the nature and scope of the extension (Department for Education 2010b), which will see the free entitlement of 15 hours per week gradually extended to include every disadvantaged two-year-old child. Some £300 million has been earmarked to expand the number of free places for two-year-olds from 20,000 to 130,000 over the next four years.

While details are yet to emerge as to how these families might be targeted, it is likely that many will share important characteristics with the families involved in our research. As a result, our research provides an opportunity to take their concerns and ideas into account in the shaping of this new policy.

Throughout our study, parents were asked at what age they considered early years provision was appropriate. Many were resistant to the idea of their child attending in a formal setting before the age of two, preferring to leave their children with family members if they were not available themselves. Most felt that in the first two years of a child's life, time spent bonding with immediate and then extended family was of overriding importance.

Minding is always done by family, not by professionals.

When they are young you have to look after them – I wouldn't want anyone looking after [her] when she was a baby.

Everyone agrees it's better to have a parent at home when the child is young.

Generally, parents responded that formal childcare was appropriate from about the age of two or two-and-a-half, at which point they felt it was important for their child to start interacting with other children. From the age of two or three, playing and spending time with other children were considered to be important, but not education *per se*. Once the child reached three, parents thought learning became more important, in preparation for school.

Pilot programmes

The new funding will allow local authorities to extend the current provision to disadvantaged two-year-olds. Details of the new policy will be shaped by evidence from pilots which targeted two-year-old children living in disadvantaged areas in the UK (Kazimirski et al 2008, Smith et al 2009), as well as international evidence.

The evaluation of these UK pilots suggests they were well targeted, with 73 per cent of the children involved living in the top 20 per cent of most disadvantaged areas, and 92 per cent experiencing at least one form of disadvantage (Smith et al 2009). The criteria used to define disadvantage in these pilots were determined primarily by geographical characteristics through a matrix of indicators, to identify 'disadvantaged areas'. However, while geographical characteristics can be used as a proxy for disadvantage, they do not necessarily capture all factors that may lead to disadvantage. This suggests that practitioners rolling out the offer for two-year-olds will have to work collaboratively with health visitors and Family Nurse Partnership programmes to detect non-geographical risk factors.

Outreach was central to the success of the pilots, with many parents hearing about the offer from professionals. The evaluation of the pilots provides extensive detail on the outreach strategies employed, and the similarities and differences between areas. The offer was communicated through various routes, including referral partners, home visits by professionals as part of existing universal services, and local authority communications, such as letters (Kazimirski et al 2008). It is not surprising that building rapport between practitioners and parents through one-to-one relationships

was felt to be particularly effective, drawing on trust and other forms of support. Overall, outreach strategies were more likely to be effective when they were based on existing multi-agency work, personalised and tailored, appropriately resourced and managed, and provided regular support for everyone involved (ibid). This is consistent with other research on effective outreach strategies (McNeil 2010).

Alongside the importance of effective outreach, the most significant finding from the pilot studies concerns the impact of quality of setting on outcomes for children and parents, particularly on outcomes related to language and parent–child relationships. High-quality settings, as defined by Ofsted standards, generated better outcomes compared to a control group. This suggests that high quality standards must be embedded in the design of the extended provision from the start.

Parents involved in the pilot reported other benefits, including ‘better understanding of their children as individuals and of different child development stages’ (Smith et al 2009: 5), feeling that their parenting skills and relationships with their children had improved, and a belief that they were providing a better learning environment at home. Parents also spoke of improvements in general wellbeing – physical and mental – and in many cases it was the parents in more difficult circumstances who felt they had gained most in this respect. This suggests that the pilots were able to generate wider positive impacts for families and society.

Health services and early years provision

Building on this evidence base, the extension of the two-year-old offer also provides an opportunity to reflect on the relationship between early years and other policy areas, particularly health. In the pilots, many of the outreach strategies worked in partnership with health professionals, and parents in our research who spoke about their outreach worker as being integral often also stressed the importance of how they were able to bring everything together. This is in tune with existing strong evidence of how effective integration between health and early years provision can support better outcomes for families (Isaacs 2008, Hawker 2010).

With funding the tightest it has ever been, there is a need for public services to be more efficiently delivered. Nevertheless, cost savings alone should not be the sole factor that determines how services change: outcomes for children and parents should always be at the forefront of the debate on how services adapt and respond to families’ changing needs. One area that has often been overlooked is the integration of services – and in particular, of health and early years provision – where it is possible to generate better outcomes for families and save money at the same time.

Health visitors and the Family Nurse Partnership (FNP) are perhaps the best-known examples of integration of health and early years policy. The FNP is a targeted programme through which nurses visit first-time mothers in low-income families from pregnancy until the child turns two. To provide intensive and holistic support, nurses work through a curriculum – primarily with mothers – that focuses on healthy behaviours, parenting skills and future plans, such as employment and education. A number of evaluations have provided strong evidence of the programme’s effectiveness, particularly of the home visits. Graham Allen’s review of early intervention recommends that the FNP should be accessible to all vulnerable first-time mothers who want it (Allen 2011), while evidence from the United States, where family nurse partnerships originated, highlights a long-term return on investment in such partnerships that, over time, outweighs their costs (Isaacs 2008).

In the UK, the FNP is supported by both the Department for Health and the Department for Education. Information from the Department of Health shows that there are FNP teams in 55 local authority and primary care trust (PCT) areas, which have together benefited more than 6000 families since 2007. Based on evidence which shows good outcomes for children and parents, the Coalition government has announced an extension to the FNP programme that aims to double the number of supported families by 2015 (Department of Health 2010, 2011). Funding in 2011/12 will be allocated through PCTs, which will be responsible for determining spend according to local need.

Linked to this expansion of the FNP is the Coalition government’s commitment to increase the number of health visitors. Health visitors work closely with Sure Start centres and health professionals to support communities and families, and the government has indicated its intention to increase the scheme’s coverage by creating an additional 4200 posts (Department of Health

2011). In all, it will need to recruit 6000 new entrants to allow for health visitors who will be retiring. Unlike the FNP, which is a targeted programme, health visitors are a universal service, providing qualified nurses to support all families between pregnancy and the child's fifth birthday. On a principle of progressive universalism, health visitors are available to everyone but work alongside midwives and GPs to identify families with greater support needs. The Family and Parenting Institute has run a long campaign aimed at increasing the coverage and level of service delivered by health visitors, arguing that health visitors are stretched and that a 'postcode lottery' often results. This means there are large variations in the services and experiences of many families. Moreover, while the spending review outlined this increased investment in health visitor services it is not yet clear where the additional funding will come from, and how it will flow through to local areas.

Integration between health and early years provision has progressed and is likely to continue to do so. The challenges, particularly in relation to organisational boundaries, in how health funding and early years funding is allocated remain difficult but the benefits clearly outweigh the difficulties.

Conditional cash transfers

It is clear from our research that parents will not simply turn up to use early years services. Greater consideration needs to be given to identifying and employing effective methods of outreach and engagement. To provide an additional incentive for parents to take-up early years services, the roll-out of the programme for two-year-olds could be complemented by a system of conditional cash transfers (CCT). From covering transport costs to the Working Tax Credit, incentives are already an important component of tackling child poverty, and a CCT could offer an additional booster for low-income families.

CCTs are essentially programmes that transfer cash, generally to low-income households, for investments in children's education and development, or their 'human capital'. These types of programmes have been particularly successful in building social protection infrastructure. Perhaps the best-known example of a CCT is the *Bolsa Familia* scheme in Brazil, through which 12 million families receive approximately £12 a month. Payments are conditional on particular investments in human capital including, for example, mothers attending pre- and post-natal care, and children receiving a full set of vaccinations, or achieving stipulated attendance rates at school through to the age of 17. In Mexico, the *Oportunidades* scheme¹⁶ covers five million households, mostly in rural areas, with the primary objective of supporting families living in extreme poverty.

These programmes have produced significant results, lowering poverty rates and narrowing inequality gaps. Now, virtually every country in Latin America has a CCT scheme (Fiszbein and Schady 2009). But CCTs are not just for the developing world: for instance, an innovative CCT called 'Opportunity NYC-Family Rewards' is being piloted across six New York City boroughs. Its aim is to consider the inevitability of intergenerational poverty and how policy interventions may offer 'the next generation a better inheritance' through immediate poverty relief and development of human capital for the future (Riccio et al 2010: v). Targeted at low-income families, the programme links cash rewards to various family outcomes, offering 22 different incentives in the areas of education (eg attendance at school), health (maintaining health insurance) and employment (sustaining fulltime work). Early findings suggest reductions in poverty and hardship, as well as cost savings, but no improvement in school outcomes (ibid).

There are common characteristics across all these CCT schemes. Firstly, payments are conditional on participation or engagement, generally in these key areas of education, health and employment. There are eligibility criteria, suggesting that targeting needs to be carefully considered, in terms of who can benefit most. They all focus on developing human capital and contributing to the building-up of an asset base, and evaluation is an important dimension of their roll out, in order to assess impact, costs and benefits.

It is clear that a Latin American or US system of CCTs cannot be directly transplanted to the UK. The welfare state infrastructure is different, and the universal NHS provision means that most people in the UK experience few of the cost and access barriers often associated with health services costing other countries. Evidence suggests that CCTs work best when linked to existing provision – they cannot be the only intervention (Fiszbein and Schady 2009). The same evidence also suggests that CCTs should target poor households 'that under-invest in the human capital of their children'.

16 For more information and links to external evaluation, see: <http://www.oportunidades.gob.mx/Portal/wb/Web/english>

In the UK, there is a role for CCTs in effectively targeting and engaging families. As part of the roll-out of the two-year-olds offer, outreach workers should be given the ability to make discretionary use of CCTs to encourage participation. Payments could be conditional on a child's attendance. These kinds of incentives would form part of a wider package of support which might include, for example, providing transport to and from nursery or offering training courses for parents. In short, we believe CCTs could boost the effectiveness of the extended two-year-old provision.

Recommendations – early years provision for two year olds

Findings from our research provide insights that should be useful in the development of early years provision for disadvantaged two-year-olds.

- Building on evidence that outreach professionals act as a 'first frontline' of provision, local authorities and the NHS must ensure effective integration between health visitors, Family Nurse Partnerships and family key workers. Integration of services can be improved and cost savings achieved through effective data-sharing and the co-location of services. There is still too little effective integration of local authority and NHS maternity, child health and early years services.
- Our research has shown that some parents will not simply turn up to a children's centre to claim their free entitlement. The group of families at which the two-year-old provision is targeted may, in particular, be less likely to perceive that the services are for them. To encourage take-up of this entitlement, outreach professionals should be empowered to use conditional cash transfers (CCTs) to fill targeted places more effectively. Evidence from overseas suggests that CCTs can offer immediate poverty relief as well as the opportunity for parents to invest in their child's human capital.

6. Developing an outstanding early years workforce

The early years workforce has a critical impact on outcomes for children (Sylva et al 2004, Cooke and Lawton 2008), with some studies finding that poor-quality provision can actually be damaging for some children (Waldfogel 2005). The latest wave of EPPE research (with children aged up to 11) has shown that the quality of the early years settings can have a lasting impact. High-quality settings have benefitted all children, with stronger effects for boys, children with multiple disadvantages and children with special educational needs (Sylva and Roberts 2010). As noted in the previous section, evaluation of the pilot trials of free places for disadvantaged two-year-olds also stressed the importance of quality.

Investment in workforce development has lagged behind other areas of early years investment. Early years provision in the UK has been rated as being relatively poor in comparison with other OECD countries, lacking suitable standards for childcare workers and a highly trained workforce (UNICEF 2008). As well as helping to generate a negative impact on some children, the low pay and status associated with the early years sector often has negative impacts on the professionals working in it, limiting opportunities for progression. Cooke and Lawton (2008: 7) suggest that low pay, a lack of clearly identified progression routes and confusion over professionalisation are key barriers to shifting the early years sector towards a higher level of skills, greater quality and higher wages. In 2009, the average hourly wage was £7.60 for those working in private, full-day care, £10.40 for those working in full-day care in children's centres and £7.40 for those providing sessional care (Phillips et al 2009).¹⁷ And while qualification levels have improved, with 72 per cent of the workforce now qualified to level 3¹⁸ (an increase of 8 percentage points since 2007), progress on graduate-level qualifications has been slower, with only 13 per cent of the workforce qualified to level 6,¹⁹ up from 11 per cent in 2007 (ibid).

The challenge of developing a highly trained and well-paid workforce has always been difficult for policymakers, but is even more so now, given economic pressures and funding cuts to public services. At the same time, both government and users are placing more pressure on the existing workforce to offer more for less as a result of wider service cuts.

The early years sector *is* different to other low-pay sectors. It is a public service with a range of aims that span from improving outcomes for children to enabling parental employment. Provided via a mixed-market model, early years providers have limited levers by which to generate income, other than through government funding and parental fees.

The importance of this sector in achieving its various aims means that there is a role for government – it cannot simply be left to market principles.

The parents' voice

Among the parents we spoke to, the quality of childcare was predominately judged by whether children were happy. 'Look and feel' – which can be difficult to quantify – were often used as proxies for quality by parents.²⁰ A safe, clean, welcoming, stimulating environment was thought to be conducive to learning and happiness.

When the environment is nice, the kid is going to like it more and be more comfortable and pick up more.

The physical environment (indoor and outdoor) was considered important to the quality of childcare.

The way the building is – how nice and clean it is – [is important]. You wouldn't want to send your child to a scraggy building.

Having a garden, having an outdoor area, that is really nice.

¹⁷ By way of comparison, the average hourly pay for UK employees at the time of this survey was £14.43.

¹⁸ Level 3 denotes Advanced level – A-level, vocational A-level (Advanced GNVQ), level 3 NVQ

¹⁹ Level 6 denotes Honours degree (eg BA Early Childhood Studies)

²⁰ There is significant debate and discussion about quality in early years provision. This research does not seek to directly engage in that debate. For more see Rohacek et al 2010.

Many parents also spoke about child numbers and ratios when discussing quality. Some commented on the need for children's centres not to be overcrowded, and for the ratio of staff to children to be right, in order for their children to be safe, enjoy themselves and learn. Where possible, parents preferred a lower ratio of children to staff, so that their child would receive more attention. A crowded place was thought to be distracting and off-putting. There was no optimal level, but a broad consensus emerged of a ratio of four to five children per adult. This is in line with Ofsted requirements, which specify minimum staffing ratios of one member of staff for every three children aged under two, one-to-four for children aged two, and one-to-eight for children aged three to seven.

If there are less kids in the childcare, then the kids are more comfortable in learning and enjoy their playing in the developmental way.

Overcrowding can lead to children missing out.

Small groups were seen to be beneficial for social and educational development.

A good low ratio of children to staff helps positive learning academically and socially.

When asked about staff experience and qualifications, the response is more mixed. Some of the parents went to visit the centre to meet the staff before making a final decision, but that was not commonplace. Most parents thought that the quality of the staff was a significant factor in the quality of childcare. There were different opinions about the importance of qualifications and what constituted relevant experience, but all parents emphasised the importance of a positive attitude.

This primarily meant a preference for staff with sufficient relevant real-life experience (not too young and preferably parents themselves) and positive attitudes, rather than any strong demand for formal qualifications. However as their children got older, parents did expect staff to have more qualifications, so that they could teach the children. Generally, the attitude of the staff was considered very important in setting the mood of a place, to which all children are sensitive.

Some [staff] are kids who have left school, done a couple of years in college – but they have no experience with kids, and then they look after your kids all day, but they don't have any kids themselves.

Whoever is in charge has to be properly qualified, fully trained in everything, and probably a parent themselves.

I'm more concerned by the experience of staff than their qualifications.

The women are just so homely. They're friendly. You just know your children are in good hands. That feeling when you go in. There's a warm feeling.

Some parents also acknowledged the childcare profession as being undervalued and lowly paid.

It's a completely undervalued job.

The government should pay for better quality people.

You get the cheapest of the cheapest teachers teaching them now.

Parents' perceptions of quality – where measures such as 'look and feel' and experience often carry significant weight – don't always fit comfortably with research that emphasises the importance of a well-qualified and graduate-led workforce. The challenge is to develop recommendations that respond both to parents' voices on the importance of experience and qualities such as empathy and to the evidence regarding formal qualifications. Needless to say, these areas are not mutually exclusive – indeed, they are often connected.

Workforce development policy

Over the last decade, government policy has been explicit in seeking to increase the level of qualifications among the early years workforce, with mixed success (see boxed text below). From a review of the international literature, a well-valued graduate workforce often stands out as critical in generating better outcomes for children. In the UK, as noted above, only 13 per cent of the workforce are graduate qualified (to level 6 or above), with 72 per cent qualified to level 3 or above (Phillips et al 2009). The number of staff qualified to graduate level in children's centres increased from nine per cent in 2007 to 14 per cent in 2009 (ibid), indicating some progress towards the previous government's target of an early years professional in every setting. However, this target has now been scrapped, raising concerns over how children's centres will develop their staff in the face of public spending cuts.

Results of a recent survey of early years professionals highlight the positive impact that qualifications can have. Early years professionals reported that a professional qualification had improved their sense of professional status, increased their confidence as a practitioner and encouraged the professional development of others (Hadfield et al 2011). Many early years professionals also reported an increased ability to effect change in their own early years setting as a result of their qualifications.

Children's workforce: policy directions

In 2006, the Department for Education and Schools published *The Children's Workforce Strategy* (DES 2006). It set out a vision of a world-class workforce that focused on achieving the best possible outcomes for all children and young people, offered ways to develop skills and build careers, and was a profession that parents and families could trust and respect.

The *Children's Plan*, published in 2007, reiterated the government's vision for an integrated children's workforce to operate across professional boundaries, but which retained the professional ethos and identity. Its explicit aim was to develop a children's workforce that was graduate-led, qualified to at least level 3 (where appropriate) and which reflected the diversity of the population, while actively engaging parents and the community as key partners (DCSF 2007).

The plan included a commitment of £117 million (over the three years to 2010/11) for the early years workforce, to fund supply cover so practitioners could take part in continuing professional development and to boost the Graduate Leader Fund (to a total of £350 million) to ensure two graduates per setting in disadvantaged areas by 2015. The Graduate Leader Fund ended in March 2011 and is being absorbed into the Early Intervention Grant.

The Coalition government has also announced changes in children's workforce policy. The Department for Education (2010c) said that 'removing the requirement for professionals in Sure Start children's centres in the most disadvantaged areas to have both Qualified Teacher and Early Years Professional status will mean they have the flexibility to make better use of the resources available to them.'

As part of the government's review of quangos (or quasi non-governmental organisations), it announced that the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) would be closed, with key functions being moved to the Department for Education by 2012 (Gove 2010).

While it is still unclear what these changes will mean, it is certain that workforce development will receive less funding. In the face of change, many organisations such as the National Day Nurseries Association and the Association of Directors of Children's Services are stressing the importance of continuing to build on the CWDC's success, especially in supporting the development of a children's workforce within an integrated framework (ADCS 2010, NDNA 2010).

Removing the target to have graduates in children's centres at a time when those centres are faced with difficult cost-cutting decisions at odds with the Coalition's own commitment to developing a highly skilled early years workforce. With outcomes for children linked to the quality of staff, quality and development among this workforce needs to remain a priority for future policy development.

Current levels of funding and provision suggest that radical change is required if the UK is genuinely to transform its early years sector. This implies a shift in how the early years sector is valued, rethinking the current market model and prioritising the sector over the long term. There are compelling reasons for doing this: as this research and wider academic evidence shows, there are significant short- and long-term returns from investment in the early years, and a clear link between outcomes for children and the quality of the early years workforce.

Teach First: Towards a graduate-led workforce

Workforce reform across public services is always difficult, given the competing tensions and variables involved in effective delivery, including pay, progression, professionalisation, user engagement, cost-effectiveness and quality. The following assesses how early years provision could adopt a more radical approach to graduate recruitment.

‘Teach First’, a charity that works towards addressing educational disadvantage by ‘transforming exceptional graduates into effective, inspirational teachers and leaders in all fields’,²¹ illustrates the potential impact of radical workforce intervention. The approach places graduates in challenging schools for a minimum of two years, and offers leadership support and development opportunities through strategic partnerships with a range of organisations. Since its inception in 2002, it has placed over 2500 teachers, and a recent independent evaluation has shown encouraging outcomes, highlighting the positive impact on pupil outcomes in Teach First schools and noting Teach First teachers’ effective classroom and strong leadership skills (Muijs et al 2010).

The aim in this report is to consider how aspects of the Teach First approach might be applied in an early years setting. In some areas, this is already happening – for example, the New Leaders in Early Years programme focuses on graduates and there are a number of programmes and qualifications led by the National College²² that focus on the integration of different disciplines and areas through children’s centres.

The Teach First approach offers an alternative perspective on workforce recruitment and development, with a funding model that relies heavily on leadership development and corporate partnerships. It provides a useful lens through which to examine new ideas about development in the early years workforce.

- Teach First is **highly competitive** for participants. By January 2011, the Teach First website reported that it had received 3000 applications for the 2011 programme, a 25 per cent increase on the previous year. Its advertising is pitched to appeal to exceptional graduates – the minimum application requirements include a 2:1 degree or better (or equivalent), an A-level in teaching subject requirements and a commitment to a two-year leadership development programme. Selection requires demonstration of a range of competencies that includes humility, respect, empathy, knowledge, leadership, planning, problem solving and self-evaluation.²³ These requirements raise the status of the programme, thereby making it even more competitive. Undoubtedly, the slowdown in other graduate recruitment as a result of the recession has increased the appeal of Teach First, but its intensely competitive nature stands in stark contrast to an early years sector that is low-status and low-paid, with very few routes for graduate recruitment.
- Teach First **works in partnership** with schools, universities and other organisations. Much of its success relies on these partnerships and, as services are pressed to provide more for less, partnership working will continue to become more important. In forging successful partnerships, the roles, responsibilities and skills of each partner need to be made clear, to ensure that everyone involved is working toward mutual goals.
- Teach First **combines training with leadership**. The design of the programme emphasises the development of leadership skills, with the result that many of the Teach First cohort are in leadership positions either in schools or outside (Muijs 2010). As well, there is a leadership infrastructure supporting schools and Teach First teachers. Again, this emphasis contrasts sharply with the early years workforce, in which career development opportunities are not necessarily clear (Cooke and Lawton 2008).

21 See www.teachfirst.org.uk

22 The National College for Leadership of Schools and Children’s Services: <http://www.nationalcollege.org.uk/>

23 For more detail, see <http://graduates.teachfirst.org.uk/recruitment/requirements.html>

- Teach First enjoys **support across the political spectrum**. In the run-up to the May 2010 general election, support for Teach First was included in the election manifestos of Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, and a commitment to expanding Teach First was made as part of the Coalition Agreement (HM Government 2010). This political support should not be underestimated, as it can act as the catalyst for turning an idea into practice. This is certainly true of Teach First, which received substantial support from the previous Labour government. This political momentum has continued, with support from the Prime Minister and Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education. Once again, this level of support stands in contrast to that given to the early years sector: here, support has been warm but insufficient to catalyse change. As outlined in the boxed text above, the changes announced by the government leave workforce development without a clear strategy, at least in the short term.
- Finally, Teach First is **a great example of innovation** – it is a programme that challenges traditional routes of teacher recruitment and training.

The current fiscal climate provides an opportunity to think more innovatively about recruitment into the early years workforce. There are thousands of skilled graduates seeking work who might consider the opportunity to train as early years professionals or to gain experience in the sector while preparing for future career choices.

The argument presented here is not necessarily that Teach First can or should be transplanted into an early years setting. What we suggest is a way to consider new and innovative methods that have the power to radically change the early years workforce.

Recommendations for the early years workforce

- The government should reinstate the long-term commitment to having an early years professional in every children's centre. In the short term, the priority should be to ensure that every setting offering places to disadvantaged two-year-olds is led by graduate-level staff. Without this guarantee of quality, resources spent on expanding free nursery places will largely be wasted.
- The government should pilot a new 'Teach Early Years First' programme, building on the runaway success of the existing Teach First scheme in schools. This should include a high level of competition for entry and a rigorous selection process, to increase the status of the profession, and work in partnership with local authorities and children's centres in particular. This would also offer opportunities to graduates struggling to enter the labour market.

7. Conclusion: Making the parents' voice heard

The voices of parents who don't regularly access childcare are rarely heard in policy debates about early years provision. However, it is often these families which are most vulnerable to the risks and consequences of poverty. The recommendations presented here on universality, effective outreach and engagement with parents and rethinking workforce development respond to the concerns and views of these families, offering policymakers an opportunity to ensure that early years provision can provide the very best opportunities for all children.

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