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Take-up of free early education entitlements

Research report

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Executive Summary

Policy context

The Free Early Education Entitlements (FEEE) represent a substantial investment by the Government in the early education and developmental outcomes of children. In England, free part-time early education is offered to all 3 and 4 year olds and to disadvantaged 2 year olds. In September 2017, the hours were extended for 3 and 4 year olds of working parents. The benefits of early education for child development are well-established. Recent evidence from the Department's Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) demonstrated positive outcomes for children from both disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged families, with benefits varying according to the amount and type of provision experienced.

Although take-up of FEEE for 3 and 4 year olds is high (94 per cent) and has increased steadily for disadvantaged 2 year olds since its introduction in 2013 to 72 per cent in 2018, regional variations mean that not all children who could benefit from the policy are engaged. London has the lowest take-up rate of both the 3 and 4 year old universal entitlement (84 per cent) and the targeted 2 year old entitlement (61 per cent). This research provides new evidence about the reasons for the lower take-up rates in London and the decline in the 3 and 4 year old take-up over recent years.

Research aims

The National Centre for Social Research was commissioned by the Department for Education to carry out research on the take-up of the funded entitlements to:

- Investigate the different patterns, including why take-up of FEEE for 3 and 4 year olds has fallen and why take-up of the disadvantaged 2 year old entitlement is lower in London than elsewhere.
- Assess to what extent factors affecting take-up in London affect other areas of England and to what extent they are different.
- Investigate what local authorities and providers are doing to improve take-up and assess what more they could do and identify additional support they need.
- Examine whether the introduction of 30 hours FEEE for 3 and 4 year olds of working parents is affecting local entitlement offers in London and how LAs and providers are responding.

Methodology

A mixed method study was carried out to address the research aims involving a rapid evidence review, analysis of administrative data on take-up, and a qualitative study to investigate the perspectives of local authority early years leads, childcare providers and parents not taking up the funded entitlements.

The evidence review identified and summarised the existing literature and data on what affects the take-up of FEEE. It included demand- and supply-side factors which help to explain geographical variation in take-up, particularly in London. The search focused on academic and grey literature published since 2011 using a wide array of search terms to capture early education and take-up.

Administrative data held by the Department was analysed to investigate the variation and trends in take-up rates. The first stage of the analysis was to categorise LAs according to take-up rates and trends to inform the sampling for the qualitative study. The second stage involved modelling the area, family and child characteristics associated with take-up rates.

The findings from the evidence review and data analysis informed the design of the qualitative study which involved in-depth interviews with local authority (LA) early years leads, childcare providers and parents. Twenty-one local authority early years leads took part in telephone interviews achieving a mix of provider types, take-up rates, ethnic diversity and region (15 London and 6 non-London). Five case study areas were selected from the LAs that completed interviews to explore the key research questions in further depth. Across the case study areas, telephone interviews were conducted with 31 providers who varied in terms of the type of FEEE offered. Telephone interviews were also carried out with 40 parents who were eligible for FEEE but had not used their entitlement.

Findings

Patterns in take-up

The evidence review identified distinct patterns in the take-up rates for the universal entitlement of 15 hours per week for 3 and 4 year olds and the targeted entitlement for disadvantaged 2 year olds, reflecting the fact that the 3 and 4 year old entitlement has been established for longer and is universal.

Clear patterns in take-up according to area, family and child characteristics were identified, demonstrating that take-up is not random. Region, economic disadvantage, English as an additional language (EAL), ethnicity, population mobility (the proportion of children aged 0 to 4 years who moved into or out of the local authority, measured in 2016) and employment status at an area level were all associated with take-up. Variation by region was marked, with take-up

of both funded entitlements lower in London and declining for the 3 and 4 year old entitlement until 2017. This pattern is not found in other large urban and diverse areas outside London. Across all areas, children from the most disadvantaged families, who stand to gain most, are least likely to access the funded entitlements.

There have been few previous attempts to investigate the factors associated with take-up rates quantitatively. The regression analyses in this study provide new evidence that at a local authority level, higher proportions of children with EAL predicted lower take-up rates of the 2 year old entitlement. For the universal 3 and 4 year old entitlement, higher proportions of children with EAL, higher population mobility and also higher proportions of children with SEND predicted lower take-up.

Provider-related factors affecting take-up

Given that the expansion of funded hours of early education has been central to the reform of childcare policy, the ability of providers to offer sufficient places to match demand is crucial. The findings from the qualitative interviews with LA leads and providers aligned with the published literature in noting the particular challenges to achieving sufficiency in London, which was perceived to be strongly associated with property costs and the lack of space or potential to expand.

The challenge of providing sufficient FEEE for 2 year olds was a common theme. Across the board, there was evidence from providers that 2 year old places were less financially lucrative due to the higher staffing ratios, the need for more space and the higher needs of the children eligible for the entitlement and their families. Both school-based providers and childminders identified particular barriers to offering 2 year old places relating to structural factors and practical difficulties.

The Early Years National Funding Formula (EYNFF), introduced in April 2017, was noted to have altered the funding context in terms of the hourly funding rates and the pass-through rate which meant that local authority activities such as outreach and brokerage, which had been important for increasing take-up, had been scaled back.

Flexibility of provision was also associated with take-up. Providers and LA leads noted limitations in the ability of meet the needs of some parents for atypical hours, variable arrangements or evening and weekend care.

LA leads and providers considered it too early to assess the impact of the 30 hours policy on the 2 year old and the universal 3 and 4 year old provision. The relevant considerations included the working status and income levels of their local parents, the ability of providers to expand and adapt and the funding rates

for each type of FEEE. It seems likely, therefore, that the impact will vary considerably across areas.

The interaction between perceived sufficiency and cost/funding issues and the distinctive nature of these challenges in London suggest that together, these supply-side issues contribute to the lower take-up of the entitlements in the capital.

Parent-related factors affecting take-up

The qualitative interviews with parents whose eligible children were not using the funded entitlements provide substantial new insight into parents whose 'personal preference' is the main reason for non take-up of formal childcare. The interviews uncovered five overlapping reasons for choosing not to take up the places.

- Parents who were not taking up FEEE perceived the potential benefits of the funded places to be primarily **childcare** and consequently, if the parent was not employed, they did not regard the FEEE as necessary or valuable.
- Linked to choices about **employment**, these parents considered it important that their child was with them and held the view that they themselves could provide input of equal or better developmental value to that received in childcare.
- The majority of the parents taking part in the interviews were from a minority ethnic background and a range of issues relating to **cultural and religious identity** were highlighted. Some parents wanted to keep their child at home specifically to teach them about their culture, religion or language. Others looked to extended family members for support with childcare rather than early education providers.
- For parents of 2 year olds in particular, issues of **trust** were important. Some parents felt uncomfortable about their child being in formal childcare before they were potty trained and before they had sufficient language to talk about their experiences.
- Parents questioned the **quality** of care and some assumed that because the entitlement was free, it must necessarily be of poor quality.

Parents also described perceived constraints as well as choices. The perceived barriers that influenced parents' choices were an interplay of quality, sufficiency and flexibility of provider within an overarching concern about costs. Cost concerns included having to pay for top-ups and extras in addition to the free hours as well as travel costs. Subsequently, parents sought a provider at a convenient location which for some, was difficult to find. Some parents considered the 15 hours per week to be an insufficient amount of time and used

informal childcare instead to support their employment. A concern about the quality of early care was also considered to be a constraint by parents.

Reasons for non take-up included active choices by parents, which suggest that there may be a limit to the take-up rates, particularly for eligible 2 year olds. However, the perceived constraints were also important and highlight where adaptations, including communication about the entitlement, could helpfully be made.

Barriers to engaging with the system

The published evidence and qualitative findings convey a mixed picture in relation to awareness of the funded entitlements, parents' access to information and the experience of the application process. In general, more parents were aware of the universal entitlement for 3 and 4 year olds than the targeted 2 year old entitlement.

From the perspective of the parents (who were not taking up the entitlement), the main barrier appeared to be confusion over the eligibility criteria. Parents had many misconceptions relating to how employment status, welfare benefits, the age of the child and local discretionary entitlements affected eligibility. It was apparent that these parents were not up-to-date with recent changes to the entitlements such as the introduction of the 30 hours for working parents and the amendments to the eligibility criteria for the 2 year old entitlement, indicating the importance of regular communication to keep parents informed. Furthermore, parents found the changing eligibility criteria for the entitlements as children pass through their pre-school years, particularly employment requirements, confusing.

Among the research participants, there were parents who were interested to find out about the entitlements and were able to articulate the benefits of FEEE for themselves as parents as well as for their child, suggesting that take-up could be increased if parental understanding of the entitlements was improved.

For some parents, the application process was a challenge, both in terms of the IT requirements for registering and then securing a place at a preferred provider.

Providers were aware that they were unable to translate all information into the community languages of their local populations and the insights of parents highlighted how having English as an Additional Language might exacerbate the barriers they face, which reflects the findings from the secondary data analysis.

Strategies to improve take-up

The evidence review and the qualitative research both demonstrated that LAs and providers are actively engaged in attempts to improve take-up of FEEE, backed by considerable funding. So far, the strategies taken have not been systematically evaluated.

The evidence from the qualitative interviews indicated that LAs and providers are focused on the demand-side factors limiting take-up with strategies that address parents' awareness of the entitlements, access to information and support with the application process.

Four specific approaches were identified: (1) marketing and messaging activities, (2) direct contact with parents, (3) partnership working between agencies and (4) setting up online application processes. Factors which undermined these efforts included limitations to working across a wide range of community languages, which some areas were able to accommodate better than others. Another factor was misconception about the capability of the DWP lists of potentially eligible parents, which are issued to LAs seven times a year. Some LAs observed that the inherent ambiguity of the lists, which reflect a time-bound 'snapshot' of eligibility, could undermine parents' willingness to engage with the policy and consequently considered to be a barrier.

LA leads, providers and parents identified further actions that they considered might help to improve take-up. Providers cited a national campaign and ring-fenced funding for outreach work. LA leads would prefer it if the lists of potentially eligible parents could be more definitive about eligibility, but this isn't possible due to family circumstances changing. Parents suggested wider marketing including the timely sharing of information in relation to their own circumstances, more information about the quality of provision and longer, more flexible hours.

Conclusions

It is clear from this research that the take-up of the funded entitlements is affected by both supply and demand-side factors that are highly interactive and dynamic. The supply of places that meet the particular needs of parents is affected by sufficiency and population characteristics which are localised. Across the country as a whole, the area-level analysis suggested that language, population mobility of children aged 0 to 4 years and SEND may be particularly important for explaining take-up rates. In London, the super-diversity of the population and its higher population mobility, in combination with higher costs to provide childcare, appeared to contribute to the lower take-up rates.

Providers were responding to the changes brought about by the EYNFF and the introduction of the 30 hours entitlement, focused on the financial viability of their

businesses. Parents not taking up the entitlement expressed choices relating to their preferences and understanding of their children's needs as well as perceived constraints and practical barriers. It was apparent that some parents would be more likely to take up the funded entitlements if they understood better the benefits of early education, while others would respond to greater flexibility to match their needs.

Local authorities and providers are engaged in wide-ranging efforts to ensure parents are aware of the entitlements, understand the benefits and access the information they need. Although robust evidence on the effectiveness of these strategies is lacking, local authorities and providers considered them to be important and identified further actions that might be useful.

Respondents to the qualitative research suggested some specific actions that may improve take-up, relating to funding, support for schools and childminders, communication and practical support for parents. The regression analysis suggests that support for parents of children with EAL or SEND, and those who are new to an area, could help to address barriers to take-up. While there is scope to improve take-up, the evidence suggests that some parents will continue choosing to begin formal early education when their child is older, meaning that there may be a limit to the take-up rates achieved.

1. Introduction

1.1 Policy and research context

Early education entitlements

The Free Early Education Entitlements (FEEE) represents a substantial investment by the Government in the early education and developmental outcomes of children. In England, there are three entitlements:

1. A universal entitlement of 15 hours per week during term time for all 3 and 4 year olds.
2. A targeted entitlement of 15 hours per week during term time for disadvantaged 2 year olds with eligibility based on income, receipt of certain benefits or tax credits, looked after children, children whom have left care through an adoption, child arrangements or special guardianship order, children who have a current statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care (EHC) plan or claim Disability Living Allowance.
3. Since September 2017, a targeted entitlement of 30 hours per week during term time for 3 and 4 year olds of working parents below an income threshold and above an hours threshold.

This report focuses on the first two entitlements, referring to perceived implications of the 30 hours entitlement where relevant.

Benefits of early education

The evidence consistently demonstrates positive effects of early education for 3 and 4 year olds on cognitive, language and social development. Comparative evidence from the PISA study¹ demonstrates that children who attended some formal early education before primary school were on average, a year ahead of their peers (Melhuish, et al., 2015). Children from disadvantaged backgrounds appear to benefit the most from early education, particularly when the provision is socially mixed, and the benefits have been found to persist well into adulthood resulting in fiscal savings for the state as well as benefits to the individual (Melhuish et al., 2015; Sylva, et al., 2014). An important factor supporting the effectiveness of provision on child outcomes is that the quality of provision is high (Melhuish, et al., 2015). Recent reports from the Department's

¹ <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/>

ongoing Study of Early Education and Development (SEED)² provide new evidence on the benefits of early education. For young children up to the age of 3 years, the amount of early childhood education and care was associated with positive outcomes for children from both disadvantaged and non disadvantaged families. The benefits varied according to the type of provision experienced, with language outcomes associated with time spent in individual based settings (such as childminders and informal care) and socio-emotional outcomes associated with group-based provision such as nurseries and childminders (Melhuish et al, 2017). Future outputs from SEED will track the impacts of early education as children begin primary school.

Take-up of early education entitlements

Although take-up of the free early education entitlements (FEEE) for 3 and 4 year olds is high (94 per cent) and has steadily increased for disadvantaged 2 year olds since its introduction in 2013 to 72 per cent in 2018³, regional variations and lower take-up in London in particular mean that not all children who could benefit from the policy are engaged. London has the lowest take-up rate of the 3 and 4 year old universal entitlement (84 per cent), comprising 80 per cent in Inner London and 87 per cent in Outer London. Take-up of the 2 year old FEEE is also lower in London than elsewhere at 61 per cent in 2018 (60 per cent in Inner London and 63 per cent in Outer London). The reasons for the lower take-up rates in London and the decline in the 3 and 4 year old take-up rates until 2017 are unclear and the gap in evidence prompted this research.

1.2 Research Aims

The aims of the research were to investigate:

- Why take-up of the FEEE for 3 and 4 year olds has fallen over recent years.
- Why take-up of the disadvantaged 2 year old entitlement is lower in London than elsewhere.
- Factors associated with different patterns of FEEE take-up.

² Study of Early Education and Development is a longitudinal study following just under 6,000 children across England from the age of two, through to their early years at school.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/study-of-early-education-and-development-seed>

³ These figures are from the Department's statistics on 'Provision for children under 5 years of age'

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/education-provision-children-under-5-years-of-age-january-2018> The first take-up figures for the 2 year old entitlement were collected in 2015 (58%).

The research also aimed to:

- Assess to what extent factors affecting take-up in London affect other areas of England and to what extent they are different; and
- Investigate what local authorities and providers are doing to improve take-up and assess what more they could do and identify additional support they need.

Finally, the research aimed to explore if take-up of the universal and 2 year old entitlement has been affected by the introduction of the 30 hours entitlement.

- Examine whether the introduction of 30 hours FEEE for 3 and 4 year olds of working parents is affecting local entitlement entitlements in London and how LAs and providers are responding.

1.3 Methodology

A mixed method study was carried out to address the research aims. The project started with a rapid evidence review alongside analysis of the Department's take-up data to categorise local authorities for the qualitative sampling and to model the association between area characteristics and take-up rates. Building on the findings from the evidence review and secondary analysis, a qualitative study including case studies, investigated the perspectives of local authority early years leads, childcare providers and parents not taking up the funded entitlements.

Rapid evidence review

The aim of the evidence review was to identify and summarise the existing literature and data on what affects the take-up of FEEE. It included demand- and supply-side factors to seek evidence that may help to explain geographical variation in take-up, particularly in London.

A wide range of search engines were used to find evidence on take-up of FEEE, supplemented with documents shared by the Department for Education, GLA, London Councils and sources known to the authors through related work. The search focused on academic and grey literature published since 2011 (to encompass the pilot of the 2 year old FEEE) using a wide array of search terms to capture early education and take-up. Relevant information relating to different aspects of take-up was extracted and organised within a spreadsheet to aid interpretation and reporting.

The search engines and search terms are listed in the Technical Appendix.

Secondary data analysis

Administrative data held by the Department⁴ was analysed to investigate the variation and trends in take-up rates⁵. There were two stages to this analysis.

1. Categorisation of LAs according to take-up rates and trends

The 152 LAs were categorised to identify patterns in take-up for the purpose of sampling for the qualitative work. First, the LAs were grouped into 'below average', 'broadly average', and 'above average' based on 2017 take-up rates. Additional variables were also created for the 32 London boroughs based on the distribution of take-up within the capital.

Secondly, variables were created to capture trends in take-up. For the 2 year old take-up, the variables described change between 2015 and 2017, the years for which data are available. For 3 and 4 year old take-up, the variables described change across 2013 to 2017 to capture longer trends. Frequency distributions informed the categories, which were then also applied to the take-up rates of 3 to 4 year olds.

2. Identification of factors associated with take-up rates

A range of socioeconomic and demographic factors identified in the rapid evidence review as potentially associated with take-up rates at LA level were explored using descriptive and regression analyses. The variables included proportions of children with SEND, English as an additional language, from non-white ethnic groups, along with indicators of income deprivation, employment deprivation, population mobility of children aged 0 to 4 years, and perceived sufficiency of childcare. The analysis was carried out on 2018 take-up rates.

The results are presented in the Technical Appendix and referred to in the report.

Qualitative research

A qualitative study involving in-depth interviews with local authority (LA) early years leads, childcare providers and parents was carried out in April and May 2018.

Twenty-one local authority early years leads took part in telephone interviews, recruited from lists provided by the DfE. The areas were selected to achieve a

⁴ Department for Education statistics on 'Provision for children under 5 years of age' <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-childcare-and-early-years>.

⁵ This analysis was carried out prior to the publication of the 2018 data, so based on 2017 figures.

mix across provider types, take-up rates, ethnic diversity and region (15 London and 6 non-London). Secondary sampling criteria included perceived childcare sufficiency rates, population of 2, 3 and 4 year olds receiving FEEE and funding rates. In London specifically, the sample included LAs who previously provided discretionary extra free hours for 3 and 4 year olds.

Five case study areas were selected from the LAs that completed interviews. The purpose of the case study approach was to explore the key research questions in further depth. Case studies were selected based on the extent to which they were demonstrating success in increasing take-up of FEEE. Criteria for selection included:

- 1 x Inner and 1 x Outer London LA demonstrating an average trend of FEEE take-up (i.e. decline in 3 and 4 year old take-up over recent years and low 2 year old take-up)
- 1 x Inner and 1 x Outer London LA with some indication of success in increasing take-up
- A non-London LA

Across the case study areas, telephone interviews were conducted with 31 providers, with between six or seven conducted in each case study area. The sample encompassed variation in provider type and whether or not the provider was offering the extended 30 hours or the 2 year old 15 hours. The sample was drawn from local lists of providers available through the Family Information Service.

Telephone interviews were also carried out with 40 parents who were eligible for FEEE but had not used their entitlement. A recruitment agency was used to recruit these parents. In total 34 interviews were conducted in the case study areas and the remaining six interviews were conducted with parents outside of case study areas but all in London, in order to meet the target of 40.

The sample was selected purposively and the achieved sample included a mix of claimants in relation to the following primary criteria:

- Type of FEEE for which eligible
- Ethnicity
- Reported economic activity e.g. whether they were in full or part-time employment or economically inactive

The sample was also balanced in terms of parents who registered and parents who had not registered for FEEE; parents with children who had additional needs; household income and the number of children in the family⁶.

Topic guides for LAs, provider and parents interviews were used to steer the discussion during the interviews and were designed in collaboration with DfE. LA and provider interviews were recorded and notes were taken. All parent interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Further details on the qualitative methods are provided in the Technical Appendix.

1.4 This report

The following chapters in this report integrate the findings from the rapid evidence review, the qualitative interviews with LAs, providers and parents and the secondary data analysis to provide a comprehensive assessment of take-up.

The purpose of the qualitative evidence is to convey the range of experiences from the different stakeholder perspectives and to delve into the interactions between the different aspects affecting take-up. The qualitative sample cannot support numerical analysis and consequently the write-up avoids numerical findings.

Throughout this report we use the term Free Early Education Entitlement (FEEE) to refer to both the 3 and 4 year old universal entitlement and the 2 year old entitlement. Distinctions are made clearly in the report when we are focusing on a particular age group or on those entitled to the 30 hours entitlement.

Throughout the report, case illustrations drawn from one of the five case study areas are provided to illuminate the findings.

The remainder of this report is structured in the following way:

- **Chapter 2** describes the patterns in take-up of the funded entitlements, drawing on the rapid evidence review and the secondary data analysis.
- **Chapter 3** explores explanations for the patterns in take-up focusing on provider-related reasons (the supply side). Evidence is drawn from the

⁶ EAL was not included in the quotas for the sampling. As it became apparent that EAL may be an important barrier to take-up, attempts were made to recruit EAL parents for the qualitative research but despite attempts via a range of channels (local recruitment agents, children's centres, charities), it was not possible.

evidence review and the qualitative interviews with LA leads and providers.

- **Chapter 4** explores the role of parental choice and perceived constraints in explaining the patterns in take-up (the demand side). Evidence is drawn from the evidence review and the qualitative interviews with parents.
- **Chapter 5** explores the barriers to take-up, covering awareness of the entitlements, access to information and the application process. Evidence is drawn from the evidence review and the qualitative interviews with LAs, providers and parents.
- **Chapter 6** focuses on London specifically, exploring possible reasons for the different take-up patterns, drawing on the evidence review and interviews with leads and providers.
- **Chapter 7** reviews the strategies implemented by LAs to improve take-up and considers views on what more action is needed. This draws on the evidence review and qualitative interviews with all three respondent groups.
- **Chapter 8** summarises the findings and draws conclusions on the relative importance of the different reasons for not taking up the funded entitlement and explanations for the distinctive experience in London.

The Technical Appendix includes full details on the rapid evidence review approach, the methods and findings of the data analysis and the qualitative methods.

This is followed by a full list of references referred to throughout the report and a glossary of abbreviations.

2. Patterns in the take-up of the funded entitlements

The study began by investigating the patterns of take-up of FEEE in more detail, as a first step to understanding why some families do not take advantage of funded early education. This chapter describes the findings from the rapid evidence review and the analysis of administrative data which were used to shape the sample design and topic guides for the qualitative study reported in subsequent chapters.

2.1 Overall patterns in take-up

A very high proportion (94 per cent) of 3 and 4 year olds nationally take up funded part-time early education places which comprises of 92 per cent of 3 year olds and 95 per cent of 4 year olds (DfE, 2018). For both age groups, the take-up rates have been stable since 2011. The funded entitlement for 3 and 4 year olds is now a well-established policy, having become universal for 4 year olds in 2000 and for 3 year olds in 2004, initially for 12.5 hours per week in term time rising to 15 hours per week in 2010. In September 2017, the entitlement was extended to 30 hours per week in term-time for children of working parents who meet certain eligibility criteria. Official figures indicate an increase in take-up between autumn term 2017 and spring term 2018, with 294,000 children taking up places in the spring term (SFR16/2018).

The funded entitlement for 2 year olds is a targeted rather than universal policy, designed to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children. In September 2013, part-time places (15 hours per week in term time) were offered to 2 year olds from families who met the criteria for free school meals or were looked after by the local authority. One year later, this entitlement extended to low income working families. Take-up gradually increased over time, reaching 58 per cent of those eligible in 2015 and rising to 72 per cent in 2018 (DfE, 2018).

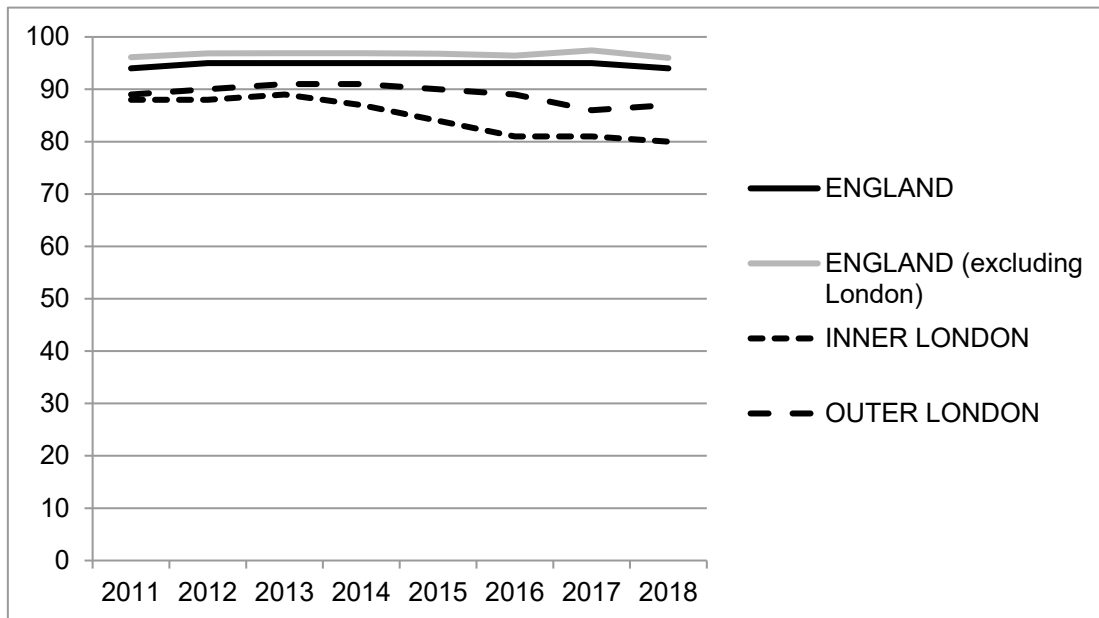
2.2 Variation by region⁷

The overall take-up figure of 94 per cent for 3 and 4 year olds masks considerable variation across regions and local authorities. London has the lowest take-up rate (84 per cent), comprising 80 per cent in Inner London and 87 per cent in Outer London. Although take-up rates were relatively steady

⁷ Further analysis of trends within and outside London was carried out as part of this study to inform the sample design for the qualitative work (see Technical Appendix).

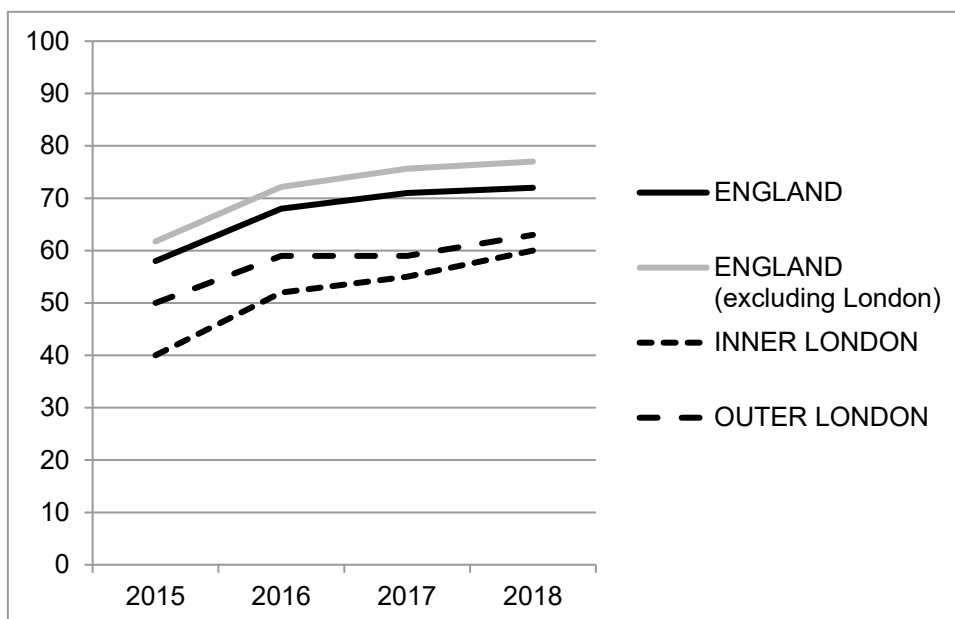
when the policy was first introduced, there has been a decline in take-up among 3 and 4 year olds in most Inner London (and some Outer London) boroughs over recent years (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Percentage of 3 and 4 year old children benefitting from funded early education



Take-up of the 2 year old FEEE is also lower in London than elsewhere at 61 per cent in 2018 (60 per cent in Inner London and 63 per cent in Outer London) (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Percentage of eligible 2 year old children benefitting from funded early education



The patterns of take-up in other large, culturally diverse city areas do not appear to reflect those of London. For example, in Manchester, there has been a gradual increase in take-up of the FEEE reaching 77 per cent of eligible 2 year olds and 93 per cent of 3 and 4 year olds in 2018. Although average take-up in Manchester is lower than in the North West overall (83 per cent of 2 year olds and 97 per cent of 3 and 4 year olds), take-up of the 3 year old entitlement is close to the national average and take-up of the 2 year old entitlement is higher. Birmingham also has high levels of take-up for 3 and 4 year olds (92 per cent), and this rate of take-up has remained steady over the last four years (although take-up for 2 year olds is 62 per cent which is below the national average).

2.3 Variation by family and area characteristics

As well as varying by region and local authority, there are also patterns in take-up of formal childcare (and the FEEE specifically) according to the characteristics of parents, children and the areas they live in. Across the country, the overarching picture (from large-scale surveys and analysis of pupil level linked administrative data) is that disadvantage is associated with lower take-up which is problematic given that disadvantaged children stand to gain most from early education. The Early Years Census and Schools Census describe the characteristics of the children taking up the funded places but not the take-up rate within different groups.

Income and area disadvantage

The National Audit Office (NAO) report on the early education entitlements highlighted the difference in take-up according to area deprivation (NAO, 2016)⁸. Among 3 year olds in 2015, take-up ranged from 90 per cent in the more deprived areas to 98 percent in the least deprived area. Recent analysis of 3 year old take-up in 2010 similarly found lower attendance among the children who went on to become eligible for free school meals (FSM) in primary school (Campbell et al, 2018). Those who claimed FSM all three of the first years of primary school were 13.3 percentage points less likely to attend for all the five terms of preschool for which they were eligible⁹.

Soon after the 2 year old FEEE was introduced, the baseline survey of the SEED study found that take-up of formal childcare at age 2 years was lower for

⁸ This was measured using the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)

⁹ The non attendance rate for the children on FSM for all three of the first years in primary schools was 29.0% compared to 15.7% of the children who had not been FSM in primary school.

the most disadvantaged families compared to others. For 2 year olds after the policy had been introduced, take-up of formal childcare was higher for the 'not disadvantaged' group (Speight et al, 2015).

Ethnicity and language

Take-up was found to be lower among children from Bangladeshi, Gypsy/Roma/Traveller, Black African and Pakistani backgrounds in a study of take up among 3 year olds in 2010 (Campbell et al, 2018). There are also differences in the take-up of formal childcare according to ethnic background with highest rates among Black Caribbean, White British, and mixed White and Black children, and lowest among children from Bangladeshi, Pakistani and 'other Asian' backgrounds, identified by the CEYSP¹⁰ series (although note that this analysis is based on children across 0-14 years, not just preschool children) (Huskinson, et al, 2016).

Children who speak English as an additional language were found to be nearly three times as likely not to take up their full five terms of eligible preschool compared to children with English as their first language, in a study of 3 year olds (Campbell et al, 2018).

Employment status

Children are more likely to attend preschool if their parents are working, with higher take-up rates among those in couple households where both parents are working (92 per cent of eligible 2 to 4 year olds) and lone parent households where the parent is working (90 per cent) (DfE, 2017). Similarly, take-up of any formal childcare soon after the 2 year old FEEE was introduced was found to be higher for children of working mothers, with 76 per cent take-up among 2 year olds with full time working mothers compared to 47 per cent of children with non-working mothers, found by the baseline survey of SEED (Speight et al, 2015). These findings reflect the fact that employed parents have a greater need for formal childcare and are more able to afford it.

The high level of overlap between the family and area characteristics associated with non take-up of formal childcare and FEEE in addition to limitations in the data available make it difficult to distinguish the factors most strongly associated with take-up. When this issue was addressed through

¹⁰ The Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents 2017 consisted of face-to-face interviews, conducted between January and August 2017, with a nationally representative sample of almost 5,700 parents in England with children aged 0 to 14.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childcare-and-early-years-survey-of-parents-2017>

regression analysis, income deprivation (as indicated by FSM status) explains most of the gap in take-up with language and ethnicity accounting for very little of the gap (Campbell et al, 2018). A strength of this study is that it uses child level data, but a disadvantage is that it focuses on take-up some years ago (necessitated by the analysis drawing on data from when children reached primary school).

2.4 Analysis of factors associated with take-up

Descriptive and regression analyses were carried out to explore the relationship between LA areas' population characteristics and take-up rates of FEEE. The analyses were undertaken using data across all English LAs. The variables included were the proportions of children with SEND, English as an additional language, from ethnic minority groups, along with area-level indicators of income deprivation, employment deprivation, population mobility of children aged 0 to 4 years, and perceived sufficiency of childcare.

Although ethnicity was significantly correlated with lower take-up, it was excluded from the regression model to prevent multi-collinearity given its high correlation with EAL. Instead, the role of ethnicity in explaining non take-up was explored in the qualitative research (see for example, section 4.1). Full details of the data, methods and results are presented in the Technical Appendix.

The regression analyses found that LA take-up rates for the 2 year old entitlement were predicted by EAL, suggesting that the higher the proportion of children with EAL, the lower the take-up rate. In the bivariate analysis, higher local authority-level take-up rates for the 2 year old entitlement were associated with areas having higher take-up for 3 and 4 year olds, lower proportions of children with EAL and from non-white ethnic groups, lower population mobility and lower employment deprivation. However, when the variables were considered together in regression analysis, only EAL remained independently and significantly associated with take-up.

The predictors of LA take-up rates for the 3 and 4 year old entitlement were similar, with the addition of population mobility and SEND. The findings from the regression analysis showed that the higher the proportion of children with EAL or SEND, and the higher the proportion of those who move between LAs, the lower the take-up rate. In the bivariate analysis, lower take-up for 2 year olds, higher employment deprivation, population mobility, child deprivation, and higher proportions of children with EAL and SEND were all correlated with lower rates of take-up. However, when the variables were considered together in the regression analysis, only EAL, SEND and population mobility remained significantly associated with take-up rates for 3 to 4 year olds.

The analysis helps to explain the lower take-up in London. The proportion of children with EAL in London (49%) was considerably higher than the national average of 23 per cent. Similarly, population mobility in London is 14 per cent compared to the national average of 10 per cent. The proportion of children with SEND in London and across the country is comparable (respectively 14%).

The analysis demonstrates that both child and area characteristics play a role in explaining variation in take-up rates. The qualitative study explored these factors in greater depth to try and understand the reasons behind the associations.

2.5 Summary

The national patterns of take-up for the universal 15 hours entitlement for 3 and 4 year olds and the targeted entitlement for disadvantaged 2 year olds are quite different. Take-up for the 2 year old entitlement has gradually increased over time but now levelling whereas the 3 and 4 year old entitlement has higher take-up and has been more stable. Partly, this reflects the fact that the 3 and 4 year old entitlement has been established for longer and is universal.

The published evidence presents clear patterns in take-up according to area, family and child characteristics demonstrating that take-up is not random. Region, economic disadvantage, EAL, ethnicity, and employment status are all associated with take-up and the regression analysis suggested that EAL, population mobility and SEND were particularly important. The regression suggests that on a national level, higher levels of EAL, SEND and population mobility within local authorities predict lower take-up rates.

Variation by region is marked, and in London, the take-up of both funded entitlements is lower and was declining for 3 and 4 year olds until 2017. Take-up in London is lower than in other large, diverse urban areas. Across all areas, children from the most disadvantaged families, who stand to gain most, are least likely to access the funded entitlements.

The descriptive evidence presented in this chapter identified the themes to be explored in the qualitative study in order to explain the reasons for non take-up. Subsequent chapters present evidence from the qualitative interviews, within the context of published evidence, to assess the relative importance of supply and demand side factors.

3. Patterns in take-up: Provider-related factors

Published evidence indicates that patterns in take-up are shaped by both supply and demand side factors. This chapter explores the supply-side, focusing on the provision of places and exploring the perspectives of local authority early years leads and providers of early education and childcare¹¹. The principal themes are sufficiency of places (meaning the extent to which the number of places available matches demand), costs and funding issues and flexibility of provision. Early views on the potential effect of the 30 hours entitlement for 3 and 4 year olds of working parents are also presented.

3.1 Sufficiency of places

With the expansion of funded hours being the core element of the childcare reforms over the past five years, the success of the policy depends in large part on the ability of the childcare market to supply sufficient places. The number of 2 year olds benefitting from the funded places has risen from 86,640 in 2014 to 163,250 in 2017 (SFR29, 2017). Although the proportion of 3 and 4 year olds taking up places has remained fairly constant, the actual number benefitting has increased by 17,750 over the same time period due to population growth. Since introduced, the 30 hours policy is likely to prompt increased demand for places (NAO, 2016).

Although local authorities have a duty to provide sufficient places (including to meet the needs of disabled children and parents working irregular hours) (Department for Education, 2018), existing evidence suggests there is variation across the country in the extent to which this is achieved. Coram Family and Childcare present levels of perceived sufficiency for FEEE for 2, 3 and 4 year olds in their annual reports collected through a survey of local authority Family Information Services¹² and have found stark differences between the regions. In the most recent report, the proportion of LAs reporting that they were able to provide enough childcare for 3 and 4 year olds entitled to the free entitlement ranged from 42 per cent in the South East to 83 per cent in the North East, and for 2 year olds entitled to the free entitlement, perceived sufficiency ranged from 32 per cent in the South East to 70 per cent in the North West. Inner and Outer London were among the areas with the highest proportion of LAs that reported struggling to provide sufficient places for the funded entitlements (Harding et al, 2017).

¹¹ Referred to as childcare providers or providers as a shorthand.

¹² The most recent survey (2017) achieved a 95 per cent response rate.

The views of the local authority early years leads in the qualitative study mirrored the existing evidence on the variation in sufficiency, with respondents in London most likely to emphasise the challenges than those in non-London LAs. The key factors affecting sufficiency in London mentioned by LAs and childcare providers in the qualitative interviews were:

- Cost of rent and property. London childcare providers were the most likely to report this as problematic. High rents and property prices were a barrier to LAs increasing the number of early education places available. Although there were some examples of LAs converting council-owned buildings into childcare provision and then leasing to private, voluntary or independent providers to generate new places, other LAs did not have the funds to do this. They also reported that high rents were a disincentive to providers to extending or setting up new provision to meet demand. Furthermore, the changes in funding rates resulting from the EYNFF caused financial barriers for some providers, impacting on the likelihood of being able to offer FEEE places.
- Lack of space and availability of appropriate venues. Providers who were at full capacity often had waiting lists of children wanting to attend their provision but they did not have the physical space to take them. Increasing space would have involved moving to a larger venue, although none were available in the locality, or extending. Extending involved large capital sums upfront which providers could not afford. Other providers had applied for planning permission to extend but this had not been granted by the LA planning authorities.

Sufficiency for 2 year olds

LAs at a national level reported greater difficulties in providing sufficient places for 2 year olds than for 3 and 4 year olds. While the majority of LAs (64 per cent) report being able to provide part-time funded places for all 3 and 4 year olds, less than half (47 per cent) said they were able to provide places for all eligible 2 year olds (Harding et al, 2017). Similarly, in the qualitative research for this study, London and non-London LAs with different levels of take up typically reported experiencing greater difficulties achieving sufficiency for 2 year olds than 3 and 4 year olds. This was attributed to the higher cost of providing care for this age group because of the need for lower staff child ratios¹³, higher levels

¹³ For 2 year olds the ratio of staff:children is 1:4, for 3 and over 1:13 if a person with Qualified teacher status, Early Years Professional Status, Early Years Teacher Status or another suitable level 6 qualification is not working directly with the children or 1:8 if not. This is the ratios for all providers other than childminders. For more detail see:

of need and support for the families in terms of explaining the entitlement and the need for appropriate facilities. These factors led to reluctance among some providers of all types to offer places to 2 year olds.

“It’s not unkind to say that 2 year olds financially are not as attractive to schools because of ratios so it has financial implications even though it is a higher rate” (LA Early Years lead, Inner London)

Correspondingly, providers not currently providing for 2 year olds often reported that they needed new facilities and buildings in order to provide appropriate support for children of this age – including sleeping and changing facilities, which require more space. Providers who did offer FEEE places for 2 year olds were motivated by a desire for equality of opportunity and to contribute to improved outcomes for disadvantaged children.

“All children deserve to be treated the same. These are important first steps in learning and no child should miss out due to being from a low income family.” (Private provider offering 2 year old FEEE places, Inner London)

To overcome the associated cost barriers, these providers reported that they had to make up the additional costs for example, by prioritising or only offering places to those buying extra hours (not realising this was against DfE guidance), restricting the number of funded-only places, and charging for additional extras, and some were consequently struggling as a business.

“The cost of 2 year old provision is not being met by the funding. We take money out of our budget for other areas and just fund it.” (School offering 2 year old FEEE places, Inner London)

Schools also had difficulties that meant they were the most reticent to offer FEEE places to 2 year olds. A key concern was about the need for ‘care’ rather than education.

“We didn’t initially want [2 year olds] because we’re a primary school; we’re not a childcare facility.” (School offering FEEE places, Inner London)

“I think generally schools didn’t want to be bothered with taking 2s because they didn’t want all of the things that come with 2s in terms of nappy changing and all that kind of stuff.” (LA Early Years lead, Inner London)

They also experienced challenges to offering FEEE provision for 2 year olds such as opening premises during the school holidays and making adjustments to buildings to make them suitable for childcare and early education. Schools reported a demand for parents to use childcare for more than 38 weeks in the year and they struggled to cater for this. However, if the 15 hours per week over 38 weeks is stretched over 52 weeks, providers reported that parents often have to pay the difference for full sessions. For example, parents still have to take 3 hour sessions a day but pay for the extra 14 weeks a year that is not covered by the entitlement causing issues for parents. Schools were reported to be more willing to take on 3 and 4 year olds than 2 year olds as they considered this to ease the transition to school and to help guarantee a future intake. However LAs considered that in areas of greatest deprivation, schools were the providers most likely to offer FEEE places, and some believed that school-based FEEE led to better outcomes by KS1, and so were trying to work closely with them to encourage them to provide more places.

“Children who’ve had a high quality nursery education benefit all the way through the school with their literacy, their numeracy and their social skills. It’s a really good start in life and it compensates for what the situation might be at home” (School offering FEEE places, Inner London)

The role of childminders in sufficiency

Published evidence also highlights the reluctance of childminders to provide FEEE for 2 year olds. Their perceived inability to meet the additional needs¹⁴ of disadvantaged children was one of a number of barriers to offering the funded 2 year old places identified by childminders soon after the policy was launched, in a qualitative study based on 20 in depth interviews with childminders across the country (Callanan, 2014).

In the qualitative interviews, London LA leads reported that childminders experienced particular barriers to offering FEEE places to all ages, including lack of understanding of the registration process, lack of resource, difficulties meeting the requirement to be rated Ofsted good or outstanding and insufficient business skills to allow them to fully assess the implications of offering FEEE places. Interviews with childminders confirmed that they tended to find the process of claiming funds difficult and that some struggled to understand the business implications of FEEE. Childminders were incentivised to offer FEEE places where the LA funding rate was higher than their standard rates charged to parents (which was the case for some in London). However as many were

¹⁴ Examples of additional needs given were providing a lot of additional support to parents (for example, support with potty training, sleep routines, healthy eating and behaviour management), working closely with social services and in some instances dealing with safeguarding concerns.

sole traders there was perceived to be a limit to how many funded places they could each provide.

“Where there were quite a few children on the 2, 3 and 4 year old offer, it just wasn’t viable for me to do it financially because of the staff wages, expenses, pension schemes, so I’ve had to actually downsize my business [due to the funding not covering the costs].” (Childminder not offering FEEE places, Outer London)

Sufficiency for children with SEND

Published evidence indicates that LAs experience challenges around providing sufficient FEEE places for children with SEND. The Family and Childcare Trust (now Coram Family and Childcare) found that the ability to accommodate particular needs across all formal childcare was limited, with only 18 per cent of LAs able to meet the childcare needs of all disabled children in their area (Harding et al, 2017). London and non-London LAs in the current study reported lack of skills and expertise in SEND among providers despite the additional funding offered for SEND children. From the provider perspective, many were taking children with additional learning needs some of whom had EHCPs, but many others who did not yet have a diagnosis. Providers thought that the rates of funding for children with SEND did not cover the actual costs of offering specialist care and this therefore acted as a barrier. This included the time it took to get a child assessed and apply for additional funding, during which providers were paying for additional support out of their own funds for which they were not reimbursed. Several providers did have children with EHCPs, in addition to those who had not yet been diagnosed and so were requiring additional input but without additional funding for the provider. This reflects recent research with providers in London which highlighted concerns that the funding cuts for local authorities would impact on the SEND support they receive (Harding & Cameron, 2018).

“We had to employ an extra three teaching assistants for the early years in order to meet the needs for these children while we waited for funding coming through for them. So that’s about £60,000.” (School offering FEEE, Inner London)

Even in LAs who perceived there to be high quality SEND provision locally (in the current study), this was not necessarily in the right location to meet parents’ needs and preferences. Some LAs had identified this as an area for development and were working closely with providers to offer training and support, which was perceived to be helpful, but a relatively gradual process. There were differing views about which types of providers were best suited to delivering high quality SEND provision. Some LAs and providers considered that specialist childminders were well placed to give the required care and that

the smaller group setting was appropriate for children with higher levels of need, while others considered that there was greater expertise in larger group-based settings.

Fluctuation and accuracy of sufficiency figures

For all ages, sufficiency was considered to be prone to change and fluctuation over the course of the year and LAs reported that a lack of sufficient places tended to be more of a problem in the summer term due to children starting early years at different points in the year but then all starting school in September. There was an example of one London LA where there had been significant capacity for FEEE places for 2 year olds but as these places had not been taken up, providers had allocated them to other groups, resulting in a shift from sufficiency to insufficiency in a relatively short period of time.

Another issue of importance to London and non-London LA leads in discussing sufficiency was a perceived discrepancy between the published take-up data held by DfE¹⁵ and locally-held statistics. LA leads reported instances of an increase in the number of children taking up a funded place at the time when published take-up rates were declining, which they thought could not be fully explained by changes in the population. One explanation offered was that this may be as a result of incorrect population figures or measuring take-up at a particular time of year. Occupancy rates tend to be higher in the summer term but the DfE census takes places earlier in the year, when take-up is lower. Some LAs described a relatively stable increase in take up of places with no known change to the local population demographics and yet a decrease in the percentage of eligible children benefitting from a FEEE place.

Insufficiency was also reported by LA leads and providers to have arisen in areas (in and out of London) where children's centres, which had been key providers of funded places especially for 2 year olds, had been closed or had to stop providing FEEE places due to reduced funding. (Note that children's centres only provide a very small proportion of FEEE places nationally.¹⁶) Other providers had not set up in this area as there was no commercial advantage and a perceived lack of demand, but when this service closed it meant disadvantaged families had no nearby provision.

¹⁵ Education provision: children under 5 years of age:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-childcare-and-early-years#provision-for-children-under-5-years-of-age-in-england>

¹⁶ Education provision: children under 5 years of age, January 2018:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/education-provision-children-under-5-years-of-age-january-2018> Table 8.

3.2 Costs and funding

The ability of childcare providers to offer the funded places is shaped in large part by the funding context which has undergone significant change over the past year. The Early Years National Funding Formula (EYNFF) was introduced in April 2017 and sets the hourly funding rates for LAs. Previously, LAs have had considerable discretion in how to allocate the funding from central government, with the freedom to pay different base rates to different types of providers (NAO, 2016; Noden and West, 2016). LAs have also been able to choose how much funding to retain centrally for administration and other activities. However, under the EYNFF, LAs are required to move towards a universal base rate, which will impact on the different types of providers, and to adhere to caps on the amount of funding retained centrally, due to the requirement to 'pass through' 95 per cent of funding to providers (ESFA, 2017).

Funding levels are determined according to a range of factors, including eligibility for the Disability Access Fund and Early Years Pupil Premium (ESFA, 2017). According to Family and Childcare Trust research (Harding & Cameron, 2018), London boroughs receive higher rates of funding per hour for 3 and 4 year olds, on average, than other parts of the country, ranging from the highest rate of £8.53 in Camden to the lowest rate of £4.91 in Bromley compared to a national average of £4.86. However, contrary to the national picture, some London boroughs receive lower funding for 2 year olds than for 3 and 4 year olds, ranging from £5.66 to £6.50 per hour, despite the higher costs of delivering childcare for 2 year olds. Within the qualitative interviews in this study, providers offering the 2 year old entitlement reported this to be a problem in terms of their business income and meant they would need to make changes in terms of increasing other costs and charging for extras to make up the difference.

The published evidence suggests childcare providers in London face particular pressures in relation to funding. Evidence from the SEED costs study of 166 settings in 2015 showed that the cost for providers to provide childcare is higher in London than elsewhere in the country, in some cases substantially (Blainey & Paull, 2017). The higher costs in London are explained mainly by higher staff salaries (which account for 75 per cent of childcare costs) as well as more expensive venue costs, particularly for 2 year olds who require additional facilities. Furthermore, Hope et al (2018) found that parental childcare costs in early years settings are 30-40 per cent higher in London than nationally and median earning growths have been slower despite average earnings being higher in London. They suggested that affordability of childcare in London is consequently getting worse which could reduce the demand for childcare.

Financial difficulties for providers

The LA early years leads who took part in the qualitative research shared views on the impact of the funding changes under the EYNFF. London and non-London LAs that experienced a decrease in funding rate under the EYNFF reported being unable to match the market rates that providers can charge parents which they regarded as a major challenge. There was a view among early years leads and providers (particularly larger private providers and chains) that FEEE places are only a viable business opportunity if they can sell additional hours around the universal entitlement. In disadvantaged areas, where parents have no need for or cannot afford to pay market rates for additional hours, providers were thought to be less willing to offer FEEE places:

“The economics just don’t stack up for providers. The LA has provided business planning support and tried to model how they could make it work but it’s just not possible, puts them under a huge financial strain.” (LA early years lead, Inner London)

In areas where there was no or limited maintained provision, this was reported to have resulted in a lack of sufficiency.

This financial barrier was tackled by providers in a number of ways, including:

- Increasing the fees for non-FEEE hours to subsidise FEEE places.
- Charging separately for lunch, snacks, music sessions and trips.
- Changing their business model to take babies for whom they could charge higher rates, or school-aged children for whom the required staffing ratios were lower.
- Reducing the staffing ratio for 3 and 4 year olds to minimum permitted ratios. Any provider with greater staff numbers had to reduce to ratio limits.
- Charging top-up fees or not permitting parents to only access 15 hours per week. For example, in one LA, providers were reported to charge top-up fees by setting a morning session from 9am to 2pm and charging parents for the hours between 12 and 2pm. (Providers interviewed for this study were unaware this is not allowed under the Statutory Guidance.)
- Limiting the number of FEEE places.

The effect of the move under the EYNFF to a universal base rate was reported in some areas to be a particular barrier for schools. This is because in some areas schools tended to have received higher rates than other provider types previously. In areas where the EYNFF resulted in a lower funding rate than

previously, LAs indicated that it was too early to fully understand the effects of this and expected greater insights in a few terms.

“London boroughs in particular are being discriminated against because they were well funded in the past and they’re being very badly hit at the moment.”
(School offering FEEE places, Inner London)

Despite reports of insufficient funding causing financial barriers for providers, there were also examples of London providers who reported that if parents of 2 years olds using their FEEE required additional hours of early education, they only charged at an hourly rate for any additional hours used (rather than for a whole 3 hour session which would be their usual policy) in recognition that they were on low incomes. Some providers who did not limit the number of FEEE places they offered reported a reduction in profits. Small providers spoke about their business just being viable, or only just breaking even, or having concerns about the longer term feasibility of trading.

In areas where the EYNFF resulted in an uplift to the funding rates, providers reported that this was an incentive to providing FEEE places, although they still had concerns about needing to fill empty spaces in the afternoon that arose due to only part-time places being funded.

Financial difficulties at LA level

Funding pressures at LA level were also reported to have had an effect on the take-up of FEEE places as a result of the requirement to pass through 95 per cent of their funding to providers as opposed to previously when they had more discretion. London and non London LAs have consequently found that having smaller teams and fewer resources has resulted in reduced capacity to implement measures to increase take-up. Outreach and brokerage that had previously been successful in engaging parents, particularly those eligible for the disadvantaged 2 year old entitlement, were no longer considered feasible with the available funds. Similarly, publicity and marketing had been discontinued in some cases. In case study areas where there had been a reduction in funding for outreach and brokerage, providers had noticed reduced demand from parents and attributed this to the lack of marketing and publicity support from the LA and children’s centres.

This evidence from the qualitative interviews reflects the findings of a recent survey of London boroughs, to which 26 of the 32 boroughs responded (London Councils, 2018). Nearly half reported a need to make savings in 2017/18 as a result of the 7 per cent cap on central spend. The most frequently cited areas impacted were LA staff numbers, support and training for PVI’s, and outreach to encourage greater take-up of the free entitlements. Looking ahead to 2018/19,

when the cap reduces to 5 per cent, over two-thirds anticipate needing to make savings.

Issues with process for claiming funding

Across London and non-London providers, experiences of the online process for claiming funding were mixed, with some reporting it to be time-consuming and burdensome and others finding it relatively straightforward. For those that struggled, they found changes to the process since the introduction of 30 hours confusing. Private providers in particular emphasised the loss of time and profit associated with the process. Some also reported that they had missed deadlines, which resulted in a loss or delay of income, and also that they found it difficult to collect all the information required from parents, such as NI numbers.

3.3 Flexibility and quality of provision

Alongside the provision of *sufficient* places, take-up is also affected by the extent to which the places match parental need in terms of flexibility and quality. For example, the FCT research found that LAs reported that only 13 per cent of childcare providers nationally were able to provide childcare for all parents working atypical hours (Harding et al, 2017).

Lack of flexibility within school-based provision was a common theme. These settings typically offer 3 hour morning and afternoon slots only, whereas parents tended to want longer sessions with the opportunity to vary start and finish times. In some areas this led to under-utilisation of school-based provision. LAs noted that this was a particular barrier in the context of changes to parental working patterns such as greater reliance on zero hours contracts and more ad hoc requirements, which meant that parents could not necessarily fit their working arrangements around the opening times of providers.

However, there were indications of a possible shift towards greater flexibility in school-based settings. London and non-London LAs reported an increased understanding among schools about the advantages of offering early education to 2 year olds, including the opportunity to engage families early on, to influence attainment and outcomes later in life and to ensure a 'pipeline' of children for school places. In addition, the introduction of the 30 hours was thought to have highlighted the need for greater flexibility from school based providers and there was a view that this may stimulate adaptation and change.

PVI settings were regarded as offering much greater flexibility, including longer hours (often from 7.30am to 7pm) and allowing for more bespoke arrangements. There were examples of childminders offering tailored hours of care including in one case study area which had successfully set up a

childminder pool providing last minute and out of hours care. Both London and non-London LAs reported a gap in provision for evening, overnight and weekend care. Parents' working patterns were often not day time only and so there was an increasing need for less conventional provision. Likewise longer sessions were important where parents were travelling for work, meaning they needed an extra couple of hours' care on their working days (i.e. provision that started earlier or finished later).

Lack of high quality provision was not generally perceived by LAs to be a major factor affecting take-up, although there were cases of particular local areas (in London and out of London) that only had poor quality provision available. LAs reported that these tended to be in more deprived areas and was linked to funding rates and the ability of local parents to pay for additional hours. In deprived areas families were reliant upon just their funded hours and so providers had limited options for meeting the shortfall in income.

3.4 The effect of 30 hours FEEE for 3 and 4 year olds of working parents on take-up

LAs reported that it was too early to have a good understanding of the effects of the introduction of the 30 hours policy on FEEE. This meant that views among LAs and providers on the effects were based on speculation about longer-term effects rather than experience. Views on potential effects were mixed and ranged widely.

No effect

Those who felt the 30 hours policy would have little or no impact cited two main reasons: 1) high levels of unemployment in the local area leading to low demand or because 2) a perception that the market would expand to increase the number of places available (with, for example, more schools and childminders offering both FEEE and 30 hours places).

“All that’s happened locally is that we’ve only got a small percentage of parents who work in [borough name] so basically they were paying for childcare and now they don’t have to. So it’s not actually increased anything, it’s just merely been very welcome to those parents.” (LA head of early years, Inner London)

An increase in take-up of 3 and 4 year old FEEE places

The explanation for this view was that parents who are currently disincentivised from taking up their 15 hour entitlement because this is not enough hours per

week to enable employment, will be able to use the additional 15 hours to move into work.

“30 hours paid childcare might actually encourage some parents to go into work, whereas the 15 hours previously wasn’t enough. So we may see some increase in the take-up across the area.” (LA head of early help commissioning, Outer London)

Another reason was that in some areas with a previous lack of sufficiency, funding for the 30 hours entitlement for 3 and 4 year olds was perceived to have eased capacity issues, including for the FEEE places. In these locations, DfE funding had been used alongside capital funds to develop greater capacity within the sector.

A reduction in take-up of the 2 year old FEEE

One group of providers and LAs were concerned that high demand for 30 hours from working parents would limit providers’ ability to offer other FEEE places and create a lack of sufficiency. There was a view that in order to have more occupied hours and greater financial security, providers might cease to offer or limit FEEE places. In general, it was recognised that it was too early to understand the effects but there was a feeling that it was more likely to affect provision for 2 year olds than for 3 and 4 year olds. This was due to the perception that providing for 2 year olds is more resource intensive. It was recognised, however, that the higher funding rate for disadvantaged 2 year olds that applied in most areas might mitigate this risk and encourage providers to continue to offer these places.

“We have some concerns that 2 year old places might be reduced so that PVI’s can fit in more 30 hour children, but the higher funding rate for 2s and the follow on business that they provide when they turn 3 and then 4 seems to make this cost-effective for them to keep offering.” (LA early years business manager, Outer London)

This was a concern particularly among LAs with a greater gap between wealthy and deprived communities.

Nonetheless, in these areas there were examples of private providers who reported that the introduction of 30 hours had had less financial impact than they expected so far and also of providers who reported that they had decided they would not offer 30 hours places as it was not financially viable for them. There were also instances of maintained settings stating they would limit the numbers of 30 hours places to mitigate the risk of FEEE places being squeezed.

A common theme across LAs was that marketing and communications around 30 hours has been intensive and, in some cases, diverted resources and

attention from the 2 year old FEEE, which may have had a detrimental effect on take-up.

“Balancing queries on 30 hours, funding and trying to support disadvantaged families is hard across a small LA team. 30 hours families are working but can be quite affluent and demanding and so can detract from the work we are trying to do with vulnerable families. Vulnerable families you have to pick them up and hold them by the hand but 30 families may be demand led.” (LA early years lead, Outer London)

3.5 Summary

Given that the expansion of funded hours of early education has been central to the reform of childcare policy, the ability of providers to offer sufficient places to match demand is crucial. The findings from the qualitative interviews with LA leads and providers aligned with the published literature in noting the particular challenges to achieving sufficiency in London, which was perceived to be strongly associated with property costs and the lack of space or potential to expand.

The challenge of providing sufficient FEEE for 2 year olds was a common theme. Across the board, there was evidence from providers that 2 year old places were less financially lucrative due to the higher ratios, the need for more space and the higher needs of children and families. Both school based providers and childminders identified particular barriers to offering 2 year old places relating to structural factors and practical difficulties.

The Early Years National Funding Formula (EYNFF), introduced in April 2017, was noted to have altered the funding context in a number of ways. While there remained considerable variation in hourly funding rates, London boroughs that received a lower amount for 2 year olds than for the 3 and 4 year old places faced particular challenges. There was also a widespread view across London boroughs that the increase in pass-through rate meant that local authority activities such as outreach and brokerage, which had been important for increasing take-up, had been scaled back.

Alongside perceived sufficiency and cost/funding issues, lack of flexibility of provision was associated with lower take-up. Providers and LA leads noted that parents often needed childcare to accommodate atypical work hours including variable arrangements and there was a limit in the ability of providers to respond. School based providers were particularly constrained in their operating hours and while PVI sector nurseries opened for long days, evening and weekend care was highlighted as a gap in provision.

In summary, the interaction between sufficiency and cost/funding issues and the distinctive nature of these challenges in London suggest that together, these

supply-side issues provide at least part of the explanation for lower and declining take-up in the capital. Across the region, providers are still adapting to the 2 year old entitlement and the introduction of 30 hours and are implementing a range of strategies for ensuring their businesses remain viable.

4. Patterns of take-up: Parental attitudes and decision-making processes

Across all sources of evidence, the two key factors that influenced parental demand for funded hours were parental choice and perceived constraints relating to the costs, quality, nature and availability of provision. This section examines the evidence from published sources and the qualitative interviews to assess the importance of parental choice and perceived constraints in explaining non take-up of early education and childcare.

4.1 Parental choice

Many parents who are not using FEEE report making an active choice to not do so. Several recent studies show that a large proportion of parents cite personal preferences including reasons such as such as preferring to look after the child themselves considering the child to be too young for formal childcare/early education (Speight et al., 2015; Ipsos, 2012; DfE, 2017).

Published findings from qualitative studies, also provide evidence of parental choice to spend time with children before they begin school (Chadwick et al, 2017), particularly where there were health or behavioural issues (Bashir et al, 2011).

The qualitative interviews in this study probed what lay behind 'personal preference', uncovering themes relating to employment, involvement with children, cultural and religious values, the age of the child and trust.

Employment

In the SEED study, the proportion¹⁷ of parents reporting 'personal preference' as the main reason for not using formal childcare was higher among non-working mothers, highlighting the interaction between employment and childcare choices (Speight et al, 2015).

The evidence from the qualitative interviews with parents in London supported the notion of a strong perceived link between formal childcare and parental employment. For non-working parents, the perception that formal childcare was only necessary for working parents impacted on their decision to not take up FEEE. This was a view also reported by both LAs and providers who

¹⁷ Estimate not reported.

suggested that they perceive provision to offer childcare for working parents rather than early education for all children.

“For people that need to go back to work, that have got no other choice but to put their children into childcare, then yes, I think it's a good thing.”
(Parent of eligible 2 year old, Outer London, aware of entitlement)

Involvement

The view of some parents in London was that they could provide the same benefits as formal childcare at home or by taking their children to places such as children's centres where they could have a similar experience whilst still being with them.

“I don't really see much benefit. I don't think there's much they'd be able to understand that early. I mean if there's like a crèche or nursery sort of thing so they can socialise, but they can do that at the park anyway.”
(Parent of eligible 2 year old, Inner London, unaware of entitlement)

“...at that age, as long as you're teaching them the right things at home, and you're trying to teach them the alphabet, teach them how to talk, their speech you're giving them the same learning.” (Parent of eligible 3 year old, Outer London, aware of entitlement)

“...I don't feel like I need to push him to go to nursery right now.” (Parent of eligible 2 year old, Inner London, aware of entitlement)

Some parents reported that they themselves knew best how to look after their child and the child would therefore be better off in their care.

“It's the way I will look after my child; no one else can look after my child that way.” (Parent of eligible 2 year old, Outer London, aware of entitlement)

Some parents who weren't working regarded the preschool years to be a time of limited opportunity for their child to be with them or other family members and wanted to actively support their child's development.

“I just want my mum and my daughter to spend as much time as they can together before my mum goes back to her home country, because it could be a while until she then comes back again to visit.” (Parent of eligible 3 year old, Outer London, aware of entitlement)

“I personally think it's my bonding time with my child.” (Parent of eligible 2 year old, Outer London, aware of entitlement)

In contrast, the parents of children with SEND within this study wanted to send their child to a provider that catered to their child's needs. However, their reasons for not taking up the entitlement instead ranged from lack of awareness, inability to set up an EHC plan in time and having workplace childcare options instead. However, only a small number of parents with SEND were interviewed within this study and do not necessarily reflect the views of all parents of children with SEND.

Some parents felt their child was better suited to being at home rather than with a group of children, for example, because their child was shy. Some were concerned about the emotional impact of separating from their child.

"I think whenever we go to playgroups and I try to step away a little bit, she comes back to me and it's hard for myself and it's hard for her, just to leave her." (Parent of eligible 2 year old, Outer London, unaware of entitlement)

"When I take the children in to drop-in centres, they always look over and go, 'Where's daddy? Where's daddy? Okay I can see him.' So what happens when I leave them?" (Parent of eligible 3 year old, Outer London, unaware of entitlement)

"I'm a new parent... when you have a child for the first time, you just don't feel comfortable leaving her or him anywhere else." (Parent of eligible 2 year old, Outer London, aware of entitlement)

Cultural and religious values

There was a perception among LA leads and providers within London that minority ethnic communities in particular had a strong preference for choosing to keep their child at home and that parents, and in particular mothers, should care for their children. Examples mentioned included Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Turkish and Romanian parents. Where childcare was required there was reported to be a preference for informal childcare provided by family members over formal provision. The high proportion of ethnic minority groups in London could therefore play a role in impacting take-up.

Findings from the parent interviews were more nuanced and mixed. For some London and non-London parents from ethnic minority groups, there were factors specific to their own cultures that may explain why they are more likely to choose to look after their child themselves rather than take up FEEE. Some parents wanted to teach their child about their culture and religion at an early age including history and instilling particular values that they felt would not be provided to their child anywhere else. Some parents also wanted to teach their

child mother tongue languages so they could communicate with their older relatives.

“I wanted to teach her about the religion a bit more too, you know, while she's at home. And when she's a young age. I find a lot of nurseries don't really help with those sort of religious things. It's easier for them to pick up things at that age.” (Parent of eligible 4 year old, outside of London, aware of entitlement)

“I'm not really ready to put him out into the wide world yet, I just want him to have a better understanding of himself and our culture, and just kind of give him a stronger grounding before he goes out.” (Parent of eligible 3 year old, Outer London, aware of entitlement)

Parents also expressed concern that a childcare provider may not be able to cater to religious needs. For example, one parent was concerned about cross-contamination of the food that their child may eat.

However, for other parents from ethnic minority communities, the driving factor for non take-up was living with or close to extended families that provided ready access to informal childcare, removing the need for formal options.

Age of child

The parental belief that a child is too young for childcare was another key theme in the published literature influencing parents' decisions not to take up FEEE. It was cited as a reason by 11 per cent of parents of the parents in CEYSP whose preschool children were not in formal childcare (DfE, 2017). This is supported by qualitative research that found some parents increase the use of their entitlement hours per week as their children grow older (Ipsos, 2012). Similarly, in the present study, LA leads and providers considered that many parents believe 2 years old to be too young for their children to be left with others and preferred to care for their child themselves. There was a view that this shifted around the age of 3, or in some communities, 4 or 5, which parents felt was an appropriate age to use formal childcare.

The perception that a child was too young was reported by many parents, particularly those with 2 year olds. The concerns around two year olds stemmed from the belief that they needed more support than older children. Concerns about their age included the belief that they needed to have undivided attention at all times to make sure they didn't hurt themselves, which they felt childcare providers were unable to provide. Furthermore some 2 year olds were not yet potty trained meaning parents would have to trust someone else to change their nappy which some felt uncomfortable with and sparked hygiene concerns including whether they would be changed promptly. Other 2 year olds were in

the process of being potty trained so parents weren't sure whether or how providers would continue this process. The limited speech of most 2 year olds also concerned many parents as this meant the child would be unable to communicate to providers what they needed or talk to their parents about their experiences.

"[At age 3] they're a bit more independent and wouldn't need as much care and more teaching." (Parent of eligible 2 year old, Outer London, aware of entitlement)

"So you hear a lot of things happening in the news, there's never positive things about nurseries in the news. So, I'd hate for my child to go because if something happens to her or she's mistreated in any way, she can't fully communicate what exactly has happened to me." (Parent of eligible 2 year old, Outer London, aware of entitlement)

Trust

A lack of trust in providers was a concern touched on by many parents in London as a reason for preferring not to take up childcare. The main concerns were about not knowing the "strangers" they would be leaving their child with as well as whether their child would be given enough attention from staff when they were distracted by other children.

"I just don't feel comfortable leaving my kid with people that I don't know. I have to trust you in order for me to leave my kid with you. I can't just leave my child with anyone." (Parent of eligible 2 year old, Outer London, aware of entitlement)

"They've got so many other children to look after sometimes they do lose track of one child. Or they've taken them out and then the child goes wandering off. I'm just frightened. You know, so many missing children and it probably won't ever happen to me, but it's always in the back of my head." (Parent of eligible 3 year old, Outer London, aware of entitlement)

Conversely, where parents were familiar with a particular provider they were more inclined to be trusting.

"I would use it because I know the person that works there. So I kind of trust them." (Parent of eligible 2 year old, Outer London, aware of entitlement)

For some there were also hygiene concerns about other children, along with worries their child would pick up other children's bad habits.

“To me it just looked like there was a load of kids running around, sneezing, coughing, and they were sharing stuff, and it was too much for me, personally.” (Parent of eligible 3 year old, Outer London, aware of entitlement)

“...it's not really the nursery, it's the children in the nursery. So I don't want my son picking up the habits of other children in the nursery” (Parent of eligible 2 year old, Outer London, aware of entitlement)

4.2 Perceived constraints

Parents' decisions not to take-up early education places were also shaped by perceived constraints or barriers as well as active, positive choices. These constraints matched onto the themes discussed in chapter 3 relating to sufficiency, costs and flexibility.

Sufficiency

Recent published survey evidence found that among parents of pre-schoolers who had not used any childcare in the last year, only 5 per cent stated this was due to lack of available spaces, 3 per cent due to lack of trust or perceived quality of provisions, and 0 per cent due to flexibility of hours suggesting these structural factors were minor barriers to the take up of formal childcare ¹⁸ (DfE, 2017).

However, the findings from this qualitative research told a different story, particularly for parents in London. The perceived barriers held by parents that influenced their choices were an interplay of quality, sufficiency and flexibility of provider with an overarching concern about costs. Many parents struggled to find a place to use their FEEE as they had high standards and wanted a good quality provider for their child that offered slots at times that suited their needs and working patterns, and where they did not have to pay additional costs for top ups, which many could not afford. They also needed a provider to be in a convenient location so they did not have to travel far and spend time and money to get their child there. This was particularly pertinent in London as its size means travel is often necessary and relatively expensive and time-consuming. What was apparent was the differing views of parents and providers. In general, providers and LA leads focused on the big picture and the range of childcare options available, where parents focused on their own particular requirements and the need to find specific options that met their needs.

¹⁸ Although, note that the base size for these findings was small.

Costs

Overall, it appears that cost is a barrier to using formal childcare. Although the FEEE is free to parents, evidence suggests that some parents are concerned about unexpected additional costs such as top up fees and registration fees (Chadwick et al, 2017). Unsurprisingly, cost tends to be more of an issue for disadvantaged families as shown in the SEED baseline survey of parents of 2 year olds (Speight et al, 2015).

These findings were reflected in the qualitative interviews with parents in London in particular who shared concerns about additional costs associated with taking up FEEE. Topping up the 15 hours per week would be the only option for some parents but was not financially viable for them. The additional costs of travel and potential charges for being late was also off putting for parents.

“..whenever you see the word 'free' there's always a catch with it” (Parent of eligible 3 year old, Outer London, unaware of entitlement)

Case illustration – Outer London LA with average take-up rates

In one LA, the early years lead, providers and parents all commented on the additional costs associated with 15 hours per week of free childcare at the prevailing funding rates. The LA lead reported that funding difficulties had led providers to offer FEEE but limit the number of places or to offer places only to parents paying for additional hours (although it is against statutory guidance to restrict places in this way). Interviews with providers in this area reinforced this view.

“One requirement we have is that parents who take [the free] 15 hours still book and pay for a full day place. So it is offered to parents who are able to pay, who get 15 hours free but have to be taking up full day places and paying extra hours” (Private nursery in case study area)

Parents within this LA also felt that 15 hours wasn't enough to meet their needs and would inevitably lead to additional charges:

“It's not particularly long enough for you to be able to go to work, without having to pay for extra time for childcare or in the same nursery [where] you have to pay for extra hours.” (Parent of eligible 2 year old, aware of entitlement)

“...even though they're giving you 15 hours, the more hours you take up at the nursery or wherever the education establishment, you're gonna end up paying

the difference” (Parent of eligible 3 year old including 30 hours, Inner London, aware of 15 hours entitlement)

Flexibility of provision

There was a view among some parents who were aware of the FEEE but had not taken it up that 15 hours per week was insufficient either for them to engage in employment or achieve benefits for the child. This view was prevalent among London parents but also mentioned by a non-London parent. For working parents, even those working part-time, 15 hours was insufficient to cover travel time and working hours. Some non-working parents felt this wouldn't be enough time to start looking for a job but only enough time to get some household chores done. In these situations, there were concerns about charges for extra hours, which were seen as unaffordable. Furthermore some providers only offered morning or afternoon FEEE sessions. Many felt this wasn't worth taking up because it did not fit with their working pattern or leave any time after picking up and dropping off their child. There were also cases where it clashed with the timings of their other children's school hours.

“I'd be able to drop both of them off and then I'd have to leave by 11:30 say and travel all the way back to get the little one and then I had two, three hours there till I have to go back to get the older one” (Parent of eligible 2 year old, Inner London, aware of entitlement)

“I am aware that Working Tax Credit doesn't kick in until you work 16 hours, so obviously for him to only be in childcare for 15 hours and then I've still got to travel to and from a place of work, I don't think would work for me just now” (Parent of eligible 2 year old, Inner London, unaware of entitlement)

“If you're having to pay bus fare to go a long distance [to work] and then a long distance to go and collect the child, it really does have a knock-on effect.” (Parent of eligible 3 year old, Outer London, aware of entitlement)

Quality of provision

Quality was a strong consideration for the parents not taking up places than perceived and was closely associated with concerns about trust. Parents wanted to send their child to providers that they felt intuitively comfortable with and could trust but often these providers were too far away from them or had no places currently available. One parent felt that providers who offered FEEE would be inherently lower quality than providers that are paid for.

“..the quality wouldn't be the same as when you're paying for something, so the fact that it's free, people just won't care about it... they won't really

put all their energy or attention on the kids 'cause the care is free.” (Parent of eligible 2 year old, Outer London, aware of entitlement)

Some parents held the view that providers were reluctant to offer FEEE places to parents as they would prefer to cater for paying parents, exacerbating difficulties with finding a place to use their child’s entitlement. This view was reinforced by some LAs and providers in London who explained that the coexistence of affluent and deprived areas disincentivised providers to offer FEEE places since they could prioritise parents paying higher rates. Some parents experienced providers not wanting to offer FEEE places.

“... if you're renting and you're getting Universal Credit, the landlords don't want to take you. So it's the same for all the nurseries, the minute they know you're getting childcare help they don't really want to take you on. Everybody wants cash.” (Parent of eligible 3 year old including 30 hours, Outer London, aware of 15 hours entitlement)

“It just needs to be, 'You've got a child, free childcare, they can go to a nursery and the nursery gets paid properly.' If the nursery was getting paid properly more nurseries would be happy to take on your child.” (Parent of eligible 3 year old including 30 hours, Outer London, aware of 15 hours entitlement)

“There's only two places that say that they've got places coming up until September and then you find that they prefer to take the children where the parents go to work and are paying rather than the funded ones.” (Parent of eligible 2 year old, Outer London, aware of entitlement)

In some LAs, early years leads reported negative views held by parents about childminders linked to a belief that school-based provision was superior and denoted ‘starting school early’. Evidence from parent interviews supported this view that schools were the preferred option for early education, particularly since it allowed schools to get to know their child over time as they progress each year. Some considered there to be better discipline at schools than at nurseries.

Summary

The qualitative interviews with parents whose eligible children were not using the funded entitlements explored the detail behind the published evidence which suggests that ‘personal preference’ is the main reason for non take-up of formal childcare. The interviews uncovered five overlapping reasons which together indicated that some parents are making an active choice not to take up the places.

For these parents, the potential benefits of the funded places were perceived to be primarily childcare and consequently, if the parent was not employed, they did not regard the FEEE as necessary or valuable. Linked to choices about employment, these parents considered it important that their child was with them and held the view that they themselves could provide input of equal or better value to that received in childcare.

The majority of the parents taking part in the interviews were from a minority ethnic background and a range of issues relating to cultural and religious identity were highlighted. Some parents wanted to keep their child at home specifically to teach them about their culture or religion. Others looked to extended family members for support with childcare rather than early education providers.

For parents of 2 year olds in particular, issues of trust were important. Some parents felt uncomfortable about their child being in formal childcare before they were potty trained and before they had sufficient language to talk about their experiences. Parents also questioned the quality of care and some assumed that because the entitlement was free, it must necessarily be of poor quality.

Parents also described perceived constraints as well as choices. The perceived barriers held by parents that influenced their choices were an interplay of quality, sufficiency and flexibility of provider with an overarching concern about costs. Referring back to the link between employment and childcare, some parents considered the 15 hours per week to be insufficient and used informal childcare instead to support their employment. Perceived poor quality of early education was also considered to be a constraint by parents which contrasts with the views of the LA leads and providers.

In summary, reasons for non take-up included active choices by parents which suggests that there may be a limit to the take-up rates for eligible 2 year olds. However, the perceived constraints were also important and highlight where adaptations, including communication about the entitlement, may need to be made.

5. Patterns in take-up: Barriers to engaging with the system

This chapter follows on from the previous discussion of perceived constraints to explore the practical barriers to taking up the funded entitlements. Framed within the published evidence, this chapter draws on the qualitative findings from the LA leads, providers and parents to identify where changes may need to be made to improve take-up.

5.1 Awareness of the entitlements

Findings from the evidence review suggested that general awareness of FEEE is high among all parents (not just those who are eligible), with 78 per cent of parents of 2 year olds who are not using formal childcare aware of the 2 year old entitlement and 71 per cent of parents with 3 and 4 year olds aware of the 30 hours scheme (DfE, 2017). Other studies have found similar levels of awareness, with Ipsos (2012) finding that 81 per cent of parents were aware of funded entitlements. There is also evidence that this level of awareness is reflected in London although awareness of the 2 year old entitlement appears to be lower than the 3 and 4 year old entitlement (GLA, 2016).

Awareness of the entitlement has tended to vary by background characteristics with awareness a greater barrier for some groups of people than others, mirroring take-up patterns. For example, awareness rates of the 30 hours entitlement are higher among parents in couple families (72 per cent) compared to lone parents (65 per cent) (DfE, 2017) and vary across different ethnic groups. NAO (2016) reported awareness of the 2 year old entitlement being more of a barrier for Bangladeshi, Somali and Polish communities than others and Ipsos (2012) found that parents from ethnic minority groups had lower levels of awareness of the universal 3 and 4 year old entitlement (61 per cent) than white parents (85 per cent). Those living in London also had lower awareness levels of the universal 3 and 4 year old entitlement (61 per cent compared to an average of 81 per cent) which may overlap with ethnicity (Ipsos, 2012). General awareness of the 30 hours entitlement for those on incomes of £45,000 or more per year was found to be 82 per cent compared to only 62 per cent for those earning under £10,000 (DfE, 2017). Similarly, Ipsos (2012) found that those from more deprived backgrounds or not in work had lower levels of awareness about the universal 3 and 4 year old entitlement. In addition to lower awareness levels, lower income parents are more confused about details of all of the entitlement such as availability and eligibility (Gulc and Silversides, 2016).

A general sense of confusion was also found by Gulc and Silversides (2016) in their online/telephone survey of 1000 parents with nearly half of all parents either confused or having 'no idea' about what is on offer. Similarly, focus

groups with eligible parents with a mixture of those who had and hadn't take up of the entitlement found that that they were confused by eligibility and felt that the system was inconsistent and kept changing (GLA, 2016). For example, parents rejected for the 2 year old entitlement sometimes assumed this meant they would not be eligible for the 3 year old entitlement and this stopped them from looking into it further. A lack of detailed understanding of entitlements was reflected in the qualitative element of the same study which revealed poor knowledge about how free hours can and cannot be used flexibly.

The qualitative interviews for this study reflected the published evidence with lack of awareness being a barrier to take-up for some parents and a lack of detailed understanding of the offer being a barrier for others. Generally, there appeared to be greater awareness of the universal entitlement for 3 and 4 year olds than the entitlement for disadvantaged 2 year olds. There was confusion among some parents from both London and non London areas about eligibility criteria, leading to an assumption that they were not entitled to a FEEE place. The misconceptions related to:

- Employment status. Some parents assumed the entitlements were just for working parents while others assumed that because they were in employment, they were ineligible.
- Benefits. Some parents assumed the 3 and 4 year old entitlement was the same as the 2 year old entitlement in terms of being for parents on benefits.
- Age of the child. There was also an example of a parent of an eligible 2 year old stating she was not eligible because her child was not yet 2 and a half.
- Changes to local eligibility criteria. There was an example of a LA where previously all 3 and 4 years olds had been funded for 30 hours and this had recently changed to primarily funding the 15 hours universal entitlement, with additional hours funded for particular groups of children facing particular need or disadvantage. The LA lead and providers reported that this had caused a lot of confusion and misunderstanding among parents.

Understanding eligibility

There was also confusion about the different types of entitlements that change as the child gets older. Parents from all areas were unsure about how many hours were available for which age groups and who was eligible for each entitlement. For example, parents who were not eligible for the 2 year old entitlement mistakenly assumed this meant they were also ineligible for the 3 and 4 year old entitlement. One parent checked their eligibility online when the

child was under 2 years old and was told they were not eligible. The parent was not aware that this was because the child had not yet turned 2. Some parents with older children who had or had not been entitled to a different entitlement previously assumed the same would apply to their younger child, without realising the system had changed.

Often those who were not aware of the entitlement or thought they were ineligible felt the entitlement was a good idea and would be something they would find useful.

“I think it's absolutely amazing. That would definitely help me out a lot and it would help out my family and friends as well as I wouldn't have to rely on them so much.” (Parent of eligible 2 year old, Inner London, unaware of entitlement)

“I think that sounds great. I've been struggling with my kids for the past couple of years trying to keep them occupied at home.” (Parent of eligible 3 year old, Outer London, unaware of entitlement)

For those parents who were aware, some were confused about how it would work in practice in terms of where, how and when the hours could be used.

“..does it come out of my wages? Would I need to pay a top-up? It's still a little bit confusing.” (Parent of eligible 3 year old including 30 hours, Outer London, aware of both entitlements)

Providers across all areas had mixed views on how informed parents were about FEEE. Some providers reported that they commonly found a lack of knowledge and misunderstanding among parents about the eligibility entitlements while others believed there was relatively good awareness of the entitlements among parents.

5.2 Access to information

Previous evidence suggests that the discrepancy between high general awareness of the entitlement and poor detailed understanding could be explained by a perceived lack of access to information. Although parents find there is an ‘overload’ of information about the entitlement in general, there is less information to facilitate understanding of how the entitlement relates to personal circumstances (Chadwick et al, 2018). This may explain the qualitative finding that parents tend to know only enough information to apply for the entitlement (Ipsos, 2012). Furthermore, one third of parents report that there is too little information about childcare in the local area (Hall et al, 2015). This may be partly underpinned by low awareness of the Family Information Service (28 per cent) and a general lack of understanding that the LA provides this service

to inform parents about childcare (Hall et al, 2015). There is also a perceived lack of a primary channel, such as a website, that could be used to communicate the key facts about formal childcare by summarising the overwhelming mass of digital information available (Hall et al, 2015; Ipsos, 2012).

A lack of universal access to information may mean that some groups are disproportionately disadvantaged from not knowing enough about the policies. For example, there is evidence to suggest that the favoured way for parents to access information is informally via word of mouth (Hall et al, 2015; Harding and Hardy, 2016; GLA, 2016) and that this is particularly true of those with higher incomes and with strong social networks (Hall et al, 2015). This implies that parents without a connection to the community, such as those new to the area or dealing with a language barrier may be less likely to benefit from informal sharing of childcare information (Hall et al, 2015) and therefore less likely to find out key information about the entitlement. Some LA leads, within this study, thought that lack of funds to translate English-language materials into different community languages was a barrier to parents with EAL engaging with the early education system. There is also evidence to suggest that parents who don't use formal childcare are less likely to know about the free entitlement, perhaps because more than half of parents find out about the free hours from childcare providers (Ipsos, 2012).

The qualitative parent interviews also found a lack of clarity in how to access information and instead parents tended to share information informally via word of mouth. This was consistent across London and non-London parents. Most were unaware of the Family Information Service and didn't use particular websites to access information; instead often opting to search online for the specific topic they wanted to find out about. Many had learnt about the FEEE via other parents. As a result, those who did not have much interaction with other parents had fewer opportunities to find out about the entitlement. Some parents found out about the entitlement from targeted leaflets and letters through the door, for example a couple of months before the child's birthday, however this was sometimes perceived to be too late to find out about it as at this point there were no places available at preferred providers. Others had found out about it from advertising posters and leaflets at children's centres and doctors surgeries. One parent heard about it on a local radio station.

Awareness of benefits

In general across all parents, there was a good awareness of the benefits of early education. Parents mentioned that attending an early education setting offered opportunities for their child to improve their social skills, be in a stimulating environment, learn more quickly and gain confidence. Some

mentioned the importance of the child to have some time away from the parent to reduce separation anxiety and to get used to a routine to aid a gradual transition to school.

“They talk better especially if they're around good kids. If they're around bad kids, no, but when you're in a nursery setting you've got a variety of children and it makes your children hopefully open-minded and they taste different foods, they get invited to different birthday parties and different cultural aspects. It exposes your child to a taster of the real-world. It makes them independent as well.” (Parent of eligible 3 year old (including 30 hours), Outer London, aware of entitlements)

“..she can be a little bit clingy, so I think to interact with other people is good for her. She's not going to be so needy with me. She's going to interact with other people and get used to other people being around rather than it being just me and her quite a lot every day.” (Parent of eligible 3 year old, Inner London, unaware of entitlement)

Parents also mentioned benefits for themselves including enabling them to work and study, get household chores done, give friends and family a break and opportunities for socialising with other parents

“I kind of feel really guilty towards my friends and family, having to ask them all the time to help me out. So it would take that guilt and worry off of me to be able to just send her into a preschool.” (Parent of eligible 2 year old, Inner London, aware of entitlement)

“..although I love my children dearly but it's keeping me sane that I can actually go out, socialise with people that are my age, younger, older and have purpose, not just being a mother.” (Parent of eligible 3 year old including 30 hours, Inner London, aware of entitlement)

5.3 Perceived barriers to engaging with the system

The application process

Recent evidence from qualitative studies with parents suggests that the application process is a key practical barrier to the uptake of entitlements (GLA, 2016; Chadwick et al, 2018). Some parents did not take up the entitlement because the expectation of a frustrating application process overshadowed the benefits of the entitlement (Chadwick et al, 2018). There were also parents who began the application process but were put off, delayed or unable to complete the application due to barriers they met along the way. These barriers included technical issues such as missing application codes and faulty and poorly designed digital application forms. Parents with limited computer skills found

these barriers particularly difficult. Communication issues such as incorrect information and false rejection letters were another frustration for parents throughout the process. There was even some consensus that the process was deliberately designed to be awkward in order to discourage parents who did not vitally need the support (Chadwick et al, 2018). Furthermore GLA (2016) found that perceptions of long placement waiting times and tedious paperwork were an additional deterrent for parents considering using the entitlement. In the qualitative research within this project, the online application process was reported by LAs and providers to be a barrier for parents to securing a FEEE place¹⁹. Parents, in particular with EAL, were reported to find the process difficult and confusing and to lack the necessary IT and literacy skills to complete an online application form independently. Parents *'don't [always] live in an online world with access to smartphones and ICT'*, and as a consequence both LAs and providers emphasised the need for face to face outreach and support with applications, particularly with EAL parents. There was an example of a parent who had had registered for a 15 hours FEEE place for her 3 year old but had not taken it up as she was waiting to find the right provider, and she had had to ask a friend to help her as she didn't have the skills to complete the online form.

Checking eligibility of 2 year olds

London LAs reported problems with checking the eligibility of 2 year olds where additional evidence was required. They also reported that parents struggled to provide the necessary documentation such as NI numbers, which acted as a barrier to completing their eligibility checks and taking up their FEEE place. Within some LAs, the introduction of Universal Credit (UC) meant that it has become more difficult to identify who is eligible for the 2year old entitlement.

Summary

The published evidence and qualitative findings convey a very mixed picture in relation to awareness of the funded entitlements, parents' access to information and the experience of the application process. Parents found out about the entitlement from a wide variety of sources and providers commented that they were unable to translate all materials into the community languages of their local populations.

From the perspective of the parents (who were not taking up the entitlement), the main barrier appeared to be confusion over the eligibility criteria with

¹⁹ It is unclear whether this referred to the 15 hours or the 30 hours policy.

misconceptions relating to employment status, welfare benefits, the age of the child and local discretionary entitlements. It was apparent that the changing criteria that apply as child pass through their pre-school years in relation to employment conditions are not yet universally understood.

Among the research participants, there were parents who were interested to find out about the entitlements and were able to articulate the benefits for themselves as parents as well as for their child, suggesting that take-up could be increased if the understanding of the entitlements was improved.

For some parents, the application process was a challenge, both in terms of the IT requirements for registering and then securing a place at a preferred provider.

6. Patterns of take-up: London compared with other areas in England

This chapter draws together the findings from earlier chapters to assess possible explanations for the low and declining take-up in London.

The patterns of take-up in other large, culturally diverse city areas do not appear to reflect those of London as they have higher rates of 2 year old take up and have not seen a decline in 3 and 4 year old take up. This suggests that there are distinct features of London that have contributed to the declining take-up for 3 and 4 year olds and the below national average take up for 2 year olds. Interestingly, however, early years leads in non-London LAs gave similar explanations for non take-up as London LAs and mentioned the same challenges. There were also no marked differences in the approaches taken by non-London LAs compared with those in London to promote the FEEE entitlements and to identify and engage eligible parents.

In relation to parental attitudes and decision-making, among both non-London and London LAs, some felt they did not have a good understanding of parental factors affecting take-up. They had some anecdotal evidence but acknowledged the need for more robust research to develop knowledge about why parents are not taking up their FEEE. In contrast, other LA leads, both in London and outside, reported that there were no or few supply-side factors affecting take-up and that the main issue was lack of demand among parents due to cultural preferences for a family member to provide care for a child or beliefs about the appropriate age for education at an external provider. As part of a wider discussion on the attitudes and views of ethnic minority groups, some LA leads also described the particular challenges of engaging parents from different cultural backgrounds who had English as an additional language.

The importance of language as a factor affecting take-up was highlighted by the secondary data analysis, reported in full in the Technical Appendix. This indicated that the proportion of children with EAL was one of the main area-level predictors of low take-up rates for 2, 3 and 4 year old FEEE, along with population mobility and SEND rates for 3 to 4 year olds, independent of other characteristics.

The average proportion of children in London with EAL (49%) is more the double that of the national average (23%). Similarly, the average proportion of population mobility for children aged 0 to 4 years in London is 14 per cent compared to the national average of 10 per cent (ranging nationally from 5% to 19%). The super-diversity of London, with populations from a wider range of background and cultures and speaking more languages, is likely to magnify the challenges encountered in trying to engage parents with EAL in other large, culturally diverse cities.

There are also significant resource implications of needing to be able to communicate in a greater number of languages and with a higher volume of EAL parents than in other cities. With reductions in LA spending being commonly mentioned as a barrier to outreach by both London and non-London LAs, it appears that the effects of smaller teams and fewer resources are keenly felt in areas with varied populations where a range of engagement strategies are required.

Key issues around funding rates raised by London and non-London LAs and providers were:

- In areas where the funding rate for 2 year olds is relatively close to or less than that of 3 and 4 year olds, there is less incentive for providers to offer 2 year old places and a greater propensity to offer places to 3 and 4 year olds instead.
- The coexistence of affluent and deprived areas in relatively small geographic areas, which means providers are disincentivised to offer FEEE places and prioritise instead places for paying parents who are able to pay higher rates.
- High costs to run a business, which result in providers choosing to charge for extras to cover costs not perceived to be included in the funding rate, which FEEE parents cannot afford.

In relation to population churn whereby the average proportion of population mobility of children aged 0 to 4 years in London (14%) is higher than that of the national average (10%), having a less stable and settled population affected the LAs' ability to ensure the community was well informed about the FEEE. Also, LAs considered that transient families were unlikely to be in an area for long enough to register their child at a setting.

Again, these challenges are likely to affect London LAs more acutely than non-London LAs. While all large, culturally diverse urban areas experience greater population churn than other areas, this is even more significant in a global city of the size of London. Similarly, the existence of extremes of wealth and poverty within small geographical areas is more prevalent in London, which may mean that a larger number of providers can opt not to offer FEEE; several London LAs have funding rates for 2 year olds that are relatively close to the rate for 3 and 4 year olds; and the costs of setting up and running a business are higher in all urban areas but particularly so in London.

7. Actions to improve take-up

This chapter describes the strategies and actions that LAs and childcare providers have taken to improve take-up of FEEE and the extent to which they are perceived to have been successful. The chapter concludes with an overview of what additional support LAs, providers and parents suggest is needed to improve take-up further.

Findings from the evidence review indicated that national and local strategies designed to improve take-up of the FEEE address the full range of potential reasons for non-take-up outlined in previous chapters, demonstrating an understanding of the multifaceted and interactive nature of the challenges. The 'Learning from What Works' report (Hempsall's, 2015), identified ten characteristics of areas where take-up is highest including partnerships between providers; financial management; and supporting parents through awareness raising, simplifying the customer journey and improving IT and online systems. The list is backed up by good practice case study examples from local areas across the country, but the report does not provide impact evidence on whether the take-up rates are a result of the activities or which of the activities is most important.

These strategies have been backed by considerable investment. The NAO reported that the Department for Education spent £7.4 million between 2012-13 and 2015-16 on activities intended to increase take-up (NAO, 2016). Most of this investment (£5.4 million) was directed to the 'Achieving 2 year olds' programme (A2YO²⁰) which supports local authorities with implementation.

The strategies to improve take-up identified from the qualitative research with LAs and providers focused on the demand-side factors, addressing parental awareness and understanding of the FEEE and practical barriers:

- Marketing and messaging approaches to improve parents' awareness of FEEE within a locality.
- A direct approach, which involved contacting parents who were likely to be eligible and making them aware of the entitlement and its benefit.
- Partnership working with professionals and volunteers engaged in targeting eligible parents to explain FEEE and its benefits.
- Improving the infrastructure of the application process to make it easier for parents to apply.

²⁰ <https://www.foundationyears.org.uk/early-education-entitlement/achieving-2-year-olds/>

Evidence from the qualitative interviews indicates that LAs typically used a combination of actions to improve take-up. The ability to implement these was underpinned by three factors: the capacity, resources and budget within early years teams; the quality and nature of partnerships and relationships across local services; and the extent of senior support within an LA for the drive to increase take-up.

The qualitative interviews with LAs and providers aimed to extend our understanding of the actions and their perceived effectiveness.

7.1 Marketing and messaging approaches

General marketing campaigns

LA marketing campaigns aimed to build recognition and familiarisation of FEEE by using bright colours and recognisable branding across all materials and adopting clear and consistent messages about FEEE. LAs themselves were not able to demonstrate or evidence that marketing campaigns resulted in an increase in take-up. However, where providers had experienced a decrease in awareness of FEEE some linked this to the fact that the LA had stopped marketing FEEE in the borough.

LAs reported advertising FEEE in a range of locations and via different methods. This included adverts on bin lorries, bus stops and distributing fliers via settings used by families of young children (such as children's centres, libraries and General Practice surgeries).

Targeted marketing campaigns

There were also examples of more targeted marketing campaigns. For example, LAs had made use of lists provided by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to identify the parents of eligible 2 year olds and send them a postcard advertising the funded entitlement. LAs also made use of local events to market FEEE. The case illustration below demonstrates how this was implemented in one case study area.

Case illustration – LA outside London

An LA outside of London with average 2 year old take-up considered early education to be a vital part of their safeguarding and social care work. The LA tried to engage parents via innovative face to face methods to explain eligibility and the benefits for children and parents. For example, they organised birthday parties at children centres where they talked to parents about the 2 year old entitlement. Providers noticed the amount of publicity and parents commented on the posters advertising the entitlement.

“Parents are very aware of the offer. There has been a lot of publicity locally.”
(School, LA outside London)

“It was more just adverts really or when you go past nurseries and you can see that you're eligible to get free hours [of] childcare.” (Parent, LA outside London)

The LA had experienced funding cuts, but was able to continue with outreach activities by identifying relevant events hosted by local partners. For example, they worked with community groups and leaders, to raise awareness and shift perceptions. Despite this, some providers commented that the amount of local advertising around the entitlement had reduced and thought that the momentum was declining.

“There was initially a big push and advertising campaign but this has now stopped and parents seem less aware.” (Childminder, LA outside London)

Ambiguity about whether or not parents were entitled to the 2 year old places was perceived to discourage parents from going through the process of checking their eligibility. LAs have access to lists of parents who are *potentially* eligible for the 2 year old entitlement, provided by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), which are issued to LAs seven times a year. LAs suggested that it would be more useful for them if they could receive a list of just those parents who definitely eligible to allow for targeted marketing and follow-up. However, data protection laws prevent this from being possible. (For more information on this, see the section on additional support needs below.)

Marketing in specific languages

There were examples of LAs that had developed marketing materials in languages widely spoken by communities within their borough. Typically, flyers were translated into multiple languages, but there were also examples of videos being developed in particular languages. Video content included a description of

FEEE, as well as a discussion of the benefits it has for children. LAs also employed community outreach workers who spoke community languages.

“... Because someone may not read in English or speak English fluently it doesn't mean that they don't have the same kind of queries but we need to make that much more [of a dialogue]. So we produce everything in different community languages but we try and support that with some direct engagement because we have to have that conversation to understand what the barriers are.” (LA early years lead, Outer London)

There were some LAs, however, that did not have the budget to market in different languages even though they thought it would be beneficial.

Marketing alone was not reported to be sufficient for improving take-up of FEEE. Where capacity and resource allowed, it was combined with the other approaches discussed below.

Messaging

There were examples of LAs that adopted different messages in their marketing of the funded entitlements, distinguishing between the 2 year old entitlement and 3 and 4 year old entitlement. For instance, in one borough the 2 year old entitlement was marketed as 'early learning', whereas the 3 and 4 year old entitlement was marketed as 'early education'. The view was that this distinction might make a difference to the way parents viewed the provision and could encourage take-up, addressing the concern among some parents that 2 year olds were too young for early education. There were also examples where the benefits of FEEE for both children and parents were emphasised.

Provider marketing

The extent to which providers publicised FEEE places ranged widely. Providers that reported actively promoting places were school-based providers and private nurseries that had placed fliers in local children's centres, libraries and GP surgeries.

Where providers did not publicise FEEE places, the reasons included:

- Having no difficulty filling places, so they did not need to advertise.
- Providers could not afford to advertise.
- They believed that all parents knew about FEEE so did not see any value in publicising it. This view was held by a range of types of provider.

In some cases, providers saw it as sufficient just to advertise the FEEE places they offered primarily via LA marketing and advertisement such as the Family Information Service website.

7.2 Direct contact

The second approach taken by LAs to improve take-up was to contact parents directly. Personal contact with parents was reported to be a highly effective way of engaging parents, informing them of FEEE and encouraging take-up. It was widely recognised, however, that this was a resource and time-intensive approach and, for this reason, some LAs had had to stop it. Findings from the qualitative interviews and RAE found that the five main approaches for making direct contact with parents were: door knocking, via staff in children's centres, making use of parent champions (or similar); improving the application process; and engaging parents of children with SEND. Mention was also made of the introduction of dedicated hubs which had been given funding solely to improve take-up of FEEE.

The 'golden ticket' approach reported to be particularly effective for parents of eligible 2 year olds. LAs sent postcards to parents letting them know that they *might* be eligible or that they were *definitely* eligible. LAs were positive about this approach and thought it to be more effective when a stronger statement about eligibility was given:

"The golden ticket was the big thing. When we introduced the golden ticket, and I'd say we did that early on, our rates [of take-up] jumped up by a very large percentage." (LA early years lead, Outer London)

Directly targeting eligible parents by door-knocking

Using the DWP lists of parents with potentially eligible 2 year olds, LA staff visited parents' homes to inform them of their eligibility. In one LA which struggled to engage parents in the FEEE, staff deliberately wore high visibility red jackets in the hope that parents would answer the door thinking it was someone from the Post Office. For this particular LA, they found this type of direct contact to be effective, but also resource intensive.

Other LAs found door knocking to be less effective, with examples of LAs reporting that parents found it too intrusive and requiring "*very intensive resource for very little outcome*".

Outreach through children's centres

LAs reported that they had been able to make use of the good relationships between children's centres and parents. Children's centres were considered an

effective way to directly engage parents by building parents' trust and reassuring parents who might have concerns about using FEEE.

A variety of strategies were taken to make sure children's centres were targeting the right population. For instance, there were examples of LAs combining the DWP lists with the children's centre lists to identify the families who were known to be eligible for, but not taking up, a FEEE place and directly targeting them.

One LA that had a high proportion of parents with English as an additional language who were eligible for the 2 year old entitlement focused their outreach work on raising awareness of FEEE with this group of parents as well provide one-to-one support with the application for the entitlement.

"If you're talking about a parent who wants to know what [the two year old offer is, or] what the universal offer is, that used to be done quite impersonally and now we have people actually in each of the children's centres, supporting and helping parents. That is particularly important for our 2 years old offer because most of our 2 years old families don't speak English and so they find it really difficult to access any of the Government's websites or other websites for that matter." (LA early years lead, Inner London)

Case illustration – Outer London borough with above average take-up

Direct and persistent contact with parents was considered to be instrumental in the increased take-up of the 2 year old entitlement in this London borough. Direct contact was achieved through door knocking and supported by insights from children centre staff about the reasons for non take-up, which typically focused on parents thinking their child was too young. Having this insight allowed the LA to focus on the benefits for the child of small group provision and the home-based education provided by childminders.

"What we were looking to do was to promote home-based childcare a lot more. We gave an outline of what's available in each type of setting and what type of child would benefit. It gave us an opportunity to promote the diversity of our offer for our parents rather than just saying "it's a thing, check if you're eligible". It more than doubled [take up of 2 year old offer], which is brilliant and has set us in good state for work with 30 hours because our childminders are kingpins for 30 hours. They are our flexibility offer."

The view from a children's centre in the borough was that childminders had been very active in trying to increase take-up. For example, local childminders had been hosting stay and play sessions at children centres to make contact with parents and build their trust.

The LA had also emphasised the skills of childminders in working with SEND children. Two childminders in the borough had been given the title of ‘childminder champions’ to denote their particular skill and expertise supporting SEND children. Their positive experience of caring for SEND children led them to become advocates and encourage other childminders to do the same.

Parent champions, volunteers and advocates

The evidence review identified an initiative of the Family and Childcare Trust (now Coram Family and Childcare) called Parent Champions²¹, which trains parent volunteers to raise awareness of the FEEE and its value for young children within their communities. The initiative addresses specifically the barriers around information and awareness not just of the details of the entitlement, but also of the value of early education (directly addressing the parental preferences identified in the literature).

LAs reported using Parent Champions as part of their efforts to increase take-up of FEEE. According to LAs, the role was used to build good relationships with parents and particularly parents from groups who have historically been hard to engage in services. Parent Champions are encouraged to talk to other parents about FEEE and inform them about the entitlement, with a view that this trusted relationship with a peer may encourage parents to take up a place. In one borough, volunteers who spoke community languages were recruited so that they could target parents who may not be using FEEE because of a language barrier.

Partnership working

The third key strategy for improving take-up was partnership working. One of the key ways LAs were able to take a direct approach and reach parents was through raising awareness of FEEE among health, social care practitioners and Jobcentre advisors, who regularly see and support parents who are eligible. The extent of partnership working varied among LAs. In some instances the partnership extended only to information sharing between the LA and practitioners so that they could make eligible parents aware of the FEEE. In these instances LAs provided fliers for health visitors and Jobcentre staff to distribute. In other LAs, partnership working was more developed and this facilitated a much more targeted approach to encourage take-up. For example,

²¹ <http://www.parentchampions.org.uk/about-us/>

in one LA, health visitors had been encouraged to introduce FEEE during the 2 year old review.

Finally, there were instances of LAs building relationships with providers, in order to increase sufficiency or market the FEEE more widely. There was one example where providers and the LA were working together to make it more explicit that childminders could be used for FEEE places.

Improving application process

The fourth strategy for increasing take-up was improving the application process which was identified by parents as a barrier (chapter 4). A number of LAs had introduced an online application process for the 2 year old entitlement for two reasons - to ease the burden on LA staff manually processing application and to make the application process easier for parents.

Views were mixed on the impact of having an online application system. LAs in favour reported that it made the application process easier for parents and providers and ensured smoother referrals:

“Best thing we ever did was get the online system. It’s easy for parents, providers and us. It gives oversight instantly and allows us to operate a seamless and quick referral service.” (LA early years lead, Outer London)

In contrast, some LAs thought having an online application system had negatively affected take-up, or had no effect on the basis that parents who were not already taking up FEEE needed one-to-one support to overcome their barriers.

Identifying and engaging parents of SEND children

The fifth strategy, which was not widespread across the sample, was to focus specifically on parents of SEND children to address low take-up. Where action had been taken, strategies included developing a new role within the Early Years team, with specific responsibility for improving the sufficiency and quality of SEND provision. Another LA developed a SEND brokerage system in parallel with developing PVI capacity to take on SEND children.

Introduction of Early Years Hubs

One approach that sits outside of the five described above, is the introduction of Early Years Hubs in London in 2018 to increase the take-up of 2, 3 and 4 year old FEEE and increase parental knowledge of early education and the entitlements alongside improving quality and promoting the early years

profession. The Hubs, located in Newham, Barnet and Wandsworth and Merton, will receive funding to address both supply and demand side issues²². An evaluation is being commissioned to assess the success of the initiative.

7.3 Facilitators to improving take-up

In order to effectively implement the approaches outlined above, the LAs needed dedicated staff that were able to promote the FEEE agenda; the buy-in and support from senior stakeholders and to make use of the budget LAs received to implement the 30 hours of FEEE.

Dedicated staff to promote FEEE

LAs that had experienced high take-up saw this as resulting from heavy investment in staff and partnership working within the LA. They had a dedicated team of staff with specific responsibility for brokerage. In addition to these roles, it was reported that good links with children's centres were instrumental, as well as having an outreach worker. Where outreach and brokerage have been reduced due to funding pressures, LA staff and providers perceived take-up to have been adversely affected.

Senior buy-in and support

Linked to investment was the buy-in and support of senior LA staff which was perceived to help in a number of ways. This included ensuring early years teams had sufficient budgets to develop marketing campaigns and helping to harness the support of senior stakeholders from key partners such as health visiting, social care and employment services. Conversely, there were LAs who reported that a lack of support from senior LA staff acted as a barrier to promoting take-up.

Use of the 30 hours budget

There were some examples of LAs making use of the funding associated with the 30 hour places for 3 and 4 year olds to improve activities to target 2 year old families. The funding provided the opportunity to develop processes and systems for the universal 15 hours for 3 and 4 year olds that could also be used for the 2 year old entitlement. This allowed extra capacity and meant 30 hour work did not take focus off the universal entitlements or the 2 year old FEEE.

²² <https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/mayoral/mayor-launches-early-years-hubs>

7.4 Additional support needed

LAs and providers participating in the qualitative research reflected on what additional support was needed to improve or continue actions they had found to be effective. Four key support needs were identified including: the introduction of a national campaign, accurate details of eligible parents, ring-fenced funding and resource for outreach and brokerage work, and local networks to improve the use of data.

National campaign

There was appetite from LAs for the introduction of a national campaign based on the view that this would improve awareness. LAs considered that a national campaign would provide a strong foundation to build on and allow them to use their resources to target the nuanced and community specific barriers to take-up in the local area. LAs also thought that a national campaign might compensate for the reduced marketing campaigns that some LAs had experienced due to budget reductions.

Accurate details of eligible parents

As described above, direct and targeted contact with eligible parents was perceived to improve the take-up of FEEE. There were three key challenges which inhibited LAs from doing this. First, LAs had a misconception that the introduction of UC and changes to EYPP meant that the DWP list no longer captures just eligible parents, but also includes parents who are not eligible. LAs suggested that it would be useful to have DWP lists that were more specific. It was also suggested that it would be useful to have information on changes to eligibility thresholds and UC communicated to LAs. However, it should be noted that the DWP lists are intended to be *indicative* of eligibility rather than specific, as rapidly changing circumstances means it is not possible to keep these records entirely up to date.

Second, early years teams had limited resources, capacity and in some cases lacked the right skills to interrogate population or health data. It was reported that making use of available local and national datasets might provide a better indication of eligible parents within the LA (where data protection legislation allowed). One solution suggested by an LA was access to help and support from DfE to navigate and interpret national datasets to identify eligible parents. Specifically they wanted support to be able to identify what datasets they could use, how these could be interpreted and how this data could be used locally.

Third, there were examples of LAs who felt they would benefit from a list of eligible parents for the universal entitlement. LAs reported that it was difficult to identify where the gaps were in take-up. For instance, one LA with below

average take-up of the universal entitlement explained that they had no way of knowing who was not using their FEEE place. They felt that there must be a dataset that could help them identify this group of parents, but were not sure who the owner of this was and how to access it.

Ring-fenced funding and resources

LAs recognised that targeted work needs to be undertaken to overcome specific localised barriers to take-up of FEEE. In the absence of sufficient funding and reduced resources, LAs have had to reduce any targeted work they had done previously.

"We need to get out and about to talk to people out during the day with pushchairs and ask them about FEEE and promote services but there's no resource to do that." (LA early years lead, LA outside London)

Trying to identify families who were not using FEEE and identify the barriers to take-up was considered a key way to achieving positive change. LAs reported that with current time and resource constraints experienced within EY teams, there was limited capacity to do this.

Local networks to improve data interpretation

Another LA suggested that using local networks to help interpret available data and plan strategies would help. It was thought that local networks would allow LAs to share practices on how to interpret local figures and what actions, if any, have been put into place to overcome barriers in interpreting and using these figures.

7.5 Parents' views on what else could improve take-up

Parents were also asked to reflect on the strategies they thought LAs and providers could implement to improve FEEE take-up. Four ideas were put forward: wider publication and marketing of FEEE; timely information from statutory services; reassurance that the childcare on offer is good quality; and longer hours with more flexible provision.

Wider marketing and publication of FEEE

Although LAs and providers believed marketing alone would not improve take-up, both parents who were aware of FEEE and those who were not, felt that wider publication might be a way to improve take-up. Parents suggested that this should be done on both a national and local level. National approaches could include adverts on the radio and television. More local approaches included advertising at local libraries. It was also suggested that social media

would be an effective channel. Parents reported having busy family lives and that wider publication might raise the profile and awareness of FEEE.

“[TV and radio adverts] would make it more knowledgeable to people because they just don’t think about it, unless you go fishing for anything, you’re not given any information.” (Parent of eligible 3 year old, Outer London, unaware of entitlement)

Timely information from statutory services

Another way parents thought take-up could be improved was through introducing FEEE to parents during visits from health visitors (for example at the 2 year check-up) or at GP surgeries. It was thought that this would be a way of raising awareness universally so that no-one missed out. Another parent proposed that all parents should be told about FEEE by their midwife soon after their child’s birth.

Reassurance of good quality childcare

As described in chapter 4, there was a group of parents who were aware of FEEE but had chosen not to use it because of concerns about the quality of childcare provision. Parents with this view described needing lots of reassurance about the quality of childcare before they would consider using FEEE. For example, one parent explained that they would like detailed information about the staff at the nursery, to ensure they had the right qualifications and experience to care for her child. Another suggested that parents might feel reassured by feedback on childcare providers from parents using the provision:

“If you give them some more information, feedback that people relate to, that comes from normal people, not from the Government or from the nursery itself.” (Parent of eligible 3 year old including 30 hours, Outer London, aware of both entitlements)

Longer hours and more flexible provision

Parents, particularly those who were lone parents, reported that they would have taken up FEEE if provision was longer and could be used more flexibly. For instance, one lone parent, who was working 30 hours per week (and in fact eligible for 30 free hours but not aware of it), was not using the funded place because it was considered insufficiently flexible. Instead of using Ofsted-registered nursery provision, this parent had chosen to employ a childminder who was not registered but flexible.

Summary

The rapid evidence review and the qualitative research both demonstrated that LAs and providers are actively engaged in attempts to improve take-up of FEEE, backed by considerable funding. So far, there is limited evidence on the effectiveness of the strategies taken.

The evidence from the qualitative interviews indicated that LAs and providers are focused on the demand-side factors limiting take-up with strategies that address parents' awareness of the entitlements, access to information and support with the application process.

Four specific approaches were identified: marketing and messaging activities, direct contact with parents, partnership working between agencies and setting up online application processes. Factors which undermined these efforts included limitations to working across a wide range of community languages, which some areas were able to accommodate better than others. Another factor was the quality of the DWP lists of eligible or potentially eligible parents. Ambiguity in eligibility was considered to undermine parents' willingness to engage with the policy and further exacerbated the resource-intensive nature of outreach efforts.

LA leads, providers and parents identified further actions that they considered might help to improve take-up. Providers cited a national campaign, accurate details on the DWP lists and ring-fenced funding. Parents suggested wider marketing including the timely sharing of information in relation to their own circumstances, more information about the quality of provision and longer, more flexible hours.

8. Conclusions

This research was prompted by concern that a substantial minority of young children are not accessing the funded early education entitlements for which they are eligible. Although take-up of the universal 15 hours for 3 and 4 year olds is high, it is markedly lower in London and has been declining over recent years. Take-up of the 2 year old entitlement for disadvantaged children is lower than for older children for reasons which are not explained in any detail by previous research. Take-up rates are also lower in London.

Building on a rapid review of the evidence and analysis of the Department's take-up data, a programme of qualitative work was carried out to investigate the drivers of non take-up, the particular issues influencing take-up in London and the strategies that have the potential to improve take-up rates. Interviews were carried out across 21 local authorities in and beyond London, sampled to cover the range of characteristics and experiences. From these interviews, 5 case study areas were selected for exploring the perspectives of providers and parents. The qualitative evidence is, by its nature, perception-based and therefore not able to definitively answer questions of relative importance of drivers of take-up or relative effectiveness of strategies. Instead, it provides the detailed insights of stakeholders who can explain the interaction between factors within a local context and with reference to the particular population.

The two main provider-related issues reported to affect take-up rates were sufficiency and funding. Given that the context for both of these issues has changed over recent years, and that the challenges are pronounced in London, it seems highly likely that they go some way to explaining the lower and declining take-up rates in London. The sharp rise in the numbers of children eligible for funded places due to population growth, and the introduction of the 15 hours for 2 year olds in 2013 and extended hours for some 3 and 4 year olds in 2017, has required a substantial expansion of the market. Evidence suggests London has lower rates of sufficiency (Harding et al, 2017) meaning it is least able to match the demand with childcare places. In the qualitative research, sufficiency was found to be closely related to cost and funding issues including hourly rates, the cost of premises and the ability to expand. These challenges were most acute in London.

The interviews with 40 parents whose children were eligible for the 2 year old or 3 and 4 year old universal entitlement, but who were not taking it up, conveyed the wide range of attitudes and experiences that related to their non take-up. Whereas published evidence, particularly from survey data, tends to collate demand-side explanations for non take-up under the umbrella of 'parental preferences', the qualitative study was able to distinguish between parental choice, perceived constraints and practical barriers to a much greater extent.

It was apparent that some of the parents interviewed had made an active and positive choice to not take up the entitlements relating to their own employment status, a desire to be involved with their children, wanting to teach their child about their culture and religion, attitudes about the appropriate age for formal education and childcare and the extent to which they trusted formal provision to meet their child's needs. However, it was also the case that some parents were not taking up the entitlement because of a lack of awareness and in particular, misconceptions over eligibility criteria. Some parents also had concerns about hidden costs, lack of flexibility and poor quality which undermined take-up. For others, the practical barriers around the application process and finding a place were the main issues.

The LA early years leads and providers demonstrated extensive understanding of the challenges of sharing information effectively with parents, particularly in areas with transient populations or where English was an additional language. The regression analysis highlighted population mobility of children aged 0 to 4 years, the proportion of EAL children and the proportion of children with SEND to be important drivers of take-up rates, and the evidence suggests that this may relate to a combination of information barriers, cultural preferences and population transience. LA leads and providers also talked about the need to explain the benefits of early education, adapting messaging to explain what early education means for 2 year olds. Multiple strategies were being implemented, usually in combination, with varying degrees of perceived success. Both providers and parents were able to identify additional strategies that they thought might be effective, including clearer information about eligibility and longer, more flexible hours.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that there is scope to increase take-up rates by addressing the funding pressures that may be undermining sufficiency, particularly in London, and ensuring effective communication with parents about the benefits of early education, their eligibility, costs and quality. From the evidence, it seems likely, however, that some parents will choose to begin formal early education when their child is older than 2, meaning that there will be a limit to the threshold in take-up rates achieved.

Technical appendix: Rapid Evidence Assessment

The following search engines were used to find evidence on take-up of FEEE.

- Google Scholar
- EBSCO Host
- ERIC
- British Education Index
- Summon
- Scopus
- Social Science Research Network
- EPPI Centre evidence library
- Web of Science

We searched using the following terms and focused on academic and grey literature published since 2011 (to encompass the pilot of the two year old FEEE):

1. (offer OR free OR funded) N2 ("child care" OR childcare OR child-care OR provision OR nursery OR ECEC OR "early school education" OR "early education" OR "infant education" OR preschool OR pre-school OR "preschool")
2. 1 + Disadvantage* N2 ((2 OR two) N2 year OR 'year olds' OR 'years old' OR aged)
3. 1 + (2 OR two OR ((3 OR three) AND (4 OR four))) N2 year OR 'year olds' OR 'years old' OR aged)
4. 1 + 'take up' OR 'take-up' OR uptake OR use OR utilis* OR promot* OR participat*
5. 2 + 'take up' OR 'take-up' OR uptake OR use OR utilis* OR promot* OR participat*
6. 3 + 'take up' OR 'take-up' OR uptake OR use OR utilis* OR promot* OR participat*

Information relating to different aspects of take-up was extracted and organised within a spreadsheet to aid reporting. In this review, we adopt the terminology of the studies reported rather than impose the OECD accepted term of early childhood education and care (ECEC).

Summary of evidence

The most robust and comprehensive information on provision and take-up is provided by the Department for Education's own research and statistics²³ which includes:

- Annual administrative data on take-up at ages 2, 3 and 4
- Cross-sectional, national, repeat surveys of providers and parents
- Statistics on 30 hours.

Alongside the official statistics are evaluations of the two year old entitlement (the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED)²⁴).

The main source of evidence on childcare sufficiency is the Family and Childcare Trust's annual survey of the perceptions of local authority early years leads, and on costs, a report from the SEED study. For detailed evidence about parents' experiences, attitudes and decision-making processes, sources include surveys and qualitative research.

In general, the evidence on the reasons for take-up (and non take-up) was descriptive rather than explanatory. Clear patterns of take-up in terms of family, child and area characteristics were evident but evidence explaining these patterns is limited. This is partly because of the interactions between the many factors that affect parents' decision-making.

²³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-childcare-and-early-years>

²⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/study-of-early-education-and-development-seed>

Technical appendix: Secondary data analysis: categorisation of local authorities

The 152 LAs were categorised to identify patterns in take-up for the purpose of sampling for the qualitative work. First, the LAs were grouped into ‘below average’, ‘broadly average’, and ‘above average’ based on 2017 take-up rates²⁵. The groups were defined according to descriptive analysis of the take-up data and it was decided to set the boundaries at 0 to 39th percentile (‘below average’), 40th to 60th percentile (‘broadly average’) and 61st to 100th percentile (‘above average’).²⁶ Using the same boundary definitions, variables were created for 2 year old take-up and 3 and 4 year old take-up for the 152 LAs.

Table 1: Take-up rates by age in England, 2017

Category	Take-up rate for 2 year olds (%)	Take-up rate for 3-4 year olds (%)
Below average (0 to 39 th percentile)	39 to <69	59 to <95
Broadly average (40 th to 60 th percentile)	69 to 76	95 to 97
Above average (61 st to 100 th percentile)	>76 to 100	>97 to 100

²⁵ The 2018 rates had not been published at the time the analysis was conducted.

²⁶ Note that for this and the rest of the analysis, LAs with >100% take-up rates (resulting from double counting) were recoded to 100%.

Based on the above categories, variables were also created for the 32 London boroughs based on the distribution of take-up within London to identify patterns within the capital (n=32)²⁷.

Table 2: Take-up rates by age in London only

Category	Take-up rate for 2 year olds (%)	Take-up rate for 3-4 year olds (%)
Below average (0 to 39 th percentile)	39 to <59	59 to <84
Broadly average (40 th to 60 th percentile)	59 to <62	84 to <86
Above average (61 st to 100 th percentile)	62 to 90	86 to 96

Note: The take-up rates for each category are expressed differently in Table 1 (England) and Table 2 (London only) due to the precision at which they were measured (2 decimal places).

Secondly, variables were created to capture trends in take-up. For the 2 year old take-up, the variables described change between 2015 and 2017, the years for which data are available. For 3 and 4 year old take-up, the variables described change across 2013 to 2017 to capture longer trends. Frequency distributions informed the following categories, which were then also applied to the take-up rates of 3 to 4 year olds. The frequency distribution ranged from -14 to 67.

- 'sharp increase (>15 ppt change across the time period)'
- 'slight increase' (6 to 14 ppt)
- 'broadly stable' (-5 to 5 ppt)
- 'slight decrease' (-6 to -14 ppt)
- 'sharp decrease' (<-15 ppt).

Table 3 and Table 4 show the trends for all LAs and London boroughs. For 2 the year old entitlement, the majority of LAs have increased their take-up rates and 15 per cent have been broadly stable. Only one LA saw a decline in take-

²⁷ City of London was not included in the London average as the number of children and providers is very small.

up according to the categories. In London, the majority of LAs had either increased their take-up rates or remained broadly stable. The picture in Inner London is also positive, with all 13 boroughs increasing their take-up rates between 2015 and 2017. The Outer London boroughs have been less successful, with a substantially smaller proportion witnessing a sharp increase and approximately one-third remaining broadly stable.

Table 3 Trends in take-up rates for 2 year old entitlement 2015-2017

	All LAs	London	Inner London	Outer London
	%	%	%	%
Sharp increase	45	31	54	16
Slight increase	40	47	46	47
Broadly stable	15	19	0	32
Slight decrease	1	3	0	5
Sharp decrease	0	0	0	0
Base	152	32	13	19

Source: Children Under 5 years of age (Table 5LA)

The picture is very different for the 3 and 4 year old take-up over a wider period of 2013-2017. Nationally, most LAs were stable in their take-up rates, but in London, substantial proportions saw declining take-up rates, particularly in Inner London.

Given that there is more data available for the 3 and 4 year old take-up than for 2 year olds, trends for the older children were examined using data over a longer period. The take-up patterns from 2013 to 2017 were also more pronounced, demonstrating its dip over the years.

Table 4 Trends in take-up rates for 3 and 4 year old entitlement 2013-2017

	All LAs	London	Inner London	Outer London
	%	%	%	%
Sharp increase	0	0	0	0
Slight increase	1	0	0	0
Broadly stable	86	47	31	58
Slight decrease	12	50	62	42
Sharp decrease	1	3	8	0
Base	152	32	13	19

Source: Children Under 5 years of age (Table 5LA)

Technical appendix: Secondary data analysis: factors associated with take-up rates

Statistical plan

A range of socioeconomic and demographic factors identified in the literature as potentially associated with take-up rates at local authority level were explored using descriptive and regression analyses. The variables included proportions of children with SEND, English as an additional language, from minority ethnic backgrounds, along with indicators of income deprivation, employment deprivation, population mobility, and perceived sufficiency of childcare.

Correlations were performed to identify associations between the 2018 take-up rates and the area level characteristics. The variables which were significantly associated with take-up rates were then incorporated into regression analysis. Separate regression models were built for data on 2 year olds and 3 to 4 year olds.

Data sources

This section describes the different datasets used in the analyses. We selected datasets that preceded or were concurrent with the take-up data. In cases where data were not available for the children aged 2 to 4, we used data about primary school aged children as a proxy.

Take-up rates: The take-up rates for 2 year olds, 3 year olds, 4 year olds, and 3 to 4 year olds (combined) across local authorities in England were taken from the Department for Education's (DfE) Provision for Children under 5 years of age in England: January 2018²⁸. The 2018 data, published in June, were based on population figures and take-up rates in January 2018.

SEND: The data on SEND comes from the DfE's Special Education Needs in England: January 2018 dataset²⁹. The variable used in the analyses was proportion of children attending primary schools within a local authority who had SEND, to provide a proxy for the proportion of children of preschool age with SEND. Given that there was no available data on preschool aged children on a local authority level, data on primary school pupils was deemed the most

²⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/education-provision-children-under-5-years-of-age-january-2018>

²⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england-january-2018>

suitable option for analysis. SEND in this case, referred to children with statements, EHC plans or SEN support.

The average proportion of children with SEND across English local authorities was 14 per cent, ranging from 9 per cent (Nottinghamshire and Havering) to 19 per cent (Blackburn with Darwen and Salford). The national average was the same as the London average (14%) and across London boroughs proportions of children with SEND ranged from 9 per cent to 17 per cent. The LAs with the highest proportion of SEND in London were Tower Hamlets, Camden, Hounslow, Islington and Hackney (all 17%).

Ethnicity: Data on children's ethnic group was taken from the DfE's Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2018 – Local authority tables dataset³⁰. The variable used in the analyses was proportion of children attending primary schools within a local authority from minority ethnic groups. Based on research from the CEYSP series (Huskinson et al., 2016) which found that take-up was lowest amongst children from non-white ethnic backgrounds, this analysis focused on children belonging to a non-white ethnic background.

The average proportion of children from a non-white minority ethnic background across English local authorities was 28 per cent, ranging from 4 per cent (Durham and Redcar and Cleveland) to 85 per cent (Tower Hamlets). Other LAs with a high proportion of children from a minority ethnic background include Newham (82%), Redbridge (74%) and Brent (71%). The London average (57%) is twice that of the national average, ranging from 27 per cent (Richmond upon Thames) to 85 per cent (Tower Hamlets). It is notable that the lowest proportion of children from an ethnic minority background within a local authority in London (27% for Richmond upon Thames) is comparable to the national average of 28 per cent, demonstrating the super-diversity of London.

English as an additional language (EAL): Data on children's first language was also taken from the DfE's Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics: January 2018 – Local authority tables dataset. The variable used in the analyses was proportion of children attending primary schools within a local authority whose first language was not English. Given that data on EAL for 2-4 year olds was not available, this data was used as a proxy.

The average proportion of children with EAL across English LAs was 23 per cent, ranging from 1 per cent in Redcar and Cleveland to 75 per cent in Tower Hamlets. The average proportion of children with EAL across London boroughs

³⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2018>

was more than twice that of the national average at 49 per cent, ranging from Bromley (15%) to Tower Hamlets (75%). Other LAs in London with high proportions of children with EAL include Newham (73%), Brent (71%) and Redbridge (67%).

Income deprivation (IDACI): The Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) in 2015, from the Department for Communities and Local Government's English Indices of Deprivation 2015³¹, was used to capture economic deprivation. The variable used in the analyses was the rank of average score within each LA. A lower rank denotes a higher incidence of deprivation where the rank of 1 is given to the most deprived LA.

Employment deprivation: Similarly, the Department for Communities and Local Government's English Indices of Deprivation 2015 was used to capture employment deprivation at the LA level. The variable used in the analyses was the rank of average score. A lower rank denotes a higher incidence of deprivation where the rank of 1 is given to the most deprived LA.

Population mobility: An indicator of population mobility was derived from the Office for National Statistics' Internal Migration - Moves by Local Authorities and Regions in England and Wales by 5 year age group in 2016³². The variables used were the inflow and outflow of residents aged 0 to 4 years within each LA in 2016. Using population data on a LA level from the Nomis, Office for National Statistics' population estimates for local authorities in 2016³³, a variable was derived to measure the proportion of children aged 0 to 4 years that moved into or out of local authority (sum of inflow and outflow divided by the population of children in the same age group). The sum of inflow and outflow was selected in favour of the net of inflow and outflow because the variable of interest was the movement of children rather than net population.

The average population mobility of children aged 0 to 4 years across English LAs was 10 per cent, ranging from 5 per cent (Wirral, Hartlepool and South Tyneside) to 19 per cent (Isles of Scilly and Redbridge). The London average for population mobility was higher than the national average at 14 per cent, ranging from Hackney and Tower Hamlets (both 11%) to Redbridge (19%).

³¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2015>

³² <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/migrationwithinthek/datasets/internalmigrationmovesbylocalauthoritiesandregionsinenglandandwalesby5yearagegroupandsex>

³³ <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/query/construct/summary.asp?mode=construct&version=0&dataset=2002>

Perceived sufficiency of childcare: The variable for sufficiency was taken from data collected by Coram Family and Childcare (previously Family and Childcare Trust) on perceived sufficiency of childcare at the LA level in 2018 for 2 year olds and 3 to 4 year olds. Perceived sufficiency was assessed through the following question: “Does your local authority have enough childcare (childcare sufficiency) for the following groups (2 year olds, and 3 to 4 year olds entitled to 15 hours/week free early education)?” Early years leads were asked to rate the perceived childcare sufficiency in their LA on a three-point scale: Yes, in all areas/ Yes, in some areas/ No or cannot tell from the data. This measure is based on the LA’s self-report of sufficiency and no further information is collected about any evidence on which they base their assessment.

Since the LA data on perceived sufficiency are confidential, we do not report on area level figures. However, it is worth noting the overarching pattern towards greater homogeneity among responses in 2018 than in previous years with more LAs reporting sufficiency. As a result, there was less variability in the data which makes it harder to detect any relationship with take-up.

Results

Bivariate relationships

Take-up rate for 2 year olds

The take-up rate for 2 year olds was significantly associated with the take-up rate for 3 to 4 year olds, first language, ethnicity, SEND, population mobility and employment deprivation. The higher the proportion of children who do not speak English as a first language, belong to a minority ethnic background, have SEND or move in or out of a local authority, the lower the take-up rates for 2 year olds. Employment deprivation was also negatively correlated with take-up, meaning that where there was lower employment deprivation (a higher rank), take-up among eligible 2 year olds was higher.

Take-up rates for 3 to 4 year olds

The take-up rate for 3 to 4 year olds was positively associated with the take-up rate for 2 year olds. Other area level characteristics associated with take-up were IDACI, EAL, ethnicity, SEND and population mobility. The higher the income deprivation (denoted by a lower rank), and the higher the proportion of children whose first language is not English, identify with a minority ethnic background, have a SEND, or move into or out of a LA, the lower the take-up rate for 3 to 4 year olds.

Table 5 Correlation matrix of relationship between area level characteristics and FEEE take-up for 2, 3 and 4 year olds

		2018 take-up rates for 2 year olds	2018 take-up rates for 3 to 4 year olds
2018 take-up rate for 2 year olds	r N	-	.41*** 152
2018 take-up rate for 3 to 4 year olds	r N	.41*** 152	-
Proportion of minority ethnic children	r N	-.54*** 151	-.73*** 151
Proportion of primary aged children with EAL	r N	-.56*** 150	-.76*** 150
Proportion of primary aged children with SEND	r N	.17* 152	-.24** 152
Population mobility of 0 to 4 year olds	r N	-.49*** 119	-.53*** 119
IDACI	r N	-.00 124	.26** 124
Employment deprivation	r N	-.22* 123	-.15 123
Sufficiency rates for 2 year olds	r N	.08 136	.08 136
Sufficiency rates for 3 to 4 year olds	r N	-.02 136	-.05 136

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.0001

Note: Differences in sample size (N) is due to different definitions of local authorities and in some instances, missing data (see technical notes).

Ethnicity and EAL

Ethnicity and EAL were highly correlated ($r=.96$, $p<0.0001$). EAL was more strongly correlated with take-up rates for 2 year olds ($r=-.54$) and 3 to 4 year olds ($r=-.73$) than ethnicity (take-up rates for 2 year olds: $r=-.56$, take-up rates for 3 to 4 year olds: $r=-.76$). Therefore, to prevent any risk of multicollinearity, ethnicity was excluded from the regression models.

Regression analysis for take-up rates of 2 year olds

Based on the positive correlations, linear regression models were built to examine potential predictors of each entitlement³⁴. The regression model for 2 year old take-up predicted 32 per cent of unique variance (adjusted R Square= .32). EAL was the only predictor of the take-up rates for 2 year olds once other variables were taken into account. The amount of variance explained by the model was lower for the 2 year old take-up rates than for the 3 to 4 year old take-up rates, suggesting that there are additional factors affecting the 2 year old entitlement that weren't captured within the models.

Table 6 Regression output: relationship between area level characteristics and FEEE take-up for 2 year olds

	2018 take-up rates for 2 year olds b/(se)
2018 take-up rates for 3 to 4 year olds	.20 (.24)
Proportion of primary aged children with EAL	-.32* (.10)
Proportion of primary aged children with SEND	-.36 (.63)
Population mobility of 0 to 4 year olds	-.40 (.56)
Employment deprivation	-.01 (.02)

*p<0.05, **p<0.001.

Regression analysis for take-up rates of 3 to 4 year olds

A separate linear regression was built to explore potential predictors of the take-up rates for 3 to 4 year olds. The regression model predicted 62 per cent of the unique variance (Adjusted R Square= .62) whereby EAL, proportion of children who moved and proportion of primary school children with SEND were the significant predictors of take-up rates for 3 to 4 year olds.

³⁴ It should be noted that the regression models explore predictors at area level rather than individual level. The focus of the regressions was to identify the area level population characteristics associated with take-up rates rather than on the size of the coefficients.

Table 7 Regression output: relationship between area level characteristics and FEEE take-up for 3 and 4 year olds

	2018 take-up rates for 3 to 4 year olds b/(se)
2018 take-up rates for 2 year olds	.04 (.04)
Proportion of primary aged children with EAL	-.20** (.03)
Proportion of primary aged children with SEND	-.76* (.25)
Population mobility of 0 to 4 year olds	-.71* (.20)
IDACI	.00 (.10)

*p<0.05, **p<0.0001.

Interpretation

With respect to take-up rates for 2 year olds, on a national level, EAL was found to be the main predictor of take-up rates, suggesting that whether children have English as an additional language influences the take-up rate above and beyond any socioeconomic characteristics. The significant associations between take-up rates and other area level population characteristics were no longer significant when EAL was taken into account.

Similarly, the main factors influencing the take-up rates of early education entitlements for 3 to 4 year olds were EAL, population mobility and SEND. The associations with IDACI and take-up rates for 2 year olds were no longer significant when considered together in multivariate analysis.

Ethnicity was excluded from the regression models to avoid multicollinearity, but when the models were run with ethnicity in place of EAL, the result were similar. This suggests that the take-up of the early education entitlements is substantially influenced by a combination of language and culture.

When the analysis was repeated with 2017 take-up rates and pupil characteristics, the variables significantly associated with take-up rates were the same, indicating a consistent picture over time.

The fact that the regression models explained 32% of the variance in 2 year old take-up indicates that there may be additional factors driving the take-up rates of the 2 year old entitlement which would be valuable in explore in future research.

Limitations

The analysis is based on the 'children under 5' data which bases take-up figures on population estimates and census returns. There is likely to be some margin of error in both statistics and this may be higher in London where the population is more transient.

Primary school population data was used as a proxy for the proportion of 2, 3 and 4 year olds in each LA with EAL, SEND and from a minority ethnic background. The extent to which these proportions are an accurate reflection is likely to vary across LAs.

It should also be noted that the timings of the data sources are variable. Ideally, all the independent variables would be timed to closely precede the calculation of the take-up rates but the IDACI and employment deprivation data is from 2015 and the pupil characteristics are approximately concurrent.

Attempts were made to include a variable for funding rates in the analysis. It was not possible in the time available to accurately calculate the hourly funding rates for each area taking account of both the base rate and the supplementary funding sources.

Technical notes

Given that the data used in the secondary data analysis came from a variety of sources, there were different definitions of local authorities across some datasets. The list of 152 local authorities in the dataset on take-up rates³⁵ was used as a reference for all other datasets as take-up rates were the main variables of interest.

The various datasets also categorised local authorities (n=152) using two different sets of codes. This is a result of a change of local authority codes introduced by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) in January 2011. The ONS produced a list of local authorities with both sets of codes³⁶ (old and new) which was used in this exercise to match the local authorities across the various datasets and standardise them using a single set of LA codes for the analysis.

In the event that the local authority code from a specific dataset did not match either of the set of codes from the ONS, the local authority would be excluded from the analysis. This included district local authorities (n=9) such as

³⁵ Department for Education's (DfE) Provision for children under 5 years of age in England: January 2018 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/education-provision-children-under-5-years-of-age-january-2018>

³⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/new-local-authority-codes-january-2011>

Cambridge and Lincoln which had a different code from Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire. As a result of the different coding systems used in the datasets and the level of granularity of the local authorities listed (for instance, county or district local authorities), the final sample size differs for each dataset.

Technical Appendix: Qualitative methods

Table 8 Achieved sample of local authorities by primary selection criteria

Primary Criteria	Selection requirements	Completed
Geography	Inner London	7
	Outer London	8
	Outside London	6
Provider types within LA	High proportion of private and voluntary sector settings	7
	Higher proportion of maintained settings	3
Take-up of FEEE	Take-up rates for 2 year olds in 2017	
	above London average	10
	broadly average	7
	below average	4
	Take-up rates for 3 and 4 year olds in 2017	
	above London average	12
	broadly average	2
	below average	7
	Trends for 2 year olds 2015-2017	
	sharp increase	7
	slight increase	12
	broadly stable	2
	Trends for 3 and 4 year olds 2013-2017	
	broadly stable	10
	decrease in take-up	11
	Relatively high 2 YO take-up, low 3 and 4 YO take-up	4
Relatively low 2 YO take-up, high 3 and 4 YO take-up	2	
Deprivation (LA level)	High	14
	Medium	3
	Low	4
Ethnic diversity	SDI Rank 1-10	4
	SDI Rank 11-20	6
	SDI Rank 21-30	5
	SDI Rank 31-40	3
	SDI Rank 40+	3
	Total	21

Table 9 Achieved sample of childcare providers by case study areas

Case study area	Provider type (as noted on sample datasheet)	Completed
A Inner London Some indication of success in increasing take-up	Preschool/Playgroup	1
	Childminder	3
	Nursery	1
	School-based	2
Subtotal		7
B Outer London Some indication of success in increasing take-up	Preschool	1
	Childminder	1
	Nursery	3
	Children Centre	1
Subtotal		6
C Inner London Demonstrating an average trend of FEEE take-up	Preschool	3
	Childminder	2
	Nursery	1
Subtotal		6
D Outer London Demonstrating an average trend of FEEE take-up	Preschool	1
	Childminder	1
	Nursery	4 (1 maintained)
Subtotal		6
E (Non-London)	Preschool	0
	Childminder	2
	Nursery	2
	School-based	2
Subtotal		6
Total		31

Table 10 Achieved sample of parents by primary and secondary selection criteria

Primary criteria	Characteristics	Achieved
Eligibility	Parent of eligible 2 year	15
	Parent of eligible 3 or 4	25
Ethnic minority group	Yes	27
	No	13
Reported economic activity:	Full time paid employment	8
	Part time paid	23
	Not in paid employment	9
Lone parents	Yes	22
	No	18
Case study area	A	10
	B	1
	C	3
	D	14
	E	6
	Other	6
Secondary criteria		
Parents who registered for childcare but did not take it	Yes	4
	No	36
Child with additional needs	Yes	2
	No	35
Household income	Up to £5,199	2
	£5,200 and up to £10,399	11
	£10,400 and up to	11
	£15,600 and up to	6
	£26,000 and up to	1
	£31,200 and up to	1
	£36,400 and up to	1
	> £52,000 and above	7
Number of children in family	1	23
	2	11
	3+	6

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Glossary

A2YO	Achieving 2 Year Olds
DfE	Department for Education
CEYPS	Childcare and Early Years Parent Survey
EAL	English as an Additional Language
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EHC	Education, Health and Care Plan
EYPP	Early Years Pupil Premium
EYNFF	Early Years National Funding Formula
EYSFF	Early Years Single Funding Formula
FCT	Family and Childcare Trust
FEEE	Free entitlement to early education
FIS	Family Information Services
FSM	Free School Meals
IDACI	Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index
LA	Local authority
NPD	National Pupil Database
PVI	Private, Voluntary and Independent providers
SEED	Study of Early Education and Development
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities



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