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## Exploring the flexibility of the free entitlement to early education: research among parents

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### Background

All three- and four-year-olds are entitled to 570 hours of free early education per year (known as free entitlement) over no fewer than 38 weeks (which, for most, equates to 15 hours per week). Children become eligible from 1 September, 1 January or 1 April (the start of term), following their third birthday. They remain eligible until they reach compulsory school age (the term following their fifth birthday, though in practice most children now start school before this). Free early education places are available at a range of early years settings, including nursery schools and classes, children's centres, day nurseries, play groups, pre-schools and certain childminders.

Department for Education (DfE) estimates show that five percent of three- and four-year-olds were not accessing their free entitlement<sup>1</sup> and around one third do not use all of their 15 free hours.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the Department commissioned Ipsos MORI to explore parents' views on the delivery of the free entitlement in order to find out how take-up could be improved particularly in relation to its flexibility.

The DfE Code of Practice<sup>3</sup> is statutory guidance for local authorities on the delivery the free entitlement. This sets out a number of parameters within which the free entitlement provision should operate. The guidance covers the minimum and maximum number of hours per day, the number of days on which the free hours should be taken, restrictions on start and finish times, and the number of providers who can be involved in delivering free hours to a child. The parameters are not what local authorities have to make available to parents but are limits outside of which the entitlement should not operate.

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<sup>1</sup> Provision for Children Under Five Years of Age in England - January 2011, Department for Education Statistical First Release 2011 (SFR 13/2011).

<sup>2</sup> According to estimates in the Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents 2010 (Department for Education, 2012), 68% of parents using the entitlement used the full 15 hours or more and 32% used less than 15 hours.

<sup>3</sup> Code of Practice for Local Authorities on Delivery of Free Early Years Provision for 3 & 4 year olds (Department for Education, 2010).

## Methodology

The research comprised three strands:

- 40 qualitative interviews with parents of three- to four-year-olds;
- a telephone survey of 801 parents of two- to five-year-olds (including parents who were soon to be eligible for the entitlement and those who had used the entitlement in the past); and
- secondary analysis of data from the 2010 Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents.

## Key findings

*Are parents satisfied with the flexibility of the entitlement?*

- There was a high level of overall satisfaction with the free entitlement (88%). The majority of parents (87%) were satisfied with the days of the week that the free hours were available and a similar proportion (83%) were satisfied with the time slots in which the free hours were available.
- The majority of parents were able to decide when to use their free hours choosing either all or most of the times and days of the week. Among the most commonly used providers, playgroups or playschools were able to accommodate this choice the most (83% of users) and childminders the least (52%).
- On average around a third of parents said that the availability of free hours made it easier for them to work (38%), do a voluntary activity (35%), study (34%), look for work (29%) or do training (29%).

*Why are some parents not using the entitlement at all?*

- The main reasons for not using the free entitlement for non-users were lack of awareness (33%) and parental preference (25%). Only a relatively small proportion of barriers related to inflexibility of childcare providers (4%).
- There were no systematic channels of information on the entitlement and most parents (53%) first found out about the free hours through contact with their childcare providers.
- Parents from black and minority ethnic communities, those living in London, and those from workless households (both couples and lone parents), were less likely than average to use the free entitlement at all.

*Why are some parents using less than the 15 hours they are entitled to?*

- The main reasons for not using the full 15 hours were constraints imposed by childcare providers (e.g. dictating times and days of use) and parental preferences (e.g. choosing to care for their child themselves) (38% and 39% respectively).
- The qualitative research found that some parents preferred to increase the number of free hours they used per week as their child became older. In accordance with this the proportion of children receiving their entitlement in full was lower among those aged three to three-and-a-half compared to children aged three-and-a-half to four (43% and 64% respectively).

*What demand is there for greater flexibility in the way the entitlement is delivered?*

- While general awareness of the entitlement was high, parents were less aware of the Government's parameters on how and when the free hours can be delivered. The qualitative interviews showed that parents didn't think of the entitlement in terms of flexibility and were generally not aware that they could use the free hours flexibly (i.e. accessing them in different configurations, such as three hours a day over five days or five hours a day over three days).

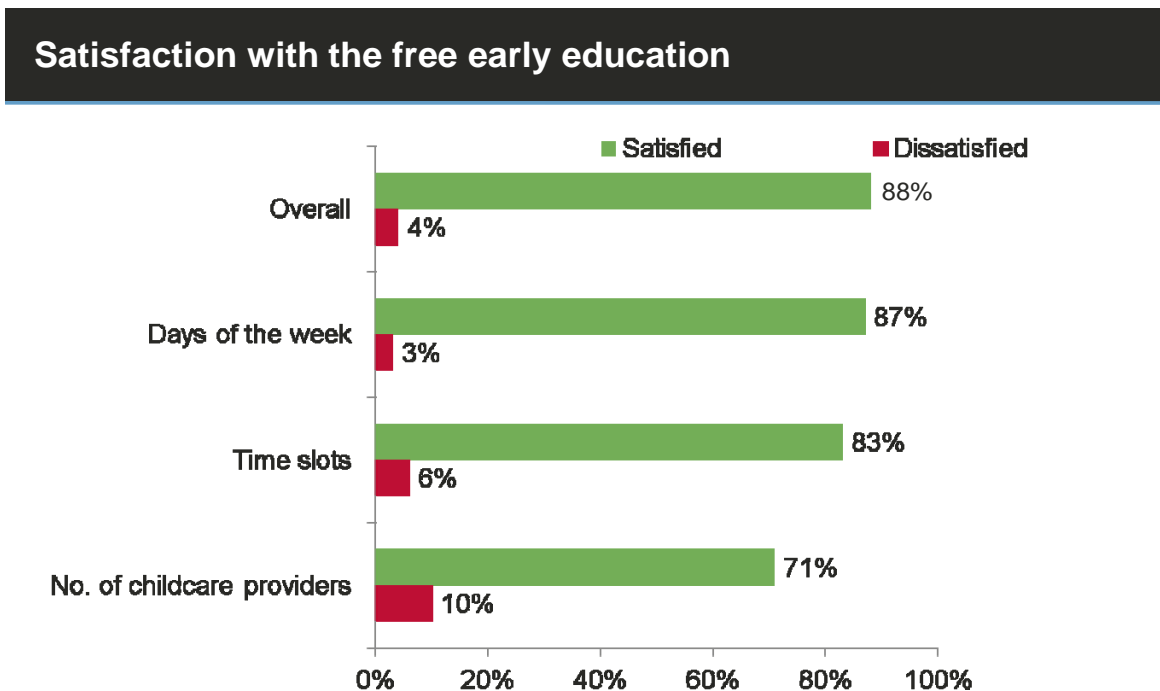
- Parents interviewed in both the qualitative strand and the telephone survey were generally positive about the potential flexibility of the entitlement (once they were aware of its parameters) but it was seen by some qualitative interview respondents as less flexible for working parents.
- There were varying levels of demand among parents for greater flexibility in the delivery of the free hours, including:
  - enabling the use of the free hours during school holidays in particular, but also at the weekend, over lunchtime and in the early morning and evening;
  - facilitating the gradual increase in hours as children get older;
  - relaxing the constraints over the days and times when the free hours can be used, including allowing more hours on a particular day and/or allowing the use of free hours on more days of the week;
  - allowing the use of the free hours to two-year-olds and also to five-year-olds as part of after-school childcare.

## Findings in more detail

### *Views of the free entitlement*

Overall satisfaction with the free entitlement was very high: 88 per cent among survey respondents. Levels of satisfaction were not as high but still overwhelmingly positive regarding the availability of the free hours during days of the week, availability of time slots during the day, and the number of childcare providers offering the free hours (87%, 83% and 71% respectively) (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**



Base: All who were aware of the free hours provision (673)

Similarly, parents who took part in the qualitative interviews expressed very positive and favourable views towards the free entitlement. In general they accepted the parameters within which the free entitlement operates without question. There were no obvious shortfalls that parents in the qualitative interviews pointed to spontaneously and, for many, the interview was the first occasion where they had had occasion to think critically about the offer. Some parents, however, said that the provision was potentially less flexible for working parents because of the difficulty of fitting a job solely around the free hours (unless the parents paid for additional childcare) or the difficulty in combining shift work or unsociable working hours with the availability of the free hours.

Sixty-six per cent of working parents said they usually or sometimes worked irregular hours and/or shifts and a third of parents (34%) worked regular hours only. Approximately a third of parents who worked irregular hours reported that this caused problems in relation to childcare arrangements. Despite this, satisfaction with the provision of free early education among parents who worked irregular hours and/or shifts was in line with overall satisfaction. In fact, part-time workers and those working regular hours were more likely than the average to say that days and time slots of free entitlement was making it *easier* for them to work (53% and 44% compared to 38% overall).

### *Accessing the free entitlement*

Eighty-four per cent of eligible respondents said that their child was either receiving free hours of early education and/or was attending a reception class at a primary or infants' school. Excluding those whose children had already started school, 55 per cent said their child received some or all of their entitlement to free hours.

Use of the free hours and/or primary school was higher among working parents than non-working parents (89% compared to 76%). White parents were also more likely than Black and minority ethnic parents to say that their child received free hours and/or attended school (87% compared to 67%).

Of those receiving the free entitlement hours, 71 per cent said they used all 15 hours (or more) and 25 per cent were partial users (i.e. used fewer than 15 hours per week).

The most common providers of the free hours were nursery schools (47%), playgroups and pre-schools (22%) and nursery classes (22%). Day nurseries and childminders were less common (3% and 1% respectively).

Among all users, the majority of parents (72%) received the same number of hours each day and for over a quarter of parents (25%) the number of free hours varied each day. Among those who received the same number of hours each day, the average number of free hours used each day was 3.9.

There is evidence from both the survey and the qualitative research that many parents prefer to build up their use of the free hours as their child gets older and closer to school age because they feel the child is too young when only just three years old to spend the full 15 hours in an early education setting. Seventy-eight per cent of parents with children aged three to three and a half years used the free hours compared to 86 per cent of those with a child aged three and a half to four years, with the proportion of full users rising from 67 to 74 per cent between the two age groups.

The pattern of use of the free hours is dictated more by the availability of childcare providers rather than parents' choice. For many parents, the 38 weeks provision overlaps with school term-times, particularly with providers attached to a primary school.

### *Communications*

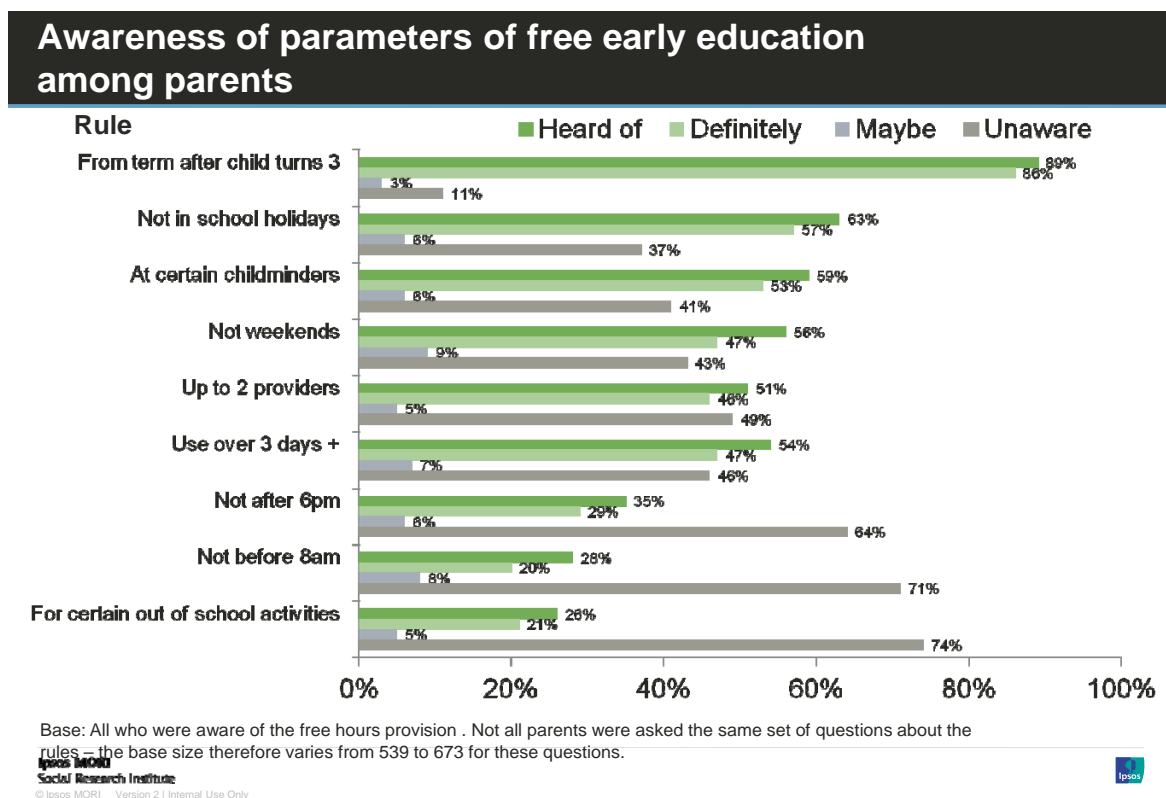
Basic awareness of the free entitlement was high: 81 per cent of all parents who took part in the telephone survey said they knew about the provision while 18 per cent were unaware. However, awareness of the specific parameters within which the provision of the free early education should operate was significantly lower (see Figure 2).

Evidence from the qualitative interviews consistently showed that parents did not receive the full information available about the free entitlement but only what they needed to know in order to apply for it, such as when the child becomes eligible and the allowance of 15 free hours per week. The telephone survey confirmed that parents were less aware of some of the parameters including that the free entitlement *cannot be used before 8am or after 6pm* (71% and 64% of parents were not aware), the entitlement *can be to used between up to two providers* (49% unaware), *the full 15 hours have to be used over at least three days* (46% unaware), *the entitlement can be used at certain childminders* (41% unaware) and the entitlement *cannot be used at weekends* (43% unaware) or *during school holidays*<sup>4</sup> (37% unaware).

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<sup>4</sup> While many providers – especially those linked to a primary school – only offer the free entitlement during term-time, there is no central requirement that the entitlement should only be available during the school term. During the research, the qualitative interviewing topic guide and the telephone survey questionnaire both contained references to the free entitlement being unavailable during school holidays. However, most parents who took part in the research were under the impression that this was indeed the rule, possibly because many childcare providers imposed this condition. Because of this, and the way the questions were presented, the research findings were unaffected.

Figure 2

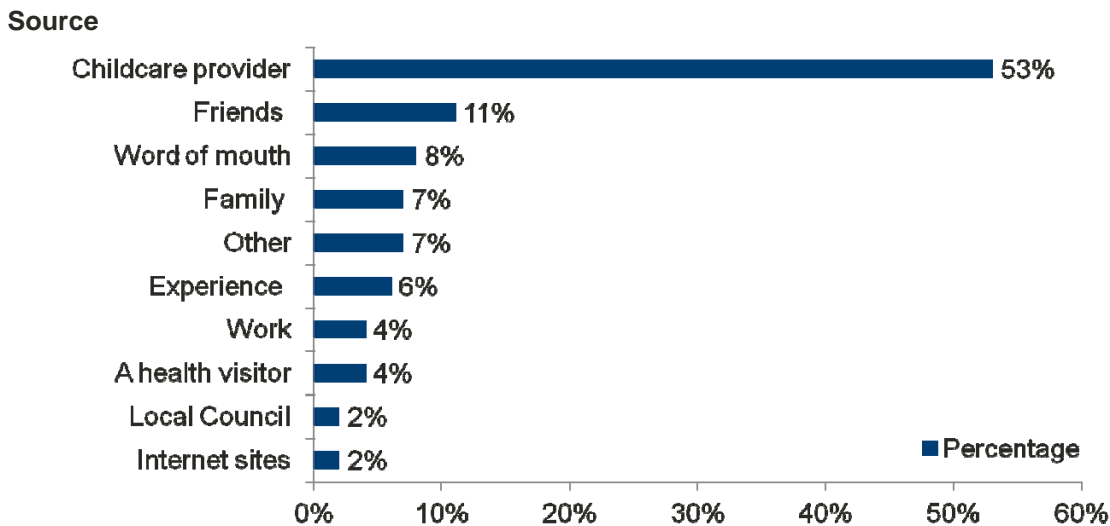


Overall awareness of the free entitlement was lower among survey respondents from ethnic minorities (61% compared to 85% for White parents) and those living in London (61% compared to the national average of 81%). Those groups that were relatively deprived were also less well informed about the free entitlement. This included parents with a household income of less than £20,800 per year (72% aware), households with couples where neither of them was working (65% aware), along with lone parents who were not in work (63% aware) compared to the average (81%).

There were no systematic channels for disseminating information about the free entitlement (see Figure 3). Most parents first found out about the free entitlement through contact with childcare providers (53% of all survey respondents). Parents who had *only* used parental or informal childcare only were significantly less aware of the provision than those who used formal childcare (64% compared to 87% aware). Those parents who do not use formal childcare are therefore at a disadvantage in finding out about the free early education entitlement.

Figure 3

## Where first heard about provision of free early education



Base: All Parents (673)

Note: chart shows mentions of 2% or more. 4% of all parents in the study did not know.

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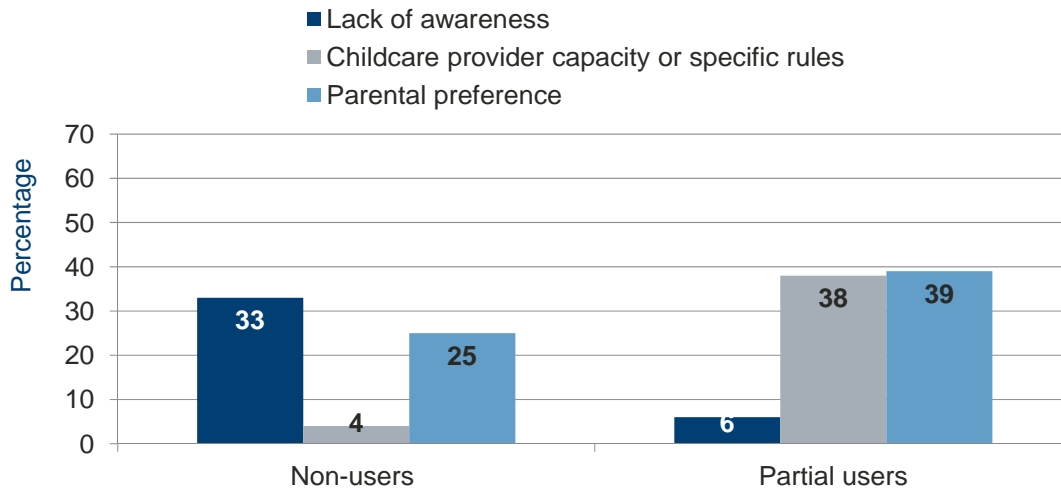
### *Reasons for non-use or partial-use of the free early education*

The research identified three distinctive groups of issues related to non-use or partial use of the free early education (see Figure 4). These included:

- lack of awareness of the free early education entitlement;
- issues related to childcare providers – these included predominantly capacity issues (e.g. a lack of places or extra sessions) and other issues including providers not offering more free hours or specific rules of operation of the provider; and
- parental preferences and attitudes – these included parents wanting to look after the child themselves or spend more with them, the child being too young or not ready or a preference for informal care.

Figure 4

## Key reasons for under-use or non-use of free early education



Base: All current non-users and current partial users (229, and 113)

\* Re-coded answers. Options do not include reasons related to child being in full-time education or other irrelevant for this analysis reasons.

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Findings from the telephone survey showed that among *non-users*, lack of awareness was a key obstacle to using the free entitlement (33% of the issues mentioned were related to this), with reasons for non-use related to parental attitudes or preferences next in importance (25% of all issues came under this category – see Figure 5).

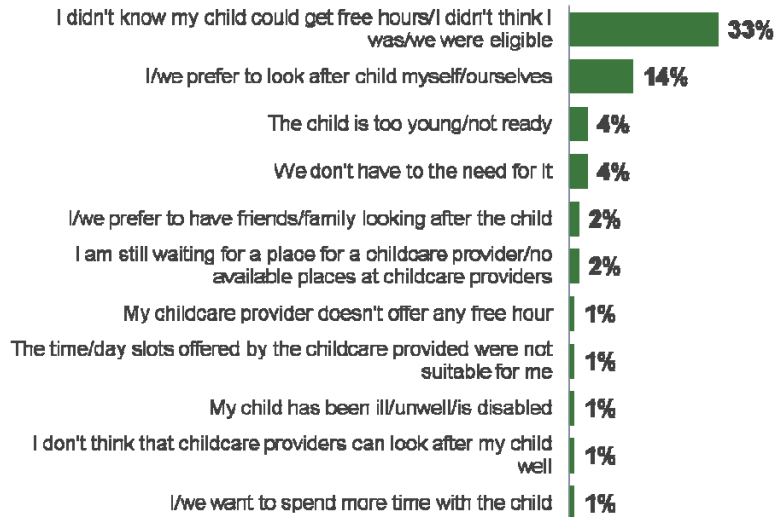
Issues of capacity or specific rules of operation of childcare providers were relatively insignificant barriers for non-users (4%). (However, one of the barriers mentioned was that the provider did not offer any free entitlement (1%).



Figure 5

## Reasons for non-use of free early education among current non-users

Why doesn't target child currently receive these free hours of childcare?



Base: All who do not use any free hours currently (229)

\* Multi-coded question. Options do not include reasons related to child being in full-time education or other irrelevant for this analysis reasons.

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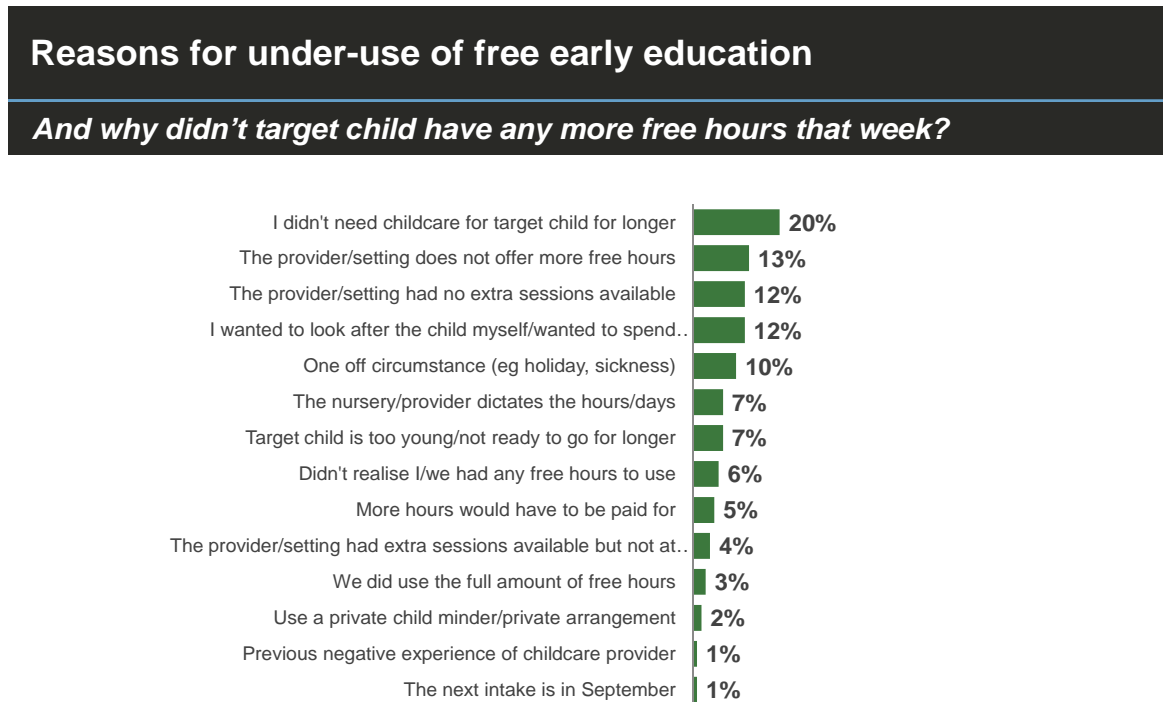


Among *partial users* (those who used some but not all of the 15 free hours per week) the main obstacles for making *full* use of the entitlement were capacity issues or specific rules imposed by the childcare providers (38% of those who gave an answer to the question) as well as parental preferences (39% - see Figure 6).

Evidence from the qualitative research illustrated that some of the specific rules imposed by providers included offering a maximum of 2 hours and 45 minutes of free entitlement per day (a total of 13 hours and 45 minutes only), morning sessions only or a September intake only. However, these rules imposed by childcare providers were within the parameters set by the Code of Practice.

Lack of awareness did not represent a significant barrier among this group (6%).

Figure 6



Base: All who do not use the full 15 free hours (113)

\* Multi-coded question. Options do not include reasons related to child being in full-time education or other irrelevant for this analysis reasons.

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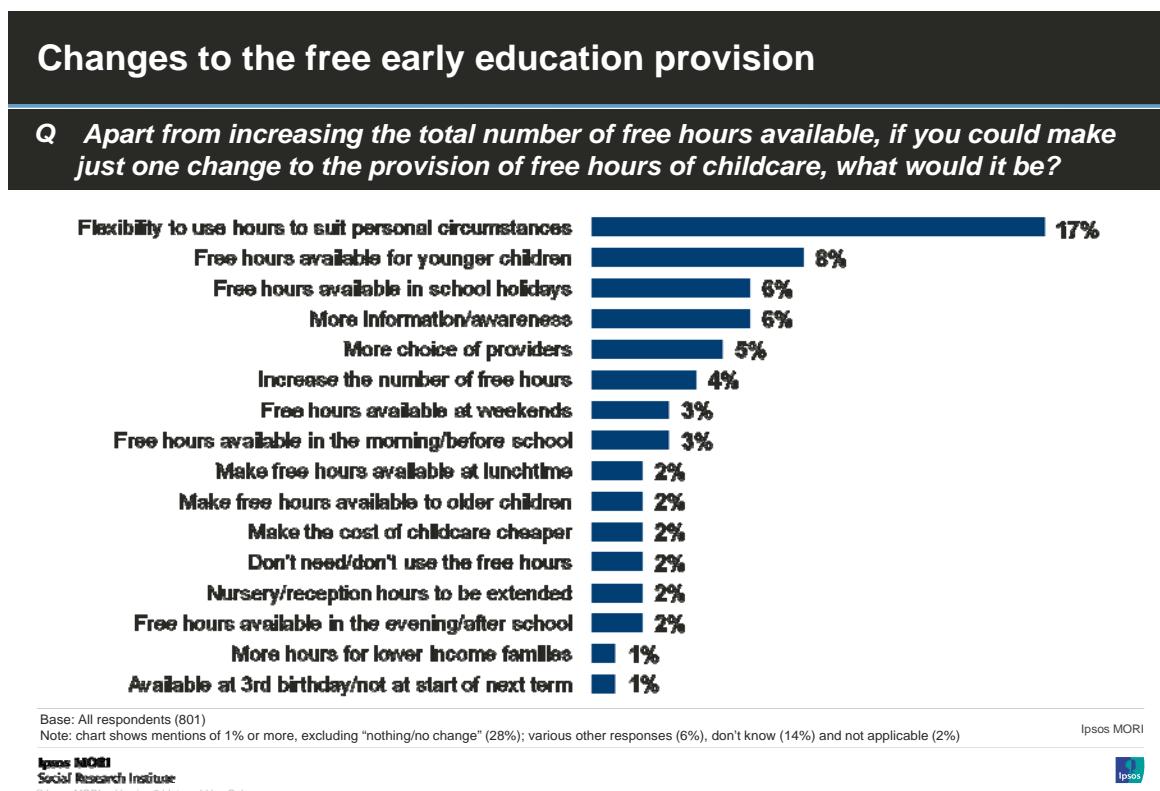
### *Desire for change*

We asked all parents in the telephone survey an open question about what one change – apart from increasing the number of hours available – they would make to the provision of the free entitlement to childcare. The most common responses were variants on there being no need for change (28% of respondents), suggesting that there was a significant core level of satisfaction with the way the free entitlement is delivered.

More than 20 different suggestions were made, with the most common illustrated in Figure 7. (The figure does not include the 28% who did not want any change.) While satisfaction was high and expectations of flexibility relatively low, the research did highlight a number of areas in which relatively small proportions of parents would like to see greater flexibility in the delivery of the free entitlement to early education.

Figure 7 illustrates that there was a general desire among 17 per cent of all those interviewed for greater flexibility about when parents could use the free hours so as to meet their individual or family needs. Other specific suggestions included reducing restrictions on the number of days and length of sessions, with 30% of all respondents mentioning issues related to flexibility in one way or another.

Figure 7



Following a question where potential changes to the entitlement were provided as response options, parents demonstrated varying levels of interest in using the free hours in the school holidays, at weekends, before 8am or after 6pm and over lunchtime. Indeed, 28 per cent of survey respondents said that it would be *very important* for them to be able to use the free hours in the school holidays *and* that they would be *very likely* to use such a flexibility. However, evidence from the qualitative research suggested that parents can prefer the option of using the free entitlement during school term times only as this meets their developmental and care needs while also allowing family time together in the holidays for those with older children at school.

There was qualitative and quantitative evidence that some parents were increasing their use of formal childcare (and the free hours) as the child got older. There was also interest in being able to use the free hours before their child turned three – 50 per cent of parents said that they would have used the free hours before their child was three years old even if that meant having fewer hours available after that age – and a small group of parents (2%) who expressed an unprompted preference for using the free hours after their child turned five.

## Conclusions and implications

This research was commissioned to help understand how use of the free early education could be increased, both by reducing the proportion of non-users and increasing the number of hours taken up by partial users. In particular, we were asked to look at how improved flexibility of the offer might increase use of the free entitlement.

Among both non-users and partial users, parental preferences and attitudes play an important part in the decisions about whether, and how much, to use the free hours. Such preferences will always mean that some people choose not to use all or even any of their entitlement. However, respondents in the qualitative research emphasised the importance to them of the social development advantages for their children in attending formal childcare and so further information on this may encourage some non-users and partial users to take up the offer.

For non-users, the other main barrier was a lack of awareness of the free offer. A key finding has been the lack of any systematic way of informing parents of the free hours and providing sufficient information on eligibility and flexibility of the provision. The haphazard way in which parents hear about the free hours means that more deprived or marginalised families are less likely to find out. To overcome this bias there needs to be a way in which *all* families are able to be informed about the offer. One way might be to inform all parents via Child Benefit mailings a few months before their child becomes eligible. Changes to Child Benefit will soon mean this will no longer be a universal benefit but this approach would overcome some of the bias in the current communications arrangements.

In particular, there should be specific strategies for informing:

- parents who do not currently use formal childcare, possibly through GPs or health visitors;
- parents from BME communities, including information translated into the main community languages;
- parents who are not in work;
- parents who are receiving benefits; and
- parents with low educational attainment.

For partial users, the second main obstacle to greater use of the free entitlement was constraints in the delivery of the free hours by childcare providers. Some constraints related to capacity (e.g. whether there were places available at all) while others related to flexibility (e.g. whether the provider actually offered sufficient free hours). Although there was little *expectation* of flexibility, there was certainly some interest in *improving* the flexibility of the free entitlement (30% of all suggestions by survey respondents for improving the free entitlement related to making the provision more flexible). Changes to flexibility might include:

- removing restrictions on minimum number of days for using the free hours;
- the ability to use the free hours during the school holidays and, to a lesser degree, at weekends;
- the ability to access the free hours before the age of three or after the child has started school;
- greater flexibility over the times of day that the free hours can be used and the length of sessions; including before 8am, after 6pm, full days and over lunchtime; and
- the freedom to increase the number of hours over time.

While some of these changes could be agreed in principle by the Government, their implementation would involve changes in the practice of childcare providers. Not all providers would find it easy to extend their provision; for example, those attached to primary schools might find it difficult to operate in the school holidays when hitherto they had been closed.

All providers would need a degree of certainty about the number of places they would have filled at any time. They would need to plan the levels of staffing required and the possible associated costs of increasing the flexibility of their offer. This might mean some form of incentivisation by central or local government to enable greater flexibility.

Current parental approval, of and support for, the free entitlement is very high. Any changes to the existing provision would need to ensure that the existing highly-valued free entitlement continues to be available to parents.

## **Additional Information**

The full report can be accessed at <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/>  
Further information about this research can be obtained from  
Michael Dale, Department for Education, Mowden Hall, Staindrop Road, Darlington, DL3 9BG;  
[michael.dale@education.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:michael.dale@education.gsi.gov.uk)

This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.