



Department  
for Education

# **Evaluation of Early Implementation of 30 Hours Free Childcare**

**Research brief**

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**Social Science in Government**

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## Introduction

The Free Early Education Entitlement currently offers 15 hours of early education for 38 weeks each year to all three and four year old children and the most disadvantaged two year olds in England. The universal offer for three and four year olds will be extended to 30 hours for children of working parents in September 2017 when 30 hours free childcare is rolled out nationally. While the universal entitlement is focused on supporting child development, the aim of the extension is that “Additional free childcare will help families by reducing the cost of childcare and will support parents into work or to work more hours should they wish to do so”.<sup>1</sup>

In preparation for the national rollout in September 2017, the Department for Education (DfE) initiated early implementation in eight Local Authorities (LAs) in September 2016 with the aim of delivering the extended hours to around 5,000 children.<sup>2</sup> This involved a universal offer to all eligible children of working parents in one LA and an offer of places to around 400 to 600 children in each of the other seven LAs. In addition to delivering places, early implementer LAs were required<sup>3</sup> to:

- Test different approaches that drive **market innovation and efficiency**, trialling different ways of supporting providers to achieve economies of scale and reduce costs.
- Generate models of **flexible provision** which match parental working patterns and meet different child needs including those with SEND (special educational needs and disability), in homeless working families and from BME (black and minority ethnic) and rural communities.
- Increase **market capacity** to secure sufficient places in a range of different geographical areas and local markets, including bringing in new providers.
- Work with Government to test how to **maximise parental take-up and employment**.
- Work with Government to **test technical delivery systems**, including eligibility checking, to ensure a smooth journey for all customers.

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Education (2015), *Childcare Bill: policy statement*, DFE-00177-2015, December, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/482517/Childcare\\_Bill\\_Policy\\_Statement\\_12.03.2015.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/482517/Childcare_Bill_Policy_Statement_12.03.2015.pdf), page 4.

<sup>2</sup> Early implementation began prior to the introduction of the EYNFF (Early Years National Funding Formula) in April 2017 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-national-funding-formula-allocations-and-guidance>) and before the publication of the Early Years Workforce Strategy in March 2017 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-workforce-strategy>).

<sup>3</sup> As specified in the Grant Funding Agreements with LAs for early implementation.

- **Positively promote the 30 hours childcare offer**, to help build momentum and maximise parental take-up on national rollout.

At the same time, the early innovators programme was introduced in 32 LAs (including the eight LAs undertaking early implementation) with funding for LAs to explore innovative approaches to support the national rollout of the 30 hours free childcare.

This report presents the findings from an independent evaluation of these two programmes undertaken by Frontier Economics, NatCen Social Research and researchers from the University of East London. This evaluation has collected a wide range of quantitative and qualitative evidence from:

- A review of the relevant documents.
- Semi-structured interviews with LA policy leads.
- Analysis of Early Years and School Census data.
- A large-scale survey with 561 providers delivering the extended hours (with an 80 percent response rate).
- A large-scale survey with 2,257 parents using the extended hours (with a 69 percent response rate).
- In-depth case studies in all eight LAs undertaking early implementation.

Feedback was also collected from presentations to LA policy leads. The evaluation sought to answer the key questions on sufficient delivery of places, take-up by parents and impacts on childcare use and parental work. It also considered some of the potential risks around financial sustainability for providers, the crowding out of other types of free entitlement places and impacts on the experience of the child.

The eight LAs involved in early implementation had diverse backgrounds in terms of size, urban / rural geography, affluence, ethnicity and type of local childcare provision. Within the seven LAs which had a limited number of extended hours places: two allocated them within a specific geographic area based on childcare hubs (creating a mini-universal approach); two allocated them to certain types of parents (one to parents living in the most rural areas and one to lower income parents); two allocated them solely or primarily through selected employers; and one allocated them to a bespoke selection of providers and parents to test a range of delivery models. The funding rates paid by LAs to providers for the extended hours were generally higher than the rates paid for the universal 15 hours offer because DfE had committed to raising the average funding rate for all free entitlement hours in the Early Years National Funding Formula (EYNFF) from April 2017. All eight LAs planned to introduce additional measures to support improvements in the flexibility of provision, while half planned specific measures to help

improve access for children with SEND and half planned direct measures to support parents to enter work.

## Findings

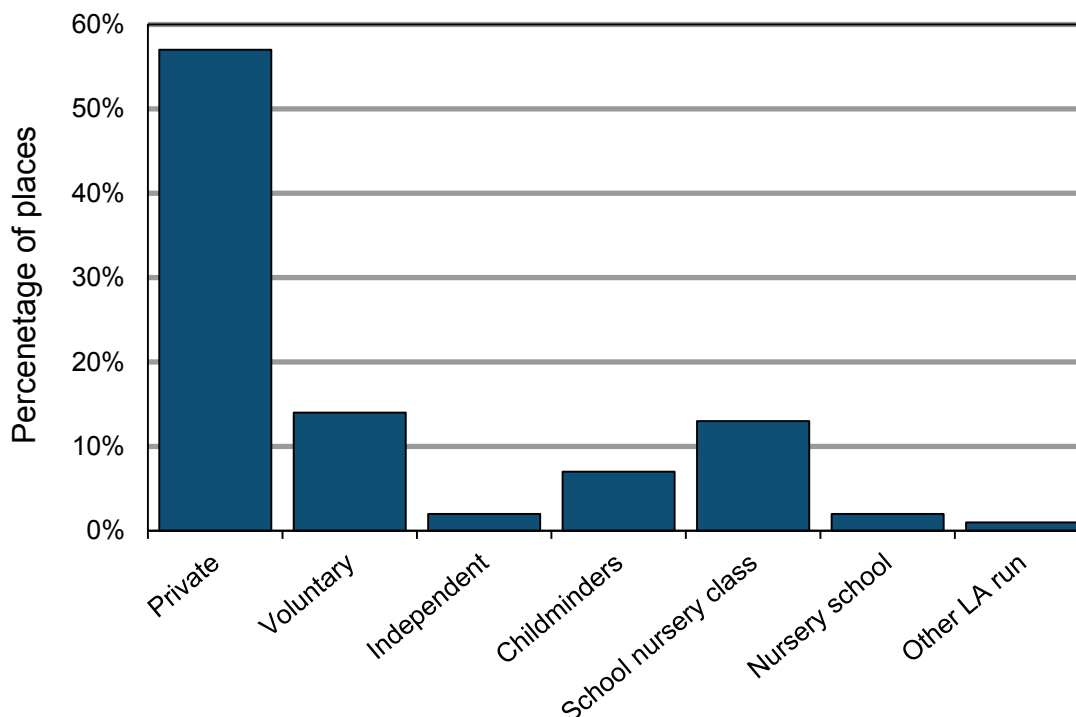
The evidence from the evaluation is arranged around ten questions.

### 1. Were providers willing to offer the extended hours?

A high proportion of providers were willing and able to offer the extended hours during early implementation. By the time of the census in January 2017, the numbers of places delivered were close to the allocated number that DfE had provided funding for in the seven LAs with a limited number of places. In the LA offering places to all eligible children, the number of places substantially exceeded the DfE estimate. In this area, 50 percent of three and four year olds using the universal free entitlement took up the extended hours and 80 percent of free entitlement providers delivered extended hours.

Of the 561 providers responding to the evaluation survey, most cited positive reasons for delivering the extended hours, including wanting to support the policy (70 percent) and because they saw it as a good business opportunity (43 percent). Some 75 percent offered the extended hours because they were invited to or encouraged to by the LA, and 68 percent did so because of parent requests. 44 percent also reported they felt parents would choose an alternative provider for the extended hours if they did not offer them.

**Figure 1: Types of providers delivering extended hours places**



Sources: Early Years Census, School Census and additional evaluation data collection, January 2017

Note: Sample size is 4,924 places.

Most places were delivered by private providers (57 percent), while 14 percent were delivered by voluntary providers and 13 percent were delivered in nursery classes in maintained schools (figure 1). Only a small proportion were delivered by childminders (7 percent) and very small proportions by independent schools, nursery schools and other LA-run provision (including children’s centres).<sup>4</sup>

Although all types of providers were generally willing to deliver the extended hours, the case studies identified a number of issues which could limit the extent to which different types of providers<sup>5</sup> will be able or willing to engage with the offer going forward:

- **Day nurseries** typically required few if any adjustments to deliver the extended hours and experienced no major difficulties in meeting parental demand. However, their response to full implementation may be different for two reasons. First, following a financial assessment of the early implementation experience some had concluded that they may limit the extended hours places to what was considered a financially viable number. Second, some managers felt that their ability to meet any increase in demand for additional hours would be limited by staff retention and recruitment difficulties.
- **Playgroups** had to make more adjustments to their offer to deliver the extended hours, but these tended to be modest and sufficient to meet demand during early implementation. Going forward, staff recruitment and retention were also expected to limit playgroups’ ability to respond to an increase in demand. In addition, reliance on venues that are low cost but shared with other users (such as community centres) could considerably limit playgroups’ ability to adapt their offer, for example, by opening for longer hours or during holidays.
- **Childminders** typically required little if any adjustments to deliver the extended hours and did not experience any difficulties in meeting parental demand during early implementation. A challenge faced by this group, particularly in areas where use of childminding provision has traditionally been low, is limited parental demand for childminders to deliver free entitlement hours.
- Some **schools** were willing and able to adapt their offer to deliver the extended hours, in some cases building on previous efforts to offer a “more modern service” to working parents. For some, declining pupil numbers were a strong motivator to adapt their offer to attract more children. But when this motivator was lacking,

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<sup>4</sup> Further details on these types are provided in section 2.2.

<sup>5</sup> Providers in the census data and evaluation survey of providers were classified into four groups of: private (including private and independent schools); voluntary; childminders; and maintained (including nursery classes in maintained schools, nursery schools and LA maintained settings including children’s centres). Providers in the evaluation survey of parents and evidence from the case studies considered four approximately corresponding types of providers of day nurseries, playgroups, childminders and schools (see section 2.2 for further details on the comparability of provider types across the evidence sources).

there was less incentive to participate in a “childcare” programme which was not seen as part of the school’s core purpose of delivering early education.

Furthermore, for schools that were full and could not expand, offering extended hours would mean a decrease in the number of universal free entitlement places, which was viewed as detrimental to the local community.

Overall, however, the main challenge for all types of providers was uncertainty around the business implications in terms of the switch in the balance of income towards free entitlement funding and the costs of any adjustments to provision required to deliver the extended hours. Business support provided or commissioned by LAs was important to give some providers the confidence that the extended hours would not undermine their financial position. Effective support needed to be tailored to the specific needs of individual settings and typically involved:

- Reviewing different options for providing the extended hours – for example, whether a “stretched” or term-time offer would better fit a setting’s business mode; whether it would be financially viable for a setting to adjust its service to deliver the full 30 hours or more prudent to offer fewer hours; or whether options for delivering the 30 hours in partnership with other settings should be considered.
- Supporting providers to understand their operational costs and their breakeven point, which was critical to overcoming their concerns about the offer not being financially viable.
- Helping providers that had operated an all-inclusive rate (and had regarded it as a selling point) to adapt to charging for additional items not covered by the free entitlement funding (for example, for food and outings).

It was also evident that any failure in LA processes to deliver a reliable and robust payment system could adversely affect participation by providers in terms of continued delivery or future recruitment of new providers.

This evidence suggests the following recommendations for the national rollout:

(A) Providers of all types are likely to be willing to offer the extended hours, but there is a need to recognise that different types may face different challenges in delivery and the kind of support offered will need to reflect this variation.

(B) An important issue in recruiting providers to deliver the extended hours will be to address the uncertainty about the financial implications which business support at the local level can help to achieve.

(C) The design of local payment processes needs to support the participation of providers by being efficient and reliable.



## 2. Were providers able to offer sufficient hours and were there any adverse impacts on other provision?

There was sufficient delivery of extended hours places to meet demand during early implementation. By four months after early implementation began, the number of places delivered had basically met or exceeded the allocated numbers. The evaluation survey of providers also showed that:

- 29 percent of providers had increased occupancy due to the delivery of extended hours (that is, had used spare capacity).
- 33 percent had increased staff hours or the number of staff in order to deliver the extended hours.
- 30 percent could definitely offer more free entitlement places, and 33 percent could possibly (but not definitely) offer more places.

There was no evidence of any adverse effects on other free entitlement and paid provision. The census data showed that, on average, each provider had started delivering seven extended hours places and reduced the number of universal 15 hours places by seven. There was almost no impact on free entitlement places for two year olds. This suggests that there had been a conversion of the universal 15 hours free entitlement places into extended hours places rather than any crowding out of other types of free entitlement provision.

However, early implementation was a very limited test of sufficiency because of the limited number of places in seven of the eight LAs and the timing in the earlier part of the school year when there is more spare capacity. Evidence from the case studies (reported above) and from early innovators indicated that if any substantial expansion in capacity is required to meet demand in the national rollout, there are risks that this could be constrained by difficulties in the recruitment of good staff, in finding additional venue space and in obtaining capital funding for investment.

This evidence suggests the following recommendations for the national rollout:

(D) Given the limited test of sufficiency during early implementation, a national level review of sufficiency in the delivery of extended hours places and impacts on other types of provision would be helpful in April 2018 when demand will be peaking for the summer term.

(E) In case a substantial expansion in capacity is required to meet the demand for the extended hours, consideration could be given to how DfE can support the sharing of any learning on facilitating utilisation of existing building space (currently being explored by some early innovators); provision of capital funding for small and large

expansion projects; and continued support for increasing the supply of good practitioners through the Early Years Workforce Strategy presented in March 2017.

### **3. Did providers work in partnerships?**

Partnership working can support providers to deliver the extended hours and is also encouraged by the greater need for shared care with the introduction of the extended free entitlement hours. Indeed, some 20 percent of providers reported in the evaluation survey that they had formed new partnerships to offer the extended hours. The case studies showed that this was aided by partnership support mechanisms in several of the LAs. However, there were challenges to partnership working (such as tensions between different types of providers) and there is a potential role for LAs to promote the development of partnerships in order to support the delivery of the extended hours. This suggests the following recommendation for the national rollout:

(F) LAs should consider how best to identify the specific challenges to partnership working in their area and how they can support the development of new and effective partnerships.

### **4. How flexible and free were the extended hours?**

According to the evaluation survey of providers, most providers did not need to extend their opening hours as they were already offering full-day provision (83 percent) and year-round provision (66 percent), but there were indications that some providers had increased their opening times (11 percent). According to the census data, only 17 percent of extended hours places involved the use of the extended hours in the school holidays. This was partly because around one third of the providers did not offer holiday care and partly due to parental choice. However, evidence from the case studies showed that some parents had been told by providers that the extended hours could not be taken during the holidays or were not aware that they could use the extended hours to cover holiday provision. More broadly, 90 percent of providers in the evaluation survey reported that they offered parents a free choice or at least some choice in when they took the extended hours. The case studies showed that there were several ways in which some providers limited parental choice for some parents. For example, some day nurseries offered free entitlement hours only for a short day or during less busy sessions.

According to the evaluation survey, around one in seven providers (14 percent) had introduced or increased additional charges (for items over and above fees) for parents because of the extended hours.<sup>6</sup> However, parents reported in the evaluation survey that

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<sup>6</sup> The early implementation guidance for LAs stated that providers were not to levy any additional charges to parents as a condition of taking up the extended hours.

55 percent of free entitlement places involved payment for additional charges. Furthermore, the case studies showed that there was confusion among some parents about charges associated with the free hours. While some parents did not make any payments or were clear they were paying for optional extras, others were not sure what they were paying for and trusted their setting to make the correct charges. Some providers had told parents that the funding for the extended hours was insufficient to cover costs and that they needed to recoup these costs in some other way. In some cases, this meant that parents were limited in when the extended hours could be used and had to pay for some provision (such as during more popular sessions) while not using the full 30 free hours. Although parents were unhappy that they could not access the full 30 free hours, their gratitude for the lower childcare bill during early implementation seemed to outweigh their frustrations.

LA early implementation teams were aware that settings' practices around charging and restrictions limited the extent to which parents could benefit from the offer and there was particular concern for the impact these practices had on lower income families. However, it was very difficult for LA staff to "interfere" with providers' business decisions particularly as these may reflect parental demand for a particular expensive service and / or interference could threaten a provider's financial viability. Furthermore, even if they wanted to intervene, there were "grey areas" in the guidance that made it difficult to establish if a setting was contravening the DfE guidance. Even if it were possible to conclusively argue that they were, they did not feel they had the tools to enforce DfE guidance.

This suggests the following recommendation for the national rollout:

(G) Improvements in the guidance for the extended hours could be considered including:

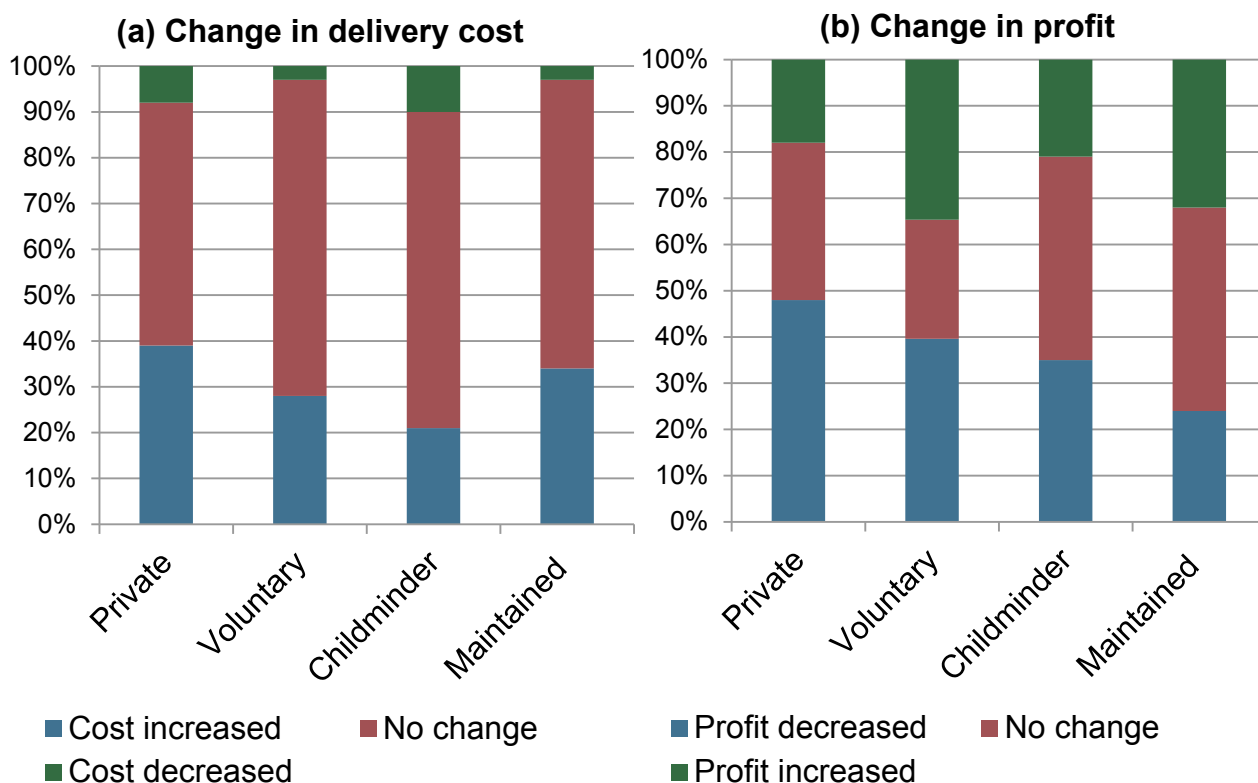
- Greater clarity on parental rights over some aspects of flexibility.
- Creating a balance between allowing some additional charges while ensuring they do not deter take-up of the extended hours.
- Greater clarity for LAs on what they could do if providers breach the conditions.
- Greater support from DfE to provide prompt and definitive answers when LAs are challenged by providers or parents on how the guidance is being implemented.

## **5. What was the financial impact for providers?**

Providers reported mixed financial impacts from delivering the extended hours, although the tendency was towards higher costs and lower profits. In the evaluation survey of providers:

- 62 percent of providers reported that there had been no impact on costs, while 7 percent reported that delivery costs had decreased due to the delivery of the extended hours and 30 percent reported they had increased.
- 38 percent of providers reported that there had been no impact on profits, while 22 percent reported that profits had increased due to the delivery of the extended hours and 40 percent reported they had decreased.

**Figure 2: Financial impacts on providers by provider type**



Source: Evaluation Survey of Providers, 2017

Notes: See table 3 in section 2.2 for a description of the provider types. Sample sizes for private, voluntary, childminder and maintained are 219, 68, 162 and 64 in panel (a) and 203, 43, 163 and 50 in panel (b).

Private providers were most likely to report an impact on costs, while voluntary providers were most likely to report an impact on profits (figure 2). For voluntary and maintained providers, the proportions reporting a positive impact on profits are very similar to those reporting a negative impact.

The financial impacts on providers will depend upon two factors:

- The extent of the change in the balance in income source from parental fees to free entitlement payments combined with the relative level of free entitlement funding rates to fees.

(b) The impact on delivery cost, including a potential reduction due to increased occupancy or a potential increase if adjustments to provision which raise costs are required.

Hence, for some providers, delivering the extended hours will be financially sustainable while not for others. Delivery may also be more profitable for some providers and less profitable for others. Drawing conclusions for the national rollout from early implementation is limited by the fact that funding rates will be different for the national rollout with the introduction of the EYNFF. Nevertheless, this evidence suggests the following recommendation for the national rollout:

(H) In future reviews of funding rates in the EYNFF, there is a need to be explicit about the level of service that the funding rates are expected to support in terms of quality and flexibility. In addition, these reviews need to consider the drivers of ongoing changes in delivery costs.

## 6. Did parents take up places?

The parental work requirement in the eligibility criteria for the extended hours meant that families using the extended hours tended to be more educated and to have higher income than other families. The evaluation survey of parents using the extended hours showed that:

- 52 percent of parents had degrees.
- 34 percent had household annual gross income of less than £31,200; 34 percent had income between £32,000 and £52,000; and 33 percent had income of £52,000 or greater.

Some 85 percent of the families using the extended hours were couple families and 15 percent were single parents (almost all single mothers):

- 46 percent were couples with a father working full time and a mother working part time, while 31 percent were couples with a father working full time and a mother also working full time.
- 10 percent were part-time working single parents and 5 percent were full-time working single parents.

According to the evaluation survey, most parents heard about the extended hours through their current childcare provider (58 percent), LA letter or leaflet (30 percent), internet or social media (22 percent) and word of mouth (10 percent). The case studies showed that, once aware of the offer, parents were positive about the policy, quick to take up the extended hours and generally sufficiently self-serving to apply and approach providers for a place. Some in the LA early implementation teams expressed concerns

around the eligibility criteria in that the delay in being able to take up extended hours until the start of the following term and the risk of the loss of eligibility could reduce the effectiveness of the incentive to support parents to work.

This suggests the following recommendations for the national rollout:

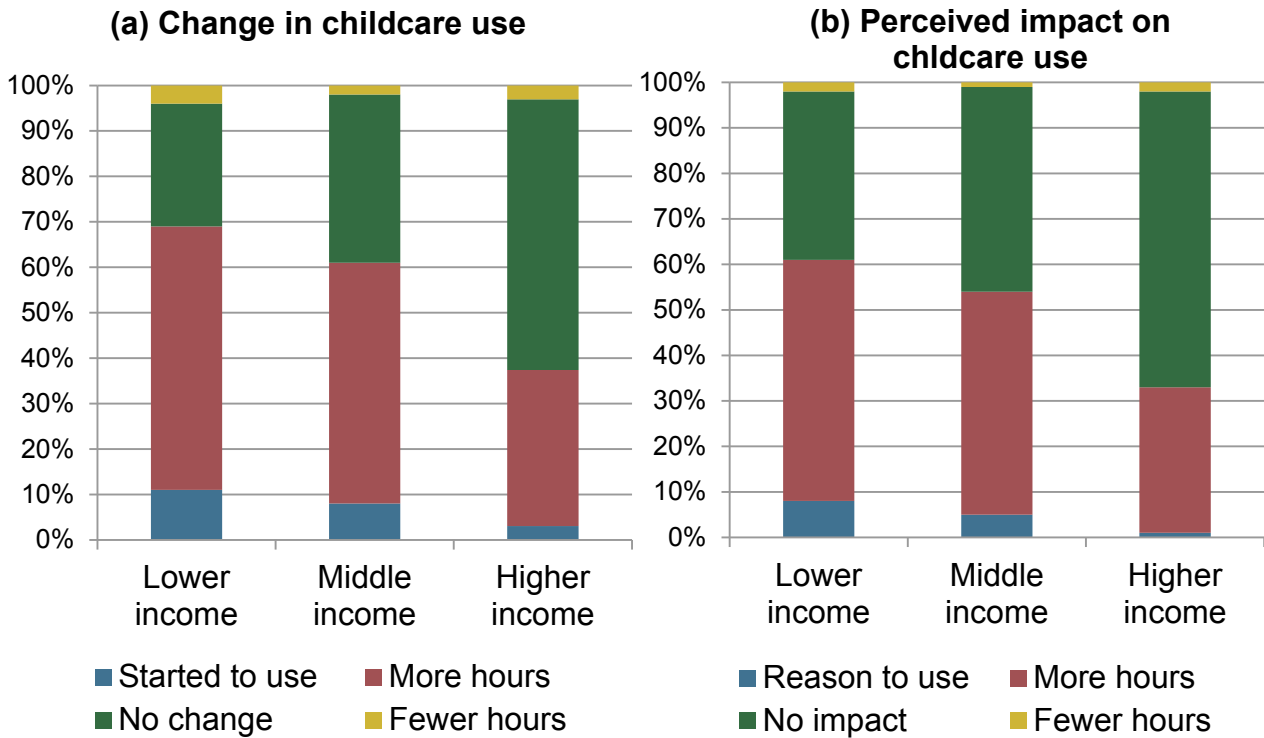
(I) Active marketing through childcare providers and LA publicity can assist parental take-up, particularly while the policy is still relatively new and the more usual word-of-mouth dissemination is less influential. Assistance with the application process or brokerage to find a place should be a lower priority than marketing.

(J) A review of the eligibility criteria could consider allowing immediate access to the extended hours for parents who enter work and allowing eligibility to continue until the child starts school even if a parent leaves work (replacing the grace period).

## **7. How did the use of childcare change?**

During early implementation, most children used the full 15 additional hours, but a substantial proportion (42 percent according to the census data) used fewer than 15 extended hours. In the evaluation survey, 8 percent of parents reported that they had started to use formal childcare when taking up the extended hours and 49 percent reported that they used more hours of formal childcare. In addition, 5 percent of parents reported that they would not have used formal childcare for the child in the absence of the extended hours, and 45 percent reported they used more hours because of the extended hours. These effects were greater for lower income families (figure 3). However, caution is needed in interpreting this as evidence of impact of the extended hours because the changes may have occurred even in the absence of the policy and responses to hypothetical questions may overstate the importance of the issue under consideration.

**Figure 3: Impacts on childcare use across income levels**



Source: Evaluation Survey of Parents, 2017

Notes: Lower, middle and higher income are defined as annual gross household income below £32,000, £32,000 or more and below £52,000, and £52,000 or more respectively. Sample sizes are 730, 734 and 639 for the three income groups in panel (a) and 708, 718 and 685 for the three income groups in panel (b).

The evaluation survey showed that some parents changed their childcare arrangements in order to take up the extended hours: 9 percent changed provider and 6 percent began to use an additional provider (meaning that 15 percent made some change). A quarter of children using the extended hours used more than one provider in a typical term-time week, indicating that a not inconsiderable proportion of children would have used multiple providers even in the absence of the extended hours. Many parents (42 percent) combined the use of the extended hours with informal childcare.

Longer hours were generally seen as having positive impacts for the child by providers involved in their delivery and by parents using them: 87 percent of parents using the extended hours reported that they thought that the longer hours improved school readiness in the evaluation survey. The case studies indicated that parents using multiple providers generally did not have concerns about any adverse effects on the child although the evaluation survey showed that two thirds of parents thought that it was better for a child to have just one formal childcare provider.

This evidence suggests the following recommendation for the national rollout:

(K) To help support the use of multiple providers, national or local training and workshops for providers could promote good shared care practice for children using multiple providers. Consideration could also be given to the provision of information and example cases for parents on how to manage a good package of care when using multiple providers.

## 8. How did parental work change?

Evidence on the potential impact of the extended hours on parental work was collected for mothers and fathers in the evaluation survey of parents:

- Compared to the time prior to taking up the extended hours, 1 percent of mothers reported that they had entered work and 23 percent had increased their work hours.
- Considering the hypothetical scenario of their work choices in the absence of the extended hours, 11 percent of mothers reported that they thought they would not be working, while 24 percent thought they would be working shorter hours.
- Compared to the time prior to taking up the extended hours, less than 1 percent of fathers reported that they had entered work and 9 percent had increased their work hours.

These effects were notably stronger for families with relatively lower incomes.

Again, caution is needed in interpreting this as evidence of impact of the extended hours because the changes in work may have occurred even in the absence of the policy and responses to hypothetical questions may overstate the importance of the issue under consideration. In addition, the timeframe for early implementation may have been too short to have encouraged parents into work. However, the evidence suggests that the extended hours may encourage both mothers and fathers to work longer hours, although mothers are likely to remain working part time rather than full time. In addition, the combination of the findings that few mothers had actually moved into work and a higher proportion reported that they would not be working in the absence of the extended hours suggests that the extended hours may support mothers to remain in work.

## 9. What other effects were there on families?

In the evaluation survey, some 78 percent of parents reported that the extended hours had given them greater flexibility in their work choices. The case studies showed that increased work flexibility helped parents to obtain more secure employment, enhanced



career opportunities and improved their work-life balance. In addition, less reliance on informal care was also reported to reduce stress and the burden on grandparents.

According to the evaluation survey of parents, there were positive impacts on family finances: 58 percent of parents reported that they had slightly more money to spend, while 26 percent reported that they had much more money to spend. The financial benefits were slightly greater for higher income families, possibly because these families tend to spend more on childcare than lower income families.

## **10. What challenged and what supported implementation?**

The case studies identified several challenges to implementation that were related to the national programme:

- The name of the policy created some difficulties for reasons related to the evidence described above. First, calling the policy “childcare” made some schools question their involvement as they view their role as delivering education rather than childcare. Second, calling it “30 hours” was seen by some providers and parents as raising false expectations as families using the stretched offer receive just over 20 hours a week. Third, calling it “free” was considered misleading by some parents and providers because some parents had to effectively pay something to access the extended hours.
- LAs and providers found the timescale for the programme unrealistic, particularly with very late confirmation from DfE to LAs (and consequently from LAs to providers) of the number of places. There were also protracted negotiations between LAs and DfE about funding with some rates agreed after the programme’s launch. Developing an adequate IT system to monitor and make payments for the extended hours in the time available proved challenging and a drain on resources, sometimes resulting in temporary “make-do” systems that will need to be revised for the national rollout.
- LAs reported difficulties initially engaging some providers because negative national publicity about the 30 hours free childcare had encouraged some to focus on the difficulties rather than to think creatively about how the offer could work for them. Some providers’ views on the financial viability of the offer reflected concerns about the level of funding highlighted in the media, while some expressed a concern about the sector’s ability to respond to an increase in demand which reflected national news stories.
- Lack of robust data on the number of eligible families, where they live and where they may take up the provision created problems as LAs could not give an indication of the likely take-up in providers’ catchment areas.

- The failure to appoint the national business support organisation to support delivery of the extended hours in the initial crucial months of early implementation planning and delivery also proved challenging.

Factors at the local and national level that facilitated programme implementation included:

- Early innovator funding was reported to have been critical to provide the LA staffing resources required to enable early implementation.
- Senior executive buy-in and engagement from across the LA, including early years, health, education and finance. As an early implementation manager explained, a supportive leadership had enabled them to think differently and creatively and this helped them to remain positive and motivated.
- The support of a multi-service team to deliver early implementation with input from Family Information Services, communication and business teams and the finance department.
- Help from the IT and data teams was seen as essential for effective planning and the development of digital solutions to deliver and monitor the programme.
- A strong and positive relationship with providers helped LA teams to work through providers' concerns and reservations. LA teams talked about having open and honest exchanges about the challenges presented by the offer and being there for settings when they needed support.
- An effective model for supporting providers to work in partnership was reported to have facilitated the early implementation in areas where this model already existed or had been developed in order to deliver the extended hours.
- The support provided by DfE officials and the opportunity to meet and share learning with other early implementers were reported to have been helpful.

This evidence suggests the following recommendations for the national rollout:

(L) Consideration should be given to how DfE can most effectively support LAs to implement the policy including ensuring adequate funding for staff resources to fully implement the policy; direct DfE encouragement of senior level sponsorship within the LA; and providing timely information to LAs on the plans for the national communications strategy.

(M) For the national promotion of the policy, it would be useful to consider the need for simple, key positive messages to promote the policy to providers and parents; promotion of some of the additional benefits; robust responses to some well-

publicised perceptions of problems; and how to separate out other broader childcare issues such as workforce development from the 30 hours free childcare.

## Limitations on learning from the evaluation

It is important to note that there are limitations on how far lessons can be drawn from early implementation for the national rollout:

- Early implementation involved only partial implementation in seven of the eight LAs which meant that sufficiency of delivery and take-up by parents could not be fully tested. Although there was complete implementation in one LA, a single case is unlikely to be nationally representative.
- Early implementation began at the most favourable time of year in terms of spare capacity in provision. Although the national rollout will begin in the same favourable conditions in September, achieving sufficiency of provision could be more challenging later in the school year.
- Early implementation was an early trial of a policy with a short timeframe and a small number of LAs. In addition, LAs were purposively selected (within a fair and competitive process) including a criterion of “a track record on innovation and delivery of sufficiency and meeting other objectives”, suggesting a more favourable implementation than might occur nationwide.
- Several elements of the policy at both the national and local level will be different in the national rollout, including funding rates, other financial support from DfE (there will be no early innovator funding), the eligibility checking system, and no obligations for LAs to undertake additional supporting measures, for example, measures to promote flexibility or access for specific types of families.
- Early implementation did not provide the opportunity for a robust evaluation of impact on parental work and only proxy measures using changes over time and responses to hypothetical questions could be considered.

## Conclusions

Overall, the evidence from early implementation suggests that there is no specific reason to believe that 30 hours free childcare will not be a success. In particular:

- A high proportion of providers were willing and able to offer the extended hours places and there was no evidence that financial implications were a substantial barrier to the delivery of the extended hours.
- Parents were keen to take up the extended hours.

- Take-up of the extended hours was associated with increases in the use of formal childcare; longer work hours for mothers and fathers; and some indication of higher work retention for mothers.
- There were additional perceived benefits for families in terms of enhanced work opportunities, direct financial support and broader wellbeing.

This report has used the evidence from early implementation to draw out some recommendations that may help a smooth national rollout in September 2017.

Summarising across this long list, the key priorities should be:

- To be mindful of the policy technical details (both at the national level and at the local level). Minor points of detail around the eligibility checking and payment processes or in the statutory guidance could be critical to ensuring that the policy is implemented in the way intended and achieves its objectives.
- Sufficient support from DfE to the LAs to adequately implement the policy, including funding for staffing resources; clarity and active assistance on the guidance; and promotion of the policy at senior levels within LAs.
- Positive promotion of the ultimate objectives of encouraging parents to work and supporting working families financially and in broader measures of wellbeing rather than a simple focus on the interim output of delivering more free entitlement hours.



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