Department for Education

Expanded childcare entitlement: process evaluation report

September 2026

Authors: IFF Research

Contents

List of figures

Key terms and glossary

- **Capital Grant Funding** – This refers to Childcare Expansion Capital grant funding provided by the government and distributed to providers via local authorities to support the phased expansion of Early Years (EY) childcare provision for working parents of all children 9 months to 3-year-olds and also for the provision of 8am to 6pm wraparound care for primary aged children.
- **Childcare Experiences Survey (CES)** - A termly online survey ran by the Department for Education targeting a sample of parents who have recently applied for the working families' childcare entitlement. The survey explores the experiences of parents with applying and using the entitlement, as well as the influence of the availability of the entitlement on parents' working patterns.
- **Childminders** – Ofsted-registered childminders providing early years care and operating on domestic settings including those registered with a childminder agency.
- **Computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) -** A survey method that combines traditional telephone interviewing with computer technology to enhance data collection efficiency and accuracy.
- **Early Learning for 2-year-olds** – 15 funded hours of early learning each week for families of 2-year-olds in England who get extra support, like those on Universal Credit or children with an Education, Health and Care Plan
- **Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)** – A framework that sets the standards for the learning, development, and care of children from birth to 5 years old in England. It applies to all early years providers.
- **Expanded entitlement** – The extension to the entitlement of funded hours for eligible working families in England, for children aged 9 months to 2-years-old, was rolled out in 3 staggered phases from April 2024 until September 2025.
- **Group-based providers (GBPs)** – GBPs are providers registered with Ofsted and operating on non-domestic premises. This includes GBPs run by private companies and those run by voluntary organisations, including community groups, charities, churches, or religious groups.
- **His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC)** – HMRC is the UK's tax authority, responsible for collecting taxes and administering benefits and other financial support for individuals, such as the expanded childcare entitlement.
- **School-based providers (SBPs)** – SBPs include maintained schools, academies, independent schools, and free schools that offer early years education for children aged 2 to 5.
- **Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND)** – This refers to children who have difficulties with learning, behaviour, socialising or physical ability which means they may require extra health and/or education support.

Executive Summary

In 2023, the government announced the expansion of the childcare entitlement to provide eligible working families with children aged 9 months and older access to up to 30 funded hours of childcare per week across 38 weeks of the year. The policy was rolled out in three phases between April 2024 and September 2025. This process evaluation explored how successfully the policy was implemented, drawing on surveys and interviews with local authorities (LAs), early years (EY) providers and parents across all three phases.

Overall take-up of the expanded entitlement

The expanded entitlement appears to be benefitting most eligible families who apply. In Autumn 2025, 585,708 parents had a code issued for children aged 9 months to 2 years and 95% of these codes were validated by a provider, indicating access to the entitlement. Just under three quarters (73%) of surveyed providers either offered or had children accessing the expanded entitlement, while 69% of providers with registered under-3-year-olds had at least one child receiving it. On average, providers had 9.0 children aged 9 months to 2-years-old receiving the entitlement and the majority (80%) were offering the full 1,140 hours of funded childcare per year.

However, take-up was not evenly distributed. Families in more deprived areas had lower code validation rates, and providers in the most deprived areas reported a lower proportion of their registered 2-year-olds receiving the entitlement than providers in the least deprived areas. Parent respondents to the CES[1] who were not accessing the entitlement most commonly reported waiting for a childcare place (18%), starting childcare the following term (18%), or choosing alternative provision that was not eligible for funded hours (12%).

Overall, the findings indicate high levels of uptake and provider participation, although some variation in access remains across different families and areas.

Preparation for the rollout

LAs and providers generally felt well prepared to deliver the final phase of the rollout. Almost all surveyed LAs (93%) agreed they were prepared for the September 2025 phase 3 rollout, while almost two thirds (65%) of providers agreed that they were prepared. Feelings of preparedness among providers increased across the three phases of the rollout.

The staggered approach to the rollout was consistently identified as a key factor supporting preparedness. Interviewed LAs and providers described how experience gained during earlier phases enabled them to refine systems, forecast demand and build

[1] Expansion to early childcare entitlements: Childcare Experiences Survey Autumn term 2025/26 Fourth Wave (2026) Gov.uk. Available at: [Release home - Expansion to early childcare entitlements: Childcare Experiences Survey - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK]() (Date accessed: 10/09/2026)

confidence for later delivery. Providers and LAs undertook substantial planning activity, including building the early years workforce, places and capacity, reviewing administrative processes and communicating with parents.

Most LAs felt sufficiently resourced to deliver the policy. Over three quarters (76%) agreed that they had sufficient staff within their EY team to deliver the rollout and 70% had recruited additional staff at some point during the rollout period. Capital funding supported the expansion of provision, although physical space constraints remained a barrier in some areas. Recruitment and retention difficulties continued to affect parts of the sector, with 31% of SBPs and GBPs operating with at least one vacant post and providers commonly reporting challenges finding suitably skilled and qualified staff.

Views on DfE support were generally positive but mixed. Three fifths (60%) of LAs agreed that information from DfE had been easy to access and understand, although providers and LAs identified areas where DfE guidance to parents could have been clearer. This meant they had to undertake a significant amount of additional work to prepare parents and help them understand the expanded entitlement.

Experiences of delivering the expanded entitlement

LAs were generally confident that childcare sufficiency had been maintained throughout the rollout. Over four fifths (83%) agreed that providers in their area had been able to meet demand for the entitlement and 88% agreed that providers were offering the full 30 funded hours to parents who wanted them. More than half (56%) of LAs reported that no eligible families had contacted them because they were unable to find a childcare place.

Providers were somewhat less confident than LAs. Just under six-in-ten (57%) providers agreed that they had been able to meet demand for the entitlement, while almost three-in-ten (29%) disagreed. Many providers reported operating close to capacity. Physical space limitations, staffing shortages and demand concentrated on particular days or sessions were the main barriers to expanding provision.

Providers also described the administration associated with the entitlement as demanding, particularly smaller providers and childminders. Tasks that providers reported taking the most time included: ensuring that all eligible parents were registered for the funding and receiving the correct invoices; dealing with parental queries and complaints related to the expanded entitlement; and keeping up to date with LA and DfE guidance and procedural changes relating to the rollout. However, others reported that the administrative burden had lessened over time as they had become more familiar with the processes.

Parent experiences of accessing the entitlement

Interviewed parents generally found it easy to find out about the expanded entitlement, although they sometimes felt official sources could have been more proactive in providing information. They drew information from a wide range of sources including social media, childcare providers, government websites and personal networks.

Interviewed parents also generally found it easy to determine their eligibility for the funded hours, although a few did still experience challenges that made accessing funded childcare more difficult. Parents described the process as simple and user-friendly, with clear instructions provided on government websites. They found the information available through the Best Start in Life Parent Hub and the online eligibility calculator particularly clear and helpful.

However, confusion remained around how the entitlement operated in practice. Parents frequently reported misunderstanding when eligibility began and how the 30 funded hours worked across the year. Some expected support to begin when a child turned 9 months old rather than from the following term, while others expected 30 funded hours to be available throughout the year rather than across 38 funded weeks. These misunderstandings sometimes affected childcare planning and return-to-work decisions.

Most parents were able to access childcare. Almost all (91%) of CES respondents who were using formal childcare secured a place with their first-choice provider, although 31% reported being placed on a waiting list at some point.[2] Parents frequently described needing to plan childcare well in advance and many were aware of pressure on places.

Restrictions and additional charges

Restrictions on the use of funded hours were common. Nearly two thirds (63%) of providers reported applying at least one restriction, most commonly limiting funded hours to term time (34%) or requiring parents to purchase additional hours in order to access funded hours (33%). However, many of these restrictions did seem to be in place for operational reasons, such as setting opening hours, and also applied to private childcare places. Additional charges were widespread; 67% of providers reported at least one additional charge, including 34% who reported at least one mandatory charge. This is in spite of policy guidance stipulating that providers cannot charge mandatory costs associated with entitlement hours.

Parents also reported that additional costs associated with funded hours were common. CES data showed that 51% of parents paid for additional hours alongside funded childcare and 58% paid either fixed or optional additional costs.[3] Although parents often accepted these costs as necessary, many felt they reduced the affordability and flexibility of the offer. Similarly, many parents reported experiencing restrictions on funded childcare that reduced the extent to which it aligned with their needs, with several noting that it had been difficult to find a job with suitable hours to fit around the childcare they were offered.

---

[2] Expansion to early childcare entitlements: Childcare Experiences Survey Autumn term 2025/26 Fourth Wave (2026) Gov.uk. Available at: [Release home - Expansion to early childcare entitlements: Childcare Experiences Survey - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK]() (Date accessed: 10/09/2026)

[3] *Ibid.*

Early indications of effects

Effects on providers

Almost half (45%) of surveyed providers reported that funding rates for 9-month to 23-month-olds were higher than private rates, compared with 11% who reported them as lower. In contrast, two thirds (66%) reported that funding rates for 3- to 4-year-olds were lower than private rates.

The entitlement appears to have influenced how some providers structured provision. Some providers reported reducing provision for 3- and 4-year-olds, while other providers reported expanding places for younger age groups. There were no differences by provider type when looking at those who limited places for under 3s. However, for 3 to 4-year-olds, childminders were far more likely to limit spaces than other provider types. Nearly two thirds (63%) of childminders limited spaces for this age group, compared to just 20% of GBPs and 6% of SBPs.

Views on business impacts were mixed: 33% of providers agreed that revenue had increased, while 32% disagreed. However, 43% agreed that the entitlement had been good for business overall. While many providers reported increased and more stable income, particularly childminders, providers in less deprived areas, and some school-based providers, others experienced little financial benefit or ongoing challenges linked to funding rates and local authority payment arrangements.

Effects on children eligible for Early Learning for 2-year-olds

Most providers reported no change in the number of Early Learning for 2-year-olds places they offered (75%), 10% reported a decrease and 6% reported an increase. Of the 10% of providers surveyed who had decreased Early Learning for 2-year-olds places, 40% had done this because they had already filled places with other children, and a similar proportion (37%) because of reduced demand.

Almost one-in-five (18%) LAs surveyed reported a reduction in Early Learning for 2-year-olds places locally, while 11% reported an increase. LAs interviewed felt there were less spaces available for children under Early Learning for 2-year-olds as many providers filled most of their places with younger children. Some LAs believed that the number of places being taken up had decreased because families eligible for both entitlements were often only applying for the expanded entitlement due to stigma around the Early Learning for 2-year-olds entitlement, and the admin burden applying for codes for both entitlements.

Furthermore, LAs interviewed were concerned that providers may have a preference for parents using the expanded entitlement, as these parents were often more likely to pay for additional private hours. Despite this, interviewed providers reported simply not coming into contact with parents using the Early Learning for 2-year-olds entitlement as frequently since the rollout of the expanded entitlement and none reportedly deliberately restricting the places available to them.

Effects on children with SEND

Most providers and LAs surveyed for the evaluation reported that the expansion had made no difference to the number of SEND places available. There was still a small minority, however, who had reduced their provision: 11% of providers reported that they had reduced places available to children with SEND, while among LAs increases and decreases in SEND provision were reported equally often (14% and 13%, respectively). Among this minority of providers that had reduced places, the most common reasons were insufficient funding to meet additional needs (59%), reduced staff capacity (56%) and difficulties recruiting appropriate staff (43%).

At the same time, some LAs highlighted that the reduction in places for children with SEND by some providers had led others to become more specialised in SEND provision, meaning that children were still able to access childcare albeit not always in their preferred setting. The expanded entitlement therefore seemed to have contributed to provision becoming more unevenly distributed for children with SEND in some areas.

As might be expected given the increased number of children accessing formal childcare, two thirds (66%) of LAs reported an increase in Special Educational Needs Inclusion Fund (SENIF) applications. Some LAs also mentioned that this increase had also been driven by needs being identified sooner, due to children entering childcare earlier because of the expanded entitlement.

Effects on parents

Parents consistently reported financial benefits from the entitlement. Interviewed parents described savings ranging from approximately £400 to £1,000 per month compared with private childcare costs. Many reported increased confidence about returning to work and improvements in household finances. Despite the financial savings, some parents still struggled with the cost of additional private hours of childcare and its effect on their family finances.

The entitlement often supported existing intentions to return to work rather than fundamentally changing employment decisions. CES data showed that more parents reported decreasing working hours (23%) than increasing them (14%) after having a child, although lower-income parents were more likely to increase their hours than higher-income parents. Parents also reported wider benefits including improved wellbeing, reduced financial pressure and positive developmental opportunities for children.

Views on the future of the policy

Providers surveyed were asked about the level of demand they anticipated for January 2026. Around two fifths (43%) expected demand to remain stable, 38% expected demand to increase and only 2% expected it to decrease. Around half (52%) agreed that they would be able to meet future demand, while 32% disagreed.

LAs interviewed reported that childcare sufficiency was currently being maintained but highlighted limited scope for future expansion because of workforce and physical space constraints. Some also identified potential mismatches between available provision and the types of childcare increasingly sought by working parents, particularly demand for more flexible and year-round care.

When asked how they felt the expanded entitlement policy could be improved, LAs, providers and parents most commonly recommended clearer communication for parents, particularly around eligibility, when entitlement begins, and how funded hours work in practice. Other suggestions included simplifying administration, reviewing funding rates for some age groups and integrating childcare application processes across government support schemes.

Conclusions

Overall, the evaluation suggests that the expanded entitlement has been implemented successfully at scale. Take-up has been high, provider participation is widespread and parents commonly reported benefits relating to affordability, work and family wellbeing. The phased rollout, preparation undertaken by LAs and engagement from providers supported successful implementation.

At the same time, experiences varied across providers, families and local areas. Capacity pressures, workforce challenges, provider restrictions, additional charges and differing local circumstances continued to shape how the entitlement was experienced in practice. While the entitlement has reduced a significant financial barrier to childcare for many parents, continued attention to childcare capacity, workforce sustainability, communication, disadvantaged children, children with SEND and provider sustainability will remain important as the policy becomes further established.

1. Introduction and methods

About the expanded childcare entitlement

All 3- and 4-year-olds in England are entitled to 15 hours a week of funded early education for 38 weeks of the year (term-time). In addition, since September 2017 3- and 4-year-olds from families where both parents are working[4] (or the sole parent is working in a lone parent family), and each parent earns a weekly minimum equivalent to 16 hours at national minimum wage or living wage, and less than £100,000 adjusted net income per year, have been entitled to 30 hours funded childcare per week, for 38 weeks a year.

In 2023 the government announced that the entitlement would be extended to 30 hours of funded childcare per week for eligible working families of children aged 9 months and older. The rollout of this policy was staggered in 3 phases:

- **Phase 1 (April 2024)** - Eligible working parents of 2-year-olds became able to access 15 hours of funded childcare for 38 weeks a year
- **Phase 2 (September 2024)** - Eligible working parents of children from the age of 9 months were able to access 15 hours of funded childcare for 38 weeks a year
- **Phase 3 (September 2025)** - Eligible working parents of children aged 9 months and above were able to access the full 30 hours of funded childcare for 38 weeks a year

These extensions to the entitlement of funded hours for eligible working families for children aged 9 months and older are referred to throughout this report as the 'expanded entitlement'.

To access the expanded entitlement, parents apply and have their eligibility checked via His Majesty's Revenue and Customs' (HMRC) Childcare Service. If a parent is eligible, the Childcare Service send an eligibility code to the parent. Parents take their eligibility code to their chosen childcare provider and the provider checks that the eligibility code is valid via the Department for Education's (DfE) Eligibility Checking Service. Parents can only access the expanded entitlement from the term after their child turns 9 months old. A parent must have received an eligibility code, and this must be validated by an early years (EY) provider or local authority (LA) in advance of the start of term[5], to enable a child to access the offer.

The aims of the expanded childcare entitlement programme were to:

- Increase the take up of early years childcare to support parents to work and become economically active

[4] Or where one parent is working and the other receives certain benefits.
[5] The start of term is defined as 1 January, 1 April and 1 September each year. Codes must be received and validated by the day before these dates to access the offer for that term.

- Put in place the effective legal, digital, and funding infrastructure to enable parents to access the expanded entitlement
- Create sufficient childcare places for eligible parents to access the expanded entitlement in their local area, including in areas of disadvantage, for vulnerable children and those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)
- Maintain the uptake of the existing entitlement, quality of provision, and financial sustainability of providers as the childcare entitlement expanded

Aims of the study

The DfE commissioned IFF Research, an independent social research agency, to conduct an implementation and process evaluation of the expanded entitlement rollout.

The implementation and process evaluation aimed to understand how successfully the policy has been delivered in LAs and EY providers. Key research questions included:

- Whether EY providers are offering the expanded entitlement, and the barriers to doing so
- Parental uptake of the expanded entitlement, including any differences in uptake across demographics
- How effectively LAs and EY providers had prepared for policy rollout
- How the expanded entitlement has been implemented in LAs and EY providers
- Barriers and enablers to effective delivery
- Parent experiences of accessing and using the expanded entitlement
- Emerging effects of the policy on EY providers and the childcare market
- Whether the policy has affected the accessibility of childcare for any groups of children
- Whether parents report any differences in their intention and ability to work as a result of the policy
- How prepared LAs and EY providers feel to continue delivering the expanded entitlement

The DfE also commissioned an impact evaluation of the expanded entitlement which is currently underway and will be reported on in late 2027.

Methodology

IFF Research collected data from LA EY Leads, EY providers, and parents in England using both quantitative and qualitative research methods over 3 waves of fieldwork. Each fieldwork wave followed a phase of the expanded entitlement policy rollout and focused on experiences of that phase of the rollout. In the final fieldwork wave (wave 3), we also asked respondents to reflect on their experiences across all policy rollout phases. Each fieldwork wave consisted of a survey of EY Leads within LAs, a survey of EY providers, follow-up qualitative interviews with LAs and EY providers and interviews with parents. Timings for each wave of fieldwork and the corresponding policy rollout out phase are presented in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Fieldwork wave timings corresponding to phases of the expanded entitlement rollout

Fieldwork Wave	Survey fieldwork timings	Qualitative interview fieldwork timings	Corresponding expanded entitlement rollout phase
Wave 1	Jul – Aug 2024	Aug – Oct 2024	Phase 1 (Apr 2024)
Wave 2	Nov – Dec 2024	Jan – Mar 2025	Phase 2 (Sep 2024)
Wave 3	Oct – Dec 2025	Jan – Mar 2026	Phase 3 (Sep 2025)

A description of each method is provided for each audience in the sections Research with local authorities, Research with early years providers, and Research with parents. More information on approaches to sampling, fieldwork and response rates can be found in Appendix A – Fieldwork .

Research with local authorities

Online surveys

IFF Research carried out online surveys of EY Leads within LAs that took around 15 minutes to complete. The survey was hosted via Unicom, a secure online survey platform. DfE invited all LAs in England to take part in each wave of the survey via an email invitation. The responses achieved were broadly representative of England in terms of region and deprivation level. In the survey, we asked about preparation for the rollout, steps taken to meet parent demand, communications with providers and parents, quality monitoring, and any administration challenges experienced.

As shown in Table 1.2, a total of 93 LAs responded to the survey during wave 1 of fieldwork, 96 LAs in wave 2 and 88 in wave 3. Response rates for the survey ranged between 58% and 63%.

Table 1.2 Local authority survey response rates

Fieldwork wave	Target number of responses	Responses (n)	Response rate (%)
Wave 1	75	93	61%
Wave 2	75	96	63%
Wave 3	75	88	58%

The LAs who responded to the survey were spread geographically across English regions. For example, as shown in Table 1.3, the proportion of responses in each region roughly matched that in the population for wave 3.

Table 1.3 Wave 3 local authority responses by region vs. population

	Proportion of Wave 3 responses	Proportion of LA population
East Midlands	5%	7%
East of England	9%	7%
London	19%	22%
North East England	7%	8%
North West England	17%	16%
South East England	11%	11%
South West England	10%	11%
West Midlands	6%	9%
Yorkshire and the Humber	16%	10%

Similarly, LAs from a range of deprivation levels responded to the survey, although there was a slight underrepresentation of the most deprived LAs (16% of achieved responses vs. 20% in the population), accompanied by a slight overrepresentation of the least deprived LAs (26% vs. 20% in the population).

Qualitative interviews

IFF Research invited all LA EY Leads who completed the surveys and gave consent to be recontacted for follow up research by email to take part in depth interviews to explore their perspectives in more detail. These interviews explored the EY Leads' views on how they prepared for the rollout and how well-prepared they felt, information and guidance they received from the government, feedback they have received from parents and providers, and their perception of the effects of the expanded entitlement on the EY sector.

IFF Research carried out a total of 30 follow up interviews (10 each wave). While these interviews were not intended to be representative of the whole LA population in England, LAs were selected to ensure a geographical spread of interviews across regions. The interviews took place online via Microsoft Teams and lasted around 60 minutes each. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis purposes.

The interview data was analysed anonymously. Under the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) the data collected was used only for the purpose of this evaluation and participants had the opportunity to withdraw their data from the research up until the point this report was prepared. Personal information about participants was kept for 12 months from the end of the fieldwork period.

Research with early years providers

Online and telephone surveys

IFF Research also carried out surveys with childminders and leaders at EY providers. The surveys took an 'online first' approach with computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) introduced later in fieldwork, targeting harder to reach provider types and those underrepresented in the online survey response rates (primarily SBPs). The surveys took around 10 minutes to complete and asked about providers' preparation for the rollout, ability to meet parent demand, communications with LAs and parents, and any administration challenges experienced.

Ofsted provided sample for GBPs and childminders in 2 stages for each wave. Ofsted first provided the anonymised population file, drawn from the Ofsted Early Years Register. For GBPs, this included all those providing childcare on non-domestic premises, while the childminder population included all registered childminders. This population file was drawn for wave 1 in July 2023, for wave 2 in September 2024, and for wave 3 in September 2025. IFF Research then filtered these population files by those who had available contact details, sorted them by region and Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) score, and randomly selected records for the sample. The number of records drawn was based on target numbers of survey completes and anticipated response rates. IFF Research sent the selected list of providers back to Ofsted who then returned the de-anonymised sample frame with contact information appended.

IFF Research compiled a SBP sample via the Schools Workforce Census, with further information supplemented from the Get Information About Schools database. IFF Research sorted the SBP population by region and IDACI score, and randomly selected records for the sample. DfE then appended contact information for the drawn sample.

Wave 1 fieldwork was delayed starting in July 2024 due to the 2024 general election. We did not invite SBPs to take part in wave 1 because schools were not open during the fieldwork period. In wave 2, SBPs were asked an additional set of questions about their experience of the first rollout to account for this.

As shown in Table 1.4 to 1.6, a total of 654 providers responded to the survey in wave 1 of fieldwork, 1,107 providers in wave 2, and 1,058 providers in wave 3. The response rate across waves ranged from 8 to 11%. In wave 3, 385 SBPs took part, 558 GBPs and 115 childminders.

Table 1.4 Wave 1 Provider survey response rates

Provider type	Target	Providers approached (n)	Responses (n)	Response rate (%)
All	640	7,497	654	9%
SBPs	0	0	0	N/A
GBPs	540	5,400	485	9%
CMs	100	833	169	20%

Table 1.5 Wave 2 Provider survey response rates

Provider type	Target	Providers approached (n)	Responses (n)	Response rate (%)
All	1,000	10,209	1,107	11%
SBPs	360	3,584	378	11%
GBPs	540	5,794	607	10%
CMs	100	831	122	15%

Table 1.6 Wave 3 Provider survey response rates

Provider type	Target	Providers approached (n)	Responses (n)	Response rate (%)
All	1,000	13,834	1,058	8%
SBPs	360	7,192	385	5%
GBPs	540	5,892	558	9%
CMs	100	750	115	15%

IFF Research applied weighting to the provider survey data to account for variance by region and provider size. Weighting targets are detailed further in Appendix B – Weighting.

Qualitative interviews

IFF Research asked providers who completed the surveys to give consent to be recontacted for follow up research to explore their perspectives in more detail. Interviews with providers explored topics including the take-up of the expanded entitlement in their area, preparedness for the rollout, actions taken to support implementation, how they delivered the expanded entitlement, the effects on the demand for places and their income, and perceived effects on parents and children.

IFF Research completed a total of 30 follow up interviews with EY providers (10 each wave). To capture a wide range of perspectives and experiences, the interviews were targeted to ensure they included a spread across provider type, region, and feelings of preparedness for the rollout as reported in the survey. IFF Research carried out the interviews online via Microsoft Teams, and they lasted 60 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis purposes.

Research with parents[6]

IFF Research also carried out interviews with parents in all 3 waves of fieldwork. These interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and were carried out either online using Microsoft Teams or over the phone depending on respondent preference. We offered families a £25 voucher as a thank you for taking part. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams or Zoom, with only core team members from IFF Research having access to the recordings for analysis. Findings have been anonymised for reporting. Under the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) the data

[6] The term ‘parent’ is used throughout but should be understood to also encompass carers and legal guardians.

collected was used only for the purpose of this evaluation and participants had the opportunity to withdraw their data from the research up until the point this report was prepared. Personal information about participants was kept for 12 months from the end of the fieldwork period.

Recruitment

Recruitment for the parent interviews was not intended to be representative of the population and, instead, was designed to cover a variety of experiences and delve deeper into trends coming out of the interviews with LAs and providers. As a result, the approach to recruitment varied slightly for each wave.

In wave 1, IFF Research asked EY providers at the end of the provider survey if they were willing to support recruitment of parents. Those who opted in were sent information about the research to pass on to parents at their setting. This included a link for parents to complete an online contact form if they were interested in participating. We also asked interviewed providers to share contact details for any parents who would be interested in taking part. The sample for wave 1 parent interviews totalled 77 parents.

For wave 2, similarly to wave 1, IFF Research asked EY providers at the end of their survey if they were willing to support recruitment of parents. Those who opted in were sent information about the research to pass on to parents; those who expressed an interest in this were invited to take part in an interview. For wave 2, eligible parents were also invited to take part if they had completed DfE's Childcare Experiences Survey (CES)[7], a survey about parent experiences of accessing entitlement, and consented to being contacted by IFF Research to take part in these interviews. For wave 2 the total sample included 376 parents.

For wave 3, IFF Research sourced the sample for eligible parents from the DfE CES recontact sample. We also included a link for parents, particularly ineligible parents, to express their interest in taking part within the Best Start in Life monthly newsletter, which is distributed by DfE to parents and carers. In this wave, IFF Research also targeted parents who were potentially eligible for the Early Learning for 2-year-old funding, to capture their experiences of this alongside the expanded entitlement. The total wave 3 sample included 327 parents.

In all 3 waves, parents were invited to interview randomly from the available sample to ensure a spread across eligibility status for the expanded entitlement, childcare provider types used, and region. Table 1.7 shows the breakdown of the completed parent interviews for each wave by eligibility status.

[7] A termly survey carried out by DfE of parents who had applied for an eligibility code for the expanded entitlement, running from Autumn 2024 term to Summer 2026 term.

Table 1.7 Number of parents interviewed across fieldwork waves

	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3
Total parent interviews (n)	**25**	**25**	**25**
Eligible for the expanded entitlement (n)	22	19	23
- Receiving	20	13	13
- Not receiving	2	6	10
Ineligible for the expanded entitlement (n)	3	6	2

Analysis approach

IFF Research aggregated, tabulated, and broke down responses from the surveys according to a range of characteristics. These characteristics included provider type and size, region, and deprivation level. Any open-text responses to the surveys were analysed using a general inductive approach, where themes and patterns were identified from the responses received. We applied weighting to the provider survey data to account for variance in region and provider size.

We took a deductive approach to the analysis of qualitative interviews, as interview transcripts were thematically analysed based on the research questions. This deductive approach was supplemented with inductive codes during analysis when unexpected themes emerged. Inductive coding is a bottom-up approach to qualitative analysis that involves determining themes and codes based on the data collected, rather than analysing it solely using pre-determined themes and codes. IFF Research summarised interviews using direct quotes and reflections from the interviews, enabling experiences to be compared by provider type and size.

We analysed findings from all strands alongside secondary data from the DfE's CES and the number of eligibility codes issued to parents of children aged 9 months to 2-years-old and the number of codes that have been validated by providers.

Limitations

A number of limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings presented in this evaluation report.

Although all LAs in England were invited to participate in each wave of fieldwork, the achieved survey sample remained relatively modest (for example, n=88 in wave 3) and findings should therefore be interpreted with appropriate caution. However, response rates were relatively high, and the regional profile of responding LAs was broadly consistent with that of the wider LA population. While the findings cannot be assumed to be fully representative, they are likely to provide a broadly reliable indication of LA experiences and perspectives on the rollout of the expanded entitlement.

Non-response bias may also have affected provider survey results, despite weighting accounting for some differences in response rates by provider type and size. This is particularly true for characteristics that cannot be weighted for because they are unknown in the population. For example, it could be reasonably expected that busier providers may have more limited time to complete an online survey, and responses may therefore have been more likely to come from quieter providers. This could have had an impact on findings related to feelings of preparedness to deliver the rollout and capacity to meet parents’ demand for places under the expanded entitlement. Alternatively, providers motivated to complete the survey may have had stronger opinions on the policy than the population as a whole. Survey invite materials were carefully designed to attempt to minimise these kinds of biases, by emphasising the value of taking part for all providers. Additionally, the month-long fieldwork period was designed to help encourage as many providers to take part as possible.

Another limitation to bear in mind is that the findings rely on self-reported outcomes throughout, rather than objective measures. For example, IFF Research asked LA EY Leads about their views on the sufficiency of childcare places in their area, rather than drawing evidence from administrative datasets on childcare place planning. The separate impact evaluation will consider these objective measures to answer questions about impact and sufficiency; this implementation and process evaluation focusses instead on experiences of the policy, particularly the delivery of the policy, as reported by LAs, providers and parents.

Self-reported findings also risk an element of social desirability bias influencing findings. Respondents may have been hesitant to give responses that they perceived as less socially acceptable, particularly during interviews with a researcher. For example, providers may have been unwilling to report that they had limited places for children with SEND, or that they imposed mandatory additional charges to parents not in line with LA guidance. Those carrying out the interviews were provided with careful prompts and questions were framed openly to minimise this.

Interpreting the findings

Analysis throughout this report focuses primarily on data collected following Phase 3 of the rollout, which was implemented in September 2025 and extended the entitlement to 30 funded hours per week (across 38 weeks of the year) for eligible working families with children aged 9 months and older. References to ‘phases’ relate to the stages of policy implementation, while ‘waves’ refer to the corresponding evaluation fieldwork conducted following each phase. Findings from waves 1 and 2 are included where relevant to explore changes over time. Only statistically significant differences (95% confidence level) are reported.

Any findings based on a sample size of fewer than 30 respondents are not included in this report as these are too small to be considered representative of the population.

2. Overall take up of the expanded entitlement

This chapter explores take up of the expanded entitlement among eligible parents. It looks at differences by family demographics and barriers to families accessing the expanded entitlement. Additionally, it explores the take up of providers offering the expanded entitlement and any barriers to this.

The chapter pulls together high-level analysis of eligibility code validation data, findings from the Childcare Experiences Survey (CES) and from the evaluation's surveys of EY providers and LA EY Leads.

Take up of the expanded entitlement among parents

The expanded entitlement appears to be reaching most eligible families who actively seek to use it. In the term following the final phase of the expanded entitlement rollout, the majority of parents in England who had received an eligibility code for the expanded entitlement went on to access it. In Autumn 2025, 585,708 parents in England had a code issued for their 9-month to 2-year-olds to access the expanded entitlement. Of these, 95% had their code validated by a childcare provider, indicating that they accessed the entitlement.[8]

Many EY providers surveyed reported caring for children who were accessing the expanded entitlement. Just over two thirds (69%) of EY providers surveyed who had registered under-3-year-olds had at least one of them receiving the expanded entitlement. On average, providers had 9.0 children aged 9 months to 2-years-old receiving the entitlement. This indicates that many providers were participating in delivering the expanded entitlement and, at a national level, the policy has achieved broad reach and successfully extended funded childcare to a large number of families.

Providers reported higher take up among 9-month to 23-month-olds compared to those aged 2. Where responding providers had 9-month to 23-month-olds registered, on average 84% of these children were receiving the expanded entitlement. On average, these providers had 9 children of this age receiving the expanded entitlement (an average of 4 children for SBPs, 18 for GBPs and 3 for childminders). In comparison, where providers had 2-year-olds registered, 66% of them were receiving the expanded entitlement. These providers had, on average, 8 children aged 2 receiving the expanded entitlement (an average of 7 for SBPs, 11 for GBPs, and 2 for childminders). This difference in take up between children of different age groups was consistent across providers within areas with different levels of deprivation. This indicates higher take-up of the expanded entitlement among 9-month to 23-month-olds than among 2-year-olds, regardless of area deprivation.

[8] Expansion to early childcare entitlements: eligibility codes issued and validated (2026) Gov.uk. Available at: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/expansion-to-early-childcare-entitlements-eligibility-codes-issued-and-validated/2026-march#content (Date accessed: 13/04/2026)

Among parents who received an eligibility code, validation and use of the entitlement. was lower in more deprived areas. In Autumn 2025, 88% of parents who had received a new expanded entitlement code in the most deprived areas[9] had had that code validated and accessed the entitlement compared to 94% of those in the least deprived areas.[10] EY providers surveyed in the most deprived areas also reported a smaller proportion of their 2-year-olds receiving the expanded entitlement compared to those in the least deprived areas. Responding providers in the most deprived areas reported that 49% of their registered 2-year-olds were receiving the expanded entitlement. By comparison, those in the least deprived areas reported that 70% of their registered 2-year-olds were receiving it.

The number of hours a child spent in formal childcare during a typical week also increased in line with their household income. For households earning over £100,000 per year, the child spent around 33 hours a week in formal childcare, while for those earning less than £39,999 this number was 24.[11] Take up of the entitlement did not seem to be evenly spread across lower and higher-income households. Families with lower incomes and those in more deprived areas appear less likely to be making full use of the expanded entitlement. Although this could be due to family preference, it raises questions about barriers to access for these parents, which is explored further in Chapter 5: Parent experiences of accessing the expanded entitlement.

There were also some differences in take up of the expanded entitlement by region. The largest proportion of non-claimant respondents to the CES were reported in the South West, the West Midlands and the North East (7%). Just 4% of surveyed parents did not claim the expanded entitlement in the South East. The average number of hours a child spent in formal childcare in a week was the highest for London at 31 hours, and the lowest in the North East at 24 hours. [12] While this regional difference in non-claimants remains relatively small, the disparity in the number of hours accessed is notable, particularly as the number in the North East is considerably below the 30 hours the expanded entitlement offer. Further work may need to be done with the lower take up local authorities to explore barriers to entry in these areas.

Parents who were not accessing the expanded entitlement had varied reasons for this. The most common reasons for not accessing the expanded entitlement were that parents were waiting for a place for their child to become available (18%); that their child was starting childcare next term (18%); or that they had chosen alternative provision not

[9] Deprivation is measured by the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) which is one of the components of the Indices of Deprivation for England. It measures the proportion of children aged 0–15 living in income-deprived households within each Lower-layer Super Output Area (LSOA). LSOAs are grouped into ten deciles, where Decile 1 represents the most deprived and Decile 10 the least deprived.
[10] Expansion to early childcare entitlements: eligibility codes issued and validated (2026) Gov.uk. Available at: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/expansion-to-early-childcare-entitlements-eligibility-codes-issued-and-validated/2026-march#content (Date accessed: 13/04/2026)
[11] Expansion to early childcare entitlements: Childcare Experiences Survey Autumn term 2025/26 Fourth Wave (2026) Gov.uk. Available at: Release home - Expansion to early childcare entitlements: Childcare Experiences Survey - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK (Date accessed: 10/09/2026)
[12] Ibid.

eligible for the funded hours (12%).[13] This suggests that, beyond a lack of available space within settings, parent choice is an important driver for not accessing the entitlement. The challenges parents face with finding a desirable childcare place is explored further in the section Finding a childcare place in Chapter 5.

Take up of providers offering the expanded entitlement

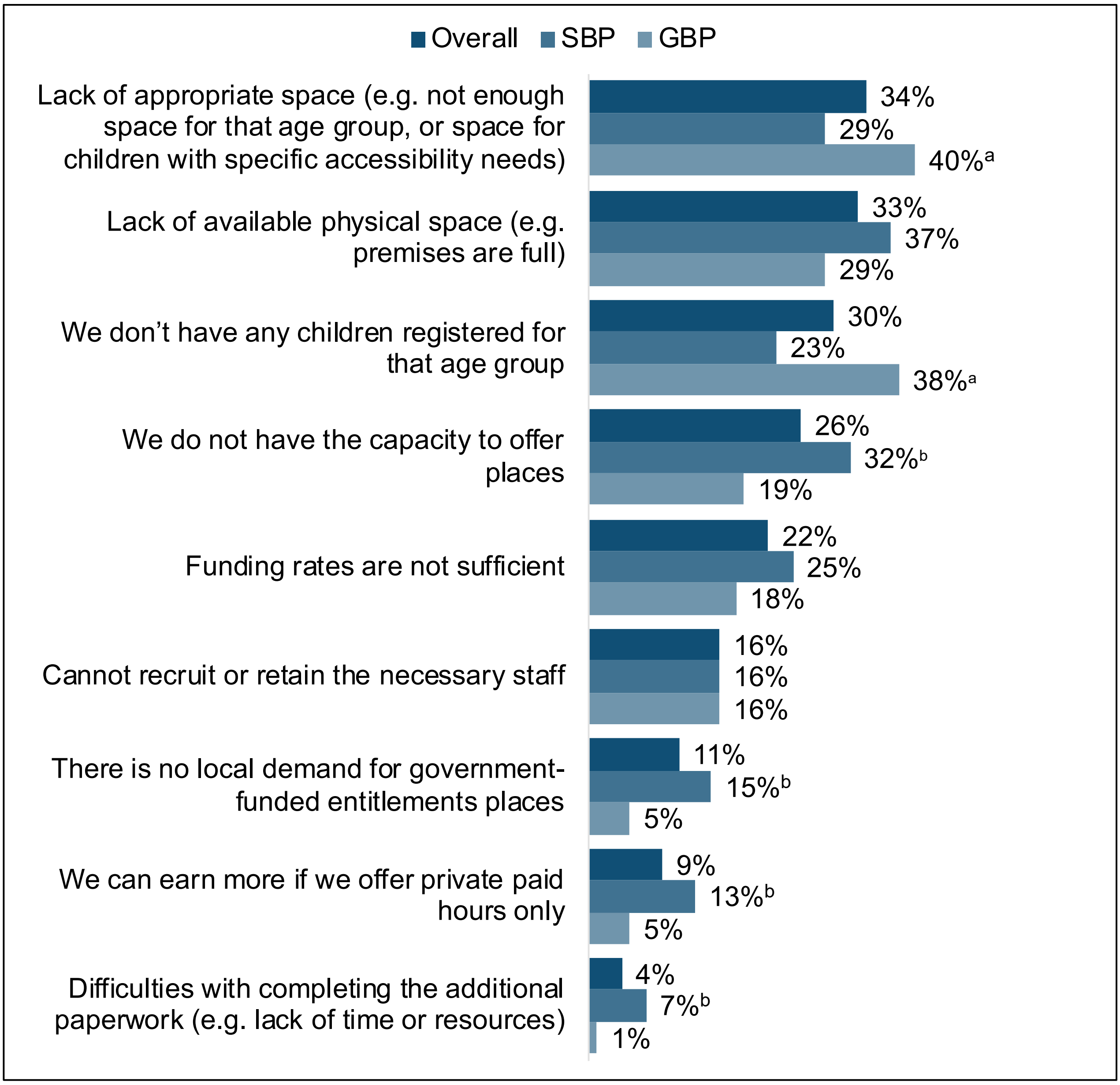
The majority of providers surveyed were offering the expanded entitlement. Just under three quarters (73%) either had children accessing, or offered, the expanded entitlement. SBPs were less likely to be offering the expanded entitlement compared to GBPs or childminders (43% vs. 94% and 93% respectively).

Most providers offered parents of 9-month to 2-year-olds the full 1,140 funded hours under the expanded entitlement. Eight-in-ten (80%) of those providers who had 9-month to 2-year-old children accessing the expanded entitlement were offering the 1,140 hours of funded childcare per year. This was in line with the perspectives of surveyed LAs, with 88% of responding LAs agreeing that providers in their area were now offering the full 30 hours to parents who want them. Childminders were more likely to be offering the full 1,140 hours compared to GBPs and SBPs (98% vs. 74% and 68% respectively). Surveyed providers who were not offering the full 1,140 hours of funded childcare per year most commonly reported this was because they did not have capacity (46%) or because it was not financially viable to do so (18%).

Providers who were not offering the expanded entitlement at all had varied reasons for this, though mostly this was due to lack of space. Surveyed providers most commonly reported they were not offering the expanded entitlement because they had a lack of appropriate space (34%), a lack of available physical space (33%) or because they did not have children registered in the correct age groups (30%). The full list of reasons given can be seen in Figure 2.1.

[13] Ibid.

Figure 2.1 Factors preventing providers from offering parents the expanded entitlement, by provider type



B3. What is stopping you from offering parents of 9 month to 2-year-olds the new 30 hours government-funded entitlement? Base: All providers not offering the expanded entitlement (n=383).
Superscript letters indicate statistically significant differences between subgroups: a denotes a significantly higher figure from SBPs; b from GBPs. Childminders are not shown separately due to low base size for this question.
Source: Expanded Childcare Entitlement Process Evaluation Wave 3 Provider Survey.

As shown in Figure 2.1, there were some differences in reason for not offering the expanded entitlement by provider type. Surveyed GBPs were more likely than SBPs to report a lack of appropriate space (40% vs. 29%) and not having children registered in the correct age groups (38% vs. 23%) as a factor that had stopped them offering the expanded entitlement. Conversely, responding SBPs were more likely than GBPs to say that they were not offering the expanded entitlement because they did not have capacity (32% vs. 19%), that there was no local demand for the expanded entitlement (15% vs.

5%), that they could earn more if they offered private hours only (13% vs. 5%) or that they had difficulties completing the additional paperwork (7% vs. 1%).

Overall, the expanded entitlement appears to be reaching most eligible families who apply, with high code validation rates and most providers offering the entitlement. However, access is not evenly distributed, with lower take up and fewer hours accessed among families in more deprived areas and those with lower incomes. This suggests that the main barrier is not willingness to use the entitlement, but differences in families' take up of the funded hours they are eligible to receive. There isn't a single reason for this. Some parents chose not to use the entitlement, or used fewer hours, based on their preferences or circumstances. Others faced more practical constraints, such as waiting lists, limited local availability, a lack of suitable places, or the cost of topping up funded hours.

As a result, measures of take-up alone may overstate the reach of the policy, as different levels of take up among different groups and in different areas suggests some underlying inequalities in access. These findings highlight the importance of focusing not only on overall take up of the expanded entitlement, but also on addressing local sufficiency, provider constraints, and the specific barriers faced by lower-income families to ensure the policy delivers equitable access across areas.

Sufficiency of childcare places and provider experiences are discussed further in Chapter 4, and parent experiences of accessing the expanded entitlement in Chapter 5.

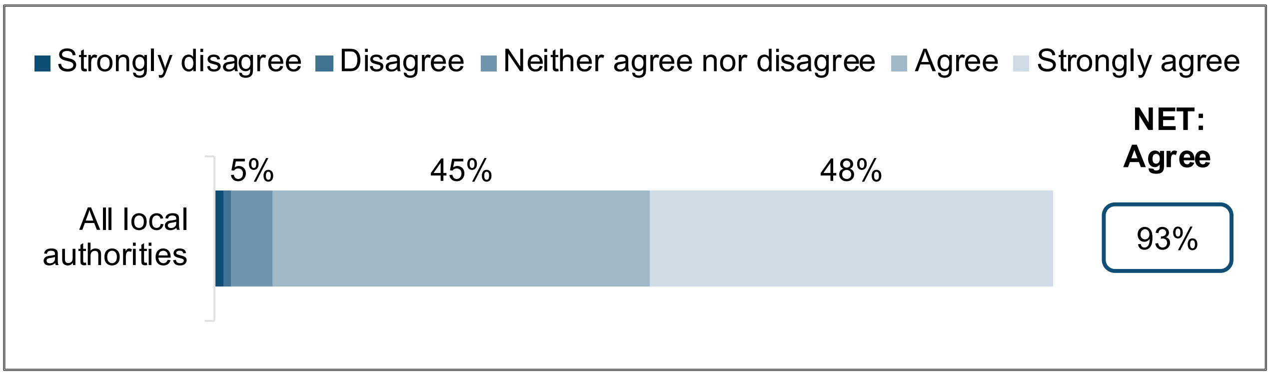
3. Preparation for the expanded entitlement rollout

This chapter explores LA and providers' preparation for delivering the expanded entitlement rollout. This includes how prepared LAs and providers felt ahead of the phase 3 rollout, and how these feelings of preparedness changed over the course of the 3 phases of rollout. The chapter covers the various steps taken by LAs and providers to prepare for the rollout, including building early years place capacity and staffing capacity, and reviewing administrative systems. Finally, it describes LA and providers' feedback on the support and guidance provided by the DfE to deliver the expanded entitlement.

Overall preparedness for final rollout

Surveyed LAs generally reported feeling prepared for the expanded entitlement rollout. Almost all (93%) of surveyed LAs agreed that they were prepared to deliver the phase 3 rollout in September 2025, as shown in Figure 3.1. High proportions of LAs feeling prepared were consistent across all 3 phases of the rollout (91% agreed they were prepared for phase 1, and 93% for phase 2).

Figure 3.1 Whether LAs felt prepared for the phase 3 rollout



A1. To what extent do you agree or disagree that your LA was prepared for the rollout in September 2025?
Base: All local authorities (n=88).
Source: Expanded Childcare Entitlement Process Evaluation Wave 3 LA Survey.

When explaining why they felt prepared for the phase 3 rollout, interviewed LAs commonly referred to the staggered approach to the rollout. Building experience within LA staff teams made up of the same personnel across earlier phases of the rollout had helped them to feel prepared for phase 3. They also described using the preparation work they had undertaken during earlier phases of the rollout to set up for the final phase, such as forecasting and modelling supply and demand in their local area.

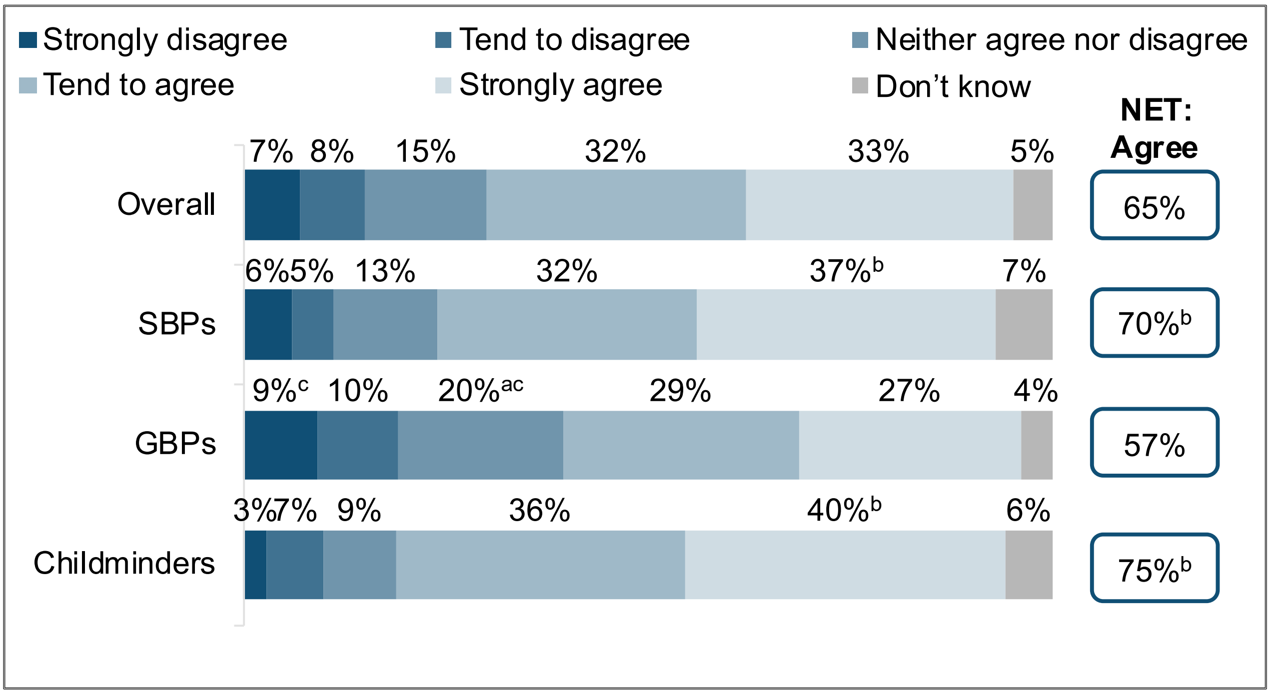
> "I do think that first phase was sort of the most significant part [for preparation]. And then you just adapt your approach based on sort of your local knowledge and how things went, [for] moving forward." - Local Authority

However, a small number of LAs did face challenges in preparing for the phase 3 rollout of the expanded entitlement. Challenges raised included concerns over the speed of the rollout phases, and difficulties with deploying capital grant funding due to complex planning requirements. These difficulties were particularly common among LAs that reported they did not have sufficient staff to deliver the rollout.

> “We've still got [providers] that haven't got off the ground even at this point when we've got to the third phase, because there's just so many barriers in terms of planning applications and that sort of thing.” - Local Authority

For surveyed EY providers, over two thirds (65%) agreed they were prepared to deliver the phase 3 rollout, as shown in Figure 3.2. This represents an increase on those who felt prepared for phase 1 (56%) and phase 2 (52%) of the rollout, indicating that providers' feelings of preparedness increased as they approached the phase 3 rollout. However, there remained 14% of surveyed providers that did not feel prepared for phase 3, and a further 15% that neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 3.2 Whether providers felt prepared for the phase 3 rollout



C17_2. To what extent do you agree that your setting was prepared to deliver the third stage of the entitlement expansion in September 2025? Base: If have children receiving the expanded entitlement or planning to (n=750).
Superscript letters indicate statistically significant differences between subgroups: a denotes a significantly higher figure compared to SBPs; b from GBPs; and c from childminders.
Source: Expanded Childcare Entitlement Process Evaluation Wave 3 Providers Survey.

Feelings of preparedness varied between different provider types. Responding SBPs (70%) and childminders (75%) were more likely to agree that they were prepared for the phase 3 rollout than GBPs (57%). This may be linked to the providers' capacity to meet parents' demand for childcare places under the expanded entitlement. As noted in the

Provider experiences of meeting demand section in Chapter 4, GBPs were less likely to report that they had been able to meet parents' demand and may therefore have felt less prepared.

Interviewed providers also generally felt prepared for the phase 3 rollout. Some noted that phases 2 and 3 of the rollout taking place in September had made it easier for them to feel prepared. This was due to it being their quietest time, as older children had made their transition to school.

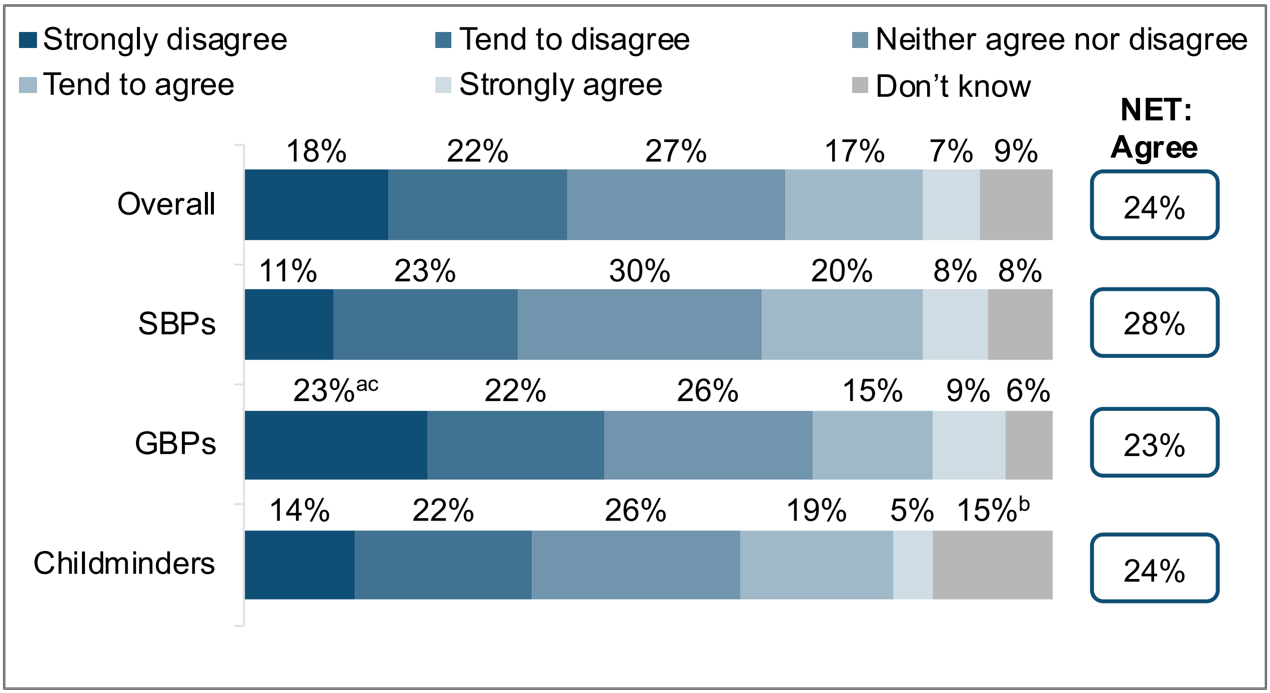
> "All your children have just left to go into school…I would say [September] was the best time to roll it out because you've got much more space and you're able to accommodate the hours if people needed them." - School-based provider

Interviewed providers also explained how the gradual rollout over the 3 phases had helped them to feel prepared for the phase 3 rollout. They found the move from 15 to 30 funded hours straightforward as they already had systems and processes in place, and many children were already paying privately for more than 15 hours per week of childcare.

> "I welcomed [the phase 3 rollout] because I didn't have any change of children. They just went up from, you know, getting 15 hours to 30 hours. So that was just the click of a button to transfer." - Childminder

Despite surveyed providers generally feeling that they were prepared for the phase 3 rollout, just under one quarter (24%) agreed that the childcare sector as a whole had been prepared for the rollout, as shown in Figure 3.3. This figure did not change significantly throughout the 3 phases of the rollout, with 25% who agreed the childcare sector was prepared for the phase 1 rollout, and 22% who reported this for phase 2. This indicates that providers retained some scepticism about the preparedness of the childcare sector more broadly, even where their own experience had been relatively smooth.

Figure 3.3 Whether providers felt the childcare sector was prepared for the phase 3 rollout



C17_1. To what extent do you agree that the childcare sector was prepared to deliver the third stage of the entitlement expansion in September 2025? Base: If have children receiving the expanded entitlement or planning to (n=750).
Superscript letters indicate statistically significant differences between subgroups: a denotes a significantly higher figure compared to SBPs; b from GBPs; and c from childminders.
Source: Expanded Childcare Entitlement Process Evaluation Wave 3 Providers Survey.

Overall, LAs and providers felt well prepared to deliver the rollout of the expanded entitlement. The staged approach to the rollout helped LAs and providers to prepare and adapt across the rollout phases. Nonetheless, some LAs did find the pace of the rollout phases and the distribution of capital grant funding challenging, especially where they felt they did not have sufficient staff to deliver the rollout.

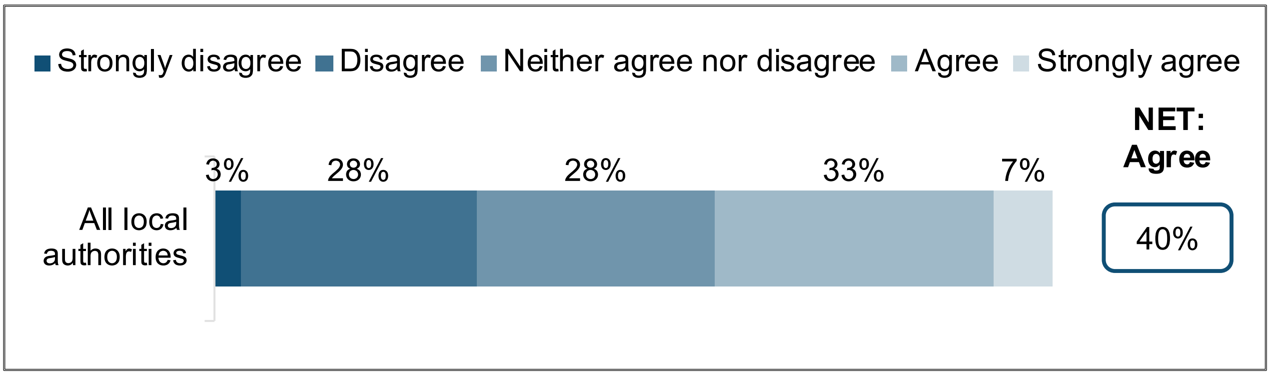
Administrative preparation for the rollout

LAs interviewed had taken several steps to prepare providers for the rollout. They reported that they had built good relationships with their providers and had regular communication with them. These included regular email briefings and newsletters with updates and encouragement for providers to consider their long-term plan and focus on the phase 3 rollout from the beginning. For example, one LA provided support by modelling incomes for providers based on different scenarios of supply and demand.

> "I would share with providers what it looks like if you offer these numbers of hours and the income you would generate, what it looks like if you offered a stretch model and the income you could generate, and with [different] numbers of children." - Local Authority

Surveyed LAs had mixed opinions on whether the administration of the expanded entitlement had become easier over time. Two fifths of surveyed LAs (40%) agreed that the administration of the expanded entitlement had become easier over time, while 32% disagreed and 28% neither agreed nor disagreed (Figure 3.4).

Figure 3.4 Whether LAs felt that the administration of the expanded entitlement had become easier over time



C1-4. When thinking about the Expanded Childcare Entitlement policy rollout overall (from April 2024 to now), to what extent do you agree or disagree that the administration of the entitlement has become easier to manage over time? Base: All local authorities (n=88).
Source: Expanded Childcare Entitlement Process Evaluation Wave 3 LA Survey.

In interviews, LAs described a number of ongoing challenges with administering the expanded entitlement. In particular, interviewed LAs noted the challenges of time pressure and issues with updating their administrative systems in time for the 3 phases of the rollout.

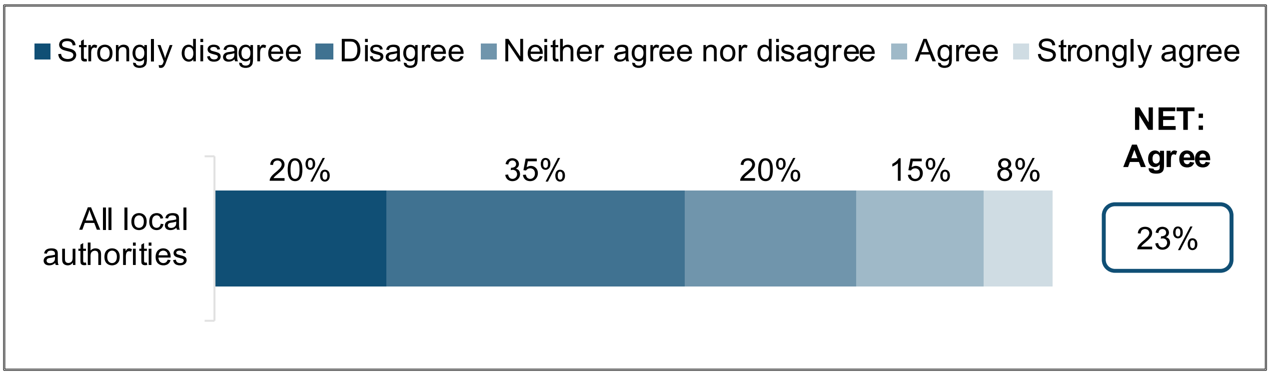
> “We had some technical challenges, obviously, because we were waiting for things like software to match. So, we had some anxiety about, will this be ready in time for us to press the button?” - Local Authority

Other interviewed LAs described the challenge of balancing multiple policy rollouts simultaneously, such as the National Wraparound Childcare Programme and/or the Free Breakfast Clubs Programme. LAs typically had a small team, or in some cases just one or two individuals, who were responsible for the rollout of several policies at the same time. This added considerably to their workload.

> “It has been really challenging to try and oversee so many DfE policy changes and programmes. They're all welcomed, don't get me wrong, … but it has been a lot to manage. … A lot at the same time.” - Local Authority

That said, among those surveyed, fewer than a quarter (23%) of LAs felt that delivering other programmes simultaneously had negatively impacted preparedness for the expanded entitlement. Over half (56%) of LAs disagreed, as shown in Figure 3.5.

Figure 3.5 Whether LAs felt that delivering other programmes simultaneously had a negative impact on preparedness for the expanded entitlement rollout



C6-3. To what extent do you agree or disagree that delivering other programmes had a negative impact on preparedness for the expanded childcare entitlement rollout? Base: All local authorities (n=88). Source: Expanded Childcare Entitlement Process Evaluation Wave 3 LA Survey.

Many interviewed providers praised how their LAs had administered the expanded entitlement. They described how the LA had provided them with information to share with parents and kept them up to date with bulletins and newsletters related to the expanded entitlement. LAs' communications typically included reminders of deadlines for providers to submit data to the LA, guidance on supporting parents with determining and renewing their eligibility, and updated funding rates.

> "So, we have online meetings and then [the LA] send out a bulletin after that with all the information that's been disseminated in the meeting. … They are very proactive." - Childminder

Some interviewed providers noted that their local authority had improved the administrative process related to the expanded entitlement over time. For example, some LAs had updated their payment models and moved to distributing funding to providers monthly rather than termly, which made budgeting easier for providers. Other interviewed providers reported that their LA had taken on feedback from previous phases of the rollout, provided more notice of upcoming changes and shared information earlier which enabled them to prepare better.

> "[We felt] much more prepared than the previous year because we had the information earlier. I think [the LA] definitely listened." - School-based provider

Interviewed providers generally felt well prepared in terms of their systems and processes for the phase 3 rollout. Several mapped their capacities and workloads well ahead of the rollout, enabling them to plan for different scenarios in terms of demand for funded hours. For example, one provider described assuming in April 2025 that all of their families receiving the 15-hour entitlement at that time would want to increase to 30 funded hours when they became eligible following the phase 3 rollout, which they used to work out if they had enough space for this maximum demand scenario. They were then able to plan accordingly ahead of time which helped them to feel prepared.

Throughout the rollout phases, interviewed providers described more proactively reaching out to eligible parents in advance of later rollout phases with information about the expanded entitlement, to reduce the number of queries they received once the policy was in place. Interviewed providers sent lots of communication to parents and offered face-to-face meetings to help support parents and address their queries related to the expanded entitlement. They described regularly reminding parents of the need to reconfirm their eligibility, or in some cases supporting parents to complete the application form for the expanded entitlement.

> “We spoke to each individual family and made sure that if they were working, both parents obviously, … [we] made sure that we had all the details on every family so that we could then advise them best as to what sort of type of funding they were entitled to. … So, myself and my team managers literally spent hours making sure that they got the right funding.” - Group-based provider

In summary, LAs pointed to delivering overlapping policy changes simultaneously and time pressures on updating their systems as administrative challenges in preparing for the rollout. While they did not always feel that the administrative processes became easier over time, providers praised their LAs’ administration of the expanded entitlement and noticed improvements made to the processes throughout the phases of the rollout. For providers, the primary administrative challenge was around preparing and supporting parents to access the expanded entitlement.

Building early years place capacity

Although LAs had raised concerns earlier in the rollout that providers would not be able to meet increased demand for childcare places due to the expanded entitlement, this concern was not raised following phase 3 of the rollout. LAs reported they were able to build on existing capacity to ensure that sufficiency was maintained throughout the 3 phases of rollout. Many interviewed LAs said they had created new nursery places to meet the increased demand, supported by collaboration with place planning teams.

> “We've now created about 1,500 new nursery places. I think the capital programmes are going really well … And we're also not getting lots of recorded unmet demand or [parents who] can't find a place.” - Local Authority

Interviewed LAs and providers had been able to use capital grant money to expand existing provision, as well as to support the introduction of new provision. For example, some providers that had previously only offered places to children aged 3 and above had been able to use capital grant funding to expand their offer to 2-year-olds and younger. Several interviewed LAs described how they had prioritised lower sufficiency areas for capital grant funding to ensure that sufficiency was maintained across the whole LA.

The main barrier to the creation of additional childcare places raised by interviewed LAs was a physical lack of space for the further expansion of providers, whether within their existing setting or an alternative setting.

> "We've got lots of providers who… want to expand but they are not in a building that is expandable... there are no bigger premises." - Local Authority

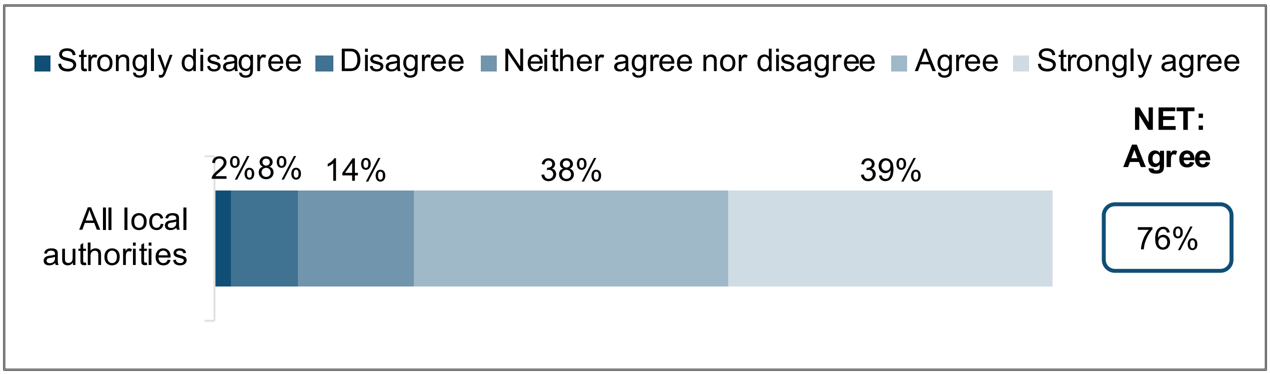
Overall, LAs and providers had typically been able to build early years place capacity, though the challenge of physical space remained for some. As discussed in the section Building early years staff capacity, challenges with recruiting additional staff were a further barrier to the creation of additional childcare places.

Building early years staff capacity

Staffing capacity within LAs

The majority of LAs felt they had sufficient staff to deliver the expanded entitlement. Many surveyed LAs had recruited additional staff to ensure they had sufficient capacity, with seven-in-ten (70%) having hired additional staff at some point over the course of the 3 phases of the rollout to help meet the demand. Over three quarters (76%) of surveyed LAs agreed that they had sufficient staff in their team to deliver the phase 3 rollout, as shown in Figure 3.6.

Figure 3.6 Whether LAs had sufficient staff within their team for the phase 3 rollout



A1-2. To what extent do you agree or disagree that your LA had sufficient staff within your EY team for the rollout in September 2025? Base: All local authorities (n=88).
Source: Expanded Childcare Entitlement Process Evaluation Wave 3 LA Survey.

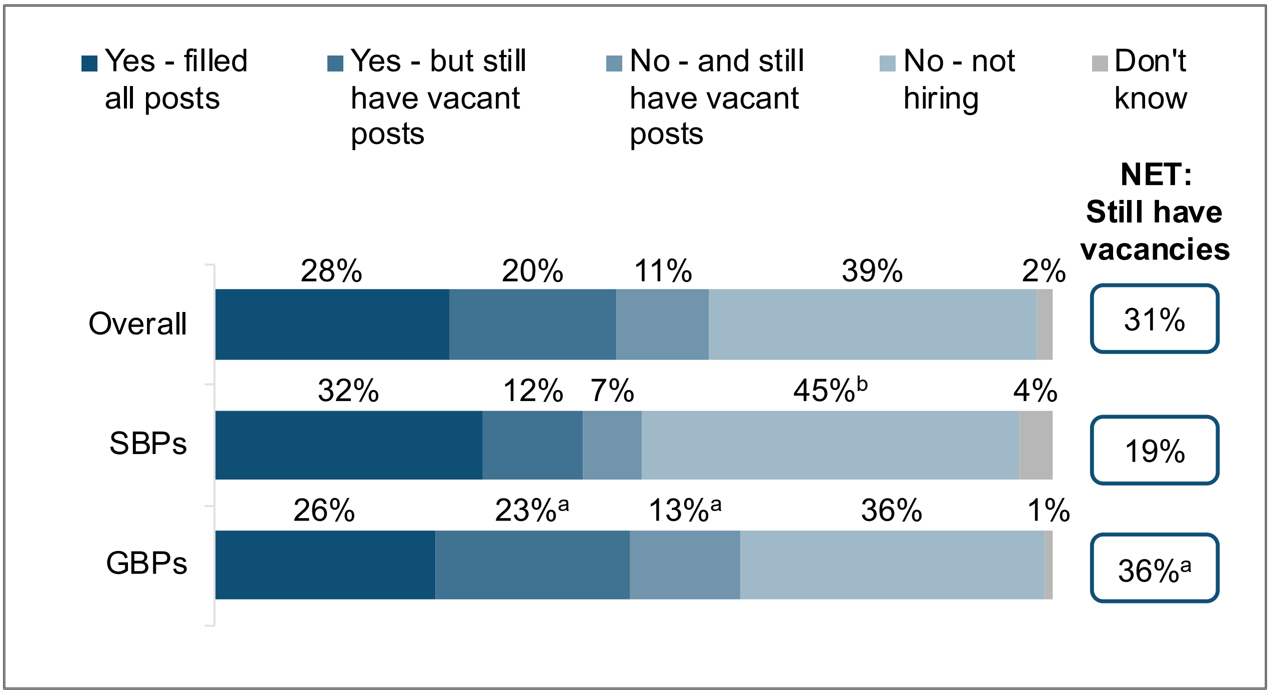
Staffing capacity within providers

Interviewed LAs had recognised that the recruitment and retention of childcare staff would be an issue for providers ahead of phase 3 of the rollout, and several had taken steps to try and address this. Some LAs felt that they had exhausted the local talent pool, but many were implementing techniques to try and boost new entries to the childcare job market. For example, one LA was working with local colleges to try and promote students progressing quickly through the available qualification routes.

> "We worked with the colleges to say, come on we need to get these students through these qualifications, lots of them have gone down the apprenticeship route." - Local Authority

Recruitment of EY staff was an issue for some of the surveyed providers. Just under one third (31%) of surveyed SBPs and GBPs were operating with at least one unfilled position, while just under half (47%) had successfully recruited new staff to help meet increased demand for places under the expanded entitlement. As shown in Figure 3.7, this included 28% who had filled all advertised posts, and 20% who had recruited some new staff but still had vacancies. A further 11% had vacancies but had not yet succeeded in recruiting any new staff, while 39% were not looking for new staff.

Figure 3.7 Proportion of SBPs and GBPs who have recruited new staff due to the expanded entitlement



C1. Have you recruited any new childcare staff as a result of increased demand for places under the expanded entitlement? Base: All SBPs and GBPs who have children receiving the expanded entitlement or planning to (n=647).
Superscript letters indicate statistically significant differences between subgroups: a denotes a significantly higher figure compared to SBPs; b from GBPs; and c from childminders.
Source: Expanded Childcare Entitlement Process Evaluation Wave 3 Provider Survey.

Challenges recruiting sufficient staff were more common among surveyed GBPs than SBPs: 36% of GBPs had vacant posts, compared with 19% of SBPs. However, SBPs were more likely than GBPs to not be hiring at all (45% vs. 36%).

Larger providers who responded to the survey (those with 61 or more children registered) were more likely than average to have recruited (61% vs. 47% of all SBPs and GBPs), and to still have vacant posts (45% vs. 31% of all SBPs and GBPs). This was particularly the case for providers who had high numbers of 9 to 23-month-olds: 81% of those with 31 or more children in this age group had recruited new staff, and 85% of these still had vacant posts.

In interviews, providers generally reported having sufficient staff to deliver the expanded entitlement. Some had recruited in preparation for phase 3 of the rollout, particularly where providers were expanding to take on younger ages where they had not done so previously.

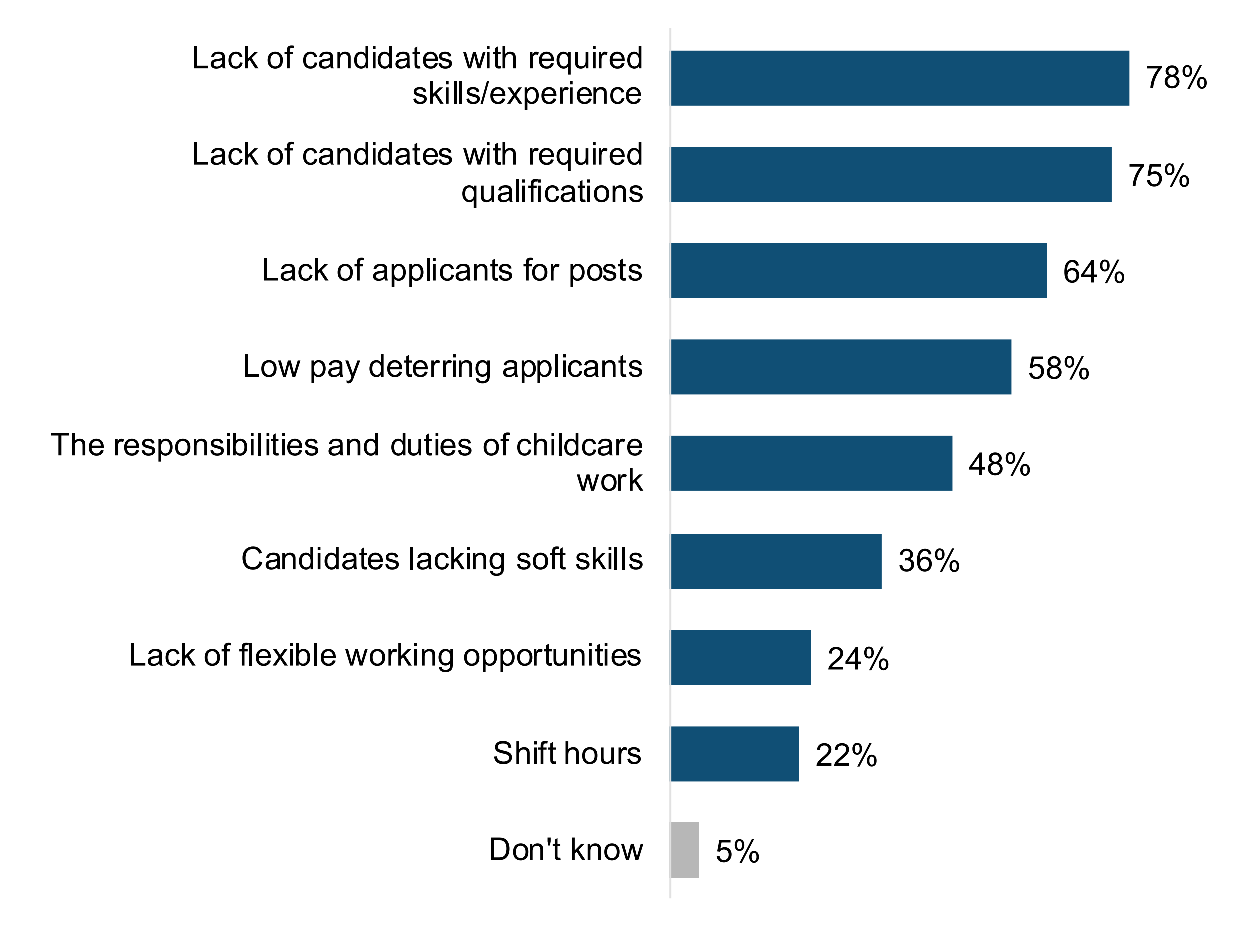
> “It was a new age group for us, so we wanted to make sure that we had the right people and skills for that and that's probably why we had to look more and more every time.” - School-based provider

However, other interviewed providers described issues they were having with recruiting new staff. Some providers reported struggling to recruit new staff just to replace staff who had left, while others had faced difficulties trying to recruit staff to meet the demand from the expanded entitlement. They described how broader challenges with recruitment and retention had in some cases made it difficult for providers to offer families the full 1,140 hours of the expanded entitlement.

> “Staffing I think is always an issue in early years […] at the moment the most we can offer [to parents] is 24 [funded] hours, so not too far off, but we just don't have [capacity] for the full 30 hours at the moment.” - Group-based provider

Surveyed SBPs and GBPs who had recruited or were still recruiting new staff were asked whether they had faced any recruitment challenges. The most common difficulties reported were finding suitably skilled staff (78%), finding suitably qualified staff (75%), or attracting any candidates to apply for posts (64%). The full list of recruitment challenges is shown in Figure 3.8.

Figure 3.8 GBP and SBPs' barriers to hiring staff



C7. What barriers are there to hiring staff? Base: All SBPs and GBPs who have recruited or are still recruiting childcare staff (n=387).
Source: Expanded Childcare Entitlement Process Evaluation Wave 3 Provider Survey.

Recruitment difficulties reported in interviews were similar, with providers most commonly mentioning difficulties finding staff with the required skills and qualifications. Finding staff with Level 3 early years qualifications was a particular struggle for several providers interviewed.

> "The only thing that we have found difficult before is when members of staff leave, we find it really hard to recruit people that have a Level 3 early years qualification, which they need to have [to be counted in ratio]." - School-based provider

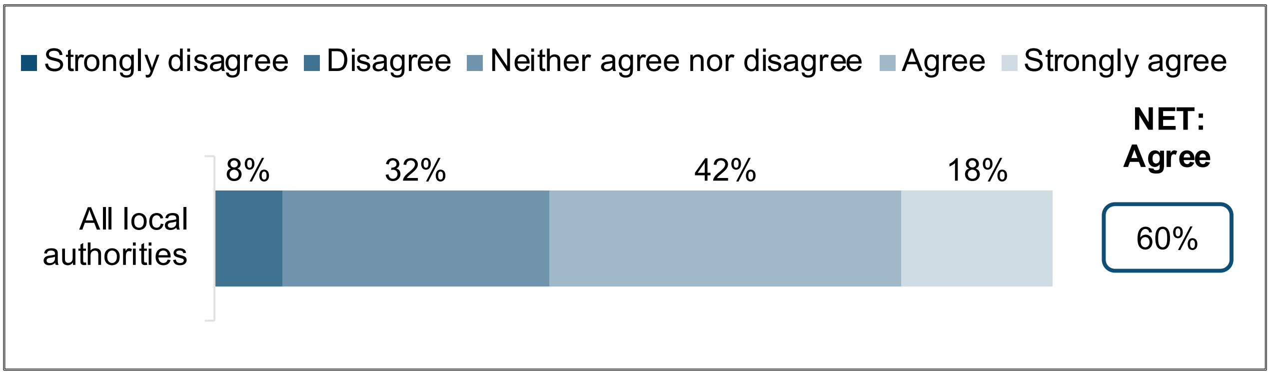
However, many interviewed providers highlighted that recruitment and retention of EY staff was a longstanding issue for them, going back further than the introduction of the expanded entitlement.

In summary, the recruitment and retention of EY staff was a challenge throughout the rollout process of the expanded entitlement. Many LAs had taken steps to try and support the recruitment of new EY staff and some providers had successfully recruited to support the delivery of the expanded entitlement. Nonetheless, recruiting suitably skilled and qualified staff remained a challenge for many providers. Recruitment pressures were particularly acute among providers caring for large numbers of younger children, suggesting workforce challenges may be greatest in parts of the sector most directly affected by the expansion.

Feedback on DfE support

Surveyed LAs were generally positive about the guidance and support they had received from DfE throughout the rollout process. Three fifths (60%) of surveyed LAs felt that the information they had received from DfE about the expanded entitlement had been easy to access and understand, while fewer than one-in-ten (8%) disagreed, as shown in Figure 3.9.

Figure 3.9 Whether LAs felt that information for local authorities about the expanded entitlement has been easy to access and understand



C1-1. When thinking about the Expanded Childcare Entitlement policy rollout overall (from April 2024 to now), to what extent do you agree or disagree that information for local authorities about the entitlement has been easy to access and understand? Base: All local authorities (n=88).
Source: Expanded Childcare Entitlement Process Evaluation Wave 3 LA Survey.

Some interviewed LAs reported having helpful, regular communication with DfE about the expanded entitlement. Some had found DfE's data on the availability of childcare places and numbers of parents who were potentially eligible helpful for their own data forecasting. They used it either as a starting point for, or a comparison to, their own sufficiency forecasting models.

> "I think we had 3 or 4 iterations of [DfE data]. And that was incredibly helpful as a really good starting point for some more complex data forecasting. […] It definitely saved me hours of time." - Local Authority

Other interviewed LAs felt that guidance provided by DfE could sometimes be too vague and was occasionally misleading for providers and parents. For example, they highlighted a lack of clarity around how eligibility begins at the start of the term after the child turns 9 months, and how the funding is available for only 38 weeks of the year. A small number of interviewed LAs reported that the guidance and funding rates were shared too late by DfE for providers to plan and agree their budgets.

> “It does feel from a local authority perspective that continually guidance comes out to us too late and then it means we have to scramble for it.” - Local Authority

Interviewed providers’ views on support from DfE were also mixed. Many had not had any issues with the support they had received and felt that the guidance was clear. However, several felt that a lack of clear guidance from DfE to parents meant that they had to undertake a significant amount of additional work to prepare parents and help them understand the expanded entitlement. Specific areas that providers had to support parents to understand included: when eligibility begins; the need to regularly renew eligibility; that the expanded entitlement is only available for 38 weeks of the year; and how stretched funding works for parents to access funded hours across the whole year.

Overall, the staged approach to the rollout across 3 waves was a key enabler to LAs’ and providers’ readiness to deliver the expanded entitlement. LAs and providers took a number of administrative steps to prepare themselves, as well as to prepare parents, for each phase of the rollout. They typically felt sufficiently prepared as a result, however, some challenges remained. For LAs, updating administrative systems and delivering multiple policy programmes simultaneously were the main challenges, while some providers struggled to recruit suitably skilled and qualified staff to deliver the expanded entitlement. Views on the support provided by DfE to LAs and providers throughout the process of the rollout were mixed.

4. Experiences of delivering the expanded entitlement

This chapter explores LA and provider experiences of delivering the expanded entitlement. In particular, LA and provider perspectives on their capacity to meet demand for the expanded entitlement, any barriers to meeting demand including the administration associated with delivering the expanded entitlement.

Current sufficiency of childcare places

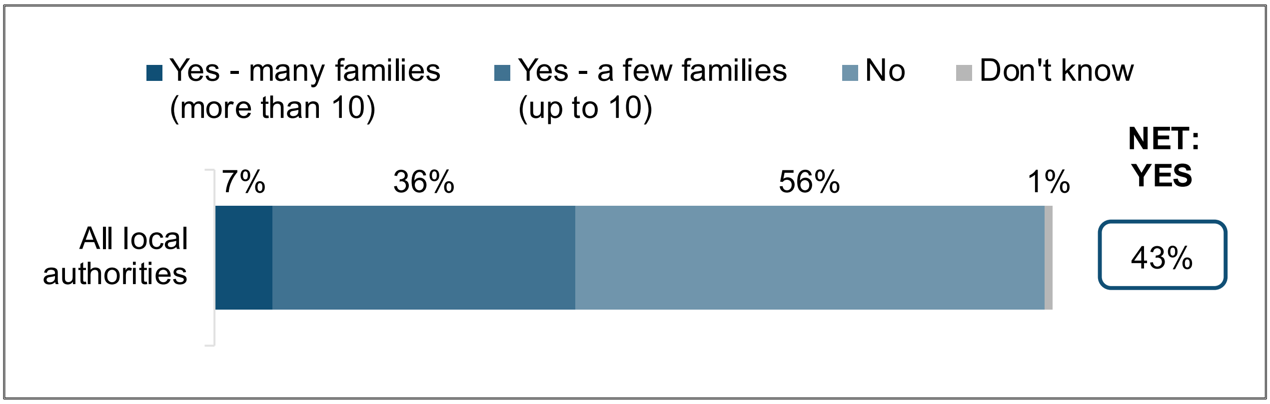
Local authority views on sufficiency

Generally, LAs were confident that providers in their area had been able to meet demand for the expanded entitlement. A large majority of LAs agreed that providers had been able to meet demand for the expanded entitlement (83%), and that providers were offering the full 30 funded hours to parents who want them (88%). Meanwhile, very few LAs disagreed with these statements (1% for each), and a small minority neither agreed nor disagreed (16% for providers meeting demand; 11% for providers offering the full 30 funded hours).

Most LAs reported either no or minimal contact from families asking for support in finding a childcare place. During phase 3 of the rollout, more than half (56%) of LAs reported that no eligible families had contacted them because they were unable to find a childcare place (Figure 4.1). Among the 43% who had been contacted by families, most said this was relatively limited: 36% reported contact from up to 10 families, while only 7% had had contact from more than 10.

It is worth noting that although a minority of LAs reported contact from families unable to find a place, the proportion remains higher than previous phases of the rollout (12% in phase 1, 10% in phase 2). This suggests that sufficiency problems may have been more common during the final phase of rollout, even if still relatively uncommon.

Figure 4.1 Proportion of LAs contacted by eligible families unable to find a childcare place



A4. Since September 2025, have you been contacted by any families eligible for the working parent entitlement, who couldn't find a childcare place that would allow them to access the funded hours they wanted to? Base: All local authorities (n=88).
Source: Expanded Childcare Entitlement Process Evaluation Wave 3 Local Authority Survey.

Of the LAs surveyed who had been contacted by eligible families unable to find a childcare place, nearly all (97%) had offered some kind of support to these families. Most commonly, this included offering brokerage support to find available places (95%), as well as helping resolve families' transport issues to ensure children could access a place (11%).

In interviews, LAs generally reported they had successfully maintained sufficiency of early years places, with only isolated cases of providers not offering the full 1140 hours. Where LAs were unable to find a place for families at their preferred provider, they had still been able to source a funded place in a different provider that met the child's needs.

One challenge mentioned by interviewed LAs regarding maintaining sufficiency was that, although some LAs had sufficient childcare places countywide, there were still certain areas within the LA where demand outstripped the number of childcare places. This was particularly problematic in larger rural LAs, as alternative providers were more likely to be too far away for families to feasibly access. Nevertheless, over the course of the rollout, some larger local authorities had taken steps to address this issue, for example by prioritising capital grant applications in areas with limited capacity:

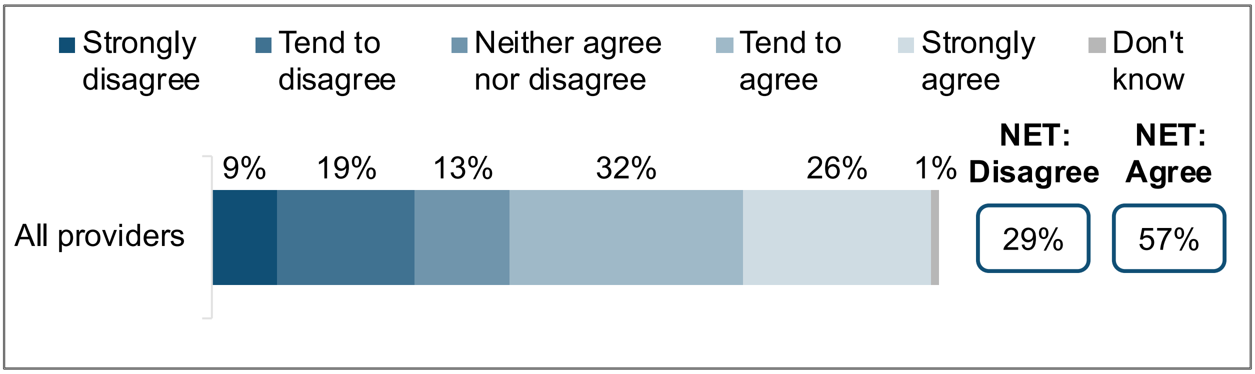
> "When we used our capital money, we targeted it only on areas where we had sufficiency needs…and [our childcare sufficiency assessment] is a digital platform now, it's very interactive. Potential providers can go in and forensically see where the gaps in the market are and fill those gaps… That's been a game changer." - Local Authority

Provider experiences of meeting demand

Surveyed providers were generally confident that they had been able to meet parents' demand for funded childcare hours, although a sizeable minority disagreed. As shown in

Figure 4.2, just under six-in-ten (57%) providers agreed that they had been able to meet demand for the expanded entitlement, while around three-in-ten (29%) providers disagreed. Confidence in meeting demand was therefore lower among providers than among LAs.

Figure 4.2 Whether providers have been able to meet the demand for the expanded entitlement



D1_4. How likely are you to agree that I/we have been able to meet the demand of parents wanting to access the new 30 hours government-funded entitlement? Base: All providers who have children receiving the expanded entitlement or planning to (n=750).
Source: Expanded Childcare Entitlement Process Evaluation Wave 3 Provider Survey.

Views on meeting demand differed slightly by provider type: surveyed SBPs were more likely to agree that they had been able to meet demand for the expanded entitlement (67%), while GBPs were less likely than average to agree with this statement (53%). In particular, this was driven by a higher proportion of SBPs who strongly agreed that they had been able to meet demand (35% vs. 26% overall).

There were some limited differences by region. Surveyed providers in the South East were slightly less likely to agree that they had been able to meet demand compared to the average (47% vs. 57% overall). When looking at the agreement scale on a more granular level, providers in London were the most likely to strongly agree with the statement (40% vs. 26% overall), while providers in the East of England were most likely to strongly disagree that they had met demand for the expanded entitlement (16% vs. 9% overall).

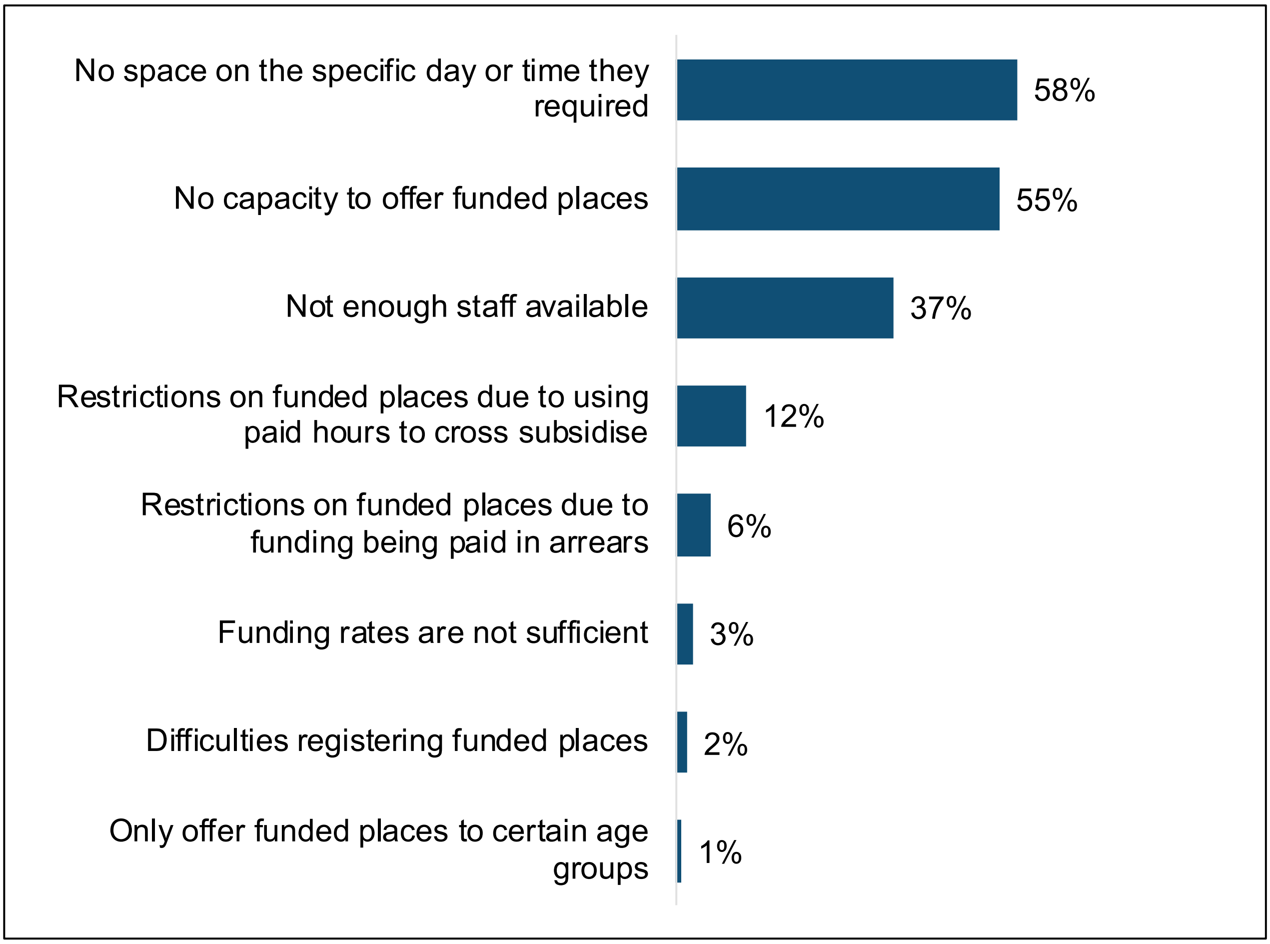
Interviewed providers generally reported being able to offer childcare to most eligible parents, but that they were operating at or very close to capacity as a result of increased demand from the expanded entitlement.

> “Normally we'd have spaces but this year … we're nearly full to be honest. We've been like that since Christmas, so I think more people are definitely accessing childcare.” - School-based provider

Barriers to providers meeting demand

Where providers had not been able to meet demand or offer the full expanded entitlement, this was most commonly due to a lack of space, but staffing capacity was also an important barrier. As shown in Figure 4.3, more than half of providers mentioned not being able to provide a space on the specific day requested (58%), or having no capacity to offer funded places (55%), while just under four-in-ten (37%) said they had insufficient staff to take on more children.

Figure 4.3 Reasons for providers being unable to offer funded childcare to all eligible parents



B3X2. Why have you not been able to offer funded childcare to all eligible parents for all of the hours they requested? Base: All providers who have not been able to offer all requested hours to eligible parents (n=170).
Source: Expanded Childcare Entitlement Process Evaluation Wave 3 Provider Survey.

Similar factors were cited by interviewed providers: those unable to meet demand reported that this was due to a lack of physical space in the setting, as well as insufficient staffing.

> "No, [we don't offer all eligible families the full 30 hours entitlement] because we don't have enough space. [Parents] take what they can and gradually increase it…. [To be able to deliver the full offer] we need a bigger building and more staff, really." - Group-based provider

A small number of interviewed providers were trying to recruit additional staff so that they could increase their capacity to take on more funded children and meet parents' demand for hours. However, as outlined in Chapter 3, many of these providers were struggling to recruit sufficiently skilled staff for these positions. This meant they were currently unable to expand or plan to expand their provision and continued to operate long waiting lists.

> "They get to a point where they can only have so many children because of the number of staff that's required. With the recruitment challenges across the whole sector… there's sort of a limited talent pool in a particular area and some of our providers have just exhausted that." - Local Authority

Instead of recruiting new staff, many surveyed providers (43%) made use of the new Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) flexibilities to help them improve their provision and capacity without hiring new staff.[14] In particular, 38% had used flexibilities to allow them to work at a higher ratio, while 15% had used them to help promote staff. Using flexibilities was particularly common for GBPs (47% used flexibilities vs. 35% of SBPs), as well as for larger providers with 61 or more registered places (50% used flexibilities, vs. 43% overall).

Overall, the rollout appears to have been largely successful in maintaining access to childcare places, with LAs confident that demand was being met and most families able to secure support where needed. However, sufficiency remains fragile at provider level: many settings were operating close to capacity, and constraints around physical space, staffing and specific days or hours limited their ability to offer the full entitlement to all families.

Administration related to the expanded entitlement

An ongoing challenge for many providers was keeping on top of the administration required to deliver the expanded entitlement. Many interviewed providers found administrative work complicated and time-consuming. Tasks that providers reported taking the most time included: ensuring that all eligible parents were registered for the funding and receiving the correct invoices; dealing with parental queries and complaints related to the expanded entitlement; and keeping up to date with LA and DfE guidance and procedural changes relating to the rollout.

> "They've just thrown all these changes at us in one go when we're already working 50 hours of contact time a week and it's like how do we even read all this documentation, let alone implement it." - Childminder

[14] The EYFS flexibilities refer to the changes made to the Early Years Foundation Stage framework in November 2024 that allowed for greater adaptability in early years settings. The latest EYFS can be found here: [Early years foundation stage (EYFS) statutory framework - GOV.UK]

Smaller providers and childminders were particularly likely to report challenges with fitting in administrative work. This was due to staff in these types of settings being more likely to have full-time delivery responsibilities, in comparison to larger nurseries which were more likely to have a nursery manager role which included allocated administrative time. One childminder noted that the time burden of completing admin on top of delivering childcare was so significant that they were planning to reduce the days they offered childcare in order to spend time completing the admin.

However, other interviewed providers felt that the administrative burden had lessened over time. This was due to becoming more familiar with the processes over the course of the rollout, as well as providers distributing more information to parents in advance of the next phase of the rollout. For example, many providers supplied their own information packs to supplement DfE guidance in order to reduce parent queries.

A few providers also noted that the admin related to the expanded entitlement was more straightforward than chasing parents for invoices. Payments from the LA were reliably regular and provided more stability of income, compared with late payments from parents.

> "There's more paperwork, but there's a lot less chasing of families to make sure that they're paying their invoices …so at least we know we're going to definitely get the 30 hours from the local authority." - School-based provider

Overall, findings suggest that the expanded entitlement policy is being delivered at scale, although there were some localised sufficiency challenges. While LAs and providers were generally able to meet demand, provider capacity was often stretched, which sometimes limited the extent to which the full entitlement could be offered to all families. The wider consequences of this for parents are explored further in chapters 5 and 7. Administrative complexity has also shaped providers' experience of delivering the offer, although this seemed to have improved over time, making the expanded entitlement less burdensome for providers to offer.

5. Parent experiences of accessing the expanded entitlement

This section explores parent experiences of accessing the expanded entitlement, and barriers to access faced by eligible families. It first covers experiences of the application process, including determining eligibility, what sources of information were accessed, and any reported barriers to understanding the expanded entitlement or eligibility. It then looks at experiences of finding a childcare place. Additionally, it pulls together findings from the Childcare Experiences Survey (CES) and phase 3 parent interviews. Throughout the chapter, we use the term ‘parents’ to refer inclusively to all legal guardians and carers, unless otherwise specified. Parents’ experiences of any restrictions or additional charges placed by providers on the use of the expanded entitlement are discussed in Chapter 6.

Understanding the expanded entitlement

Interviewed parents generally found it easy to find out about the expanded entitlement, although they sometimes felt official sources could have been more proactive in providing information. Interviewed parents most commonly found out about the expanded entitlement through social media, like Instagram and Facebook, the news, and government announcements on TV and radio. Family and friends were also key sources of information, especially for first-time parents or those unfamiliar with the childcare system. LAs were less frequently mentioned but were sometimes helpful in providing guidance or directing parents to resources. Parents also reported receiving extensive help from their providers in understanding what the expanded entitlement meant for them and how they could access their hours in a way that suited them. Some parents only found out about expanded entitlement because they were informed by their childcare providers.

Interviewed parents reported that they would have benefitted from knowing about the expanded entitlement earlier, and that it would have been helpful to have been informed about it through official sources, rather than through their own research. Parents felt that receiving clear, official information about the expanded entitlement earlier would have enabled better planning and allowed them more time to become familiar with their options. Suggested ways of contact included letters sent in the post, health visitor or midwife visits and information pages on council websites.

> “What would be handy, I guess, when you have the midwife visits after you have a baby, if maybe the midwives knew the information and could pass that information on to you.” - *Parent, eligible for and receiving expanded entitlement*

The fact that parents often accessed information through informal sources may have led to inconsistent messaging on the details of the policy, particularly where providers were less knowledgeable about the expanded entitlement. However, at the same time there was no clear link between the source of information accessed by parents and their ability to access funded childcare; indeed, some who accessed both official information and information from their provider said that the advice given by providers was more practical and detailed than the government guidance (e.g. providing answers to FAQs).

Many parents interviewed noted that the way the expanded entitlement was advertised created some confusion. They felt the expanded entitlement was presented as beginning when a child turns 9 months, when in practice eligibility only starts from the beginning of the following term. This created issues for parents who had planned to return to work when their child turned 9-months-old and later realised they would not receive funding for the first few months of their childcare. In some cases, this either meant a parent had to wait to put their child into a setting, which made it challenging to balance childcare responsibilities with work commitments, or had to cover the costs until the expanded entitlement started. As discussed further in Chapter 7, this meant that the expanded entitlement had not made it easier for some parents to return to work.

> "So, I applied for it, but he was too young to use it when he initially first started going to nursery. He was like maybe around 8 months but I also wanted to try and get him settled there as well […] at that point, we were paying the full fees to the nursery." - Parent, eligible for and not receiving expanded entitlement

Parents interviewed also reported that it was not always clear the 30 hours were only available for 38 weeks a year. These parents expressed frustration as they had made childcare plans based on receiving 30 hours of childcare each week, only to discover the actual limitations when speaking to their provider or upon receiving invoices. This confusion about how the expanded entitlement operated in practice persisted throughout all 3 phases of the rollout.

> "I first had the invoice and it come up and it kept saying like 20 odd, I spoke to my childminder because I thought I was getting 30 hours entitlement and she was like well you are but because obviously you're not going to be off during school holidays, we have to literally spread it over the full year." - Parent, eligible for and receiving expanded entitlement

Determining eligibility

Interviewed parents generally found it easy to determine their eligibility for the funded hours, although a few did still experience challenges that made accessing funded childcare more difficult. Generally, parents described the process as simple and user-friendly, with clear instructions provided on government websites. They found the information available through the Best Start in Life Parent Hub particularly clear and helpful. Online calculators, often accessed through the Best Start in Life Parent Hub or HMRC websites, were a widely used tool that parents found useful in determining their eligibility and easy to use.

> “I think I saw it on the Gov website, but it was easier explained on the [Best Start in Life Parent Hub]. It was really useful because it was nice to know what I was entitled to, because of working part time, I wasn't sure.” - Parent, eligible for and receiving expanded entitlement

However, some interviewed parents mentioned challenges in navigating government websites and found the information on the gov.uk website difficult to access. Those who were self-employed reported difficulties in understanding how to declare their irregular income and what documentation was required and felt there was no clear guidance for their circumstances. Others reported that information about the expanded entitlement was presented in lengthy pages of text and used technical terminology, making it difficult to identify the key details relevant to their situation, such as eligibility criteria, application steps, and deadlines.

> "I wish that the information was just there in like a small paragraph where you didn't have to read through writing and writing and writing. […] It's too much information." - Parent, eligible for and receiving expanded entitlement

One parent reported being told by a provider they could not access the expanded entitlement, despite determining their eligibility online, applying for the funding and receiving a code. When the setting received the code, they informed the parent they were not eligible and provided a limited and unclear explanation that the eligibility code did not work. The setting did not direct the parent to any other resources nor provide further clarification, and the parent paid full nursery fees without understanding why they were deemed ineligible.

> “I was working the 16 hours and the nursery…they said that I just wasn't allowed for it…I did the code thing and then I gave them the code but then they said the code says I'm not valid for it.” - Parent, eligible for and not receiving expanded entitlement

Some working parents entitled to funded childcare hours are required to reconfirm their eligibility for the expanded entitlement every 3 months, especially those who are self-employed or have irregular income. Many parents interviewed reported that this process was straightforward, however some described it as a source of stress and confusion,. For these parents, the process of submitting employment details, tax information and other supporting documentation could be complex and repetitive, and they sometimes had difficulty remembering what information they had previously submitted. Some parents also described feeling anxiety regarding the risk of missing a reconfirmation deadline which could result in an immediate loss of entitlement with no opportunity to rectify mistakes. A small number of parents reported they set reminders for themselves to avoid this. Despite DfE sending automated reminders before and on reconfirmation deadlines, some parents mentioned that they did not receive these and would benefit from automated reminders, or a yearly summary of key dates. These experiences increased the administrative burden associated with maintaining access to the entitlement.

> "It in some ways would be useful to get reminders to say to update your details. Almost like a prompt." - Parent, eligible for and receiving expanded entitlement

Overall, although some parents had difficulties understanding their eligibility, most found this process straightforward and used government information websites and calculators to support them. The main source of stress for parents was reconfirming their eligibility every 3 months which added an administrative burden and was a source of anxiety for some.

Finding a childcare place

Almost all (91%) parents surveyed through the CES who reported using formal childcare arrangements were able to get a childcare place at their first choice of provider. Despite this, 31% of survey respondents reported being placed on a waiting list at some point[15].

Interviewed parents reported that waiting lists were common, and some had been advised by providers that there were limited or no spaces for long periods of times, sometimes years. Parents reported that this created a sense of urgency, causing them to feel pressured to secure places quickly, sign up for places while they were still pregnant or to contact multiple providers in search of availability.

> "I called them and they said basically we've got one space left in the baby room on a Friday. And that's the last space for 2 years." - Parent, eligible for and receiving expanded entitlement

For example, one parent reported that the setting their older child attended had contacted parents and urged them to apply for a place if they were planning on having another child to ensure they could secure a spot.

> "The nursery were messaging the people who had children there saying places for 2025 [were] already getting booked up. If you are planning on having a child or have a child please [apply], we'll prioritise siblings." - Parent, eligible for and receiving expanded entitlement

[15] Expansion to early childcare entitlements: Childcare Experiences Survey Autumn term 2025/26 Fourth Wave (2026) Gov.uk. Available at: Release home - Expansion to early childcare entitlements: Childcare Experiences Survey - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK (Date accessed: 10/09/2026)

Parents interviewed attributed this to an increase in demand caused by the expanded entitlement. They felt settings had become busier and reported that settings seemed to have taken on more staff and more children since the rollout. For example, one parent reported that since the introduction of funded hours there were significantly more children in the baby room and less staff time available for each child compared to their earlier experience.

Despite this, parents interviewed were able to find childcare settings in locations that suited their needs, with many emphasising the importance of proximity to their home or workplace. Parents specifically highlighted the value of settings being within walking distance, which was a key factor in their choice of provider.

> “So it's on my doorstep. It's literally a stone throw away from the doorstep. So it's in walking distance and stuff.” - Parent, eligible for and receiving expanded entitlement

Interviewed parents who were receiving the expanded entitlement had been able to access the full 30 funded hours if they wished to. However, a small number of parents reported difficulties in securing additional private hours on top of these with providers telling them they were unable to accommodate children for longer than the 30 hours a week or equivalent. This resulted in some parents needing to explore alternative childcare arrangements, such as splitting hours between multiple settings, or using informal childcare from family members to cover additional hours needed.

Overall, parents generally found it straightforward to establish eligibility and most were able to access a funded place. However, experiences were still shaped by long waiting lists and some confusion about how the entitlement worked in practice. This meant that some families had difficulties accessing the offer at the time and in the way they had expected. This indicates that the practical value of the expanded entitlement for families also depends on the extent to which it allows them to access funded childcare that aligns with their needs, rather than just whether places are available.

6. Restrictions and additional charges

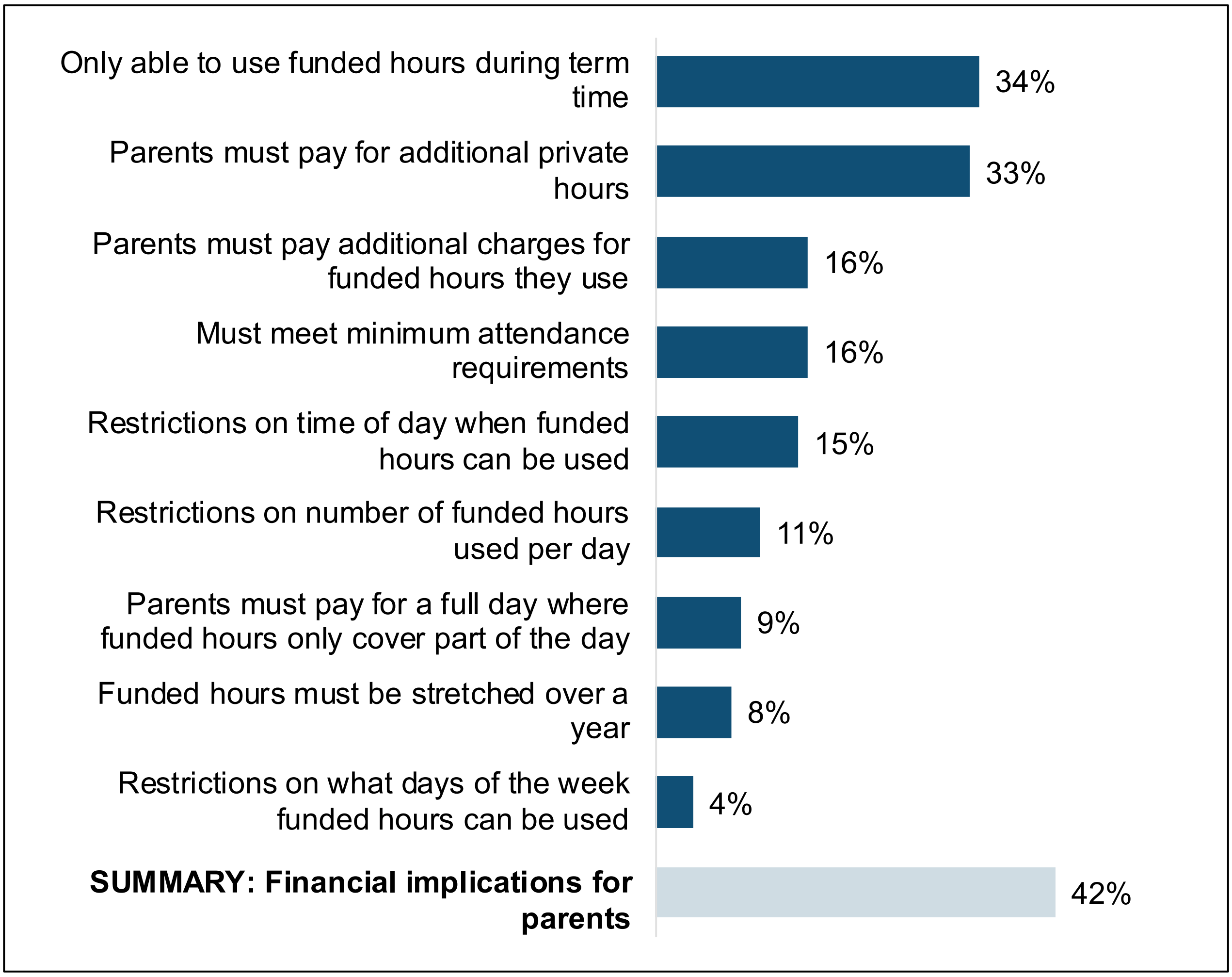
This chapter explores the restrictions that providers placed on the use of the expanded entitlement, including restrictions on when and how funded hours can be accessed by families and any additional charges associated with their use. It also explores parents' experiences of these restrictions and additional costs, and to what extent they affected parents' ability to access funded childcare.

Provider restrictions placed on use of the expanded entitlements

Although most providers were offering the expanded entitlement to all eligible parents, many surveyed providers placed restrictions on how parents were able to use the funded hours to pay for childcare. Nearly two thirds (63%) of providers with children receiving the expanded entitlement placed at least one restriction on how parents could access funded hours. The most common restriction was that hours could only be claimed during term time (34%), followed by parents having to pay for additional hours of childcare to claim their funded hours (33%). This is despite policy guidance prohibiting providers from associating mandatory charges with the entitlements, including requirements to pay for additional hours.

The full list of restrictions reported by surveyed providers is shown in Figure 6.1.

Figure 6.1 Restrictions that providers reported placing on how eligible parents can access the expanded entitlement



C9. Do you have any of the following restrictions on how eligible working parents of 9 month to 2-year-olds can access their 30 hours of funded childcare? Base: All providers with children receiving the expanded entitlement or planning to (n=750). Note that the summary code 'Financial implications for parents' includes all those who selected 'Parents must pay for additional private hours', 'Parents must pay additional charges for the funded hours they use', and 'Parents must pay for a full day where funded hours only cover part of the day'.
Source: Expanded Childcare Entitlement Process Evaluation Wave 3 Provider Survey.

Surveyed SBPs were more likely to have placed at least one restriction on access to the expanded entitlement, with seven-in-ten (71%) reporting any restrictions, compared with 59% of GBPs. This can be partly explained by many SBPs only operating during term time and therefore restricting use of funded hours to term time only (63% vs. 34% overall). SBPs were also more likely to place a number of other restrictions, although many of them were similar operational restrictions that would likely apply to all children in the setting:

- Restrict the time of day that funded hours could be used (29% vs. 15% overall). This was most commonly restricting access to school hours only (86% of SBPs who restricted the time of day gave this reason), which are sometimes the opening hours for SBPs

- Restrict the number of funded hours that could be used per day (20% vs. 11% overall). This might also be linked to the limited opening hours of many SBP settings
- Require parents to supplement the cost for a full day where funded hours only covered part of the day (16% vs. 9% overall)
- Restrict what days of the week funded hours could be used (8% vs. 4% overall)

In total, 42% of providers reported at least one restriction that imposed direct financial costs for parents (either by requiring them to pay for additional private hours, to pay for a full session, or to pay additional charges associated with sessions). GBPs were slightly less likely than both SBPs and childminders to have these kinds of restriction in place (36% vs. 45% and 48%). These restrictions contradict the policy guidance.

Qualitative evidence suggests that, although restrictions were common, many restrictions were in place for all children rather than only those accessing the expanded entitlement. Some of these restrictions were inbuilt to their business model, for example offering specific opening hours or days, while others were in place to simplify administration. For example, in interviews, some providers reported that they only offered childcare in whole-day sessions to ensure all places were filled and simplify pickup logistics. This was regardless of whether the child would be accessing funded hours or paying privately. While these kinds of operating contexts reduced the flexibility of the offer available to parents, the restrictions were pre-existing rather than being a direct result of trying to manage demand for the expanded entitlement.

> “We're only open 38 weeks, 9 till 3, which makes the 30 hour weeks up. So it's quite easy from a funding point of view... If you're a working parent, your child comes here 30 hours, then you just claim the 30 hours and that's it. So, yeah, in all honesty, it's quite straightforward for me to be clear about funding.” - School-based provider

Some interviewed providers did place restrictions on access to the expanded entitlement that went beyond their usual business arrangements. This was generally to make administration easier and ensure they could operate at full capacity. For example, providers who stretched hours across the full year noted that this resulted in parents being entitled to a non-integer number of hours per week.[16] As accommodating pickups and drop offs throughout the day was not possible for the setting or for parents, these providers often required parents to pay for top-up hours so that their child attended a full session (i.e. morning or afternoon). Others chose to limit access to the expanded entitlement to term time hours to avoid these logistical difficulties.

[16] The exact figure depended on setting opening times.

> “When you stretch it over the whole year it’s something like 21.88 hours…how would you offer that 1.88 hours? A child could say then book in for an hour and a half and not for the rest of the day, and then what do I do with the rest of that day? I need to sell it, I need to sell all the spaces to break even.” - School-based provider

Interviewed childminders often reported being more flexible with the hours they were able to offer to families and placed fewer restrictions on access. In particular, it was more common for interviewed childminders to offer funded hours before 9am and after 3pm. Some childminders also mentioned accommodating a high degree of flexibility in their offer, with families able to claim different numbers of hours each week depending on their needs.

> “I'm just sort of totting up how many hours she does and then I’ve just said well when we get to the term allowance, you'll have to pay for any extra hours after that.” - Childminder

Parent experiences

Interviewed parents reported experiencing several restrictions, including having to attend for specific sessions (e.g. 8:00-13:00) or having to use a maximum of 8 funded hours per day, which go beyond the restrictions set out in statutory guidance. These limitations created challenges for parents in aligning their working hours with offered childcare hours, sometimes necessitating alternative arrangements or incurring additional childcare costs to cover periods not included within the expanded entitlement. This meant that some parents still struggled to afford formal childcare despite accessing the full expanded entitlement.

Conversely, some providers required children to attend for a minimum number of hours in order to access the full expanded entitlement. This meant parents who wanted to use fewer hours were not given flexibility and sometimes had to pay for additional hours they didn’t need. For example, one parent reported that a provider required their child to attend for the full week and advised that their place would be withdrawn if this was not met. As a result, the parent chose not to enrol their child at that setting and instead secured a suitable place with an alternative provider after contacting their local authority for support.

> "No, they were really regimental they basically, I wanted to put him in for only maybe 3 days or 2 days like to be a bit flexible not to go for they said he had to go in for the full week. […] So, it just felt very like not flexible at all." - Parent, eligible for and not receiving expanded entitlement

Some interviewed parents explained challenges that came from the restriction that expanded entitlement only covered term time. Some parents therefore paid for hours during school holidays. Where families were unable to afford the cost of private childcare during these periods, they reported reducing their weekly funded hours to stretch the expanded entitlement across the full year, and subsequently paying monthly additional fees for any extra hours needed. Parents expressed frustration at having to cover these additional costs, with some noting that they struggled to afford the additional charges.

> “I'm paying for these 20 hours and it's nearly a thousand pounds a month and that's a lot of money […] actually would it be better for me to work 3 days a week because that is funded. The 20 hours on top up it's the price of my mortgage again. For a solo parent, that's a lot of money.” - Parent, eligible for and receiving expanded entitlement

However, restrictions on funded hours did not prevent parents from accessing the expanded entitlement; instead, parents worked around these limitations to make childcare fit their needs. Interviewed parents accepted the restrictions on when funded hours could be claimed, but some reported having to adjust their working hours or search for jobs to align with the childcare hours or sessions available at settings. For example, one parent described the difficulty of finding work that fits around the only available funded nursery days, while another highlighted the frustration of needing to pay for additional hours outside fixed funded sessions to cover their working day. Some parents decreased their working hours since having a child based on the number of funded hours they could claim using the expanded entitlement.

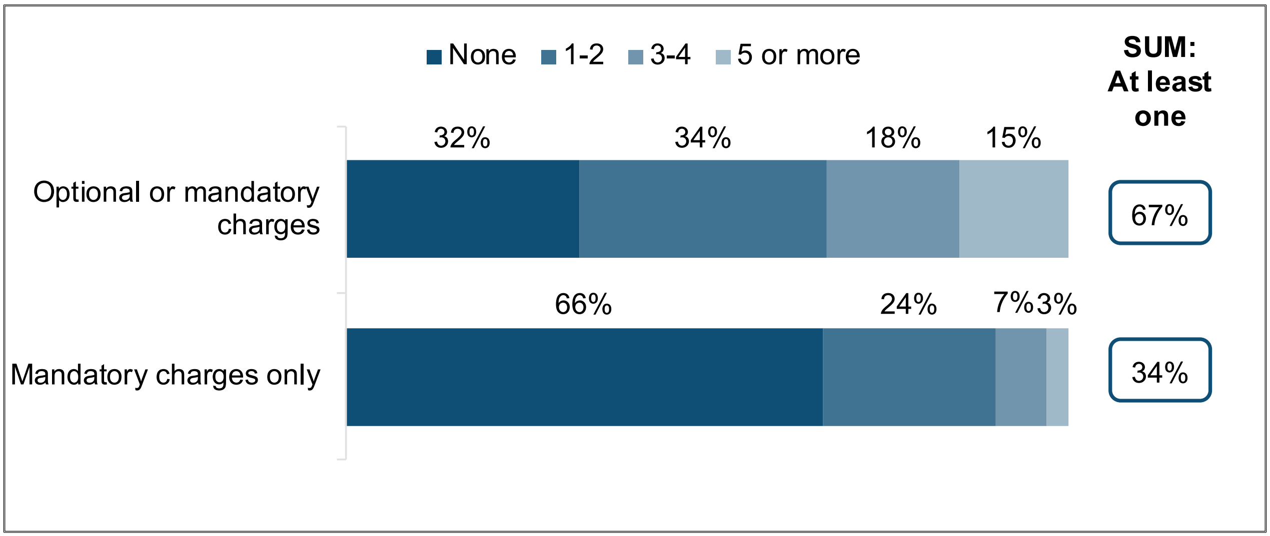
> “It's a bit frustrating because I need it from 07:30-17:30. And I can't do that because that's not what the nursery do. They do 2 sessions 08:00-13:00 and 13:00-18:00. And then I have to pay on top for the other hour in the morning. And that's quite frustrating for me when I only need the 10 hours. It's quite frustrating that it's funded, but then I have to pay for an additional hour.” - Parent, eligible for and receiving expanded entitlement

Overall, while the expanded entitlement was widely available in principle, providers often adapted the offer to fit their business model and operational constraints, which in practice reduced the flexibility of the offer for parents that had been originally intended. For some interviewed parents, restrictions on how funded hours could be used made it more difficult to align childcare with their needs and working patterns. Parents described these restrictions as reducing the flexibility they had in deciding how and when to use their childcare hours, and in some cases leading to increased costs.

Additional charges

Some providers also required parents to pay additional charges to access the expanded entitlement. These could be either mandatory or optional for parents, although statutory guidance makes clear providers cannot impose mandatory charges associated with the entitlement.[17] As shown in Figure 6.2, in total, just over two-in-three (67%) surveyed providers had at least one optional or mandatory charge in place, while one-in-three (34%) providers reported that at least one charge was mandatory for parents to access funded hours through the expanded entitlement. This was despite the guidance preventing mandatory charges.

Figure 6.2 Count of number of additional charges imposed by providers



C13. Which of the following are eligible parents of 9 month to 2-year-olds using the expanded entitlement asked to pay towards as additional daily charges? Base: All providers with children receiving the expanded entitlement or planning to (n=750).
Source: Expanded Childcare Entitlement Process Evaluation Wave 3 Provider Survey.

There was some evidence to suggest that additional charges and fees set by providers had increased since the introduction of the expanded entitlement. In phase 1, nearly three quarters (73%) of LAs reported they believed providers had increased the additional fees they required parents to pay, and 30% of LAs had received complaints about it from parents accessing the expanded entitlement. Many parents interviewed in phase 1 who were already accessing childcare prior to phase 1 of the policy rollout, had experienced increases in fees and charges since March 2024. However, the effect of the expanded entitlement was difficult to separate from general cost-of-living increases. Parents tended to attribute increased fees and additional charges to the increased running costs they knew settings were dealing with, including rising costs of energy, staff, and resources. One parent, however, did report being told explicitly by their provider that their private daily rate increase was to compensate for government funding rates that were lower than their usual rates for private fees.

The most common additional charge was asking parents to pay for meals, drinks or snacks (35% optional, 13% mandatory). Other common charges were for extra one-off activities (32% optional, 10% mandatory), and other consumables such as nappies (17% optional, 10% mandatory). The full list of additional charges required by providers is shown in Figure 6.3.

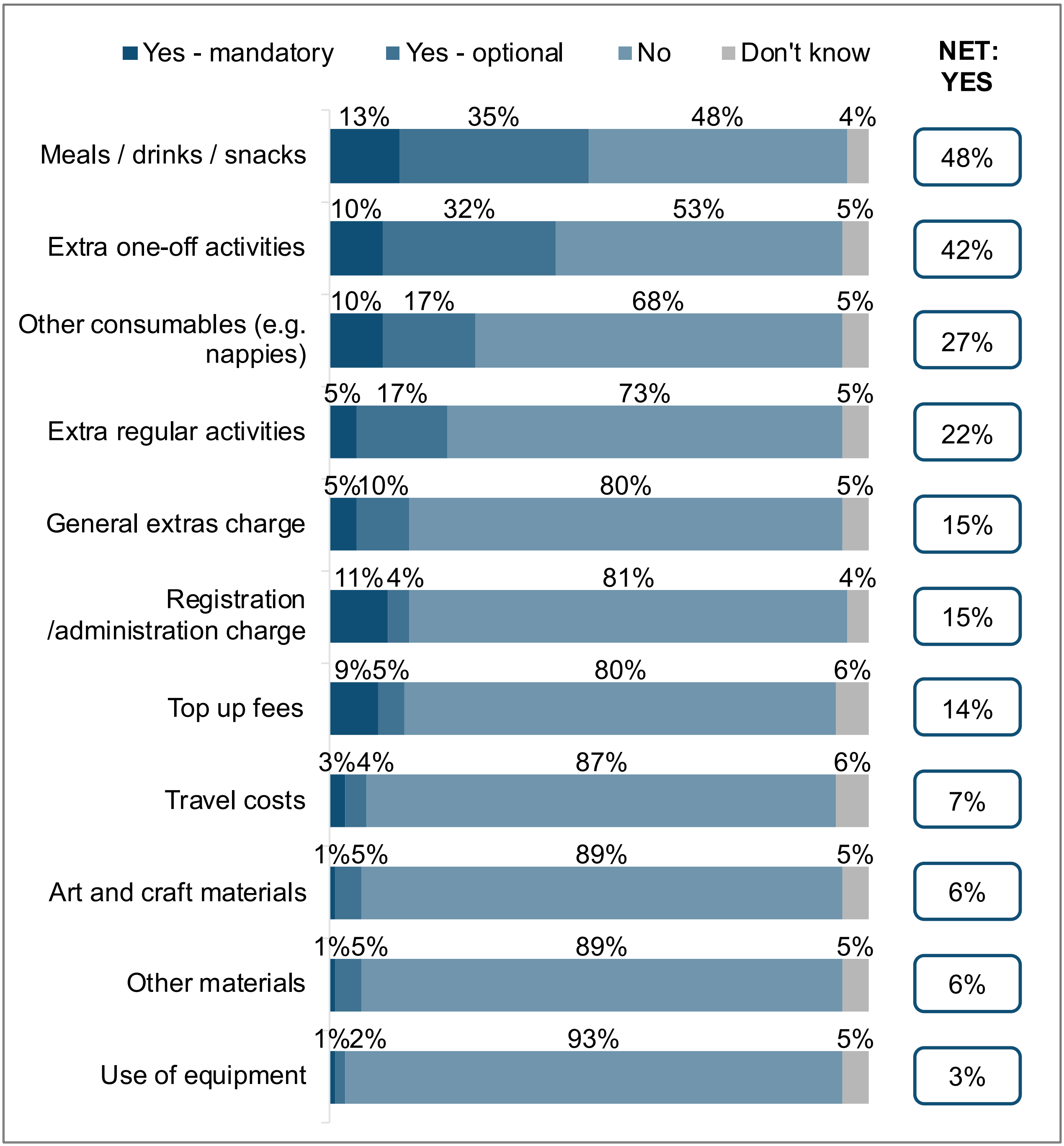
[17] See [Early education and childcare - GOV.UK]

There were a number of differences in additional charges by provider type, with surveyed childminders generally less likely to charge parents additional fees compared to other provider types. At an overall level, slightly over four-in-ten (44%) childminders had no additional charges in place for parents at all, compared with 22% of SBPs and 30% of GBPs. Additionally, nearly eight-in-ten (77%) childminders had no additional charges that were mandatory, compared with 66% of GBPs and 52% of SBPs.

More particularly, surveyed childminders were less likely than average to ask for contributions towards meals, drinks or snacks (28% vs. 56% for both GBPs and SBPs), and registration or administration charges (6% vs. 21% of GBPs, 13% of SBPs).[18] There were no items that childminders were more likely than average to charge parents for.

[18] According to statutory guidance, early years providers cannot charge business costs such as admin fees to parents in relation to the entitlements.

Figure 6.3 Additional charges which providers charge to parents eligible for the expanded entitlement



C13. Which of the following are eligible parents of 9 month to 2-year-olds using the expanded entitlement asked to pay towards as additional daily charges? Base: All providers with children receiving the expanded entitlement or planning to (n=750).
Source: Expanded Childcare Entitlement Process Evaluation Wave 3 Provider Survey.

In line with evidence from the survey, interviewed providers were most likely to mention charging parents for lunch or snacks. In interviews, they rarely mentioned imposing additional charges for other items, and many said they had no additional charges at all. This was particularly true for childminders, where additional charges were rare except for occasional more expensive items, such as special outings that the childminder would struggle to cover the costs for.

Where interviewed providers placed additional charges on parents, they felt that these were clearly advertised to parents as optional. Despite this, interviewed providers generally reported that the majority of parents at their setting had opted into the charges, as this made the childcare service much more all-inclusive and easier to access. Providers felt that parents saw the additional charges as reasonable and few mentioned receiving complaints.

A few providers interviewed in phase 3 noted that the existing requirement (clarified further in the 2025 iteration of the statutory guidance) to make their additional charges optional had caused logistical difficulties within the setting. Providers reported that this had introduced an additional level of administration burden on staff who needed to keep track of which families had opted in to an optional extra and which had not. For example, following the updated guidance, providers needed to track which children had paid for snacks rather than distributing snacks to everyone, or were worried about parents who had not paid for nursery lunches providing packed lunches that triggered other children's allergies. Others had decided to absorb the costs of food for those not paying the charge to avoid these kinds of difficulties.

> "We just charge a pound per child per week for a snack…but I mean no child would ever not have it if they didn't pay it." *School-based provider*

> "I don't charge for food because I need to do the food because of the child with the allergy… it's easier if I just do a batch of food for everybody." – Childminder

Parent experiences

Compared to previous phases of the rollout, in phase 3, interviewed LAs reported an increase in queries from parents regarding additional charges. LAs felt that this was due to increased awareness among parents of the statutory guidance on what providers are allowed to impose additional charges for, rather than an increase in the additional charges being requested.

> "We're now getting more complaints … 'I don't think I should be charged for this and I want you to investigate' sort of thing. And I think a lot of it is with people increasingly using AI as well, parents seem to be much more informed as to what sort of is and isn't allowed." - Local Authority

In contrast to provider accounts, many interviewed parents suggested that optional charges were not always transparently advertised as such, despite LAs reporting issuing new guidance encouraging providers to do so. Many parents described charges as mandatory or felt they had not been clearly communicated to them prior to receiving their invoices. Interviewed parents reported having to pay a variety of additional charges on top of their childcare hours. Some parents did not see the additional charges for consumables, meals, and other items as optional but rather as mandatory. Even when presented as "optional", some parents reported it was difficult to opt out of paying these additional charges.

> “I think they have changed their policy now. I'm pretty sure it was non-optional when we first started whereas now I suppose technically it is, but then it's like, how do you opt out? I think you almost have to opt out of everything rather than like, I don't want him to do this. […] so we've just kind of stuck with it.” - Parent, eligible for and receiving expanded entitlement

This is in line with CES data, which showed that 51% of parents pay for additional hours, and 58% of parents pay either fixed or optional additional costs. [19] Some interviewed parents expressed confusion about what the additional charges were for, reporting that they felt charges were not in line with what was provided. Some parents also reported struggling to understand invoices where additional charges were bundled in with their funded and additional hours, which made it difficult to know what they were paying for.

> “Yeah, it's nearly £13 now, £12.80 or something […] It doesn't cost me 13 pounds to feed her for a day at home.” - Parent, eligible for and receiving expanded entitlement

Some parents interviewed reported that when applying, settings requested substantial deposits or holding fees to secure a place, sometimes well in advance of the child starting childcare, even for parents eligible for funded hours. Parents reported a lack of clarity as to what these fees guaranteed and whether they were refundable. Practices varied between providers, with some, particularly childminders, not requiring deposits, while others did. One parent stated they contacted their LA who advised that deposits should not be required. As a result, this parent sought alternative providers who did not require a deposit.

Overall, additional charges reduced the extent to which childcare felt genuinely funded or affordable to parents, particularly where charges were perceived as mandatory or were not clearly communicated in advance. While parents accepted additional services with their associated additional cost as necessary, many expressed frustration or concern about affordability. This meant that the affordability of childcare while using the expanded entitlement did not always align with parents’ initial expectations. However, for those families interviewed, these charges did not appear to prevent them from accessing funded hours and parents mostly felt the quality of care was good and worth the expense.

---

[19] Expansion to early childcare entitlements: Childcare Experiences Survey Autumn term 2025/26 Fourth Wave (2026) Gov.uk. Available at: [Release home - Expansion to early childcare entitlements: Childcare Experiences Survey - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK]() (Date accessed: 10/09/2026)

7. Early indications of effects of the policy

This chapter explores the early emerging effects of the expanded entitlement on providers, parents and children. It examines provider and LA perspectives on funding rates and their effects on revenue and business sustainability, including any changes to the number of places offered. The chapter also considers early effects on access to childcare for specific groups, including children eligible for Early Learning for 2-year-olds and children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Finally, it explores the effects of the expanded entitlement on parents, including effects on job choices and working patterns, family finances and wider wellbeing.

Funding rates and effects on provider revenue

The funding rates for the expanded entitlement mostly matched or exceeded the private rates charged by surveyed providers for 9 month to 2-year-olds. As Table 7.1 shows, almost half (45%) of surveyed providers reported that funding rates were higher than private rates for 9 month to 23-month-olds, while only one-in-ten reported them being similar to (9%) or lower than private rates (11%). For funding rates for 2-year-olds, views were more mixed, with 38% of surveyed providers reporting them as higher than private rates, but a similar proportion reporting them as lower (30%) and 23% reporting them as similar.

Most surveyed providers reported that funding rates for 3 to 4-year-olds were typically lower than private rates[20]. This was reported by two thirds (66%) of providers, with only around a quarter reporting the funding rates as higher than, or similar to, private rates (12% and 14%, respectively).

[20] 30 funded hours of childcare have been available for eligible working parents of 3 to 4-year-olds since 2017.

Table 7.1 Differences between funding rates and private rates by age group, as reported by providers

Age group	Funding rates are higher than private rates	Funding rates are similar to private rates	Funding rates are lower than private rates
9 month to 23-month-olds	**45% overall** • 5% of SBPs • 36%[a] of GBPs • 88%[ab] of CMs	**9% overall** • 9% of SBPs • 11%[c] of GBPs • 4% of CMs	**11% overall** • 7% of SBPs • 17%[ac] of GBPs • 6% of CMs
2-year-olds	**38% overall** • 26% of SBPs • 28% of GBPs • 61%[ab] of CMs	**23% overall** • 25% of SBPs • 21% of GBPs • 25% of CMs	**30% overall** • 28%[c] of SBPs • 43%[ac] of GBPs • 11% of CMs
3 to 4-year-olds	**12% overall** • 17%[b] of SBPs • 10% of GBPs • 13% of CMs	**14% overall** • 24%[bc] of SBPs • 12% of GBPs • 9% of CMs	**66% overall** • 39% of SBPs • 72%[a] of GBPs • 76%[a] of CMs

C16. Are the hourly funding rates offered by your local authority for children more than, less than, or the same as the hourly fees you charge parents privately? Base: All providers who have children receiving the expanded childcare entitlement or planning to (n=750).
Superscript letters indicate statistically significant differences between subgroups: a denotes a significantly higher figure compared to SBPs; b from GBPs; and c from childminders.
Source: Expanded Childcare Entitlement Process Evaluation Wave 3 Provider Survey.

Differences between funding rates and private rates varied starkly by provider type. Surveyed childminders were more likely to report funding rates as higher for under 3s, both for 9 month to 23-month-olds (88% vs. 36% of GBPs and 5% of SBPs) and 2-year-olds (61% vs. 28% of GBPs and 26% of SBPs). However, for 3 to 4-year-olds, only 13% of childminders reported the funding rates as higher, while over three quarters (76%) reported them as lower. A similar proportion of GBPs (72%) reported the funding rates for 3 to 4-year-olds as lower, compared to around two-in-five (39%) SBPs.

While it was common for at least one of the hourly funding rates to be lower than private rates charged by providers, only a minority of surveyed providers limited intake as a result of these differences. Of those who reported at least one of the funding rates as lower, just a third (32%) had limited the number of children they could afford to take at that age group. This was most common for those with lower funding rates for 3 to 4-year-olds (33%), whereas just one-in-five (19%) providers with lower funding rates for 2-year-olds limited spaces for this age group. Even fewer limited spaces for 9 month to 23-month-olds as a result of lower funding rates (16%).

Providers limiting spaces for 3 to 4-year-olds

Similarly to the difference in rates, the proportion of surveyed providers limiting spaces for 3 to 4-year-olds also varied by provider type. Funding rates had a fairly limited effect on the spaces providers offered to differed age groups overall, However, the findings suggest that the expanded entitlement have led to less childminders offering provision to 3 to 4-year-olds, while other providers have expanded their provision for the younger age groups.

There were no differences by provider type when looking at those who limited places for under 3s. However, for 3 to 4-year-olds, childminders were far more likely to limit spaces than other provider types. Nearly two thirds (63%) of childminders limited spaces for this age group, compared to just 20% of GBPs and 6% of SBPs.

Interviewed childminders also reported that, as a result of funding rates, they had limited the number of 3 to 4-year-olds they take or stopped taking them all together. They acknowledged that the funding rate for younger children was good in comparison to private rates, but that taking older children or even keeping children on once they turned 3 was not financially viable.

> "I now have to turn children away when they reach 3 because the funding rates are too low. I can't work for 50% of the money just because they've turned 3." - Childminder

The ratio of 3 to 4-year-olds providers can have per staff member is higher than it is for younger age groups. As a result, funding rates for 3 to 4-year-olds are set lower than for younger age groups. However, childminders cannot take as many children as GBPs and SBPs, and interviews suggest that they often find it more challenging to care for a 3 to 4-year-old than a baby. As a result, some interviewed LAs felt that childminders were the provider group most negatively affected by the expanded entitlement. This was because they could not compensate for the lower rate for older children by taking more on.

> "[Childminders] have quite clearly said they prefer a universal rate for all age groups for child minders because that just makes sense. So, there is no incentive to keep a child beyond the age of 2 because the funding drops." - Local Authority

Views on the funding rates were more mixed among interviewed SBPs and GBPs. Despite many surveyed GBPs reporting that funding rates were lower than private rates, issues with funding rates or needing to limit places for certain age groups was reported much less frequently in interviews.

Although lower funding rates for older children had negatively affected some interviewed providers, others had benefitted from the higher rates for younger children. The higher funding rates had led to some nurseries expanding their provision to babies or offering more places to under 2s. One SBP had begun taking on 9-month-olds and noted how this had been financially beneficial due to how much higher funding rates were than their private rates.

> "On our authority, we're at £7 something [for 2-year-olds] and £9.90 something for the under 2s. Whereas we charge roughly, £5 or £6 an hour. So, it's about a pound an hour more for the 2-year-olds and slightly more than that for the under 2s, so it's been a positive thing." - School-based provider

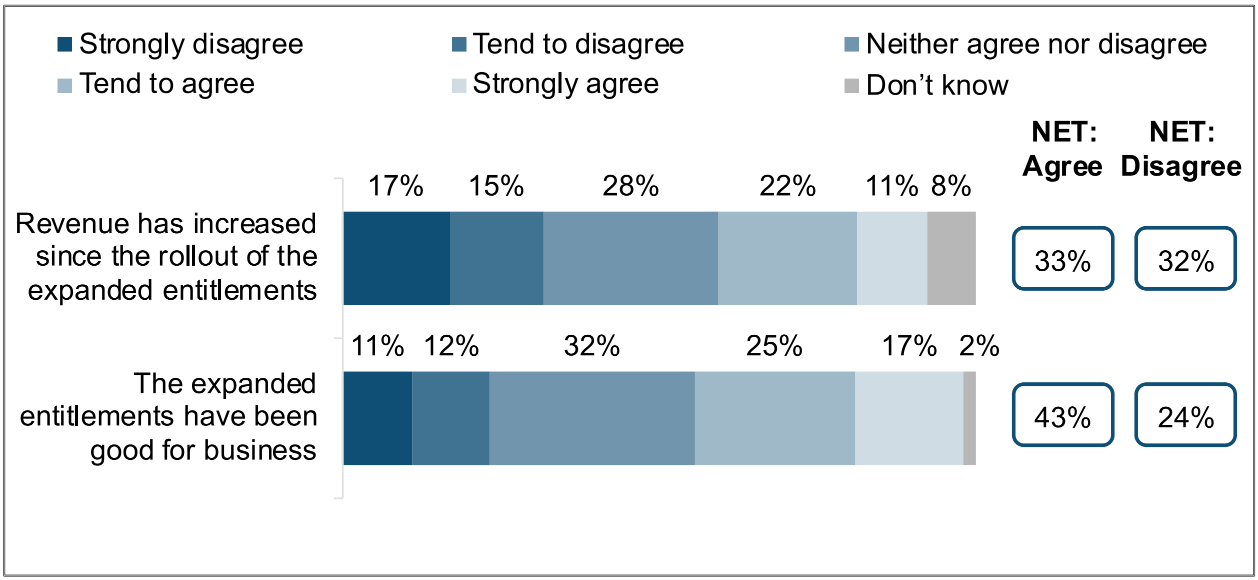
Therefore, it appears that the expanded entitlement may have shaped the distribution of age groups that some providers cater for. Furthermore, the funding rates for the expanded entitlement appear to have not affected all provider types equally. Delivering the expanded entitlement for 3 to 4-year-olds was reported to be less sustainable for childminders. This meant many reduced spaces available for older children in this setting, indicating that parents may have less flexibility on the provider type they can use for their older preschool children.

Effects on provider revenue

Findings indicate that the expanded entitlement has had mixed effects on the revenue and business of providers. While some providers felt that the expanded entitlement had increased revenue and stability, this was not felt across all providers in the sector.

Providers had mixed views on whether the expanded entitlement had increased their overall revenue, as shown in Figure 7.1. A third (33%) of surveyed providers agreed that their revenue had increased since phase 3 of the rollout but a third (32%) also disagreed, and 28% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 7.1 The reported effect of the expanded entitlement on providers' revenue and business



D1_3. How likely are you to agree that revenue has increased since the rollout of the new 30 hours government-funded entitlement? D1_6. How likely are you to agree that the expansion of the childcare entitlement has been good for the business? Base: All providers who have children receiving the expanded childcare entitlement or planning to (n=750).
Source: Expanded Childcare Entitlement Process Evaluation Wave 3 Provider Survey.

Surveyed providers' views on revenue varied by provider type. Childminders were most likely to agree that their revenue had increased since the rollout (45% vs. 33% overall), in line with being the provider type most likely to agree that funding rates are higher than private rates for under 3s. On the other hand, GBPs were most likely to disagree that their revenue had increased (43% vs. 33% of SBPs and 13% of childminders), in line with being the provider type most likely to be negative about funding rates.

Providers were also asked whether the expanded entitlement had been good for business (also shown above in Figure 7.1). Views on this were more positive than views on revenue, particularly for surveyed SBPs and childminders. Over two-in-five (43%) providers agreed that the expanded entitlement had been good for business. This was higher for SBPs and childminders, where around half agreed (49% and 50%, respectively), compared to 35% of GBPs. However, there were still a quarter (24%) of providers that disagreed that the expanded entitlement had been good for business, most commonly GBPs (31% vs. 16% of SBPs and 17% of childminders). This is in line with GBPs being more likely to report funding rates as lower than private rates compared to SBPs and childminders (Table 7.1).

These mixed views on the effect of the expanded entitlement on revenue and business were echoed in interviews with providers. While some felt that the policy had created financial difficulties for their businesses, others reported an increase in revenue and its reliability. For example, some SBPs and GBPs said that not only were the funding rates for younger children higher, but their income had also become more reliable. This was a result of no longer relying primarily on parents paying them directly and instead receiving a large proportion of their income from their LA since offering the expanded entitlement. Therefore, providers were less commonly experiencing parents being unable to make childcare payments on time and could rely on a large proportion of their income coming from their LA at the time they expected.

The effects of the expanded entitlement on revenue varied among interviewed childminders. Some childminders noted how the funding rates for younger children were a lot more than what they would charge privately. For example, one childminder's funding rate for under 2s was double what they would charge privately. Another childminder was glad that their rates were set by the government because they would increase periodically with inflation. They noted how it had always been a 'difficult conversation' to have with parents when they needed to increase their private rates.

However, other childminders reported issues due to their income coming from their local authority. Some childminders found it challenging receiving payments on a different schedule to the one they would use privately, for example, receiving the money termly. Another childminder was struggling with their revenue because their LA often had difficulties issuing payments on time. Throughout the phases of the rollout, they had become increasingly dependent on their income coming from the LA, meaning that their income had become more unreliable.

> "Every single term there's IT issues, there's delays. It's just a nightmare. It's like, you can't tell your mortgage provider, sorry, I might not get paid on time, you know, and we don't know when we're going to get paid." – Childminder

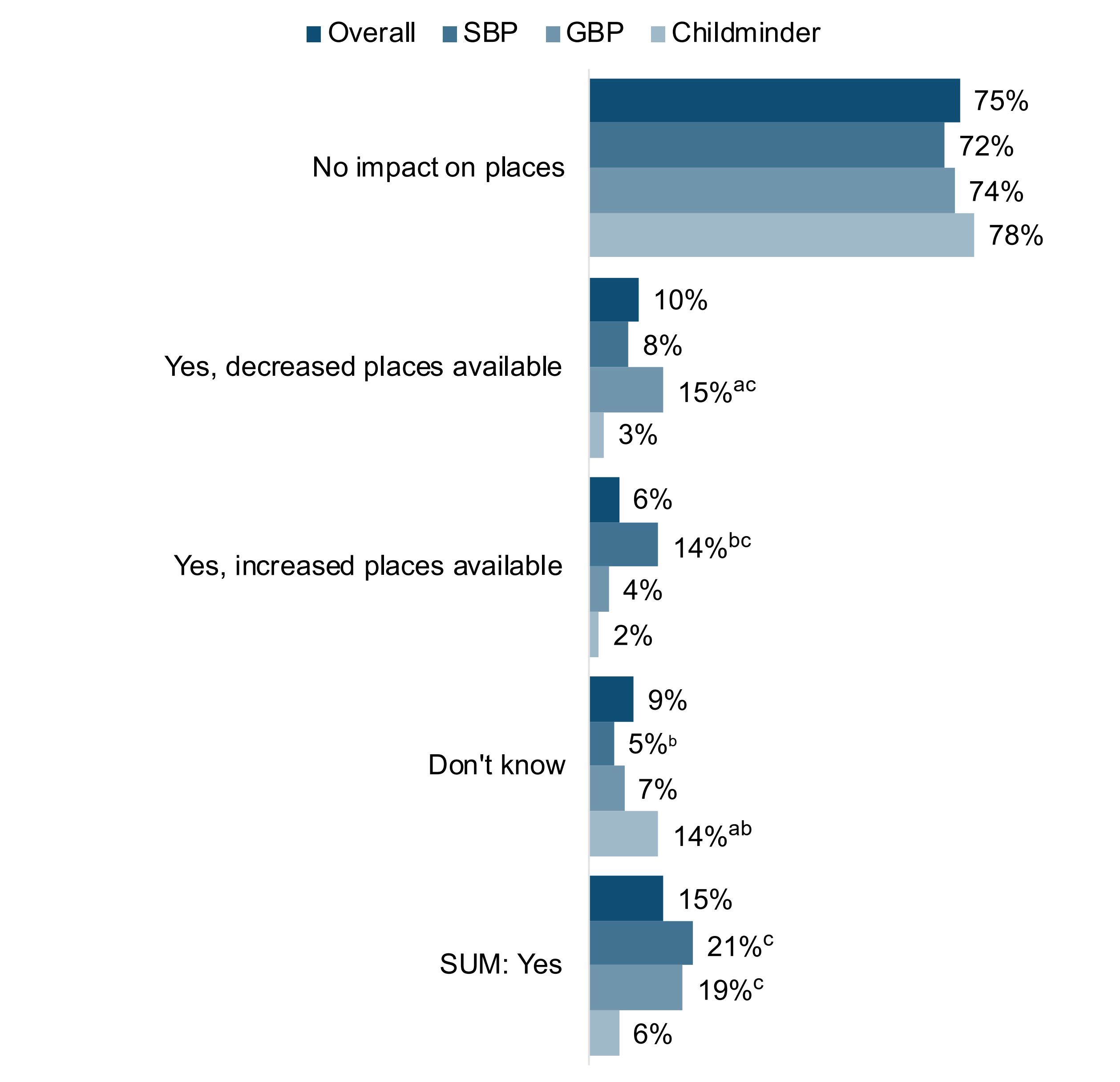
Overall, the expanded entitlement has had a mixed impact on providers' finances and businesses. While many providers reported increased and more stable income, particularly childminders, providers in less deprived areas, and some school-based providers, others experienced little financial benefit or ongoing challenges linked to funding rates and local authority payment arrangements. As a result, views on the policy's business impact were more positive than views on revenue alone, but experiences varied considerably across provider types and local contexts.

Effects on children eligible for Early Learning for 2-year-olds

The Early Learning for 2-year-olds entitlement gives eligible parents of 2-year-olds access to 15 hours of funded childcare per week. Families are eligible for the support if they receive certain benefits (e.g., Universal Credit) or have a child with an Education, Health, and Care Plan, or if the child is in receipt of Disability Living Allowance (DLA) or are looked after by the local authority. The Early Learning for 2-year-olds entitlement covers 15 hours of childcare per week, whereas the expanded entitlement covers 30 hours.

Most surveyed providers reported that the number of places they offered under Early Learning for 2-year-olds had not changed. As shown in Figure 7.2, three quarters (75%) of providers reported no change, whereas only 15% said that the number of places offered had changed. This included one-in-ten (10%) that said the number of places they offered had decreased, and a smaller proportion (6%) that said they had increased. Although still only a small proportion, GBPs were more likely to report that the number of places offered under Early Learning for 2-year-olds had decreased compared to SBPs and childminders (15% vs. 8% of SBPs and 3% childminders). On the other hand, SBPs were more likely to report that the number of places had increased (14% vs. 4% of GBPs and 2% childminders).

Figure 7.2 The effect of the expanded entitlement on Early Learning for 2-year-olds places, as reported by providers

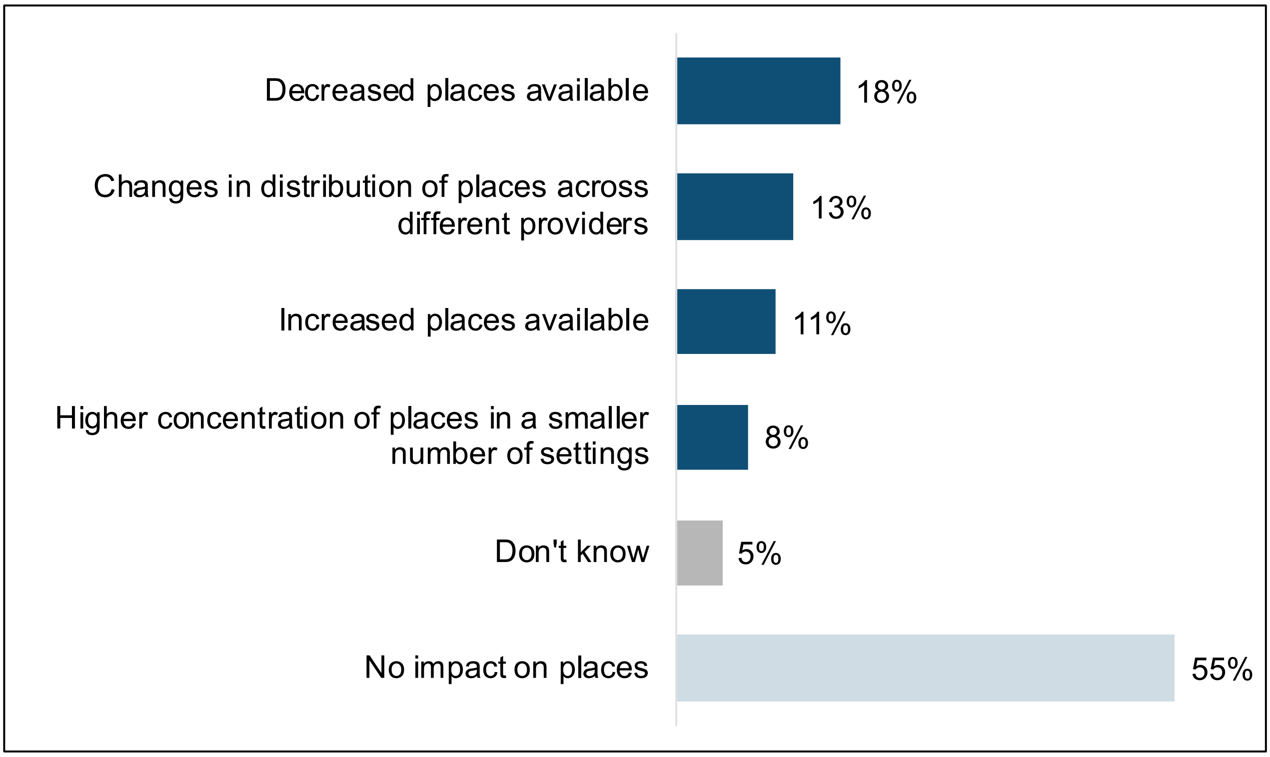


B7. Have the entitlements being expanded to include younger age groups, from 9 months to 3-year-olds in September 2025, affected the number of childcare places you are able to offer under the 2-year-old disadvantaged entitlement? Base: All providers who have children receiving the expanded entitlement (n=741).
Superscript letters indicate statistically significant differences between subgroups: a denotes a significantly higher figure compared to SBPs; b from GBPs; and c from childminders.
Source: Expanded Childcare Entitlement Process Evaluation Wave 3 Provider Survey.

In line with the 15% of providers reporting a change in the number of Early Learning for 2-year-olds places they offered, 43% of LAs agreed that the number of places offered to these children locally had changed. Although this may appear to be a disparity, it should be noted that LAs will only have needed to observe a few providers limiting spaces to report this themselves.

Where LAs reported changes, these were most commonly fewer Early Learning for 2-year-olds places or a change in their distribution among settings. As shown in Figure 7.3, almost one-in-five (18%) LAs reported that the number of Early Learning for 2-year-olds places had decreased. LAs also witnessed a change in the way places were distributed (13%) and a higher concentration of places in a smaller number of settings (8%). Although a minority, just over one-in-ten (11%) LAs reported an increase in places.

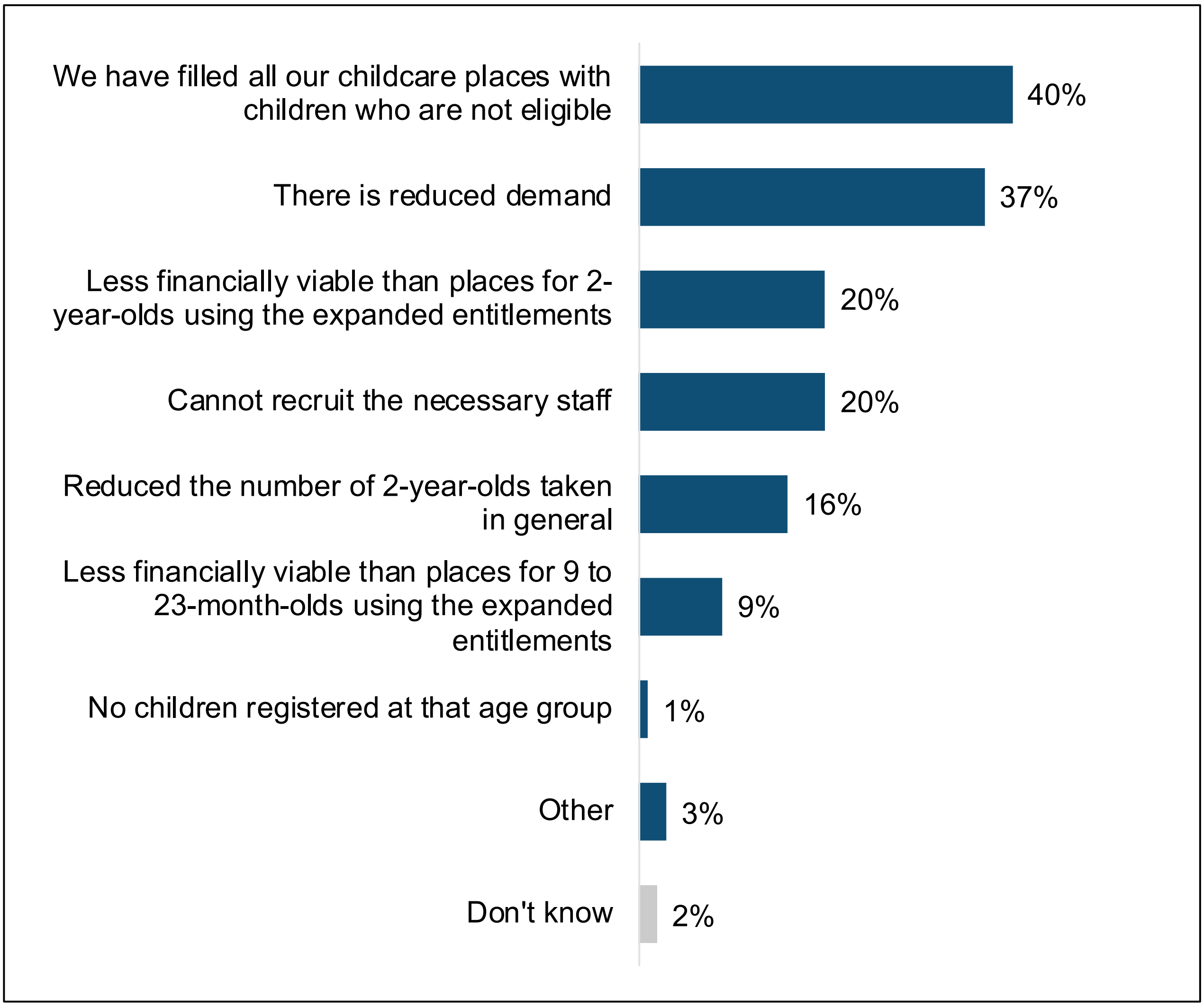
Figure 7.3 The effect of the expanded entitlement on Early Learning for 2-year-olds places, as reported by LAs



D4. In what way has the expansion of the childcare entitlement affected the places available to children entitled to the 2-year-old disadvantaged entitlement? Base: All local authorities (n=88). Responses under 3% not shown.
Source: Expanded Childcare Entitlement Process Evaluation Wave 3 Local Authority Survey.

For the minority of surveyed providers who had limited spaces for Early Learning for 2-year-olds, the main reason reported was places being filled up by children under the expanded entitlement. Of the 10% of providers who had decreased Early Learning for 2-year-olds places, 40% had done this because they had already filled places with other children, and a similar proportion (37%) because of reduced demand. As shown in Figure 7.4, some providers reported that they had decreased places because they were less financially viable than expanded entitlement places for 2-year-olds (20%) and 9 month to 23-month-olds (9%).

Figure 7.4 Reasons why providers have decreased the number of Early Learning for 2-year-olds places



B8. Has the number of childcare places you offer under the 2-year-old disadvantaged entitlement decreased for any of the following reasons? Base: All providers that agree disadvantaged children are negatively affected by new expanded entitlement (n=86).
Source: Expanded Childcare Entitlement Process Evaluation Wave 3 Provider Survey.

A reduction in demand was the main reason shared by interviewed providers as to why their places had decreased. Some providers noted that they came into contact with parents using the Early Learning for 2-year-olds entitlement much less frequently since the rollout of the expanded entitlement. One SBP was very concerned because they were in a very deprived area, but the number of children they had under the Early Learning for 2-year-olds entitlement had dropped from 20 to 5. While this could be related to less eligible parents being aware of and claiming the Early Learning for 2-year-olds entitlement, it should be noted that the number of families eligible has also decreased since the beginning of the rollout of the expanded entitlement.

> "There seems to be a real gap where we would be made aware of those families or they would contact us. We don't really hear from the disadvantaged [families] anymore. They must be somewhere I just don't know where." - School-based provider

Although some surveyed providers reported not taking children under Early Learning for 2-year-olds because it was less financially viable, no interviewed providers reported doing this. For many providers, it appears that they have not decreased the number of Early Learning for 2-year-olds places deliberately.

LAs reported having concerns that there were less spaces available for children under Early Learning for 2-year-olds. As children using the expanded entitlement can access childcare from 9 months, they felt that many providers filled most of their places with younger children. They were concerned that by the time parents using the Early Learning for 2-year-olds entitlement try to find a childcare place, there will be fewer available. Furthermore, some felt that disadvantaged families may be less likely to try another provider if they are turned away from their first choice. Although interviewed providers did not report having to turn away children under Early Learning for 2-year-olds yet, a few were concerned that due to increased demand, they would have fewer spaces available for them in the future.

> “We haven't got spaces till they are 2. So [parents using the expanded entitlement are] booking those spaces a year, 18 months in advance, which means children who get the [Early Learning for 2-year-olds entitlement] don't get that till the term before they're due to start and potentially there's no places.” - Group-based provider

A few LAs were also concerned that providers may have a preference for parents using the expanded entitlement, as these parents were often more likely to pay for additional private hours. Particularly for providers receiving funding rates lower than their private rates, LAs felt they may be financially incentivised to prioritise parents that will pay privately for some hours for the sustainability of their business. One LA said that they had directly been told this by a provider, however, others said that this was just a concern and something they had not yet seen evidence of.

> “We do have some concern that there may be limitations in terms of place availability for those families who are wanting just their funded hours because providers are thinking about their sustainability and wanting those families who will pay in addition to their funded time.” - Local Authority

A few parents interviewed who were eligible for Early Learning for 2-year-olds places reported difficulties in accessing childcare. One parent reported being turned away from a nursery and was not sure why, while another parent was given only one option for nurseries with available places. This nursery had very little flexibility with when the hours could be claimed, requiring that the parent used 3 hours a day, 5 days a week. As this did not align with their working patterns, the parent withdrew the child from nursery.

> "[The local authority] directed me to the only [available] place that was in my borough which was [provider name] and I signed him up to there. It didn't work for me really, the hours, because it was literally him going in for 3 hours a day." - Parent, eligible for but not receiving the expanded entitlement or the Early Learning for 2-year-olds entitlement

Some LAs believed that the number of places being taken up had decreased because families eligible for both entitlements were often only applying for the expanded entitlement. LAs believed that this was because of the expanded entitlement offering more hours, the potential stigma around the Early Learning for 2-year-olds entitlement, and the admin burden of applying for 2 codes.

> "It's an additional administrative burden for parents… they don't want to do 2 applications despite the fact that we're communicating with them… seems counterintuitive for them to have to apply twice through different systems." - Local Authority

Interviewed LAs took steps to mitigate the effects of the expanded entitlement on children under Early Learning for 2-year-olds. Some LAs carried out an eligibility check on families to identify those eligible for Early Learning for 2-year-olds that may only have been claiming the expanded entitlement. This was to gain a better understanding of whether these families were still accessing childcare but under the expanded entitlement, or if they were not accessing it at all. Some were paying providers a higher rate for children under Early Learning for 2-year-olds places to provide more incentive for providers to protect these places. LAs were concerned about the impact a lack of accessible places will have in the long-term.

> "We've gone from 89% accessing their [Early Learning for 2-year-olds] entitlement to 61%...It's taken a moment in time for it to collapse and potentially it could take us years and years and years to build that head of steam back up because they're simply not accessible places because they've all been taken up by children funded from 9 months onwards." - Local Authority

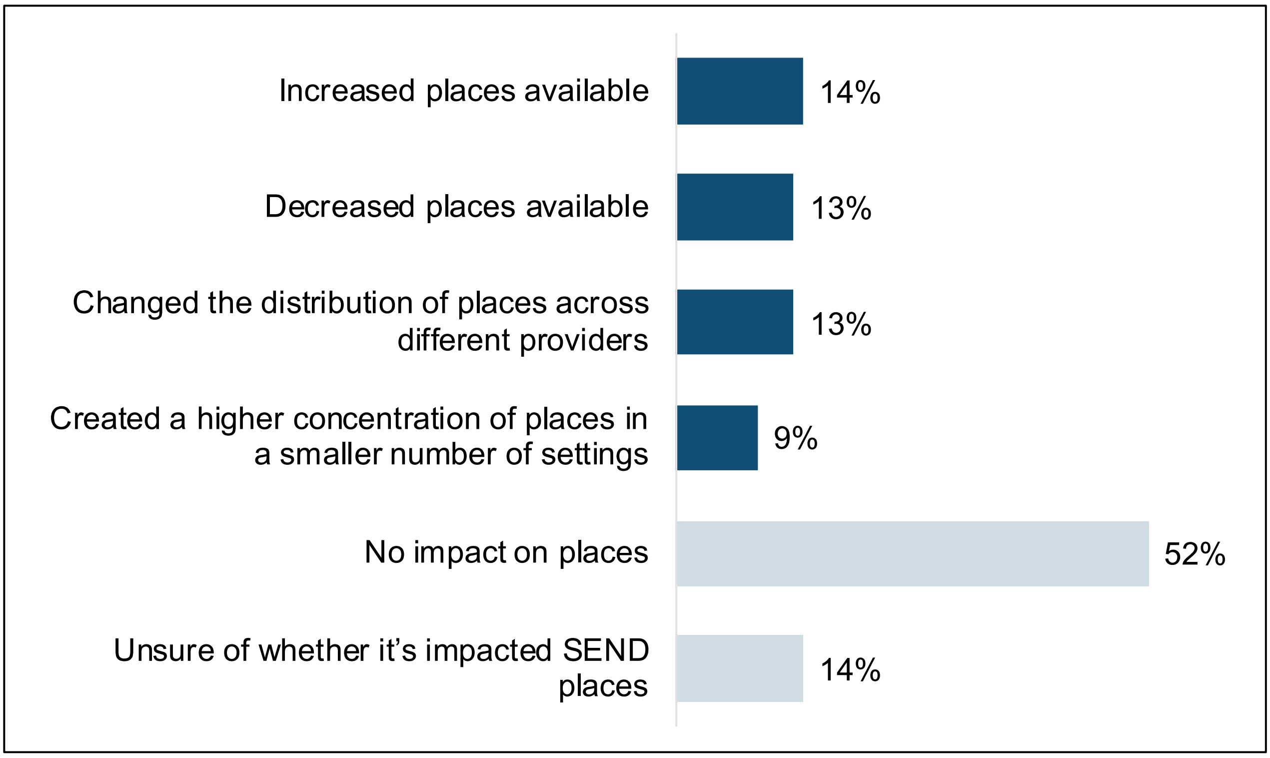
Overall, findings indicate that while changes to the number of Early Learning for 2-year-olds places are not widespread, the expanded entitlement has negatively affected the number of Early Learning for 2-year-olds places in some areas. While providers tended to think that the decrease in these places was because of reduced demand or places already being filled up by younger children, some LAs feared that, in addition to this, some providers may have a financial incentive to preferentially offer places to families using the expanded entitlement instead. LAs interviewed feared that the effect of the expanded entitlement on displacing Early Learning for 2-year-olds places may have not been fully realised yet and may intensify over time. This indicates that continuing to monitor the access to childcare for disadvantaged children is important as the expanded entitlement sets in.

Effects on children with SEND

Most providers and LAs surveyed for the evaluation reported that the expanded entitlement had made no difference to the number of places offered to children with SEND. Of the providers surveyed with children receiving the expanded entitlement, only one-in-ten (11%) agreed that the expanded entitlement had reduced the number of places they could offer to children with SEND. Two-fifths (41%) disagreed and a similar proportion (39%) neither agreed nor disagreed that the number of places offered to children with SEND had reduced. There were no regional differences in the proportion of providers agreeing that the number of places offered to children with SEND had reduced due to the expanded entitlement. However, providers in the West Midlands were more likely to agree that the expanded entitlement had increased demand from parents of children with SEND (33% vs. 22% overall).

Among LAs, a third (34%) of LAs agreed that the expanded entitlement had changed the number of places offered to children with SEND. An increase in the number of places was just as commonly reported as a decrease (14% vs. 13%) as shown in Figure 7.5. Other LAs reported that the distribution of places among providers had changed (13%) or a higher concentration of places in a smaller number of settings (9%). As might be expected due to an increased number of children accessing formal childcare, two thirds (66%) of LAs reported an increase in Special Educational Needs Inclusion Fund (SENIF) applications from providers.

Figure 7.5 Effects of the expanded entitlement on places for children with SEND reported by LAs



D3. In what way has the expansion of the childcare entitlements affected the places available to children with SEND? Base: All local authorities (n=88). Responses less than 3% not shown.
Source: Expanded Childcare Entitlement Process Evaluation Wave 3 Local Authority Survey.

In line with the small proportion who reported a decrease in places, most LAs (72%) reported no change in the number of complaints they received from parents about the availability of places for children with SEND since phase 3. A minority of LAs (16%) had seen an increase in the number of complaints, and 8% had seen a decrease.

Similarly, interviewed LAs rarely mentioned receiving complaints from parents of children with SEND about them being unable to find a place. Those that had received complaints reported usually being able to find children a place.

> “We don't get a lot of queries from parents who can't find a place. And then when we do, we are almost always able to find them somewhere.” - Local Authority

LAs interviewed felt that certain providers in their area had become more well known and specialised in providing care for children with SEND throughout the rollout. As the number of children at some providers had increased since the rollout of the expanded entitlement, some providers reportedly took on more children with SEND, leading them to develop more specialised provision and a reputation for good care in this area.

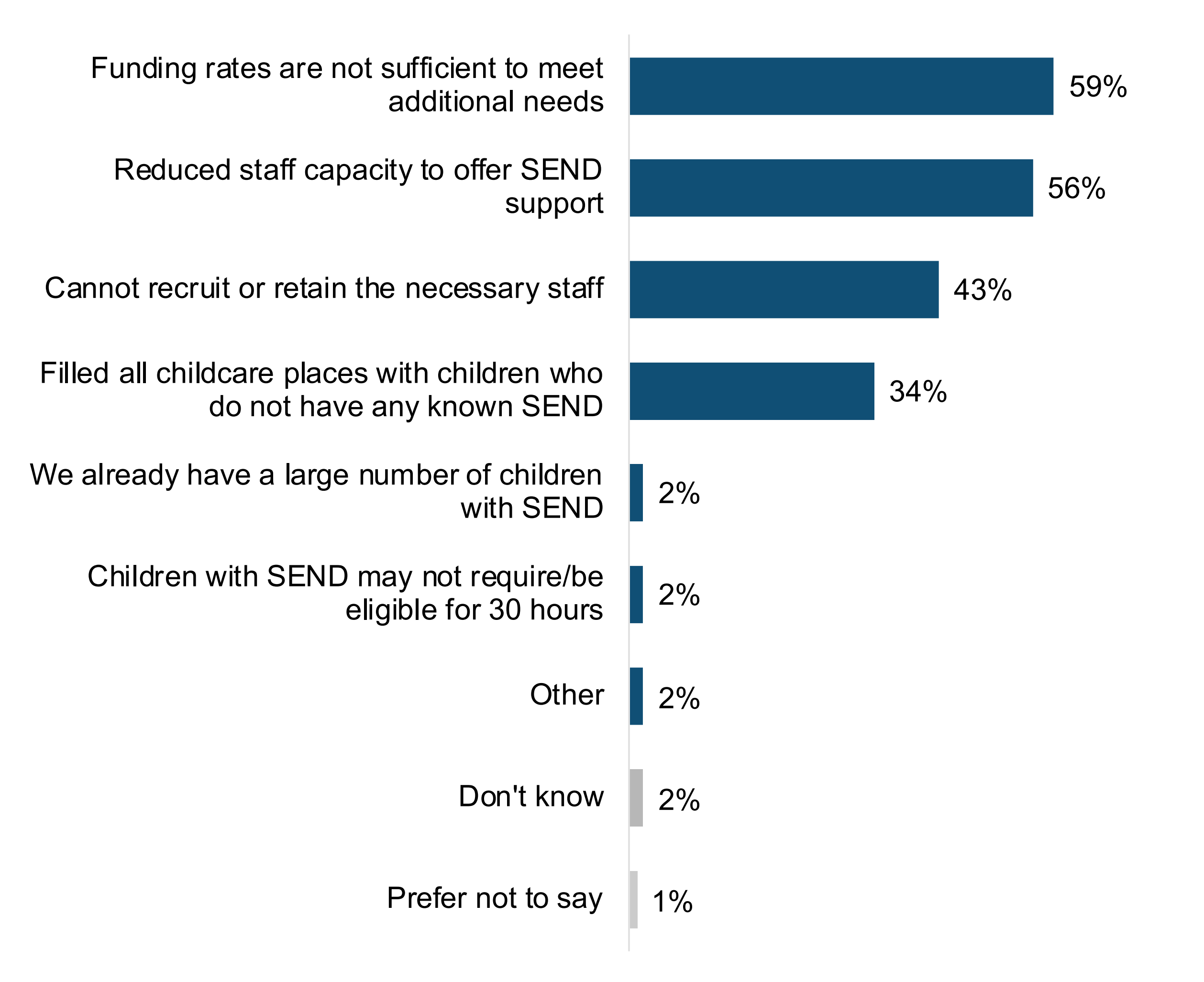
> “It does tend to end up that you do have certain providers who end up being more well known for being more supportive of children that may have an additional need or disability.” - Local Authority

While some LAs felt that certain providers had become more specialised in SEND provision as a result of the expanded entitlement, they reported that other providers had reduced their provision or not been able to meet the increased demand. Some LAs interviewed reported that providers faced resource and staff constraints due to the expanded entitlement, that sometimes led to them offering reduced hours to children with SEND.

> “But we do have some providers we know that sort of end up offering reduced timetables and things like that because they can't necessarily find the staff to support those children for the full number of hours that they would like to access.” - Local Authority

Surveyed providers also reported an issue of reduced staff capacity to provide for children with SEND. Of the providers who had reduced the number of places offered to children with SEND, the main reason for this was that funding rates were not sufficient to meet additional needs (59%). However, this was closely followed by having a reduced staff capacity to offer SEND support (56%) or not being able to retain or recruit the necessary staff (43%). As seen for children under Early Learning for 2-year-olds, places being filled up by other children also limited the number of places providers could offer to children with SEND (34%). The full list of factors that led providers to reduce capacity for SEND places is shown in Figure 7.6.

Figure 7.6 Reasons why the expanded entitlement have decreased the places providers can offer to children with SEND



B10NW2. Why has the new 30 hours government-funded entitlement reduced the number of places you can offer to children with SEND? Is it because...? Base: All providers who reduced number of places they offer to children with SEND due to the expanded entitlement (n=94).
Source: Expanded Childcare Entitlement Process Evaluation Wave 3 Provider Survey.

Providers interviewed explained that staffing was a barrier to offering places to children with SEND, and even those who had not reduced places felt that their staff capacity was stretched. Issues around staffing were echoed in interviews with parents whose children had SEND. For example, one parent explained how they felt that the nursery was too overwhelmed with the number of children they had. Therefore, they felt that their child was not receiving the support with their mobility that they had been promised and the nursery had received additional funding for.

> "I think he's kind of getting pushed to one side where they should be supporting him with his standing, his walking." - Parent, eligible for and receiving the expanded entitlement

Where providers reported having fewer issues with recruitment, they had hired additional staff and created additional quiet areas to adapt to the increased number of children with

SEND they had. Having qualified staff and good support was highlighted as beneficial for providing good quality support to children with SEND. One SBP highlighted how they had a SENCO who planned activities with the children and facilitated conversations with families about how best the children can be supported.

> “We have our own SENCO who plans activities and obviously works with all her colleagues and [considers] how we can better support the child. And also we bring parents into that a lot as well for face-to-face meetings to discuss privately what the challenges [are] and…how we can support each other.” - School-based provider

However, in line with survey findings, interviewed providers noted how the funding rates sometimes limited the support they were able to offer for children with SEND. Some providers felt that the funding rates for children with SEND failed to cover staffing costs, which could limit the hours they were able to offer, particularly if the child required one-on-one support.

LAs interviewed felt that the expanded entitlement had led to children entering childcare earlier which was beneficial for identifying additional needs earlier and getting the necessary support in place. However, providers interviewed noted that as they increasingly took on younger children, they often did not know a child’s needs when they started. This could be challenging because the need for additional support and the knock-on implications for space and staffing was only realised once the children were already in their provision.

> “Often as well at such a young age, you're still identifying what that child needs in terms of support yeah so we've had to take children and then realise that we need to recruit to those posts as well.” - School-based provider

Overall, findings suggest that the expanded entitlement has not had widespread unintended consequences on children with SEND so far, but it has introduced new pressures and uneven patterns of provision. While some providers reported reducing places for children with SEND due to staffing constraints and insufficient funding, others have expanded the number of places they offer or specialised their provision for children with SEND. Interviews with LAs indicate that there is a growing concentration of SEND provision among certain providers suggesting that the childcare system has started to adapt in response to changes in demand caused by the expanded entitlement. Further support needs to be put in place to ensure all settings are able to offer places to children with SEND.

While this may indicate a risk of uneven access to provision across different areas, interviews suggest that the expanded entitlement may also have had some positive effects on children with SEND. LAs and providers felt that children were entering formal childcare at a younger age because of the entitlement and were therefore having their additional needs identified earlier. However, this can also place additional pressure on providers as SEND needs may emerge after children enrol, meaning that providers must alter their staffing capacity at short notice. Taken together, these findings suggest that the expanded entitlement has led to a reconfiguration of SEND provision which may have implications for the consistency of support and the evenness of access across different areas.

Effects on parents' working choices

Many interviewed parents reported that the expanded entitlement made it easier to return to work after having their child. Although many parents were planning on returning to work regardless of whether the expanded entitlement was in place, the expanded entitlement had given them more confidence in their decision and their family finances. Particularly for parents who had an income roughly equivalent to the cost of childcare without funded hours, the expanded entitlement served as a motivator that it was 'worth it' to go back to work.

> "It was good to know that like, at least if I was going back, I wouldn't be like working for nothing…my whole salary wouldn't go on her childcare. So that is a very, it was very big motivation for me." - Parent, eligible for and receiving the expanded entitlement

The expanded entitlement also influenced some interviewed parents' decision to return to work earlier than they had originally planned. This was due to the expanded entitlement being accessible on a termly basis, so some parents decided to return to work at the start of term to be able to access the expanded entitlement immediately. One parent reported that one of the reasons why they accepted a job role was because it started in time for them to access the expanded entitlement.

> "The reason that I returned and didn't take [any maternity leave] extra unpaid was because if I didn't return by certain points in September, I wouldn't have got the funding." - Parent, eligible for and receiving the expanded entitlement

Interviewed parents reported being able to make positive career choices as a result of the expanded entitlement. For example, one parent had been able to stay in their self-employed role after having their child rather than seeking an employed role. This was because the expanded entitlement gave them confidence that they would still be able to afford childcare even with the variation in their monthly wage. Another parent had been able to accept their desired job role with lower responsibility and a lower wage, which aligned better with their goals and priorities since expanding their family.

> "I can now accept a lower salary… In my old role, I was quite senior. So, I was used to having a better salary. But also now that I've got the 2 kids, I don't really want to be in that kind of high-level role." - Parent, eligible for and receiving the expanded entitlement

Some parents receiving the expanded entitlement had, or were still considering, condensing or decreasing their working hours since having a child. This was so that they were paying for less additional hours, as the additional hours were expensive and the expanded entitlement did not cover the hours of their full-time job. For example, a few parents with flexible working policies had reduced their hours to a 9-day fortnight or 4-day work week to reduce their childcare costs. Others were questioning whether working full-time was financially beneficial for their family given the cost of extra childcare hours, and a few had switched to working part-time as a result of this.

> "Obviously, [working part-time] reduces the cost of childcare. So, it saves me £200 a month by not working the Wednesday." - Parent, eligible for and receiving the expanded entitlement

CES data shows that for most parents, working hours have stayed the same following the rollout of the expanded entitlement[21]. In line with qualitative findings, more parents were decreasing (23%) their hours since having a child than increasing them (11%). However, lower income parents were more likely to increase their hours than higher income parents.

Interviews with parents highlighted that not all parents had been able to increase their working hours since the expanded entitlement rollout. Some interviewed parents reported that the expanded entitlement had not made it any easier for them to return to work. A particular barrier noted by these parents was that the expanded entitlement could only be claimed the term after a child turns 9 months. This sometimes did not align with when parents needed to return to work, and the cost of childcare without the expanded entitlement during this time motivated a small number of parents to stop working.

> "I had my daughter and then came back, came back for a month and then, because she wasn't entitled to the funding at the time, I was paying for the childcare and it was, the childcare was double my wages. It was ridiculous how much childcare is. And then so I had to, I literally couldn't afford to work." - Parent, not eligible and not receiving the expanded entitlement

Other parents reported that the expanded entitlement had not made it easier for them to seek or return to work since having a child. One parent highlighted how the fact that the expanded entitlement is not available to parents applying to work may make it more

[21] Expansion to early childcare entitlements: Childcare Experiences Survey Autumn term 2025/26 Fourth Wave (2026) Gov.uk. Available at: Release home - Expansion to early childcare entitlements: Childcare Experiences Survey - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK (Date accessed: 10/09/2026)

difficult for parents to seek employment. They felt that applying for jobs is almost a ‘full-time job’ in itself, and they had to pay privately for childcare 2 days a week while they applied. They acknowledged that if they had not been able to afford to pay privately, they may not have been able to return to work.

Some parents who were already accessing childcare before the rollout felt that their work flexibility had decreased as a result of the expanded entitlement. This was because providers had become a lot busier and now required notice far in advance for days to be increased. This made it more challenging for a few parents to work extra shifts as their nurseries no longer offered extra days on an ad-hoc basis.

> “There's less flexibility. So, like with [first child], if I had to work a random Monday, I would just book her in for an extra day of nursery. But now there's no capacity for nursery to do that. I can be less flexible with work, if you like, because they have no space.” - Parent, eligible for and receiving the expanded entitlement

Overall, the expanded entitlement has improved the affordability of returning to work and made it easier for many parents to do so. In some cases, the expanded entitlement has supported an earlier return to work or preferred career choices. However, the findings suggest that the expanded entitlement has more often supported or enabled existing work intentions than fundamentally changed working patterns. Many parents would have returned to work anyway, and some parents were still decreasing or condensing their working hours since having a child due to the cost of childcare. This highlights that the expanded entitlement reduces an important financial barrier to parents working, but that wider constraints persist such as the timing of eligibility, the cost of additional hours, limited flexibility in provision, and a lack of support while seeking work. While the expanded entitlement can support parental employment, these barriers mean that some parents still must reduce hours or stop working after having a child.

Other effects on parents

Almost all interviewed parents reported having made financial savings on childcare due to the expanded entitlement. Parents who had paid for childcare prior to the rollout of the expanded entitlement reported reductions in their childcare bill. Other parents who had only ever used childcare under the expanded entitlement noted that they were saving a significant amount of money on childcare compared to what they would have paid otherwise.

Savings reported by parents ranged from £400 to £1000 per month when comparing their childcare bills to what they would be if paying private fees. Some parents were not sure how they would have afforded childcare without the expanded entitlement.

> “I think our bill at the nursery was about £800 a month… With the 30 hours and the tax free, we now pay about £350. So, it's quite a big difference in price. So, it's really, really helped us.” - Parent, eligible for and receiving the expanded entitlement

Financial savings on childcare enabled some families to spend more money on leisure activities. One parent noted that they would have had to cut back on spending such as cancelling subscriptions or buying their child fewer gifts if they were not using the expanded entitlement. Some reported that the savings meant having a child was economically feasible, and therefore, it had given them more confidence in their decisions around family planning. For one family, it had enabled them to have a third child sooner than they thought.

> “[The expanded entitlement] definitely influenced the decision to have a third child. We really wanted to have more children, but we would have definitely not been able to have a third baby until a bit later financially, because the cost of childcare before the hours for us was so high.” - Parent, eligible for and receiving the expanded entitlement

Despite the financial savings, some parents still struggled with the cost of additional hours of childcare and its effect on their family finances. For example, one parent was unsure how they would be able to afford to have more than one child in nursery, as they were spending £400 a month on childcare for one child despite accessing their full expanded entitlement.

> “I personally don't know how somebody can do this with more than one child, because if we had 2, that's £800 we would have just had to pay, not 4. And our income isn't increasing. The cost of everything else is increasing.” - Parent, eligible for and receiving the expanded entitlement

Parent example: the effect of the expanded entitlements on family life and finances

One parent had returned to work after having their second child and was accessing the expanded entitlements. They reported that their childcare had become much **more affordable**. Previously, their monthly wage had only been 20p more than their childcare costs for two children, but now, their childcare costs had decreased substantially, and they were only paying £75 a month for childcare. This had allowed the family to **save money and move house**.

> “It did mean that when it came in, with [second child] that we were able to move house because we knew that we wouldn't be paying them extortionate fees again. So, yeah, it has changed. It did change our lives.” - Parent, eligible for and receiving expanded entitlements

Despite these benefits, the high cost of additional childcare hours had motivated this parent to **keep their working days at three days a week** rather than increasing their hours. This was because they felt that working more but needing to pay for additional childcare hours would not be worth it financially.

> “At the minute [the expanded entitlements are] making me do them three days because [the cost] does jump up then quite considerably when you look to add another day or add another half a day, it does, it doubles, triples in price per month.” - Parent, eligible for and receiving expanded entitlements

Benefits for parents were not only limited to financial benefits; some parents reported that being able to access childcare using the expanded entitlement had benefited their mental health and wellbeing. This was particularly true for parents with limited access to informal childcare, who noted that being able to place their child in childcare allowed them to have a small break. One parent noted how their wellbeing had improved because their job formed part of their personal identity and they were able to return to this.

> “I feel like for me, I always introduce myself like I'm [NAME]. I'm a nurse. It is part of my identity.” - Parent, eligible for and receiving the expanded entitlement

Some parents also noted the positive effects of formal childcare on their children’s development. They felt that accessing childcare had exposed their children to a wider range of experiences, such as arts and crafts and outdoor activities. Additionally, these parents noted the positive effects of their children having more opportunities for socialisation, which gave them more confidence around adults and other children, better prepared children for school, and contributed to their speech and language development.

> "He's come on so much by going to nursery and he loves it. His motor skills, his reasoning, his speech, all of those things have come on, and I attribute them to nursery." - Parent, eligible for and receiving the expanded entitlement

Taken together, the findings suggest that the expanded entitlement has delivered benefits overall, but those benefits and costs are not distributed evenly across providers, children and families. As discussed previously in this chapter, the expanded entitlement has led to childminders finding it more challenging to take older pre-school children. Furthermore, there is some evidence that the availability and distribution of places for children with SEND and children using Early Learning for 2-year-olds has changed since the expanded entitlement rollout. The expanded entitlement benefits parents in multiple ways, including reducing financial pressure, supporting parental wellbeing, and increasing early access to developmental opportunities for children. However, financial pressures persisted for some parents, meaning that improvements to family finances and wellbeing since the expanded entitlement have been felt more by some families than others.

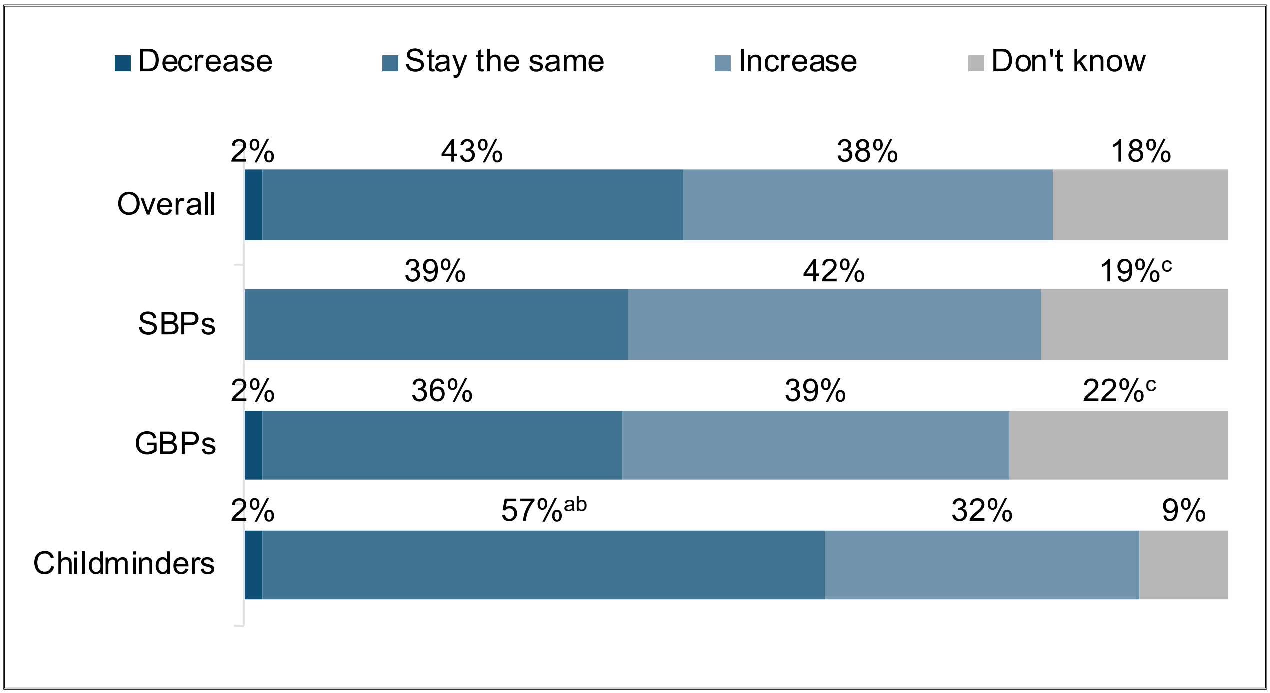
8. Views on the future of the policy

This chapter sets out LA and provider perspectives on their capacity to continue delivering the expanded entitlement. It includes whether providers expect parents' demand for childcare to change in the future, whether they feel they will be able to meet any changes in demand, and any challenges they anticipate facing. The chapter also highlights the recommendations made by LAs, providers and parents interviewed about how they think the expanded entitlement could be improved.

Future capacity to deliver the expanded entitlement

Providers had mixed feelings about whether demand for the expanded entitlement would change in the short-term future. More than two fifths (43%) of providers surveyed anticipated that demand for the expanded entitlement would stay the same in January 2026, while a similar proportion (38%) anticipated an increase in demand, as shown in Figure 8.1. Almost one-in-five (18%) did not know. This indicates uncertainty among providers as to future levels of demand for the expanded entitlement.

Figure 8.1 Whether providers anticipated that demand for the expanded entitlement would change in January 2026



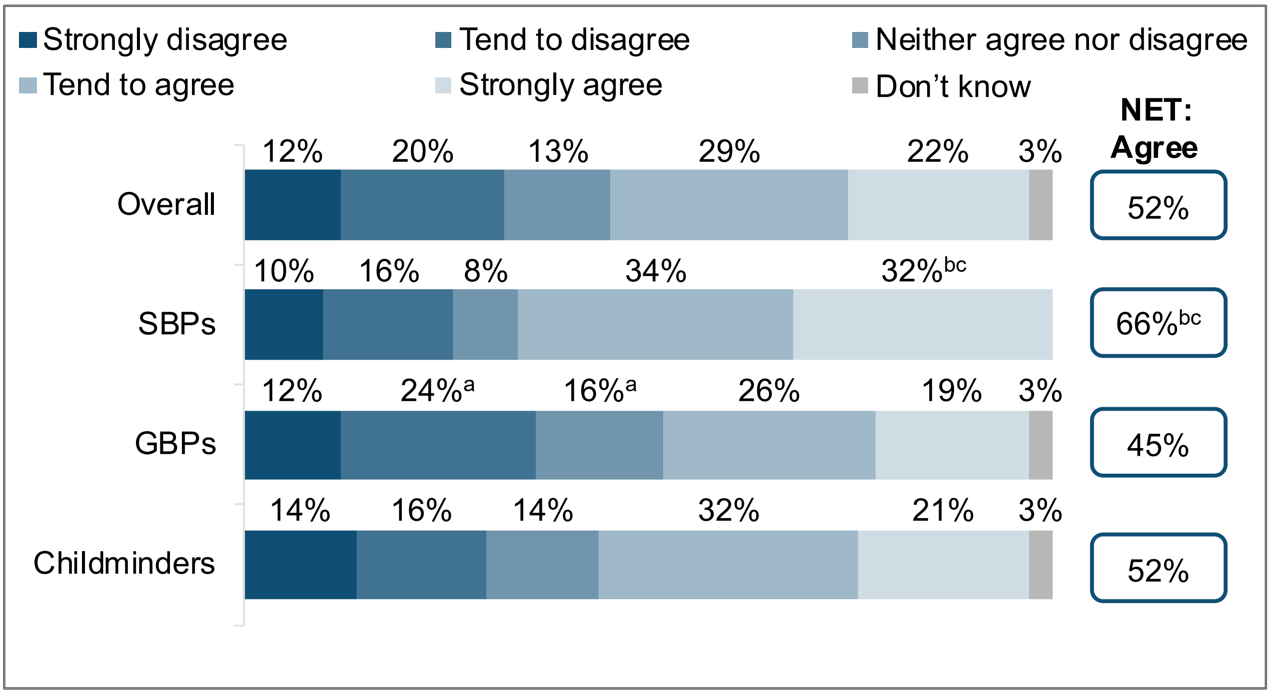
D1B. Do you expect demand for the 30 hours per week of government funded childcare for 9 months to 2-year-olds to increase remain the same or decrease from January 2026? Base: All providers who have children receiving the expanded entitlement or planning to (n=750).
Superscript letters indicate statistically significant differences between subgroups: a denotes a significantly higher figure compared to SBPs; b from GBPs; and c from childminders.
Source: Expanded Childcare Entitlement Process Evaluation Wave 3 Provider Survey.

There were, however, some differences between provider types surveyed in their views of future demand. More than half (57%) of childminders surveyed expected that demand will stay the same, more than SBPs (39%) and GBPs (36%). Furthermore, large providers (with 61 or more registered places) were more likely to anticipate an increase in demand (50%) than providers of other sizes (30% of those with up to 10 registered places, 32% of those with 11-30 registered places, and 40% of those with 31-60 registered places).

There was also a relationship between providers surveyed that had been able to meet demand and their perspective on future demand. Providers that had not been able to meet demand of parents wanting to access the expanded entitlement at the time of the survey were more likely to anticipate an increase in demand in January 2026 (47% vs 34% of those that had been able to meet parents' demand).

Providers surveyed had mixed confidence about whether they would be able to meet the demand of parents for the expanded entitlement in January 2026. Overall, just over half (52%) of providers agreed, while just under one third (32%) disagreed that they would be able to meet parents' demand, as shown in Figure 8.2. Just over one-in-eight (13%) providers surveyed neither agreed nor disagreed. This indicates some further uncertainty among providers about their capacity to meet future demand for the expanded entitlement.

Figure 8.2 Whether providers agreed that they will be able to meet parents' demand in January 2026



D1_5. To what extent do you agree that I/we will be able to meet the demand of parents in January 2026?
Base: All providers who have children receiving the expanded entitlement or planning to (n=750).
Superscript letters indicate statistically significant differences between subgroups: a denotes a significantly higher figure compared to SBPs; b from GBPs; and c from childminders.
Source: Expanded Childcare Entitlement Process Evaluation Wave 3 Provider Survey.

SBPs surveyed were significantly more likely to agree that they would be able to meet parent demand in January 2026 (66%), when compared with GBPs (45%) and childminders (52%).

Most of those that had been able to meet parents’ demand for the phase 3 rollout were confident that they would be able to meet future demand. Over four-in-five (85%) providers that had been able to meet parent demand for the expanded entitlement also agreed that they would be able to meet demand in January 2026, while only 6% of this group disagreed. This suggests that successfully meeting existing parent demand gave providers confidence in relation to meting future demand.

Providers interviewed echoed this generally cautious confidence that they would be able to meet parent demand for the expanded entitlement in the future. A small number anticipated challenges around this, such as having limited physical space, which meant that they were unable to increase the number of places offered. Ongoing challenges with recruiting childcare staff was also raised as an issue that may limit providers’ ability to meet future demand.

Several LAs interviewed noted that, although they were currently maintaining sufficiency of childcare places, there was limited scope to expand provision further, consistent with the concerns raised by providers. LAs were therefore concerned about maintaining sufficiency if demand for the policy continued to grow.

> “So, there's a bit of apprehension, I guess, about could we suddenly see in the next year a lot more families return to work? Obviously, you know, birth rates have been low. Is that going to pick up in the near future? …Normally, if your birth rates pick up, you've got a good couple of years before you've got to worry about childcare places. We've got 9 months now.” - Local Authority

A small number of LAs interviewed highlighted that while they were maintaining sufficiency, the type of childcare available was not always meeting parents’ needs. While there were enough childcare places available for parents who wanted them, the places were not always in the types of settings that parents wanted or needed them to be to fit in with their working lives. These LAs described a reduced demand for community-run pre-schools and some SBPs which only operate during school hours and term time, as these types of settings are less likely to suit the childcare needs of working parents. Combined with an increased demand for year-round childcare, a few LAs were concerned about maintaining sufficiency going forwards: if these settings closed due to lack of demand, and the places in these settings were lost, it would not always be possible to create additional places in other settings to maintain sufficiency.

> “We're just aware … that we might end up with more term-time-only provision than is needed … So, we're hoping it won't be a problem, but we’re looking at that mix of provision and whether that is actually going to serve the families as needed.” - Local Authority

Overall, findings point to ongoing uncertainty among providers about future demand for the expanded entitlement and their capacity to meet it. While some providers expressed cautious confidence, this was often based on having successfully met demand to date, whereas those who had struggled were more likely to anticipate further increases and challenges. Although many LAs reported that they are currently maintaining sufficiency, both LAs and providers described limited scope to expand provision, with staffing shortages and physical space acting as key constraints. This suggests that the childcare system is operating with limited headroom and may face increasing pressure if demand continues to grow. In addition, emerging mismatches between the types of provision available and what parents need, particularly between term-time settings and demand for more flexible, year-round care, indicate that future sufficiency challenges may relate not only to the number of places, but their suitability.

Recommended improvements to the policy

LAs, providers, and parents interviewed made recommendations about how they felt that the expanded entitlement policy could be improved. Their suggestions included: clearer guidance for parents; reframing how the entitlement is described and changes to administration and funding.

Clearer guidance for parents

The most commonly raised recommendation for the expanded entitlement policy concerned the guidance provided to parents. LAs, providers, and parents interviewed mentioned a number of areas where the guidance could be clearer and more accessible for parents. These included how to determine eligibility, when eligibility begins (the term after the child turns 9 months old), and how parents can move their funding between providers.

> “In my eyes it shouldn't be classed as 9 month funding or 2 year funding when it isn't for that age, it's for the term after, and it's not really that clear until you properly research it.” - Parent, eligible not receiving expanded entitlement

Parents interviewed typically said they would have liked to receive more information about their eligibility for support with childcare, including the expanded entitlement, in advance of their children beginning childcare. Some said that it may have encouraged them to return to work earlier if they had known more about the expanded entitlement.

Parents provided a range of suggestions as to how they would have liked to receive such information:

- From midwives or health visitors, at routine appointments during pregnancy or in the weeks after giving birth
- Through local libraries and other locations where parents gather
- On posters with QR codes, in public areas such as shopping centres or bus stops
- Through health services, such as when children attend for their childhood immunisations, or within the red book that is provided to all parents when their child is born

Parents interviewed were concerned that advertising campaigns online and through social media may no longer run now that the expanded entitlement are established. They felt this may affect new parents' awareness.

> "I guess I'm worried that now the change has happened, will the momentum be lost on the advertising? Because it's like the change is done then it just becomes status quo. I guess there's potentially new parents that will be missed." - Parent, eligible and receiving expanded entitlement

Reframing the entitlement

A few LAs, parents and providers interviewed suggested that the expanded entitlement should not be advertised as 30 hours of funded childcare. They felt this was misleading to parents and instead information provided should explain how many funded hours are available across the year.

> "I think sometimes it feels like things are badged as more than they really are. And I can see it as a parent, you see 30 hours and you think, oh, great. And then you don't realise that it's actually 21 hours, really, when you spread it across the whole year. So, I think it's just that clarity of communication around it being really clear that that's across 38 weeks." - Local Authority

Administration and funding

In terms of administration, one LA interviewed felt that the delivery of the expanded entitlement could be improved with a standardised funding agreement for LAs to use with their providers. While they appreciated the need for some flexibility in funding agreements to suit the local context, they found that not having a standardised agreement provided scope for providers to challenge the funding agreements the LA had prepared. The need to develop their own funding agreement and respond to providers' challenges was seen to be a considerable administrative burden. The LA felt that a standardised funding agreement would both improve consistency between LAs and reduce the administrative burden.

> "It'd be useful to have some consistency in [funding agreements]… Because we don't have that, it causes an awful lot of challenge from providers." - Local Authority

Some providers interviewed wanted more freedom to set their own rates, and others, particularly childminders, recommended that the funding rates for 3 to 4-year-olds needed to be higher. Without an increase in funding rates for this age group, some childminders were not able to offer childcare to these children.

Conclusions

Overall, the evidence suggests that the expanded entitlement has been implemented successfully at scale. High numbers of eligible parents have applied for and used the entitlement, most providers are offering it in some form, and LAs generally reported that they had maintained sufficiency of childcare places. Parents also reported clear benefits in terms of reduced childcare costs, greater confidence in returning to work, and wider benefits for family finances and wellbeing. However, the findings also show that the pathway from eligibility to effective access is not always straightforward or evenly experienced. The entitlement is being delivered through a childcare system that is adapting to new demand but doing so with limited headroom in some areas and settings. For example, some childminders' provision for older preschool children has been affected, as has the distribution and access to places for children with SEND or using Early Learning for 2-year-olds in some areas. As a result, the policy is broadly achieving its intended aim, but its reach, flexibility and benefits vary across families, places and provider types.

Overall delivery and take-up

The expanded entitlement appears to be reaching most eligible families who actively seek to use it. In Autumn 2025, 585,708 parents in England had a code issued for children aged 9 months to 2 years to access the entitlement, and 95% of these codes were validated by a childcare provider, indicating that parents accessed the offer. Most providers were also participating: just under three quarters (73%) of surveyed providers either had children accessing, or offered, the expanded entitlement. This indicates that, at a national level, the policy has achieved broad reach and has successfully extended funded childcare to a large group of families.

However, high overall take-up does not mean that access is straightforward for everyone. The evaluation found lower code validation rates in the most deprived areas, and children in lower-income households tended to spend fewer hours in formal childcare than those in higher-income households. This points to a gap between being eligible for the entitlement and being able to use it in practice.

There isn't a single reason for this. Some parents chose not to use the entitlement, or used fewer hours, based on their preferences or circumstances. Others faced more practical constraints, such as waiting lists, limited local availability, a lack of suitable places, or the cost of topping up funded hours.

What this highlights is that the key issue is not just awareness or eligibility, but whether families can access childcare that genuinely works for them—something that is available, affordable, suitable and flexible. Looking at take-up alone risks overstating the reach of the policy, particularly where families use fewer hours than they are entitled to, or where access depends on accepting additional costs, restrictions, or provision that does not fit well with their needs.

Sufficiency and capacity

The evaluation found that the EY system has largely maintained overall sufficiency during the rollout. LAs were generally confident that demand was being met, and most reported limited contact from families who were unable to find a childcare place. Where families did need support, LAs commonly provided brokerage or other assistance to help them secure provision.

However, this broadly positive picture is more mixed at provider level. Providers were less confident than LAs that they could meet demand, and many described operating at, or close to, capacity. Where providers were unable to offer all requested funded hours, this was most commonly due to physical space constraints, lack of availability on specific days, or insufficient staffing. These constraints mean that sufficiency may exist at an LA level while individual families still struggle to find the right place, in the right location, on the days or hours they need.

Looking ahead, this points to a shift in how sufficiency needs to be understood. It is not just about the overall number of places, but whether those places are in the right locations, available at the right times, and suitable for the families who need them most. Some LAs were already identifying a mismatch between the types of provision available and what working parents needed, particularly where term-time or school-hours provision did not align with demand for more flexible, year-round care. Taken together, this suggests that future pressures are likely to be driven as much by the suitability and distribution of places as by their overall supply.

Implementation and delivery infrastructure

The staged rollout was a key enabler of implementation. LAs and providers generally felt better prepared as the rollout progressed, and the phased approach allowed systems, processes and communications to be refined over time. For providers, the move from 15 to 30 funded hours was straightforward because many already had children in place and systems set up.

However, the evaluation also shows that the infrastructure needed to deliver the entitlement remained administratively demanding. LAs reported challenges associated with updating systems, managing eligibility processes, responding to policy changes, and delivering several childcare programmes at the same time. Providers, particularly smaller settings and childminders, described the time required to manage codes, invoices, parental queries, eligibility checks and changing guidance as a continuing burden.

This administrative burden matters because it shapes how the policy is experienced. Providers and LAs often acted as interpreters of the policy for parents, explaining eligibility rules, reconfirmation requirements, stretched funding, additional charges and when support began. This helped parents access the entitlement but also created variation in the consistency and clarity of information received. Overall, the delivery infrastructure is working, but it still relies heavily on local and provider-level effort to make the national offer function in practice.

Parent understanding and access

Parent awareness of the expanded entitlement increased over the course of the rollout and most parents who applied were able to access the expanded entitlement. Many found the eligibility process straightforward and valued tools such as online eligibility checkers. However, awareness did not always translate into clear understanding of how the entitlement operates.

Two areas of confusion were particularly substantial: when eligibility begins, and how the 30 funded hours work across the year. Some parents thought they could access the entitlement as soon as their child turned 9 months, rather than from the following term. Others expected 30 hours to be available every week of the year, rather than for 38 weeks or stretched across the year. These misunderstandings had practical consequences. Some parents faced unexpected childcare costs, delays in returning to work, or frustration when invoices did not match their expectations.

This suggests communication is central to whether the policy works as intended. If parents do not understand how the entitlement works in practice, including timings, conditions and what it involves, they may find it harder to plan childcare, manage costs or make informed decisions about work. Improving the clarity, timing and consistency of communication would therefore help with access, and with the policy's wider aim of supporting parents into work.

Provider delivery models and the offer experienced by families

The entitlement was not experienced as a uniform offer by parents. While most providers offered funded hours, many applied restrictions on when and how those hours could be used. Nearly two-thirds of surveyed providers reported applying at least one restriction, including limiting funded hours to term time, requiring parents to take additional paid hours (even though guidance states that there can be no mandatory costs associated with the expanded entitlement), or restricting the times or days when funded hours could be used. Many providers also applied charges for additional services, including for meals, consumables and activities, with some parents perceiving these as difficult to opt out of even where they were described as optional.

These restrictions and charges reflect how providers are making the entitlement work within day-to-day operational and financial constraints. For providers, this is often about keeping settings financially viable, managing staffing and occupancy, and making funded hours fit within existing session structures. For parents, however, these restrictions and charges can reduce flexibility, increase the effective cost of childcare and limit the extent to which the entitlement feels like a straightforward 30-hour offer.

This is an important implementation issue. While the entitlement is set nationally, how it works in practice is shaped locally by provider capacity, business models and incentives. In practice, this means families' experiences vary, not just based on eligibility, but on what different providers are able or willing to offer. This can affect both affordability and flexibility, particularly for families who need more flexible hours, full-year provision, or lower-cost access without additional charges.

Effects on parents and work

The expanded entitlement has delivered clear benefits for many parents. Interviewed parents commonly reported substantial savings on childcare costs, greater financial confidence, and improved ability to return to work after having a child. For some, the entitlement made returning to work feel financially worthwhile. For others, it enabled them to return earlier, remain in self-employment, or make preferred career choices.

However, the evidence suggests that the entitlement is more likely to enable or support working decisions than to transform working patterns overall. Many parents said they would have returned to work regardless, with the entitlement making this easier or more affordable rather than fundamentally changing their plans. CES data also suggests that most parents' working hours had stayed the same after the rollout. Of the parents who changed their work hours, more parents were decreasing than increasing their hours since having a child. However, lower-income parents were more likely than higher-income parents to increase hours.

The policy therefore appears to influence decisions at the margin. It reduces the financial barrier to work, supports confidence, and helps some parents return earlier or make work choices that better suit their family circumstances. But it does not remove all barriers to work. The timing of eligibility, the cost of additional hours, limited availability of flexible provision, and provider restrictions all continued to shape whether parents could increase hours or work in the way they wanted. This suggests that the entitlement is supporting labour market participation, but its effect on overall labour supply is likely to be constrained by wider childcare affordability and flexibility issues.

Effects on disadvantaged children and children with SEND

The evaluation points to some early indications that access to funded childcare may be evolving differently for certain groups, although the evidence at this stage is limited and not always consistent.

For children eligible for Early Learning for 2-year-olds, most providers reported no change in the number of places. However, a minority of providers and LAs described localised reductions, changes in distribution, or a greater concentration of places in fewer settings. Providers often attributed this to lower demand or places being filled by younger children accessing the expanded entitlement, while some LAs raised broader concerns about possible financial incentives to prioritise families purchasing additional hours. Taken together, this suggests that any displacement effects are not yet widespread, but may be beginning to emerge in some areas. There is some risk that disadvantaged children, who become eligible later and may be less likely to secure places in advance, could face additional barriers where capacity is more constrained.

For children with SEND, the picture was similarly mixed. Most providers and LAs did not report changes in the number of places, and some evidence suggests that providers were adapting their offer, including in some cases specialising further. There were also indications that earlier entry into childcare may support earlier identification of additional needs. At the same time, some providers reported pressures linked to staffing, funding and the availability of appropriate support, which in a minority of cases led to reduced places or more limited provision. LAs also reported increased Special Educational Needs Inclusion Fund applications, suggesting growing demand for additional support.

Overall, the evidence suggests that access has not reduced in a clear or widespread way, but there are some early signs of change in how provision is organised. Some providers were adapting to new patterns of demand, while others were more constrained. This may mean that access starts to vary more between areas and settings over time, particularly for children who need more support. As these patterns are still emerging, they should be interpreted cautiously and kept under review as the policy beds in.

Provider sustainability and market effects

The effects of the expanded entitlement on providers and the wider childcare market were mixed. Some providers reported increased revenue, greater income stability and benefits from receiving regular funding through LAs rather than relying solely on parent payments. Funding rates for younger children were often reported to compare favourably with private rates, and in some cases, this encouraged providers to expand provision for younger age groups.

This suggests that the market is responding to the policy, but not always in a consistent way. The expanded entitlement appears to be influencing how providers, especially childminders, structure their offer, such as which age groups they prioritise, how places are organised, and whether additional costs are passed on to parents. These responses are generally

understandable given the pressures providers are operating under, but they can also shape how affordable and flexible the offer feels for families.

Looking ahead, this highlights the importance of how these patterns develop over time. The ability to maintain the current entitlement offer, alongside provider sustainability and quality, is likely to depend in part on how providers continue to adapt, and how far the system can respond to those pressures, while supporting consistent and equitable access for families.

Future delivery

Overall, the system appears to be coping at present, and most providers expect to be able to meet demand in the near term. That said, confidence is not evenly shared. Providers who have already been able to meet demand were much more confident about the future, while those who had struggled were more likely to expect ongoing pressures.

LAs similarly reported that, although sufficiency is currently being maintained, there may be limited scope to expand further in some areas due to workforce and space constraints.

Looking ahead, there is some uncertainty about how demand may develop as the policy sets in. Some LAs expected that more families may return to work or seek childcare earlier, while capacity may not adjust as quickly in all areas. The extension to younger children also shortens the planning window, meaning changes in demand may feed through more quickly than under previous models.

Future challenges are therefore likely to be about both capacity and how well provision matches what families need. The key issue may not just be the number of places available, but whether those places align with parents' working patterns, affordability constraints and preferences. This may become more important if demand continues to change, particularly where existing provision does not fully match how families want to use childcare.

Summary

Overall, the evaluation suggests that the expanded entitlement represents a significant and largely successful policy intervention. It has been implemented at scale, is reaching most families who apply, and is delivering clear benefits in terms of affordability, confidence and access to childcare. The staggered rollout, LA preparation and provider engagement have all supported delivery, and the policy is helping many parents to return to work or make work choices that better fit their family circumstances.

However, the findings also show that successful delivery depends on more than eligibility and headline take-up. Families' ability to benefit from the entitlement depends on local availability, provider capacity, the affordability of additional hours, clarity of information, and how funded hours are structured in practice. The policy has reduced financial barriers to childcare, but it has not removed all barriers to childcare or work. Its benefits are therefore significant, but uneven.

The expanded entitlement is broadly working, but within a childcare system that remains under pressure. The system is adapting through local management, provider restrictions, charging practices, shifts in age-group provision and increased reliance on staff and space capacity. These adaptations have enabled implementation, but they also shape who benefits most, how flexible the offer feels, and whether the policy can fully achieve its intended outcomes for disadvantaged families, children with SEND and parents needing more extensive or flexible childcare.

As the policy becomes more established, the key challenge will be ensuring that high take-up translates into access that works well in practice for different families. This will mean continued attention to areas such as sufficiency, workforce capacity, communication and provider sustainability, as well as the experiences of lower-income families, disadvantaged children and children with SEND. Together, these factors are likely to shape how far the entitlement delivers its intended impact over time.

Appendix A – Fieldwork dates

The table presents the fieldwork dates for each fieldwork strand across the 3 waves of the research.

Table A1 Survey and interview fieldwork timings

Fieldwork type	Fieldwork wave	Fieldwork dates
LA survey	Wave 1	July – August 2024
LA survey	Wave 2	November – December 2024
LA survey	Wave 3	October – November 2025
LA interviews	Wave 1	August – September 2024
LA interviews	Wave 2	January – February 2025
LA interviews	Wave 3	January – February 2026
Provider survey	Wave 1	July – August 2024
Provider survey	Wave 2	November – December 2024
Provider survey	Wave 3	November – December 2025
Provider interviews	Wave 1	August – September 2024
Provider interviews	Wave 2	February 2025
Provider interviews	Wave 3	February 2026
Parent interviews	Wave 1	September – October 2024
Parent interviews	Wave 2	February – March 2025
Parent interviews	Wave 3	February – March 2026

Appendix B – Weighting

As noted in the Methodology section of this report, weighting was applied to the provider survey data to account for variance in setting size band (0-10 places, 11-30 places, 31-60 places, 60+ places), and region (North, Midlands, South).

Wave 1 data was weighted to align with the following population proportions:

Table B1 Wave 1 weighting by setting size band

Setting size band	Population proportion	Survey proportion
0-10 places	47.26%	23.70%
11-30 places	21.15%	29.51%
31-60 places	19.60%	29.51%
61+ places	11.98%	17.28%

Table B2 Wave 1 weighting by region

Region	Population proportion	Survey proportion
North	23.93%	26.45%
South	47.49%	44.19%
Midlands	28.57%	29.36%

Wave 2 data was weighted to align with the following population proportions:

Table B3 Wave 2 weighting by setting size band

Setting size band	Population proportion	Survey proportion
0-10 places	41.74%	10.12%
11-30 places	18.86%	28.91%
31-60 places	20.19%	31.44%
61+ places	18.27%	28.46%
Unknown	0.94%	1.08%

Table B4 Wave 2 weighting by region

Region	Population proportion	Survey proportion
North	26.33%	26.83%
South	44.78%	40.47%
Midlands	28.88%	28.95%
Unknown	0.01%	0%

Wave 3 data was weighted to align with the following population proportions:

Table B5 Wave 3 weighting by setting size band

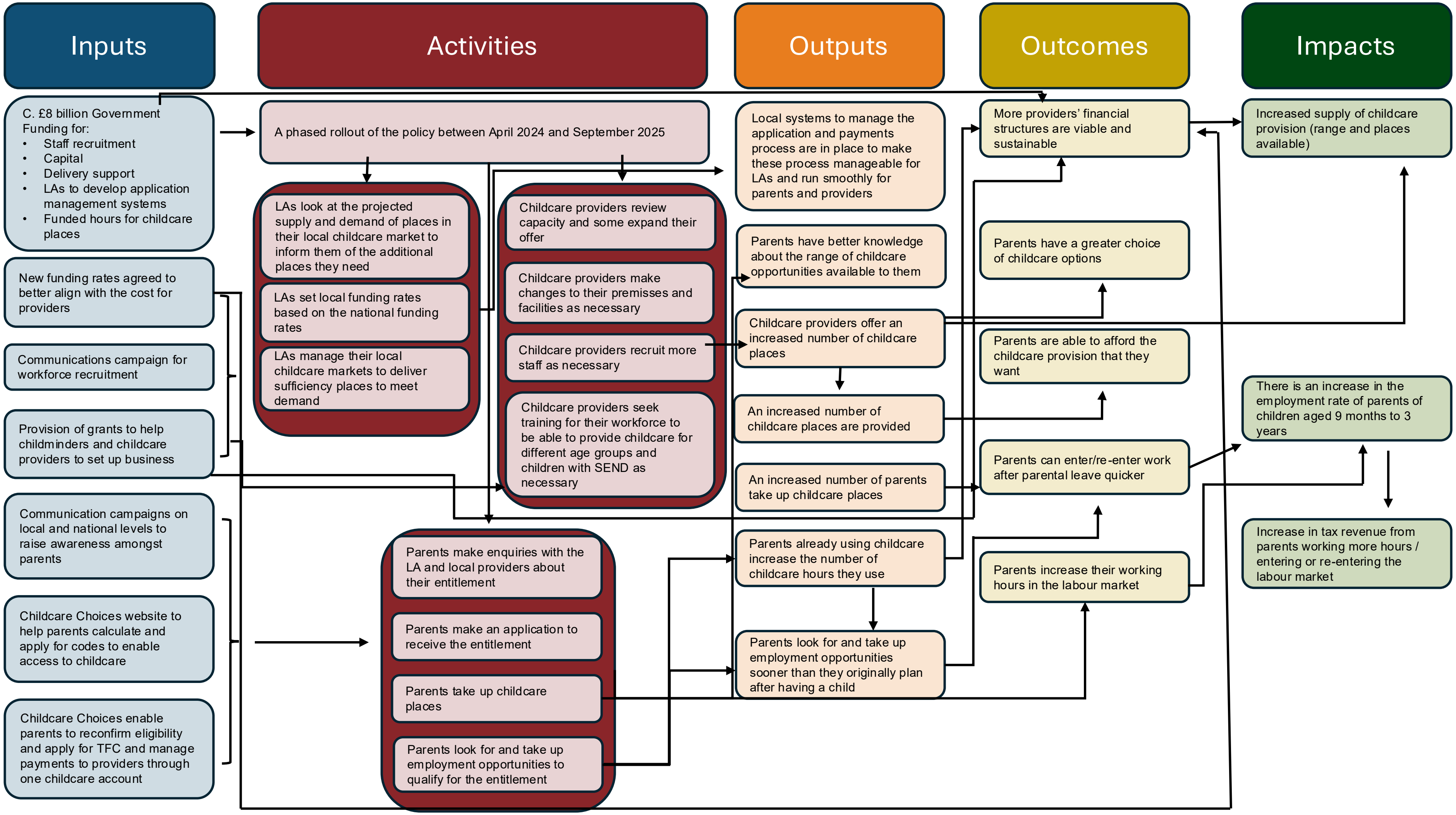
Setting size band	Population proportion	Survey proportion
0-10 places	41.95%	15.14%
11-30 places	23.76%	33.59%
31-60 places	22.35%	35.25%
61+ places	11.93%	16.02%

Table B6 Wave 3 weighting by region

Region	Population proportion	Survey proportion
North	25.67%	25.39%
South	45.40%	43.36%
Midlands	28.93%	31.25%

Appendix C – Theory of Change

This diagram shows the Theory of Change for this evaluation, including inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts.



The inputs are:

- Approximately £8 billion Government Funding for staff recruitment, capital, delivery support, LAs to develop application management systems, and funded hours for childcare places.
- New funding rates agreed to better align with the cost for providers.
- Communications campaign for workforce recruitment.
- Provision of grants to help childminders and childcare providers to set up business.
- Communication campaigns on local and national levels to raise awareness amongst parents.
- Childcare Choices website to help parents calculate and apply for codes to enable access to childcare.
- Childcare Choices enable parents to reconfirm eligibility and apply for TFC and manage payments to providers through one childcare account.

The activities are:

- A phased rollout of the policy between April 2024 and September 2025.
- LAs look at the projected supply and demand of places in their local childcare market to inform them of the additional places they need.
- LAs set local funding rates based on the national funding rates.
- LAs manage their local childcare markets to deliver sufficiency places to meet demand.
- Childcare providers review capacity and some expand their offer.
- Childcare providers make changes to their premisses and facilities as necessary.
- Childcare providers recruit more staff as necessary.
- Childcare providers seek training for their workforce to be able to provide childcare for different age groups and children with SEND as necessary.
- Parents make enquiries with the LA and local providers about their entitlement.
- Parents make an application to receive the entitlement.
- Parents take up childcare places.
- Parents look for and take up employment opportunities to qualify for the entitlement.

The outputs are:

- Local systems to manage the application and payments process are in place to make these process manageable for LAs and run smoothly for parents and providers.
- Parents have better knowledge about the range of childcare opportunities available to them.
- Childcare providers offer an increased number of childcare places.
- An increased number of childcare places are provided.
- An increased number of parents take up childcare places.
- Parents already using childcare increase the number of childcare hours they use.
- Parents look for and take up employment opportunities sooner than they originally plan after having a child.

The outcomes are:

- More providers' financial structures are viable and sustainable.
- Parents have a greater choice of childcare options.
- Parents are able to afford the childcare provision that they want.
- Parents can enter/re-enter work after parental leave quicker.
- Parents increase their working hours in the labour market.

The impacts are:

- An increased supply of childcare provision (range and places available).
- An increase in the employment rate of parents of children aged 9 months to 3 years.
- An increase in tax revenue from parents working more hours / entering or re-entering the labour market.

Department for Education

Reference: RR1656
ISBN: 978-1-83870-840-5

For any enquiries regarding this publication, contact www.gov.uk/contact-dfe.

This document is available for download at www.gov.uk/government/publications.