

Vision for Childcare

Introduction and background

Earlier this year the Children's Commissioner began work on an [Independent Family Review](#), which was commissioned by Government to understand more about family life across the UK. At the end of the summer, Part 1 of the Review was published. One of the clear things to emerge was the importance of high-quality affordable childcare for families. Families chose, where possible, to draw on support from their own family and friends. When this was not available, they wanted childcare which had a familial feeling, which was trusted, reliable, and affordable. The Review also highlighted a need to understand more about childcare and seek solutions to some of the challenges which families are facing. This report aims to fulfil these purposes. In the introduction to the report, the Children's Commissioner states that 'By providing high-quality, affordable, and accessible childcare and early education I believe that we are laying the foundation for children's future happiness, health, and educational achievements. We are also giving parents and families across the country the support they want, need, and deserve.'

Key findings

Delivering world-class childcare and early education for all

- Providing a truly world-class early education and childcare offer will need ambition which goes beyond tinkering about at the edges.
- Families need a system that is easy to understand and navigate, and which they can trust to deliver affordable, high-quality, and consistent care.
- We need a flexible childcare offer that wraps around education, and that works for the realities of family life. It is not enough to have a brilliant early education offer if parents still find themselves unable to work because they have no childcare for their older child in the school holidays.
- Evidence shows that children who receive high-quality early education go on to get better GCSE results at 16 – early education is therefore a vital element in narrowing the attainment gap.
- Beyond education, good mental and physical health, happy, loving relationships with family, and great careers are founded on the quality-of-care children receive in their early years. Research shows that children who are falling behind at the age of 5 are not only far more likely to be struggling with reading and writing at the end of primary school but are also more likely to be excluded and to be involved with children's social care.
- The rate of increase of children meeting all their early learning goals was slowing before 2020, and there are widely held concerns that children who missed out on periods of early education during the pandemic have been significantly affected.
- Three main themes emerged from the Family Review. These were: families wanted childcare that was available and flexible to their working arrangements, particularly for school-age children and those with additional needs; they wanted high-quality care which they knew would help their children to thrive; and they wanted it to be affordable.

Current childcare provision

- The Family Review highlighted 4 challenges which families face – understanding the existing offer, affordability, lack of availability of spaces, and particular difficulties for parents of children with SEND. These challenges mirror the issues which emerged from the Department for Education's recent Survey of Childcare and Early Years.
- It is difficult for families to negotiate the current childcare offer. There are currently 5 strands of childcare spread out over 3 government departments. These are: tax-free childcare, which covers 20 per cent of costs to provide a total of up to £2,000 a year; the childcare element of Universal Credit (or Tax Credits) which covers 85 per cent of costs to provide a total of up to £7,752 a year; 15 free hours a week for all 3- and 4-year-olds; 30 free hours a week for 3- and 4-year-olds in working families; and 15 free hours for 2-year-olds whose parents receive certain benefits, who have a disability, or are in care.
- In 2021, 93 per cent of parents with a child aged 0-4 were aware of the universal 15 free hours a week offer, 89 per cent of eligible parents were aware of the 30 free hour offer, 80 per cent of parents with a 2-year-old were aware of the 2-year-old offer, but only 49 per cent of working families were aware of the tax-free childcare scheme.
- In the Family Review, families across the country reported how the cost of childcare, and the difficulty of organising it, placed a stress on them. This was true for those with children of all ages as they tried to make working life co-exist with the timings of the school day and holidays. Parents spoke of the difficulties of navigating the system. They asked why there was least support when children were one, and why there was no single source of information to which they could turn.



- Childcare costs to parents vary substantially by the age of child and number of hours used. The Department for Education's childcare and early education survey to parents shows that the average weekly childcare payment is much higher than the median weekly childcare payment. In the same survey, 24 per cent of families with a child between 0 and 4 find it 'difficult' or 'very difficult' to pay for childcare. For 14 per cent of families, costs are a barrier to using childcare.
- Whereas there is enough childcare for younger children in most areas, there is not enough for older children or disabled children. In the Coram Family and Childcare's annual survey to local authorities, only 57 per cent of local authorities reported sufficient childcare 'in all areas' for children under 2. Just 63 per cent of local authorities reported sufficiency 'in all areas' for the 2-year-old free entitlement; 79 per cent for the 3 and 4-year-old 15-hour entitlement and 73 per cent for the 3- and 4-year-old 30-hour entitlement.
- Only 26 per cent of local authorities reported sufficient childcare in all areas for 5-11-year-olds after school and only 13 per cent of local authorities in all areas for 12- to 14-year-olds after school.
- In the Family Review, parents of children with SEND spoke about the challenge of finding childcare. This difficulty is reflected in the office's analysis. Only 21 per cent of Local Authorities reported sufficiency for childcare 'in all areas' for disabled children.

Accessibility and take-up of childcare

- When asked about the sources of information on childcare used in the last year, 47 per cent of parents used word of mouth, 36 per cent used a school, 25 per cent used social media and 9 per cent used their local authority/Family Information Service. Only 20 per cent of parents have ever used their local authority/Family Information Service to find information about childcare.
- Section 12 of the Childcare Act 2006 requires local authorities to provide a Family Information Service with information on the provision of childcare in their area. They find this challenging, both because of funding cuts and because of churn in childcare provision which makes it difficult to maintain an updated directory of providers.
- The office of the Children's Commissioner conducted an audit on a sample of 60 local authorities from a range of geographical areas. The team navigated the Family Information Service to ascertain whether it could find a childminder within 2 minutes for a randomly selected postcode. For 27 per cent of local authorities, the office was unable to easily find a local childminder on the Family Information Service. For 60 per cent of local authorities, the childcare directory was missing information recommended in the statutory guidance.
- Looking at take-up of the universal childcare offer for 3-4-year-olds, analysis by the office of the Children's Commissioner found that take-up is lower for children with SEND, for some ethnic groups (Chinese, Irish/Traveller, Roma), and for pupils with SEND. Although children with SEND have an overall take-up figure of 94 per cent, for those with multiple profound difficulties it is just 83 per cent.
- There are striking differences between local authorities, ranging from 51 per cent to 98 per cent.

Delivering a world-class early education and childcare system

- For school-age children, the most straightforward approach to making childcare manageable and affordable is by providing an extended school day, so that children can be cared for on school premises. This opens opportunities for additional extra-curricular activities and clubs, including breakfast clubs, in a place with which children are already familiar.
- Schools should be opened for more early years provision, particularly in the face of falling rolls and empty primary classrooms. Drawing on school resources to increase provision for 2, 3- and 4-year-olds in school would also be a way to meet the needs of disadvantaged children who are less likely to be in private provision.
- Bringing early education into the wider school sector would present an opportunity to align workforce training, development, and support with that of wider school staff and teachers, thereby professionalising the early years sector.
- Research has shown that childminders feel isolated from other parts of the early years system and overwhelmed by a registration and inspection system which appears designed for group-based settings. To bring more childminders into the sector it is essential to ensure the right balance is struck between easing administrative burdens and ensuring there is the right oversight and support in place to drive up quality.
- Every local area should be required to have an agency for childminders. This would transform the way in which information is provided to parents, childminders are supported, and different parts of the system are joined up. Agencies should be able to provide a bespoke brokerage service for parents – understanding what their working patterns are, what additional needs their child has, and what their existing childcare arrangements are. They could provide training, support, and networking opportunities to childminders, with much more frequent contact and oversight.
- The system needs to be designed to work for families whatever the age of their children, with support spread more evenly. This could take the form of a childcare account for families, drawing on some of the user-friendly elements of the tax-free childcare account, with parents able to allocate guaranteed hours as well as additional fees to providers throughout their child's early years.
- There is currently no clear progress measure for the early years. Two things are needed to address this. Firstly, the introduction of a unique child identifier, so that children's early development (recorded by the 2-year-old development check) can be linked to data on how they do at school. Secondly, a reformed check for 2-year-olds should be developed, which will incorporate all the essential health assessments as well as all areas in the Early Years Foundation Stage, so it can be used as a baseline for how a child does throughout their education.
- In the Family Review, it was clear that parents, particularly fathers, had spent more time caring for their children during lockdown than ever before. Although this has now fallen back, it is still much higher than pre-pandemic levels. Now is the time to modernise parental leave, with an offer that protects time for each parent and allows them to spend quality time with their child at a time that suits them.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/cc-vision-for-childcare-oct-22.pdf>