Closing gaps early [1]

The role of early years policy in promoting social mobility in England

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the current state of early years policy in light of the evidence about what works. We assess the strengths and limitations of where we are today, and identify priority areas and key next steps for policy attention. The report covers three types of early years policy: parental leave and parenting; early education and childcare; and financial support to households with young children. Our focus throughout is on narrowing gaps at school starting age between children from different backgrounds - essential to breaking the cycle of disadvantage and making progress on social mobility.

• The UK has made a great deal of progress over the past 20 years, doubling the period of paid maternity leave and introducing new rights to paid paternity leave and parental leave. In some instances, it has been nudged by European Union directives, which may be a concern for future policy post Brexit, but several of the extensions were made without EU prompting.

• Progress in parenting policy has been more uneven. While parenting is a major factor contributing to gaps in early child development, research has also highlighted the difficulties of designing and implementing policies to improve parenting or close gaps in parenting and the home environment between low- and high-socio-economic status families.

• While the results of many evaluations have been disappointing, some programmes have achieved positive results, including encouraging, though mixed, evidence from evaluations of early Sure Start centres and later children's centres. Carefully designed programmes, drawing on the growing evidence base, can play a role in reducing disparities in early childhood, although delivering them effectively at scale remains challenging.

• Early education and childcare has been a major focus of policy in this area. Of concern is that recent developments indicate a shift in funding and policy focus away from quality early education for child development towards childcare affordability for working families. Investments in affordability are welcome, but neither the tax-free childcare scheme nor the 30 hour entitlement for working families are well-designed to promote social mobility, meaning longer hours in state-funded early education for children who are already relatively advantaged,

which may be expected to widen gaps in child development at school starting age. Particularly worrying, these investments are coming at the expense of the quality of provision.

• Recent years have seen the axing of financial support for graduate training; the removal of the local authority role in continuing professional development; the lifting of the requirement for Sure Start centres in disadvantaged areas to offer graduate-led early education; and a lack of movement to improve non-graduate qualifications in response to the Nutbrown Review. One third of staff working in group-based care still lack either English or Maths GCSE or both. A current

proposal to remove the requirement for maintained nursery and reception classes to have a qualified teacher is particularly worrying and could affect children in disadvantaged areas most of all.

• Targeted places for disadvantaged two-year-olds continue, but nearly one-third of eligible two-year-olds still do not take up their place, while many of the available places for two-year-olds are not in the highest quality settings.

• The early years pupil premium offers an important financial supplement to settings catering for low income, disabled and looked after children, but is far from sufficient to change the bigger picture of inadequate funding to support high quality provision. Given recent evidence of a lack of impact of early education places on foundation stage profile scores, the need for a renewed focus on quality is particularly urgent.

• Cash transfers can have a significant impact on household financial resources and therefore on children's outcomes. From 1997 to 2010 cash transfers for children became much more generous, with children under five the greatest beneficiaries. Since 2010 aspects of this

support have been unravelled: notably, additional benefits for babies have been scrapped; the tax credit

system has been more narrowly targeted; and a freeze on working-age benefits means a steady erosion in the real value of support. The ‘benefits cap' and the two-child limit have introduced a separation between the calculation of family needs and the level of benefits received, with devastating consequences for families affected.

• Meanwhile, there has been a shift in the expectations on parents of young children. Work requirements are being extended under Universal Credit to include parents of three- and four year- olds, and to require parents (and other workers) working part-time to be looking for longer hours as a condition of support. The 30 hour free childcare policy needs to be seen in this context as well. It is not clear that this shift is in the best interest of children.

• Changes to benefits and tax credits are projected to lead to sharp increases in child poverty in the next five years, undoing much of the progress of the early 2000s. It is difficult to see how even well-designed policies to support parenting and ensure access to high quality early education can have their optimal impact against such a backdrop.

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