

World class: What England can learn from global experience to make early years policy work for disadvantaged children ^[1]

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Excerpts

Introduction

England's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system is at a turning point, leaping up the political agenda in recent years, with significant interest from both major political parties. A recent government announcement of a large-scale expansion to England's ECEC system provides the opportunity for England to become a leader in high-quality provision, but only if policies and corresponding implementation are well thought through.

Given there is increasing appetite to reform England's early years system, this report looks at what the country can learn from others to apply to that process. While other recent reports (Ofsted, 2023 and Ville et al., 2022) have looked at early years policy internationally, this is the first to focus on what we can learn from others to ensure England's system works to support the most disadvantaged children.

Example countries, nations and jurisdictions include some of the 'usual suspects', those whose early years systems are very well developed and frequently held up as exemplars of good practice (such as the Nordics), but also includes countries where provision has been improved more recently, or where specific aspects of their early years systems could be beneficial for England. The report also includes cautionary tales, where changes made by countries have resulted in unintended consequences or poor outcomes. Throughout, learnings and implications for England's early years system are highlighted.

Background

Why is a high-quality, equitable early years policy needed? High-quality ECEC can be a significant gap-closer, reducing the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers (Gambaro et al., 2014). By the time children start school, disadvantaged children already lag behind their more advantaged peers (Archer & Oppenheim, 2021).

As well as the benefit to individual children, there is an economic case for investing early too. Research has found high quality early education to have a 13% return on investment (Garca et al, 2020), and that for every £1 spent on early years education, £7 has to be spent to have the same impact in adolescence (Public Health England, 2015).

Existing provision in England

Currently, England has some policies that support equitable, high-quality ECEC. For example, the ECEC curriculum in England (the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile) is well evidenced and widely respected (Wall et al., 2015). Furthermore, funded places are available for disadvantaged two-year-olds to support access to ECEC.

However, despite these measures there are significant areas for improvement. While funding is in place for disadvantaged children at age two, close to a third of eligible children are not enrolled (Archer & Oppenheim, 2021).

There are also inequalities in access to provision. Currently at ages three and four in England, while all children are eligible to 15 hours a week for 38 weeks a year (570 hours total), parents in families meeting certain work-based criteria can access 30 hours (1140 hours total). Previous Sutton Trust research has found that only 20% of families in the bottom third of the earnings distribution are eligible for the 30-hour entitlement (Pascal et al, 2021). This suggests that the current criteria are not sufficient to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged families in England.

There are also long-running issues in England with how the provision is operationalised. The amount of funding given to providers for the 15 and 30 hour entitlements is lower than what is needed by settings to provide those hours. As a result, many providers need to find ways to subsidise these shortfalls, either by charging more for additional hours above the entitlements, and/or by charging for extras such as lunch or snacks (Pascal et al, 2021).

Qualification levels of staff are also a concern, with the proportion of unqualified staff working in the early years rising, alongside worryingly high levels of staff turnover (Pascal et al, 2020).

Plans for expansion

Recent announcements to extend free ECEC provision for working families are also problematic, with the government announcing a move towards 30 hours per week for 'working' families of children from nine months. The extension is being introduced in stages, with the full expansion planned for

September 2025.

However, recent analysis from the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) found that only a fifth of families earning less than £20,000 a year would have access to the full expansion from nine months to age two (Drayton et al, 2023), with families falling between new and existing offers at age two being left with no free provision.

There are also concerns on how quality can be maintained and improved during the planned expansion. A recent government consultation on changes to the early years workforce in view of the expansion includes several suggestions to reduce the qualifications of the workforce, for example, by reducing the percentage of level 2 qualified staff required from 'at least half' to either 30% or 40%.

Evidence from other countries tells us that increasing ECEC provision without focusing on quality risks exacerbating inequality even further (see Quebec case study).

The aim of this report is to summarise the evidence behind high-quality ECEC provision, focusing particularly on areas where England appears to fall behind other countries, such as staff quality and participation of disadvantaged families. We also reviewed what other countries have done or are doing to address some of these issues, including country profiles for each of these providing further information.

Using desk-based research, we focused on countries that met the following criteria: Where ECEC is already high-quality, or progress is being made to make it high-quality, data on policies is available, and wherever possible, where outcomes related to those policy choices have been evidenced. Through dedicated searching we also identified where progress is being made towards high-quality provision (e.g., New York).

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Key themes and recommendations

In reviewing the available literature three key themes emerge:

- Remove barriers for disadvantaged families to increase participation
- Children benefit from being in settings with highly qualified staff
- Having a higher number of staff to children supports better quality provision

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Addressing these three key themes would help put England on a path to ensuring that all children, regardless of family situation, are able to access high quality provision and, ultimately, enjoy better outcomes.

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Supplementary materials complement the report. Access the [full country profiles](#) [5] and an [international cost comparison](#) [6] as well as [examples of families](#) [7] which demonstrate differences in England's early years government support.

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