

Briefing 6: Early Implementation – findings and lessons learned

In September 2016, eight local areas began funding children for 30 hours of free childcare. Each area was asked to fund c400 children and to test implementation with a view to supporting the full roll-out in September 2017. The eight areas were: Hertfordshire, Newham, Northumberland, Portsmouth, Staffordshire, Swindon, Wigan and York.

All Early Implementers shared their progress and early learning at the first round of Childcare Works Progress Sharing (PS) meetings in autumn term 2016. Copies of the presentations (where used) have been shared and are available on the Childcare Works Knowledge Hub site <https://khub.net/web/achievingtwoyearolds>

This paper draws together what we consider to be common early findings and emerging learning across all eight local areas, as presented at the meetings.

Whilst specific challenges may be different based on geography, the focus of early implementation, and different models of delivery there are many shared general experiences:

- Early, open, and face-to-face communication with providers and key partners is a key task, benefiting message management, myth busting, and positive energy
- Providers are actively and positively engaging, and need support to navigate information and to consider necessary actions
- There is a need to support providers to make informed decisions about 30 hours which includes support for business planning, partnership working/collaboration and modelling delivery
- Parents need to know about the entitlement and how to apply for it. Multiple methods should be used, including use of modern technology
- Parental demand has been described as very strong and will drive the market, which will drive supply of provision

- Access to 30-hours childcare can be life-changing for some families and many good news stories are emerging
- Parents need and want flexible delivery, often in one setting, spread across the year
- Market management and planning based on sound childcare sufficiency assessment is essential
- Senior management commitment within the local authority needs to be achieved and informed to ensure operational barriers are removed and progress is swift and nimble.

Getting messages right from the start

Early Implementers identify effective and timely communication as an essential task.

Learning from the implementation of the two-year-old early learning entitlement demonstrated senior level commitment unlocks barriers and supports adequate resourcing. This is certainly the case for 30 hours, as Early Implementers emphasised the need to have support from senior managers, cabinet and councillors at an early stage.

Communications with providers, partners and families need to be clear and controlled. There is a need to maintain communications, even when there is no real news to share, especially with providers. This maintains a feeling that providers know everything there is to know. Regular, transparent information builds trust and confidence, is reassuring and reduces anxiety. It is also important to manage messages to avoid information overload and this suggests a need for a planned communications strategy.

Advice to local authorities is to start dialogues with providers and families early, and include key colleagues such as finance, settings, Families Information Service, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), training, business support, Jobcentre Plus, sufficiency teams etc. LAs should set up a steering/working group to oversee and take ownership of implementation, including provider representation, and reporting progress to the local sector and senior management to ensure focus is maintained.

Developing parental awareness and prompting action

Families need to have confidence in the sustainability of provision and the new policy agenda before they are willing to change existing childcare arrangements. Many parents have established relationships with providers that should be valued and protected. Parents need to have clear, unbiased and accurate information about the entitlement, eligibility and options and opportunities for how to use it.

Early findings suggest some parents may not choose partnership models of delivery and transitions across providers, preferring a single provider in many cases. Formal partnerships between providers or different days in different settings can challenge these preferences, and will be more relevant when full roll-out occurs.

Early Implementers recommend promoting 30 hours to fathers as well as mothers, and identify word of mouth as an important mechanism for parents to learn about the entitlement.

Partnerships with providers

Early Implementers advised it is important to share information relating to eligibility criteria, funding rates, eligibility number estimates, and support available in relation to business modelling. Guidance around delivery models (including additional hours and services) is important, so providers can consider all options for change, selecting those that work best for them.

During the Early Implementation, the early years sector required reassurance full roll-out would be happening, and to build confidence in demand and financially viable delivery models. Sharing positive messages of early and successful implementation is a useful way of developing confidence, information exchange and peer-to-peer support.

Terminology is key. It is recommended terminology is considered and then applied consistently. Nationally, the programme is titled '30 hours free childcare'. It is important

parents are informed the entitlement is free, and for up to 30 hours a week or 1,140 hours across more weeks of the year.

Using the dynamics of demand and supply

Early Implementers stress the need for a robust assessment of supply and demand. It can be challenging to understand parental demand, particularly with the introduction of a new entitlement. Families may make different life decisions based on eligibility for 30 hours and this means there will need to be continual assessment of demand to identify gaps and communicate early with providers to increase supply. Some areas have identified higher numbers of eligible families than previously estimated by HMRC. Work is required to ensure estimated eligibility numbers are sound and based on supplied data and local intelligence.

Supply-mapping is required to identify any potential gaps in provision and to support action planning to address any gaps. This entails working with providers to support them to assess demand locally and to harness local intelligence to inform an authority-wide assessment of supply to meet demand.

Demand

Demand for 30 hours has been high during the first stages in early implementation areas. Across all areas take-up was at 70% in the autumn term 2016, predicted to reach 100% in the spring term 2017. Early indications suggest the majority of parents will use 30 hours a week, others prefer to access a smaller amount such as 24 hours a week across more weeks of the year. Demand for single-site provision has been higher than local areas expected. Local authorities need to consider how they support partnership working, and encourage parents to take-up their entitlement using more than one provider where such models are required.

30 hours offer needs to be flexible and provide options and delivery models that meet the needs of working parents. There is new demand for out of school provision attached to

childcare delivered during school hours. This requires a new approach from out of school providers and linked settings.

Managing the childcare market: a local authority duty

Providers from across the sector have responded positively to 30 hours in early implementation areas. Local areas placed emphasis on supporting provider business modelling and developing operational delivery models based on parental demand. Early business support for providers has been prioritised and is recommended to other local authorities planning implementation. This includes:

- Supporting providers to identify and establish partnerships. Providers will need to be clear about how delivery is managed (for example, responsibility for the universal entitlement and 30 hours, the grace period etc.) and how transition is managed
- Encouraging providers to assess demand locally with parents and work with other local childcare providers and the local school(s) to plan together how they will meet demand
- Support for providers to understand breakeven and baseline delivery costs
- Financial projections and business modelling, including cost calculation tools
- Work with 'pathfinder' settings to stimulate peer-to-peer support

There may be a need for local authorities to review school admission arrangements, in particular priority allocation arrangements for children accessing the universal early years entitlements and those accessing 30 hours.

Additional information

In addition to the presentations shared at the PS meetings, Northumberland and Wigan have shared links to videos developed as part of their work. Northumberland:

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/northumbria-county-council/id1171204966?mt=2>

Wigan: <https://youtu.be/lscF10cnJiY>