

Early years



Must knows Children

Key messages

Effective, high quality early years provision makes a difference to young children, helping to break the cycle of disadvantage to give them a good start in life. It is a key element of early help and leads to better developmental outcomes and readiness to learn.

Accessible and affordable childcare also underpins economic development, helping women into work and tackling poverty. Councils must ensure the availability of high quality part-time early education for all three and four year olds, and for 40 per cent of the most disadvantaged two year olds from September 2014.

Councils have a statutory duty to ensure sufficient childcare for working parents, as far as is practicable, and sufficient children's centres to promote integrated health, early education and childcare.

These duties sit alongside responsibilities for children's social care and safeguarding. Responsibility for commissioning public health for 0- 5 year-olds will transfer to local government in 2015.

Early childhood education and childcare for the under-fives is very fragmented. Councils have a wide range of duties to promote high quality early years provision and secure free early education for all three and four year olds, as well as disadvantaged two year olds.

Early education and childcare provision for this age range is offered by a mix of public, private and voluntary providers. Unlike attendance at school, none of the provision offered is compulsory.

Councils must also secure sufficient childcare, as far as is practicable, for working parents and ensure that there are sufficient children's centres to meet local demand. Explicit limits were placed on the council's role in childcare provision by the 2006 Childcare Act. Councils should not provide places directly unless there are no private or voluntary sector organisations that are willing to do so.

Free early years education

There is a statutory entitlement for 15 hours a week of free early years' education for all three and four year olds. This was extended to include twenty per cent of two year olds from the most disadvantaged families in September 2013, and to forty per cent of two year olds in September 2014.

Government funding for the two year old entitlement is £755 million for 2014/15. Funding has been distributed to councils through the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG).

As they are discouraged by law from offering childcare directly, the role of councils is mainly as commissioner of services. Each area is required to have a fair and transparent funding formula (the Early Years Funding Formula). This has to be agreed with the Schools Forum in each area, which reduces the influence that councils have over local decision making.

Quality assurance

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) sets standards for the learning, development and care of children from birth to 5 years old. All schools and Ofsted-registered early years' providers must follow the EYFS, including child minders, preschools, nurseries and school reception classes.

Ofsted are now the sole arbiters of quality in early years' provision and the ability of councils to intervene and provide support to education and childcare settings has been curtailed.

Councils must base their decision whether to fund a provider to deliver early education places on the provider's Ofsted inspection judgement. Councils must not undertake a separate quality assessment and can only place conditions on providers that address concerns raised by Ofsted.

Similarly, councils cannot require providers to undertake any training or other quality improvement programmes, unless they address concerns raised in the Ofsted inspection report and the provider has been judged less than 'good' by Ofsted.

To bring the rules for early education into line with those for maintained schools, providers that fail to promote fundamental British values, or which teach creationism as science for example, cannot be funded to provide free early education.

Childminder agencies

Childminder agencies, once they are registered with Ofsted, are now allowed to operate. Agencies do not provide childcare directly but register childminders and provide them with training, support and advice. Councils can choose to set up childminder agencies to continue to offer their experience in this area.

Early Years Pupil Premium

The Government has announced plans to introduce an Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) from April 2015 with the aim of closing the gap between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers. Providers will get up to £300 extra a year for each eligible child. As well as children from low income families those eligible will include looked after children and those adopted from care. The EYPP will be paid to councils in England through the Dedicated Schools Grant.

0- 5 Public health transfer

Children's public health commissioning for 0- 5 year-olds will transfer from NHS England to local government on 1 October 2015. For more information see the Must Know on children's health.

Children's centres

The provision of sufficient children's centres to meet local needs is also a statutory requirement in the Childcare Act 2006, although the definition of access and type of provision is more flexible.

The core purpose of children's centres is to improve outcomes for young children and their families, and reduce inequalities, with a particular focus on those in greatest need.

Providing services 'through' a children's centre does not mean that all services should actually be delivered in a children's centre, or that children's centres should be given any greater weight as potential service locations than other settings.

Children's centres are multi-agency, and can include midwives and health visitors, early education and childcare, links to job centres and adult skills, parenting groups and a range of family activities. They are a key part of early help, increasingly targeted to meet local priorities in the context of diminishing resources.

Children's centres, like early years providers, must be registered with Ofsted, and are subject to inspection against national standards. Ofsted will be implementing some changes to the current inspection arrangements. Inspections will be organised according to how local authorities deliver their children's centres.

Childcare affordability

Finding the right care at the right price can be problematic for parents. There has been a long running debate about the right balance between funding the supply of childcare through providers and funding the demand for childcare by providing subsidies for parents.

The Budget in March 2014 included a proposal for a new tax free childcare subsidy to be introduced in the autumn of 2015 along with a number of changes to the way in which childcare support will be provided via Universal Credit (UC).

Subject to Parliamentary approval, the scheme will support working parents (including self-employed) earning up to £150,000 a year. For every £8 paid by parents towards the cost of childcare for children up to the age of 12 (or 16 if they are disabled), the state will provide a £2 top-up up to a maximum cost of £2,000 per child each year.

The employer-supported childcare voucher scheme will remain open until the new scheme takes effect and will continue for existing members if they choose to stay on the older scheme.

The way that Universal Credit will interact with the proposed new tax-free childcare scheme is far from straightforward. UC is expected to cover 85 per cent of childcare costs for households that qualify, where a lone parent or both earners in a couple pay income tax.

There have been calls for support for childcare through UC to be scrapped and replaced by a single scheme for all working parents.

Family Information Service

Information for families about all aspects of early years and childcare is provided through a family information service, provided by each council.

Questions to consider

Is the new offer for two year olds reaching eligible families, and if not, what is being done to ensure it does?

Are your local schools offering sessions when parents want them, including outside core school hours, for example?

Is there a good understanding in your area of the way that children's centres can support families to improve outcomes for young children?

Useful resources

Statutory early education and childcare guidance – updated September 2014:
www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/298754/2014_Draft_Statutory_Guidance.pdf

Statutory guidance for children's centres:
www.gov.uk/government/publications/sure-start-childrens-centres

Non-statutory advice on childminder agencies:
www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/348953/Childminder_agencies_-_step-by-step_guide_final.pdf

Tax Free Childcare
www.gov.uk/government/consultations/tax-free-childcare



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